

# An audit of the culture starts with two handy tools

By CHRISTOPHER WAGNER  
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**A**s a pair of facilitators entered a North Carolina middle school, three 7th graders met them at the door. "What are you doing here?" one student asked. "We're looking for the best middle school in North Carolina," a facilitator answered. "You found it!" the student exclaimed, and the others heartily agreed. This chance encounter provided the facilitators just one of many clues in assessing the school's culture.

Schools have tried various improvements to create more effective schools, but many educators and researchers are discovering a "missing link" (Wagner & Hall-O'Phalen, 1998). That missing link has more to do with the school's culture than with elaborate curriculum alignment projects, scrimmage tests, and the latest buzzword reform efforts. Researchers agree that school culture is an important, but often overlooked, component of school improvement (Levine & Lezotte,

1995; Sizer, 1988; Phillips, 1996; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Frieberg, 1998).

Culture is the bracing for the bridge from previous to future achievement. If the braces are firm and strong, the chances of improving are high. Getting the culture right should always precede "programs" in efforts to raise student achievement. Schools with top-down, "do it or else" staff development plans rarely improve, while schools sensitive to their cultures are successful in improving

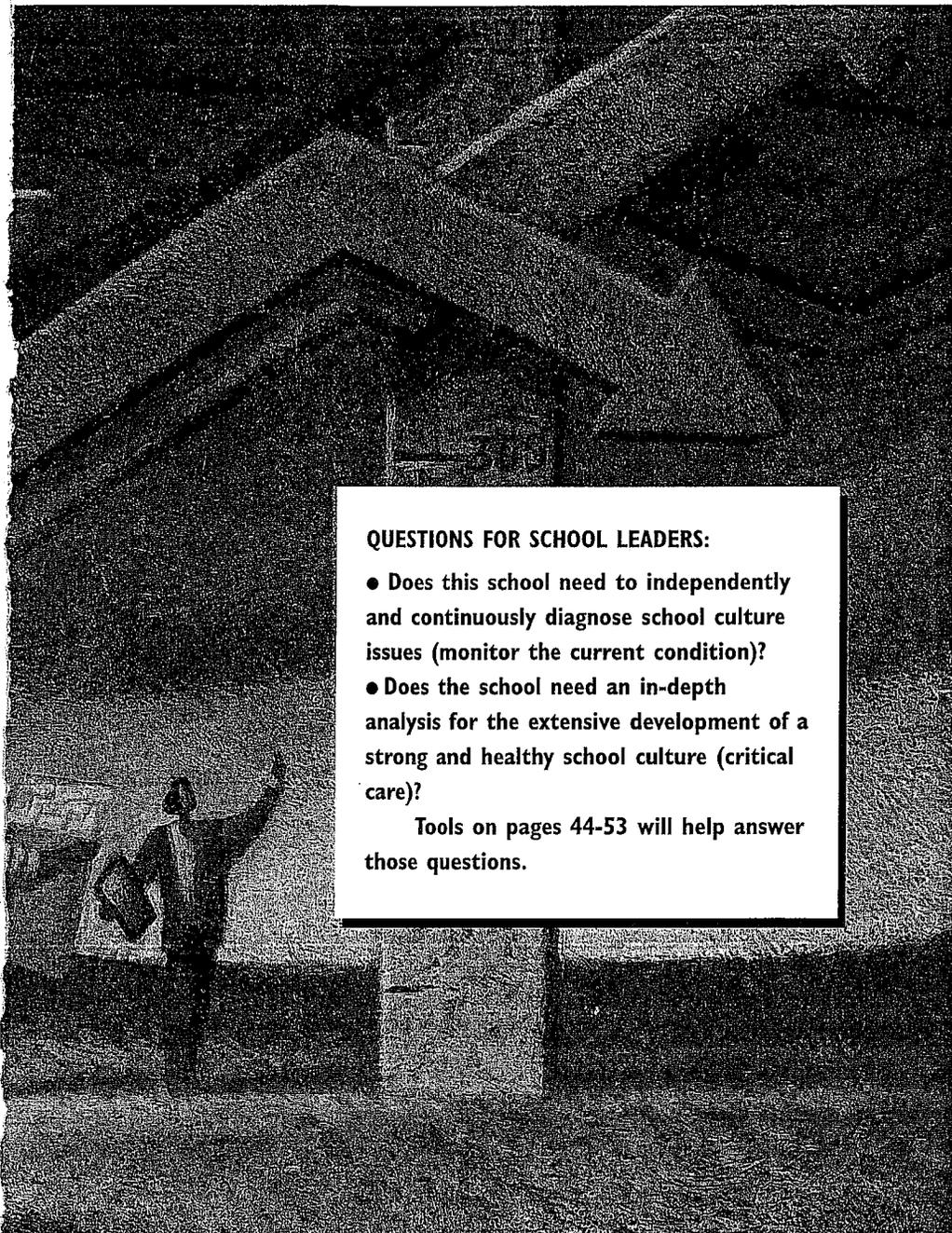
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student learning. As Sheila Patterson, a teacher at South Stokes High School in Walnut Cove, N.C., recently said (personal communication, Oct. 10, 2001), "It's an attitude, not a program."

