



Evaluating and Strengthening School Culture:

Key Indicators and Strategies

Research and surveys highlight that a positive school culture correlates with improved academic outcomes and teacher retention.

However, defining and evaluating school culture is often elusive. What is school culture and how is it measured? How can school leaders evaluate if the school lives up to the promises of the mission and vision statements?

Identifying key indicators and goals for school culture can help schools achieve long-term success, even in the face of challenges.

The Importance of Understanding the Definition

Harvard Professor, [Ebony N. Bridwell-Mitchell](#), says that an important first step before making changes to school's culture is to “understand what constitutes culture — once they learn to see it not as a hazy mass of intangibles, but as something that can be pinpointed and designed — they can start to execute a cultural vision.”

Dr. Ryan Daniel, principal of Fort Foote Elementary School [tells Edutopia](#), “People should see the climate of a building, and they should feel the culture when they walk into it.”

Another simple definition offered by the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is, “Culture refers to the underlying values, norms, and rules (both written and unwritten) that shape observed outcomes and behavior.”

A comprehensive definition of school culture also explores key elements. According to the [National School Climate Center \(NSCC\)](#), a positive school climate, which is often considered equal to school culture, encompasses:

- Norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.
- People are engaged and respected.

- Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

This definition highlights how positive school culture works. School leaders can also consider the above list as a checklist to think through areas of strength and weakness. For example, the school may adequately enforce norms and rules that create a safe space. However, the school may need to improve communication of a shared school vision to the school community.

Measuring Positive School Culture

[Research](#) indicates a positive correlation between the following aspects of culture and student success:

- Cultures that have high standards,
- Clear expectations of both staff and students,
- A well-defined school structure with clear goals,
- Respect for multicultural students and families, and
- Community involvement within multiple aspects of the school.

This list provides administrators and stakeholders with clear benchmarks to measure the culture, and goals to achieve a positive school culture.

According to [Johns Hopkins University](#), one of the first and most important steps a school leader or administrator can take when working to improve their overall school culture is to conduct an audit of school practices to ensure consistency between the school's mission and its institutional practices, including:

- Curriculum implementation and scaffolding

- Teacher professional development
- The use of discipline
- Grading policies
- Parent communication
- Community building

Dr. Daniel [recommends](#) using surveys to learn from students and teachers what they like about their school and areas where they'd like to see change. Specifically, she suggests that leaders ask,

‘How much do the adults in this school like being here?’

“When the school climate is truly positive, staff like to be there, students perceive this, and we often see a virtuous cycle of student–staff interactions,” she explains.

Edutopia, George Lucas Educational Foundation, suggests [concrete steps](#) for evaluating school culture and climate (SCC). The foundation recommends forming a school climate team that comprises teachers from different grade levels who meet monthly to assess the climate. Including the entire community (including the school board) in building efforts is essential. The SCC team should communicate all plans, actions, and the resulting data, emphasizing “why” the school will take the actions and what role each stakeholder plays in implementation.

Surveying students, parents, and staff is a starting point in the evaluation. Additionally, the school should evaluate all bullying and other negative incidents. Only after identifying the issues and the current climate can the school develop a practical plan to address the school culture and take reasonable steps towards improvement through responsibility sharing and accountability.

Various organizations, such as [Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy School Culture 360™ Survey](#) and [National School Climate Center School Climate Survey](#), support schools with resources such as surveys that can help identify a school’s strengths and areas for improvement related to school culture.

Strategies for Transforming School Culture

Strategies for building a more positive school culture may vary greatly depending on the findings in the evaluation. Some research-backed strategies include the following recommendations.

Fostering Inclusion with Cultural Sensitivity Training

According to a [study published in the Intercultural Education Journal](#), inclusion has a positive effect on student performance. Inclusion increases confidence when students' individuality, including their culture, is openly recognized and discussed within the school.

Administrators can utilize teacher training to reinforce the ideas of a positive school culture. The training can cover various topics, including cultural sensitivity, inclusion within the classroom, and the importance of consistency.

