

## The Principal of Happiness

By Greg A. Ray, Andrew Greatrex, Greg Kaiser and Matt Della Porta, PhD  
from the International Thought Leader Network

**How one principal is rewriting the formula for success by capitalizing on a happy, healthy and engaging environment for educators and students.**

“Our most commonly held formula for success is broken,” according to Harvard researcher, positive psychology expert and *New York Times* best-selling author Shawn Achor.

Conventional wisdom holds if we work harder we will be more successful, and if we are more successful, then we’ll be happy. If we can just improve our test scores, secure that raise or lose those 10 pounds, then happiness will follow.

But numerous discoveries in the field of positive psychology and neuroscience have shown this formula is actually backward. Happiness fuels success, not the other way around. Studies show when we are positive, our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient, and productive. As Shawn Achor explores in *The Happiness Advantage*, happiness is one of the greatest competitive advantages you can give the human brain at any age. In addition to increasing our potential for success, it buffers against stress and depression.

When Connie Crigger, Principal at Shirley Mann Elementary School in Boone County, Kentucky wanted to enhance her school’s culture by incorporating more positivity into the educational experience—a growing trend connected to social/emotional learning and a focus on the overall well-being of students beyond performance measures—she faced the challenges of how to do it, how to

sustain it and how to communicate it effectively to impact not only her school, but also parents, the district and the entire community.

Mann Elementary is already a National Blue Ribbon School. “I am very proud of that,” she says. “But to me, that is really just a title. It’s really about what goes on in my building every day.” Crigger also works in a high performing academic district. Last April, Boone County was recommended to earn the distinction of accreditation by AdvanceED. Nonetheless, Superintendent Dr. Randy Poe is quick to point out that his attention lies beyond the numbers. “We don’t focus on test or performance scores, we focus on the health, well-being, and the engagement of students. Their grit, too—that’s all a greater determination of success than ACT scores and other such things,” he stresses.

According to Crigger, focusing on a more holistic approach to education, her faculty and staff didn’t want just another program. “Student success is really all about building character, culture, and climate,” she says. “We didn’t want another quick fix program or one more thing that we had to do.”

### **The Happiness Advantage and The Orange Frog**

Crigger read *The Happiness Advantage* and watched Achor’s TED Talk, one of the most popular of all time

with more than 15 million views, and decided to do her own research. While she was impressed Achor was the winner of more than a dozen distinguished teaching awards at Harvard University, where he lectured on positive psychology in the university’s most popular class, she was equally impressed his parents were both educators and before attending Harvard on an ROTC scholarship, he was a volunteer firefighter in his hometown of Waco, Texas. “I could relate to Shawn’s message beyond all the research and studies,” she says.

Crigger didn’t necessarily want to lead her school to just work harder. Instead, she wanted everyone to reap the benefits of the happiness advantage. “Ultimately, it came down to one reality Shawn stated in his book. Happiness is a choice! I wanted my school, and beyond, to have this mindset and understanding that there are habits and new behaviors we can learn to adopt that greatly influence our overall levels of performance, potential and engagement on a daily basis. I wanted everyone from staff to teachers to students to have this choice. I attended a program called The Orange Frog Workshop. It was based on a story about a frog named Spark that illustrates the journey to creating a happier, more productive and more satisfying life, learning environment and workplace.”

In the book, Spark is caught between two worlds. He was

exactly like every other frog in his pond with one notable exception. Spark emerges from a tadpole with a slight but noticeable orange spot. And this orange spot makes Spark feel uncomfortably different. What's more, Spark begins to make a disconcerting observation; when he does things that make him feel better (and produce more positive results) the orange spots increase. Spark is left with a difficult decision; be normal, which makes him less conspicuous or continue doing those things that make him happier, more productive and... more orange.

By the end of the story, readers see and feel pressures they recognize in their day-to-day life as students and educators. They also witness the most remarkable transformation that takes place when Spark finally chooses to adopt an orange way of life. Not only does his own personal satisfaction and productivity increase, these same results slowly start to ripple out to the other frogs in the pond.

The Orange Frog training workshop, developed by Achor and his partners at International Thought Leader Network (ITLN), was being used by hundreds of organizations around the world, providing a sustainable approach to increasing engagement and enhancing productivity at the individual, group and organizational levels. Based on her experience in Washington, DC, Principal Crigger and Superintendent Poe decided that *The Happiness Advantage/Orange Frog Workshop* provided the solution to embedding happiness into daily life in her school that she was searching for. With Crigger as an instructor, she and Poe decided all faculty and staff would go through the workshop and, as the

story goes, Mann Elementary has never been the same.

