

## Changing School Culture

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**Barth, R. S. (2002). The culture builder. *Educational leadership*, 59(8), 6-11.**

In this essay, Barth defines and discusses school culture and its relationship to leadership and learning. Barth defines culture as a complex pattern that consists of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths. Because culture shapes what people think and how they act, Barth believes that cultural behavior has tremendous power over student and organizational learning. Barth, a professor at Harvard and the founder of the Principal Academy, recognizes that changing culture is very difficult and that a leader cannot do it alone. The leader's job is to create an atmosphere where others are persuaded to observe the culture as it is and to help shape new ways of behaving.

Barth notes that a key identifier of a toxic school's culture lies in the "nondiscussables," that is the topics that are not discussed openly except in the parking lot. Examples of such topics are "the leadership of the Principal" or "how decisions are made around here." He lists examples of healthy and unhealthy cultural behaviors and the kinds of things that leaders can do to change a toxic school culture into a healthy one.

This brief paper by one of the major voices in the studies of school culture may be used as a prompt with faculty to begin to develop a dialogue of introspection, reflection, diagnosis and common understandings of what needs to be done to create cultural change.

**Blood, P., & Thorsborne, M. (2005, March). *The Challenge of Culture Change: Embedding Restorative Practice in Schools*. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices: Sydney, Australia.**

These educators define restorative practice as those that have an emphasis on relationships and believe that it is these relationships that help prevent incidents of inappropriate behavior from arising in the first place. Restorative Practice requires a shift from traditional discipline, driven by punitive (or rewards based) external motivators, to restorative discipline, which is driven by relational motivators that seek to empower individuals and their communities.

The authors report that they have come to realize through their years of experience that it is critical that school leaders recognize that this philosophy and policy requires cultural and organizational change in order to create and sustain the effort of building restorative practices. These changes challenge beliefs about discipline and authority. Since school cultures are highly resistant to change, a strategic approach is required. An in-depth discussion of the concept of culture change is discussed and the strategies for changing culture are described.

Stages for the implementation of this kind of culture change process are listed in detail. They are 1) gaining commitment, i.e. making the case for change and establishing buy-in, 2) developing a shared vision, 3) developing responsive and effective practice, 4) developing a whole school approach, and 5) professional relationship building. Action steps for each stage are described. Subsequent to the presentation of strategies, how to manage the transition is also discussed, which includes a timeline and the importance of involving the community.

This paper does not present a quick fix or suggest that a layering on of a justice model of conferencing will work. Instead they advocate a systems approach to change and present a roadmap leaders can adopt/adapt as they begin to look at how to infuse restorative practices into their school improvement efforts. The authors speak candidly about their own successes and failures and give concrete and practical examples.

School leaders who are considering the restorative justice model for their school will benefit from this paper. A bibliography is included.

**Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1990). *The principal's role in shaping school culture*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.**

This textbook was written to provide guidance to the school principal who is ultimately responsible for school reform. This book first discusses current pressures for school reform and the need to consider different and competing perspectives. The authors believe it is important to understand these perspectives and the assumptions behind each one, because they constitute underlying beliefs that shape behaviors and decisions. All of these will need to be confronted when reform activities are undertaken.

The book describes organizational cultures or subcultures within the greater society and presents evidence connecting organizational culture to productivity in business and schools. Next, a description is given of how the principal shapes a school culture by fulfilling five roles: those of symbol maker, potter, poet, actor, and healer.

Five case studies of principals in school settings that varied according to principal incumbency, school characteristics, student abilities, and organizational history are presented. These case studies of school leaders – black and white, male and female, at public and private, elementary and secondary, poor and privileged, suburban, urban and rural schools, were each successful change agents. The book concludes with defining the common threads among the principals and action guidelines.

This book is a good example of early conceptions of school reform, especially when school reform looked to business as a model for change. These case studies may prove enlightening but they do not include efforts that were abandoned because they were not successful or deal

with the micropolitics and environmental issues that have been subsequently identified since the 1990s.

