Framing the School Culture
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Culture might be an elusive concept for some. Yet, it is a concept that should hold a place of significance in our schools and classrooms.

Roland Barth, in his article, <u>The Culture Builder</u> said, "Probably the most important—and the most difficult job of an instructional leader is to change the prevailing culture of a school." Is that true? From my personal experience, I tend to agree with him.

In my opinion, culture is the prevailing key toward improving student achievement. As educators, we love to put new programs and initiatives in place thinking that the next "big thing" is going to solve our problems. We love to talk about what we will do next year and how things will be better under our next plan. Yet, few educational leaders establish a plan to change the prevailing culture because few educational leaders elevate their culture to the level of significance that it should hold.

Improving student success begins with an honest reflection of the current school culture. Barth goes on to say, "A school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the president of the country, the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal, teachers, and parents can ever have." If that is true, and I believe it is, then most of our school improvement efforts are misguided. School improvement plans rarely, if ever, address the issues of the school culture. Why? Mostly because the school's culture is based predominantly on the adults. In essence, the culture is us – it's who WE are.

The Resilient Culture
Improving a school's culture begins with an honest reflection of who we are and what we believe our job to be. Every school already has a culture and it is already acceptable by the majority of the people working in that culture. We know it is accepted by the people in that culture because nobody talks about it.

New teachers assimilate within days into "the way we do things around here." Even school leaders who might have an internal mission to improve student results or change the status quo, are quickly brought to their knees if they begin changing too much of the culture. "That's not the way it's always been done" or "You're causing too much change" or "That just won't work in this school."

"Culture trumps strategy" is a phrase that has often been used in businesses (not education). What they mean is that the culture of the organization has the ability to support or undermine the results they seek. Businesses want to improve their products, support their customers, or build their organization. When they push for a culture change is normally tied to competition and staying relevant. Without changes in their culture they may find themselves losing market share and even the dissolution of their business. For most businesses, culture improvement is the only way they can stay in business.

One of the easiest ways to build a new culture is to build something new. That may be starting a new business, opening a new school, or hiring a completely new staff. When that happens, the culture can be designed from the ground up. Yet there are few times in life when a leader has the opportunity to frame a beginning like that. Instead, the majority of leadership challenges, especially in schools, deals with improving or changing the prevailing culture while that current culture is running full steam.

A culture is felt the moment someone enters a building or talks to an employee. Let's use churches as an example. There is a different feeling from a cathedral than from a country church. There is a different feeling based on the pastor or minister and what they believe. There is a different feeling from the physical setup, window, chairs, lighting, etc. There is a different feeling from who attends – or who does not attend. But each location and each culture normally have a purpose that meets a certain need. The crowning of a king is probably not going to happen in the country church but is more likely to happen in the cathedral. Traditional churches tend to be stationary while contemporary churches are designed for movement. The culture of the church will serve the purpose of the church.

What about the culture of a school? While many of them look the same from the outside, the culture of a school hits your senses the moment you walk into the building. It is apparent in the way people talk to each other, the office staff, how people use their time, the topics used for discussion, the books that are read, the items that are funded, or the issues deemed to be important. Culture is in the way the building looks, the signs, the posters, where students learn, where teachers congregate, and most importantly – the conversations that are held between adults. School culture is in everything that is done and said. It is the invisible glue that bonds together the product of learning for children and adults. It is the catalyst for producing the product that you want to have.

Just as an example, I recall walking down the hall of a school and the hallway was adorned with student work. Okay… that seems good from the outset, but then I notice that the student work is always at my eye level. In other words, the student work adorning the hallways is not for the students but for the adults. While that may seem like a small issue – it is an indication of the culture and what the adults in charge consider to be important.

Culture and History
"But that is the way it's always been done!" Even when that is not said aloud it is often a pervasive argument in far too many schools. It is a way of looking at things only from a historical perspective.

Would you go to a dentist whose practices have not changed over the past fifty years? If your answer is "no", (and I suspect it would be), then why would you think that the practices that are normally seen in schools are acceptable? Walk into the school of your choice. If the classroom setup resembles what it did 100 years ago, then you can say there is a culture problem.

Culture and history go hand-in-hand. If that history is one that is an incentive or ritual that moves everyone toward providing the product that is desired, then keep it. If that historical incentive or

ritual does not help to move the organization toward the product desired, then it is time to change it.

