

Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures

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Regardless of the focus of particular change efforts, schools need to nurture and build on the cultural norms that contribute to growth.

School improvement emerges from the confluence of four elements: the strengthening of teachers' skills, the systematic renovation of curriculum, the improvement of the organization, and the involvement of parents and citizens in responsible school-community partnerships. Underlying all four strands, however, is a school culture that either energizes or undermines them. Essentially, the culture of the school is the foundation for school improvement, a view summarized by Purkey and Smith (1982):

We have argued that an academically effective school is distinguished by its culture: a structure, process, and climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning. . . . The logic of the cultural model is such that it points to increasing the organizational effectiveness of a school building and is neither grade-level nor curriculum specific (p. 68).

If certain norms of school culture are strong, improvements in instruction will be significant, continuous, and widespread; if these norms are weak, improvements will be at best infrequent, random, and slow. They will then depend on the unsupported energies of hungry self-starters and be confined to individual classrooms over short periods of time. The best

workshops or ideas brought in from the outside will have little effect. In short, good seeds will not grow in weak cultures.

Giving shape and direction to a school's culture should be a clear, articulated vision of what the school stands for, a vision that embodies core values and purposes. Examples of core values might be community building, problem-solving skills, or effective communication. These value commitments vary from community to community; what is important for school leaders to know is the role of values as the fuel of school improvement. If core values are the fuel, then school culture is the engine.

The 12 Norms of School Culture

The cultural norms listed in Figure 1 can be supported where they exist and built where they do not by leaders and staff. The degree to which these norms

Figure 1. The Cultural Norms That Affect School Improvement.

1. Collegiality
2. Experimentation
3. High expectations
4. Trust and confidence
5. Tangible support
6. Reaching out to the knowledge bases
7. Appreciation and recognition
8. Caring, celebration, and humor
9. Involvement in decision making
10. Protection of what's important
11. Traditions
12. Honest, open communication

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are strong makes a huge difference in the ability of school improvement activities to have a lasting, or even any, effect. Building these norms depends equally on teachers' will and commitment since good leadership alone cannot make them strong; but without such leadership, culture cannot begin to grow or be expected to endure.

While we discuss these norms from the teacher's point of view, because teachers are culture shapers, it is important to bear in mind that there is a student culture as well. The same 12 norms apply to the culture of the school for students, but they are a direct reflection of what adults are capable of modeling among themselves.

Wherever these norms exist, they reside in teachers' and administrators' beliefs and show up in their actions. The following are hypothetical statements that represent what teachers believe and how they behave—not idle words in philosophy documents, but real actions rooted in beliefs of most of the faculty in a school with a strong culture.

1. Collegiality.

"In this school the professional staff help each other. We have similar challenges and needs and different talents and knowledge. When I was having problems with cliquishness among the girls, I brought it up at lunch and got some excellent ideas from the other teachers. I wasn't afraid to bring it up because I know people here are on my side. If someone thinks they hear a strange noise coming from my room, they'll stop to check it out. It isn't everyone for themselves and just mind your own business.

"I think these people are darn good at what they do. I know I can learn from them and believe I have things to offer in return. Sometimes we evaluate and develop curriculum and plan special projects together, like Esther, Lorie, and Allen doing the one-week SCIS workshop for all of us this summer. Teaching each other sometimes requires more time to plan than 'expert-led' workshops, but it allows us to work together on a significant project. Similarly our study groups—organized around topics such as cooperative learning, thinking skills, and involving senior citizens—allow us to exchange ideas. In this school we resist

the notion that teaching is our 'second most private activity.'"

2. Experimentation

"Teaching is an intellectually exciting activity. Around here we are encouraged by administrators and colleagues to experiment with new ideas and techniques because that is how teachers and schools improve. And we can drop experiments that do not work and be rewarded for having tried. We are always looking for more effective ways of teaching. Just last year we published 'Opening Classroom Doors,' a booklet with short descriptions of new ideas tried in classrooms. One teacher, for example, shared how she used jigsaw activities to do cooperative learning in social studies."

