FOSTERING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE IN THE NEW NORMAL

A Handbook for Educators
OPENING MESSAGE

A year has passed since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, with countries and their school systems spending most of the year in lockdown. Beyond responding to the immediate needs of our learners, educators need to create future-proof schools and future-ready learners. When future historians look back, they will see COVID-19 as the turning point for innovation and the shift away from the currently dominant industrial-age model of education.

Out-of-school learning will be more popular, with online schools, community education pods and home-schooling replacing brick-and-mortar schools. Student-centred learning, acquisition of skills and real-world issues will need to be at the forefront of education. Teachers will not merely be transmitters of knowledge, but, instead, mentors who guide students’ learning journeys, both academically and morally. Schools will need to produce well-rounded global citizens, not just workers for the economy.

The uncertainty and hardships of the pandemic are bringing more urgency to building and maintaining a positive school culture as we move forward into a new era of education. Supportive leadership, deep relationships with the greater community, collaboration among teachers and an emphasis on empathy can positively impact students’ learning outcomes. More importantly, a culture of learning needs to be established; schools need to create structures to help their students and staff to be passionate about and take ownership of their own learning.

An existing positive school culture can also act as a school’s safety net, protecting the school against any unexpected shocks. As we usher in the new school term, I hope you use this handbook as a resource and inspiration as you work with your team to create your desired school culture and build back better.

S. Gopinathan
Academic Advisor
The HEAD Foundation

MODERATOR’S MESSAGE

The first webinar series Educational Leadership in a Crisis showed the imperative need for a school leadership that grew a positive school culture. Culture is that invisible glue that keeps communities united, and today’s school leaders recognise that openness and trust go much further in uniting a community, especially in these unprecedented times.

As different school leaders shared during the second webinar series Fostering a Positive School Culture in the New Normal, it became apparent that embracing change rather than avoiding it was the key to survival. In fact, many school principals were the first to admit that they had no choice in the face of a pandemic whose reach is yet to be completely documented. When one is dragged willy-nilly into the unfamiliar territory of online learning and forced to deal with technological challenges, suddenly and surprisingly, many things become possible.

This handbook captures the culture-building process in schools from its ideation to its formation, as discussed in the webinar series. It demonstrates how the relationships within and between the school and larger community play a vital role in this process. That same positive school culture, not surprisingly, led to many evidences of a culture of care where student and teacher alike learnt about each other and learnt how to empower and support each other. This in turn provided an environment wherewith the school built up the structures for learning among students as well as among teachers.

The panellists are, very importantly, all practitioners and they speak from the ground about their experiences and what they learnt about educating in the new normal. Through them, we have seen that building a positive school culture is the way to ride the waves of change, and I hope this webinar series and handbook will help you in your culture-building journey.

Belinda Charles
Former Dean
Academy of Principals, Singapore
Culture as the Smell of a Place

Compare the city of Kolkata, India in summer and Fontainebleau forest, France in spring – the former is hot, humid and draining, evoking a sense of constraint and lethargy, while the latter is crisp and energising, evoking a sense of freedom and sparking creativity. Professor Sumantra Ghoshal, an influential management expert, describes this as the ‘smell of a place’ – the context in which an organisation operates – and how it can exhaust or uplift staff.

Motivating people has a lot more to do with changing the context of a working environment, and less with changing people themselves. Organisations can create elaborate systems and transformation strategies, but many end up failing because the underlying culture was not changed.

Changing the smell of the place is a top-down endeavour; school leaders have the ability to create stretch, discipline, trust and support – all aspects of inspiring positive behaviour in students and staff.

Just like how going into the forest of Fontainebleau in spring makes one feel fresh and want to run and jump, school leaders should aim to create school environments and cultures that make staff and students intrinsically feel motivated and excited to learn.

Adapted from “The Smell of the Place by Professor Sumantra Ghoshal – Transcript” on https://empoweringpeople.nl/

PANELLIST BIOGRAPHIES

Jean Francis V. Dela Cruz is Teacher-in-Charge at Santiago A. De Guzman Elementary School in the Philippines. He believes that by optimising the usage of ICT in improving the access to and quality of basic education services, internal and external stakeholders will take a more active part in monitoring and supervising teaching-learning activities as well as in providing technical assistance towards a better culture of practice and excellence.

K. Govindan was formerly Principal of Peiying Primary School in Singapore. He has been an educator for 37 years, rising from a classroom teacher to Head of Department, Vice-Principal and Senior Quality Assessor, before becoming Principal. He believes the key to being an uplifting force in a child’s learning is using innovative strategies to inculcate the joy of learning in every child.

Moliah Hashim is Principal of Princess Elizabeth Primary School in Singapore. Prior to this, she was the Chief Executive Officer of Yayasan MENDAKI for a period of four years from December 2009 to December 2013. During the span of her career, she has held several key appointments, including Principal of Northland Primary School and Cluster Schools Superintendent, Schools Division South. To date, she has served at the Ministry of Education for 35 years.

Elsie Jeremiah joined the Ministry of Education, Singapore, as a teacher in 1979. Since 1998, she has served in various school leadership roles. In her efforts to build a culture of learning in the schools she has led, Elsie focused on building staff competencies to ensure engagement in learning in every classroom and enjoyment of learning for every child, believing that this will enable every child to discover and pursue his or her passion for the betterment of society.

1 Professor Sumantra Ghoshal was Professor at INSEAD and the London Business School, and was the Founding Dean of the Indian School of Business in Hyderabad. He was known for his speech ‘The smell of the place’ at the World Economic Forum Conference in Davos in 1995.
Tan Chor Pang has over two decades of school leadership experience. In his time as Principal, he has been known to be ahead of his time in innovative solutioning and strategic leadership. His most recent innovation, which garnered the MOE Innergy Gold Award 2019, is a novel approach to schooling – a family-oriented and co-curricular activity-centric model.

Host and moderator:
Belinda Charles works with the Academy of Principals (Singapore) in the area of mentoring and is currently a part-time lecturer with the Psychology and Child & Human Development Academic Group at the National Institute of Education. Before her retirement from the Education Service, Mrs Charles led different types of schools in Singapore as a school principal. On her retirement in 2010, she took up the post of Dean of the Academy of Principals for seven years.

Disclaimer: All deliberations made by the authors are their own. They do not represent the views of their national or local education departments, their respective schools nor The HEAD Foundation.
The question to ask then is, “What are the barriers to enacting the espoused values?” The barriers may include:

- **Motivation:** Staff may not have incentives or motivation to follow through;
- **Competency:** Staff may not have the self-awareness that they are doing it wrong or have the capability of doing it right;
- **Structural:** The school may not be providing enough support, or time and space to do the right things;
- **Conflicting values:** e.g. Efficiency vs Efficacy, Autonomy vs Alignment.

So in making sense of this complexity, we can ask the following questions:

- What is identifiable?
- What is actionable?
- What is measurable?
- What are the low hanging fruit?
- Where, when and how do we trigger the virtuous cycle?

With this clarity, we can see that there are cultural elements that are identifiable, actionable and measurable. We can then start on our culture-building journey!

**Moliah Hashim**
Principal
Princess Elizabeth Primary School, Singapore
School leaders can agree that having a positive school culture is ideal; research has shown that a positive school culture improves attendance rates and academic achievement, and promotes student well-being and teacher retention. But what do we mean by a positive school culture? As defined by Michael Fullan in his renowned guide “Leading in a Culture of Change”, school culture is the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates. It is the underlying influences and attitudes within the school and can be seen in the quality of interactions, efforts and work produced.

