The School Culture Model

IDENTIFY YOUR SCHOOL’S CULTURE AND LEARN THE SECRETS FOR MOTIVATION, TEACHER BUY-IN, AND A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT.

by Chanie Wilschanski

ECSUMMITOFEXCELLENCE.COM
“The school culture is an EFFECT of the leader’s daily behaviors actions and routines.”

Are you ready to break the cycle of overwhelm in your school?

Do you believe that you can achieve great things in your school if you only had the roadmap, systems, scripts and frameworks to follow?

Do you feel isolated and alone sometimes because you can’t really talk about the issues you deal with on a daily basis?

Now you have a chance to experience the power and impact along with the confidence to lead that you’ve always craved.

Join me for Masterclass One of the school of excellence Ripple Effect!

Let’s do this!

— Chanie Wilschanski
Creator of the School of Excellence Method

Chanie Wilschanski is an Early Childhood Leadership Coach and Culture Specialist who began her journey over a decade ago, teaching toddlers at the acclaimed Preschool of the Arts in NYC. After receiving her Masters in EC and Special Education, Chanie started training teachers and school leaders on the HOW part of creating excellence in their schools.
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Are you focusing on the right things with your staff at the right times?

The greatest struggle you face as an Early Childhood Director is wondering what you should be focusing on to build and grow your school.

There are a myriad of activities, goals and projects that can take up your time.

Should you focus on...

- Team building
- Teacher training
- Parent relationships
- The school culture
- Your time management
- New, developing projects
- Marketing
- Expanding the school

One challenge of running a preschool is that you think your situation is different than everyone else.

You think that your school - with its location, demographic, parent body, teacher body, and budget - is different. That no one truly understands how hard you have worked to build the school, or what you have to deal with on a daily basis.

The reality is: It’s not different!

Every school lives inside a specific culture. Either you actively create that culture, or it’s being created by default.

Once you stop thinking that you are different and that no one really understands you, then you become free to explore options and possibilities of building and growing your school and its culture.
In this workbook, I’ll help you understand the 5 stages of school culture. I’ll give you specific examples and stories of what it feels like at each stage so that you can quickly identify where you are in the pyramid.

I’ll also share with you the core focus areas that you need to laser in on so that you can quickly graduate to the next stage.

A few days ago, I was visiting a school and the director was sharing with me how she is busy building and creating this gorgeous and complex video of children and parents in her school to use for marketing.

They had already spent **thousands of dollars** on the video.

I asked her one question, “Who will be watching this video? And how will you get the video in front of them?”

She looked at me blankly, responding, “It’s a good thing to have.”

Sure it is, there are lots of things that are great to have. But being at the stage which her school was, this was NOT something that she should be focusing on.

**This happens too much.**

I see schools and directors, investing thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of their time working on something that just isn’t going to give them a big return on what they are doing.

They convince themselves that because other people did this and got results, they should be doing this too.

Yes, you should be learning from other directors - but you have to know where you are holding so you can know what you should be focusing on right now.
Michael Phelps eats an egg sandwich for breakfast with fried onions and cheese, for lunch he can have chocolate chips pancakes and french toast, and a pound of pasta and a whole pizza! And this is just half way through the day!

But here’s the deal. Michael is an olympic swimmer and burns an insane amount of calories. He’s also won 8 gold medals for swimming.

If you were to mimic his diet you wouldn’t fit through the door, because you aren’t an olympic swimmer.

What you need to understand is that just because another director focuses on one area and invests and does things a certain way, that doesn’t necessarily mean it is what’s right for you.

I sat down with my mentor Todd Herman and crafted out these 5 stages of school culture. At the very bottom we have:

**Level One: Toxic**

The very bottom of the culture model is toxic.

While most schools don’t feel like their school is in this stage, all schools have moments where the culture is toxic.

It’s important to note how often these moments truly happen.

Here are some signs you might have a toxic culture in your school:

1. **There is only one way to do things.**

   Either you or your staff are determined to complete tasks in one specific way.

   When you invite teachers to try new techniques and strategies, they hang on to “the old way” of doing things. They very politely point out case studies, with facts and figures to prove their claims, why this way is so much better. Trying something new seems too risky.
2. There are noticeable secrets and undercurrents.

