

Creating a Culture for Learning

by Sidney Trubowitz

Everywhere we read about efforts to revitalize schools. Such initiatives include restructuring governance by centralizing the power to make decisions, introducing a mandated curriculum for all teachers to follow, and reinforcing an accountability process with a strong focus on test scores. All these school-improvement proposals rely on a belief that change can be imposed from the outside without the participation of teachers, administrators, students, and parents. The likely results of such proposals are the development of learning environments that devote little time to reflection on what constitutes good practice; teachers who function in a mechanical fashion; and, after a momentary flurry of activity, a return to the status quo.

To achieve growth that will be lasting and more than superficial, what is needed are opportunities for public school staffs, parents, students, college faculty, and professional organizations to work together. Their aim must be to build a different kind of school culture, one that develops an exemplary curriculum, identifies effective teaching approaches, and establishes an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Having worked for more than twenty years with the Queens College-Louis Armstrong Middle School collaboration in New York City, I have seen firsthand what helps to establish a different kind of educational tone and what gets in the way of creating a culture promoting learning. Here is what I have learned.

The Elements of a New School Culture

A Thinking Atmosphere

The usual school organization finds the elementary schoolteacher with children all day long and the secondary school instructor seeing 150 students five times a week for a daily forty-five-minute period. The teacher begins each morning by signing in or by punching a time clock. From there it's a walk to a room, a door closed, and a day without peer dialogue. Professional development is restricted to the occasional guru-led workshop. No time is provided for teachers to reflect on the day's

happenings with others or by themselves. In other countries “alone time” as part of the teacher’s day is considered essential. It is not unusual in the corporate world to provide weekly brainstorming sessions for employees. Recent trends toward extending the school day and year will leave teachers with even less time for reflection.

In our public school-college collaboration, no single event or procedure made up the emotional and intellectual scaffolding that supported a thinking atmosphere. Rather, a day-to-day series of happenings contributed to a climate that encouraged reflection before moving into action. School administrators gave ready approval for teachers to attend professional conferences or visit other schools. A well-publicized professional library to which teachers and parents had easy access was established. Administrators, teachers, and professors who worked in the school recommended articles to each other. Faculty conferences were planned with teachers to demonstrate and discuss what colleagues were doing. At brown-bag luncheons and breakfast meetings with coffee provided, such topics as a favorite children’s book or how best to use student teachers were explored. Teacher schedules were organized so that small numbers could meet regularly to discuss topics of mutual interest.

Open Communication

A school culture promoting learning bespeaks an openness of communication in which ideas and feelings are freely expressed and acknowledged. But if that is to occur, there is a need to move through and beyond times of distrust and suspicion. The origin of these negative attitudes is grounded in past experience. There are the years of criticism leveled at public school teachers and administrators by the press, college faculty, the public at large, and even the educational bureaucracy itself. Newspaper headlines highlight the sins of individual instructors and the inadequacies of public education and its personnel. External agencies and professors issue reports describing low levels of student achievement. Central office administrators talk blithely of inferior principals and teachers. It’s little wonder that public school personnel experiencing the never-ending onslaught of reprimand view outsiders and often their own school administrators with skepticism and defensiveness. The messages they hear say “This is what you’re doing wrong.” They never see “This is what you’re doing right.” In our collaboration we found that only after extensive shared experience did staff feel comfortable enough to express its views without fearing retaliation.

Barriers between people eroded as college faculty and school administrators worked with teachers in their classrooms, as parent-teacher retreats took place at the college environmental center, as parents were invited to shadow their children through a typical day, and as

parent-teacher-professor committees explored school concerns. When administrators, teachers, professors, and parents met to discuss educational matters, they interacted not as figures occupying particular roles but as individuals with views to offer. This is not to say that the participants all brought similar levels of expertise and experience to the discussions: only that everyone's contributions received respect. The aim always was to develop an atmosphere of trust in which attitudes of superiority and critical judgments were absent and where opposing stances provided leeway for empathic understanding.

We also recognized the value of social interaction to professional growth. School parties, student-faculty athletic events, theater groups, and book clubs all assisted in getting to the real person, moving past the outer layers of personality, and facilitating authentic communication.

The Value of an Outside Observer

One of the assets school staffs bring to their work is extensive experience within their own institutions. Even the most introspective educators, however, face the dangers of allowing familiarity to influence objectivity and of failing to profit from what others have learned elsewhere. Perceptive observers can ask questions and make comments that broaden understanding and supply insights that may escape those who are immersed in a project.

In our public school-college collaboration, we worked with people of broad backgrounds whose lack of knowledge of bureaucratic strictures proved a boon as they made suggestions free from traditional thinking. For example, at one session dealing with the problem of acclimating students and parents from throughout Queens to a new middle school, Seymour Sarason, a professor emeritus of Yale University and a periodic visitor to the school, recommended conducting a week-long orientation for newcomers and their families before the beginning of the school year. We were able to persuade the board of education of the value of such an activity despite its departure from usual practice. It has since become a fixture in how the school operates.

