

CHAPTER 1



Building Community . . . The Foundation for Excellence

*No society can remain vital or even survive
without a reasonable base of shared values.*

*Where community exists, it confers upon its
members, identity, a sense of belonging, a measure
of security. A community has the power to motivate
its members to exceptional performance. Community
can set standards of expectations for the individual
and provide the climate in which great things happen.*

—JOHN W. GARDNER, FORMER
PROFESSOR, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Eight Habits of the Heart for Educators

Building community is the foundation for any successful educational journey. Academic initiatives and educational resources of every kind will have little impact until the framework for building community is established. In his remarks above, John W. Gardner, who was U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare during the civil rights movement, offers us an insightful look at what happens when community is in place: All members feel safe and encouraged to do—and be—their very best, both individually and together.

Today, the concept of building community in schools is rather widespread, but real school communities are far less commonplace. We all know the value of community. Recently, however, we have mistakenly thought that community would “happen” automatically while we gave our time and attention to the applications of systems and programs. And in so thinking, we removed ourselves from this very important field of play. Drs. Thomas Lickona and Marvin Berkowitz, character education research specialists, tell me that caring environments are just as essential to learning in the 21st century as they were when I was a boy growing up in Glen Allan, Mississippi. This is not to downplay the importance of technology to the learning process but rather to play up the importance of our continued personal role in ensuring the presence of good community in our schools and on our playgrounds.

Although the title of this book is *Eight Habits of the Heart for Educators*, as I see it, building a school community is the master plan for our project. If we take the school community as our blueprint, then the Eight Habits of the Heart—behaviors I found modeled in the Mississippi Delta community where I grew up—are the construction materials:

Nurturing Attitude

Responsibility

Dependability

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Friendship

Brotherhood

High Expectations

Courage

Hope

They're great building blocks, but we may not achieve the result we want unless we have a blueprint. Obviously, we also need the glue or mortar, if you like, to assemble the materials, and to me, the glue is the spirit of unselfishness that was pervasive in the environment of my youth and in the schools I attended, a spirit that remains available in these times.

So before we talk about the Eight Habits in detail, it seems to me, we should have an idea in our heads of where we're going and the general direction we need to head in order to get there. In this chapter, we'll take a close look at what a school community looks like: What do you need to turn your school into a community where not only students but educators, too, will thrive? Then, in Chapter 2, we turn to unselfishness—what I call “the human touch”—and how that can be a force to bring us together. Finally, in Chapter 3, I'll tell you how the Eight Habits of the Heart came to be and why I think the lessons I learned on the Mississippi Delta so long ago can help you transform your schools. In each chapter of this book, you'll find some opportunities to participate in the project of building community at your school. I hope you'll find them useful.

The core of this book is based on my experiences in Glen Allan, Mississippi, in the 1950s. Back then, educators seemed to know instinctively just how to create a community in which their students could thrive. They knew who their students were, and our names constituted more than an attendance roll. Our teachers identified with our lives. They made it a point to know our families, and parents were welcomed

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visitors within our school. In spite of negative remarks others may have made about us—those who didn't care to know us—our teachers knew we had the capabilities to become great people, and their lesson plans and daily conversations reflected their vision for our future.

It was a time when *service learning*—doing for others—was commonplace, and learning about the nation in which we lived was expected and welcomed. Our teachers didn't call it "character education," but their expectations for good behavior were everywhere. They'd often say, "Find you a good pattern and cut your life out by it." Looking back, I can honestly say that it was indeed a visionary time, although it was also marked by a social system that had not yet matured to fully embrace our shared humanity. However, my schoolmates and I were fortunate because of educators who continued to plan for a great future. Miss Maxey, my first-grade teacher, started the process for me. Let me tell you a little about the day I met her.

 **From the Front Porch**

School started in early September in the 1950s, and the sun was still hot in the Mississippi Delta while the humidity, as always, showered us like rain. For the first time, I was facing the monumental task of leaving the safety and comfort of my great-grandparents' home for my very first day at school. My great-grandparents, Poppa Joe and Mama Pearl, were clearly excited about my adventure, but their enthusiasm had not yet trickled down to me.

