

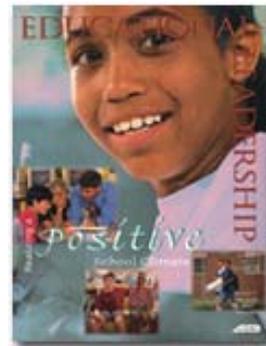
# Educational Leadership

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Realizing a Positive School Climate Pages 28-30

## How Leaders Influence the Culture of Schools

**School leaders—principals, teachers, and parents—are the key to eliminating toxic culture and building positive culture. Four exemplary schools provide a glimpse of what this kind of leadership provides.**



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*Kent D. Peterson and Terrence E. Deal*

Parents, teachers, principals, and students often sense something special and undefined about the schools they attend. For decades, the terms climate and ethos have been used to capture this pervasive, yet elusive, element we call "culture."

Although hard to define and difficult to put a finger on, culture is extremely powerful. This ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools, too often over-looked or ignored, is actually one of the most significant features of any educational enterprise. Culture influences everything that goes on in schools: how staff dress, what they talk about, their willingness to change, the practice of instruction, and the emphasis given student and faculty learning (Deal & Peterson, 1994; Firestone & Wilson, 1985; Newmann & Associates, 1996).

What is school culture, and who shapes it? Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that has built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools. This highly enduring web of influence binds the school together and makes it special. It is up to school leaders—principals, teachers, and often parents—to help identify, shape, and maintain strong, positive, student-focused cultures. Without these supportive cultures, reforms will wither, and student learning will slip.

We have learned about the importance of school culture in a variety of ways. Over the past dozen years, we have conducted studies of school leadership, restructuring, and culture building and we have consulted with educators in hundreds of schools in the United States and abroad. Although interviewing staff highlights the importance of culture, it has often been through site visits that we have seen the power of positive cultures in action.

### The Blight of Toxic Cultures

Unfortunately, some schools have, over time, become unproductive and toxic. These are schools where staffs are extremely fragmented, where the purpose of serving students has

been lost to the goal of serving the adults, where negative values and hopelessness reign.

For example, in one high school, disgruntled staff came to faculty meetings ready to attack new ideas, criticize those teachers concerned about student achievement, and make fun of any staff who volunteered to go to conferences or workshops. Teachers who support change talked about the meetings as battlegrounds, the Sarajevos of education, where snipers and attacks were the norm. Negative staff had effectively sabotaged any attempts at collegial improvement.

Even good schools often harbor toxic subcultures, oppositional groups of staff or parents who want to spread a sense of frustration, anomie, and hopelessness. Toxic schools are places where negativity dominates conversations, interactions, and planning; where the only stories recounted are of failure, the only heroes are anti-heroes.

No one wants to live and work in these kinds of schools. But it takes leadership, time, and focus to rebuild these festering institutions. Happily, most schools are not this far gone, though many have cultural patterns that do not serve staff or students.

## **The Opportunities of Positive Cultures**

In contrast to the poisonous places described above, many schools have strong, positive cultures. These are schools

- where staff have a shared sense of purpose, where they pour their hearts into teaching;
- where the underlying norms are of collegiality, improvement, and hard work;
- where student rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishment, teacher innovation, and parental commitment;
- where the informal network of storytellers, heroes, and heroines provides a social web of information, support, and history;
- where success, joy, and humor abound.

Strong positive cultures are places with a shared sense of what is important, a shared ethos of caring and concern, and a shared commitment to helping students learn. Some examples might illuminate the possibilities.

Ganado Primary School in Ganado, Arizona, was once identified as one of the worst schools in the state. Now the culture is one that supports learning for its Navajo students, professional innovation for its staff, and meaningful parent involvement for its community. The principal, Sigmund Boloz, and his staff regularly meet for "Curriculum Conversations" about new instructional techniques, and they discuss new books during "Teachers as Readers" meetings. The school acclaims student accomplishment of all types during the "Celebrating Quality Learning Awards." The building, whose architecture symbolizes the four directions of Navajo beliefs, has student work and the rugs of skilled Ganado weavers displayed everywhere.

