



Climate and Culture

Why your board should pay attention to the attitudes of students and staff

BY DEL STOVER

Urban school leaders who want to reform low-performing schools usually embark on a series of obvious strategies: strengthening the curriculum, promoting sound instructional practices, providing more staff training, and tutoring students who need help. But in this swirl of activity, an important piece of the puzzle is often overlooked: the attitudes and beliefs of students, teachers, and administrators.

Good climate and culture are key to the success of urban schools, according to researchers who've spent years studying the subtle interpersonal dynamics that take place among students and educators. Many are convinced that a closer look at climate and culture can help urban boards determine why one school is academically successful and—more important—why another

is poor performing and consistently failing to improve.

A school's climate "is probably the best predictor of whether a school will have high achievement"—more so than the socioeconomic status of students or the school's past levels of achievement, says Clete Bulach, associate professor emeritus of educational leadership at the University of West Georgia

and a long-time researcher in the field.

To some degree, school board members accept this claim. After all, a school where students are enthusiastic about learning should do better than one where students are bored or have low expectations. And a school where teachers feel empowered to tackle instructional challenges should fare better than a school where the staff is demoralized and lacks enthusiasm.

But researchers such as Bulach contend that school boards consistently overlook this simple truth when seeking to improve poor-performing schools. They invest heavily in staff development, tutoring programs, or a new instructional initiative—yet make little or no effort to ensure that conditions within a school are receptive to these reform efforts.

“You can implement a good-quality improvement plan and knowledgeable, data-driven decision making, but if the [staff] doesn’t believe that things can be improved, it’s not going to implement [changes] with the same depth or energy or commitment,” says Kent D. Peterson, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and coauthor of *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership*.

ACADEMIC IMPACT

What’s true for staff is no less true for students, says Brian Perkins, a member of the New Haven, Conn., school board and a researcher who studies school climate.

Perkins says urban leaders must be cognizant of the distractions from learning that stem from negative student perceptions about school safety, teachers, and the learning process.

Perkins, chairman of the Council of Urban Boards of Education’s Steering Committee, is author of a national survey of 33,000 urban students. The survey, funded by CUBE and the National School Boards Association, will be released nationally in December.

According to Perkins, the findings should provide policymakers with their clearest picture yet about the experiences, attitudes, and nonacademic development of children in urban schools.

“We don’t have a full picture of what’s going on in the nation’s urban schools,” Perkins says. “We have a range of tests we use to assess students to determine where the schools are in an academic space, but we don’t assess their psychological well-being—their social health—in a comprehensive way.”

How important is it to assess these less-tangible aspects of the school experience? How much do school climate and culture affect academic performance?

Given the many factors that affect academic achievement, it’s difficult to quantify, but decades of studies make clear that a cor-

relation exists. Take, for example, a case study cited in Peterson’s book, coauthored with University of Southern California professor Terrence E. Deal.

The study, based on research in 1995, compared two schools serving minority student populations of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. One school had a 60-percent dropout rate and student grades that were

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largely in the D and F range. At the other school, students scored in the top quartile in math and first in the district in language arts.

Why the contrast? According to the study, Peterson and Deal note, the only discernible difference was that the poor-performing school had terrible teacher morale. The higher-performing school had a learning environment of passion and commitment and a “positive, focused culture.”

In the most basic sense, researchers say, the act of learning is a very human endeavor—one that is undermined if students are distracted by bullies, teachers fail to challenge students, or struggling students are ignored and forgotten.

Research conducted by Perkins offers an example of this subtle interplay and its effects. In one district, he discovered that some students had given up on school. After watching drive-by shootings, drug overdoses, domestic violence, and deaths due to AIDS and cancer, these students didn’t expect to live past age 25.

“That has great implications for achievement motivation,” he says. “You have 14- or 17-year-olds who would say, ‘Why bother? Why do I need to learn algebra?’”

Still, Perkins notes that academic performance is not the only measure of a school’s success. It also is important whether students feel safe, believe adults care about them, and develop values of respect and cit-

izenship. The data in the CUBE survey, he says, will help school districts “identify and address those issues” that affect student learning.

Of course, data is useful only if school boards are serious about responding to the problems identified. Based on his observations over the years, Bulach is somewhat skeptical about the long-term commitment

of school officials to stay on top of the measures they might implement.

“What I see is spitting in the wind,” he says. “Everyone goes through the motions. ‘Yeah,’ they say, ‘we evaluate our school climate. We do a school improvement plan.’ But does it ever improve? Many times it does not.”

CLIMATE VS. CULTURE

Some educators use the terms “climate” and “culture” interchangeably, but researchers in the field say there is an important difference between the two. How students and staff members feel about their school is climate. *Why* they feel the way they do is determined by culture—by the values and behavior of those in the school.

