



*Regie Routman leads voluntary professional development in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 2014.*

## Creating a Culture of Trust

By Regie Routman

*High achievement and good test scores are a byproduct of a healthy, thriving school culture.* It took me two decades of teaching, coaching, and mentoring in underperforming schools to fully appreciate that teachers, leaders, and students cannot maintain energy and focus on improving instruction and raising achievement without a whole school of trusting relationships. In fact, trust between and among teachers, principals, and parents is the greatest predictor of substantial improvement in student achievement. (Kirp, 2013) However, in the high stakes world of teaching, if school culture—and trust, in particular—is considered as a factor in school improvement, it's usually in a supporting role not a leading one. Yet, a thriving culture helps any organization succeed and is a major factor in why people choose to stay. In schools, it is the knowledgeable and respectful principal who is the key player in building the caring

and professional relationships that are necessary for whole school achievement and wellbeing.

## The Role of Principal Leadership

In this article, I highlight three principals and the impact of their leadership on school culture and teacher and student success. I worked closely with each of these principals over a number of years in weeklong residencies. The residencies centered on improving reading and/or writing through demonstration teaching and coaching, applying an Optimal Learning Model to instruction, coaching principals in instructional walks, establishing Leadership Teams, and instituting ongoing Professional *Literacy* Communities (PLCs) (Routman, 2014). Residencies in many diverse schools have revealed 10 practices as essential to schoolwide literacy improvement.

### 10 Actions That Promote High Trust and Achievement

1. Celebration of strengths and successes
2. A collective sense of responsibility for all students and staff
3. High expectations for all learners (teachers, students, and principal)
4. Common language and shared beliefs that align with research-based practices
5. Continuous professional learning centered on authentic and relevant work to increase student learning
6. Implementation of a viable curriculum with accompanying first rate resources and texts
7. Meaningful and respectful conversations and feedback that move learning forward
8. Coaching that leaves the learner with "I can do it!" feeling
9. Promoting ongoing assessment, mostly formative
10. Sensible and practical use and application of data

Taken together, these actions foster trusting relationships, which builds capital when tough issues arise. Successful principals lead by encouragement, not intimidation, and teachers willingly try harder and teach better when they trust and admire their leaders.



*Kim Ball*

When Kim Ball took over Sandy Grade School in Sandy, OR as principal, the high poverty elementary school was failing to successfully teach students to read and write. A small rural school with a 50% rate of transiency and a growing English Language learner population, the culture of the school was one of fear, anxiety, and dissention. According to the director of curriculum and instruction and many of the teachers, trust levels and expectations for what students could accomplish were dismally low, and most teachers did not work well together. Data on writing achievement, including standardized tests and formative assessments, confirmed students were on average about two years below grade level. Improving the teaching of writing became the schoolwide focus.

Kim Ball's laser focus on demolishing the negative culture of the school began with her openness, listening without judgment, and deliberate efforts to create a climate of high trust and respect. She connected with each teacher by taking the time to listen to his or

her hopes and concerns and to get to know them. Kim's instructional walks into classrooms became a highlight of the day for many teachers. In particular, well-planned professional learning, application of the Optimal Learning Model (OLM), and responsive teaching replaced low expectations and "random acts of professional development." Joy in teaching and learning began to nourish a growing collaborative and trusting culture. The result after two years was greatly increased writing achievement and recognition by the state of Oregon as one of the state's top 5% performing Title 1 schools. Kim Ball's leadership showed it was possible to quickly improve the culture of a dysfunctional school and make it a thriving one, which gives much hope for change in similar schools.

I have had the privilege of working closely with three of the four principals that Sandy Grade has had in the past five years. Despite the disruption and normal setbacks that occur with too much change in too short a time period, the writing gains have held. Teachers say, "That's where the joy is." In fact, writing scores on standardized tests are where most students have excelled. Typical writing samples at most grade levels go beyond the Common Core State Standards expectations. Almost every teacher became a highly effective writing teacher under Kim Ball's leadership and high trust culture, and that writing expertise continues to be passed on to teachers new to the school through teacher mentoring. While the school still has much work to do in reading, they are "cautiously optimistic" about moving forward with their latest principal.

Kate Gordon, who has been a literacy coach and reading specialist at Sandy Grade School since (2008) describes Kim Ball's leadership this way:

She genuinely cared for us as people, even those teachers who were struggling. She modeled for us how to care for each other in a school where there had been a lot of backbiting and conflict. She didn't see conflict as a problem; she faced it head on as something we would tackle together. She was straightforward and honest at all times but also kind. Even in hard conversations, you left feeling whole.

