

Elusive Culture

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Every school wants to improve culture, but what exactly is culture? It's hard to define and equally hard to implement. Even if you establish a "better" culture in your school, what does that even mean? What metrics do you use to establish that a school's culture has improved? If it's hard to define, hard to implement, and hard to measure objectively, why are schools spending so much money and energy chasing it?

Let's dive headfirst in search of this white whale and see if we can catch it.

Kids would define culture as a "vibe," which isn't that far off. It's subjective enough to make it hard to define but palpable enough to feel in the air around you. Great sports teams have this vibe. It's derived from a shared vision, a clear goal, and a cohesive and passionate work ethic to achieve the goal and realize the vision. The key word here is passion. Many schools have a "shared vision" and a "cohesive work ethic," but without the passion, it is just some vague words on a mission statement and never really translate into the type of culture we envision.

The relationship between culture and vibe is that culture is the vision, and vibe is the passion behind the vision. So, how does a school establish or improve its culture and vibe?

We need to start with the boring but more straightforward part of defining what culture means in our school, then move to the more nuanced part and build passion around living up to the culture we just defined. This definition of culture closely

resembles a mission statement or a philosophy school post on their website. Still, those are typically very broad and have no real accountability. *The definition needs to have tangible metrics against which to be measured.*

The dictionary defines culture as "the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people or other social groups" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). This is an excellent start mainly because one could establish objective metrics for this definition. What customs does your school have, and should you modify or improve on these customs? What arts and social institutions are valued at your school, and what are you doing to show this value? What are the tangible achievements that have been made, and what are the goals and paths to achieve those goals moving forward?

What do you value, and how are you holding yourself and your school accountable for living up to those values? These are the core tenets of culture.

It is possible to build a great culture at your school, but the leadership must be very intentional about what that means by creating a mission statement with a clear path to accountability. If this is truly a priority for the school, it must invest time and money into cultivating it. Things like having X amount of pep rallies—and not just for sports—sometimes for no reason. Celebrating small wins around the school that point back to the definition you establish. Wins by students and staff,

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school-wide competitions, celebrating charity work, organized support for the school community, a program that lifts students who are down (whether socially, academically, or emotionally), and so many other actual programs can not only be established but need to be openly valued to build your culture.

Once the school defines its desired culture and values (mission statement), create a checklist to see what is being done that supports this mission. It needs to focus on building a passion for this mission. Once the passion is shared by much of the school, it becomes a vibe. Passion is something you can't fake, though. Students and staff will sniff out anyone going through the motions. If that happens, it's very hard to regain trust and build momentum. The most important part of this process is not to rush it. You must put the right people in the right places and hire the right people to fill the inevitable holes that will exist. This is assuming your leadership is already passionate about changing this area. If going through the motions is already the status quo for your school's leadership, it will be very hard to change.

Establishing or changing a school's culture is a personal thing and must be done at a personal level. Any school can make kids go to a pep rally, give prizes for achievements, or create a few clubs that contribute to the mission, but if the staff leading those endeavors aren't passionate and devoted, it will always be an uphill climb. Hiring the right people is key. These great staff members need to be rewarded as well. Which is tough with limited budgets, but I don't know anyone who went into teaching for the money. These people must

feel valued and given authentic leadership opportunities and a long leash to try new things and create new traditions. If you have money, I am certain they would not turn it down.

I understand that all schools have more significant problems, limited staff, and an even more limited budget, but once this culture/vibe exists in your school, you can do so much more with so much less. It is always worth the investment in the long run, if it's done right.

Every school has different needs, and the leadership needs to know what needs to be filled to create the most significant cultural change. The passion must be passed down from teachers to students, and then once it takes, something magical happens. The students become the source of energy, and they refuel the staff. When done right, a self-sustaining energy loop is created, and culture becomes a vibe.

Again, to change or establish a positive culture at your school, you must create a cultural definition or mission statement with a clear path for accountability. You must place and/or hire passionate people and give them some power to make changes. You must be patient and not rush through the process.

It can be done. In many cases, it must be done. When it's done, your school becomes a better place to learn and work.

References

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.) Culture. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved January 22, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>

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