

# School Culture and Organization: Lessons from Research and Experience

A Background Paper for  
The Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform

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### 1. The many conflicting cultures of schooling

The word “culture” describes a wide range of influences on how people behave in organizations, communities and even nations. In general, it refers to a set of common values, attitudes, beliefs and norms, some of which are explicit and some of which are not. People in a particular culture may or may not be conscious of its influence and may or may not be able to articulate its elements. They do what they do and say what they say because that is the way things are commonly done or said. They tell certain kinds of stories and extol certain kinds of behavior and mythologize certain kinds of events, and the sum total of all these actions and conversations becomes the context they need for finding meaning in their lives and establishing relationships with others.

It has long been observed that an organization’s success can be attributed to its culture. Peters and Waterman, in their 1982 classic *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America’s Best-Run Companies*, found that excellent companies possessed distinctive cultures that were passed on through story, slogan and legend and served to motivate employees by giving meaning to their work. “Without exception, the dominance and coherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies,” they wrote. “Moreover, the stronger the culture and the more it was directed toward the marketplace, the less need was there for policy manuals, organization charts, or detailed procedures and rules.”<sup>1</sup> With many such observations, they established an inevitable link between a company’s culture, or shared values, and the way it was organized and managed. They showed, too, that poor-performing companies had either no detectable culture or a dysfunctional culture. Such companies “usually focused on internal politics rather than on the customer, or they focus on ‘the numbers’ rather than on the product and the people who make and sell it,” they wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Peters and Waterman were not the first to make these kinds of observations, but they were certainly among the most celebrated to do so, and subsequent analyses of organizational success or failure have, for the last couple of decades, dwelt heavily on the influence and interaction of culture and structure in a range of institutions, including schools. Indeed, in a subsequent book, *A Passion for Excellence*, Peters himself took up the subject of school culture and leadership, noting that outstanding principals were “showmen, visionaries, masterly users of symbols and supersalesmen.”<sup>3</sup> Education researchers had begun to make similar observations. Baldrige and Deal brought them up in their 1975 book, *Managing Change in Educational Organizations*. John Goodlad called attention to school culture in the same year with *The Dynamics of Educational Change*. So did Dan Lortie, in *Schoolteacher* (1975). Rutter and his colleagues detailed culture issues in their classic *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children* (1979); so did Joyce and his colleagues, in *The Structure of School Improvement* (Joyce, Hersh and McKibbin, 1983). The school leadership literature has steadily expanded on and refined these observations over the last 20 years. It

is now widely believed that if you want to improve schools, you have to change their cultures and structures through the exercise of certain kinds of leadership.

This is easier to say than it is to do, because schools are not businesses and students are not adults. Schools are far more complicated institutions, socially and politically. Urban schools, particularly those serving highly diverse populations, harbor many conflicting cultures, each of which affects student learning in different ways—e.g., whether students are dependent or independent learners, whether they see scholars as role models, whether they think boldly or enjoy debate or disagreement. To begin with, students bring numerous ethnic cultures, languages and habits of mind to the classroom, each of which is associated with varying child-rearing and educational traditions. Layered on these are class cultures, each of which can likewise be distinguished by distinctive kinds of formal and informal communication. Ruby Payne is only the latest in a long line of socio-linguistically oriented educators who have shown that the cultures of the impoverished, the middle class and the wealthy differ markedly in ways that affect literacy acquisition and attitudes toward schooling (Payne, 2001). The formal education system is itself a product of middle class assumptions and traditions, several of which—democratic community, individualism, and corporate capitalism, for example—conflict in important ways when it comes to values, myths, cardinal virtues, tales of heroism and norms. Finally, layered on the system's general culture is the culture of bureaucracy, the method the education system has employed to carry out its institutional mission. Bureaucracy is not a neutral form of organization. It, too, carries with it a host of values, beliefs, assumptions, forms of communication and processes for making decisions, prioritizing issues and spending time and resources. It is itself a powerful culture—as it would have to be, given all the other cultures that have to be managed somehow, and given the political environment within which the system exists.

