Pull out negativity by its roots

Those who grow healthy school cultures must root out weeds of bad culture

By RICK DuFOUR and BECKY BURNETTE

The question facing educational leaders is not “Will our school have a culture?” but “Will we make a conscious effort to shape our culture?”

The culture of a school — the assumptions, habits, expectations, and beliefs of the school’s staff — exists as clearly as the school building itself.

But, while principals are routinely advised to “build” a strong culture, cultures cannot be built. Architects and engineers construct a building using a linear, sequential model. Phase one must be addressed before moving to phase two. The building process is both visible and time-bound. Eventually building ends, and maintenance begins. The building is relatively permanent, specifically constructed to resist external pressures such as weather. Finally, a building is not constructed by accident. Unless there is a decision to erect the structure and purposeful steps taken to carry out that decision, the building will not exist.

None of this is true with culture. Tending to culture is nonlinear and requires rapid responses to unanticipated problems as they arise. Cultural norms are typically invisible, implicit, and often unexamined, made up of scores of subtleties in the day-to-day workings of the school. Culture is ongoing. At no point can it be said that the culture is complete and permanent. In brief, school culture is organic rather than static.

The more accurate metaphor for the process of shaping culture is not building a building but cultivating a garden. A garden is nonlinear, with some elements dying out as others are being born. A garden is influenced both by internal and external factors. Its most vital elements occur underground and are not readily visible. Most importantly, a garden is fragile and very high maintenance. Even the most flourishing garden will eventually become overgrown if it is not nurtured. Flowers left unattended eventually yield to weeds. The same can be said of school cultures. Unless educators carefully tend to their schools’ cultures by shaping the assumptions, expectations, habits, and beliefs that constitute the norm within them, toxic weeds will eventually dominate.

Those who hope to grow strong, healthy school cultures must remain vigilant in rooting out the weeds of bad culture, including unwillingness to accept responsibility, working in isolation, turf

Rick DuFour is superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School District 125. You can contact him at Two Stevenson Drive, Lincolnshire, IL 60069, (847) 634-4000 ext. 268, fax (847) 634-0239, email: rdufour@district125.k12.il.us.

Becky Burnette is principal of Boones Mill Elementary School in the Franklin County Public Schools in Franklin County, Va. You can contact her at 265 Taylors Road, Boones Mill, VA 24065, (540) 334-4000, fax (540) 334-4001, email: bburnette@frco.k12.va.us.
The premise that the causes of learning lie exclusively or predominantly outside the sphere of influence of educators diminishes our profession. More importantly, this outlook breeds the cynicism and pessimism that represent the mortal enemies of any school improvement initiative.

To improve self-efficacy, schools can:

- Create cognitive dissonance.
  School leaders can help staff members question their assumptions by presenting evidence contradicting those assumptions. Volumes of research studies demonstrate that what happens in school makes a difference in student achievement. Leaders should share those findings and talk with staff about the studies.

- Internal and external benchmarking also creates dissonance. At one high school, for example, data helped staff discover that student test scores had climbed in mathematics and writing, but remained flat in reading. Data also revealed that reading scores in other similar area schools were significantly higher and steadily improving. The principals presented this information to staff members to analyze and discuss, helping them rethink their assumptions about their students’ abilities.

- Create small victories.
  A garden cannot be rushed. Certain elements in the growth cycle must be addressed, and the process requires patience. Leaders must demonstrate that patience and take the long view, but must also recognize the importance of identifying, achieving, and celebrating evidence of growth along the way. Effective leaders plan for short-term wins; they do not just hope for them (Kotter, 1996). They establish a goal of particular interest to the faculty, take the necessary steps to accomplish that goal, and announce its achievement with fanfare. As a result, wary staff members look more favorably on the initiative and momentum begins to build.