3. High Expectations

"In this school the teachers and administrators are held accountable for high performance through regular evaluations. We are specifically expected to practice collegiality and to experiment with new ideas. We are rewarded when we do and sanctioned if we don't. Our continued professional development is highly valued by the school community. While we often feel

under pressure to excel, we thrive on being part of a dynamic organization."

4. Trust and Confidence

"Administrators and parents trust my professional judgment and commitment to improvement—no matter how effective I already am—and show confidence in my ability to carry out my professional development and to design instructional activities. We are encouraged to bring new ideas into our classes and given discretion with budgets for instructional materials."

5. Tangible Support

"When I need help to improve my instruction, people extend themselves to help me with both time and resources. Indeed, when resources become scarce, professional development remains a priority. Around here people believe the professional knowledge and skills of teachers are so important to good schooling that developing human resources is a high and continued commitment. Despite financial constraints we still have sabbaticals, summer curriculum workshops, and funds to attend professional conferences."



Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base

"Cultures are built through the everyday business of school life. It is the way business is handled that both forms and reflects the culture."

These first five norms have complicated and dependent relationships with one another. Little (1981) has written at length about the first three norms in her studies of "good schools." In these schools, leaders have high expectations that teachers will be collegial and experiment in their teaching. Rather than being dependent on fortuitous chemistry in a group (though it helps), collegiality is an expectation that is explicitly stated by the leader, rewarded when it happens, and sanctioned when it doesn't. Barth (1984) goes so far as to argue that "the nature of the relationships among the adults who inhabit a school has more to do with the school's quality and character, and with the accomplishment of its pupils, than any other factor." The importance of leaders being explicit about what they want and pressing for it is supported by recent work on school change (Loucks, 1983). While leaders need to be direct about what they expect, excellent leaders allow people plenty of latitude in choosing how they realize it.

My interpretation of the school effectiveness literature leads me to believe that these schools are both tightly coupled and loosely coupled, an observation noted as well by Peters and Waterman in their studies of America's best run corporations. There exists in excellent schools a strong culture and clear sense of purpose, which defines the general thrust and nature of life for their inhabitants. At the same time, a great deal of freedom is given to teachers and others as to how these essential core values are to be honored and realized. This combination of tight structure around clear and explicit themes, which represent the core of the school's culture, and of autonomy for people to pursue these themes in ways that make sense to them, may well be a key reason for their success (Sergiovanni, 1984, p. 13).

Thus, leaders might require teachers to work on expanding their repertoires of teaching skills but leave the choice of how and what up to them. Simultaneously, though, these leaders would offer tangible support—for example, one release afternoon a month—and provide a menu of options such as in-house study groups, outside speakers, tuition for attending workshops or courses, or support for individual projects.

6. Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base

"There are generic knowledge bases about teaching skills and how students learn; about teaching methods in particular areas; about young people's cognitive and affective development; and about each of the academic disciplines. These knowledge bases are practical, accessible, and very large. Teachers and supervisors are continually reaching out to them to improve their teaching and supervision."

There are two features of this norm we would like to highlight. The first is its aggressively curious nature. There is always more to learn, and we can respond to that understanding with energy and reach out beyond our classes or our buildings, sharing journals, attending workshops, visiting each other and other sites. A principal could model this by inviting several teachers to visit another school with him or her. Such an activity might build collegiality by bringing together teachers who don't normally work together. Indeed, as much may happen during the ride together and over lunch as happens during the visit itself.

The second feature of this norm is the reality and usefulness of these knowledge bases. The erroneous belief that there is no knowledge base about teaching limits any vision of teacher improvement. It is also isolating because in the absence of knowledge, good teaching must be intuitive; if "goodness" is inborn and intuitive, then having problems is a sign of inadequacy or too little of the "right stuff." This syndrome discourages talking about one's teaching, especially one's problems. Furthermore, if good teaching is intuitive and there's no knowledge base, what's the good of working on improvement?

