Culture Shifts: The Influence of Organizational Changes on Staff Culture & Students' School Experiences

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Abstract

This evaluative case study focused on how organizational changes—specifically a new directional system—affected staff culture in a rural Midwestern school district. This work was theoretically grounded in Owens and Valesky's school climate model. Through observations, interviews, and a review of documents, I determined that the new directional system led to cultural changes among the staff that also had a positive impact on students. Specifically, the directional system informed the district's hiring practices, incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies, and inspired teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, it changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed—themselves and their students.

Keywords: school climate, staff culture, organizational change, rural schools, school reform

Introduction

What would it take to make school irresistible to students? Taylor Local School District (TLSD, pseudonym), a rural school district in the Midwest, sought to answer this question while designing a new PK-12 building to support its innovative directional system. This system incorporated new instructional strategies, including service learning, project-based learning, co teaching, differentiation, subject integration, and technology integration. The district opened the building in 2015 with the hope that it had created a supportive, collaborative, technology-rich space for teachers as they experimented with instructional strategies. The district's efforts were based on a core desire to increase student engagement, prepare them for meaningful careers, and make learning "irresistible." This paper is based on findings from a larger qualitative case study which examined the effects of the district's reforms on staff culture and student learning experiences. This present work examines how organizational changes in the form of a new directional system affected staff culture, which in turn impacted students' experiences in school.

Education reform in rural communities does not necessarily align with state or national educational policy priorities (Butler, 2014; Gagnon, 2016; Ruecker, 2022; Sher, 2018). Federal policy reform has attempted to change staff culture through the dismantling of teacher union protections, and the removal of so-called "ineffective" teachers and leaders based on student performance on standardized exams. Educational policy has typically assumed access to a sufficient number of qualified teachers who can be leveraged during school closures, the creation of new

charter schools, and other school turnaround measures (Gagnon, 2016). The logic of such neoliberal policies is misguided, but especially detrimental in rural areas that already struggle to recruit and retain teachers (Butler, 2014).

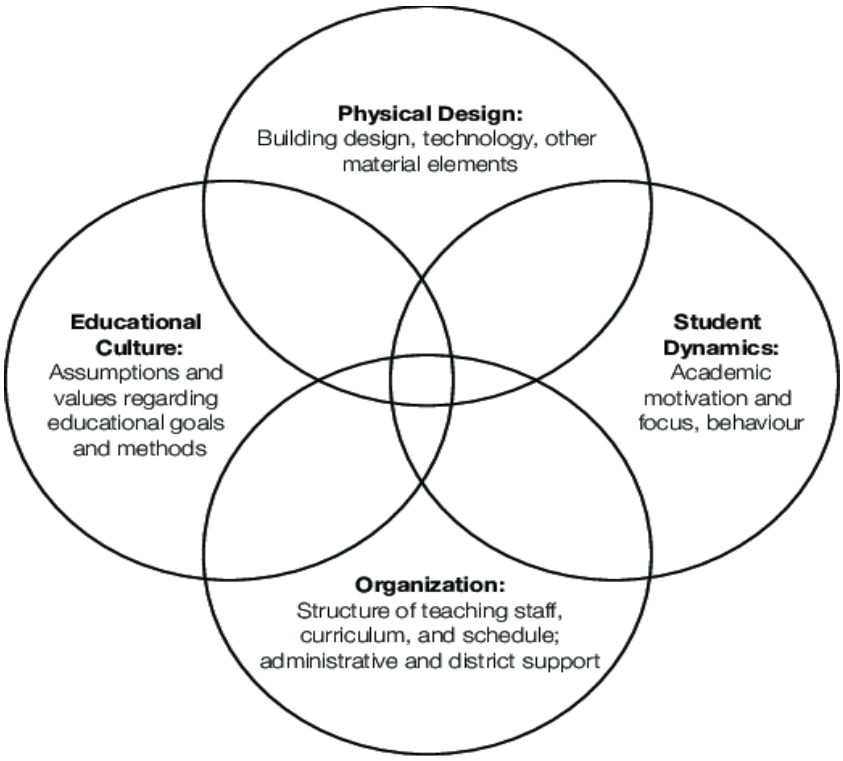
Federal-level policies have also attempted to reform schools through curricula. The 2009 Race to the Top grants incentivized states to adopt college- and career-ready standards at the same time that a consortium of state leaders collaborated to develop the Common Core standards in math and English language arts. Given the history of inequitable learning opportunities for students from different backgrounds in the U.S., there is certainly merit in ensuring that all students are held to the same academic standards. Yet there is also value in grounding students' learning in their communities. Rural schools that embrace place-based education tend to recognize their communities as educational resources, and they cultivate learning experiences that are responsive to their local communities. Decisions on what and how to teach will necessarily include state standards, but these decisions will also incorporate their communities' needs and values. Nevertheless, rural education reform advocates can learn from advocates in other areas, as debates about how to reform urban and rural districts often create an unnecessary divide between the two camps. While standards-based reform advocates would benefit from learning to ground students in an education that is responsive to their local communities, rural reform advocates could learn to work toward more equitable and multicultural learning experiences (Gruenewald, 2003; Kannapel, 2000).

