

2013 CEREMONY BREAK-OUT SESSION: ADDING YOUR VOICE TO THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

SCHOOL CULTURE



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

About 70 people (approximately half administrators and half teachers) attended the Roundtable Discussion on School Culture as part of the National Blue Ribbon Schools 2013 Ceremony. Joiselle Cunningham, 2013 Washington Teacher Ambassador, and Charles Doolittle [title? I can't find him on ED's site] both with the U.S. Department of Education, facilitated the discussion.

Participants were asked to discuss issues related to building a positive culture in their schools, then write responses in terms of the following questions:

- How are you and your colleagues building a school culture where each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged?
- How do you maintain a focus on school culture while implementing new standards and evaluation systems?
- What are your school's goals for culture and/or climate? What does success look like? What evidence will you use to evaluate your success toward these goals?

Following some rounds of table discussions, Joiselle Cunningham and Charles Doolittle asked a representative from each table to distill ideas raised. Key themes that emerged within participants' discussions centered on staying focused on students in the face of challenges, addressing the whole child, and the importance of communication and collaboration in maintaining school culture. Below are some details and key points raised from the discussions, as well as illustrative quotes.

How are you and your colleagues building a school culture where each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged?

Addressing the Whole Child.

"Identify and communicate a theme or vision: achievement, character, community."

"Responsive classroom – teach culture of empathy, model, expect school-wide."

- Besides academics, schools play an important role in teaching respect, responsibility, and tolerance. Service learning is a popular method for doing that.
- Schools actively promote pro-social behaviors, such as respect, kindness, and helpfulness.
- Schools focus on wellness, whether leading by example with staff activities, fitness clubs and wellness-focused family nights, or initiatives focusing on health and nutrition.
- Popular ways to keep the atmosphere and spirits high are family activities, morning assemblies, and lots of community events like concerts or festivals.
- Celebrating successes is important, for students and staff. Schools celebrate academic accomplishments, attendance, and more.

Making it Personal.

“Tailored intervention systems based on student data; student involvement.”

“Guidance counselor provides class and individual instruction.”

- Teaching and interventions are tailored to each student’s needs. RTI and PBIS are popular strategies, as are gifted programs.
- Schools provide students with an advisor or teacher mentor, someone to they can turn to and who will guide them academically and emotionally.
- Teachers work with students on individualized goals so learning is personal.
- Administrators and teachers are culturally aware and competent, creating a safe and welcoming environment.

Creating Partnerships and Collaboration.

“As a staff, we naturally collaborate about students.”

- In secondary schools, students are organized by teams so they have a peer group they know well.
- Schools allow for peer mentoring or a buddy system so students can support each other.
- All staff keep an eye on all students, collaborating across grades to ensure their welfare. They make decisions as a team.
- Schools make parents an integral part of the school, possibly creating a parent liaison to reach those parents who don’t feel comfortable. They maintain frequent parent-teacher contact.

Attending to Safety and Fairness.

“Through consistency with instruction, grading, use of theme, cooperation, and rewards. Grading that is fair.”

- Administrators and teachers make sure the school’s policies for grading, instruction, and discipline are applied consistently.
- Schools maintain a bullying prevention program.
- Everyone who works with students, including parents and coaches, go through a certification program for youth protection.
- Schools try to create a healthy example by serving nutritious snacks, hosting fitness clubs or events, and/or creating a team to address health issues.

How do you maintain a focus on school culture while implementing new standards and evaluation systems?

Keep the Focus on Students.

“Maintain a student-focused approach.”

“Teachers maintain community in their classrooms.”

- Administrators and teachers try to focus on why they’re at school; their ultimate job is to help students succeed.
- When making changes, administrators and teachers always try to keep their effect on students in mind.

- The school’s vision or mission statement is a good tool for helping staff stay focused on school culture.

Open Communication and Collaboration.

“We work as a staff, use data and discuss, and then agree to implement with integrity.”

“Before integrating a new set of standards and evaluation systems, a person must be knowledgeable about the new information.”

- Among school staff, open and honest communication is vital when making any changes.
- Uncertainty impedes positive culture so schools make sure there is time to share information and ensure everyone knows what it happening and why.
- PLCs and professional learning opportunities are great opportunities for collaborating about changes and keeping everyone informed.
- Parents should always be kept informed and involved in changes where possible because they are an important part of the school.

Culture Enables Successful Implementation.

“A positive school culture allows for the smooth implementation of new standards and evaluation systems.”

- It helps to have everyone working together—teachers, administrators, and parents. Schools are communities.
- Attitude is essential. Positive thinking enables positive implementation.
- A strong supportive climate enables teachers to work together. It provides a safe environment for trying new things.
- Gathering frequent feedback from staff, parents, and students can help implementing changes.
- Everyone has to be willing to go beyond what is required and make the time to get the work done successfully.

What are your school’s goals for culture and/or climate? What does success look like? What evidence will you use to evaluate your success toward these goals?

Creating a Welcoming Environment.

“[Be] family oriented, and the school becomes their extended family.”

“Parents, teachers, administrators working together.”

- Ideally, school becomes an extension of family.
- Schools want parents to be more involved, to make them feel respected and welcomed.
- Administrators and teachers want to be part of a community that works together and shares successes.
- Teachers are passionate about what they do and hope to instill that excitement in students.

Maintaining Strong Academic Learning.

“Goal: fostering a love of learning; engaging all students; serving as a center for excellence.”

“To afford [students] choices and inspire them for future careers and ensures that they have the skills they need to be successful.”

- Regardless of everything else, ensuring academic achievement for all students, no matter their needs, is why schools exist.
- Schools will provide a safe and enriching environment for learning.
- Students will leave school prepared for college or careers.
- Teachers will support each other in the pursuit of student learning.
- Schools will instill a love of lifelong learning in students.

Contributing to Social/ Emotional Well-Being.

“Address bullying, promote student leadership and involvement, and focus on a comprehensive approach to character education.”

- Students understand and contribute to school culture by being involved in decision-making, taking on leadership positions such as in student council, and participating in activities.
- Everyone will collaborate; each student is seen as a valuable piece of the whole school.
- Students will feel valued and supported in all areas, academically and emotionally.
- Each student will find confidence and security.

Multiple Measures Are Needed for Evaluation.

“Evidence: students are engaged in class, students are happy, teachers are collaborating, students are learning.”

“We pride ourselves on the positive data from our parent and student surveys.”

- School is not just about learning and therefore success isn’t just about academic achievement, but everyone achieving the most they can is one part of success.
- Student engagement is another part of success. Do students participate in activities or athletics? Do they take ownership in the school?
- Success can be measured by growth in all areas—academic, social, emotional—for students, staff, and parents.
- Surveys are a useful tool, but ultimately, everyone needs to have a voice regardless of how they are given the opportunity.