### **Embedding Happiness**

While the workshop experience proved instrumental in mobilizing people, Crigger still had to determine what a positive culture really looked like to her and how it was sustained among faculty and staff in a school environment... and eventually how students caught on, learning these new habits and behaviors, participating in grade appropriate ways and spreading happiness into their daily lives.

As she had made happiness a choice, she recounts a fundamental insight, "It's critical when you start working and implementing Orange Frog in your building that you do this as part of your DNA, as part of your culture, part of everything you do," she believes.

**Highlighted below are core aspects of the practices and work routines Crigger has employed at Mann to create and sustain a culture primed for positive; her "how and why" for rewriting the formula for greater success.**

#### **Creating a common language.**

"*The Orange Frog*" provided a common language for us and we fully embraced it," says Crigger. "We have people saying, 'stay orange' to each other all the time, and the meaning and context is clear. Even at home, a number of parents tell us students respond to difficult situations with the question, 'What would Spark do?' A common language has really helped us have something to fall back on. We are a pretty big district and it's very broad and diverse, but now there is this one culture, this one concept, this one idea that brings us together."

Notably, it was Principal Crigger who first gave Superintendent Poe

*The Happiness Advantage*, and since then she has gone on to be a leader in Boone County by shaping a culture of happiness throughout the district. She and fellow Principal Mike Wilson have trained more than 600 employees, ranging from other principals to bus drivers and cafeteria staff.

#### **Identifying existing staff work routines to embed new behaviors.**

To proactively affect her school's cultural DNA, Crigger identified existing staff work routines and embedded principles she learned from *The Orange Frog* into these routines. For example, during an onboarding meeting for recently hired staff, Crigger used a dramatic approach to show these new employees what the culture of Mann Elementary was all about.

She instructed each new staff member to bring two things to their first meeting: one that was meaningful and positive, and one that was "baggage" that had a negative association for the individual. "So, we each brought these two items in and first we shared some very positive things about ourselves," she recalls. "For me, it was the antique pitcher that my grandma used to make iced tea in, which is something that I cherish."

"But, before anyone shared anything about the negative thing they had brought, I asked them to throw it away. I said, 'I want you to put it in this trash bag.' They asked me, 'seriously?' and I said, 'Yes, throw it away.' Then, we literally took a trash bag full of our negative items and threw it in the dumpster and said that we do not want or need that negative baggage around here." By taking the existing routine of onboarding a new hire and embedding a dramatic, positive practice into the process, new staff instantly understood the

unique, happiness-driven culture of Mann Elementary.

### **Incorporating positive habits.**

Principal Crigger drew from

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core principles of *The Happiness Advantage/Orange Frog Workshop* to incorporate happiness-boosting activities, including the practices of acts of kindness and gratitude. After the workshop, participants were challenged to select one of these positive habits and practice it for 21 consecutive days.

To carry the practice of positive habits beyond 21 days and to include people who had not yet participated in the workshop, Principal Crigger targeted regularly scheduled faculty meetings to embed these new habits.

She announced each meeting would start with “Compliments and Concerns.” Her intent was to give faculty the opportunity to discuss both the negative and the positive that was happening at the school. Although progress was slow at first, with faculty raising concerns such as whether the copy machine would work on a given day, meetings eventually became opportunities for faculty to perform acts of kindness by expressing appreciation and positive recognition toward one another. In this manner, Principal Crigger used acts of kindness to transform meetings from mundane to inspirational, which further sustained her positive building culture.

“Unlike specific programs and theories in psychology, this

work is practical and easy to incorporate into the collaborative and individual components of our day. It frequently draws on social interactions and relies on controllable behaviors,” she says.

### **Spreading gratitude.**

Crigger quickly discovered the transformative power of

gratitude—another Orange Frog positivity habit. To include others in their gratitude practice, she and four other principals purchased 500 gratitude journals and gave one to every employee, including cafeteria workers and custodians. “This has been awesome to watch because then our students heard about the adults practicing gratitude and wanted to join in too,” she observed.

She learned that for her school culture to be sustainable, it needed to be more than words on a wall—it had to be ingrained in how life was lived in her building. “Gratitude is a critical part of culture,” she states. “It changes your psyche. Once you start focusing on the things that you are grateful for, you don’t focus on the negative stuff you might have been thinking about normally.” Achor calls it The Tetris Effect. As Principal Crigger explains, the brain learns to recognize patterns that are repeated over and over; in the case of gratitude, we can purposely teach our brains to search for the positive throughout our day and pay less attention to the negative.

### **Involving students.**

Principal Crigger stresses that affecting students with culture change requires a step-by-step plan. With gratitude for example, students eventually took notice of

these practices and began to learn gratitude and kindness as well. “For elementary kids, you have to start with the basics,” she affirms. “Some of our students have difficult lives, and when they come to school they can choose to focus on the negativity in their lives, or they can learn to be grateful for what they have that day.”