**Eilers, A. M., & Camacho, A. (2007). School culture change in the making: Leadership factors that matter. *Urban Education*, 42(6), 616-637.**

This mixed methods case study contributes to the literature on school change by describing leadership practices at the school level and the ways in which these efforts were supported and augmented with district level support.

Baseline qualitative data were collected using the annual district-wide teacher survey scale. This school culture scale measured collaborative leadership, evidence-based practice, and communities of practice. Further qualitative data were collected three times over a two year period. These were classroom observations, structured interviews, and focus groups with members of the school and district community.

Quantitative data were also collected from the state's comprehensive assessment scores annually published on the state's website. These included percent passing in reading and math at the state, district, and school level. In addition information is given on student demographics, school conditions, and teacher experience.

Results from the survey data on school culture measures demonstrated an improvement in a pre and post comparison and in comparison with district level results. This study also reported a significant increase in the percentage of students passing the state reading and math assessments, from about a percentage in the low 20's to nearly 50 percent.

This case study provides evidence that leadership coupled with multiple district supports, which are focused on learning outcomes and instructional practices, can result in dramatic change at a school in a short period. The support provided by the district included teacher leaders who gave curriculum assistance, instructional coaching and facilitation on data analysis. The principal also drew upon other resources in the district such as fellow principals and consultants.

This study is rich in describing the activities of the principal, the specific actions by district level personnel, and the measures used. It could be used as a model of data collection and/or specific supports that yield positive results.

**Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 335-356.**

This is a scholarly article that considers, within an anthropological framework, an explanation of low achievement within the population of minority students. Recognizing and rejecting early notions that questioned the cognitive abilities of minority students' ability to learn, the author discusses the theories of linguistic differences in speaking and listening that lead to

misinterpretations of behavior and expectations, and the labor market explanation where school achievement will not help the students and their families break out of a cycle of poverty that they attribute to the racism that is endemic in American society. He then presents a third explanation that is a synthesis and reconciliation of the two: the politics and culture of school failure and success. After listing the inadequacies of the two, the author posits that learning what is taught can be seen as a form of political assent and not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance, i.e. student's perceived illegitimacy of the school and its teachers, which results in the development of oppositional behavior. Furthermore students are put into the situation that in order to maintain their linguistic cultural identity they must reject the school and what the school aims to teach. Within the school, teacher behavior that does not respect or recognize cultural differences can force students to take sides.

In order to transform the limitations of learning in this culture it is necessary for schools to become agents for a more progressive society. The people in schools must recognize that politics is the distribution of power and power resides in the dominant culture. They must learn to recognize the routine practices that limit the choices of the minority student within schools as they act to change the larger society.

This article was written during the time when political and sociological communities were impacting instructional practices especially within the "Whole Language" literacy movement. This movement espoused "making meaning", recognizing the importance of what the reader brings to the page as opposed to the reader simply reciting from the page, which was viewed as compliance to a meaning created by another. When comparing curriculum and instruction during the subsequent decades, it is evident that this time period created change. But still, the author believes much remains the same.

This article could prove interesting to those who wish to understand the origins of current philosophies of curriculum and instruction as influenced by political thinking and economic realities, and how these may be applied to educational reform.

**Higgins-D'Alessandro, A., & Sath, D. (1998). The dimensions and measurement of school culture: Understanding school culture as the basis for school reform. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27(7), 553-569.**

The purpose of this article is to present the "School Culture Survey" as a reliable and valid tool to measure the degree to which the culture of a school represents a good community. The author describes the historical frameworks of school culture as community, and how the School Culture Scale (SCS) was developed. Results from two studies provide evidence that the scale is reliable and valid. These findings are described in detail.

Arguments are made that the concept of school culture as operationalized by the SCS should be beneficial in planning and evaluating school reform efforts, especially those with the goal of building a school community. A copy of the scale can be obtained from the author at no charge and at this writing is not produced commercially. By reading this article school leaders may be

able to assess whether the SCS is a tool they would find useful in guiding their efforts in school culture change.

