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A School for Leadership

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At leadership-themed schools, students learn the key habits they need to succeed
Some people are surprised to learn that I spent the first 25 years of my career as a teacher. I taught courses on leadership at the university level, and I loved it.
In 1976, in conjunction with the U.S. bicentennial celebration, I conducted an intensive review of the "success literature" that had been published during the previous 200 years. From that research emerged a set of habits — traits and behaviors commonly exhibited by highly successful individuals. The number of habits I included in the list grew and shrank over time, but eventually I settled on seven. The more I integrated the habits into my classroom discussions, the more I realized that the habits had relevance to almost any leadership topic because they were culturally universal and based on timeless principles.
More than a decade later, in 1989, The 7 Habits of Highly

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Effective People was published. Never did I foresee the life the book would take on across the globe, or the tremendous experiences that would come my way as a result. Although most of those experiences have occurred in high-level corporate or government settings, none has thrilled me more than what I am about to share.

[Birth of a New School Mission](#)

In 1999, I met Muriel Summers, principal of A. B. Combs Elementary School in Raleigh, North Carolina. She was attending a 7 Habits seminar and approached me during a break to ask, "Do you think these leadership principles can be taught to young people, as young as 5 years old?" I responded, "I don't know why not," and encouraged her to give it a try.

A. B. Combs is a magnet school with a diverse student population, but at that time it was not attracting many students. Not long after we met, Muriel's superintendent told her that he was about to demagnetize the school. Muriel pleaded for an opportunity to come up with a new magnet theme that would attract more students. The superintendent gave her one week to do it.

In hurried pursuit of a new theme, the A. B. Combs staff went to parents and local business leaders to ask what they wanted from a school. They responded that they wanted students who were responsible, who showed initiative, who were creative, who knew how to set goals and meet them, who got along with people of various backgrounds and cultures, and who could resolve conflicts and solve problems. Interestingly, not one parent in any focus group said anything about academics or higher test scores — not one.

Reflecting on what parents and business leaders had said, Muriel noticed how closely their priorities matched the 7 Habits. And as the staff analyzed the responses, the word that kept surfacing in everyone's mind was leadership. Soon the school had a new theme built around the 7 Habits (see *The 7 Habits in Kids' Language*, p. 65) and a new mission statement: To Develop Leaders One Child at a Time.

[It's All About Leadership](#)

Under the banner of leadership, the A. B. Combs culture almost immediately took on new and exciting dimensions. Here are some of the practices that the school has developed over the years.

[Putting the Culture First](#)

A. B. Combs devotes the first week of every school year to working with students to recreate their leadership culture. During that week, instead of tackling core subjects, teachers and students review the 7 Habits and write class mission statements. They talk about accountability, assemble individual student leadership notebooks in which students will record their personal and academic goals and track their progress throughout the year, write classroom "codes of cooperation," and create artwork for the classroom walls and hallways. Students create, apply for, and interview for class

leadership roles, such as library leader, mail room leader, or classroom greeter.

The first week is also used to establish expectations for manners and etiquette. Students are taught to greet visitors, look them in the eye, and welcome them to the school. They learn that good hygiene and grooming are part of being a leader. During this week, students get to know one another and begin to feel connected, which prevents many of the discipline issues that might otherwise crop up later.

[Reinforcing the Culture Every Day](#)

The language spoken in the hallways and classrooms of A. B. Combs celebrates and expresses belief in the potential of the students. Teachers assert, "We show them we love them every day, particularly by the way we respect them." Each morning, students are met at the door of their classroom by their teacher and an assigned student greeter, who typically shake their hand, greet them by name, and add a positive comment about a recent accomplishment.

Students are expected not only to take on leadership roles in their classrooms, but also to fill schoolwide leadership roles — leaders of science, leaders of math, leaders of public speaking, and so on. Students plan and lead many school activities, and they even interview new teacher applicants. Applicants are often stunned by the depth of students' questions.

The school day begins with a video news program that students help write and produce. A student shares a brief lesson on one of the habits; other students announce birthdays and significant accomplishments and recognize "Leaders of the Week." The principal or another administrator gives a word of encouragement; sometimes students perform a leadership skit.

Teachers start their mornings with a "hallway huddle": 15 minutes before the first bell, each grade-level team meets in the hallway to share an inspirational quote, a great thing that happened the day before, and of course, any information they need to coordinate regarding their students. With such a start to the school day, it's almost impossible for any teacher to feel isolated.

[Making Leadership Visible](#)

The school hallways and classrooms are filled with posters, murals, and artwork illustrating the leadership theme. Hallways are labeled with street signs bearing the name of one of the habits or some other leadership concept. Photos of leaders who have visited the school and of well-known world leaders whom the students have learned about are also displayed. Outside the media center, international flags represent students' 26 nationalities.

[Establishing Traditions](#)

Over the years, the school has developed traditions that intentionally build relationships, give students opportunities to be leaders, fulfill district and state academic requirements, reinforce school values, and create lasting memories. Here are a few examples:

Leadership Day. Twice a year, the school is opened to guests who have requested the opportunity to observe it. Students give short speeches, share their leadership notebooks, teach visitors about the habits, guide tours, perform musical arrangements, and showcase other leadership talents.

