An Open Letter on Teacher Morale

Dina Strasser

If you want to know something about school morale, ask the people in the trenches.

Dear Educators:

When *Educational Leadership* asked me to write an article for this issue, I almost said no. I surprised myself. I'm a writer, a blogger, and an English teacher by trade, and I never say no to a request to write. I hadn't realized how painfully I felt that the trajectory of U.S. *education* had skewed in the past 10 years.

In the face of the failure of funding for public schools, damaging teacher evaluation policies, stultifying infatuation with high-stakes testing, and continued national myopia regarding the influence of economic inequity on our students, to write about how to help teachers "put on a happy face" felt ludicrously peripheral.

I believed, finally, there was only one way to do this with integrity, and that was to test my own experiences and ideas in fire. I recruited seven administrators and teachers and interviewed them in person and over e-mail. Most were from New York's Rochester City School District, where poverty rates are through the roof and attendance rates are in the gutter. This is one of the districts for which our governor intended the threat when he stated that poor-performing schools needed "a death penalty."

Word of mouth had indicated that despite their district's deeply challenging conditions, these teachers and administrators had succeeded in maintaining morale. I asked them, What do you do, and what do you need, to stay sane?

What follows is a list of recommendations for administrators that resulted from those conversations, informed by my own experiences as a public educator. Here's what these educators told me builds—and sustains—school morale.


"If a teacher asks for a refrigerator, and you say to yourself, 'Why does this person need a refrigerator?' still get them the refrigerator," said one administrator. These Rochester educators understand that teachers work in woefully underfunded, undersupplied conditions, even in the districts with the strongest tax bases. If they're asking for something—one administrator wistfully listed "books" as one of those items—chances are they need it.

The best Rochester administrators don't give teachers the runaround. They give them instead the benefit of the doubt. They follow through, and they move heaven and earth to get teachers what they want, even if they're not quite sure why
the teachers want those things in the first place. If they don't succeed, they work directly with teachers to find a viable alternative. This is an often overlooked but crucial way an administrator builds trust.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate.

One principal I spoke to made it a priority to have at least one administrator—herself or a vice principal—step into each classroom in her building every single day. "It guts my schedule, but it's so important," she said. "That way, I can acknowledge the true work going on in the building, and no one feels like I'm trying to 'gotcha' them. People walking in and out of classrooms are part of the culture." If there's a purpose to the classroom check, make it completely transparent—as in, "Today, I'm going to run around and make sure everyone's learning targets are posted."

These Rochester administrators and teachers don't wait for a situation to resolve itself before communicating about it to their staff, nor do they entertain fears that communicating openly with teachers about the complexity of school issues somehow diminishes their position as leaders. "I tell my teachers all about what's happening to me within the new evaluation system, as well as what's happening to them," one principal said. "They have to know that we're absolutely in this together."

The Rochester educators spoke admiringly of colleagues who could remember the names and ages of all the children of their staff members. One administrator poignantly spoke of supporting teachers who struggled with various health issues. These types of communication, which acknowledge deeply personal situations and struggles, count the most. Every other conversation with teachers, whether it's about curriculum, testing, or evaluation, needs to be driven by the knowledge of the teacher as an individual, and not the other way around.

3. Treat teachers like adults.

Number 3 leads naturally from Number 2. In particular, a true leader, as my Rochester educators stated time and time again, doesn't put his or her staff on surveillance. Buildings where lesson plans, e-mail, sick time, arrivals and departures from campus, and even custodial orders are centrally examined, assessed, and debated create what philosopher Michel Foucault called the *panopticon*—a place where order is maintained through fear of constant and unpredictable monitoring. The panopticon, it's interesting to note, was first conceived by English social theorist Jeremy Bentham as a method of designing prisons.

This approach simply doesn't work. It breeds cynicism and resentment in teachers who already believe they are considered unworthy of, say, more than one working copier in a building or a phone that isn't permanently attached to the wall. Instead, the educators I spoke to took great pains to give teachers respectful autonomy, even to the point of moving past their initial impulses to the contrary.

"Say I'm in a meeting with a concerned parent and a teacher, and the parent has a valid point about the teacher's work," said one principal. "I will not criticize the teacher in front of the parent. Instead, I work hard to make sure everyone feels validated in that meeting, and then I have a private conversation with the teacher later if I have to."

Rochester administrators also spoke of involving teachers at the ground level regarding a basic element: their schedules. They take their role as leaders seriously in this regard and wield much of their decision-making power to create and approve working schedules that meet teachers' personal needs. Start and end times are flexed to give teachers time to pick up their kids from school or drop them off at day care, and administrators don't question teachers about how they spend their time.

The result is something closer to a "results only" workplace rather than the panopticon. As long as the work gets done, and done well, everything else is up to the teacher. As a former Rochester city superintendent wrote me, "When teachers are consistently told what to do (given scripted lessons, for example) and are not able to design the structure of their classes, gauge student achievement based on their own training and experience, or manage student behavior according to their strengths, then one can expect low morale." Conversely, high teacher morale is the result of teacher empowerment.

"The teachers have to know that they're my number one," said one Rochester principal. Stated another principal bluntly, "And you never know how close a teacher is to walking out."

4. Play with the gray.

So how do you get refrigerators, conduct respectful evaluations, provide flexible schedules, and convince teachers that they're your number one?

As one administrator put it, you "play with the gray." You navigate the system to get the things done that you need to get done.

The Rochester educators spoke of this tension between doing what their systems asked them to do and doing what they believed was ethical and humane. Each and every educator cast these dilemmas firmly in the light of maintaining a moral stance in the context of a system that often seemed to work against them.

For example, administrators often stepped in to mitigate the harsher consequences of district policy. Deadlines were
quietly extended. Mandatory meetings were held but truncated in an effort to protect teachers' time. It was the administrators' way of breaking the tyrannical grip of the panopticon.

Yet did they break it? These educators' experiences raise the age-old question: Is massaging the internal workings of the system enough to truly reform the system? When does it become necessary to let the public know, for example, that you're opting out your own children from standardized tests? Or that you struggle with the idea of suggesting to the parents in your school that they investigate that same course of action? That you're forced to make choices between following the rules and following your conscience?

At some point, principals, administrators, and teachers may choose to shift the responsibility of reform to levels beyond the personal by participating in public protests, such as those represented at www.newyorkprincipals.org (see "Letter to Parents about Testing" and the APPR paper). As a former superintendent wrote to me, "As administrators, we have a moral obligation to stand tall with teachers to do what's right for kids."

Henry David Thoreau seconded this thought in his essay Civil Disobedience. "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law," he wrote, "so much as for the right." Yet such actions come at great personal risk. My interviewees struggle with this choice every day.

In the end, it was abundantly clear in these interviews that the administrators who fought for their teachers—however silently—earned ultimate respect.

"So you save the teachers?" I asked one administrator.

The Rochester administrator smiled a humble but resolute smile. "I'd like to call it doing the right thing," he said quietly.

5. Remember that morale is only a side effect.

An e-mail from a former city superintendent helped me put to rest my initial fears that morale is a peripheral issue by pointing out, ironically, that I was correct. Morale, it turns out, is peripheral.

"Teacher morale, in my experience, is not a function of practices designed to maintain or create it," the superintendent wrote. "It's a by-product of being treated as leaders and being treated with respect. Teacher morale is the end product of empowering teachers to make decisions that affect their lives."

So Where Do We Go from Here?

Readers, I hope something on this list inspires and supports you. I also hope that at least one item on this list—this real list, written by real people in the deepest education trenches—makes you frustrated, even angry. Angry that such measures are necessary for the survival of the hearts and minds of educators. Angry that educators are being driven to make such choices. And angry that our education system is broken so badly—and broken, ironically, by ostensible efforts to fix it—that it results in such a list.

If you're angry, ask yourself why. And then do something about it.

Sincerely,

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A focus on student learning can inspire and motivate teachers—but only if we define student learning in terms of education’s highest aims.

Current education trends have clearly taken a toll on teacher morale. Teachers are often blamed for low student test scores, although it seems obvious that many of the factors affecting student achievement are beyond their control. Teachers are also threatened with new systems of evaluation, some of which are scientifically questionable—even bizarre—in the inconsistent results they produce. Some of our brightest, most dedicated teachers are unhappy because policymakers don’t trust them to choose curriculum content or instructional methods. It’s hard for teachers to maintain high morale when they feel neither respected nor trusted.

So efforts to raise teacher morale are certainly needed and important. But educators may be suspicious of superficial efforts to boost morale if they perceive that their school is using such efforts in a bad cause—to ensure compliance and rally uncritical teacher support for a new program imposed by the district or state, for instance. History is loaded with cases of groups being manipulated to exercise great enthusiasm for bad causes.

Here I discuss how we can raise teacher morale in a good cause—improved student learning. “All our children learning” is surely a worthwhile rallying cry. Yet dedicated educators may feel that something is missing unless we address two important, complex questions: What do we mean by student learning? and What is the aim of this learning? Our answers to these questions affect three areas that are central to our efforts to revitalize teacher morale: collegiality, creativity, and continuity.

Collegiality—Around What Goals?

We often hear that greater collegiality among teachers contributes to a sense of well-being and common purpose. Some even suggest that working together to implement the new Common Core State Standards will increase teacher collegiality. Although this might happen among elementary school classroom teachers, who teach both language arts and mathematics, it is unlikely to occur at the secondary level, where the disciplines are sharply separated. At any grade level, collegiality will only further the cause of improved student learning if we ask what mathematics, language arts, and other subject areas can offer one another and how each contributes to the deeper aims of helping students grow into better adults.

Something vital is missing from our current vision of schooling—a sense of the common purpose beyond the learning of skills and information specific to each discipline. Years ago, Jerome Bruner (1960) suggested,
Our main aim has become to prepare everyone for college, and the principal reason for going to college is viewed as getting a good job. These are not bad aims, but in emphasizing them we tend to neglect what have long been considered the deepest, truest aims of education: to produce people who are morally good, intellectually competent, socially sensitive, spiritually inquisitive, and committed to living full and satisfying lives. These aims do not appear in the Common Core standards. If they did, teachers from the various disciplines would be encouraged to meet together often to share what their disciplines can contribute to one another and to these truly common aims.

Consider how odd it must seem to bright high school students that they are expected to "master" (test well in) four or five disciplines, but they are taught by people who apparently know only one. Surely, we are missing something here. As a former math teacher, I would be delighted to share with students the stories of Isaac Newton and his attempt to establish the chronological accuracy of the Bible, of Gottfried Leibniz and his "best of all possible worlds," of Carl Friedrich Gauss's schoolboy inventions of powerful mathematics, of the beautiful and fruitful correspondence between British mathematician G. H. Hardy and Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, of the Pythagoreans' dread of irrational numbers, of Bertrand Russell's stand on war, of Lewis Carroll's fascination with puzzles and logic. None of these topics are forbidden by the Common Core standards, but neither are they invited. Collegiality across the disciplines would encourage such additions to the curriculum.

The current emphasis on high-stakes testing, unfortunately, has aggravated a tendency to focus on the details of each distinct discipline. Yet there are bright signs here and there—teachers trying to restore not just the prestige of the liberal arts but also their spirit (Edmundson, 2013).

For example, Andrew Delbanco (2012) describes a form of collegiality at Columbia College that could be promising for high school teachers. The professors and graduate students who teach in the core curriculum required that all first-year students meet weekly to discuss the assigned texts and to "consider substantive questions" (p. 30). Coming from different disciplines, they encourage one another to think beyond their individual specialties—to stretch their disciplines from within and make connections to the great questions of human life. If high schools practiced this kind of collegiality, they would raise the intellectual level and understanding of both teachers and students and, in doing so, also raise morale.

Creativity—Why Leave Educators Out?

Collegiality across the disciplines would help sustain a high level of intellectual interest among teachers. But teachers also need freedom to exercise this intellectual interest creatively. Education policymakers today tout creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving as major aims of education for students—yet they institute methods that deprive teachers of opportunities to exercise their own creativity. I hear stories of such deprivation from teachers across the United States.

Many teachers today are expected to follow a rigid routine for each daily lesson: Post a learning objective, instruct, assess the effects of instruction, and assign homework. Of course, all conscientious teachers use this routine for some lessons; as a math teacher, I used it often. But its overuse can be deadly boring and even counterproductive. Some days, our aim is not to produce specific learning, but to inspire. Some days, our aim is to open discussion about a social or ethical problem. Some days, our aim is diagnosis; we need to listen to our students before planning how to teach the next round of learning objectives. In every case, good teachers respond to both the assumed needs of their students (established by the curriculum) and the expressed needs of their students (gathered by observing and listening to them).

Good teachers recognize that students' needs vary; groups and individuals have different aptitudes and interests. Therefore, good teachers try, at least occasionally, to help students create their own learning objectives. For example, math students might engage in projects connecting math with art, music, architecture, warfare, literature, ecology, genetics, religion, welfare, or a host of other possible topics. Such projects require both teachers and students to exercise their imaginations. The idea is to excite curiosity, awe, and appreciation of the world.

In suggesting that teachers use projects, even in math classes, I'm not saying they should use the "project method" for everything. Rather, I'm calling for teachers to exercise their creativity in using the host of methods and concepts available to them: object lessons, Socratic questioning, role-play, discovery, games, projects, mastery learning, group work, storytelling, and yes, drill and practice. The wealth of possibilities invites teachers to be creative, and this impulse should not be squelched by heavy-handed supervision.

Planning is part of the creative aspect of teaching. Creative teachers reject the search for pedagogical panaceas and take joy in planning a variety of lessons. They ask, What connections can I make to other subjects my students are studying? What methods, beyond direct instruction, can I use? Are there fascinating new words to discuss? Can I work in something about a story or article I've read recently?

For me—at every level, from a self-contained 6th grade class, through 12 years of high school math, through many years of doctoral-level teaching and advising—planning has always been a special pleasure. It presents an
opportunity to review and extend my own knowledge and to reformulate it more articulately. Everything is possible at the first delightful stage of planning—all the material that is prescribed, all the material we already know and enjoy, all the new things we plan to introduce. Creative planning facilitates spontaneity.

Teachers are, of course, expected to think about what their students will learn as a result of their instruction. But teaching has the potential to produce much more than specific "learnings." Creative, caring teachers convey themselves, a view of the world, and a way of relating. By sharing knowledge in which they delight, they may bring some students to delight in it also. But they need not state this as an objective and insist on it; students should feel free to consider and set aside such offerings, knowing that the teacher respects their individual interests. Creative teachers also strive to achieve desirable outcomes beyond specific learning objectives, such as confidence; the ability to relate; self-control for some kids, a little boldness for others; increased breadth of vision for some, settling down and concentrating for others; and a whole range of ethical values more felt than learned.

Freedom to plan and teach creatively is conducive to both higher morale and a deeper sense of responsibility. Notice, too, that collegiality and creativity are symbiotic: Collegiality informs creativity, and creativity enriches collegiality.

**Continuity—What Kind?**

Intellectually vigorous collegiality and creativity contribute to strong morale, and so does continuity. Fairly stable school staffs are more likely to exhibit high morale than those experiencing high turnover. Further, recent research seems to show that, in general, low teacher turnover strengthens student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2013).

To increase stability, we should put less emphasis on getting rid of underperforming teachers and much more on making them better—just as good schools respond to underperforming students. As long as a teacher is not demonstrably immoral or irresponsible, the school community should work to improve that teacher’s efficacy—for instance, by assigning a really fine mentor and by enlisting assistance from the collegial groups to which the teacher belongs. There should be no disgrace in needing and accepting help. The whole faculty will feel better knowing that the school community stands ready to give aid when it is needed. Substandard teaching should not be ignored or covered up—nor should it be advertised in public postings. Rather, it should be addressed vigorously. Such an approach is likely to increase staff stability and raise both teacher morale and student learning.

Another practice that can strengthen continuity is one that has enriched my own teaching experience and may do so for others as well. Why don't we encourage teachers and students to stay together for, say, three years instead of the usual one year (with mutual consent, of course)? Or we might consider arranging for a whole team of teachers to work with students over a period of years; one advantage of this arrangement is that students may be able to establish a strong relationship with at least one member of the teaching team.

Stability and long-term relationships are two important kinds of continuity. Perhaps even more important to our efforts to raise morale are continuity of curriculum and purpose. The Common Core standards, implemented judiciously, may contribute to continuity of curriculum in separate subjects through the grade levels, but continuity of purpose, guided by the large aims discussed here, should pervade our efforts.

**A School with Purpose**

A school is not just a center for the production of learning. At its best, it is a place with which people identify, a place to which they become attached. It is a place in which educators break down curriculum boundaries to work collaboratively, planning and teaching with creativity and with the steady purpose of producing better adults—caring, competent people who will live deeply satisfying lives and contribute to an evolving democratic society. Working in such a good cause, teachers are bound to have high morale.

**References**


**KEYWORDS**

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Can't Wait for Monday

Rafe Esquith

In the face of unfair criticism and unreasonable demands, educators must stick together and keep their eyes on the prize.

It was an ordinary Friday afternoon. While the students were eating lunch, I walked down the hallway of my elementary school's main building and stopped by the office to check my mail. I had to hurry because my students eat lunch in about two minutes so they can dash back to class for a guitar lesson. It's something they love to learn. As I sorted through my mail, I saw a fellow teacher glumly enter the office. It looked like she was having a hard day, so I tried to cheer her up. "Happy Friday," I said with a smile.

"I hate Fridays," she responded curtly. "It just means that Monday is that much sooner."

Morale in many schools mirrors the pessimism of this teacher. And why not? Really, what is there to be cheerful about? Students seem surlier and more difficult to teach than ever. Poverty is destroying families. Societal values have decayed to a point where many students come to school completely unprepared to learn. Many campuses are falling apart; in my own classroom, we're not allowed to drink the water because it has been deemed unsafe by the city.

Bureaucrats, even well-meaning ones, have tried to correct things by imposing so many tests, rules, and regulations that the passion dedicated teaching professionals once felt has cooled. A teacher works hard all day, comes home, and reads an article blaming him or her for the failure of students to do well on tests or behave appropriately. I don't know the exact moment when teachers became the scapegoat for factors beyond their control, but that moment has come. And the unfair, often ridiculous expectations being placed on teachers explain why some of them can't even be happy about an upcoming weekend of family and fun, knowing that Monday looms.

Yet, most people would agree that school morale is important. People do better work when they feel good. And if the professionals on campus feel good, the students are certain to feel better as well.

What can we do about school spirit? On my own campus, two things have not only kept many of the staff above water, but also enabled them to swim strongly against the current.

A Principal Who Has Our Backs

First, we have a principal who makes a difference. I walk by his desk every day and see the blood pressure medication on it. I hear some pretty disagreeable parents screaming at him while he tries to explain why their "perfect" child is
being excluded from an activity. And of course, he often sits in his office facing the most incorrigible students in the school, sent there by a teacher at the end of her rope.

Yet, despite it all, this principal consistently has his teachers' backs. He banned from campus a father whose demands were so threatening that two of the teachers were afraid of the man's presence. When a student with a history of emotional problems accused a teacher of inappropriately grabbing him, this principal did not simply step aside and allow the police and school authorities to investigate the allegation. Instead, he personally interviewed every student in the class and even went to several middle schools to question some of the teacher's previous students, quietly gathering evidence for the authorities that the teacher under siege had never laid a hand on any student. The investigation eventually proved that the student had made up the incidents.

It was a trying time for this teacher—as it would be for any teacher accused of wrongdoing—but despite the scars left from a necessary but absurd investigation, his principal's tireless defense of his integrity was the greatest balm to heal the wound. And although the investigation was kept quiet until it was over, when word of the principal's role got out, all the teachers felt a little better about their day. As a result of this principal's quiet professionalism, the staff is more unified, and a good teacher is still helping deserving kids each day.

School morale begins at the top, and when school leaders respect and believe in their teachers, everyone wins. Most staff members are more than willing to do some of the more unpleasant parts of their jobs because they work for a principal who rolls up his sleeves and works alongside them.