You know something’s up when you walk into a room, and teachers who were previously chatting away go quiet.

3. Teachers are forming cliques and/or gossiping.

Teachers are hanging tight to one another, or gossiping about their colleagues with each other. They’ll look to commiserate with other teachers about things their assistants or directors have said or done, creating an unpleasant environment of dissatisfaction.

4. You have extremely poor teacher attendance.

Teachers are constantly calling in sick, or taking days off, whether they are using paid or unpaid leave. This is your culture saying, “Your teacher’s don’t want to be here.”

5. There is unhealthy competition.

Teachers hide their ideas from their co workers and get upset when other teachers “steal” their ideas. They come across as wanting to share and be helpful but hang tight to ideas that are theirs.

If your school is currently at this level, don’t get discouraged and think that this is the end. You can change this.

I’ve seen cultures pull themselves out of really toxic places.

But how? How do you start taking yourself out of this toxic culture?

Hiding in your office and just focusing on the things that you need to get done won’t get you anywhere.

Defending yourself by blaming this toxic culture on your location or lack of good teachers isn’t going to solve the core issues.

If you want to pull yourself out the mess, you need to take responsibility as the leader. You create the culture and you can transform it.
Level One Strategy: Gratitude

Start focusing on what you see is working. Be grateful to your teachers for what they do everyday.

Be specifically grateful. Don’t just say thanks! That is not enough!

I know you may be thinking:

“I always say thank you to my teachers.”
“I buy them presents.”
“I got them coffee and muffins.”
“I even bought a coffee machine for their teachers’ room.”
“I do so much for them and they are so ungrateful.”

This is why I’m talking about specifics.

Get super specific about why you are grateful for each teacher.

When you see a teacher dealing with a crying tantruming child and she is rocking it, the next day, write her a thank you card that says:

“Dear teacher,
I noticed how you soothed Sam and kept calm throughout his tantrum. He was kicking and screaming a lot and i can’t even imagine how hard it must have been. You probably even got hurt in the middle of it. I was so impressed by how you kept calm throughout it all. A true professional and a loving teacher. I’m grateful to have you on our team. Here is a muffin and latte to start your day :) Thanks again
Signed, Your name

Do you know how powerful this is?
Gratitude, showing appreciation and validating goes further than anything else.
Here are 2 specific stories from clients who started implementing simple ways to show teachers that they are grateful.

This director is committed to sending personal emails to her teachers around twice a month. Read the comment from her teacher that she got in response to this.

**Here’s the secret:**

I’ve told this strategy to more directors than I can count. But I’d say only 67 of them have actually done it!

Because it is super easy to talk and so much harder to take action. So if you want to get out of a toxic culture, take action.

Stop reading this guide, and write a thank you card right now to 3 teachers.

Don’t overcomplicate and worry about what you are going to say or that you don’t have nice handwriting. Just DO IT!

It’s ok if it’s not perfect. The message to the teacher is the same. You care and you thought about her.
Level Two: Passive

This is a challenging stage, as teachers in this culture say that they are onboard with all your new changes and programs. But they are secretly or inadvertently sabotaging it.

The thing you must understand is that this passive behavior is usually not malicious.

Teachers exhibit these behaviors because it can be convenient, or simply because this has been their method of communication their entire life!

Many times they feel this is the best approach to getting what they need.

Here are some signs you have some passive teachers:

1. **They are inefficient on purpose - and don’t realize it.**

   They miss or forget deadlines and then hope that you’ll excuse them because of their absent-minded nature. They come late often and tell you, “I’m really trying” and then continue to show up late.

   These teachers procrastinate and take a loooonnggg time on projects, in the hopes that this way they won’t have to take on anything new.

2. **They avoid confrontation at all costs.**

   So when they say “sure, I agree to the new ideas” they really don’t, they just really can’t confront you with the fact that they don’t agree.

   And so they are left angry and resentful inside and they don’t tell you about it and it stews and cooks up inside them.
3. They passively do what they are told.

These teachers come to work and do their jobs. But they live in their own classroom world. They do a great job and the parents love them so it’s hard to see through this. In reality, they just want to get through the day without anyone asking them to do anything extra.

