

Handout #4 - "Just Ask" Non-negotiables for creating a culture of learning

What are non-negotiables

"In high achieving environments, there exists a unified belief system that has been carefully crafted after extensive discussion and input from all stakeholders. There is no need to debate or argue about whether or not to act on these beliefs; put succinctly, all stakeholders accept the beliefs as pivotal to the success of the organization. They represent practices that are so much a part of the culture that outside observers are impressed by their efficacy, and insiders do not even give them a second thought. We call these practices non-negotiables."

Examples of non-negotiables

1. We act on our belief that all students can learn!

This, the most important non-negotiable, appears first on our list. Readers will note that there is extra punctuation for emphasis. The word all is underlined because we cannot disregard the learning needs of any individual. Every child we face in our classroom deserves our attention as well as our relentless effort to find the key to his success. The exclamation point at the end of the sentence denotes the passion with which we embrace the belief that all children will show clear evidence of learning. We know that it is not acceptable to simply believe in the ability of all youngsters to learn; it must be identifiable in our words and actions and the responses of the students. Without exception, we must see each child as a capable individual who can grow in knowledge and skills.

2. We accept learning as the fundamental principle of the school and examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.

When student learning is the lens through which we examine our practices, the tenets of standards-based education.

- Standards guide all classroom decisions.
- The focus is always on student learning.
- Expectations for learning are the same for all students, even those who have traditionally performed at low levels.
- The final determination of the effectiveness of instructional practices is whether or not they result in higher levels of achievement for students.
- Assessment results are used to inform teachers, individually and collectively, about the effectiveness of curricular and instructional decisions.

In order to accomplish this, we know that we must be open-minded, lifelong learners who keep abreast of, share, and use research-based practices, who seek ways to scaffold and extend learning, and who are willing to forego practices that do not help students learn.

3. We engage in and assume leadership for promoting collaborative practice.

Noted educator Roland Barth wrote, "The relationship among the adults in the building has more impact on the quality and character of the school and the accomplishments of its youngsters than any other factor." In our meetings, including collaborative team meetings, hallway conversations, and other chance

encounters, a spirit of collaboration is palatable. In fact, administrators, classroom teachers, specialists, parents, and community members work together, sharing leadership roles, to promote student learning. This requires explicit knowledge and skill, and perhaps additional training, in areas such as planning and facilitating productive meetings, adult learning theory, building consensus, and providing growth-producing feedback to one another.

4. We believe that all students belong to all of us.

In high-performing cultures, there is clear enduring evidence that all stakeholders accept and act on the belief that all students belong to all adults. Inclusive pronouns such as “our” and “we” are used instead of “your,” “my,” and “I.” The notion that one grade or content area does not “have a standardized test” is nonexistent because all feel responsible for the learning of all students. General educators do not leave the education of students with special needs, accelerated learners, second language learners, etc. to the specialists who are present to support the learning of those students. Those specialists, in turn, extend their expertise to all students. As teachers work together for the success of all students, there is no evidence of blaming or finger pointing when things do not go well but instead a resolute commitment to seek solutions to problems or setbacks in the interest of each and every student’s achievement.

5. We collectively develop and adhere to clearly articulated norms.

Working together is the guiding principle that enables us to reach our desired outcomes. At the outset of our collaborative efforts, we establish standard procedures we would follow in our work together. We work collectively to devise a list of the norms we would follow and view adherence to these norms as instrumental to our success. Norms range from establishing meeting times, decision-making processes, a respect for a variety of opinions, and that participation is both a right and a responsibility. Most importantly, we accept the premise that the primary purpose of our work together is to make a difference in student achievement. We agree to follow a pre-determined meeting agenda and stick to the topic under discussion so that we can move toward making decisions that will improve our practice. We believe that in cultures where norms are not established, goals are harder to reach, collaborative efforts are less structured, off-task behavior can more readily occur, and participants can become disenchanted about the potential work the team can accomplish.

6. We establish and maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.

Words like trust and respect are often seen in the vision or mission statements. It is all well and good to include these words in our belief statements, but they must also be reflected in our day-to-day practice. When our actions match our words, we treat each other as valuable, contributing members of the team. Visible signs of trust and respect include:

- New territory is explored and disagreements are treated with respect and opportunities to offer alternative ways to thinking are the norm.
- Each individual is given equal time to express an opinion or share an idea.

- Differences of opinion are encouraged and seen as potential solutions to problems.
- Ideas which lead to increased student learning are recognized and praised by peers.
- Interactions are characterized by honesty and presented in a positive manner.
- Individuals feel comfortable exposing their vulnerability with one another because they know they will not be judged.
- The interest of the school as a whole is put first as educators share their best ideas.

Such an atmosphere of trust and respect leads to an unspoken comfort level that can lead to extraordinary results.

7. Isolation is not an option! Collaboration is a right and a responsibility.

In this age of accountability, schools are often judged on the results they achieve. Studies have repeatedly shown that the schools with the highest achievement are places where structures for collaboration are established and maintained over time. No longer can we work in an environment where we close our classroom doors and carry out our lessons in isolation, rarely if ever interacting with our fellow teachers. When we do not operate as individual entities and instead work in true cooperative ventures, we can expect the following results:

- gains in student achievement
- unforeseen solutions to problems
- increased confidence among staff members
- a desire to test new ideas
- more support for new teachers
- an expanded repertoire of strategies, materials, and teaching approaches

Numerous studies have concluded that a major source of discontent among professional educators is a feeling of isolation. We talk openly about the importance of working together, and organize our work environment so that collaboration will occur in a natural and fluid manner.

8. All adults are committed to the success of all other adults.

When we propose this non-negotiable in our workshops, there is almost always a collective gasp as participants grapple with the potential power of this construct. We interpret this reaction to mean that, for most educators, this is not a norm in their schools. If, however, we want all students to achieve at the highest levels, then all of us must also perform at the highest levels. Great care must be taken to make sure that each one of us has all the necessary information to design and carry out the best possible learning experiences for students. We avoid blaming previous teachers or parents for student learning gaps. We instead see the learning of our colleagues and the parents of our students as important components of our professional responsibility.

9. We focus on results.

This means that we analyze assessment results together, hold data-driven discussions, make data-driven decisions, establish SMART goals for specific measurable skills and knowledge, identify improvement strategies, and adapt instruction to meet student needs. Our definition of data extends far beyond standardized test results to creating a body of evidence that includes formative assessment data from classroom assignments and interactions with students as well as multiple other sources.

Some of the questions we continuously ask ourselves are the following:

- What data should we gather and analyze?
- What data do we have to inform our daily practice?
- How can we use data to inform long-term curricular and instructional decisions?
- How do we determine the significance of the data?
- How should the data be analyzed so that it is useful to all members of the school community, including students and parents?
- And most importantly, what action do we take after we have analyzed the data?

<https://justaskpublications.com/just-ask-resource-center/e-newsletters/just-for-the-asking/non-negotiables-for-creating-a-culture-for-learning/>

Oliver, Bruce. "Just ASK's Non Negotiables for Creating a Culture for Learning" **Just for the ASKing!** October 2010. Reproduced with permission of Just ASK Publications & Professional Development (Just ASK). © 2010 Just ASK. All rights reserved. Available at www.justaskpublications.com.