**Louis, K. S. (2007). Changing the culture of schools: Professional community, organizational learning, and trust. *Journal of school leadership*, 16, 477-487.**

Karen Seashore Louis is a Professor in educational policy and administration at the University of Minnesota. In this article she traces the historical thinking regarding school reform from the 1980s when researchers were looking at teacher work and what they could learn about teacher decision-making. During the 1990s there became an increasing focus on teacher professionalism and teacher learning communities. Subsequently the research community began to look at organizational learning and the role professionals play in this learning. In this context professionals are actors and their actions are developed within a learning community whose knowledge base is shared and developed. A key ingredient that enables this collaboration is trust.

Seashore fears that school leaders may view creating collaborative teacher groups sufficient in creating and sustaining change. She notes that as leaders begin the change process their realization of how long change takes lengthens in proportion to how long they are there. She fears that school leaders are never in one place long enough to see the change through over the long haul.

This essay provides a summary of the teacher collaboration movement and speaks to the notion of the social context of learning and change. However since 2007 when this article was written, much has been written and studied in regards to what teachers talk about, study and act on as a result of collaboration, such as teacher as action researcher and the inclusion of data analysis within collaboration conversations. This article is in contrast to Pope's article where the unit of analysis is on the individual and the individual is thought to be the object of change.

**MacNeil, A. J., Prater, D. L., & Busch, S. (2009). The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12(1), 73-84.**

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether the 10 dimensions (defined within the study) of the Organizational Health Inventory(OHI) is a useful tool in measuring the differences in school culture and climate when comparing Exemplary, Recognized and Acceptable schools. The history of OHI development including the results of reliability and validity testing are described. It was hoped that the results of this study would help inform Principals which are most effective aspects of school climate that increase student achievement.

The sample comprised 29 schools located in a large suburban school district in southeast Texas. The Texas Education Agency assigned one of three ratings to the schools based on student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Test results from 24,684

students were used as the basis for these ratings. Teachers in each of the schools rated the organizational health of their respective unit using the OHI. A total of 1727 teachers completed the survey. The individual school was used as the unit of analysis for the study.

Significant differences were found on all 10 dimensions of the Organizational Health Inventory, with Exemplary schools out-performing Acceptable schools. No statistical significance was found between Exemplary and Recognized schools. Statistical significance was found with Recognized schools out-performing Acceptable schools on the Organizational Health dimensions of Goal focus and Adaptation.

Since Goal Focus and Adaptation were the only two dimensions that exhibited statistical significance between the categories of Recognized and Acceptable schools, it may follow that these may justify special attention by the Principal when developing a healthy school climate. With this in mind the author provides a caveat that a singular leadership style was not identified and questions the reliability of doing so.

In addition while it is not surprising that the findings of this study suggest that students achieve higher scores on standardized tests in schools with healthy learning environments, it is notable that in this study significance existed between outliers, that is high vs. low performing schools, and not within or between intermediary levels. This may be useful when evaluating other research studies that try to define differences in school cultures and climate.

**Pope, C. C., & O'Sullivan, M. (1998). Culture, pedagogy and teacher change in an urban high school: How would you like your eggs done? *Sport, Education and Society*, 3(2), 201-226.**

This case study explores the notion that school culture change first occurs at the level of the individual teacher and documents an individual teacher's response to a change in curriculum and pedagogy.

Culture influences how we think about children, the nature of learning, the appropriate forms of teaching and school life in general. Since it is the teacher who negotiates changes in curriculum and pedagogy, it follows that it is important to understand at a personal level what this change process looks and feels like as changes in the inner learning of the teacher are explored.

The teacher in this case was an experienced physical education teacher who had transferred to an inner city school where he was unaccustomed to the student population demographics. These differences are illuminated in detail, as are the teacher's assumptions about the learners, their level of motivation to learn, and the process he went through in order to acclimate and become effective. In addition he was asked to implement a change in curriculum from a sports based physical education curriculum to a sports education based curriculum. For him it meant a change in teaching how to play a sport (drills and practices) to what sports mean and how to use sports in life long learning.

