

Creating and Sustaining a Positive School Culture

Working together to build a positive school culture yields many desirable outcomes for students and educators. For students, a positive culture leads to a stronger connection to the school, greater academic motivation, deeper empathy for others, and fewer risky and impulsive behaviors. For educators, a positive school culture yields less burn-out and greater authenticity and retention, more openness to innovation, increased productivity, and stronger camaraderie among colleagues and with students. Specifically, for educators, a positive school culture allows teachers and administrators to engage in high quality relationships with one another, to see their work as meaningful, and to share and actualize a collective future-focused vision for the school. As a result, students feel safe and understood and have the space to grow in their learning experiences and perform at their optimum levels.

It is important to note that efforts to improve a school culture must be far-reaching and multifaceted. Focusing on just one area for improvement will not yield the desired outcome. Staff, parents, and students must all be unified as they focus their efforts on making the common school vision, mission, and values a reality.

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1) Understanding the depth of school culture—its origins and underlying assumptions—is essential to building a positive school culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To unify an organization, it is critical to have a shared <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vision (Where are we going?) Mission (Why do we exist? What is our purpose as we align toward our vision?) Values (How are we going to treat one another and our larger community?) Having a vision, mission, and values however, does not ensure a healthy school culture. Those words have to be put in action as members of the school community deal with the challenges and daily decisions. The attempts to establish systems, goals, and strategies to improve programs and practices also contribute to a school's culture. It is important to note that school culture is the sum of all that school personnel have learned in their efforts to deal with problems and make changes. Culture is much more than the day-to-day operations of a school that are visible to everyone there. There is a history to culture within schools—there are people who made decisions and events that occurred that shaped the culture. That story is a critical part of what everyone sees and experiences each day. It explains the reasons why things are done the way they are on a campus, for better or worse. Culture operates with underlying assumptions that define it. These assumptions shape decisions and influence behavior and can be the impetus for building or destroying relational trust. For example, consider the implications of the following assumptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every person should be treated with respect and dignity, no matter how young or old. All voices matter and everyone should be heard. 	Culture Fundamentals: 9 Important Insights from Edgar Schein Three Levels of Culture from Edgar Schein Edgar Schein Interview Transcript: Cultural Insights Establishing a Collaborative School Culture Through Comprehensive School Reform

