

Developing and Assessing School Culture: A New Level of Accountability for Schools

A Position Paper of the Character Education Partnership (CEP)

Executive Summary:

A positive *school culture*—what many people call “school climate”—is the cornerstone of all good schools. It is the foundation for school improvement. Nevertheless, it often goes unmentioned and unaddressed in school reform and assessment.

This CEP position paper argues that education in our nation is at a defining moment, one with the potential to reshape our national conversation about school improvement. Successful schools—ones that foster both academic excellence and ethics—have positive, effective school cultures. We define a positive school culture broadly to include the schoolwide ethos and the culture of individual classrooms, high expectations for learning and achievement, a safe and caring environment, shared values and relational trust, a powerful pedagogy and curriculum, high student motivation and engagement, a professional faculty culture, and partnerships with families and the community.

Because a positive school culture is central to student success and holistic school transformation, we must help all schools acquire the tools needed to develop and assess such cultures. Schools must also be *held accountable* for assessing the quality of their school cultures. CEP joins a number of other national organizations, including the U.S. Department of Education and the National Council on School Climate, in advocating for this new level of accountability.

What do the best schools in America—whether serving communities of economic privilege or poverty—have in common? In addition to very dedicated educators, they have *school cultures* that foster excellence and moral character. Such cultures consist of the shared expectations, values, and patterns of behavior that define who we are—how we treat each other and how we do our work. In their book *Building an Intentional School Culture: Excellence in Academics and Character*¹, Charles Elbot and David Fulton remind us of Harvard educator Roland Barth’s wise observation: “A school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have.”²

A Defining Moment

Education in the United States is at a defining moment. There is a revitalized national mission to improve schooling, with a new financial and political commitment to help achieve lasting results. There is also an understanding that things need to be done differently. Schools must be held accountable not only for scores in math and reading, but as importantly, for school cultures that promote excellence across the board, including 21st century work skills, college readiness, and responsible citizenship.

Tremendous thought and funding have been invested into struggling schools by districts, states, private foundations, and the federal government. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned efforts have often focused on improving one or another aspect of school life—such as safety, learning standards, assessment, staff development, or parent involvement—rather than seeking to develop a school culture that addresses all of these factors in a truly integrated way.

These narrowly focused school interventions have largely failed. We now know that unless a school can develop and sustain a comprehensive, positive school culture—one that unifies faculty, students and parents around a common mission and commitment to quality—improvements in isolated features of a school will never truly turn the school around.

The choices we make as a nation about what schools should be held accountable for—about *what constitutes an effective school culture or climate*—are critical. The national discourse on this issue, including the important work of the National School Climate Council³, is central to the future of U.S. education. How that conversation becomes manifest in education policy is vital.

School Cultures That Work

Some of the most impressive examples of the power of positive school culture are successful “turnaround schools”—schools that have significantly raised student achievement and improved student behavior through cultural transformation. Examples of these can be found among schools receiving the National School of Character (NSOC) award from the Character Education Partnership (CEP).⁴ Drawing on research on “smart and good schools”⁵, CEP defines “character” broadly to include both *moral character*—treating others well (through kindness, honesty and respect)—and *performance character*, doing things well (as demonstrated

by perseverance, critical thinking, and a commitment to quality). A true school of character has a school culture that requires the best of students and teachers in both realms—doing one’s best work and being one’s best ethical self.⁶

In the NSOC program, elementary, middle, and high schools and whole districts tell the story of how they have implemented CEP’s empirically derived Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education and provide data showing the difference that comprehensive character education has made in their students’ learning and behavior.⁷ The Eleven Principles define a school culture that demands and supports ethical virtue and citizenship while providing an instructional environment that demands and supports best academic effort through challenging work and high expectations.

These Eleven Principles include intentionally fostering moral and performance character through every phase of school life, developing a caring school community, creating an engaging academic curriculum, promoting shared school leadership, and involving families and the community as partners. Taken together, these principles constitute a holistic approach to developing a positive school culture. Many schools outside of the National Schools of Character program have created similar, effective cultures of character that reflect these principles without explicitly referencing them.

