

# How to Create a Culture of **Achievement**

*in your school and classroom*

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# Introduction

The part of a tree that we can readily see is above the surface. But because we understand that this living organism needs to sustain itself, we realize that there is just as much happening below. And we know that damaging its roots or poisoning its soil can result in the death of the tree.

A school's culture works in much the same way. There are things we can readily see; these are the procedures of the school. But we know that there are other elements below the surface, which serve to nurture the whole. These are our ways of work, and they speak to the relationships between and among people, as well as the ways we choose to inform ourselves. Margaret Wheatley (1998) describes the three elements that lie above the surface of an organization as its processes, structures, and patterns. We add tools to this list, as these are the ways an organization measures itself. All of these are easily seen and typically what people will first invoke when discussing a school's culture. But the underlying elements, those that are not readily observed, are equally essential, and include the relationships, identity, and connections (Wheatley, 1998). We add data to this list. These factors exist whether we choose to examine them or not. And as with any living organism, what happens both above the ground and below it needs to be cared for to sustain the school's culture.

The mission of the school should capture all of these elements, surface them, and integrate them. The mission is the starting point, not the ending

point. Everyone involved in the school—from parents and students, to teachers, staff, and administrators, to external auditors and community members—needs to know the mission and how their work supports it. From the mission, schools and their leaders need a specified set of purposeful language, actions, and routines designed to make students and other stakeholders feel welcome, comfortable, important, and understood. They also need a specified set of purposeful language, actions, and routines that identify organizational systems—practices that build the culture of achievement. That’s what this book is about: creating and implementing a system to operationalize the mission and, in doing so, ensure that students achieve.

## Organizational Practices That Build Culture

This book will offer some suggested practices and structures to help schools get into a cycle of continuous improvement driven by mission, inspired by vision, and operationalized by culture. The practices are organized by *pillars*, or overarching ideas that communicate to stakeholders how the school’s mission will be kept alive to thrive in the daily life of the school. We selected the term “pillar” because it is an architectural element that is designed to transmit weight within a structure. In other words, the pillars hold things up. Pillars are the structures that hold up the mission statement. They are the link between the mission statement and the ground on which people teach and learn.

Over the past several years, our collective experience in schools and our wide reading of business and education books have led us to identify five pillars that are critical to the culture of achievement that each of us hopes to build. These five pillars, each with a chapter devoted to explaining it, are as follows:

1. Welcome
2. Do no harm
3. Choice words
4. It’s never too late to learn
5. Best school in the universe

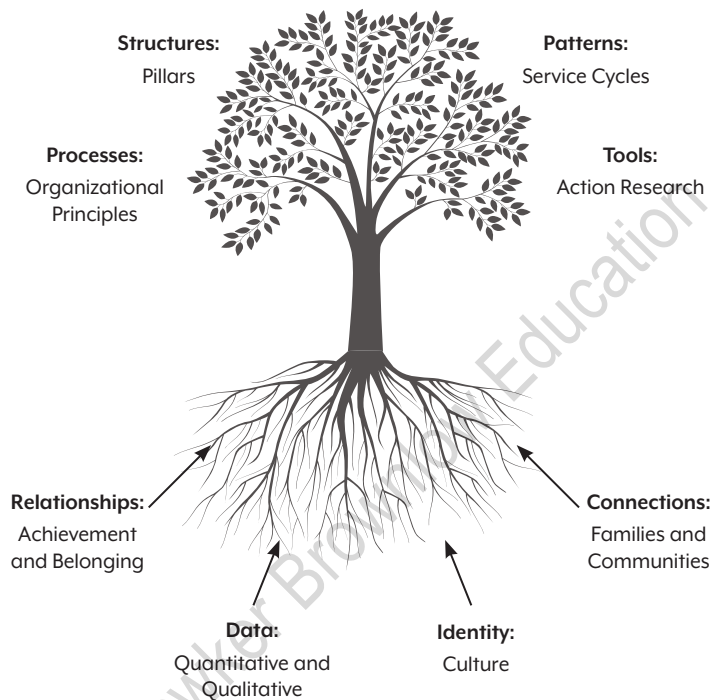
In chapters 2 through 6, each pillar is explained. We discuss why that pillar is important in building culture, and we provide examples from schools as the staff within the building has worked to implement that pillar. In addition, each chapter highlights practices and structures to ensure that the pillar becomes part of the daily practices within the school. These features include the following:

1. **Organizational principles**, the specific components of the pillar that provide definitions and examples of quality implementation.
2. **Service cycles**, a series of actions that staff understand are essential to operationalizing the school's mission and its pillars.
3. **Action research tools**, a means to balance and align investment in reflective practice, responsive planning, and competent performance.

