Innovative Environments: The Equity Culture Audit: An Essential Tool for Improving Schools in Kentucky

Roger C. Cleveland, Eastern Kentucky University
Norman W. Powell, Eastern Kentucky University
Sterling Saddler, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Tiffany G. Tyler, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABTRACT

In the last twenty years, the state of Kentucky has passed legislative initiatives to address the education needs of its children. Even with the implementation of the progressive laws that were passed, many formidable challenges still confront education delivery in the State. This article introduces and describes the utilization of "the Equity-Culture audit" as an invaluable tool for data collection and school culture assessment. The authors examine the significance of the role played by leadership in the creation and maintenance of a school's culture. In addition, there is a discussion of how systemic change in districts and schools can be achieved by assessing and transforming their cultures and climates. Organizational change in schools requires active involvement and direction from the instructional leadership. The article also provides a brief account of Equity-Culture audits conducted in the state. Attention is devoted to the informative revelations of the findings and the data–rich value of these audits. Descriptions of how Equity-Culture audits serve as powerful data collection instruments for indentifying problematic issues and developing viable solutions for challenged schools are examined.

Keywords: equity, culture, audit, schools, Kentucky.

Introduction

The administrator is the chief instructional leader in a school and has primary responsibility for ensuring that its culture is conducive to optimum student learning. The simple act of respecting students, teachers and other stakeholders provides a model and sets the tone for how others will relate to one's leadership style. Effective leaders exemplify the leadership they want others to emulate. They model constructive ways of interacting with the people in their building and the stakeholders who provide vital support to the school.

School culture is a critical ingredient in the establishment of a successful school learning environment. When considering which is most important between instructional innovations, or school culture, it is school culture that provides the most significant educational foundation for successful student achievement. Brown (2004) lists the following factors as "ingredients" of effective school culture:

- An inspiring vision, backed by a clear, limited and challenging mission
- A curriculum, modes of instruction, assessments and learning opportunities, that are clearly linked to the vision and mission and tailored to the needs and interests of the students
- Sufficient time for teachers and students to do their work well
- A pervasive focus on student and teacher learning, coupled with a continual, school-wide conversation about the quality of everyone's work
- Close, supportive teacher-student, teacher-teacher and student-student relationships
- Many opportunities and venues for creating culture, discussing fundamental values, taking responsibility, coming together as a community and celebrating individual and group success

- Leadership that encourages and protects trust, on-the-job learning, flexibility, risk-taking, innovation and adaptation to change
- Data-driven decision-making systems that draw on timely, accurate, qualitative and quantitative information about progress toward the vision and sophisticated knowledge about organizational change
- Unwavering support from parents
- District flexibility and support for multiple school designs, visions, missions and innovations.

Successful leaders understand organization culture. They employ the strategies listed above of school culture components in the daily operation of their schools and the overall improvement plan for their buildings. Schein (1996) believes that the leader is the sustainer of culture. Lynch (2006) describes school culture in conventional organizational development terms. She maintains the culture in an organization is the framework of everyday work. "Healthy cultures with positive interactions, important traditions and avenues to celebrate the organization, make it joyful to go to work. When school district cultures are not healthy, the students suffer" (p. 20).

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (2008) promotes in Standard Two, the importance of school culture. It underscores the role of school leadership in learning, particularly as it relates to the role of school culture and student learning. The ISLLC Standards acknowledge the importance of promoting learning environments within schools that are based on well defined school culture for informing student learning.

Equity-Culture audits are effective mechanisms for reviewing and implementing a school improvement plan based on school culture with specific actions and recommendations. This investigatory process allows a team of educators to visit a school or school district and identify how well the system is working based on a set of specific audit criteria. Depending on the process, the Equity-Culture audit may last from a few days, to a week. The audit team develops a set of questions, they observe the school setting, and they conduct a series of interviews with key personnel in the school. Most meetings are conducted with school administrators, faculty representatives and, in some cases, parents and other stakeholders. After several school visits and extensive individual and group interviews, the audit team will draft a final report to be presented to the school administrator. It is solely up to the school administrator to act on the team's recommendations.

Benefits of the Equity-Culture Audit

In terms of violence reduction and school safety, Equity–Culture audits can serve as essential components of district-school improvement efforts by providing comprehensive benchmarking. During equity-culture audits, the district-school's safety and crisis disposition is subjected to an extensive review. Disciplinary infraction reports are analyzed for trends and patterns of misbehavior, disparities, and application of institutional policy. Moreover, each Equity-Culture Audit results in a detailed list of recommendations and commendations, supporting the justifications for the need to create and maintain safe and orderly learning environments.

The authors investigated a select number of schools in Kentucky to obtain data to determine the degree to which these schools successfully implemented and delivered their instruction; curriculum; assessment; and school management.

Particular focus was placed on inclusion and diversity practices within the schools to determine the extent to which the environment was conducive to successful teaching and learning. The audit team also wanted to investigate the degree to which the schools were creating a sense of community among all of their stakeholders. As a result of the conducted studies, observations at two Kentucky school campuses revealed the findings that will be examined in the next sections. At each school, the administrators were briefed on the audit team's recommendations. The actual names of the schools and their districts have been changed to protect their confidentiality. The findings to be discussed are the actual conditions that led to the recommendations that were provided to the schools.

Henry Elementary

In spring 2008, the audit team conducted a culture assessment for Henry Elementary School, Concord County School District. The culture audit team activities included formal and informal interviews with students, faculty, parents, and student support staff. The audit team also compiled eighty-nine surveys completed by classified and certified staff as well as parent surveys. MLC (n.d) conducted seven focus group interviews with teachers and classified staff, interviewed 52 fourth and fifth graders, and interviewed 42 parents.

Leadership, communication, discipline, and professionalism were major themes at Henry Elementary School. Beginning with professionalism, the audit team noted both leadership and staff did not always follow the tenets of professionalism that comprise an integral part of the district's belief system. Both neglected to observe confidentiality when dealing with sensitive information regarding students and

fellow staff members. According to one staff member, "We have a big push for confidentiality, but some teachers and the principal share things that shouldn't be shared with people who are not appropriately concerned with the issue." Moreover, survey results indicated that approximately 60% of certified and classified staff strongly disagreed or disagreed on the fact that teachers, parents, and leadership had a high level of respect for one another.

In the case of leadership, school leadership demonstrated limited oversight, insufficient implementation, and ineffective monitoring of the implementation of school policies, procedures, and programs. School leadership did not provide consistent follow through and support for certified and classified staff in matters concerning discipline, staff relationships, resources and implementation of school policies and procedures. This was evidenced by the school's implementation of CHAMPS early in the 2007-08 school year. The CHAMPS program is a positive, proactive disciplinary program that provides teachers a consistent method for teaching students how they are expected to behave throughout the school.

As part of the school's implementation of CHAMPS early in the 2007-08, the leadership organized committees to write rules and procedures for common areas in the school. These committees were charged with developing rules and procedures as well as consequences for not observing the rules. