

Three Ways to Boost School Pride (and Why It Matters)

By Kate Larson



BUILDING CRUCIAL CONNECTIONS CAN HELP STUDENTS FALL IN LOVE WITH THEIR SCHOOL

There's nothing better than a wave of excited students filling your classrooms and hallways at the beginning of a school year. But how can we maintain that sense of excitement through June — including the January doldrums and end-of-the-year chaos? By nurturing students' sense of school pride and the feeling that they are part of a community they want to belong to.

School pride isn't just the product of dressing up in school colors or doing a crazy hair day (although those can be fun ways to boost engagement). While these things are a part of creating a positive school culture, fostering true pride in the school community takes commitment and effort from administrators, educators, and staff. This commitment couldn't be more important. In a 2014 survey, American high school principals overwhelmingly cited school spirit as a key factor for student success, both inside and outside the classroom. More than 90% of principals said that students with high levels of school pride were more confident and more likely

to be school leaders. When their students were surveyed, those who reported high levels of school spirit were significantly more likely to outperform their peers academically. In addition to this fact, a recent article by The New York Times reported that chronic absenteeism was on the rise over the last few years. According to the article, an estimated 26% of public school students were considered chronically absent last school year, up from 15% before the pandemic. While there are many factors that contribute to this unsettling trend, boosting school pride and student engagement can be a powerful way to address the issue or even reverse the trend entirely.

One student told researchers that "school spirit means supporting your school no matter what and taking pride in your achievements, knowing your school has helped you to reach your goals." So how do we inspire students to feel proud of their school in this way?

THREE STRATEGIES TO *boost pride and morale*

1. FOSTER A STRONG CONNECTION TO YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

One potentially surprising way to boost school pride is to build relationships with the members of your school's neighborhood and community. Invite local citizens who might want to spend time in a classroom explaining their careers or host a job-shadowing day for older students. Encourage your students to research the history of their town or city and reach out to the local historical society or local government leaders. Find ways to link young students with retirees to form cross-generational learning partnerships. Research shows that strong parent-community-school ties help schools improve student achievement and are a great way to get your students excited about representing their school to the community at large.

To get started, consider a crowdsourced project for the entire school. Create a community resource map while individual classrooms brainstorm lists of people, organizations, and local groups who might have something to offer the learning community. These can be assembled to create a school-wide resource (an actual map, a spreadsheet, or some other visual representation of the many people and groups who support your learners). Now you have a tool for building community relationships as well as students who are eager to start making connections.

Alternately, challenge graduating students to establish a community gift from the school. Interview residents to determine what the neighborhood might need and where they might need it. Public art, benches, or playground updates are a good place to start. Students can work with residents to poll, vote, and select a project that's followed by fundraising and donated work days. Giving back to the community in the name of the school sets a precedent for future students and establishes a strong relationship.

2. REFRESH YOUR PHYSICAL SPACE

Walking into a freshly painted lobby, sinking into a cozy reading nook in a redesigned school library, or catching a glimpse of recent student artwork in a gleaming display case are experiences that inspire a visceral sense of delight in any learning environment. Students can tell when facilities are being maintained and cared for, as well as when their teachers have spent those precious last few days of the summer organizing and decorating their classrooms in anticipation of

the newest crop of learners. In fact, studies show that the school environment has a huge impact on student well-being. Beyond creating a bright and inviting space, you can also use minor building upgrades to create a distinctive visual identity for your school.

Your school logo, motto, values, and colors can all be used as design elements to cultivate a sense of kinship and



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belonging among students. This can be as ad hoc as teachers decorating their classroom doors or as coordinated as a full-scale renovation, depending on existing needs and available resources. On top of decor, school furniture can either signal to students that they fit (literally, in the case of chair and table height) or they don't. Seating options can invite collaboration, creativity, and comfort or can unwittingly become a constraint to learning.

When it comes to wall space, start to think about how you can use yours to promote a sense of student pride by displaying student work, highlighting students who are great community members, and honoring educators for their dedication. By making your physical space a reflection of how much the faculty and staff care about the school, you can inspire your students to be equally passionate.

3. SUPPORT TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH

Educators and administrators lead the way in modeling school pride, but teachers' overall happiness and mental well-being are also important components in shaping students' feelings about their school. Teacher burnout can not only threaten teachers' ability to stay in the profession (55% of educators told the NEA in February that they were considering leaving earlier than planned), but also harm student engagement. In fact, research shows that students' perception of their teachers' happiness strongly correlates with student attitudes and motivation. Not only that, but when teachers have better

mental well-being, their students score higher on overall well-being and lower on psychological distress. In other words, students thrive when their teachers are thriving.

So how can administrators support teachers' mental health? Make sure there are clear protocols for how to handle challenging student behavior, including how and when to involve school mental health services and/or administrators. Keep the lines of communication open between the administration and teaching staff so you can identify and address teacher pain points as they arise. Make sure that educators have time, both during the day and outside of school hours, to unwind and engage in activities that help them de-stress.

SCHOOL PRIDE COMES FROM KNOWING THAT YOU BELONG

Connecting students more deeply with their learning spaces, the wider community, and their teachers is a recipe for a student body that takes ownership of their school and their individual accomplishments. One high school principal told researchers that school spirit is a "sense of community with students, parents, teachers, and administrators working together with a common purpose and with activities for all segments of the school population."

Here is one final question: as you approach the beginning of every school year, how will you work together with your students to find that common purpose? 🌞

