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SCHOOL CULTURE:
"The Hidden Curriculum"

By Craig D. Jerald

Walk into any truly excellent school and you can feel it almost immediately—a calm, orderly atmosphere that hums with an exciting, vibrant sense of purposefulness just under the surface. Students carry themselves with poise and confidence. Teachers talk about their work with intensity and professionalism. And despite the sense of serious business at hand, both teachers and students seem happy and confident rather than stressed. Everyone seems to know who they are and why they are there, and children and staff treat each other with the respect due to full partners in an important enterprise.

Sociologists recognized the importance of school culture as early as the 1930s, but it wasn't until the late 1970s that educational researchers began to draw direct links between the quality of a school's climate and its educational outcomes. Harvard researcher Ron Edmonds, often regarded as the father of the "effective schools" movement, included "safe, orderly climate conducive to learning" on his influential list of school-level factors associated with higher student achievement. "The school's atmosphere is orderly without being rigid," he observed, "quiet without being oppressive, and generally conducive to the instructional business at hand."[1]

Yet despite its importance, organizational culture is possibly the least discussed element in practical conversations about how to improve student achievement. Perhaps that is because factors such as strong leadership, close monitoring of student progress, a common and coherent curriculum, and teacher collaboration all seem like pieces of the puzzle that educators can directly affect. On the other hand, even the synonyms we use to describe a school's culture—terms such as "atmosphere" and "climate"—make it sound more like an environmental condition than an educational one. And much like the weather,

should act in it. Effective schools, however, suggest a clear, common "definition of the situation" for all individuals, sending a constant stream of unambiguous signals to students and teachers about what their roles and responsibilities are. The school does that through its organizational culture.

In some high schools, for example, the organizational culture defines athletic success as paramount. In others, especially where peer cultures predominate, norms and values push social popularity as sacred. And in others, academic effort and excellence are revered or at least valued highly enough to compete for students' attention amid many other claims on it.

The instructive role of school culture is not lost on effective leaders. John Capozzi, the principal of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School near Queens, New York, explains, "In addition to [a] close emphasis on classroom instruction, we have what we call our 'hidden curriculum,' which develops personal relationships between faculty and students and deliberately works at developing character."[6] By identifying school culture as his "hidden curriculum," Capozzi acknowledges that like the academic curriculum, the elements of school culture can be identified and taught. Elmont's 2,000 students, most of whom are African American and Latino, produce impressive outcomes. Ninety-seven percent of entering ninth graders graduate on time with a regular diploma, and 88 percent of its 2005 graduates earned a prestigious Regents Diploma.[7]

At University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, students begin learning the "culture curriculum" even before the first day of school. Entering seventh graders are required to attend a three-week August Academy. "It allows students a chance to meet their teachers, meet their peers, and experience school a full three weeks before the school year starts [and] provides them with

a comfort level," says Principal June Eressy. "But the most important thing is they get to understand the culture of the school. They get to understand that we are serious about education and that we are serious about them going to college. They need to start thinking about it now to get where they need to be."[8]

Teachers at University Park's August Academy accomplish that goal through a combination of overt messages and subtle lessons that emphasize not only academics but also the values and behaviors the school expects of students. "We work on interdisciplinary units during that time," Eressy explains. "I wanted the kids to be reading a book they could finish in three weeks, because in my experience a lot of urban kids don't finish what they start, so I want them to learn right from the get go: 'You start it, you finish it.'"[9]

University Park establishes a "definition of the situation" that tells students they are capable young people who *will* work hard and go to college. The results are impressive. Although three quarters of University Park's students are low income, compared with only about 30 percent statewide, 90 percent of the school's 10th graders scored proficient or advanced on the Massachusetts mathematics assessment in 2005, beating a statewide 29 percent by a huge margin.[10] And all of its students get accepted to college, with most going on to four-year institutions.[11]

Still, although many effective schools couple an ambitious academic ethos with warm, caring, and supportive relationships, Eressy warns that schools too often focus on nurturing alone. "There are too many schools that have succeeded in building warm and caring and nurturing places for kids but have failed to translate that into a culture of high expectations," she says. "That doesn't do the kids any good."[12] Research bears out her assertion. A large study of middle school climate involving 30,000 students in Chicago Public Schools found that social support has a

positive effect on academic achievement but only when coupled with a climate of strong "academic press."[13]

A school's culture sends signals not only to students but also to staff. Teachers and school leaders also must work to build positive norms related to their own work. According to Robert Marzano, this part of a school's culture has to do with professionalism and collegiality—whether teachers believe and act as if they can achieve positive outcomes for students and whether they support each other, working collaboratively to achieve common goals.[14] In a study of social relations in Chicago elementary schools in the 1990s, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider found that one powerful factor affecting school improvement was whether staff in the school trusted each other.[15] Marzano advises schools to take a proactive approach to establishing a professional culture—defining norms and expectations clearly, creating governance procedures that give teachers an active role in decision making, and ensuring that teachers can engage in meaningful professional development focused on improving classroom instruction in the subjects they teach.[16]