These teachers REALLY don’t like challenging or thought-provoking questions.

They get upset when other teachers ask questions during meetings, lest the meeting now go a few minutes over time!

Letting this behavior go on for too long will bring your back to toxic.

I had a client, let’s call her Susan.

She was struggling with a teacher who she felt had reached the end of her rope and she was thinking of letting her go at the end of the year.

I listened intently to the reasons the director was frustrated and I told her I would observe it and look into it deeper.

As I worked with the teacher and got to know the director more over the weeks, I realized a consistent pattern. The director was constantly solving this teacher’s problems. She never gave her the chance to learn from her own cycle of mistakes. She constantly jumped in to save and protect her and to be the hero.

When I spoke with her, Susan said, “Chanie, I can’t afford for her to make mistakes, the stakes are too high!”

This reminded me of a great conversation I had with Alyssa Gallagher during the Early Childhood Leadership Conference.

She chatted with me about the different types of leaders and how some leaders create space for teachers to thrive and some unknowingly stifle their growth. To hear the full interview with Alyssa, click here.
I worked with the director and gave her two strategies to start off with:

1. When she met with this teacher she only had five yellow sticky notes. This meant that she can only share her opinion five times during the conversation. You would think five times is a lot. Try it yourself and you’ll see how often we impose our ideas on other people with the best of intentions.

2. The other strategy was called “passing the pen back”. Whenever the teacher came and said to Susan, “What should I do about this?” Susan responded that she wanted her to come up with 35 of her own ideas and then come to back to her in a day or so and share them with her. This went on for close to three months before the real shift happened.

What happened?

This teacher has been teaching for over 2 decades. And for the first time in her career she checked Pinterest! And she chose an idea from there and followed through with it in her classroom.

The moment Susan took that step back and created the space for the teacher to think on her own, she suddenly went from passive thinking to actively thinking how to make her classroom better.

Was it easy for Susan?

Of course not! Susan had to bite her tongue more times than she cares to count. And she got frustrated more times than she wants to admit. But it takes time and commitment to build teachers into leaders!

Now you may see just one of these behaviors, but one of them is enough to show you that there are warning lights and you need to take action.

Nothing ever got better on its own.
You need to take action and work with some strategies if you want change and growth to take place.
Level Two Strategy: Modeling

Here are some ways to get you out of this stage and into the next one.

1. Model and show open and honest communication

Many times teachers didn’t have the best role models for communication and so they are just mimicking how they were raised.

Show by dogma that it’s safe and ok to share your opinion. When someone disagrees with you at the meeting, thank them for sharing their voice and that you want to hear what people have to say.

**Consistently model it.**

2. Speak directly to the teacher, stating facts about her behavior. And how this can’t be tolerated. Deadlines need to be met and communication is key if she can’t meet the deadline.

You may also be really uncomfortable with confrontation and so you let a lot things slide and turn the other way because you pray it will get better. It’s hard for you to stand up for it.

It’s ok if something is hard for you and doesn’t come naturally to you. You don’t have to know how to do everything as a leader.

What’s not ok is when you dismiss it and say “This is just who I am!”

3. Tell the teachers about books you are reading.

Let teachers know about podcasts or books or Ted talks that you have watched. Show them you are constantly learning and growing. This will inspire teachers to ask you more about it and maybe even be curious to learn more.
Level Three: Comfortable

This is the stage that close to 90% of schools are holding. Let me describe what it typically looks like:

People really get along in this culture.

Everyone is nice to each other, but not authentically, since there is fear of possibly hurting someone’s feelings.

This is a place where teachers sets goals and reasonable standards and the director does as well.

They all want to do well, but not if it pushes them too far away from their comfort zone.

And if it rocks the boat too much, they are out.

You produce good results and there are great things happening in the school and you’ve had it this way for while. And you like it this way.

**But there is too much fear around challenging the status quo.**

The dangers of staying here, is that if you aren’t moving forwards you’re moving backwards.

And so if you don’t push out of comfort, you will go back to passive.

Here’s another client story.

I worked with an extremely progressive school. At first glance, I was in awe of the teachers and their incredible ability. Everything about the school seemed amazing: the set up, the walls, the furniture, the way they spoke with the kids, etc.

