Fostering an Ethic of Excellence

Ron Berger

For 25 years I've led a double life. I'm a full-time classroom teacher in a public school. To make ends meet for my family, I've worked during the summers, and sometimes weekends, as a carpenter. In carpentry there is no higher compliment builders give each other than this: That person is a *craftsman*. This one word says it all. It connotes someone who has integrity, knowledge, dedication, and pride in work—someone who thinks carefully and does things well.

I want a classroom full of craftsmen—students whose work is strong, accurate, and beautiful; students who are proud of what they do and respect themselves and others.

> ### *I want a classroom full of craftsmen.*

In my classroom I have students who come from homes full of books and students whose families own almost no books at all. I have students for whom reading, writing, and math come easily, and students whose brains can't follow a line of text without reversing words and letters. I have students whose lives are generally easy, and students with physical disabilities and health or family problems that make life a struggle. I want them *all* to be craftsmen. Some may take a little longer; some may need to use extra strategies and resources. *In the end, they need to be proud of their work, and their work needs to be worthy of pride.*

I'm concerned when I pick up a newspaper these days and find an article about the "crisis" in education and how a new quick fix will remedy things. I think as a nation we've gotten off track regarding education. Our concern seems to be centered on testing and on ranking students, schools, and districts. I believe our concern should be centered on what we can do in our schools and communities to bring out the best in kids.

Some schools are very good; some are not. Those that are good have an ethic, a culture, which supports and demands quality work. Those schools that are not effective need a lot more than new tests and new mandates. They need to build a new culture.

In my work with schools across the country, I encounter places where students are remarkably good at something. These schools dominate state competitions in orchestra, chess, wrestling, visual arts, debate, and essay contests, and have done so for years.

What's going on here? I don't think this is genetics or luck. Private schools and universities can recruit talent, but these are public schools. Every year they take whatever kids they happen to get and make them stars. This phenomenon isn't limited to special areas. My colleagues at the Central Park East High School in Harlem and the Fenway High School in Boston work with urban students, almost all of whom are low-income and non-white, for whom the predicted graduation statistics are dismal. These schools graduate 95% of their seniors and send about 90% to college.

These schools don't have any special magic. The key to excellence is this: *It is born from a culture*. When children enter a family culture, a community culture, or a school culture that demands and supports excellence, they work to fit into that culture. It doesn't matter what their background is. Once those children enter a culture with a powerful ethic—an ethic of excellence—that ethic becomes their norm. It's what they know.

> ## When students enter a culture that demands excellence, they work to fit in.

Unfortunately, most students, I believe, are caught on school treadmills that focus on *quantity* of work rather than *quality* of work. Students crank out endless final products every day and night. Teachers correct volumes of such low-quality work; it's returned to the students and often tossed into the wastebasket. Little in it is memorable or significant, and little in it engenders personal or community pride. I feel that schools need to get off this treadmill and shift their focus from quantity to quality.

Work of excellence is transformational. Once a student sees that he or she is capable of quality, of excellence, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility. There is an appetite for excellence. After students have had a taste of excellence, they're never quite satisfied with less.

Five practices (see box below) are essential for creating and sustaining a classroom culture of excellence: (1) assign work that matters; (2) study examples of excellence; (3) build a culture of critique; (4) require multiple revisions; and (5) provide opportunities for public presentation.

Classroom Projects That Inspire Excellence

When I speak, I begin with slides of children's work—work by my own students and students in other classrooms in our school. People sit up. They point to things on the screen. There's electricity in the room.

♦ *A science project.* I show slides of my 6th-grade students managing a scientific project, done in collaboration with a local college laboratory, to test the town's homes for radon gas. The slides show students preparing surveys, kits, and informational packets for the families in town and learning the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program to do data analysis of results. They show pages from their final radon report for the town. The report turned out to be the first comprehensive radon picture of any town in the state. After being featured in the media, our report was requested by towns all over the state, by the state radon commission, and even by

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CREATING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE: FIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

1. Assign work that matters. Students need assignments that challenge and inspire them. At the Raphael Hernandez School in Boston, for example, middle schoolers took on a study of vacant lots in their Roxbury neighborhood. Students researched the history of the sites and interviewed neighborhood members regarding what uses they would prefer for the lots. Their proposals were formally presented to the mayor of Boston and his staff, and one of the sites was later converted into community gardens.

2. Study examples of excellence. Before they begin work on a project, the teacher and students examine models of excellence—high-quality work done by previous students as well as work done by professionals. What makes a particular science project, piece of writing, or architectural blueprint so good? What was the process of achieving such high quality? What mistakes and revisions were probably part of the process?