This last factor—the essentially political nature of educational governance—adds the icing to the cultural layer cake that is schooling in America. Politics itself creates distinctive political cultures that can interact with all the other cultures in ways that affect the intellectual, material and moral resources available to students in any particular school at any given point in time. Whether they will learn evolution, or will say the pledge of allegiance or have books or can read *Huckleberry Finn* are matters dependent upon political will in a country sharply divided along political, religious and cultural lines.

All these interacting cultures and cultural influences converge upon the schoolhouse, where they are mediated well or poorly, with fortunate or unfortunate consequences for teachers' and students' abilities to do their work successfully. When we say that we want a better or a different organizational culture in our schools, we are asking that the people caught up in this complex, highly compromised environment somehow develop a set of values, beliefs, stories and means of operating that will transcend all these other influences and tensions and focus everyone more on the central tasks of learning. Clearly, this is a daunting task. Like all organizations faced with multiple tasks and influences, schools develop a homeostasis, an equilibrium that both stabilizes them and

makes them extremely resistant to change. Only the boldest system-wide actions could get anyone's attention, let alone inspire him or her to act differently for any length of time.

## 2. What are the ingredients of a productive school culture?

Studies of effective schools have established a number of cultural elements that seem to have some impact on student achievement. Fyans and Maehr (1990) singled out academic challenges, a sense of community, recognition for achievement and perception of school goals as salient variables. Cheong (1993) related organizational ideology, shared participation, charismatic leadership and intimacy to stronger teacher motivation and satisfaction. Senge (1990), Fullan (1992), and Deal and Peterson (1990) all point to the importance of a shared vision championed by a strong leader with a sense of moral purpose. From the work of these and many other researchers and practitioners of school reform, a few general principles emerge.

If you want a school culture that supports hard work and high achievement, you need the following ingredients:

- An inspiring **vision**, backed by a clear, limited and challenging **mission**
- A curriculum, modes of instruction, assessments and learning opportunities that are clearly **linked** to the vision and mission and **tailored** to the needs and interests of the students
- Sufficient **time** for teachers and students to do their work well
- A pervasive **focus on student and teacher learning**, coupled with a continual, school-wide conversation about the **quality** of everyone's work
- Close, supportive teacher-student, teacher-teacher and student-student **relationships**
- Many opportunities and **venues for creating culture**, discussing fundamental values, taking responsibility, coming together as a community and celebrating individual and group success
- **Leadership** that encourages and protects trust, on-the-job learning, flexibility, risk-taking, innovation and adaptation to change
- **Data-driven decision-making systems** that draw on timely, accurate, qualitative and quantitative information about progress toward the vision and sophisticated knowledge about organizational change
- Unwavering **support** from parents
- **District flexibility and support** for multiple school designs, visions, missions and innovations.

It goes without saying that you also need luck, good timing and political cover.

The aim of each and all of these ingredients is to create an environment conducive to learning. Such environments are easily recognized: everyone is clearly learning; everyone expects to learn and expects everyone else to learn; classrooms and school halls contain numerous examples of high quality student work and achievement; there are multiple opportunities to learn in multiple ways, depending on how a person learns and at what pace; each student has

productive relationships with many other students and with many teachers and adults in the community; great learners are celebrated and modeled; people work together on interesting projects in small and large groups; the school is abuzz with conversations about interesting and important matters; a language of inquiry and thoughtfulness tends to dominate; people listen to one another; everyone feels safe enough and free enough to take risks, to be wrong, to make mistakes, or to try something new; widespread trust is evident; strangers are welcomed; diversity is capitalized on as a strength; and it just feels good to be there. In such environments, you feel known and respected and surrounded by people who will help you when you need them. Someone's always got your back.

