

The Gray School

There is a school in Anytown, USA, that is gray as gray can be. In fact, for reasons no one can now recall, it is even called the Gray School.

Each day, the teachers walk the long colorless hallways, enter their classrooms, and shut their doors behind them. They open their textbooks and teach, and test, and grade student's work. Some of the students do very well, and some of them do not. That's just the way it is. And the teachers wait . . . for the end of the school day, for the next snow day, for the next holiday break, for summer vacation.

In the office, the principal and staff record long rows of numbers—attendance figures, budgets, test scores—and file them away in big gray cabinets. Sometimes the vice principal walks the hallways while the students are in class and comes back to report new graffiti in the bathrooms or litter in the schoolyard. The principal tells the secretary to put an announcement in the teachers' mailboxes to remind students that graffiti and litter will not be tolerated. Then the principal and his staff wait in their offices . . . for the end of the school day, for the next snow day, for the next holiday break, for summer vacation.

Each morning, and between classes, the students hang around the schoolyard and the cafeteria and hallways until the very last minute. Then they go into their classrooms and wait for their teachers to tell them to open their textbooks. And the teacher teaches, gives them tests, and grades their work. Some of the students do well, and some of them do not. That's just the way it is. And the students wait . . . for lunchtime, for recess, for bus time, for summertime.

The parents and community think the school is okay. After all, it has been this way since they were in school, and some of them did very well, although some of them did not. That's just the way it is, and there's not much anyone can do to change things. So the parents wait . . . for Mondays, for the opening of school, for graduation.

Now, each year, the newspaper reports scores for student achievement for all the schools in the region. One of the students from the Gray School saw that the school was very low on the list and asked his teacher why. "Well," the teacher said, "some students do well in this school and some do not. That's just the way it is."

"But why?" the student asked. "Why is that the way it is?"

The teacher thought a minute. *Is it because some students just don't have the ability to do well? Is it because they don't have support at home? Is it because the students don't think*

learning is important? Or is it because the teachers are not teaching them very well? Any of these responses to the student's question simply led to another question . . . Why?

So the teacher said to the student, "I don't know why, but I will try to find out." The teacher didn't know where to start, but she finally worked up the nerve to ask the principal, who replied, "Let me get back to you."

But the principal never got back to the teacher, and the teacher never got back to the student, and soon all traces of the question disappeared from the long, colorless hallways of the Gray School in Anytown, USA.

Questions for Reflection

In your opinion, what are the elements of the Gray School's culture that are the most destructive to student achievement?

Directions: In your table groups, select a facilitator (who will keep you on task and make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak) and a recorder (who will write down your group's ideas).

First, share your individual responses to question 1 above.

Then, assume you are members of the Gray School's leadership team. What three or four features of this school would you select as targets for change? Why are these important? (Be ready to share your choices—and your rationale—with the large group.)