



# Just for the ASKing!

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on building strong school cultures.

## Building Strong School Cultures: Signs of Progress



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Educators all across the nation and world are searching for answers that will help improve student achievement and overall learning in their schools. In their search, many schools are going through a restructuring process as they try to determine what is working in their buildings and what needs to be revised or changed completely. As they seek new and better ideas, they develop improvement plans, extensively analyze achievement data, and examine their overall school culture. Almost universally, they are making sincere, good-hearted attempts to make a positive difference in their schools.

In schools where educators are achieving their goals, there are certain behaviors that are indicative of strong school cultures. A closer examination of the attitudes and actions in these schools provides vivid clues about why some schools are successful while others seem to struggle. Three questions that may lead to some answers are:

- **What makes a school culture stronger?**
- **What are the indicators that the culture has strengthened?**
- **What do administrators and teachers do that results in exceptional student achievement?**

The following practices offer insights into the signs that the culture of the school is moving in the right direction.

### **Unified Vision**

All adults in the school are involved in the establishment of the school's mission and vision. As a result, the words contained in the mission statement are not pat phrases or empty rhetoric but true representations of the views of the adults who will be charged with bringing life to the words in the vision. The staff members also fully understand that there is no one formula or recipe to reach projected goals. They begin by adapting a conceptual framework which is fluid and which can be altered and adjusted as the vision is pursued.

### **Collaborative Decisions**

In great school cultures, all stakeholders know that they not only have a voice in decisions but that they will be truly heard. Leaders do not provide answers but instead ask questions that not only inspire but also

provoke. As author Jim Collins notes, in strong cultures, leaders “encourage debate and dialogue, not coercion.” They establish a system whereby “red flags” expose data and information that can no longer be ignored. The leaders also understand that top-down mandates do not work. There are no pronouncements or decisions made in isolation. The leaders build alliances with teachers, parents, and students recognizing that everyone must be included in establishing the school’s direction.

### **Guaranteed Curriculum**

In cultures dedicated to student learning, all students are guaranteed and have access to the same rich curriculum, knowledge, and skills as all other students. No students are ever left behind. Data are continually used to identify students who need additional support for learning. Students are not made to feel that they are burdens or “losers” but individuals who may need more time and support to master the identified curriculum. Adults devise a system of supports for student learning that enables all students to be successful.

### **True Collaboration**

When schools reach a stage of true collaboration in all arenas of the school, there is no competition, no distrust, and no disharmony. Teacher teams fully understand that their mission is to increase student learning. They are willing to bring any and all issues related to improved instruction to a team meeting or to a table discussion with no hesitation or reservation. As Rick Du Four describes it, the adults move from “collaboration lite” to honest, purposeful professional interactions.

### **Deep Discussions**

Discussions at team meetings have depth, explore new territory, and expand on ways to take student learning to higher levels of thinking and problem solving. Bloom’s Taxonomy is ever-present at team meetings. The adults understand that teaching is not simply a march through benchmarks but the execution of exciting, student-centered learning experiences based on research-based strategies. In addition, the team members establish pacing guides which guarantee that each team member will be able to teach the essential content for which the teachers are responsible. The teammates fully understand and believe that collaboration is the most effective method that will enable each member to deliver the best instruction possible.

### **Rigorous Instruction**

There is extensive evidence of rigor throughout all curricular areas since the adults understand that their mission is to stretch each student to his or her fullest potential. To motivate students to tackle a rigorous curriculum, teachers build close relationships with students and provide encouragement and reinforcement to keep students intrinsically motivated and totally immersed in their learning. Researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Diane Friedlaender examined the practices of five urban California high schools that had the same low-income populations as surrounding schools with similar demographics. They found that the five schools graduated and sent students to college at levels far above the state average. The reason for the difference in achievement, they concluded, was the “rigorous courses led by teachers who build close bonds with students and who collaborate professionally.”

### **Data-Driven Analyses**

Teachers make decisions that are based on student achievement data. As they collaborate, they examine both formative and summative data to determine next steps in instructional delivery. They firmly believe that there must be a way to improve student learning. Likewise, they are not defensive about data; they don’t make excuses if data results are not good. They analyze, reflect, and, in some cases, decide which students need second chances on an assessment or which students may require reteaching. As Robert Marzano has written, confident educators use “disappointing results as implementation challenges to inspire hope and resilience.”

### **Caring Attitudes**

As problems arise and school wide decisions are made, strong cultures do not respond with more rules and

harsher punishments. Instead there is a renewed emphasis on high expectations and a caring attitude toward individual students. The adults clearly understand and accept that it is the student/teacher relationships that can make the greatest difference in student growth.

### **Responsive Leaders**

In his work in professional learning communities, Rick DuFour has written that “Hosts of researchers...have concluded that substantive change inevitably creates discomfort and dissonance as people are asked to act in new ways.” It is often a conflict that cannot be ignored or avoided. A diligent leader also understands the human dynamics of the change process and anticipates that change may result in a certain amount of fear, insecurity, and, in some instances, stone walling on the part of the teaching staff. The leader must persevere with a sense of calm and establish a tone of persistent effort over time by making the vision statement a living document and by being responsive to the concerns of teachers, parents, and students.

### **Ongoing Support**

In healthy school cultures, the leader is tuned in to the day-to-day climate of the school and responds to needs in a timely manner. He or she is able to distinguish when individual teachers are going through the motions instead of having an emotional investment in the school’s vision. This leader does not judge, neglect, or abandon struggling staff members but instead determines what type of support an individual might need in order to establish a stronger commitment to the school’s goals. The leader also has a clear plan to involve new staff members in becoming acclimated to the school’s vision. Stated another way, the competent leader looks for ways to revitalize not demoralize.

### **Fierce Resolve**

Participants in establishing and maintaining an enduring school culture realize, in the words of writer Jim Collins, that there is “no single defining moment.” It is a “cumulative process, step by step, action by action, discussion by discussion, and pushing in a constant direction over an extensive period of time” that makes an unquestionable difference. To achieve legitimate success, there are no shortcuts but a fierce resolve to maintain a coherent and constant work ethic over the long haul.

### **Educational Politics**

In summary, another way to determine if the school culture is moving in the right direction is to use terminology in the current political climate to make an analogous comparison to the culture of the school. If schools are to become truly invigorated, there must be a sense of **bipartisanship** in which all participants work toward a collective goal. The culture should include **constructive dialogue and negotiations** in order to **form a more perfect union**. Once the vision is established, participants must agree to eliminate the “**pork**” from every curriculum area and concentrate on consistent standards from classroom to classroom. The leader must periodically apprise the staff of the **state of the union** in order to encourage honest dialogue and, where appropriate, introduce a **stimulus package** to promote ongoing progress. And finally, when all is said and done, the culture of the school can be summed up in just a few words, **Yes We Can!**

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