**Teachers Who Believe**

But a fine leader is not enough. Part of the responsibility for maintaining school morale rests on the teachers themselves.

Let's keep this real. Teaching can be a thankless job. Many parents are terrific, but others make frequent, unrealistic demands that can ruin a teacher's day. Insincere politicians pontificate about the value of our schools, but we don't have enough money to fix a leaky roof. The ever-present media are always ready to print a headline trumpeting a horror story about a teacher committing some heinous crime, but these same media outlets rarely run a story about the hundreds of thousands of educators who come in early, stay late, and dip into their own pockets to finance activities. It's an old story—people watch the car accident and don't notice the 99 percent of drivers who are following the rules and keeping the roads safe.

But good teachers know something. If they are frustrated, they understand how their students must feel when they're forced to participate in a broken system in which standardized tests have become everything. Many kids grimly come to schools where the regurgitation of facts has replaced any real scholarship or learning. Good teachers know that now, more than ever, they must do everything in their power to believe in what they are doing. Optimism is the foundation of all good teaching. Optimism in the face of daunting reality is downright heroic—and that, in fact, is what good teachers practice all day long while others denigrate their contributions to society.

We teachers are the key to staff morale. High morale depends on feeling appreciated, and because educators are rarely given their due, we need to appreciate one another. We can choose to be defeated by the problems we face, or we can use those very problems to steel our resolve. We can become bitter and discouraged, or stronger and more dedicated. We don't have to face every Friday with depression knowing that Monday is that much closer.

**Taking a Second Look**

It's Saturday night, and I'm finishing up these thoughts. Early this morning, I was at school. Every Saturday for the last 30 years, I have come in to Room 56 and worked with former students now in middle and high school. I teach them Shakespeare, literature, mathematics, SAT preparation, and life skills. When I arrived at school at 6:30 this morning, I saw a host of my fellow teachers. They're working together on a project to teach kids about good health, and today they were taking hundreds of kids to a stadium to prepare for running a marathon. There were at least a dozen smiling teachers. They were not being paid. They looked gloriously happy, and that was nothing compared to the smiles on the faces of their excited students.

Yes, it's easy to look around and say there's not much to be cheerful about. Maybe that's why good educators take a second look. It's true that the kids at this school are poor, and many come from homes with severe family problems. But this school also has a hard-working principal who has the backs of his staff. It has teachers who willingly volunteer their Saturdays, work as a team, and improve the lives of their students.

What keeps outstanding teachers going and doing a good job? It's the same thing that got them into the profession in the first place. School morale can remain high when teachers remember that they got into this crazy system because of the students. Although many organizations or politicians claim to "put the kids first," in reality teachers are the ones who do this. They are the ones who stand up every day in front of young people, trying to inspire them and open doors that were previously closed.

Not all the teachers at this school will be able to remain positive. Not all the kids will be successful. Not all the parents...
will be supportive. But courageous educators find a way to stick together, and their accomplishments create school morale that is much better than most would expect. That positive spirit feeds on itself, because a few years from now one of those marathon runners will return to thank a teacher for the extra time he was given. Those success stories trump every leaky roof or absurd new rule and regulation.

School morale remains high because heroic teachers overcome the negative forces by keeping their eyes on the prize. Such heroes can't wait for Monday. There's a lot to do, and they can't wait to give each student the best they have to offer.

Rafe Esquith teaches at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles, California. His most recent book is *Real Talk for Real Teachers* (Viking, 2013).

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Building School Morale
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What to Do When Your School's in a Bad Mood

Megan Tschannen-Moran and Bob Tschannen-Moran

Administrators can bolster school morale by expressing empathy and focusing on strengths.

In this age of accountability, schools are often not happy places. Educators may feel frustrated and resentful over the ways in which they're being asked to generate ever-greater results in a context of scarce resources. Hardworking and successful teachers may feel undervalued and underappreciated by new evaluation systems designed to identify and deal with underperforming teachers. And rapidly evolving curriculums are placing teachers in a constant state of flux.

These and other factors leave educators reporting higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction with their jobs than at any other time in the past 25 years; indeed, more than half of all teachers today report feeling great stress at least several days a week (Harris Interactive, 2013).

For many educators, morale has been declining steadily, and work has become more of a chore than a calling. That makes bolstering school morale a primary school-improvement strategy. But to begin, we must first understand the nature of morale.

Morale as Mood

We can think of morale as an organizational mood, and we can view a school with low morale as a school that's in a bad mood (Solomon & Flores, 2001). Moods are different from emotions. Emotions are intense, intrusive feelings tied to particular events or circumstances. Moods are less intense, more generalized, and more long-lasting. Anger, for example, is an emotion that arises in response to a specific action or circumstance, and it often results in a set of palpable physiological changes. Cynicism, on the other hand, is a more diffuse mood that reflects one's orientation toward the world.

Moods are not things that just come over a person and over which a person has no control. They are, rather, habits of mind or ways of being in the world. The same can apply to organizations. The faculty of a school can evidence a collective mood, either good or bad. Some of the more common bad moods include feelings of suspicion, resentment, cynicism, resignation, and despair. Such moods influence people—and what they're ready, willing, and able to accomplish. As Ramsey (2000) noted, "people with low morale tend to see obstacles as potential opportunities for failure, while people with high morale see obstacles as challenges which need to be solved" (p. 93).

Although all bad moods are problematic, the most devastating of all bad moods is resentment, or wounded pride, because it tends to be clandestine and can sabotage both organizational leadership and objectives (Solomon &
Building and sustaining school morale are essential functions of school leadership. Education leaders can use three crucial strategies to turn a school's bad mood into the kind of good mood that promotes student learning and success.

**Strategy 1. Mind Your Manner**

For a start, school leaders would do well to manage their own mood and way of being with people because these are contagious. If leaders convey a sense of frustration at the many demands confronting them, these feelings can easily spread throughout the organization. On the other hand, if leaders do a good job of managing their personal presence and energy, those good vibes, too, will spread.

School leaders must, therefore, take the responsibility for showing up every day with positive energy and presence. This doesn't mean they should be inauthentic in how they engage with their faculty and staff. Rather, good self-care practices should give them the resources they need to genuinely keep their own morale from sagging.

One simple strategy that many leaders have found helpful is to take at least one short break during the day for rest, reflection, and renewal. An elementary principal we knew made it a daily practice to visit the preschool class in her building because it never failed to lift her spirits. Another principal made a point of going outside and taking a brief walk around the grounds during the early afternoon. In addition to breaks, many leaders have expressed the value of connecting with colleagues for advice, support, and counsel around the demands of the job. External resources, such as leadership coaches, can also help school leaders find fresh perspectives, muster new energy, and develop new strategies for moving forward.

The key is for school leaders to engage in these practices intentionally and regularly, rather than letting them get squeezed out by their busy schedules. Such renewal strategies aren't included in a school leader's job description, but neglecting to develop them and do them well may undermine the quality and influence of a leader's work. When leaders do a good job managing their energy, they convey a sense of creativity, optimism, and hope—the very energies that make for and undergird successful schools.

**Strategy 2. Cultivate Empathy**

Empathy, properly understood and expressed, is a beautiful gift. Empathy is neither sympathy nor pity. Rather, it's expressing a respectful understanding of another person's feelings and needs in any given situation. It's particularly powerful when school leaders express empathy to teachers and staff members who are frustrated by, discouraged about, and distressed over circumstances they cannot fully control. When school leaders express empathy in this way, they create a positive sense of connection, foster cooperation, and evoke the willingness as well as the courage to try new things.

This understanding of empathy has led Marshall Rosenberg (2005) to develop a process for expressing empathy in ways that can help school leaders improve school morale and win cooperation. The process, known as nonviolent communication, focuses on four distinctions that can shift your communication in ways that will garner greater cooperation.

**Observe, Don't Evaluate**

When speaking with a staff member, it's important to convey only clear observations of what you saw or heard, without including any evaluative language or overtones. This skill takes commitment as well as practice to master. For example, instead of saying, "Your comment was rude and inappropriate," describe what you witnessed—for instance, "I heard you say 'Shut your mouth,' and then I saw you turn and walk away."

Although this may not sound as though one is expressing empathy, it is, in fact, a crucial first step. Evaluative language interferes with the communication process before it even gets started. Instead of establishing a sense of partnership, it sets up a defensive dynamic that doesn't facilitate cooperation, learning, growth, or change. Making clear, matter-of-fact observations of what you saw or heard minimizes argument and maximizes the possibility for cooperation. This practice alone can begin to shift a school's mood in positive directions.

**Acknowledge Feelings, Don't Judge**

Having expressed a clear, neutral observation of what happened in a particular situation, it then becomes important to try and identify the feelings that were stirred up in that situation. The key is to identify those feelings, both in oneself and in the others involved, without taking on the thoughts that accompany those feelings.

For example, instead of asserting, "You stormed off in a huff because you thought you were right and she was wrong," you might say, "I'm guessing that when you walked away, you were feeling hurt and frustrated and perhaps even overwhelmed by the intensity of your emotions."

Separating feelings from thoughts can be more difficult than it seems because the English language is structured in
ways that disguise thoughts as feelings. Sentence structures that begin, "I feel like …", "I feel that …", or "I feel as if ...." are often followed by words that convey an opinion or judgment rather than an authentic emotion, as in, "I feel that what you said was unprofessional."

**Recognize Needs, Don't Offer Solutions**

When staff morale is low, it's an indication that one or more universal human needs are not being met. These may include the needs for recognition and acknowledgement, respect, harmony, and self-efficacy, or the need for a sense of meaning and purpose. Although different people have different strategies for meeting these needs, the needs themselves are what we hold in common and what can create a basis for empathy.

For example, when someone complains, "Oh, great! Not another last-minute change!" instead of pushing back, it's helpful to acknowledge that perhaps the person's need for consistency has been stirred up. When leaders recognize such needs, even when they're being expressed as complaints or with sarcastic or hurtful comments, it invites a more empathetic and often more constructive response.

