Dr. Emilean Clemons
Written Answers to Questions

1. How do you address issues of school or district culture?

A positive culture is critical to the success of any organization and can transform the climate from one of lethargy and negativity to one where energy and positivity permeate the atmosphere. Culture is the "way we do things here", and I firmly believe the culture of a school is "felt" when one enters the building or the classroom, and that "feeling" determines the interactions and the behavior of the students, staff, and other stakeholders entering the building. In an individual school, or school district setting, our priority is our students—their safety and success mentally, emotionally, and academically. It is our responsibility as educators to focus on successful student achievement as our ultimate goal.

As an instructional leader, I must be intentionally present and engaged within every aspect of my school, recognizing that building relationships is a key factor in promoting a positive climate conducive to student learning. "Walking the walk" through classroom visits, being available to meet with teachers during PLCs, campus visibility, and attendance at athletic and other after-school events not only has enabled me to develop relationships with students and staff but has provided me with priceless opportunities to mingle with families, business partners, and other community members. I visit classrooms often—not to simply evaluate teachers—but to let them know I am there to support them. Without saying a word, my presence is promoting a positive culture within the school, reminding the teachers I am there all the time to support and affirm them. There is no doubt in my mind that when stakeholders—students, staff, community members—feel valued as individuals and know their input truly matters, there is nothing that cannot be accomplished.

Recognizing that a cultural problem exists is the first step toward change. The exciting part about this is that, once we peel back the layers and acknowledge that we have an issue, we are on the road toward transforming the culture! As the school principal, it is impossible for me to build a positive culture on my own—however, when we all recognize that "we are a team" and "we are in this together", the dynamics change. Suddenly there is a shift to "us", the entire team, with the team recognizing that I, as the leader, am on their side. A few years ago, we began the implementation of PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies). I wanted to get the PBIS framework in place quickly so that we could see an immediate improvement in our school culture. I quickly recognized that positive change happens a little at the time, building slowly but surely, with fidelity, upon the established foundation, setting positive systems and procedures in place, and then repeating the process until, one day, we recognized those systems had become a part of the culture with everyone working together toward the maintaining that culture. This positive shift was developed through our working together as a team, as "one", recognizing the need for a shift within our school environment.

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2. How do you hold yourself and others in the district accountable?

In order for a person—leader or otherwise—to hold himself or others accountable, there must a clear definition of roles and responsibilities, along with the establishment of clear goals and expectations. An understanding of the organizational structure and reporting relationships is also necessary. Open communication, trust, and integrity demonstrated by the leadership promote an atmosphere of transparency and collaboration, all of which foster a willingness to embrace accountability. An important factor that promotes accountability is the absence of fear of retribution. When employees feel safe, they are more likely to work collaboratively in accomplishing tasks assigned to them; however, when fear is present, there is almost a paralysis that occurs, stifling creativity and productivity. Continual monitoring, providing feedback with interventions when necessary, and coaching supports greater ensure the employee's success, thereby benefiting all of us.

I believe that when I engage in self-accountability, I am acting as a role model to those I supervise. The willingness to be self-accountable promotes transparency, sending a positive message to everyone. In my current position as a high school principal, I hold myself accountable based upon the expectations and indicators by which I know I will be evaluated. Because my responsibilities are clearly defined, it is not difficult for me to create a plan where I lay out and accomplish my tasks efficiently and in a highly effective manner. However, as the leader of the school, I recognize that leading the school cannot be done by one person and, therefore, involve my leadership team in the processes. Engaging my assistant principals in the planning process ensures that, not only am I creating a plan that holds me accountable, but I am preparing my assistant principals to be leaders and providing them with the autonomy to create their own plans for task completion. At the beginning of each year, I work with my leadership team to develop a distributive leadership plan that clearly specifies individual responsibilities. Weekly leadership team meetings are held with discussions, feedback, and possible tweaks to the plan. In essence, through consistent monitoring of the distributive leadership plan and feedback regarding task completion, self-accountability is quietly taking place.

This process applies to accountability at every level—whether it be top leadership, mid-management, principals, faculty, or staff members. Accountability is fostered when the following characteristics are present in the organization:

- Clearly defined job descriptions outlining roles and responsibilities
- Clear expectations and goals
- Explanation of the organizational structure and reporting relationships
- Establish the baseline for the evaluation
- Outline areas of opportunity or need for growth
- Continual feedback
- Evaluative conversations without fear of retribution

I truly believe that effective evaluative processes in place foster an atmosphere where accountability is a positive part of the environment.

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