Table 1: The Four Types of Educators and Their Goals

Educator Classification	Organizational Goal
Believer	Academic success for each student
Tweener	Organizational stability
Survivor	Emotional and mental survival
Fundamentalist	Maintaining the status quo

In the following chapters, I will identify the distinct characteristics of each of these groups and describe how they form, behave, and interact with the school system, students, and one another to create a distinct and divided school culture.

CHAPTER 3

The Believers

We have already learned that there is a high correlation between teacher expectations and student performance. During my study of school culture, one group emerged that possessed the ability to achieve higher levels of student performance and satisfaction in the classroom as compared to their colleagues. Their actions manifested their commitment to student success. This group was composed of seasoned educators (practicing more than 3 years) who had made a decision to accept a student-centered paradigm as their primary mode of operation, regardless of outside opposition. I call this group the Believers.

I found Believers in every school I visited. Their number and level of influence varied from school to school, but their presence was definitely felt on each campus. It did not matter if the school was high or low performing; each had a set of Believers who fought in many different ways for an ideal learning environment.

A 1987 study on transformational school cultures identified 12 characteristics of powerful and positive school cultures (Butler & Dickson, 1987):

1. Collegiality
2. Experimentation
3. High expectations
4. Trust and confidence
5. Tangible support
6. Reaching out to the knowledge bases

7. Appreciation and recognition

8. Caring, celebration, and humor

9. Involvement in decision making

10. Protection of what is important

11. Honoring traditions

12. Honest, open communication

I found similar characteristics and aspirations in the Believers I studied. In their journey to establish a healthy school culture, the Believers encountered resistance. Others in the school had very different goals and worked to suppress the characteristics of positive and powerful school culture. The intensity of this clash of values became a factor in how effective Believers were within their school culture. Their intrinsic paradigm coupled with outside influences created a set of very noticeable characteristics. These characteristics included:

- High levels of intrinsic motivation

- Personal connection to the school and community

- High levels of flexibility with students

- Application of positive student pressure

- Willingness to confront opposing viewpoints

- Varied levels of pedagogical skills

The ultimate goal of Believers was success for every student academically, socially, and emotionally. They were not happy and they did not feel successful unless every child within their influence maximized his or her potential. They worked with all other willing stakeholders in multiple arenas to accomplish this goal. They had a strong presence on school improvement teams, curriculum initiatives, and voluntary committees. Change was not foreign and threatening to them; in fact, they embraced any change that they felt would improve student performance.

Intrinsic Motivation

During interviews with building principals, I asked the following question: "If you were to start an initiative that provided an extra

benefit for students but required teachers to work outside of the contractual day, which staff members could you count on to participate?" Without exception, each principal's answer correlated by at least 90% with my findings: they named the same staff members whom I had already identified as Believers. Believers demonstrated a willingness to put forth more than the required effort. They made themselves available and in many cases sought opportunities to contribute to any effort that they viewed as positively affecting students.

Believers appeared to have a consistency and drive that did not depend on the influence of leadership. In the schools I observed, although teacher perception of administrator effectiveness ranged widely from "extremely low" to "exceptional," the observable characteristics of the Believers remained the same, regardless of the quality of their leadership. Many of the schools that I studied were known publicly as low performing or failing, but these labels and public perception did not seem to deter the Believers. In fact, there was no detectable difference in performance between Believers in schools labeled high performing and those labeled low performing. These indicators reveal a high level of personal commitment to education and the goals of an egalitarian educational system on the part of the Believers.