**Ask, Don't Demand**

Because the work of leaders is to win cooperation with organizational goals, it's important for leaders to learn to communicate in ways that avoid generating resistance and resentment. Winning cooperation becomes more likely when we ask whether someone would be willing to do something rather than demand it be done in a particular way. Asking, for example, "Would you be willing to tell me what's bothering you?" rather than saying, "Come back over here and apologize!" is more likely to generate a positive response.

This small shift in language can make a huge difference in outcomes. Asking, as opposed to telling or demanding, acknowledges and respects people's need for autonomy and makes instigating change far more likely. Such expressions of empathy are not signs of giving in to poor practice or expressing weakness in the face of opposition. Rather, they're signs of cooperative engagement in seeking mutual understanding and collaboration.

**Strategy 3. Focus on Strengths**

Keeping conversations constructive takes great care and a sound, structural framework. Appreciative inquiry provides just such a solid, research-based model (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Appreciative inquiry is both a philosophy and a process for fostering whole-system change by focusing on strengths and what's going well rather than on problems, gaps, or discrepancies. Although it may seem counterintuitive to focus on strengths when things are going poorly, this approach has been found to be surprisingly effective, especially when dealing with issues like low morale in the workplace.

The thesis of appreciative inquiry is simple: Explore and amplify strengths—that is, find examples of what you want, then design and execute strategies that replicate and expand on those strengths. It's far more effective than ferreting out examples of the things you don't want and designing strategies to eliminate them.

Appreciative inquiry was developed as a transformational change process for organizations and groups by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987). Its practices revolve around five principles (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011):

1. **The Positive Principle** asserts that the real power to transform problems stems from identifying, appreciating, and amplifying people's strengths and the things they're doing well rather than trying to identify, analyze, and fix weaknesses.
2. **The Constructionist Principle** asserts that positive energy and emotion are constructed when people have positive conversations and interactions.
3. **The Simultaneity Principle** claims that conversations and interactions become positive in new ways the instant we ask new, positive questions. Asking about aspirations and possibilities—as opposed to searching for root causes of problems and engaging in the finger-pointing that can ensue—directs attention to the things that cause people to look up, lean forward, and feel good.
4. **The Anticipatory Principle** asserts that our questions and reflections flow from the outlook we hold. In the absence of hope, it's hard to seek out, much less celebrate, the positive. When we anticipate a positive future, however, everything tilts in that direction. An underperforming school that can catch hold of a vision of itself as a vibrant learning community can cultivate a sense of hope and an increased sense of collective efficacy in moving forward toward that vision.
5. **The Poetic Principle** involves becoming mindful of what adds richness, texture, depth, beauty, significance, and energy to life. By doing so, life becomes a work of great poetry, filled with hopeful meaning and movement toward positive growth and change. That's because we get more of what we focus on. To quote a maxim from appreciative inquiry, "What we appreciate, appreciates." When we focus on problems, we get more problems. When we focus on possibilities, we get more possibilities.

**Tackling Your School's Morale**
When we've worked with schools to improve morale, we've had great success implementing the appreciative inquiry process using the Four-I cycle (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Here's how the process looked in one school we worked with.

**Initiate: Focus on Strengths**

The first I, Initiate, involves the choice to use a strengths-based approach to address a concern, such as school morale. Take Peabody Elementary School, a most unhappy place after the new principal, Sandy, replaced a principal who had led the school for nearly two decades. The old principal had allowed teachers to do pretty much as they pleased, and the school was adrift when Sandy came on board.

Charged with the task of raising test scores and turning around this underperforming school, Sandy energetically dove in, trying to fix the school's many problems. But after a year and a half of escalating tension and plummeting morale, Sandy took a different tack. She decided to cultivate a shared vision for Peabody that focused on amplifying the school's strengths rather than on overcoming its weaknesses. Appreciative inquiry always starts with that first, fateful decision to focus on strengths.

**Inquire: Share Uplifting Stories**

The second I, Inquire, begins with conducting paired interviews in which people tell stories and explore the experiences they've had in contexts with high morale. In paired interviews, the teachers at Peabody explored such questions as, "Tell me about one of your best experiences working in a school or organization where morale was high; what contributed to your high spirits and sense of purpose?" or "Imagine you could transform the quality of the working relationships in this school in any way you wanted; what would that look like?"

After each pair had explored its stories, pairs joined together to form small groups. Each person briefly recounted his or her partner's story, values, and wishes. As the sharing unfolded, participants identified three to five themes that energized them. Some of the themes that emerged at Peabody included keeping the focus on the students, making learning meaningful, treating one another with respect, valuing honesty and openness, being appreciated, having clear and concise expectations, letting go of the past, and having a positive and warm working environment.

**Imagine: What If?**

The next phase in the process, Imagine, involves developing vivid images of what the school would look and feel like if it honored the themes selected and if the relationships in the school were just as people desired. Participants then share those images—but not by coming up with a set of bullet points.

One group at Peabody developed a skit with a bumblebee theme to suggest how people would "bee" together in terms of the behaviors and attitudes they would evidence at school. Another group created a pyramid of trust. A third group created a gigantic collage of images and phrases cut from magazines of the kinds of working relationships and care for students they envisioned. There was much laughter and camaraderie as the groups worked, with both Sandy and the assistant principal joining in on the fun.

After the groups developed their images of the future, they tried to capture them in a set of claims for the school, framed as though those new images were already present and expressed fully in the organization—claims such as these:

- We're happy, safe, unified, welcomed, valued, positive, clear about expectations, and free to communicate openly without fear. We come to work every day with a clean slate, ready to accept new ideas.
- We work in an environment in which communication is open and nonjudgmental, positive feedback abounds, and everyone is treated respectfully as equals. We always demonstrate a willingness to meet and listen to concerns with an open mind.

**Innovate: Take Action**

In the fourth and final phase of the process, Innovate, small groups convene to design and plan action steps for moving the school closer to the beautiful, vivid images that participants developed in the Imagine phase. People designate responsible parties, schedule activities, identify locations, and plan the logistics of getting things done.

Strategies over which team members have control are listed as commitments. Participants listed such items as, "We commit to greeting one another in the hallways with eye contact and a smile" and "We commit to giving positive feedback to at least one staff member each week." Strategies that require the involvement of, permission from, or resources from another party are called requests. Participants requested, for example, that the administration make quarterly visits to their classrooms for the sole purpose of celebrating what's going well.

The process isn't complete until all these steps are captured in writing. Once the school has tried the suggested innovations, the process can begin all over again. It's an iterative, ever-evolving process of organizational learning, growth, and change.

**A Goal That Matters**
Logistically, the four phases of the appreciative inquiry cycle could be completed in a daylong planning and development summit or across several shorter meetings over a longer period of time. Either way, the appreciative inquiry process provides a constructive way for staff members to engage in productive conversations concerning what they want their school to be and how they want to move it forward. The process fosters higher morale, even if the current reality is one of distress, distrust, and pain.

We all need schools that are in good moods—schools that are upbeat and positive, that display collective good humor and a determination to succeed, that abound with constructive relationships, where the extraordinary becomes possible. This should be the goal of every school and every school leader.

References

Endnote
1 The Peabody Elementary School example (a pseudonym) is actually a synthesis of two schools with which we worked.

Megan Tschannen-Moran is a professor of educational leadership at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. Bob Tschannen-Moran is CEO of the Center for School Transformation. They are the authors of Evocative Coaching: Transforming Schools One Conversation at a Time (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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The House That Affirmation Builds

Susan Stone Kessler and April M. Snodgrass

Honoring everyone’s contribution to making a school great builds both community and morale.

Building a positive community and school climate is a crucial but often overlooked step in school improvement. If we want teachers to devote themselves passionately to student learning—and students to achieve all they can—we must first ensure that both students and teachers want to be at our schools.

At Hunters Lane High School, a high-poverty urban school in Nashville, Tennessee, we’ve found that by communicating clearly, recognizing teachers’ and students’ contributions, and giving students and parents many ways to get involved, we can build a solid school community while improving our school’s overall quality.

Hunters Lane is a community of 1,557 students and 140 teachers and staff members. Seventy-six percent of our students are economically disadvantaged, and the same percentage are minorities. In the past six years, we’ve implemented processes that strengthen this community. These processes are inexpensive—but priceless in terms of building morale. They have contributed to a 65 percent reduction in students being referred to the office, a 51 percent reduction in suspensions, and an 8 percent increase in student attendance at our school, compared with six years ago.

Communicate Early and Often

Effective communication breeds higher morale. Because knowledge is power, people will seek information until they get it. This tendency can result in the spread of myths and misinformation about school issues, which distracts everyone from the main goal: student learning. At Hunters Lane, we use effective communication systems to ensure that no one wastes time trying to "get to the bottom of" an issue.

How Are We Doing?

Our How Are We Doing? (HAWD) process ensures that we identify and work together to solve problems that our teachers experience. We hold meetings four times a year; although participation is optional, a high percentage of our staff participates.

In our first HAWD meeting, which takes place during the third week of school, groups of staff members meet with the executive principal during their planning period to discuss what’s going well and what needs to be improved. Time and again, teachers identify problems that most people (wrongly) assumed administrators were aware of (like the copy machine in the library being out of order). If the same problem is mentioned two or more times, we know that
action needs to be taken. Often a workable solution emerges as the group discusses the issue.

For instance, some teachers shared that too many students were coming late to class. Administrators began strictly enforcing our "Restricted Lunch Volunteers" policy, under which students who come to class tardy eat lunch separately, instead of eating with the rest of the school or participating in lunchtime student activities or clubs. The number of tardies soon decreased.

In the second quarter, teachers meet with the principal individually or in small self-selected groups to share what's working in the school and what problems they see. Some teachers need that chance to talk one-on-one because they don't feel comfortable raising concerns with an audience present. After these first two HAWDs, administrators prepare and disseminate a summary sheet listing both the positive situations and the problems teachers identified. After each problem, we list the actions taken to solve it.

