

Leading the Charge

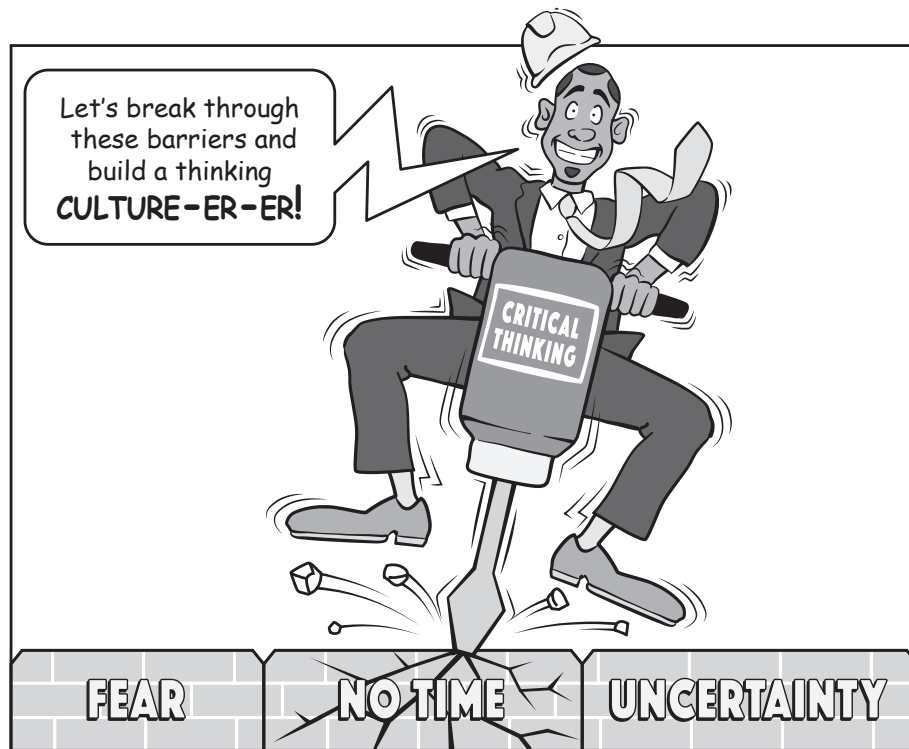
School leaders are pivotal to establishing a positive tone and cultivating a positive climate for increases in achievement. Climate impacts all stakeholders including teachers, parents, students, office staff, custodians, cafeteria workers, and all others who have an instrumental impact on the culture of the school.

An administrator who recognizes that critical thinking does connect to academic success will want to invest in an initiative to promote deeper learning among students. Paving the way to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning through a thinking initiative can result in positive outcomes.

To prepare a path toward a critical thinking initiative, the following are actions to consider. Other actions should be evaluated and added as applicable to implementation of initiatives relative to the school and change.

- Establish clear goals and garner school-wide and community-wide commitment to these goals.
- Recognize and assess the successes in instruction and student learning.
- Brainstorm ways to establish a thinking culture among all staff in order to develop a school-wide thinking environment.
- Engage staff in discussions about how they are fostering critical thinking in students and how they are incorporating critical thinking in instruction and assessment.
- Determine the extent to which critical thinking is being developed and modeled in the classroom environment and embedded into the classroom culture.
- Examine what is currently happening where thinking is being integrated into instruction. What are the successes? Do we need to replicate this in other areas? Where do we start? What is a timeline for any proposed actions? What are the expectations?
- Acknowledge any fear or discomfort that staff might have about critical thinking and provide emotional support.
- Assess how stakeholders feel about making critical thinking a shared initiative for the entire school community.
- Solicit input from teachers about the training or resources needed to reach the identified expectations.

- Create an awareness of what is meant by a school-wide thinking environment that promotes deeper learning. How will visitors know upon entering the school and any classroom that thinking is valued?
- Promote critical thinking within curriculum and instruction; focus on how it can be used in school, everyday life, and issues important to the community.
- Educate staff as to what responsibilities a thinking emphasis would entail, involving the staff in adjusting responsibilities if applicable.
- Develop and articulate a common vision, a plan, and a way to evaluate success. Stand behind the plan.
- Recognize the staff throughout the year for progress made toward individual and school-wide goals. Celebrate evidence of incremental success and determine if adjustments should be considered. Be willing to confront teams/individuals who are not meeting the collaborative goals toward continuous improvement.



A Thinking-Centered Environment

Any classroom environment can promote critical thinking when it is emotionally supportive. Creating a critical thinking environment takes a conscious effort by teachers and all other staff members. School leaders should support teachers as they deliberately create classrooms that value thinking. If you know how to build a thinking culture, then you can readily determine how to be an integral part of that thinking environment.