She also found *The Orange Frog* has given her a fresh take on an old adage which has been effective for younger students. “You can say to kids, ‘if you don’t have anything nice to say, then don’t say anything at all,’” she explains. “But what I say now is, ‘Oh my goodness, would Spark say something like that? Would Spark be sad to know what you said?’”

### **Embedding existing programs with positivity.**

Given *The Orange Frog* is culture-centered, it can be used to bring new life to existing programs—another effective tactic for sustaining a positive culture shift.

Principal Crigger described Boone County’s participation in a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, which supports students’ academic and social success by setting clear behavioral expectations for school conduct. “We decided to add *The Orange Frog* as part of our PBIS program,” she recalls. “So, our students earn paper cut-out frogs that go on the wall in the hallway, and each one has a student’s name on it. Between this and other initiatives we’ve done, we now have over 4,000 frogs on the walls of our school!”

When a student receives enough paper frogs, she gets to trade in those small frogs for a large stuffed orange frog and we say that she has made it to Pond 4, which is in the parable, and is also represented by a large makeshift pond in the middle of our building. Students earn frogs

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by doing something exceptional—great hallway procedures or maybe just being really kind to each other. When a class earns 20 frogs, the PBIS team gives them a list of choices as a prize to claim. These include getting to leave the building first at the

end of the day, having lunch in the classroom with your teacher, having a pajama day; there are all kinds of options. So, we have been able to incorporate the concepts of *The Orange Frog* directly into our PBIS program.

We have all kinds of different programs that have just become a part of who we are—the programs were already there, but *The Orange Frog* just added to them,” she says.

### Engaging and Communicating with Parents.

One of Principal Crigger's most appreciated efforts is her *This Week at Mann* parent newsletter. Each week, Principal Crigger begins the newsletter with a section called “Orange Thoughts,” which explains what has been happening lately at Mann. She follows this up with “Spark's Spotlight,” which might feature an exceptionally orange student, a school resource officer going out of his way to be a true spark, or a class project that resulted in a poster listing 100 acts of kindness for kids. By regularly reaching out to parents with positive inspiration, Principal Crigger ensures her school culture spreads well beyond the walls of her building.

“We also created postcards with our teachers in the first two weeks of school, to send out a little gratitude to the parents and

thank them, with teachers telling the parents how grateful they were to have their child in their classrooms,” she says. Spreading

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happiness beyond the walls of her school building was Principal Crigger's way of capitalizing on what Achor calls The Ripple Effect—the contagious nature of happiness that so often allows positivity to spread from person to person and place to place.

Crigger consistently looks for opportunities to provide parents with a real understanding of the impact of principles of positive psychology have on their child's social and emotional health.

### Connecting purpose and culture.

“The purpose here at Mann Elementary has always been to be more positive. Mindset matters,” Crigger asserts. “What *The Orange Frog* did was provide the steps and skills to connect with this purpose and create the direction for us to get there together. It has helped our kids to understand that there is a higher purpose to their school and learning.”

Principal Crigger speaks glowingly about her school, often recognizing her staff, faculty, and students as a whole. However, when asked to tell a story about a student who earned his paper Orange Frog in the PBIS program, tears filled her eyes. “A little first-grader last year really had some challenges behavior-wise; we had meetings with his parents and so forth,” she remembers. “We were really concerned about how this was

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going to go for him. How was he going to make it in the public school system? Last week, he earned his Orange Frog and made it to Pond 4. And he can tell you why: he has been kind and made good choices. It's night and day."

For Crigger, rewriting the formula for success by capitalizing on a happy, healthy, and engaging environment for educators and students connects with her highest purpose. "Learning what behaviors influence our ability to scan the world for positive and create higher levels of happiness in our lives is important," she concludes.

### We Are Grateful

While our team at ITLN paid a recent visit to Mann Elementary, a stand-out example of students participating in their school's positive culture occurred. To our surprise, the students in Ms. Pat Morgan's class had prepared a special play adaptation of *The Orange Frog* to perform for us.

After the play concluded, Ms. Morgan explained the impact of *The Orange Frog* on her students. "As we put this play together, I noticed a difference in the way my students were interacting with each other," she said. "Some of the kids who ordinarily don't get along worked really well together to help prepare this play. There was something about the message of Spark's journey that seems to have really changed them."

It changed us, too!

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Learn more about The Happiness Advantage in education during the September 6 Lunch & Learn, "Creating Contagious Cultures." In partnership with ITLN, TEPSA will host The Happiness Advantage | Orange Frog Workshop and Train-the-Trainer November 7-9 in Arlington ISD. For more information visit [www.OrangeFrogSchools.com](http://www.OrangeFrogSchools.com) or [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org).