Talk to teachers and administrators struggling to improve low-performing schools, and you’ll often hear the same concern: “We’ve read the research and tried our best to implement the strategies. Yet our students are not making the achievement gains we know they should. We don’t know what more we can do.”

A solution for this frustrating dilemma may lie in recent research on social and emotional learning. As Eric Jensen (2011) explained,

How much hope and optimism your kids feel at your school is more important for boosting achievement than their IQ. . . . Without it, all other strategies will fail.

The Obstacle of Learned Helplessness
Families in poverty often feel that no matter how hard they work, no matter how tenacious their determination and persistence, life won’t get any better. Living under such stressful conditions, children in poverty may develop learned helplessness—the feeling that it’s useless to try (Beaumont, 2009; Jensen, 2009). This learned helplessness often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as students stop trying to succeed, fall farther behind, and ultimately even drop out (Ingrum, 2006).

Addressing students’ social and emotional needs and helping them develop positive attitudes may well be the missing link of school reform—the central difference between low-performing and high-performing schools. To successfully raise the achievement of students in poverty, schools must do more than transform academic programs and practices; they must break the cycle of learned helplessness. Schools must teach students to hope.
A Culture of Hope
There is good news. Despite the rather grim and often politically charged atmosphere of school reform today, a quiet revolution is spreading a bright ray of hope for our neediest students. A growing number of U.S. schools have embraced what ASCD has called the “education of the whole child” (ASCD Commission on the Whole Child, 2007). These educators are supplementing research-based school improvement strategies—such as collaborating, examining data, studying the research, and putting interventions into place—with an emphasis on the social and emotional needs of students.

Research supports the importance of hope for increasing students’ motivation, boosting personal planning, and providing purpose for learning (EdVisions, 2010; Newell & Van Ryzin, 2007). Hope and optimism build students’ sense of personal efficacy and their academic success (Gallup, 2014). Best of all, hope can be taught. In studying dozens of schools in more than 40 states for 10 years, we have documented the power of hope and optimism in schools (Barr & Gibson, 2013). Our research affirms the bodies of research on effective schools (Barr & Parrett, 2007; Chernoweth, 2009); high-poverty and high-performing schools (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011); student resilience (Benard, 2003; Henderson & Milstein, 1996); and human needs (Maslow, 1998). It also provides a new framework for understanding effective schools, which we call a culture of hope.

Schools that create a culture of hope support students’ social and emotional needs in four areas, which we call seeds of hope: optimism, place, pride, and purpose. In addition to an excellent academic program, all four of these qualities are necessary for student success.

Sowing a Sense of Optimism
Optimism is the belief that things can and will get better. Research has documented the importance of an optimistic school culture, which occurs when all teachers and administrators believe that all students can learn and succeed (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Gallup, 2014). In schools that embody a culture of hope, the energy of optimism is electrifying and uplifting. It’s contagious.

Some studies suggest that the human brain may be naturally hardwired for optimism, but that certain circumstances—or even short-term suggestions—can affect how the brain processes information and can determine how optimistically or pessimistically an individual regards the future (Sharot, 2011). That’s why effective schools need to conduct a concerted, schoolwide effort to instill hope and optimism in every student, every day.

With schoolwide agreement that all students can learn, remarkable things occur. Teachers and support staff flood students with positive feedback and high expectations. Teachers meet their students at the door and welcome them by name. The school is filled with positive signage and printed slogans and messages, overflowing with infectious optimism.

What You Can Do
Create a shared vision of optimism. Assemble a strong, positive staff and develop a shared vision with input from staff, parents, and students. Principals tell us that it can take three years of team building, helping teachers confront their own racial and class biases, and carefully recruiting and hiring new team members to achieve a unified set of beliefs.

Build a welcoming environment with an atmosphere of respect and safety. Use common areas of the school to set an inviting tone that conveys respect for the diversity in the community and student body. For example, many schools with large Latino student populations fill the hallways with Latino artists’ paintings, building cultural pride. Others become dual-language campuses, with all students learning two languages.

In the Arapaho reservation outside Lander, Wyoming, the school hosts a family night once each month. Kids and adults can play basketball in the
gym, learn about the Internet in the computer lab, and take lessons in the Arapaho language at the culture center next door. The evening ends with a community potluck dinner. Family night presents a welcoming, strong, optimistic message to all the current and former students and their families.

*Recognize and celebrate success.* Integrate celebration into the fabric of the school with academic project fairs, competitions, and other opportunities to share learning with others. Plan for students to receive recognition for their work at least twice a year and for the entire school to have some form of community celebration every month.

Classrooms can have some form of celebration every week, such as a “goal party,” at which students who have met goals receive recognition, or an “author’s chair,” where students have the opportunity to share their writing and receive feedback. The most important aspect of celebrations is that every student can participate at some level, so be sure to include celebrations of physical, academic, and social achievements.

*Sowing a Sense of Place*

Feeling that they belong—that they are accepted, respected, and included—boosts students’ motivation, self-confidence, and success in school. Yet within the context of high-stakes testing and accountability, many schools find it challenging to help students overcome feelings of isolation and alienation.

Schools that build a culture of hope focus on developing strong relationships among students and between students and staff. In these schools, the motto is, “We treat our students just like we would treat our own kids.” Although it takes work to create a welcoming, inclusive school community, once that community is established, educators’ efforts to boost learning are more effective (Chenoweth, 2009).