Inaugural Ball. Each fall, following student body elections, students plan and conduct a gala celebration of democracy, which includes the swearing in of the school's new student leaders followed

by dance performances.

Silver-Tray Luncheon. Fifth grade students attend a special lunch where they are taught basic manners and table etiquette.

Service Projects. Each grade level takes on one or more community service projects every year, such as helping the local chapter of the Red Cross or managing canned food drives.

Telling Stories

One way to reinforce a school's culture is through positive stories that are told over the years until they become folklore. Such stories abound at A. B. Combs. For example, Principal Summers tells how a student's thoughtful question led to a change in the acronym for the school's "code of cooperation." The code was MAGIC (Model expected behavior; Accept responsibility; Give respect; Improve through goals; and Cooperate). During one of the principal's monthly chat sessions, the student said, "Miss Summers, what we do around here is not 'magic' It is hard work." He suggested a new code: LEAD (Loyalty, Excellence, Achievement, Discipline). Although it required replacing signs throughout the building, the code was changed. Hearing such stories reminds students that their ideas are valued and that they are important contributors to the overall success of the school.

Promising Results

Although A. B. Combs's new theme focused on teaching leadership, not on academic achievement, test scores began to rise. The percentage of students passing end-of-grade tests rose from

67 percent to a peak of 97 percent — quite a feat in a school in which 40 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches and 18 percent are English language learners. Enrollment also rose; the number of students vaulted from 350 to nearly 900, with more waiting to get in.

What parents spoke of most, however, was the rise in students' self-confidence. Previously shy students took on new attitudes. Teachers were delighted with the dramatic drop in discipline problems. The school has won many awards, including being named one of the top six magnet schools in the United States by the U.S. Department of Education.[1]

In due course, other schools began replicating the approach, with similar positive results. More than 40 schools in the United States have now embedded the 7 habits into their schools' culture, and about 100 more have begun the process this year. In addition, educators from more than 30 countries have now visited A. B. Combs, and several are creating leadership-themed cultures in their schools. The promising results these schools are achieving stem largely from the fact that they are taking a three-pronged approach, focusing on (1) the whole child, (2) the whole school, and (3) a whole lot of imagination.

The Whole Child

The skills and attributes that the A. B. Combs community identified as important in 1999 — problem solving, creativity, trust, initiative, responsibility, teamwork, communication, cultural sensitivity, and so on — are now being endorsed in greater intensity by parents and business leaders around the world. Many educators will recognize these skills and attributes as important aspects of educating the whole child. Whole-child approaches stretch beyond basic academic skills to include physical health, social development, character, and other nonacademic subjects, all of which are critical to preparing young people for the global realities that await them.

Two words sum up the meaning of educating the whole child and also encompass most of what parents and business leaders are requesting: independence and interdependence. We want students to leave school prepared to lead their own lives responsibly (independence) and to work well in teams and with people of all kinds and cultures (interdependence).

The 7 Habits closely match the attributes of independence and interdependence. As students learn the 7 Habits and other leadership skills, they gain concrete, real-world skill sets that can empower them throughout their schooling, professional careers, and personal lives. Just as important, the 7 Habits and other leadership principles help to create cultures in which students feel valued, self-confident, and physically and emotionally safe.

In such a culture, classroom management and discipline issues become opportunities for student growth and self-regulation. For example, when conflicts arise between students, teachers may ask them to take a few moments to proactively control their emotions, seek first to understand, and come up with a win-win solution. Many times, students do this on their own.

[The Whole School](#)

Successful leadership-themed schools involve the whole school in the culture-building process. To understand how this differs from the more common approach to promoting student character, imagine a pyramid divided into three levels. The lower, broader level of the pyramid represents what I call poster schools. These schools display posters in hallways encouraging students to be kind, responsible, team-oriented, good listeners, and so on. Occasionally, the principal and a few teachers refer to desired skills and traits during assemblies, in newsletters, or in short messages at the start of the school day. In some cases, a month-long theme is announced: "This month we will focus on being honest."

The middle level of the pyramid represents schools that teach life skills, character education, or leadership as part of a prescribed curriculum. I refer to these as box schools because each teacher or team of teachers often receives a box of short lesson plans and activity resources. Teachers then teach the contents of the box according to the prescribed program.

Both the lower and middle levels of the pyramid have legitimate value. In fact, schools operating at the top level also incorporate many aspects of the lower levels. However, I see the three levels as being a matter of good, better, and best.

So what is the top level? This level — the path less taken, in my experience — represents schools that integrate the desired character attributes and skills into their culture. In these schools, leadership is more than a "program." It is a philosophy evident everywhere — in school and classroom mission statements, in activities, in reward systems, in hiring decisions, in approaches to discipline, in the appearance of the school, in songs the chorus sings, in awards assemblies, in morning announcements, in development meetings, and in budget proposals. You see it in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallways, in the home, and in relationships. In schools that operate only in the two lower levels of the pyramid, students know about the concepts; in schools that operate at the top level, students both know and feel the concepts.