Without a healthy school culture, staff may not be open or receptive to professional learning opportunities. Traditionally, school improvement efforts emphasized an individual teacher learning new skills. The theory was, "If people don't improve, programs never will." This belief also promoted the notion of individual professional development as the primary means to school improvement. However, in reality, negative cultures,



#### QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS:

- Does this school need to independently and continuously diagnose school culture issues (monitor the current condition)?
- Does the school need an in-depth analysis for the extensive development of a strong and healthy school culture (critical care)?

Tools on pages 44-53 will help answer those questions.

#### What is school culture?

Wagner (2000) describes school culture as shared experiences both in and out of school (traditions and celebrations), a sense of community, of family and team.

- Staff stability and common goals permeate the school.
- Curricular and instructional components, as well as order and discipline, are established through consensus.
- Open and honest communication is encouraged and staff demonstrate humor and trust.
- Stakeholders are recognized in schoolwide celebrations.
- The school's leaders and district leaders provide tangible support.

**SOURCE:** Wagner, C. (2000, October 20). *School culture analysis*. Address conducted at the meeting of the Manitoba Association of Resource Teachers (MART), Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

**MORE INFORMATION** about school culture and school culture audits can be obtained from:

- The Center for Improving School Culture  
[www.schoolculture.net](http://www.schoolculture.net)
- The National School Improvement Project  
[www.garyphillips.com](http://www.garyphillips.com)

colleagues, and environments often overwhelm the best teachers.

The theory of individual professional growth has given way to a culture-centered approach toward professional learning aimed at collegial teams — learning and practicing together. Acknowledging that “unless teams of teachers improve together, schools never will” stresses the culture approach toward improvement and change. The goal of professional development is the inculturation of a continuous improvement philosophy among teams of professionals rather than individual teachers. This can only occur in a healthy school culture

designed to promote higher levels of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination.

Determining the quality and health of the school culture is essential for all schools as they strive to improve. Yet most have not assessed their culture. Educators are more likely to dwell on raising scores and meeting state requirements than to examine a holistic view of the school and the relationships among the people who work, learn, and relate there.

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## SELF-ASSESSMENT: SCHOOL CULTURE TRIAGE

*School culture requires consistent care. Determine the current condition of your culture. Do you need simply to monitor and maintain, or are you headed for intensive care?*

**Instructions:** Copy and distribute this survey to teachers and instructional staff in the same school. Have them fill out the form completely, then tally individual scores. Add up individual scores and divide by the number in the group for an average. Compare that number with the Scoring Guide on the next page to determine the health of your culture.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always or almost always
<b>PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION</b>					
1. Teachers and staff discuss instructional strategies and curriculum issues.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Teachers and staff work together to develop the school schedule.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Teachers and staff are involved in the decision-making process with regard to materials and resources.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The planning and organizational time allotted to teachers and staff is used to plan as collective units/teams rather than as separate individuals.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>AFFILIATIVE COLLEGIALLY</b>					
1. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values	1	2	3	4	5
2. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each others' company.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our school schedule reflects frequent communication opportunities for teachers and staff.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.	1	2	3	4	5
6. There is a rich and robust tradition of rituals and celebrations, including holidays, special events, and recognition of goal attainment.	1	2	3	4	5
<b>SELF-DETERMINATION/EFFICACY</b>					
1. When something is not working in our school, the faculty and staff predict and prevent rather than react and repair.	1	2	3	4	5
2. School members are interdependent and value each other.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.	1	2	3	4	5
6. People work here because they enjoy and choose to be here.	1	2	3	4	5

