

A Collaborative Culture for School Improvement: Significance, Definition, and Measurement

**Research Summary
Middle Level Leadership Center
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The first section of this research summary documents the importance of an effective, collaborative school culture. The next section defines the concept of organizational/school culture and the final section provides a description of methods to measure or assess school culture. An understanding of the research associated with these three sections is important as a school leadership team, a school improvement team, and/or a school faculty embark on the tasks of organizational growth.

The Significance of an Effective, Collaborative School Culture

A school with an effective learning culture...

- Maintains the image of a “professional community,” similar to the fields of law or medicine. Teachers pursue a clear, shared purpose, engage in collaborative activity, and accept a collective responsibility for student learning (Newman & Wehlage, 1995).
- Has a clear mission. Teachers value the interchange of ideas with colleagues. Strong values exist that support a safe and secure environment. There are high expectations of everyone, including teachers. There is strong, not rigid, leadership (Deal & Peterson, 1990).
- Encourages teachers to work collaboratively with each other and with the administration to teach students so they learn more (Fullan, 1993).
- Is a place where both teachers and students learn (Rosenholtz, 1989).

Schools organized around democratic and collaborative cultures produce students with higher achievement and better levels of skills and understanding than do traditionally organized schools (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In addition, Fullan (1998) reported:

Student achievement increases substantially in schools with collaborative work cultures that foster a professional learning community among teachers and others, focus continuously on improving instructional practice in light of student performance data, and link to standards and staff development support. (p.8)

Gruenert (2005) analyzed the relationship between school culture and student achievement in a study of 81 Indiana elementary, middle, and high schools. Working from the assumption that school culture can be defined as the guiding beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that are evident in the way the school operates (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996), he found significant relationships between various factors of school culture, school climate, leadership, and student achievement. Of most interest are the significant correlational relationships between school culture factors and student academic orientation, instructional management, and student achievement in both math and language arts. Of the twelve relational tests between culture and student achievement, nine were significant. Though only correlational in design, this study adds

to the growing body of research supporting the importance of an effective, collaborative school culture.

Reporting findings from a national study of highly successful middle level schools Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, and Petzko (2004), provided practical insight about effective, collaborative school cultures in highly successful schools.

- Principals and teachers shared a common core of values and beliefs that guided programs and practices, including high expectations for all students, education of the whole child, all students will be successful, and a dedication to a coherent curriculum, student-centered instruction, and the effective use of formative and summative student data.
- Principals viewed themselves as collaborative leaders, as did their teachers. They fostered collegiality and the opportunity for collaborative work among teachers centered on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- Teachers were also strongly committed to collaboration, fulfilling school-wide roles as decision-makers, coordinators of professional development, and leaders in the efforts to improve classroom instruction across the whole school.
- Student and adult learning was the focus of the schools, with all adults committed to continual learning for student and themselves.
- School structures, such as student and adult schedules and physical arrangements of classrooms, were designed to foster collaboration and relationship building among students-teachers, students-students, and teachers-teachers.
- Principals and teachers indicated that building “relationships” among adults was a major factor in creating their effective school cultures, with principals and teachers regularly discussing the importance of relationships and the part relationships play in the difficult decision-making, problem-solving tasks that a faculty/staff must address. (p. 91-92)

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) described the link among school culture, leadership, and student achievement. They stated, “Fostering school culture that indirectly affects student achievement is a strong theme within the literature on principal leadership” (p. 47). From their comprehensive meta-analysis of empirical studies of leadership and student achievement, they described the following key leadership behaviors: (a) promote cohesion among all staff, (b) promote a sense of well-being among all staff, (c) develop an understanding of purpose among all staff, and (d) develop a shared vision of what school should be like (p. 48). They concluded that each of these leader behaviors directly related to school culture and school culture related to student achievement. In another comprehensive synthesis of the leadership literature associated with student achievement, Cotton (2002) described 26 principal behaviors that contributed to student achievement. The behaviors fell into five categories, one of which was characterized as school culture. It is evident from these two comprehensive studies of the literature that the educational research community has concluded that leadership influences school culture and school culture influences student achievement.