But the knowledge base on teaching is very real and expanding all the time. It tells us that there are certain things that all teachers do, regardless of age group, grade, or subject. It tells us the situations or missions that all teachers have to deal with in one way or another. It also tells us what our options are for dealing with each area of teaching, and that matching behaviors and techniques to specific students is the name of the game. In some cases, it even gives us guidelines for how to go about the matching.

Teachers make decisions and act to deal with numerous aspects of their instruction and relationships with students. For example, experts agree that there are dozens of ways to gain and maintain attention, several kinds of objectives (Saphier and Gower, 1982), and over 20 models of teaching (Joyce and Weil, 1980). Because there are many ways to deal with each of the myriad of teaching tasks, skillful teaching involves continually broadening one's repertoire in each area and picking from it appropriately to match particular students and curriculums. The knowledge base about teaching is the available repertoire of moves and patterns of action in any area, available for anyone to learn, to refine, and to do skillfully.

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Caring, Celebration, and Humor

Consider another knowledge base. Each subject has, in addition to the formal knowledge of its discipline, a how-to knowledge base of teaching methods and materials. Where it is the norm to consult the knowledge bases, teachers are reaching to learn new methods and examine the latest materials and not to find the single best ones, because there are no best ones. They seek to expand their repertoires so as to expand their capacity to reach students with appropriate instruction.

This particular norm, reaching out to the knowledge bases, is one of the least understood and most neglected. It is also one of the most powerful for rejuvenating an ailing school culture. In schools where the knowledge bases are cultivated, a common language for talking about instruction emerges. This language reduces the isolation commonly experienced by teachers (Lortie, 1972).

7. Appreciation and Recognition

"Good teaching is honored in this school and community. The other day I found a short note from the principal in my mailbox: When Todd and Charley were rough-housing in the ball you spoke to them promptly and firmly yet treated them maturely by explaining the whys of your intervention. It really makes our grown-up talk about respect mean something when teachers

take responsibility for all kids the way you do." He just observed that incident for a minute, yet took the time to give me feedback. (Somehow it had more impact in writing, too.) Things like that make me feel there is a real value placed on what I do with students. I am recognized for my efforts and achievements in the classroom and the school."

There are many ways this message can be sent: teacher recognition as a regular feature of school committee meetings; PTA luncheons at the beginning and end of the year for faculty and staff; short notes in teachers' mailboxes from a principal who notes something praiseworthy during a walk around the building; perhaps even superior service awards written up each year in local newspapers with stipends given annually to a few teachers. Of course, underlying these efforts should be a pay scale that is at least competitive with neighboring districts.

8. Caring, Celebration, and Humor

"There are quite a number of occasions when we show our caring for each other and awareness of significant events in each others' lives, as well as celebrating benchmarks in the life of the school. Estelle, for example, somehow arranges a 15-minute party with some goody for every faculty

member's birthday in her building. We often have these short but satisfying little gatherings in the teacher's room before the kids come in. There is a lot of humor and laughing together in this school."

9. Involvement in Decision Making

"I am included in certain meaningful decision-making processes in this school, especially when they directly affect me or my kids. That doesn't mean I am consulted on all policies or decisions, but to tell you the truth, I don't want to be—I'd never get all of my own work done. But when I am consulted, it's not a phony gesture, my input is taken seriously. And there are mechanisms open for me to raise issues. Last spring I asked the faculty advisory council to look at how kids were treating each other in the halls. That led to a faculty brainstorming session on the topic of school climate. I don't always get people to buy into my issues, or even ask them to. But when I do, the issues are treated seriously, and I am esteemed for bringing them up even if my solutions do not carry the day."

10. Protection of What's Important

"Administrators protect my instruction and planning time by keeping meetings and paperwork to a minimum. In fact, we don't even have faculty meetings in the usual sense ... certainly not just for business and announcements. Those needs get covered by memos and word-of-mouth contact with the principal. When we do meet, it is for curriculum and instruction purposes, often in small groups like the study group on learning styles I was in last spring."

