

Start Recognizing Students

School leaders and teachers often ponder the question, “How should we define and inform school culture?” This complex and dynamic question should be considered through the lens of student recognition programs.

Culture, in itself, has many functions. Education scholars who write about culture point to the symbolic value of artifacts and habitual activities. These artifacts and experiences create meaning for others—dictating the norms, values, and expectations seen as appropriate and non-negotiable in schools. School culture, then, can be used to highlight what is acceptable while also increasing the aspirations and achievements of everyone within the school. The norms and expectations should be witnessed as the halls of schools are traveled and as each day unfolds.

Therefore, how students are recognized and celebrated is deeply embedded in the culture of a school and defines what is valued among students, teachers, and principals.

Creative and New Practices

Recognition programs use experiences and artifacts to celebrate students who demonstrate high academic achievement, personify important attributes, and exude tremendous effort and growth across multiple domains. One example is the National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS), which is an exemplary student recognition program for students in grades 4-6. In many ways, recognition programs such as NEHS impact the climate and culture of a school. Here are five best practices to use recognition to shape your school’s culture.

1. Highlight individuals. Schools across the country use forms of recognition such as “Student of the Month,” “Most Improved,” “Scholar of the Day,” or “Star of the Week.” These frequent and consistent opportunities highlight students for their individual

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achievements or contributions to the school community.

You can also involve students in the creation of a space or means of recognizing students. For example, identify a decorative artifact or symbol that easily welcomes additions, such as a tree. I still recall the tree decoration that adorned the wall at the elementary school I attended. It not only connected with the name of the school—Arbor Hill Elementary—but also served as a centerpiece for the community. Adding leaves and flowers to the tree signified students who should be celebrated for their contributions to the learning community.

2. Involve everyone. Every adult in the school community should be given the opportunity to celebrate students for their contributions. From the bus aide to the crossing guard to the food service staff to the librarian, the entire community must reinforce desired attributes and achievements through recognition efforts. For example, the librarian or support staff might celebrate students who exhibit responsibility and service within the school library. Recognition specific to a certain area of the school furthers a positive culture

to and throughout all components of the school community.


3. Put students at the center. Capturing student voice also serves as a way to empower and recognize students. One strategy includes journaling. Ask students to write about a question, topic, or theme that places them in the position to view themselves as agents of change. Extract a quote from the student’s writing that might be impactful or inspirational, and affix the student’s name or photo to it. You can frame this content as a “thought piece” that might impact the school community. For example, ask students to think about what makes a great leader. After they are done writing, review the content and select students who might not receive praise or recognition, and identify the best avenue to feature and recognize these students. This effort allows you to celebrate the voice and thoughtfulness of your students, while also highlighting the importance of the question posed.

4. Go beyond. Recognition, at times, can serve as a turning point in the life of a student who might not experience academic success often. One way to get at this is to distribute forms to teachers, asking them to indicate a student who would not typically receive recognition. This type of acknowledgement celebrates positive attributes that students display and highlights the need to recognize students who might often go without positive affirmation. This kind of recognition can serve as a catalyst for a student’s desire to strive for greater achievement.

5. Connect with community leaders and organizations. The celebration of student achievement should extend beyond the walls of the school building. For recognition program events, invite guest speakers or presenters who represent the surrounding community. Local news stations, popular business owners, and elected or appointed officials can show students what it’s like to achieve a successful career and highlight the possibilities of their futures. Organize a program

such as Lunch with Leaders, where local “celebrity” or community leaders can host a special lunch with students who have demonstrated achievement or have met specific targets established by school leaders. Including external community in recognition efforts might also create opportunities for students to access resources or experiences within the community.

Celebrate Greatness

Recognition programs serve as a comprehensive way to articulate, celebrate, and reaffirm school climate and culture. Leaders who operate recognition programs—like NEHS—have the chance to embed desired attributes and achievements into the life of school communities. There is great value in consistent, frequent, and innovative approaches to shaping school culture by acknowledging and celebrating student achievement. Defining what greatness looks like can be best executed by recognizing and celebrating the attributes and achievements of your students. 

Jonathan D. Mathis is director of the National Honor Societies at the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

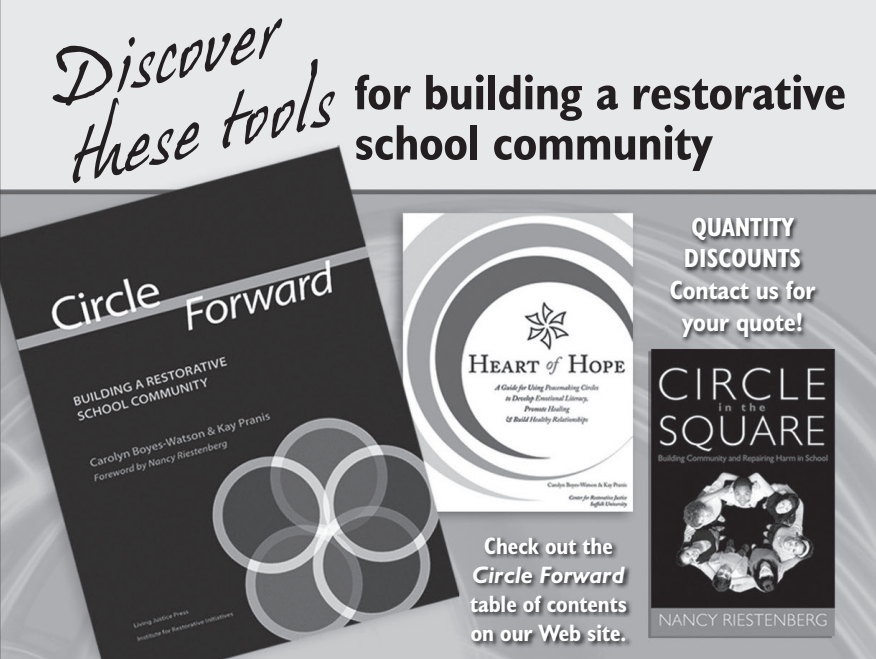
About NEHS

Founded in 2008, the National Elementary Honor Society (NEHS) is a program of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals Foundation. NEHS is modeled after the National Honor Society with regard to recognizing high-achieving students and increasing aspirations for future success, academic and otherwise. Members of NEHS are recognized for their extraordinary achievement and display of the program’s four pillars: scholarship, responsibility, leadership, and service. For more information, visit www.nehs.org.

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