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An online study guide for professional development related to *Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change* can be found at <http://www.corwin.com/schoolcultures>.

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Changing School Culture

An Introduction and Overview

The message of this book for principals is research based and practical. We argue that school leaders must move beyond the current pressure to place exclusive priority on curriculum and instruction and, instead, focus on integrating and focusing the fragmented subcultures that exist in any school. It is the influence of peers, parents, colleagues, and community that creates a fidgeting, rebellious student or a burned-out and cynical teacher. Nothing inherent in a classroom creates these realities, nor can classroom teaching alone cause them to disappear.

Intensification of leadership is our term to describe an approach to changing the cultural conditions that affect teaching and learning. We are not advocating the abandonment of instructional leadership; principals clearly need to understand and support what teachers do in classrooms in order to help create the conditions that allow them to be more effective. Intensification of leadership acknowledges the existing reality that there are already multiple leaders in any school, and offers a road map to integrate these influences into a more coherent and less contradictory message.

There is a fundamental problem, however: you cannot control your school's culture. Most of the people—teachers, students, and parents—who collectively determine what the school's culture is like have limited incentive to listen to you. Managing a school's culture is not dependent on

the *authority* that you have based on your position, but can only be affected by increasing your *influence* over behaviors, beliefs, relationships, and other complex dynamics present in the school that are often unpredictable.

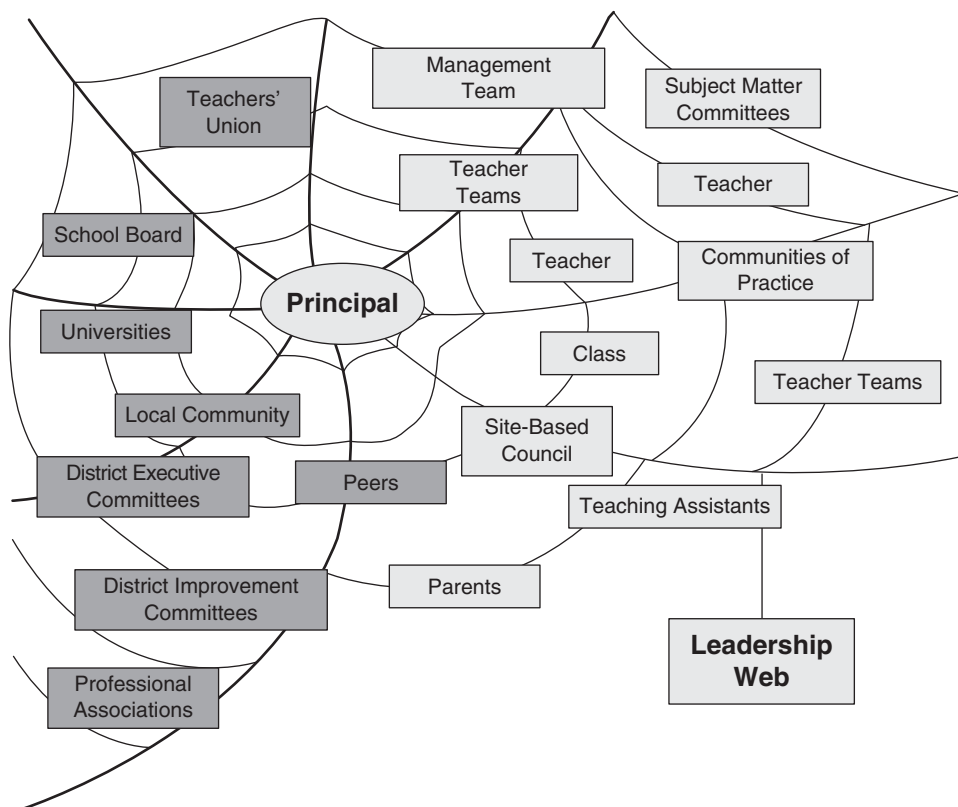
Before we begin to examine schools that have made lasting cultural change, we offer a caveat. It is beyond the scope of this effort to assess the issues of changes in educational policy or public attitudes that provide the backdrop for principal's work but over which they have little influence. Nor do we deal with schools in crisis; those in which academic performance and teacher morale suggest a need for a dramatic "fresh start." The issues we address will be those facing the vast majority of "typical schools" and "typical school administrators."

There is a tradition in the school reform literature that treats elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools as if they are vastly different places. While this is true when the discussion focuses on specific curricular or instructional strategies, such as the efficacy of early reading programs or AP coursework, our research (and that of others) suggests that schools have much in common. Every principal faces similar challenges when faced with changing the "way we have always done things here." It doesn't matter if an elementary school adopts 4-block reading or a high school implements block scheduling, school leaders will face similar forms of resistance, skepticism, and challenge. The old adage that high schools teach subjects and elementary schools teach children is countered by the finding that grade and other teams exert influences in elementary schools that can be every bit as powerful as those of departments at the secondary level.

