

School Culture and Change:
An Examination of the Effects of School Culture on the Process of Change
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The following excerpts were selected by Victoria M. Young. You are encouraged to review the full article for proper references and more information. It can be found at <http://usca.edu/essays/vol122004/hinde.pdf>

This article reviews much of the literature on school culture and its effects on teachers and the process of change from the point of view of an experienced classroom teacher turned college professor.

Understanding school culture is an essential factor in any reform initiative. ...culture surrounds and envelopes teachers forming their perspectives and influencing their decisions and actions.

School Culture Defined

- the underlying stream of values and rituals that pervade schools.
- expectations and assumptions that direct the activities of school personnel and students.
- is not a static entity. It is constantly being constructed and shaped.
- develops as staff members interact with each other, the students, and the community.
- becomes the guide for behavior that is shared among members of the school at large.
- societal values are a major ingredient of school culture.

The Culture of Change

Schweiker-Marra (1995) determined 12 particular norms of school culture that facilitated change.

The first six norms involve teacher knowledge and qualities:

- (1) collegiality,
- (2) experimentation,
- (3) high expectations,
- (4) trust and confidence,
- (5) tangible support, and
- (6) referring to a knowledge base.

Additionally, administrators provide opportunities for professional development, and support the teachers in other tangible ways.

The remaining six norms demonstrate effective teacher interaction with each other and their administrators:

- (7) appreciation and recognition,
- (8) caring and humor,
- (9) involvement in decision-making,
- (10) protection of what's important (in this case, the educational needs of the students are paramount and are the guiding influence in the culture of the school),
- (11) traditions, and
- (12) honest, open communication.

School leaders include the principal, teachers, and parents.

The school principal in particular is the key to change. Fullan (1991) identified characteristics of principals that facilitated change. These principals

- 1) work closely with staff to clarify and support the innovation,
- 2) work collaboratively with other change agents (i.e. vice-principal and lead teachers) throughout the school year,
- 3) develop supportive organizational arrangements, consult, monitor, and reinforce the change process.

Factors Inhibiting Change

There are myriad factors that inhibit change. Mandated change is unlikely to be effective.

As Seymour Sarason points out, the problem of change is a problem of power. In order for the culture of schools to adjust to allow for change then power must be wielded in such a way as to *allow others to gain a sense of ownership with the goals and process of change*. It is often a delicate balance between mandating change (a process that is usually unsuccessful, as stated earlier) and bringing teachers to believe in the need for and efficacy of the reform so that they feel a sense of ownership. Schools that are successful in this endeavor will be able to enact lasting and effective change.

Final Thoughts

Sarason (1996) relates the following story that was anonymously left in the mailbox of Dr. Emory Cowen of the University of Rochester:

Common advice from knowledgeable horse trainers includes the adage, “**If the horse you’re riding dies, get off.**” Seems simple enough, yet, in the education business we don’t always follow that advice. Instead, we often choose from an array of alternatives which include:

1. Buying a stronger whip.
2. Trying a new bit or bridle.
3. Switching riders.
4. Moving the horse to a new location.
5. Riding the horse for longer periods of time.
6. Saying things like, “This is the way we’ve always ridden this horse.”
7. Appointing a committee to study horses.
8. Arranging to visit other sites where they ride dead horses efficiently.
9. Increasing the standards for riding dead horses.
10. Creating a test for measuring our riding ability.
11. Comparing how we’re riding now with how we did it 10 or 20 years ago.
12. Complaining about the state of horses these days.
13. Coming up with new styles of riding.
14. Blaming the horse’s parents. The problem is in the breeding.

Dismount!