



When leaders value standards, they create effective work cultures

As a principal of a high-poverty campus, I am always on the lookout for additional funds. As I've mentioned before, I am fortunate to work with outstanding teacher leaders who are continually learning. We learn from each other, the students, parents, books, workshops, experts, and, on rare occasions, from the business world. As I consider the release of our new Standards for Professional Learning, I am reminded of my recent exposure to standards from another organization. My lesson learned: Standards guide effective practice.

As part of our 8th-grade curriculum, I teach an etiquette class. Our culminating activity is to eat out at an upscale restaurant to practice what we have learned. Unfortunately, the restaurant we chose offered a very small discount that made the excursion cost prohibitive. Fortunately, my son waits on tables at a restaurant that is owned by the same company that owns the upscale restaurant. The employees of these restaurants receive a 50% discount for up to four people on meals. We seized the opportunity to see if we could get a couple of employees to host our group of 8th graders. I can't say I was optimistic that we could get volunteers.

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Mark Diaz is president of Learning Forward's board of trustees.

on board MARK DIAZ

The day arrived with our students wearing their Sunday best. The "Chili Heads" (employees of Chili's restaurants) arrived with smiles on their faces, two more volunteers than we needed, and ate a meal with us. I was struck by their genuine kindness, their love of being together, their unstated mission of helping others, and the immediate rapport they created with the students. They talked about their futures with the students; all were going to college or culinary school, or are on the management track. They talked about working at Chili's as a family experience.

I wondered, why would employees take time from their personal schedule with no thought of remuneration to do this? What is the culture of Chili's, and what are the standards that encourage this behavior? To find out, I contacted Marcy, the manager for the past four years of the Chili's franchise where the Chili Heads came from.

Marcy was humble about her role as leader. She feels fortunate to have had an excellent mentor, a group of natural leaders as employees, and standards that indicated to her she was not crazy doing what she was doing. As a manager, she sees her job to develop leaders, invest in personnel, and create a "can culture" versus a "can't culture."

She describes the standards that guide their work culture. Employees hold each other accountable, value communication, offer healthy feedback, and support each other. Employees consider being a Chili Head an opportunity rather than a job.

When I asked her about districts' decisions to cut back on professional development in this financial environment, she said, "Leaders build leaders." While she couldn't put herself in district leaders' shoes, she did have a suggestion: "Can't they cut back on spelling instead?"

Doesn't this sound familiar? This restaurant understands the role of mentors, a positive culture, mutual accountability, communication, feedback, support, leadership development, and sustained investment in personnel. They have standards, and they use them every day.

When I returned to our campus, I wondered — are we Chili Heads? And I wonder with you — how can our standards help guide your work so your faculties have the opportunity to grow, lead, and serve? ■

