

# Can't Wait for MONDAY



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## Rafe Esquith

It was an ordinary Friday afternoon. While the students were eating lunch, I walked down the hallway of my elementary school's main building and stopped by the office to check my mail. I had to hurry because my

students eat lunch in about two minutes so they can dash back to class for

a guitar lesson. It's something they love to learn. As I sorted through my mail, I saw a fellow teacher glumly enter the office. It looked like she was having a hard day, so I tried to cheer her up.

"Happy Friday," I said with a smile.

"I hate Fridays," she responded curtly. "It just means that Monday is that much sooner."

Morale in many schools mirrors the pessimism of this teacher. And why not? Really, what is there to be cheerful about? Students seem surlier and more difficult to teach than ever. Poverty is destroying families. Societal values have decayed to a point

where many students come to school completely unprepared to learn. Many campuses are falling apart; in my own classroom, we're not allowed to drink the water because it has been deemed unsafe by the city.

Bureaucrats, even well-meaning ones, have tried to correct things by imposing so many tests, rules, and regulations that the passion dedicated teaching professionals once felt has cooled. A teacher works hard all day, comes home, and reads an article blaming him or her for the failure of students to do well on tests or behave appropriately. I don't know the exact moment when teachers became the scapegoat for factors beyond their control, but that moment has come. And the unfair, often ridiculous expectations being placed on teachers explain why some of them can't even be happy about an upcoming weekend of family and fun, knowing that Monday looms.

Yet, most people would agree that school morale is important. People do better work when they feel good. And if the professionals on campus feel good, the students are certain to feel better as well.

What can we do about school spirit? On my own campus, two things have not only kept many of the staff above water, but also enabled them to swim strongly against the current.

*In the face of unfair criticism and unreasonable demands, educators must stick together and keep their eyes on the prize.*



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personally interviewed every student in the class and even went to several middle schools to question some of the teacher's previous students, quietly gathering evidence for the authorities that the teacher under siege had never laid a hand on any student. The investigation eventually proved that the student had made up the incidents.

It was a trying time for this teacher—as it would be for any teacher accused of wrongdoing—but despite the scars left from a necessary but absurd investigation, his principal's tireless defense of his integrity was the greatest balm to heal the wound. And although the investigation was kept quiet until it was over, when word of the principal's role got out, all the teachers felt a little better about their day. As a result of this principal's quiet professionalism, the staff is more unified, and a good teacher is still helping deserving kids each day.

School morale begins at the top, and when school leaders respect and believe in their teachers, everyone wins. Most staff members are more than willing to do some of the more unpleasant parts of their jobs because they work for a principal who rolls up his sleeves and works alongside them.

### **A Principal Who Has Our Backs**

First, we have a principal who makes a difference. I walk by his desk every day and see the blood pressure medication on it. I hear some pretty disagreeable parents screaming at him while he tries to explain why their "perfect" child is being excluded from an activity. And of course, he often sits in his office facing the most incorrigible students in the school, sent there by a teacher at the end of her rope.

Yet, despite it all, this principal consistently has his teachers' backs. He banned from campus a father whose demands were so threatening that two of the teachers were afraid of the man's presence. When a student with a history of emotional problems accused a teacher of inappropriately grabbing him, this principal did not simply step aside and allow the police and school authorities to investigate the allegation. Instead, he

## Teachers Who Believe

But a fine leader is not enough. Part of the responsibility for maintaining school morale rests on the teachers themselves.

Let's keep this real. Teaching can be a thankless job. Many parents are terrific, but others make frequent, unrealistic demands that can ruin a teacher's day. Insincere politicians pontificate about the value of our schools, but we don't have enough money to fix a leaky roof. The ever-present media are always ready to print a headline trumpeting a horror story about a teacher committing some heinous crime, but these same media outlets rarely run a story about the hundreds of thousands of educators who come in early, stay late, and dip into their own pockets to finance activities. It's an old story—people watch the car accident and don't notice the 99 percent of drivers who are following the rules and keeping the roads safe.

But good teachers know something. If they are frustrated, they understand how their students must feel when they're forced to participate in a broken system in which standardized tests have become everything. Many kids grimly come to schools where the regurgitation of facts has replaced any real scholarship or learning. Good teachers know that now, more than ever, they must do everything in their power to believe in what they are doing. Optimism is the foundation of all good teaching. Optimism in the face of daunting reality is downright heroic—and that, in fact, is what good teachers practice all day long while others denigrate their contributions to society.

We teachers are the key to staff morale. High morale depends on feeling appreciated, and because educators are rarely given their due, we need to appreciate one another.

We can choose to be defeated by the problems we face, or we can use those very problems to steel our resolve. We can become bitter and discouraged, or stronger and more dedicated. We don't have to face every Friday with depression knowing that Monday is that much closer.

## Taking a Second Look

It's Saturday night, and I'm finishing up these thoughts. Early this morning, I was at school. Every Saturday for the last 30 years, I have come in to Room 56 and worked with former students now in middle and high school. I teach them Shakespeare, literature, mathematics, SAT preparation, and life skills. When I arrived at school at 6:30 this morning, I saw a host of my fellow teachers. They're working together on a project to teach kids about good health, and today they were taking hundreds of kids to a stadium to prepare for running a marathon. There were at least a dozen smiling teachers. They were not being paid. They looked gloriously happy, and that was nothing compared to the smiles on the faces of their excited students.

Yes, it's easy to look around and say there's not much to be cheerful about. Maybe that's why good educators take a second look. It's true that the kids at this school are poor, and many come from homes with severe family problems. But this school also has a hard-working principal who has the backs of his staff. It has teachers who willingly volunteer their Saturdays, work as a team, and


improve the lives of their students.

What keeps outstanding teachers going and doing a good job? It's the same thing that got them into the profession in the first place. School morale can remain high when teachers remember that they got into this crazy system because of the students. Although many organizations or politicians claim to "put the kids first," in reality teachers are the ones who do this. They are the ones who stand up every day in front of young people, trying to inspire them and open doors that were previously closed.

Not all the teachers at this school will be able to remain positive. Not all the kids will be successful. Not all the parents will be supportive. But courageous educators find a way to stick together, and their accomplishments create school morale that is much better than most would expect. That positive spirit

feeds on itself, because a few years from now one of those marathon runners will return to thank a teacher for the extra time he was given. Those success stories trump every leaky roof or absurd new rule and regulation.

School morale remains high because heroic teachers overcome the negative forces by keeping their eyes on the prize. Such heroes can't wait for Monday. There's a lot to do, and they can't wait to give each student the best they have to offer. ■



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