



Why School Culture Matters, and How to Improve It

By Michael Haberman

From elementary school to high school, school choice is an integral part of U.S. urban education today. In New York City, eighth graders just learned if they'd been accepted into one of their top high school selections, and in the coming weeks, families will learn where their children will be attending kindergarten in the fall.

When families finally do find out, it will mark the end of what is often a months-long process that involved visiting schools and ranking their picks. That ranking was based on any number of dimensions, including the school's rating, location, and neighborhood. However, I'm sure that when they chose their favorites, the school's culture was just as important as its scores.

Culture is intangible, but it's essential: you can walk into a school and know immediately whether you want to be there. The same thing goes for the students and the staff.

However, just because culture is intangible doesn't mean that it's undefinable; Nadine Engels and her co-writers described "a shared sense of purpose and values, norms of continuous learning and improvement, collaborative collegial relationships... and sharing experiences" as factors that contribute to a positive school culture. Innovation, leadership, teamwork, and "goal-orientedness" are also important.

That sounds like the ideal school to me (if not the ideal work environment). Imagining a school that embodies those values, it's easy to see why Engels wrote that school culture "has an effect on students' learning," and why education reform leader Michael Fullan argued that principals should prioritize their school's culture over everything else.

But knowing that school culture is important and even knowing what makes for good school culture doesn't guarantee that principals will be able to create it. In fact, principals are at a decided disadvantage when it comes to creating organization-wide change: a recent *Education Week* story notes that most principal training provides "less focus on the skills and strategies for creating a workplace culture, which are more commonly found in management training for other industries."

Instead, principals often try to tackle individual symptoms (like attendance, graduation rates, and grades) rather than addressing their cause. When principals do try to shift a school's culture, one of the problems they typically encounter is that they act without getting stakeholders' buy-in first.

That's a mistake: having every member of a school community—teachers, students, family mem-



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bers—work together toward a shared vision is just as important as the vision itself. John Brown and Cerylle Moffett write that without that buy-in, a school leader's vision becomes "mandates without meaning" that cost principals the "support [school leaders] need most."

For businesses, creating the right culture is essential for the bottom line. Google famously encourages its engineers to take 20 percent of their time to pursue a new project that they're passionate about. Why? Because it makes those engineers work even better: Gmail, Google

News, and the WiFi-equipped buses that bring Google employees to work all arose from that 20 percent time.

If you think that investing that much time—and ultimately money—to fund 'pet projects' isn't worth it, think again: Google reported earning \$14.2 billion last quarter, and hitting \$50 billion in revenue last year.

Or take JetBlue Airways. Its famous brand is an extension of its corporate culture—and a selling point for its customers.

However, the airline lives up to its values, particularly by investing in talent and delivering on cus-

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tomers service. But equally important is the fact that the airline’s leadership creates a tight-knit team that works together: President and CEO Dave Barger greets new employees by saying: “I’m Dave. It’s a first-name-basis airline. My door is open.”

The result of that deliberate cultural strategy is a growing airline—and growing revenues. As a PENCIL Partner, Barger applied the same managerial and organizational principles to help then Principal Monica George take PS 153 from failing to a model of success.

Obviously, school leaders can’t always mimic businesses—but they can learn from them. When business leaders teach principals the skills that they use to build a strong organizational culture, school leaders can completely transform their schools.

I already mentioned Dave Barger, who helped Principal George and PS 153 cut teacher attrition from 25 percent to 3 percent, and raise the school’s grades on the NYC Progress Report from an “F” to an “A.”

Barger is just one example: through PENCIL’s school-business partnerships, business people are helping principals throughout New York City turn their schools into vibrant communities. At PS 330Q in Queens, Principal LaShawna Harris is working with Restaurant Associate’s Charles LaMonica on a coor-

dated approach to establish a more positive school culture and improved results. By emphasizing team-building and professional development among the school staff, the two partners are promoting Harris’ vision of a unified school community that is founded on the school’s values. Also, the staff appreciation days that Harris and LaMonica have brought to the school are a small but significant way of thanking the staff for the work they do on behalf of students.

Since LaMonica and Harris began working together, the school has seen a 22-point increase in the percentage of teachers who believe that the principal communicates a clear vision of the school, as well as a 43-point increase in the percentage of teachers who feel supported by Principal Harris.

At PS 48, Principal Pat Mitchell has seen her school’s scores go up on both the Progress Report and the Learning Environment Survey. To continue this recent progress—and to ensure that the rest of the school community is on board with her new direction—Principal Mitchell worked with marketing consultant Ruth Zsolnai on new vision and mission statements that capture the school’s new ideals. They’ve also worked together on a new logo, brand, and marketing materials that communicate and symbolize those ideals.

We need to help more principals get the same support that principals George, Harris, and Mitchell did. We also need to ensure that all principals receive the professional development they need to assess, create, and refine school culture and how to effectively ‘sell’ that vision to their school community. Whether it’s in a school or a business, organizational culture is like the air we breathe: invisible, intangible, and absolutely vital. ■

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Michael Haberman is President of PENCIL, a New York City-based not-for-profit that brings together business and education expertise to develop innovative programs that improve school and student performance. PENCIL directly serves more than 400 schools in New York City, touching more than 200,000 students. Michael speaks and writes regularly on the ways that skills-based, cross-sector collaboration can propel schools and students forward. For more information, visit pencil.org.