Historically, education reforms have done little to change how students experience school (Hess, 1998; Payne, 2013). Rather, the end result has often focused on making existing practices more efficient (Schlechty, 2009). To transform a school and create an entirely new experience for students and staff, there must be a change in the school's culture and structure (Schlechty, 2009). The reform efforts taken at TLSD, grounded in the district's values, involved a new directional system which led to noticeable changes in the staff culture. This culture change resulted from new hiring practices, use of new instructional strategies, and a shift in how teachers assessed themselves and their students. These cultural changes ultimately impacted students' experiences in school. Unlike federal reforms which are imposed from the top down, these changes were grounded in the district's values and developed in collaboration with teachers.

Theoretical Framework

For this study I employed use of Owens and Valesky's (2015) school climate model to illustrate the interaction among four interrelated dimensions: ecology, organization, staff culture, and student milieu. "*Climate* is generally defined as the characteristics of the total environment in a school building" (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 185). A visual of a Venn diagram with each of the four dimensions overlapping is in Figure 1 (next page).

Figure 1: *School Climate Model*[1]



Ecology refers to the material elements of a school, such as facilities and technology. Organization refers to the way a school operates, including teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum. Milieu refers to the "social dimension in the organization, which includes almost everything relating to the people in the organization" (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 186). Culture is "a system of shared values and beliefs" which interact with people, structures, and systems to produce behavioral norms (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 189). Culture is "both a product and a process" (Bolman & Deal, 2008). It is the result of years of experience, but also is recreated as new people join, learn, and share in the organization's culture. The values that are expressed on paper or in organizational documents matter far less than the values that are lived (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Although it has long been ignored or taken for granted, organizational culture is critical to a school's success (Teasley, 2016).

Ecology, milieu, organization, and culture "are the levers for change available to the school leader who seeks to shift the organizational climate of a school" (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 195). The value of this model is that it shows how organization, staff culture, and student milieu intersect, such that organizational decisions regarding teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum can influence staff culture and thereby affect student experiences. One limitation

1. Copyright permission has already been requested to reprint this image. The original comes from Neil Gislason (2009) Mapping School Design: A Qualitative Study of the Relations Among Facilities Design, Curriculum Delivery, and School Climate, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 40:4, 17-34, DOI: 10.3200/JOEE.40.4.17-34.

of this model is that Owens and Valesky did not describe the extent to which each dimension relates to the other in schools (Gislason, 2009).

The Context of Taylor Local School District

TLSD is a small rural district in the Midwest, home to a large community of Old Order Amish. When driving in to Taylor from my home or my job nearby, busy streets with traffic lights and local businesses turned to long state roads shared with horses and buggies. Spread out on either side of the road were houses with propane tanks, barns, and expanses of farmland where cows, horses, and sheep roamed on warm days.

At the time of this study, TLSD enrolled 488 students. Of those, 460 (94.1%) were white, non-Hispanic. Roughly 29.9% of the students were from families experiencing economic hardship, and 11.8% were students with disabilities ("State" School Report Cards, District Details). Although the district has had many successes, it has struggled to meet consistent expectations on the state's standardized exams. There is a tension between these state requirements and the culture of the district. The district includes a statement on its website that reads, "while you will see grades assigned to us by the State…they do not tell our story." Based on this statement and my time in the district, I learned that doing well on the state's standardized exams was important, but insufficient to capture the enormity of what they were accomplishing in other areas, and definitely not reflective of the district's core values. TLSD was nationally renowned for its achievements in agriculture, having earned top awards annually in state and national Future Farmers of America (FFA) competitions. Every fall, the school takes a week-long break so that students can participate in the county fair. The district is heavily influenced by its setting, but is not defined solely by it. As one of the high school students described it,

> Even though we're an ag-[agricultural] based school, it doesn't even feel like just ag. When people think of ag, they think of farmers. Everybody there is a farmer. Everybody who is going to leave is a farmer—no. We're a bunch of different people that have come together to do similar things but in different ways.

Students from the district have been recognized at the county and state levels for accomplishments in art, athletics, and academics in addition to agriculture. The town is small, but the students are exposed regularly to the world around them, through annual field trips to other states and overseas.

TLSD tackled two major changes at the same time—their physical structure (with a new building), and their organizational structure. Both could be traced back to the hiring of the district's former superintendent. Joy, the agricultural education teacher described the changes this way:

> There were some teachers who believed strongly in service learning when we started this. Um, at the same time we had an administrative change, almost an entire administration changed, so we lost a superintendent, principal, athletic director—all that core had left. And our school board had the vision to understand the person they hired had to do business differently. Because we, I remember saying this to the school board when we were hiring [the former superintendent], that we're on the cusp of greatness.

Because of the turnover of leadership and the unusual opportunity that the district had, Joy felt that

the school board was uniquely positioned to do something amazing with the district, and therefore was supportive of organizational changes.

Organizational Changes in TLSD

Organization refers to the way a school operates, including teaching and planning practices, scheduling, and curriculum. The physical changes to the district in the form of a new building facilitated collaboration across grade levels, student autonomy over their learning, and improved student and staff morale. Yet this physical change did not occur in isolation; the district had already adopted a new directional system whose implementation started shortly before moving into the new building. The district's directional system and supports to make the directional system successful helped to define the organizational structure of the district.

