

Building School Culture in an Age of Accountability

Principals Lead Through Sharing Tasks

by Rick Allen

New accountability demands are forcing changes in school practices for administrators and teachers alike. But how can a principal create or maintain a positive school culture in the face of the pressures that accountability brings?

A common, short-term reaction is to focus on test preparation and scores. "If the superintendent tells [the principal] that your job is on the line because of test scores, then you don't care about constructivism—you work to get the test scores up," says Thomas Sergiovanni, professor of education in the Center for Educational Leadership at Trinity University in San Antonio, Tex. But fretting about numbers won't necessarily cultivate a positive school culture that's focused on raising the achievement of all students, he adds.

In this age of accountability, veteran educators and school leadership experts alike insist that the principal, as the prime shaper of school culture, must listen to other groups within the school. Those include teachers, students, and parents. Encouraging such dialogue indicates the principal's willingness to take risks in sharing power, experts say.

Dialogue Leads to Understanding

Fostering dialogue within a school community can also help principals address school climate, or "the way we feel about things," says Karen Dyer of the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C. A good climate, in turn, can positively influence culture, which encompasses a school's beliefs and practices.

If the leadership creates the right climate so that teachers understand and "feel connected" to the goal of, say, closing the achievement gap between different socioeconomic groups, members move from mere "compliance" to "commitment," says Dyer. Otherwise, teachers "always need to be monitored" for compliance, and that can hurt the climate and culture, she adds.

Kent Peterson, who has researched and written extensively on positive versus "toxic" school cultures, suggests that a principal and the school community should first conduct "deep analyses" of the current school culture. "By delving into their histories, staff and administrators, like families, are better able to understand why their cultures developed,"



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Peterson says.

These analyses can help schools identify aspects of culture that they need to change, such as hostile faculty meetings or resistance to genuine examinations of student performance data. They can also reinforce positive traits such as respect for professional learning or attention to the needs of low-income students, he adds.

The Paradox of Using Data

Accountability mandates, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in the United States, are in theory largely designed to force schools to take a “person-centered approach,” so every child has a chance to see his individual cognitive capacities not only recognized but maximized, says Ann Miser, educator and coauthor of the ASCD book *On Becoming a School Leader: A Person-Centered Challenge*.

The paradox of accountability efforts like NCLB, however, is that the overreliance on measures of cognitive abilities can cause tunnel vision, Miser warns, and lead to a school culture that doesn't really address the needs of students, teachers, or families. “Educators are frustrated because they have a holistic view of student performance. Scores reflect one part of a child's development into a citizen and a member of the community,” says Miser, an education professor at the University of Hawaii, Hilo. “Tests don't deal with the socio-emotional aspects of a student—we don't have measures for collaboration” and for other qualities that show students are succeeding in “figuring out their place in the world.”

Creating or keeping a positive school culture that focuses on continuous improvement can be difficult while under the harsh glare of the accountability spotlight, but “accountability measures are largely good,” says Kathryn Birkett, principal of Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, Ill.

Birkett's leadership goals this year include making her staff more aware of the importance of student data, while removing the misperception that teachers are “being analyzed.” She plans to empower those teachers who are “strong, good, and wise leaders” to work with students who need the most help. “These teachers have to be comfortable trying something and, if it fails, trying again. Nobody yet has come up with the answers for the disenfranchised student or low achiever, but now we need to look at new and better ways to help these students,” Birkett says.

Sharing Authority

Nobody says that sharing leadership is easy, but principals who avoid cultivating leadership in others maintain a kind of stunted culture, say experts. In her ASCD book, *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement*, Linda Lambert states that “when a principal—rather than the school community members—consistently solves problems, makes decisions, and gives answers, dependency behaviors on the part of staff actually increase.”

Typically, dependency occurs when a principal makes major decisions, gives or withholds information and permission, and directs the work of the school, according to Lambert. A

“codependency” results when teachers and the principal depend on each other to keep such hierarchical roles in place. The result, concludes Lambert, is a diminished capacity for leadership and problem solving in the school.

Such traditional principal hierarchies tend to go hand in hand with schools that foster “a culture of isolation”—in other words, most schools in the United States and in many parts of the world, contends Vivian Troen, who, with Katherine Boles, recently wrote *Who's Teaching Your Children?* (Yale, 2003).