There were also several other indicators of a high level of intrinsic motivation among the Believers. One that is very telling is also very basic: work attendance. When reviewing the attendance records of the educators I observed, I found a significant disparity in days away from work between the Believers and other groups. In fact, Believers appear to understand what many researchers are just beginning to grasp: inconsistency and frequent changes in instructors greatly impact student achievement. A study by Duke University found that in North Carolina for every 10 days of absence of a 1st- or 2nd-year teacher, a student's reading and math test scores in 4th and 5th grade declined by about one-fifth the advantage of a first or second year teacher with less than 5 days absence (Keller, 2008). The study went on to find:

> Schools with high proportions of poor children suffered more from teacher absences. For instance, the poorest 25 percent of schools averaged almost one more sick day per teacher than the richest 25 percent. And schools with persistently high rates of

teacher sick and personal days were more likely to serve low-income than high-income students."(p. 11)

Believer attendance was solid in every school examined in this study, and external variables like location, ethnicity of students, socio-economic profile of the community, and personal profile of the Believer did not serve as a deterrent to solid work attendance.

Other indicators of intrinsic commitment and motivation included attendance at voluntary professional development opportunities, membership in professional organizations, and a willingness to purchase classroom materials with personal funds.

Connection to the School and Community

Another area of distinction for Believers was their life pattern. Demographic data on the participants revealed a clear pattern of home ownership within reasonable proximity to the school. Only 10% of the Believers in this study rented their residence or had an unstable housing situation. The home ownership variable reveals that the Believers made a conscious decision to build their lives in close proximity to their work environment, which indicates that they plan to continue their employment and participation at their school for some time to come.

Many of the Believers I interviewed indicated that they met their spouse in the community in which they live and work and that their children either attended the district of their employment or a neighboring district. Their religious and civic alliances were also built in close proximity to their home and work environments, further solidifying their ties to the school community.

This commitment to their profession and individual schools brought Believers a sense of stability and appeared to shape their relationships with students in a positive way; they shared a community with them. During classroom observations, students would regularly talk about seeing their teacher at the grocery store or at church. This sense of familiarity seemed to produce a positive bond between students and educators.

Flexibility

Of all the characteristics of Believers, none was more striking than the high level of flexibility they demonstrated. While other educators were very strict with school rules, grading procedures, seating arrangements, and other similar issues, Believers sought to individualize their responses to students instead of adopting a rigid approach to student relations. It was clear that the main goal of the Believers—student success—motivated their desire to be flexible. In one seventh-grade science classroom I observed, students lined up at the teacher's desk to turn in a science project. The class had been working on the project for over 6 weeks, and their grades on the project would constitute more than 50% of their final grades for the marking period. As students lined up, one young lady still sat with her arms folded on her desk and her head resting on her arms. When she finally lifted her head, it was apparent she had been crying. After all the projects had been turned in, the teacher, a Believer, noticed the student's posture, tapped her, and asked the student to follow her into the hall so that they could talk. When they returned, the expression on the student's face and her entire disposition had changed dramatically. She was smiling, and the anxiety she displayed earlier seemed to have dissipated.

After the students were released from class, I approached the teacher to inquire about her actions in the hall and the source of the student's anxiety. The teacher explained that this student was very conscientious and had never missed a deadline for turning in an assignment. She went on to explain that the student's parents were going through a painful divorce, and the combativeness of her parents sometimes caused her to be displaced with relatives. The previous evening, the teacher explained, the student's father was intoxicated and tried to force his way into their home. Her mother called the police, and her father was arrested. Consequently, the student spent the evening at her aunt's home. Her science project was at her dad's apartment, and the student did not know if she could return to get it any time soon. The teacher extended the deadline for the student, and she informed her that she would share the details of her situation with the principal so they could contact the father to see if he would be willing to drop the project off at school. The teacher followed through with his promise,

and before the day was over, the girl's grandfather delivered her project to the school.

In this situation, the teacher chose to talk to the student before drawing a conclusion about her anxiety and penalizing her for the lateness of the very important assignment. When I asked the teacher about her flexible and personalized approach to the situation, she replied, "I want these kids to learn and love science. I do not care about rules or deadlines. I want to spark something special in my students, and if bending a little does the trick, that is a small price to pay."

Believers also showed flexibility in their classroom management and in their interpretation of the student code of conduct. When reviewing school discipline data, Believers wrote formal discipline referrals to the office at nearly 30% the rate of Fundamentalists. Was it that the Believers did not encounter student discipline issues? The answer is no; they, too, encountered difficult students. What differed were the methods they used to manage discipline incidents. These methods were rooted in intentions that differed significantly from those of other groups in the school.

