

Culture

The “secret sauce” of school improvement

By Bryan Goodwin

Three years ago, Miami-Dade County Public Schools created, amid much fanfare, a “School Improvement Zone” that targeted eight low-performing high schools and their 31 feeder schools. On paper, the Zone appears to have focused on the right things, such as improving reading instruction and providing extra time for learning by extending the school day by one hour and the school calendar by 10 days.

Yet, three years and \$100 million later, the district has little to show for its effort. According to the district’s internal report (Urdegar, 2009), academic growth rates for 8th graders in the Zone schools were actually lower than students in comparison schools. It’s worth noting that many schools in the control group already were focused on improving reading instruction through the federal Reading First program, leaving the most significant (and costly) difference between the Zone schools and the comparison group the additional time added to the school day and calendar.

So why didn’t the extra time pay off in higher student growth rates?

For starters, many students played hooky; absenteeism in the Zone schools spiked significantly during the extra days. Moreover, 60 minutes added to a day might not really be enough extra time for struggling students to receive the support they need. Yet another clue to

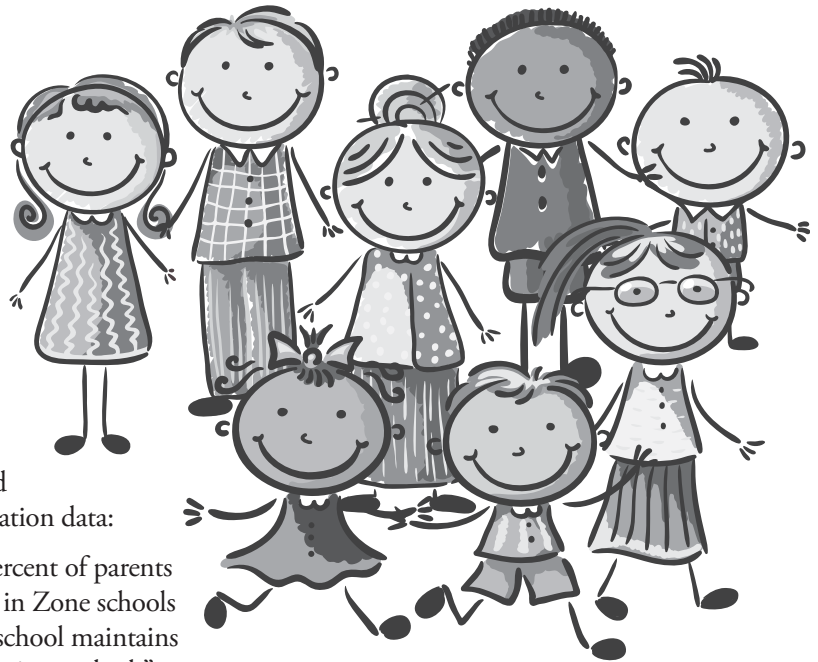
understanding what went wrong surfaced from the evaluation data:

- Only 43 percent of parents of children in Zone schools said their “school maintains high academic standards” versus 62 percent in control schools.
- Only about half, 56 percent, of students in Zone schools said “this school is safe” versus 70 percent in control schools.
- Just 34 percent of teachers in Zone schools reported that “staff morale is high” versus 55 percent in control schools.

The district’s own report concluded that low staff morale in the Zone schools likely contributed to the effort’s failure. So, if there’s a \$100 million lesson to learn from the Miami experience, it may be that school culture is a key—and often missing—ingredient in school reform efforts.

The missing ingredient

In 2001, McREL researchers launched a four-year project to determine how high-poverty, high-performing, “beat-the-odds” schools differ from low-performing schools serving similar students. After surveying hundreds of teachers, we got a surprising answer. We found that low-performing schools did many of the “right” things—things



that research says are correlated with higher levels of student achievement. They offered challenging curricula, encouraged teacher collaboration, and tried to improve teachers’ practices through high-quality professional development. The missing ingredient—the thing that beat-the-odds schools were attending to that struggling schools were not—was their school culture.

The study, *High-Needs Schools: What Does It Take to Beat the Odds?* found that teachers in high-performing schools were more likely than those in low-performing schools to report these elements were in place at their schools:

- A shared mission and goals
- A safe and orderly climate
- A strong press for high academic achievement
- Structured and well-managed classrooms

Taken together, these elements help create a “culture of high expectations” in a school. Schools that beat the odds develop, with input from teachers, a schoolwide vision and a clear focus for their

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improvement efforts; in turn, their vision sets high expectations for student performance and behavior. Simply stated, the culture of high-performing schools (as in KIPP schools and in the Promise Academy in Harlem, the subject of Paul Tough's book, *Whatever it Takes*) boils down to two simple, yet powerful rules: "work hard" and "be nice." That such school reform components as "assessment and monitoring," "collaboration," "professional development," and "individualizing instruction" do not appear on this list doesn't mean they're unimportant. It just means that teachers in both low- and high-performing schools reported at similar rates that their schools were attending to these issues.