Source: Penelope Masden-Copas

## SCORING GUIDE: SCHOOL CULTURE TRIAGE

*The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After using the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggest the following:*

- 17 – 40 =** Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school's culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing your school's culture.
- 41 – 60 =** Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school's culture to determine which area is most in need of improvement.
- 60 – 75 =** Monitor and continue to make positive adjustments.
- 76 – 85 =** Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75! Continue monitoring, though, with each school improvement planning cycle, or at least every two years, to be sure you stay in top shape.

**Source:** *Penelope Masden-Copas*

## SCHOOL CULTURE AUDIT

*This school culture assessment has been used successfully in public schools of North Carolina, Florida, and Kentucky over the last decade. It can be used with one school or an entire district. It provides immediate feedback, is cost-effective, and recognizes both strengths and challenges.*

### What is a School Culture Audit?

What are we looking for in a School Culture Audit? An audit is not a "find a problem and fix it" process. Rather than asking, "What is wrong with this place?" cultural auditors ask, "What, in your opinion, would make this school the best it can be?" School culture is assessed by examining three types of behavior (Phillips, 1993):

- **Professional collaboration**  
Do teachers and staff meet and work together to solve instructional, organizational, or curricular issues?
- **Collegial relationships**  
Do people enjoy working together, support one another, and feel valued and included?
- **Efficacy/self-determination**  
Are people in this school because they want to be? Do they work to improve their skills as professionals, or do they see themselves as victims of a large and uncaring bureaucracy?

Each audit has five steps:

1. Interviews
2. Observations
3. Survey
4. Evaluation
5. Presentation

When combined, information obtained from these different vantage points produce a clear picture of the school's culture. The facilitators should not be from the school being audited.

### Directions

**Step One: Interviews** — Designate days when the facilitators will interview staff, parents, students, classified staff, and administrators. See Page 47 for more detailed instructions for the interviews.

**Step Two: Observations** — Designate days when facilitators will make informal observations of the school. These observations include discussions with students, faculty, and other stakeholders. See Pages 48-49 for more detailed instructions for the interviews.

**Step Three: Survey** — Designate days when representatives of all school community groups will take the school culture survey. See Pages 50-51 for the survey and more detailed instructions about administering the survey.

**Step Four: Evaluation** — Evaluate what has been learned during the School Culture Audit. See Page 52 for more detailed instructions about evaluating the results.

**Step Five: Presentation** — Present the findings of the School Culture Audit to the community. See Page 53 for more detailed instructions about the presentation.

