THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL SCHOOL LEADERS IN BUILDING A HEALTHY SCHOOL CULTURE

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School culture serves as the foundation for long-term continual school change (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005). Therefore, school personnel should identify the school culture as the transformation process evolves. In consideration of schools that are now multicultural and are led by principals, the broad analytic category of school culture emerges as central to transformational leadership.

There are several definitions of school culture available in the academic literature. For example, school culture is the deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of the school’s history (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Schein (1992) defined culture as a pattern of collective assumptions that a group or organization has learned over the course of time through shared experiences. Similarly, Peterson (2002) suggested that culture builds in a school over time as teachers, school leaders, parents, and students work together. School culture influences the staff development and professional growth that takes place in a school (Spillane, 2005). Therefore, successful change begins with understanding the culture of the school (Andrews & Crowther, 2002). Burns (1978) affirmed at the inception of transformational-leadership theory that transformational leaders can enable mutual growth and collaboration in organizations; therefore, it is clear they can develop favorable school cultures.

To lead change and bring about lasting school improvement, school principals should encourage collaboration, empower teachers and students, and motivate in a manner that convinces others to embrace the school’s culture (Mitchell & Sackney, 2002). Many researchers discussed the significance of school leaders in facilitating a positive school culture. For example, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) pointed to the importance of the school leader as one who can have a profound impact on the school culture through actions that develop norms, values, and attitudes among staff. Schein (1992) further supported the importance of leaders in shaping organizational culture in that they create and modify culture, and the management of the culture is what ultimately defines their leadership. Teske and Schneider (2001) contended that an effective transformational school leader
defines the culture in the school, establishes high standards, and integrates those standards into the mission of the school. Furthermore, according to Fullan (2002b) the principal is the main agent of change in a school, and principals who are equipped to handle a complex, constantly changing environment can implement the initiatives that lead to continual and sustained improvement in teaching and learning.

The culture in a school also influences student achievement (Levin, 1987). Deal and Peterson (1990) contended that higher achieving schools were those of cultures that fostered collaboration, empowerment, and engagement. Leithwood and Seashore-Louis (1998) suggested that successful schools are more capable of increasing student achievement when the culture shares common characteristics, including a commitment to the students, respect for shared decision making, a collective belief in the importance of professional growth, collective celebrations of success, and a mission grounded in the ideal that all students can achieve (Barth, 2002; Kelley et al., 2005). In other words, student performance is likely to increase if the school culture is favorable.

Transformational school leaders modeling collaboration, professionalism, and vision in a school positively influence the school culture (Wagner, 2004). These attributes are essential in leading a school environment defined by the contemporary tenets of multiculturalism. As such, school leaders are expected to demonstrate in their words, actions, and policies the ideals and beliefs they hope to encourage in others and establish in their organization.

References