She allowed herself to be a learner and be vulnerable. Everyone knew how smart she was, but she wasn't afraid to seek expertise if she needed it. She sought help from all of us. She trusted her staff and we trusted her.

Her instructional walks were instrumental in building that trust for the whole school. She was in classrooms a lot, noticed teachers' strengths and gave immediate, positive feedback. But she also was not afraid to say if something needed improvement. She had high expectations and expected us to do better, but she was always there to help us and to celebrate our accomplishments.

She pushed us to be more reflective and better teachers. She took an active role in our professional development. She had great respect for the Leadership Team who met with her weekly to plan and carry out the professional learning. The staff really valued the weekly professional learning. They knew we didn't have "an agenda"; it was their agenda based on our schoolwide literacy focus and their needs and students' needs. Everyone invested in the work we were doing. If PD meetings ran over, everyone voluntarily stayed. The work was that important.

Kim Ball, who is now the high school principal in the same district, comments on how she transferred key practices to the secondary level.

When I become a high school principal I took every bit of what I learned as an elementary principal and employed it to support academic growth. In our professional development time we studied the Optimal Learning Model and how we could immediately apply what we had learned to better outcomes for students. I began instructional walks the next day providing positive feedback to teachers on the implementation of what we had learned.

Daily instructional walks have been critical for moving our school forward. There are so many terrific things going on in classrooms that teachers should be celebrated for! When teachers know you recognize and respect what they are doing, it is easier for them to hear and incorporate suggestions to enhance their practice. Honoring teachers' talents, creating access for them to teach each other, and doing everything in your power to fulfill their needs bonds the school team together.

Marilyn Jerde, Principal, Arapahoe Ridge Elementary School, Westminster, CO,  
2000-2005



*Marilyn Jerde*

Marilyn Jerde's first year as principal at Arapahoe Ridge, a diverse, K-5 suburban school outside urban Denver, was also the start of a residency model to improve literacy. The residency work was prompted by lower than expected achievement in reading comprehension on state tests. After two years of a focus to improve reading, district and state assessments indicated the school had gone from mid-level achievement in reading to high-level achievement. While continuing its reading emphasis, the school shifted its professional development focus to writing and the reading/writing connection. The school became so cohesive, collaborative, and high achieving under Marilyn Jerde's leadership that it became a literacy hub school where other schools in the district came to learn from and with the principal and teachers. Marilyn went on to become the Director of Elementary Education for Westminster, CO and presently works mentoring principals in a leadership program at Denver University.

After Marilyn left Arapahoe Ridge, she was followed by a first-time principal who successfully respected and built upon the academic success and existing culture for six years. Two more principals followed, the most recent taking the helm in fall 2014. Significantly, over fourteen years the overall reading and writing achievement gains of the school have held, even with many staff changes, a shift in population that includes more students receiving free and reduced lunch and many more second language learners. A core of the original staff--about six teachers are still there--continue to mentor new teachers coming on board.

Cami KostECKi has been a teacher at Arapahoe Ridge since 2001. She began as a second grade teacher and has spent the last decade teaching grade 4. She describes Marilyn Jerde's time at her school as "the golden age."

We were a team; we believed in each other. There was very little back fighting or meanness. Everybody trusted and encouraged each other. On Sunday nights, I would always be so excited thinking, "Oh, I get to go to work tomorrow!" It was where we all wanted to be.

I recently interviewed Cami KostECKi (August 2014) and asked her what it was that Marilyn Jerde did as principal that contributed to that "golden age." In her own words and chosen topics, Cami talks about where and how Marilyn Jerde excelled:

### ***Relationships***

She was a master at making people feel valued, never judged. She was there to help you in any way she could. You always knew you'd gain something from your time with her and be able to apply it right away. You knew she cared about the kids and the staff. She also had a way of knowing you, not intimate things, but personal things that made you feel good. Also, celebrations were a part of every gathering, and everyone loved that.

### ***Knowledge***

You knew she was smart and that she knew instruction and how to teach. She knew what she was talking about; yet she was humble and she was a learner. She understood what we do as teachers. She didn't obsess over tests. She put the data in perspective. She was more student-

driven, not data-driven. She knew the data was important but we looked at the whole student first.

### ***Professional Learning***

Professional learning was the foundation of the school. She made it relevant, timely, focused, coherent, and it really was important. It was central to everything we were doing. We met every week on our early release day for almost two hours.

### ***Sense of humor***

She's a great storyteller. We all love her stories. She can laugh at the situation and laugh at herself. It makes life a lot easier.

### ***Charisma***

There's something that draws you to her. People who have worked with her talk about what a great time they had working with her. She has a quality that makes you want to do your best for her. She brings out the best in every person. You want to improve and it's not just for higher test scores.