Source: Christopher Wagner

## STEP ONE: INTERVIEWS

### Directions to the facilitators

1. Ask the school principal for a designated space for the interviews – a conference room, designated classroom, corner of the media center, or faculty lounge to conduct interviews. Make sure there are beverages and snacks available since most professional staff will be giving up their preparation period.
2. Randomly select groups of five to eight each of faculty members, parents, students, classified staff, and administrators to be interviewed. Interview the various groups separately.
3. Assign at least two facilitators to each group. Explain the process you will be using and how the information that you collect will be used. Tell interviewees that they are not required to answer any question. Do not use a tape recorder – nothing shuts down an interview quite as fast, and you want open, candid responses.
4. Ask each group a series of questions relating to the school's culture. Decide in advance which questions each facilitator will ask. Both facilitators ask questions, take notes, and record direct quotes.
5. Ask vision questions to encourage a positive picture of the future. Instead of asking "what is?," ask "what ought to be?" Keep the group's focus positive and avoid falling into a "woe is me" whining syndrome. Pay attention to the dominant emotions elicited from these "vision" questions:
  - When you awoke this morning and thought about another day in this school (as a teacher, student, custodian, etc.), what was the dominant feeling or emotion you experienced?
  - What factors caused you to feel that way?
  - Think of the previous week in terms of emotional peaks and valleys. Identify some peaks of bliss. Identify some valleys of despair.
  - Imagine a peak of emotional bliss next week as a teacher (student, administrator, etc.). How would you set it up for yourself? Who could you get to help?
6. Identify what is important to the group and how people improve. Look for whether their responses reflect the formal curriculum and stated professional development goals. Do improvement areas reflect the silent curriculum and unstated or spin-off outcomes? Note responses in which people say they are learning from each other or in more formal settings such as planned staff development sessions.
  - As a teacher (student, administrator, etc.), recall one way you have improved in the past year. What is something you are doing differently or better?
  - What were the major forces or who contributed to your improvement?
  - What is one way you would like to improve in the next 12 months? How could you make this happen?
7. Get to the heart of attitudes about differentiated instruction/student achievement with a question and a follow-up. Typical responses to the first question detail the lack of study habits and poor parenting.
  - How have students changed over the past few years?
  - Since we all agree that students are not the same as they were a few years ago, how have you modified your teaching to reach every child?

Other questions might include:

- If you had the power to make today the best day of teaching you ever had, what would you do?
  - How could we make this staff come together in a unified, collective, and supportive manner?
  - What are some instructional highlights of your day and what can you do to experience them more often?
  - How can teachers make the classified staff feel more valued and respected?
8. Take a few minutes to debrief and compare notes after each interview.
  9. Analyze notes for evidence of the presence or absence of professional collaboration, collegiality, and self-determination. This information will be included in the School Culture Audit report, which will be shared with school stakeholders.

The responses to these questions will begin to yield the emotional status of each group. Facilitators identify sources of dominant emotions and hints for improvement from the "imagined bliss" question.

Source: Christopher Wagner

## STEP TWO: OBSERVATIONS

Facilitators make informal observations of the school. These observations include discussions with students, faculty, and other stakeholders.

### Directions to the facilitators

1. Speak with a good cross-section of students and staff.
2. Separate and circulate throughout the school for best results.
3. Look for specific examples of 13 characteristics related to the three types of behavior being evaluated by the audit: **professional collaboration** (teachers planning together, sharing teaching modalities, teaming in their delivery, etc.), **collegiality** (friendly environment, emotional support, continuation of cherished rituals and traditions), and **efficacy/self-determination**. Make a note of each example and determine the degree to which each characteristic is present in the school. Share the notations in the profile presentation. Note both positive and negative examples.

Each of the 13 characteristics listed here is related to those three types of behavior. For example, 3, 4, 6, and 10 support professional collaboration; 1, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 13 align with collegiality; and 2 and 9 represent efficacy.

Determine to what degree each of these characteristics is present in the school.

#### Examples:

- Facilitator observes shared and good-natured (as opposed to mean-spirited) humor in the faculty lounge as an example of characteristic #8.
  - Facilitator observes mutual respect exhibited between teachers and secretarial staff prior to the beginning of the school day. A notation is made on characteristic #1: collegiality.
  - Facilitator observes cooperative effort to secure reading grant and makes a notation regarding #4: experimentation and entrepreneurship, and #9: shared decision making.
4. After the observations, facilitators review notes in a debriefing session. Their notes are shaped and interpreted to more clearly specify the characteristics identified. The data are included in the School Culture Audit report to the staff and school community with all other collected data.