Believers generally had high expectations for student conduct, but they chose to use nonpunitive measures more often than punitive measures. When behavior issues arose, they relied heavily on student loyalty, which they gained through positive personal relationships. Students seemed to lament the fact that they disappointed an advocate instead of rejoicing over whatever personal pleasure that gained through the conduct violation.

Believers used observable classroom management techniques at a much higher rate than other groups within the school. Many of these techniques were informal and private. A significant number of Believers had a "look" that communicated seriousness to a student who was violating a rule. This had an immediate impact on the student that other teachers, even after writing disciplinary referrals and threatening punishment, could not achieve. The authors of *Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want* found that the children they studied in urban Philadelphia schools really admired and respected teachers who "stayed on them" and "made them be successful" (Wilson &

Corbett, 2001). Students in these schools had a very low level of respect for teachers who wrote a lot of referrals; they considered them to be "weak" and "scared" (p. 71). Students in the Believers' classrooms displayed a high level of respect for their teachers. They knew these teachers believed strongly in students' ability to not only achieve academically, but also behaviorally. And they knew their teachers understood that they would make mistakes at times. There was an understanding that most issues would be resolved in the classroom, and the main office was reserved for serious issues or severe problems.

Positive Pressure

Believers do not want to see any student fail. This desire produces a very observable characteristic called positive pressure. Positive pressure is a collection of unrelenting responses to student underperformance and apathy. The teacher simply does not allow the student to fail. In the classrooms of Believers I observed, it was apparent that to students, failure was not a possibility. Even students who were not performing well in other classes met at least minimum learning standards in Believers' classrooms.

Strategies for positive pressure took many forms, including calling parents, moving a student's seat closer to the teacher, detaining students from lunch or recess socialization, providing positive incentives, and requiring after-school tutoring, to name a few. If one strategy did not produce the breakthrough that the Believer expected, he or she tried a new one and repeated this process until the student met the classroom academic and behavioral expectations. Some Believers used a stoic and very strict approach in their pressure, and others took a motivational approach similar to a football coach firing the team up before the biggest game of the season. Their methods varied, but the end result consistently indicated that the student understood that failure was not an option in the classroom and that resistance only brought on a new wave of pressure.

It was very apparent that Believers felt every student was capable of learning the assigned curriculum. Believers did not have different performance expectations for each student. The evidence is very clear

that varying student expectations based upon unscientific observation has a real effect on student performance:

> In his 1983 review of the teacher expectations research, Jerry Brophy estimated that five to ten percent of the variance in student performance is attributable to differential treatment accorded them based on their teachers' differential expectations of them. Various other researchers have accepted and quoted this estimate. Five to ten percent is hardly the epidemic of mistreatment and negative outcomes perceived by some educators and members of the general public, but it is significant enough, particularly when compounded through year after year of schooling, to warrant concern. (Cotton, 1989, p. 11)

This unwavering expectation of universal student achievement was the driving force behind all of the positive pressure.

In a ninth-grade science class, a young man entered the classroom, put his head on the desk, and withdrew from class participation before the class had even officially begun. His teacher approached him and whispered in his ear. I guessed that he was giving the student gentle verbal encouragement to participate with the class. The student did not respond. About 2 minutes later, the teacher approached the student again and told the whole class how much he really wanted the disinterested student to come to the front and help him demonstrate an experiment. This attempt caused the student to lift his head for a moment and make eye contact with the teacher, but he still did not speak or move to participate. On the third attempt, the teacher stated to the class that the disinterested student was a scientific whiz kid and his great performance during last week's football game proved how well he solved problems, and that he was best qualified to demonstrate this experiment. The teacher expressed to the class that "the best" was the only acceptable option in his class and that the class would not continue until the disinterested student assisted with the demonstration. This caused many of the more involved and interested students to verbally coerce the student into participating. As he approached the teacher, the student mumbled his displeasure, but the peer pressure

had cracked his aloof disposition, and he complied with the teacher's command to participate for the rest of the class period.

