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Culture: Attitudes That Support or Sabotage Professional Growth and Development

Like every organization, every school has a culture, the history and underlying (and often unspoken and unwritten) set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, symbols, and ceremonies that shape everything about the school. The culture, shaped and built up over time, influences what happens and what does not happen in the school. School culture greatly influences the ways in which school personnel think, feel, and act. It also influences the way those external to the school, such as parents and community members, perceive and interact with the school. School culture impacts the quality and success of every school endeavor, including professional development. Kent Peterson, professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, suggests that "Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning."¹

"Some of the most powerful aspects of culture are not," according to Dennis Sparks, "immediately

evident. They are present in the web of relationships that exist within and around the school and in a set of taken-for-granted and often hidden assumptions and beliefs."² These assumptions and beliefs exist about a variety of topics – the goals of education, the nature of teaching and learning, and the role, power, and importance of professional development.

Determining and understanding the quality and health of the school culture is essential for all schools striving to either maintain or improve student performance. While there is no one best culture, recent research and knowledge of successful schools identify common features in professional learning communities.³ Expectedly, the culture of schools committed to professional growth and learning, respects and values learning, focuses on student performance, and encourages work that appropriately differentiates the curriculum and instruction so that the needs of every student are met.

The Relationship Between Culture and Professional Development

School culture positively impacts professional development when teachers believe professional growth and learning is valued, respected, critical, and expected for every staff member. The most positive school cultures not only value professional learning but value staff members who embrace ownership of their own personal professional development as well as that of their colleagues. In these positive cultures, staff members routinely engage in the sharing of ideas, collaborative work, and structured study groups. Professional learning is not only recognized in these cultures but is celebrated.

Negative cultures have just the opposite effect on professional learning. Staff members view professional learning as not being of value and certainly not being the expectation. Teachers in negative cultures do not believe they have anything new to learn or believe the source of new learning should be trial-and-error within one's own classroom.



Auditing the School Culture

School culture requires consistent attention and work, but much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul. School culture can have a positive influence on the health of the learning environment or can be a significant barrier to learning. Thus, feedback about school climate and culture can play an important role in school reform and improvement efforts. Without continual and varied sources of feedback, reforms may lose a sense of direction and suffer from a lack of knowledge about school — and classroom-based efforts and about the perceptions of those who are key partners in the learning environment (students, parents, and community). Measuring the influence of change-directed activities on the climate in which teaching and learning occur should be a key factor in improving and sustaining educational excellence.⁴

No single factor determines a school's climate. However, the interaction of various school and classroom climate factors can create a fabric of support that enables all members of the school community to teach and learn at optimum levels. Making even small changes in schools and classrooms can lead to significant improvements in the overall school culture. There are many ways to evaluate the school culture. Christopher Wagner proposes two questions for school leaders:⁵

- Does this school need to independently and continuously diagnose culture issues (monitor the current condition)?
- Does the school need an in-depth analysis for the extensive development of a strong and healthy culture (critical care)?

The goal is to determine the elements of the culture that support the school's core purposes and the mission and those which hinder or impede the

Shaping the School Culture

Shaping the culture is critical. Clete Bulach and Bobby Malone report research findings that reveal that students attending schools identified as having a positive culture had significantly greater achievement than those attending a school characterized as having a negative culture.⁷ In a study of 91 elementary schools, William Brookover showed that school culture had a greater influence on student achievement than other variables such as race and economics.⁸ The Federal law known as No Child Left Behind clearly mandates that schools be deliberate in implementing strategies that help more students succeed. Creating and maintaining a positive school culture that enhances professional learning may be precisely the strategy needed to boost student achievement and should, therefore, be a strategy documented in the school improvement plan. Shaping the culture should also be a strategy

achievement of goals and intended ends. In addition to Wagner's questions, school leaders may consider other questions:

- What are the positive aspects of the culture and how might these be reinforced?
- What are the negative aspects of the culture and how might these be changed?

Audits of the school culture can be formal or informal. School leaders can conduct informal assessments by talking to those Peterson refers to as the school's storytellers (those who know and enjoy recounting the history of the school).⁶ Additionally, school leaders can review existing school documents such as prior school improvement plans or files created to support school reaccreditation. Other examples of audit instruments include student and staff surveys, staff entrance and exit interviews, and ambient noise checklists. Penelope Madsen-Copas has developed a paper and pencil instrument that she refers to as a School Culture Triage designed to audit three components of the culture: Professional Collaboration, Affiliative Collegiality, and Self-Efficacy. Whether a formal or informal method is employed, what is important is that the culture is assessed, read, and appropriately shaped to support professional growth and development.



worthy of the attention of a structured committee. Consider the following steps to guide the work of a school culture committee:

- STEP 1:** Educate committee members so that all share a common definition of culture and so that all realize the importance of assessing, reading, and shaping the culture.
- STEP 2:** Identify committee members. The committee should be made up of a small group of school leaders and parents who have a committed interest in creating a positive culture and who can be objective in assessing the existing culture.
- STEP 3:** Develop a charter to clarify the work of the committee.

Shaping the School Culture, Continued

STEP 4: Visit, interview, and/or read the literature on schools that have been successful in creating and maintaining a positive culture (including a focus on professional development).

STEP 5: Determine how the committee will assess the culture. What data will be collected, how, and by whom?

STEP 6: Analyze the data. Summarize the findings.

STEP 7: Share the finding with the full school

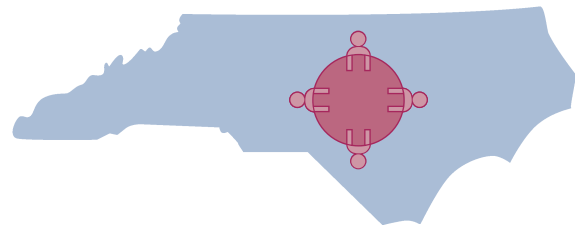
community emphasizing both the positives and the negatives. Be open to feedback from the greater community.

STEP 8: Develop an action plan for each identified area.

STEP 9: Establish a monitoring process for determining whether the action plan is successfully implemented, the effects of the actions, and for continuing the assessment, reading, and maintenance of the culture.

Conclusion

Schools need both clear structures and strong, professional cultures to foster teacher learning – learning that will lead to appropriate changes in instructional practices and increased student achievement. A school's culture either supports or sabotages professional development. With a strong, positive school culture that supports professional growth and development, schools can become places where every child has a "highly-qualified" teacher and every child achieves.



Resources

The following resources may be beneficial to schools interested in assessing, reading, and shaping their culture and to those desiring to establish school culture committees.

Deal, T.E. & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Sizer, T.R. (1988). A visit to an "essential" school. *School Administrator*, 45(10), 18-19.

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***NOTE:** These are actual survey instruments that may be used to assess underlying norms and values and the school culture.

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2. Sparks, D. (2002). Powerful force lurks beneath the surface. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(3), 3.
3. Op cit
4. Freiberg, H.J. (1998). Measuring school climate: Let me count the ways. *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 22-26.
5. Wagner, C. & Masden-Copas, P. (2002). An audit of the culture starts with two handy tools. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(3), 42-43.
6. Peterson
7. Bulach, C. & Malone, B. (1994). The relationship of school climate to the implementation of school reform. *ERS Spectrum*, 12(4), 3-8.
8. Brookover, W. (1979). *School social systems and student achievement: Schools can make a difference*. New York: Praeger Publishers.