By examining what lies above the surface of a school's organization, we can expose what lies below—the relationships, identity, culture, and data that are necessary to anchor and sustain the school. The image can be found in figure i.1.

The collective power of a school community that turns its attention to building a culture of achievement cannot be underestimated. As with trees to be nurtured, the care and maintenance of our resources provides us with the shade we need.

**FIGURE i.1**  
**Above and Below the Organizational Surface**



## Creating Culture in Schools

*An underground flow of feelings and folkways [wending] its way within schools in the form of vision and values, beliefs and assumptions, rituals and ceremonies, history and stories, and physical symbols. (Deal & Peterson, 1999, pp. 7–8)*

This book proposes that effective organizations, including schools, should make building culture part of a planned strategic effort. Most school improvement plans concentrate on academic achievement goals, decisions about academic focus, deployment of instructional models, and teaching techniques and curriculum tools. Most school improvement plans therefore aspire to create academic focus, an academic sense of responsibility, intensity, and urgency—that is, an “academic press” (Lee & Smith, 1999). Academic press is absolutely necessary, but not sufficient to operationalize the mission of the school. We believe that no school improvement effort will be effective, maintained, or enhanced unless school culture and academic press are both addressed and aligned. Both developing school culture and creating academic press are necessary, but neither is in and of itself sufficient.

We suggest that these two elements of school effectiveness must be integrated and unified. Heretofore, researchers have referred to two curricula operating in the school. The first is the academic curriculum, which has been described as the objective, explicit curriculum of the school. The

second is school culture—the implicit curriculum of the school. In this book, we propose that a school’s culture should not be underground and assumed. It should be uncovered, openly and purposely discussed, assessed, and developed. School culture cannot be hidden and implicit; rather, it must be as explicit as our approach to teaching and learning. In fact, we propose that our academic press and our school culture should be looked at, thought about, and acted upon in a unified and coordinated manner.

Cultures are not created overnight or by pen and planning alone. Jerald (2006) argues that culture is born from an organization’s vision, beliefs, values, and mission. Stating your mission is significant, but only a small part of your effort. Culture develops and grows up through an accumulation of *actions, traditions, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals that are closely aligned with that vision.*

According to Deal and Peterson (2009), research suggests that a strong, positive culture serves several beneficial functions, including the following:

- Fostering effort and productivity.
- Improving collegial and collaborative activities that in turn promote better communication and problem solving.
- Supporting successful change and improvement efforts.
- Building commitment and helping students and teachers identify with the school.
- Amplifying energy and motivation of staff members and students.
- Focusing attention and daily behavior on what is important and valued.

So we have purposely worked at developing school culture in ways that will further engage each student in a world-class educational experience. The looking, thinking, and acting we will encourage will be about increasing a culture of educational engagement by promoting

1. A culture that is *welcoming*,
2. A culture in which the *conditions for learning are ever-present*,
3. A culture in which we examine *how our behaviors affect us, others, and our world*,
4. A culture in which there is a shared belief that we are a *part of something special and great*, and

5. A culture in which the language creates and facilitates *personal pride, purpose and power*.

## Cultures: Yes, Schools and Students Have Them

We believe that culture must be purposely developed and managed to optimize the chance to live our mission, become our vision, and fulfill our educational purpose and responsibilities. We also recognize that our students bring their cultures with them. Consider the following students, all enrolling in a local high school.

Amal is a 14-year-old girl. For the past six years she has attended an Islamic private school. Prior to that she was homeschooled. To this point in her life she has had virtually no unsupervised interactions with males outside her immediate family. She has a strong fundamental cultural identity as a Muslim girl.

Renee is also 14 years old. She has been homeschooled all her life. Her family organized the homeschooling of their children with other members of their church. Renee has a strong sense of culture from the values instilled in her by her family and her Christian faith.

