On *Purpose*

Dedication bf ¶

This book is dedicated to my wife, Suzanne, and our three girls:
Kirby, Casey Elizabeth, and Lucy. ¶
No better teachers did ever a man have.

SAMUEL CASEY CARTER

On *Purpose*

How
Great School
Cultures
Form Strong
Character

Contents

Preface

Culture means a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, and truths they accept.

Character can mean one of two things: (1) that which someone really is—their nature as formed by habit or (2) the expression of a person's unique individuality.

Schools are made. This book is about how they are made well. By telling the stories of twelve very different but equally extraordinary schools from all across the country, this book explains how school cultures are made, how they form student character, and, ultimately, how great school cultures harness student character to drive achievement.

All schools have a culture. No school is without one. School culture shapes what occurs within the building and what happens without—whether for good or for ill. The key questions are simply what are the particular sources of your school's culture and what effect does it have on your school's outcomes.

Answering these questions well and having the means to harness school culture to drive positive outcomes, I believe, is *the* school leadership question of the next ten years.

Given the rate of change in our society at large and the speed with which recent high school and college graduates are expected to compete with their peers *worldwide* for the same jobs and opportunities, it has become the essential duty of all school leaders to create environments that overwhelmingly

give students both the academic skills and the personal where-
withal to compete successfully in a global economy.

This book profiles twelve outstanding schools that together
provide a roadmap for anyone wishing to create a great school
culture. In the detail of what these schools do and through the
study of how they do it, the reader of this book will learn in
practical terms how great school cultures are made and what is
required to harness the transformational power of school cul-
ture to drive outstanding student outcomes.

From Good to Great

The twelve extraordinary schools profiled later in these pages
demonstrate that a school's faculty and administration, given
the right priorities and a proper coordination of effort, can
purposefully create a school culture that dramatically improves
the lives of the children entrusted to their care. Further, these
schools show that children who benefit from these environ-
ments experience a renewed sense of self and an individual
sense of purpose that can then be tapped to drive remarkable
student achievement.

Although it may be surprising that a particular school cul-
ture would produce equally good athletes, good citizens, good
artists, and good scholars, it turns out to be very common that
a schoolwide focus on what it means to be good—a culture of
character—is at the root of many schools being great.

In its simplest formulation, the schools highlighted here
teach us that if children are taught to be good, they can learn
to be great. The level of accomplishment regularly achieved in
these schools is astounding, but it would not be possible with-
out the moral excellence that precedes it. Seriousness and
hard work are required to do well in school, but for the faculty
and administrations of the schools profiled here, it is their
schoolwide attention to *student happiness* first that makes this
level of achievement possible.

What happens to students in these schools happens *on pur-
pose.* And so these schools are celebrated for the remarkable

degree to which they purposefully shape their school cultures to achieve very certain outcomes. But there is more here.

No matter how well *intentioned* our school systems may be, the absolute priority in schools today is not placed first on the individual well-being—let alone on the *intended* happiness—of each individual student. The schools profiled here quite simply teach that schools are for children; structured in any other way, they lose their *purpose.* These schools also teach us that to be effective, school cultures have to be *intentional.* School cultures have to be purposefully constructed to produce very particular outcomes. If they are not intentional, if they are not explicit about what they want to achieve and how they intend to achieve it, then they invite every form of mixed message to dilute their overall mission or diminish their ability to execute on it.

And that's the point. The risk of not purposefully focusing on school culture is that you risk inviting every possible alternative to what you ultimately want for your school.

Although this single observation should be sufficient to get schools and communities focused on creating great school cultures that form strong character, there are three reasons why this topic that is so important to the success of our children gets lost among other discussions.

THREE FALSE STARTS

First, the academic and popular literature on schooling has almost a cultlike fascination with the role of school leadership in driving great outcomes. To the detriment of our understanding about school climate and culture, we have focused almost exclusively on leadership. However important the role of the school principal may be, we must not forget that the primary job of all senior leaders is to create the proper *work environment* and then effectively *motivate* those who work there. Too much of the discussion surrounding school principals has failed to recognize the many elements outside of school leadership that shape a school environment, let alone how the

workers in that environment are best motivated. Most especially, this discussion surrounding school principals has failed to notice that in every school in the world, the greatest amount of work is done—or should be done—by *students,* and so it is *they* who most need to be motivated by the environment.