With many schools struggling to keep up with changes in education, it can be easy for school culture to be overlooked with more immediate and critical concerns to address. However, the importance of deeply understanding a school’s culture cannot be overstated. It is only when we understand the intangible values and behaviours of our school community members that practical steps can be taken to implement change and track measurable outcomes.

1.1 The three levels of culture
Ms Shiarell Loida Mangilit-Cruz

Ms Shiarell Loida Mangilit-Cruz joined Ramon Magsaysay Elementary School in the midst of the pandemic. Needing to adapt to a new school environment while leading her school safely through remote learning, Shiarell made quick use of Schein’s three-tiered culture framework to understand prevalent beliefs in the school community, facilitating effective communication and resource mobilisation.

**SCHOOL PROFILE**

**Ramon Magsaysay Elementary School**
- Quezon City, The Philippines
- Public Elementary School
- 1,500 students
- 45 staff

**Schein's Culture Triangle**

- **Artefacts**: All visible signs of culture in an organisation
- **Espoused Values**: Organisational values using public statements
- **Basic Underlying Assumptions**: Fundamental beliefs about the school and the reasons for “being”

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1 Taken from “The Effects of a Positive School Environment” by the Council for Children’s Rights.
2 Michael Fullan, O.C. is a Canadian educational researcher and former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). He is currently Global Leadership Director for New Pedagogies for Deep Learning.
3 Edgar H. Schein is Professor Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management. “The Culture Triangle” is one of his ground-breaking and defining works.
Basic underlying assumptions
The deepest level of understanding culture is identifying the common underlying assumptions of your school community. These are the underpinning expectations and assumptions that guide espoused values and behaviours, which may not be immediately apparent.

In Ramon Magsaysay Elementary School, for example, two underlying core expectations are:

- **Students** should be consistent achievers and high performers in both academic and non-academic programmes; and
- **Teachers** should be achievers in more than just teaching and subject-based knowledge; they should also excel in writing, research, innovation and leadership.

Understanding these core assumptions helped Shiarell manage the expectations of her staff and students and address potential stress points as the school adapted to virtual learning.

Espoused values
The second level of understanding your school’s culture is identifying the espoused values of the school. These are school and personal values that are articulated, and can be measured and tested on school grounds. In the Philippines, for example, all educators are encouraged to create and support schools that impart in students citizenship values such as being God-fearing, humane, nationalistic and environmentally-conscious.

Artefacts
The most apparent and easily identifiable indicators of school culture, artefacts are physical and visible signs that form the first impression of a school. Clean school grounds and polite students, for example, fall in this category, and are artefacts of the espoused values of being environmentally-conscious and humane, respectively.

1.2 Three considerations for culture-building
Mr Tan Chor Pang

An essential aspect of creating and maintaining a positive school culture is having a concrete plan. Mr Tan Chor Pang dissects three key considerations for leaders when starting on their culture-building journey.

1. Go upstream to the source of problems
Beyond responding quickly to visible problems with direct and short-term solutions, leaders should take the time to identify and solve the root cause of recurring issues. This will produce more sustained and impactful returns.

To do this, leaders can:

- Ask at least three levels of cause-and-effect questions; and
- Identify whether other visible problems lead to the same root cause. Identifying the root cause of multiple visible problems is key to developing long-term and sustainable solutions.
2. Take the easy wins early
   As understanding root causes and changing predominant mindsets take
time and effort, an early reaping of the rewards of ‘low-hanging fruit’ can
courage parents, students and staff to be excited by progress.

3. Fail fast, fall forward, finish upward
   • Before action is taken, leaders should define what success looks like, set
targets and monitor the outcomes regularly. A successfully implemented
vision for an improved school culture should be measurable by data or
observable behaviours.
   • Engage in quick and short cycles of change. When outcomes are not ideal
after two or three cycles, make quick adjustments or discern whether
a change of plans is necessary. While failure is a necessary part of the
process, this iterative method ensures each outcome is more effective
than the last, and that each cycle is a learning process for the next.

Try it out! Identify an immediate problem in your school and go upstream to
find its root cause.

What could be the cause of this problem? *(1st level)*

What could again be the cause of this reason?
*(3rd level – This is most likely the root cause)*

List two possible solutions to address the root cause identified.
1.

2.

What could be the cause of this reason? *(2nd level)*

What could again be the cause of this reason?
*(3rd level – This is most likely the root cause)*

2.
Jot down your thoughts!
DEFINING GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Leading and shaping school culture all begins from values. Establishing the core values our schools stand for can help guide the culture-building process at every step. An alignment of school values, mission statement and school vision can create common consensus amongst staff and students on the key principles that shape the school’s actions.

A strong embodiment of school values can create a close-knit community of students, staff, school leaders and community members, where actions and behaviours built upon mutual understanding, support and care create a robust and healthy school culture.

As we move into a future where education disruptions are increasingly likely, and remote or hybrid learning becomes part of the new normal, having a well-established culture anchored on a robust set of values gives schools the resilience and flexibility needed to navigate an unpredictable future.

2.1

The school mission statement as your guiding vision
Ms Elsie Jeremiah

In shaping the culture of a school, a mission statement is important in articulating the desired culture, belief system, and the expected actions and behaviours of the school community. It sets overarching expectations and aims, and communicates the ethos of the school to students and staff. Beginning with your school's mission statement is a good way to identify the main goals of your school and the values that guide the community in meeting those aims.

Ms Elsie Jeremiah, former Principal of Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School, breaks down how the school’s mission statement acts as a guiding beacon for desired behaviours and practices that shape the school’s culture.
Mission Statement
of Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School

“We provide a conducive and nurturing Christian environment for the holistic development of every child through high engagement in, achievement through and enjoyment of learning.”

1. What do we do as a school?
Kuo Chuan’s mission states the school’s end goal: The holistic development of every child, at the intellectual, physical, social and emotional level.

2. How do we do this?
First, Kuo Chuan commits to providing a nurturing and safe environment for learning and growing.

Second, lessons are designed to be enjoyable experiences to engage students in the learning process.

This mission statement tells the world that Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School believes in the commitment to and enjoyment of the learning process. It sends a clear message to all staff, students and stakeholders on what is expected when they join this school and become members of the team.

Try it out! Think about your school’s mission statement, or the reason for your school’s existence. From this, can you identify:

1. What are your goals as a school?

2. How do you do things as a school to achieve these goals?

In a positive school culture, there is collective effort on the part of everyone to see and believe in the same vision and mission for a school.
Now that we have seen how a values-led teaching practice can be invaluable, we can consider how to cultivate a school culture rooted in shared values. With 14 years of experience as a school principal and four years of leading teams to validate Singapore public schools, Mr K. Govindan has amassed a wealth of experience in shaping and assessing school cultures. Here, he shares his tried-and-tested 3P framework for breaking down and consciously constructing a school culture:

### 1. Purpose
**Begin with the end in mind**

To start creating a positive school culture, school leaders can first visualise the kinds of learners and outcomes they desire. Identify why we are doing what we are doing, as a school community. Keep the destination in mind and stick to the process wholeheartedly to see change through.

### 2. Processes
**The scaffolding**

#### Step 1: Unpack school values

Leaders unpack and decide on the desired values together with their staff, to bring everyone on the same page on the values to be emulated and translated into programmes and behaviours.