I didn't want to go. I might have stayed all day in my small bedroom, but the smell of cured ham gently led me out to the sunporch where both my great-grandparents were waiting with smiles. As soon as I had eaten my breakfast—not only Poppa's cured ham, but grits, hot biscuits, and molasses—Mama Pearl eagerly led me to her bedroom, where she pointed out my new clothes laid out on the bed: long blue jeans, a long-sleeved plaid shirt, and,

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worst of all, new high-top shoes. Mama Pearl stood beaming by the foot of the iron bed. Poppa yelled from the sunporch, "Boy, you like your new stuff?" Mama Pearl answered for me, "Sure he does."

I said nothing. It was hot, and all I could see were winter clothes. At that moment, the world that I had known all my young life ended. I was afraid. School was for the big children, not for me. Nevertheless, I got dressed, and Mama Pearl and I set out for school. As I walked slowly behind her, Mama Pearl kept calling out to me to run and catch up. Inevitably, I did. With the Glen Allan "Colored School" in sight, Mama Pearl walked even faster, so excited you'd have thought *she* was going to school. She was full of talk about what she saw, and when she got to the school, she immediately grabbed my hand and walked me to the teacher, who was standing in the front door with the biggest smile I'd ever seen.

Miss Maxey, the teacher, welcomed Mama Pearl and me and reached out and shook my hand. "Go on in. Go on in," Mama Pearl kept saying, so I did. Once I was inside, Miss Maxey pointed out cousins and friends on the playground and showed me where I would be sitting, right by the big window. And then she gave me my very own book and talked with me about how much fun learning would be. She worked her teacher magic on me, and my fear began to go away.

On my first day of school, I left a place where I was safe and well loved—a little fearfully, I'll admit—for another place where I would be safe and well loved. Miss Maxey welcomed me inside, showed me that people I knew were already there, gave me my own place, and spoke to me—one to one—about all the interesting things we would be doing together. Poppa Joe, Mama Pearl, and Miss Maxey built *community* for me, a secure and welcoming world where I could set my fears aside and think beyond the only life I had known.

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I grew up in a world that was far less than perfect. In an era of segregated education, what were then referred to as “colored schools” had secondhand books; their students weren’t invited to participate in library events, and we were sometimes called names by those in authority; some of us had to leave school to work whenever the cotton farmers came for us. But these negative influences were held at bay because the caring community would have it no other way. Our teachers paid no heed to Jim Crow, the legal and social laws that were designed to foster thoughts of inferiority. The teachers were guided by their vision of who we were and who we could become. Our teachers stretched our imagination, protected us in our uncertain world, and set us out on a course to achieve great things. Educators can have no higher goals.

How can you make your students feel welcome in your school?

How can you boost your students’ view of themselves?

How can you protect your students from today’s problems?

Today, there are still many students who need a new and positive view of themselves—and educators who can help them achieve this vision. Educators still know how important it is for students to have their minds fully engaged if they are to grasp the lessons and to make the connections between what they’re learning and their daily lives, to say nothing of their future plans. You must set out with the intention of building an environment essential to growing and developing students’ lives in the most positive manner possible. The process of doing so will affect your work as educators, and the academic returns for your students will be worth your commitment of time, energy, resources, and creativity.

In addition, as you build a community for your students, they will see a model that they, too, can use to build community among their peers. Positive behavior and healthy relationships will develop among your students as they become engaged in the principles required to build community. Being fully engaged can be impeded by numerous

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barriers and roadblocks: feeling insecure, being bullied, and having low self-esteem, as well as reading and comprehension challenges, medical conditions, and the lack of support from a parent or caregiver. A good caring community provides a safe place for honest communication, the first step in eliminating or reducing the roadblocks to full engagement.

But how do we get there from here? This remains the challenge. It's not easy to focus on building community when the school day presents so many demands if educators are to meet local, state, and federal requirements. Community in schools will not show up on its own, however. You must define the community you want for your classroom and your school; this is a critical first step toward understanding what you will need to do to build and maintain it.

As an educator, you have the lead role. You are the one out front with the title, the position, and the influence. Community building can start with you and your willingness to put forth the effort on a daily basis in spite of all the other challenges you face. But you do have help, and much of it will come from your fellow educators. You can start by asking them to join with you in imagining a new school community and in listing all the things they believe are needed—on a personal level—to make that dream come true.