Building a strong culture is not an overnight task. According to Bryk and Schneider, "Relational trust is not something that can be achieved simply through some workshop, retreat, or form of sensitivity training, although all of these can be helpful. Rather, relational trust is forged in daily social exchanges. Trust grows over time through exchanges where the expectations held for others are validated in action."[17] Creating and maintaining a strong culture—for students and teachers alike—also depends on their understanding of "the definition of the situation" defined earlier. "For relational trust to develop and be sustained," say Byrk and Schneider, both staff and students "must be able to make sense of their work together in terms of what they understand as the primary purpose of the school: Why are we really here?"[18]

Making It "Positive": Vision and Values

As Elmont and University Park illustrate, at the heart of every positive culture is a positive vision for students and staff. But vision can be a very vague and fuzzy concept, leading to vague and fuzzy definitions of the situation. What is vision really, and what are its pieces and parts?

One useful definition of vision comes from James Collins and Jerry Porras, who conducted a research study of "visionary companies" that had sustained successful outcomes over long periods of time. They say that an organization's vision first consists of a well-defined "core ideology." That ideology includes a "core purpose" as well as a set of fundamental values and beliefs, the "essential and enduring tenets" of an organization.[19]

Do effective schools differ *measurably* from other schools in the fundamental values and beliefs shared by their staff members? Two years ago, the Hay Group set out to answer that question. The organization asked several thousand teachers across 134 randomly selected schools to participate in a "culture sort," a group exercise in which participants work together to arrange statements of belief and values in order of priority.

The study found that staff members in both high-performing and low-performing[20] schools ranked "measuring and monitoring results" at the top of their lists. But high-performing schools also prioritized "a hunger for improvement," "raising capability—helping people learn," "focusing on the value added," "promoting excellence—pushing the boundaries of achievement," and "making sacrifices to put pupils first." In contrast, low-performing schools valued statements such as "warmth—humour—repartee—feet on the ground," "recognising personal circumstances—making allowances—toleration—it's the effort that counts,"

and "creating a pleasant and collegial working environment."[21]

The second component in an organization's vision, according to Collins and Porras, consists of an "envisioned future"—a clear picture of what the organization expects to look like and what it wants to have accomplished five, 10, or even 15 years from the present. In many effective schools, the envisioned future encompasses *graduates* as well as the organization itself. Where does the school staff expect students to be five, 10, or 15 years after they graduate? The answer to that question will shape how teachers work and the messages they send to students.

Making It "Strong": All about Alignment

A school's culture—positive or negative—stems from its vision and its established values. But whether the culture is *strong* or *weak* depends on the actions, traditions, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals that are closely aligned with that vision. In their study of visionary companies, Collins and Porras found that "Many executives thrash about with mission statements and vision statements […] that evoke the response 'True, but who cares?' […] Building a visionary company requires 1% vision and 99% alignment."[22]

Some schools have a generally "positive" culture that is focused on student achievement and success but too weak to motivate students and teachers. For example, school leaders might talk about values and beliefs, but no follow-up actions, traditions, ceremonies, or rituals reinforce those messages. Similarly, a teacher might be told that improving professional practice is a value but find that the school budget provides few resources for professional development or be asked to embrace a more collegial culture only to find that no time is designated for teachers to meet and plan together. In such situations,

individuals are likely to arrive at their own definitions of the situation, which makes work toward common goals difficult. Even if the climate is pleasant and orderly, it is likely that teachers quietly disagree on what their primary responsibilities are and what the main purpose of the institution is, making improvement planning and instructional collaboration nonproductive. Students receive little guidance and are left to come up with their own answers to the question, "What am I here for?" Although most follow the rules, academic effort is considered voluntary.

In contrast, effective schools make sure that even the smallest aspects of daily life align with the core ideology and envisioned future. No symbol or ceremony is too minor to be coopted into serving the larger vision. For example, fifth graders who enter Washington, D.C.'s, Key Academy middle school this fall will be asked to identify themselves as members of the "Class of 2018"—the year their teachers expect them to graduate from *college*. Visitors to the school are encouraged to ask students what class they are in, and students invariably provide their intended college graduation date. Teachers talk frequently about what college they attended and their diplomas hang on the walls of the school. Identification cards outside teachers' classrooms list their alma maters along with their names.

To be sure, many middle schools encourage students to begin thinking about college. But Key Academy envelops students in a ubiquitous and infectious set of symbols, ceremonies, and traditions that foster *ambition* and *effort* focused on the unifying vision—preparing every single student to go to college. Not surprisingly, the school's mostly low-income African-American students consistently garner the highest middle school assessment results in the city, and many of its graduates win admission (and sometimes substantial scholarships) to competitive public and private high schools.