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Each member of a collaborative team has something meaningful to contribute. ○ Every student can engage in continuous and meaningful learning. ○ Feedback—from teacher to student, student to teacher, teacher to teacher, administrator to teacher, and teacher to administrator—is an essential tool for improvement and progress. ● The culture of a school is changed by first identifying the problem or problems. Note that the established school culture will generally both help and hinder progress toward making the changes to resolve the problem, but it is important to focus on the problem rather than the culture. ● It is likewise important to be very specific about the problems that need to be addressed and then consider what the components of the solution are. Be patient. Creating cultural change in schools by identifying and addressing each problem requires time and a step-by-step effort. ● Collaboration and feedback are key elements to this change and culture building process. All staff members need to work together to identify and solve the problems on a campus. This will not only encourage buy in, but will build trusting relationships among coworkers. ● Identify the discrepancies between behavior and values. Most schools have stated values, vision, and mission statements of some kind. When cultural change is needed, there is generally a discrepancy between the stated values, vision, and mission and the behavior of the staff and/or students. Note the discrepancy and closely examine the roots of the behavior asking what people are willing to do to change that behavior. 	
<p>2) When educators (teachers and administrators) enjoy high-quality relationships with one another, there is a sense of safety that allows educators to express personal ideas and varying viewpoints without fear of negative consequences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High-quality relationships are based on trust and respect and require constructive communication characterized by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sincere expressions of gratitude, ○ Willingness to apologize and make amends, ○ Acknowledgements of effort, ○ Recognition of successes, ○ Encouragement in struggles, and ○ Authentic concern for one another. ● High quality relationships mean that teachers and administrators are able to discuss tough problems or issues, take risks, make mistakes, and ask for help from one another without criticism. ● In a positive school culture, teachers and administrators feel valued for their unique strengths and talents and never feel threatened by their peers or at risk that colleagues will deliberately undermine their efforts. ● Empathy and compassion are key to creating high quality relationships. Certain conditions in a school setting may inhibit empathy and compassion: 	<p>Creating a Positive Trusting Culture</p> <p>Building a Positive School Culture</p> <p>Building Trusting Relationships for School Improvement</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The students and staff do not feel safe, ○ The students and/or staff do not identify with one another, ○ An imbalance of power among teachers and administrators, ○ A belief that some people are not deserving of help. ● Work to cultivate empathy and compassion on a campus by engaging in activities that allow students and staff to regularly imagine how another person feels, emphasizing the damage of jumping to conclusions about others. ● Overall, educators need to understand comprehensively what qualities define a positive school culture and the process by which that is achieved. They need to collectively participate in the effort to improve their culture. 	
<p>3) Providing meaningful opportunities for teacher leadership on a campus improves the school culture.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teachers prefer schools with a strong instructional culture that is developed and sustained by teacher leadership. ● Teacher leadership should be embedded within existing structures and practices in a school. ● Teacher leadership roles can be formal or informal; related to curriculum, policy, or instruction; and be school or district-based, depending on the needs of a specific campus or population. ● A school culture that fosters teacher leadership includes a collegial environment, a focus on problem solving, trust, and clear and effective communication. ● A collegial environment is one that allows teachers to regularly collaborate before, during and/or after school. There is a clear and shared vision amongst the campus staff and everyone feels a part of the effort to realize that vision. Teachers and administrators should be able to freely discuss their efforts to meet the goals of that vision and discuss where they struggle or need support. ● A focus on problem solving requires that members of the staff work together to solve problems rather than complain about them. The teachers have the attitude that no problem is insurmountable, but rather with some creative thinking and collective effort, things can improve. ● A trusting environment is one where doors are open, both the teachers' and the administrators'. Everyone needs to feel that they have been heard and understood in order to establish trust and then tackle whatever challenges they face together. This sort of trusting environment allows the real problems to surface quickly so that it can be addressed. The collective focus is on the growth and improvement of individuals, allowing for mistakes and setbacks as part of the learning process. ● Clear and effective communication is crucial to a positive school environment that supports teacher leadership. Poor communication can be a severe hindrance to progress. Everyone needs to feel like they are on the same page with clear and concise messages conveyed regularly. Communication should be two-ways between the teachers and the administrators. 	<p>How Leaders Influence the Culture of Schools</p> <p>How to Build Trust in Schools</p> <p>Staff and Student Recognition Ideas</p> <p>Megan Tschannen-Moran's Web Site with Helpful Resources on Building Trust</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Regular and abundant recognition of student and staff achievement is another significant way to build a positive culture. This may require help from the teachers and staff to nominate each other and students who are demonstrating exemplary character or empathy or other attributes that help build a positive school culture. ● All staff members should model the school's code of conduct and professionalism in their words and actions. ● All teachers and staff should share the responsibility for the students on campus, not just the ones they interact with directly. The students are not "yours" or "mine" but "ours." Everyone works together to help all of the students. ● Teachers and staff should always speak respectfully regarding students and their parents and should believe in the ability for all students to learn and improve. 	
<p>4) While no one individual is personally responsible for a school's culture, effective leadership does have a significant impact on the culture of the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Principals, administrators, department chairs, etc. all affect the culture of the groups they lead. In the day-to-day interactions at the school, principals, administrators, department chairs, and other school leaders need to be visible and welcoming to students, staff, and parents. ● Healthy and positive school cultures tend to be centered on self-discipline, compassion, nurturing, collaboration and a love of learning. It is vitally important that school leaders model the type of behavior they hope to see in their staff. Such behaviors should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Having a growth mindset where the goal is to recognize the individual talents of the staff members and encourage them to use their talents for the benefit of all; ○ Being reflective and humble and willing to recognize one's own strengths and weaknesses while allowing other teachers and leaders to lend support where needed; ○ Communicating with clarity and frequency important events happening on campus, expectations for students, parents, and staff, and other pertinent information that helps students and their families as well as staff members feel in the loop. ● Utilizing team building activities and/or department or staff retreats is another powerful and helpful tool to help teachers and staff connect with and trust each other. Principals, administrators and department or level chairs are critical in the success of such events. ● The development of a school vision and goals-- even a motto for the year--can occur at such events. It is important that the vision and goals, etc. be revisited regularly, that visible reminders be displayed and that all school leaders honor the vision and goals of the school. ● Principals, administrators, and department chairs should participate in professional learning communities, level teams, and cross-curricular lesson planning aimed at improving school culture. They need to establish the norms and systems for effective collaboration. In order for these communities to be successful, teachers should be involved in the decision-making process. 	