To illustrate our approach, throughout the book we will consider cases drawn from real schools and principals who have done things right—or were blindsided by unanticipated events and consequences of their own actions. The authors of this book are researchers who have collectively spent more than fifty years trying to understand the world of teachers, administrators, and students. To understand these worlds, and to seek solutions to problems of practice, we have grounded our approach in organizational and management theories that were not specifically written for education. We have also been in the classroom and have worked directly with many schools and educational professionals, so we have the capacity to pull what is relevant from this broader and more abstract base. We hope that a novice school leader will find our analysis and recommendations useful to guide beginning efforts to take a more active role in shaping school cultures. We also expect that expert, experienced school leaders will read this book and find it affirming as they see themselves in our vignettes and recommendations.

This chapter will introduce the key assumptions, concepts, and topics that serve as the basis for the remainder of the book. How we perceive the nature of school culture is central to developing an intensification of leadership to change that culture. Just as physicists sometimes conceptualize light as a wave and sometimes as a particle, we will describe school cultures as both stable and fluid. We will introduce the acronym PCOLT to describe three key conditions for creating constructive school cultures: *professional community*, *organizational learning*, and *trust*. At the end of

Figure 5.1 Leadership Web

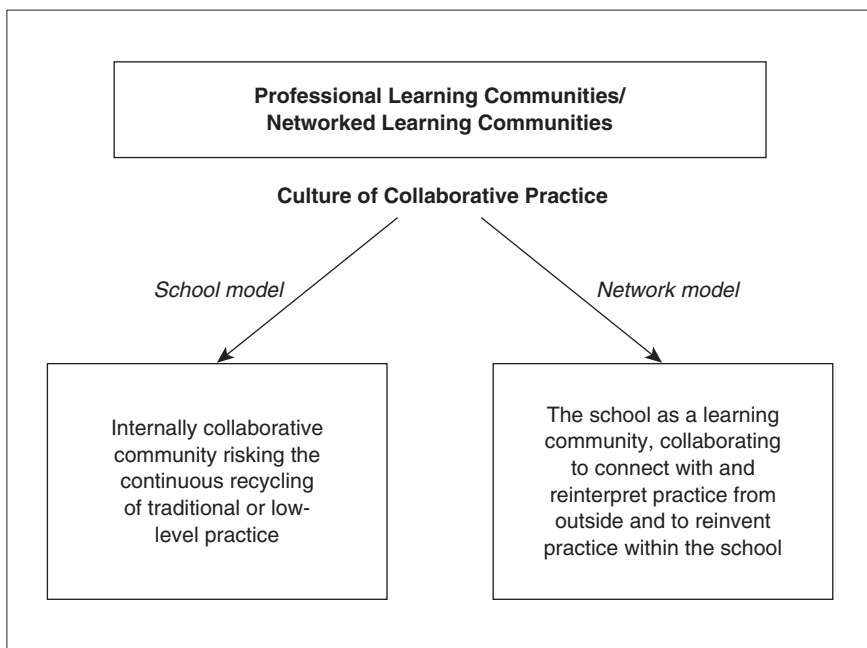


SOURCE: Adapted from Leif Moos, Danish University of Education.

What does it mean to think about schools as webs of influence rather than pyramids of authority? Most important, from our perspective, it means that creating good school cultures must be concerned less with rearranging the formal structures within the school and increasingly with nimble decisions about who should be at the table when ideas are being debated and discussed. In addition, it means that you can broaden your thinking about who might be a source of support, and stop thinking about yourself and the other administrators in your building as an isolated team.

Nearly twenty years ago, two management scholars observed that, in “the variety of expectations, demands, needs, activities and approaches (that occur in schools), . . . [r]elationships that strike casual observers as haphazard and senseless appear regular and sensible when viewed from the perspective of those who must try to make sense out of all of the pieces” (Shedd & Bacharach, 1990, p. 191). Principals are not solely responsible for weaving a web of productive relationships among stakeholders, who range from individual teachers to professional associations that set

Figure 5.2 Professional Learning Communities/Networked Learning Communities



SOURCE: D. Jackson. (2006). *From PLCs to NLCs*. Paper presented at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and School Improvement, Barcelona, Spain.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO NEXT?

Richard Elmore, a political scientist who has spent most of his career thinking about large educational policy issues, has long argued that the most important ability for principals is knowing the right thing to do. As Elmore notes in his descriptions of the principal collaborative that he has organized in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he has come to believe that participation in semipermanent networks is what keeps them vital and focused. Rather than principals being part of a loose set of unpredictable relationships from which they can glean new ideas, the point of formal networks is to give school leaders the certainty that they have a safe place to connect with peers—and with university researchers who may provide “loose ties” to emerging knowledge to foster more reflection (see Elmore, 2000, 2005).