When I asked Marilyn what she thought she did that contributed to her success as principal, she made the following comments, which I organized into topics:

### ***Credibility***

Above all, teachers knew I was knowledgeable about literacy and leadership and that our professional learning was relevant, reflective, and well planned. Teachers appreciated that I placed high importance on being in classrooms regularly and that I paid close attention to the positive things I observed. I got to know all teachers well, and not just as teachers but as people with busy lives. Also, I placed great importance on maintaining a high level of confidentiality.

### ***Decision Making***

I was clear and transparent about what needed to be a principal decision and what could appropriately be a team decision, and staff appreciated that.

## ***Fairness***

Everyone was treated the same. I didn't play favorites. As a principal, I was aware that everyone is watching what you do; I made an effort to treat everyone equally and fairly.

## ***Difficult conversations***

I was never hesitant, when necessary, to have "fierce conversations", especially those related to a child's learning challenges or a teacher's instructional practices. I tried to ensure all my interactions with teachers were thoughtful, respectful, and professional, but I never softened or conditioned important messages.

## ***Honoring Teachers' Requests***

I made time for teachers whenever it was needed. I took all their concerns seriously and always found a way to meet their needs whether it was a schedule change, resources, a coaching need, or help with a child. I ran interference with difficult parents. I did everything I could and as quickly as I could to support teachers. I believe my support of them made them feel that who they are and what they do matters.

## **Sue Marlatt, Principal, Strathmillan School, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2004-present**

Strathmillan School is a K-5 school with a diverse population including students who are second language learners, students who live with foster families, and many students who face behavioral and emotional challenges. Under Sue Marlatt's steady leadership, the school has always had as its priority "becoming a literacy strong school." Their strong focus on writing began in 2010 as part of a Manitoba initiative. Connected to that initiative, I conducted a writing residency in her school in 2013 and 2014; a third residency will take place in the spring of 2015. Sue notes that the biggest changes that have occurred include:

- Raising expectations for what kids can accomplish
- Establishing shared beliefs and common language and understandings
- Writing for authentic audiences and purposes
- Students' stamina for writing

- Teachers and students being “incredibly excited” about writing
- A deeper focus on the pedagogy of writing.

Sue also notes, “There’s been a movement from ‘This is important to me for my children’ to ‘This is important to us for our children.’”



*Sue Marlatt*

Sue comments on the changes:

Who’s the writing for and what’s the purpose of the writing has changed everything we do. We’re no longer writing just because it’s writing time. Kids can’t wait to write now. They’re excited to share their stories and have their writing celebrated. Where kids had previously been writing just a couple of sentences in first grade, they are now writing chapter books for readers. The number of books being published just exploded after the residency! With proper frontloading and support, almost every student is now ready to do the writing. We make sure we do enough shared writing and guided practice before releasing kids to write. We have far fewer reluctant writers than we’ve ever had. In fact, kids can’t get enough writing!

One thing that has improved the writing is that staff sees that I'm a learner too. I try to teach every day in classrooms. I'm honest with them about the work being hard, but worthwhile. It's not easy. While I've always been actively involved in classrooms, what makes a huge difference now is that I am much more intentional and knowledgeable. I know why I'm visiting, what to look for, and how to support teachers. Also, I let staff know what I expect to see in every classroom, for example, organization of student writing and writing beliefs posted.

Sue always had the trust of most of her staff, but that was not initially the case for a few teachers.

I learned I had to slow down and acknowledge the work of teachers, even those moving very slowly. I moved too quickly at first in wanting those teachers to improve. Once I began to notice the good in what they were doing, it paved the way for them becoming better teachers. With newly established trust, they asked for my help. I modeled for them what I expected to see, such as shared writing. I coached them, we co-taught lessons, and gave each other feedback. We became true partners in the teaching-learning process.

## In Conclusion

School achievement gains can be fragile and fleeting. A school's sense of wellbeing can dissipate quickly, which can cause morale and test scores to drop despite a focus on learning outcomes and implementation of high standards. Successful principals recognize the importance of intentionally working on building a culture of trust and professional learning every single day. Former principal Marilyn Jerde advises: "Tread lightly, respect what's there, and honor what's in place even if some things need to change. When principals move too fast, teachers see it as not honoring their work and efforts."

Finally, high achieving schools are places where teachers and students are joyful about the learning and the work. Deep engagement and curiosity are the norm along with students and teachers as self-directed learners. The work can be exhausting, but inventive principals strive to ensure it's also exhilarating. As one teacher noted when talking about her principal: "I've never worked harder in my life, but it's the best and

most important work I've ever done. And it's not just the students who are thriving. I'm thriving as a learner too."

## References

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