<p>The Principal's Role in Successful Schools</p> <p>How to Build a Growth Mindset Into School Culture</p> <p>10 Team Building Games That Promote Critical Thinking</p> <p>Designing Support for Beginning Teachers</p> <p>The Good Mentor</p> <p>5 Ways to Foster a Positive School Climate</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ample time to discuss ideas and collaborate should also be built into the school day to allow for professional learning communities, level teams, and cross-curricular lesson planning to be effective. Within these communities participants should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop a shared vision involving both the teaching and learning on a campus; ○ Practice productive, inquiry-based collaboration; ○ Establish an environment of trust amongst teachers and administrators; ○ Provide feedback that is meaningful, kind and continuous; ○ Examine instructional plans, assessments, student work and data; ○ Use peer evaluation to review each other's work; ○ Be open to new ideas; ○ Subscribe to the belief that all students can learn. • School leaders need to make certain that new teachers have a strong support system and a meaningful mentoring experience as well as differentiated professional development opportunities. • Ultimately, all teachers and administrators should see themselves as learners and model this mindset for students. 	
<p>5) Positive school-wide approaches to discipline, social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, and safety work together to build an overall positive culture.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should expect high quality work from students as well as high moral character. Students need to know that there is room to make mistakes and that kindness and respectfulness and hope are the guiding principles in the classroom. • Discipline should work with students rather than against them. Specifically, restorative practices in discipline help students recognize the impact of their choices and take responsibility for their actions, specifically making amends for damage or hurt caused. • Zero-tolerance policies create a culture that excludes students by using in-school suspension or sweeps, out-of-school suspensions, expulsion, etc. Such policies disrupt learning for students and teachers. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Once students are removed from a classroom, they miss instruction and classwork. Making up this work becomes more difficult and discouraging. ○ Often, students are initially suspended for non-criminal behavior such as disrespect. ○ When students are out of school there is an increased likelihood of students engaging in negative behavior. ○ Overall, research has shown that zero-tolerance policies do not improve student behavior. • In contrast, research shows that recognition of students' efforts has long lasting effects. A myriad of different ways to recognize student achievements in all aspects of school exist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Send postcards home to students and their parents when they have excellent attendance. 	<p>Collaborating With Others</p> <p>Empathy Activities: Bullying Prevention</p> <p>Empathy: The Most Important Back-to-School Supply</p> <p>Grades 3 to 5 A Teacher's Guide to Empathy from Kidshealth.org</p> <p>20 Tips for Creating a Safe Learning Environment</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have a “caught you being good” mentality with specific award tickets for students who are kind and responsible during lunchtime. Have a regular drawing for those tickets so that students can earn some sort of reward (treasure box, movie tickets, etc.) for their efforts. ○ Send home thank you notes to students who go above and beyond expectations. ○ Have a regular assembly where students are recognized for their specific achievements (earning good grades, exemplifying specific qualities that are part of the school vision or anti-bullying efforts, etc.) ● A multi-tiered approach that is school-wide, targeted, and interventional works to improve student performance and reduce aggressive behavior, thus improving the overall school culture. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>School-wide</u>-- In such an environment, students need opportunities to work together with a common vision and according to the needs of the individual students school wide. The curriculum should be inclusive and collaborative so that students learn to work cooperatively and deal effectively with potential conflict. ○ <u>Targeted</u>-- At this level, students engage in peer mediation and mentoring, intervention, restitution, etc. ○ <u>Intervention</u>-- Here, students receive individual help for severe misbehavior. Counseling, outside agencies, and professional help are utilized to help individual students. ● Social and emotional instruction aims at helping students understand their own feelings and provides them strategies to control their emotions. Such efforts identify students who may be struggling and can help prevent disruptive behavior later. ● Social and emotional instruction generally focuses on six specific characteristics to help students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <u>Self-awareness</u> – Students learn to assess their feelings, interests, and abilities and set goals according to that assessment. ○ <u>Peer awareness</u> – Students understand the point of view and feelings of other students. ○ <u>Conflict management</u> – Students learn to calmly react to stress and respond to conflict in a healthy, peaceful manner. ○ <u>Positive attitude</u> – Students are encouraged to face new challenges and ask for help when they need it. ○ <u>Understanding the rules</u> – Students learn the reasons behind the rules and why it is important to follow them. ○ <u>Reflection</u> – Students reflect on social, moral, and cultural issues in order to better understand society, themselves, and their peers. ● Bullying prevention practices are also a critical component to creating a positive school culture where students feel safe. 	<p>Why Social and Emotional Learning Is Essential for Students</p> <p>How to Implement Social and Emotional Learning</p> <p>Teaching Students to Be Peer Mediators</p> <p>Best Practices for Tutoring Programs</p> <p>Developing a Tutoring Program</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ School policies should reflect clear expectations for teachers and students regarding bullying. ○ A protocol for immediate action should be in place when bullying occurs. ○ A practice of listening to all sides of the story individually is essential. This includes listening to all students involved as well as their parents. ○ Students who have been affected by bullying should be referred to counselors for help. ○ Class or group meetings where students are able to safely discuss their experiences with bullying are a helpful practice. ○ Teaching students about empathy and helping them foster it in themselves will create a greater likelihood that students will intervene when they witness incidents of bullying. ● Safety in school also extends to the physical space for learning as well as the mental and emotional experiences of students on a campus. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students feel safer when the physical space of the school is well maintained. For example, fresh paint, frequently cleaned floors, air conditioning or heating, and tidy learning spaces all contribute to students' sense of safety on a campus. ○ In the classroom, students should feel safe to express their thoughts and ideas without ridicule or criticism. Classrooms should be safe zones for all ideas. This requires that teachers establish and model ground rules for kindness and respect. Teachers should also be quick to redirect comments or behavior that does not follow those ground rules. ○ Emotionally, students should also feel safe to share their worries or concerns that might affect their ability to learn. Counselors need to be accessible to students and the means through which students and parents can connect with outside resources if needed. ● Implement supportive strategies to address students' learning difficulties. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teachers need to be well-informed about the protocol for identifying students who may have learning disabilities. ○ Likewise, teachers should regularly monitor students who may be struggling academically. ○ Tutoring and mentoring programs should be well-established on campuses so that students have ample opportunities to get help when they need it. ○ Student tutors should be well-trained in empathy and compassion so that they are always respectful of other students who may need extra help. 	
6) Involving families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Parents should always be welcome on campus as visitors or volunteers. 	Getting Parents