Second, school culture is often presented as a topic of such complexity that it cannot possibly be managed to yield certain outcomes. This is simply untrue. "School-Level Factors," as Robert Marzano (2003) and others have rightly identified them, are a well-understood subset of the total number of influences on student outcomes. School-level factors, however, drive teacher-level effects, and in the end, it is overall teacher quality that is the single most accurate indicator of a student's performance in school (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). If school cultures do not create environments in which teachers are intrinsically rewarded for their hard work and so willingly contribute their very best efforts, then the school will miss the mark. This book aims to fix this mistake.

Third, but perhaps most importantly, the discussion of school culture as it is presented here is intended as an antidote to so much discussion of character education as it is popularly understood. However well intended, what passes for character education is often so hopelessly thin and so irregularly supported that it has little lasting effect on the moral formation of students and even less impact on the broader activities they engage in across any given school day. Although some of these shortcomings can be overcome through better program design, it is the strong opinion of many people featured in this book that character education programs often unintentionally (and unknowingly) undermine their stated purpose. In this book, we argue that to work at all such programs must first be entirely reoriented to a greater good. By making the low goals of "disciplined behavior" or "caring kids" their main objective, these efforts typically miss altogether the fundamental truth that human happiness is the greatest catalyst of human excellence. In stark contrast to so much "character education programming," the schools featured here demonstrate that

when schools are properly ordered, they naturally become centers of both happiness and excellence.

Consistent with this way of thinking, the schools profiled in this book demonstrate a very simple but profound truth: Schools become great by creating a culture in which confident children joyfully strive to accomplish worthy goals in concert with their friends. What is more, the children in these schools understand why this striving is good and what this requires of them and their fellow students. On the other hand, too many efforts at character education just aim for a more mild-mannered school. In so doing they tear at the heart and soul of what makes real teaching and learning such a passionate exercise.

Taken altogether, the schools profiled here remind us what great schooling looks like and what concrete steps we can take to create many more great schools like them.

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To the parents, teachers, administrators, but most especially the students of all the schools I visited while writing this book—both those profiled here and the many that were not included—your words run throughout these pages.

And to Kirby, Casey, and Lucy, but most of all, my wife Suzanne, who continues to be the surest inspiration for the very best of my efforts, it is to the four of you that this book and all my work is dedicated.

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About the Author

Samuel Casey Carter wrote this book as senior fellow at the Center for Education Reform, an advocacy organized based in Washington, D. C., whose mission is to change laws, minds, and cultures so that good schools might flourish. Today he is president of CfBT USA, the United States charity affiliated with CfBT Education Trust headquartered in the United Kingdom. Previously, Carter was president of National Heritage Academies, a charter school management company that operates more than sixty public charter schools in six states, where he oversaw corporate strategy and the implementation of the company's educational operations.

Carter is also the author of *No Excuses: Lessons From 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools,* a book on the effective practices of high-performing schools that refuse to make poverty an excuse for academic failure. In addition to *No Excuses,* Carter has edited three other books including Mary Beth Klee's *Core Virtues,* a literature-based character education program for parents and teachers of elementary school students. His articles, essays, and columns have appeared in more than 180 newspapers and magazines, including,

The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, New York Times, New York Post, Washington Times, Los Angeles Times, Investor's Business Daily, and *Detroit News.*

After receiving a bachelor degree from St. John's College in Annapolis in philosophy and mathematics, Carter studied theology at Oxford University and philosophy at the Catholic University of America. He lives in Washington, D. C., with his wife Suzanne, whom he met while they were both teachers, and their three girls: Kirby, Casey Elizabeth, and Lucy.

SECTION I
Theory

1

Four Common Traits of Great School Cultures

This book was written while I served as a senior fellow at the Center for Education Reform (CER) in Washington, D. C. CER is an advocacy organization whose mission is to change laws, minds, and cultures so that good schools might flourish.

For more than fifteen years, CER has amassed one of the largest national repositories of primary and secondary literature on school performance. It was with access to these resources that the research team at CER and I examined close to 3,500 schools over the course of a year looking for mainstream-American schools that have not been widely promoted as examples of great school culture but whose cultures demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to strong character development and the teaching of the whole child.

From this initial pass, we identified nearly 350 high-performing schools with a reputation for instilling strong personal character. The goal in the end was to arrive at a set of

geographically, demographically and programmatically diverse schools that together could tell a larger story about how school cultures are formed and how they can be shaped in a very certain way to have the most positive effect on student outcomes.

