

Taking Action to Improve the Learning Environment

To identify your first steps in improving your school's learning environment, prioritize the most important, "non-negotiable" components of your new system and expectations. Your very first step should be a quick win - something easy to change that will excite and motivate your school community. To identify this step, ask:

- What issues currently exist in my learning environment?
- What change can be made within our school that will create the most difference with the least effort?

Look for changes that are easy to implement and will lead to rapid improvement. Avoid complex, controversial changes. From this quick win, prioritize other actions to implement a culture change in your school.

Case Study: Starting Small

In Principal Scott Syverson's high school, most students would linger in the hallways after the bell signaled the start of class. This habit was the first thing that Principal Syverson decided to fix to signal a shift in the school learning environment.

With his leadership team, Principal Syverson determined that every adult in the school needed to be in the halls during passing periods to hustle students to class - and that any teacher in the building could ask a student to go to the right place.

Principal Syverson went into the hallway during passing periods to model what he expected and to have the staff see him working to improve the school along with them.

This new system made the adults accountable for late students. If Syverson saw a student in the hallway when they shouldn't be, he would ask what class they were missing - and then follow up later with the teacher.

Soon, every student was in their seats when the bell rang.

Committing to Change

Changes to a school learning environment stick when they become habit and routine. Consistency is not glamorous - but a vision transforms an environment through continuity and coherence.

Stand by your new culture and your promises.

- If you promise to have lunch with the student council every Friday, stick to your word. If you decide that each student will receive a handshake every morning, wait outside at 7:00 am, rain or or shine. Be persistent. Be relentless. This is the hard work.

Hold your community to the same high expectations.

- Ensure that all adults are consistently applying and enforcing the expectations and consequences.
- When staff aren't consistent, be open and honest when reminding them of the systems the school has put into place. If a teacher is speaking to a student in a way that perfectly captures the new language of your school, compliment her. If you observe an action that is not in line with your school culture, remind the teacher of the new expectations, follow-up later, then schedule a meeting if the problems persist.
- This attention to detail, and practice of holding your community accountable for the new expectations, ensures that the new culture becomes habit instead of slowly drifting away.

Create a school-wide expectation that the community will work together.

- Once everyone in your school knows the school-wide systems, they can help each other to enact them. If a school custodian sees a student run through the halls, she is expected to stop the student - and has the words and support to do so.
- Some schools design practices to support these cross-school expectations - for example, a classroom chart to collect compliments from other teachers.
- Encourage and expect teachers to support students that are not in their classes, and to enforce the new school values themselves.