Low-performing schools: One big, unhappy family

Tolstoy opens his novel *Anna Karenina* with the line, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The same might be said of school cultures. While high-functioning schools reflect many similar characteristics, low-performing schools display an array of dysfunctional behaviors. Charles Payne, in his book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, provides numerous examples of toxic, dysfunctional school cultures. Here are a few examples he provides:

- A teacher in the Bronx is given two weeks by her principal to "shape up or ship out" after she submitted too many reports about disruptive students (including three about a boy who tries to suffocate himself with a plastic bag and throw himself from a third-story window).
- A young teacher in Utah, who eats lunch with his students,

plays with them at recess, reads with them in the library, and stays with them afterschool when they are in trouble is told by his principal to "tone it down and keep the peace" (Kane, 1992, as cited in Payne, p. 21).

- After receiving national certification, a teacher in Virginia becomes the subject of malicious gossip and finds garbage in his mailbox, presumably put there by jealous colleagues.

These experiences are not only common; they go to the heart of the problem in low-performing schools, according to Payne, who cites ongoing research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research. When the Consortium compared the 30 most highly rated schools in Chicago with 30 of the lowest performing ones, it discovered that questions related to the quality of relationships—in particular, the level of trust and respect teachers have for one another—were among the best predictors of school performance.

Payne cautions his readers, however, that while it is tempting to see adults in dysfunctional schools "acting like fools and assume that's all they are," (p. 24) that these adults are, in fact, victims of their environments, which have been shaped by external factors:

Take a decently functioning suburban school, take away 40 percent of its funding, most of its better teachers, and the top-performing 50 percent of its students, and see how much fun faculty meetings would be after that. If we give people an enormously challenging task and only a fraction of the resources they need to accomplish it, sooner or later they start to turn on one another, making the job more difficult still. (p. 24)

The power of "can do"

In his book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*, Martin Seligman recounts the unintended outcomes of a laboratory experiment conducted at the University of Pennsylvania in the mid 1960s. The purpose was simple: to see if the dogs would become conditioned to a particular tone when it was followed by a brief, mild electrical shock (akin to a static shock) and exhibit a Pavlovian response, reacting with fear when they heard the tone.

After conditioning the dogs to the pairing of the tone with the shock, the researchers placed the dogs into a large box with two compartments separated by a low wall they could easily jump over. The scientists expected that when they rang the tone, the dogs would jump into the next compartment to avoid the coming shock. Instead, the dogs cowered and whimpered, making no attempt to avoid the coming jolts of electricity.

Seligman realized that the dogs had been "taught" to be helpless. During the conditioning, nothing they did changed the outcome (they got shocked every time), and they "learned" that nothing they did mattered. So why try?" (p. 20). Observing the dogs' learned helplessness, Seligman realized that people often learn similar behavior.

The cultures of low-performing schools reflect a learned helplessness. Teachers in these schools "learn" that nothing ever gets better and nothing they do matters, so they hunker down and wait for each new program to pass as quickly as possible. In such demoralized school cultures, technical fixes—such as bringing in a new reading program, creating

90-minute reading blocks, or extending the school day—rarely have much impact.

In contrast, teachers in high-performing schools believe that as individuals, and as a group, they are capable of improving student achievement, and they trust their colleagues to work as hard as they do to make it happen. Ohio State University researcher Wayne Hoy and his colleagues (2006) have coined the term “academic optimism” as a way to define the cultures of high-performing schools, which display three characteristics:

1. Press for academic achievement
2. Collective efficacy (i.e., a shared belief among teachers that they can help students succeed)
3. Faculty trust in parents and students

After surveying teachers in nearly 100 schools, Hoy and his colleagues determined that academic optimism was an even more powerful predictor of student achievement than socioeconomic status:

In the same way individuals can develop learned helplessness, organizations can be seduced by pervasive pessimism. According to the pessimist view, voiced with a tired resignation, “These kids can’t learn, and there is nothing I can do about it, so why worry about academic achievement. ... Academic optimism, in stark contrast, views teachers as capable, students as willing,

parents as supportive, and the task as achievable. (p. 440)

McREL’s own meta-analysis of research on effective leaders similarly points to the importance of building a can-do school culture (what we call a “purposeful community”). Most notably, among 21 responsibilities of school leaders linked to higher levels of student achievement, we found that effective principals do the following:

- Set high, concrete goals and expect all students to reach those goals.
- Develop a clear vision for what the school could be like and promote a sense of staff cooperation and cohesion.
- Involve teachers in decision making and sharing leadership.
- Systematically celebrate teachers’ accomplishments (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Final thoughts

We think of school culture as the “secret sauce” of school improvement. It’s not the *only* ingredient that matters, of course. Schools must still attend to the technical ingredients of reform, such as improving reading instruction or using data to differentiate learning, depending on each school’s needs. A can-do culture, after all, must still *do* something. In the end, a strong, positive school culture can give these more standard-fare ingredients the extra zing that makes a real difference for students.

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