Defining and Specifying the Significance of School Culture

In this chapter a reader will learn about the following:

- Defining culture, the concept's contemporary significance for education reform, and its productive application to schools
- Research validated traits of a productive school culture
- Operational levers for constructing an effective school culture

ELCC STANDARDS

ELCC standards addressed in this chapter include the following:

- 1.1—Develop a vision of learning
- 1.2—Articulate a vision
- 2.1—Promote a positive school culture
- 3.1—Manage the organization
- 6.1—Understand the larger context

INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this book is that for a school to be maximally effective, individual components of an education reform effort must be woven together into a coherent, consciously constructed, and purposeful tapestry. It is insufficient and possibly counterproductive to graft incremental change after incremental change onto the side of an ongoing school. A tiny speck of teacher performance pay here, a dab of curriculum alignment there, a tiny piece of teacher professional development over there, block scheduling and a day or two of leadership training here, and a friendly nod to parent engagement somewhere for good measure is no way to systematically enhance the performance of a learning organization. However, these individual, ad hoc, and sometimes shortsighted and superficial school improvement components will have much more meaning, and are likely to have a substantially greater cumulative and lasting impact on student achievement, if woven into an organizational substrate where they are consciously considered, crafted to be internally consistent, examined for empirical validity, and rendered mutually reinforcing. That internal substrate, the purposeful organizational tapestry of shared values, beliefs, and expectations into which individual education reform threads should be sewn, is what is meant in this book by the label "school culture."

This book will describe means by which this coherent tapestry can be envisioned, then woven together, and then sustained. However, it is first useful to gain an understanding of several crucial component concepts, beginning with the notion of "culture," and then "school culture." This chapter will begin by discussing what is meant by "culture" generally and move on to discuss what is meant by "school culture" particularly.

THE LARGER CONCEPT OF "CULTURE"

"Culture" is a theoretically encompassing, analytically significant, and practically useful concept. However, it is elusive. While the concept is amenable to definition, description, illustration, and intuitive understanding, it is not easily measured. Nevertheless, once comprehending the essential components of the concept, its analytic application to schools and its practical perspective for enabling schools to become effective emerges more clearly.

Defining and Describing the Concept of "Culture"

In social science, *culture* is a theoretical and analytic concept employed by anthropologists and sociologists to capture the totality of a people's way of life, both material and immaterial. All tribes and clans, many nations, and most any other coherent collectivity of humans (and even animals) have a culture. A culture does not dictate precisely what individual members of a collectivity believe, think, or do. Rather, culture is an amalgam of individuals' modal actions, articles, and attitudes that have evolved over time. These various dimensional components are known as "traits." Traits are present everywhere and shape, but do not necessarily dictate in detail, virtually every object and action in the day-to-day lives and environment of a collectivity's members.

Culture shapes what one eats and wears (even *how* one eats and *how* one wears one's clothes), how one earns a living, the language or dialect one speaks, the formal title or titles one holds, times and terms under which one communicates with others, and how one finds a mate or interacts with siblings, parents, relatives, and others within the collectivity. Culture shapes the status hierarchy and social networks among a people and how the collectivity is governed or ruled. Some of a culture's rules may be formally and explicitly specified (e.g., constitutions and laws). However, most of a culture's mutually shared beliefs and traditions are unwritten, informal, and conveyed through casual and continuous contact and socialization, rather than through direct indoctrination or formal education. When direct and formal efforts exist to socialize the young or new members of the society, such efforts may take place in schools. However, there are other venues as well, for example, coming-of-age religious ceremonies such as confirmation for Christians and bar mitzvahs for Jews or the instruction that characterizes organizations such as Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, Indian Guides, and Explorers.

These many shared traits serve as the behavioral and perceptual substrate into which one is born and into which individuals as children, youth, adolescents, and adults continually are socialized. Of great importance, culture shapes how one views the actions of others and how a member of a collectivity believes others will perceive and react to him. Culture shapes roles. A "role" is the bundle of expectations held for the behavior of an individual in a specified position interacting with others (e.g., the role of a father, mother, brother, uncle, boss, elected official, teacher, or principal) or undertaking a task or engaging in an endeavor (e.g., being an attorney, pipefitter, farmer, mayor, editor, or a school leader).

Culture is a comprehensive collection of a people's actions and beliefs that enables a collectivity to adjust to its physical environment, continually renew itself, and sustain its gene pool. Hence, culture has many self-reinforcing features, reciprocal activities and beliefs, and sanctions that guide individuals' and institutions' immediate and long-range action and thought and, thus, assist in sustaining a collectivity and its individual members over time.

Culture, climate, and physical environment have an impact upon one another. It is a people's culture, be it Etruscan or Eskimo, Kwakiutl or Kurd, Sioux or Siberian, Balinese or Bedouin, that enables the group to take advantage of and survive in their particular physical world and where necessary to cope with the adversity of cold, heat, drought, flood, fire, or other threatening environmental conditions. However, there is reciprocity. A culture can shape climate and other parts of the physical environment; witness the likely impact of contemporary carbon emissions upon the atmosphere, the mass cutting of tropical rain forests, or the construction of mammoth dams that tame wild rivers and possibly alter weather patterns.

Cultures are not immutably molded; the shared behaviors and beliefs of a people are not forever fixed in time or space. Cultures, to survive, must continually adapt to the environmental, economic, technological, and demographic changes that impinge upon them. Not to evolve jeopardizes the ability of a people, and their culture, to survive. The historical and archeological record is replete with the remnants of once-vital cultures that did not adapt sufficiently or could not defend themselves from the incursions of other cultures (e.g., Huns, Vikings, Visigoths, and Aztecs).

Whereas each culture is a unique blend of a spectrum of shared beliefs and actions, there exist a few universal traits that appear to occur in all cultures. For example, all cultures have some kind of creation story, means for ensuring that children are raised, expectations about adult sexual conduct, and rules regarding property.

Creation

A creation story captures how the earth came into being and how humans appeared on earth. There are plentiful versions of creation, some scientific, some quite primitive in terms of modern cosmology. However, fact or fiction in this instance matters less than the apparent universal desire to have a justification or rationale for human existence.

There are other universal cultural elements, including several that, as later will be explained, can carry over particularly to schools. One is a story

regarding the particular culture's beginning and its idealized purposes. This frequently involves a set of historical explanations for the culture's formation, usually a story based upon one or multiple heroes. These heroes usually embody ideals, values, sometimes superhuman abilities, characteristics, preferred behaviors, and outlooks that the culture promulgates across generations.

Values

A second universal cultural element is a set of core beliefs, those parts of its idea system and ideology that enable culture participants to make sense of life and to live in harmony with themselves and peers. This often appears as "religion." It also can be a common code of conduct such as that adhered to by Spartan or Samurai warriors or Christian knights of the Crusades. The Judeo-Christian ethic, a blend of religious and secular actions and personal values, perfuses much of Western culture. There also can exist a pervasive and toxic set of beliefs such as that found at the common core of Hitler's Nazi philosophy of Aryan racial supremacy or jihadist imperatives regarding the avowed elimination of "corrupt Western culture."

In summary, culture is a collectivity's historically rooted, but continually evolving, set of shared beliefs and preferred behaviors. These common beliefs and preferred action patterns form an encompassing mental matrix that envelopes and shapes the active lives and conscious actions of those who are part of the collectivity sharing the culture. Culture is a people's way of life and their way of interpreting life and all that they see around them. This common outlook is inculcated into children and other new members of the culture.

Culture shapes what behavior one can expect of others and what one believes others will expect in return. This common outlook influences the rewards and status that individuals strive to achieve and that are accorded by others in the culture. Culture enables a people to adapt to their physical environment, and it shapes their social interactions among themselves and outsiders.

A tribe, clan, society, or people without culture would be like an individual never having had a memory. There would be no knowledge of who one was, from where one came, where one lived, what one was named or even what a name was, to whom to relate, how one acquired food, what one did day to day, or even how to dress, drive, drink, talk, or live. In such circumstances, instinct might prevail, and primitive survival of a sort might be possible. However, the spectrum of material and perceived risks would be bewildering and the level of physical and personal comfort at its most minimal.