The Directional System

TLSD's directional system included its core beliefs, vision, mission, principles, and instructional strategies. The superintendent explained, "every decision that we make, whether it's providing teacher PD [professional development], whether it's providing something for students, we're constantly going back to that [directional system] saying, 'Is this what we believe in?' 'Is this what we want for our kids?' 'Is this going to help them be better at what they do?'" The directional system centered the learning experience on "student voice, passion, and ownership." The district's mission statement expressed a commitment to "create partnerships with our families and community which broaden minds to learn and serve through collaboration, innovation, and rigorous academics for life's learning journey."

To achieve this mission, the district supported teachers in adopting seven instructional strategies: (a) service learning, (b) project-based learning, (c) co-teaching (across disciplines and grade levels), (d) differentiation, (e) subject integration, (f) technology integration, and (g) designing engaging work. The superintendent explained that engaging work was at the core, like the center of a flower, with the remaining six strategies like the petals of that flower. These seven strategies supported the district's principles, namely that the district was transitioning from a bureaucratic institution to a learning organization characterized by "service and project-based learning that addresses real world problems for real world audiences," "customized student learning based on student need and readiness which uses technology as a primary tool," and "deeper, amplified learning" which makes the first two principles "purposeful and engaging to students." The district also expressed belief "in the freedom to fail and grow as we explore new ways to think and do," which, in conversations with teachers and students, emerged as a belief in a growth mindset. The district relied on a District Leadership Team (DLT) to mentor teachers in instructional strategies.

District Supports

The success of the district's directional system relied on the investment of resources. TLSD supported and encouraged teachers with the instructional strategies through collaborative planning time, implementation bonuses, and professional development.

Collaborative Planning Time. The teacher contract gave administrators permission to build common planning time into the teachers' schedule. Having the time structured into the day and as part of the teacher contract helped to address one common barrier to collaborative planning—not having the time.

Implementation Bonus. A second source of support was through implementation bonuses (IBs). Each teacher in the district was eligible for up to a $2,000 bonus annually upon completion of a "high quality implementation" of any one of the district instructional strategies. Teachers wrote the rubrics used to assess the IB.

Professional Development. A third source of support was professional development. The school district funded many of the professional development opportunities for teachers. Participants primarily discussed professional development focused on designing engaging work, or implementing service learning. The superintendent reported that approximately 75% of the staff has participated in some training on designing engaging work. Teachers identified this structured, Schlechty-inspired professional development as a district priority.

Methodology Design

This project began as an evaluative case study. As defined by Merriam (2009), a case study is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 40). This study was "bounded" in that the research focused specifically on the Taylor Local School District. It was evaluative in that it involved "description, explanation, and judgment" (Merriam, 2009, p. 49). My goal was not to judge as an authority on what the district should be doing, but rather to learn if the directional system was making a difference in how teachers and students experienced school. Evaluations that assess instrumental effectiveness are process evaluations, wherein one might monitor daily tasks and/or assess program activities (Patton, 2015). Process evaluations assess whether or not a program has actually been implemented and to what extent. Studying organizational climate "is the study of *perceptions* that individuals have of various aspects of the environment in the organization" (Owens & Valesky, 2015, p. 199). The study of organizational culture therefore requires conversations with people and examination of symbols that "reveal their assumptions, their beliefs, and the values to which they subscribe" (p. 199). Thus, it is not necessary to attempt to show how changes to the organization contributed to quantifiable student or teacher outcomes. A qualitative case study was ideal for this process evaluation because it is descriptive in nature, and can generate multiple types of data to gain a thorough understanding of what was happening in the district (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005).

Methods

I began this study in 2017 with open-ended fieldwork—classroom observations, unstructured interviews, and review of documents. I later added formal interviews and focus group interviews. In all, I observed 9 classes and 1 community event held at the school. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 faculty/staff and 3 community members. Whenever possible, I tried to observe one class taught by each teacher that I interviewed. I initially sought to interview parents as a separate category but because of the small size of the district, several teachers and community members were also parents, or former parents, of students in the district.

I conducted 6 focus group interviews with 11 students across the elementary, junior, and senior high schools. I met with each group twice. I followed recommendations for focus groups with children. Each group was comprised of no more than 6 students who were no more than 2 years apart in development (Gibson, 2012; Singleton, 2015). I began each focus group by introducing myself and establishing ground rules, including the opportunity for them to ask questions, and the right to pass on a question (Gibson, 2012; Singleton, 2015). To corroborate and clarify findings, I reviewed several documents, including district organizing framework documents, district newsletters, local online newspapers, and videos. I also reviewed five years' worth of monthly school board meeting minutes, starting with the first set of publicly available minutes in 2013 (after the bond measure passed which allowed the district to construct the new building) through 2017 (the year I began in-person data collection). I used these data sources to create a timeline to help me better understand the chronology of developments in the district prior to my arrival in the field.

Analysis

Inductive analysis is an approach to "derive concepts, themes, or a model" from detailed readings of raw data (Thomas, 2006). Although evaluation objectives guided analysis initially, they ultimately were not used as "a set of expectations about specific findings" (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). I did start my process using the district framework as a guide for deductive coding, but I quickly realized that what was in writing on the district framework failed to capture what the participants were sharing with me, so I changed direction (Stake, 1995). I returned to my first interview and experimented with inductive coding using grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2010). I began to see stronger patterns in the data, so I conducted a second round of inductive thematic coding, revising categories as needed, so that I could then sort the data in the cloud-based program *Dedoose*.

