

# Transforming School Culture

David F. Piperato

Principal, Palisades High School, Pa.

and

Joseph J. Roy

Principal, Springfield Township High School, Pa.

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If today's trends continue, education in the 21st century will be characterized by increasingly fractured relationships and even more alienated students. Closed, individualized, bureaucratic cultures typical of many schools are unable to reverse these trends. Collaboration within the schoolhouse and beyond is critical to meeting the individual needs of students. Just as industry moved from mass production to mass customization, schools will need to similarly customize the educational experiences of individuals to re-engage them and to begin the restoration of relationships.

Despite widespread school improvement efforts in schools across the country, public dissatisfaction with school performance and outrageous student behavior continues. Due to the perceived failure of schools to change from within, efforts to force change from without have gained momentum. Several resulting pressures in society lead to an increasingly competitive environment for public education. These pressures include demands from employers and the marketplace, school choice, access to global communications/information and the implementation of educational standards. For public schools to remain viable in this increasingly competitive environment, they will need to help all students meet educational standards. The way to accomplish this, we believe, is through collaboration.

## *Core Values of a Collaborative School Culture*

After understanding the societal trends that will compel schools to develop cultures of collaboration, the biggest challenge still confronts school leaders – actually transforming the culture of schools. Educators willingly engage in technical discussions about curriculum, scheduling, staffing and facilities as part of school improvement sessions. Honest, open discussions about school culture, about what we believe in, are rare. Most school reform efforts have fallen short because we have not taken the time and the risk to examine the foundation - school culture.

In order to change the culture, educational leaders must understand the core values and beliefs that provide both direction and stability. Core values provide direction by serving as the ideals against which we measure our behavior. Core values provide stability by serving as the unchanging beliefs at the heart of a school. Many school reform efforts that focus on increasing graduation requirements, changing schedules and expanding standardized testing completely miss the cultural side of redesigning schools.

A positive, collaborative culture is the sum of several core values. The first core cultural value is a school mission focused on student and teacher learning. A second value is the belief that all students and staff can learn and grow. A commitment to establishing relationships among students and staff that support the school's educational goals is a third core value. Shared leadership, relationships based on mutual respect and caring, collegiality and a focus on performance and improvement are additional core values in a collaborative culture (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

## *Using the Three R's to Develop Collaborative Cultures*

We view culture as an intricately woven quilt. The countless individual threads that are woven together represent the interdependent core values. If we try to get a better view of the quilt by taking apart the threads to look at them individually, we lose sight of the entire quilt. Similarly, if we try to understand culture by separating the core values and looking at each in isolation, we lose sight of the entire culture. By employing this holistic approach, educators will develop a culture that is based on the three main components: creating restorative relationships, relevance and responsibility.

## *Restorative Relationships*

Collaborative school cultures include visible, positive relationships and partnerships within the school system and beyond. As a result of the trends leading into the 21st century and the resulting competitive educational environment, school culture must be more client-centered in an effort to meet the needs of individual students. Relationships based on the beliefs that all students can learn and teachers are responsible for student learning are fundamental in a collaborative culture. In order to remain competitive, educators will need to believe and act in ways that demonstrate that students are at the heart of our efforts. Teacher - student

relationships must be characterized by mutual respect, collaboration and concern. Restorative relationships are based on high expectations for student behavior and performance coupled with high support.

Traditionally, teachers have done their work in isolation from the world beyond school as well as in relative isolation from colleagues. Teaching should focus on meeting individual student needs by developing multiple relationships to access all available resources. Schools frequently require students to meet the needs of the organization by, for example, offering courses only at certain times and by offering only certain courses. Students needs are frequently overridden by organizational needs.

This mass production style of education de-personalizes relationships and leads to increased isolation and conflict between teachers and students. Since no single teacher can meet the various needs of a classroom of students, schools must look for new relationships and partnerships within the school walls and beyond. Teachers who are accustomed to working alone must develop the mindset to seek out partnering opportunities and the skills to make restorative partnerships work.

Restorative relationships are a core component of a collaborative culture. Traditional school cultures inhibit collaborative relationships by isolating teachers from one another and by fostering a lack of respect between teachers and students. Schools that are committed to fostering restorative relationships encourage teachers and students to collaborate with each other as well as with external partners.

### *Relevance*

As a core component of culture, relevance, reminds us that what we do in schools must be meaningful and useful to both students and society. A positive, collaborative culture is characterized by work that motivates students because that work is relevant. Cynicism, poor student performance, strained relationships and alienation from school are symptoms of an irrelevant educational experience and a damaged school culture. A restorative culture encourages teachers, employers, students, parents and the community to work together to create meaningful learning experiences for students.

Schools cannot develop relevant, meaningful learning experiences for students in closed cultures. A collaborative culture that embraces the world beyond the school is necessary so that what we do in school is relevant to students and to society. Schools focused on meeting the needs of all students believe that all students can learn when learning experiences are relevant.

### *Responsibility*

The third component of culture - responsibility - includes both student responsibility to learn and the school's responsibility for student learning. In a restorative culture, all members of the community are responsible to each other including students to students, teachers to students, students to teachers and teachers to teachers. A culture based on responsibility rejects excuse making and the blame game in interpersonal relationships. A culture based on responsibility accepts high standards for behavior and performance combined with generous support. Each individual accepts responsibility for his/her actions with the full support of others. For example, if a classroom rule is violated the offender accepts responsibility both for his/her actions and for repairing any harm done to relationships. Classmates accept the responsibility for supporting the offender to prevent future infractions.

### *Conclusion*

In an effort to be restorative, schools must go beyond cosmetic reform efforts and focus on their foundation, school culture. The closed, individualized and bureaucratic school culture familiar in many systems must give way to collaborative cultures focused on the Three Rs of restorative relationships, relevance and responsibility. The transformation to a collaborative culture will occur only with a sustained, focused effort on the part of the entire school community. The first step in this transformational process is a commitment to building healthier relationships followed immediately by training key school community members in the concepts of restorative practices. A collaborative culture based on the Three Rs enhances individual relationships and fosters a sense of community. "A community in which teachers, administrators, parents and students pay attention to each other's feelings and demonstrate empathy for one another. A community in which young people are held accountable while being supported where they learn appropriate behavior without stigmatization" (Wachtel, 2000).

### *References*

Deal, T.E. & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.  
Wachtel, T. (2000). "SaferSaferSchools: Restoring Community in a Disconnected World." <http://www.restorativepractices.org/Pages/safersanerschools.html>

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