

BARUTI K.  
**KAFELE**

***CLOSING THE***  
**ATTITUDE GAP**

How to **Fire Up** Your Students to Strive for Success

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**ASCD**

Alexandria, Virginia USA



1703 N. Beauregard St. • Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA  
Phone: 800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600 • Fax: 703-575-5400  
Website: [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org) • E-mail: [member@ascd.org](mailto:member@ascd.org)  
Author guidelines: [www.ascd.org/write](http://www.ascd.org/write)

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*This book is dedicated to all of the students and staff  
I have had the privilege of working with throughout  
my 24 years as a classroom teacher, building  
principal, and educational consultant.*

*As the African proverb states: I am,  
because we are—and because we are, I am.*



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# *CLOSING THE* **ATTITUDE GAP**

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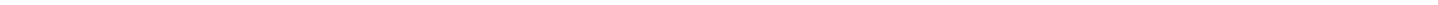
## How to Fire Up Your Students to Strive for Success

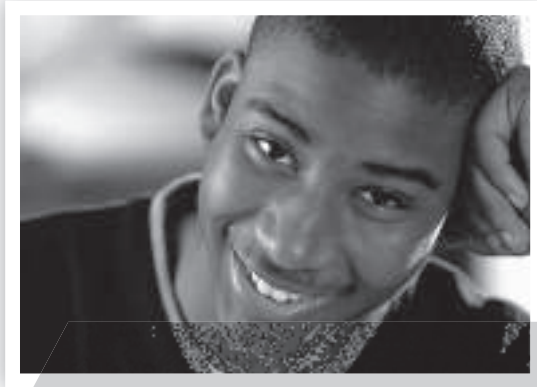
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# INTRODUCTION



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In August of 2009, ASCD published my book, *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*. From the moment that book hit the market, my life changed dramatically. Prior to writing it, I was the principal of Newark Tech High School in Newark, New Jersey. As I say to everyone, I was born for this work; throughout my 14 years as an urban public school principal, it was my heartfelt conviction that I was living my *passion*. I absolutely loved waking up in the morning and going to Newark Tech to motivate, educate, and empower—to lead. In fact, I loved what I did so much that I stopped referring to myself as Baruti K. Kafele and began to refer to myself as “Principal Kafele,” even when I was away from the school. I felt that in order for me to maximize my own potential as an educator and a principal, I had to be Principal Kafele 24/7. (It caught on: Now everyone calls me Principal Kafele.)

The student population at Newark Tech was about 70 percent black and 30 percent Latino. About 85 percent of students received free or reduced-priced lunch. The school had never met the benchmark for adequate yearly progress prior to my arrival. Partly as a result of my keen focus on transforming stu-

dent attitudes, test scores began to soar after I arrived to such an extent that the school soon received national recognition.

As these great accomplishments were happening at Newark Tech, *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life* was gaining momentum. My phone started ringing ceaselessly and the emails streamed in steadily. School and district administrators from all over the United States and abroad were calling on me to conduct workshops at their schools. They identified a desperate need for solutions toward motivating their black male students.

Over two solid years, demand continued to grow. I was torn as to what to do: stay at Newark Tech and live my passion as the building principal, or leave the school to meet this national and international demand? After wrestling with this decision for two years, I finally decided to meet the demand. What a difficult decision it was to leave the school that I had poured my heart and soul into for six years. Despite my passion for the work, I was an emotional wreck for the entire first year after I left Newark Tech. And yet, here I was, on July 1, 2011, starting on a new mission with the sole purpose of providing educators with strategies to motivate their black male learners.

Before moving forward, let me address my usage of the word *mission*. Never do I refer to what I do and what we as educators do as a job, profession, or career—not during these desperate times. I couldn't work at an optimal level if I did so. Instead, I refer to my work as a mission. When I think of a mission, I think of work that not only *must* be done, but *will* be done. I

have to keep going and going and going until all students are successful, because their success as students is tied to my success as an educator. (You'll find more of my thoughts on education as a mission in Chapter 2.)

As I got out into the field as a full-time consultant, I met educators in city after city and town after town who were desperately seeking answers. No matter what part of the country I traveled, I met educators who were eager to learn more on meeting the needs of their black male learners.

