

How long has it been since you were 16 and felt the emotions of a high school student?

Teachers at West Linn (Oregon) High School, concerned about school climate and effectiveness, decided to spend a "Day in the Life" of students to find out what students experience during their hours at school and how they feel about it.

Despite high SAT scores, low staff turnover, and excellent daily attendance at West Linn, teachers were aware of students who were bored by classes and others who felt overworked. Some teachers thought the individual needs of the 1,100 students were not being met while others complained the school was too student-centered. In short, although West Linn is thought to be a "good" school, the staff had doubts about the overall climate and effectiveness of the program.

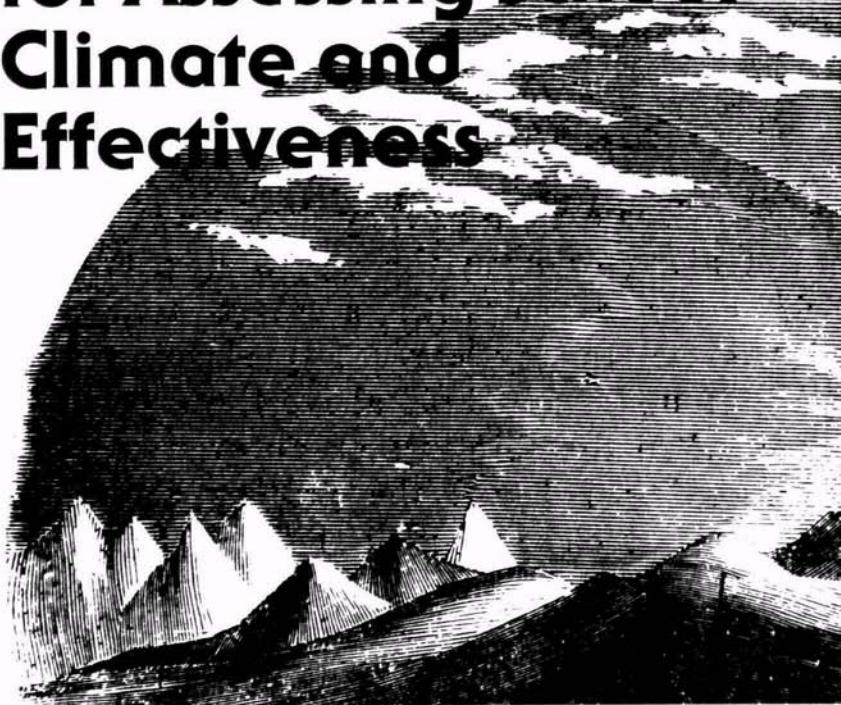
Twice in three years teachers responded to that inner feeling that something was missing by hiring consultants and holding retreats. Each retreat generated a long list of impediments to staff communication and a litany of management's ineffectiveness. Action plans were written to improve school management and enhance interpersonal communication and, for a brief time, the staff felt renewed potency and self-worth.

But while these efforts helped create more harmonious working conditions, they did not address the question of school climate; that is, "How does the school feel to students?" and "How could it be made to feel better?" Nor did these staff development activities address school effectiveness issues such as "Is the educational program structured so that students have the opportunity to make the greatest possible academic gains?"

The Day in the Life Idea

To help address the issues of climate and effectiveness, the "Day in the Life" idea was born. While these issues are not opposed to each other, the proponents of school climate are generally perceived as working the

"A Day in the Life"—A Technique for Assessing School Climate and Effectiveness



affective side of the street, while school effectiveness researchers are viewed as concerned with the cognitive aspects of schooling. The "Day in the Life" strategy sought to unite these two camps by assessing the climate of the school through an examination of the issues that school effectiveness researchers have found to be critical.¹ After conducting this type of assessment, a school staff can proceed to improve both climate and effectiveness through a unified intervention.

The "Day in the Life" idea is simple. It starts with the sociological research technique of shadowing (having an observer tail a subject and attempt to experience things as they are experienced by that subject). At West Linn, teachers acting as observers shadowed typical students and experienced an average school

day from the students' perspective.

A similar process was used by the authors of a 1964 ASCD publication now out of print, *The Junior High School We Saw*.² At West Linn, however, we armed our observers with a checklist focused on the variables that school effectiveness researchers have shown most powerfully discriminate between effective and ineffective schools.³ The "Day in the Life" technique differs from classical research, not only in its lack of scientific precision, but in the fact that its goal is to report the perceptions and findings of both the subjects and the observers to the local school community. By so doing, locally appropriate improvement strategies can emerge to address the problems uncovered.

