



NOT GETTING ALONG?

How well the adults in a school work together is crucial to student success. Eight signs to look for
By Caralee Adams

When you walk into your school every morning, do you hear whispered conversations behind closed doors? If so, you probably work in a school with an unhealthy workplace culture. (Take our quiz on page 49 for more telltale signs.)

Crafting a positive school work environment takes time and will that many of us often lack. Yet some experts say that how the principal, teachers, and staff get along is paramount to parental involvement and to cutting-edge instruction.

"In many respects, teachers treat students in the same way they are treated," says Gary Gordon, vice president of The Gallup Organization's education division and author of *Building Engaged Schools*. "If you create a positive culture that

respects people as professionals, provides basic tools, makes expectations clear, and is caring, that goes a long way towards productivity in the classroom."

Unfortunately, the workplace culture in many schools is undeniably dysfunctional. Energy is used to gossip, compete, and divide instead of to communicate, collaborate, and unite. Here are some signs that your school is in need of a change of climate, and some suggestions on what everyone can do to turn it around.

SIGN #1 CLASSROOM DOORS ARE ALWAYS SHUT. There's artwork over the windowpanes. What's happening inside is a mystery. Too often, teachers operate in their own separate caves. When we isolate ourselves, we miss out on the oppor-

tunity to learn from each other. Scarce resources and scarce recognition mean that colleagues become competitive, hoarding supplies and ideas, says Roland Barth, a former public school teacher, principal, and founding director of the Principals' Center at Harvard.

"Under the surface, it's 'The better you look, the worse I look.' If I help you to group kids in math, the more parents will want their kids in your class and not mine. I have diminished myself," says Barth, who wrote *Improving Schools From Within*. "Adults can have primitive skills in getting along with others."

Visiting and observing one another's classrooms can open up possibilities, but when? One solution is to plan a visit exchange for classroom teachers during "specials," such as gym or music.

Principal Sue Masterson, of Madison Elementary, in Janesville, Wisconsin, came up with a creative holiday gift for her teachers: coupons for one hour of substitute teaching by Masterson herself,

so that teachers would have time to observe another classroom. "Now they don't even have to ask, they just hand me the coupon," she says.

SIGN #2 COLLEAGUES GUARD THEIR LESSON PLANS LIKE SECRET DIARIES.

If best practices are best-kept secrets in your school, it's hard to grow as a teacher. You and your colleagues could be saving precious time by dividing up lesson planning, leveraging each other's areas of expertise.

Collaboration is most likely to happen when it is encouraged from the top. "It's got to be on the schedule," says Dr. Richelle Patterson, assistant director for educational issues for the American Federation of Teachers. In a healthy school, there is scheduled time for professional development—observation and discussion—throughout the week.

To give grade-level teams an opportunity to meet, Shepardson Elementary School, in Fort Collins, Colorado, all but

did away with staff meetings. Instead, Principal Mary Kay Sommers uses that time for grade-level teams to discuss what's really important to them. Recently, third- and fourth-grade teachers took on a book study, reading chapters every week and designing lessons together.

At least once a week for 30 minutes, teachers at Shepardson analyze student scores in small groups. They compare notes on differentiating instruction. "It gives them access to good ideas," says Sommers, "and fosters an atmosphere in which they can go to one another."

Collaboration can get romanticized, however, says Judith Warren Little, professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Forced collegiality—when the principal requires collaboration on a prescribed agenda—often doesn't work. Learning communities work when teachers have an internal commitment to the group and choose the topics themselves.

SIGN #3 RECOGNITION IS RARE. We all thrive on positive feedback. Because teachers work in their own individual classrooms, it can be hard for anyone to see and recognize their achievements.

Then there are the societal hang-ups about pouring out praise. Sometimes supervisors are reluctant to praise. They don't want to inflate egos. Or they fear that if they don't recognize everyone, someone will feel left out. That's a problem, warns Gordon: "If we aren't going to recognize excellence, mediocre performance becomes the norm."

Bonnie Tryon, principal of Golding Elementary School, in Cobleskill, New York, sends congratulatory notes to her teachers and passes along compliments from parents. "You have to constantly praise, and provide critical feedback when necessary," she says. "It's a balance."

Whether or not encouragement is forthcoming from above, teachers need to push each other. Give a top writing or science project its due. Praise a colleague when she helps you resolve a parent conflict or a student behavior issue.

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Take the Quiz: How Bad Is It?

Choose the response that is most true. Answer every question.

