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Student learning grows in professional cultures

By Joan Richardson

An article in a professional publication describes how a variety of schools have used study groups to explore topics of interest to teachers. Two teachers reading the article react quite differently.

One says, "Great idea. The teachers in my school would love to try that. How would we get started?"

Another groans. "That might work in your school but it would never work in my school."

Each teacher has just identified an element of the culture in her school.

Culture is, simply, the way we do things around here. No teacher needs a handbook to know "what's right and what's rude" in the school in which she works. Students, teachers, and parents may not be able to define a school's culture, but they know what is important and what is expected in that school.

In their upcoming book, *Shaping Culture: The School Leader's Role*, Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson describe culture this way: "Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have been built up over

time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges."

Every church, business, community, even every block in your neighborhood has its own culture. Schools are no different. A school's culture may support teachers who try to improve their teaching or it may ridicule anyone who tries to stand out from the crowd. It might encourage teachers to work on projects together or it might punish anyone who seeks such collegial support. The culture may encourage teachers to set high standards for students or it may send a message that "these kids can't be expected to do much better."

Why does culture matter? For that, Kent Peterson has a very simple answer. "In study after study, where culture did not support and encourage reform, it did not happen. It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of culture and its relationship to improved student learning. You have to have the structures, a curriculum, appropriate assessments – all of that. But if you don't have a strong and healthy school culture, none of the rest will matter," he said.

In their 1985 article, Jon Saphier and Matthew
Continued on Page 2

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Culture

The 12 norms of a healthy school culture

- 1 Collegiality
- 2 Experimentation
- 3 High expectations
- 4 Trust and confidence
- 5 Tangible support
- 6 Reaching out to knowledge base
- 7 Appreciation and recognition
- 8 Caring, celebration, and humor
- 9 Involvement in decision making
- 10 Protection of what's important
- 11 Traditions
- 12 Honest, open communication

Source: "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures" by Jon Saphier and Matthew King (*Educational Leadership*, March 1985).

School's culture shapes student learning

Continued from Page One

King identified 12 norms which they said affected school improvement. (See column at left.)

"If certain norms of school culture are strong, improvements in instruction will be significant, continuous, and widespread; if these norms are weak, improvements will be, at best, infrequent, random, and slow," they said.

Peterson believes schools must begin by identifying the norms and beliefs in the school. He suggests answering these questions:

What are the rituals, traditions, and ceremonies in your school?

Who are the heroes in your school?

What stories do you tell about your school?

What symbols, slogans, and images represent your school?

How do you recognize student achievement?

How do you recognize staff growth?

Next, identify norms and beliefs that the staff wants to reinforce or change.

Again, Peterson poses a series of questions to help a staff:

Do the daily actions of teachers and principals support your underlying core values?

Do the history and stories that are told about your school support your core values?

What rituals and ceremonies would reinforce the key values in your school?

EXEMPLARY SCHOOL CULTURES

Each of this year's winners of the U.S. Department of Education Model Professional Development Awards can point to a time when the school's culture began to shift. (See the fall issue of the *JSD* to learn more about these winning schools and districts.) Like other USDOE winners, Ganado (Arizona) Intermediate School principal Susan Stropko said she focused on cultural issues before trying to address issues of student learning. "I went in knowing the culture had to be changed. They were not feeling very heard or cared

about. Nothing was going to change in that school until that changed," she said.

At Ganado, the process began by having grade level teams talk about their frustrations over lunch once a week, a step that Peterson endorses. "People need a chance to believe things can get better, they need a positive path, and they need hope," Peterson said.

"These conversations were basically about everything that was wrong. There was real unhappiness. They needed some time to vent," Stropko said.

Stropko joined in those conversations. "I did not go off on my own. I sat there and I listened. I was trying to establish my own credibility as a listener and as an administrator who would value what I heard and would work to get teachers what they said they needed."

These staff conversations continued until the Christmas break. "It was only after all of that that we could talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the school," she said.

"Their own changes were harder to talk about than the changes they wanted me to make. Once they laid out what they wanted to achieve, then we found out what we wanted to learn in order to do that," she said.

Peterson said a school needs to identify its own culture and say openly that not everyone will like working in this school. "If you've been going along for years with established structures and an established culture, it's very hard to re-examine what you're about. There is pain in giving up things that are fun and being able to complain without responsibility is part of the fun for some people," he said.

"There are people who don't want to improve their practice. They just don't want to be helped all the time," Peterson said.

Schools that gain the reputation as a "work hard, play hard" school soon will be less attractive to staffers who don't share that attitude and, eventually, he said, the new culture will perpetuate itself.

Doing a history of your school's culture

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This activity will help a school staff understand its present culture and how that culture evolved. It can be used with a school that is examining its culture for the first time or a school that needs to update its understanding of the culture.

TIME: Two hours.

SUPPLIES: Chart paper, markers, masking tape. Optional: yearbooks, copies of school newsletters or annual reports, newspaper clippings about the school, etc.

