

CLOSING THE **ATTITUDE GAP**

How to Fire Up Your Students to Strive for Success

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Before reading this chapter, look into a mirror and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do my students see in my classroom?
2. What do my students hear in my classroom?
3. What do my students feel in my classroom?
4. What do my students experience in my classroom?
5. Do I provide a learning environment that fosters the proper attitude for my students' success?

Educators have been focusing on the question of how to close the achievement gap as measured by results on state standardized assessments for as long as I've been a teacher. National data over the years reveal that the gap doesn't seem to be going anywhere. As I visit schools and school districts nationally, I notice that folks feel good when even the slightest improvements are made.

In all my time as an urban public school teacher and principal, I have maintained that my students, who happened to be majority black, were brilliant and highly capable, with the ability to achieve anything they set their sights on achieving. This was the premise underlying my mission. The achievement gap consequently did not make sense to me—it seemed to place my students at a deficit before the first lesson. I knew that I couldn't inspire my students to strive to maximize their potential if they entered my classroom or school with a deficit mindset. They had to be in the pilot's seat, ready to soar.

I began to ask questions about the achievement gap. Why is it so? What are the differences? What is it that allows one group

to outperform the other? Is it biological? Is it mental? Is it social? Is it cultural? Is it economic? Is it political? I wanted answers. I wanted to know why it was that this achievement gap existed and persisted. As I began to examine the answers to each of my questions, it became clear to me that there was another type of gap that wasn't getting the attention it deserved: the attitude gap. I define the attitude gap as *the gap between those students who have the will to strive for academic excellence and those who do not*. The key words in the definition are "will to strive." Students need to have this will in order to succeed. Their will is their attitude; they have to *want* success. The challenge for teachers is that "will" can't be taught—it has to be unleashed! One of the purposes of this book is to assist you with doing just that—helping your students to unleash their will to strive for academic excellence.

Throughout my years of teaching and leading, I have worked with students who had to go home to deplorable situations. Even the walk to and from school could be a challenge for many, often more so than any course they may encounter in school. Many of my students lived in challenging neighborhoods that could easily sap the drive out of anyone. Neighborhoods that are plagued by gangs, drugs, and violence can be both psychologically and emotionally draining. The challenges of living in such neighborhoods can drastically inhibit motivation and learning. I say to educators frequently that although we should feel for students who live in such neighborhoods, we cannot feel sorry for them. Feeling sorry for them is not going to help them out of their situation. Students do not need our

sympathy. They need our inspiration and encouragement to change their realities for the better. We must therefore continue to hold them accountable for nothing less than excellence. By doing so, we will show them that despite their hardships they will soar high because we are their teachers and leaders. Excuses are unacceptable. There is an African proverb that states, “He who cannot dance will say the drum is bad.” We cannot afford to blame the drum. We must look deeply within ourselves and ask, “What are we doing to change our students’ attitudes so that every day that they walk into my classroom, they are fired up and ready to excel?”

Attitude is everything. Consider my own experience: I went from repeating my sophomore year in high school to graduating college *summa cum laude*. What was the difference between these two periods in my life? What about other successful people who struggled tremendously but turned it around dramatically and became success stories? What was the commonality that enabled them to achieve? I have concluded that it is a change in attitude.

How Climate and Culture Affect Student Learning

When I was a 6th grade classroom teacher, a colleague shared with me that she was going to attend a big literacy conference over the weekend, because she felt that teaching reading to her struggling students was one of her deficiencies. She was excited about the prospect of learning new teaching strategies and was particularly eager to hear one of the featured speakers.

On Monday morning, I went to see my colleague in her classroom about a half-hour before school began. She was *on fire!* She told me that she could barely sleep because of all of the new strategies she'd learned at the conference that she wanted to implement immediately with her students, many of whom were at risk of failing.

After the first period, I returned to my colleague's classroom to see how the implementation of her newly acquired strategies went. When I arrived, she was sitting at her desk looking rather bewildered. I asked her what happened. She said that implementation was unsuccessful because of the behavior of her students. She shared with me that she spent more of the period disciplining her students than she spent teaching them. This did not surprise me at all. I honestly did not anticipate that the rollout of these new reading strategies would succeed because she had extreme climate and culture problems in her classroom. Despite her excitement, I knew that these problems would wind up eating the new strategies for breakfast! Clearly, the attitudes of my colleague's students prevented them from receiving the new strategies.

In classrooms across the United States, teachers are feeling the pressure to perform to a degree that I believe has never before been seen in U.S. education. Achievement levels must rise, so the number-one priority in schools is raising test scores, which is not necessarily equivalent to providing a world-class education. We have become a test prep/test score culture: If a school's scores are up and adequate yearly progress (AYP) has been met,

the school is considered high-performing. The only pressure is to maintain the status quo. If, however, AYP has not been met, there is tremendous pressure on the school to improve in order to avoid sanctions in the form of negative press when test scores are published; reorganization of the school, which could include the transfer of teachers and administrators; and an inordinate amount of school-level planning throughout the course of the school year.

In my ongoing visits to schools, I get to see the panic and pressure up front and personal. I speak to educators who have thrown up their hands in frustration. Some have gone so far as to question whether or not they want to remain in the field of education. They feel that they have done all they can do and do not feel they can do any more.

One middle-aged white female teacher in an urban north-eastern city spoke to me specifically about her 5th grade black males: She wanted so badly for them to be successful, but she felt she just wasn't getting through to them. As we conversed, she began to cry. She was hurting inside. She told me that she loved her kids, but that she had simply run out of strategies to reach them. She said that her students had severe behavioral problems. I told her that I would like to visit her classroom the next day, when the students returned. I suspected much of her problem was due to the climate and culture of her classroom and perhaps even the whole school. I wanted to get a bird's-eye view of what the climate and culture looked like when she and her students were in the room.

When I walked into this teacher's classroom, I immediately noticed a major problem with her classroom climate and culture. The room was chaotic and lacked organization, the walls were practically bare, and there was no clear evidence that the teacher was in charge. Many names were written on the board for after-school detention; several had a string of check marks beside their names. Looking at the students, I could literally see the brilliance in each of their eyes. I knew they were smart and that they had the potential for greatness. The problem was that the teacher focused too much on discipline and not enough on climate and culture.

What do we mean by *climate* and *culture*? I have studied school and classroom climate very intently and have read many different definitions of the term, which can be reduced to a single word: *mood*. When I analyze the climate of a given school or classroom, I am essentially gauging how the overall feeling and tone of the environment affects the teachers' ability to teach and the students' ability to learn. School and classroom culture can also be reduced to a single word: *lifestyle*. When I analyze the culture of a given school or classroom, I am essentially gauging how the overall way of life of the environment affects teachers and students. When I assess the combined climate and culture of a school or of individual classrooms, I want to gauge what the students see, hear, feel, and experience there and whether the learning environment fosters the proper attitude and decision making necessary for student success.