For the last decade, many school reform leaders have suggested that such environments be created through establishing small "learning communities" or breaking large high schools into more manageable units of 400 or fewer students (for example, Meier, 1995; Raywid, 1997; Sizer, 1996; Toch, 2003). Smaller schools, they argue, offer more opportunities for people to know one another and for teachers to personalize learning. But the real virtue of small schools is that they offer a better chance than large high schools to put all of the above ingredients together and create the kind of culture just described. Small groups have a better shot at getting members to agree upon a vision and a mission, getting buy-in from their communities, developing a curriculum tailored to their students, increasing the amount of individualized learning, holding school-wide conversations about improvement, and cultivating rich, productive interdependent relationships. Small schools have a better chance of breaking teachers out of their classroom isolation, training the entire staff, and sustaining long-term professional development initiatives. It is easier to gather data and develop data-driven decision-making systems in a small school than in a large one, and, when the data suggest changes, it is easier to turn a small school around than a large school. To be sure, smallness in itself is not necessarily a virtue. If you don't know how to exploit your smallness to put together the ingredients listed above, your school will experience all of the weaknesses of smallness and none of the advantages.

Because lists of the features of successful organizations are deceptively simplistic, it is important to go a little deeper into some of the key ingredients.

*Vision and mission.* All other things being equal, a school that knows where it wants to go and knows what it needs to do to get there will be more successful than a school that is just treading water. Most high schools have no vision of a future any different from the present. Their managers may speak of better *results* in the future, but they foresee no changes in the *structure* of the institution that might bring about improvements. Apparently, better results will come from somehow working harder or coming into more money. Lacking a vision of anything different, they tend also to lack specific missions. They exist to "provide educational opportunity for all," or to "educate each child to his or her potential," or "to create good citizens"—noble, but vague sentiments. This is like a business saying its mission is "to make money." True enough, but not sufficiently detailed to inspire or rally employees around improvements. High

schools' efforts to do almost anything for almost anyone guarantee that they will be unable to focus their precious little time and energy on what's most important, and they will have no chance to create a special culture of learning that might compete with all the other cultures milling about in the school. Like shopping malls, to which they have often been compared (Powell et al., 1985), comprehensive high schools are just large, culturally neutral buildings where strangers assemble to make what they can of the experience. Shoppers with the most capital make the most of it; the rest just hang out.

Vision and mission are about Purpose. Organizations without clear, concrete purposes tend to be inefficient and always disappointing to a substantial number of their customers. What is the purpose of the American high school today? What is the purpose of *any particular* high school? If the only answers are general, vague and abstract, and if they have not been debated in a long time, it is likely the organization has gone stale. Well-managed conversations about purpose, vision and mission revitalize schools in three ways. First, they create new and deeper relationships among people who care about the school. Second, serious inquiries into matters people have come to take for granted build a sense of community that begins to mold school culture around common values, ideas and hopes. People tend to "buy in" to the school and think of it as theirs. Thirdly, of course, agreement about vision and mission leads to practical criteria for making decisions about what is most important, what must be set aside and what to do when unpredicted situations arise. Ultimately, the needs generated by such "super-conversations"—the need to make choices as a group, the need for decision-making criteria, the need to define limits and constraints and relevant data—set the tone and lay down the habits for a coherent organizational culture that supports learning.

Coherence about purpose cannot be achieved by top-down fiats requiring everyone to be on the same page at the same time. It comes, rather, through consistency of relationships and conversations, as well as repetition of a limited number of processes and values over a range of different circumstances. No matter whom you talk to in the organization, or what documents you read, you hear and read similar themes. Everyone seems to know why they are there, what they are doing as individuals and what their organization is contributing to some greater good. Everyone is proud, everyone feels he or she "belongs" there.

*Curriculum, instruction and assessment.* So many books have been written about these subjects that it would be silly to try to reference any in particular. The problem we face is that the high school curriculum has evolved through addition, not redesign, and the larger American high schools became over the last 50 years, the more courses and activities they created. Today, we take a high school curriculum with 600 courses and credit-worthy activities for granted and we worry that if we do not offer all of it, we will shortchange our students. We have built textbooks and standards and assessments and policy around this bloated curriculum, locking it in further and making it increasingly difficult for school designers to depart from it.