School leaders, both formal and informal, help shape the nature of school culture (Leithwood, 2005) and thus the nature of school improvement. Leadership and school culture go hand in hand, in both the development and the sustainability of school reform. Dantow (2005) described the relationship: “In the schools that sustained reforms, there was more likely to be continuity of leadership (but not always), commitment to the reform among key stakeholders, and the reform was an obvious feature of the structure and culture of the school” (p. 135). With few exceptions,

the literature of leadership, culture, and reform are consistent. The school leader is instrumental in shaping the school's culture and leading reform and the presence and sustainability of reform is highly associated with the school's culture. "In essence, the principal is probably the most essential element in a highly successful school. The principal is necessary to set change into motion, to establish the culture of change and a learning organization, and to provide the support and energy to maintain the change over time until it becomes a way of life in the school. Over time, the principal's leadership will shape the school, positively or negatively. Without high-quality leadership, high-quality schools cannot exist" (Valentine et al., 2004, p. 112). An understanding of the concept of school culture is important if leaders are to influence both culture and achievement. The following section provides insight about the meaning of school culture.

Defining School Culture

Schein, a longtime leading expert in the field of organizational culture, describes culture as a relatively stable pattern of organizational behavior that lies outside the immediate awareness of the organization's members and reflects the shared behavioral, emotional, and cognitive learning the group has undergone over time. As an organization evolves, the behaviors of the organization develop a consistent pattern based upon the shared assumptions of the organization (Schein, 1992). Espoused values, group norms, habits of thinking and acting, personnel behavior, are among the more readily understood elements that Schein (1992) believes represent the organization's culture. These patterns not only evolve over time, they also are shared or handed-down over time to succeeding generations within an organization. If the cultural norms are congruent with the mission of the organization, the organization flourishes. If the cultural norms are incongruent or even toxic, the organization cannot flourish. Hopkins, Ainscow, and West (1994) described culture as the observed patterns of behavior, the norms of working groups, the dominant values espoused by the school, and the unwritten policies and procedures that new members to the school learn.

Many writers have provided formal definitions of school or organizational culture. Listed below are some of the most frequently cited definitions. Culture is:

- an informal understanding of the "way we do things around here." Culture is a strategic body of learned behaviors that give both meaning and reality to its participants (Cunningham and Gresso, 1993, p. 20).
- the stable, underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behavior over time (Deal, 1990, p. 7).
- both product and process. As product, it embodies the accumulated wisdom of previous members of the organization. As process, it is continually renewed and recreated as new members are taught the old ways and eventually become teachers themselves (Bolman and Deal, 1991, p. 250).
- the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another group (Hofstede, 1997, p. 180).
- a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group has learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1992, p. 12).

- a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. Culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act (Barth, 2002, p. 7).

As noted in the first section of this summary, a collaborative, learning culture is an essential ingredient in overall school success. Successful schools generally have a strong set of commonly held norms and values, a primary focus upon teaching that supports student learning, open dialogue, and collaboration among all members of the organization (Louis, Marks, and Kruse, 1996). With an understanding of the importance of school culture and the meaning of culture, the next section describes processes to measure school culture.

Measuring School Culture

Measuring a school's culture is an initial step toward meaningful school improvement. Once measured, the formal and informal leaders of the school can engage all faculty members in an analysis of the data and discussions that begin the chain of conversations necessary to become a professional community capable of identifying problematic issues, addressing them, and thus growing as a school. Personnel at the Middle Level Leadership Center have developed two different types of assessment tools for collecting data useful in faculty analysis and reflection about school culture.

The first tool is the School Culture Survey (SCS), a six factor, thirty-five item survey completed by teachers about their school's culture. This valid, reliable instrument provides data about critical cultural variables based upon the collective perception of the faculty. The factors are: (1) Collaborative Leadership, (2) Teacher Collaboration, (3) Professional Development, (4) Collegial Support, (5) Unity of Purpose, and (6) Learning Partnership. Research studies using the School Culture Survey have documented the relationships between the factors of the SCS and numerous other school effectiveness/improvement variables such as principal instructional and transformational leadership (Gaworecki, 2003; Gruenert, 1998; Lucas, 2001; Maher, 2000; Miles, 2002), school climate (Gruenert, 1998), and teacher empowerment (Maher, 2000). For more information about the School Culture Survey and other instruments recommended by the staff of the Middle Level Leadership Center, see the Center's website at www.MLLC.org.

