Community Culture and School Climate

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Educational research confirms the importance of school climate and culture to the academic attainment of students. Culture is the shared assumptions and ideologies of an organization, its philosophical base (Schein, 1992). Climate is the particular school's ambience, the feeling one receives upon entering the building. Climate is viewed separately from culture but is a subdivision of culture (Hoy, Tarter & Kottkamp, 1991). Climate is nebulous. It cannot be seen or touched, only felt. Principals and teachers are the architects of climate in a school; students just walk into it.

A positive, open, and nurturing climate creates an environment that fosters productivity and achievement for both teachers and students. This type of climate is intimate, supportive, and collegial. A child educated in this type of environment is eager to learn and enjoys his/her time in school. Children in this environment develop motivation, respect, and care for one another. They become contributory members of the student body (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991).

Qualitative analysis demonstrates the importance of a healthy, open, positive climate on academic achievement and self-esteem. Motivation can lead to higher achievement. Intellectual ability alone does not constitute school success; intellect must be propelled by motivation and channeled by instruction. The relationships among school personnel contribute to the school's climate, as does the physical plant of the school itself. Schools must be a second home for children, orderly, attractive, warm, comfortable. Schools should be welcoming. But the major facet that creates climate is the attitude of the people who inhabit the building.

So, the question remains, how do we change the school environment? How do we enable all schools to have open, positive climates that are inviting, intimate, collegial, supportive and nurturing?

Part of any educational process is establishing an environment that is warm, friendly, nurturing, accepting, yet disciplined with a focus on expectations and achievements. The recommendations from research regarding climate refer to the steps that educators can take to create an "open" school climate (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991). Climate, however, extends beyond the four walls of a school building; it is a function of the broader community of which the school is a part.

The support of business, the willingness of parents to invest time and attention to their children's education, and the responsiveness of government agencies and private organizations all contribute to the climate of a school. Community support enhances motivation, the desire to learn, and the willingness to succeed. The establishment of a community climate that permeates the local school building is essential. Community members have the power and potential to support and change the educational system. By creating and fostering a community climate everyone becomes vested in education. Everyone becomes responsible for what happens in the local school building.

A community climate means human interaction, the embracing of quality and an unapologetic love of humanity. Community climate means cohesiveness and interdependence. It is the sense of being part of a team, working for the common good, achieving group goals, and fostering interdependent relationships. This community climate fosters the social and emotional aspects of development needed to enhance the cognitive aspects of education. Community climate emerges from the interdependent relationships that children can have with caring adults. Values become part of the collaborative effort of the neighborhood.

Today's children enter school with various psychological and or physiological needs not met by the larger society. As Glaser (1992) points out, the basic needs of love, belonging, power, and safety are not being met appropriately to accommodate a ready learner. Creating an open, positive, and nurturing school climate that extends beyond the four walls of the educational institution necessary to meet the needs of today's children.

Establishing a community climate rests on a culture whose basic assumption is that everyone is responsible for the future of children. Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that creates the social skills and behaviors of the people within the organization. Culture is a system of shared orientations that hold a unit together and give it a distinctive identity (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Schein, 1992). The organization in this situation is the community.

Once these basic assumptions are accepted they will translate to the overall strategies and beliefs of the community. Creating mission statements, goals, means to obtain the goals, and forms of measurement grow out of basic assumptions. Currently, the mission of public schools is to educate all children. This needs to be the mission of the community, with the school a prominent

institution within that community. The community must embrace the mission of educating all children. The community must establish the goals, means, and forms of assessment in conjunction with educators. Educational reform will fail as long as it is limited to internal changes within the school. Educational reform must be a community effort. It must reflect a healthy community culture and contribute to the climate of the school.

References

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