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## *School Culture Under the Microscope*

*What It Is, How It Works, and  
Why It's So Important*

*School is a state of mind.*

—John Gardner, founder of Common Cause



It's more important to student success than the curriculum. The reading program. The basic texts. Technology. The physical plant. Or even the testing program. And it's more important to teacher morale and effectiveness than wages, benefits, or working conditions. What is it? It's the culture of the organization.

No, we're not talking about the school's art and music program or about some glob of microplasm that pupils examine under a microscope in a school science lab somewhere. We're talking about the core values, cherished beliefs, ingrained expectations, norms of behavior, and the unwritten rules, roles, and rituals that make up the context in which everyday teaching and learning take place.

Sound a little too “fuzzy,” soft, vague, or ethereal to be of interest to practical-minded, overburdened, hard-scraping, hard-scrambling, everyday school administrators? It shouldn't. These factors are the true driving forces in the rough-and-tumble real world of what we call school. Together, they constitute the organizational culture that defines what kind of place the school really is, and what it stands for.

Unfortunately, the language and the concept of “school culture” are still mysterious, remote, or alien to many school administrators. The sociology of the organization isn't anything that some principals and superintendents understand, think about, worry about, or attempt to influence. They assume that whatever kind of culture their school has just happened, or resulted from forces beyond their control—and isn't too critical anyway. Of course, they're making a colossal mistake. Sometimes, it's a career-buster.

As it turns out, the culture, more than any other single factor, determines the ultimate success or failure of any school, including yours.

This was a lesson reinforced for me several years ago during a visit to a high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The school was in an old, somewhat worse-for-wear building. It served a low-income minority population. Its budget was the same as all the other high schools in the city. It followed the same curriculum as the other schools. Its staff didn't differ significantly from other staffs. On the surface, there was nothing particular to distinguish this school from its sister schools throughout the district.

Nevertheless, this school had been singled out and recognized by the federal government as a National School of Excellence. Its track record of student growth and achievement had caught the eye of federal officials, who identified it as an exemplary Blue Ribbon School—a model for other high schools across the nation to follow.

What accounted for the school's success and star status? An unusually powerful and positive organizational culture. The only thing this school had more of than other comparable schools in the city was a shared culture of commitment, pride, hard work, mutual support, trust, and hope that extended beyond the school walls and into the entire community. A strong culture was enough to elevate the school above its counterparts.

Of course, this one school's singular success wasn't a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. Similar examples of culture-driven high performance occur in most cities. You probably have one or more in your own district. It could be your school. The point is, culture matters in schools and all organizations.

Every group or human institution (e.g., family, clan, neighborhood, Scout troop, street gang, bridge club, Red Hat Society, corporation, or labor union) has its own unique internal culture. This culture is often described as the “personality,” “character,” or “ethos” of the organization. Schools are no exception. If the school has a soul—and I believe it does—that soul resides in its culture.

What's confusing to school administrators is that some well-intentioned authors unduly complicate the notion of organizational culture by drawing

on highly technical definitions that only a scientist or anthropologist can appreciate and by making fine distinctions between similar terms (e.g., “culture” and “climate”). It doesn’t have to be that complex.

Obviously, most school leaders aren’t scientists; so for the practical purposes of this book, a much looser and simpler definition is both useful and helpful.

In this context, the term “culture” is used synonymously with descriptors such as the “climate,” “atmosphere,” or “environment” within the school. Other observers have defined the school’s culture as the “architecture of the invisible,” the “social memory,” or the “hidden curriculum.” Still others merely refer to it as the “Fourth ‘R’ (Relationships).” Without splitting hairs over definitions, you get the idea.

Whatever you call it, the culture is an unwritten code of conduct. My dictionary defines it as “socially transmitted behavior patterns” made up of

Adopted folkways	Sacred cows
Assumptions	Shared lore
Ethical definitions	Standards
Legends	Traditions
Mores	Unstated purposes
Myths	Work ethics
Priorities	

These elements give every school a special style, temperament, feeling, and tone all its own that constitute its one-of-a-kind culture

This culture (good or bad) is maintained, sustained, transmitted, and perpetuated through its handed-down customs, history, stories, heroes, rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, special events, mascots, logos, slogans, mottoes, symbols, and symbolic acts. Sometimes, even the name of the school announces the culture found inside (e.g., St. John’s Military Academy, Marcy Open School, Downtown Prep School).

