Enhancing School Culture:

Reculturing Schools

Every organization has a culture, that history and underlying set of unwritten expectations that shape everything about the school. A school culture influences the ways people think, feel, and act, Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning. As Fullan (2001) recently noted, "Reculturing is the name of the game."

When a school has a positive, professional culture, one finds meaningful staff development, successful curricular reform, and the effective use of student performance data. In these cultures, staff and student learning thrive. In contrast, a school with a negative or toxic culture that does not value professional learning, resists change, or devalues staff development hinders success. School culture will have either a positive or a detrimental impact on the quality and success of staff development.

What Is School Culture?

School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the "persona" of the school. These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, solve problems, deal with challenges and, at times, cope with failures. For example, every school has a set of expectations about what can be discussed at staff meetings, what constitutes good teaching techniques, how willing the staff is to change, and the importance of staff development (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Schools also have rituals and ceremonies--communal events to celebrate success, to provide closure during collective transitions, and to recognize people's contributions to the school. School cultures also include symbols and stories that communicate core values, reinforce the mission, and build a shared sense of commitment. Symbols are an outward sign of inward values. Stories are group representations of history and meaning. In positive cultures, these features reinforce learning, commitment, and motivation, and they are consistent with the school's vision.

Positive vs. Toxic Cultures

While there is no one best culture, recent research and knowledge of successful schools identify common features in professional learning communities. In these cultures, staff, students, and administrators value learning, work to enhance curriculum and instruction, and focus on students. In schools with professional learning communities, the culture possesses:

• A widely shared sense of purpose and values-,
• Norms of continuous learning and improvement-,
• A commitment to and sense of responsibility for the learning of all students;
• Collaborative, collegial relationships; and
• Opportunities for staff reflection, collective inquiry, and sharing personal practice.
(Stein, 1998; Lambert, 1998; Fullan, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1998).

In addition, these schools often have a common professional language, communal stories of success, extensive opportunities for quality professional development, and ceremonies that celebrate improvement, collaboration, and learning (Peterson & Deal, 2002). All of these elements build commitment, forge motivation, and foster learning for staff and students.

Some schools have the opposite--negative subcultures with "toxic" norms and values that hinder growth and learning. Schools with toxic cultures lack a clear sense of purpose, have norms that reinforce inertia, blame students for lack of progress, discourage collaboration, and often have actively hostile relations among staff. These schools are not healthy for staff or students.

By actively addressing the negativity and working to shape more positive cultures, staff and principals can turn around many of these schools. Principals are key in addressing negativity and hostile relations.

Staff Development

School culture enhances or hinders professional learning. Culture enhances professional learning when teachers believe professional development is important, valued, and "the way we do things around here." Professional development is nurtured when the school's history and stories include examples of meaningful professional learning and a group commitment to improvement.

Staff learning is reinforced when sharing ideas, working collaboratively to learn, and using newly learned skills are recognized symbolically and orally in faculty meetings and other school ceremonies. For example, in one school, staff meetings begin with the story of a positive action a teacher took to help a student--a ceremonial school coffee cup is presented to the teacher and a round of applause follows.

The most positive cultures value staff members who help lead their own development, create well-defined improvement plans, organize study groups, and learn in a variety of ways. Cultures that celebrate, recognize, and support staff learning bolster professional community.

Negative cultures can seriously impair staff development. Negative norms and values, hostile relations, and pessimistic stories deplete the culture. In one school, for example, the only stories of staff development depict boring, ill-defined failures. Positive experiences are attacked--they don't fit the cultural norms. In another school, teachers are socially ostracized for sharing their positive experiences at workshops or training programs. At this school's faculty meetings, no one is allowed to share interesting or useful ideas learned in a workshop. Positive news about staff development opportunities goes underground for those who still value personal learning (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

In some schools, professional development is not valued, teachers do not believe they have anything new to learn, or they believe the only source for new ideas is trial-and-error in one's own classroom. Anyone who shares a new idea from a book, workshop, or article is laughed at. In these schools, positive views of professional learning are countercultural. Those who value learning are criticized. The positive individuals may either leave the school (reinforcing the culture) or become outcasts, seeking support with like-minded staff.

