

Culture v. Climate

When I first looked at this comparison, I immediately thought the two were intertwined. That may be true in part, but it is clear that culture is the “big picture” of a school and the climate is the “day-to-day details” of a school. I love how Gruenert and Whitaker discuss how to bust a culture with “Celebrate Mondays” (pg. 13). Every teacher looks at Mondays as the enemy. My own philosophy is to use Mondays as a conversation day; a day that a teacher can connect with students and ask about their time off; a day that culture *and* climate can be formed; a day when the lessons will vary depending on the responses of the students. What I learned from the text is that culture takes a long time to establish or change and that climate can take a sentence to change (or more 😊).

Culture is what I view as the most important part of school. I believe that having a big picture and ultimately treating teachers as the most important cogs in an evolving system is the key to creating a successful culture in a school. I worked for about 5 years in the Minneapolis district and the overall culture was to take care of yourself and hope to get tenured. MPS is a unionized school district and everything seems to revolve around if you get tenured or if you don't. Once you are tenured, your culture changes to one of many ways: defiance, compliant or indifferent. Shouldn't all cultures want the missing ingredient of exuberance? Shouldn't teachers want to make things better? In my current school, there is a clear culture of success. The teachers work together, help each other, maintain high expectations and accept differences in technique. This is a culture of compliance, exuberance and excellence. One could use data to determine this is so, or as Gruenert and Whitaker state numerous times in the book, “You walk into some schools and immediately feel welcome.”

Another thing about culture is that it creates an entire focus for the school. Creating morale in a school is all about “positive leaders in a staff who care about their staff” (pg. 12). The culture of a school looks at who teachers are as a whole and not as an individual. It focuses on being secure with oneself and being yourself, or normal. In culture, it is important to retain teachers’ humor, stories, symbols, values and beliefs. By doing this, teachers feel empowered to be the best educators for students that would be possible. Anyone can agree that being supported by your supervisors would provide a culture of the highest performance.

Climate is the tool that can shape culture. According to Gruenert and Whitaker, “If a principal asks teachers not to use sarcasm with students, most of the teachers will comply... if it persists... it becomes embedded in the culture.” (pg. 29) Climate is an attitude that can change regularly and can depend on moods. Climate creates possible decension if allowed to prosper. The ultimate question is which culture do you want for your school? On page 50 of the text, it is clear that a school can deteriorate quite quickly if the culture turns negative. I have seen both positive and terrible cultures in my decade of being an educator.

At my school, the clear culture is that of high expectations. Everyone chooses to work toward a common goal. Teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators continue to work towards helping students be the best of themselves. Our environment is that of collaborative and comfortable. We seemed to have achieved the “Nirvana of school cultures” (pg. 50) which “embraces learning for all adults and students.” It is clear that by our learning communities, observations, collaboration and communication that our school chooses to be the best, learn from the best and expect the best. As we are a multiple Minnesota Reward School (every year since its birth) and a Blue Ribbon School (national award) we continue to look at how to improve and build on our success.

To close this chapter, it is clear that climate is a changeable item and that culture is a long term idea. The true relation seems to be to change the climate to a positive and collaborative idea and eventually the culture will follow suit. I am happy to be at my current school and for many years prior, my culture was very difficult to sustain. I drive 30+ minutes to my current school (vs. 6 minutes to MPS) and it is worth every minute that is wasted on driving. I truly understand the contrast and comparisons between culture and climate now.