Most cultures also boast their own scribes, storytellers, protectors, keepers of the flame, and at least one self-appointed “conscience” of the organization. You can probably pick out who plays these parts in your school.

But you can’t learn about your school’s culture or any other school’s culture from publications or official pronouncements. Cultures usually aren’t written down.

Nevertheless, everyone in the organization knows what the culture is and actually helps create, preserve, and fine-tune it. The culture’s framework of prescribed patterns of behavior and expectations are continuously invented, reinvented, discovered, developed, adopted, or adapted by all the participants over time.

It's no surprise, then, that a school's culture is more than the sum of its parts and takes on a life of its own. It shapes individual and group conduct and defines what's important, what's possible, what's expected, what's accepted, what's preferred, what's praised, what's tolerated, what's encouraged or discouraged, what's rewarded, what's punished, what's taboo, who's up, who's down, and who's allowed to play (and win) within the organization. It is the culture that gives life within the school its meaning, passion, and purpose.

More than anything else, the culture's informal guides to behavior dictate the way people (students and adults) act and interact (sometimes even how they dress), what they talk about (or don't talk about) in the student commons or the faculty lounge, what approaches to instruction are valued, how teachers perceive students and vice versa, how people treat each other, what motivates both teachers and learners, and how people go about their work every day. In many ways, every school is a captive of its own culture.

Obviously, culture concerns are heady stuff, much too important for any self-respecting school leader to deny, ignore, or just let happen. If you're a principal or superintendent, it pays to pay attention to the culture of the organization. Period!

If you want to know who has the real power in your school, how things really get done, and what it takes to go along and get along within the organization, you won't find the answers in the official rules, job descriptions, discipline code, union contract, or staff handbook. The only way to learn these things is to figure out the culture and how it works. One of the best-kept success secrets for school leaders is to get to know how the culture within your organization actually operates and to use the culture to your advantage.

There is no question that adult and student behaviors alike are heavily influenced by the culture in which they teach and learn. Cultures aren't carved in stone. Cultures are interactive. They are shaped by the people who make up the culture, and, in turn, the participants are shaped by the very culture they helped produce.

Cultures are also elastic and organic. They can be stretched. They can grow and change. As a school leader, you can be bound by the existing culture. Or you can do the stretching and nurturing of growth. But you can't be successful completely independent of the organization's unwritten rules and cultural imperatives.

Sadly, some school officials spend their entire careers completely oblivious and unaware of the culture and how things really work in their own department, school, or district. We've all known administrators who come to the job every day without a clue about what's going on around them. It's almost as if they live and work in some parallel universe rather than in the real world of the school.

I'm reminded of a former superintendent of mine who felt that the primary function of his job was to relate to his immediate employer—the

school board. Consequently, he intentionally devoted 60 percent or more of his time to serving and servicing board members. Everyone else (kids, teachers, parents, and community members) had to take a backseat and wait their turn.

His approach to the superintendency may have been good politics, but it was bad for the overall climate within the organization. It didn't help that his obsession with the school board made him appear aloof and disdainful of other stakeholders. Because he distanced himself from everyday relationships and dynamics at the school level, things pretty much had to bump along without his engagement.

Quicker than you would think possible, morale took a nosedive. People felt a bit abandoned. Many grew uneasy and resentful. Throughout the district, there was a lot of frustration, some tension, and even a little fear. And any sense of a "culture of collaboration" rapidly evaporated.

Some called this period the "dark ages" of the district. It may have been less than coincidence that during this time, voters rejected a levy referendum for the first time in the history of the school system.