At the core of my workshops on motivating black males is the idea of an *attitude gap*. I believe strongly that unless we focus on the attitudes of black males first and foremost, we are only spinning our wheels; the best math, reading, and writing strategies that money could buy aren't going to raise black male students' achievement alone. Far too many of us focus on closing the achievement gap without realizing that closing the attitude gap needs doing first. I am convinced that black males must have an "attitude of excellence" before actually experiencing excellence.

As I spread this message of attitude transformation across the country, it occurred to me that I should write a book on the importance of closing the attitude gap. A year after leaving Newark Tech, I checked into a New Jersey hotel with the intent of writing the foundation for this book without interruption. Because the concept of the attitude gap is not applicable only to black males, I decided to broaden the scope of this new book to address at-risk children of all racial and ethnic groups.

I took a week off my speaking engagements to start the project. My plan was to spend five days at the hotel and to write at least 5,000 words per day, so that by the time Friday evening arrived, I would have a solid foundation of 25,000 words to which I could then add over the next several weeks and months. Every day throughout the week, I focused my writing on the educators of at-risk urban children. At the end of each day, I would reluctantly surf the Internet for national news stories, just to stay in the know. I say “reluctantly” because I knew that the news would distract me from my writing, and distracted I became. One of the things that kept coming up in my searches was a significant increase in murders of black youth by other black youth, including innocent bystanders who were losing their lives to stray bullets while doing nothing more than playing outside on a hot summer day. Although these news stories troubled me to no end, they were nothing new to me. As I continued my work on the book and reflected upon the news stories of black-on-black violence, I began to feel that I ought to reverse course and focus my book more narrowly on black children.

After I checked out of the hotel, I immediately went back on the road, speaking to countless urban and rural school educators in daylong workshops. Only a few of these workshops addressed black children specifically; most addressed children of color in general. Educators at the workshops seemed truly inspired and told me that they felt ready to immediately implement the strategies I covered. These educators were starving for information that would further inspire their learners to develop the will to strive for excellence. It soon became clear to me

that the message of my book needed to be expanded not only beyond solely black learners, but beyond solely urban learners as well.

When September arrived, I started leading motivational assemblies in schools. Most of these schools were diverse, and several had majority white student populations. As I spoke to these kids about their attitudes toward school and life, I noticed it wasn't only the black and Latino students who were inspired—the white students were equally affected. At the conclusion of my assemblies, white students were among the kids approaching me to talk about their personal challenges and situations or just to say thank you and to shake my hand. Teachers, counselors, and administrators pointed out to me emphatically that the problem of poor attitude and lack of motivation was pervasive and in no way confined to students of color. Given that my message of attitude transformation resonated with children of all racial and ethnic groups, I definitively concluded that my book would address educators of all at-risk children, urban and rural, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Throughout my first year on the road full time, I have had countless one-on-one conversations with teachers and administrators about the plight of children of color in urban and rural schools. Several of the educators I have spoken with have broken down and cried in the midst of our conversations. Others have done so during question-and-answer periods after my presentations. It is an emotional topic, and educators want to see their students come to school every day striving to maximize their potential. I remind educators that students have the



capacity to perform; the question is, do they have the *will*? I tell educators to stop focusing solely on achievement, examine their students' attitudes, and consider ways to get them excited about learning and the prospects for their futures.

Often, when I am presenting at a conference, I will also attend sessions for my own professional growth and to remain current within the field. I attend a wide range of sessions, including ones in which I have little personal interest, just to know what's out there. Every time I sit in on these sessions, it occurs to me that in order for the teachers to effectively implement the strategies being discussed, their students have to be willing to receive them—that is, they need to have a receptive attitude. Attitude is everything; students have got to want what they are given.

The topic of closing the attitude gap typically generates a wealth of discussion with my audiences. Everyone has so much to share and so many questions to ask that I often leave the presentation wishing I could have covered even more. This book serves as an opportunity for me to cover a lot more ground and begin to address the hundreds of emailed questions that I receive from educators from all over the country.

Each chapter of the book begins with a reflective exercise. Daily reflection is absolutely crucial to the success of your students. It is imperative that at the beginning and end of each day you stop and reflect upon your mission, assessing what works and what adjustments might need to be made. Throughout the book, I make references to experiences I had in

schools I taught in, led, or visited as a consultant; I also make references to my children, each of whom has had a significant effect on my focus as an educator. It is my hope that this book will serve as a good starting point for a much broader national conversation on closing the attitude gap.

