

Changing a Culture by Building Relationships

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Spencer County High School, Kentucky

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Tracy Bale didn't even wait for school to start on his first day as principal of Spencer County High School to make some changes. It was 45 minutes until the first bell, and students were gathering in the parking lot, as they had always done, with the intention of hanging out until school began. Bale was in the parking lot, too. He told the students that if they were going to arrive early for school, they had to come into the gym.

"It had become a real circus out there," Bale said, noting that the early-morning hangout scene was just one example of how SCHS had developed into what Bale called "an unhealthy learning environment."

Today, SCHS students no longer hang out in the parking lot, there are clear rules against cursing and other disruptive behaviors, and students know they get three warnings in class before they are given in-school suspension and their parents are called.

But new rules can only do so much to change the culture of a school, Bale said. Much more important, he said, are new relationships.

From his first day on the job, Bale made a point of reaching out to students, parents and teachers. Bale's message: we're all in this together. The new principal's commitment to relationships as the cornerstone of school success is evident in where he spends most of the school day. Bale doesn't have an office; he has a desk with a laptop in the middle of an SCHS hallway - and he doesn't even spend a lot of time there. He and his two assistant principals spend the bulk of the school day visiting classrooms, dropping by the cafeteria and otherwise making their presence known.

"Any principal can find a reason to stay in his office all day," he said. "But I want to spend as much time as possible with students and teachers to try and build those relationships."

Bale said he sees relationship-building as the greatest deterrent to unhealthy behaviors at Spencer County High School. The high-profile presence of administrators and staff in the hallways, combined with a school culture that won't brook disruptive behaviors, has created a more positive learning environment. One sign of the school's success: suspensions and drug violations among students are way down. Student suspensions dropped by almost two thirds in his first year. In 2005-2006, there were just two drug violations; two years before, there had been nine.

Bale's advice for other educators who want to build a school environment that supports learning: show you care. "A high-achieving school is a school where adults care about the kids, so the goal here is to build a culture where everyone genuinely cares about everyone else," Bale said.

Further details about this story can be found in our source:

Jennifer Wohlleb, for the Kentucky School Board Association, "[Hall Monitor: Spencer County High School Principal Takes Office to Students](#)," January 2007