

## IN MY OPINION IN MY OPINION IN MY OPINION

# Cultivating an Academic Image

*Send the message that you and your school are focused on academics first.*

**By Vance A. Dalzin**

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**T**he media, particularly the television and movie industry, rarely depicts principals as academic leaders (Pristash, 2002). But most of us chose the profession because we wanted to be involved in academics on a larger scale than we could be as teachers (Dalzin, 2007). As principals, however, we are often frustrated by a society that seems to value athletics and the social aspect of school more than the academic part.

We get a clear signal when there's a meager turnout for a parent meeting that is about an academic topic but a full house when it is about an athletic program. Most people in a community can tell you the record of an athletic team more readily than the school's average on the ACT or another standardized test.

We are consumed with prom, homecoming, and myriad other things that can't be classified as academic in nature. How can we create an academic image for ourselves and our schools when it seems that everyone values academics less than other elements? Many of the following suggestions have helped me at my school and have been implemented in other schools across the country.

### The Building

What is displayed in a school sends a symbolic message about what is valued there. It is common in high schools to display a plethora of pictures, trophies, and other artifacts that celebrate collective and individual athletic accomplishments. Those are important things to celebrate, but I would argue that they are not as important as academic achievements.

Seeing an academic slogan on a banner or pictures of valedictorians

as you walk in the school door is a powerful symbol of what is valued in the school. Photos of National Merit Scholarship finalists, honor roll lists, and academic bowl and math team awards are good examples of some academic items that could be displayed. In some schools, there is an academic "wall of fame" that showcases high-achieving students and graduates who went on to make significant accomplishments.

### The Principal's Image

A principal should be seen as someone who values academics. College degrees reflect accomplishment and should be displayed in the principal's office. If our offices are filled with only athletic artifacts, it suggests a less-than-academic image.

It is also important for us to model being readers. Books and professional journals in the office help promote that view.

Dress is another symbolic statement. We should dress up for academic events, such as National Honor Society induction ceremonies or academic awards programs, to send the message that the events are important.

### Celebrations

Celebrating individual and collective academic accomplishments should be a distinct part of the school's culture. How about an academic pep rally before the state testing? Or better yet, a celebration of achievement after the results are available. Those events should be the norm in schools that also have pep assemblies for their athletic programs.

Some schools have academic letters as well as athletic ones and have uniforms or at least team T-shirts for students who compete in academic

bowls, math meets, debates, and other academic team events. In a school that values academics, the morning announcements should highlight individual and team academic accomplishments as well as athletic and artistic ones. Principals should be visible and involved in academic celebrations.

In addition, advisers of successful academic teams should receive as much recognition as winning coaches or music directors. Sending personal letters to honor roll students, National Honor Society inductees, National Merit Scholarship finalists, and academic bowl winners helps demonstrate what a principal values in the school.

### Time

How we spend our time is perhaps the most significant symbolic message of what principals value. In addition to formal classroom observations, it is important to be seen in classrooms regularly on an informal basis, showing enthusiasm for creative lessons, projects, simulations, and the like. We have to make an effort to spend as much or more time on developing courses, scheduling, and observing teachers as on managing student and athletic issues.

Are you viewed as someone who is visible around student learning or who is seen just in your office or at athletic events? The following examples are easy ways to start:

- Engage in conversations with students about academic topics throughout the day
- Walk around the cafeteria or study hall to see what types of assignments students are working on.
- Model reading for the students during a silent sustained read-

ing period or other appropriate time

- Volunteer to be a guest lecturer or read a poem or a story in a class to demonstrate your love of academics.

### Publications

School publications should include material that is academic in nature. They should inform stakeholders about instructional programs and celebrate academic achievement. The yearbook and school newspaper editors should be encouraged to focus on academics. What is displayed on the school's Web site is a message about what is valued and it, too, should include an academic focus.

Perhaps the area over which principals have the most control is the parent newsletter. As the editors of the parent newsletter, we can ensure that there are examples of students' and staff members' academic accomplishments. In the principal's section, it should be clear that academics are the most important thing happening in the school.

### Meetings

Many of us are frustrated by the fact that we spend a lot of time in meetings that have little focus on academic achievement. Staff meetings, parent organization meetings, school board meetings, student council meetings, administrative team meetings, and the like rarely have an academic agenda item. We should look at these meetings as if we are still teachers and those meetings are our classrooms. We can make it a priority to ensure that academic agenda items are prevalent in every aspect of the school community. Meetings should always have some focus on academics.



Photos courtesy of the author

*Seeing an academic slogan on a banner or pictures of valedictorians as you walk in the school door is a powerful symbol of what is valued in the school.*

## ACTION PLAN

Use these guiding questions to help you plan to cultivate a more academic image for yourself and your school:

- What artifacts are displayed in and outside of the building? Do they serve as symbols of achievement and send a message that academics are valued in the school?
- Are you viewed as an academic leader by your internal and external stakeholders? How do you know?
- Are individual and collective academic accomplishments celebrated in your school? How?
- Do you spend more time on academic tasks than on other tasks in your role as a principal?
- How much information about academic elements is in your school publications, such as parent newsletters, the school newspaper, and the yearbook?
- What percentage of items on meeting agendas can be classified as academic in nature?
- Do you guard instructional time? Do you try to prevent your school from becoming consumed by homecoming, prom, nonacademic field trips, and other distractions to the learning day?
- Is your school logo or theme academic or athletic? What does your school letterhead say about your school? Is the slogan about learning?
- What does your office look like? Does it send the message, "I am an academic leader"?
- Are you a champion for academics? Do you write articles about academics in the local newspaper or professional journals or magazines? Do people see your excitement about academics on a daily basis? Are you continuing to grow by reading, taking classes, and teaching classes? Do your staff members, students, and community members know that?

## If Not Us, Who?

I understand and respect that the comprehensive high school is an important part of U.S. culture and that it encompasses a lot more than just academics. And I agree that it should. I also appreciate that two of the most important components of learning in a school are relationships and a positive environment, which are enhanced by nonacademic elements.

But in our pursuit of that ideal, we principals have, to some degree, created images of ourselves and our schools that seem to value academics less than other aspects of the high school experience. I implore school principals to ensure that the image of

their roles and their schools convey the message that academics come first. If the school principal is not viewed as the person who is most concerned about academic achievement in the school, then who will be? **PL**

### REFERENCES

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