Of course, the board-consumed superintendent eventually moved on, and a new era was ushered in. Through fate or design, he was followed by a school leader who championed grassroots involvement, open communication, and decentralized decision making. Unlike his predecessor, the replacement felt that part of his job was to lead, educate, and even discipline the school board when necessary, not merely to serve it.

It should come as no surprise that things quickly returned to "normal," and a more cohesive culture reemerged under this new leadership. And subsequent bond issues passed easily. If you think there's a take-home lesson for all of us here, you're right!

It was a different (but just as instructive) story for another urban superintendent I knew, who had the misfortune to follow a predecessor known for visibility, accessibility, and inclusiveness. By contrast, shortly after taking over, the newcomer told one of her principals that she didn't have time to meet and mingle with the teachers standing close by during a visit to his school. Naturally, the story of the brush-off spread almost instantaneously throughout the district.

Soon after, at a meeting of district principals, the new superintendent responded to an administrator's request for clarification by turning away from the questioner and saying to other principals nearby, "Did you understand what I said? Then you explain it to him. I don't have time to repeat it." Wouldn't you know—this story also made the rounds of all the schools in record time.

Surprisingly (?), despite improved test scores, this tact-deprived superintendent lasted only 18 months. Could it have had anything to do with being totally out of touch with the prevailing culture of the district?

Even more blatant, perhaps, may have been the misstep of another newly hired superintendent in my old hometown, who announced, even before his first official day on the job, that "There will be no classroom

parties next year." It might be possible to get off to a worse start, but I don't know how. There's nothing quite like debunking an organization's culture before you even show up. Needless to say, this is not a recommended career move for any school official.

If you think these cases seem a little extreme or isolated, a more common example—one all of us have witnessed in some form—is the principal who is always bragging about the "family" atmosphere in his school, while in reality everyone knows that the staff is riddled with dissent, and the principal himself is viewed as a bully.

If you haven't noticed this kind of disconnect between what is said and what is real, you're not paying attention. Of course, a culture based on denial never fools anyone. It is frequently a surefire recipe for early departure.

Administrators like those above, who are not in tune with the culture of the school, quickly become irrelevant. They don't matter. At best, they are ignored or patronized. They aren't really leading anyone or anything anywhere, and don't even know it. (Usually, no one has the heart to tell them that they are no longer running the school.) Instead, staff members merely tolerate their presence and pretty much do things their own way. You don't want this to happen on your watch. As an old mentor once told me, "If the train leaves without you, you can't rightly call yourself the engineer."

In the final analysis, how people in any organization feel about the organization, themselves, their work, their leaders, and their future is largely the result of the culture. As leader, unless you have a handle on the culturally embedded beliefs, behaviors, and biases within the school, you are deprived of a powerful and essential leadership tool.

At the risk of repetition, it is the school's culture that determines how honest people are, how happy they are, how hard they will work, how loyal they will be, and how much they will put up with. Likewise, it is the culture that attracts people to the organization—or drives them away. In short, a school can be only as good as its culture allows it to be.

This culture thing is a huge deal. As leader, you deny or downplay it at your peril. Your only real choices are to embrace the culture, enter into it, reinforce it, adjust it or adjust to it, challenge it, or work to mold, shape, redirect, or reinvent it—or sit on the sidelines—but you can't simply ignore it and remain in charge.

Naturally, all administrators want the most affirming, actualizing, positive, productive, rewarding, and inspiring culture possible, not just for students but for teachers, parents, and the overall community as well. The best school cultures work for everyone. Such an inclusive, fully functioning culture can make your school not just another choice for students and parents but the best choice. Do you want to settle for anything less?

In practice, every principal and superintendent you've ever known or heard about claims to have created a school culture based on service,

integrity, equality, compassion, teamwork, and academic excellence (and perhaps “truth, justice, and the American way” as well).

You and I and everyone else in the world know that not all school cultures are alike. They are not always what they seem or claim to be.

There are many ways to be a school. That’s why you will find as many kinds of teaching and learning environments as there are separate institutions (see Chapter 2).

Every school looks a little different. And every school acts and reacts differently. The proof of the culture is in the behavior—not in the slogans.