Culture is not a circumstantial or casual correlate of contemporary living. It is a critical condition of human survival. In the abstract, this concept can be applied to schools. Every school has a culture. It is impossible for such not to exist. However, the thesis of this book is that simply having school culture is insufficient. Rather, *what is desired is a consciously constructed school culture, one that consistently aspires to and that can contribute to high levels of student academic performance.*

APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE TO SCHOOLS: WHAT IS SCHOOL CULTURE?

Similar to change efforts in other sectors, organizational growth in education does not occur in an isolated environment. Rather, it occurs within institutions that have norms and values, assumptions and expectations. While often used interchangeably, several authors distinguish the constructs of school climate and school culture on the basis of organizational climate being the descriptive beliefs and perceptions individuals hold of the organization, where culture is the shared values, beliefs, and expectations that develop from social interactions within the organization (Rousseau, 1990; Schein, 1992). School culture is "the way we do things around here" (Bolman & Deal, 1993, p. 6)—those tangible and intangible norms and values shared by members of a school that help shape the behaviors of teachers and school leaders.

Certainly, a school's culture is but a microscopically narrow swath of what comprises an entire culture of a people. Whereas even elementary schools certainly are complicated institutions, no school encompasses even a small percentage of all the traits that a complete culture, particularly a modern postindustrial or information-oriented culture, contains. However, schools, even if encompassing only selected components of a culture, are an integral part of an entire culture. In contemporary times, schools are a major societal instrument for formalizing and reinforcing a body of shared beliefs, for transmitting culture from generation to generation, and for enabling a people to ensure that their civilization is capable of renewal and adapting to new conditions.

However, it is not the utility of schools for sustaining culture that is of significance here. Rather, it is the converse. This section explores the significance of culture for sustaining the successful operation of schools. Before doing so in detail, however, it is useful to explain why a concern for school culture is now particularly timely and significant.

Failure of Contemporary Education Reforms and the Regrettable Absence of a Concern for a Coherent and Productive School "Culture"

The United States currently continues with a several-decades-long effort to render its schools more effective. The inception of this reform epoch can be traced most specifically to the Reagan presidency's publication and distribution of a highly visible public report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This document dominated media headlines and policy deliberations literally for years following its 1983 release. It continues to be a historical major reference point today. It triggered a rash of legislative and administrative efforts to render schools more rigorous and to elevate student academic achievement.

A Nation at Risk was filled with hyperbole and implied the imminent implosion of American world dominance. It proclaimed that the root causes of this endangerment were to be found in the low academic expectations for pupils held by what were trumpeted as America's all too flabby and anti-intellectual public schools.

A Nation at Risk was inaccurate in its caustic criticisms of American schooling. There was no evidence provided at the time that schools were performing for their students in any way worse than had historically been the case. However, aside from its inflammatory and imaginative rhetoric, there was a more fundamental dynamic undergirding the issuance of *A Nation at Risk*. The report was emblematic of the United States' transition from a domestic-oriented to a global economy.

This transition signaled the end of a manufacturing-dominated era, comfortably devoid of intense worldwide market competition, wherein a youngster could do poorly in school, fail to graduate, drop out, obtain well-paying employment, marry a high school sweetheart, raise a family, and enjoy the material part of a middle-class dream of a nice home and new automobile. Henceforth, in the new postindustrial or information age society, the path to material, and perhaps spiritual, success was to run through a far more extended and thorough education. Whereas the nation once was well served by educating a mere 10 percent of the total population to high standards, an elite that could command the world's most powerful economy, university systems, government, industry, and military, such days were over.

A student in Iowa was now competing for a good job with a counterpart in India. A student in Boise had continually to look over his shoulder at the academic

performance of youthful economic competitors in Beijing. As a consequence of the new worldwide economy, now virtually the entire population had to be educated to high standards, something that no large industrialized nation had ever striven to accomplish.

But, how does one convert a previously serviceable but nevertheless mediocre public school system into an engine of mass high academic performance? The question is not rhetorical but neither is it easily answerable. *A Nation at Risk* triggered multiple reform proposals and for more than a quarter of a century, the United States has experienced wave after wave of trial-and-error reform strategies. These have ranged from relatively inexpensive and politically palatable programs and proposals such as reduced high school electives and more extensive high school graduation requirements to the enormously costly (tens of billions of dollars) program of reducing average class size from 28 to 15.

Figure 1.1 contains a list illustrating the strategies that have been tried throughout the nation beginning in 1983. Figure 1.2 depicts the most encompassing and most costly reform of all, the employment of thousands of additional certificated professionals in the American education system.

**Figure 1.1**   U.S. Education Reform Strategies Following *A Nation at Risk*

Post *A Nation at Risk* Education Reform Strategies

- **Intensification of academic requirements** (high school graduation and college admission)
- **Education finance** (intrastate and intradistrict equal spending, smaller classes)
- **Governance changes** (mayoral takeover or administrative decentralization)
- **Curricular and instructional alignment** (goals, textbooks, curriculum, and tests synched)
- **"Professionalization" of teachers** (more preservice preparation, career ladders)
- **Accountability** (sanctions related to student achievement results)
- **Market solutions** (vouchers, charter schools, performance incentives, outsourcing of services)
- **School-based solutions** (small learning communities, schools within schools)
- **Out-of-school aid to students** (health, housing, nutrition, supplemental services)
- **Technology** (laptop programs, online materials, distance learning)

Source: Compiled by the authors

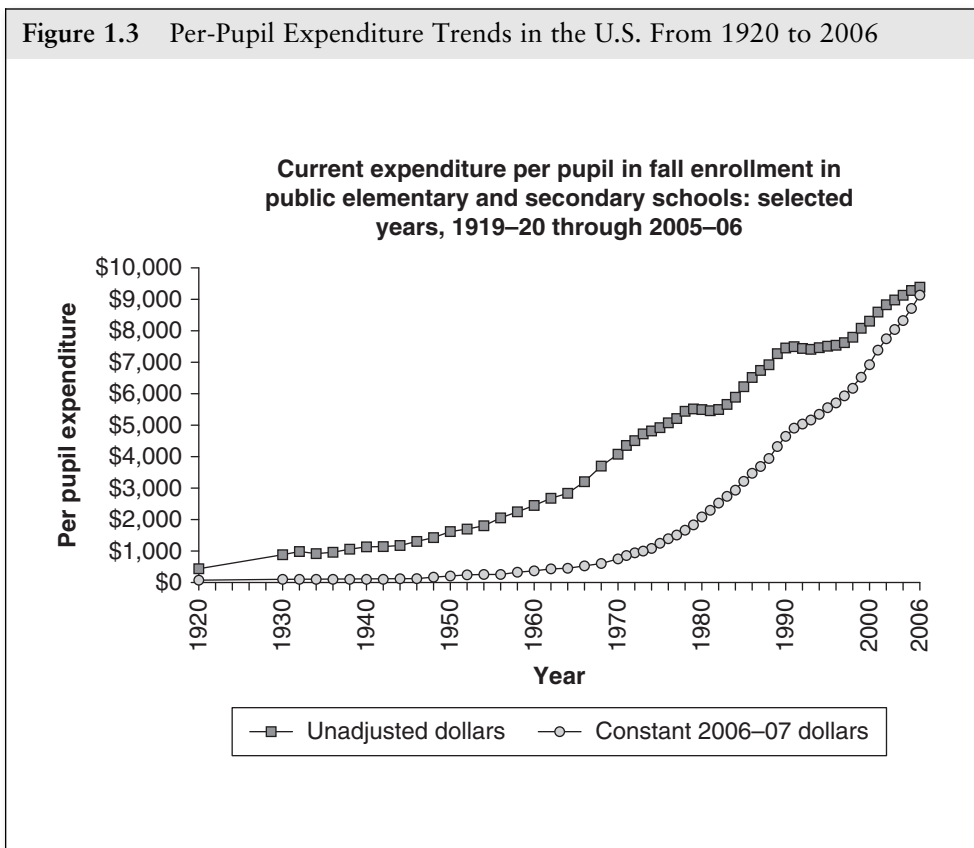**Figure 1.2**   Number of School Employees in the U.S. From 1972 to 2008
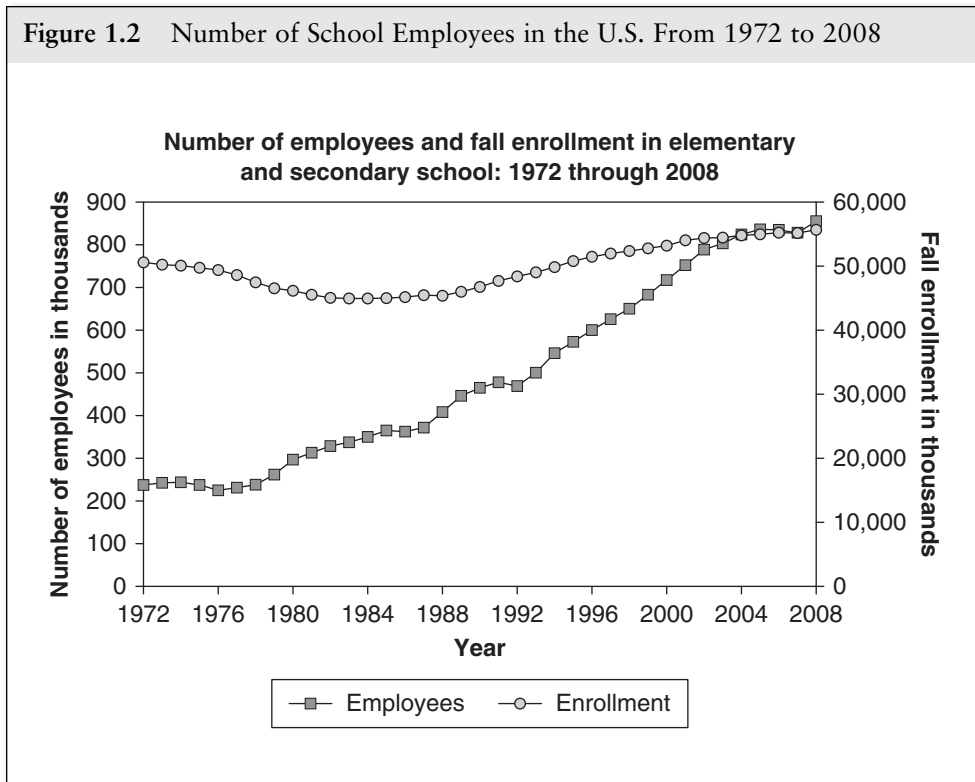
**Number of employees and fall enrollment in elementary
and secondary school: 1972 through 2008**

Of course, given the crazy-quilt decentralized governance of American education, 50 state-based systems relying upon more than 13,000 historically autonomous local school districts, there has seldom been a coherent effort to weave these reforms into a pattern. Their full implementation, with consideration of fidelity to the theories of action or logic patterns behind them, or even leaving any one of them in place for a sufficient time to see what it might contribute by way of elevated student achievement, was never a high priority.
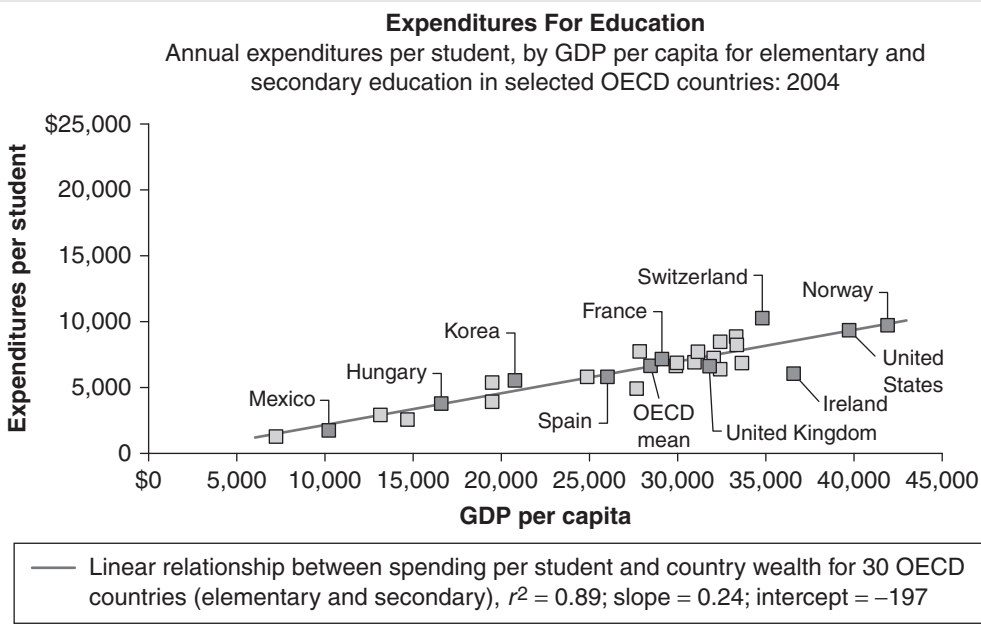
The closest effort to having a coherent national policy was the 2001 enactment and 2002 initial implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Even this highly proclaimed and costly piece of legislation, out of deference to historic state autonomy over education issues, contained no

detailed comprehensive reform strategy embedded within it. Its principal contribution was to alter the criteria by which schools' success was to be perceived. No longer would levels of resources schools received be taken as measures of success. Rather, after NCLB, it was to be the level of academic performance achieved.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the reform ideas identified in Figure 1.1. Many individual items on it continue to make a great deal of sense. However, the cumulative consequence of this massive effort has been maximally costly and minimally effective, as evidenced in nearby Figures 1.3 through 1.6. Here can be seen the ever upward historic trajectory of U.S. school spending, its costly nature relative to other developed nations, and the regrettable flat lines of achievement results and high school graduation rates.

**Figure 1.3**   Per-Pupil Expenditure Trends in the U.S. From 1920 to 2006

Current expenditure per pupil in fall enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools: selected years, 1919–20 through 2005–06

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006

Figure 1.4   Per-Pupil Expenditures, by Gross Domestic Product, for Select OECD Countries

Expenditures For Education

Annual expenditures per student, by GDP per capita for elementary and secondary education in selected OECD countries: 2004

Linear relationship between spending per student and country wealth for 30 OECD countries (elementary and secondary), $r^2 = 0.89$; slope = 0.24; intercept = −197

