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# Culture Playbook

*Culture Starts with Us*

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2022



# Culture Starts with Us

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Start High School strives to ensure the school environment is psychologically safe for students and staff. This is done by investing in the understanding of what school culture is and what school culture is not. School culture is not an environment in which teachers are empowered to do or teach whatever they want, whenever they want. It's not an environment in which the teachers can choose to work in isolation. The focus of school culture is not all teachers having fun and being happy. Happiness is more than a mood; it is a mindset. According to Shawn Achor in *The Happiness Advantage*, "Happiness is the joy we feel striving after our potential." *In Start High School our school culture focuses on every teacher and student always striving to reach their fullest potential in a safe, encouraging, and supporting environment.*

Start High School Teachers often feel they need to be *perfect* or work themselves to *exhaustion*. We want to create an environment where our teachers don't work themselves to *exhaustion* or feel they must be *perfect*. We want teachers to be able to *work Hard, play harder*, and receive *affirmation* for their efforts.

## Goals

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1. Understand common language regarding school culture.
2. Understand that culture begins with my own behavior, emotions, mindset, and beliefs about what our students can achieve.
3. Understand *Above the Line/Below the Line* and teach it to the rest of the staff.
4. Prepare your mind to present the *Best Version of You*.
5. Understand  $E + R = O$  and present it to the rest of the staff.
6. Develop a plan to generate and display more spirit and pride in our school by students and teachers.

## Expectations

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- Hold each other up and be responsible for our commitments.
- Use the same language.
- Develop and practice the *Above the Line* behaviors and skills to use in school and in life.
- Strive to bring the *Best Version of Myself* every day during school and at home.
- Be willing to coach others when they drift *Below the Line*.
- Have consistent expectations for our own behaviors as well as for our students' behavior every day.

# Ambitious Goals

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1

Create a *Student Culture Team* that will develop a plan for the entire school that frequently models, rewards, and incentivizes positive attitudes and behaviors from our students.

2

Organize a *School Spirit Team*, made up of students and staff, that will develop and present a plan for creating more school spirit and pride.

3

Create a *Positive School Environment* by having a positive mindset during the school day. When passing colleagues and within 10 feet “please make eye contact,” and within 5 feet please say, “Hello.”

4

Create a *Psychologically-Safe Environment* by never using school data to name, blame, or shame. We want to use school data to uncover, discover, and recover. Create a *Penalty Free Environment* in which students and teachers take risks outside of the comfort zone where learning takes place.

5

The *Teacher Evaluation System* is not about judgment and accountability, it's for feedback and coaching.

6

The administrators will help create an environment where teachers' opinions matter.

7

Create an environment in which teachers are affirmed and praised by the administrators and their peers in the school. Teachers will work hard to praise other teachers for their hard work.

8

Create a systematic way to display, recognize, and reward teachers' classroom projects or units of study (i.e., Erin's Newsletters, Building Newsletters to Parents, School Bulletin Boards).

9

Ensure staff have all the tools and resources they need to be highly effective

10

Practice creating a “Not to Do” List at the beginning and end of each school year. Whenever something is added to the teachers' plates, something needs to be removed.

11

Teachers will strive to develop and display empathy for all students and staff.

# The Best Version of You

Each staff member owes it to his/her family, students, colleagues, and himself/herself to thrive to be the *Best Version of You*. Not only is it more harmonious and healthier, but it will also allow you to be more successful. For years we have been taught the formula backwards. We were told to work hard, become successful, and then we will be happy. There are many examples of people who work hard and are unhappy. The correct formula is to *choose happiness*. Your brain and body will work better, and you will be successful. You owe it to yourself to get your mind right, use the strategies that lead to happiness, and own your 20 feet. When you focus on owning the 20 feet around you, you will always be making positive contributions to the school culture.

## The Formula (Backwards)



## The Correct Way



The promises we make to each other are “collective commitments.” We will review this Playbook every year and add the positive behaviors we want to see more of, and the unwanted behaviors we want to see less of.

We understand we cannot complain about what we permit. We must all be school leaders that addresses the behavior and coaches the person when we see *Below the Line* behaviors in our school. Whether these *Below the Line* behaviors are intentional or not, and whether they come from a student or a colleague, we as school leaders cultivate the school culture we want. Just like a “gardener” tending the garden by fertilizing, watering, removing rocks, and pulling weeds, we must do the same with our school culture.

It's not only the administrators' job to supervise and maintain a positive school culture; all teachers must play their part.