Next, I excerpted the data according to theme. I conducted a third round of coding of these excerpts using grounded theory methods. I began to notice relationships among themes that could form a framework. I returned to the literature to discover an established school climate framework that added explanatory power to my findings. With some modifications, I used this framework to guide the remainder of my analysis. I approached this work systematically and maintained a detailed audit trail (Lub, 2015).

Findings

The district's organizational changes, as articulated in the directional system, contributed to changes in staff culture. It 1) informed the new hiring practices; 2) incentivized exploration of new teaching strategies; and 3) inspired some teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, the directional system changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed. In turn, these changes had an effect on student milieu—how students grew and experienced school.

New Hiring Practices

The directional system altered the district's approach to hiring new staff, thereby shifting what values, beliefs, and practices were brought into the district. This made a noticeable shift in the staff culture. One teacher identified the district's hiring practices as the most critical factor in

changing the culture of the school. She described her experiences sitting in on a teacher candidate's interview:

> And in the very beginning, before, when we were first transitioning to this, and when we hired our math teacher that we'd hired, and I remember this interview, the guy said "I don't think I'm comfortable co-teaching." And we said "well maybe this isn't the right place for you." And he said, "yeah I think it's not."

This teacher went on to explain that even "great people cannot fit into this situation." It was essential that any new teacher that the district hired shared the philosophy of the school. She continued,

> But our intentional hiring practices have altered the culture of this building quicker than anything because the people we have coming in believe in this vision of designing the future and the process for which we've created and really have hopped on board and said "okay I don't exactly understand exactly how to do service learning, but can you help me?"

Likely because much of the staff turnover was in the high school, the high school students were more aware of the difference that hiring had made. As one high school student noted,

> When we got the new school, we hired a couple new staff members and that helped a lot because our staff members, they work together a lot on our collaboration, but they're open minded and they care. That's not to say that we didn't have that at the old building, but it wasn't as high of a level of care. But here, it's crazy [how much they care].

As the student noted above, of course, there were open minded, caring teachers who shared the district's philosophy before the district changes, but the significant cultural changes required more staff who aligned with where the district was going. The directional system was designed to inform the district's work, including the hiring of staff and faculty who shared the district's values.

Exploration of Teaching Strategies

After the district adopted the new directional system, it used the implementation bonus (IB) to incentivize teachers to explore new teaching strategies. From the start of the IB in 2016 through the end of 2018, approximately half of the teachers in the district participated in any given semester. Research participants noted that the level of difficulty with each IB rubric varied, and some were not willing to attempt strategies with more cumbersome rubrics. The most popular choices for the IB were differentiation, co-teaching, and service-learning/ project-based learning (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: *IB Participation by Instructional Strategy*

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017*	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Fall 2018	Total
Differentiation	2	11	13	7	9	42

Technology Integration	2	0	0	0	0	2
Service Learning/ Project-Based Learning	0	0	4	8	5	17
Co-Teaching	13	2	2	4	0	21
Subject Integration	1	1	0	0	0	2
Designing Engaging Work**	-	-	-	-	5	5
Multiple Strategies***	4	4	-	1	-	

*Note: The superintendent was unable to access raw data for Spring 2017 and is unable to verify the accuracy of the estimates for this semester.
**Not available as a district strategy until Fall 2018.
***Some teachers chose to work on two or more strategies during the same semester.

Table 2*: IB Participation by Semester*

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017*	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Fall 2018
Number of Teachers Participating	22	13	19	20	19
Number of Teachers in District	40	40	40	40	39
Rate of Participation	55%	32.5%	47.5%	50%	48.7%

While differentiation had the highest participation rate, service learning had its fingerprints all over the district. Service learning was an instructional strategy in the district, particularly in the agriculture program, for roughly a decade before the district implemented the new directional system. Teachers expressed a commitment to service learning even when it was not one of their strategies for pursuing the IB. For instance, the art teacher supported an Empty Bowls/Fill the Bowls service learning project by having students create pottery in her classroom to sell at the fundraising event. The K-3 team started a composting project before the district began the IB, and they continued to have long-term goals for developing a school garden.

Although service learning is designed to connect academic curriculum to community involvement, teachers and administrators were the only ones to explicitly connect service learning

to academic standards. High school students talked about how service learning gave them opportunities to demonstrate agency and grow as leaders. Junior high students echoed the development of leadership skills; identified the fun aspects of service learning, such as the "pencil wars," a schoolwide competition to collect school supplies for under-resourced schools in Africa; and noted how it helped them think about "a bigger picture" and "how we can help other people in different environments." Elementary students, who were too young to participate in FFA, seemed to believe that service learning was only for junior and senior high students.