### C H A R A C T E R I S T I C S

1. **Collegiality.** The way adults treat each other, i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.
2. **Efficacy.** Feeling of ownership or capacity to influence decisions; i.e., do people tend to live with or solve problems?
3. **High expectations of self and others.** Excellence is acknowledged; improvement is celebrated, supported, and shared.
4. **Experimentation and entrepreneurship.** New ideas abound and invention occurs.
5. **Trust and confidence.** Participants believe in the leaders and each other based on the match between creeds and deeds.
6. **Tangible support.** Improvement efforts are substantive with abundant resources made available by all.
7. **Appreciation and recognition of improvement.** People feel special and act special.
8. **Humor.** Caring is expressed through "kidding" or joking in tasteful ways.
9. **Shared decision making by all participants.** Those affected by a decision are involved in making and implementing the decision.
10. **Shared vision.** Participants understand what's important and avoid trivial tasks.
11. **Traditions.** The school has identifiable celebrations and rituals that are important to the school community.
12. **Open and honest communication.** Information flows throughout the organization in formal and informal channels. Everyone receives information on a "need-to-know" basis.
13. **Metaphors and stories.** There is evidence of behavior being communicated and influenced by internal imagery.

Source: Christopher Wagner.

## OBSERVATIONS

1. **Collegiality.** The way adults treat each other, i.e., respect and harmony vs. disrespect and discord.

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13. **Metaphors and stories.** There is evidence of behavior being communicated and influenced by internal imagery.

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Source: Christopher Wagner.

## STEP THREE: SURVEY

### Directions to the facilitators

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- Ask representatives of all school community groups to take the School Culture Survey (*see next page*).
- Assure participants survey responses are anonymous.
- Surveys should be presented and collected in person – mailing is a waste of time and postage.
- Professional staff may complete the survey in 10 to 15 minutes in a faculty meeting. A faculty member collects the surveys at that time.
- The school secretary usually circulates and collects surveys from teaching assistants, other clerical staff, custodians, and bus drivers.
- Administer parent and student surveys immediately after their participation in the interview. Parent surveys also can be distributed during open house, parent/teacher conferences, or at a PTA/PTO meeting.
- A committee (formed for this purpose of an administrator, teacher, clerical staff member, etc., or the school improvement committee) tabulates the responses, creating separate scores for each subgroup to compare.

### Tabulating survey results

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A standing school committee (such as the school improvement committee) should tabulate the survey results, providing an average for what is perceived to be present and what is perceived to be important for each of the 13 questions.

The committee should then review the averages for gaps in the two numbers on each question. A general rule is that gaps of 3.0 or more need to be addressed.

#### Example

In the **presence** line for #1: Democratic decision making, Four people circle 2, eight people circle 3, two people circle 4, eight people circle 5, and two people circle 6. The sum of all rankings is 92. The mean, 92 divided by 24 (people) equals 3.8.

Then, in the **importance** line, two people circle 5, three people circle 6, 10 people circle 8, seven people circle 9, and two circle 10. The sum of all rankings is 191. The mean, 191 divided by 24 (people) equals 7.9.

The gap (difference) between importance and present equals 4.1. Conclusion: This school should address the issue of democratic decision making.

Source: Christopher Wagner. Survey adapted from Phillips, G. (1993). *The school-classroom culture audit*. Vancouver, B.C.: Eduserv, British Columbia School Trustees Publishing.

# SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEY

**Background:** The 13 items in this survey have been identified as key indicators of a school's culture. Your opinion and ranking of these factors is important and will be valuable in assessing your school's culture. What is culture? For this survey, culture is defined as the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize the school in terms of:

- How people treat and feel about each other;
- The extent to which people feel included and appreciated; and
- Rituals and traditions reflecting collaboration and collegiality.

**Directions:** Please rate each item twice. First, rate the item by circling an appropriate number reflecting its PRESENCE in your school. Second, rate the item by circling the appropriate number relative to its IMPORTANCE to you.

**I am a:** (Please circle one)

Student    Teacher aide    Custodian    Parent  
Secretary    Administrator    Teacher    Bus driver    Other

7. Schoolwide recognition of success for students and staff.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

1. Democratic and participatory decision making.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

8. An effort to maximize active learning in academic areas.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

2. Strong leadership from administrators, teachers, or teams of both.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

9. District support for school improvement efforts.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

3. Staff stability-low turnover from year to year.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

10. Collaborative instructional planning and collegial relationships.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

4. A planned, coordinated curriculum supported by research and faculty.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

11. Sense of community, family, and team.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

5. Schoolwide selected and agreed-upon staff development.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

12. Clear goals and high expectations for students and staff.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

6. Parental involvement, engagement, and support.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

13. Order and discipline established through consensus and consistent application.

Not present    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Always present  
Not important    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10    Extremely important

Please use the space below to make any additional comments about the items on this survey.