I was so excited to work with them on intentional and mindful play as they were already doing so much of it.
There were a few classrooms that had challenging children and the teachers were looking for strategies.

After listening to the examples, and understanding the context I suggested they create social stories for the children. We did a webinar training on the topic and at the end, when we discussed implementation, I was shocked by what I heard.

“*We already do this*”

“*It’s not going to work*”

“*Parents won’t like it*”

“*How is this different from what we are doing?*”

“*Do you have proof it will work?*”

I couldn’t believe the questions I was getting from teachers who I thought were really progressive and innovative and like a challenge and want to grow.

When I spoke with the director on the phone afterwards, she said, “Yeah, my teachers are really amazing and they know that they don’t really like to learn new things. That would require some extra work that they aren’t used to.”

**This is comfortable.**

On the outside this school is doing amazing things. You would never think this school would be struggling with this.

But when I dug deeper they really didn’t want to take any extra steps or moves that would rock the boat too much.

They were comfortable where they were and didn’t want to be pushed further.
Level Three Strategy: Follow the Leader (take the first step)

You take the first step as a director do something different tomorrow:

- Greet the families from a different entrance
- Have tea instead of coffee
- Ask a teacher to lead a staff meeting
- Write a thank you card for a teacher

Do something different yourself to challenge your status quo.

2. Don’t pick the safe choice.

The next time you’re confronted with options and you need to make a decision, pick the risky choice. Show your team you’re ready to take risks and you’re ok with being wrong and making a mistake it’s so powerful to model this for your team.

No one is ever always right.

Create a challenge for yourself in an area you struggle with, it can be something really simple like focusing when teachers talk.

Next time a teacher walks into your office, challenge yourself to make eye contact. Close browsers. Turn your chair around. Really listen.

3. Demonstrate you’re trying new ways to become a better leader.

This is a challenge from my mentor David Marquet: the next time you go out to dinner, have the waiter pick your meal.

When they ask, “what do you want to eat?” Answer, “you pick my meal.”

That anxiety and fear of what will they bring you, will show you just how hard giving up control is. And how when we do it, it makes us uncomfortable.

You can share this experience with your teachers.
Level Four: Collaborative

This is the ideal state of a culture. In this culture teachers not only get along, but they are truly working together.

There is a common understanding of the school mission and vision.

Teachers have clarity about where the leader wants to go.

Collaborative culture isn’t just that teachers get along or that they meet together; it is a unified environment for example, where a teacher of 3 year olds will ask for advice and support from a toddler teacher.

This is a place where the director very comfortably says, “I don’t know” and it is not uncommon for a new teacher to pipe in and share how she can help.

This is a place where even the newest hire feels safe to participate and be involved in the school.

I was recently invited to speak at my friend Kris Murray’s ChildCare Marketing event. At the event I spoke about how to create this culture.

One exercise I led really gave those in attendance an eye-opening experience. First, I asked the directors and owners to build two models—one of a safe environment, and one of a fear environment, using sand and figurines.

Then, I asked them to write down the words that reflected what they created.

Suddenly, they realized the model they built did not resemble the core words they chose.

So they redid their model.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in creating these models that we lose sight of the core values that are the foundation. Without the foundation, the model is sure to crumble.
I talked about this in length with Simon Sinek at the Early Childhood Leadership Conference during his session “How to Create A Culture of Innovation and Creativity in Your School”. You can watch the full session right here.

A director won’t have teachers coming in to complain about one another. In this culture, teachers have the communication skills to work things out with each other.

**There is no gossip or backstabbing.**

Teachers and assistants connect and when there are differences of opinion they work it out together.

**In this culture a director understands that she is human and makes mistakes - and she owns up to them.**

Teachers know that they can rely on their colleagues for support.

If they need help with a newsletter or ideas teachers feel safe to ask and teachers will share their best ideas with each other.

In addition, teachers are free to express their own creativity they begin to explore ideas and bring them to life.

You’ll walk into 3 or 4 different two year old rooms and each one will be different!

The real question is:

**How can you really get to this place and stay there?**

Because many schools have moments of collaboration and they live more in the stages of comfortable or passive.