Learning Communities

Principals and other school leaders can and should shape school culture. They do this through three key processes. First, they read the culture, understanding the culture's historical source as well as analyzing current norms and values. Second, they assess the culture, determining which elements of the culture support the school's core purposes and the mission, and which hinder achieving valued ends. Finally, they actively shape the culture by reinforcing positive aspects and working to transform negative aspects of the culture (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Read the Culture

Principals can learn the history of the school by talking to the school's storytellers (they are the staff who enjoy recounting history), looking through prior school improvement plans for signals about what is really important, not just what is required, or using a faculty meeting to discuss what the school has experienced, especially in staff development, over the past two decades. It is important to examine contemporary aspects of the culture--a series of exercises can determine the core norms and values, rituals, and ceremonies of the school, and their meanings. For example, asking each staff member to list six adjectives to describe the school, asking staff to tell a story that characterizes what the school is about, or having staff write metaphors describing the school can reveal aspects of the school culture.

One approach asks staff to complete the following metaphor: "If my school were an animal it would be a because The principal then looks for themes and patterns. Are the animals strong, nurturing, hostile, loners, or herd animals? Are the animals stable or changeable? These metaphors can suggest deeper perceptions of the culture.

Finally, developing a timeline of rituals and ceremonies for the year--asking when they occur, what symbols and values are important in each, and what the ceremonies communicate about the school and its commitment to professional learning can fill in the culture picture. For example, what does the end-of-the year staff gathering communicate? Is it joyful, sorrowful, congenial, or standoffish? What are the rites and rituals of the gathering? What traditions keep going year-to-year, and what do they represent? Is the last gathering of the year a time for closure, goodbyes, and a sharing of hopes for the future?

Assess the Culture

Staff and administrators should then look at what they have learned about the culture and ask two central questions:

N   What aspects of the culture are positive and should be reinforced?

N   What aspects of the culture are negative and harmful and should be changed?

The staff can also ask: What norms and values support learning? Which depress or hinder the growth of energy, motivation, and commitment? What symbols or ceremonies are dead and dying and need to be buried--or need to be resuscitated?

There are other approaches as well. One way to assess the culture is to use the School Culture Survey (Tools for Schools, 2001) to examine core norms and values. Collect the survey results to see how strongly held different norms or values are, then determine whether they fit the culture the school wants.

Shape the Culture

There are many ways to reinforce the positive aspects of the culture.

Staff leaders and principals can:
- Celebrate successes in staff meetings and ceremonies-,
- Tell stories of accomplishment and collaboration whenever they have the opportunity; and
- Use clear, shared language created during professional development to foster a commitment to staff and student learning.

Leaders also can reinforce norms and values in their daily work, their words, and their interactions. They can establish rituals and traditions that make staff development an opportunity for culture building as well as learning. As we saw at Wisconsin Hills Middle School, all workshops began with sharing food and stories of success with students. At other times, leaders can reinforce quality professional learning by providing additional resources to implement new ideas, by recognizing those committed to learning their craft, and by continuously supporting quality opportunities for informal staff learning and collaboration.

Staff and administrators may also need to change negative and harmful aspects of the culture. This is not easy. It is done by addressing the negative directly, finding examples of success to counteract stories of failure, impeding those who try to sabotage or criticize staff learning, and replacing negative stories of professional development with concrete positive results.

Conclusion

Today, shaping culture is even more important because of the national focus on higher curriculum standards, assessments, and accountability.

Standards-based reform efforts attempt to align content, teaching, and assessment. But without a culture that supports and values these structural changes, these reforms can fail.

Schools need both clear structures and strong, professional cultures to foster teacher learning. Carefully designed curriculum and assessments are keys to successful reform, along with teacher professional development. The school's culture either supports or sabotages quality professional learning. Developing and sustaining a positive, professional culture that nurtures staff learning is the task of everyone in the school. With a strong, positive culture that supports professional development and student learning, schools can become places where every teacher makes a difference and every child learns.

References

Deal, T.E. & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement.* Bloomington, Ind.: National Educational Service.

Fullan, M. (200 1). *Leading in a culture of change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hord, S. (1998). *Creating a professional learning community: Cottonwood Creek School.* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED424685).

Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Peterson, ICD. & **Deal, T.E.** (2002). *Shaping school culture field book.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stein, M. (1998). *High performance learning communities District 2: Report on Year One implementation of school learning communities. High performance training communities project.* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction No. ED429263).

Richardson, J. (2001, April/May). School culture survey. Tools *For Schools.* (Available in PDF format for members only.)

Kent D. Peterson is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. You can contact him at 1025 W. Johnson St., Madison, WI 53706, (608) 263-2720, fax (608) 265-3135, e-mail: kpeterson@education.wisc.edu.