School Climate The Key To Excellence

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Abstract
School climate refers to the “feel” of a school. This can vary from one school to another. School climate is an orderly environment in which the school family feels valued and to pursue the school’s mission free from disruption. School climate plays a significant role in providing a healthy and positive atmosphere. The interaction of various factors in the school can create a fabric of support that enables members of the school community to live together in harmony. Positive school climate can yield positive educational outcomes for students and teachers, similarly a negative climate can prevent optimal learning and growth in the institution. Improved school climate is a goal to pursue. School climate affects everyone associated with the school students, staff, parents, and the community. It is the belief system or culture that underlies the day-to-day operation of a school. Improved school climate is a goal to pursue. School principals need to constantly work toward improving their school climate, culture, and conditions so that student learning is improved.

Keywords: school climate, controlled environment, healthy school, humanistic schools, instructional leadership.

INTRODUCTION
Improving schools require changing them. But change takes place at two levels the way things look and the way things work. Changes in the first level are structural, remitting in altered arrangements. Changes in the second level are normative, resulting in altered beliefs. When only the first level changes are introduced in schools it may appear that things are being done differently, but the results seem not to be affected, at least for a very long time.

The psychological side of human nature is more readily affected by school climate and the symbolic side is more readily affected by school culture. This paper is an attempt to examine school climate and assess its importance in bringing about school improvement. It is expected that school principals should help improve school climate and create conducive environment for learning for teachers, student and the school community.

Defining Climate
School climate is a general term that refers to teachers' perceptions of their work environment, it is influenced by formal and informal relationships, personalities of participants, and leadership in the organization. The organizational climate of a school is the set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members. In more specific terms, school climate is the relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behavior, and is based on their collective perception of behavior in schools (Hoy & Miskel, 1996; Tagiuri, 1968).

Keefe, Kelley, and Miller (1985) defined school climate as the relatively enduring pattern of shared perceptions about the characteristics of organization and its members (p.74). Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) view climate as the enduring characteristics that describe the psychological make up of a particular school distinguish it from other schools, and influence the behavior of teachers and students, as well as the "feel" that the teachers and students have for that school. Litwin and Stringer (1968) for example define climate as the perceived subjective effects of the formal system, the informal style of managers and other important environmental factors on the attitudes, beliefs, values and motivation of people who work in a particular organization.

Climate is a reflection of organizational structure and gives a school its unique personality. School climate can determine the success or failure of a school. A positive climate promotes and breeds a successful outlook atmosphere. Effective school create and maintain climates that are comfortable, pleasant, and orderly. They consistently promote high expectations of staff and students (Stronge & Jones, 1991).

The Healthy School

Climate can also be understood by applying the metaphor of health to the school. Miles describes the healthy school as one that exhibits reasonably accepted goals (goal focus), communication that is relatively distortion-free vertically, horizontally, and across boundary lives (communication adequacy), equitable distribution of influence to all levels of the organization (optional power equalization), and effective and efficient use of inputs, both human and
material (resource utilization). The healthy school reflects sense of togetherness that bonds people together (cohesiveness), a feeling of well-being among the staff (morale), self-renewing properties (innovativeness) and an active response to its environment (autonomy and adaptation) (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1998). Finally, the healthy school maintains and strengthens its problem-solving capabilities (problem solving adequacies).

In a healthy organization, the goals of the system would be reasonably clear to the system and accepted by them. The goals must also be achievable with existing or available resources and be appropriate with the demands of the environment. Communication adequacy in the organizations are not simultaneous face-to-face systems like small groups the movement of information within them becomes crucial. The dimensions of organizational health imply that there is relatively distortion-free communication vertically, horizontally, and across the boundary of the system to and from the surrounding environment. That is information travels reasonably well just as the healthy person “knows himself” with a minimum level of repression, distortion etc. In the healthy organization, there is good and prompt sensing of internal strains, there are good data about problems of the system to ensure that a good diagnosis of system difficulties can be made. People have the information they need and have gotten it without exerting undue efforts (In Sergiovanni & Starrat, 1998).