Figure 1.5   NAEP Mathematics Scale Scores Over 35 Years for Students at Ages 9, 13, and 17: Selected Years 1973–2008
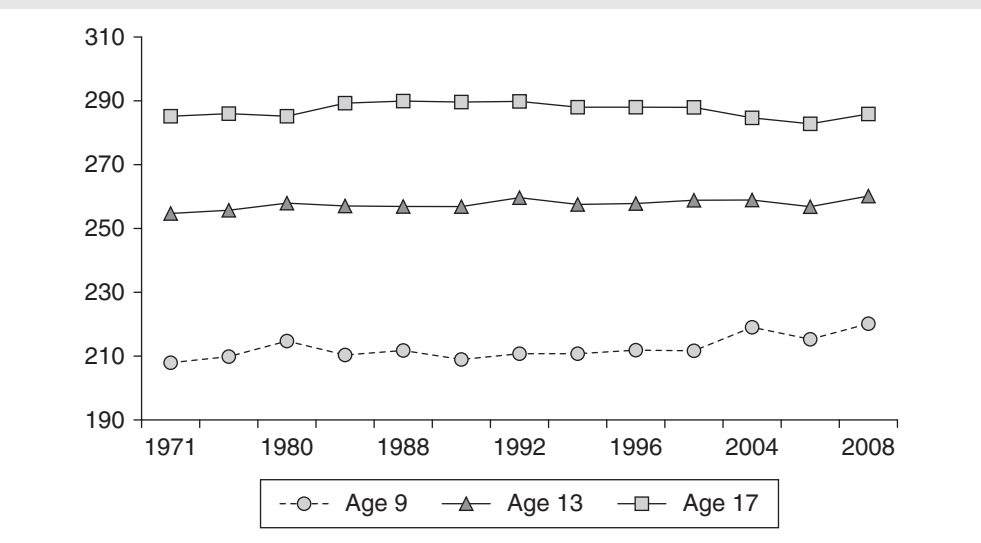
Figure 1.6   High School Completion Rates 1968 to 2006
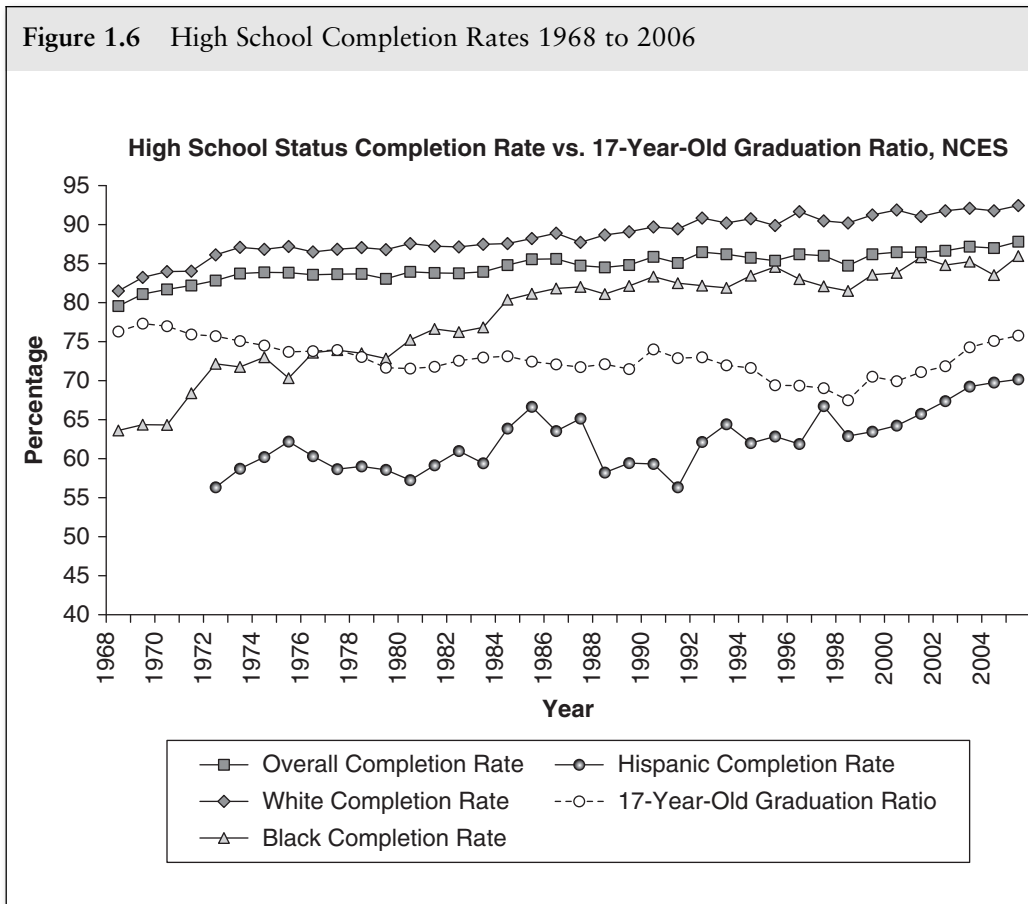
Source: Reproduced from NCES publication "Dropout Rates in the United States: 2005" (Laird et al., June 2007). Rates prior to 1972 are based on authors' calculations using CPS data. The status completion rate is the percentage of 18- through 24-years-olds not enrolled in secondary school who have a high school credential. High school credentials include regular diplomas and alternative credentials such as GED certificates. Hispanic ethnicity is not available before 1972. The 17-year-old graduation ratio is from the Digest of Education Statistics. HS graduates for the graduation ratio include both public and private school diplomas and exclude GED recipients and other certificates. October 17-year-old population estimates are obtained from Census Bureau P-20 reports

Why Have Reform Efforts Proved to Be Unproductive?

There is no absolutely conclusive answer to this question. Explanations range from assertions of lazy teachers and administrators to macro sociological theories claiming that the alleged fundamental anti-intellectual nature of American life eviscerates virtually every effort to render schools effective for all but the most gifted students. Other explanations claim that the nation has failed to make a sufficient financial commitment to public education, trains teachers insufficiently, is unable to create sufficiently powerful teacher performance incentives, or is lacking the fundamental dynamic of institutional

competition that characterizes many successful achievement efforts in sectors of society other than education.

The explanation that seems most plausible, and the rationale that provokes and pervades this book, is that individual reforms, regardless of how sensible each is in the abstract, are insufficient by themselves and sum to less than the total value of their individual parts because of the frequent absence of a consistent culture into which they can fit, a culture that is not simply coherent but also one that visibly and intentionally proclaims the centrality of academic achievement and reinforces this message at every reasonable turn.

The Special Case of High Schools

One certainly might wish that all elementary and middle schools were more effective. However, the larger challenge is high schools. The United States settled upon its current comprehensive high school model a century ago. The Progressive Era marked the transition of secondary schooling from an elite to a mass enrollment institution, an institution featuring a curriculum rooted in the classics to one equally concerned with vocational training. Whereas the comprehensive high school may well have suited the nation at the height of its manufacturing hegemony, it is not clear that the model is suited to the still-emerging information age and global economy. However, knowing with certainty with what it should be replaced is not now possible. What is possible is to construct of a variety of high school models worthy of experimentation and to tailor the precepts of productive cultures to each of them.

Concern for Context

An effective public school seldom has the luxury of operating in a contextual vacuum. Rather, there are federal, state, and local school district regulations and expectations with which a school must comply. If these contextual conditions are at odds with what it takes for a school to be effective, then the principal and teachers are swimming upstream against difficult odds. The following are elements of a contextual minimum. These are the elements for which the larger community is responsible. Their presence does not guarantee an effective school. However, their absence renders an effective school improbable.

Prototypical effective school cultures operate within the context of an effective state and school district environment where the following are true:

- The larger community, particularly the business sector, district school board, and central-office leadership are organized around, forcefully and consistently supportive of, and publicly committed to the pursuit of high academic achievement.
- Financial resources are adequate.
- Student academic learning goals are specified and highly visible.
- A structure of routine testing or achievement assessment exists.
- An alignment of goals, tests, administrator selection, teacher recruitment induction, professional development, textbook acquisition, and school supports (e.g., counseling) is in place.
- Financially related resources and student assignments or attendance boundaries are arranged in a rational and equitable manner.
- Day-to-day operational infrastructure matters (e.g., transportation, attendance enforcement, food delivery, supply ordering, and payroll distributions) are undertaken in an effective manner.
- Concern for student and staff safety and well-being is sufficient.

MAKING THE TRANSITION TO A
HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE

A supportive school district and community and the presence of effective federal and state policies do not guarantee a school's culture will be productive. There is much that is determined internally, rather than contextually. This section reviews what is known from research regarding crucial internal components of an effective school culture.

Exploring What Is Known
Empirically About "Turnarounds"

When first entering a school one almost instantly notices whether the setting is loud or quiet, orderly or messy, bright or dim, relaxed or frantic, whether students are well behaved or disorderly, and on and on. All of these conditions and components, and much more, are manifestations of a school's culture.

Deal and Peterson defined school culture in 1990 as "deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have formed over the course of [the school's] history."

School culture is "a group's shared beliefs, customs, and behavior . . . culture includes the obvious elements of schedules, curriculum, student demographics, grading and attendance policies, as well as the social interactions that occur within those structures and give a school its look and feel."

For the purposes of this book, school culture is conceived as the way that inhabitants of and others connected with a school act, interact, think, and feel; specifically, the nature of relationships and tone of conversation between individuals, the appearance of a school and the manner in which it is presented, and the social norms, values, expectations, and attitudes that its adults, students, and other constituents hold and act upon.