“Principals have to make an attitudinal shift. They tend to believe that power—or what they think is power—is a zero-sum game. Often principals worry that teacher leadership will take power away from them,” argues Troen.

In their book, Troen and Boles propose moving away from the culture of isolation by having teacher teams with mixed experience levels work under the supervision of a “chief instructor,” who would report directly to the principal. Under their plan, the principal's capacity to focus on instructional leadership would increase because there would also be a facility manager, who would handle building maintenance.

Indeed, some principals are already sharing authority by asking teachers, students, and parents for ideas about what issues should be brought to the table. When Neuqua Valley High School, a six-year-old school that has gradually grown to 3,600 students, confronted the issue of preventing student anonymity, the teachers decided to create an advisory program. Under the program, each student works with the same teacher-advisor throughout high school.

Students and School Culture

In shaping the school environment, Sergiovanni advises, leaders should pursue the “domestication of wild culture,” which is how he describes a student culture that has little adult influence. If students are left to themselves, they may “make decisions that lead to an anti-school culture,” he warns.

When leaders don't assert themselves, the overall school culture gets “normed toward isolation and keeping your mouth shut,” he says. On the other hand, in a positive culture, staff members look at goals and ask whether they're getting them done, he adds. Winning the culture wars, according to Sergiovanni, means getting teachers, students, and families to embrace school norms that define “who we are and where we are going.”

At Neuqua Valley, for example, students are an integral part of numerous committees with teachers and administrators, including those on diversity, planning, and school climate, says Birkett.

At the same time, Birkett believes that school leaders must make their expectations for students clear. Whether it's a policy against smoking on school grounds or arrangements for a homecoming dance, “good dialogue is necessary,” she says.

Parents can also help shape school culture if the school is “invitational” to them, says Miser. For example, when Miser was a high school principal, parents served on her school's advisory

group for the interdisciplinary studies curriculum and as an audience for students' authentic assessments. Other parents set up service learning projects or helped clean, paint, and repair the school. Having parents around also kept student discipline problems down, notes Miser.

Commitment to Ideas, Not Personalities

All members of a school community should have an idea of “the common good and what we are about,” says Sergiovanni—in other words, the school vision. Then the principal can identify challenges by asking different stakeholder groups how close the school is to reaching its vision. A school culture based on a particular leader's personality, ability to excite, or interpersonal skills can still fall short because this focus may “keep others out of leadership.”

Instead, the school culture should rest on the idea that leading is a right that has an implicit obligation, what Sergiovanni calls “leadership by entitlement.” This type of leadership builds up a positive culture when teachers, students, and principals understand their reciprocal roles and step up to the plate to assume them, he says. A principal has an obligation to support teachers and the goals of the school. Students have an obligation to learn, teachers to teach, and parents to support learning.

When the roles are publicly agreed upon, school members are “doing things because ideas or commitments are leading the way—not a charming personality or the local state capital,” says Sergiovanni.

An engaging personality is still an asset for a principal, suggests Miser, but the trick is to balance school and personal visions. “A principal can inspire teachers to learn how to reconsider their own challenges as teachers, to help them organize and frame them differently,” she says. Then, even if a principal leaves, the teachers will have grown through the coaching.

Even in the most collaborative school cultures, “principals remain key to shaping underlying norms, values, and beliefs,” says Peterson. Principals shape culture in the hundreds of daily interactions they have with the school community. Peterson notes that the principal's roles include being a “symbol” who reinforces core values through daily work; a “potter” who builds culture through hiring, budget, and supervisory decisions; a “poet” whose written and oral messages can reinforce a healthy culture; an “actor” on all the “stages” of school events; and a “healer” who can help repair the culture after tragedy, conflict, or loss.

Dyer knows that even minor efforts can foster a positive culture. As an elementary principal, her vision was to make learning the highest priority. Not even a classroom visit from the principal should disrupt the learning process, Dyer asserts, so she asked students to give her no more than “a wave with a little finger” during her visits. Their pact, says Dyer, was a small gesture to show students that in their school's culture classroom learning outranked everything else.

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