

Core Values in the School Setting

Core values are the central beliefs of a person or organization. These serve as guiding principles for behavior that apply in a variety of settings and situations. In the business world, core values help companies establish and align their vision across employees and customers. In schools core values can help create common understanding and agreement about how individuals will interact and communicate with one another.

On every campus, students and staff members bring their own unique perception of social, emotional, and behavioral skills. These perceptions are influenced by age, culture, religion, geographic region, and previous experience. As a result, schools must clearly define and share their core values rather than assuming these beliefs are understood. A campus core values become the foundation upon which all other social, emotional, and behavioral expectations are anchored.

Arguably, all schools implement some form of behavior expectations and rules. These expectations are usually designed for specific settings (such as the cafeteria or hallway), or for situations (requesting to use the restroom). Sometimes rules are agreed upon by all staff and other times each teacher determines their own. When schools adopt common core values, they provide alignment and consistency to anchor all other behavior rules and expectations.

What is the difference between a core value and a rule? The table below outlines some of the distinguishing features:

Values	Rules
Broad	Detailed
Provide context	Build efficiency
Apply for a lifetime	Apply in a specific setting
Long term	Short term
Abstract	Concrete
All-encompassing	Procedural
“Be respectful to others”	“Raise your hand to share your idea”

Core values and behavior expectations/rules both play an essential part in building a successful learning environment. One of the initial tasks for the Ground Work team is to identify common core values and determine the specific expectations that will be modeled, taught, prompted, acknowledged, and corrected related to each of those values.

Determining Core Values

The Skill-Building section of the Ground Work framework starts with establishing the campus core values. Schools sometimes develop core values based on their mascot, motto, or a long-standing school tradition. For example, a school with an eagle mascot wants to identify core values that match the acronym of “SOAR”. Subsequently, they begin to choose values limited to those letters and come up with values such as “Successful, Organized, Achieve and Responsible”. There are a few problems with this process:

1. The campus determined what would be taught and reinforced about student behavior based on a predetermined acronym, rather than what they want their students to learn (the process is backwards).
2. The campus chose overlapping concepts. The O, organized, and the R, responsible, are very similar terms. As behavior expectations are further developed, it becomes difficult to delineate behaviors that are organized versus those that are responsible. It would be much simpler if they chose just one of the terms.
3. Not all the terms they chose are actionable. For instance, “success” is the result of other actions/values rather than an action itself.

So, while the idea of core values may be simple, the selection of these values sets the foundation for the rest of the campus behavior system. There are a few criteria to consider when establishing core values:

Criteria	Description
Lifelong application	Values will apply in post-secondary life.
Universal implementation	Values apply in all school environments not just one setting.
Relevancy to all	Values are for the entire school community, not just students.
Actionable	Values are put into action, not just experienced as a result.
Mutually exclusive	Values are distinctly defined and different from one another.
Addressed if violated	When the value is not displayed, the behavior will be corrected.
Concise	Values are consolidated to 3-5 terms for alignment & consistency.

For the purposes of the Ground Work framework, it is recommended for campuses to anchor to the core values of: **Safe, Respectful, Responsible**. These 3 terms are not only familiar to most staff and students, but they also meet the criteria above.

Recommended Core Values: Safe, Respectful, Responsible

Be Safe

- Behaviors related to safe connect to physical actions, including how individuals use their body to interact with things, people, and space around them.
- Examples of safe behaviors include: walking inside buildings, keeping hands to self, staying in a designated location.
- Non-examples of safe behaviors include: hitting/kicking others, leaving the classroom or building without permission.

Be Respectful

- Behaviors related to respect connect to communication, including ways in which individuals speak or non-verbally interact with others in the school setting.
- Examples of respectful behavior include: waiting turns to talk in a group, listening to others.
- Non-examples of respectful behaviors include: teasing/ name-calling, verbal threats, interrupting.

Be Responsible

- Behaviors related to responsible connect to items or work tasks, including use and care of classroom supplies, assignments and classroom tasks, school & student property.
- Examples of responsible behaviors include: engaging in assignments when directed, returning supplies after use.
- Non-examples of responsible behaviors include: Refusing to engage in an assigned task, vandalism, misuse of supplies.