

A School Culture Audit

Asking questions about your school's beliefs and assumptions about rigorous education is a powerful way to begin bringing about change.

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Ever feel like you're swimming against the current? Unfortunately, that's all too common. Educators know that something needs to change; they analyze data, build a plan, and provide professional development, yet little changes.

Often that is because they fail to take into account the culture of their schools. Culture reflects the complex set of values, traditions, assumptions, and patterns of behavior that are present in a school. School culture, unlike school climate, is an indication of the most deeply held beliefs about schooling. Peterson and Deal (2002) describe culture as "the unwritten rules and assumptions" (p. 9) that shape the work of staff members and students, and it is visible in the informal, often unspoken rules about how people behave (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

The pressure to change schools produces uncertainty and unpredictability in the lives of teachers and other school personnel. Understanding culture—how it works and how it can be shaped—is important for improving a school's program.

One Way to Understand School Culture

We spoke with one new principal who commented, "The culture in this school is just too traditional. I'm the new person, and there's really nothing I can do to change it."

We disagree. It takes time and patience to shape school culture, but doing so is one of the most powerful ways a principal can improve his or her school (Williamson & Johnston, 2005).

Bolman and Deal (2003) identified four ways that culture is present in schools. Each can be used to nur-

ture a greater commitment to a rigorous academic experience for students.

RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

How can rituals and ceremonies promote rigor? Rather than just celebrating top grades, ceremonies can also be used to celebrate progress and improvement and to reinforce school values.

One school ritual is selecting new teachers. One principal told us, "I've developed a set of questions that I ask every [job] candidate. If they're listening carefully, they will understand that this school values the success of every student and expects every student to succeed in a rigorous and challenging environment." The responses provide the principal with clues about whether the candidate shares the vision while affirming the school's commitment to rigor.

HEROES AND HEROINES

Who are the heroes and heroines in your efforts to increase rigor in your school? Which teacher is considered the most rigorous by parents, but is also the most respected and requested?

A principal in suburban Seattle told us how he uses every opportunity to celebrate teachers who take risks that contribute to student success. His school uses a showcase in the lobby to recognize the school's heroes and heroines. It includes pictures and descriptions of teachers, staff members, and students who reflect the schools' academic mission and commitment that students will not fail.

STORIES AND TALES

What important stories are told to newcomers? Are they stories about the support that teachers feel when

they demand high achievement from students? Are new students told that learning is not optional and that everyone in the school believes that it is his or her responsibility to help each student learn? Do you tell turnaround stories about students who have overcome difficulties to learn at high levels?

The principal of a school in suburban Denver encouraged her teachers to “snitch” on other teachers who had some special success with students. Her goal was to find teachers who reflected the school’s commitment to a rigorous program that is complemented by high support. The principal delighted in sharing these stories with parents, other district personnel, and school staff members to create a culture of success and celebration of that success.

Rewards and Reinforcements

What is the reward system—both formal and informal? Are teachers rewarded for insisting that students complete work at acceptable levels? Are students rewarded for progress as well as for high grades?

It’s important to reward teachers who are leading efforts to improve rigor in your school. One method we’ve found useful is to “Name it, claim it, and explain it.” A principal we worked with took digital pictures of teachers who were working to improve student learning. He began each faculty meeting with a PowerPoint slide of what he saw. He said, “I saw something great related to rigor this week. It’s on the screen. If it belongs to you, stand up and name what you did, claim it as yours, and explain what you were doing.”

Regularly recognizing and celebrating positive examples of rigor will

reinforce the commitment to rigor in your school and classrooms.

A Cultural Audit

So what can a principal do? A helpful place to begin is to take a close look at your school’s prevailing culture—in other words, conduct an audit. An audit can be as simple as a quick assessment of current activities and routines or it can be a more complex, comprehensive evaluation.

We suggest that a good place to begin is to conduct a quick assessment of your school’s culture by talking with students and staff members, observing patterns of behavior, and considering your own behavior:

- At a staff meeting, ask each person to list five adjectives that describe the school’s culture. Organize the words into common themes. Discuss their meaning.
- Walk the halls of your school. What do you see? What artifacts convey messages about student success? About the value of rigorous work? About a commitment to not accepting failure?
- Talk with a cross section of teachers or students. What gets them excited about their work or learning? What do they find joy in?
- Consider the last three months. What have you done to show your enthusiasm for learning and student success? How have you recognized and rewarded students and staff members?

You may also want to think about the four indicators of culture. How do you assess their presence in your school? How might you use those



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elements to improve the educational rigor at your school?

Final Thoughts

The culture of a school is one powerful way to shape the behavior of those who work at and attend it. A cultural audit can help principals assess the current culture and develop a shared commitment to a high-quality educational experience for every student. **PL**

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Using the Four Categories to Assess School Culture

Rituals and Ceremonies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Does your school have a set of routines and rituals that clearly communicate your values about rigor? Do they work? ■ Are there special ceremonies or events at your school that demonstrate a commitment to the success of every student? ■ What messages do you communicate in your daily actions, classroom visits, and other interactions with members of your school community?
Heroes and Heroines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Who are the heroes or heroines on your staff? Why are they recognized? ■ What ways do you identify and celebrate people who contribute to the success of every student or who have high expectations for student success?
Stories and Tales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What do you say and do to communicate your commitment to the success of every student and to increasing the rigor of your school's program? ■ What are the stories you tell about your school, its students, and its staff members? What stories do you encourage others to tell?
Rewards and Reinforcements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do you recognize and reward teachers who reflect your school's commitment to rigor? Are these strategies successful? ■ Do you routinely reward teachers, staff members, and students who make exceptional efforts to improve student learning?