School Climate Matters

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A new teacher is relieved after a colleague shared a lesson plan with her. A student walks into math class with a feeling of dread after failing an exam. Parents walk away from the principal's office feeling they have been heard and respected. These are examples of school climate, the immediate feel or tone that is felt or experienced on a day-to-day basis by students, staff, and community. Because of its moment-to-moment nature, school climate can be immediately impacted (Eller and Eller, 2009). School culture, on the other hand, is slower to change. Sometimes the terms 'climate' and 'culture' are used interchangeably. However school culture is a broader term than climate. It is the unwritten rules and traditions, norms and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act and think, how they dress, what they talk about or avoid talking about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or don't, and how teachers and site leaders feel about their work and their students. School culture is the glue that holds the school together (Deal and Peterson 1999, p. 2-3). (The term 'climate' will be used here to include the concepts of culture as well.)

A positive school climate may be one of the most important ingredients of a successful instructional program and may be the missing link in school reform efforts (e.g. Bulach & Malone, 1994; Delar, 1998; Gittelsohn et al., 2003; Gregory et al, 2007). Deal and Peterson (1999) show that when the school culture does not support and encourage reform, improvement does not occur. A recent study of 21 elementary, middle and high schools in Los Angeles with diverse student populations and achievement levels found that low quality climates were found where the achievement gap was most evident (Shindler, 2010). So this begs the question: Will adding on programs within a school where the climate is poor have the desired effects?

One key factor that has surfaced in schools successful in improving student achievement is high relational trust or positive social relationships among members of the school community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This includes adult-to-adult, student-to-adult, and student-to-student relationships. For example, high poverty 'turnaround schools' that showed the greatest success created climates rich in these three protective factors: caring relationships, high expectations messages and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution. Changing curriculum, programs, materials, or specific subject content may improve what is taught in a classroom, but may not alter what is learned. In other words, it's not what you do; it's how you do it (WestEd, 2003; California Dept of Education 2009, pp A2-A4).

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So how does school climate impact educators and students? Research shows that the impact is wide ranging. For school staff, climate impacts their ability to make change, successful implementation of programs, depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, attrition and retention, relationships and trust, feelings of accomplishment, commitment to the profession and sense of efficacy (e.g. Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Miller et al. 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). And for students, studies have shown that school climate impacts students' learning, academic achievement, motivation, safety, absenteeism, group cohesion, stress, mutual trust, and feelings of connectedness and attachment to school (e.g. Fleming et al., 2005; Ma & Klinger, 2000; Brand et al., 2003; Freiberg, 1999; Griffith, 1995; Comer, 1984; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Eccles et al., 1993; Ghaith, 2003; Kerr et al., 2004; Wolfe, 2001; Sousa, 2006; Devine & Cohen, 2007).

In our zeal to focus on student aptitude in academic subjects we may have forgotten that it is the climate determined by daily interactions on campus and how we do the business of school that can have profound effects on both students and staff success. The good news is we can do something about it.

References upon request.

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