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AUTHOR   Firestone, William A.; Wilson, Bruce L.
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ABSTRACT
              Organizational cultures are systems of publicly and
collectively accepted meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions that
a staff uses to guide its actions and interpret its surroundings. In
an effort to suggest concrete ways a principal can change or maintain
a culture, three important elements of a school culture are
discussed: content, symbols, and communication patterns. Content
refers to commitments and task definitions emphasized by the school,
including values such as diversity, respect for individual autonomy,
and commitment to high standards. Symbols of a culture are the means
used to convey its content. These may include legends or stories;
iconic physical objects such as flags, trophies, or even classroom
furnishings; and rituals such as assemblies, teachers' meetings,
conferences, and other recurrent activities. Communication patterns
help reinforce the cultural context carried by the symbols. To be
effective, a principal must establish preferences for certain kinds
of cultural content, reinforce it through the symbol system, and
consistently communicate this culture in all of his or her
interactions around the school. (TE)

CREATING CULTURES THAT SUPPORT INSTRUCTION:

A VIEW OF THE PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP ROLE

William A. Firestone
Bruce L. Wilson

Research for Better Schools, Inc.

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CREATING CULTURES THAT SUPPORT INSTRUCTION:

A VIEW OF THE PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP ROLE[1]

Recent studies of business suggest that organizational cultures are the key to organizational productivity and that they can be shaped by institutional leaders.[2] Yet, very few educators have followed these leads to analyze how cultures vary among schools or the ways in which principals can create cultures that are more conducive to effective instruction. The system of publicly and collectively accepted meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions that a staff uses to guide its actions and interpret its surroundings can contribute greatly to the school's effectiveness. For instance, Brookover and his colleagues found that where a staff has high expectations and believes students can succeed they learn more, and Rutter concluded that a school's "ethos" was central to its success.[3] Gross and Herriott found that where the principal treated teachers as competent professionals, they taught better and students learned more, even when student background was controlled.[4]

This paper identifies important elements of a school's culture that principals should recognize. In doing so, it points to concrete ways that a principal can change or maintain the school's culture.

School Culture

The school's culture help define its tasks for staff. It answers questions like: What are acceptable standards for student achievement? How should order be maintained? How much can I deviate from the official curriculum? How acceptable is it to "talk shop" with other teachers?" Task definitions establish the standards and expectations that are

important for instruction. Cultures also influence teachers'
commitments, including their willingness to keep working at the school,
their emotional ties to it, and agreements to follow the rules and norms
governing behavior. Commitment is an issue because education is often
viewed as an occupation to which people are weakly committed, partly
because of strong, conflicting attachments to family and other jobs.[5] Yet,
the improvement of instruction often requires more effort as well as
different kinds.

Educators interested in analyzing a school's culture should focus on
its content, symbols, and communication patterns. Content specifies the
commitments and task definitions work that are desirable in the situation.
We already have some idea of the cultural content that will promote
effective instruction. Some suggestions come from the research on
effective schools. Others come from studies of innovative school districts
and excellent corporations. For instance, Berman and McLaughlin found that
especially innovative districts had cultures that emphasized diversity of
services delivered, the primacy of service over "bureaucratic or political"
concerns, open boundaries that allowed learning about new approaches and
resources, and norms of mutual trust and encouragement for risk taking.[6]
Peters and Waterman conclude that the culture of excellent corporations
stresses a bias for action by trying things, norms encouraging the employee
to stay close to the customer, a respect for individual autonomy combined
with a belief that productivity comes through people, strong definitions of
what the company stands for, and a commitment to high standards.[7] There is
a substantial overlap between these two sets of cultural elements.

Moreover, they overlap with and ext...   as of the effective schools research.

Symbols of a culture are the means us...   carry its content. Stories are a major kind of symbol. They include myths and legends as well as accounts of true events. They are usually about individuals and are interpreted to indicate positively and negatively valued traits or the consequences of certain actions. They can be about mythical heroes or the "common worker," like the business story about the assembly line worker who made the company president follow safety regulations. Other symbols are physical objects like flags, trophies, report cards, lesson plans, and the furnishings of classrooms and work spaces. Rituals or repeated ceremonial activities such as assemblies, teachers' meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and a variety of other activities are a third kind of symbol. When analyzed in their context, stories, icons, and rituals all help to specify the task definitions and commitments important in a particular school.[8]

Typically, major themes in a culture are expressed redundantly through a variety of symbols. In fact repetition is how one knows a theme is important. The analysis of symbols is complex because effective symbols are inherently ambiguous. A symbol's power comes from the way it combines school-specific and universal elements.

Communications patterns help reinforce the cultural content carried by symbols. Stories and rituals cannot express their meaning unless there is an ongoing flow of communications to ensure that these symbols are appropriately interpreted. Here it is important to know both the quantity of communication and how it is organized. Even where communications are rare

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there will be some central sources--including whisperers, gossips, and secretarial sources among others--and some isolates.[9] There may be subgroups that communicate actively among themselves but not with others. Then symbols can take on different meanings among different groups.