#### Step 2: Undertake a culture gap review

Based on this new understanding of the school values and what they mean to the school, leaders can ask where the current reality is. Through a culture gap review exercise, the school community identifies the strengths and areas for growth, and draws up an action plan to achieve the desired culture.

#### Step 3: Plug the gaps to establish the desired culture

Implement the action plan to address the issues identified in step 2. Set up programmes and systems for staff and students to reinforce values and best practices. Provide resources and empower all members to take ownership of the action plan.

### The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers and principals, since student learning is ultimately the product of what goes on in classrooms.

3. People

The differentiating factor

While structures are important in implementing and facilitating culture-building, the differentiating factor in having a nurturing and supportive school culture is focusing on the softer aspects by caring for the people. The people in the school must have a sense of fulfilment and feel valued and trusted.

At Peiying Primary School, Govindan took extra care to engender a culture of support and develop trust amongst his staff. The strong relationships and robust systems already in place before the pandemic made the transition to remote learning much easier. Govindan understood how staff members had more responsibilities to attend to while working from home, and trusted them to complete tasks in their own time. As a result, teachers were proactive in putting in extra hours and went the extra mile to explore innovative adaptations to remote teaching.

Try it out! Together with your team, review and list down at least three core values and outcomes that are desired for an improved school culture.

1. 
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2. 
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3. 
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   -

What programmes, processes or initiatives can be created to emulate and reinforce these values and outcomes? Can any existing programmes be revised to fit these aims?

- Culture-building is a process that requires deliberate effort.
  - K. Govindan, retired Principal, Singapore

Tips

Leveraging School Culture, Turning Adversity into Advantage

- Begin with the end in mind, have clarity on your end goals
- Adopt a structured approach to culture-building, with action plan and strategies
- Give as much attention to the softer aspects
- Celebrate efforts, count blessings
2.3

Using values-led leadership to craft school culture

A GUIDE

Here are some guiding questions to help you reflect on values-led leadership, and how you can implement them in your own schools:

- Do you know, understand and are motivated by the ‘why’ that sits at the heart of your school? Does it really resonate with you, and do you know your role in delivering your school’s vision?

- Do all colleagues not only know but understand what you are trying to achieve and why?

- What are the core values that support the delivery of this vision? Are they relevant to the context in which you are working, and are all colleagues aligned with and upholding these values? How do you know?

- Are you leading by these values in your daily practice? When you are faced with difficult decisions, do you use them to drive how you act and what you do? Do you use values to decide your priorities?

- Do your artefacts, systems and processes in school align with and reflect your values? How do you do things at your school? This should be able to be traced back to your values and subsequently support your vision.

- Leading by your values will be challenging; there may be tension and opposition from others who may feel differently. How can you communicate through these differences while standing by your values?

- Context is everything. Culture will look and feel different in every school. ‘Copying and pasting’ best practices you have seen may not work. Why did it work in that school? Why might it or might it not work in your school?

Adapted from “9 tips on using values-led leadership to craft school culture” on ambition.org.uk

Jot down your thoughts!
BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY

As the African proverb goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” An entire community, from school management, students and staff, to parents, regional government offices, neighbours and businesses, is involved in the development of a child. At every level, there are many stakeholders who can make an impact on the school environment and quality of learning. Cultivating a culture of relationships with these stakeholders can bring to schools unique opportunities for collaboration and partnership in regular times, but can also be crucial for a school’s survival during a crisis.

School leaders have the unique position and responsibility to model and emulate the values they want to see in their school’s culture. As leaders, they pave the way in forming strong relationships within and beyond the school community. A school’s capacity to tide over a crisis can depend on their ability to mobilise their greater community and leverage on a wide network of partners to provide resources when needed.

3.1

The principal as the Chief Culture Shaper
Ms Shiarell Loida Mangilit-Cruz

As leaders of educational institutions, principals model behaviours and attitudes that are passed on to the wider school community. Hence, it is the essential task for principals, as Chief Culture Shapers, to consciously create and emulate a positive vision for a nurturing school culture that prioritises strong relationships within and beyond the school.

SCHOOL PROFILE
Ramon Magsaysay Elementary School
Quezon City, The Philippines
Public Elementary School
1,500 students
45 staff

The school takes the personality of their principal...
The principal can either extinguish a flame of positivity or ignite a flame of hope. The principal is responsible for the culture and mood of the school.

- Dr Marcus Jackson, Principal in Atlanta, USA
Here, Ms Shiarell Loida Mangilit-Cruz discusses the three key roles of principals as Chief Culture Shapers of their schools:

**Chief**

As leaders, principals lead by:
- Creating a clear vision and mission for their school. They identify what the school’s short- and long-term goals are;
- Setting guidelines to monitor the behaviours of staff, students, and the wider community, to ensure they are in line with desired school values and outcomes.

**Culture**

As leaders, the role of the principal means:
- Principals greatly influence change or maintain the culture in a school;
- Principals are actors who play out the vision and values of the school. Their actions should reinforce activities in the school.

**Shaper**

With strong influence on school culture, principals should model these positive traits and qualities in their interactions:
- Demonstrate stewardship. The principal should protect the school and its people;
- Empower others to change their behaviours. Help them to do their part while they are learning to adapt to a reformed school culture;
- Be visible, open and available to their stakeholders;
- Communicate regularly and purposefully with staff, students, parents and wider community members regarding the school culture we want them to embrace;
- Exhibit passion and positivity in their interactions with stakeholders.

When the pandemic forced schools to close, many students were not adequately equipped to learn virtually from home. For Santiago A. De Guzman Elementary School, a lack of resources for nearly half the student population meant students struggled to attend virtual classes. Mr Jean Francis V. Dela Cruz and his team quickly analysed these gaps in learning and resources, and leveraged on a wide network of community partners to bridge these gaps sufficiently.
Santiago A. De Guzman Elementary School then used a three-pronged approach of enabling communities of practice, engaging stakeholders and maximising digital technologies to keep education going.

1. Enabling communities of practice
Prioritising virtual relationships of support, the school used free and commonly available online platforms such as Zoom, Padlet and Google Drive to conduct virtual communities of practices. Within their groups, teachers, parents, and students were able to collaborate regularly to discuss the challenges of online learning and share information and learning resources.

2. Engaging stakeholders
To check in on the well-being of the school community, Santiago A. De Guzman Elementary School also started a series of Virtual Stakeholders’ Forums, streamed on their social media platforms. Topics such as distance learning and well-being were discussed, with time for casual dialogues with pupils, parents and teachers.

The series served as a virtual bridge in connecting the school to students, families, and community partners. Especially in times of crisis and uncertainty, open communication and feedback mechanisms are, more than ever, essential to maintaining strong relationships with all stakeholders.

3. Rallying the broader community to maximise digital technologies
As a whole-of-government effort to make remote learning accessible, the Valenzuela city government teamed up with the Department of Education, Philippines to utilise Facebook Live to broadcast a regular schedule of live lessons to learners across all grades. Not forgetting their learners with limited or no resources, Jean and his team worked closely with the city government to secure smartphones and basic necessities for each student in need.

Inspired by this generous effort, the local community came together to sponsor students with free internet load subscriptions, and an astounding number of parent-volunteers mobilised themselves to deliver printed resources and hygiene kits to students’ doorsteps.

Establishing strong and deep relationships with an extensive network of partners and building a culture of relationships before the crisis was instrumental to the school’s smooth transition to a new normal. As demonstrated by the overwhelming community support received when the school was in need, there is certainly strength in numbers. Engaging and mobilising your larger community pays off and pays forward in numerous ways.
Try it out! Describe one way in which you can:

1. Create virtual communities to sustain school practices.

2. Virtually engage all stakeholders.

3. Build a network of relationships with the school’s broader community (e.g. parent volunteers, local government offices, local telecommunication providers).

“Rather than dwell on negativities brought forth by the pandemic, this crisis has strengthened the bonds of support, hope and love among us.”

- Jean Francis V. Dela Cruz, Teacher-in-charge, Santiago A. De Guzman Elementary School
3.3
Maintaining community and sense of connectedness

A GUIDE

During disruptions to education, schools must find ways to remain committed to the social and emotional needs of entire school communities while providing remote learning and enrichment opportunities to students. Schools are uniquely positioned to help members of their communities, particularly those who may need additional support, to maintain a sense of connectedness and well-being:

• Use available and free technology and online tools to connect with families and stakeholders. Whenever possible, opt for videoconferencing and/or social media tools to get face time with stakeholders;
• Be intentional about creating settings for frequent formal and informal engagement. Provide opportunities for community members to connect with one another in a safe and structured environment;
• Incorporate intentional community-building and self-care strategies into discussions. Create opportunities for small-group conversations;
• Prioritise the human side of education. Show families and community members you care and acknowledge the challenges they may be facing. Be flexible and understanding;
• Find ways for families to have agency in their students’ remote learning experiences, provide feedback to the school and connect with other families.

Try it out! How can these tips be used to engage stakeholders in your wider community (e.g. parent volunteers, local government offices, local telecommunication providers)?

Adapted from “Communicate-Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis: Practical Tips for School Staff and Administrators” on WestEd.org
Jot down your thoughts!
Formed from the merger of two high schools in 2017, Boon Lay Secondary School faced the obstacle of integrating two vastly different school cultures to create a unified school community. As the then-Principal, Mr Tan Chor Pang was also challenged to improve the grades and well-being of his students, many of whom were from low-income families and had low to mid-range Grade 6 national examination scores.

4.1 Building an extended family in school

Mr Tan Chor Pang

In Singapore, a co-curricular activity (CCA) is a non-academic activity that is compulsory for all students in public secondary schools, and many primary and post-secondary students take them up as well. Students can choose from clubs and societies, physical sports, uniformed groups and performing arts, and participate in these activities outside of curriculum time. CCAs are a key component of students’ holistic development.

The family-oriented, CCA-centric and aspiration-focused school organisation that emerged from the merger exemplifies the strong culture of relationships the school is anchored in. Unlike traditional schools structured by academic level and subjects, Boon Lay Secondary School is an extended family formed from communities of co-curricular activity (CCA) groups, banded across age-groups and educational streams.

4 FORGING STRONG SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Trust is the foundation of strong relationships, and strong relationships between school members is the foundation of a positive school culture. School leaders need to make teachers and students feel a sense of safety and belonging in the school, and build a community of relationships where everyone feels known, heard and respected by one another.

School leaders should also seek to empower their school community in their various roles and provide structures that make school members feel valued and supported in taking on various challenges. Teachers and students should be given resources and ownership over problems and their solutions, to cultivate trust and grow competencies.

A strong network of trusting relationships makes a school much more resilient to schooling disruptions, as members of the school community proactively help each other through change and are empowered to innovate novel solutions to unprecedented problems.
Key concepts in this unique organisational structure are:

- **The foundation of familial relationships** intrinsic in the school’s organisation and structure.

- **A culture of senior-junior mentorship** within CCA groups, where seniors are role models, with support from CCA teacher-mentors who follow students through their entire high school years.

- **Students learning and interacting** across all streams and levels.

- **Teachers connecting and working in partnership with parents** to help each child realise their dreams and aspirations.

- **Teachers working collaboratively** and in coherence with school goals, taking initiative and ownership in solving problems.

**Tip**

To create a student-centred school culture, leaders can strategically create opportunities for student leadership and seek out unique ways to engage students in contributing to the vibrancy of life in school.

As the school organisational structure promotes friendship, collaboration and care across all levels, students gradually became less self-conscious about their perceived academic ability and class rankings. They were able to recognise themselves and their peers for their strengths and talents. There were significant and sustained improvements in discipline and academic results, and accolades from the community and public for students’ positive behaviours and achievements.

**Put in practice: Cultural shifts to enhance relationships in school**

Adapting lessons from the Boon Lay Secondary experience, Chor Pang shares three ways you can prioritise relationships in school to dramatically shift your school’s culture for the better:

1. **INVEST TIME WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS AND CONCERNS**

   Be genuinely interested in the concerns of parents, students, teachers and members of the wider community, and take directed action to address those needs. Create platforms to meet with stakeholders, actively seeking out their opinions, needs, concerns, interests and feedback. Discovering the unique skills and competencies your stakeholders have will also benefit your school in expanding your network of resources.

2. **ENGAGE YOUR STAKEHOLDERS TO OWN ISSUES AND SOLVE PROBLEMS**

   Empower your staff and teachers to find their own unique solutions to problems and create opportunities for them to develop and implement plans. Addressing critical concerns need not rest solely on the shoulders of school leaders; teachers and staff must be (1) encouraged to own problems and solutions, and (2) provided with the support and resources to follow through with their plans. Creating a positive school culture built on strong relationships means providing structures that give your teachers agency to propose and implement change.

3. **BUILD TRUST, PROVIDE SUPPORT, AND ENHANCE ACCOUNTABILITY OF STAKEHOLDERS**

   Trust and accountability are two essential qualities of a positive school culture centred on relationships. Trust is built when support is given, and enhanced when there is accountability. When the trajectory of accountable outcomes is positive, trust of and across stakeholders will invariably increase.
Try it out! Describe two ways you can create opportunities for students to meet and interact with peers outside of their classes.

1. 

2. 

4.2

Maintaining community spirit virtually

Ms Yenny Dwi Maria

Sudden school closures can be difficult and unsettling for everyone in the school community. With students and staff needing to adapt to remote learning and abrupt changes, the familiarity of school routines can help them feel safe and maintain a sense of normalcy amidst great change. To ward off the isolation of remote learning and teaching, Ms Yenny Dwi Maria and her team maintained a sense of community and school spirit by creatively reinventing morning assemblies.

A creative twist to pre-COVID-19 routines

To break up the mundanity of remote learning, Yenny tapped on the creativity and resourcefulness of her teachers to make virtual morning assembly interesting. Different members of the school community, from the Student Affairs team to homeroom teachers and even student leaders, took turns organising exciting events to energise the community as they began a day of virtual learning together.

Many familiar aspects of the school’s morning assembly routine were retained, such as singing of the National Anthem and traditional songs, Holy Quran Recitation or Bible Study, the sharing of inspirational videos, weekly reflections and talent shows. By keeping familiar elements of a school’s routine while incorporating new ideas in response to unique circumstances, Yenny and her team successfully reinvigorated a school tradition that maintains morale and community spirit and provides a sense of safety and familiarity for the community during a crisis.
Graduation Day was also moved online and streamed on the school’s YouTube channel. Pre-recorded scenes of the school principal presenting awards and medals to student representatives were shown, and simultaneously in their own homes, parents presented their children with the awards and medals. Students would then take family pictures in their graduation gowns and submit the photos to the school.

As school leaders, teachers and students can be a great distance from each other during remote learning, it is even more important for a school to sustain and tap on a strong culture of relationships to ensure all members of the community are well-connected and cared for.