Dig a little deeper into "why" something has been done the way it is currently being done. Who started it? Who supports it? Who gets the most from it? Many times we find that an incentive or ritual had a purpose for a limited period of time and is now outdated. Instead, begin new incentives and rituals that move the school toward the product you want. Most of us would not rely on our 8-track tapes, Polaroid cameras, or home movie projectors for entertainment. When those items were in vogue they served an authentic purpose for that time. But that time has passed. What was the purpose behind the classroom where every desk is in a row? What was the purpose of teacher lectures? What was the purpose of A-F grades? If the activity does not support the culture you want, then change it.

Build a Culture of Experts
It would be difficult to build a house with just a hammer. It takes different tools at different times. The more detailed the house the more tools will be needed. Our teachers need a variety of tools or teaching strategies in order to help every child to learn. Nobody has all of those tools when coming out of college and acquiring those tools is not an easy task. Our students need teachers with many different skills that will empower them to help all students.

Too many excellent teachers have been thwarted from learning new strategies by a culture that diminishes the idea of continual learning. Many different people stand in the way of creating a culture of continual learning that includes principals, teachers, parents, and legislators. Too often there is a school culture that discourages innovation, risk taking, or highly engaging teaching practices. Building a culture for the best student achievement requires updating our teaching tools on a consistent basis just like any other profession. That requires a culture of encouragement and support. It requires processes and time. It requires a culture where ongoing development of our teachers is an expectation to continue in the business.

Renewing The Guild System would be a culture change for education as a profession. That system has been in all civilizations for a large part of human history. It is a simple system or associations of people engaged in the same occupation and its primary object is one of mutual support toward maintaining the integrity of the occupation and the product.

Education needs to be a culture similar to the Guild System where we have teachers as experts whose product, student learning, has been proven. Individuals entering the profession are labeled as an apprentice and their work should be a combination of hands-on experiences along with lessons from an expert. After a period of time those individuals will rise to the level of journeyman whose work is improving and striving to become an expert. The prevailing culture promotes that all teachers are alike, thereby preventing teachers from recognizing the need to build their skills and rise through a system to become an expert.

Not all teachers are alike. We appreciate all of our teachers, at every level of their abilities, but they are not all alike. Why do we think that all teachers are the same? That is a cultural handicap toward improving what happens in our schools.

A great culture is one that encourages the adults as much, if not more, than the kids. That encouragement is not to stay the same, but to model the life-long learning that schools often preach. A positive educational culture rids any jealousy that might hold back any teacher from getting better at their craft. That positive culture creates the conditions where teachers are allowed to improve and they should be paid for those improvements. There are different levels of skills in every profession and education is no different.

Culture and Mission
The mission statement of a school or district should be designed to frame the culture. Most do not. A typical statement of "Every child will learn" does not give enough depth to the culture that will make that happen. Too many mission statements exist only on paper and are not brought to life by the people in the organization.

There are great businesses that have clearly articulated their mission and their product aligns with that mission. Many mission statements in schools are complicated or unknown. The mission statement should lead the culture. A good place to begin a culture change is a mission statement that truly embodies what you want. When it does that then you begin to hold everyone accountable to that mission.

Culture and Societal Reflection
Our schools often mirror what happens in society. Students bring societal ideas and issues with them to school. Adults do too. However, it is not mandatory and definitely not advantageous for schools to be reflective of every change in societal culture.

Parents send their children to school to be learners. Some parents specifically want their child's education to reflect their values so they send their child to a private school with those values. Those values mirror a specific culture.

There are some societal cultural battles that should not make their way into the school setting. Too often there are communities, parents or teachers who want the school to reflect more on certain societal reflections more than the culture that allows for the best learning for all students. This is especially important when there is a proliferation of gangs, drugs, or conflict.

To keep the focus on learning, a school must have a culture that is so clearly defined and well communicated that anyone or anything that seeks to bring in ideas or attitudes that are in conflict to that culture are immediately opposed. School culture should support the needs of the community, but not to the detriment of the students whose learning requires a learning culture.

Culture and Consistencies
It is against the law to yell "fire" in a theater. It is dangerous and hurtful. In a library there is an expectation of, (shhhh! - No talking), everyone should be quiet. The culture of quiet in the library is different than the culture of quiet in some restaurants, businesses, or a museum. The culture of an amusement park is different than the culture of a parade. The culture of a democracy is different than the culture of a monarchy.