Regardless of the level of understanding of service learning, nearly everyone at every level appeared to be engaged in some way. At the elementary level, students engaged in work that was ultimately used in service to the community. For instance, early elementary students created artwork that was auctioned to raise money; third graders made Valentine's cards for service women and men overseas; and kindergarteners presented the results of their composting projects to the school board. In 2017, a new class on Designing the Future was developed for 8th graders. The course helped students reflect on their passions, talents, and career aspirations, and included service-learning projects. Service learning appeared to be most prominent in the agriculture program, however, which engaged the entire high school, or roughly a quarter of the building's student population.

Service learning was prominent in my observations, the documents I reviewed, and conversations with teachers and students, but there was clear evidence of other strategies being employed. Several teachers engaged in co-teaching, particularly at the elementary level. It was the most popular IB during the first year (2016), although the rate of participation quickly tapered off. One pair of teachers shared that they "thought it would be easier" to co-teach and "didn't think it would take as long to learn to do efficiently." In my observations, co-teaching appeared to overlap with differentiation, as teachers ran different activities with different groups of children. During the time of this study, only two teachers attempted the technology IB. One teacher noted,

> I thought about doing technology, but the thing about technology that kind of scared me on the IB bonus is that they want you to do things…that you couldn't otherwise do without technology...I think the technology one would be difficult.

Another teacher joked about how the IB for technology integration is "a bear" meaning it was so burdensome that it gave the "feeling of it being unattainable." Technology was everywhere in the school, however, and utilized frequently. Students drew on iPads in art class, engaged in activities projected on SMART boards, and programmed robots in STEM class. While I was observing a STEM class, one student let me play with his vehicle and taught me how to drive it. A girl in his group then proceeded to tell me all about the class. The boy who let me play with his group's vehicle interjected repeatedly and when the period ended, he yelled out for "five more hours!" It was one of the most energetic classes that I observed, and some of the students even shared what they were learning at a school board meeting.

Sharing what gets learned happened regularly in the district. "Showcases," where teachers shared what they were doing with others across the district, started before the IB, but afterward these showcases allowed teachers who participated in the IB to share what they did for the IB. One teacher insisted that the showcase "was the best professional development last year." She said that during this professional development, "These teachers were sharing individual data points for every kid and saying this is the differentiation strategy, this is the co-teaching strategy, this is the

service learning strategy, and this is how we're moving kids." A K-3 teacher explained how sharing during the showcase inspired the kindergarten and third grade teachers to start a book study on *Teach Like a Pirate*.

> *Teach Like a Pirate*, it was based on the implementation bonus. That was something [a teacher] shared, and then because she was so excited about it, we were all like, "Oh, we want to do that!"…In her presentation, she referred to it and was excited about it and said great things about it, so that inspired us to want to read this book to get all these good ideas. That's where that sparked from.

Another influential professional development started before the district began implementation bonuses. Theresa, a kindergarten teacher, was part of a group of teachers that participated in a book study on Carol Dweck's *The Growth Mindset*. Theresa said, "It was a great book. It meant a lot to us and we got a lot from it. Then we shared about it at our showcase, which inspired other teachers to want to read the book also." In this way, the IB incentivized teachers to try new strategies, and through sharing these strategies during the showcase, it indirectly motivated other teachers to try new things.

Growth Mindset

The directional system did not use the term "growth mindset" explicitly, but it did note an expressed belief "in the freedom to fail and grow as we explore new ways to think and do." The concept of growth was noted frequently in interviews with staff. The administration encouraged teachers to try new things and not be afraid to make mistakes. The superintendent told me, "we encourage people to make mistakes, not in a bad way, but you know we call it a growth mindset. We encourage people to try something and if it's a mistake, how do we get better at that?" The focus on growth was also likely inspired, at least in part, from the book study on growth mindset some of the teachers chose to do, and additional professional development on the topic. The concept of growth appeared to influence staff culture, particularly what they valued, what they believed to be true, and behavioral norms. It influenced the language that they used with students and each other, and it influenced their teaching and assessment practices.

Belief in growth mindset affected teachers' practices and language. The teachers' embrace of the growth mindset manifested in their language used with students, and in their teaching and assessment practices. One teacher shared that instead of students saying "can't," students have learned to say, "I will try, I will do my best, I'll put forth my best effort." The teacher added, "We talked with the kids how, 'The reason that everyone's learning different things at different times is because we all came to kindergarten knowing different things, and so everyone's working at their own pace from where they started,' and how, 'Your effort that you put into things can help you move, but it's just showing growth.'"

The belief in the growth mindset manifested in the teachers' vocabulary even when they were not teaching. Consider the following exchange between two K-3 teachers while discussing a glass garage door that replaces part of a wall facing into the hallway:

> Teacher 1: I like the window being there. I don't care about it going up and down.
> Teacher 2: The door, the garage door.
> Teacher 1: The garage door part of it. I like the window itself, but I just don't need the open

> and close. We don't really—we haven't found, yet, a way that that is needed.
> Teacher 2: Yeah. I like your growth mind, [Teacher 1].
> Teacher 1: Maybe there will be a time that we'll find the perfect thing, we just haven't found it yet that we need that.

The first teacher started to focus on the negative aspects of having the glass door, but then shifted her language to show that there is potential in the door that has not yet been realized. These teachers' embrace of growth mindset in their everyday vocabulary is an example of how the concept of growth has permeated the staff culture.

