Shaping School Culture

Share the secrets for success of principals in seven high-achieving, high-poverty urban middle level schools.

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i've had problems with [new] people [coming] from other schools who may have talked with kids a certain way. Talked to parents a certain way. And who had to just be pulled to the side and [told], 'Look, we don't talk to children that way here.' We almost had to just go through a whole re-education process where, you know, you don't say, 'This is stupid.' No, you don't tell them to shut up. No you don't tell parents, 'Well, that's just the way it is.' No, that's not the way it is.'

The staff member quoted above works in a high-poverty middle level school that has demonstrated remarkable student performance gains over several years. It was one of seven middle schools that participated in a study conducted by the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin for the U.S. Department of Education, examining how high-performing, high-poverty middle level schools improved student performance. The findings reported in this article are preliminary. One striking feature shared by all of these schools is the culture of equity and high achievement that shapes the way staff members go about their work. Strong leaders play a significant role in building these cultures. Once established, these cultures are deeply embedded in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of staff members. When a strong, positive culture exists in a school, members of the organization feel a responsibility to protect that culture.

Communicate a Clear Purpose

In most of the study schools, a new leader came in who was responsible for improving student performance and forming a clear focus for the school. These leaders were committed to creating cultures that valued equity and high expectations. Leaders from these seven schools promoted their values through their dialogue, actions, and symbolic gestures.

Dialogue

In some cases, implementing high expectations meant that staff members needed to change the defeatist attitudes they held about student learning. These leaders made it very clear that such attitudes would no longer be tolerated. For example, the former principal of Memorial Junior High School in Eagle Pass, TX, recalled, "One of the first [changes] was, high expectations. Don't come and tell me that this is a poor Mexican child, and he comes from the barrio and everything. No, no, no. I don't want you to come and tell me...that we have absolutely no jurisdiction over [a child] while he's at home. When he crosses that street and he gets in here—what are we doing about that child?"

Staff members from other schools shared similar accounts of leaders coming in with a new sense of purpose that raised the level of expectations for everyone. At JFK Middle School in Utica, NY, a district staff member recalled how the principal was determined to have his staff members accept his focus: "He just has a way of getting those expectations across to people and making them get that—or helping them to get there. He can be very gentle...but he just won't take no for an answer."
Action
These principals embodied the values they were instilling in the whole school. They demonstrated that they were not asking their staff members to attempt changes they themselves were not willing to make. The principals in most of the schools exhibited a strong work ethic, arriving early and leaving late. At Inman Middle School in Atlanta, GA, staff members viewed the principal as someone who kept long hours and expected his staff to be willing to work hard as well. The principal confirmed, “You [work hard] and if that's not your work ethic, then you just don't fit in. And that's sort of the way it was; it was an overall work ethic.”

These leaders held high standards for themselves. A teacher at JFK Middle School summarized how the principal led by example: “He is a person who gets things done. I mean, he is on top of everything. And the thing that I always loved is his dedication. He expects a lot from us. He certainly does. But he doesn't expect more from us than he expects from himself.... He'll be here till all hours at night. He's here on the weekend. I mean, he is extremely dedicated.”

Symbolic Gestures
Principals used symbolic gestures to communicate specific values. In several of these schools, principals paid attention to facilities to instill a sense of school pride in community members. At Hambrick Middle School in Aldine, TX, one of the first things the new principal did was clean up the building, replacing the chairs in the auditorium, repairing broken light fixtures, and having the lockers painted. A staff member explained that “those small things added up to huge differences so that kids started to see that it was important to [the principal] and it was important to us where they studied.... It was clean and well kept [and that] made them proud of where they came to school.”

Principals also found additional money for stipends or for attending professional development sessions for teachers who stayed after hours tutoring students who needed additional help. Typically, this was not a large amount of money, but it did send an important message to teachers about being valued and the importance of taking time to meet individual students’ academic needs.