Joyce Elementary School in Detroit, Michigan, has developed a strong, student-focused culture. The school is located in an economically depressed area, but its culture is rich with hope and support. Over the past 20 years, Principal Leslie Brown Jr. has worked with his staff and

parents to build a place that values its students, encourages professional improvement, and celebrates success. Regular classes for parents support their interest in learning. Staff hold high expectations for themselves and students. Joy and caring fill the hallways. A special honors ceremony with speeches, medallions for the students, and time to reflect on personal achievement attracts hundreds of community members each year.

Powerful informal professional norms characterize Central Park East Secondary School in New York City. Under the leadership of Deborah Meier, the staff and students developed a school culture with a clear vision about schooling for secondary students, linked with the coalition for Essential Schools for ideas and support (Meier, 1995). Staff exhibit a passionate professionalism and enjoy extensive opportunities for collegial dialogue, problem solving, and community building. The culture encourages student involvement in community service and teacher commitment to continual instructional development and design. The final student performance assessment remains a powerful tradition that reinforces a dedication to excellence and allegiance to learning.

At Hollibrook Elementary in Spring Branch, Texas, ceremonies and traditions reinforce student learning. Under the leadership of Suzanne Still and staff, and supported through ties to the Accelerated Schools Model, the school developed numerous traditions to create and foster increased student success (Hopfenberg, 1995). For example, faculty meetings became a hotbed of professional dialogue and discussion of practice and published research. "Fabulous Friday" was created to provide students with a wide assortment of courses and activities. A "Parent University" furnishes courses and materials while building trust between the school and the largely Hispanic community. Norms of collegiality, improvement, and connection reinforce and symbolize what the school is about.

In many other schools, local heroes and heroines, exemplars of core values, provide models of what everyone should be striving for. These deeply committed staff come in early, are always willing to meet with students, and are constantly upgrading their skills.

How do these strong cultures come about? School leaders—including principals, teachers, and often parents and community members—shape and maintain positive values and shared purpose.

## **The Role of School Leaders**

School leaders from every level are key to shaping school culture. Principals communicate core values in their everyday work. Teachers reinforce values in their actions and words. Parents bolster spirit when they visit school, participate in governance, and celebrate success. In the strongest schools, leadership comes from many sources.

School leaders do several important things when sculpting culture. First, they *read the culture*—its history and current condition. Leaders should know the deeper meanings embedded in the school before trying to reshape it. Second, leaders *uncover and articulate core values*, looking for those that buttress what is best for students and that support student-centered professionalism. It is important to identify which aspects of the culture are destructive and which are constructive. Finally, leaders work to *fashion a positive context*, reinforcing cultural

elements that are positive and modifying those that are negative and dysfunctional. Positive school cultures are never monolithic or overly conforming, but core values and shared purpose should be pervasive and deep.

What are some of the specific ways school leaders shape culture?

- They communicate core values in what they say and do.
- They honor and recognize those who have worked to serve the students and the purpose of the school.
- They observe rituals and traditions to support the school's heart and soul.
- They recognize heroes and heroines and the work these exemplars accomplish.
- They eloquently speak of the deeper mission of the school.
- They celebrate the accomplishments of the staff, the students, and the community.
- They preserve the focus on students by recounting stories of success and achievement.

Examples abound in the schools we have already described. At Ganado Primary, Boloz and his staff constantly share stories of the many changes they have made in the school. At Joyce Elementary, Brown and his faculty celebrate the successes of their students and parents in ritual "clap outs" and larger ceremonies. At Central Park East, school leaders meet regularly with students to communicate caring and support for hard work. Hollibrook Elementary holds regular discussion groups in parents' homes to cement ties and build trust. In small and large ways, school leaders refashion the negative sides of school culture and reinforce the positive aspects.

The role of school leaders in the crafting of cultures is pervasive (Deal & Peterson, 1994). Their words, their nonverbal messages, their actions, and their accomplishments all shape culture. They are models, potters, poets, actors, and healers. They are historians and anthropologists. They are visionaries and dreamers. Without the attention of leaders, school cultures can become toxic and unproductive. By paying fervent attention to the symbolic side of their schools, leaders can help develop the foundation for change and success.

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**Kent D. Peterson** is Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Educational Administration, 1025 W. Johnson St., Madison, WI 53706 (e-mail: [kpeterson@mail.soemadison.wisc.edu](mailto:kpeterson@mail.soemadison.wisc.edu)). **Terrence E. Deal** is Professor at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Department of Educational Leadership, Nashville, TN 37203.

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