

What Makes a Great School?

Parents often ask me what is my vision for successful education. My response always relates to high quality teaching and learning founded upon high quality inter-personal relationships. Successful schools rely on recruiting, retaining and supporting good teachers. Successful schools have minimal personal conflict and maximum personal happiness and satisfaction. Successful schools are also learning schools – they understand the value of self-improvement and continually strive to improve teaching quality.

I would like to share what I believe to be the eight underpinnings for a successful (great if you prefer) and evolving school. In no particular order, they are:

1. A Community of Learners

An effective school for me is a place where everyone is teaching and learning – simultaneously, under the same roof. Students are teaching and learning, teachers are teaching and learning and senior leaders are teaching and learning. Schools are not merely a place where the adults are learned and students are learners. A successful school needs to focus on continuous school improvement resulting in improved student outcomes – both academic and personal. Internal action research groups are critical in monitoring these outcomes.

2. Collegiality

My experience in a wide range of schools suggests that the quality of adult relationships within a school has more to do with the quality and character of the school, and with the accomplishments of students, than any other factor. Staff at any school need to get on well with each other, readily share their skills and knowledge and actively help each other become better.

3. A Willingness to Explore New Ideas

New ideas should never be viewed as a nuisance because they are too hard or difficult, they should be viewed as a sign of life! If we are serious about learning for ourselves, and others, then we also need to take risks. We will never know how things might change a school for the better unless we are prepared to take risks and make mistakes that we can learn from.

4. Respect for Diversity

Schools are full of different people – teachers, parents, students – they have different ethnicities, abilities, interests and backgrounds. Valuing those differences, and I strongly believe New Zealand schools are good at this, helps make any school a more enriching learning environment.

5. A Culture of Inquiry

It is critical to engender a philosophical, inquiry-based culture within a school. 'Why' questions are always powerful learning devices – teachers in a successful school won't believe in the 'empty head' model of knowledge acquisition where information is deposited by the teacher. We should always encourage independent and inter-dependent learning.

6. Humour

A lot of funny things happen in schools yet often they can be taken too seriously and the humour of the situation is lost. People learn and develop through humour. I always tried to make an effort to elicit and cultivate humour – we all know laughter is the best medicine. Any staffroom should be alive with the sound of laughter and camaraderie.

7. A Community of Leaders

One definition of leadership I read and like says, “to make happen that in which you believe.” Everyone, therefore, should get a chance to be a leader at school. Providing leadership opportunities for both staff and students needs to be a focus in any school.

8. Low Anxiety and High Standards

Considerable research suggests that attention, learning performance, retention and recall all diminish when the anxiety of the learner is high. I believe lower anxiety levels are best achieved if students, through their holistic teaching and learning programmes, get an appropriate balance in their life.

A successful school education should be as much about building character, resilience, and a healthy mind and body as it is in achieving high academic grades.

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