Office of Special Services

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Research You Can Use

School Culture

Introduction

Many of us know of schools where staffs seem to be trying really hard. They have adopted the latest in research- based practices. They have a great deal of professional development. Yet, with the adoption of all of the innovations, these schools do not improve. From the outside it seems that they have everything going but nothing is happening in terms of increased student achievement. Why?

According to Kent Peterson, (1999) the answer may lie in the school's culture. He says: "One of the most important and powerful elements of an effective and successful school is its positive culture." In the Journal of Staff Development (Summer of 2002) he also states: Without addressing the school culture, no reform, no new curriculum, no amount of staff development will create a high-performing school.

Peterson defines school culture as the set of norms, values and beliefs, ritual, ceremonies, symbols, and stories that make of the persona of the school. According to him, "These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, to solve problems, deal with challenges and at times, cope with failures.

However, many schools have negative or toxic cultures that do not support the changes in teacher practice that promote increased student achievement. Consider the brief stories of school A and school B.

School A

School A is a middle school in a medium sized city. It has a student body of 750 and a staff of about 50. School A has been on the state's school improvement list for two years. It has had three different principal, in the last two years.

This year, School A has a new principal who is eager to grapple with the challenge of affecting change. In faculty meetings, Ms. Greene, the principal encourages staff members to offer ideas for improving the school. When a teacher attempts to make a suggestion, her colleagues snicker or stare with hostility until she sits down in embarrassment.

Ms. Greene has arranged for numerous motivational speakers to pump her staff up, but unfortunately, she sees no evidence of staff implementing any of the techniques. She even suggested that the staff do a ropes course over one weekend but no one volunteered to go on the outing.

When outsiders come into the school they see no evidence of school A's vision, or mission. If one asks students or faculty members what the school's goals are, the students shrug their shoulders and the staff reply they don't know or they give a platitude like helping every student to reach his or her maximum potential.

In school A, the conversations are about student lack of learning, how poorly the teachers in the elementary grades prepared the students for middle school, and how the parents don't care and don't value learning. Teachers frequently complain, "How does she expect me to teach these kids, they just aren't motivated to learn!"
School A has what Fullan (1996) refers to as a "balkanized" school culture. In this type of culture, there are separate and competing groups that jockey for position and supremacy like loosely connected independent city states.

School B

School B is a middle school in the same school district as School A. School B has a population of about 700 students. School B was on school improvement for the last two years but there is momentum for improvement. When visitors come to the school, the students greet them. The students are eager to tell the visitors what they are learning and how much they enjoy school.

The school walls show evidence of its vision and mission. The staff says: "We're all learners here!" Staff meetings are opportunities for teachers to share with each other and Ms. Turner, the principal, actively encourages staff to bring their most successful instructional strategy to the meeting. She begins every staff meeting with a focus on what is working and where students are showing gains as evidenced by the disaggregation of data.

The teachers participate in collegial groups and they use collaborative structures to focus on student work and the improvement of their own practice. Several teachers have

participated in coaching training and have volunteered to coach other teachers in their grade level teams.

Ms. Turner invited the staff to identify their needs for professional development. She and the staff prioritized which professional development activities were to be focuses for the year. The staff selected a few topics and so Ms. Turner arranged for the delivery of the topics with follow up activities each month.

School B has what Fullan refer to as collaborative culture. There is sharing, celebrating and supporting. Most of all, there is inquiry, reflection, and dialogue that are positive and worthwhile.

The Impact of School Culture

Although the scenarios of School A and School B are interesting, does school culture really make an impact on a school's ability to improve? The Southwest Educational Laboratory (SEDL) summarized literature on the importance of school culture. Authors noted:

- Culture can assist school improvement efforts for at-risk students, or act as a barrier to change.
- To the extent that it provides a focus and clear purpose for the school, culture becomes the cohesion that bonds the school together as it goes about its mission.
- Though we concentrate on its beneficial nature, culture can be counterproductive and an obstacle to educational success; culture can also be oppressive and discriminatory for various subgroups within the school.
- When schools seek to improve, a focus on the values, beliefs, and norms of both the school and the environment outside the school is necessary.
- Lasting fundamental change (e.g. changes in teaching practices or the decision making structure) requires understanding and, often, altering the school's culture; cultural change is a slow process.

Further support for the importance of school culture comes from Stolp (1994). He indicated that healthy and sound school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation, and with teacher productivity and satisfaction.

Peterson (1999) indicates why school culture is important. He says: "In study after study, where culture did not support and encourage reform, it did not happen. It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of culture and its relationship to improved student learning. You have to have the structures, a curriculum, appropriate assessments, - all of that. But if you don't have a strong and healthy school culture, none of the rest will matter."