**Try it out!** Describe two ways or events where the school community would normally get together. How can you adapt these routines or events to create similar opportunities for school members to connect remotely?

1. ____________________________________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________________________________

Before the pandemic, morning assembly routines of attendance-taking and announcements at SPK Penabur Kelapa Gading involved only a few teachers and students-in-charge, who would lead the entire school community in these activities. During the switch to remote learning, however, it was no longer feasible for daily whole-school assemblies. With morning assembly shifted to a virtual medium, Ms Sherly Kalatting found she had to rely on a large number of homeroom teachers to double up as class managers and maintain a sense of connectedness for their students.

The 15-minute homeroom period opens the virtual schooling day. Homeroom teachers lead their classes through a morning routine of prayers, announcements and attendance-taking, while also looking out for the well-being of students and extending pastoral care and support. During this time, homeroom teachers also collect feedback from
students and parents on the remote learning process, making homeroom sessions a vital time for teachers and students to communicate and establish a conducive atmosphere to begin the day.

In the position of suddenly having to empower many homeroom teachers to take on these roles, Sherly relied on the following framework to build trust, confidence and ease in her teachers in the new virtual process:

1. **SET CLEAR OBJECTIVES.** What is the expected behaviour of students that we want shown during online learning?

2. **COMMUNICATE OBJECTIVES CLEARLY.** All teachers and school members should have a clear understanding of expected values and behaviours, in line with the school’s vision and mission. Once all staff have a common and clear understanding of these objectives, communicate them clearly to parents and students.

3. **PLAN AND IMPLEMENT HOMEROOM ACTIVITIES.** Get students involved in deciding what activities and guidelines they want during their homeroom session. Hearing and valuing students’ and teachers’ voices is an aspect of a positive school culture. Students and teachers should feel safe, supported, engaged and accepted in voicing and implementing their ideas.

4. **SUPERVISE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF HOMEROOM ACTIVITIES.** Teachers must be willing to have their sessions observed, for review and for other members of staff and leadership to provide support when necessary.

5. **GATHER FEEDBACK FROM ALL STAKEHOLDERS.** Seek constant feedback from students, teachers and parents on homeroom and related activities. Offer a variety of platforms (e.g. Google Forms, WhatsApp, LINE, Google Hangout or e-mail) to cater to the varying abilities and preferences of students and parents. In a positive school culture, students and teachers are comfortable expressing themselves, asking questions and giving honest feedback.

6. **REFINE AND IMPROVE.** After gathering and analysing feedback, first acknowledge the issues, give clear explanations, and provide affirmation that follow-up will be done. Internally, identify the source of the problems and make plans to fix it. Make adjustments to improve the implementation of activities in line with desired outcomes.

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**Tip**

It is important to delegate and choose suitable people to oversee various aspects of school projects. School leaders need to embrace everyone in the school community, and can demonstrate this by trusting and believing in their capabilities.

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**Try it out!** Describe two platforms where you can gather feedback from staff, students and parents.

1. 

2. 

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List two ways you can utilise and incorporate their feedback into activities, and communicate that their opinions are valued and heard.

1. 

2. 

Jot down your thoughts!
SHAPING A CARING SCHOOL

Creating a culture of care in our school community begins with nurturing a supportive and safe environment for students and staff. As leaders with great influence on the behaviours and values of the school community, principals can nurture a positive school culture by being personable and considerate towards their staff, showing empathy and support for the challenges they encounter. Particularly in times of disruption, going the extra mile to appreciate students and staff as they adapt to change makes a real difference in their attitudes and morale.

But beyond nurturing their communities from within, schools are able to and should encourage their learners to care for the community they live in. Bringing forward a culture of care to vulnerable groups beyond the school compound can serve to nurture civic-minded, empathetic and socially-aware citizens. A true culture of care in schools begins with its people, and goes beyond the school grounds to impact and touch the lives of people in need.

5.1 Creating a supportive virtual working environment

Mr K. Govindan

Coping with the abrupt shift to remote learning can be difficult. However, the staff and students of Peiying Primary School had established a strong culture of care that they leveraged on to ease the stress of sudden schooling transitions. The school continuously reminded staff and students to look at the positives and count their blessings. Through the various stages of lockdown, the school community rallied around this mantra to look at situations as the glass being half full rather than half empty.

Addressing the well-being needs of staff

As then-Principal, Govindan kept abreast of the needs of his teachers as they transitioned to teaching remotely. Working with his School Staff Developer and the Staff Well-Being Committee, he organised Touch-Base Conversations with his staff via Zoom.

Govindan personally messaged his teachers to check in on how they were coping with the new work-from-home arrangements, particularly if they had had difficulties using online technologies, or had young children who were learning from home too. He asked after their well-being, even extending his concern to their families. Being personable and showing consideration for teachers’ circumstances is a good way to reinforce a culture of care in our school, particularly as school leaders with great influence over the school community.
Appreciating your staff

Rewards and recognitions are also an important way to show appreciation for the hard work and efforts of staff. Performance management is an ongoing process of staff appraisal; staff who perform well are rewarded with performance bonuses and recommended for promotion. Before the pandemic, staff who were promoted were recognised at a ceremony held in the school. In 2020, despite the pandemic, Peiying Primary School still made an effort to recognise promoted staff via a Zoom event.

Steps to nurture a supportive work environment

- Check in regularly with teachers to understand their challenges, especially in unfamiliar situations.
- Show empathy for your teachers’ personal circumstances. Offer support and understanding where you can.
- Focus on the positives in the face of uncertainty, and express gratitude for staff. Celebrate the small wins.
- Recognise the efforts of your staff publicly and reward them appropriately.

5.2

COVID-19’s teaching moments

Mdm Moliah Hashim

To have a transformational impact on their own learning journeys and on the larger community, staff and students need to be committed in developing themselves. They should be supported and encouraged to proactively explore, experiment and expand their mindsets to embrace innovation. Under the right circumstances, every student and staff member can be developed as change agents and care advocates.

Strengthening a culture of care through positive education

To enhance student well-being and character, Princess Elizabeth Primary School incorporated Positive Education in their classroom time:

- **Mindful Walking**: Walking while being aware of our body’s movements can help relieve stress and clear the mind. It also helps young, active children focus better and is a useful strategy to teach mindfulness.

- **Restorative Practices**: In contrast to school discipline in the traditional sense, restorative practices teach students to resolve disagreements and problems in a positive manner, and to take responsibility for their behaviours.

- **Student Recognition System**: Building a system to recognise and reward students’ good behaviours reaffirms their behavioural choices and reinforces their learning process.
Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS): An evidence-based framework, PBIS is a set of ideas and tools that schools use to develop programmes, practices and strategies to improve behaviour and create a conducive learning environment.

Through positive education, students see purpose in their school experiences and develop meaningful, caring relationships with their teachers and peers. This in turn enhances their sense of belonging to the school and promotes student well-being.

Caring for the community
For Princess Elizabeth Primary School, the sudden challenge of learning in the pandemic was also used as a teaching moment to practise the school values of Empathy and Respect. Students showed gratitude and appreciation for the tireless efforts put in by the school cleaning staff to maintain sanitation standards during COVID-19, and for the migrant worker community in Singapore who were hit hard by the virus.

A documentary featuring the rapid spread of COVID-19 among migrant workers living densely in dormitories sparked the idea to set up an online gratitude wall. As part of their Values in Action project, Primary 6 school prefects helmed this project and created a virtual wall of appreciation and encouragement for the migrant worker community.