Source: Christopher Wagner. Survey adapted from Phillips, G. (1993). *The school-classroom culture audit*. Vancouver, B.C.: Eduserv, British Columbia School Trustees Publishing.

## STEP FOUR: EVALUATION

### Directions to the facilitators

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1. Analyze the data and identify strengths (presence of culture-rich examples) and weaknesses.
2. Organize the analyzed data into a written School Culture Profile answering questions such as:
  - What specific comments (quotes) were expressed about building professional collaboration in this school?
  - What did we observe that would lead us to believe there is a strong sense of collegiality here?
  - Which responses indicate the presence or lack of efficacy?
  - What gaps exist between what is present and what is important as revealed in the survey?
  - How do the survey results compare with information gathered in the interviews and observations?
  - What trends or common themes are revealed in the collected data?
3. If there are no specific examples of professional collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy/self-determination, then point to what is unhealthy about the culture and what is inhibiting improvement. Some examples:
  - When teachers say they feel isolated and want to spend more time with colleagues, there is an obvious lack of opportunity for collegial involvement.
  - If teachers cannot identify a source of help for an instructional dilemma, there is a problem with professional collaboration.
  - Constant complaints about red tape, central office policy and the ever-increasing demands made by the state department reveal the lack of self-determination and efficacy.
4. Present the written profile to the school improvement team and administration before making an oral presentation to the school community.
5. Many schools elect to do a School Culture Audit in the fall and again in the spring as a pre/post instrument.

## STEP FIVE: PRESENTATION

### Directions to the facilitators

1. Use an extended faculty meeting held immediately after school for the presentation, or better, report it at an evening PTA/PTO/School Council meeting. Since the meetings are always positive and extremely informative, schools typically make great efforts to invite the community.
2. Keep the presentation to an hour or less.
3. With two or more facilitators, one facilitator opens the meeting by sharing statements and direct quotes from the interviews. These statements are tied to the big three behaviors: professional collaboration, collegial relationships, efficacy/self-determination.
4. Another facilitator shares notes from the observation, including comments overheard or summaries of discussions. These comments answer the questions: How are people treating each other? What types of behaviors are staff members modeling for the children? How inviting does the school feel? What evidence is there of collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy?
5. Share information from the survey, noting any significant gaps between presence and importance.
6. Conclude with four or five recommendations for improvement. Facilitators also may agree to work with the school improvement team, site-based council, etc., to assist in planning and implementing improvements.
7. Facilitate a discussion among stakeholders about the findings. Addressing the following key questions provides a basis for sustained improvement that has the potential to involve and secure ownership from the entire school community:
  - What areas of our school's culture (professional collaboration, collegiality, efficacy/self-determination) appear to be strongest and why?
  - What can we do as a school community to maintain and/or improve these strengths?
  - What areas of our school's culture (professional collaboration, collegiality, efficacy/self-determination) present the greatest challenge for improvement?
  - What can we as a school community do to improve in these areas?

### PRESENTATION TIPS

**When presenting to the school community,** take care to highlight school culture strengths. There is always something good to say.

**A typical statement might be:**

"During the interview, several people indicated a desire to develop thematic units with teachers in other disciplines. One teacher said, 'I respect my colleagues and would like the opportunity to just sit down and talk about what they teach. A few years ago, we worked together on a thematic unit. The kids liked it, we got a lot accomplished, and it gave us a chance to teach together. Many of us would like to do that again.' Another teacher reported an interest in learning more teaching strategies from her colleagues.

"Based on the data collected, one of the facilitator's recommendations for strengthening professional collaboration would involve planning time for several volunteers to develop a pilot thematic unit. Once the unit has been taught, the teachers involved could report their experiences to the entire faculty."