Cultural consistencies in different types of businesses help reinforce the way things should be done. We stand in line. We smile at the customer. We show up at a certain time. We work overtime. We get more training. We do what the cultural consistencies of the organization dictate. All of the consistencies are designed to get a specific product in a specific way at a specific time. If any of those items break down then the business is in trouble.

There should be some cultural consistencies in our schools, but they should never be a one-size-fits-all. That consistency is in the expectation for children to learn.

Culture On The Walls and In The Halls
If you were from another planet and entered your school, would that alien know what your purpose is? I've done that exercise with different groups of people and I've had people tell me that the school was a warehouse, morgue, athletic complex, factory, and other identifiers. What we see, hear, smell and touch are all a part of the culture in every school.

There are schools around the nation where the culture of the school is apparent from the moment you enter the school. When a school has great clarity on what is important to them they display that importance. It is heard in the conversations. It surrounds your senses because everyone in the organization lives that culture. It could be inquiry-based learning or whole-brain teaching. It could be the framework for reading or an emphasis on experimentation. It could be everyone speaking several languages, wearing a uniform, or student projects adorning the trophy case. All schools should display their cultural expectations and then live those expectations.

Culture Killers
Through a number of years of working in schools I've come to see certain things in the schools that I term to be "culture killers." These items really are a part of the culture, but these things kill the positive culture of learning for our children.

Culture killers are practices that set a culture in the wrong direction. Because school culture is something that can be hard to talk about, it can be uncomfortable or dangerous to address a culture killer item because there are people associated with these practices. Those people believe you are talking about them, not the culture. Culture killers are almost always focused on the adults and not the children. Here are a few examples.
- A principal spends the majority of the day in his office checking the Internet or his email.
- Teachers talk about their vacations, cars, sports, or anything other than their students and learning.
- Teachers take a sick day just before a vacation so they can extend their vacation and leave their students without a teacher.
- Adults say they can't wait for June so they can have three months away from the kids.
- The only trophies for accomplishment are for sports.
- Adults are hired because of a family name or friend of somebody influential.
- Data is not used to show progress or decline.
- Excuses for poor performance are centered on the kids, parents, or community.
- The classroom is filled with adult interests (college, sports, family, or hobby items) instead of student work.
- Teachers assign work to students while they answer email or check the internet.
- Students are socially promoted or retained without providing interventions.
- Cliques are allowed to permeate the social fabric of the school.

- Certain students get certain teachers.
- The best teachers are not teaching the neediest children.
- Parents are not provided data to help them understand their child's progress.
- Grades for students do not match student performance on standardized testing.

Culture Reflections

Reflecting on or examining the school culture is the most important role of any of our educational leaders. This includes principals, superintendents, and school board. Leaders must want to improve student learning. That is the primary purpose for our schools. To do that each leader must remember to recognize the current culture and envision the culture that yields better learning.

Every culture currently produces the exact product it is getting. Therefore, if a leader wants a different product, that leader must work with other leaders to change the existing culture. Start by recognizing there is a culture and it is okay to evaluate and talk about it. If there is immediate pushback when it is discussed - that is the culture talking.

Look at every idea for improvement carefully to determine if it is improving the culture or if it is reinforcing the current culture. Here are a few additional ideas for the school leader to reflect upon to evaluate the culture.
- How is time being used and who is getting the benefit from that time?
- How much time is provided to students for their learning?
- Is the physical design for student learning?
- What is your mission?
- What are the traditions and what is their purpose?
- Who benefits the most from the current culture?
- How are people indoctrinated into the culture?
- What is the conversation in the teachers' lounge?
- How are conflicts resolved?
- Who has a bad attitude and what has been done about it?
- Who shows up to help?
- How are the parents involved?

Conclusion

Almost everyone recognizes that schools need additional support. Some say that we fund schools too much and some say we don't fund them enough. Some want to run schools like a business and some want to give parents more choice. Even those arguments are based on a lack of understanding of the impact that culture has on our schools. Supporting our schools means working together on the culture of the school.

We can frame the future with a quote from Ron Edmonds. *"We already know enough to successfully teach all children whose education is important to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far." ~ Ron Edmonds*

We improve our schools by purposefully framing the culture. When we work together and establish learning as the purpose for education, we help every student to reach his or her full potential. We must support strong positive school cultures that promote learning for all students. Let's start by evaluating the culture of every school and then collectively frame the culture we want so our students can learn. That will certainly get us farther along the pathway of improvement than our current and outdated school improvement processes.