How and Why These Schools Were Selected

To arrive at the set of schools profiled here, we first removed schools that in our estimate pursue a more "programmatic" approach to character development—as opposed to developing a comprehensive school culture committed to strong character. Next, we removed many of the most storied schools in the country that have extraordinary school cultures that readers might dismiss as being "unscalable" or inapplicable to their circumstances—especially elite private schools and strict observance religious schools. At this stage, we also eliminated schools that some would identify as too "autocratic," for example, military academies and reform schools, preferring instead to tell the story of schools where the moral order comes more from inside and is more explicitly voluntarily chosen.

From these, the team prepared a comparative study of thirty-nine schools in preparation for in-person school visits and interviews with the parents, students, faculty, and administrative leaders at each school. After my field visits were complete, I decided to profile the twelve schools featured here.

Altogether, they come from nine states in the north, south, east, west, and midwestern regions of the country. Ten of the twelve are public schools—two of these public schools are charters, three are magnets, and two of these magnets have a preferential option for the economically disadvantaged. The two private schools are both of religious orientation. These characteristics are summarized in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1   Featured Schools

Name of School	Type	Students	Grades
Arlington Traditional, Arlington, VA	Public Magnet	442	PK–5
P.S. 124, New York, NY	Local Public	1143	PK–8
An Achievable Dream, Newport News, VA	Public Magnet	987	PK–12
Cotswold Elementary, Charlotte, NC	Public Magnet	499	K–5
Grayhawk Elementary, Scottsdale, AZ	Local Public	821	K–6
Atlantis Elementary, Port St. John, FL	Local Public	720	K–6
Benjamin Franklin, Franklin, MA	Public Charter	394	K–6
Hope Prima, Milwaukee, WI	Private	220	K–8
Providence St. Mel, Chicago, IL	Private	650	K–12
Harvest Park Middle School, Pleasanton, CA	Local Public	1129	6–8
Veritas Academy, Phoenix, AZ	Public Charter	322	6–12
Hinsdale Central H.S., Hinsdale, IL	Local Public	2624	9–12

Together, they serve the broadest range of diversity that is seen in American schooling: Four serve minority low-income students, three serve lower-middle to middle-income families, four serve middle- to upper-middle-income families, and one is almost a statistically perfect mix of minority, white, low-, middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-income children. Two are preK or kindergarten to fifth grade. Three are kindergarten to sixth grade. Two are preK or kindergarten to eighth grade. One is a middle school (6–8), one is a middle-high school (6–12), one is a high school (9–12), and two are preK or kindergarten to twelfth grade. The demographics of these schools are summarized in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Demographics of the Featured Schools

Name of School	Ethnicity					Median Income
	White	Hispanic	Black	Asian	Other	
Arlington Traditional, Arlington, VA	59	12	8	21	0	Medium
P.S. 124, New York, NY	3	21	36	40	0	Low
An Achievable Dream, Newport News, VA	1	2	96	0	0	Low
Cotswold Elementary, Charlotte, NC	45	11	43	0	0	Medium
Grayhawk Elementary, Scottsdale, AZ	88	3	2	7	0	Medium High
Atlantis Elementary, Port St. John, FL	81	5	6	0	7	Medium
Benjamin Franklin, Franklin, MA	89	1	1	8	0	Medium
Hope Christian, Milwaukee, WI	0	1	99	0	0	Low
Providence St. Mel, Chicago, IL	0	1	99	0	0	Low
Harvest Park Middle School, Pleasanton, CA	59	0	3	26	2	Medium High
Veritas Academy, Phoenix, AZ	91	5	1	0	3	Medium
Hinsdale Central H.S., Hinsdale, IL	81	4	3	12	0	High

, Prima

All of these schools beat the competition in their local areas as far as academic and other student achievement is concerned. All of them far exceed the national performance levels for the populations they serve. Nine of the twelve would rank superior on any national ranking of any kind. Together, they are just a snapshot of the more than 115,000 schools in the country, but they are among the very best—for they aim only to bring the best out of their students—and they prove what is possible for every school in America.

FOUR COMMON TRAITS

The great value in the study of these schools is not in any general framework, but in the details. The beauty of these schools is in what they do and how they do it, so to understand them correctly, we have to address each of them on their own terms.

This is, after all, exactly what these schools teach us about children: If we do not address *who* they are first, we cannot hope to learn *what* they can do. For this reason, the great bulk of this book is dedicated to twelve school profiles that highlight some of the novel features of each school and focus on particular aspects or practices at the heart of that school's extraordinary school culture.

That said, these twelve schools and these twelve very particular profiles of them also tell a larger story about how school cultures are made, how school cultures form character, and how great school cultures harness character to drive achievement. To help the reader apply these lessons to their circumstances, the next chapter addresses each of these themes in brief. But first, a quick overview of what these schools have in common.