Directions

1. Ask each member of the group to identify the decade in which they began working at the school: 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, etc.
2. Divide the group according to the decades they identify. (Try to have at least three persons per decade. Put two decades together if necessary.)
3. Give each group at least one sheet of chart paper and ask members to identify the key elements of the decade. Suggest these questions for them to consider: Who were the school leaders – both formal and informal – during that decade? What were the crises and the challenges of the decade? What were the school's successes? What were the prevailing ideologies? What were the main curriculum features at that time? How was the school schedule organized? What clothing, music, and hairstyles were popular at the time?

Give each group 20 to 30 minutes to reminisce and jot down the key events.

4. Ask each group to post its decade's history on the wall. Arrange the decades in chronological order along the wall.
5. Ask the group to reflect aloud about the themes and patterns they see in these lists. Record these on a separate chart. Time: 60-90 minutes.

U
Understand the culture
of the school before

trying to change it.

— *Michael Fullan and*

Andy Hargreaves,

“What’s Worth Fighting For?”

Working Together for

Your School!”

Strategies for strengthening culture

W *What is culture?*
An informal

understanding of the way

we do things around

here, i.e. what keeps the

berd moving in roughly

the right direction.

— Terrence Deal

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This process can be done as a follow-up to the activity on Page 3 or it can be done separately. This activity will help your staff determine its priorities and sharpen its focus on school culture this year.

TIME: 90 minutes.

SUPPLIES: Chart paper, markers, masking tape.

PREPARATION: Provide each staff member with a copy of the article, “Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures” by Jon Saphier and Matthew King (*Educational Leadership*, March 1985). The article identifies the 12 norms of a healthy school culture. Ask them to read it and reflect upon it before your scheduled meeting.

On the day of the meeting, post 12 sheets of chart paper around the room. Label each sheet of paper with one of the 12 norms.

Directions

1. Divide the faculty into 12 groups and assign one norm per group. (See Page 2 for the list of norms.) Ask them to share their ideas about this norm. Time: 5 minutes.
2. While still in the subgroup, have the members list as many suggestions as possible for strengthening that norm in the school. Time: 10 minutes.
3. Ask each group to explain the assigned norm to the entire faculty and provide an example of how it operates in the school today. Ask each group to limit its presentation to two minutes.
4. Then, ask the same group to post its suggestions for strengthening the norm in the school. Solicit suggestions from other group members. Post those as well. Time: 30 minutes.
5. When all norms have been explained and suggestions posted, distribute five stickers to each staff member. Using the stickers, ask staff members to vote for the norms they believe need the greatest attention during the upcoming school year.
6. Tally the number of “votes” given to each norm. Post the votes for staff members to see.
7. Type up the staff suggestions and share them with the school improvement team or other appropriate committee.
8. Set aside time at a school improvement team meeting to discuss each norm and select one or two suggestions for focused attention during the school year.

Developing cultural action plans

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This activity should be done by the staff group at your school that would consider cultural issues, such as a school improvement team, leadership team, or climate committee. At the conclusion of this activity, the group should have an action plan for every norm that your school has agreed to address this year.

TIME: 90 minutes.

SUPPLIES: Chart paper, markers, masking tape.

Directions

1. Before the meeting, use a sheet of chart paper to create one form for each norm your school has agreed to address this year. Post those sheets on the walls of the meeting room. Example:

NORM: _____

What steps will we take to improve?	
When?	
Who will do this?	
What results do we want?	

2. Provide the group with the suggestions resulting from the activity on Page 4. Time: 10 minutes.
3. Ask each group to discuss the suggestions and select the ideas that they believe will do the most to improve that norm in the school. Time: 30 minutes.
4. Fill out each action plan. Time: 30 minutes.
5. Share the completed action plans with the staff and with the school's parents' organization.
6. Implement and monitor progress on the plan throughout the year.

*The only thing
of real importance
that leaders do is
create and manage
culture.*

—Edgar Schein,

*“Organizational Culture
and Leadership”*

Evaluating your school's culture

*Culture building
requires that school*

leaders give attention to

the informal, subtle, and

symbolic aspects of

school life which shape

the beliefs and actions

of each employee within

the system.

— William Cunningham

and Don Gresso

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: This activity will help a staff assess its impact on the school's culture. Although this tool is presented here as an end-of-the-year evaluation tool, it could be easily modified and used as a beginning-of-the-year evaluation.

TIME: Two hours.

SUPPLIES: Chart paper, markers, masking tape.

Directions

- Using a sheet of chart paper, create one panel like the following for each of the 12 norms on Page 2.

<i>This is a strong and healthy norm at our school.</i>				
<u>COLLEGIALITY</u>				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree

- Post the 12 panels around the meeting room.
- Give each staff member 12 stickers and ask them to identify their beliefs about each norm by placing the stickers in the appropriate location on the chart paper. Direct them to use only one sticker per norm.
- When all the stickers have been placed, divide the group into 12 smaller groups (one for each norm) to discuss the results and present them to the entire staff.

