

# Principles for Principals February

For questions or comments, please contact [LouisianaLeaders@la.gov](mailto:LouisianaLeaders@la.gov).

## February's Topic: Instructional Leadership/Meeting Student Needs

Schools and leaders often use motivational slogans like “Aim for the Stars,” “Going and Growing,” “Excellence for All,” and “Future Leaders, Current Scholars” to communicate high expectations for students and staff. Slogans like these are used because leaders have intuitively understood that direct action is necessary for student success. Students do not “accidentally” achieve excellence. Yet, we also know that achieving these expectations is often easier said than done.

This month’s principal, “**Positivity is nice, intentional positivity is powerful**,” is directly connected not only to the expectations we explicitly communicate through our slogans and attempts at motivation, but also to the subtle, subconscious expectations we convey through our daily interactions.

Consider the mental images we hold: the “Student of the Year” versus the student we work extra hard to support so they do not repeat a grade. Do we address these students the same way? Do our conversations reflect equal expectations? Before answering, reflect on the data, observations, and interactions that have shaped our preconceptions about each student. These priming effects heavily influence how we treat students of varying abilities and behaviors.

A landmark 1968 study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (often called *the Pygmalion effect*) demonstrated this powerfully. Researchers gave teachers false information that certain randomly selected students were “intellectual bloomers” or “growth spurters” based on a nonexistent test. The researchers then observed



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### My 3 Three Things

1. **One thing I wish I would have done differently my first year:** delegated more and trusted my team earlier instead of trying to carry everything alone my first year.
2. **One thing I was glad I did my first year:** listened to my predecessors’ wisdom; their insights and experiences guided my decisions, helped me avoid pitfalls, and strengthened my confidence as a first-year principal.
3. **One thing every principal should know/do:** prioritize authentic relationships — connecting with students, staff, and community builds trust, drives growth, and sustains the culture needed for lasting school success.

and followed the interactions of the teachers with both groups of students and found that the “growth spurters” cohort was given more opportunities and were treated with greater potential than the other group. And ultimately, the “growth spurters” performed better than the other groups, even months later when retested.

Essentially, those slogans do communicate worthy expectations; however, how we treat and interact with students on a daily basis has a much greater impact on their outcomes. Recognizing that we are in a prime position to directly impact our students’ outcomes simply by how we choose to view them, and ultimately how we choose to interact with them, becomes a significant path to improving outcomes for students..

## **Making Positive Connections Purposefully**

Teachers and administrators engage in hundreds of small, meaningful interactions with students and colleagues each day. The cumulative impact of these moments is often underestimated. The following activities help leadership teams and staff intentionally build positive relationships.

### **Leadership Team Activity (Focus: Staff Interactions)**

1. List every teacher, staff member, and employee on separate sheets of paper.
2. Each leadership member privately places red stickers on those with whom they have had a negative interaction this year.
3. Each member places green stickers on those with whom they have had a positive interaction this year.
4. As a group, review the red stickers, prioritizing individuals with multiple negatives, and commit to initiating a positive interaction with them within the next two weeks.
5. Identify those with no interactions (no stickers) and commit to pursuing a positive interaction with at least one within two weeks.
6. Compile a shared list of those with negative or no interactions. As positive interactions occur, document them.
7. Repeat the process periodically throughout the year to sustain positive connections across all staff.

### **School-Wide Activity (Focus: Student Interactions)**

1. On large chart paper, list all students by grade level, leaving space for stickers.
2. Staff review the lists for students they typically interact with.
3. Individually place red stickers on students with whom they have had a negative interaction this year.
4. Place green stickers on those with a positive interaction this year.
5. In pre-existing cohorts (e.g., grade-level teams), analyze red-stickered students, prioritizing those with more negatives, and commit to a positive interaction within two weeks.
6. Identify students with little or no interaction and commit to a positive interaction with at least one of them within two weeks.
7. Cohorts compile lists of students with negative or no interactions and document positive interactions as they occur.
8. Separately, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) compiles a school-wide list of students with negative/no interactions, pursues positive connections, and documents them.

9. School leadership compiles its own comprehensive list of such students, pursues positive interactions with them, and documents these interactions.
10. Repeat periodically throughout the year to ensure ongoing positive interactions with every student.

By intentionally cultivating positive expectations and interactions, educators can harness the power of priming to support higher achievement and stronger relationships across the school community.

## Questions for Reflection:

Based on this month's topic.

1. When you think about the students (or staff members) you find most challenging, what specific past interactions, data points, or labels have quietly shaped your expectations of them? How might those unconscious “primes” be influencing the way you speak to, look at, or provide opportunities for them right now?
2. We post motivational slogans all over the building, but daily micro-interactions appear to carry far more weight. Which of your everyday habits or phrases (tone, eye contact, wait time, follow-up questions, etc.) do you suspect might be sending a stronger message about your expectations than any poster on the wall?
3. Most of us naturally invest more positive energy in students (or colleagues) we already enjoy working with. What internal resistance or discomfort do you feel when you think about deliberately initiating a positive interaction with someone you have had mostly negative or no interactions with? Where do you think that resistance comes from?
4. The activity highlights people who received no stickers — neither red nor green — meaning little to no meaningful personal interaction. Why do you think some individuals end up in that “invisible” category? What systems, schedules, or assumptions in our school might be unintentionally keeping certain students or adults on the margins?
5. What structural changes (schedules, meeting norms, recognition systems, professional learning, etc.) would help make intentional positivity the default way adults interact with every student and colleague rather than a special two-week project?

## Resources

Rosenthal, R., & Jacobsen, L. (1968). Pygmalion in the Classroom. *The Urban Review* 3(1) pp 16-20.

Taylor, T., & Dibner, N. (2019). *Connect the Dots: The Collective Power of Relationships, Memory, and Mindset in the Classroom*. John Catt Educational.