

Why is Cultural Leadership Important to a 21st Century Superintendent?

Today's school superintendents are faced with increasingly complex organizations and demanding environments in which they lead. An essential skill for successful superintendents is cultural leadership. Kentucky is piloting new standards for superintendent effectiveness. Standard 3 of the new system is on Cultural Leadership. It challenges superintendents to understand and act on the important role a system's culture has in establishing and maintaining the exemplary performance of all schools. Leaders understand the people in the district and community, how they came to their current state, and how to connect with their traditions in order to move them forward to support the district's efforts to achieve individual and collective goals. While supporting and valuing the history, traditions, and norms of the district and community, a superintendent must be able to "re-culture" the district if needed, to align with the district's goals of improving student and adult learning outcomes and to support the work of the adults and students with passion, meaning and purpose.

Culture is important because it can powerfully influence human behavior. Culture is powerful because (1) individuals are selected and indoctrinated so well; (2) the culture exerts itself through the actions of a large number of people; and (3) all of this happens without much conscious intent making it difficult to challenge or at even to discuss (Kotter, 1996). It is crucial for superintendents to understand the power of culture on the organization and that culture trumps everything. Or as Dr. Peter Drucker (1909-2005) is credited with saying, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Simply put, no matter how powerful the strategy, it will not work if it is not supported by the organizational culture.

Organizational culture is often referred to as "the way we do things around here" (Deal & Peterson, 1999). It is a straight-forward and useful way of thinking about this phenomenon we all experience in the organizations we join and in which we aspire to lead. The culture is a learned pattern of behavior, shared from one generation to the next through the stories, traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that bind the people around the values, assumptions and beliefs of the organization (Deal & Peterson, 1999). It is the glue that holds the organization together.

Our business is a people business. It is the people, not the programs that make a school. School organizations are made up of folks who adopt and share assumptions, values, and norms of behavior that influence the success of the school (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Culture and climate has never been more important than right now as we work to implement higher standards and a more rigorous and challenging accountability system in Kentucky. Jones (2009) shares a clear connection between the culture of a school, instructional leadership, and student learning achievement. A healthy school climate, an indicator of the culture, has proven to increase student achievement as well (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). With student achievement being emphasized and with greater accountability for all

students' success, it is imperative for superintendents and school leaders to cultivate a learning culture in our schools.

Every superintendent aspires to develop and sustain a school system culture that is student-centered, high performing, and embraces continuous improvement. Successful school systems have developed ways of operating and problem-solving that work for them. At the same time, these successful districts also recognize that their success can blind them to changing conditions. They guard against becoming entrenched in ways that drive out new and improved thinking and problem-solving.

Leadership is critical. Leaders create and reinforce norms and behaviors that are expected within the culture. What leaders stress as important, how they confront crises, what they role-model, and who they bring in and allow to remain in the organization are powerful in establishing norms for a culture. Superintendent effectiveness is dependent upon one's skills in cultural leadership.

Resources

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