If this activity is being done at the beginning of the year, ask the group to focus on answering this question: *What actions do we need to take to improve this norm in our school?*

If this activity is being done at the end of the year, ask the group to answer this question: *What evidence do we have to demonstrate the results we've achieved?*

- Reassemble the larger group. Ask one representative from each of the 12 smaller groups to present their ideas. After the presentation, allow time for additional comments from others who were not in that group. Time: 60 minutes.
- Suggestions from this activity should be shared with the school improvement team as they develop their action plans for the year.

Learning about school culture

*Stimulate your thinking about your school's culture
by reading some of these books and articles*

- ❑ *Assessing School and Classroom Climate* by Judith Arter. A consumer guide that offers educators help in choosing the best instruments for assessing school culture. Order document #ED 295 301 from ERIC Document Reproduction Services, (800) 443-3742 or (703) 440-1400, fax (703) 440-1408. Price: \$16.84.
- ❑ "Building Professional Community in Schools," Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis, and Anthony Bryk, *Issues in Restructuring Schools*, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Issue No. 6, Spring 1994. Reviews critical elements of a healthy school culture.

A copy of the report is available online at www.wcer.wisc.edu/completed/cors/issues_in_restructuring_schools/ISSUES_NO_6_SPRING_1994.pdf
- ❑ *Educational Leadership and School Culture*, edited by Marshall Sashkin and Herbert Walberg. Berkley, Calif.: McCutchan Publishing, 1993. Examines the research on the nature of educational leadership and school culture and how they are related. Order by calling (800) 227-1540. Price: \$33.75.
- ❑ "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures," Jon Saphier and Matthew King, *Educational Leadership*, March 1985. Identifies the 12 norms of a healthy school culture. Check your local library for a copy.
- ❑ *The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture*, by Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1990. Examines the crucial role that principals play in developing and maintaining healthy school cultures. Order document #ED 325914. from ERIC Document Reproduction Services, (800) 443-3742 or (703) 440-1400, fax (703) 440-1408. Price: \$25.95.
- ❑ *Shaping School Culture: The School Leader's Role* by Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998. Provides an in-depth look at the ways that real schools shape their culture. Includes many examples. Available November 1998. Order by calling (800) 274-4434 or fax (800) 569-0443. Price \$33.95.
- ❑ *Transforming School Culture: Stories, Symbols, Values & The Leader's Role* by Stephen Stolp and Stuart Smith, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1995. Synopsizes research while offering numerous examples of schools' experiences with culture changes. Order by calling (800) 438-8841 or fax (541) 346-2334. Price: \$16.50.

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NSDC STAFF

Executive director

Dennis Sparks
1124 W. Liberty St.
Ann Arbor, MI 48103
(734) 998-0574 Fax: (734) 998-0628

Associate executive director

Stephanie Hirsh
16306 Sunset Valley
Dallas, Texas 75248
(972) 818-1450 Fax: (972) 818-1451

Business manager

Shirley Havens
P.O. Box 240
Oxford, Ohio 45056
(513) 523-6029 Fax: (513) 523-0638

Director of publications

Joan Richardson
1128 Nottingham Road
Grosse Pointe Park, Mich. 48230
(313) 824-5061 Fax: (313) 824-5062

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Editor: Joan Richardson

Designer: Susan M. Chevalier

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Principals essential in shaping school culture

Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

Q *I'm a principal but, sometimes, I feel as if the teachers are steering the ship at my school. What is my role in shaping the culture of the school?*

A Teachers must play a crucial role in helping a school fulfill the vision of what a school wants to be, but the principal is an essential part of any change. Principals set the tone for their school every day, every week, and every year – from activities as small as picking up gum wrappers on the school grounds and their promptness in returning telephone calls to issues as large as sharing decision making and pursuing their own professional development.

In their book, *The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture*, (see Page 7 for details), Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson identify six major ways that principals shape the culture, both formally and informally:

- 1) Developing a sense of what the school should be and could be;
- 2) Recruiting and selecting staff whose values fit with the school's;

3) Resolving conflicts, disputes, and problems directly as a way of shaping values;

4) Communicating values and beliefs in daily routines and behaviors;

5) Identifying and articulating stories that communicate shared values; and

6) Nurturing the traditions, ceremonies, rituals, and symbols that communicate and reinforce the school culture.

Since leaders must be models of the changes they seek, take time to reflect about your own attitudes and actions. Do you have a personal vision of what the school should be? Have you communicated that vision to your staff? How have you done that? What stories and anecdotes about the school do you share with your staff, with others in the school district, with your friends, and with parents?

Network with other principals. Read the stories of other principals who have struggled to reshape their schools. Their stories will provide you with guidance — and perhaps inspire you to continue the hard work that you're doing.

Send your questions to Dr. Developer, 1128 Nottingham Road, Grosse Pointe Park, MI 48230.

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