This means that the whole school is involved. All students are taught the habits, not just the gifted or struggling students. All staff are taught the habits. All students and

all staff have leadership roles. Cafeteria staff members are considered leaders of nutrition; custodial crews are considered leaders of cleanliness. Every teacher is the teacher-leader for his or her classroom, and several lead professional learning communities or the 7 Habits team that oversees schoolwide and grade-level implementation. There is no one leader at these schools — all are leaders. Parents, too, are involved, which makes it truly a whole-school effort.

[A Whole Lot of Imagination](#)

Granted, neither the whole child nor the whole school concepts are new. The challenge lies in their implementation, which is why many schools settle for the "poster" or "box" options. Indeed, with all the pressures to raise test scores and with so many daily distractions, the last thing teachers want is one more thing on their plates.

The good news is that teachers in leadership-themed schools frequently state that making leadership a focus is not "one more thing." It is a better way of doing what they were already doing. The key is that instead of teaching leadership skills as a separate curriculum, these schools integrate the habits and other leadership principles into every subject and many school activities. To do so requires a whole lot of imagination.

The most obvious type of imagination appears as teachers find creative ways to integrate the habits into existing lesson plans. When teaching a history lesson, for example, a teacher might ask students how the historical figure they are studying could have handled things more proactively. Another teacher might use a science lesson to point out how Einstein synergized with his peers to get through school. Writing assignments may include writing a personal mission statement or discussing why it is important, when writing a poem or short story, to begin with the end in mind. Such forms of imagination also show up in clever hall displays, class activities, and student leadership roles.

But the type of imagination, or "image"-ination, that is truly at the heart of building a culture of leadership involves (1) the image people have of one another, and (2) the image people have of their own role. Pam Almond, a kindergarten teacher at A. B. Combs, expressed both types of images when she said, "I see each child as having something special about them that nobody else has. I might be the only person in their life who sees that gift in them, and I feel it is my responsibility to show it to them." Pam's ability to imagine the potential of every student enables her to find and nurture the gifts that each student brings to the classroom.

But notice also the image Pam has of herself and her role — as being a person who can reveal to each child his or her gifts. What would happen in schools if every adult saw that as his or her number-one responsibility — to reveal and nurture each student's gifts? Isn't that what teaching is about? Similarly what would happen if school leaders saw their number-one responsibility as identifying the unique gifts of each staff member and bringing those gifts together in ways that unite and lift the entire school? In fact, I define leadership as communicating people's worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves.

[Timeless Principles for Our Times](#)

I often hear people refer to the 7 Habits as 21st century skills — and they are. But they are also the same skills and traits of character that I discovered in my study of the success-makers of the 18th and 19th centuries. And they are the same skills and traits that will make people more effective in the 22nd and 23rd centuries. This is

because they are based on principles that have been around for a long time and will remain for years to come.

I'm thrilled that the same 7 Habits that I discovered in a classroom are now coming back to the classroom in new and powerful ways. At A. B. Combs and other leadership-themed schools, educators are preparing students to achieve success, not only for today but also for tomorrow.

1 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement. (2008). Creating and sustaining successful K-8 magnet schools. Washington, DC: Author.

Students are expected to fill schoolwide leadership roles-leaders of science, leaders of math, leaders of public speaking, and so on.

"I see each child as having something special about them that nobody else has."

[The 7 Habits in Kids' Language Habit 1: Be proactive.](#)

I am a responsible person. I take initiative. I choose my actions, attitudes, and moods. I do not blame others for my wrong actions. I do the right thing without being asked, even when no one is looking.

[Habit 2: Begin with the end in mind.](#)

I plan ahead and set goals. I do things that have meaning and make a difference. I am an important part of my classroom and contribute to my school's mission and vision.

[Habit 3: Put first things first.](#)

I spend my time on things that are most important. This means I say no to things I know I should not do. I set priorities, make a schedule, and achieve my goals. I am disciplined and organized.

[Habit 4: Think win-win.](#)

I balance courage for getting what I want with consideration for what others want. I make deposits in others' emotional bank accounts. When conflicts arise, I look for third alternatives. I look for ways to be a good citizen.

[Habit 5: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.](#)

I listen to other people's ideas and feelings. I try to see things from their viewpoints. I listen to others without interrupting. I am confident in voicing my ideas. I look people in the eyes when talking.

[Habit 6: Synergize.](#)

I value other people's strengths and learn from them. I work well in groups, even with people who are different from me. I seek out other people's ideas to solve problems because I know that by teaming with others we can create better solutions than any one of us can alone. I am humble.

[Habit 7: Sharpen the saw.](#)

I take care of my body by eating right, exercising, and getting sleep. I spend time with family and friends. I learn in lots of ways and lots of places, not just at school. I take time to find meaningful ways to help others.

PHOTO (COLOR): A. B. Combs students have frequent opportunities to practice

speaking in front of an audience.

PHOTO (COLOR): Students are surrounded by reminders of the habits of leadership, from school signs to school songs.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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