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(parents, guardians) is a critical component in building a positive school culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it a practice to solicit help from parents for field trips or special days or events where volunteers are needed. • Survey parents at the beginning of the school year to determine what interests, skills and hobbies they have that they might be willing to contribute to the classroom in some way. • Have regular informal meetings on campus where parents are invited to learn about specific and important topics related to students. • Encourage and support an active PTSO at the school. • Have a strong relationship with feeder schools so that parents and prospective students are able to ask questions of and have access to the teachers, counselors, administrators, and coaches on campus. • Hold family-friendly campus activities and events and invite the entire community. • Incorporate activities within campus events that include younger siblings and younger students such as halftime or intermission activities or crafts or face painting before sporting events or school plays. • Encourage coaches and their team members or sponsors and their club members to hold training clinics or camps during school breaks that invite younger siblings or younger students in the community to participate. • Make sure to have school communications presented in all the languages that students speak at home if possible. Have printed greetings on campus be in several languages. • Hold multi-cultural events where students' various cultures and countries are represented. 	Involved in the Classroom 10 Ideas for Engaging Parents
7) Improvements in school culture are not only measured by academic accomplishments but also by perceptions and behaviors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey teachers, staff and students about their perceptions regarding school culture. Discuss the results to inform continuous school improvement. • Improved student achievement is only one indicator of a positive school culture. Improvement measures that provide a more detailed picture of a school's culture also include instances of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaboration, creative thinking and problem-solving, ○ A commitment to human rights and social justice, ○ Ethical decision-making. • One means to assess improvement in school cultures is a character code that is developed with the input of the students, parents, and staff. It should include "we" statements such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ "We pursue excellence in character." ○ "We honor each other by being kind, respectful and fair." ○ "We give our best effort in all academic endeavors." • The tenets of the character code should be part of the daily expectations in every classroom. 	Education World: Is Your School's Culture Toxic or Positive? The School Leader's Tool for Assessing and Improving School Culture

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