SOURCE: Shawn Achor

# Our Beliefs

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## We believe:

- ➔ In the value of meaningful relationships with other staff and students.
- ➔ Mistakes and the consequences that follow are part of the learning process.
- ➔ That people are responsible for themselves and their own happiness.
- ➔ In student-centered instruction.
- ➔ Student agency and ownership of learning.
- ➔ Positive attitudes are critical and a smile is contagious.
- ➔ All classes add value to our students.
- ➔ That all staff should be engaged and involved with students' afterschool activities.
- ➔ Focusing on students' mental health is just as important as test scores.
- ➔ We need to create psychological safety for all staff and students.
- ➔ In educational integrity.
- ➔ Students should be recognized for high-quality work and behavior.
- ➔ The power of lifelong learning.
- ➔ A school with more spirit and pride will engage our students and staff.

# Strategies for a Happiness Mindset



## GRATITUDE EXERCISES

Write down three things for which you are grateful that occurred in the last 24 hours. They don't have to be profound. It could be a really good cup of coffee, the warmth of a sunny day, or collaboration with a colleague.

## THE DAILY HAPPINESS DOUBLER

Take one positive experience from the past 24 hours and spend two minutes writing down every detail about that experience. As you remember it, your brain labels it as meaningful and deepens the imprint. It's a double-dose of daily happiness.



## THE FUN FIFTEEN

Do 15 minutes of fun cardio activity, like dancing, gardening, or walking the dog every day. The effects of daily cardio can be as effective as taking an antidepressant.

## MEDITATION

Every day, take two minutes to stop whatever you're doing and concentrate on breathing. Even a short, mindful break can result in a calmer, happier you.



## CONSCIOUS ACT OF KINDNESS

At the start of each day, send a short email or text praising someone you know. Our brains become addicted to feeling good by making others feel good.

## DEEPEN SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

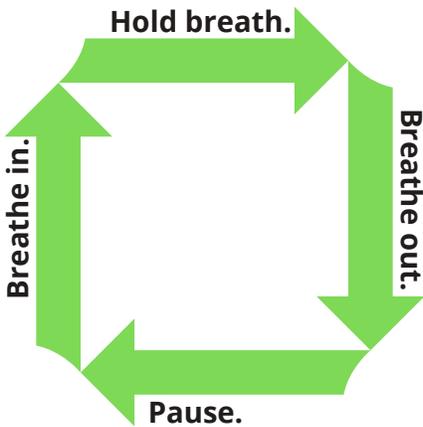
Spend time with family and friends. Our social connections are one of the best predictors for success, health, and even life expectancy.



*SOURCE: Shawn Achor*

# Mindfulness Training for Staff

## EQUAL PART / BOX BREATHING



### HOW

Inhale through the nose deeply from the belly for 4 seconds, hold the breath for 4 seconds, exhale from either the nose or the mouth for 4 seconds, and pause for 4 seconds. REPEAT for a minimum of 4 cycles = 1 minute of mindful breathing. Variation: Mix up the number or count up and/or down.

### WHY

To *balance* the central nervous system and feel calm, focused, and centered resulting in the ability to access the rational part of the brain (prefrontal cortex). This is key for *responding* instead of *reacting* to stay *Above the Line*.

### WHEN

Before school, during school (in between classes/transitions), or whenever you notice you feel challenging emotions such as anger, stress, frustration, and anxiety.

## 4—7—8 OR DOUBLED BREATHING



### HOW

Inhale through the nose deeply from the belly for 4 seconds, hold for 7 seconds, and exhale through the mouth or nose for 8 seconds and repeat a minimum of 3 times = 1 minute of mindful breathing. Variation: Pick a number (2-5) as your inhale and make the exhale twice as long.

### WHY

To activate the calming and relaxing part of the nervous system.

### WHEN

This technique should be used for the following: extreme stress, anxiety, anger, or as an aid to help fall asleep at night when the brain cannot shut off.

## MORNING MINDFULNESS



### HOW

Take 5-10 minutes each morning to do one or more of the following:

1. **Gratitude.** Write or think about 3 things for which you are grateful that morning and why.
2. **Mindful Breathing.** Set a timer for 3-5 minutes and try to focus on your natural breathing. When the mind gets distracted, gently remind yourself to return to your breath.
3. **Mindful Eating.** Eat your breakfast and drink your coffee/juice/tea mindfully. Remove all distractions (phone, laptop, TV) and pay attention to the taste, temperature, texture of the breakfast and incorporate the three S's: eat/drink *slowly*, *small* bites/sips, and *savor* each moment.

### WHY

The goal of showering in the morning is to cleanse the body, but what is equally important is to take the time to cleanse the mind. Eliminating distractions from a morning routine will start the day with a clean slate resulting in a much calmer, clearer, and more positive start to the day.

# Equity Focus

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Students that participate in extracurricular activities typically have higher grade point averages and demonstrate better behaviors in school.<sup>4</sup> Every year we will survey our students that are not participating in activities and uncover interests that we can possibly add to our school.

We realize in schools across the country that some subgroups receive more frequent and higher tiered discipline than others. At Start High School we will frequently monitor and track this data and provide the supportive training to our staff, whenever necessary.