Princess Elizabeth Primary School’s parents, students and staff sent in their messages, poems and drawings via online platforms. These messages were also translated into the main languages of the migrant community in Singapore, such as Mandarin, Tamil, Hindi, Bengali, Bahasa Indonesian and Burmese, to reach out to those who could not read English. The resourceful school prefects, parents and teachers sought the help of their contacts, including their own domestic helpers, for the translation. The wall went live on 1 May 2020, in conjunction with Labour Day, and went viral on social media with the hashtag #HomeForALLPEPSEdition.

A culture of care means more than just caring for your peers; for Princess Elizabeth Primary School, it meant going beyond their community and showing support for vulnerable groups severely impacted by the pandemic. Cultivating a culture of care for all means nurturing students and staff who not only empathise with and support one another, but also show concern for others in their wider community.

Values in Action is a compulsory programme for students in 1-12 public schools in Singapore. Students learn about community issues and needs, and come up with proposals to contribute to improvements in school or in the community.
Try it out! Can you think of groups in your wider community who could benefit from awareness and aid? How can your school community start an initiative in solidarity and support of their needs?

5.3

How to create a climate of care in school

A GUIDE

Today, school leaders are faced with the challenge of uniting and inspiring their school communities in the midst of COVID-19. It will involve the deep, human work of establishing a climate of care, one in which school leaders care for returning teachers, the children and the families they work with.

Two key mindsets can help with this work of caring for school communities:

1. Take a strength-based approach

A strength-based approach articulates for the community the ways in which they have been strong, and helps to leverage those strengths to face the new work ahead of them.

- Leaders can ask teachers to share how they have taken care of themselves during a challenging time, and how this experience has enhanced their abilities to cope, persist and grow;
- Teachers can encourage students to share and draw on the strengths and interests they gained while at home during school closures and holiday breaks, from helping out at home to completing puzzles and games.

These discussions can help them recognise that the challenges they experienced have morphed into strengths and interests.

2. Enact kindness

Most efforts to enact kindness will entail deep listening, thoughtful communication, and empathy. Empathy in this case takes the form of listening to and really acknowledging another’s pain and suffering, without attempting to ‘solve’ it:

- Take the perspective of another person – be the listener and the student, not the knower;
- Stay out of judgment;
- Try to understand what emotion they are articulating;
- Communicate your understanding of that emotion.

For school leaders, letting a real conversation unfold without judgment could help with staff and family discussions around stress and tribulations likely to arise throughout the pandemic years.

Adapted from “How to Create a Climate of Care in School This Fall” on greatergood.berkeley.edu
Try it out! Schedule a conversation with a teacher or staff member whom you think needs a listening ear. Apply the tips as defined above to be more empathetic and kind in your conversations with them. Reflect on this interaction and describe how it was different from previous interactions: how did they respond, and how did that make you feel?

Jot down your thoughts!

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MOULDING HOLISTIC LEARNERS

Schools are widely assumed to be places of learning – but does this mean a culture of learning is present in schools? For educators, there can be days where we question if any learning happened in the classroom at all, or if students simply absorbed facts in a one-directional flow from teachers. When a school successfully cultivates a culture of learning, students exhibit enthusiasm in and take charge of their learning process, are engaged and unafraid to ask questions, and are motivated to develop as a whole person beyond academic requirements.

Creating a culture of learning amongst students is a whole-school effort, where trusting relationships within the school community scaffold and support students’ innate curiosity and passion for learning. Opportunities are created and made available for everyone to develop their talents at their own pace, and the growth and development of each child is placed at the centre of any initiative.

6.1 Relationships as the cornerstone of learning
Ms Elsie Jeremiah

Maintaining a culture of learning in schools is a constant work in progress. For Ms Elsie Jeremiah, the key principles to nurturing a genuine culture of learning are:

• A shared belief amongst staff, students and parents that every child can learn;
• Strong trusting relationships between students, staff and parents;
• A safe and inclusive environment where everyone is given opportunities to grow as a learner.

At Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School, a three-pronged focus on student-teacher relationships, peer relationships and structures supports a culture of learning. It also helps to cultivate a long-lasting passion for learning in students and scaffold their learning every step of the way. With a foundational belief that every child can learn, teachers are motivated to understand deeper reasons behind student underperformance and misbehaviour, and guide them compassionately to get back on their feet.

Teacher-student relationships

Form teachers, who stay with each class for two years, hold regular one-on-one conversations with students to check in with their progress and well-being, and get to know each student as an individual. Information about each student is recorded centrally. With such a system, the school maintains extensive knowledge about each student and is able to use this
information to support their needs adequately throughout their secondary school journey.

These strong relationships between students and teachers also allow students to be comfortable in seeking help from teachers whenever they need it. Giving students the agency to decide if and when they need extra help from teachers also gives them ownership over their learning process and develops their skills in self-directed learning.

**Peer relationships**

At Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School, peer bonding begins the moment a new cohort is enrolled in the school. Student leaders are attached to each class to introduce new students to the school’s culture and promote bonding in their new classes. These student leaders continue to follow each class beyond formal orientation programmes, meeting the class on a weekly basis for the next 10 weeks until the class is comfortably settled in.

Healthy peer relationships within classes create a strong foundation and provide a safe and inclusive environment for students to support one another in their learning. Many meet in groups after school to discuss and complete homework assignments together, and coach each other according to their individual strengths. Students thrive in a culture of learning when everyone takes responsibility for their own growth, and proactively assists their peers in their own learning.

**Initiatives for a culture of learning**

Schools can encourage a culture of learning through routines, support for all students, and comprehensive student management protocols:

- **Focus on quality learning and the creation of a culture in which all students are expected to learn successfully, in their own ways and at their own pace;**
- **Create a system to value and show appreciation to individual talents, and actively ensure that all students are engaged in challenging, meaningful learning tasks;**
- **Provide support structures for students with greater needs, in the form of after-school supervised study sessions;**
- **Stretch opportunities for those who wish to go further or faster. Encourage and facilitate students to initiate after-school consultations with teachers;**
- **Incorporate strategies to promote appropriate behaviour, including agreeing on responses and consequences for inappropriate student behaviours, and providing sufficient support for teachers to implement these policies.**

“When learning and development is an integral, essential or necessary element of school culture, it will be pervasive and we will see learning and the constant search for better ways of doing things in all areas.”

- Elsie Jeremiah, former Principal, Singapore
Try it out! Describe two ways you can incorporate peer learning activities in your classes.

1. 

2. 

At Boon Lay Secondary School, students’ aspirations drive programme offerings. The school customises, empowers and creates opportunities for each student to help them achieve their dreams.

Modular Academic Curriculum (MAC)

The Modular Academic Curriculum (MAC) at Boon Lay Secondary School was conceptualised with the view of allowing students to explore and learn beyond their official subject offerings. As a self-directed learning programme, MAC runs parallel to classroom teaching, with students learning online with periodic in-person coaching. When students complete the curriculum and meet the requirements, they can choose to change the level of a subject and switch from a ‘Normal Academic’ to an ‘Express’ course.
Students with no intention of moving to the Express course can also use the resources for revision and additional learning without officially switching courses.

With MAC, a structure of online learning was already in place, and teachers and students were familiar and comfortable with learning via the virtual classroom. The culture of self-directed learning also proved to be handy during school closures.

Student Development Module Programme

The Student Development Module Programme helps students discover their talents, explore their options and work towards their dreams through enrichment learning. Through a whole-school approach, this programme offers creative and vocationally-relevant modules for every student to explore their interests and hone their talents outside of an academic context. As students at Boon Lay Secondary School generally have lower Grade 6 national examination results and may feel uninspired to learn, this programme broadens students’ aspirations and encourages them to believe there is even more that is possible for them.