3. Build a culture of critique. Formal critique sessions build a culture of critique that is essential for improving students' work. The rules for group critique: "Be kind; be specific; be helpful." Students presenting a piece of work first explain their ideas or goals and state what they are seeking help with. Classmates begin with positive comments and phrase suggestions as questions: "Have you considered . . . ?" The teacher uses the critique session as the optimal opportunity for teaching necessary concepts and skills. Through this process, students have regular experiences of being able to improve the quality of a piece of work as a result of feedback from others.

4. Require multiple revisions. In most schools, students turn in first drafts—work that doesn't represent their best effort and that is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned. In life, when the quality of one's work really matters, one almost never submits a first draft. An ethic of excellence requires revision.

5. Provide opportunities for public presentation. Every final draft students complete is done for an outside audience—whether a class of kindergartners, the principal, or the wider community. The teacher's role is not as the sole judge of their work but rather similar to that of a sports coach or play director—helping them get their work ready for the public eye.

the federal radon commission. The slides show a classroom transformed into something like a non-profit company—printing and mailing off copies of the report, responding to requests and questions with individual cover letters. This was work that mattered.

♦ *Biographies of seniors.* In another project, my 6th-graders interviewed senior citizens and wrote their biographies. No one needed to tell them the reason for doing a quality job. These books were to be gifts to the seniors, gifts that might become precious heirlooms. Because their work would have this public audience, students were motivated to seek critique from everyone. They read the drafts of their biographies to the whole class for suggestions. They labored, draft after draft, on their cover designs. They wanted their books to be perfect. This, too, was work that mattered.

> *Once students see that they are capable of excellence, they are never quite satisfied with less.*

Archiving Excellence

One of my jobs as a teacher is to be an archiver of excellence. Wherever I am, in my school or in other schools, I am on the lookout for models of beautiful work, powerful work, important work. These examples set the standards for what my students and I aspire to achieve in school.

In my library I have photographs of historical architectural scale models built by 4th-graders in Decatur, Georgia, that would set a high standard even for high school students. I have a field guide to a pond in Dubuque, Iowa, written and illustrated by elementary school students, that is bookstore quality. I have statistical math studies designed by 3rd-graders in Maine. I have photocopies of students' stories, essays, reviews, novels, and poetry. I have videotapes of portfolio presentations by students from all over the country. And I have 25 years of models from my own classroom and school—copies, photographs, slides, and videotapes—that I draw from almost daily.

When my class begins a new project we begin with a taste of excellence. I pull out these models of work by former students, videotapes of former students presenting their work, exemplary work from other schools, and examples of work from the professional world. We discuss what makes the work powerful; what makes a piece of creative writing compelling; what makes a scientific or historical research project significant and stirring.

Culture Matters

The achievement of students is governed to a large degree by their family culture, neighborhood culture, and school culture. Students may have different potentials, but in general their attitudes and achievements are shaped by the culture around them. Students adjust their attitudes and efforts in order to fit into the culture. If the peer culture ridicules academic effort and achievement—it isn't cool to care openly about school—this is a powerful force. If the peer culture celebrates investment in school, this is just as powerful. Schools need to consciously shape their cultures to be places where it's safe to care, cool to care.

When children first come to school, they do care. An enthusiastic attitude toward learning seems universal in kindergartens. By secondary school, however, things are very different. I am struck in particular by conversations with middle school and high school students from poor urban or rural neighborhoods who attend large schools. When I ask about the social norm for showing interest in learning, I am often met by friendly laughter. Students say you would be out of your mind to raise your hand in class or otherwise show interest in school. This attitude appears to be a primary obstacle to achievement in these schools.

Jason's Story: The Power of Positive Peer Pressure

I was raised with the message that peer pressure was something negative. Peer pressure meant kids trying to talk you into smoking cigarettes or taking drugs. I realized after ten years of teaching that *positive* peer pressure was often the primary reason my classroom was a safe, supportive environment for student learning. Peer pressure wasn't something to be afraid of, to be avoided, but rather something to be cultivated in a positive direction.

> *Schools need to create a culture where it's "cool to care."*

A few years back I got a boy who was new to my school as a sixth-grader. He entered the class with a bad attitude and wasn't about to change it to please an adult.

This boy, whom I'll call Jason, was clear about who he was. The evening of the first day of school I read through his background sheet, an introduction form he had filled out to let me know a bit about his life and interests. I met with him the next day to learn more about him. I learned that Jason's father was a logger who spent his life alone in the woods cutting firewood. Jason worked with him whenever he had the opportunity—clearing brush, cutting and stacking wood, and working with heavy equipment. Jason was proud of his

3

skill in the woods, and he loved his life there.