Staff members in effective schools also see concrete signs that reinforce the school's professed culture. If the school values raising student achievement, then the most proficient teachers are assigned to the hardest-to-reach students. If family involvement is valued, all staff learn how to engage in partnerships with parents. The core ideology is monitored, reinforced, and supported.

Hobby of the Hay Group lists five kinds of "reinforcing behaviors" as follows that send strong signals about vision and values:

- *Rituals:* celebrations and ceremonies, rites of passage, and shared quirks and mannerisms.

- *Hero Making:* role models, hierarchies, public rewards, and mentors.

- *Storytelling:* shared humor, common anecdotes, foundation myths, and both oral and written history.

- *Symbolic Display:* decoration, artwork, trophies, and architecture.

- *Rules:* etiquette, formal rules, taboos, and tacit permissions.[23]

At Dayton's Bluff Elementary School in St. Paul, Minnesota, for example, teachers post the state academic standards and student writing that meets them on bulletin boards. Many schools do something similar, but Dayton's Bluff teachers take one extra step—translating the standards from educator language into "kid language" in order to ensure that the bulletin boards send signals to students and not just to teachers or parents in the school. Thus, the standards that reads, "By the end of the year, we expect fourth-grade students to be able to produce a narrative account that engages the reader by establishing

a context, creating a point of view, and otherwise developing reader interest" bears the translation, "The beginning makes the reader want to keep reading your memoir."[24] In schools that simply post the standards as they are written, the standards are a symbolic display targeting teachers and other staff. At Dayton's Bluff, they are a symbolic display targeting students.

When alignment is tight and the culture is strong, new students and staff members pick up on an organization's true vision and values almost immediately, whether the culture is negative or positive. According to Peterson and Deal, students "know things are different in a positive or negative way—something more than just rules or procedures." Teachers are quick to get the message too. "Within the first hour of a new assignment, teachers begin to sift through the deep silt of expectations, norms, and rituals to learn what it means to become an accepted member of the school."[25]

Conclusion

As educators come under greater pressure to achieve much better and more equitable student outcomes, they will need to leverage every tool available to them, including organizational culture. Of course, no one suggests that changing culture is simple, easy, or quick. As Michael Fullan puts it, "Reculturing is a contact sport that involves hard, labor-intensive work."[26] But it is a sport that must be played more aggressively if our schools are to achieve the kinds of results we now expect of them. The first step is to help educators recognize that having a strong, positive culture means much more than just safety and order.

Endnotes

[1] Edmonds, R. (1979, March/April). *Some schools work and more can. Social Policy. 9*(5), 28–32. (p. 32)

[2] Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (pp. 1–3)

[3] Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (pp. 7–8)

[4] Hobby, R. (2004, March). *A culture for learning: An investigation into the values and beliefs associated with effective schools.* London: Hay Group Management. (p. 6). Retrieved October 3, 2006, from http://www.haygroup. co.uk/downloads/Culture_for_Learning.pdf

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[12] Eressy, J. (2005, September). *The University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts.* Presentation given at the Alliance for Excellent Education's High School Achievement Forum, Washington, DC. Audio file retrieved October 3, 2006, from http://www.all4ed.org/events/UPCS.html

[13] Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. B. (1999, Winter). Social support and achievement for young adolescents in Chicago: The role of school academic press. *American Educational Research Journal, 36*(4). 907–945.

[14] Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (pp. 60–61)

[15] Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (p. xiv). In 1994, the researches conducted surveys of educators in Chicago public schools and analyzed those findings along with data on student achievement: "A relatively small number of survey items, on what we began to call relational trust, sharply distinguished schools moving forward under reform from those that were not."

[16] Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (p. 65)

[17] Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (pp. 136–137)

[18] Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (p. 137)

[19] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1998). Building your company's vision. In *Harvard business review on change* (pp. 21–54). Boston: Harvard Business School Press. (p. 21)

[20] Schools were sorted into performance categories based on a "value-added" analysis of three years of student assessment data.

[21] Hobby, R. (2004, March). *A culture for learning: An investigation into the values and beliefs associated with effective schools.* London: Hay Group Management. (p. 67). The full report, which includes a step-by-step description of the Culture Sort activity as well as a list of the 30 values statements the Hay Group used in its research, can be found online at http://www.haygroup.co.uk/downloads/Culture_for_Learning.pdf

[22] Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (1998). Building your company's vision. In *Harvard business review on change* (pp. 21–54). Boston: Harvard Business School Press. (p. 49)

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This is the sixth in a series of issue briefs to be written for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement during 2006. These commentaries are meant to help readers think beyond simple compliance with federal law or basic implementation of programs: What unacknowledged challenges must educators and leaders confront to help schools operate more effectively and to sustain improvement over the long run? In what ways does the conventional wisdom about teaching, learning, and school improvement run counter to current research and get in the way of making good decisions? What are the emerging next-generation issues that educators will face next year and five years from now? Readers can visit **www.centerforcsri.org** to obtain other papers in this series and to access additional information on school reform and improvement.

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