The truth is, the curriculum is way out of control, “a mile wide and an inch deep,” incoherent and in need of serious pruning. If the stakeholders in a particular high school want to create a new vision and mission for the school and tailor it to their students, they will have to eliminate something from this curriculum, focus their offerings on the school’s new purpose, develop interconnections among units and courses, and link the formal curriculum to an informal curriculum that extols the virtues necessary for success. They must be free to do that or they will not be able to create a new culture. Districts are often reluctant to grant this freedom, because they have come to believe that all students are entitled to the bloated curriculum, and departures from it would be “inequitable.” It is enormously expensive for a district to offer everyone a comprehensive high school with a bloated curriculum. Such extravagant redundancy is neither equitable (look at the dropout statistics, graduation rates, and so on), nor an efficient answer to the problem of student mobility, nor a sensible strategy in the age of the Internet. Even our poorest citizens have access to an enormous amount of information from countless sources outside of schools. Schools should focus on covering only the most important information and skills, and on showing young people how to understand them, connect them and use them.

The bloated curriculum, and the standards and assessments that drive it, force teachers to narrow their instructional options. Direct, teacher-led instruction with little student discussion and little individualization continues to dominate in classrooms. It is the only way teachers can expeditiously cover so much content. A slimmer curriculum opens up more pedagogical options—Socratic seminars, group work, project-based learning, independent study, interdisciplinary learning—and it permits students to move beyond superficial, rote learning. Depending on the mission a school might adopt, it might want its students to know fewer things in depth, instead of many, easily forgettable, things that they could learn about outside of school.

*Time.* At the heart of any culture are attitudes toward time and commonly accepted norms about how to spend it. Anyone who has observed classes in an inner-city high school can see immediately that many students’ attitudes toward time differ markedly from their teachers’ attitudes and from the assumptions about time embedded in the bloated curriculum. Adults feel a sense of urgency; students do not. Some of the students’ attitude can be attributed to adolescence, no doubt, and some of it to the influence of a culture of poverty wherein long-term planning is rare and delayed gratification almost non-existent. Whatever the causes of student languor, teachers tend to slow down to the students’ pace. Almost everything takes longer than it seems it should. On top of that, most of the students who enter schools like those at the Manual Complex are already “behind” three or four grade levels. If we consider a grade level 1,000 hours of instruction, that means that the inner-city high school has to somehow offer 8,000 hours of instruction (or their equivalent) in four years, while teaching a bloated curriculum and working at a pace that is already slower than the pace at a suburban school. It can’t be done. It isn’t done. A significant number of ninth graders at Manual or North or Lincoln fail to graduate in four years.

Time in high school is insufficiently allocated and wastefully used, especially considering the needs of the under-prepared, unmotivated student. It is also inadequate for teachers either to do what they are currently doing or to learn and practice how to do something more efficient and effective. If secondary schools are going to be reformed, we will have to rethink the relationships between culture, organization and time (Brown, 2003, pp. 54-87).

*A pervasive focus on student and teacher learning.* When educators look at disappointing student achievement indicators, they often say, "I taught it; they just didn't learn it." This evasion of responsibility is a consequence of a certain kind of culture wherein it seems perfectly natural to blame students for their failures. Students themselves even buy into it. This "I Taught It" culture is not conducive to maximum learning. It must be converted into a "They Learned It" culture. The shift from a *teaching* focus to a *learning* focus may sound simple, but it actually requires profound changes in curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, management, organization and leadership. It turns the school on its head. Instead of beginning with what the school offers, you have to begin with what the student requires. You have to know your students—their learning capacities and paces, their interests, their concerns, their hopes—first; the curriculum comes second. The job of the teacher is to know the student and draw him or her toward the curriculum.

