



Research Brief

School Climate

Question: What is known about changing school climate and culture, beliefs and attitudes?

Summary of Findings:

Numerous articles define culture as “the way we do things around here.” Culture is about the relationships, general attitudes, and perceptions within schools. Research has directly linked a school’s ability to restructure or to improve achievement to the culture and climate of the school. A school's climate should be optimistic and nurturing, one where everyone believes that all students are capable of learning, and where it is safe, fun and intellectually challenging. The attributes of a supportive climate promoted in successful schools include (Macneil & Maclin, 2005):

- Continual sharing of ideas- Teachers share ideas daily regarding vital issues of instruction, curriculum, testing, school organization, and the value of specific knowledge.
- Collaboration-Teachers become involved in team teaching and other collaborative efforts in program development, writing, and research.
- Egalitarianism- Teachers dispense with formalities and anyone who takes an interest in a department meeting can vote. The notion that the quality of ideas is more important than the source.
- Practical application-Teachers ask themselves, How does what we are doing help students, teachers, and schools? What did we do this week to help?
- Principals who desire to improve a school's culture, must foster an atmosphere that helps teachers, students, and parents know where they fit in and how they can work as a community to support teaching and learning. Creating a school culture requires instructional leaders to develop a shared vision that is clearly communicated to faculty and staff. Additionally, principals must create a climate that encourages shared authority and responsibility if they are to build a positive school culture.

But many schools have a less than an ideal climate. In 1988, R.G. Owens and C.R. Steinhoff identified four distinctive school cultures (Delisio, 2005):

- Family culture. Described as a school that is a family or a team. The most important element is concern for each other, and staff commitment to students and their culture is common.
- Machine culture. The school runs like a well-oiled machine. The focus is on precision rather than on nurturing learners.
- Cabaret culture. A circus-type culture. The relationships and status in the organization come from theatrical practices. These schools are "all show and no go."
- Little Shop of Horrors. The school culture is viewed as unpredictable. Tension and stress abound. People view it as a prison. They have no choice but to function or try to escape.

Perhaps the climate most damaging to a school’s ability to meet the needs of students is what e-Lead calls a “toxic culture.” e-Lead points out:

Toxic cultures in schools can be created by a lack of hope—“these students just aren’t willing to learn”—a lot of pessimism—“we’ll never get that funding”—turf battles and dogmatism—“I’ve been doing this for 30 years and I’ll keep doing it my way.” Schools that have discipline, drug, or violence problems can also create a toxic environment—“it’s impossible to learn when your life is on the line.” All of these sentiments are absolutely crippling and must be avoided.

And with a less than ideal culture, it is easy to play the Blame Game instead of trying to solve problems. As the Center for Improving School Culture puts it, "If Fish in the aquarium are sick- Don't blame the fish! Instead, check the water."

Del Stover (2005) points out the importance of the role of the principal: “In the final analysis, researchers say, any serious look at school climate and culture should lead policymakers to a simple -- and challenging -- conclusion: Almost everything depends on leadership. Forget about fancy programs or interventions. Attitudes and behaviors in a school are not going to change unless the principal understands how to work with the existing culture -- and knows how to help it evolve into a healthier one.”



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Positive school cultures can be developed through assessment, analysis, improving and strengthening a school's identity, and then monitoring progress, said Dr. Wagner of the Center for Improving School Culture (CISC). Some schools assess the school culture as often as four times a year. One way to assess school culture, and then strive to improve it, is through the CISC triage survey. The survey has 17 questions about school culture, and, based on that, administrators can determine the current condition and decide whether the culture needs to be monitored or maintained, or whether it needs intensive care.

Attending to a school's culture does not happen overnight, nor without conflict. According to Rick Dulfour (2004), "Perhaps there are schools that have made the transition to a professional learning community without conflict or anxiety, but I am unaware of any. Disagreements and tension are to be expected. The question schools must face is not, 'How can we eliminate all potential for conflict as we go through this process?' but rather, 'How will we react when we are immersed in the conflict that accompanies significant change?'"

Online Resources:

The Center for Improving School Culture (CISC)

The Center for Improving School Culture was developed as a resource to help learning communities assess, analyze and improve their culture. Educational researchers have established a close and undeniable connection between the health of a school's culture and student achievement. The health or toxicity of a school's culture has also been linked to staff satisfaction and morale. In an era of high stakes accountability, we must keep the school's culture healthy and student achievement high?