Valuing growth as a measure of success. Nearly every teacher that I spoke with expressed a belief that growth was a sign of success—for them as professionals, and for their students. When asked what makes a teacher successful, one said "I think a successful teacher at [TLSD] is one who is open minded, seeking new strategies to improve teaching and learning, looking for opportunities to grow, and always looking for collaborative opportunities with teachers in the building and the community that we have. And valuing every kid individually." One K-3 teacher equated her own success to her students' success, suggesting she is successful, "if our kids are engaged and that they're showing growth."

The administration created systems to invite teachers into deep reflection on their practice. The IBs required a considerable amount of reflection. While the process was cumbersome, teachers insisted that it was the reflection piece that helped them grow professionally, and they valued this. One teacher summed up the process as follows:

> But in its purest sense, you complete a rubric, you do reflections on a monthly basis, you grow. What's really cool about it, I feel like some of our evaluation standards are based to how well a kid grows. And that, that's part of the implementation bonus. But a lot of the reflections say, the reflection questions say, "how did you grow as a professional?" "How did your behavior alter the classroom?" "How did your expectations change?" "How did you change?" And then if I change, obviously the classroom is going to get better because I have grown as a professional.

Another teacher concurred,

> I think the IB, it makes you reflect on your teaching and write it down. We talk a lot, but actually typing out exactly what progress and things that you're doing differently, writing it all down and actually seeing it that way is helpful and beneficial. It's helped us work with a wider range of people, because not just [my co-teacher] and I—because we work with…our intervention person, we work with our K-3 team, we work with a lot of different people, so obviously get a lot of different perspectives, helps grow.

When asked what makes a student successful, teachers generally responded that they wanted to see the students grow. The art teacher said that she tells her students, "I just want you to get above where you are, to improve in some way." When asked specifically how she defined a successful student, the teacher added, "I think successful students grow some way, in everything they do." Two of the K-3 teachers defined a successful student similarly, as "a student that's showing growth and making progress, who's determined to do better, putting forth their best effort with what they have" and as "a student who has made growth towards their goals."

High school students confirmed the significance of growth in their experiences in the district, much of which they attributed to their work on service learning projects. One high school student shared,

> I can tell you right now that I used to be super introverted, but this past year, doing all these service learning projects and even science fair and all that stuff, it's an insane amount of extra readiness now that I have—I wouldn't say I'm the biggest extrovert, but I definitely have become a lot more extroverted, and I feel more confident as a leader. I've done a lot more this year than I did last year, so I feel like that growth in the amount of stuff that I'm doing is really impacting how I grow.

Another high school student concurred,

> I definitely have grown as well. I used to not be able to get in front of the class and even talk. Even in a group like this [the focus group], I'd be too afraid to do. So, I've grown a lot in that sense—being able to present, and when we did science fair there was a huge paper we had to write, and there was a lot of—you have to put all your effort into it and you have to work and you have to stay focused, so that helped me with being able to work harder and build my work ethic as well as being able to analyze and not get as stressed as I should have been, probably, at some points. And it helped me when I had to present my science fair in front of two judges that I didn't know, and the anxiety, and there's just a lot. But I've grown a lot, and I know that everything we've done has helped that so much.

By bringing in teachers who share the district's values, encouraging them to try engaging strategies, and supporting their growth, the district helped to cultivate a staff that was reflective and valued the growth of each individual student. In turn, teachers created opportunities that gave students "an insane amount of extra readiness" and opportunities to have "grown a lot" from their experiences.

Challenges with Organizational Changes

Staff turnover is a challenge in many rural schools, and TLSD is no exception. Having to contend with the changes to the district was a likely factor in many teachers' departure. Staff turnover was both a help and hindrance to the development of the district's culture. It was helpful in that the school had an opportunity to lose staff who were unable or unwilling to adjust their practices to align with the new directional system. It was a hindrance in that investments must continually be made to bring new people on board and to help them catch up with the district's vision and ways of doing thing. As one teacher noted,

> There's really only a handful of us that have been here for a long time, and not too many that have even been here for a few years. And I think they're making the transition and wanting to be more project-based, more service learning. Some people just said, "I'm out," and went their own way. I think we got some good—I think they've been more selective about bringing people in who think the same way and are interested in pursuing the same goals.

Although the superintendent believed that the IB has been intriguing for new staff, it posed challenges for existing teachers. Several teachers cited the reflection required for the IB as beneficial, but the amount of time required was overwhelming for some. One teacher shared how the constant pressure of complying with the IB could be both rewarding and stressful. She stated,

> It's always like, "Oh, my gosh. It's the end of the month. I have to do the reflection" [exhales]…When I'm getting the end of the month, it's like an, "Ugh, do I really want to do this?" But I've found that as I write those reflections, other things come to me and I make revelations sometimes, or at least minor revelations.

The IB also incentivized teachers away from strategies that are valuable to them. Two K-3 teachers had the following exchange:

> Teacher 1: But the area I want to work on is the service learning, and I want the freedom to experiment with that.
> Teacher 2: Right, and not with a rubric. That's the problem. It's like, "Woah, that rubric's too hard. I'm not doing it. I will not do it. I won't do it," you know what I mean?
> Teacher 1: It's overwhelming, yeah.
> Teacher 2: I don't want to feel that way—"Because I'm not going to succeed according, maybe, to this rubric. I'm just not going to try." That's a hard thing. You don't want to just go for something that, "I already am strong at that. Okay, I'll just do differentiation because then I'll get the money," you know? I don't—you want to grow yourself.