How Blended Learning Saved My Teaching Career

Last year was my third year of teaching in inner-city Indianapolis, and I had reached my breaking point. I was a Teach for America alumnus, Sontag Prize in Urban Education winner for excellence in teaching mathematics, a Teach Plus Teaching Policy Fellow, and a two-time attendee of conferences by the Gates Foundation celebrating effective teachers and teaching. However, this, my third year, was about to be my last in the classroom.

I adored my students and enjoyed teaching high school math. My students realized significant academic success, as measured by both district and state assessments. Additionally I was able to enjoy some personal success by developing close, personal relationships with my students both in the classroom and through extracurricular activities I sponsored. However, after some deep soul-searching, I came to the realization that, despite such success-affirming indicators, including glowing performance evaluations and a comfortable paycheck, at the end of the day I did not view teaching as a true profession. I despised feeling like, despite my best efforts, I was having little impact in my school beyond the four walls of my classroom.



“I found a school that uses a blended-learning model, which has enabled me to view teaching as a true profession and career.”

As U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently stated, “The factory model of education is the wrong model for the twenty-first century. Today, our schools must prepare all students for college and careers—and do far more to personalize instruction and employ the smart use of technology.” Secretary Duncan’s com-

ments spoke to my frustrations as a teacher. My greatest sources of frustration stemmed from my inability to be recognized and treated as a highly capable professional and the constraints of teaching within the same outdated school model of the last decades.

I had to make a change. So I did. I found a school that uses a blended-learning model, which has enabled me to view teaching as a true profession and career. Without the opportunity to teach in a blended-learning environment, I wouldn’t be in the classroom anymore.

Blended learning is not about replacing teachers with machines. Rather, it’s about leveraging technology to provide students and teachers with immediate feedback, holding each individual student accountable for his or her academic success, and personalizing coursework to best meet students exactly where they are. Dave Levin, one of the founders of the KIPP charter network, recently emphasized that blended learning relies upon skilled teachers. This point is absolutely critical: without highly effective teachers and instruction, a blended-learning model cannot be successful or sustainable.

As enlightened and progressive educators, we must get away from the notion that the most important thing about our students is their grade level. Where I currently teach, we have eighth-grade students taking sixth-grade math, seventh-grade history, and ninth-grade English. Specific academic courses are assigned based upon each student’s instructional level. In fact, we do not have any two students taking the exact same course load. We also empower our students with the responsibility to choose their work at any given time, while constantly monitoring their individual data to ensure they are not solely working on one particular course while ignoring others.

Of course, school is also a place where social interaction is of the utmost importance. Our students do not just sit in front of computers all day. In addition to their digital coursework, our students have workshops based on their grade level, along with office hours, or one-on-ones with teachers. I am able to design projects, experiments, and real-world applications to bring the concepts that the students are learning through their digital curriculum to life. I am able to teach them

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how to think creatively. For example, I have found that it is much more meaningful to have my students develop a formula for cutting a piece of Laughing Cow cheese horizontally into equal pieces, or to take a leaky faucet and use math to calculate exactly how long it will take for that sink to fill up than to have them answer traditional questions from a textbook or worksheet. This is truly an exhilarating experience for a teacher, and, furthermore, I feel challenged by it.

I firmly believe that teaching in a blended-learning environment is a path to a sustainable career for teachers who are looking for a change of pace from a traditional school environment to one that values autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

I work amidst a small staff (fourteen adults, including just four teachers, all with three or more years' experience) that was entirely hand selected. We collaborate at our daily staff meetings before school and work closely throughout the day to maximize the educational experiences for our kids. With an eye towards sustaining our high-commitment and high-expectations culture, our school leader implores us to be out of the building each day by 4:15 p.m. On Fridays, we release our students at 2:30 p.m. and the last hour of the day is devoted to professional development.

With a small, experienced, and professional staff, we make many decisions collectively. Last year, I enrolled in an educational leadership doctoral program because I felt that becoming an administrator was my only avenue to greater leadership opportunities and an income sufficient to support a family. However, in my current school, I am able to take on many leadership roles and earn a higher salary while also staying in the classroom and ensuring that my students receive the best possible math education. This dynamic environment is enabling me to view teaching as a true vocation. I have since left the doctoral program, realizing administration is not my passion: teaching students is my passion.

It is clear that changes are needed in our country's schools. Study after study has made it clear that the teacher is the most important in-school factor for student achievement. However, we currently have an epidemic of teachers leaving the classroom just as they're getting



really effective at their jobs. By leveraging technology and personalizing instruction in classrooms led by highly skilled teachers, we can change the educational outcomes for hundreds of thousands of students across this country. Blended learning doesn't only benefit students—it also provides opportunities for teachers like myself to feel, perhaps for the first time, like true professionals and instructional leaders. Sustainability and professionalism are key to keeping teachers like me in the classroom. The blended-learning model provides both. ■

A lengthened version of this article appeared on Edweek.org, March 27, 2013.

Josh Woodward is an AAE member and a lead teacher at Carpe Diem Meridian, a public charter school for grades 6-12 in Indianapolis.

Member Mention: Leslie Dodge Wins 9Teachers Who Care Award

Member Mention: Leslie Dodge Named 9Teachers Who Care Honoree

Leslie Dodge, a teacher at Polaris at Ebert, in Denver, Colorado, recently won the 9Teachers Who Care Award for her exemplary care, compassion, and dedication to the hundreds of students who have passed through her classroom throughout her career. 9Teachers Who Care is a monthly award that recognizes teachers who demonstrate excellence in their profession.

Highlights from Leslie's career include helping to advance the DPS social studies curriculum by providing her students with mock Congressional hearings, writing and implementing a new fifth-grade social studies guide for Denver Public Schools, running after-school tutoring programs, running an after-school art club, and writing and producing plays in which students acted. Additionally, Leslie participated in the Denver Teacher Program, training twelve new teachers coming into DPS from

different occupations, and trained new DPS fifth-grade teachers in the district's new math curriculum.

"Unlike so many others, I knew from the age of seven, when all I asked Santa for was a teacher's chalkboard, complete with a box of chalk and an eraser, I wanted to spend my life in front of a group of students," Leslie said. "I have taught for forty-one years and hope to spend many more heart-warming years in the classroom setting. Some people tell me I still have the enthusiasm of a first-year teacher. I guess they are right, but it's easy to come to work when I've got a job that makes a difference. I put pencil to paper last year and figured I've touched the lives of over 2,000 young people in my career. Now that's cause for enthusiasm!"

AAE congratulates Leslie on winning the 9Teachers Who Care Award, and for her dedication and excellence in the teaching profession. We are proud to call her a member! ■



Studying Abroad – Not Just for Students

Have you always wanted to study abroad but never had the opportunity? Are you ever envious of students who study abroad during the summer? Well, now is your chance to travel!

Global Exploration for Educators Organization (GEEQ) is a 501c3 non-profit organization that runs summer professional development travel programs designed for teachers.

GEEQ is offering twenty different travel programs for the summer of 2013: India/Nepal, Italy, Portugal/Spain, Amalfi Coast, Eastern Europe, Budapest to Istanbul, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Comfort Thailand, Thailand/Laos, Cambodia, China, Comfort China, Russia/Mongolia/China, Turkey 15 day, Turkey 8-Day, South Africa/Mozambique/Zimbabwe/Botswana, Morocco, Peru, and The Galapagos Islands. The registration deadline is June 1st, but space is limited and many programs will be full well before the deadline.

Educators have the option to earn graduate school credit and professional development credit while seeing the world. The trips are eight to twenty-four days long and are designed and discounted to be interesting and affordable for teachers. GEEQ provides teachers educational materials and the structure to help them bring their experiences into the classroom. The trips are open to all nationalities of K-12 and university educators and administrators, as well as retired educators. Educators are also permitted to bring along a non-educator guest.

Detailed information about each trip, including itineraries, costs, travel dates, and more can be found at www.geeo.org. GEEQ can be reached seven days a week, toll free at 1-877-600-0105 between 9AM-9PM EST. ■





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AAE APPRECIATES OUR MEMBERS!

Let us recognize your classroom accomplishments!



Morphing into a 21st Century Teacher

27 Ways to be a Better 21st Century Educator

Participate

Participate in conference calls around the world with your class.

Use

Let students use their cellphones.

Create

Have students create movie trailers for introduction of the lesson.

Design

Design alternative assessments that use the whole brain.

Be

Be just as teach savvy as your students.

Design

Have students design and create websites.

Involve

Get students involved with the community.

Code

Use tablets, create aa for tablets. Explore information through the tablet.

Focus

Focus on the student's point of view. Are you saying what they are hearing.

Re Think

Re-think how the student interprets your lesson.

Dialogue

Dialogue with your students.

Discern

Teach students how to discern what is good information and what is not.

Incorporate

Incorporate seeing things from a different perspective.

Question

Encourage and entertain all questions.

Collaborate

Collaborate with teachers from outside your circle.

Question

Let students question what they are learning.

Real

Make it real-life relevant.

Contributors

Let students contribute to their learning.

Flip

Flip the classroom with useful resources.

Document

Document the learning for your reflection and the students' reflection.

RELATE

Learn new ways to relate to your students.

Web 2.0

Learn, explore, integrate, utilize.

Facilitate

Facilitate learning as opposed to giving knowledge.

Photograph

Have students have students photograph the world around them.

Make

Have students make time-lapse videos for later reflection.

Social Media

Be social.

Integrate

Integrate theatrics into your classroom. Invest in the character you are teaching about.

Special Thanks to an inspirational teacher – Tiffany Poirier – who gets it... <http://vimeo.com/tiffanypoirier>

By: Mia MacMeekin