In educator workshops I hold around the country, participants are asked to come up with a personal definition of a productive caring school community and then—the tough part—to create one group definition from their individual input. At first, they appear reluctant to give up any part of their individual definition. But left with little choice, they soon begin to talk among themselves, find common ground, and develop a group definition of community that reflects all their input. Here's one group's list:

What possibilities do you see in the faces of your students?

How do you ignore the negativity surrounding many of their lives?

How do you propose to make each student in your class feel?

*Eight Habits of the Heart for Educators***In an Ideal School Community . . .**

- There is consistent opportunity to invite, nurture, achieve, and reach full potential respectfully.
- Everyone respects others, fosters growth, and appreciates diversity while being nurturers and lifelong learners.
- There is an eager exchange of thought, where values and opinions are respected, modeled, and accepted.
- Diverse groups share goals, knowledge, and opportunity with support and encouragement from each other.
- Everyone demonstrates respect and cooperation, providing for interdependence among the members, while allowing for uniqueness and creativity.
- Members foster intrinsic motivation in an accepting and nurturing environment—one that values excellence and encourages all to achieve their maximum potential.

In our workshops, this exercise does several things. First, it points out that educators all have their own ideas of what a good community should look like. Second, by having to create a group definition, the participants recognize the value of communication and discover that one mosaic can be created from many thoughts—an ideal that now bears all their signatures. This exercise also bonds educators who may not have known each other before the workshop, and afterward, I notice a freer flow of information among them. They ask questions of each other, and they laugh and touch each other. By defining community together, they also discover values they have in common.

I have also noticed that many of the group definitions look the same, although they come from different sets of educators from different parts of the country and the world. If providing the best for children is at the center of their thinking, it doesn't matter if educators

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are from Alaska, Central America, South Carolina, or South Dakota—they all seem to think along the same lines.

Opportunity to Build Community in Your School

- Personally define your ideal teaching/learning community—using twelve words or less.
- Invite another educator or two to join you by creating their personal definitions of community.
- Once you have more than one definition, create a group definition.

Can you live with and celebrate the new definition?

Once the ideal community is defined, the next steps are vastly important. How do you bring the ideal to life? How do you move this task beyond intellectual conversations? What will be required of each individual educator? What tools will you use? How can you do this in spite of the obstacles or barriers in your way?

Educators Just Like You . . . Building a School Community

Dr. Delores Saunders, a member of the Department of Defense Educational Administration team in Frankfurt, Germany, and most recently a former president of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, asked me to help them build community within the military schools in Europe, parts of Asia, and Central America. She especially wanted teachers to understand that community could not be left to chance. Educators had a dual responsibility not only to teach the required curriculum but to build the necessary climate for that curriculum's

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success. Dr. Vicki Lake, now a professor at Florida State University, was assigned to work with me.

As Dr. Lake remembers those days,

Four of us worked for two weeks that summer to create this curriculum. The next school year we took the show on the road, so to speak, and fine-tuned the faculty module. Our premise was to start with the adults in the school, create a caring community, then come back and work with individual classrooms.

Workshops were designed. Training took place and the idea of building community within school became a topic of priority. Over time, we were all able to see the impact of the community being built, as educators first embraced each other and then reached out to parents, staff, and the community, all for the benefit of the children. The future of the children became the center of focus as it was in Glen Allan, Mississippi, when I grew up. Specific side benefits of impacting student behavior and character development also emerged as this building community curriculum was put in place. I began to see that when community exists within schools, students dream; grades improve and so does behavior. This last item—discipline—was a particular interest of Dr. Lake:

I had always struggled with the dichotomy of the rewards-and-punishment classroom management system and my obligation and duty toward young children to empower them by teaching and modeling pro-social skills. My school wanted me to use a discipline model that starts with a warning, name on the board, loss of recess or time out, etc. . . . almost every classroom uses this system. It is not a bad system, but it was not and is not congruent with my philosophy of children or teaching.

How could I really teach character traits, model them, and expect children to practice them in an environment that focused on punishment? It did not work for me. My last few years in the classroom,

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I threw out assertive discipline and focused on cooperative learning with specific attention to teaching pro-social skills or character traits.

Many of the skills Vicki Lake talks about would find a comfortable home somewhere in the Eight Habits of the Heart. It's heart-warming to know that the notion of building community continues to move beyond the small schools of the Mississippi Delta where I first experienced it.