As mentioned earlier, teachers admitted that they avoided pursuing the IB in the more difficult strategies, such as the one for technology integration which one teacher described as a "bear."

The superintendent acknowledged that "some people don't like the amount of work in [the IB]," and some people simply had other constraints on their time. The superintendent was aware that the teachers were constricted. She lamented, "we've managed to carve out time for them but there's just never enough time for teachers to dig down and get to what they need."

In spite of the problems, roughly half of the teachers continued to step up to the challenge of participating in the IB each semester. The district's commitment to hiring staff who aligned with the new directional system helped to shift the staff culture. Beliefs about growth mindset and valuing service were also important inputs that continued to shape the staff culture.

Discussion

Owens and Valesky's (2015) school climate model illustrates the interaction among four interrelated dimensions: ecology, organization, staff culture, and student milieu. This paper focused on how organizational changes—specifically the new directional system--affected staff culture in TLSD. Through observations, interviews, and a review of documents, I determined that the new directional system led to cultural changes among the staff that also had a positive impact on students. Specifically, the directional system informed the district's hiring practices, incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies, and inspired teachers to adopt a growth mindset. In short, it changed who was in the building, what they taught, and how they assessed—themselves and their students.

Some of the participants noted that the hiring practices had the biggest influence on the

culture shift. After losing a significant number of teachers at the high school level, the district was able to hire new teachers whose beliefs, values, and teaching practices aligned with the district's directional system. High school students, who had been with the district the longest, identified how this shift led to more caring teachers.

The directional system also incentivized the exploration of new teaching strategies. The directional system prioritized service learning, project-based learning, co-teaching, differentiation, subject integration, and technology integration. From the start of the IB through the fall of 2018, differentiation was the most popular strategy, followed by co-teaching, and then service learning. Co-teaching was initially popular, but only a few teachers continued to work on it after that first semester. Co-teaching benefits students but requires considerable planning time in order to be effective (Scruggs, et al., 2007). Although differentiation was not addressed in great detail in interviews, the teachers who co-taught demonstrated evidence of differentiation in how they managed different groups of students. Service learning was the strategy most frequently discussed and was one that teachers were committed to even without the incentive from the IB. Some teachers felt that the IB actually incentivized them away from service learning, the strategy that they wanted to focus on more. Yet when their peers shared what they learned from working on the IB, teachers were inspired to pursue their own professional development and try new things.

Finally, the new directional system inspired staff to prioritize growth—their professional growth and their students' growth. This focus on growth seemed to be the culmination of the administration allowing for the freedom to try new things and learn from successes and failures, as well as the teachers deciding to study the concept of growth mindset after an IB showcase on the topic. Teachers had conversations with their students about their academic performance in terms of growth. Teachers stated that students began to modify their language, and instead of saying "can't" they have learned to say, " I will try, I will do my best." Likewise, teachers have modified their language with each other. When discussing the garage door on her classroom, one teacher modified her language from "I don't need the open and close" to "We haven't found, yet, a way that that is needed." High school students even discussed how much they had grown as a result of service learning projects. Bolman and Deal (2008) explain that "a specialized language both reflects and shapes a group's culture" (p. 284). The use of the term growth by so many participants—administration, teachers, and students—was evidence of how widespread the concept had been incorporated in the district.

These innovations were not without challenges, however. Like many rural districts, TLSD had a high rate of turnover. Given the challenges that rural schools have with recruiting and retaining teachers (Gagnon, 2016; Sher, 2018), TLSD demonstrated courage and conviction by implementing innovative standards for employment. Although getting hired in TLSD may be harder than getting hired in other districts, what TLSD offered may serve to mitigate their retention challenges. Some research suggests that TLSD's practices are associated with teacher retention in rural districts. For instance, one study found that for rural teachers, the key to retention lies in relationships, specifically their commitment to students; opportunities for leadership and collaboration; connections to community; and personal and professional ties (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). For some teachers, living in a tightly-knit community can even outweigh the higher salaries that another district may offer (Gallo, 2020). By cultivating a stronger staff culture, TLSD is helping to bridge connections that may keep teachers in the district longer.

Financial incentives can help to retain teachers in rural schools, although they are not likely to be sufficient. Gagnon (2016) notes that many states that offer financial incentives to teachers couple these with other strategies. Although the superintendent believed that the IB helped to raise

interest in the district, it was too soon to determine whether or not the IB was an effective recruitment tool. Moreover, the stress associated with completing the IB could, for some teachers, outweigh the benefit. Some of the TLSD teachers cared more about continuing with the district strategies than pursuing the IB. Professional growth was also somewhat in conflict with the IB. Two teachers discussed wanting to grow themselves with the IB, but not wanting to risk losing the financial incentive by choosing a more challenging strategy.

