

achievement gap. In fact, this book contends that dysfunctional school cultures create systems that maintain the gap. Mary Kennedy writes, “The traditional induction to teaching encourages teachers to rely on their own prior beliefs and values for guidance and to think of their practice as a highly personal and idiosyncratic endeavor” (2005, p. 11). School culture is indeed a delicate web of past personal experience, organizational history, and interaction with the greater society; however, I contend that dysfunctional or toxic school culture is not insurmountable. As we shall see, many aspects of human behavior, social conditions, and history suggest that these types of environments can be transformed.

The goal of this book is to provide:

1. A framework for understanding how school cultures operate from a political and sociological perspective
2. Practical strategies to manipulate that culture in order to intentionally create positive atmospheres that not only tolerate change, but that seek and embrace the changes that maximize organizational effectiveness

Technical Change Versus Cultural Change

To make clear the power of school culture, I must first identify the two types of organizational change prevalent in today’s schools: technical and cultural change. *Technical changes* are changes to the tools or mechanisms professionals use to do their jobs effectively. These changes within a school context refer to changes in structure, policies, or teaching tools (for example, changing from a 6-period school day to a block schedule, revising the curriculum with changes in learning standards or text material, or offering more advanced and rigorous classes, to name a few). These changes are definitely necessary to effect an improvement in student performance, but they produce very few positive results when used by people who do not believe in the intended outcome of the change.

Technical changes have become very popular in public schools, especially since the passage of NCLB. Why would educators continue to seek these surface-level changes when the United States has such a long history of initiatives that eventually overwhelm our school system’s culture of low efficacy? Central leadership and site leadership have scrambled to find programs or initiatives that will be the magic bullet to fix all ailments. Terms like *research based* and *best practice* have been no match for the deeply ingrained disbelief in student ability that cripples many struggling schools. In fact, I have had the opportunity to study several schools where pessimistic faculty members are eager to prove that new strategies or programs aimed at raising student performance do not work in order to justify and solidify their hypothesis that not all students are capable of achieving excellence.

CHAPTER 2

The Framework of Modern School Culture

School culture is a complex web of history, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. To effectively diagnose and eliminate toxic school culture, we must take an honest look at the internal and external factors that create the conditions that make cultural transformation difficult.

Schools in the Era of Accountability

The accountability movement, and No Child Left Behind in particular, did not create the cultural issues confronting today's school system. But this new era has brought some deeply rooted belief systems and practices to the forefront for examination, including issues such as how we analyze, staff, and fund schools. An examination of the current environment and conditions in our schools can help us understand the myriad of paradigms that exist within the walls of our public schools and therefore help us strategize to transform the environment into a healthy one.

Who Is to Blame?

No Child Left Behind mandates the school as the responsible party when it comes to effectiveness. This is very different from the traditional belief that students and their families were primarily responsible for the effectiveness of education; educators were the experts, and schools provided students with the *opportunity* to learn. Students were expected to comply with their educators' demands to acquire knowledge. Schools believed that if parents supported the expert guidance of the teacher and encouraged their children to follow that guidance, students would succeed in school. It was not surprising, then, that all students were not academically successful, because levels of support for education were different in every household. Additionally, success or failure in school was determined solely by educators in the form of completely subjective grading scales and

Unfortunately, in many other classrooms, I observed similar paradigms with pedagogy that perpetuated gaps in student achievement. Simply put, many Believers wanted all of their children to learn at high levels, but they did not know how to make that desire a reality. In many cases, I observed all of the character attributes of a Believer coupled with methods like silent reading, hour-long lectures, photocopied worksheets, and low-level question-and-answer sessions. It was apparent that the teachers who used these methods were affected by their students' lack of growth, but they were clueless to the fact that their methodology was the key variable in that lack of growth.

In order to close the achievement gap, we need to do more than just believe in our students; we need to properly instruct and guide them. Our field has a wealth of available research on the most effective teaching methods for each student enrolled in our public school system. Educators who adopt egalitarian idealism as the center of their educational paradigm must cultivate professionalism as well. In order to achieve an end, a person must have conviction, but that conviction must be buttressed with skill.

A Unifying Force

Believers display the qualities and value the paradigms that unite staff members and make a positive school culture. Their core beliefs are in alignment with the stated mission of schools: success for every student. They have high expectations for student achievement, and they are willing to embrace strategies that improve their performance. They have made a commitment, not only to the field, but also to the communities that they serve. If schools are to transform their cultures into fertile ground for positive experimentation and student nurturing, they must increase their population of Believers, and their Believers must become more vocal members of the school community.

- Frequent use of worksheets as “busy work” to fill time
- Frequent granting of free time as a reward for behavioral cooperation

The Survivors I observed were not very well respected among their peers. All of the stakeholders in the organization agreed that the Survivors were not good for the school and condemned their practices universally. Many educators felt sympathy for them, but there was consensus that Survivors did not belong in the classroom in their current state of mind.

Organizational Response

When professionals, especially those responsible for the well being of children, reach a point where they spiral into a pit of depression that they cannot dig themselves out of, the organization must respond—and respond swiftly. The state of the Survivor cannot be ignored or easily fixed. The best and only real solution is to remove the Survivor from the conditions that caused the depression until he or she can get proper treatment (Haberman, 2005). Wishful thinking or turning a blind eye will not solve the problem, and leaving Survivors in the environment that caused their psychological breakdown can only make matters worse.

In the cases I observed, the administration generally used the following methods to deal with Survivors:

- Reassigned the teacher to a less challenging teaching assignment
- Worked with officials to have the teacher transferred to another school within the district with the hope that a change in environment might be invigorating
- Counseled the teacher into retirement, if that option was available
- Ignored the symptoms and responded harshly to the disruptive students in an attempt to force them to cooperate with the teacher
- Dealt strictly with the professional behavior without consideration for the cause and responded harshly to the teacher through a series of punitive measures for nonperformance
- Sought the teacher’s removal through termination or some form of medical leave

Skill Levels

Like Believers, Fundamentalists display a wide range of professional skills. I observed some Fundamentalists who displayed very low levels of content knowledge and pedagogical skills and others who displayed high levels of knowledge and used very effective teaching strategies with their students.

A Fundamentalist is not an ineffective teacher by virtue of his or her political stance. But certain values Fundamentalists hold dear make it very difficult for them to promote a healthy school culture. Fundamentalists who I observed using very effective teaching strategies were effective with the students that they were entrusted to educate, but they still refused to work effectively with other professionals or embrace any form of change, and they had a generally negative disposition about the motives and ability of their leaders.

I contend that even the most effective Fundamentalists still pose a threat to a school's culture and its achievement of universal success for all students. Even though they show pockets of effectiveness and proficiency, they are not poised to embrace techniques and strategies that could allow them to be even more effective. Obviously, a Fundamentalist who does *not* exhibit effectiveness in the classroom is an even bigger problem. An ineffective professional who rejects change presents a danger to any organization.

Warring Paradigms

Of all of the members of the school community, Fundamentalists are by far the most active. They actively and consistently seek to add to their ranks and to gain political power to support their belief system. They are very active within the formal and informal organization, and their level of commitment to achieving their end is much more intense than that of the Believers. Watching them operate within several different school systems revealed a savvy, well-organized, and determined group of individuals.

Emotional Versus Rational

One characteristic of Fundamentalists that became evident during my observations was their commonly used strategy of keeping the philosophical argument focused on emotion. They regularly engaged in debates, sometimes arguments, with staff members with opposing viewpoints. During these debates, they centered their arguments about how a proposed policy change or change in practice affected them and other staff members on the emotional issues associated with the change—on comfort, convenience, and working conditions.