Some make a distinction between the climate and culture of a school, but, for the purposes of this book, the two concepts are considered together because they are closely intertwined. It is interesting to note that, historically, climate has always affected culture (e.g., the arctic climate led Eskimos to build igloos, hunt whales, etc.), but, in schools, the opposite can be true. The cultural values espoused by the faculty, staff, and students greatly affect the climate, or atmosphere, that is present within the building.

School culture is important, both conceptually and concretely, because it can influence student academic achievement, employee satisfaction and productivity, parent engagement and commitment, and the support of the larger community.

The following section of this chapter illustrates selected conditions and characteristics of successful schools and schools that, while once failing their students and communities, turned themselves around and became effective. The research is slender and, in part, stems from sectors other than education (e.g., business and the police). However, it is worthy of attention.

Empirical Findings on Effective School Culture Components

Hassel and Hassel (2009a) posit that if we could bring schools from the brink of doom to stellar success, thousands of students would permanently benefit but that education typically has failed to recognize turnarounds as a means of school improvement, primarily because they have been tried rarely in education and studied even less. Those that have analyzed case studies of turnarounds of all types and sectors, including schools, find great similarities in leadership characteristics and practices. Hassel and Hassel note that

> bad-to-great transformations require a point-guard leader who both drives key changes and deftly influences stakeholders to support and engage in

dramatic transformation. To be sure, staff help effect a turnaround, but the leader is the unapologetic driver of change in successful turnarounds. Effective turnaround leaders follow a formula of common actions that spur dramatic improvement. The actions interact to move the organization rapidly toward impressive, mission-determined results that influence stakeholders to support additional change. (Hassel & Hassel, 2009a, p. 23)

Although Hassel and Hassel (2009a) draw their lessons from cross-sectional studies of the Continental Airlines turnaround and the New York City Police Department success against crime, they suggest how school leaders might use similar techniques. One is to choose a few high-priority wins with visible pay-offs and success to build momentum. In an elementary school, they suggest as a quick win that a principal might aim to raise reading scores to within one grade level of year-end goals for 90 percent of fifth graders by the end of the first semester, something they argue that high-poverty start-up schools have achieved. "Imagine the impact when teachers realize that the school need never again graduate a class of non-readers," Hassel and Hassel speculate (2009a). They also suggest "norm-busting," perhaps by bending school time-use norms. A principal might also replace some key leaders to help organize and drive change, transforming the culture by having staff capable of leading instructional change identified by student progress data, providing the principal with greater clarity regarding needed staff changes.

Successful turnaround leaders are focused, fearless "data hounds." They choose their initial goals based on rigorous analysis. They report key staff results visibly and often. All staff who participate in decision making are required to share periodic results in open-air sessions, shifting discussions from excuse making and blaming to problem solving (Hassel & Hassel, 2009b, p. 26).

LINK TO CASE STUDY 1

Case Study 1 describes the culture of Buchanan Middle School—a school with many rich traditions and strong historical roots, yet having recently undergone a relocation and currently facing the reality of a leadership change. Reflecting on your current school, in what ways does the school culture shape an individual's actions? In what ways is the established culture facilitating or impeding individual and collective progress?

Earlier, Duke (2005) studied 15 case studies of elementary school turn-arounds and found that in 10 of the 15 cases, the principal was replaced, and in all cases, the manner in which leadership was exercised was changed:

Among the facets of leadership style that changed as part of the turn-around process in the case study elementary schools were the following:

- Principal spending a great deal of time in classroom (4)
- Principal closely monitoring teachers to make certain new practices are implemented (3)
- Principal modeling good teaching practice and coaching teachers (3)
- Principal makes a point of being visible in school (3)
- Principal makes a point of being accessible (2)
- Principal is highly directive (1)
- Principal handles most disciplinary cases (1) (Duke, 2005, p. 8)

Duke also found that although there was no one particular principal leadership style, principals, after providing teaching staff additional training, took action to remove staff members who lacked the skills or desire to raise low-achieving student performance, transferring them, counseling them out of teaching, or encouraging retirement. This permitted new positions for highly specialized teachers.

Kowal and Hassel (2005) conducted a thorough literature review at the time about turning around low-performing schools with new leaders and staff, reviewing both cross-industry research compared to incremental-change research and school, noneducation, and change leadership. They also interviewed national experts on school turnarounds. They suggest that turnarounds may be even more challenging in schools than in other social institutions:

While a school's failure has serious consequences for it students, only rarely does chronic failure have similar existence-threatening consequences for the school and its staff (Walshe, Harvey, Hyde, & Pandit, 2004). . . . "Failure" has historically had a much more complex definition in public schools than in business. . . . Practical and political challenges to turnarounds are more likely in public schools than in the private sector. Public school turnarounds are generally externally motivated while most for-profit turnarounds initiate somewhere within the organization. The external impetus in a school turnaround may affect school stakeholders' commitment to the change. (Walshe et al., 2004, pp. 3–4)

They also find the existing knowledge of turnaround research limited:

The evidence is strong that a school's leader makes a big difference in student learning in all school settings. However, understanding of the characteristics that distinguish high-performing school leaders from the rest is very limited. In addition, no research yet describes how the characteristics of high-performing leaders differ in emerging school contexts such as start-up and turnaround schools. A large body of research and theoretical writing explores school leadership in general, and some of this may apply to aspects of turnaround school leadership. However, no school leader research yet provides a model of school leadership that is

- validated, or has been proved to accurately describe what distinguishes high performers from the rest, eliminating items that are appealing but inconsequential and including items that may not be intuitive from limited observations;
- limited to characteristics that describe the person not the job; and
- detailed enough on those characteristics that districts may use it for accurate selection of high-performing leaders.

To the extent that the existing school leader research is useful for understanding high-performing school leaders in general, it lacks any studies that describe the distinguishing characteristics of school leaders who are very successful in a *turnaround* situation specifically. . . . No high-quality research has been conducted to clarify the competencies that distinguish successful school turnaround leaders from those who are moderately successful or unsuccessful. (Kowal & Hassel, 2005, pp. 17–18)

In "What Does It Take to Transform a School?," a report prepared for the Wallace Foundation by Public Agenda, Johnson (2007) surveyed turnaround principals to discover what successful "turnaround" principals actually do and what skills they need. She discovered that principals who are "transformers" have a clear vision for their schools and a can-do attitude that enables them to get past obstacles versus "copers" who seem overwhelmed by the challenges and have difficulty prioritizing teaching and learning. The transformers, who were often formerly vice principals, created a culture in which each child could learn: devoting the majority of their efforts to evaluating, coaching, and supporting their teachers; walking the halls to stay in touch with what was going on in the classrooms; reviewing data on student performance to set goals, analyze problems, and reallocate resources; becoming "a turnaround specialist" who seizes control of an underperforming school, often replacing staff and

establishing new rules with a firm hand. Johnson also found that money, in the form of higher salaries and signing bonuses, would help attract and retain transforming principals.

Brinson, Kowal, and Hassel (2008) found that the research on turnarounds was sparse, particularly beyond merely replacing the school principal. They asked what must happen in a turnaround situation for it to succeed, what actions the new principal must take, and what the linkage between those actions and improved student learning might be. They found 14 leader actions that were associated with successful school turnarounds:

1. Collect and analyze data

2. Make action plan based on data

3. Concentrate on big, fast payoffs in year one

4. Implement practices even if requiring deviation from norms or rules

5. Require all staff to change ineffective practices

6. Implement necessary staff changes

7. Concentrate on successful tactics; discard the ineffective

8. Report progress but focus on high goals

9. Communicate a positive vision

10. Help staff personally feel problems

11. Gain support of key influencers

12. Silence critics with quick success

13. Measure and report progress often

14. Require all decision makers to share data and participate in problem solving

The Institute of Education Sciences' *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practice Guide* (Herman et al., 2008) defines turnaround schools as meeting two criteria:

First, they began

- as chronically poor performers—with a high proportion of their students (generally 20 percent or more) failing to meet state standards of proficiency in mathematics or reading as defined under No Child Left Behind over two or more consecutive years.

