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From the Executive Director

Culture Is Not an Accident—It Is a Choice

Every school division has a culture. Whether intentionally cultivated or unintentionally allowed to develop, culture influences everything—from student achievement and employee morale to community confidence and the pride people take in their schools. It is often said that "culture eats policy for lunch," and after a recent visit to Richmond County Public Schools, I was reminded just how true that statement really is.

During my visit, I had the opportunity to tour Rappahannock High School. It was not the newest school building I have visited, nor did it feature the latest architectural design or cutting-edge amenities. Yet, what stood out immediately was something far more valuable: pride.

From the moment I arrived, it was evident that the school was cared for. The grounds were meticulously maintained. Landscaping was neat and welcoming. Entrances were inviting. Inside, the hallways, classrooms, and common spaces reflected an unmistakable sense of ownership and respect. Every detail—from thoughtfully displayed student work to the cleanliness of the building and the warm atmosphere—communicated that this was a place where people cared.

That feeling cannot be purchased through a capital improvement project.

Culture is not determined by the age of a building. It is not dependent upon the size of a budget or the availability of the newest technology. Instead, culture is reflected in the daily choices made by every individual in an organization. It is demonstrated through expectations, accountability, relationships, and a shared commitment to excellence.

For school boards, this serves as an important reminder that one of the most significant responsibilities of governance is establishing the culture expected throughout the division. Boards often focus on budgets, facilities, policies, and academic performance—all of which are critically important—but culture is the foundation upon which every one of those priorities rests.

Boards set the tone through their vision, expectations, and leadership. They hire and evaluate the superintendent, adopt policies that reflect organizational values, and communicate what excellence looks like. When a board consistently reinforces expectations around professionalism, respect, pride, accountability, and service, those values begin to permeate every level of the organization.

Culture cannot simply be written into a strategic plan. It must be modeled, reinforced, celebrated, and protected.

Visitors can often sense the culture of a school within moments of walking through the front doors. They notice whether people greet one another, whether students feel connected, whether staff members appear invested, and whether the physical environment communicates care and pride. Those observations may seem small individually, but collectively they speak volumes about the organization's values.

The culture of a school division also shapes the experience of those who work there. When employees know they are valued, when expectations are clear, and when everyone shares responsibility for maintaining high standards, schools become places where people want to stay, grow, and serve. Likewise, students benefit from learning environments where pride, respect, and belonging are evident every day.

My recent experience at Richmond County Public Schools served as a powerful reminder that excellence is often found in the details. It was evident that maintaining a positive culture was not viewed as someone else's responsibility—it belonged to everyone. That collective commitment was visible throughout the campus and left a lasting impression.

Richmond County Public Schools and the leadership at Rappahannock High School should be commended for creating an environment that reflects pride, professionalism, and purpose. Their example demonstrates that while facilities matter, it is ultimately the people within them—and the culture they intentionally build—that make the greatest difference.

As school board members continue the important work of governing their divisions, perhaps one of the most valuable questions to ask is not simply, "What are we accomplishing?" but rather, "What culture are we creating?"

Because when culture is intentional, everything else has a stronger foundation upon which to succeed.

Thanks for all that you do.

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