



School Improvement Booster

An e-newsletter provided by
Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

July 2012: School Culture

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School Leadership: Part II – School Culture

Keith Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson, and Kyla Wahlstrom, supported by the Wallace Foundation, produced two landmark studies about school leadership, the first in 2004, [How Leadership Influences Student Learning](#) and a second in 2010, [Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning](#). In the second study they write, “In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary view of the research, that **leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim.**” In other words, SCHOOL LEADERS MATTER.

Just this year, 2012, the Wallace Foundation released the first in a series of reports called *The Wallace Perspective* in which they looked at their work in leadership and identified five leadership practices that they find as central to effective school leadership.

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards (discussed in the [June 2012 School Improvement Booster](#));
2. **Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;**
3. Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. Managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Summer is an important time for school leaders to recharge and reflect on their own leadership actions. We hope this newsletter helps you do just that. We isolate one practice at a time, so that you may consider it thoughtfully.

This issue is focused on **creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.** We invite you to think about school climate and culture as one in the same. How students and staff feel about the climate/culture in your school influences their commitment to learning – learning of the

students and learning of the staff. Before we highlight the research providing insight into building a culture of success, take a moment to consider how students, staff, parents, and the community feel about your school. How do they feel when they walk through your schoolhouse door? Are they greeted and made to feel welcomed, valued, and safe? Within the school do people work together to identify and solve problems of educational practice? Are they focused on student success? Is the school organized to suit the adults in the building or the educational needs of students? Is there a feeling in the school by students, staff, and parents that if we put our heads together, we can accomplish just about anything? Are there leaders everywhere and systems to develop leaders? Does everyone understand how decisions are made? Is information related to school communicated to everyone?

Think about these ideas and where you might be on the spectrum. This is not an exhaustive list, but can be the impetus for some thoughtful conversation about the culture of your school. One approach to this is to ask your staff to fill [this sample matrix](#) out individually and then come together and share your responses. Another might be to think of major areas of school improvement like goal setting, professional development, collaboration, school safety, welcoming environment, etc. and develop a matrix of your own. Here's an example of what is in the [sample matrix](#).

Some Climates/Cultures	Hoped for School Climate/Culture	Where are we?
Office personnel are all business, making sure the business of the school is organized and efficient.	Office personnel ensure the school is organized and efficient, but also create a climate of kindness, assistance, and welcoming as visitors and staff come into the school.	

How and why do we develop the culture to be collaborative and focused on student success?

Workplace culture must be thoughtfully developed - not left to chance. A culture of high expectations where virtually all students learn well is omnipresent in successful schools. Busy school leaders may be tempted to let culture issues slip to a low level of priority. But the culture that emerges as a result of being left to chance won't move the school or district forward. System culture impacts the kind of work people do and how they get along with one another. Ultimately culture impacts student learning, both academic and social.

Widely Shared Sense of Community

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom wrote in 2004 about the importance of culture where students, staff, parents and the community are valued, welcomed, and where everyone feels safe:

“The creation of a widely shared sense of community among all of a school’s stakeholders is important for several reasons. First, the affective bonds between

students and teachers associated with a sense of community are crucial in engaging and motivating students to learn in schools of any type. A widely shared sense of community is also important as an antidote to the unstable, sometimes threatening and often insecure world inhabited by a significant proportion of the families and children served by especially challenging schools.”

Instructional Coherence

Fred Newman is known for his work in the development of an initiative common in Iowa, Authentic Intellectual Work (AIW). Leithwood, et al., 2004, quote Newman’s work about a culture of learning, both for staff and for students, where students can move easily into their futures and staff members have the instructional skills and support to help students thrive.

“Developing instructional program coherence requires strong leadership which fosters teachers’ professional community and a shared commitment to the program. Leadership behaviors include: the decision to adopt or develop a common framework and to make it a priority for the school; to insist that the framework be used by all teachers; to strongly encourage teachers to work with their colleagues to implement the framework; and to provide sustained training for staff in the use of the framework (Newman et al., 2001).”

Teacher Working Conditions

Teacher working conditions are critical to school culture. Research evidence, again from Leithwood, et al., in 2004 identifies “conditions which enhance teachers’ work by affecting such variables as teacher commitment, effort and job satisfaction. The amount of evidence in support of any one of these conditions varies, but in most cases is best described as moderate.” Some of the conditions, on which school leaders have influence, include

- visible student outcomes
- powerful and salient feedback about teacher efforts to influence student learning
- opportunities for teacher leadership in the school
- high levels of perceived support by school administrators
- broad participation in school decisions
- clear links between change initiatives and student welfare
- teaming with other teachers
- increased program coordination
- opportunities for meaningful professional development

“Variability, complexity and uncertainty in the workplace reduce teachers’ commitment, effort and satisfaction. “

Congenial versus Collegial Relationships

Roland Barth’s helpful article in *Educational Leadership* in 2006 examines the various kinds of relationships that exist in schools. While having a congenial relationship with one’s co-workers is pleasant and hoped for, moving those relationships to collegial encourages the focus to be on improving student learning. In collegial relationships educators talk with one another about their practice, share their knowledge of the teaching craft, observe one another while teaching and root for each other’s success. Researcher Judith Warren Little found that the following school leaders’ actions foster collegiality:

- *State expectations explicitly.* For instance, “I expect all of us to work together this year, share our craft knowledge, and help one another in whatever ways we can.”
- *Model collegiality.* For instance, visibly join in cheering on others or have another principal observe a faculty meeting.
- *Reward those who behave as colleagues.* For instance, grant release time, recognition, space, materials, and funds to those who collaborate.
- *Protect those who engage in these collegial behaviors.* A principal should *not* say, for instance, “Janet has a great idea that she wants to share with us today.” This sets Janet up for a possible harsh response. Rather, the principal might say, “I observed something in Janet’s classroom last week that blew my socks off, and I’ve asked her to share it with us.” In this way, leaders can run interference for other educators.

