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Four Common Traits of Great School Cultures

This book was written while I served as a senior fellow at the Center for Education Reform (CER) in Washington, D.C. CER is an advocacy organization whose mission is to change laws, minds, and cultures so that good schools might flourish.

For more than fifteen years, CER has amassed one of the largest national repositories of primary and secondary literature on school performance. It was with access to these resources that the research team at CER and I examined close to 3,500 schools over the course of a year looking for mainstream-American schools that have not been widely promoted as examples of great school culture but whose cultures demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to strong character development and the teaching of the whole child.

From this initial pass, we identified nearly 350 high-performing schools with a reputation for instilling strong personal character. The goal in the end was to arrive at a set of

geographically, demographically and programmatically diverse schools that together could tell a larger story about how school cultures are formed and how they can be shaped in a very certain way to have the most positive effect on student outcomes.

HOW AND WHY THESE SCHOOLS WERE SELECTED

To arrive at the set of schools profiled here, we first removed schools that in our estimate pursue a more “programmatic” approach to character development—as opposed to developing a comprehensive school culture committed to strong character. Next, we removed many of the most storied schools in the country that have extraordinary school cultures that readers might dismiss as being “unscalable” or inapplicable to their circumstances—especially elite private schools and strict observance religious schools. At this stage, we also eliminated schools that some would identify as too “autocratic,” for example, military academies and reform schools, preferring instead to tell the story of schools where the moral order comes more from inside and is more explicitly voluntarily chosen.

From these, the team prepared a comparative study of thirty-nine schools in preparation for in-person school visits and interviews with the parents, students, faculty, and administrative leaders at each school. After my field visits were complete, I decided to profile the twelve schools featured here.

Altogether, they come from nine states in the north, south, east, west, and midwestern regions of the country. Ten of the twelve are public schools—two of these public schools are charters, three are magnets, and two of these magnets have a preferential option for the economically disadvantaged. The two private schools are both of religious orientation. These characteristics are summarized in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 Featured Schools

Name of School	Type	Students	Grades
Arlington Traditional, Arlington, VA	Public Magnet	442	PK–5
P.S. 124, New York, NY	Local Public	1143	PK–8
An Achievable Dream, Newport News, VA	Public Magnet	987	PK–12
Cotswold Elementary, Charlotte, NC	Public Magnet	499	K–5
Grayhawk Elementary, Scottsdale, AZ	Local Public	821	K–6
Atlantis Elementary, Port St. John, FL	Local Public	720	K–6
Benjamin Franklin, Franklin, MA	Public Charter	394	K–6
Hope Prima, Milwaukee, WI	Private	220	K–8
Providence St. Mel, Chicago, IL	Private	650	K–12
Harvest Park Middle School, Pleasanton, CA	Local Public	1129	6–8
Veritas Academy, Phoenix, AZ	Public Charter	322	6–12
Hinsdale Central H.S., Hinsdale, IL	Local Public	2624	9–12

Together, they serve the broadest range of diversity that is seen in American schooling: Four serve minority low-income students, three serve lower-middle to middle-income families, four serve middle- to upper-middle-income families, and one is almost a statistically perfect mix of minority, white, low-, middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-income children. Two are preK or kindergarten to fifth grade. Three are kindergarten to sixth grade. Two are preK or kindergarten to eighth grade. One is a middle school (6–8), one is a middle-high school (6–12), one is a high school (9–12), and two are preK or kindergarten to twelfth grade. The demographics of these schools are summarized in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Demographics of the Featured Schools

Name of School	Ethnicity					Median Income
	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Other	
Arlington Traditional, Arlington, VA	59	12	8	21	0	Medium
P.S. 124, New York, NY	3	21	36	40	0	Low
An Achievable Dream, Newport News, VA	1	2	96	0	0	Low
Cotswold Elementary, Charlotte, NC	45	11	43	0	0	Medium
Grayhawk Elementary, Scottsdale, AZ	88	3	2	7	0	Medium High
Atlantis Elementary, Port St. John, FL	81	5	6	0	7	Medium
Benjamin Franklin, Franklin, MA	89	1	1	8	0	Medium
Hope Prima, Milwaukee, WI	0	1	99	0	0	Low
Providence St. Mel, Chicago, IL	0	1	99	0	0	Low
Harvest Park Middle School, Pleasanton, CA	59	0	3	26	2	Medium High
Veritas Academy, Phoenix, AZ	91	5	1	0	3	Medium
Hinsdale Central H.S., Hinsdale, IL	81	4	3	12	0	High

All of these schools beat the competition in their local areas as far as academic and other student achievement is concerned. All of them far exceed the national performance levels for the populations they serve. Nine of the twelve would rank superior on any national ranking of any kind. Together, they are just a snapshot of the more than 115,000 schools in the country, but they are among the very best—for they aim only to bring the best out of their students—and they prove what is possible for every school in America.

FOUR COMMON TRAITS

The great value in the study of these schools is not in any general framework, but in the details. The beauty of these schools is in what they do and how they do it, so to understand them correctly, we have to address each of them on their own terms.