At Start High School we realize that 450,000 minorities across the country are kept from AP classes every year.<sup>2</sup> We understand the research states that if a student takes just one AP class (even if he/she fails the exam), he/she is more likely to graduate from college in five years or less.<sup>3</sup>

We will try to remove all barriers and serve as advocates for all students to be stretched and challenged in our school.

Since the recession ended, 99% of the 11.6 million jobs created went to graduates with some college or post-secondary training.<sup>5</sup> We want to ensure by each December, all of our students have completed a FAFSA form, whether they intend to go to college or not. By December we want every student to have applied to at least one community college, post-secondary program, or traditional college.

The level of hope that a student has is a better predictor of college success than the ACT, SAT, or GPA.<sup>1</sup> Hope is when students believe that tomorrow can be better than today, and they have several pathways to a life outside of poverty.

We strive to ensure all students will have agency.

Consistency in our school can help ensure equity. Consistency can be displayed by the way teachers grade students' work, the expectations they have for students, and the discipline they prescribe to students.

We will make curriculum relevant to our students' lives.

Every year we will review the data for subgroups participating in school activities and sports, advance placement courses, college credit plus, as well as incidents of school discipline.

# Above the Line Behaviors

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INTENTIONAL POSITIVE BEHAVIORS THAT ADD VALUE TO OTHERS,  
SCHOOL, AND CULTURE

- Call staff members by name.
- Follow through on rules and commitments.
- Embed Start High School's beliefs and values in our work.
- Acknowledge staff in hallways.
- Find ways to collaborate.
- Be professional.
- Clean and take care of shared restrooms and workspaces.
- Embrace productive discomfort.
- Listen intently.
- Ask for help when needed.
- Avoid gossip.
- Model appropriate behaviors for students and staff.
- Follow the school rules and expectations.
- Practice mindfulness and happiness.
- Be empathetic to others.
- Display respect; don't judge others.
- Check in on staff and family.
- Be respectful.
- Share our story.
- Embrace our diversity.
- Have courageous conversations on race, equity, systemic racism and prejudice.
- Wait 24 hours to address a problem with a person and then must let it go.
- Participate in group activities.
- Show school spirit and pride.



## ABOVE the LINE

Discipline Driven Response

*Who have I been today?*

*What kind of person did my colleagues meet or experience?*

# For Better Outcomes

Learn how to control your emotions for better outcomes. Always *respond* and never *react*. When there is an event that challenges your emotions, 1) Press Pause—Count to Five, 2) Breathe Deeply, 3) Get Your Mind Right and Respond. Remember, your job is to create positive events for others.

$$\mathbf{E + R = O}$$

**Events + Response = Outcomes**

*SOURCE: Jack Canfield, Focus 3*



**NO**  
**B**lame  
**C**omplain  
**D**efend

*SOURCE: Focus 3*



# BELOW the LINE

Impulsive Default Reaction

*Who have I been today?*

*What kind of person did my colleagues meet or experience?*

## Below the Line Behaviors

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IMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS THAT THAT ADD NO VALUE OR SABOTAGE OTHERS, THE SCHOOL, AND THE CULTURE.