Second,

- they showed substantial gains in student achievement in a short time (no more than three years). Examples of substantial gains in achievement are reducing by at least 10 percentage points the proportion of students failing to meet state standards for proficiency in mathematics or reading, showing similarly large improvements in other measures of academic performance (such as lowering the dropout rate by 10 percentage points or more), or improving overall performance on standardized mathematics or reading tests by an average of 10 percentage points (or about 0.25 standard deviations). (Herman et al., 2008, pp. 4–5)

In addition, the IES practice guide only included case study research for those turnaround schools that performed better than expected from their demographics, which are "beating the odds" schools, 10 case studies that looked at turnaround practices at 35 schools, 21 at the elementary level (Herman et al., 2008, pp. 4–5).

The guide identifies four practices unique to "beating the odds" schools, followed by selected recommendations for school principals:

Recommendation 1: Signal the need for dramatic change with strong leadership.

A change in leadership practices in the school is essential. Because the current school leader may be enmeshed in past strategies, installing a new principal can signal change. The case studies on school turnarounds have numerous instances of new principals being catalysts for change. Teachers often cited the new principal as the motivating force.

Recommendation 2: Maintain a consistent focus on improving instruction.

Turnaround schools need to examine student achievement data to identify gaps and weaknesses in student learning. Principals can establish a data leader or data teams to organize and lead the effort. They can examine student learning through standards-based assessments and classroom assessments. Using the state assessments or other measures aligned with the state standards helps ensure that the progress in learning will result in higher achievement on high-stakes tests. School personnel can also look at data on factors that contribute to or impede student learning, such as attendance, discipline, and fiscal expenditures.

The school leader should become the instructional leader and be highly visible in classrooms. Strong instructional leadership shows the importance of strengthening instruction that is aligned to standards, curricula, and

assessments and guided by ongoing data analysis of both achievement and nonachievement outcomes. The principal needs to set an example, lead the effort, and maintain vigilance toward the targeted, measurable goals.

Professional development should be based on analyses of achievement and instruction and differentiated for teacher needs and the subject areas targeted for instructional improvement.

Recommendation 3: Make visible improvements early in the school turnaround process (quick wins).

Having set goals for the turnaround, school leaders should identify one or two that build on the school's needs and strengths, are important to staff, and can be achieved quickly.

School leaders should consider strategies that minimize dependence on others for decisions or financial support.

One goal that a school may set for a quick win is to change the way it uses time—change that can be pursued quickly, with immediate effects on instruction.

Establishing a safe and orderly school environment is another quick win.

Recommendation 4: Build a committed staff.

The school leader should assess the strengths and weaknesses of the staff and identify staff members who are not fully committed to the turnaround efforts.

The school leader should redeploy staff members who offer valuable skills but are not effective in their current role and bring in new staff with specialized skills and competencies for specific positions, such as intervention or reading specialists.

The school leader should replace staff members who resist the school turnaround efforts. (Herman et al., 2008, pp. 8–9)

Goldring, Huff, May, and Camburn (2008) also found that rather than individual attributes distinguishing principals, only contextual conditions predicted how principals allocated their attention across their major realms of responsibility, although the study did not examine how leaders and principal practices related to school outcomes. Marks and Nance (2007) also found that different accountability contexts differentially affected principals' influence and that the principals' influence in both the supervisory and instructional domains is strongly related to that of teachers' active participation in decision making.

Distilling What Matters Operationally

Research results, logic, craft knowledge, and examined professional experience suggest that effective school culture is characterized by six crucial learning conditions. These are conditions that by themselves may be insufficient to guarantee elevated student achievement, but they appear to comprise a set of necessary instructionally related components.

Figure 1.7 displays these crucial cultural components and aligns them with operational levers upon which a leader can rely for implementation.

Figure 1.7   Operational Levers and Key Components of an Effective School Culture
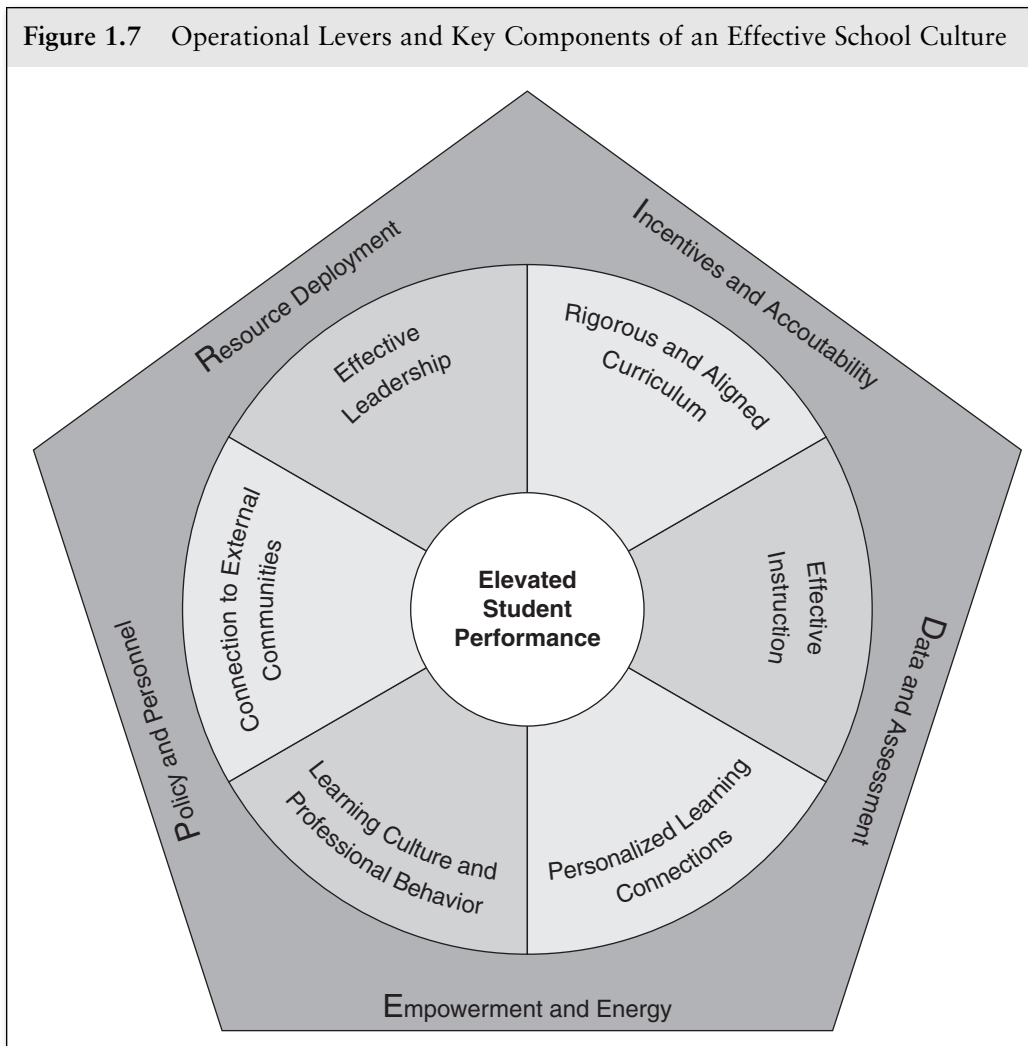
One way to view this figure is to see the circularly displayed six desired components as a portion of the "vision" that should characterize an effective school. The next chapter describes and analyzes these components. Then, remaining chapters explain each of the five operational levers in detail.

Figure 1.8 provides a contrasting illustration of selected characteristics that distinguish effective from ineffective schools and school culture.

