

## TCA Vision -- A Culture of Encouragement, Appreciation, and Gratitude

By Jim Kretchman

I have been asked on occasion to share my thoughts regarding the founding vision as it relates to staff appreciation at TCA. My hope is that you will find these ideas to be helpful categories in which to think, and perhaps be inspired to renew your own effort to express encouragement, appreciation and gratitude. However, with equal fervor, it is my hope that no TCA parent ever feels a sense of pressure or burden to do so. Acting from a sense of obligation or pressure would utterly defeat the purpose, and ultimately do more harm than good. Consider this an invitation to reflect – taking action is totally up to you.

To keep this short, I'm going to make a few statements without offering support for them. These are the facts:

- We ask more of our staff than other public schools ask of their staffs. We do more with less in virtually every aspect of this school.
- As a charter school, we have less money to work with. We pay less.
- Our school is counter-cultural, so our staff is in a constant battle with the culture at-large.

These are my beliefs:

- Most of our staff works here because they believe in our mission, our purpose, our cause.
- People who do more for less want to know that they matter, and are making a difference to those that they seek to serve. They wonder “is their sacrificial service in vain?”

The natural and appropriate response to being on the receiving end of a caring staff that does more for less is 1) encouragement 2) appreciation and 3) gratitude. In my mind, these three words have different meanings, they represent different feelings, and the differences lead somewhat naturally to different expressions. The distinction between appreciation and gratitude may not even be totally valid in a strict linguistic sense, but I'm going to use them here to represent two similar but different concepts.

**Encouragement** is an act of kindness. It is needed in our community going in every direction between parents, staff and students. Raising kids is a tough job, and so is teaching them in a public school. My hope is that parents would encourage each other, and each other's children. If my child wins a D20 math contest, how cool it would be for my child to get a note of congratulations from another parent. We can “pay it forward” to each other's children as each celebrates various accomplishments over the years. Think of what a difference that could make in our community. Similarly, teachers face a tough day in/ day out reality. We all need words of encouragement, especially during hard times. Let's not miss those windows of opportunity to speak words of life. Let's make TCA a great place to work!

I use the term **appreciation** to represent a general sense of thankfulness. It stems from a recognition that someone, or some group, deserves our thanks. In contrast, **gratitude** is an acute emotion. Sadly, it is one that is fleeting. Deep feelings of gratitude seem to be triggered by an event, and for a moment, I richly, deeply, and sincerely feel overwhelmed. For example, on many occasions I've walked by someone in a wheel chair and feel a profound sense of gratitude for my own health. But rarely does that feeling last long. While I find that I can appreciate

someone for long periods of time, genuine gratitude seems to visit me with power, move my heart, but then fade as the distractions of life pull me back into auto-pilot.

I hope that you can relate to the distinction I'm suggesting. Perhaps the terms aren't quite right, but I hope you agree that we are dealing with two different concepts here. The question then becomes "how can the parents at TCA express appreciation and gratitude?"

I believe that there is a place for both, but only "appreciation" leads itself to planned, organized and collective efforts. It is fine and fitting that we plan a party in December to say "thanks" to the teachers. I think food is always welcome in the teacher's lounge, and is a wonderful way that our parents can show that we value and care for our staff. I think it's even possible to pick a date on a calendar, and declare that on this date, we will express our appreciation to our staff.

That said, it is my passionate belief that this kind of thing can never substitute for spontaneous, heartfelt, personal expressions of genuine gratitude. Because of the nature of the emotion, there is no way that I can "plan" to be deeply grateful on a given date. My hope and invitation to each of us is that IF and WHEN we are visited by genuine gratitude, we must find some way to show it. I am utterly convinced that this is a powerful force for good, and it means the world when it shows its face. I think we all remember times of being on the receiving end of that kind of gratitude. It can be as simple as a handshake and some words, but it sends an amazingly powerful message, person to person, heart to heart. It can be verbal, but a note is even better. I know that teachers save these and read them over and over. If you are so inclined, a small gift as a token can be great. I know teachers that have received a sandwich, a latte, or a picture their student drew. Any words or actions that come from a heart captured by gratitude will go a long way to helping our staff know that their efforts really matter to at least one person.

The spontaneity and randomness of deep gratitude raise one valid concern. There is no way to insure that it happens. Moreover, there is certainly no way to make sure that it happens equally, consistently, and fairly, or on a staff member's birthday. But such is life. While we can "manage" appreciation, and appreciation events, we must merely invite our community to express gratitude if and when they feel it, and then hope it happens. We really have no other choice.

One final observation over the years is that because gratitude is spontaneous and personal, it may happen, or it may not. There is freedom in this, and there must be no sense of duty to "muster it up" in yourself or in others. By contrast, some of our collective efforts at appreciation that have led to some parents feeling "pressured" to donate time or money. This perception of pressure is tragic as it creates a lose/lose for both the parent and the staff member. I'm very thankful to all our room parents and PTO leaders who have worked so hard to lead our community in efforts to show appreciation. If you ever find that there is a lack of interest in a corporate expression of appreciation (like you can't find volunteers or donors), then I hope you can relax and find peace in knowing that this doesn't mean there will not be individual expressions of gratitude. If you feel exhausted (I've been there) then perhaps you might consider spreading the word about WHY you think our staff deserves our appreciation and gratitude, and then just let our community rise or fail on an individual basis.