We connect our third HAWD of the year to the anonymous, state-developed survey on working conditions that all Tennessee teachers take annually. Maintaining the anonymity of the survey, we debrief our school's results together as a staff. A majority of Hunters Lane teachers complete this survey. We recently received 100 percent faculty agreement on answers to questions like "School leadership facilitates using data to improve student learning." The final end-of-year HAWD is used to plan the upcoming year.

We conduct the HAWD quarterly because administrators need to know what teachers think—and because what teachers think is working well or is not can change quickly. HAWD allows our staff to communicate openly about problems and collaborate to solve them. There's no retaliation for raising an issue because the point of the process is for us to solve our problems. No one need wonder whether the suggestion box is ever opened.

**Communicating with Parents**

Communicating with parents, particularly about bad news, is challenging. It's easy to deliver news about who won the spelling bee, but there's no easy way to share negative information, such as a weapon being found on campus—so principals often allow others to share it for them. This is a huge mistake. In the absence of clear communication, people are more likely to believe falsehoods or sensationalized reporting.

In times of crisis, such as a security issue or a group of students getting in trouble, parents want the principal to tell them clearly what occurred, what the facts are, and what the school is doing to prevent a recurrence. They become rightfully suspicious if the principal is nowhere to be found. We make it a point to deliver bad news to parents first—before the media does or before we send a press release—through e-mail and our automated phone call system. Parents receive the information before the incident becomes breaking news. The trust that develops from knowing they'll hear from the principal is reassuring to worried parents.

Hunters Lane addresses what matters to parents through our Parent Academic Achievement Team. Approximately 12 parent volunteers meet with our executive principal regularly to review schoolwide data and give school leaders feedback about their children's learning experiences in and out of school. These volunteers brainstorm ways to solve problems and enhance achievement. Parent suggestions are often compelling and easily implemented. For example, parents suggested having teachers publish assignments for each upcoming week in the open-access grade book. When parents check their child's grades for one week, they can see that big test coming up in the next.

**Affirm Teachers**

U.S. teachers are asked to give more to their job each year. As accountability movements cause leaders to scrutinize teachers' performance sharply, stakes continue to rise for job security. As the stress grows, it's important to take time to celebrate each teacher's individual contributions.

We're deliberate about celebration at Hunters Lane. At key times throughout the year, we find ways to recognize teachers in a light and positive way. In October, each teacher chooses one colleague to single out for some specific attribute by completing a form finishing the prompt, "We are oozing with good cheer for Ms. ___ because ..." (examples such as "she takes time to do little things for students," or "he shows respect for others' opinions"). We make sure every teacher gets one of these "October Ooze" certificates from a peer—and we share some of the funny ones at faculty meetings.

In recognizing employees, leaders often make the mistake of always rewarding the same people, frequently the "favorites" of the principal or the students. With our system, we affirm everyone for his or her own talents and gifts. As part of teachers' holiday bonus, the principal crafts an individualized certificate of appreciation for each faculty member specifying what she appreciates about that teacher. On the last day at school for faculty in December, following our holiday meal, we publicly present the certificates, which say things like, "Awarded to Mr. Blake for approaching his first teaching year as a learner" or "Awarded to Mrs. Poll for creating a safe haven in her classroom." This is one of teachers' favorite parts of the year.

In a school with 100 certified teachers plus 40 staff members, composing a different statement for each recipient—not to mention keeping track to make sure that as the years progress, the same sentiment isn't repeated—can be labor intensive. Individualizing these awards is worth the effort, however. Many teachers prominently display these...
certificates—and even frame them—in their classrooms.

At the end of the school year, busy and complicated as it is, instead of sending teachers off with "have a good summer" and a high five, we host a luncheon to present silly superlatives and serious awards. Teachers receive "faculty superlatives" their peers have voted on (such as most likely to remember a student 10 years later, best smile, or most likely to be put in detention when she was a student). We also distribute service awards and honor our retirees.

Besides these events, we host an opportunity for fellowship and fun every month. We give special attention to February, a challenging month morale-wise: Winter's gotten old, everyone is tired, and spring break seems far away. We turn it into "Fabulous February" with traditions like our yearly door decorating contest. Teachers decorate their classroom doors in a Black History Month, Valentine's Day, or school spirit theme so the building is full of positive messages. And every Friday we make sure there are delicious treats to share at lunch.

Encourage Student Involvement

Encouraging students to be active in school life also enhances school culture. We try to set up activities so that the largest number of students possible can be involved. For example, each of our five small learning academies connected to career fields selects and trains student ambassadors—students who have strong communication skills. Student ambassadors serve with teachers and each academy's many community partners on the academy's advisory board. They lead tours, get involved in accreditation processes, and help recruit business partners, who enhance students' learning and increase opportunities for students outside of school.

Our One Lunch period gives all kids a chance to be included in activities and forges relationships among teachers, students, and administrators. All students go to lunch during the same 45-minute period. Students can eat in the cafeteria if they choose, but most take advantage of various clubs and activities that are available during this period as they eat (from traditional clubs like the National Honor Society to Hunters Lane originals, such as our Warrior Outdoor Club to raise urban students' interest in outdoor activities). If at least three students share an interest and have a teacher willing to sponsor them, they can start a club.

Everyone values One Lunch. Students love the freedom and all the options of things to do. Some kids just spend time with friends or talk with teachers during this break. Students have access to computer labs and art rooms.

Teachers appreciate built-in time during the day for makeup work and tutoring. (All teachers are on duty somewhere during One Lunch and get a second duty-free lunch period.) Administrators, who might meet with kids or circulate to different clubs or areas, love the chance to talk to many students in a relaxed environment.

It also strengthens climate to showcase students' accomplishments, especially to recognize a range of students of different ability levels. Hunters Lane uses project-based learning, and we showcase completed projects to our students, parents, teachers, and community members at our school's interdisciplinary fair and district's annual project expo. This is a public way of giving students recognition. We select projects on the basis of their quality and the student's academic history, but we don't choose work from only top performers in academically oriented classes. Two of the projects we submitted last year—which scored well—were quite different in nature: one showcased bilingual children's books, created by a team of freshmen involved in our International Baccalaureate program; the other was a plan for a charity boxing match created by some academically typical sophomores in their first year in our Academy of Hospitality.

Our annual spring showcase combines several events into one night. First, visitors view projects by our younger International Baccalaureate students, then we present our spring concert, which is accompanied by a student art show. We end the night by giving awards to about 200 of our 1,300 underclassmen. By the time the night ends, at least one-third of our students have been honored in some way.

Just Begin!

When students, teachers, and parents feel like a valuable part of the school, they will contribute to improving the school's academics. Acknowledging that everyone has a stake in making our school a good place to work, in and of itself, increases morale. The key is simply to begin the process.

Endnote

1 For information on the TELL Tennessee teachers survey, see http://news.tn.gov/node/7103.

Susan Stone Kessler is executive principal and April M. Snodgrass is assistant principal at Hunters Lane High School in Nashville, Tennessee.

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"Why Does the Public Hate Us?"

Deborah Lynch

Despite the toll taken by negative public perceptions, Chicago teachers are determined to fight for their students. In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education report *A Nation at Risk* ignited a national debate that has led to decades of school reforms accompanied by declining public confidence in public education (Jones, 2012). The accountability movement represented by No Child Left Behind and, more recently, Race to the Top has contributed to the American public's perception that public schools are failing—and that a big part of the problem is bad teachers.

In Chicago, reform efforts based on these assumptions have challenged the morale of the teaching force. As the Chicago Public Schools' chief executive officer in 2002, Arne Duncan began a campaign of school closures and turnarounds of high-poverty, struggling (read "failing") schools—policies strongly opposed by teachers.

These actions have proven to be ineffective. A study by the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009) found what urban teachers already knew: There is no evidence that replacing teachers and principals to "turn schools around" leads to higher student achievement. In fact, the only strong linear relationship in student achievement is the one between poverty and performance. Yet just this past spring, the Chicago school board ignored the expressed opposition of teachers and community groups and voted to close another 50 "underperforming" schools (or "underenrolled" schools—the distinction changed from moment to moment) (Maxwell, 2013).

A Survey of Chicago Teachers

How have these policies, focused on teacher scapegoating and targeting of underperforming schools, affected Chicago teachers? To find out, I surveyed 20,000 teachers in Chicago Public Schools during the 2011–12 school year by e-mail. More than 2,300 teachers completed the anonymous online survey, which consisted of both multiple-choice and open-response questions; 100 respondents participated in in-depth follow-up interviews. The survey results provide a window into the minds of Chicago teachers in the days and months leading up to the first teachers' strike in Chicago in 25 years—a seven-day walkout in fall 2012 that captured the attention of the nation (Lynch, 2013).

Not surprisingly, more than one-half of the responding teachers said that morale in their school was low (30.6 percent) or extremely low (20.7 percent). Fewer than one-fifth of the teachers reported that their school's morale was high (13.9 percent) or extremely high (2.2 percent). What problems led to such low morale?
Public Perception: The Number 1 Challenge

When asked about the most serious challenges facing them today, the urban teachers in the study reported that public perception was their most serious problem—far more serious than even student behavior or school safety (see Table 1). On a scale ranging from 1 (not serious) to 5 (extremely serious), the teachers ranked public perception at 4.3.

Table 1. What Are the Most Serious Challenges Facing You as a Teacher?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Perception</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Public Schools Mandates</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching to the Test</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Security</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Size</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leadership</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Conditions</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Behavior</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of Respondents = 2,275–2,304*

In addition to rating the seriousness of each challenge, teachers were encouraged to add comments. The intensity of their feelings about negative public perceptions was shocking:

"It's demoralizing to see your life's work pilloried almost daily in the news."

"We are being used as scapegoats for a lot of problems. ... Nobody can figure out how to solve the problems of poverty, broken families, lack of role models ... hard problems to solve and it's just easier to say that teachers are all bad."

"If we spend our time reading the news, then we know teachers are the most evil people on the planet right now. When talking with friends and others, I hear, 'What's wrong with these teachers?' and I say, 'Hey, you know I am a teacher, right?' And they respond, 'Well, you're OK; it's the rest of them.' Well, I am the rest of them."

"It has gotten to the point where I don't even tell people I am a teacher anymore. Now I just say, 'I work with at-risk youth.' It's just easier."