There are literally dozens of ways to organize the many common elements shared by the schools profiled in these pages. Their school cultures are often founded on similar or related principles, they regularly have like effects on their surrounding communities, and of course, they share many of the same practices. But in the words of the students, teachers, and

administrators who work in the great school cultures celebrated here, it is the following four traits that provide the most insight into what they have in common:

1. A strong belief that culture determines outcomes

2. A nurturing but demanding culture

3. A culture committed to student success

4. A culture of people, principles, and purpose

These four traits, however, do not surface one after the other to form a school culture—they are not steps or the means to a great school. Further, it is unclear whether these four traits emerge in differing degrees to shape schools of various quality. Whether these four traits are on display to some degree in lower-performing schools, I cannot say. But in great school cultures that form strong personal character, it is absolutely certain that they are all four in evidence—like a formula or a necessary pattern that once in place provides the occasion for all the benefits that follow.

1. A Strong Belief That Culture Determines Outcomes

All schools have an identity that affects the identity of the children in them. There is no other way to say this. In addition to what is explicitly taught, there is a great deal that is implicitly learned throughout the school day, and great school cultures work hard to make sure these teachings are consistent with what they value most. The immense amount of work required to intentionally shape a school culture has its origins in the strong belief that culture determines outcomes and that the work is worth it.

If you do not believe in the transformational influence that school culture has on everything and everyone in your school, then much that takes place around you will occur well outside your control because it will not be done *on purpose.*

Schools that most powerfully wish to shape their student outcomes through their school culture, therefore, take concrete steps to establish clear, outward expressions of this inward belief. It is only in knowing exactly what you *intend* for your school to achieve that you can begin to do it each and every day *on purpose.*

2. A Nurturing but Demanding Culture

How great school cultures make rigorous and regular demands on everyone associated with them without overplaying their hand or overstaying their welcome is perhaps the single most important quality to look for and understand in the school profiles that follow. They aim to achieve a perfect balance between a nurturing and demanding culture by *nurturing the person first* while looking for every opportunity to stretch the skills, attainments, and natural attributes of all their community members—parents, students, and teachers alike.[1]

Excellence for these schools always means being the very best *you* can be. The goal is not a perfection of excellence but a *striving* to do *your* best, which means great school cultures begin nurturing the true character of each individual first.

Although each of these schools achieves this balance in various ways and through various devices, they do not attempt to plant the seed without first tilling the soil. A clear common trait across all of these schools is that they focus on establishing *authentic relationships* between students and their teachers before they expect those teachers to be able to make authentic and worthy demands of their students.

3. A Culture Committed to Student Success

The students in the schools celebrated here possess a number of remarkable qualities with astonishing regularity. They are effective communicators, enthusiastic learners,

and emerging leaders. As we will see in a moment, they are confident team players who learn to take intelligent risks. But above all else, they are joyful, cheerful, and happy. This is how they are described by their teachers, by their families, and by themselves.

Students in great school cultures understand the adults in their lives want them to succeed. It is precisely because so many influential adults assume their success and are demonstrably committed to their individual achievement that the students in these schools learn to accept the sacrifices of hard work and learn to desire the great good that can come of it. But it is equally important that students are given *specific means to succeed*, so in the schools profiled here, students are given specific tools to help them *do* the things that are expected of them.

Schools are for children. Classrooms must be student centered. This is not a learned educational philosophy but a simple truth. For students to learn well, teachers must teach well, which means they must be passionate about great teaching and committed to continually learning how best to connect with each of their students through the subject matter in question and through the particular needs of each child. Above all else, this is what it means for a school culture to be committed to student success.

4. A Culture of People, Principles, and Purpose

The schools profiled here are celebrated for doing their work *on purpose* as opposed to so many others that are not so intentional in their action, principled in their outlook, or purpose driven from the start. For each of these schools, it takes extraordinary people—with actions that are directed by clear principles—to create a school culture that knows what it is doing and achieves its goals on purpose.

But let us not understate what we mean. School cultures do not become great simply by doing what they set out to do. Rather, greatness comes when they invite the opportunity for greatness in others, when they demand principled action and genuinely encourage their students to pursue *life's purpose.* Today, this means that schools once again need to become places that teach about the true, the good, and the beautiful, and to do so, they must create an environment in which the true, the good, and the beautiful can be experienced firsthand.

To understand these four common traits more fully, let us turn now to consider how great school cultures are created.