11. Traditions

"There is always something special to look forward to as I scan the calendar. Be it a fair, a trip, or a science Olympiad, there are events coming up that students and teachers alike see as refreshing or challenging and a definite change of pace. Some of these traditions are rooted in ceremony, others in activity. They exist both in the curriculum as grade-level projects or activities, and as recurrent events within the life of the school."

12. Honest, Open Communication

"I take responsibility for sending my own messages. I can speak to my

colleagues and administrators directly and tactfully when I have a concern or a beef without fear of losing their esteem or damaging our relationship. Around here people can disagree and discuss, confront and resolve matters in a constructive manner and still be supportive of each other. And I can listen to criticism as an opportunity for self-improvement without feeling threatened."

Robert Hinton captures these qualities when describing changing relationships in a Chinese village during the revolution:

One had to cultivate the courage to voice sincerely held opinions regardless of the views held by others, while at the same time showing a willingness to listen to others and to change one's own opinion when honestly convinced of error. To bow with the wind, to go along with the crowd was an irresponsible attitude that could never lead to anything but trouble. ... The reverse of this, to be arrogant and unbending, was just as bad (Hinton, 1966, p. 395).

This type of communication is supported by several of the cultural norms. Difficult issues and criticism require an inner conviction that one is all right and respected by others. Appreciation and Recognition, Involvement in Decision Making, and Reaching Out to the Knowledge Bases support this kind of mutual respect.

How to Build the Norms of School Culture

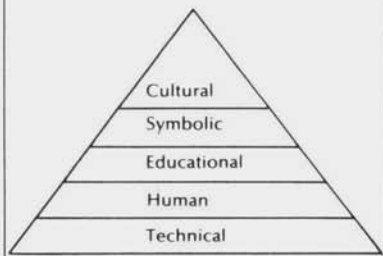
Sergiovanni (1984) describes five leadership forces where actions make a difference in building good schools (see Figure 2). Effective leaders have skills with which to apply each force.

Technical skills pertain to such managerial matters as scheduling and delegating; human skills include listening,

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Figure 2. Sergiovanni's Leadership Forces that Build Good Schools.

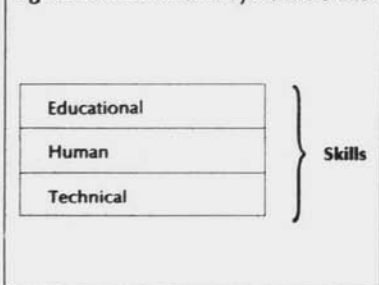


Trust and Confidence

group dynamics, and conflict resolution. Educational skills include knowledge about teaching and learning; symbolic skills include knowledge of and commitment to core institutional values and ways of articulating and representing them. And the cultural arena involves building norms such as the 12 discussed here. But if we are to understand what leaders do to build and maintain excellence in schools, the relationship among these five forces and arenas for action needs expansion.

Leaders show their technical, human, and educational skills through activities that call them forth rather directly: A parents' night must be organized (technical and human); difficult meetings chaired (human); and conferences held after classroom observations (human and educational). We offer the proposition that leaders show

Figure 3. Cultural and Symbolic Skills.



“Our district distributes \$6,000 service awards for recognizing teachers’ contributions in a variety of areas.”

their symbolic and culture-building skills through those same activities and not in separate activities that are exclusively symbolic or cultural (with exceptions like opening-of-school speeches that are symbolic occasions). From this perspective Sergiovanni’s diagram might be redrawn as shown in Figure 3.

Cultures are built through the everyday business of school life. It is the way business is handled that both forms and reflects the culture. Leaders with culture-building on their minds bring an ever-present awareness of these cultural norms to their daily interactions, decisions, and plans, thus shaping the way events take place. Because of this dynamic, culture-building occurs simultaneously and through the way school people use their educational, human, and technical skills in handling daily events or establishing regular practices.