After the class ended, I asked the teacher how often he used similar techniques with this student. He told me about once per week, but during the first 3 weeks of school he had to use them daily. The student was currently earning a C in his class, and he had never before passed a science class since entering secondary school. The teacher further explained that failure is not allowed in his class and that rule is nonnegotiable. He expressed that he would use every available means to enforce this rule.

Willingness to Confront

Many of the attributes of Believers—such as high expectations for student behavior and achievement, effective connection with students, patience, and flexibility—reflect best practice as supported by the research on improving student performance. It would seem, then, that Believers would aggressively recruit others to these ideas; however, this was not the case in the classrooms I studied. In fact, Believers tended to speak out and challenge others only when something overtly intolerant was exhibited. Believers, as a whole, appeared to be passive and permissive of others where issues of inequity, low student expectations, and roadblocks to school reform were concerned, except in extreme cases.

In one staff meeting I observed in a rural middle school, the principal delivered a presentation on the latest student test results from their state's standardized test. The news was not good. Not only did student performance not improve, it actually got worse. As the meeting went on, it was apparent that all were displeased they had missed their federal achievement goal of adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the third straight year. One of the staff members raised his hand as the principal finished explaining all of the details of the assessment results and said, "We never had this problem before they built that trailer park around the corner." Immediately, two Believers scolded him for his comments. I only observed Believers speaking out or challenging viewpoints in similar extreme circumstances. When their peers exhibited similar beliefs through much more subtle means, such as in casual comments about student potential, general complaints about school or district

function, or consistent pessimism about the school-improvement process, Believers were silent. They appeared to be content to work with their students and control their own spheres of influence instead of actively engaging their colleagues in philosophical debates about what they felt was best for students.

If schools are going to effectively create positive and productive cultures, the Believers simply have to become more active and aware of the day-to-day assaults on the very belief system to which they adhere. They have strong cases for their stance: research and ethics support their goal of success for every student. If Believers would simply engage in intellectual discourse on a regular and consistent basis, they might discover that they could change school culture for the better beyond their own spheres.

Pedagogical Skill

The Believers' paradigm was very consistent: all students must be successful. But there were huge variances in the level of teaching skill Believers exhibited. In many cases, I observed Believers who not only held to the principle that all students can learn, but they employed teaching methodologies that best promoted the achievement of that goal. In these classrooms, I observed many instances of effective use of instructional technology, cooperative learning activities, differentiation for student learning style, and ongoing formative assessment with immediate feedback for students. These methods, coupled with the teacher's belief systems, made Believers' classrooms havens for student performance.

Unfortunately, in many other classrooms, I observed similar paradigms with pedagogy that perpetuated gaps in student achievement. Simply put, many Believers wanted all of their children to learn at high levels, but they did not know how to make that desire a reality. In many cases, I observed all of the character attributes of a Believer coupled with methods like silent reading, hour-long lectures, photocopied worksheets, and low-level question-and-answer sessions. It was apparent that the teachers who used these methods were affected by their students' lack of growth, but they were clueless to the fact that their methodology was the key variable in that lack of growth.

In order to close the achievement gap, we need to do more than just believe in our students; we need to properly instruct and guide them. Our field has a wealth of available research on the most effective teaching methods for each student enrolled in our public school system. Educators who adopt egalitarian idealism as the center of their educational paradigm must cultivate professionalism as well. In order to achieve an end, a person must have conviction, but that conviction must be buttressed with skill.

A Unifying Force

Believers display the qualities and value the paradigms that unite staff members and make a positive school culture. Their core beliefs are in alignment with the stated mission of schools: success for every student. They have high expectations for student achievement, and they are willing to embrace strategies that improve their performance. They have made a commitment, not only to the field, but also to the communities that they serve. If schools are to transform their cultures into fertile ground for positive experimentation and student nurturing, they must increase their population of Believers, and their Believers must become more vocal members of the school community.