

INSIGHTS

Successfully Transitioning into the School Culture

By Sharon Riley Ordu

School culture, or “the way we do things around here,” encompasses values and beliefs, behavior and norms, heroes and heroines, stories, myths, and history, as well as traditions and rituals. It is also about ways of thinking. All of these parts can tremendously impact new teachers and their success. Therefore, understanding your school's culture and how to transition successfully into that environment are important for you as a new teacher.

Understanding the culture requires you to be observant, listen attentively, and to gain understanding as quickly as possible. Direct conversations with teachers, parents, students, administrators, staff, and other stakeholders indicate whether the culture is healthy or unhealthy. Student achievement data, mobility, retention and attendance rates of students, demographics, and level of parent involvement also characterize school culture.

School culture is dynamic—a changing phenomenon. As a new member of this professional community, you will contribute to the culture. That is why a successful transition is imperative.

Stay focused. Teaching is a noble profession. Remember that you are in the school to serve students and provide them with a quality education.

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Nothing should distract you from this lofty goal.

Individualistic Culture

In school cultures emphasizing individualism, teachers generally work in isolation. Because there is so much to learn during these formative years, new teachers in this culture should quickly identify a network of critical friends or mentors. Collaborative cultures are better environments for novices.

Steer clear of naysayers. Every school houses individuals who can be perceived as negative. They typically disagree with the school administration, don't embrace change well, and are very vocal about their concerns. Often naysayers attach themselves to new teachers to build a cadre of followers. As a beginner, strive to remain neutral and avoid being pulled into such groups or negative activities. If necessary, minimize your time in the teachers' lounge, and be sure to refrain from gossiping.

Contribute positively to the culture. To promote a healthy culture, attend professional development training and conferences, observe effective peers in action, and bring best practices to the classroom, remembering that students come first.

Establish critical friends. As a new teacher, you will want to create relationships with a network of positive, quality teachers who share the vision of the school and from whom you can learn. Critical friends provide valuable advice and

lend a helping hand when needed. They may offer to observe your classroom and may open their own classrooms for visits. The first three years of teaching are significant to establishing a successful career. Use this time to develop strong pedagogical skills, learn and comprehend best practices for grade level and subjects taught, and build a repertoire of teaching strategies.

Communicate and seek assistance. Look to school administrators, lead teachers, subject-area coaches, and other teachers for help and opportunities to learn and grow. When a formal mentoring program or orientation does not exist, try making a list of what you don't know or understand, and then seek out individuals willing to give answers and help you navigate through the beginning years. Enrolling in classes or trainings to learn more about pedagogy and subject matter also is beneficial.

Observe rituals, ceremonies, traditions, and norms. These practices tell a lot about a school. Note ceremonies that take place during the year—whether a Teacher of the Year honor or an awards program for students. Also notice established rituals and traditions; they tend to take place annually and some at particular times during the year. Watch for norms, particularly the unstated group expectations for behavior, dress, and communication.

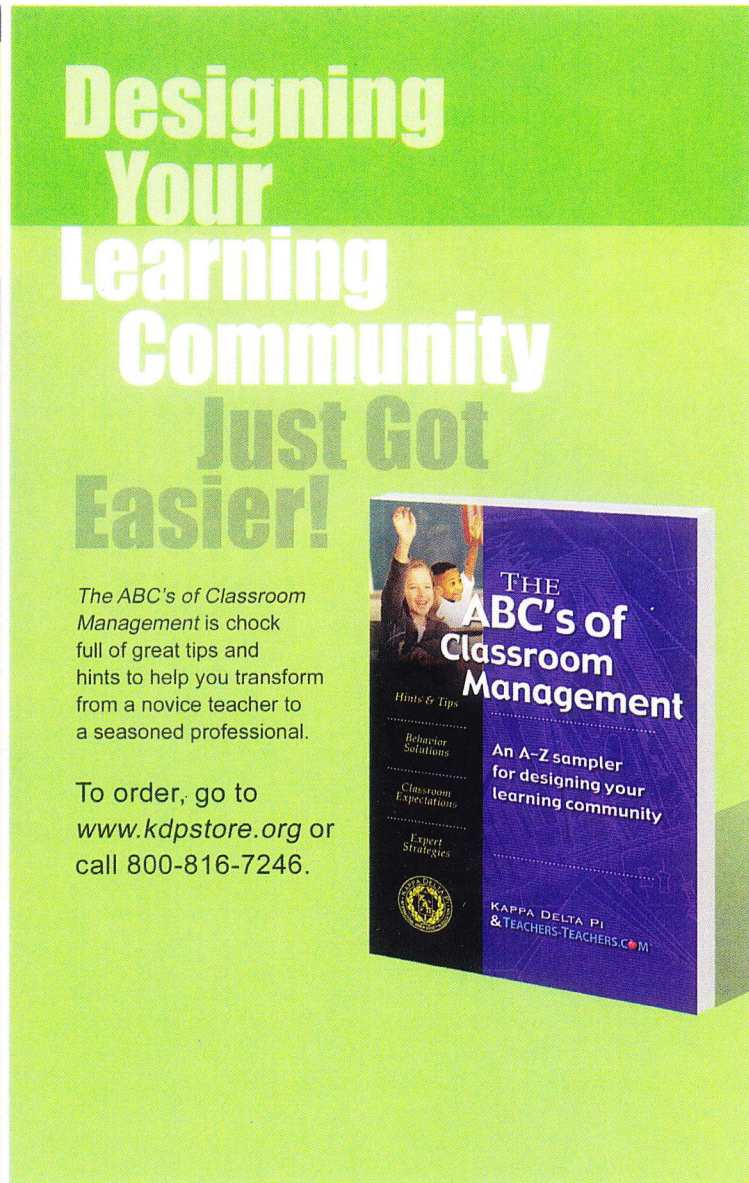
Being a new teacher is a vulnerable and impressionable arena, and you will start out well by knowing what school culture is and how to assess your environment. Building good relationships school wide—with students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and community contacts—is vital. The ability to identify people and situations that help you to be successful as a new teacher is instrumental to a smooth transition.



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