

Changing a School's Culture, From the Ground Up

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Change is tough, or so the saying goes. But think about change from a different perspective: a child's. Remember when you learned to ride a skateboard or bike? Or how proud you were the first time words flew off the page into your memory? For children, change can be exhilarating.

My question to you is: How can we educators initiate change in our own schools that lets us experience joy in the process of learning and evolving?

Shore Up Your School Culture

What is your school culture like? Resist the temptation to answer right away. Instead, take a walk around your room or building with a smart phone or camera. Photograph the posted signs, materials on lockers, doodles on notebooks, and whiteboard graffiti. Or capture a series of social-media bites from your school's Twitter or Instagram feed.

Why should you do this? Because it's exactly what we don't notice that shapes our school culture. People are bombarded with hundreds of messages each day that influence their self-identity, either telling them they matter or that they are an afterthought. What messages is your school sending to students, support staff, and teachers?

The Importance of Language

Collect 20 to 30 images and lay them out like you were going to display them on a bulletin board. I like to use [Picasa's collage feature](#), but [Linoit](#) and [Padlet](#) allow you to organize and annotate your thoughts with additional sticky notes. Write down your impressions as you scan the photos. Are there messages of acceptance or division? Are the messages in your building focused on following strict rules or building relationships? We all expect the best effort from our students, but we need to think about whether we phrase that in neutral, negative, or positive language.

Here's an example. One computer lab I visited had this sign: "Thank you in advance for taking good care of the equipment in this room. Others will benefit as well as you." But I've seen other lab rooms with signs saying: "Students who damage equipment will be charged with vandalism." It's obvious which sign creates a more positive culture.

Identify Stakeholders

Share your photo collage with others (including a cross-section of students) and discuss what it means. How can teachers, staff, and students work together to create more positive messaging in your building? Organize groups to walk through the building and identify signs with negative language. Then brainstorm ways to address the issue: perhaps encourage student council members to write a letter to teachers and staff, or create a school-wide positive messaging contest.

Next, think about who isn't plugged into your school's culture. Lasting change requires a "we" that doesn't exclude stakeholders. Whose voice goes unheard in your school? Consider parents, students, faculty, staff, and community members. Who tells these groups that their ideas matter?

In order to change school culture, we first have to understand the perspective of all stakeholders. Gathering data from parents, community members, or students may be as simple as setting up a table periodically at a game, science fair, or play. Staff it with teachers or student council members and provide a short survey on a few laptops or paper. Talk with people who take the time to provide feedback. This could be repeated at a variety of venues, including senior citizen centers, chamber of commerce meetings, or food banks. Even if you aren't available for an event, provide the survey or an online link to outside groups. Then follow through by exploring the data with a professional learning community, students, or attendees at a board meeting. Is it clear to stakeholders how they can use their voice to initiate change at your school?

Unless we understand our school culture—and begin to take steps to change it—we may [choose the wrong drivers for system reform](#). The change we desire might not be possible until we invest in all voices.

Rename Challenges as Opportunities

Fear is a natural response when change is foisted upon us unexpectedly or without adequate buy-in. (That never happens in schools, right?)

It's not easy to contend with fear. But we can do it, individually and collectively. We can choose to rename challenges as opportunities, and acknowledge harsh realities while creating plans to mitigate them.

Let's imagine for a moment that you have a student with a handheld device who appears disengaged from the task at hand. What do you do? The most obvious choices are to take the device away or have a conversation. The first choice is easier, but it won't build a relationship or good will. The second choice requires you to calmly discuss the matter with the student.

This can be transformational. A student often falls through the cracks when the only attention he or she gets is a stern reprimand for wrongdoing, rather than negotiating towards a mutual solution. One solution could be to use proximity as a reminder to the student when he or she is distracted, or have students voluntarily stack their devices on tables so they are out of reach but still visible. Perhaps you could establish a three minute stretch-or-text break in your room after a period of hard work. But before any change can be implemented, a conversation has to happen.

Find Others Interested in Change

Wait, you might be thinking. I can't change a culture by myself. And you're right. Change requires a critical mass of determined individuals. But you're not alone, either. There are other like-minded people who want to change education. Social media is one useful tool for helping you get there. (Check out the Teach Like a Pirate [#tlap](#) Twitter chat on Monday nights from 7 to 8 p.m. ET to get your imagination moving). You can also check out online communities like the [CTQ Collaboratory](#), [English Ning](#), [Discovery Education](#), or the [National Science Teachers Association](#). There are dozens of spaces that allow people to network, share, and learn from one another in personal learning networks that go beyond one-shot interactions.

These networks, whether down the hall or in a virtual space, allow you to share your successes (and failures) with others. Using them may require a new approach: Having the courage to ask for help. Find opportunities to talk with someone who challenges your thinking. Share something that happened in your classroom this week, whether good or bad. This builds new knowledge and relationships.

Driving Change Within Your Sphere of Influence

One thing we know we can impact is the classroom in which we teach. Cultivate that change by honoring [student voice](#) and ideas. Identifying the right change driver—a strategy based on classroom input—will establish relevance and inspire hard work from students. Here's a hard pill to swallow: The agreement for change must come from those who are most impacted by the change. Often, we design for content deliverables rather than people. That's a mistake, since any change process is first and foremost about people.

Not everyone is ready for change at the same rate—but all of us are capable of some change. The educational community is currently undergoing this process as part of [design thinking](#) (think [Project Lead the Way](#) or [Makerspaces](#)). This change process is transforming many different aspects of education, from curriculum design, to teacher feedback systems, and more.

But as we plan for meaningful change, what changes the most may just be ourselves. Just like we did when we rode our first bike or unlocked the secrets of books through reading, we can pursue challenging experiences that transform us for good.

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