Jason hated school, he said. He hated teachers. He had always done terribly in school, but it didn't matter; he didn't need school—his father hadn't needed school, and he didn't either. Soon he could leave school and cut wood full-time and make a living. He hated the fact that he didn't live with his father. He hated the fact that his mother had moved to this junky town. He hated women and girls in general.

Jason made no friends the first two days of school. In the classroom and on the playground he was suspicious and unfriendly. On the third day, I took the class and their parents on an Outward Bound-type adventure trip to build a sense of community and challenge. We climbed a mountain and went cave-exploring together. The students and parents were scared and excited and knew they had to work together as a team. Underground, in the dark, Jason couldn't worry about whose hand he was grabbing for help. He helped others, even girls, and they helped him. He got compliments from others for his support in the tight squeezes and smiled for the first time.

But he wasn't a new person. The trip had been a beginning, had built important bridges, but back in the classroom it wasn't long before his scowl returned. He'd be darned if he was going to put any effort into his schoolwork.

Adult Approval Was Not Enough

If my teaching personality were all I had going for me with Jason, I wouldn't have gotten too far. Adult approval was not the big motivator in his life. Fortunately, I had the power of the school culture on my side. Students in my school have learned to care since pre-school. They have shared their work with pride with different audiences since they were four years old. They have been surrounded by models of strong work and children who enjoy school, care about their work, and are outspoken about it. They have learned to feel that a safe and inclusive emotional environment is the norm. This is not to say that work or behavior is always good, but rather that it is expected.

> **Our students have learned that in order to fit in, working hard and respecting others are expected.**

There was no role for a mean-spirited class clown in our classroom. Jason may have garnered social power and attention in other schools by cracking jokes at the expense of others or at the expense of class lessons, but here he got only frustration and complaints from peers. Jason may have fit in fine in other schools by turning in lousy work, but here, during our regular classroom critique sessions, he was met with critical eyes and helpful suggestions from peers. When Jason turned in sloppy, meager work, other students advised him to put a little more care into it. At first, he met their suggestions with defensive anger.

The turning point for Jason came when he pinned up something for class critique that was well done and was showered with compliments from the class. They knew what a breakthrough this was for him. He actually blushed. In the same way, the first time Jason stepped out of his role as a bully to do something nice for another student, it was discussed during our morning meeting, and he was met with unfamiliar praise.

During the course of the fall, Jason's work began to improve, along with his attitude. At one point he looked at his work and smiled. "I'm proud of this," he said. "I think it's the first good thing I've ever really done in school. I think the class will like this."

> **Jason had bought in to school.**

Jason's academic skills didn't become stellar overnight, and his personality remained difficult at times. But he was a different kid. He made eye contact with me and with others. He was proud of his work. He was willing to put time into reading and writing. He had bought in to school.

An Ethic of Excellence

How do I really know what I have done for students? How do I know what my school has done? I think of my life in my small town. The policeman is a former student. I trust him to protect my life. The nurse at my medical clinic is my former student. I trust her with my health. The lifeguard at the town lake is my former student. She watches my grandsons as they swim. There may not be numbers to measure these things, but there is a reason I feel so thankful trusting my life to these people. They take pride in doing their best. They have an ethic of excellence.

Adapted from Ron Berger's **An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students** *(Heinemann, 2003). Ron Berger was a public school teacher for 28 years and is now a school consultant/designer for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound. He can be reached at rberger@massed.net.*

an 8th-grader at Place Middle School tell a new student who is "talking trash" in the hallway, "Hey, that's not the Place Way." Without something like *The Place Way* (see box, p. 6), students might not feel justified in nudging their peers, partly because they may not feel clear enough about their own values. A touchstone can be enormously empowering for students.

The touchstone can be incorporated into a school by displaying it in all classrooms, printing it on student ID cards, sending a printed refrigerator magnet home to parents, and conducting a school-community signing ceremony. At Lowry Elementary, students read the touchstone over the PA each morning as part of morning announcements. Many schools print it in their newsletters.

We recommend a step-by-step process (see box) to help each school develop its touchstone. Since ownership is crucial, it's important to include teachers, parents, and students in this process.

Some schools create a motto, which serves as a shorthand for the touchstone. For instance, students at Slavens School know that "take the high road" really means to live the whole set of touchstone values. Keep this in mind when crafting a school touchstone—is there a line or phrase that might serve as a motto?

