

School Climate: Hot or Cold?

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Abstract

Measuring school climate begins with the tone the principal has set for the school. When the school climate is HOT, meaning it's encouraging, supportive, positive, and facilitates learning, student achievement is positively affected. Conversely, when the school climate is COLD, meaning its negative, untrusting, and adversarial, student achievement is negatively affected. The school leadership greatly affects the climate of a school building and the school community as a whole. Hot and on-fire – teachers feel supported, share in decision making processes, and feel heard and valued. Cold and unfeeling – teachers are not celebrated, valued, or have little to no input with school decisions. Effective school leaders know how to preserve a school culture and maintain a positive school climate in order for all stakeholders to feel connected to the school's vision. Conversely, when school climate is ignored, the morale of a school suffers in multiple ways.

Key Words: School climate, school culture, school environment, school leaders, morale

Introduction

Hot: Imagine a school climate and culture that nourishes, embraces, and celebrates student achievement, teacher resources, and community support. Cold: Imagine a school climate and culture that is toxic, finds fault, and lacks pride and respect. It is not difficult to choose the school in which deep learning, deep caring, and mutual trust takes place. It is believed that the climate and culture of a school is directly proportional to the leadership style of the school leader. Barth (2001) believes that the greatest influence on a school's learning environment is the school culture, not the state department of education, superintendent of schools or local school board. Barth further believes that the school's leader has the highest potential of affecting the morale of all school stakeholders.

Often the words school climate and school culture are used interchangeably. However, there are subtle differences between the two. School climate can be defined by the overall feeling, attitude and morale of a school, where school culture "is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act" (Barth, 2001, p.8). It is important to note that the definitions of school climate and school culture are very similar, and they are interwoven in a school setting. It would be impossible to have a properly functioning school with a poor school climate and a positive school culture. The opposite would also be true.

Literature supports that school climate and school culture affect student learning – the main purpose of schools. Since the purpose of education promotes teaching and learning, compassion and understanding, and motivation and encouragement, it is then necessary to have a leader that fosters the environment that promotes these critical attributes. Furthermore, the purpose of a classroom teacher is to assist the students in becoming life-long learners and productive citizens who will transfer knowledge acquired in the classroom to make connections to their world. A school leader who demonstrates his/her consistency in supporting these statements is a school leader who builds morale, respects decisions, and extends the view of leadership to include teachers. Teachers are considered the transformational leaders who have the greatest impact on student learning. Although administrators are viewed as leaders within the school, the classroom teachers are the ones that have the greatest impact on students. "They can transform students' lives, motivate and inspire, and get students to do things they never thought they could do" (Eaker, DuFour, DuFour, 2002, p.23).

School principals set the tone in each school. Principals have the position to affect academic improvement, school spirit, and workplace climate. When there is strong evidence of mutual respect within a school, all stakeholders benefit. The effectiveness of the leadership in a school has the ability to boost the morale of the entire community. When one's work is appreciated and respected, it makes it easy to reach the expectations with pride and enthusiasm. The top-down philosophy holds true for the faculty, staff, and students. All stakeholders can take pride in reaching federal mandates, most especially when their tireless approach to improving learning and ultimately reaching student achievement is supported and encouraged.

School Leadership Characteristics – How it Affects School Climate

Effective leadership is the primary key to an effective school. Leadership is situational. Depending on the individual/group you are leading and the type you are addressing, you must determine whether your behavior should reflect a structuring, coaching, encouraging, or delegating style. As an instructional leader, the school principal believes, supports, and defends the needs of every student. In addition, the leader ensures that the curriculum is in alignment with the goals, takes an active interest in assessment techniques, and empowers teachers to take ownership of their teaching and learning in the classroom.

A school leader that promotes a positive school climate is first a good listener and relationship builder. This will allow real meaningful dialogue to occur. An effective school leader makes decisions based on what is best for students, and does not avoid stakeholders with whom he or she does not agree. Devos and Bouckenooghe (2009) describe school leaders as those who wish to promote a positive school climate by projecting characteristics of leadership that include respect, trust, friendship, and a belief that he or she is not the most important person in the building. Senge (2010) further describes a leader to be a designer, a steward, and a teacher. According to Senge, a school leader promotes teacher leadership and content mastery in the classroom; effectively problem-solves, and continually fosters learning for the entire school community. Supportive of Senge's beliefs, Preble and Gordon (2011) advocate for leaders who promote a climate of mutual trust, even when it forces individuals to create solutions for the greater good of the school community. Fullan further believes that to have a successful school climate, individuals need to work cohesively, allowing for the main goal of the institution to emerge through discussion, debate, and a unified resolution. By working collaboratively and collegially as a team, the stakeholders will feel valued and important in the shared-decision making to promote a successful school.

Who does school climate affect?

School climate affects all stakeholders because it impacts interactions among stakeholders, perceptions of those interactions, and outcomes. A famous quote from Dr. Haim Ginott (1976) summarizes the impact educators make, hence the impact climate has on the students entrusted in the care of educators,

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I have a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

At the beginning of each school year, how could educators go wrong if they read and reread this quote? On any given day, school leaders, which also include teachers, have a tremendous influence over the success of students. Successes would include academic achievement as well as personal growth, fulfillment, and overall self-confidence.