Miles uses the language of organizational theory in his analysis of health; the basic ideas seem to fit schools as well. The dimension of health for any school operates in a system of dynamic interaction characterized by a high degree of interdependence. Clear goal focus for example depends upon the extent to which the school communicates its goals and permits inhabitants to modify and rearrange them. At another level, a high degree of health emerges school adaptiveness, while school adaptiveness contributes to, and is essential to the health of the school.

Climate and Learning
How do we know that climate makes a difference? What does research tell us about climate? There is empirical evidence indicating that school climate is related to student achievement. Brookover and others, after conducting a study of 68 elementary schools, conclude that the school social system explains much of the variance in achievement and other behavioral outcomes of the school (In Sweeney, 1992). Hoyle, English, and Steffy (1985) stated that school climate may be one of the most important ingredients of a successful instructional program. “Without a climate that creates a harmonious and well functioning school a high degree of academic achievement is difficult, if not downright impossible to obtain” (p.15).

Research tells us that school climate make a difference in creating the right environment for learning. The persistence and intensity effort necessary to help the young people learn is spawned in an environment in which there is joy and passion for teaching and learning. Schools strive to become the best they can be and are driven or led by key beliefs and values shared by students, teachers, board members, administrators, parents, custodians and all others who are a factor or force in the life of the school. Great schools enrich the lives of those who work in them as well as those whom they serve. Developing and maintaining a winning climate is challenging but extremely rewarding goal for those who want to make a difference.

Susan Rosenholtz (1989) found that the quality of work relationships that existed in a school had a great deal to do with that of the school's ability to improve. She defines quality as the degree of openness, trust, communication, and support that is shared by teachers. These factors encouraged not only learning but also job satisfaction and improved performance as well. Rosenholtz refers to schools that possess these qualities as being “learning enriched” to differentiate them from “learning impoverished” schools.

Climate focuses attention in the schools interpersonal work life as it affects teachers, administrators, and supervisors. But climate affects students as well. For example, one important line of inquiry links assumptions that teachers and administrators hold for students to climate dimensions. This research uses the Pupil Control Ideology (PCI) scale developed by Donald Willower and associates (1967). This measures the assumptions and attitudes of teachers and supervisors toward students on a continuum from custodial to humanistic. Custodial schools tend to be rigidly controlled and concern with maintenance and order. Within custodial schools students do not participate in decisions makings and are extended to accept decisions without questions. Further, they viewed students as being irresponsible, undisciplined, untrustworthy, and trouble-prone. As a result, strong emphasis is given to controlling students through the development and use of primitive methods.

Humanistic schools on the other hand, resemble communities that include students as fuller members and seeking their cooperation and interaction. Self-disciplined is emphasized and learning is considered, promoted, and enhanced by obtaining student identity and commitment. In schools with humanistic climates teachers are more likely to cooperate with one another as they work together, to have higher morale and to enjoy a sense of task achievement.
Social interaction among teachers is also high. In custodial schools these characteristics are not found and students are likely to be more alienated. Teachers are more likely to view the school as a battlefield. Hoy and Appleberry (1970) found that in schools with more custodial climates, teachers, were significantly less engulfed in their work, showed less esprit, and were more aloof. These are important findings that point to the link between climate and factors that directly affect the quality of teaching and learning.

Kohn (1996) criticizes many of the programs that offer what amounts to recipes for taking care of discipline problems and maintaining controlled environments. He contends that many if not all, of these packaged discipline programs focus on “handling” and “training” children, offering ways to outsmart them and methods for establishing consequences that ensure mindless compliance and control. Does such an environment, asks Kohn “really promote meaningful learning?” (p.62). Kohn’s alternative is to make the classroom a community where students feel valued and respected, where care and trust have taken the place of restrictions and threats. In this environment, students have a major role in making meaningful decisions about their schooling and in designing educational communities in which they feel connected to one another and to adults. The work of Aston and Webb (1986) that links teachers’ sense of efficiency, motivation, and commitment to teachers behavior, student behavior and student achievement provides further evidence.