In another instance, Clarence Bunch, a professor of art education, proposed installing a school museum. After consultation with the principal, teachers, and colleagues, it too has become an integral part of how the Louis Armstrong Middle School functions. It is now the scene of displays of student work, shows by neighborhood artists, and exhibitions of artifacts produced by children from other countries.

The Need to Develop a Common Language

A healthy educational community needs to avoid jargon and to use words and phrases that have shared meaning. The list of terms banded

about in discussions of education without clear definition is long. For example, there is much support for the idea of parental involvement, but there is little talk about how parents are to participate in a school. Are they to help set goals? To be used only as resource people? To evaluate teachers? To establish budgetary priorities? To select texts?

Other ideas needing clarification include accountability, curriculum, staff development, and leadership. To create a culture in which the participants communicate with clarity, there is a need to reach common understanding of these terms and others.

In our collaboration, the effort to ensure that people used mutually understood terms was supported by weekly preschool meetings attended by the principal, teachers, parents, and college faculty. Teachers and professors joining with parents at the monthly Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) meetings also helped to bridge language barriers.

Respecting Teacher Autonomy

In many schools, teachers are besieged by external impositions on instructional time. Public-address announcements interrupt the day. Directives from the district office insist on participation in citywide contests. A steady stream of messages emanating from the school's main office, administrators, colleagues, and others fragments the flow of teacher-student interaction. Test scores become the single measure of teacher effectiveness, with the result that teaching to the test becomes the norm and occupies much of the school day. Teachers are mandated to teach in a prescribed manner. A one-size-fits-all approach views teaching as a robotic endeavor rather than one demanding thoughtful analysis of student needs.

At the Louis Armstrong Middle School, curriculum exploration and experimentation are the norm, undergirded by a belief that a rich educational program will result in good student test scores. That has been the case over the years. It has also become a cardinal rule that the public-address system is used only for the direst of emergencies; that for the first hour at least, messages to classrooms are forbidden; and that demands for written reports are to be kept to a minimum. If time for instruction is to be valued, then the teacher's domain, the classroom, needs respect and not indiscriminate intrusion.

Obstacles to Building a Positive School Culture

The task of building a school culture that promotes learning is ongoing with the constant struggle to overcome obstacles. For example, the traditional way in which schools function inhibits an easy exchange of ideas among professionals. Schools have a hierarchical organization headed by a principal aided by assistant principals, chairpeople, and

deans. The teacher group alone is seen as the target for improvement. A common method for achieving instructional growth is the supervisory observation, with classroom visits followed by a discussion in which the principal, after an initial listing of strengths, outlines areas in need of improvement. Rarely is this process viewed as a conversation in which ideas are shared. Rarely are questions asked that might encourage reflection. Rarely are plans made to pursue issues in greater depth. The subordinate position of the teacher is reinforced by requiring that planbooks gain administrative approval and letters sent home are first screened by the principal.

If thinking is to become part of the school culture, there should be a different conception of how people in different roles are to operate. The hierarchical nature of schools, with communication flowing only one way, leaves little opportunity for groups to dialogue about instructional issues.

The limitations of professional preparation present another problem. Cooperation and collegiality are characteristics of a school culture promoting group exploration of ideas. When educators have had little experience in working together, the attempt to collaborate is likely to meet strong obstacles. The education of teachers, administrators, and such specialists as reading instructors, school psychologists, and special education staff takes place in separate courses. With other faculty I arranged to bring graduate classes of special education teachers, prospective school psychologists, and potential administrators together for a few sessions. The initial inability of the participants to listen to the point of view of the others was startling. It is clear that if school professionals are to work effectively with one another, teacher-preparation programs must help future educators become aware of how roles shape behavior and learn ways of dealing with conflict.

The culture prevailing in the society outside schools also impacts the task of creating a thoughtful school community. We live in an environment filled with demands for immediate solutions to complex problems. Profound political issues are presented in sound bites. Popular television programs appeal to instincts removed from any need to think. The speed of e-mail and fax machines obliterates the opportunity for considered contemplation before making a response. To build a culture supportive of learning, schools must resist external pressures pushing for precipitous action unsupported by prior thinking.

Another obstacle to establishing a culture for learning is the inevitability of resistance to new ideas. The teaching profession draws people who are hard workers, who are committed to service, and who place a high value on stability. Attempts to alter customary work patterns will encounter resistance. The desire for the security of the status

quo will serve to reinforce customary modes of behavior and to block out ideas that are different. The challenge for those trying to create a new school culture is to empathize with the reluctance to change and, at the same time, to support those ready to explore new approaches to education.

To develop schools that are not simply institutions responding to the external pressures prevailing at a particular time but rather are centers of ongoing exploration, learning, thinking, and adapting to the needs of students, we need to look more closely at how schools are organized, how people interact with one another, how change occurs, and how we view the role of the teacher.

Sidney Trubowitz is a professor emeritus at Queens College of the City University of New York.