For example, suppose there is interest in a revised curriculum planning procedure. What would a culture-builder do in a leadership position? A sure way to prevent the crisis-management of curriculum—where small numbers of parents can successfully pressure a school board, superintendent, or principal to “look into” a curriculum area such as science—is to maintain a planning process that systematically and routinely evaluates and renovates all curriculum areas. Such a system might ask parent-teacher committees to assess the existing curriculum by reviewing literature, consulting experts, and interviewing parents. Having established a curriculum’s strengths and weaknesses, the committee could write a statement of philosophy to guide the next phase—the identification of new curriculums, texts, and activities—recognizing that the review process might well validate existing programs.

With the first phase of planning complete, the parents leave the committee and turn the actual development of new curriculum over to the faculty and administration. Over the next several years programs and activities are piloted and implemented, leading back to the evaluation phase in approximately five years. In this way

“... collegiality is an expectation that is explicitly stated by the leader, rewarded when it happens, and sanctioned when it doesn’t.”

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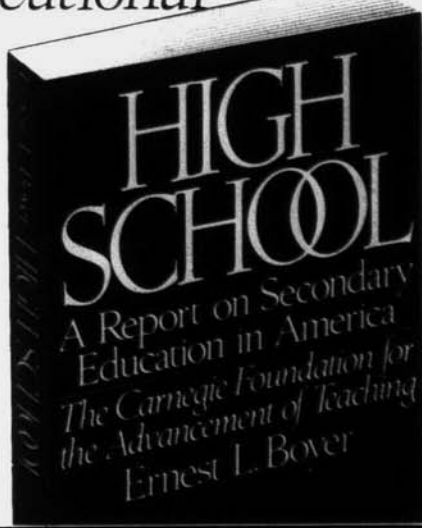
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all curriculum areas can be located on the planning cycle. While this approach to curriculum planning can be done by whole school systems, the process is especially powerful when conducted in individual schools.

A planning process such as this is itself an opportunity for infusing the cultural norms into a school. A good place to start is with a leader offering to parents and teachers Lightfoot's (1983) notion of a "consciousness of imperfection," a perspective in which we assume that any school has areas of strength and weakness and that the "good" school is distinguished by its openness to dealing with its imperfections. The school leader could use this opportunity to point out how improvements emerge from a culture that embodies norms such as our 12. She or he can then outline a process that demands experimentation by piloting new curriculum and encourage collegiality by asking teachers to work together on evaluation and design. Central to the planning is a commitment to involve stakeholders in decision making while being clear about the limits of their influence.

After completing the review, the administrator must ensure that teachers receive support to carry out their plans. For example, if a science committee recommends integrating microcomputers into science laboratories, funds need to be budgeted for purchasing equipment and training teachers. While providing support, the principal needs to emphasize the high expectations she or he has for their work. Building specific goals into teachers' formal evaluation—which should take place no less than every three years—is a useful way of making the connection between support and high expectations. Down the road a principal will want to recognize teachers' efforts by reporting to the superintendent and school board and perhaps even attaching rewards for their efforts. Our district distributes six thousand dollar service awards for recognizing teachers' contributions in a variety of areas.

The culture builders in any school bring an ever-present awareness of the 12 norms to everything they do in the conduct of daily business. It is this

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awareness and commitment to culture building that is more important than any single activity or structure in the school organization. Once we are clear about what the important norms of a strong culture are, the activities and forms through which we build them are legion.

If we are serious about school improvement and about attracting and retaining talented people to school careers, then our highest priority should be to maintain reward structures that nurture adult growth and sustain the school as an attractive workplace. A strong culture is crucial to making schools attractive workplaces. If the norms we have outlined are strong, the school will not only be attractive, it will be energized and constantly improving. □

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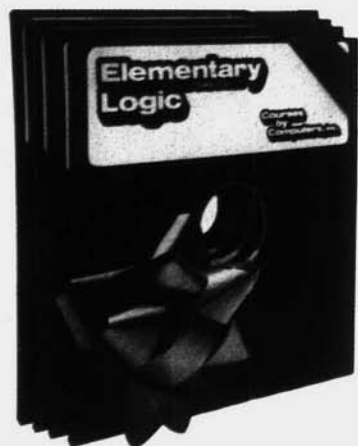
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