What gets taught in rural schools is another factor contributing to teacher retention. Seelig and McCabe (2021) found that "a collaborative culture, exemplified by professional opportunities to connect with other teachers to align curriculum or address student needs, appeared to be key to teacher satisfaction and retention" (p. 12). They also note the value of "pedagogical flexibility and autonomy" (p. 8) that allowed teachers in their study to focus on their students' needs instead of overly focus on external academic standards. TLSD's commitment to center students' growth over meeting arbitrary standards gave teachers the freedom to experiment with new instructional strategies that served the needs of their students, and allowed teachers to retain a level of professionalism and agency that current reform efforts are undermining elsewhere.

Alongside the ecological changes in the district, these organizational changes helped to cultivate a more caring and supportive environment for students that assessed students in terms of growth and service. Despite stereotypes of rural districts being "effortlessly close-knit" (Gallo, 2020), participants were clear that the changes in the district led to the cultural shift and enhanced ethic of community care. Scholars have identified caring relationships and high levels of social trust as critical to students' academic success in schools (Noddings, 2013; Payne, 2013). In fact, Noddings (2013) insists that "the primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 182). Noddings does not attempt to dismiss the importance of academics, but instead insists that the pursuit of academics should not be at the expense of an ethic of care. Service learning helps to promulgate the ethic of care throughout the district. Research shows that students who participate in service learning experience increased self-esteem and self-concept, and highly internalized moral standards. They also have positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher levels of civic engagement, social skills, and academic achievement (Celio, et al., 2011). TLSD students expressed similar outcomes. As one high school student noted, "doing all these service-learning projects and even science fair…it's an insane amount of extra readiness now that I have…and I feel more confident as a leader."

In order for these reforms to be sustainable for TLSD and other districts like it, policy needs to support the recruitment and retention of teachers to rural schools. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) created significant barriers to teacher recruitment but the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides more flexibility. Flexibility with teacher preparation pathways, strengthening partnerships between districts and universities, placing student teachers in rural districts, and including coursework on rurality are all ways to boost the available pool of teachers for rural districts (Gagnon, 2016). State leaders also need to allow flexibility with teaching and assessment without abandoning criteria for equity and accountability. ESSA permitted a handful of states to explore "innovative approaches" to assessment such as performance-based assessments (Every Student Succeeds Act, n.d.). Performance-based assessments align well with service learning projects and enable students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. These approaches require more resources than standardized assessments, and therefore need the support of policymakers in order to implement with fidelity as an alternative accountability measure.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The use of Owens and Valesky's school climate model illuminated possible interactions between different aspects of the district's changes. At the same time, models for organizational change necessarily limit data analysis, and therefore limited the ability to address all of the possible changes in the district (Chance & Segura, 2009). There is space for additional research on the implementation bonus in the district and its effects on teacher recruitment, retention, and student performance. Some research suggests that highly effective teachers are no more likely to choose performance based incentives than other teachers, although performance based pay could attract more risk-loving teachers to the profession (Bowen & Mills, 2017). Collecting data on why teachers chose to work at TLSD and why some left would prove helpful over time to see if the IB is having an impact on recruitment and retention. Collaborative planning time was an important organizational change that facilitated staff working together, but in and of itself was not identified as shifting the staff culture. Rather, the collaboration that resulted from being together in the new building was identified as contributing to cultural changes. Thus, I included collaborative planning time as an example of district supports, but not as a driver of cultural change. Finally, further studies that examine how students in classes that are employing district strategies compare to those using traditional pedagogical approaches might prove beneficial, although the small size of the district will make this challenging, and perhaps impossible to do in secondary level classes that have only one teacher per subject area.

Conclusion

Superintendents everywhere (often unknowingly) straddle two cultures: an abstract professional culture dominated by fads, and an on-the-ground local culture centered on every day, real life. Rural superintendents are more likely than superintendents in large districts to experience the on-the-ground culture more intensely (Howley et al., 2014). Importantly, rural superintendents sometimes resist their state government's agendas. Howley et al. (2014) argue,

> Teachers and communities need the influence of superintendents with a broader outlook in order to undertake curriculum work that addresses their communities' rural identities, rural commitments, and rural fates. Reclaiming local schools on behalf of communities would seemingly be a more appropriate response than adopting yet another imported fad, especially, we think, in communities where educators are demoralized, the community is excluded from the school through numerous "professional" barricades, and the work of cultivating young minds has been virtually abandoned. (p. 625)

TLSD's superintendent expressed gratitude that its board was supportive of their initiatives, believing the standardized assessments were not as important as the sense of efficacy that students would carry with them after leaving school. Those who insist that the only way innovation can flourish is through neoliberal policy reforms or in nontraditional (e.g., charter) schools are simply touting a false message. Innovation can flourish in traditional public schools if policymakers would simply let public schools be innovative. Education policy "yearns for intelligibility, predictability and certainty" which necessitates the elimination of "complexity, contingency and contestability" (Clarke, 2018, p. 6). It is policymakers' insistence on control through standardiza-

tion, assessments, and numerical evidence that squelches any possibility for innovation. The district in this study took a completely different approach. Instead of an increase of control, the administration opted for shared leadership. Instead of standardization, they opted for student-centeredness. Assessments and numerical evidence still mattered, but those factors were not more important than watching students grow, show initiative, serve their community, and find their purpose. Under the leadership of the district's superintendent, the district transformed into a model of what is possible when a community takes a chance on something innovative.

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