Creating this culture is not a program or an event, or even a specific strategy, it’s a way of life for the leader and the team.
Level Four Strategy: The 3 Cs

There is much more to this strategy than what I can bring here.

What follows is a brief overview, but if you want to learn more about truly building this in your school the right way, find out more here.

1. **Competence**: What is the competency level of your teachers?

   Every teacher will have a different level and it’s critical to understand how to actually diagnose how competent each teacher is, and in which areas she excels.

2. **Clarity**: How clear is the school vision and how clear are your expectations of the teachers?

   This is pivotal and so many leaders mess this up!

   You need to clearly articulate with very SPECIFIC detail about your expectations and guidelines of what the school is about and how to actually do it.

   When you say, “This is a progressive school”, what does that mean at 9am, at 12pm and at pick up time?

   How does a progressive classroom look and feel? Are there specific guidelines the teacher needs to follow?

   What are the areas that are absolute musts and what areas are there more freedom to explore and experiment? Don’t say that every area she can explore and experiment.

   You wouldn’t tolerate a teachers experimenting with coming to school late or submitting her newsletter 5 days after the due date!

   **So be SPECIFIC - break it down.**

   I created a short video clip where I talk about the difference between something called Red work and Blue work. This will give you more clarity around this topic. Check it out here.
3. **Control**: How much control do your teachers have about their jobs and decisions that are made?

You will need to tune the level of control to the level of competence and clarity that the teacher has.

If you want to understand these 3 C’s in greater depth, I chat about it together with my friend and mentor Captain David Marquet in a full session during the Early Childhood Leadership Conference. [Grab the Full Pass for access to this session + more.](#)

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**Level Five: Legacy**

Forbes defines the word Legacy as:

> “Legacy is not bound by age or time served. Legacy represents your body of work at each stage of your career as you establish the foundational building blocks and accumulate the required wisdom to contribute to growth, innovation and opportunity both in and outside of the workplace.”

For many school leaders, leaving a legacy is defined as the end of their career when they are ready to retire.

Your leadership and legacy is NOT defined at the end of the journey and the road that you traveled. Rather it’s shaped by:

- Moments you shared with your team
- The hard decisions you had to stand up to
- The imperfect action you took each day
- Mistakes you overcame through the many phases of your journey.

At each stage of your school, you are learning how to create a sustainable impact on the teachers, children and parents. It’s important to understand that there is no summit.

*There is no top of the mountain.*
There are many stops and mini basecamps along the way where you refuel, take stock and continue your journey,

At each stop you will learn new ways of mastery and consistently tap into the greatness of your team.

So as Steven Covey says, “Begin with the end in mind”

**What do you want your legacy to be?**

Think about Steve Jobs, Martin Luther King Jr. or any other leaders? What is their legacy based on?

**Level Five Strategy: Reflection**

If you were to leave your job today, ask yourself these questions:

1. What is the legacy you want to leave behind?
2. How would your teachers and parents define it?
3. Are you paying attention to the feedback your staff are giving you?
4. Are you asking your staff for feedback in the right way?
5. What is the story you would tell people about your legacy?
6. What is the story you think others will tell about your legacy?
   Would their narrative be the same as yours?

Only you as the director of your school can set the tone and define the standards that your school will live by.

You must be incredibly self-disciplined to consistently hold yourself, and your team, accountable every step of the way.

Something else to think about is your teacher’s view of legacy.

The next time you interview a teacher and you look at her resume and her previous experiences ask her, “What legacy did you leave in each of your jobs?”
Final Thoughts

At the end of the day there are still so many things that you need to focus on as a school director, and you really try your best to juggle everything.

When you take the time to understand the stage of your school and are truly honest with the activity that is taking place, then you take the steps and strategies that I outlines to move forward.

Climbing this pyramid isn’t easy and requires a lot of hard work, commitment and dedication. However, when you know where you are and understand the common pitfalls that can occur then you can choose a strategy or a tool and quickly move to the next phase.

Work with Chanie!

If you want to chat further about:

• How to boost your staff morale
• Create teacher accountability
• Motivate your teachers to take risks and empower them

Click the button below and find out more about working with Chanie.

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