School leaders who foster collegiality do so by implementing structures that support it. These behaviors include but are not limited to the following:

- Making sure teachers have time and space to meet with one another during the school day – at least one hour per week
- Ensuring the building and district have data systems in place to support collegial work
- Monitoring the progress of the collaborative groups, expecting problems to be identified and various solutions implemented until the problem is solved.

[Improving Relationships within the Schoolhouse](#)

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a process available through Iowa AEAs to help schools address climate and academic success through a system wide approach. Unlike most other behavioral strategies, PBIS links student behavior and instruction. It is defined at the PBIS website this way: “School-wide Positive Behavior Support is a systems approach to establishing the social culture and behavioral supports needed for all children in a school to achieve both social and academic success. SWPBS is not a packaged curriculum, but an approach that defines core elements that can be achieved through a variety of strategies. [Positive Behavioral Supports](#) can help you with all students, but particularly those falling furthest behind.

Niraz Shah on Culture

Niraz Shah, cofounder of Wayfair.com, a growing home furnishing web-based company, discussed culture in an interesting interview with the New York Times. Mr. Shah has built three companies and suggests culture is integral to their success. He gives this advice and more in this article.

- Be tenacious. Improvement is never done.
- Be sure to celebrate wins.
- Make the physical space open and conducive to communication.
- Hire for core values and then focus on building skills. Wayfair.com hires people who are team-oriented, innately bright, highly collaborative and friendly. (What are your core values?)
- Embrace the use of data. (Do you model the use of data in your work?)
- Good ideas come from everyone and from everywhere.

- Anyone in the company can recognize another employee for good work and do it publicly.
- Once there has been healthy debate and a decision is made, support the decision.

[Read the entire article about Mr. Shah's ideas in the New York Times.](#)

Michael Fullan on Change

Michael Fullan and his colleagues wrote about change in 2009 in [The Challenge of Change](#). Fullan identifies “Developing Cultures for Learning” as a main driver of change. He notes, “Change knowledge has a bias for action. Developing a climate where people learn from each other within and across units, and being preoccupied with turning good knowledge into action, is essential. Turning knowledge into actionable knowledge is a social process. Thus, developing learning cultures is crucial. Good policies and ideas take off in learning cultures, but they go nowhere in cultures of isolation.”

What should I do to address the culture in our school?

As Mary Poppins reminded us, “Once begun is half done!” And as Dr. Fullan stated above, “Change knowledge has a bias for action.” Here are some things you might do to start:

- Analyze the matrix above individually and as a staff or write your own. Talk about how you might move forward.
- Review board and administrative policies designed to improve climate and culture. Are those policies being followed consistently by staff and students? If not, find ways to generate more conversation about the policies, plan for short term improvements perhaps during registration or kick off events this fall, and celebrate the wins.
- Survey the staff to assess current school culture and then once you know more about the culture, begin to make positive changes. Contact your AEA school improvement consultant for assistance. In addition, here are some websites with school culture surveys that could help you think about questions appropriate for your school:
 - Tennessee Department of Education [Survey Information](#)
 - University of Missouri [Survey Information](#)
 - Canadian [Survey Information](#)
- Analyze your Youth Survey Data with the staff. The DE website provides [survey analysis tools](#) to assist. Discuss how you might improve some of the areas where students marked your school lower than you'd hoped.
- Create a focus group of parents and volunteers to find out if the building is welcoming and feels safe. Get their input about what might be improved. There is a science to conducting focus groups and potential disaster if done poorly, so don't shy away from the expert assistance that your AEA can provide. Some districts have received help from ISU Extension, as well. Lastly, don't underestimate the value of the information you will get, which in most cases clearly outweighs facilitation and design fees to do the work.
- Analyze your district/building communication plan and do a spot check of the last several communication pieces sent out last spring. Do you provide info in multiple places – the website, newsletters, radio and other media outlets, letters home, etc.? Does the info provide a rationale, contact information for feedback, include a broad audience, etc.?

Quotes

“Getting good players is easy. Getting 'em to play together is the hard part.” - Casey Stengel

“If you treat that child the way you want your child to be treated, you’ll always be right.” - Al Harper, principal at Elmont Jr/Sr High School in New York

“How to induce more children to grapple zestfully with academic issues may elude our most determined efforts. But I strongly suspect that observing adults honestly wrestling with intellectual problems might win more youngsters to the life of the mind than any other experience the schools could devise.” - Schaefer

Next ISFIS School Improvement Booster

Look forward to the next ISFIS School Improvement Booster which will continue the 5 Leadership Practices from the Wallace Foundation with number 3: *Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.*

If you have any questions, comments or feedback about the School Improvement Booster, please contact Susie Olesen at susie.olesen@isfis.net or Margaret Buckton at margaret.buckton@isfis.net.