LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Houston Kraft

How Behavior Creates School Culture

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Houston Kraft, Cofounder of CharacterStrong

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, "Equipping Educators to Meet the Moment" was our most recent theme for The CharacterStrong National Conference. What does it truly mean?

To answer this, we need to understand the definition of "equip." According to Google, "equip" has two parts: supplying necessary items for a particular purpose and preparing someone mentally for a specific situation or task. This duality perfectly encapsulates the current needs we have in education - we require both tools and training.

Consider this: having tools without training is like carrying a heavy pack filled with useful items but lacking the knowledge to use them. Conversely, training without tools leaves us well-prepared but unequipped to handle practical challenges. In education, we need both to truly meet the demands of our time.

Each year, we survey the educators we serve to understand their needs better. This year, 678 respondents, including staff members, school counselors, principals, and district leaders, highlighted their top pain points:

1. Student mental health

2. Disruptive behavior

3. Attendance and engagement

4. Staff buy-in

5. Student discipline

Notably, Four out of these Five Issues are Behavior-Related

So, what does it mean to be equipped for these challenges? It means understanding behavior deeply—how to navigate, support, and respond to it. At CharacterStrong, we equate behavior with culture, drawing from James C. Hunter's definition: "Culture is how group members actually behave repeatedly and habitually." Culture isn't just a mission statement or values on a wall; it's the collective behavior of the group.

Phil Boyte, an expert in school culture, frames it well, "You either have a school culture by default or by design." Group behavior is your culture, whether you're paying attention or not. The question is, are we intentional about shaping it?

To shape group culture, we must recognize that it is a collection of individual behaviors. Personal behavior, or character, is formed by thousands of daily choices, which collectively shape the culture of a classroom or campus. Therefore, the behaviors we want on our campuses—kindness, for example—require both common language and intentional action.

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Skills Create Character

1. **Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation:** When students and educators develop self-awareness, they become more attuned to their own emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. Self-regulation follows, allowing individuals to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.

2. **Empathy and Social Awareness:** Empathy enables individuals to understand and share the feelings of others, fostering compassion and consideration. Social awareness involves understanding social cues and dynamics, which is essential for building respectful and inclusive relationships. These skills contribute to the development of character traits like kindness, respect, and integrity.

3. **Responsible Decision-Making:** Making ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behavior is a key aspect of character. When individuals are equipped with strong decision-making skills, they are more likely to act in ways that reflect their values and the collective good.

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Character Shapes School Culture

Defined by the sum of individual behaviors, character directly influences school culture. Here's how:

1. **Modeling Positive Behaviors:** When students and educators exhibit strong character traits, they model positive behaviors for others. This modeling creates a ripple effect, encouraging similar behaviors throughout the school community.

2. **Creating a Respectful Environment:** Character-driven behaviors foster an environment of respect, trust, and safety. This environment is crucial for effective teaching and learning, as it reduces conflicts, bullying, and disruptive behavior.

3. **Encouraging Inclusivity and Belonging:** A culture built on empathy and social awareness promotes inclusivity and a sense of belonging. When individuals feel valued and understood, they are more engaged and committed to the community.

Intentional Design of School Culture

By intentionally fostering social-emotional learning, we can design a school culture that supports every student and educator:

1. **Integrating SEL into Curriculum:** Embedding social-emotional learning into the curriculum ensures that students regularly practice and develop these skills. Lessons and activities focused on SEL can be incorporated into daily routines and academic subjects.

2. **Professional Development for Educators:** Providing educators with training in SEL equips them with the tools to support their development and to teach these skills effectively. Educators can model SEL competencies, creating a consistent and reinforcing environment for students.

3. **Creating Supportive Policies and Practices:** Policies that prioritize mental health, well-being, and character development contribute to a positive school culture. Practices such as restorative justice, peer mentoring, and community-building activities reinforce the importance of SEL and character.

4. **Building a Common Language:** Establishing a common language around social-emotional skills and character helps create a shared understanding and commitment to these values. It enables consistent communication and reinforces the collective goals of the school community.

5. **Celebrating Positive Behavior:** Recognizing and celebrating acts of kindness, empathy, and responsible decision-making reinforces the desired behaviors. Celebrations can include awards, shout-outs, and showcasing positive stories in school communications.

Creating a culture of kindness isn't accidental; it requires deliberate, proactive effort. Our goal at CharacterStrong is to equip educators with tools and training. To help everyone understand that social-emotional skills build character, and character builds school culture.

By fostering these skills that live beneath the behavior, we can intentionally design a school culture that supports every student and educator.

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Houston Kraftis a speaker, curriculum maker, and kindness advocate. In 2016, Houston cofounded CharacterStrong providing curriculum and trainings that transform the way schools teach social-emotional learning, character education, and kindness.. This piece was reprinted with Houston's kind permission. We celebrate his important voice in education and beyond and the impact his work is having on all of us!