"I wanted to teach in an inner-city school to really help these children. In the past six years, I've felt unappreciated, battered, and watched like prey."

"When politicians, corporations, and the media gang up on you, it is difficult to believe you are anything but the underdog, emphasis on the word dog."

"We are not the enemy."

The pain and feeling of betrayal in these statements are palpable. These teachers didn't expect great riches, or even gratitude—but they didn't expect blame, derision, and questions about their competence and commitment.

Other Serious Concerns

The second most serious challenge teachers responding to the survey identified (with an average rating of 4.1) was the Chicago Public Schools accountability mandates that teachers faced. These mandates included increased testing (too much, too many, too often); school closure and turnaround policies that destabilized communities and ignored the importance of neighborhood schools; and the expansion of charter schools (perceived to be at the expense of traditional neighborhood schools).

Job security and parent involvement tied for third place as serious challenges, with an average rating of 3.7. It's
important to note, however, that all 10 items presented in the survey question were rated at least as serious.

**What Would Improve Morale?**

Survey respondents were also asked about their levels of satisfaction with various working conditions. The responses to this question (Table 2), along with the respondents' open-ended comments about what they need in order to do their jobs, suggest some possible avenues for improving the morale of teachers in Chicago and other school districts.

Table 2. How Would You Describe Your Satisfaction with the Following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Average Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of Respect from the Principal</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community within the School</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Support for Your Role</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Support from the Teachers’ Union</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Input in School Decision Making</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Support for Student Discipline</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Resources to Do the Job</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale of the Faculty and Staff</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Respect from Chicago Public Schools Leadership</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Respondents = 2,294–2,303

**Respect from School Leaders**

Although more than half of the teachers reported that their school's morale was low or extremely low, they also identified respect from their principals as the factor they were most satisfied with (an average 3.2 rating out of 5). Teachers who reported being very satisfied or extremely satisfied with the level of principal respect and support described their principals as empowering, encouraging, appreciative, trusting, visionary, concerned, demanding, and fair. They stated that these principals followed through, were open to suggestions, had high expectations, and held staff accountable while giving them autonomy. Such principals acted as buffers against the sometimes unrealistic demands of the bureaucracy. They made an effort to keep teachers informed, and they worked hard to provide a positive work environment.

"My principal is the best I have ever had. She is respectful, thoughtful, and very hardworking. Almost every decision that is made is based on what is best for the students."

"It is because of the great rapport and the fact that the hard work we do is backed up by our principal that I don't go totally crazy with all of the new requirements that are being thrown at us."

"The administrative support in our building makes me want to go to work in the morning. I know that I have the freedom to support my students in the way I see fit and that my administration values my expertise in teaching."

**A Sense of Community**

Teachers also reported a relatively high level of satisfaction with the sense of community in their school (an average rating of 3.0). Over and over again, teachers reported that this sense of community kept them going. Feeling besieged and often betrayed by the public and by the district administration, those lucky enough to work in a school with a strong sense of community and collegiality reported that it was a real buffer against hostile forces.

"We're a family at my school. It makes what comes at us from outside much easier to deal with."

"Our teachers and staff work as a team. … We know how hard the job is, and we protect and help one another when
things are especially difficult."

"We know our school is rough, and we are working with students who get no support at home. We work to support each other and make our working environment less hostile."

"With all the attacks on teachers, it has forced us to have a bond with each other, creating a sense of community."

"My school has a great sense of community because of our shared passion for helping our students in need, but sometimes that camaraderie comes from our shared struggle."

**A Voice in Decision Making**

Although many teachers appreciated the respect and support of their principals, they still reported dissatisfaction with the lack of control over their working conditions. Teachers did not feel they were heard when they called for reduced testing demands, and they resented district and city officials, many with little or no teaching experience, coming to their schools periodically to tell them what to do.

"They lack experience as teachers, yet they are dictating how to teach."

"We don't feel trusted by—or trust—the administration. The staff feels like we have no voice in decision making but are always blamed for everything."

"The attitude of the school is punitive. This is a bad work environment. The principal is inconsistent, and teachers are given a new directive every week."

"We know how to educate the young. The 'suits' downtown seem only interested in the bottom line, not kids."

**The Ability to Teach More and Test Less**

With the increased demand for accountability, teachers reported grave concerns over the pressure to spend more time on test prep and testing and less time on actual teaching. They ranked increased testing as the least effective of recent reforms. They were concerned about the effects of this incessant testing on their students, who they believed were being deprived of meaningful instruction. They were further concerned that the increasing demands to teach to the test were taking a toll on the quality and scope of the curriculum. This, they believed, was an especially egregious injustice to urban children, who need a rich, relevant, and engaging curriculum the most.

"We lose four weeks of teaching a year to actual testing. It's probably two months if you think of all the preparation and testing. ... There are only so many times you can say [to the kids] 'this one really matters.'"

"So many tests and assessments that we have no time to teach. And God forbid you be creative."

"At some point, you are overwhelmed by the data and you have little time for instruction. ... Some teachers estimate that they are doing 60 percent assessment and 40 percent instruction."

"We no longer have as much autonomy in how to run our classes and teach our lessons. It's testing, testing, testing. That is all we do, and the students hate it. It takes an enormous amount of time away from teaching and learning."

"Teaching is the easy part."

**Being Understood**

Teacher respondents wanted the public to know what they do and how much it means to them. They wanted the public to understand that teaching in urban schools is hard work, but it is work they chose, embrace, and love. They wanted the public to know that, contrary to the popular stereotype, the vast majority of their fellow teachers are caring and committed. They wanted the public to understand that they work long hours and contribute significant amounts of their own money to do their best for their students.

"Don't believe the media. Teaching is rocket science."

"There is little help from the critics but much criticism from people who don't understand the problems we are faced with."

"Teaching in urban schools is the hardest, most heartbreaking job. ... It's the hardest job you'll ever love."

**Being Supported**

Teachers know that they cannot do the job alone. They need support from the home, which is vital to the success of every student. They also need support from the community, which many of them feel has written off poor children.

"If it takes a village, then where are the villagers?"

"The lack of support we receive is staggering. It is very easy to condemn teachers but a lot harder to look at the situation objectively."
"Our hands are tied when there is no support from home."
"This is extremely hard work, but most of us come ready and prepared for the challenge every day. We aren't looking for money, but we are looking for the support and respect we deserve."

**Being Heard**

The fact that so many teachers responded to the survey was a statement in itself. Many explicitly stated that they did so in the hope that someone might listen.

"Hopefully, people will listen and it might effect some change."

"I was happy to have the opportunity to spout off if someone might actually hear me. Maybe it will help, but if it doesn't, at least I said something."

"I looked at this as an opportunity to voice my opinion and get the word out that we need to be heard. ... I can no longer work for CPS [Chicago Public Schools]. ... I want someone to know why teachers are leaving. If it keeps happening, we are not going to have a good school system or a productive society."

"It is really important to me to speak out about what it means to be a teacher and what we really do every day. I am very anxious to help because it is the only way we have a voice."

**Voices of Experience and Caring**

Many of the respondents were skeptical that the study could make a difference, but they participated just in case. These urban teachers have insights and experience that should be the basis for education policy. They are the resilient ones who show up day in and day out to serve society's most vulnerable and most forgotten children. We ignore their voices at our peril.

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**KEYWORDS**

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Getting Beyond the Blame Game

James Harvey

If we truly want to improve our schools, let's stop blaming the teachers.

Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has gone down in recent years (Gordon, 2011; Kilbride, 2012; Sobota & Couller, 2013)—and it's hardly surprising. Consider the devastating layoffs amidst the Great Recession, the deteriorating working conditions as teacher salaries have stagnated and class sizes have grown, a regimen of reforms that threatens educators with sanctions under No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, pressures to impose poorly conceived pay-for-performance measures on teachers, and public shaming of teachers by public officials and newspapers on both the East and West coasts. By September 2013, enrollment in California teacher preparation programs had dropped 24 percent from the previous year and 66 percent below enrollments a decade earlier (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2013; Freedberg, 2013).

In a devastating aside on the California report, a commentator wrote, "In a normative economic sense, becoming a California public school teacher is beneath the dignity of anyone who has an alternative" (Freedberg, 2013).

Not surprisingly, surveys indicate that teacher satisfaction has declined dramatically in the last five years, on some measures to the lowest level in the last 25 years (Harris Interactive, 2013). A decade of belt-tightening and unprecedented levels of teacher and union bashing from pundits, philanthropists, and all sides of the political spectrum have finally come home to roost.

A Profession Under Assault

My first hint that things were going south with the reform movement came from a retiring superintendent. She noted that she had entered teaching shortly after A Nation at Risk appeared in 1983 and lamented, "My profession has been under assault throughout my career." As the reductive approach to teaching and learning embedded in the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind and the Obama administration's Race to the Top came to the fore and the slash-and-burn tactics of celebrity school leaders like Michelle Rhee won plaudits from national media, it became clear that the self-confidence of the best of the profession was shaken while morale throughout the teaching ranks verged on shattered.

Anecdotes may not be data, but as a way of knowing, they are often hard to beat. And old-school insights from high school English classes such as the "telling detail" still have something to teach us. Many of those details document the appalling decline in civility that has greeted U.S. teachers as the quality of the debate about schooling has fallen to
new lows.

In 2012, one confident young woman who held National Board certification—which documented her command of both challenging content and the knowledge and skills required to create appropriate learning experiences—told me of mornings sitting in tears in the school parking lot as the stress within the building turned the profession she loved into a frustrating obstacle course. She has since left K–12 education.

An assistant principal in the South, a talented young black man, affirmed that many mornings he came across teachers outside the school who were so distressed that he found substitutes for their morning classes while he helped them pull themselves together. His "telling moment" arrived when his wife declared that she was tired of sending his suits to the dry cleaners to rid them of the smell of the tear gas employed liberally at the school when the police needed to break up particularly ugly gang fights. "Assessment and the Common Core don't address these gang issues," he commented soberly. Subsequently, he left that school to become an administrator elsewhere.