As evidenced by the more than 100 National Schools of Character recipients over a 12-year period, when schools implement these Eleven Principles well, test scores typically go up and behavior problems go down—often dramatically. For example, Walnut Middle School in Grand Island, Nebraska, prior to implementing its comprehensive character education initiative, had 146 incidents of “disruptive aggressive behavior” and 48 police reports of “personal injury assaults” in the 1998-99 school year. Following its efforts to create a schoolwide culture of character, those numbers dropped to only 14 aggressive incidents and 8 police reports in the 2005-06 school year. Simultaneously, the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on state tests in math, reading, and writing rose significantly.⁸

Evidence that success stories like these are replicable on a broad scale comes not only from CEP but also from other organizations that focus on helping schools build a culture of quality. For example, Expeditionary Learning Schools (ELS) works with more than 160 public schools, primarily high-need elementary, middle, and high schools across the country, helping faculty transform school culture and implement rigorous, engaging, project-based learning. Data from state assessments show that in many U.S. cities, the highest-performing schools in student achievement are those in the ELS network. Schools implementing the EL model across the country significantly outpace district averages in math and reading, and most of the new EL high schools serving low-income students have sent 100% of graduating seniors on to college.⁹

What enables schools and programs like these to have such a positive, often life-changing impact on the students they serve? The answer, we think, is clear: Performance excellence and ethical excellence are *born from a culture*. As Ron Berger observes in his book *An Ethic of*

Excellence, students' achievement and character are shaped by the culture around them.¹⁰ Regardless of their background, when students enter a culture that demands and supports quality work and moral character, they tend to work to fit into that culture. Once they enter a school culture with a powerful virtuous ethic, that ethic becomes their norm. It's what they know.

Students themselves testify to this power of school culture to change how they experience school and approach their work. A sixth-grade girl was asked how her current school, in which students regularly presented their work to classmates and other audiences, differed from her previous school. She described the difference in terms of school culture: "In this school, everyone looks at my work. In my old school, only my teacher knew anything about my work. I have to try much harder in this school because the work is more important."¹¹

What Educational Research Shows

These case studies of positive school cultures are supported by broader research investigations comparing schools that score differently on measures of school culture. Elbot and Fulton cite findings such as these:

- Of the 134 secondary schools in England that were part of the 2004 Hay Group study, "the successful schools had a much more demanding culture—hunger for improvement, promoting excellence, holding hope for every child—while less successful schools had less of a press on improvement."¹²
- In a study of Chicago's public schools, the top academic performing schools scored high on a measure of "relational trust," a central feature of school culture which assesses how well each stakeholder (students, parents, teachers, and administration) believes that members of the other groups are fulfilling their role obligations.¹³
- A review of research on school success finds that high staff productivity and student achievement are both linked to "positive school climate."¹⁴

In 2003, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs*, summarizing eleven research reviews of various educational interventions aimed at creating positive school cultures and reducing anti-social and risk behaviors. The *Safe and Sound* report concluded that social and emotional skills can be taught and modeled and supported by school culture and that they predict motivation to learn and academic success as well as positive social behavior.¹⁵

In their 2006 monograph, *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators*, University of Missouri at St. Louis psychologists Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier identified character development programs that have clear empirical support.¹⁶ Among the approaches found effective are the Child Development Project of the Developmental Studies

Center¹⁷ and Just Community Schools¹⁸, both aimed at creating positive classroom and school cultures.

In her 2010 chapter, “Building a Sustaining Classroom Climate for Purposeful Ethical Citizenship,”¹⁹ University of Notre Dame psychologist Darcia Narvaez argues that positive school climates are powerful because they meet students’ needs for belonging, competence, and autonomy.²⁰ She summarizes the research on student motivation and learning as showing that a climate of “high support and high expectations for both achievement and behavior produces the best results”²¹

Three Conditions for Building Positive School Cultures

Three conditions, we believe, are essential if educators are to apply what we know about school culture to the challenge of bringing about deep and enduring improvement in our schools.

1. Schools need measures of success and areas for improvement that go beyond test scores.

Clearly, schools must be held accountable to external standards, and standardized testing is part of that accountability. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and similar state initiatives sought to use standardized testing in math and reading to address a real and pressing problem: the achievement gap for sub-groups of students and the inequities in access to good schooling in many low-income neighborhoods.

However, test scores must never become the sole measure of school success. When they do, they have a serious unintended negative consequence: limiting our vision of what a good school is. Because of many schools’ preoccupation with preparing students for high-stakes tests in math and reading, they have tended to neglect important curricular areas such as science, social studies, the arts, physical education, and health. In many cases, they have also given short shrift to civic involvement, social-emotional growth, and character development.

The solution is not to eliminate testing but to keep it in proper perspective so that it does not diminish the holistic mission of education. Schools and classrooms must approach assessment and all their work in a manner that develops the whole person, including crucial 21st-century skills such as creative problem-solving, teamwork, respect for diversity, ethical decision-making, and commitment to human rights and social justice.