The Day in the Life Process

In April, a flyer was circulated to

Teachers in this high school who "shadowed" students discovered problems with class interruptions, low expectations for low achievers, and inadequate learning time.



the West Linn teaching staff proposing the "Day in the Life" idea. The flyer asked:

- Is taking six classes a day too much of a load for the average student?
- Do we have too much, too little, or an appropriate amount of social time in the school day?
- Are there dramatic differences in the tone of many classes and is this in the best interest of the students?
- Why do some students feel frustrated in their inability to take all the course work they'd like, while others have exhausted the curriculum after only two years?

Teachers were then asked to volunteer for the role of observer. Teachers who preferred not to have a colleague visit their classroom were given the opportunity of confidentially requesting that the "typical" students selected to be subjects not be ones enrolled in their classes. Seven teachers exercised this option. The names of the 30 teachers who volunteered to be the observers were placed in a hat, from which eight names were randomly selected.

Then, eight students (subjects) were randomly selected, using a process that ensured an equal number of males and females, freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and an equitable distribution of students whose grades were superior, average, and below average.

Next, observers were matched

Figure 1. "Day in the Life" Checklist and Observers' Findings

Taking this school day as a whole, do you feel the student would have:

	YES	NO	Undecided or No response
1. Felt the school had high expectations for his/her achievement?	2	5	1
2. Felt the climate in the school was orderly and conducive to learning?	5	2	1
3. Felt the instruction provided was based on data regarding his/her understanding? (Monitoring)	4	2	2
4. Felt the instructional materials made available were appropriate to help him/her learn?	5	3	0
5. Felt his/her good school work and effort were appreciated?	5	3	0
6. Felt his/her day was structured to provide the maximum opportunity to learn? (Academic learning time)	2	6	0
7. Felt most of his/her class time was spent productively and on task?	2	5	1
8. Felt the school was dedicated primarily to the process of learning?	3	3	2
9. Felt he/she was an active participant in the teaching/learning process?	3	3	2



with students, and meetings were held to refine an observation checklist, discuss the shadowing process, and set up an observation schedule (See Figure 1).

On each of eight consecutive days following this meeting, observers followed their students through a "typical" day of classes and activities. Once all the observations had been conducted, a session was held with the eight observers to plan a faculty meeting. Although not intended as such, this session turned into an informal and extremely valuable debriefing session.

Finally, late in May, a faculty meeting was held during which three panelists (selected from the faculty) questioned the observers about their experiences. The eight students/subjects attended the meeting and participated in this presentation.

Findings

The goal of this endeavor was simply to take a snapshot of life at West Linn High School with full recogni-

tion that still photography may not duplicate reality. I do not wish to imply that these findings are valid or reliable or that similar findings would surface in other schools.

Areas of Weaknesses Identified.

The composite perceptions of the eight observers for teacher expectations, providing academic learning time, and time on task indicated that these elements of effective schooling were not adequately provided for these eight students.

While trying to assess the level of expectations, the observer of a senior student wrote, "I perceived that Jane did not feel that the school had high expectations for her performance and achievement. Her classes do not tax her academically. She is, however, participating in her major interest area, music, to a greater degree than her other subjects. For the remainder of the program, she is marking time until graduation."

A related concern involved a sophomore student who was allowed to select a program with low expectations for achievement. The teacher commented, "If this student had been placed in these lower track classes according to her true ability, then the expectations were appropriate." Needless to say, the observer suspected that the student was going unchallenged due to inadequate guidance.

Several observers noted that transition time and the 50-minute instructional hour worked counter to the goal of providing adequate academic learning time. To illustrate this, a teacher who followed a sophomore commented that "Several hours could have been used for certain classes while, in others, the student would have benefited as much from picking up the work and going to the library to complete it." This concern was echoed by the shadow of a senior who noted, "I felt that the whole experience was a bit rushed. A schedule allowing longer blocks of time would be more conducive to learning."

