

A Climate for Innovation



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A MAJOR responsibility of the person in charge of curriculum in a school district is to generate a psychological tone or climate conducive to change; a climate which creates a press by teachers and principals to seek better ways of educating young people. If teachers and principals are to feel secure, at least to the point at which they will try new teaching strategies and experiment with different programs, their interactions with the central office staff, especially the curriculum specialist, must promote feelings and beliefs that result in open communication and a willingness to take risks. The importance of climate building becomes strikingly apparent when one encounters the large number of educators who have experienced unsuccessful attempts to innovate due to a negative climate rather than to a lack of skills and capabilities.

On the surface, it would appear that building this kind of climate would be a relatively simple task. However, it has never been easy to develop the desired psychological tone for change in a district. The advent of union-style negotiations, the move toward accountability, and the stress on teacher evaluation, coupled with a shortage of funds, have made the development of a positive climate an even more difficult, if not impossible, task for most curriculum leaders. Yet, the curriculum specialist is presently under tremendous public pressure to bring about

change in current practices and to increase the quality of instruction.

In the face of this dilemma, it has become imperative that central office curriculum personnel (a) have a clear understanding of the climate that is necessary for promoting desirable change and (b) behave in ways that are most likely to create this climate.

The first task is to identify the characteristics of a desirable school climate. The results of studies by Gross, Halpin, and Stern¹ indicate that teachers and administrators are most likely to feel secure enough to experiment in those situations where:

1. They believe that they can create new programs and strategies which will improve the quality of education in their schools;
2. They and the board of education have a feeling of mutual trust and understanding;
3. They believe that they will receive psychological and financial support for their efforts to develop, implement, and evaluate innovative programs;

¹ Neal Gross and Robert E. Herriott. *Leadership in the Public Schools: A Sociological Inquiry*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965; Andrew Halpin. *Theory and Research in Administration*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967; and George Stern. *People in Context*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1950.

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4. They believe that it is more important to seek better ways of educating young people than to be absolutely sure that what they try will be successful;

5. They have a commitment to and an understanding of the long-range goals for their school;

6. They feel free to communicate openly with each other about their concerns, beliefs, and ideas.

A Climate for Change

Because of the curriculum specialist's position in the central office, he is able to facilitate the development of this affective tone through the careful planning of his work. The ways in which he interacts with teachers and principals and structures and carries out his activities are crucial to building a climate for change.

Based upon personal experience as a curriculum director in a large suburban school district, the writer believes that there are seven general guidelines one can follow to produce the desired climate. These principles, although logical, are frequently ignored or forgotten in the hectic daily activities of the central office curriculum specialist. Nevertheless, it is important for the curriculum leader to:

1. *Keep the board of education, parents, teachers, and school administrators informed about and, when possible, involved in the development and evaluation of innovative programs.* The trust, understanding, and support necessary for successful completion of a change in instructional practice demand that all these people understand the purposes of the change and why specific modifications have been made in the program.

2. *Have innovative programs (a) be proposed and developed by teachers and (b) be evaluated and selected by departmental, school, and/or district committees which are dominated by classroom teachers.* This practice focuses on developing teachers' confidence in their ability to improve education in their school and gives teachers a feeling of being trusted and supported by the administration.

3. *Have the school staff select a set of goals and an overall organizational model for their school which define the form of curriculum and instruction five years in the future.* By this act, the curriculum specialist helps teachers and principals develop a feeling of direction and identify clear long-range goals for their school. It also provides them with a basis for making sound decisions about which innovative programs should be supported and which should be discarded. Teachers often feel insecure with change when they are not sure where they are headed. Model and goal selection alleviates this problem.

4. *Stay flexible, eliminating, when possible, financial barriers and red tape which interfere with change.* The quickest way to turn off a promising idea is to indicate that the budget is set and a proposed change will have to wait until the next school year, especially if it is still October or November. The next best means of killing a proposed innovation is to ask for a detailed written description of how those proposing the change will implement and evaluate it. A third way to stifle an innovative idea is to hold rigidly to rules and regulations which keep the principal and teachers from trying promising educational approaches.

What is needed is a clear, consistent effort to provide financial support when it is needed, even if providing such support demands looser budgeting or a "creative ideas" contingency fund available at the curriculum specialist's discretion. There will be many times when the "rules" will have to be bent in the interest of providing a better education for youngsters; existing district regulations and policies are logically written for the maintenance of current practice, rather than the promotion of change.

5. *Set expectations in written and oral communications which emphasize the belief that teachers and principals can and should implement significant changes in their schools.* Over an extended period of time, staff reaction to such an expectation is usually a willingness to risk the new and innovative. The trust implicit in supporting

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such expectations typically results in increased trust among teachers and between principals and teachers who become involved in innovative projects. These expectations also help develop staff members' confidence in their ability to effect changes in their schools.

6. *Have teachers and principals collect and use data to support the need, or lack of need, for changing current practice.* While "intuition" may be the best source of some program changes, most should be based on data collected to determine if problems growing out of personal feelings really exist. This provides a basis for those who oppose modifying the program to check and validate their position. On the other hand, such a process may enable innovators to find support for their efforts.

7. *Finally, listen to and consider all staff members' ideas and positions, whether they support or criticize new approaches.* Such a stance demonstrates the belief that it is more important to find the best educational practices than to "change for change's sake." It will also result in more honest and open communication among staff members, since the threat of being attacked for unpopular ideas has been limited.

When these guidelines are employed systematically, the chances for implementing change in district schools increase significantly. The longer these principles guide the actions of the curriculum specialist, the more likely teachers and their administrators will feel comfortable with their involvement in innovative programs and the more positive the psychological climate for innovation will become.

With the increased public support for individualization of instruction,² there is a definite need to refocus attention on building a climate conducive to change in our schools. In fact, there may be no other choice, for it appears possible that the public could soon be more receptive to real change in the schools than are the majority of educators.

² George H. Gallup. "The Fourth Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 54: 39; September 1972.

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