*What You Can Do*  
*Implement well-developed transition programs.* To ease the transition from middle school and make new students feel more comfortable and confident, provide a smaller, more personalized learning environment through some form of freshman survival course and a 9th grade academy with special courses for freshmen. Identify at-risk students before key transition points, and monitor their progress during and after transitions.

*Regularly monitor students’ sense of belonging.* Gather student input through confidential surveys at least twice a year, and then take public action on the basis of the results. One Ohio middle school discovered, through routine surveys, that students felt they received care and respect from adults on campus but not from their peers. The students’ revelations about classmates’ ostracism and intimidation led to a concerted effort to address the issue, including a conflict-resolution program that trained students to be peer mediators on the playground. The school plans to regularly survey students to monitor progress and fine-tune interventions.

*Establish student advisory groups.* Many effective high schools carefully select and assign students and teachers to advisory groups that meet daily or weekly for the entire four years of high school. Such advisories provide a place to belong, an ongoing adult connection, and a small group of peers who care about and support one another. Advisory group leaders become student advocates, develop close relationships with students and families, provide academic and career counseling, and help each student develop a pathway to success.

*Create small school settings.* One effective approach to ensure that all students find a sense of belonging is to break large high schools into smaller units. Magnet programs, minischools, career pathways, and career clusters are examples of how large, comprehensive high schools are increasing students’ connections with one another and with caring adults.

*Sowing a Sense of Pride*

Pride—the belief that one is capable and competent—is a direct antidote to learned helplessness.

**IN A WORD**

Schools that capture the joy of their students for life and learning and the joy of their teachers for their work spread that to the community they come in contact with. These schools seem to more readily reach out to their at-risk students and inspire them with that joy-filled worldview.

—Jessica Walters, teacher, Woodlawn Catholic Regional School, Pawtucket, Rhode Island
Successful schools work hard to systematically develop students’ pride in themselves, their families, their community, and their school. This personal pride and self-confidence grows from assuming important responsibilities and working hard to achieve academic success.

Building pride and self-esteem demands an everyday, long-term commitment to helping students develop healthy, realistic beliefs about who they are and what they can do. The more students succeed in school, the more confident they will feel.

**What You Can Do**

**Surround students with high expectations.** Effective schools target struggling students with interventions aimed at changing their self-perceptions. In one Kentucky school, each staff member identified 10 challenging students and made a commitment to shower each of them with positive verbal reinforcement. For two weeks, these students heard “It’s so good to see you—glad you’re here today,” or “We missed you yesterday! Sam will help you with your missed assignments.” The positive effect on the students’ attendance, behavior, and academic work was remarkable.

**Provide opportunities to assume real responsibilities.** Put students to work, knowing that pride results from a feeling of being needed. In one alternative school in Meridian, Idaho, students serve on discipline committees, recruit new students, and vote on hiring decisions. In another school, students monitored their own progress through learning portfolios and then led their own parent conferences in which they explained their learning goals, progress, and problems.

**Enable all students to participate in service learning and voluntary service programs.** Service and volunteer programs provide a tangible way for students to feel important and necessary. In Vancouver, Washington, where students participate in volunteer work that connects to their career interests, one student who transformed from belligerent obstinacy to dependability explained, “Over at the children’s hospital, they really need me. I feel like I’m doing something important by volunteering there.”

**Sowing a Sense of Purpose**

Talk to almost any high school student, and you are likely to hear, “I’m bored with school; why do I have to do this stuff?” Many students express a lack of connection between their personal lives and dreams and their school learning. Schools that build a culture of hope help students explore the world of work and careers and think about who they are and what they want to do with their lives. By helping students set both short-term and long-term goals, we give them reasons to work hard, even when the task at hand may be less than motivating.

If optimism is the beginning point for a culture of hope, purpose is the goal. With purpose, the fruits of our labor in schools are realized. Purpose and passion fuel resilience, another antidote for learned helplessness. With it, students confronted by a challenging task are more likely to say, “I’ve got this. Last time I tried, it took me three times, but I did it. This time I’ll do it in two tries, maybe even one!”

**What You Can Do**

**Help students develop realistic dreams for their future and prepare a detailed plan to achieve their goals.** Recognize the relationship between motivation and personal interests, talents, and goals. As a graduation
requirement in an Ohio district, students work with teachers and counselors to develop and implement a personal action plan for college and career success. Develop students’ interests and talents. Connect every student with an adult who shares his or her interests and talents. Through elective classes, introduce students to activities beyond their normal scope of experiences, including visual and performing arts and diverse career areas. In a Kentucky school, every staff member, as well as a large group of community volunteers, offers a 45-minute elective course once a week designed to help students explore an interest. One student recalled an elective taught by a volunteer who happened to be a retired entomologist: “I felt so excited on Wednesdays when we had class, because I want to be a biologist.”

Build the habit of reflective inquiry. Instill a weekly, or even daily, Drop Everything and Reflect time during which students and staff reflect through writing. Reflective inquiry can help high school students develop a personal plan for life after graduation: What do I want to do? Why do I want to do it? What do I need to do in order to get there?

Re REPLACING HELPLESSNESS WITH HOPE
High-quality curriculum and instruction are essential for school improvement, and they will be enough to enable many learners to succeed. But students who have internalized learned helplessness need something more. They need a culture of hope. By infusing students with optimism, place, pride, and purpose, schools are transforming learning for students of poverty—overcoming obstacles with optimism and replacing helplessness with great hope for the future.

References

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