Eddie chose this school to provide some separation between his schooling and his friends who are involved in gangs and attend what would have been Eddie's school. Despite his school choice, gang involvement is a large part of his family, his extended family, his current friends, and his community. That culture is a part of who Eddie presently is. Life on the streets dictates certain rules of survival, such as "fight back and defend family" and "retaliate when you or your family is disrespected."

Stephen chose to enroll in the school because of its unique health science career focus with industry-based internships. Stephen has always expected to attend college and graduate school and become a doctor. He gave up the opportunity to attend a high-performing suburban high school to attend one that catered to his niche interests. Stephen comes to school with a lot of cultural capital that has always made him a driven and successful student.

Tony attends the school because of the influence that a community mentor has had on his life for many years. Tony lives with his mother, his four



siblings, and extended family members who have come and gone over the years. His mother's health limits her activity outside the home, and the family depends on public assistance. Tony has never been particularly interested or successful in school. His propensity to sleep in and ignore his alarm is frequent, as is his absenteeism. Tony expresses no postschool plans, and his commitment to graduate is weak. Tony's behavior is shaped by the challenges of living in a sphere of generational poverty.

These real vignettes are wrought with biting and predictable stereotypes. We assure you that each of these young people is a unique individual packed with obvious and hidden attributes, interests, talents, and gifts. Each has aspirations and nightmares that are influenced by every opportunity given to them and by every opportunity they were denied. The fact remains, however, that each of these unique individuals will come to school with a cultural identity that is based on his or her experiences. That culture has provided much of the context for how these individuals view the world.

So this book is also about the culture of schools populated by individuals. Although others may suggest that conscious attention to creating school culture may be mostly to promote student achievement, especially when the school population is diverse and includes many who may not have had experiences developing the cultural capital leading to successful public school performance, the five new students we profiled taught us otherwise. As a public school, we should at least expect that the school culture will be more pluralistic than many of these students have experienced. It may be less tolerant of behaviors they know that help them survive on the streets. It will certainly be committed to graduation and postsecondary planning. The public school will be more tolerant of differing views about sex, religion, politics, and discipline than some students have been raised to believe, while others may see the school's view as narrow and restricting. The fact is that students enter the culture of the school with an intact cultural identity that has been formed from already being part of one or more home and community cultures. The job of school, then, is to foster a bicultural student body—one that recognizes the home culture while creating a school one.

A diverse student body also means that students who have many different cultural histories are about to converge on a setting that hosts them all. On

that point, *know now that we believe that teaching tolerance, understanding, and respect is a nonnegotiable part of creating an effective school culture.* We believe that creating an effective school culture for a student who arrives with a dissimilar cultural identity and history is likely to make a student bicultural. An effective school culture will provide students a respectful mediating experience through which they can understand, examine, affirm, modify, or change understandings of the world and how they want to engage in it. The bicultural experience will be pluralistic to the extent that each student will feel respected, welcomed, and included within that which defines the school. What is the alternative to a bicultural experience? If left to chance, if students feel prejudged and unwanted, they will create cultural cliques and take separate and parallel journeys through the school. They will not belong, feel ownership, and engage in the school or its mission. Their perspective of the school culture will be that there is no place for them, and that the school is not a place they want to be part of or a place where they choose to engage.

The other extreme to bicultural identity may be a wholesale rejection of all they believe and all the values and beliefs they have come to school with. If this means a rejection of behaviors and rituals that are illegal, undeniably destructive and antisocial, all the better. But public schools cannot be in the business of purposefully changing Republicans into Democrats or making pro-choice activists out of right-to-life believers (or vice versa). Public schools should be about creating understanding and tolerance regardless of students' personal moral and religious beliefs; and if information, reflection, and maturity solidifies their choices, causes them to doubt their choices, or changes their choices, so be it. The fact is Amal, Renee, Eddie, Stephen, and Tony have cultural identities and histories. School should provide them the safe opportunity to share their narrative, to tell their story, and to start writing the next several chapters of the person whom they aspire to be.

## **The Culture Must Facilitate Quality**

As we have noted, having a mission is an important first step in improving student achievement, because it focuses the various people inside the organization on a common purpose. We are reminded of a school that had four