**How to Promote Optimism in Your School**

Here are 15 actions leaders can take to promote optimism and positive school culture.

* **Become The Head Optimist—**As the leader, **you** are the number one model for optimism. Show your staff members, students, and parents what deliberate optimism looks like. For decisions that you have to make, everyone around should be able to watch you facing trouble or choices realistically and without panic, gathering information from many sources, identifying what you can’t control and showing attitudes and actions to minimize its impact. They should also see you identifying what you can control and planning strategies to do so, actively following a plan of action, and owning the decision and its results. Above all, let your actions point away from defeatism and toward hope.
* **Say No to “Us-Them” Thinking**—Us-them thinking is a roadblock to optimism. It breeds helplessness against forces that we think are out to get us. At a faculty meeting, practice this activity focused on RELATEDNESS: Have small groups brainstorm a list of 10 ways in which they are related to or need each other. Share those lists with the larger group. Then have groups make and share a second list: 10 ways to uplift each other and acknowledge each other’s gifts and competence. Don’t stop with just writing the lists. Set goals and plans **to act** on the ideas from the lists. Check back soon to discuss the outcomes of the activity.
* **The Gift of Showing Up—**Make sure you are visible in the hallways, at the front entrance, on the playground. Show up during passing periods and other times students are coming, going, or gathered. Greet people. Say, “Hi! I hope you’re having a good day.” Add their names, if you know them. (Try to learn all their names.) Avoid starting a conversation with anything like this: “Is this where you are supposed to be?” Your cheerful, encouraging presence, in itself, spreads optimism and helps everyone in the school feel safe.
* **Donut Drop-off**—Use the morning rush to turn hurried chaos (and sometimes grumpiness) into a warm welcome. Once in a while, surprise each parent with a donut during drop-off time in the parking lot or in front of the school. Add a quick, “Hello” and “Thanks for being a part of our school community.” Turn the event into a rally by adding the pep band and staff members dressed up in school colors. Use any available staff members and volunteers to help. Involve your kitchen and custodial staff. It’s a simple but strong gesture of appreciation that will boost school pride and raise parents’ spirits. (You might contact a company that makes energy bars for a one-time donation. Who can’t use an energy bar just about any morning?)
* **Staff Morale Revival**—As chief optimist, designate yourself as a key morale booster. In that role, know that the way to increase morale for your staff is to treat each one as the professional that he or she is. Serve as the head example of respect for their skills, insights, abilities, and ideas. Morale flourishes when individuals are able to use their own power to make decisions that affect their professional lives, when leadership is shared with them, and when they feel valued and in control. Consistently craft opportunities for these things to happen. Get staff input for ways to do this. Cover a wall in the teacher’s lounge with mural paper to create a “Morale Graffiti Wall” where they can write or draw suggestions for actions that will show that they are valued as professionals. Pay attention to their graffiti. Put as many suggestions as possible into action.
* **More (of the Principal) Is Better—**When you visit a classroom, does the teacher stop instruction? or ask, “Is there something you need?” or change posture or tone of voice? or suddenly develop various nervous tics? Do the students whisper (or even shout), “Oooooh”? Or suddenly clam up? Or uncharacteristically misbehave? A building principal friend of ours told us that she started a practice of visiting each classroom a few times a day. Amazingly, before long her entrance was hardly noticed. In joyful schools, the momentum is unchanged when an administrator enters the room. Everyone is comfortable when he or she joins in on the fun. Think of how much connection you will build for yourself and everyone else when you become the familiar (and welcomed) figure in classrooms! The more you visit, the more you will see the real life of the classroom instead of “principal-presence anxiety” or “Let’s impress the principal” performances. Your presence, when nonthreatening, breeds optimism.
* **Lightening the Load—**Surprise teachers by taking something off their plates instead of adding to them. Find something they are required to do that is dispensable (or could at least be suspended for a while) or a program that hasn’t been that successful. Even if you can’t remove a requirement, surprise them (individually, or in groups) once in a while with a long lunch, an extended planning period, or time to go for a walk. Enlist the administrative team and other non-teaching staff members to fill in. Drop in and take over a class yourself when you see that a break is needed for the teacher.