The qualitative methodologies of participant observation and interview were used to document the changes the teacher experienced. This paper describes the methods and documentation of results in detail. Especially noteworthy is the attention directed to the conundrum of interview methodology and to the power relationships between subject and researcher that are necessary to neutralize. A seven-stage typology is presented that describes the change process.

Readers of this paper will find rich descriptions of a variety of constructs to the meaning of culture and culture change. Also informative is how it illustrates qualitative research methodology and the case study approach. It has been believed that change happens to individuals first and organizations second, and this paper illustrates individual change, although it is not assumed that one experience can be generalized to many. Those who are interested in conducting or understanding qualitative research or exploring concepts of culture and change would benefit from this paper.

**Rhodes, V., Stevens, D., & Hemmings, A. (2011). Creating positive culture in a new urban high school. *The High School Journal*, 94(3), 82-94.**

The State of Ohio issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) in 2007 to fund five new high schools focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math (STEM) programming. To this end a partnership was formed in Cincinnati between Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS), Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT), the University of Cincinnati (UC), Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, and Strive Partnership -- a regional education, business, and municipal consortium. The city of Cincinnati was awarded a grant and in August 2009, the year the new public high school was formed beginning with 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The application intended for the new school to operate as a choice-based high school with a first-come, first-serve open enrollment policy for children residing in the district. The student population would reflect the racial, ethnic and socio-economic makeup of the district. Grades 9-12 would be phased in one year at a time beginning with the 9th grade in 2009. When the school was opened, 86% of students were African-American, 28% had special needs, and 84% received free and reduced lunches. Ninth graders in the inaugural class came from 48 feeder schools.

The narrative featured in this article, based on accounts by a faculty writing group, was written by the school principal, Dr. Virginia Rhodes; a technology teacher, Douglas Stevens; and a university faculty member, Dr. Annette Hemmings and tells the story of this effort. It presents a firsthand narrative of what the principal and teachers did to create a positive school culture, the lessons they learned, and what they face as they look ahead to succeeding years.

The narrative is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Positive School Culture, Faculty Writing Group, Planning Year (organizational structure, vision and core values, principal search, teacher-led school, teacher interviews, building team culture), Implementation Year, and Lessons Learned and Looking Ahead. The narrative ends as they begin their second year with grade 10.

Each section carefully and thoroughly communicates the school's rationale and intentions of all decisions and actions. It is a candid account of what did and what didn't work and illustrates how they continually used inventiveness and problem.

This accounting of a group of educators creating a new school could serve as an example for others who are looking to chronicle their own experiences. It is especially noteworthy that they included lessons learned. However, direct teacher or student voices would contribute a richer and fuller narrative.

**Waldron, N. L., & McLeskey, J. (2010). Establishing a collaborative school culture through comprehensive school reform. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 20(1), 58-74.**

The authors, professors of education at the University of Florida, provide a description of a process for Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) that targets the cultural change needed to provide an inclusive school environment that meets the needs of special education students. Great emphasis is placed on the role that professional development plays in this change. High-quality professional development and strong building level administrative leadership are described in great detail.

The advocated CSR process follows this sequence:

1. Form the team (teachers, psychologists, administrators, support staff).
2. Define what inclusion means and what it looks like.
3. Analyze data & collaboratively identify clear and concrete goals.
4. Explore options for change with staff and outside experts, with emphasis on improving the skills of professionals to meet student needs.
5. Provide extensive staff development such as co-teaching, differentiation instruction, evidence-based approaches for reading instruction, and structures for distributed leadership.
6. Provide embedded support such as coaching and teacher leaders.
7. Monitor the changes (data analysis) and make additional changes as a result.

An extensive bibliography is included.

The focus of this article is to explain and promote the need for high quality professional development. Readers would be interested and well served to procure from the National Council of Staff Development (NSCD) its publications on the standards and criteria for professional development. These publications also include tools that help staff implement these standards and ways to measure the effectiveness of the professional development program.