Most observers commented on the relatively low attention paid to time on task. A freshman was observed not spending his class time productively, "But rather in talking to friends, etc." The observer of a junior pointed out the relationship between academic learning time and

time on task with this statement: "The P.E. class did not start until 15 minutes after the bell and ten minutes were given to students to get dressed at the end of the period. Also art class was too short. Students barely got their projects, materials, paints, and became involved with work, when the signal came to clean up."

Strengths Noted. In providing an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and in demonstrating an appreciation for quality work the majority of observers felt the school was effective.

As one might have expected, there was considerable variance in the degree to which the school was seen as orderly and conducive to learning. Apparently, not only is there variety in the behavior tolerated by different teachers, but to some degree orderliness is in the eye of the beholder. A teacher assigned to observe a freshman noted, "In some cases the classroom was actually chaotic. Sometimes peer pressure even made students afraid to work diligently in the classroom." Another observer remarked, "Very orderly day. Whether order is conducive to learning for all students is questionable. Order is very good for management." Nevertheless, the most characteristic comment on learning climate was this: "The learning environment was orderly and structured with the exception that frequent interruptions from office messengers interrupted the history lecture I observed, breaking the thread of concentration."

Teachers also commented on the appreciation shown to quality work with these characteristic observations: "I think the interest that Tom showed indicated that he feels his efforts are appreciated," and, "When Jack responded, it was acknowledged." However, one observer shared this insight: "With the exception of Woodshop and possibly P.E., the day seems to be a job for students to complete, so they can receive payment and go home, rather than an effort and accomplishment to take pride in."

Do Students Experience School Differently Depending on their Grades?

All three of the observers of the students with grade point averages of

3.5 and above stated they felt the instructional materials were appropriate and that the school was primarily dedicated to the process of learning.

The three observers of the students with lower grade point averages (2.0-2.17) felt that their students were not provided adequate academic learning time and furthermore most class time was not spent on task. In addition they felt that the school did not hold high expectations for these students' achievement. Ironically, these same observers indicated that when these students did work, their efforts were appreciated.

From these data it appears that not only does the school expect very little from students with lower grades, but when these minimal expectations are met, teachers express appreciation.

Finally, the observers of the high achieving students reported that their students perceive the school as being primarily committed to the learning process, while two of the observers of the low achieving students concluded otherwise. From these data, it appears that in spite of the lesson from *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, educators still treat students differently based on questionable data as to their ability.⁴

Where Does West Linn Go From Here?

Our next faculty retreat has already been planned and the consultant has been hired. But this time the topic is problem-solving skills, and the problems to be addressed are the ones uncovered in the "Day in the Life" process.

The high school has identified as a goal for 1981-82 the study of flexible schedule practices in order to provide adequate academic learning time for our students. The principal has pledged to reduce the number of classes disrupted by messengers and, as a result of these efforts, our expectations for low achievers will change. Finally, plans are under way to make a "Day in the Life" an annual event, so that we can continue to focus on what needs to be our continuing agenda for change. All 16 participants were united in suggesting the experience be available to more faculty and students next year.

Conclusions

Following the "Day in the Life" process will not provide a valid and reliable assessment of the climate of a school or an absolute measure of the effectiveness of its programs. The validity and reliability of this process could be improved if more teacher/observers were used, if the observers underwent greater training in the pertinent research on school effectiveness, if they were coached on the use of the observation checklist, and if the shadowing occurred several times during a semester rather than only a single day. However, West Linn "Day in the Life" participants see real value in the model. It is our experience that the act of participation leaves an indelible mark. The eight "Day in the Life" teachers and the eight "Day in the Life" students will never again view the teaching/learning process in quite the same way. Furthermore, tough, emotional, delicate, and educationally valid issues have been raised and will be dealt with by our faculty. And these issues weren't raised out of rancor, crisis, or administrative fiat.

The validity of this assessment of West Linn's program is not the issue; what is important is that a discussion of the factors that increase school effectiveness is on our agenda. The "Day in the Life" process is one powerful technique to raise these very important issues in your school community. ■

¹ Most published research on school effectiveness is based on results of reading and math achievement and is derived from the study of elementary schools. Thus, any application of this research to secondary schools is done without extensive empirical support.

² John H. Lounsbury and Jean V. Marani, *The Junior High School We Saw* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1964).

³ Items one through eight on the perception checklist were inspired by a recent ASCD videotape synthesizing major school effectiveness studies: *Teacher and School Effectiveness*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1981.

⁴ Rosenthal and Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968).

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