By Christopher R. Wagner

The
School Leader's Tool

FOR ASSESSING AND IMPROVING   SCHOOL CULTURE

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.

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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The real question is, As principals, how do we determine the current status of our school's culture? Although improving school culture is an often-touted goal, there have been few research-based tools to help principals and school improvement teams measure the health of their school's culture. One of those tools, the School Culture Triage Survey (see figure 1)—developed and refined by Phillips (1996), Phillips and Wagner (2002), and Wagner and Masden-Copas (2002)—has been used by schools across the United States and Canada to quickly and accurately determine the present state of any school's culture.

Several researchers have used the survey and come to similar conclusions. Phillips (1996) conducted more than 3,100 school culture assessments from 1981 to 2006 and found compelling anecdotal evidence to suggest that the connection between school culture and student achievement is a reality and that culture influences everything that happens in a school. Phillips also found connections between school culture and staff member satisfaction, parent engagement, and community support.

In a later study, Melton-Shutt (2002) studied 66 elementary schools in Kentucky to determine whether a relationship existed between scores on the School Culture Triage Survey and state assessment scores. In every case, the higher the score on the survey, the higher the state assessment score, and the lower the survey score, the lower the state assessment score. In addition to the effect school culture has on student achievement, the culture of a school is linked to staff member satisfaction, parent engagement, and community support. A study of 61 schools in Florida provided similar results to Melton-Shutt's findings (Cunningham, 2003). The higher the score on the survey, the higher students scored on Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test in reading. The lower the survey score, the lower the reading scores.

Administering the Survey

When examining a school's culture, it is important to be very clear about what is being assessed. The 17-item pencil-and-paper School Culture Triage Survey measures the degree to which three "culture behaviors" were present in a school or school district. These behaviors are:

- Professional collaboration: Do teachers and staff members meet and work together to solve professional issues—that is, instructional, organizational, or curricular issues?
- Affiliative and collegial relationships: Do people enjoy working together, support one another, and feel valued and included?
- Efficacy or self-determination: Are people in the school because they want to be? Do they work to improve their skills as true professionals or do they simply see themselves as helpless victims of a large and uncaring bureaucracy?

These three culture behaviors or markers provide insight into the overall culture of the learning community and, specifically, to the culture within the school walls. In the vast majority of schools that use the School Culture Triage Survey, the health or toxicity of the school's culture positively correlated with student achievement.

The survey must be completed individually and anonymously. It is especially helpful to gain the support of the school improvement team, the school advisory council, the school climate committee, and other stakeholder groups well before administering it. Typically, it is distributed at the beginning of a faculty meeting without much of an explanation. The principal may begin by saying, "Please take a moment to complete this short survey on school culture. The school improvement team will tabulate the results and share them at our next faculty meeting."

More Important Than Skill

In the past, beliefs about school improvement tended to emphasize an individual's attainment of skills. The theory in practice was that if people don't improve, programs never will.

Important Tips and Suggestions

Distribute the survey to teachers and administrators only.

Distribute surveys without the scoring page. (We are educators: we look ahead, and it skews the results every time!)

Ensure that everyone understands that this is an anonymous survey—no names.

Involve teachers in the collection and tabulation of the surveys.

Share the results with the staff at the next faculty meeting. During this meeting, many schools select one or two items for improvement. They often select a task force to develop and implement an action plan.

Administer the survey again as a follow-up in three or four months to monitor progress.

Figure 1

School Culture Triage Survey

SCORING: 1 = 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.

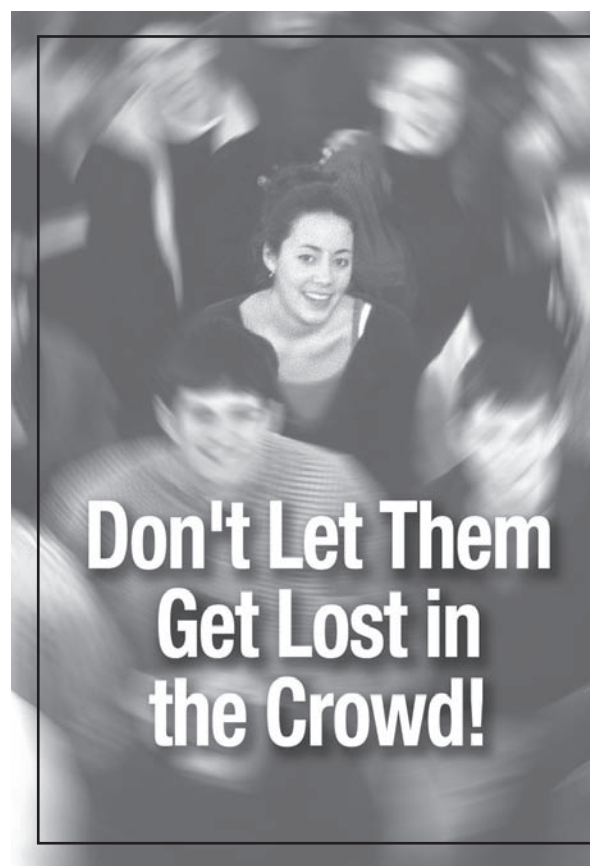**76–85** Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75!

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.

This belief also promoted the notion of individual professional development as the primary pathway to school improvement. In reality, negative cultures, colleagues, and environments often overwhelm the best teachers. In his book, John Brucato (2005), the principal of Milford (MA) High School, shares the tremendous efforts the school staff made to establish an aligned curriculum and advanced teaching and testing strategies and implement a variety of improvement programs. Rather than copy his school's reform efforts, however, his suggestion is to begin with improving the school's culture first. Without a healthy culture, Brucato believes, none of the other strategies will work well.

Schools should be nurturing places for staff members and students alike. How people treat and value one another, share their teaching strategies, and support one another is important in today's schools. Relational vitality with students, parents, the community, and especially with one another is the foundation for a healthy school culture and maximizing student learning. **PL**

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