At Boon Lay Secondary School, every student is guided in the building of their own portfolio of academic learning and a range of enriching exposures that will get them to the next stage of education and help them achieve their dreams and aspirations. Taken together, the two optional programmes described here encourage students to take charge of their own learning and constantly seek to improve themselves. Such programmes acknowledge that learning takes many forms, and give students the opportunity and platforms to explore and develop their skills and talents holistically, reinforcing a culture of learning.

“

We need to think beyond the current situation. We must look ahead and start laying the right foundations to prepare for the next challenge.

- Tan Chor Pang, retired Principal, Singapore

Try it out! Describe two possibilities for add-on learning which you can explore, to extend students’ learning beyond the school curriculum and boundaries.

1. 

2. 

In Singapore, students in Secondary School take subjects at the ‘Express’ (a 4-year course) or ‘Normal Academic’ level (a 5-year course), based on their Grade 6 national examination results.
6.3

Creating a culture of learning at your school

A principal, leading by example, must initiate and promote conversations that intentionally put students first, looking at other issues such as curriculum selection, evaluation systems and tests as merely systems needed to support student success.

Here are a few ways you can make learning the primary goal:

- Set high and clear expectations;
- Give students opportunities to create their own learning path. Let teachers and students determine how best to learn the expected concepts and strategies;
- Allow plenty of opportunities for teachers to share progress with students. Students will be more invested in their learning if they are aware of their progress;
- Make learning a community effort. Healthy, friendly competition between students or groups is one way to encourage growth. When students know each other well and can work together, an atmosphere of camaraderie develops, creating deep and supportive relationships;
- Include parents, caregivers and the community in the process of learning. This develops understanding and trust among all stakeholders;
- Expect and accept mistakes as part of the learning process. Share your own successes and failures;
- Celebrate success. Take the time and effort to share in the excitement of achievement.

Adapted from “Creating a Culture of Learning at Your School” by the Eastern Michigan University.
NURTURING LIFELONG LEARNERS IN OUR TEACHERS

A school-wide culture of learning begins with teachers. Teachers should be empowered as educators who constantly improve and stay up-to-date with the latest innovations in curricula, pedagogies and assessments. Industry revolutions, pandemics, and natural and man-made disasters can change education and school as we know it, and teachers should be constantly ready to adapt to new frontiers.

A robust system of teacher development is essential to ensure teachers are empowered and supported through change. Not only will this ensure a smooth transition to new paradigms of education, it will also inspire teachers to innovate using new and creative ways of teaching and learning for the benefit of students in the classroom.

In a culture of learning, teachers see themselves as lifelong learners engaged in improving their knowledge and understanding, not just of the teaching profession and of their subjects, but also on how to prepare students for an ever-evolving future.

7.1 Helping teachers stay ahead
Ms Yenny Dwi Maria

Schooling disruptions can bring about fundamental changes in teaching and learning that many are not prepared for. Ms Yenny Dwi Maria, however, saw it as a learning opportunity for her and her teachers to develop themselves. When a robust culture of learning is integrated in schools, teachers will be willing and excited to constantly improve themselves and their peers.

For Yenny, leveraging on a culture of learning in her school meant addressing obstacles to new challenges and empowering her teachers with the right mindset and resources to adapt to changing circumstances ahead of time.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL PROFILE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMPN 211 Jakarta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jakarta, Indonesia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Secondary School</td>
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<tr>
<td>670 students</td>
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<tr>
<td>43 staff</td>
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Initial obstacles
Government’s revision to curriculum, learning emphasis and assessments

Solutions
Constantly communicate government updates to teachers, pointing them to available resources and courses.
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<th>Initial obstacles</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
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| Teachers’ lack of familiarity with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) | Empower teachers in terms of technology, pedagogy and education policy updates:  
• Initiated and conducted ICT training before the lockdown;  
• After the lockdown, moved to online training with virtual professional learning communities. Teachers even initiated training sessions amongst themselves to practise using application functions for virtual teaching, i.e. Microsoft Teams and Google Meet;  
• Peer coaching and mentoring in small groups virtually. Teachers who encounter technical issues are able to seek help in school with safety measures in place;  
• Management team approached all teachers personally to offer assistance and pair them with a buddy;  
• Provided necessary manuals, tutorials and recordings to familiarise teachers with the targeted technology applications. |

**Tip**

Remember that technology is a tool to deliver the content. It is important to put content over technology; online learning is not all about the latest technological tools.

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<th>Initial obstacles</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
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| Teachers’ isolation and well-being | Maintain and strengthen the bond within teachers and staff members:  
• Create opportunities for teachers to design project-based learning across subjects.  
• Start extra-curricular projects for teachers and staff, e.g. publishing a book.  
• Offer recognitions and rewards to thank and show appreciation for their hard work.  
• Check in regularly with teachers to help keep the team on track and provide timely support. |

In the Indonesian language, a teacher is a GURU, a shortened form of DIGUGU dan DITIRU, meaning someone who is **trusted** and followed. As role models themselves, teachers have the responsibility to embrace a culture of lifelong learning, in order to be prepared for an ever-changing future, and guide students through a new era of change.

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"A true teacher is a life-long learner who never stops improving himself or herself."

- Yenny Dwi Maria, Principal, SMPN 211 Jakarta
Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary School recognised that teachers were key players in shaping a culture of learning in schools. More importantly, however, teachers themselves should be active learners in a culture of learning, and need to seek to constantly inspire their own learning journeys, before they can inspire students.

School leaders must take the lead in modelling behaviours that will promote an exciting culture of learning among teachers and students. School leaders must empower staff, allow them autonomy in teaching, take calculated risks, and be quick to forgive honest mistakes and extend second chances. Schools can further encourage teachers to upskill by allowing them opportunities to translate their knowledge into classroom practice.

If every teacher believes that every child can learn and wants to learn, and if every teacher is able to engage every child in his or her class and make learning enjoyable almost every day, then the pervasive culture of learning will be nurtured.

- Elsie Jeremiah, former Principal, Singapore
Ms Elsie Jeremiah and her team motivated and equipped their teachers to participate in the creation of a culture of learning, through comprehensive and sustained professional development programmes over the years:

- Time is set aside on a fortnightly basis for large-group professional development on general skills, and on a weekly basis for subject-based learning;
- Teachers are also encouraged to participate in learning opportunities at intra-school and national platforms;
- Space and time are specially carved out for teachers to experiment with various teaching and learning strategies to come up with new ideas and discover innovative ways of engaging students for deeper learning:
  - Every teacher is allocated this time within their schedule;
  - Funds are made available to develop good ideas into teaching tools for themselves and for colleagues to utilise;
  - Opportunities are also provided for teachers to share their innovative teaching strategies on national and international platforms.

Experimenting with teaching strategies

The school actively makes an effort to encourage teachers to innovate and implement new ideas that advance student learning outcomes in the classroom. Sustained professional development offered throughout the year also helps to equip teachers with deep skills and conceptual understanding which allow them to design engaging and enjoyable lessons. Such experiences promote staff collegiality, encourage teamwork and experimentation, and strengthen bonds amongst teachers. When teachers themselves are creative and inspired, this infectious joy of learning naturally spreads to the classrooms as well.