Public "telling details" also document the derision that educators, teachers, and the unions that represent them routinely receive from many of today's reformers:

- Unprompted, Michelle Rhee, then chancellor of schools in Washington, D.C., invited PBS's John Merrow, producer of Learning Matters, to film her as she fired a principal (Winerip, 2011).
- The Los Angeles Times made available the results of teacher evaluations for every teacher, by name, throughout the city (Song, 2010). In the aftermath, one shamed teacher, reported by his colleagues to be a dedicated and award-winning performer, committed suicide (Hoag, 2010).
- The New York Post followed suit in New York (Gonen, 2012). In the process, the Post labeled as "New York's worst teacher" an educator who was, according to colleagues and administrators, one of the finest in the city, a teacher dedicated to working with students with the greatest challenges (Strauss, 2013).
- The public narrative about reassignment centers in New York City public schools blamed teachers and unions for shortcomings in this disciplinary process. Reports indicated that in these reassignment centers, or "rubber rooms," up to 600 teachers were being paid for months or years at a time while awaiting arbitration on charges of misconduct (Brill, 2009). The narrative ignored the small number of arbitrators available to work on these complex issues and the fact that many arbitrators quit because the state's department of education had not paid them for years (Fleisher, 2012).
- In February 2010 at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island, negotiations between district administrators and the union over additional pay for additional time broke down amid a frantic rush to get School Improvement Grant applications under Race to the Top out the door. As a result, the entire teaching staff was fired (Greenhouse & Dillon, 2010). The persistently low performance of Central Falls students, in the poorest district in the state and one with a large immigrant population, was apparently the fault of no one but school staff.

Public Shaming

In the midst of these telling details, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has played a troubling role. Early in 2010, he declared, "I think the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans was Hurricane Katrina" (Anderson, 2010). Although within 48 hours he apologized for this unconscionable remark (Maxwell, 2010), the cat was out of the bag. In an unforced error, he had expressed in public a view that reformers have not hesitated to express to me in private.

Within a month, the secretary took sides in the Rhode Island controversy. He "applauded" the school firings, arguing, "When schools continue to struggle, we have a collective obligation to take action" (Montopoli, 2010). President Barack Obama added fuel to the fire: "If a school continues to fail its students year after year after year, if it doesn't show signs of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability" (Greenhouse & Dillon, 2010). Within weeks, the union and the administration in Central Falls worked out a bargained solution to the impasse, but the whole incident played out in educators' minds as a case of the most senior education and political leaders in the United States using teachers as scapegoats for education failures that were actually grounded in larger social shortcomings.

Still later, Secretary Duncan found himself again on the defensive after initially endorsing the release of teacher data by the Los Angeles Times. "What is there to hide?" he asked in an interview the day after the Times released the data (Felch & Song, 2010). By 2012, however, in the middle of an election campaign, his views had evolved. Newspapers should not publish teacher ratings, he told Education Week, because "we're at a time when morale is at a record low .... We need to be strengthening teachers, and elevating them, and supporting them" (Sawchuk, 2012). Left unspoken was any sense that the secretary of education or the president of the United States had contributed to what Duncan acknowledged to be "record low" levels of teacher morale.

Indeed, Duncan's change of heart on the publication of teacher ratings mirrored a condemnation of the practice issued by philanthropist Bill Gates, a fairly consistent critic of school performance. Writing in the New York Times, Gates argued that releasing teacher ratings to the public was "a big mistake" (Gates, 2012). In no other line of work, he said, is employee performance publicly reported. He noted that at Microsoft, "we … would never have thought about using employee evaluations to embarrass people, much less publish them in a newspaper."
While calling for more effective evaluation systems, Gates (2012) concluded, "The surest way to weaken [the effort to improve teaching through evaluation] is to twist it into a capricious exercise in public shaming. Let's focus on creating a personnel system that truly helps teachers improve."

From Anecdotes to Data

Recent surveys document that anecdotes about teacher stress and alienation increasingly describe the norm and not the exception in U.S. schools. According to the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher (Harris Interactive, 2013),

- Half of teachers (51 percent) report feeling under great stress several days a week, an increase of 15 percentage points over the proportion of teachers reporting that level in 1985.
- Teacher satisfaction is on the decline. Five years ago, 62 percent of teachers reported themselves to be "very satisfied." Today, just 39 percent of teachers do so, the lowest level in 25 years.
- Less-satisfied teachers are more likely than very satisfied teachers to be in schools where budgets declined in the last 12 months.
- Less-satisfied teachers are more likely to be located in schools that experienced drops in professional development and in time for collaboration with other teachers.
- Large majorities of less-satisfied teachers are also likely to agree that two significant issues are either "challenging" or "very challenging" for school leaders: maintaining an adequate supply of effective teachers (58 percent) and creating and maintaining an academically rigorous learning environment (66 percent).
- In a significant finding, 97 percent of teachers give high ratings to other teachers in their schools.

Two Problematic Policies

Teachers might also be understandably upset that two kissing cousins in education policy—performance-based pay and value-added measurement—are high on reformers' agendas, although there's almost no research support for either practice and considerable opposition among the scientists, psychometricians, and statisticians who presumably would develop, implement, and monitor these proposals.

The measurement and analytical challenges involved with these proposals are formidable, according to analyses from the RAND Corporation (Marsh et al., 2011); Educational Testing Service (Braun, 2005); and the National Research Council. The latter lists a range of problems: measurement error; the difficulty of attributing student growth to individual teachers; the possibility that teachers might teach to the test; and the need for equal interval scales that permit consistent ranking of schools, teachers, and value-added progress (so that a 10-point improvement from 50 to 60 equals a 10-point improvement from 85 to 95, a much more difficult gain to achieve) (Braun, Chudowsky, & Koenig, 2010). There's also the difficulty associated with vertically linking tests from grade to grade to compare growth; the challenge of precision in the face of small sample sizes, leading to year-to-year fluctuations in estimates of teacher effects; and issues of data quality. According to the National Research Council, such problems bedevil the effort to measure value-added progress or to provide rewards for outstanding performance.

On cue, as if to provide a real-world example of the futility of trying to tie teacher pay to performance or effort, a study from Vanderbilt University indicated that even bonuses as high as $15,000 annually were ineffective in improving teacher performance (Springer et al., 2010). In passing, it should be noted that the very idea of performance-based pay is an insult to the profession, implying that financial carrots must be dangled in front of teachers to make sure they work hard enough.

A Weak Signal in a Lot of Noise

In the 2013 Angoff Memorial Lecture sponsored by the Educational Testing Service, Edward H. Haertel, Jacks Family Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford, turned a critical, scholarly eye on value-added measurement (Haertel, 2013). His review of the literature concluded that teachers account for about 10 percent of the variance in test score gains in a single year, with out-of-school factors accounting for 60 percent. Citing a quip from Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond, "You can't fire your way to Finland!" Haertel pointed out that statistical models designed to estimate teachers' value-added scores have to "separate a weak signal [10 percent] from much noise and possible distortion" [the 90 percent made up of a range of both in-school and out-of-school factors] (p. 5).

In a carefully constructed argument, Haertel poured cold water on the much-vaunted claim that the best teachers can improve student performance by 50 percent over five years. Measurement error makes it impossible to accurately identify the best and worst teachers, he noted. The effects of good (or bad) teaching fade out over five years. And, as a practical matter, it's impossible to assign the top-performing teachers to the lowest-performing students or replace the current teaching force with nothing but top performers. The concept is more satisfactory in theory than it could ever be in practice.

Moreover, Haertel argued, the technical dimensions of assessments mean that a value-added approach to teacher assessment translates into bias against those teachers who work with the lowest-performing or the highest-performing classes. Presumably, then, it works against the very teachers whom policymakers want in classrooms.
with low-performing students.

Although value-added measures (VAM) might in carefully controlled circumstances be valuable as private signals to teachers, Haertel roundly condemned the idea that they should be used to make personnel decisions about teachers:

> My first conclusion should come as no surprise: Teacher VAM scores should emphatically not be included as a substantial factor with a fixed weight in consequential teacher personnel decisions. The information they provide is simply not good enough to use in that way. It is not just that the information is noisy. Much more serious is the fact that the scores may be systematically biased for some teachers and against others. … No statistical manipulation can assure fair comparisons of teachers working in very different schools, with very different students, under very different conditions. (pp. 23–24)

Yet, despite resting on a scientific foundation of sand, the concepts of performance-based pay and value-added assessment are central to the policy prescriptions of reformers like Michelle Rhee, Arne Duncan, and Jeb Bush; groups like Chiefs for Change, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and Rhee's StudentsFirst; and the foundations that support such groups, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation.

**Stuck in Theory X**

In the 1960s, MIT's Douglas McGregor developed a typology for describing management's perceptions of employee motivation that has stood the test of time (McGregor, 1960). Theory X managers considered workers to be lazy and inclined to avoid work if they possibly could. Managing such shiftless employees required measurement, hierarchy, and control. Theory Y managers, on the other hand, considered workers to be self-motivated and inclined to seek out challenges and respond to them. Managing self-motivated employees required encouraging their creativity.

Although neither theory was entirely satisfactory, the dichotomy seemed to describe something very real in management–labor relations. William Ouchi (1981) later developed Theory Z as an appendage to McGregor's formulation. Building on W. Edwards Deming's famous 14 principles of productivity and highly successful Japanese manufacturing practices, Ouchi argued for developing employee loyalty to the enterprise by providing stable employment while encouraging high productivity through enhanced employee morale, creativity, and job satisfaction.

What's striking about the school reform discussion of the 21st century is how solidly it's grounded in the management outlook of Theory X, an outlook that was discredited and largely rejected in the corporate world nearly 50 years ago.

**Looking Ahead**

Belt tightening and teacher bashing have had debilitating consequences for both the attractiveness of the profession for high school graduates and the health and well-being of U.S. schools and prospects for U.S. competitiveness. It's high time pundits, philanthropists, and policymakers moved beyond the blame game and engaged in a more productive approach to improving our schools.