- Celebrate success.
  An organization’s culture can be found in the stories it tells itself. For 17 years, a part of every faculty meeting at Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., has been devoted to sharing success stories. Individual teachers are recognized for their students’ extraordinary accomplishments, teaching teams are recognized for reaching student achievement goals in their courses, and the entire faculty is recognized for evidence of steadily improving student performance on indicators the school tracks. The principal typically tells the stories, although sometimes teachers supply them. Often, the stories are presented in the voices of the students themselves. Each year, every senior completes a survey on the teacher who has made the greatest impact on his or her life. Excerpts from the responses are presented to the entire staff in an internal memorandum every six weeks. Stevenson staff members are constantly reminded by the students themselves of a teacher’s ability to make a positive difference in students’ lives. It would be virtually impossible for Stevenson teachers to operate on the assumption that teachers cannot impact students’ achievement when they are constantly surrounded by such success stories.

- WEED 2: WE PREFER TO WORK BY OURSELVES.
  Schools have traditionally allowed the weeds of professional isolation to run rampant. Teachers decide what to do based on their own knowledge of content, instruction, assessment, and classroom management. Isolation is alive and well due to lack of time, incompatible schedules, personal routines, and deeply rooted traditions. Yet teachers cannot thrive isolated from their colleagues and denied access to fresh ideas and insights.

  A collaborative culture doesn’t result from the principal’s hope or invitation. A collaborative culture results from a systematic effort to engage staff in ongoing, daily, job-embedded professional growth in an environment designed to ensure collaboration.

  Toward that end, schools can:

  - Cultivate effective teams.
    Schools plant the seeds of a collaborative culture when they develop the capacity of teachers to work together in teams. Every teacher should be assigned to a team that focuses on student learning. The team’s structure (course specific, grade level, interdepartmental, vertical, etc.) is less important than having all teachers on a team with student learning as the focus.

  - Provide time for collaboration.
    A school isn’t likely to have a collaborative culture unless the principal creates a master schedule with a consistent time each week for teams to work together during the school day. Principals should protect the collaborative time for teamwork just as teachers protect students’ instructional time.

  - Ask each team to develop operational protocols.
Teachers unaccustomed to working together benefit from establishing the norms or protocols that will guide the behaviors of team members. Team protocols should take the form of commitments members are prepared to make to one another in carrying out their work as a team. Examples might include: “We will be on time for all team meetings; we will come to meetings prepared with all necessary materials; we will be active listeners and fully engaged at all our meetings.”

Insist that each team establishes and pursues SMART goals, and provide each team with relevant feedback regarding its progress.

Teachers begin to function as a team when members of the group work interdependently to achieve a common goal. When principals insist that each team identifies a SMART goal (Strategic and specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, Time-bound), they increase the likelihood that individual teachers will begin to function as a team. When they also create systems to provide each team member with relevant information regarding the extent to which it is making progress toward its goals, they promote a focus on results.

**Monitor and celebrate the work of teams.**

There is much wisdom in the management adage, “What gets monitored gets done.” Principals must do more than provide teachers with time to meet in their teams and hope teams use the time effectively. They must monitor the work of teams by insisting they produce specific documents and artifacts that demonstrate the collective efforts of the team. Examples might include written goals, common assessments, rubrics, analysis of student performance, specific strategies to improve current results, etc. Principals must then provide feedback, encourage, redirect, and publicly celebrate the collective efforts of teams.

Ridding the school culture of the weeds of isolation takes continuous effort from school leaders — but the resulting collaborative culture provides a fertile soil for significant gains in staff and student learning.

**WEED 3: WE MUST PROTECT OUR TERRITORY.**

When the school’s culture emphasizes staking out your plot and protecting your turf, when it focuses on what divides rather than what unites constituencies, the weeds of territorialism will eventually overtake the school. The “us vs. them” mentality can take many forms. Teachers can view each other as competitors. Administrators and staff can approach each other as adversaries. Parents can be depicted as meddling nuisances.