Sweeney and Winter (1994) discuss the fact that there are many useful ways to measure school climate, but little has been learned about how to develop a climate that is positive. After the authors interviewed 32 teachers about climate, a common stand emerged. The teachers felt that the principal played the most important role in fashioning a school’s climate. The teachers felt that the support a principal provided was a key to the climate of school. The interviews led to the identification of five types of administrative support that affects school climate: recognizing achievement, backing up and encouraging teachers, caring and administering school rules fairly. This support, caring and recognition will promote a sense of pride that will lead to a more positive climate. Teachers surrounded by this environment will give the most of their time and talents.

Further emphasizing the importance of the principal’s role in climate, Keefe, Kelley, & Miller (1985) stated the principal is responsible for a school’s climate and the teacher is responsible for the climate in the classroom. They affirmed that principals and teachers must be:

1. Aware of the conditions and events that influence personal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.
2. Alert to the conditions and events that influence professional attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.
3. Aware of the expectations of others and know whether or not those expectations are understood.
4. Aware of the response to conditions or events that can not be controlled but must be coped with.
5. Able to plan, initiate, and implement events or changes that influence conditions which can be controlled.
6. Able to formulate long-range plans for maintenance and improvement of conditions and events, which influence the quality of outcomes, attained by students.

Adams and Bailey (1989) discussed the importance of principals taking care of their teachers. This care involved supporting teacher preferences, promoting feelings of self-efficacy, and focusing on the well being of teachers through enhanced working conditions. The way teachers feel about themselves is a direct result of the leadership patterns and styles of the principals. Through their leadership, principals should provide a belief in people, job and role diversity, high expectations, positive reinforcement, and celebrations of good performance. Teachers who feel good about themselves will become inspired to teach and deliver instruction at an exceptionally high level. Principals who take the time necessary to make sure that teachers understand their worth will find that classroom instruction will improve as teachers’ self-efficacy improves.

To further demonstrate the power of teacher self-worth, Purkey (1983) found that research lends evidence that when teachers understand, accept, and like themselves, they have a much greater capacity to understand, accept, and like their students. Further research indicates that principals who demonstrate positive self-worth will act positively. They show a high regard for their employees as human beings and make continuous attempts to build the self-esteem of their staff members. Sweeney (1992) indicates that survey research conducted in more than 600 schools across the US, using the School Improvement Inventory, provides a great deal of valuable information about school climate. The research findings support the fact that most schools tend to have a positive climate, but vast difference appear between the most and least positive climate.

According to Sweeney, the size of school, community type, and level of attendance make difference in a school’s individual climate. Suburban schools are found to have more positive climate than rural schools. Urban schools usually have the least
positive climates and elementary schools have more positive climates than secondary schools. Schools with significant discipline problems as perceived by teachers tend to have less positive climates. The ratings of principal effectiveness in learning environment management, instructional leadership, and human resource management highly correlates with climate measures. The principal behavior is most highly associated with positive climate measures.

The principal is the key figure in promoting an environment within the school that is conducive to student learning. Such an environment is positive and express how school's environment impacts on all, not only the students but good teachers morale and high student achievement go hand-in-hand. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) state that the creation of such a setting does not just happen. It takes the combined effort of both the principal and the staff to identify factors that create and also those that inhibit the development of a positive climate. It takes cooperative team to work to develop strategies to promote the desired climate or to overcome the inhibiting factors. In schools with a humanistic climate teachers are more likely to cooperate with one another as they work together to have higher morale, and enjoy a sense of task achievement. Social instruction among the teachers is also high. They describe a healthy school as one that exhibits clear and reasonably accepted goals. The healthy school reflects a sense of togetherness that bonds people together, a feeling of well being among the staff. The healthy school maintains and strengthens its problem solving capacities.