This is, after all, exactly what these schools teach us about children: If we do not address *who* they are first, we cannot hope to learn *what* they can do. For this reason, the great bulk of this book is dedicated to twelve school profiles that highlight some of the novel features of each school and focus on particular aspects or practices at the heart of that school's extraordinary school culture.

That said, these twelve schools and these twelve very particular profiles of them also tell a larger story about how school cultures are made, how school cultures form character, and how great school cultures harness character to drive achievement. To help the reader apply these lessons to their circumstances, the next chapter addresses each of these themes in brief. But first, a quick overview of what these schools have in common.

There are literally dozens of ways to organize the many common elements shared by the schools profiled in these pages. Their school cultures are often founded on similar or related principles, they regularly have like effects on their surrounding communities, and of course, they share many of the same practices. But in the words of the students, teachers, and

administrators who work in the great school cultures celebrated here, it is the following four traits that provide the most insight into what they have in common:

1. A strong belief that culture determines outcomes
2. A nurturing but demanding culture
3. A culture committed to student success
4. A culture of people, principles, and purpose

These four traits, however, do not surface one after the other to form a school culture—they are not steps or the means to a great school. Further, it is unclear whether these four traits emerge in differing degrees to shape schools of various quality. Whether these four traits are on display to some degree in lower-performing schools, I cannot say. But in great school cultures that form strong personal character, it is absolutely certain that they are all four in evidence—like a formula or a necessary pattern that once in place provides the occasion for all the benefits that follow.

1. A STRONG BELIEF THAT CULTURE DETERMINES OUTCOMES

All schools have an identity that affects the identity of the children in them. There is no other way to say this. In addition to what is explicitly taught, there is a great deal that is implicitly learned throughout the school day, and great school cultures work hard to make sure these teachings are consistent with what they value most. The immense amount of work required to intentionally shape a school culture has its origins in the strong belief that culture determines outcomes and that the work is worth it.

If you do not believe in the transformational influence that school culture has on everything and everyone in your school, then much that takes place around you will occur well outside your control because it will not be done *on purpose*.

Schools that most powerfully wish to shape their student outcomes through their school culture, therefore, take concrete steps to establish clear, outward expressions of this inward belief. It is only in knowing exactly what you *intend* for your school to achieve that you can begin to do it each and every day *on purpose*.

2. A NURTURING BUT DEMANDING CULTURE

How great school cultures make rigorous and regular demands on everyone associated with them without overplaying their hand or overstaying their welcome is perhaps the single most important quality to look for and understand in the school profiles that follow. They aim to achieve a perfect balance between a nurturing and demanding culture by *nurturing the person first* while looking for every opportunity to stretch the skills, attainments, and natural attributes of all their community members—parents, students, and teachers alike.¹

Excellence for these schools always means being the very best *you* can be. The goal is not a perfection of excellence but a *striving* to do *your* best, which means great school cultures begin nurturing the true character of each individual first.

Although each of these schools achieves this balance in various ways and through various devices, they do not attempt to plant the seed without first tilling the soil. A clear common trait across all of these schools is that they focus on establishing *authentic relationships* between students and their teachers before they expect those teachers to be able to make authentic and worthy demands of their students.

3. A CULTURE COMMITTED TO STUDENT SUCCESS

The students in the schools celebrated here possess a number of remarkable qualities with astonishing regularity. They are effective communicators, enthusiastic learners,

and emerging leaders. As we will see in a moment, they are confident team players who learn to take intelligent risks. But above all else, they are joyful, cheerful, and happy. This is how they are described by their teachers, by their families, and by themselves.

Students in great school cultures understand the adults in their lives want them to succeed. It is precisely because so many influential adults assume their success and are demonstrably committed to their individual achievement that the students in these schools learn to accept the sacrifices of hard work and learn to desire the great good that can come of it. But it is equally important that students are given *specific means to succeed*, so in the schools profiled here, students are given specific tools to help them *do* the things that are expected of them.

Schools are for children. Classrooms must be student centered. This is not a learned educational philosophy but a simple truth. For students to learn well, teachers must teach well, which means they must be passionate about great teaching and committed to continually learning how best to connect with each of their students through the subject matter in question and through the particular needs of each child. Above all else, this is what it means for a school culture to be committed to student success.

4. A CULTURE OF PEOPLE, PRINCIPLES, AND PURPOSE

The schools profiled here are celebrated for doing their work *on purpose* as opposed to so many others that are not so intentional in their action, principled in their outlook, or purpose driven from the start. For each of these schools, it takes extraordinary people—with actions that are directed by clear principles—to create a school culture that knows what it is doing and achieves its goals on purpose.

But let us not understate what we mean. School cultures do not become great simply by doing what they set out to do. Rather, greatness comes when they invite the opportunity for greatness in others, when they demand principled action and genuinely encourage their students to pursue *life's purpose*. Today, this means that schools once again need to become places that teach about the true, the good, and the beautiful, and to do so, they must create an environment in which the true, the good, and the beautiful can be experienced firsthand.

To understand these four common traits more fully, let us turn now to consider how great school cultures are created.