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Defining the School's Culture

A school's culture can be defined as the traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms within a school that can be shaped, enhanced, and maintained through the school's principal and teacher-leaders (Short & Greer, 1997). An effective process for improving a school culture includes empowering diverse stakeholders to rebuild relationships that will instill a staff's commitment to support student success in highly challenged school communities. When a school district or site has been challenged for its lack of performance, a survival culture permeates every dimension of the organization. Primary beliefs of the school staff focus on job security and basic survival. To create a new culture of change, school principals and teacher-leaders must focus on an overall organizational transformation that includes the following successful practices:

- Defining the role of the school principal, teacher, and school community through open communication and academic growth activities that can best serve the needs of a particular school community.
- Scheduling effective communication mechanisms, such as staff lunchroom visits, department forums, staff meeting pop-ins, and all-district personnel rallies.

- Sharing successes through employee union newsletters, internal correspondence, and community relations that breed further successes for diverse student populations.
- Visualizing schoolwide and classroom goals that support the goals of a school site and district to generate key results and offering staff development training that supports these results.

When working to change school culture for low-performing schools, principals and teacher-leaders must first consider the basic needs of their staff and their students. The school leaders must evaluate the social and environmental contexts of a school's practices to define the existing school staff's culture and norms when working with students (Forester, 1996). Additionally, staff members and students should not feel monitored, and the feelings of individual teachers and students must be acknowledged.

The student should be the centerpiece of defining a school's culture, because the student is the chief client served by the educational profession (Englert, 1993). When a school's culture can be reformed to support the assumption that all students have the capacity to learn and achieve, the school principal and teacher-leaders can modify previously held beliefs about how students learn and create new strategies to help low-performing students become successful (Burke, Baca, Picus, & Jones, 2003). Examples of how a school's principals, staff, and supporting school district can nurture high-performing schools and students include the following:

- School staff development and districtwide staff convention themes can be developed that focus on achievement (e.g., Everybody Counts Everyday, T.E.A.M.—Together, Everybody Achieves More).
- A school board and school site policy revision can include input from staff, board members, and the community.

- Standards of attendance can be central in all school reform initiatives, and teacher accountability should be paramount.
- School principals can instill the belief in all stakeholders that failure is not an option: It's only a nagging possibility that keeps school staff focused.
- School principals should watch their thoughts, words, actions, habits, and character, because they become their destiny.

UNDERSTANDING ATTITUDE DEFINED BY ACTIONS

A school community attitude is defined by those actions that support achievement. An effective school and community relations program requires ongoing two-way communication within that school community. By being aware of the school community's perceptions of the school, the school principal and teacher-leaders can (a) deal more effectively with misconceptions when they arise; (b) eradicate racial and economic disparities for students; and (c) reengage parents and community members into the unique learning needs of their student community (Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000).

Reading the pulse of the community and forming effective partnerships with diverse community members requires the development of a proactive community relations program at the school. Effective community relations programs utilize community partners in their school reform efforts for overall problem solving, resource development, school-based and classroom monitoring of reform initiatives, and creating a seamless delivery of educational support services. Examples of effective school and district-based community relations strategies with diverse school community stakeholders include:

- Scheduling public board meetings at schools that incorporate staff and achievement recognition programs.

- Organizing brown bag lunches at schools to meet staff, share the school's vision and priorities, and discuss challenges, successes, needs, and questions.
- Providing community forums throughout the year at diverse geographical sites in the school community and presenting them at different times and in diverse languages.
- Convening whole-department meetings with district staff groups.
- Requiring a staff and community textbook account-ability committee to oversee the purchase and bar coding of textbooks.
- Organizing school-site beautification days with district office support.
- Hiring school counselors and security assistants to sup-port a healthy and secure learning environment.
- Creating maintenance strike teams at schools to provide immediate physical improvements.
- Organizing human relations camps for high school students.
- Analyzing leadership and learning survey data col-lected from principals and teachers to support district office decision making.
- Sharing successes through union newsletters and memos to staff.
- Using the media to document successes and build over-all school community morale.
- Interviewing the school principal and teachers and publishing stories about past successes in the classroom that correlate to success schoolwide.

SCHEDULING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

An effective school-based community relations program should include ongoing publications produced by the school about critical school issues, newsletters, press releases, quarterly community forums, planned culturally sensitive community

celebrations, awards ceremonies and testimonials, volunteer recognition events, and community partner celebrations.

At the school-site level, an effective community relations school staff member should be able to (a) interpret the school board policies to the school community; (b) serve as a source of information for the school community; (c) inform the school staff about community concerns and opinions; (d) create on-going internal and external written communications; (e) create crisis management plans; and (f) provide ongoing schoolwide inservice trainings for all school personnel (Fiore, 2002).

Each activity that the public relations staff member maintains and develops should be organized on a predetermined timeline. For example, the parent handbook for each school year should be created in the early summer and mailed to parents as part of the back-to-school mailing in August. Press releases should be organized around the school calendar of events and key recognition activities. Form 1.1 provides a community relations workplan that can be used by a school site in planning appropriate community relations activities.

Form 1.1   Community Relations Workplan

Directions: The school-site public relations staff member and school personnel should complete the planning table with appropriate community relations activities and timeline for the school year.

Type of Activity	*Activity Description*	*Timeline*
Standard school-site publication (e.g., school-site parent handbook, community resource guide)		
School newsletter (e.g., school community news, student successes, new community partner contributions)		

(Continued)

Form 1.1   (Continued)

Type of Activity	Activity Description	Timeline
Press releases (e.g., test score results, events, grant program awards, student achievement)		
Quarterly forums (e.g., state and district standards, curricular choices to support state standards, student assessment instruments, student achievement)		
Cultural community celebrations (e.g., Martin Luther King Day, Cinco de Mayo)		
Awards ceremonies and testimonials (e.g., student achievement, school recognitions, guest speakers, legislator visits)		
Volunteer recognition events (e.g., thank-you lunches, volunteer play days with family, volunteer development programs, volunteer recruitment orientations)		
Community partner celebrations (e.g., community partner recognition events for adopt-a-school programs; event sponsorships; book, equipment, and supply donations; staff support and training donations)		
Other:		
Other:		
Other:		