

LEADERSHIP

# Wow-Factor Schools: 8 Ways to Build an Awesome School Culture

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Some schools have such a positive school culture that you can see and feel it as soon as you enter the building. It's evident on the walls, in the students and staff, and in every classroom you visit. How can school leaders foster such a rich and positive school climate? It starts by first understanding what contributes to a school's culture.

The [National School Climate Center](#) notes that “empirical research has shown that when school members feel safe, valued, cared for, engaged, and respected, learning measurably increases, and staff satisfaction and retention are enhanced.” Here are eight ways to cultivate a vibrant school culture starting now.

## 1. Live your vision mission

Every school community should have a unique mission statement that speaks to the beliefs, values, and aims of the learning community. But it's not enough for a mission to live in a file folder or to sit unnoticed on a school web page. A school's mission should be regularly revisited and reflected upon to ensure the school and its members are genuinely living the mission. According to John G. Gabriel and Paul C. Farmer in their book [How to Help Your School Thrive Without Breaking the Bank](#):

“A vision is your school's goal—where you hope to see it in the future. The mission provides an overview of the steps planned to achieve that future. A vision is concise and easy to recall, whereas a mission is lengthier and more explanatory in nature.”

When the vision and mission are authentically embedded in a school's practice, and when students, staff, and community members stay true to the shared mission, a school remains

## 2. Embrace social-emotional learning for teachers *and* students

School is no longer solely about the three R's. The classroom has become a place that serves to support a student's holistic growth — mind, body, *and* heart. When schools embed social-emotional learning (SEL) into their classrooms and curriculum, students and staff learn to be mindful of emotions, challenges, stresses, and traumas and make room for academic learning.

According to The Pennsylvania State University and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation research brief [Social Emotional Learning in Elementary School](#), “Extensive research shows that SEL programs can promote academic achievement and positive social behaviour, and reduce conduct problems, substance abuse, and emotional distress.” You may be interested to read more on the need for SEL [here](#).



## 3. Foster a culture of resilience

Building a culture of resilience can begin in the leadership office. School principals and leaders are models for how to react and cope with stress, setbacks, and disputes. Students and staff look to the top for [how to bounce back](#), adjust and proceed against school challenges.

Elle Allison notes in her piece “The Resourceful School”:

“Resilience is often described as a personal quality that predisposes individuals to bounce back in the face of loss. Resilient leaders, however, do more than bounce back — they bounce forward. With speed and elegance, resilient leaders take action that responds to new and ever-changing realities, even as they maintain the essential operations of the organisations they lead.”

It's easy for negativity to breed when things get tough. A resilient leader can spread a can-do attitude that permeates the larger school culture.

## 4. Communicate well — and often

When a school leader ensures that students, staff, and parents are not only informed but have an active voice in their school community, they build a culture of inclusivity, eliminating feelings of distrust, uncertainty, and hostility.

In his book [How to Say the Right Thing Every Time: Communicating Well With Students, Staff, Parents, and the Public](#), Robert D. Benson writes that “With school leaders

misunderstandings, and mixed messages can cause the system's wheels to spin or come off altogether."

Honesty, transparency, and taking advantage of the mighty collaborative muscle of a school community contributes to the creation of a powerful and strong culture.

You may be interested in: [Meaningful Communication: The Key To Solving Workplace Problems](#)

## 5. Recognise the awesome in your staff

Everyone wants to do well. School staff members work hard to ensure the best possible outcomes and experiences for their students. A school leader who routinely recognises that

a staff member's success is a feather in everyone's cap promotes the interconnectedness of the work.

Celebrating people's contributions, efforts, and victories also make people feel appreciated and seen. [Dr. John Paul Sanchez](#), who received his EdD in Administrative Leadership in 2017, notes that "There's a science to the recognition of your teaching staff. [My] professor was very direct with me. He helped me understand that recognition for hard work cannot only be recognised by the principal. It must be part of a culture of recognition by all in the building. That was a pivotal point for me. I could literally see how fast the culture can change just by providing and nurturing a culture that creates change."

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Read also: [How Leaders Can Move Hearts And Minds Through Recognition](#)

## 6. Recognise the awesome in your students: positive behaviour interventions & supports

Positive Behaviour Interventions & Supports, or PBIS, is a way for schools to encourage good behaviour with a focus on prevention rather than punishment. The [National Education Association](#) (NEA) says, "PBIS improves the social culture and the behavioural climate of classrooms and schools which ultimately lead to enhanced academic performance." When we shift a school's cultural focus away from punishment for non-compliance to a focus on recognising and praising positive behaviours and successes, we move away from operating under a deficit model.



"This is why exclusionary disciplinary procedures, specifically zero tolerance policies

make schools less hostile to students, asking not “What are you doing wrong?” but “What are you doing right?”

## 7. Make your school’s brand + community members visible

When people walk into your school, they should immediately see *and* feel the school’s culture. This can start with visuals like photographs of staff and students, quotes that represent the school’s beliefs about learning, student work on the walls, or even a mission statement clearly displayed. Create the sense that a family lives and works in the space by making hallway and classroom spaces visibly branded, warm, and engaging.

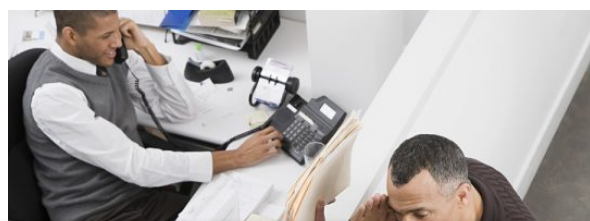


In a [study](#) of 3,766 students and over 100 classrooms across the United Kingdom, researchers from the University of Salford found that lighting, paint colours, temperature, and fresh air had the ability to positively impact student learning. Furthermore, classrooms that were well organised, displayed student work, and featured flexible arrangements improved student outcomes. When students and staff arrive at school, they should feel a sense of pride, ownership, and community.

## 8. Remember that every positive word and action matters

Teacher’s lounge culture has a reputation for being toxic with negativity. It’s easy to sit around the copy machine, venting about the latest school policy or a co-worker’s failure — or worse: a student’s shortcomings. But negativity is contagious and seeps into a school’s overall culture, soaking into the interactions between all of its members. Students look to school leaders and teachers to model empathy, kindness, and maturity.

Dr. Kent D. Peterson, co-author of [Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership](#) says, “There’s an informal network of heroes and heroines and an informal grapevine that passes along information about what’s going on in the school... In a toxic school environment, teacher relations are often conflictual, the staff doesn’t believe in the ability of the students to succeed, and a generally negative attitude wins.”





School culture plays a major role in the success and development of staff in a school. “It affects attitudes toward spending time to improve instruction, motivation to attend workshops, and the [activities] people choose to participate in,” Peterson says.

Every hallway smile and ‘hello’ that staff and students receive sinks in and builds up their self-efficacy and sense of belonging. So, too, does open-door policies and a culture where students and staff are encouraged to share their ideas and solutions. Concordia’s Associate Professor of Education, [Julie Owens](#), agrees:

“ Move away from constantly complaining; it is okay to not like how things are, but complaining gets you nowhere. Instead, focus on ways to improve the situation and work with a team to move forward. If you have built relationships, you have a team you can trust.

Watch: [Leadership Nuggets: There Is Power In The Words You Use](#)

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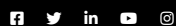
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