They might begin with a consensus-building exercise to examine the proposition that although there are clearly problems in many U.S. schools, the enterprise as a whole is not a failure. They might consider the possibility that adopting policies and rhetoric that threaten to drive some of the best and the brightest out of K–12 education is a prescription for education disaster. And they might want to pay more than lip service to the need to bring research to bear on policy by actually paying attention to what researchers have to say about their policies.

They could also consider how corporate management practices have become more enlightened over the years and incorporate those findings into education policy. Finally, they might bring teacher leaders, union officials, policymakers, and philanthropists together around an agenda aimed at identifying both the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. education with the goal of supporting the former and addressing the latter.

It's reported that the Irish poet William Butler Yeats once said, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." For too long, education policy debates in the United States have been about job training, market forces, and filling buckets. It's about time the discussion reclaimed the true mission of education in a democracy: lighting fires of the mind that support and defend the values of a free society.

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James Harvey is executive director of the National Superintendents Roundtable and is coauthor, with Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Luvern Cunningham, and Robert Loft, of The Superintendent's Fieldbook (Corwin, 2013).

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Learning the Languages of Appreciation

Paul White

Certificates, public honors, and gift cards may sound like a great idea, but do they really encourage school staff?

Most Americans today don't feel valued at work. U.S. Department of Labor statistics show that individuals who voluntarily leave their employment cite not feeling appreciated as the top reason they are leaving (Robbins, 2000). Although 51 percent of supervisors say they recognize employees who do a good job, only 17 percent of the employees at the same organizations report that their supervisors do well at recognizing them (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012).

Like any workplace, schools need to ensure that employees feel appreciated for their good work. Research has shown that appreciation and recognition are important for educators in a variety of roles (Fraser & Brock, 2006; Giangreco, Edelman, & Broer, 2001; Heller, 2004). When teachers and staff feel valued, numerous positive results follow, including lower staff turnover (Scherer, 2003) and improved student achievement (Cotton, 2003).

The Problem with Recognition Programs

Although almost 90 percent of all organizations and businesses in the United States have some form of employee recognition program (Bersin, 2012), job satisfaction and employee engagement are actually declining. In a 2012 poll, Gallup (2013) found that only 30 percent of U.S. employees are actively involved in and emotionally committed to their place of employment. This is the highest level of disengagement found since the research began in 2000.

As a psychologist and consultant, I've worked to help schools, businesses, and nonprofit organizations create more positive environments for their staff. In our work with schools, my consulting team and I have found that employees’ responses when discussing employee recognition typically range from apathy to cynicism. One employee stated, "I haven't heard anything positive for two years, and you expect me to believe they value me?"

As well-intentioned as most employee recognition activities are, they often lead to negative results. The generic nature of rewards many programs use—when everyone gets the same certificate—makes them feel impersonal. In addition, it has been reported that 90 percent of all recognition programs give awards for time of service, which does little to motivate staff (World at Work, 2011).

Another problem is the focus on recognizing employees in front of large groups, which is uncomfortable for many
people. One teacher we worked with emphatically stated, "They can give me the award, but I won't go up and get it unless they carry me up there!"

Finally, most recognition programs heavily emphasize tangible rewards—plaques, certificates, gift cards, coupons, and small tokens. Although most people don't mind receiving gifts, if they don't also hear verbal praise, receive individual attention, or get assistance when they need it, the objects received seem superficial.

Core Conditions for Appreciation

In our work with school personnel, we have found that four conditions need to be present for team members to feel appreciated.

1. Appreciation is communicated regularly.

What does regularly mean? It varies depending on the work setting, the frequency of interaction between coworkers, and the nature (length, history, and closeness) of the relationship. However, it clearly implies more than once a year at a performance review or when someone receives a "Staff Member of the Month" award.

2. Appreciation is communicated through language and actions important to the recipient.

Most of us tend to communicate appreciation through actions we value, but not everyone feels appreciated in the same ways. The ways people like to be affirmed can be thought of as five different "languages of appreciation." Some people value words of affirmation, and others are encouraged when someone does an act of service by helping them with a task. Spending quality time is another way to demonstrate support. One teacher reported, "I just want my principal to stop by my room once every two weeks and listen to me vent for 10 minutes." Bringing a colleague a tangible gift like a cup of coffee when you know he or she has had a long day can be a pick-me-up. Even a physical touch, like a celebratory high five or a fist bump when a difficult project has been completed, can be valuable.

One assistant principal shared that he didn't really need to be told that he was appreciated. This is because when he was growing up, "if someone praised you, the next thing that was coming was an 'ask.' They would ask me to do something for them or loan them money. So when I receive a compliment, my first response is, 'What do they want?'" His language of appreciation was quality time. He was a coach, and if you hung out with him at practice, he lit up and almost couldn't stop talking about his players.

3. Appreciation is personal and individualized.

Recognition of a group is a good start, but if the appreciation doesn't relate to what each team member did to help achieve the goal, the communication can fall flat. People want to hear about what they have done—that you appreciate that they stayed late after the parent meetings to help clean up or that you have noticed them coming in early to provide extra instruction to a struggling student.

To effectively offer words of affirmation, follow these guidelines:

- Use the person's name. People like to hear their name. In larger schools, a cafeteria worker may wonder if the principal even knows who she or he is, and the personal touch is especially important.
- Specifically name what the person did. Just as students respond best to specific praise, so do colleagues. Describe the valued action ("Juanita, I really appreciate how you answer the phone and greet visitors cheerfully") rather than just give a global compliment ("You are doing a great job!").
- Tell the person why that action is important. Often team members follow through on actions, but they are not sure why their contribution is important. ("Marquees, when you get your reports to me on time, it makes it easy for me to compile my reports and get them to administration on time as well. Thanks!")

4. Appreciation feels authentic.

If the recipient does not believe the appreciation is genuine, nothing else really matters. So what makes appreciation seem inauthentic? People we've worked with mentioned these factors:

- A person's tone of voice, posture, or facial expressions don't seem to match the words.
- How a person relates to you in front of others differs from how that person interacts with you privately.
- The individual has a history of saying one thing and doing another.
- The person offering the praise appears to have an ulterior motive.
- The actions suddenly appear after a training or implementation of a program on appreciation.
- Relational conflict in the past hasn't been addressed.

How do you get past people’s perception that you don’t truly value them? There is no magic bullet. Ultimately, it comes down to a person's assessment of your actions and motivation, something over which you have no control. The best course of action is to repeatedly and regularly communicate appreciation in the language and actions that are important to your colleague and that point to specific actions or character qualities you value. Over time, you may be
Creating a Culture of Appreciation

When we started working with workplaces, we focused primarily on managers and supervisors. But we kept hearing that team members wanted to encourage one another—not just those individuals who reported to them. This has affected our approach in two specific ways.

First, we’ve learned that appreciation has the most positive effect on workplace culture when both coworkers and supervisors offer it. A top-down approach does not work as well as an "any-direction" model. Food service providers can communicate appreciation to the assistant principal. Teachers can praise custodians. Paraprofessionals can encourage the learning resource center professionals.

Second, we argue against implementing a systemwide, top-down appreciation program. If all teachers, staff, and administrators are told that they are going to learn how to communicate appreciation, that edict automatically undermines the perception of authenticity of any appreciation communicated within the system. Alternatively, we recommend that team members be exposed to the concepts of authentic appreciation and be given the resources to apply the concepts to their work group so that they can opt in, if they choose. For example, having each team member take an inventory that identifies his or her preferred ways of receiving appreciation is an excellent starting point.

We’ve seen that when employers implement appreciation programs in this way, champions often emerge who are extremely supportive and enthusiastic about implementing the concepts with their team. They may lead a pilot program in which their team receives training in showing appreciation to colleagues and begin applying what they learn. Then, as other groups see the program in action, they want to join in. Finally, the training and resulting culture change go viral as leaders and teams choose to go through the training process in a time frame that works for them.

(Many programs and initiatives don’t succeed because the timing isn’t right for the participants.)

What You Can Do

As a psychologist, I am committed to behavior change. My goal is to help individuals change their actions and the interactions within their group. We know that no one is looking for more work to do, so we try to help teachers, staff, and administrators make sure their actions of encouragement are effective and efficient—that they spend time with those who value time, send notes to those who like receiving them, help out those who will be grateful for the assistance, and give a gift (and the right gift!) to someone who will appreciate the thought.

A key question, then, is, How do you know what your colleagues value? Do you just ask them? Probably not. In our culture, it’s not common for people to discuss how they feel appreciated. This type of question would typically make both the asker and the answerer feel uncomfortable.

But people do tend to think in terms of encouragement and discouragement. So you might ask, "When you’re discouraged, what is something that someone can do or say that would encourage you?" Even this question can feel weird to some, so you might consider creating an online survey asking people what kinds of encouragement and support they value most. Our [website](http://example.com) offers a variety of free resources on employees’ different languages of appreciation.

If you or your colleagues are exploring how to improve the morale in your school, consider the following:

**Commit to taking action.** Commit to do what you can to communicate your appreciation to others. Don't look to your supervisor, administration, or the district to take the lead. Start by doing what you can, where you are.

**Team up with others.** Any behavior change is more likely to occur (and to continue over time) when others are involved. Ask a friend, a colleague, your supervisor, or the team you lead to do some reading with you and discuss how what you read could apply to your setting. Commit to working on a plan of action together.

**Learn from others about what works and what doesn’t.** Other teachers, principals, administrators, and districts have tried a variety of employee recognition programs and activities—some of which have been helpful and others of which were a waste of time and energy. Learn from them.

**Persevere.** Most things that are worthwhile take time and effort. There will be obstacles or delays. You will try something, and it will "sort of" work. Learn from it, make corrections, and try again. And beware of programs that sound too good to be true.

Our experience has shown that true, significant change can occur in workplaces when the right people (which could mean anyone, regardless of position) implement the right actions (that is, authentic actions) at the right time (when people choose to and when they have the time and energy to commit to the process). I challenge you to give it a try and then enjoy the benefits of your actions!

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Paul White is a psychologist, speaker, and consultant who focuses on making work relationships work. He is the coauthor, with Gary Chapman, of *The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* (Northfield, 2011).

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