

# School Culture: An Accurate View

These days everyone seems to be talking about how principals, schools, and systems should be improved. When principals discuss the “recipe for success,” they always consider creating optimal conditions for teaching to support deep learning for students. Nurturing a positive school culture is a key ingredient in the process. The NAESP and NASSP report, *Rethinking Principal Evaluation: a New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice*, reinforces this view, listing school culture as a key area that ideal principal evaluation systems should include. The report, which was developed by a committee of practicing principals, argues that principals should be held accountable for a more comprehensive picture of school and student success—one that places a priority on outcomes principals can control. School culture, along with student achievement and professional growth, among others, are elements that contribute to a well-rounded, accurate view of school success.

At its most basic level, school culture is comprised of those elements that make schools safe, orderly, warm, and, most importantly, conducive to teaching and learning. Principals play an integral role in establishing such environments. This depends on his or her ability to enact the following characteristics:

- A commitment to distributed leadership that supports collaborative decision-making;
- Supportive social relationships within the school and among staff and students;
- Hands-on knowledge about how educational theory translates into strategic action;
- A focus on pedagogy in which leadership is centered on improving student learning outcomes, and teachers are encouraged to take risks; and
- Structures that facilitate smooth operations.

## Teachers and Staff, Too

The impact of a positive school culture reverberates throughout a building, impacting more than students’ sense of well-being. The working environment for teachers and staff is important as well, since it has a big effect on their instructional performance. For example, research has linked high levels of student achievement with high ratings by teachers regarding “instructional climate,” which is a tone of continuous professional learning set by the principal. This is especially important because of the high turnover rate for teachers that some schools experience.

Principals directly impact school culture, for teachers especially. Influential activities can include establishing a clear vision for school success; communicating expectations



for quality teaching and learning; facilitating professional development opportunities; and creating an atmosphere of collaboration, high expectations, pride, and trust.

Principals who promote a positive school culture create ideal conditions for improvement. These conditions result in teachers being open to new, more effective approaches to instruction; students feeling safe and supported; parents feeling welcome and involved; and evidenced-based curricula and programs being implemented to improve teaching and raise achievement.

In addition to teachers, many other school professionals help to support students’ positive development, which includes mental health. School counselors, psychologists, social workers, and school nurses can be integral to a positive school culture. Principals should make sure to set clear parameters among the leadership team; engage all stakeholders in building the consensus vision; and embrace diverse perspectives in the group.

## Measurement Matters

In this era of high stakes accountability, it’s no longer enough to enact social and emotional learning programs and nurture a positive environment. In order to leverage the impact that a positive school culture can have on a school community, it must be measured and analyzed for continuous improvement. A few examples of how principals believe their role in school culture can be measured include:

- Observations;
- School culture surveys of staff and community stakeholders;
- Recruitment and retention of staff and students;
- Stakeholder participation in school activities;
- Appropriate student behaviors and attendance rates; and
- News clippings and other mentions in the media.

In addition, student and parent perception surveys can be as revealing as attendance and discipline referral rates. Sharing results of such measures can ensure that both the principal and the school stakeholders have an accurate view of the principal’s leadership, as well as the leading indicators of student success.

Promoting a positive, safe school culture is one of a principal’s most important responsibilities, and it must be measured in order to matter. Every student deserves to attend a school that inculcates the kind of culture that lays the foundation for developing the cognitive, social, and emotional skills needed to be successful academically and to thrive in life. ■