

Chapter **TWO**

Learning Your School's Culture

As important as setting up your classroom is getting to know the school you're in. Where do you go for help? What is the recess policy? When do you get observed? What do you do during a fire drill? When is Meet the Teacher Night, and what is required? When is the school building opened in the morning and closed at night?

As much as they're similar, all schools are different. Leadership, teachers, students, parents, staff, neighborhood, and community all help to create an environment that is distinct and original. The resulting way of life—particular to the personalities involved—evolves over time.

This way of life is the school's culture. You'll want to learn as much as you can about it before the first day of school, well before your first student even looks at the front of the building. This chapter will teach you many of the questions to ask and hopefully inspire you to think of others. The answers you get will lead to a smoother start to the school year.

WHO YOU NEED TO KNOW: THE BIG FOUR

Many people play important roles in how a school functions, but four of them are crucial to your success: the office manager (or administrative

assistant or secretary), the custodian, the teacher representative (if you have one), and the principal.

The Office Manager, Administrative Assistant, or School Secretary

This person may be known as the head honcho, commandant, or chief, but one thing is almost certainly true: He or she is at the center of all that happens. Keeping an open, friendly, professional relationship with this person will make your school life infinitely smoother. You will most likely visit the office every day, signing in, getting your mail, or asking the office manager questions about a variety of issues, such as sub days, reserving a school bus, a student's permanent record, or the multitude of other issues for which you may need advice. The secretary can help you with the great many administrative needs and questions you will have.

Get to know this key player and try to quickly understand the way things are done in the office. Because schools are awash in a sea of data, paperwork, and legal requirements, probably the most considerate act you can do for the school secretary is to complete and return all the forms and requests with the greatest possible speed. These may not be your top priority, but in the school office they are.

The Custodian

This person manages the infrastructure of the school, doing things like fixing broken doors, leaky windows, and ineffectual heaters, as well as keeping the place clean and safe. The custodian is the in-house handy person, when something breaks or you need help with some physical aspect of your room, he or she is the person to ask. And custodians are usually very busy.

Find out how you can make things easier for the custodian, and the favor will very likely be returned. If the custodian wants you to stack your chairs at the end of the day, train your kids to do it. Find ways to show your

appreciation, too. Offer to be the one who takes up a collection during the holidays for the custodian on your floor or wing. Buy a card for your fellow teachers to sign, get everyone to chip in a few bucks, and give it to the custodian before the winter vacation. Gestures like these make a world of difference.

I regularly sweep the floor of my classroom, even though I don't need to because the custodian will do it. But I tell him not to sweep. One afternoon, after an especially tough day, there was paint all over the floor, the lock on my door was broken, and I was beat. I was about to head to the hardware store to get some extra cleaning supplies when the custodian came by. "I got it," he said. "Go home. You look exhausted." The next day when I arrived at school, my floor was immaculate, all the whiteboards had been wiped clean, and the lock was fixed. The room looked like new.

Your Teacher Representative (or Union Representative)

Find out who represents teachers in your school: It may be a union representative or other individual. You may or may not agree with the stances of the organization that represents teachers, but regardless, your teacher rep can provide important information regarding salary steps, in-school elections, and decisions about school-based policies and rallies. Getting to know that person, reading the bulletins, and attending the meetings will help you stay educated on these issues. You will also learn about the politics of education and develop your own stance on issues.

Another good reason to get to know the teacher rep is that she or he can help

BTW: At some schools, you may opt out of representation, and some have different agreements with their employees. Be sure you are very clear about your rights and your responsibilities before you sign on with a school. Make sure you feel comfortable.

protect you if you're investigated or are being treated unfairly by a parent or your administration. The rep can stand between you and potentially unjust or unfair political practices.

A colleague of mine was wrongly accused of touching a child inappropriately. The teacher had a stellar record and when the supposed incident took place there were numerous parents present. Nonetheless, she was scared. The child had a record of lying in school and the parents were very unsupportive. My friend notified the representative of the incident and the next day the teacher had a phone call with a union lawyer and an appointment with the school district investigator to move the case along. Instead of dragging out over weeks and months, the union rep's proactive approach helped resolve the conflict quickly.

The Principal

Although rewarding, the job of principal is also punishing. Principals oversee every aspect of the school, a lot of which involves you and other teachers. They have to cope with a multitude of details daily, and in most cases they can't be on top of everything. It goes without saying that since this is your boss, you will want to do what you can to encourage a mutually respectful relationship.

Chapter 5 has plenty of information about your relationship with your principal, but the most important thing to know is this: Stay in touch with your principal but don't overwhelm him or her. Let the principal know about the terrific things happening in your classroom (it will make her day), be punctual to meetings, and submit paperwork on time. Be respectful of the principal's time. Find out when is the best time to approach the principal with questions so you're more likely to get the answers and help you are looking for.