2. Educators must have a comprehensive understanding of what “school culture” is. While there is a growing understanding and evidence of the importance of school culture, we still need to develop a common national vocabulary for defining and discussing it. Many educators and researchers use the term *school climate* as the foundation for the conversation about school improvement. The National School Climate Council (NSCC) has created School Climate Standards that are helping to inform a federal discussion aimed at creating new benchmarks in this area for public schools.²²

The NSCC uses the phrase *school climate* broadly as the umbrella term to cover a wide range of aspects of the schooling experience for both students and faculty—just as this paper uses the term *school culture*. Its frameworks describe an environment of safety, respect, support, and challenge for all school members across a full range of domains: physical, emotional, social, ethical, civic, and intellectual. CEP agrees wholeheartedly with this comprehensive conception.

There would be a danger if individual schools or the nation as a whole were to adopt school climate standards that use a narrower definition of school climate. If, for example, new guidelines were to focus only on creating a safe and caring *social* climate—without adequately addressing the *intellectual* climate and broader school culture needed for student achievement—we will have lost a critical opportunity. A more meaningful approach to climate or culture will assess schools broadly and deeply, with benchmarks and metrics that include the full range of academic and social factors that make for a quality school.

A positive school culture broadly conceived includes the school's:

- social climate, including a safe and caring environment in which all students feel welcomed and valued and have a sense of ownership of their school
- intellectual climate, in which all students in every classroom are supported and challenged to do their very best and achieve work of quality; this includes a rich, rigorous, and engaging curriculum and a powerful pedagogy for teaching it
- rules and policies that hold all school members accountable to high standards of learning and behavior
- traditions and routines, built from shared values, that honor and reinforce the school's academic and social standards
- structures for giving staff and students a voice in, and shared responsibility for, solving problems and making decisions that affect the school environment and their common life
- ways of effectively partnering with parents to support students' learning and character growth
- norms for relationships and behavior that create a professional culture of excellence and ethics.

The most successful new school models in urban settings²³ have adopted a distinctive version of this—a carefully defined and branded holistic school culture that includes norms and rituals regarding peer relationships, civic responsibility, work habits, social courtesy, and a strong commitment to academic achievement.

3. Finally, schools need tools for developing and assessing school culture, and must be held accountable for their school cultures. Many schools do not intentionally shape their cultures because they lack the tools for doing so. Many such tools exist and are described in detail in resources such as the frameworks of the National School Climate Council and books such as *Building an Intentional School Culture*, *An Ethic of Excellence*, *Smart & Good High Schools*, and *Leading a Culture of Change*, to name just a few.

One culture-building tool used by a growing number of schools is a “code of character,” or “school touchstone.” Touchstones—ideally developed over a period of weeks or even months with input from school leaders, staff, students, and parents—typically use a series of “we” statements (e.g., “We pursue excellence in scholarship and character,” “We honor each other by being respectful, honest, kind, and fair”) to express the school’s collective commitments to ways of working and relating to others that reflect high levels of moral and performance character.²⁴ When schools do the hard work of discussing their code or touchstone every day in an effort to hold all school members accountable to the agreed upon values, this tool has strong potential to shape a positive school culture.

Equally important, a school’s culture-building efforts must include tools for *assessing* school culture. What gets measured, matters. If there are standardized tests that measure students’ performance in subjects such as math and reading, but no systematic ways to measure a school’s culture, then schools will have less clarity about what school culture is, less incentive to make culture-building a priority, and no sure way of monitoring their progress in developing a positive culture and using assessment data to make continuous improvements.

Assessing School Culture: Developing a Unified Framework

To help schools evaluate the quality of school culture—and hold them accountable for doing so—will require creating a new “school report card,” one that includes the rigorous assessment of school culture. We applaud the U.S. Department of Education’s current efforts to encourage the assessment of school climate and the National School Climate Council’s leadership in developing school climate standards that encompass all aspects of learning and the school environment.²⁵

If the assessment of school culture is to be powerful, it must be deep, comprehensive, and authentic. The indicators of school quality that make up a new school report card must include both student and faculty culture. They must include both moral character and performance character: ethical behavior and high achievement. Finally, they must include specific, concrete indicators of a curricular and instructional environment that is rigorous, challenging, and engaging for all students, one that prepares them as scholars and 21st-century citizens.