School climate affects how a teacher designs and delivers a lesson. Imagine a school where trust, respect, and confidence are placed at the feet of the teachers. A trusted, supported, and confident teacher then finds creative ways to stimulate curiosity, engage the imagination and pass the joy of learning on to each of his or her students. A supported teacher provides a safe, creative and innovative environment where students, even those who have difficulty with the subject matter, feel comfortable and welcome. Moreover, a supported teacher uses methods that embrace all types of learning styles. His or her joy of learning is contagious and is passed not only from student to student, but also from colleague to colleague. This is an environment where staff development, open communication, and continuous improvement are embraced. This is an environment where the school leader has modeled the need to embrace continuous improvement and open dialogue. This is an environment where a novice teacher can become a masterful teacher. "Effective principals extend as well as express what they value.

They nurture a subtle process of enabling teachers to work together to generate solutions” (Fullan, 1997, p.20). While effective leaders are encouraging shared decision making, teamwork, and professional growth, they are nurturing a positive school climate and culture in which all stakeholders will benefit.

Outcomes of School Climate

Hot: Signs of a positive school climate may include a happy, productive, and high achieving student body and staff. When the students and staff feel success, energy, enthusiasm, and pride in their work, this symbolizes a positive school climate and a high morale within the school building. When the community continues to support the school’s initiatives and activities, this is another indication of positive school climate. Stakeholders feel valued and needed when their voices are heard and they are asked for opinions, ideas and collaboration. When the outcomes of a school climate are positive, student achievement can truly be the focus of efforts.

Cold: Conversely, there are apparent signs of a negative school climate as well. Negativity breeds negativity. In a school environment where the climate is negative and the morale low, usually the focus is on problems not solutions. Student achievement takes a back burner, and morale issues take precedence. Factors that signal a negative school climate could include complacency, apathy, suspicion, boredom, and low productivity.

When the School Climate Needs to Change

“Probably the most important and the most difficult job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture of a school. The school’s culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, ‘the way we do things around here’” (Barth, 2001, p.7). Changing a school climate or school culture takes time. Much like what a teacher does in the classroom, the school leader(s) need to take inventory. As Barth (2001) explains, the school leader needs to do his/her homework by immersing in the school culture to become aware of the prevailing culture. This can be completed by meetings with past and present teachers and staff, community members, and neighboring families. Using the findings of these meetings, the new school leader can then inform future practice by understanding the behaviors, situations, and decision-making models of the established norms of the school community. Using the school improvement model, an in-depth study of the school’s past and current profile needs to be completed. Analyzing the profile, collecting data, and then determining the areas of need begin the school-wide process for reform. Developing action teams to work with another will increase the empowerment of the faculty and staff, and place priority on involvement, teamwork, and priorities. Stakeholder involvement and the characteristics of the stakeholders need to be considered. Timelines and expectations need to be set, and open communication and active listening is a must. As Bolman and Deal (2010) explain, four things need to take place to build spirit, faith and commitment within the school.

- **Learn and celebrate the history.** Snapshots into the history of a school can shape the vision of the school’s future. Celebrating the history of the school includes the triumphs and tragedies. These times of celebration can have mixed feelings of humor, entertainment and reflection.
- **Diagnose the strength of the existing culture.** The existing culture of a school can be strong or weak. Diagnosing the culture, through observations of pride or lack thereof, are key components to understanding the history of a school. Some schools may need change, and a new leader may be an open invitation for the change.
- **Reinforce and celebrate the culture’s strengths.** Every school has reasons to celebrate, even if the culture in a school is particularly weak. It is worth the efforts to find the strengths in former students and faculty, existing students and faculty, and in individuals whose efforts are worth celebrating.
- **Mark transitions with ceremony.** Ceremonies mark the beginning and endings of traditions. At retirement, a new principal feels beloved and valued when the staff recognize his or her contributions to the school and the community. And in turn, when a new principal takes command, a welcoming celebration offers the ideas of support and enthusiasm (pp.104-105).

With these lessons in place, relationships will strengthen and a unified goal of understanding challenges and experiences will form.

Factors of an Effective School Leader

The characteristics of an effective leader differ from source to source, but all sources believe that building morale, building relationships, practicing open communication, and empowering others will definitely affect a school’s climate and culture. Collins (2001) explains that a level 5 leader will move a company from good to great because this type of leader is “self-effacing, quiet, reserved, and even shy.

These leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. They are more like Lincoln and Socrates, than Patton or Caesar” (p.12). He continues to explain that “level 5 leaders are ambitious, but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves” (p.21).

Schools are no different than organizations that need to be run by effective leaders who demonstrate professional behavior and positive interactions. Working through difficult situations and following through on promises can have a positive impact. A school leader’s influence can be compared to a classroom teacher’s influence. Just as the teacher sets the tone in his or her classroom, a principal sets the tone in his or her building. “Leading from good to great does not mean coming up with the answers and then motivating everyone to follow your messianic vision. It means having the humility to grasp the fact that you do not yet understand enough to have the answers and then to ask the questions that will lead to the best possible insights” (Collins, 2001, p.75). When school leaders put the interest of students ahead of the interest of their schools, there is an increase in student achievement, staff morale, and their own job satisfaction (Westerberg, 2013).

Summary

School Climate: Hot or Cold? Effective schools and leaders have the capacity to determine the climate of their school because they share three common elements: learning, teaching, and leadership. Decision making strategies such as consensus building and open communication are key factors to attain the goals of an effective school. The ability to encourage that which is working and help develop that which needs improvement are elements which should not be overlooked. If a school climate needs to change, it takes the resources of the community and a willing and effective school leader. The final quote in Barth’s (2001) chapter on school culture summarizes the impact of a school leader and the school climate. “Show me a school whose inhabitants constantly examine the school’s culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I’ll show you students who graduate with both the capacity and the heart for lifelong learning” (p.19).

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