For example, an unresolved problem with bullies can have a detrimental effect on a school’s climate. But why does the bullying exist? Are children not being taught to respect one another? Are teachers unresponsive to complaints, thus emboldening bullies and discouraging victims from speaking up?

Asking such questions—digging deeper into attitudes and behavior (the culture)—may be the only way to achieve real change, Perkins says. He recalls one school where, after conducting a climate survey, he found that 70 percent of students reported a lack of respect for teachers, and 90 percent of

teachers reported that they didn't feel as though they are respected.

The findings convinced the principal and staff to do some soul searching—and seek changes in the culture that had prompted such disrespect. They conducted focus groups with students, boosted teacher training, brought in speakers to talk to students, and established a conflict mediation program to help students and teachers deal with problems in a less-confrontational way.

Over the next few years, these efforts to change the school's culture led to improvements in the climate. Indeed, the impact went far beyond original expectations. Surveys showed an improvement in student attitudes about teachers, suspensions declined, fewer students were sent to the principal's office, daily attendance rose, and more students in class meant more time spent learning.

That's not surprising to Bulach, who says there's often a spillover effect when officials begin attacking negative attitudes and beliefs. "If you change behaviors related to respect to others, you'll change behaviors related to compassion, courtesy, kindness, consideration, forgiveness."

For that reason, Bulach suggests school officials make a focused response to the findings of a climate survey. Don't try to tackle too much, he says. Choose your battles carefully.

"The biggest problem I see with schools and their attempts to improve [school climate] is they are not focused," Bulach says. "Their school improvement plan has too many things in it. My belief is that if you want to improve culture and climate, you focus on one aspect and you hammer it."

John Shindler, director of the Western Alliance for the Study of School Climate, says survey results seldom show a school doing well in some areas of school climate and poorly in others. A school's climate is good, bad, or mediocre, he believes.

Some very basic factors are "at the heart of what makes a good climate," Schindler says. "You can't separate climate from in-

struction. You can't separate climate from leadership. You can't separate climate from the purposeful things you do to build a relationship with students. If a school is doing great on one thing, it tends to all fall in line."

LEADERSHIP IS EVERYTHING

In the final analysis, researchers say, any serious look at school climate and culture should lead policymakers to a simple—and challenging—conclusion: Almost everything depends on leadership.

Forget about fancy programs or interventions. Attitudes and behaviors in a school are not going to change unless the principal understands how to work with the existing culture—and knows how to help it evolve into a healthier one.

This reality puts school boards in a tough spot, says Larry Sackney, who has studied school climate as a professor of educational administration at the University of Saskatchewan. A serious effort to improve school climate—and thus to reform schools at all—means getting serious about hiring good principals who know how to change the school culture.

"You need a principal who has the ability to develop a team—and get it moving," he says. "Leadership plays a very important role in setting the tone in a school."

School boards also need to accept that some principals fall short of the mark. While mentoring and training can help, they might not be enough, and these principals will need to go. "Leadership is a funny thing," Sackney says. "For the principal who's in trouble, it's not easy to turn it around."

A similar hard line is needed with a school's worst teachers, Sackney says. School boards need to encourage and back principals who want to remove burned out and demoralized teachers.

"If you live in a climate where people are constantly bitching, it drags and wears people down," he says. "It's got a detrimental effect. If you can't see things turning

around, if there's constant negativity ... you may have to do some staff shuffling."

Finally, school board members who want to improve school climate should look in the mirror, Sackney says. Boards that bicker at meetings, badmouth superintendents, or put politics above instruction set a corrosive tone that eventually permeates the entire school district.

"It starts with the boards themselves and works its way through the system," he says. "If the staff doesn't have respect for the school board ... it really demoralizes and drags everyone down. The board has to set the climate—and that sets the tone for the rest of the system."

Cynthia Knox, a school board member in Texas' Fort Bend Independent School District, says her board started a discussion of race and culture several years ago, and it has been good for the school board and the community.

"It helps us look at the whole child," she says. "It helps us as board members to show sensitivity. Yes, we have a big focus on [academic] accountability, but we also need a big focus on children who don't want to be in school or who see too much fighting."

Feedback from students made clear that "things were happening in our school related to race," she says. The district has responded with a diversity initiative that involves an advisory council, staff training, and a No Place for Hate campaign developed by the Anti-Defamation League. The district also has participated in the CUBE survey.

"My hope is we will use the same kind of proactive, positive approach in response" to the survey findings, Knox says. "We need to show the value of this for students, what [the survey] has found for us, and what we will do about it."

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