The book is written as a motivational handbook for educators. I cannot tell you the number of principals who have said one or more of the following to me before a presentation:

- “I really need you to fire up my teachers.”
- “I need you to get my teachers pumped up.”
- “I need you to motivate my staff.”
- “I need you to really shake my teachers up.”
- “My teachers don’t realize the power that they have—I need you to remind them.”
- “Please don’t pull any punches with my staff.”
- “Light them up!”

My personal motto is “I’m on fire.” I want to ensure that you, too, are on fire and remain on fire for your students throughout the entire school year as you take your mission of teaching to the next level.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that I do not personally characterize myself as a scholar, intellectual, researcher, or career consultant. Each of these roles has its place toward improving education and student outcomes, but none represents who I am. I am a *practitioner*—one who has been on the front lines of urban education for 21 years as a classroom

teacher and building principal, and one who will one day return to those front lines. I therefore write from the vantage point of one who has lived and breathed teaching.





# 1

## How Climate and Culture Shape Attitude

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# *REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS*

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Before reading this chapter, look into a mirror and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do my students see in my classroom?
2. What do my students hear in my classroom?
3. What do my students feel in my classroom?
4. What do my students experience in my classroom?
5. Do I provide a learning environment that fosters the proper attitude for my students' success?

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**E**ducators have been focusing on the question of how to close the achievement gap as measured by results on state standardized assessments for as long as I've been a teacher. National data over the years reveal that the gap doesn't seem to be going anywhere. As I visit schools and school districts nationally, I notice that folks feel good when even the slightest improvements are made.

In all my time as an urban public school teacher and principal, I have maintained that my students, who happened to be majority black, were brilliant and highly capable, with the ability to achieve anything they set their sights on achieving. This was the premise underlying my mission. The achievement gap consequently did not make sense to me—it seemed to place my students at a deficit before the first lesson. I knew that I couldn't inspire my students to strive to maximize their potential if they entered my classroom or school with a deficit mindset. They had to be in the pilot's seat, ready to soar.

I began to ask questions about the achievement gap. Why is it so? What are the differences? What is it that allows one group

to outperform the other? Is it biological? Is it mental? Is it social? Is it cultural? Is it economic? Is it political? I wanted answers. I wanted to know why it was that this achievement gap existed and persisted. As I began to examine the answers to each of my questions, it became clear to me that there was another type of gap that wasn't getting the attention it deserved: the attitude gap. I define the attitude gap as *the gap between those students who have the will to strive for academic excellence and those who do not*. The key words in the definition are "will to strive." Students need to have this will in order to succeed. Their will is their attitude; they have to *want* success. The challenge for teachers is that "will" can't be taught—it has to be unleashed! One of the purposes of this book is to assist you with doing just that—helping your students to unleash their will to strive for academic excellence.

Throughout my years of teaching and leading, I have worked with students who had to go home to deplorable situations. Even the walk to and from school could be a challenge for many, often more so than any course they may encounter in school. Many of my students lived in challenging neighborhoods that could easily sap the drive out of anyone. Neighborhoods that are plagued by gangs, drugs, and violence can be both psychologically and emotionally draining. The challenges of living in such neighborhoods can drastically inhibit motivation and learning. I say to educators frequently that although we should feel for students who live in such neighborhoods, we cannot feel sorry for them. Feeling sorry for them is not going to help them out of their situation. Students do not need our

sympathy. They need our inspiration and encouragement to change their realities for the better. We must therefore continue to hold them accountable for nothing less than excellence. By doing so, we will show them that despite their hardships they will soar high because we are their teachers and leaders. Excuses are unacceptable. There is an African proverb that states, “He who cannot dance will say the drum is bad.” We cannot afford to blame the drum. We must look deeply within ourselves and ask, “What are we doing to change our students’ attitudes so that every day that they walk into my classroom, they are fired up and ready to excel?”

Attitude is everything. Consider my own experience: I went from repeating my sophomore year in high school to graduating college *summa cum laude*. What was the difference between these two periods in my life? What about other successful people who struggled tremendously but turned it around dramatically and became success stories? What was the commonality that enabled them to achieve? I have concluded that it is a change in attitude.

## **How Climate and Culture Affect Student Learning**

When I was a 6th grade classroom teacher, a colleague shared with me that she was going to attend a big literacy conference over the weekend, because she felt that teaching reading to her struggling students was one of her deficiencies. She was excited about the prospect of learning new teaching strategies and was particularly eager to hear one of the featured speakers.



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