<http://www.schoolculture.net/>

School Culture Triage Survey

By Drs. Christopher Wagner and Penelope Masden-Copas

http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/images/schoolcultureadminimage1.pdf

Leadership For An Improved School Culture: How To Assess And Improve The Culture Of Your School

By Dr. Christopher Wagner

Kentucky School Leader; Fall 2004/Winter 2005

<http://www.schoolculture.net/kyschoolleaderfall04.pdf>

An Audit Of The Culture Starts With Two Handy Tools

By Drs. Christopher Wagner and Penelope Masden-Copas

Journal of Staff Development; Summer 2002

<http://www.schoolculture.net/jsdsummer2002.pdf>

Leading Edge: Culture Shift Doesn't Occur Overnight--Or Without Conflict

By Rick DuFour

Journal of Staff Development, Fall 2004 (Vol. 25, No. 4)

Culture has been defined as "the way we do things around here." Leaders shape the norms of behavior (and thus the culture) of their organizations in a number of ways. When principals work with staff to build processes to monitor each student's learning and to develop systems of intervention that give students additional time and support when they experience difficulty, they create the structures that support the concept of learning for all. When they give staff clear parameters to guide their work but considerable autonomy in implementation, they increase the likelihood that staff members will embrace that concept. But when principals are unwilling to tolerate actions that violate the underlying values of the culture, they use a powerful strategy for shaping the norms of behavior within their school.

<http://www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/dufour254.cfm>



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Building a Learning Community: The Culture and Climate of Schools

By: Angus Macneil, Valerie Maclin

July 2005

What makes a good school? In today's public schools, where diversity is vast and complex, a good school must provide a strong functioning culture that aligns with their vision of purpose. Good schools depend on a strong sense of purpose and leadership. However, in order to build a culture that is integral to school life, principals must gear their students, faculty, and staff in a common direction and provide a set of norms that describes what they should accomplish.

<http://cnx.org/content/m12922/latest/>

Improving School Culture

Article by Ellen R. Delisio

Education World; Originally published 05/03/2005; updated 09/16/2005

What kind of culture pervades your school? Do staff members feel like a family? Or is it like a factory or a Little Shop of Horrors? One way to assess school culture, and then strive to improve it, is through the Center for Improving School Culture's triage survey. A school's performance never will improve until the school culture is one where people feel valued, safe, and share the goal of self-improvement, according to Dr. Christopher Wagner, co-director of the Center for Improving School Culture.

http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin407.shtml

Climate and Culture

Why your board should pay attention to the attitudes of students and staff

By Del Stover

American School Board Journal, December 2005

Urban school leaders who want to reform low-performing schools usually embark on a series of obvious strategies: strengthening the curriculum, promoting sound instructional practices, providing more staff training, and tutoring students who need help. But in this swirl of activity, an important piece of the puzzle is often overlooked: the attitudes and beliefs of students, teachers, and administrators. Good climate and culture are key to the success of urban schools, according to researchers who've spent years studying the subtle interpersonal dynamics that take place among students and educators. Many are convinced that a closer look at climate and culture can help urban boards determine why one school is academically successful and -- more important -- why another is poor performing and consistently failing to improve.

<http://www.asbj.com/specialreports/1205SpecialReports/S1.html>

Asking the right questions: A school Change Toolkit

McREL offers a wide array of resources related to each component of the school system and each phase of the improvement process. McREL and its partner laboratories also offer resources related to factors or strategies that research has shown to be associated with improved student achievement. The Climate and culture section includes the advice that school leaders greatly influence the climate and culture in a school, an influence that is reflected in the relationships between staff, between students and staff, and even between students. Through their actions and interactions they communicate what is valued and create shared meaning for the daily work within the school.

<http://www.mcrel.org/toolkit/>

<http://www.mcrel.org/toolkit/res/climate.asp>

Creating a Learning-Centered School Culture & Climate

e-Lead

Ideally, all schools will be safe, fun, intellectually challenging places where students explore topics with interest. The reality, however, is that many schools like to think of themselves as possessing these traits when in fact they do not. When advocating for a better environment for learning, proponents of reform plans must look at their teaches, the parents, and the people of the school and put everyone under a microscope. For example, a principal, parent, or teacher that accuses another of being unenthusiastic or uninspiring is wading into dangerous waters; improving a school's culture involves improving people and this can be extremely difficult. Educators that cannot do this, however, put their schools at risk for becoming institutions with a "toxic culture."

<http://www.e-lead.org/resources/resources.asp?ResourceID=25>



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Educational Links: Climate and Culture

The South Australian Centre for Leaders in Education (SACLE)

Lots of links and resources on school culture and climate. The South Australian Centre for Leaders in Education (SACLE) provides high quality professional services to support, challenge and continually strengthen the practice and leadership capability of educational leaders within the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS).

<http://www.sacle.edu.au/climate.html>

Student Motivation, School Culture, and Academic Achievement: What School Leaders Can Do

Ron Renchler

This sixth issue of the Trends & Issues series offers an overview of some recent studies of motivation as it operates at both the organizational and individual levels, especially in an educational context. Students in public schools obviously cannot be given the immediate financial and professional rewards given to individuals who display high levels of motivation in the workplace. However, there is a variety of other methods educators can use to awaken and sustain young people's motivation to learn. The greatest challenge educators face is to discover what those methods are and to make them an integral part of our educational system.

<http://eric.uoregon.edu/pdf/trends/motivation.pdf>

Evaluating School Climate and School Culture

Andrew T. Roach • Thomas R. Kratochwill

http://journals.sped.org/EC/Archive_Articles/VOL.37NO.1SeptOct2004_TEC_Roach37-1.pdf

Submitted Date: 3/6/2006 By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning

<http://www.principalspartnership.com>

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