Much has been written about "learning environments" and "learning communities" (e.g. Senge, 1990; Wilson, 1996; Brown, 2003). The gist of it is that in both settings, learning takes place in multiple ways involving multiple sources, and learners assume more control over the goals, content, forms of instruction and learning opportunities. Learning communities involve much more group learning and interdependent support than one finds with traditional instruction. They involve much less teacher control and pre-specification of ends. Students tend to work together in groups to solve problems of mutual interest or deliver services they consider important or develop an expertise they all seek. Everyone learns, including the teacher or group leader (Wilson & Cole, 1997; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). Learning communities involve a high level of dialogue, conversation, discussion and collaboration. Because much of the dialogue focuses the group on values, goals and quality, learning communities can become self-correcting and highly adaptive to change. As open systems, they are also more likely to stimulate creativity and innovation than traditional instructional systems.

The shift from traditional school structures to more open systems for learning is difficult and time consuming. As Wilson and Ryder (2000) point out, the approach involves short-term inefficiencies; and, because learning communities do not lend themselves to centralized control and are somewhat unpredictable, they try the patience of bureaucrats and others who may be rule-bound or in a hurry. Teachers, too, may be reluctant to change their current roles, for fear of losing some measure of control and satisfaction. The best way to bring teachers along is to create professional learning communities first, with a view toward spreading the model throughout the school once teachers have experienced its benefits.



*Relationships.* Culture is rooted in relationships. What people talk about, how they talk about it, how often they talk. How much they trust each other, share with each other or forgive each other. What stories they tell each other, what heroes they extol, what virtues they praise. These things determine the patterns of behavior that become distinctive features of an organization. Organizational structures can increase or decrease the amounts of connectivity and communication among the people in the building and between the people in the building and the outside world. “If moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, as you can’t get anywhere without them,” writes Michael Fullan in *Leading in a Culture of Change*.<sup>4</sup> His chapter on the subject is entitled “Relationships, Relationships, Relationships,” to emphasize their importance in schools and in successful businesses, where they are now “the new bottom line” (Lewin & Regine, 2000).

Anyone who has tried to change relationships in an organization can vouch for the complexity of the task. Relationships involve emotions. Teachers who have worked in the same building for a long time have arrived at certain emotional compromises with their colleagues and students; it will feel risky to re-negotiate them. New teachers may feel too vulnerable to be as honest as they need to be. Some teachers and managers possess a good deal of insight into themselves and can accept constructive criticism; some barely know themselves and shatter when asked innocuous questions about what they are doing. Some students possess more empathy, responsibility, flexibility and social skillfulness than others.

Increasingly, schools have been turning to “advisement groups,” “crews” and other such small group systems in which students can learn and practice various critical social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. Research suggests that SEL skills are linked not only to capacity for productive relationships, but also to attitudes toward learning and likelihood of academic success (Rhodes, 2003). SEL skills include such things as ability to empathize, self-assess strengths and weaknesses, understand different perspectives, control impulses, resolve conflicts, make healthy decisions, manage emotions under stress, manage time, articulate a value system, form lasting friendships, ask for help, participate in group activities and take responsibility. Life skills such as these are best acquired in small groups and in a range of direct and indirect learning venues. If the curriculum of advisement is linked to the vision, mission and curriculum of the school and if it is handled well, it can be a powerful force for a new culture and it can change the dynamics of every classroom in ways that markedly affect student achievement.

*Leadership.* Much—perhaps too much—has been written about the kinds of leadership necessary to assemble all the ingredients for cultural change and shepherd an organization through the ups and downs of the change process. All too often, the leadership literature has been reduced to simple formulas that, once memorized, are supposed to guide any individual through any leadership situation. This kind of information and training is worth little. Like all knowledge and expertise, knowledge about leadership is embedded in concrete

and specific situations. It is heavily contextual. Richard Elmore touches on this when he writes, "Improvement at scale is largely a *property of organizations*, not of the pre-existing traits of the individuals who work in them. Organizations that improve do so because they create and nurture agreement on what is worth achieving, and they set in motion the internal processes by which people progressively learn how to do what they need to do in order to achieve what is worthwhile. ... Improvement occurs through organized social learning."<sup>5</sup> Leaders must know how to bring about organized social learning.

