



# *The Power of a Touchstone*

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A central tool for shaping an intentional school culture is the schoolwide touchstone. The touchstone is crafted by the school community and contains universal principles to guide daily reflection, decision-making, and behavior. It may serve as a reminder to "maintain a sense of humor," as it does at Cory Elementary, or to inspire students and staff to "take the high road," as it does at Slavens School, or to "engage in courageous conversations," as it does at West-erly Creek.

*A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal.*

—Roland Barth, Harvard University

Students thrive when they are immersed in an environment defined by shared values. Many students attend schools where values and expectations differ from classroom to classroom and hallway to hallway. This can be profoundly confusing to students and demoralizing to staff, who feel undermined by their colleagues. Without a consensus on values, students learn to respond to the values and expectations of individual teachers, but do not develop an affinity for *shared* school values, since there appear to be none.

## *Successful Businesses Use Touchstones*

Businesses have been using touchstones for years. For example, Toyota has developed a highly effective culture, partly by following the *Toyota Way*, which expresses how employees are to approach their work:

*We accept challenges with a creative spirit and the courage to realize our own dreams without losing drive or energy. We approach our work vigorously, with optimism and a sincere belief in the value of our contributions. We strive to decide our own fate. We act with self-reliance, trusting in our own abilities. We accept responsibility for our conduct and for maintaining and improv-*

*ing the skills that enable us to produce added value.*

A touchstone is not a set of commandments, nor a mission or a vision statement. A touchstone expresses the "how" of an organization, including how to treat each other and with what attitude to approach learning and work. It is meant to inspire individuals to be their best and to guide their thoughts and actions on a daily basis. At Denver School of Science and Technology, the staff rate themselves twice a year on how well they are upholding the values of the school. Parents can be asked to do the same thing. The touchstone applies to *all* members of the school-community.

If the touchstone is properly introduced and developed, students will start holding themselves and their peers accountable for living its values. You might hear an 8th-grader at Place Middle School tell a new student who is "talking trash" in the hallway, "Hey, that's not the Place Way." Without something like *The Place Way* (see box), students might not feel justified in nudging their peers, partly because they may not feel clear enough about their own values. A touchstone can be enormously empowering for students.

## **THE PLACE WAY**

**At Place Middle School, we pursue excellence in scholarship and character.**

**We celebrate and honor each other by being respectful, honest, kind and fair.**

**We show our cultural appreciation for each other in all we do.**

**We give our best in and out of the classroom and take responsibility for our actions.**

***This is who we are, even when no one is watching.***

**T**he touchstone can be incorporated into a school by displaying it in all classrooms, printing it on student ID cards, sending a printed refrigerator magnet home to parents, and conducting a school-community signing ceremony. At Lowry Elementary, students read the touchstone over the PA each morning as part of morning announcements. Many schools print it in their newsletters.

We recommend a step-by-step process (see box) to help each school develop its touchstone. Since ownership is crucial, it's important to include teachers, parents, and students in this process.

Some schools create a motto, which serves as a shorthand for the touchstone. For instance, students at Slavens School know that "take the high road" really means to live the whole set of touchstone values. Keep this in mind when crafting a school touchstone—is there a line or phrase that might serve as a motto?

### *Creating Rubrics for the Touchstone*

We also recommend that a school create rubrics based on each touchstone value. For example, in *The Place Way*, what does it mean for students and adults to show "cultural appreciation for each other in all we do"? What are observable behaviors that reflect a high degree of cultural appreciation? A low degree? We worked with one school where "awareness" was a touchstone value. However, when we began developing rubrics, it became clear that there was no consensus among teachers about what they meant by this concept. One teacher thought it related to emotional self-awareness, and another thought it meant being aware of traffic before you crossed the street. Building rubrics and identifying strategies for growth can help clarify, for students and adults, what the targets are and how to reach them.

The touchstone serves as the reference point for helping a student (1) perceive and understand a situation, (2) act skillfully, and (3) reflect and learn from that situation. For example, a teacher might use the touchstone to help a student identify what "taking the high road" looks like in a par-

### *The touchstone becomes the school's "north star."*

ticular situation, such as the playground, and then help him reflect on his actions. Or a parent could help her son identify what "taking responsibility for our own learning and behavior" might look like on an upcoming field trip. (For a high school example of a touchstone, see *Smart & Good High*

## STEPS FOR DEVELOPING A TOUCHSTONE

1. Put butcher paper outside classrooms with columns labeled "Things to Preserve and Celebrate" and "Things to Improve." Have students and teachers write their suggestions. Collect the sheets and look for patterns.
2. Have each member on the character education committee write down up to four core school values (e.g., respect, best effort) and up to four sentences that might fit into the touchstone (e.g., "We give our best in all that we do.") and then break the committee into four groups. Have each group agree on four values and four sentences. Then pair up the groups and have each pair agree on four values and four sentences. Repeat the process until one set of four values and four sentences remains. Finally, select a member of the group to write a draft of the touchstone based on the final list.
3. Circulate the draft of the touchstone to parents, students, and community members for their feedback.
4. Print the finalized touchstone on school newsletters, refrigerator magnets, school T-shirts, school ID cards, and posters throughout the school. Consider having students paint the touchstone on the school walls.

*Schools at [www.cortland.edu/character/highschool](http://www.cortland.edu/character/highschool), chapter 3, pp. 36-37.)*

**T**he touchstone becomes the "north star" of the school and helps guide the daily decision-making of students and staff. It can inform decisions about many aspects of school life, including parental involvement and the hiring of staff. ■

*Adapted from The Intentional School Culture: Building Excellence in Academics & Character by Charles Elbot and Dave Fuller, Denver Public Schools. The book is available for \$5.00; contact [Barb\\_Evans@dpsk12.org](mailto:Barb_Evans@dpsk12.org).*