A. The last time I attended a professional-development workshop, I was encouraged to share what I learned with my colleagues.
1. Yes 2. Not really 3. No

B. My principal knows me as a person, i.e., he/she knows my hobbies, my child's name, etc.
1. Yes 2. Perhaps 3. No

C. If I asked to observe another classroom, my colleague would...
1. welcome me. 2. hesitate.
3. say she'd rather not.

D. We all know not to touch certain subjects in staff meetings.
1. Yes, quite a few
2. Maybe one or two subjects
3. We feel free to speak openly.

E. Teachers are asked to give input on candidates for new hires.
1. Yes 2. No

F. When my principal walks into the teachers' lounge, the conversation usually...
1. continues as it is because it's about our teaching.
2. continues because it's innocent small talk.
3. ceases quickly.

G. If my principal and I both wrote a job description for my position, they would mostly match.

1. Yes
2. They might overlap
3. No

H. When was the last time you socialized with a colleague outside of school?

1. In the last month
2. In the past six months
3. Hardly ever

I. Most teachers get a chance to take on some kind of leadership role in our school.

1. Yes 2. No

J. Our principal has had training in and is evaluated on building a positive workplace culture.

1. Yes 2. Don't know 3. No

To Find Your Score: Total the numbers for your answers.

10-14: Your school culture is positive and supportive. Teachers like working there.

15-21: Your school needs to get serious about creating a positive culture.

22-28: Your negative, stressful work environment likely has many teachers with one foot out the door.

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SIGN #4 THE TALK IN THE STAFF LOUNGE IS RARELY ABOUT TEACHING.

It's not healthy for break rooms to be all about venting and gossiping. "Some kinds of teachers'-lounge talk can really be toxic," says Little. They can reinforce norms that aren't conducive to teacher learning and trigger a view that teachers aren't responsible for kids' success.

In a well-run school where employees' basic needs are met, the conversations are more likely productive and will naturally center on students, says Tryon.

Sometimes good dialogue takes a little prompting. Gordon suggests posting a question or provocative article each week for discussion. Also, check your own griping tendencies. Each day, try to share one idea and ask for one in return.

SIGN #5 NEW TEACHERS AREN'T STICKING AROUND. We've all heard the statistic that 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years.

Research shows poor administrative support is the second-most-cited reason for their departure, after poor salary.

"The worst thing you can do to new teachers is to send them to work without a strong induction program," says Patterson of the AFT. "We expect new teachers to do exactly what teachers with years of experience can do."

Little adds: "There is something about a productive culture that integrates novice and veteran teachers so veterans have a chance to learn from the novice ones and the novice has good access to the lessons of experience."

SIGN #6 TEACHERS ARE THE VERY LAST TO KNOW. Too often, educational decisions are made from the top down or by politicians outside the school, leaving those of us in the classroom frustrated.

Schools with healthy workplace culture empower teachers by bringing them into the decision-making and leadership loop. Teachers should serve on school committees and participate in interviews for new

hires. Every teacher should have some kind of leadership role in the school.

SIGN #7 CERTAIN SUBJECTS ARE TABOO AT STAFF MEETINGS. Is there a big issue at your school that is so volatile that no one dares bring it up? Barth calls these issues "nondiscussables," and says the more of them a school has, the worse the environment.

"Issues that are inflammatory, such as race or ineffective leadership, get talked about in the parking lot," says Barth. "But they are so radioactive that they can't be brought up in a meeting." As long as staff tiptoe around these issues, the school will be immobilized, he contends.

Open communication is encouraged at The Met, an innovative school in Providence, Rhode Island. Staff contribute to a newsletter, *TGIF*, produced and distributed in the school each Friday. "All issues are talked about," says Jed Katch, teacher at The Met. "I feel supported as a teacher. We all work hard to be respectful and responsive."

SIGN #8 EVERYONE MAKES A BEELINE FOR THE DOOR WHEN THE FINAL BELL RINGS. Hanging out to debrief at the end of the day with colleagues can build good relationships within a school. Gallup research has shown that having a best friend at work makes employees more engaged and productive. "It gives you some safety—someone to share feelings, trials, and victories with, without feeling misconstrued," says Gordon.

Sure, the principal sets the tone, but it takes the actions of everyone in a school to create a nurturing work environment. "Teachers can be the ones to take action," says Barth. "Everyone waits for the principal to do something. We all need to take some initiative."

Every year, Tryon hosts a holiday party for her staff in her home. They've come to know each other so well—and what their special dishes are—that a potluck sign-up list is not necessary. Socializing, whether it's a formal dinner or just morning coffee, helps build friendships. "Whether you are a new teacher or a 40-year veteran about ready to retire," she says, "It's about creating a school family." □

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