Interrupts others

Borrows without asking

Is unprepared

Isn't coachable

Doesn't clean up

Uses sarcasm toward others

Walks by trash in the hallway or outside

Talks behind someone's back

Makes fun of others

Is dishonest

Doesn't take responsibility for mistakes

Lacks integrity

Isn't open to learning

Doesn't embrace diversity

Gossips

Ignores inappropriate behavior by staff or students

Complains

Never checks in on others

Can't keep secrets

Is judgmental

Is disrespectful and not engaged during staff meetings

Is unreliable

Does not accept feedback

Makes excuses

Doesn't listen

Distorts the truth

Disrespectful to others

Does not value other opinions

Is defensive when looking at data

Is defensive when getting feedback

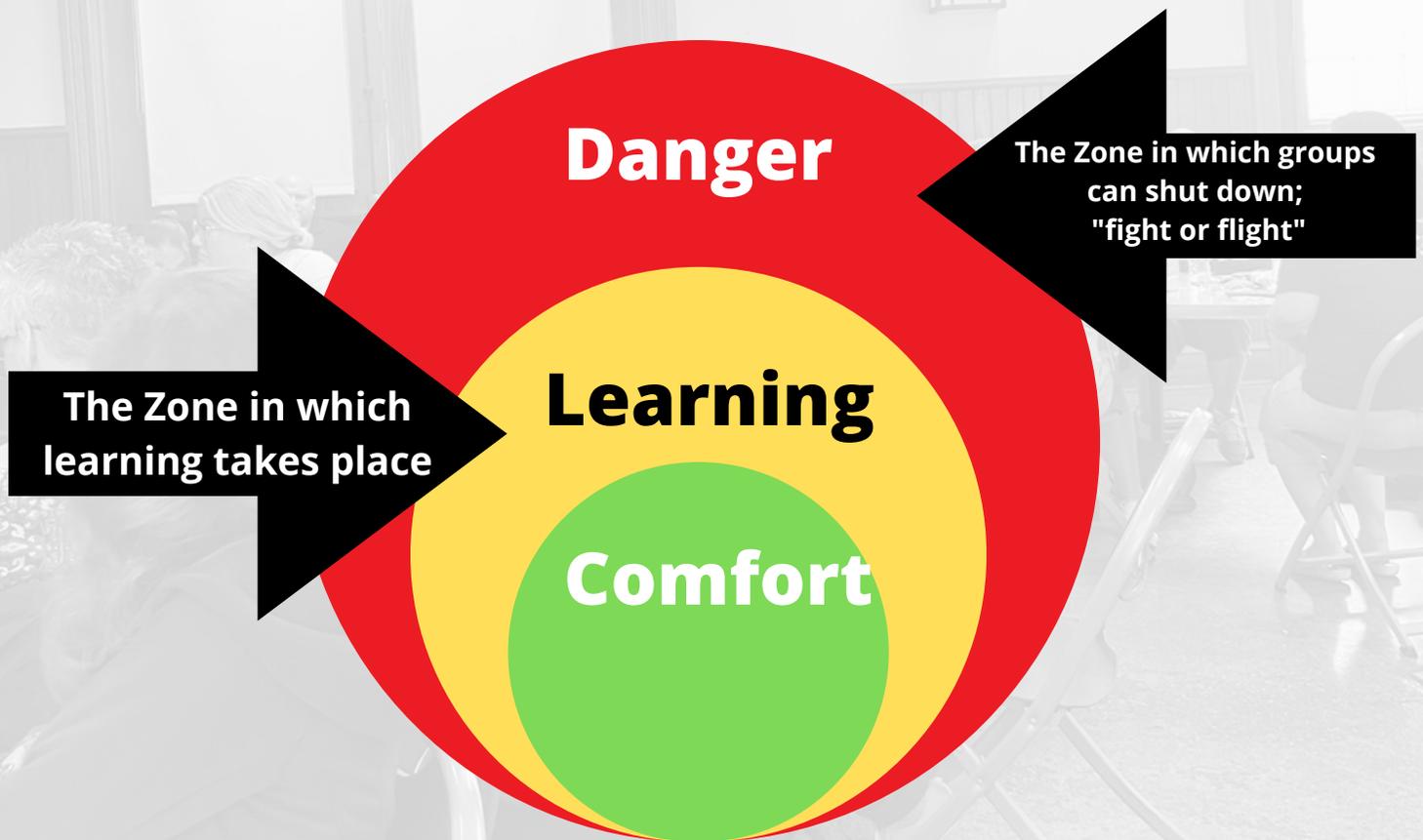
Does not display empathy to staff or students

# Culture of Learning

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Culture of Learning / Penalty-Free Learning Zone / Embrace Productive Discomfort

We embrace the *Learning/Risk Zone* and will demonstrate resiliency. We learn from mistakes and “Fail-Forward.” We are curious and dare to challenge, take risks in the classroom, and learn from our mistakes. We understand students learn from rigor, and we will create *Penalty-Free Learning Environments* for our students, and for ourselves. Mistakes are part of the learning process. We only grow and learn when we are uncomfortable. We can lead and have courageous conversations on race, equity, systemic racism, and prejudice.



JUST BECAUSE I AM OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE, I'M NOT IN DANGER.

I CAN TAKE RISKS, ASK FOR HELP, MAKE MISTAKES AND FAIL; I WILL ALWAYS BE VALUED AND UTILIZED.

# Research-Based Practices & School-Based Practices

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Every building will adopt and implement *Research-Based Practices*. Once a practice has been adopted by our school it has become part of the culture. Many of the practices that have the greatest impact on student learning are free. It just takes the time and effort to learn how to implement each practice with fidelity. What will our teachers be fiercely devoted to in our building?

- Create the assessment/test before the unit or lessons. This should ensure that the teacher has identified all of the important standards that the student will master.
- Provide penalty-free learning opportunities to students. Not every assignment has to be graded. Written feedback has more impact on students than giving a grade.
- Have a plan in place so the classroom teacher is not the only person responsible for closing the gap or intervention. Have classroom, grade-level and building responses to intervention.
- Use the Multi-Tiered Support System with fidelity. There should be different strategies and approaches before a student is ever referred to special education.

Embed time in each lesson, or in the way you teach, to get to know your students and develop strong relationships.

Conversations around poverty and the lack of support in the home are *Below the Line* conversations. Teachers should focus on what they can control and impact in the school.



SOURCE: Doug Reeves

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*SOURCE: Doug Reeves*



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