Teachers often want to see the “why” behind requests from the administration. So, using the most up-to-date research while training teachers is important. Administrators should also encourage informal conversations during training sessions where honesty is encouraged and never punished.

Inclusion doesn't apply only to students, but also to staff. [The American Journal of Education published research](#) points out that schools that incorporate input from all staff members are more successful in implementing cultural changes than those that are not inclusive of all staff's voices and opinions.

Administrators should model the behavior they wish to see from staff. Creating a culture of inclusivity within the staff often will trickle down and have a positive effect inside the classroom.

Setting High Expectations for Both Teachers and Students

Another step that can improve school culture is setting a standard of high expectations throughout the education community. Creating a culture where student expectations are

communicated in every classroom (because all the teachers are being held to the same standard as well) creates a clear message of goals throughout the school. This can be as simple as the rule “respect your peers.” This one single rule, if reinforced properly in all classrooms, can have a profound effect on the culture within the school.

Communicating School Values Consistently

Another step that can improve school culture is to spread the culture in visible ways throughout the school. The example previously discussed about “respect your peers” could be used here as well. If every classroom and hallway had this phrase posted, with examples of what respecting your peers looked like, this could easily become an overarching cultural theme. This, along with continuous language of reinforcement from staff, could improve school culture through clearly communicating the concept of respect.

The school can utilize this concept of respect to create new and unique traditions, another step in creating a positive school culture. In one example, monthly awards can be given to students who show acts of respect, with a final annual award or school-wide celebration. This creates a positive incentive that relates directly to the concept of respect. Of course, this example can be used with whatever theme or vision the administration and staff choose. Some schools highlight a different value or theme each month. Most importantly, consistency is key for a positive cultural change to take place.

Engaging the School Community

Creating a positive school culture involves all stakeholders: staff, administration, students, and parents. Schools that effectively communicate and involve parents, and the community at large, are more successful at making cultural changes.

Involving the community can include strong Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), community-attended events, and proactive and clear communication with the community. It is the school’s job to communicate both overarching themes for the

school year as well as what is happening on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion: Moving Toward Positive School Culture

“A school’s culture is a powerful force that will work for or against improvement efforts,” Sam Redding and Julie Corbett of the [Center on School Turn Around](#) assert. In other words, making the effort to build a positive school culture can have wide-reaching and significant impacts.

Students who attend schools with positive school cultures are more likely to have higher academic achievement, be more engaged in activities, and have a positive attitude towards learning. Teachers are also more likely to retain their jobs when working at a school with a positive and supportive culture. With consistency and a clear plan, schools can set students, and the organization as a whole, on a path toward success.

References

What Makes a Good School Culture? Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2018.
<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/18/07/what-makes-good-school-culture>

How Principals Can Foster a Positive School Culture Edutopia, 2024
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/creating-positive-school-culture/>

What is School Climate and Why is it Important? National School Climate Center
<https://schoolclimate.org/school-climate/>

Shifting School Culture to Spark Rapid Improvement The Center on School Turnaround, 2018 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592993.pdf>

School Culture Johns Hopkins School of Education
<https://education.jhu.edu/edpolicy/policy-research-initiatives/school-culture/>

School Culture 360™ Survey Johns Hopkins School of Education
<https://education.jhu.edu/edpolicy/k-12-education-solutions/school-culture-360-survey/>

School Climate Survey National School Climate Center
<https://schoolclimate.org/services/measuring-school-climate-csci/>

Evaluating Your School's Culture and Climate Edutopia, 2023.
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/evaluating-school-culture-climate/>

Good education for all? Student race and identity development in the multicultural classroom International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 2014
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S014717671300120X?via%3Dihub>

Teacher Job Satisfaction and Student Achievement American Journal of Education, 2015
<https://doi.org/10.1086/689932>

The relationship between teacher efficacy and students' academic achievement: A meta-analysis Social Behavior and Personality, 2018
<https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.6554>

Authors

[Rachel Peachey](#) with Joseph Salomone and Meri Kuusi-Shields