* **Snippets of Appreciation—**Use the platform of any school event (such as athletic games, theater presentations, talent shows, assemblies, or parent nights) to thank staff and students that are in attendance. Make this a quick announcement to let them know how important they are. If possible, include some humor so that it is memorable. The perfect time to do this is right before the National Anthem or Pledge of Allegiance. Be sure to thank the coaches and other folks who planned and orchestrated the event.
* **Bragging, Not Whining—**Create a “brag board” in the teachers’ lounge using pictures of the teachers’ own children or grandchildren. Ask them to add captions with an accomplishment or trait to celebrate. These faces help remind us that educators are a part of shaping the children in our families to become good citizens, as we are for our students. How we hope for them all to have ethical, kind, optimistic educators in their lives! This brag board can expand to include pictures of classes in our school, with captions bragging about some optimistic actions of the class members. Perhaps having these children looking over shoulders in the teachers’ room and reading about their optimistic actions will cut down on complaints or cynicism that can sometimes be heard in this room.
* **More Laughter, Please—**Try to use humor in your faculty meetings. Build your own collection of funny video clips or memes that will make staff members laugh while uplifting, not demeaning, educators or students. (Search for “funny teacher videos” or “funny principal videos” on YouTube.)
* **Small But Powerful Notes—**Write occasional notes to staff members telling them what you value in them and thanking them for how they contribute to the optimism in your school. Do the same for students and parents: write a personal note when you see an accomplishment or great act of kindness or when you hear of a student’s success or loss. Make this a consistent habit. It may seem simple and ordinary, but its impact is extraordinary.
* **Surprise Prizes—**Randomly (and without notice), recognize a student or staff member who has done something noticeably optimistic (or selfless, kind, brave, or remarkable) by giving a $5 or $10 gift card. Present this as a surprise in the student’s or teacher’s class. There’s no need for a school wide announcement. The word will spread by itself. (Do a few on the same day, or spread out the event to unexpected days during the school year.)
* **Real Help for Parents—**Offer get-togethers, brief “courses” on the school website, or handouts that give parents concrete help for pressing concerns in their lives. Such topics as these can help parents build needed understanding and skills: *how to raise a pre-adolescent, how to deal with your high schooler’s social media obsession, how to help your child get homework done without screaming or doing it yourself, the top ten traits of elementary students, characteristics of middle schoolers and how to live with them,* or *how and when to pull the plug (or confiscate the battery) on technology*.
* **Classroom Visits That Matter—**See that your classroom visits of any length are both informal and useful. Make sure your purpose is not just to evaluate or do a walkabout; instead **intend** to be curious. With every visit, learn something that helps you appreciate the teacher and students. Ask students to tell you about their work or demonstrate something they are learning. Give open-minded attention to the instructional strategies and ways the teacher is addressing different student needs. Don’t let the students or teacher see you as a note-taking critic. Take the stance of a fan. Nothing promotes optimism like the realization that your principal is a fan of you and your students!
* **Listen Before You Leap—**A key skill of optimism is listening instead of jumping to conclusions. Take the time to get all sides of the story and dig deeper to understand the motivations of all parties and possible effects of a situation. A blanket negative directive from the administrator deals a blow to morale and impedes optimism. For example, if you know who is always late to duty, don’t send out an email or text reminding staff to be on time for duty. This action just instigates hostility toward the “perpetrators” and is unlikely to improve the behavior. Speak honestly and kindly to the persons individually. Find out why this is happening, and work together to choose a constructive plan.

(Adapted from [*Deliberate Optimism: Reclaiming the Joy in Education*](https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/deliberate-optimism/book241459)*, Debbie Silver, Jack C. Breckemeyer & Judith Baenen,* Corwin Press, 2015.)

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