Principals established traditions that communicated a common culture in symbolic ways. At the majority of schools, teachers and administrators went out into the hallways to say good morning to students, communicating through this daily routine that they cared for individual students. At Memorial Junior High School, the principal had the names of students who scored well on the state-
administered writing test painted on the hallway walls each year. At Inman Middle School, the principal began a “Changing of the Chairs” ceremony at the end of each school year that symbolized the transfer of leadership responsibilities from the eighth graders to the seventh graders. The principal explained, “I’m real big on tradition. I think tradition is important. It’s important to family. It gives people something to hang their hat on.”

**Build Consensus**

Communicating a belief in high expectations and equity led to powerful changes in attitudes at the study schools. However, principals would not have been able to build consensus for their ideas if they did not offer staff members support for the changes they were being asked to make. Leaders in these schools thoughtfully built consensus by acting with caution, asking staff members to make tough choices, identifying advocates, sharing authority, supporting staff members, eliminating distractions, and giving staff members time to collaborate.

**Take Stock**

Strong leaders entered study schools intending to improve school performance. However, these leaders carefully surveyed the setting before initiating specific changes. At Pocomoke (MD) Middle School, the principal shared her view “that every principal comes in, and they assess where they think the school is at that given time, and their agenda is to move it forward.” At Tonasket (WA) Middle School, a teacher talked about how “as a newcomer on the campus, [the principal] approached his new task methodically, by listening and observing to determine how his personality would fit with the school staff.” Other principals took the summer before starting their new position to learn more about the needs of the staff and students.

**Make Tough Choices**

Once a principal offered a new direction, he or she asked staff members to make a choice about whether they fit into the school’s future. In each school, staff members reacted to what they were being asked to do in a variety of ways. Some staff members accepted the new direction because they felt they had no alternatives. At Inman, a staff member stated that people could not resist change because “they would be resisting the whole school. They would be an island.” If they wanted to stay at the school, they had to accept change even if they did not do so enthusiastically. Although these staff members were not excited about the new direction their school was taking, they also were not able to derail new efforts because so many other staff members supported the new direction. Some staff members realized their goals did not match the new purpose of the school and felt that it would make more sense to leave. The staff at Memorial recalled how “out of 125 teachers, slowly but surely maybe 25 left. But those 25 were very detrimental.” A majority of the study schools went through similar restructuring patterns. As positions became open, school staff members selected individuals whose values were aligned with the schools’.

In most schools, there were groups of staff members who had long been frustrated and were ready for change. These people enthusiastically supported the school’s new direction. For example, many teachers at Hambrick discussed how difficult their work situations had been in the past. Many were tired of the status quo; they welcomed the change.

**Identify Advocates**

Those ready for a change often were targeted by principals to become advocates for positive change. They made up a critical mass that was essential to improvements. The principal at Inman attributed the success of their changes to the fact that they “had just enough critical mass, which I will define as about 35%...that allowed us to levy [change].”

People came together to form a critical mass in different ways. In some schools, principals identified initiators among those on staff who were hungry for a change. These people took on key positions. At Tonasket, enthusiastic teachers were appointed positions as teacher leaders through which they could motivate their peers.

**Share Authority**

The leaders of these middle level schools understood that their initiatives would have more success if staff members felt that they shared responsibility for decision making. Although the leaders at the study schools did not waver in commitment to high expectations and equity, they also were not autocratic in their leadership styles. For example, at Rockcastle County Middle School in Mount Vernon, KY, the principal who initiated most of the school’s changes.

“Said, when you share authority, you share responsibility.” By sharing his authority, others were allowed to take ownership of the new direction for the school.

Other principals shared similar leadership approaches. Teachers at Pocomoke also felt their principal wanted them to contribute to making decisions: “So I think that makes it more exciting to be here because you feel like you can… actually maybe do something about [problems that arise].” But although these leaders sought input from others, they were unwilling to negotiate some things. Although the principals would negotiate about the best way to achieve equity and excellence, they rigidly held onto the goal of achieving equity and excellence.