The second tool developed by the staff at the Middle Level Leadership Center and used in all Center school improvement projects is the School Culture Typology, a self-reflective tool and related activity designed to identify a school-wide perspective of the "type" of culture that exists in a school. The typology tool was first developed in 1997 based upon the work of Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) as a hands-on, practical method of defining for discussion purposes a school's stage or type of culture. The activity was revised in 2000, reflecting the work of Deal and Peterson (1999) and again revised slightly in 2006. To complete the activity, teachers assign point values to statements that are "most descriptive" of their school from a series of statements representing twelve elements of school culture. Those elements are (1) student achievement, (2) collegial awareness, (3) shared values, (4) decision making, (5) risk-taking, (6) trust, (7) openness, (8) parent relations, (9) leadership, (10) communication, (11) socialization, and (12) organization history. Once the members of a leadership or school improvement team, or the whole faculty, have completed individual worksheets, the facilitators of the activity lead the

group in a consensus discussion or take the individual worksheets and compile them to form a mathematical summary of the teachers' responses. This process creates a composite picture of the school's "predominant" type of culture. The six types of culture, derived from the writings of Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) and Deal and Peterson (1999) are (1) Toxic, (2) Fragmented, (3) Balkanized, (4) Contrived Collegiality, (5) Comfortable Collaboration, and (6) Collaborative. As a school strives to develop a truly collaborative culture, the school's leadership and/or improvement teams can monitor the cultural change with this typology tool and the School Culture Survey. For more information about the School Typology Activity, contact Jerry Valentine (ValentineJ@missouri.edu), professor at the University of Missouri and Director of the Middle Level Leadership Center or Steve Gruenert (sgruenert@isugw.indstate.edu), assistant professor of school leadership at Indiana State University.

A school's leadership team and/or school improvement team can also write a qualitative depiction of the school's culture through purposeful observations and reflection about the major categories or elements associated with school culture. As a basis for the written depiction, the elements described previously for the school typology activity, the factors from the School Culture Survey, the previously mentioned elements of school culture from Schein (1992) or Barth (2002), or a combination of the above could be used. Individuals and small groups can pool insight and establish a very accurate picture of the school's culture through observation, discussion, reflection, and documentation of existing practices. In fact, some scholars of organizational culture believe that the only true way to understand school culture is through a naturalistic observational approach as compared to a survey approach. While our Center's work with schools does not support that conception, questioning the value of assessing an aspect of an organization that is represented through the values, beliefs, assumptions, mission, relationships, symbols, rituals, traditions, myths, and behaviors within the organization by using a perception-based survey is understandable. At the Middle Level Leadership Center we believe that the measurement of a school's culture is best accomplished with a mixed-method approach, using the three methods of perception survey, descriptive reflection, and naturalistic observation. That approach, used in the school improvement projects at MLLC, allows for triangulation of findings, producing a highly accurate measure and deep understanding of multiple aspects of a school's culture.

A Final Thought

As important as school culture is to school improvement, one must not overlook the fact that shaping a school's culture is a complex process...a mixture of leadership, relationships, trust, student focus, values, beliefs, etc. developed and nurtured over months and years. The essential questions become (a) "Does a leader and a school work first to build a collaborative culture and then student success evolves?" or (b) "Does a process of collaborative work focusing on student success produce both a collaborative culture and student success?" At the Middle Level Leadership Center, we believe the latter produces, over time, a lasting, caring, collaborative culture and the foundation for continuous student-centered success. The more we collaborate together to study and problem-solve our issues that impact student success, the more we build the trust and relationships that produce a collaborative culture. It begins with the formal leadership, evolves through a nucleus of teacher leaders, and eventually permeates the whole faculty and thus the school community. In the end, we have a collaborative, professional, learning community.

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Author Notes: The original version of this Research Summary of School Culture, entitled Collaborative Culture: The Building Block of School Improvement, was written by the staff of the Missouri Center for School Improvement in August, 1996. The authors of that document were Jerry Valentine, Center Director; Dan Cockrell, Assistant Director; Bryan Painter, Graduate Assistant; and Steve Gruenert, Graduate Assistant. Approximately 20% of the original document was retained in the development of this new research summary.

For additional information about the processes and tools used to measure school culture, climate, leadership, and other school improvement variables, see the website of the Middle Level Leadership Center at www.MLLC.org.

Critical and constructive feedback about this Research Summary are welcome. Send comments to Jerry Valentine at ValentineJ@missouri.edu.