Fullan, in *Leading in a Culture of Change*, calls attention to the importance of learning in context. "Learning in the setting where you work, or learning in context, is the learning with the greatest payoff because it is more specific (customized to the situation) and because it is social (involves a group). Learning in context is developing leadership and improving the organization as you go. Such learning changes the individual and the context simultaneously."<sup>6</sup> Leaders learn how to make learning in context possible for everyone in the organization. Again, Elmore: "Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement."<sup>7</sup> What these insights, and the many others in Fullan's book add up to is summed up in his statement that "In a culture of complexity, the chief role of leadership is to mobilize the *collective capacity* to challenge difficult circumstances."<sup>8</sup> His point is that leadership in complex social institutions like schools requires a grasp of how systems and individuals interact and considerable, slow, steady immersion in the day-to-day nitty-gritties of school life. Knowledge about leadership cannot be imparted through a two-hour training or a five-day institute in the mountains. It has to be learned and practiced clinically.

### 3. Recommendations: First steps toward building new high school cultures.

With district encouragement, assistance from the Commission on Secondary School Reform and community support, each high school might begin the renewal process with a number of audits:

- **Coherence audits.** These would be semi-ethnographic descriptions of the school culture, of the kind often required by North Central accreditation teams. They would include analysis of existing documents describing the school's vision and mission; analyses of the curriculum and its alignment with existing vision and mission documents; surveys of parents, teachers, administrators and students regarding school culture and focus; and interviews with key stakeholders. Some of the audit materials already exist; others could be developed by Commission consultants and administered by consultants, teachers and even students.
- **Time audits.** All school personnel are likely to say that they have no time to try new reform efforts or to go through self-studies. It is important, then, to find out just how efficiently and effectively each school is using its time at the moment. This would enable reform agents to identify opportunities to maximize uses of time and free up time and energy for

- new endeavors. It would also establish benchmarks against which new efforts could be measured over the years.
- **Audits of school communication and relationships.** Who talks to whom, about what, in what ways and how often? Communication patterns are the highways over which reform ideas and knowledge must move. If they do not connect, or if they Balkanize the school, or if they sap hope rather than embolden it, a new school-wide culture is unlikely to flourish. Materials for diagnosing communications patterns, knowledge flow and relationships exist among organizational analysts and can be adapted to school environments. The Commission might want to partner with CU and DU graduate schools of business and anthropology to create and apply appropriate studies.
  - **Management system audits.** Every school is a complex system composed of numerous interacting sub-systems. How those sub-systems and the people who comprise them are managed determines how effectively a school can deal with change. Like leadership, management in the private and non-profit sectors has been subjected to considerable scrutiny over the last few decades. Managing change is a subject that has particularly received a great deal of attention in the research literature. Each high school should undergo an analysis of how its managers currently see their jobs, how its managers could benefit from training in systemic management techniques and how the school could take advantage of new management technologies. Again, DPS might want to partner with higher education in this aspect of high school reform.
  - **Leadership studies.** Reform requires leadership. Who are the leaders in our schools? Where do they come from? How are they selected? How much latitude are they given and in what ways are they constrained? Are they employing best practice? Does the system reward their leadership? Any movement to reform DPS high schools must begin with an analysis of the district's capacity to find and sustain the right kind of leadership over a number of years.

Audits in these five areas do not constitute secondary school reform, of course. But they would create critical information, without which a major reform effort could neither find the right starting place in each school nor assess reform's progress and eventual success. Change begins with new data that raise new questions and stimulate new ideas about what to do.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Peters, T. J., & Austin, N.K. (1985). *A passion for excellence: The leadership difference*. New York: Random House, p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> Fullan, M. (2001b). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Elmore, R. (2000). *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Fullan, M. (2001b). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> Elmore, R. (2000). *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: Albert Shanker Institute, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Fullan, M. (2001b). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, p. 136.