Barth, (2002) agrees. He notes: "Unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of a school, all innovations, high standards, and high stakes tests will have to fit in

and around existing elements of the culture. They will remain superficial window dressing, incapable of making much of a difference."

Assessment of School Culture

Rick DuFour(2002) states that "The question facing educational leaders is not: Will our school have a culture? But "Will we make a conscious effort to shape our culture?" The first step in shaping the culture is to conduct an assessment. Barth (2002) indicates that instructional leaders must first become aware of the culture. He suggests a series of questions that leaders might ask:

- What do you see, hear, and experience in the school?
- What don't you see and hear?
- What are the clues that reveal the school's culture?
- What behaviors get rewards and status?
- Which ones are greeted with reprimands?
- Do the adults model the behavior they expect of students?
- Who makes the decisions?
- Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school?

Richardson (1998) lists questions that Peterson says principals might ask to determine the existing culture:

- What are the rituals, traditions, and ceremonies in our school?
- Who are the heroes in our school?
- What stories do you tell about our school?
- What symbols, slogans, and images represent our school?
- How do we recognize student achievement?
- How do I recognize staff growth?

In the assessment of school culture, one has a choice to develop a survey instrument or use one that has been developed and validated for that purpose. One suggestion for developing an assessment of school culture is to make a tool based on the norms of collegiality from Saphier and King (1985).

Saphier and King list 12 norms of a healthy school culture:

- Collegiality
- Experimentation
- High expectations
- Trust and confidence
- Tangible support
- Reaching out to knowledge base
- Appreciation and recognition
- Caring, celebration, and humor
- Involvement in decision making

- o Protection of what's important
- o Traditions
- o Honest, open communication

A tool could be made turning each of these norms into a statement that allows a yes or no answer. For example:

Norm	Statement	Yes	No
Collegiality	There is evidence that staff in this school use collaborative structures to work in a collegial way.		
High expectations	Staff at this school holds high expectations for students.		

If it is difficult to develop a school culture assessment, there are two in the recent summer issue of the Journal of Staff Development. Also, the Center for Improving School Culture (See the website at the end of this article.) has information on school culture audits.

Shaping School Culture: Strategies for Improvement

Peterson (1994), points out that the process of shaping a collaborative school culture is neither easy nor quick. He notes that it involves: (1) reading the existing culture, (2) identifying aspects of the underlying norms and assumptions that serve the core mission of the school and the needs of the students, (3) reinforcing and celebrating those aspects that support development of a collaborative culture and changing those folkways and norms that destroy collegiality.

Of course, the challenge of changing and or shaping a school's culture should not fall solely on the school's principal. It is a task best undertaken with principal and staff together. However, there are many strategies that school principals can use to affect a positive school culture: The following are suggestions taken from several articles:

- Communicate core values in what you say and do.
- Honor and recognize those who have worked to serve the students and the purpose of the school.
- Observe rituals and traditions to support the school's heart and soul.
- Recognize heroes and heroines and the work that these exemplars accomplish.
- Speak of the deeper mission of the school.
- Celebrate the accomplishments of the staff, students, and the community.
- Preserve the focus on students by recounting stories of success.
- Use clear, shared language created during professional development to foster a commitment to staff and student learning.
- Tell stories of accomplishment and collaboration whenever there's an opportunity.

- Provide positive examples: Make contact with other schools that succeed academically despite similar challenges, so that teachers can see for themselves that it can be done.
- Confront negativity and hostility head-on and work to redirect negative energies.
- Protect emergent sources of positive focus and effort.
- Actively recruit more positive and constructive staff.
- Vigorously celebrate the positive and the improving sides of the school.
- Ensure that improvement efforts and plans are successful by supporting them with time, energy, and resources.
- Reconnect staff to the mission of schools: to help all children learn and grow.

Conclusion

The references cited above clearly promote the value of a positive school culture in the implementation of reform efforts. Too often, schools look for the latest innovation, or the program that will fix current achievement. Programs and curricula while important are not sufficient in and of themselves. The successful implementation of these programs and curricula will depend on the ability of schools to overcome the debilitating influence of negative cultures that resist change, discourage collaboration, reinforce inertia, and blame students and parents for lack of progress. Schools must actively and persistently root out the negative aspects of school culture so that all students achieve and all staff grow and change. Culture, "the way we do things around here," should enhance learning for students and staff, not inhibit it.

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Useful Websites

The Center for Improving School Culture: http://www.schoolculture.net

The National School Improvement Project: http://www.garyphillips.com

North Central Educational Laboratory (NCREL) http://www.ncrel.org
(See especially the article on building collaborative cultures: seeking ways to reshape urban schools.)

UPCOMING EVENT

33rd Annual Parent Involvement Conference
Thursday November 7th & Friday November 8th , 2002
Doubletree Hotel
3202 Quebec Street
Denver, CO