Creating Rubrics for the Touchstone

We also recommend that a school create rubrics based on each touchstone value. For example, in *The Place Way*, what does it mean for students and adults to show "cultural appreciation for each other in all we do"? What are observable behaviors that reflect a high degree of cultural appreciation? A low degree? We worked with one school where "awareness" was a touchstone value. However, when we began developing rubrics, it became clear that there was no consensus among teachers about what they meant by this concept. One teacher thought it related to emotional self-awareness, and another thought it meant being aware of traffic before you crossed the street. Building rubrics and identifying strategies for growth can help clarify, for students and adults, what the targets are and how to reach them.

> ## *The touchstone becomes the school's "north star."*

The touchstone serves as the reference point for helping a student (1) perceive and understand a situation, (2) act skillfully, and (3) reflect and learn from that situation. For

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STEPS FOR DEVELOPING A TOUCHSTONE

1. Put butcher paper outside classrooms with columns labeled "Things to Preserve and Celebrate" and "Things to Improve." Have students and teachers write their suggestions. Collect the sheets and look for patterns.

2. Have each member on the character education committee write down up to four core school values (e.g., respect, best effort) and up to four sentences that might fit into the touchstone (e.g., "We give our best in all that we do.") and then break the committee into four groups. Have each group agree on four values and four sentences. Then pair up the groups and have each pair agree on four values and four sentences. Repeat the process until one set of four values and four sentences remains. Finally, select a member of the group to write a draft of the touchstone based on the final list.

3. Circulate the draft of the touchstone to parents, students, and community members for their feedback.

4. Print the finalized touchstone on school newsletters, refrigerator magnets, school T-shirts, school ID cards, and posters throughout the school. Consider having students paint the touchstone on the school walls.

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example, a teacher might use the touchstone to help a student identify what "taking the high road" looks like in a particular situation, such as the playground, and then help him reflect on his actions. Or a parent could help her son identify what "taking responsibility for our own learning and behavior" might look like on an upcoming field trip. (For a high school example of a touchstone, see *Smart & Good High Schools* at www.cortland.edu/character/highschool, chapter 3, pp. 36-37.)

The touchstone becomes the "north star" of the school and helps guide the daily decision-making of students and staff. It can inform decisions about many aspects of school life, including parental involvement and the hiring of staff.

Adapted from **The Intentional School Culture: Building Excellence in Academics & Character** *by Charles Elbot and Dave Fuller, Denver Public Schools. The book is available for $5.00; contact Barb_Evans@dpsk12.org.*

The Power of a Touchstone

Charles Elbot and Dave Fulton

A central tool for shaping an intentional school culture is the schoolwide touchstone. The touchstone is crafted by the school community and contains universal principles to guide daily reflection, decision-making, and behavior. It may serve as a reminder to "maintain a sense of humor," as it does at Cory Elementary, or to inspire students and staff to "take the high road," as it does at Slavens School, or to "engage in courageous conversations," as it does at Westerly Creek.

> *A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal.*
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> **—Roland Barth, Harvard University**

Students thrive when they are immersed in an environment defined by shared values. Many students attend schools where values and expectations differ from classroom to classroom and hallway to hallway. This can be profoundly confusing to students and demoralizing to staff, who feel undermined by their colleagues. Without a consensus on values, students learn to respond to the values and expectations of individual teachers, but do not develop an affinity for *shared* school values, since there appear to be none.

Successful Businesses Use Touchstones

Businesses have been using touchstones for years. For example, Toyota has developed a highly effective culture, partly by following the *Toyota Way*, which expresses how employees are to approach their work:

> *We accept challenges with a creative spirit and the courage to realize our own dreams without losing drive or energy. We approach our work vigorously, with optimism and a sincere belief in the value of our contributions. We strive to decide our own fate. We act with self-reliance, trusting in our own abilities. We accept responsibility for our conduct and for maintaining and improving the skills that enable us to produce added value.*

A touchstone is not a set of commandments, nor a mission or a vision statement. A touchstone expresses the "how" of an organization, including how to treat each other and with what attitude to approach learning and work. It is meant to inspire individuals to be their best and to guide their thoughts and actions on a daily basis. At Denver School of Science and Technology, the staff rate themselves twice a year on how well they are upholding the values of the school. Parents can be asked to do the same thing. The touchstone applies to *all* members of the school-community.

If the touchstone is properly introduced and developed, students will start holding themselves and their peers accountable for living its values. You might hear

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THE PLACE WAY

At Place Middle School, we pursue excellence in scholarship and character.

We celebrate and honor each other by being respectful, honest, kind and fair.

We show our cultural appreciation for each other in all we do.

We give our best in and out of the classroom and take responsibility for our actions.

This is who we are, even when no one is watching.