

The **12** norms of a healthy school culture

- 1 Collegiality
- 2 Experimentation
- 3 High expectations
- 4 Trust and confidence
- 5 Tangible support
- 6 Reaching out to knowledge base
- 7 Appreciation and recognition
- 8 Caring, celebration, and humor
- 9 Involvement in decision making
- 10 Protection of what's important
- 11 Traditions
- 12 Honest, open communication

Source: "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures" by Jon Saphier and Matthew King (*Educational Leadership*, March 1985).

School's culture shapes student learning

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King identified 12 norms which they said affected school improvement. (*See column at left.*)

"If certain norms of school culture are strong, improvements in instruction will be significant, continuous, and widespread; if these norms are weak, improvements will be, at best, infrequent, random, and slow," they said.

Peterson believes schools must begin by identifying the norms and beliefs in the school. He suggests answering these questions:

What are the rituals, traditions, and ceremonies in your school?

Who are the heroes in your school?

What stories do you tell about your school?

What symbols, slogans, and images represent your school?

How do you recognize student achievement?

How do you recognize staff growth?

Next, identify norms and beliefs that the staff wants to reinforce or change.

Again, Peterson poses a series of questions to help a staff:

Do the daily actions of teachers and principals support your underlying core values?

Do the history and stories that are told about your school support your core values?

What rituals and ceremonies would reinforce the key values in your school?

EXEMPLARY SCHOOL CULTURES

Each of this year's winners of the U.S. Department of Education Model Professional Development Awards can point to a time when the school's culture began to shift. (*See the fall issue of the JSD to learn more about these winning schools and districts.*) Like other USDOE winners, Ganado (Arizona) Intermediate School principal Susan Stropko said she focused on cultural issues before trying to address issues of student learning. "I went in knowing the culture had to be changed. They were not feeling very heard or cared

about. Nothing was going to change in that school until that changed," she said.

At Ganado, the process began by having grade level teams talk about their frustrations over lunch once a week, a step that Peterson endorses. "People need a chance to believe things can get better, they need a positive path, and they need hope," Peterson said.

"These conversations were basically about everything that was wrong. There was real unhappiness. They needed some time to vent," Stropko said.

Stropko joined in those conversations. "I did not go off on my own. I sat there and I listened. I was trying to establish my own credibility as a listener and as an administrator who would value what I heard and would work to get teachers what they said they needed."

These staff conversations continued until the Christmas break. "It was only after all of that that we could talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the school," she said.

"Their own changes were harder to talk about than the changes they wanted me to make. Once they laid out what they wanted to achieve, then we found out what we wanted to learn in order to do that," she said.

Peterson said a school needs to identify its own culture and say openly that not everyone will like working in this school. "If you've been going along for years with established structures and an established culture, it's very hard to re-examine what you're about. There is pain in giving up things that are fun and being able to complain without responsibility is part of the fun for some people," he said.

"There are people who don't want to improve their practice. They just don't want to be helped all the time," Peterson said.

Schools that gain the reputation as a "work hard, play hard" school soon will be less attractive to staffers who don't share that attitude and, eventually, he said, the new culture will perpetuate itself.