Actions All Teachers Should Take

- Establish a climate where students feel safe to take risks and contribute to discussions. Students need to feel safe to think in the classroom environment.
- Build a community of thinkers by modeling respect for students when they speak. This helps students learn to show respect for the ideas of peers and of others.
- Remove any barriers, actual or perceived, to allow students to feel a strong comfort level in classrooms.
- Invite students to share their thoughts freely. Students should not be afraid of making mistakes. When students feel safe, they are more likely to ask questions, offer responses, and engage in conversations.
- Model that every voice is valued. The inclusion of every individual voice gives teachers an opportunity to show that all contributions count and provides a way to check for understanding. If students know that everyone's thoughts are valued, they will more likely take risks and increase input during discussions.
- Engage students in collaborative conversations to help students ask questions, compare information, understand multiple perspectives, develop reasoning, and deepen understanding of content.
- Provide students genuine encouragement and constructive feedback to help them become motivated and eager to contribute.
- Ensure that responses or feedback demonstrate that mistakes will not be ridiculed but perceived as opportunities to rethink the issue or situation.

These actions can be taken by the school leader to cultivate a thinking culture for teachers.

In a culture of thoughtfulness, times may arise when students have their thinking challenged. This can occur when new perspectives are considered, knowledge is stretched, or evidence is weighed. If the appropriate environment for thinking is established and nurtured throughout every classroom, then any conflicts or student-posed questions that arise during discussions will not cause disruptions but can prompt learning.

While any classroom or learning space can be used to develop thinking, it is the culture that is built by the school leader, teachers, and students that makes the environment a safe and nurturing place where students can grow to become skillful thinkers. As the school leader, you must acknowledge your support and become an active participant in fostering a thinking climate for all.



Looking for Rigor in Teacher and Student Roles

A common responsibility of school leaders is the observation of teachers and students during instruction. Classroom visitations allow principals to note the degree to which *all* students are actively engaged in the learning process and what the teacher is doing to sustain that engagement. Instructional leaders who support critical thinking need to pay attention to the roles of teachers and students in a thinking-centered environment. This looks much different from what you would observe in classrooms where the teacher seems to be more actively engaged than many of the students. The most effective teachers know how to minimize the time that they direct the lesson and when to shift control of the learning to their students.

The content presented in the Hess “walkthrough” tools highlights the shifts that occur between teacher and student roles when teachers change how they ask questions, design tasks, and give students more control of their own learning. Familiarity with the behaviors that indicate when rigor is embedded in instruction helps school leaders engage in meaningful conversations with teachers and students about what they are doing *and what they are learning by doing it*.

Research-Based Behaviors That Support Deeper Thinking	
Teachers	All Students
1. Build conceptual understanding, schemas.	1. Engage in conceptual discourse (if–then, alike–different, cause–effect).
2. Probe for reasoning and allow for wait time and discussion.	2. Offer no canned answers (can support their thinking).
3. Provide tasks requiring analysis of evidence.	3. Generate deeper questions to guide their learning.
4. Strategically scaffold to advance thinking for all students.	4. Persevere when challenged; seek alternatives; self-monitor and adjust strategy.
5. Provide “processing” time for reflection, self-assessment, and to solidify the learning (every 10–15 minutes!).	5. Actively listen, probe, and respectfully challenge others with evidence/reasoning.

Source: Hess, 2013.

Shifting Student Thinking and Engagement Levels by Shifting Depth of Knowledge (DOK) Levels		
DOK Levels	Teacher Role	Student Role
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions to focus attention (Who? What? Where? How? When?) • Directs, leads, demonstrates, defines • Scaffolds for access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquires vocabulary, facts, rules, routine procedures • Memorizes, recites, quotes, restates, practices • Asks for support
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions to differentiate/classify, draw out inferences • Scaffolds for conceptual understanding (Why? What conditions? Give example/non-example) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains relationships, sorts, classifies, compares, organizes information • Makes predictions based on estimates, observations • Proposes questions to investigate and strategies
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions to probe reasoning and underlying thinking (How do you know? What is the hard evidence?) • Designs tasks for deeper thinking • Scaffolds connections to Big Ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncovers relevant, accurate, credible information or flaws in a design • Develops supporting (hard) evidence for conclusions or claims • Tests ideas, solves non-routine problems • Self-assesses; uses feedback to improve quality of work
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions to extend thinking, explore alternative sources, broaden perspectives (What are the potential biases? Can you propose an alternative model?) • Scaffolds for peer-to-peer discourse/reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiates, transfers, and constructs new knowledge • Modifies, creates, elaborates based on multiple sources • Investigates real-world, non-routine problems and issues • Self-assesses; uses feedback to improve quality of work

Source: Hess, 2013.

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