Sweeney (1992) further indicates that principals must enable and guide staff members to identify key beliefs and values that should guide the school. The principal must also promote a student-centered school while providing feedback and rewards to students and staff. A sense of family must be fostered within the school and the importance of parents and community should be well established. Finally, the principal must provide open communication lines, promote pride through achievement, and develop a high level of trust with students and staff.

Ubben and Hughes (1992) cited some of the traits of a successful principals as those who hold high expectation for staff and teachers, spend major portion of their day work in working with teachers and improving instructional program, identify, and diagnose instructional problem, and they are deeply involved in the school’s "culture" climate to influence it in positive ways.

School Climate and Change
A common view of change processes is that the change begins as a decision at the top of the administrative hierarchy and filters down to the classroom level. Although the direction of change is influenced from the "top" most principals recognize that to be successful the process is inevitably interactive. Cuban (1984) has challenged the top-down model of district-wide change and suggested instead that truly effective school system simultaneously provide opportunities for both top-down and bottom-up influence (In Pajak, 1989). Effective leadership for desirable human change comes from persons who themselves are open to life, growing, and fully functioning. These will arrange for the organization of school settings within which young people can grow with confidence, competence and can learn to accept the hard knock of defeat and discouragement, as well as thrilling experiences of success and achievement. They need to develop self-concepts which will enable them to face the world as secure, free, creative, and courageous person (Duke, 1988).

Howard, Howell, and Brainard (1987) identified eight indicators of positive school climate. The identified list includes:

1. Respect. Each member of the school must be treated with respect and see themselves as persons of worth.
2. Caring. Individuals are the school should feel that people are concerned about them and interested in their well being.
3. High morale. School members feel good about what is happening, are willing to perform assigned tasks, and are confident, cheerful, and self-disciplined.
4. Opportunities for input. Everyone in the school should be given the opportunity to contribute ideas and know they have been considered.
5. Continuous academic and social growth. Both students and faculty strive to develop their skills and knowledge. The professional staff holds high expectations for students.
6. School renewal. The school is self-renewing, is growing, developing, and changing.
7. Cohesiveness. School members should feel a sense of belonging to the school. This will result in school spirit or esprit de corps.
8. Trust. Individuals within the school must have confidence that others can be counted to do what they say will do. Integrity is an essential characteristic of school members’ (p. 7). The authors discuss the fact that their extensive experience with climate improvement leads them to believe that "nothing of substance improves until the school’s climate is improved" (p.30). People's feelings about their school can encourage or impede change. As a school’s climate improves there will be less discipline problems, better attendance, improved achievement, dropout decline, more respect for and help to others, and a collective responsibility for the well-being of the school.
CONCLUSION
The crucial task of the principal in exercising leadership for climate improvement is to establish and communicate expectations for long-range improvement. In exercising leadership for climate improvement, the principal’s major role is to provide the staff with information, the expectations, the support, and the supervision so that the staff is able to serve as mediators and transmitters of the principal’s expectations. If the principal’s words or actions express either a sense of complacency or a sense of futility in the message the faculty will receive and respond to, and transmit. If the principal is both optimistic and systematic in messages, which are transmitted, the staff will also be optimistic and thorough in performance. Many principals do not realize the extent of the power of the exercise and the mediating influence for good or bad which their words and actions have on their faculties. When the principal does not trust the faculty, then the faculty does not trust the principal; neither do the students, and the parents. Effective principals and effective leaders for climate development must see their role as both vocation and avocation. If there is a single tool, which the principal should have, it is a mirror. Looking into that mirror the principal can find the person whom, more than any other is both responsible for and accountable for, the feelings of satisfaction and productivity for staff, students, and parents. The direct quality of the principal’s leadership of staff leads to the mediated and indirect influence, which the principal has on, the climate experienced or perceived by students and patrons.

REFERENCES


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