



Improving School Culture

What kind of culture pervades your school? Do staff members feel like a family? Or is it like a factory or a concentration camp (teachers stay in their space - don't venture out)? One way to assess school culture, and then strive to improve it, is by going through a 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.

"Schools that have improved have put the emphasis on culture," Dr. Wagner told attendees at the April 2005 Association for School Curriculum Development (ASCD) convention. "Culture always should precede programs. If teams of people do not improve, a school never will."

Why Is School Culture Important?

What is "school culture"? A working definition from Roland Barth defines it as "how we do things around here," according to Dr. Wagner. Wagner expands on that definition. School culture, he says, is shared experiences both in and out of school, such as traditions and celebrations, a sense of community, of family and, team."

The older theory of school improvement held that it is the result of properly implemented "research-based" educational programs, Dr. Wagner said. Now many people agree that if the people in a school don't improve, nothing will. Studies are finding that the culture or climate of a school can have a marked impact on student performance.

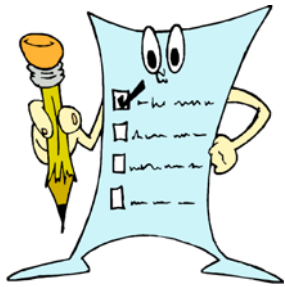
Dr. Amy Melton-Shutt, principal of Burns Elementary School in the Daviess County Public Schools of Owensboro, Kentucky, said she decided to make school culture a priority when she became principal of the now-closed Drakesboro Elementary School, a position she held for three years before taking the assignment at Burns.

"I decided I would not focus on instruction. I would focus just on school culture for the first year," Dr. Melton-Shutt said at the ASCD presentation. After the presentation, she added, "I decided not to focus on the instruction because I knew that the instruction was solid and consistent. I didn't need to immediately change anything in the instruction due to my knowledge of the high level of instruction in the building -- I knew that the





instruction was solid and engaging for our students because I had been at Drakesboro, as a teacher, for eight years, and I had faith that my colleagues were teaching at a high level." As part of the emphasis on culture at Drakesboro, the staff had celebrations, such as Friday assemblies to celebrate reading, and recognized staff members. As a result of those and other efforts, Drakesboro's state test scores went up by 17 points.



Dr. Melton-Shutt used the Center for School Culture triage survey to determine if a relationship existed between survey scores and scores on Kentucky's Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). She surveyed staff in 66 schools. In every case, the higher the school culture score, the better the school was ranked. The lower the survey score, the lower the school's ranking.

Identifying A School Culture

In 1988, R.G. Owens and C.R. Steinhoff identified four distinctive school cultures, according to Dr. Wagner:

- 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."
- Concentration Camp culture. 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.

Signs of a positive school culture include:

- Staff stability and common goals permeate the school.
- Curricular and instructional components are well defined.
- Open and honest communication is encouraged, and staff members demonstrate humor and trust.
- Stakeholders are recognized in school-wide celebrations.



Administration

- Staff members are recognized as well; they are called to the center of the gym for recognition
- School leaders and district leaders provide tangible support.

Growing A Positive Culture

Positive school cultures can be developed through assessment, analysis, improving and strengthening a school's identity, and then monitoring progress, said Dr. Wagner. Some schools assess the school culture as often as four times a year.

One tool the Center for Improving School Culture uses is a triage survey, which all staff members complete. (Triage is a medical term that refers to a quick assessment of a situation to determine which areas need help first.) 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.

Questions include:

- Are you striving for a positive school climate supported by a spirited staff?
- Is your school focused on teamwork and collegiality?
- Are all stakeholders involved in the process?
- Do you struggle to attain higher levels of student achievement year after year?

Another way to evaluate school culture is through a school culture assessment or profile. This is a more extensive evaluation conducted over several days, Dr. Wagner said. The process also includes a survey for school personnel, but with different questions from the triage survey; observations, interviews with staff members; and then an analysis of the data. Evaluators are looking for major trends and important rituals and traditions that determine the uniqueness of the school culture. They also look for opportunities for positive growth and make suggestions for improvements.

The three major indicators of a healthy school culture are collaboration (do people work together and share information), collegiality (is there a sense of belonging and emotional support), and efficacy (do stakeholders feel as if they have control of their destinies or do they view themselves as helpless victims of "the system?"), according to Dr. Wagner.





Administration

In one school, he said, a principal told teachers during the day that the assistant principal died of cancer. The faculty met after school in the media center, held hands, prayed, and shared stories about the assistant principal. Another school makes it a point to remember everyone's birthday.

"Every school has a culture," Dr. Melton-Shutt told the audience. "Every school can improve its culture."

Adapted from an article by Ellen R. Delisio
http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin407.shtml





School Culture Triage Survey

Years teaching experience _____

Years at this school _____

Instructions: Please rate each item relative to its presence in your school.

Never
Rarely
Sometimes
Often
Always

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	Teachers/staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.					
2	Teachers/staff work together to develop the school schedule					
3	Teachers/staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.					
4	The student discipline plan is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff					
5	The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective teaching teams rather than as separate individuals.					
6	Teachers/staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values.					
7	Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each other's company					
8	Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.					
9	Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff.					
10	Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school					
11	There is a rich and strong tradition of rituals and celebrations, including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.					
12	Teachers/staff value and appreciate each other's specific talents.					
13	When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.					



		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
14	School members are interdependent and value each other.					
15	Members of our school community seek alternative solutions to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.					
16	Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than to blame others.					
17	The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for administrators to tell them what to do.					
18	People work here because they enjoy it and choose to be here.					
19	Teachers/staff meet to pray and worship together					
20	Teachers/staff plan spiritual outreach for the students.					