**Support Staff Members**

In addition to sharing authority, leaders also viewed it as their role to support the work of their staff members. Teachers at JFK Middle School believed that their principal was willing to provide them with whatever support they needed to help students do well. Teachers reported that he constantly asked, “What can we do to help you out? What do you need?” At Memorial, staff members talked about an environment in which they felt supported because their needs were met. One teacher shared that she had come from another school where she did not have her own classroom or the materials she needed and how this completely changed at
M emorial, where the principal helped her staff members be successful by providing them the support they needed.

Eliminate Distractions
Leaders gained acceptance for their ideas by eliminating distractions for teachers. Some of these schools had a history of inappropriate student behavior, which took teachers' time and energy away from instruction. In two schools, this issue was addressed through a constellation of activities. At Hambrick, the principal instituted a number of organizational changes that helped with student discipline. She eliminated bells to begin and dismiss classes, reduced transition time between classes, and eliminated the use of lockers. These actions reduced unstructured time. All of these small changes had a positive effect on school climate, and discouraged inappropriate student behavior. At M emorial, vandalism was common before the school day began. The new principal changed the school's policy and permitted students to enter the building in the mornings. The vandalism stopped and teachers felt safer and more focused. The message from these principals was that they were there to help teachers do their jobs well.

Provide Time to Collaborate
Unlike teachers working in many other schools across the United States, teachers in these seven schools had many opportunities to talk with one another. Many of the teachers from these seven schools contrasted their new work situations with previous ones in which they did not have time to work and talk with their colleagues. They described current work situations in which they have daily interactions with other staff members. Teachers at Tonasket ate lunch together every day. For them, leaving their classrooms during lunch and sharing this time with their coworkers represents their beginning to coalesce as a staff. A teacher explains that this was not always the case: “Everyone was very isolated. They went to their own rooms. We holed up in our rooms, just to protect ourselves, cover our rear ends. And we started to open up. One of the best things that happened when we moved out here [to the new building] was we had this lunch room that we were all encouraged to be in for lunch. And it gave us a time to get to know each other and break down those barriers and start talking.”

More often, this exchange of ideas occurred during daily team meetings facilitated by the fact that teachers had common planning periods. The former principal from Pocomoke explained, “Having team meetings in middle school is really important for buy-in because you get a set of people who work with the same kids meeting together every day to talk about curriculum issues, to talk about management issues, to plan together, to commiserate together, and then to celebrate together.”

These schools had, over time, developed a shared understanding of who they were, where they had come from, and what their common culture was. This understanding was nurtured by the principals and could not have come about if teachers did not receive ample time to talk with one another.

The cultures of these schools allowed staff members to establish a foundation from which they could feel safe to examine where their schools were and where they wanted to go. Within these shared cultures existed a supportive environment in which no one felt as if they were struggling alone.

Having Time to Improve
The principals in these schools would not have been as successful in shaping a positive culture if they had not had the time to make these changes. Schools and staff members needed time to evolve. They needed to accept change and build consensus around a positive culture. In all of the schools, the principals had the luxury of having at least four years during which they were able to shape the schools’ cultures. During this time, the schools did not experience the instability at the administrative level that often impedes improvement. An assistant principal from Hambrick summed up the importance of this opportunity: “It took a couple of years to get going because it’s just like anything. I always compare it to a football program. You hire a football coach, you don’t expect him the first year to take [you to] a national championship or even to a bowl [game].”

Eventually, staff members took responsibility for making sure the culture survived. They protected the positive culture they had worked hard to establish. They were proud of what they had accomplished, and in many cases, they remembered working in circumstances that were much worse.

Conclusion
The embedded qualities of equity and high achievement that existed at these schools were immediately obvious the moment a visitor walked onto the school grounds. They were evident in the language and behavior of the staff members, most notably with the pervasive use of the words hard-working and family in relation to ensuring that every student would be given the attention and support they needed to succeed.

Equity and high achievement were emblematic of these schools. In every case, effective leaders were essential and instrumental in establishing, shaping, and maintaining positive school environments that enabled these schools to dramatically increase their student performance.

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The study Driven to Succeed: Case Studies of High-Performing, High-Poverty Turnaround Middle Schools is available through the U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service.