The good news is that we are not starting from scratch. Many successful school improvement organizations have already put great time and care into defining and assessing elements of effective school culture/climate. They include—in addition to the National School Climate Council, CEP, and other character education organizations—various school networks such as

Expeditionary Learning Schools; the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; Smart & Good Schools; KIPP Schools; and the Harlem Children’s Zone, to name just a few. The work of Rick DuFour and his colleagues on “professional learning communities” is also relevant to this effort in that it helps to identify the elements of a school’s staff culture that optimize student learning.²⁶

The above organizations, and many others that believe in whole-child education, operate across a wide range of the political and philosophical spectrum. Regardless, and remarkably, they demonstrate close commonality in the vision they articulate regarding the culture or climate of what they would consider a “good school.” It would not be difficult to distill a unified common framework and to identify and/or design practitioner-friendly tools for assessing school quality.

Conclusion:

This is a call to action. We urge all who have a stake and role in shaping our nation’s schools—teachers, school leaders, school boards, parents, teacher educators, educational organizations, researchers, and policy-makers—to do what they can within their sphere of influence to advocate for building and assessing school culture. If, as a nation, we can agree to define a “good school” as one that has a positive culture—with high expectations and support for both student achievement and responsible social behavior—that will be our best hope for developing lifelong learners and ethical citizens for the 21st century.

Notes

¹ C. Elbot & D. Fulton, *Building an intentional school culture*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008).

² R. Barth, “The culture builder,” *Educational Leadership*, 2002, 59 (8), 6-11.

³ www.schoolclimate.org/climate/council.php

⁴ See the annual *National Schools of Character* publication of the Character Education Partnership, www.character.org

⁵ T. Lickona & M. Davidson, *Smart & Good High Schools* (www.cortland.edu/character; www.instituteforexcellenceandethics.com).

⁶ See CEP’s position paper, *Performance Values: Why They Matter and What Schools Can Do to Foster Their Development* (www.character.org), and “Performance Character/Moral Character” in *excellence & ethics* (Winter/Spring, 2010), www.cortland.edu/character.

⁷ T. Lickona, E. Schaps, & C. Lewis, *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 1995). Available from CEP’s website, www.character.org.

⁸ M.A. Richards & V. Duel, "From Chaos to Character: Walnut Middle School's Story, *The Fourth and Fifth Rs* (Cortland, NY: Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, fall, 2006).

⁹ *Expeditionary Learning School Performance Report* (2010), www.elschools.org

¹⁰ R. Berger, *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship With Students*. (Plymouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

¹¹ Berger.

¹² M. Fullan, *Leading a Culture of Change*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

¹³ A. Bryk & B. Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. (New York: Russell Sage, 2002).

¹⁴ P. Gonder & D. Hymes, *Improving School Climate and Culture*. (Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 1993)

¹⁵ www.casel.org

¹⁶ M. Berkowitz & M. Bier, *What Works in Character Education*. (St. Louis: Center for Character and Citizenship; Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2006). Available at www.characterandcitizenship.org.

¹⁷ For research on The Child Development Project, see www.devstu.org.

¹⁸ For research on just community schools, see F.C. Power, A. Higgins, & L. Kohlberg, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ D. Narvaez, "Building a sustaining classroom climate for purposeful ethical citizenship," in T. Lovat & R. Toomey (Eds.), *International Research Handbook of Values Education and Student Wellbeing*. (New York: Springer, 2010).

²⁰ E. Deci & R.M. Ryan, *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. (New York: Academic Press, 1985).

²¹ J.E. Zins et al., "The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success," in J.E. Zins et al. (Eds.), *Building academic success: Social and emotional learning*. (New York: Teachers College Press: 2000).

²² www.schoolclimate.org/climate/council.php

²³ For two different approaches to positive school culture-building in urban schools—each with demonstrated positive impact on student learning and social behavior—see Expeditionary Learning Schools (www.elschools.org) and the Knowledge Is Power Program (www.kipp.org).

²⁴ For strategies for developing, implementing, and assessing the effectiveness of school touchstones, see *Building an Intentional School Culture* and “The Power of a Touchstone to Shape Culture and Character,” in *excellence & ethics: The Education Letter of the Smart & Good Schools Initiative* (spring, 2009), www.excellenceandethics.com; www.cortland.edu/character.

²⁵ www.schoolclimate.org/climate/council.php

²⁶ R. Dufour & R. Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work*. (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1998).



1025 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 1011 • Washington, DC
Tel: 202.296.7743 • Fax: 202.296.7779 • www.character.org