Figure 1.8	Comparison of School Characteristics in Effective and Ineffective Schools	
Characteristic	*Effective Schools*	*Ineffective Schools*
Teacher professional development	Opportunity to advance classroom practice	No impact on teaching and learning
Student discipline	Students know of, but do not feel the need to test or violate, school rules	System overwhelmed with discipline problems
Human expressions	Smiles, hugs, laughter	Sighs of frustration
Teacher attitude toward job	Want to be the best in their field	Want to clock in, clock out, and receive a paycheck
School appearance	Welcoming, bright, cheerful, well organized, reflects attitudes and achievements	Unwelcoming, sloppy, dirty, decrepit, reflects attitudes
Adult and adult-student relationships	Collaborative, friendly	Tense, antagonistic
Performance expectations	High for everybody	Don't want to get hopes up
Feelings about learning	Enjoyable and important activity	Tedious and useless; chore
Self-confidence	Failure is not an option	I/We can't do anything right
Self-efficacy	Any facet of the school can be changed	No matter what is done, things will never change
Day-to-day social environment	Friendly, calm, people work together	Tense, chaotic, everything is a battle
Leadership	Leads by example and exhortation	Demands that everybody follows
Collaboration	Two heads are better than one	Everyone for him or herself
New ideas	There's always room for improvement	Not worth the effort; the current system is fine

Source: Compiled by the authors

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER FOR DISCUSSION

The following cultural prototypes are provided for illustrative purposes to demonstrate to a reader that there is more than one way a school can be organized in order to implement what is known to be effective. These three prototypes embody the previously reviewed visionary elements or threshold conditions that, as best they can presently be identified or deduced, are crucial to the operation of an effective school. The following three prototypical schools are not ideologically or empirically pure. Their distinguishing characteristics and components can be mixed and matched to form hybrids.

"Modern management schools" are characterized by conditions such as the following:

- High-performance orientation visible in symbols and adult language
- Emphasis given to continuous improvement
- Formal curriculum and curriculum structure and sequence emphasized
- Routine reliance by teachers and administrators upon student achievement data as a formative tool for guiding and individualizing instruction
- Formal curriculum focused and interpreted narrowly
- Student performance data relied upon by management for the supervision and evaluation of teachers
- Heavy reliance upon scripting and relative lack of teacher instructional discretion
- Reliance upon technology (computer-assisted instruction)
- Time orientation heavy in the present and accomplishment seen as urgent priority and attention given to efficient use of student and teacher time
- Professional development tightly tied to teachers' perceived instructional deficiencies
- Performance incentives in place, both collective and individual
- Evidence of competitive orientation (e.g., rankings, ratings, comparisons)

"Achievement schools" are characterized by conditions such as the following:

- "Charter" from community or from history to pursue high achievement
- Organized around and frequent visible reference to a unifying theme (e.g., science or occupational training) or mission (e.g., International Baccalaureate)
- Attention and visibility given to symbols of school purpose and achievement (e.g., award ceremonies, kudos, attention to exemplary performers)

- Processes, as opposed to immediate outcomes, and traditions seen as important
- High integration of formal and informal curriculum
- Broad interpretation given to purposes of schooling
- Informal curriculum given great weight
- High future orientation and time seen as a continuum; persistence valued
- Intentional fostering of sense of elitism or separatism
- Minimal hierarchy in administration
- Attention to fostering and sustaining a sense of community
- Likely formal links to alumni or networks of similar schools

"Leadership-dependent schools" are characterized by conditions such as the following:

- School autonomy in selection, reward, and assignment of teachers and staff
- Broad discretion at the school level in resource allocation
- Hierarchical administrative structure
- Strong sense of individual school (as opposed to school system)
- Greater attention to outcomes than processes
- Highly visible leadership

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, a reader is introduced to the concepts of culture and school culture: their definitions, descriptors, and traits, the outcomes that often result in successful schools, and steps to take when initiating a change in a school's culture.

It is important to remember that there is no such thing as a perfect school culture, but there are a number of tangible traits that tend to set successful schools apart from less successful schools. Positive relationships, individual and collective confidence, a sense of efficacy, high performance expectations, and continuous learning lead to a positive community in which students learn more, and innovative strategies may lead students to love learning. By thoroughly describing how they want a school to think, act, behave, and feel and informing staff members that they play a crucial role in the process, it is possible for a school leader to gain the commitment necessary to transform the culture in a school.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When somebody refers to the culture of a school, to what types of things are they referring?

2. What are some characteristics that differentiate the culture of a successful school from the culture of a less successful school?

3. Have you ever been in a school that you felt was very successful? What types of things did you notice while you were there?

4. Have you ever been in a school that you felt was quite unsuccessful? What types of things did you notice while you were there?

5. If you became the principal of a school, what facet of the school's culture would you want to address first? Why?

6. If you should inherit an ineffective school, and desire to alter the culture, what steps might research results suggest you take?

7. If you were successful in establishing a positive culture in your school, how might you expect the outcomes to differ as a result?

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Case Study 2: Possible Reform at Washington High School

How Far Can a Productive Culture Stretch?

Otto Jungherr had been the leader of Washington High School for 20 years. He had been its founding principal and was now preparing to turn over the leadership reins to one of his hand-picked, highly trusted, experienced-tested assistant principals, Gordon Lal.

Washington was located in a large and sophisticated city, the center for a huge and diverse metropolitan area. It was a large school, both in its geographic footprint and its enrollment. It had three thousand students distributed over three grade levels. The school occupied six acres of prime land in one of the city's most desirable residential areas. The physical facility, even if two decades old, was impressive. The school was perched on the top of a hill and could be seen from a great distance. In addition to its three-story academic buildings, it had a large performance-oriented auditorium, an Olympic swimming pool, a new three-thousand-seat basketball pavilion, and a football stadium seating 15,000. Its architecture was Palladian and imposing. Its white paint made it gleam in the sunlight. Its appearance was inspirational.

Washington had long been known for its students' academic and athletic prowess. Its graduates routinely were accepted at the nation's top-ranked and most selective public and private colleges and universities and the nation's military academies. Moreover, in football and basketball, both men's and women's, it was a powerhouse, favored to be top ranked year after year. Its athletes regularly were sought by colleges, and its coaches were lionized and continually being elevated into the college ranks.

The school's enrollment was large because its attendance area covered a great deal of the city. Consequently, it drew upon middle-class families from virtually every ethnic and cultural segment. Its students came from the homes of professionals, business executives, academics, successful shop owners, and expert artisans and craftsmen. Mean family income was high, but so was the diversity. White, Black, and Asian and Pacific Island students had long attended the school and had long gotten along. Muslim and Hispanic students were relatively new to the school but were increasingly common. Racial tension was seldom seen at Washington High School. However, academic and athletic competition was a long-valued and routine part of the school's culture.

Otto Jungherr started his public school teaching career as a Latin instructor. After 10 years of successful teaching, he began to climb the administrative ladder. He had been

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Note: This case study, as with others associated with other chapters, is about an actual school, actual people, and actual conditions. Nothing is fabricated. All cases are about situations school leaders routinely encounter. However, in each instance, names of people, schools, and locations have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

Washington's first principal, and his powerful personality had indelibly colored the school. He was the son of a German immigrant. His family had scrimped financially so that he could become well educated. He was proud of his German heritage, well informed regarding the rigor and curriculum of classical European secondary schools, and it was in this image he had created Washington High School. Academic and athletic excellence had enabled him to succeed as an American, and he was intent on creating an environment where these qualities would enable other students to succeed also, regardless of their family background.

Washington High School had acquired a rich set of traditions and a national reputation under Jungherr. Students wore uniforms, even though it was a public school. They were simple uniforms, but they clearly suggested that to attend Washington was to be part of something larger than yourself.

Teachers always dressed professionally. They treated students with great respect and civility. However, teachers were well inducted and thoroughly indoctrinated that they were authority figures, not friends, when it came to students.

The halls during passing periods were lively and full of animated students. However, there was certainly no excessive roughhousing, and violence was just not a factor. Classes were 50 minutes in length, and instruction was expected to begin immediately. No class was released early. Excuses for leaving class during instruction were exceptional.

Friday had a shortened class schedule, only 40 minutes per class. However, the time saved was devoted to an all-school assembly concentrating on either a musical or dramatic performance, an award service, or a lecture about a contemporary topic, be it current events, the economy, culture, or technology.

A student honor society, known as the Eagles, was responsible for student conduct and hall monitoring. Eagles also oversaw all athletic events and assemblies. The Eagles handled student conduct well.

There was a Washington High School Student Honor Code that was highly publicized and heavily reinforced by the school's administration and faculty. Classroom or instructional infractions, such as suspicions of plagiarism or cheating, were handled by a combination of faculty and student Honors Court. Punishment for proven violations was severe, including having to repeat a course and notification on one's transcript.

The Washington High School curriculum featured solid three-year subject requirements for English literature, U.S. history, civics and world history, foreign language, mathematics (through calculus), and science. (Latin was offered, and the classes regularly filled.) Advanced-placement courses were offered throughout all of these areas. In addition, physical education was a constant requirement, and a variety of art, music, and drama courses were all offered as electives. There was a full slate of men's and women's athletic teams and additional activities such as a school marching band, orchestra, drama club, glee club, chess club, and a great deal of community service. All students were expected to partake of the academic curriculum and to engage in an extracurricular afterschool activity. Technology was woven into the instructional program in virtually every course.

Washington was a comprehensive high school. That is, it operated three curricular tracks, one for the college bound, one for vocationally oriented students, and another rather amorphous track known as the "general curriculum." The latter seemed oriented mainly toward a mixture of the liberal arts and business courses.

Washington High School teachers tended to be among the more senior in the district. There was always a waiting list for any subject matter opening. However, principal Jungherr had made a practice of mixing youth with experience in the teacher force he employed. He spent an enormous amount of time selecting and overseeing teachers. He favored subject matter master's degrees and some amount of prior teaching experience elsewhere. Formal credentials, other than for specific subject areas, were minimally important, while Jungherr seemed to specialize in finding an unusual blend of personalities. The school appeared to be a virtual Noah's Ark of personality types. Jungherr wanted it this way. He thought that the adolescents who attended Washington High School would benefit from seeing a variety of adult role models, one or more of whom might well be attractive to a youngster and perhaps provide lifelong inspiration.

Finally, Washington High School had a large and active alumni society. Many of the school's graduates had moved on to become Hollywood celebrities, Olympic participants, professional athletes, prize-winning scientists and researchers, highly visible public officials, business executives, and successful entertainers. The school's Hall of Fame, and the first-floor-corridor gallery of their photographs, was composed of individuals that would have made most any college proud. Moreover, many of these graduates were generous in their financial support of the school, as reflected in a new gym, new music auditorium, new band uniforms, and so on. Other schools in the district were understandably envious. The Friday assemblies, planning for which Jungherr personally oversaw, were regularly populated by one of these successful alumni returning for a personal appearance and an inspirational presentation.

Jungherr had overseen the formation and expansion of Washington High School. He was instrumental in its success. He was widely recognized as one of the most successful school principals in America. He was frequently lauded in person, by the profession, and in the press. He was understandably proud of his accomplishment.

Still, a question remained. Was Jungherr Washington High School? Would it survive his retirement and replacement? Could his successor walk in his shoes, or was Jungherr, or at least his reputation, bigger than life?

Jungherr was imposing, not only by virtue of his towering physical presence but also because of his stunning reputation. To be in his company was to experience a living educational administration icon. Jungherr consciously contributed further to this dominant sense of his presence by furnishing his office in a manner that prominently displayed his many awards, honorary degrees, trappings of authority, and photographs of him in the company of high-level luminaries from all walks of life. Jungherr had accomplished much, and he was not bashful about displaying his success.

Lal was quite a contrast, at least by way of appearance, personality, pedigree, and past experience. He also was far more modest in his demeanor. He is Polynesian. He had migrated

to the United States during the 1960s with his parents. He was physically quite fit, had been a college athlete, and worked diligently to retain his athletic demeanor. He had served in the United States Navy.

Jungherr had liked all that he saw in Lal, and he admired his keen, Ivy League–honed intellect, organizational and political savvy, and analytic capacity. He and Lal often engaged with each other after-hours by reading passages from Greek classics and discussing their meaning for modern times. They held each other in reciprocal high regard.

Jungherr was bombastic. Lal, even if forceful, was quiet. Jungherr often had an answer before there was a question or a solution before he knew the problem. Lal was a good listener and almost always succeeded in engaging others in striving to define the problem and searching for a solution. Jungherr micromanaged fiercely. Lal was artful at delegating. Jungherr had a spontaneity about him that was good and bad. He celebrated success quickly and criticized failure just as rapidly. Jungherr was charismatic and magnetic, even if bullying. Lal was calm and poised, even when he was obviously happy. Jungherr praised others lavishly, sometimes too lavishly. Lal was more restrained, but he left no doubt when he was pleased by the performance of another.

Gordon Lal was honored to have been selected to follow Otto Jungherr. He had served a six-year apprentice as assistant principal under Jungherr. He knew Washington High School in and out, its facilities, its personnel, its curriculum, its various parental and public constituencies, and its students. He thought he was ready. He admired and was grateful to his mentor; however, he was not sure that he wanted everything to stay the same.

Lal knew the differences between him and his predecessor. He was comfortable with himself. He was happy to have the baton passed to him. However, he was reasonably sure that some changes were needed.

Here are some of the changes he was contemplating:

- Lal was not persuaded that student uniforms added to the success of the school. He was open to eliminating this policy.
- He thought the curriculum was outmoded. He believed that many of Washington's incoming students would benefit more if the academic requirements were decreased and a greater range of vocational and technical courses were offered.
- The weekly assemblies struck Lal as overkill and undertaken more to satisfy Jungherr's ego than educate students.
- The school's Hall of Fame, in Lal's perception, seemed to celebrate the wrong thing. It made it appear that unless you achieved absolute stardom you were a failure.
- The classic Greek model of excellence in both mind and body seemed somewhat outmoded in the twenty-first century. Lal wondered if less attention should be given to athletics, while still maintaining a concern for physical conditioning and nutrition, and more attention given to modern technological applications.
- Heavy reliance upon the Eagles to maintain order and student discipline struck Lal as placing too great a responsibility upon students to police their peers.

- Lal was fearful that the vaunted Washington High School Honor Code was being honored more in the breach than in reality, and he wanted to examine its continuing relevance and practical utility.
- Jungherr's blend of old and new teachers seemed to Lal to be alienating to students. He wanted to alter the blend to favor a larger infusion of younger teachers.
- The Washington High School Alumni Society seemed too powerful to Lal. Why cede so much influence to a group no longer vested in the outcomes of the school and out of touch with its present-day student body?
- Lal questioned the overwhelming didactic or direct instructional approach and overwhelming use of lectures by teachers at Washington High School. He thought a heavier reliance upon constructivist learning principles, more student engagement in projects, and greater reliance upon experiential learning was probably the way to go.
- Lal thought the school could be improved by relying upon teachers to make more decisions. He had read about distributed leadership, and it had made sense to him. He and his assistant principals could not be expected to be experts about instruction in every content field. Department chairs and teacher leaders could usefully supplement administrators' knowledge, and he was moved to delegate greater authority to the school's teachers.
- Finally, Lal was sure that his office should change and become less of a temple in which others could worship him and more of a place for listening and engaging.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think about Washington High School? How much is it like your high school? Would you like to have attended Washington in your youth?

2. How would you characterize the culture of Washington High School under principal Jungherr? What is good? What is less than good?

3. Is the Washington High School tripartite curriculum—college, vocational, and general studies—suited for the twenty-first century?

4. Is Washington High School a cult of personality? In your judgment, can its current culture survive after the departure of principal Jungherr?

5. Did Jungherr groom the right successor?

6. What do you think of Lal's possible changes? Is he on the right track, or would you urge him to move slowly?

7. What degree of evidence exists favoring Lal's vision of how Washington High School should operate?

8. Do you think Lal is endangering or improving Washington High School's culture?

9. Should Lal realize that if something is "not broken, then don't fix it"?

10. Is Lal interested in change for change's sake, so that he can put his personal imprimatur on the school, or does he genuinely believe that the school should be changed to be more effective?

11. How far can a school's culture be stretched before it is a different kind of school?