



PREVIEW

School culture affects everything that happens in a school, including student achievement.

A simple survey allows schools to evaluate three main aspects of school culture: professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, and self-determination/efficacy.

By CHRISTOPHER R. WAGNER

The School Leader's Tool

FOR ASSESSING AND IMPROVING SCHOOL CULTURE

Once thought of as a soft approach to school improvement efforts, school culture has finally amassed the depth of research necessary to qualify as a mainstay in a school leader's annual improvement plans. Every school has a culture, and every school can improve its culture.

And school culture may be the missing link—a link that has much more to do with the culture of the school than it does with elaborate curriculum alignment projects, scrimmage tests, and the latest buzzword reform efforts—in the school improvement conundrum (Wagner & Hall-O'Phalen, 1998). Several authors and researchers (Levine & LeZotte, 1995; Sizer, 1988; Phillips, 1996; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Frieberg, 1998) agree and refer to school climate, and more specifically to school culture, as an important but often-overlooked component of school improvement.

Assessing School Culture

School culture consists of “the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize a school” (Phillips, 1996, p. 1). School culture is the shared experiences both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations) that create a sense of community, family, and team membership. People in any healthy organization must have agreement on how to do things and what is worth doing. Staff stability and common goals permeate the school. Time is set aside for schoolwide recognition of all school stakeholders. Common agreement on curricular and instructional components, as well as order and discipline, are established through consensus. Open and honest communication is encouraged and there is an abundance of humor and trust. Tangible support from leaders at the school and district levels is also present.

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School Culture Triage Survey

1 = CORNERS NEVER 2 = RARELY 3 = SOMETIMES 4 = OFTEN 5 = ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS

Professional Collaboration

1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals. _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Affiliative Collegiality

1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others' company. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
3. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff? _____ 1 2 3 4 5
5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations including holidays, special events and recognition of goal attainment. _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Self-Determination/Efficacy

1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
2. School members are interdependent and value each other. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do. _____ 1 2 3 4 5
6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here. _____ 1 2 3 4 5

Scoring the School Culture Triage Survey

The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After using the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggest the following:

17-40 Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school's culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing the culture.

41-59 Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school's culture to determine which area is in most need of improvement.

60-75 Monitor and maintain making positive adjustments.

76-85 Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75!

Before engaging in an elaborate and extensive analysis of the school culture, this quick assessment of current status can assist in determining the wise allocation of time and resources.