Principals and Culture

An understanding of school cultures will be much more useful if there are ways to shape them so they are more supportive of effective instruction. The principal is well placed to shape such cultures by attending to the three elements discussed above.

First, the principal must know clearly what cultural content he or she prefers. That is, the person must know what his or her own values, task definitions, and commitments are. While this is fundamental, it is far from easy because being in favor of some things often requires not supporting others. Schools are in many ways overloaded institutions expected to accomplish too many disparate goals.[10] Some studies of principals suggest that they are hard-working, well-meaning individuals who seek to accommodate rather than making strong commitments.[11] Such accommodation can undermine strong cultures.

Second, the principal can shape the symbol system of the school in many ways. Metz describes a principal who controlled the circulation of stories in his school. During the mid-1960s when many people defined the frequent disruptive events in all schools in the district as part of a series of collective protests to injustice in the larger society, this principal tried to define disciplinary infractions as rare individual

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outbursts that teachers could handle with patience and skill. He frequently told stories like the following:

> I saw this done beautifully in a classroom with the kids. "I ain't going to study today, 'cause I don't feel like it." And the teacher just grinned at him. And she said, "Well, I'm going to give you a book just in case you change your mind." In five minutes he was studying."[12]

This principal also suppressed alternative viewpoints by limiting discussion at faculty meetings and minimizing information about student protests. While this example is of a principal who is primarily concerned with maintaining order, similar (or diametrically opposite) tactics can be used to create cultures supportive of academic excellence. In addition to managing stories, the principal should also consider how the allocation of funds, space, and time can symbolize the importance given to instruction and learning.

Third, the principal can be an active communicator of the culture. Unlike teachers who are relatively isolated, principals spend a great deal of time talking with their staffs in impromptu, unscheduled conversations.[13] The trick to shaping a culture that effectively supports instruction is maintaining consistency across hundreds of separate interactions. Metz compares principals' effective communications to an impressionist painting made through a myriad of little strokes. Each seems meaningless when viewed from up close, but they form a pattern when seen from afar.[14] Such consistency can be maintained only if the principal's own values are firmly anchored. Where it is maintained and the principal's values fit the situation, teachers will often want to do the kinds of things that improve instruction and will often discover those things on their own. This is another description of effective leadership.

Conclusion

It is at least as fruitful to look at how the principal influences instruction in a school by shaping its professional culture as it is to look at more formal approaches, such as those stressing supervision and evaluation. Culture creation is an important part of the principal's leadership responsibility and can be accomplished by shaping the flow of stories among teachers and attending to the content of school ritual. The principal must also attend to the symbolic significance of seemingly routine actions like the allocation of discretionary funds or available space. Perhaps most important, the principal has a central position in the professional communication network that can be used to communicate a consistent set of meanings throughout the school.

ENDNOTES

1. This research was supported by Research for Better Schools, Philadelphia, Pa. and a grant from the Center for Educational Policy and Management at the University of Oregon. Both programs are supported by the National Institute of Education. None of the organizations supporting this work are responsible for the opinions presented here.

2. Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, In Search of Excellence: Lessons From America's Best-Run Companies (New York: Harper & Row, 1957). Terrence Deal and Alan Kennedy, Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

3. Wilbur Brookover, C. Beady, P. Flood, J. Schwitzer, and J. Wisenbacker, School Social Systems and Student Achievement: Schools Can Make a Difference (New York: Praeger, 1979; Michael Rutter, Barbara Maughan, Peter Mortimore, and Janet Ouston, Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children (London: Open Books, 1979).

4. Neal Gross and Robert Herriott, Staff Leadership in Public Schools (New York: John Wiley, 1965).

5. Dan C. Lortie, School teacher: A Sociological Analysis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975). Philip Cusick, "A Study of Networks Among Professional Staffs of Secondary Schools." Educational Administration Quarterly 17 (1981): 114-138.

6. Paul Berman & Milbrey McLaughlin, An Exploratory Study of School District Adaptation (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1979).

7. Peters and Waterman, op. cit.

8. Stephen Barley, "Semiotics and the Study of Occupational and Organizational Cultures," Administrative Science Quarterly 28 (1983): 393-413.

9. Deal and Kennedy, op. cit.

10. Matthew Miles, "Mapping the Common Properties of Schools: in Improving Schools: Using What We Know Rolf Lehming and Michael Kane (eds.) (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981).

11. See for instance Harry Wolcott, The Man in the Principal's Office (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1973).

12. Mary Metz, Classrooms and Corridors: The Crisis of Authority in Desegregated Schools (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1978), pp. 195-196.

13. See for instance, John Kmetz and Donald Willower, "Elementary School Principal's Work Behavior," Educational Administration Quarterly 18 (1982): 62-78.

14. Metz, op. cit.