**To resist turf wars, schools can:**

- **Find common ground.**
  
  Any complex organization will include those with contrasting opinions and unique perspectives. Leaders of a learning community acknowledge differences, but concentrate on identifying a few “big ideas” for constituencies to rally around. They establish these big ideas by helping everyone understand best practices and presenting information that enables the staff and community to assess how the school measures up to those practices. Guiding principles won’t free a school from problems or disagreements. But commonly held big ideas can provide a lens through which to view the problems and can help people treat each other with a greater modicum of grace.

  For example, a school’s teachers, administrators, and parents might agree to endorse these three big ideas:

  1. Because the school’s primary purpose is to teach students, all proposals, policies, and programs should be evaluated on the degree to which they promote student learning.

  2. Each student’s learning should be closely monitored, and steps should be taken at school and at home to provide additional time and support for students who are struggling with the material.

  3. Schools get better results when teachers work collaboratively with each other and partner with parents.
    - **Ask for commitments.**

    Even if people rally around common concepts they hope will shape the school’s culture, they tend to focus on the failure of other groups to act in accordance with those concepts. Principals can help groups shift their focus from the deficiencies of others to their own sphere of influence by asking each group’s members to spell out what they are prepared to do to bring the critical concepts to life. A faculty that identifies specific actions and behaviors it expects of its members is more likely to grow a healthy culture than a faculty that focuses on others’ failures.

**WEED 4: WE FOCUS ON ACTIVITY RATHER THAN RESULTS.**

Just as gardeners must know when and how much fertilizer to apply to nourish, rather than burn out and destroy individual plants, leaders must carefully concentrate and focus interventions and initiatives to contribute to a strong culture. Too many rob a staff of energy, kill school improvement efforts, and lead to a culture that answers new calls for action with a “this-too-shall-pass” mentality. Schools that embrace every educational fad sow frustration and discontent. Michael Fullan calls these schools “Christmas tree schools.” Like Christmas tree ornaments, the changes in these schools are fragile, dangling precariously, unable to survive an ill wind. When schools focus on the quality and depth of their improvement efforts, and when they judge the impact of those efforts on results rather than the number of activities, changes will become organic — “of the tree” not “on the tree.”

**To build a culture that focuses on results, schools can:**

- **Say no!**

  Effective school leaders are a buffer...
between staff and those well-intentioned souls (legislators, governors, reformers, central office, parents, etc.) who want to press their agendas on the schools. They recognize that the world’s capacity to generate ideas to improve schools exceeds the staff’s capacity to implement meaningful change. Thus, they work with staff to clarify a shared vision of the school they are trying to create. They identify a few initiatives that offer the greatest leverage for moving the school in that direction. Most importantly, they focus collective efforts and energies on those few initiatives and resist the temptation to pursue other worthwhile projects.

- Develop targets and timelines.

Schools have a cultural bias to focus on the means rather than ends, on activities rather than results. Leaders can help overcome this cultural predisposition by 1) establishing schoolwide SMART goals that identify how the school will assess its improvement initiatives and 2) asking each team of teachers to translate schoolwide goals into team goals. When schools focus on a few critical goals and establish benchmarks to monitor progress toward these goals, they are less susceptible to being overrun by random acts of innovation.

CONCLUSION

Every school has a culture, whether or not the principal is mindful of shaping it. Weedy cultures are low maintenance. Flourishing cultures require persistent cultivation and constant care.

Principals are well-positioned to cultivate their schools’ cultures. Cultivating a professional learning culture takes ongoing, never-ending work.

Those who are able to sustain the effort will find that the fruits of their labors produce much more than a well-tended garden. The seeds they sow will make a difference in the lives of both students and staff.

REFERENCE


By Your Own Design: A TEACHER’S PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GUIDE

The National Staff Development Council and the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse for Mathematics and Science Education have created this collection of resources to assist teachers in creating, implementing, and evaluating professional learning plans.

Copies of the CD-ROM are available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, — [www.nsdc.org/bookstore.htm] — or by calling the NSDC business office at (800) 727-7288. Request item T1.

$10, NSDC MEMBERS    $12.50, NON-MEMBERS.