For example, geography teachers at Kuo Chuan Presbyterian Secondary had learnt about game-based learning as a tool to increase engagement in the classroom. A team of three teachers came up with the idea of creating a board game to teach students geography concepts through incidental and experimental learning, and presented the draft to Elsie and her team for review. The game, having met the school’s criteria, was approved and developed into a teaching tool for the Geography department to use.
Try it out! List two ways in which you can encourage and support your teachers to innovate with unique ideas that boost students’ learning experiences:

1. ____________________________  
   ____________________________

2. ____________________________  
   ____________________________

Over the years, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) has collaborated with many partners to build structures that support teacher development and learning. For instance, it oversees the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST), which leads initiatives for the continued development of teachers and MOE staff. It works to foster a stronger teacher-led culture of professional development and professional excellence, and creates a strong support structure to help all teachers. A centralised database of resources and programmes in a dedicated portal for professional development allows teachers from all schools to be equally supported and encouraged to develop themselves professionally.

A system-wide teaching-learning ecosystem
Mrs Wai Yin Pryke

Over the years, Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) has collaborated with many partners to build structures that support teacher development and learning. For instance, it oversees the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST), which leads initiatives for the continued development of teachers and MOE staff. It works to foster a stronger teacher-led culture of professional development and professional excellence, and creates a strong support structure to help all teachers. A centralised database of resources and programmes in a dedicated portal for professional development allows teachers from all schools to be equally supported and encouraged to develop themselves professionally.

It is a well-known saying that ‘It takes a village to raise a child’. This is the same with teachers: teachers are made, not born.

- Wai Yin Pryke, former Principal, Singapore
Sustaining an ecosystem of teacher development

There are clear and structured systems in place at MOE to encourage a culture of lifelong learning amongst teachers:

- **Teacher Ownership, Teacher Leadership:** At every level there is support for the teacher, who is viewed as a professional with agency, to decide on how they want to learn and improve their teaching craft;

- **Mentoring and Coaching:** At the school level, there is coaching and mentoring by Senior Teachers and Lead Teachers;

- **Career Progression:** At every level of promotion entailing a change of roles, there is support in terms of structured training programmes that allow the teachers to continue learning and growing;

- **Collaborative Learning:** Teachers can also join professional learning communities outside of their schools, often led by Master Teachers, for greater exposure and to learn best practices from teachers from other schools;

- **Industry Collaboration:** Teachers are also encouraged to go outside of the education context to learn from other sectors to “broaden perspectives, create new learning experiences for professional development and to enrich students’ learning”;

- **‘Phygital’ learning:** Teacher learning is now ‘phygital’ – both physical and digital. Although face-to-face training has been the preferred mode, training has increasingly moved online, even before the pandemic. MOE has set up a dedicated portal for teachers to explore and sign up for learning opportunities and build their own learning roadmap.

- **Platforms for teacher sharing:** Once in two years, there is a Teachers Conference that allows teachers to showcase innovative practices, network and learn from each other.

Adapting processes for your school

As a small and centralised system, Singapore’s education system is unique in the region. Schools and districts, however, can still adapt lessons from such a system, to create support structures and their own network of partners that benefit teachers:

- Instead of a national system-wide view, form ‘alliances’ with like-minded schools in your geographical cluster. For example, Indonesia has a network of working groups, such as the Secondary School Subjects Teachers Working Group (*Musyawarah Guru Mata Pelajaran, MGMP*) where subject teachers at different schools come together to discuss challenges and learn from each other;

- Think big, start small. Decide on what areas you would like to collaborate in for teacher and student learning:
  - Within your district, are there schools you could collaborate with?
  - Are there opportunities for teacher exchange to take place?
  - Would you be able to organise sharing sessions on an area of expertise?
- What about businesses in your area? Could they offer talks to your teachers so they can learn more about having an innovative mindset? Could some big corporations sponsor teacher work attachments?

Teacher development is a lifelong journey that needs to be supported by leaders with time and resources. Even a little support can go a long way in creating and encouraging a culture of learning amongst teachers. Having a ‘gotong royong’, or co-operative spirit, will certainly help uplift teachers and students and encourage them to continually seek self-improvement and be lifelong learners.

Jot down your thoughts!
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. DEFINE AND CONTEXTUALISE
   What culture do I want to build?

   Why do I want to build this culture?

   What does this mean within the context of my school?

2. DIAGNOSE AND DEVELOP PLAN
   What data/information do I need to assess the current culture and how do I gather them?

   What are the areas I need to focus on?

   What does this mean within the context of my school?
What structures in school can I leverage upon to draw up a plan of action?

3. COMMUNICATE, ENGAGE AND IMPLEMENT
What is my key message?

How can I communicate effectively with different audience groups to gain support?

How can I implement the plan?
Who can I involve?

4. MONITOR, REINFORCE, SUSTAIN EFFORTS

What possible barriers are there?

How do I know when the school has adopted the culture?

What monitoring processes do I have?
How can I reinforce the culture?

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How can I sustain the efforts?

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CLOSING MESSAGE

Our first Making HEADway series, *Educational Leadership in a Crisis*, was launched as a direct response to the impact the COVID-19 crisis had on schooling. Following the webinars and accompanying handbook, which has been translated into Bahasa Indonesian and Vietnamese to reach more educators in the region, we heard from you, our partners, about the value of the series, not just as we navigate this crisis, but also as we attempt to build back better.

This second series attempts to unpack the nebulous concept of school culture and provide our audience and readers with actionable examples from practitioners across the region.

In this handbook we have shared with you how leaders in some Southeast Asian countries have worked towards building a positive culture in their schools. We have provided examples of how leaders have defined culture in their schools; worked towards building a culture of care and compassion between educators, students and the wider community; and, importantly, imbuing a culture of learning in their schools.

We hope that this handbook will provide you with some actionable tips and strategies to deepen the positive culture in your school. The COVID-19 crisis has presented those of us in education with an opportunity to rethink how we educate tomorrow’s leaders. If we are to see the kind of changes we desire in curriculum, pedagogies and assessment methods, we need to ensure that our schools have a culture that not only allows for, but also encourages and promotes, innovation. Culture is often a defining trait of any organisation and schools are no different. I urge you to utilise this handbook as a tool in your efforts to promote a positive school culture in the new normal.

Thank you.

**Vignesh Louis Naidu**
Director, Operations
The HEAD Foundation
Making HEADway – a practitioner-focused series of webinars with accompanying handbooks – was conceived, designed and launched by The HEAD Foundation in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 crisis. In each webinar series and handbook, leading academics and exemplary educators in the region share strategies and actionable tips on how to immediately respond to school closures, and on future-proofing our schools and education systems to build back better.

Also in this series

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN A CRISIS

In this first instalment of Making HEADway, school leaders from Southeast Asia showed how they led school- and system-wide responses to the educational disruptions caused by COVID-19, while eminent educational leadership experts discussed how educators can adapt these strategies and tips to their schools.

Watch the recordings here:  Get the e-handbook here:

Coming soon JUNE-JULY 2021

BRIDGING THE GAPS IN REMOTE LEARNING

Much has been said about the educational inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic — but what can be done to alleviate the situation? Apart from online platforms, can schools use other forms of technology to reach students? In this practitioner-focused series, we explore the spectrum of educational technologies from virtual classrooms to radio lessons, show how communities play a part in education, and how we can create inclusive and engaging lessons in a remote setting.

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20 Upper Circular Road
The Riverwalk #02-21
Singapore 058416

headfoundation.org

f TheHEADFoundation
@HEAD_Foundation
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