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Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D., et. al.

The Tumbleweed Turnaround Leading a Culture of Learning

“If you want to change and improve the climate and outcomes of schooling—both for students and teachers—there are features of the school culture that have to be changed, and if they are not changed, your well-intended efforts will be defeated.” -Seymore Sarason

Tumbleweed Elementary is a K-6 school located in sunny Palmdale, California. The school serves approximately 1,200 students of which more than 90 percent are minority and 90 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch. Between 2003-2009 scores, achievement had steadily declined to the point that Tumbleweed was deemed a “persistently low achieving school” by the state of California. It was a troubling time at Tumbleweed.

In 2009, the Palmdale School District was mandated to select a model of intervention. A “Turnaround Model” was selected which entailed a change in leadership as well as displacement of all certificated and classified personnel. As the new principal, Jezelle Fullwood based her selection of Tumbleweed’s faculty upon two factors: a teacher’s ability to deliver excellent instruction *and* each individual’s willingness to embrace a culture of learning in their school.

Culture Trumps Structure Every Time

The importance of culture is often overlooked and under appreciated. Effective principals recognize that it is not enough to put structures in place and hold teachers accountable. As Phil Schlechy observed, “structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability.” Principal Fullwood realized a strong learning culture would be critical to success.

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker have also highlighted the importance of culture and suggest, “the most effective strategy for influencing and changing an organization’s culture

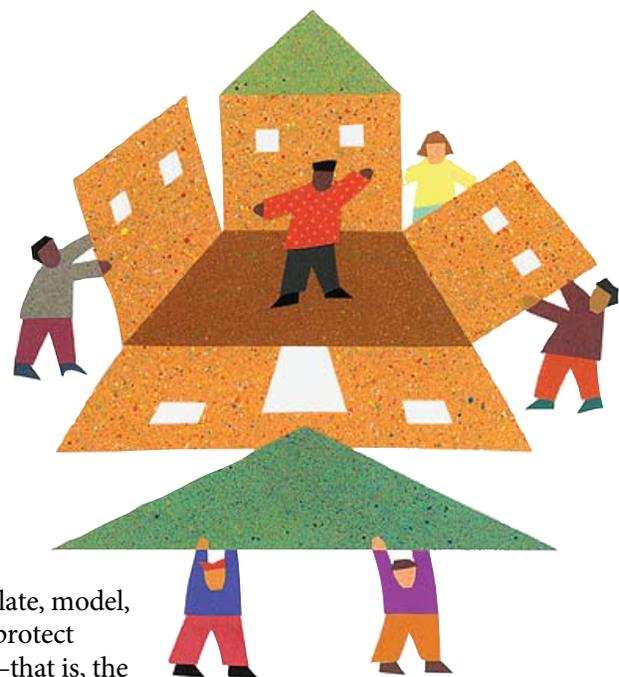
is simply to identify, articulate, model, promote, and protect shared values—that is, the collective commitments that will define that organization.” Principal Fullwood also understood the importance of clearly articulating a specific set of cultural expectations to the entire school community.

Fullwood intentionally approached building school culture differently and set the stage for what she described as a “*culture of care and respect*” by focusing on relationships among and between the teachers. She understood that if Tumbleweed Elementary School was going to turn around years of poor performance, learning would need to be at the core of the school’s culture.

A Culture Grounded in Collaborative Relationships

In a learning culture, relationships are characterized by a sense of teamwork and collaboration. Teachers take responsibility and support one another. They work together, share experiences, and learn from their mistakes as well as successes. Good ideas are heard, acted upon and celebrated but unfortunately, these kinds of collaborative relationships are not the norm in all schools.

In most schools, the school year begins with individual teachers working in isolation to prepare their classrooms and review their curriculum for the upcoming school year. There is typically a half-day faculty meeting focused on a myriad of policies and procedures with an ice-breaker



thrown in for good measure. After the faculty meeting in these schools, teachers return to their individual classrooms and continue to prepare by themselves.

In contrast, the first meeting at Tumbleweed was an informal “meet and greet” focused on building relationships. At this initial meeting, Fullwood welcomed teachers and shared her vision for the school. She explained *why* it was important for teachers to collaborate, outlined *how* teachers would be expected to work together and identified *what* they would be expected to collaborate about. This informal meeting served as an excellent precursor to the formalized work of setting norms and creating a mission and vision for the school.

A Culture Committed to Professionalism

Tumbleweed embraced the Professional Learning Community model as the framework for their school improvement process. Fullwood made it clear administrators would attend and actively participate in meetings and professional development, regularly discuss and analyze assessment data, and formalize school improvement plans; not as a part of the evaluation process, but as part of their responsibility to support the faculty’s efforts to ensure all students were learning.

Principal Fullwood also made it clear that while it was important for administrators to be visible, available, and open to working with teams, the occasional difficulties that arose between teachers were to be handled initially by team members. Rarely did conflict resolution involve administrators, and then, only as a last resort. Fullwood’s clear expectation that teachers act in a professional manner, honor their team norms, and focus on student learning fostered stronger relationships, greater trust and higher levels of communication within the teams.

A Culture Focused on Best Practice

At Tumbleweed, a culture of learning meant ensuring that all students received high quality instruction. Cindy Harrison, Heather Clifton, and Chris Bryan identified practices that were present in school cultures that supported learning. In these schools:

1. Teachers meet regularly to examine data and make changes in instruction,
2. Teachers problem solve with colleagues about students and instructional strategies,
3. Teachers plan, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching units and materials *together*,
4. Teachers celebrate and share responsibility for the success of all students.
5. Teachers, students, and staff respectfully learn from *and* with one another, and
6. Teachers regularly observe one another and provide feedback for the purpose of improving teaching and learning at their school.

At Tumbleweed, teachers developed lessons that reflected the essential standards. Teams determined the most effective instructional practices based on data from common formative assessments. Results were transparent and public; if one class was more successful than another with an essential standard, the team reflected on their practice and collaborated on how best to meet the needs of the students. Targeted and layered interventions reflected the needs of students and many times included enrichment for those who had met standards. In short, cultural expectations at Tumbleweed were intentionally designed to promote ‘best practice’ among teachers.

A Culture of Shared Responsibility

In a learning culture, teachers work interdependently towards common goals and support one another. At Tumbleweed the language shifted from “my kids in my room” to “our kids from our school.” Fullwood recognized the value of promoting shared responsibility beyond the faculty and regularly invited parents and community partners to participate in the success of Tumbleweed through family nights, parent institutes, Saturday School and other special events. Strong relationships proved to be valuable assets as the entire school community embraced the belief that all children can learn.

Important Lessons About Leading a Culture of Learning

The turnaround at Tumbleweed demonstrated the importance of a culture focused on learning. Principal Fullwood clearly articulated and modeled a set of expectations and engaged in specific actions that promoted a learning culture in her school. The result was that student achievement improved dramatically in the first year of the Tumbleweed turnaround; each subgroup improved by more than 50 percentage points and the entire school achieved an unprecedented gain of 92 points on the California State Test.

The learning culture of any school is the result of a principal’s intentional effort to improve the quality of relationships in their school. Effective principals clarify roles, expectations, and organizational purpose. They recognize the importance of collaboration and teamwork, model professionalism, champion the use of best practice, and encourage a sense of shared responsibility for student success. The turnaround at Tumbleweed demonstrated that a school culture focused on learning is the driving force behind success. ■

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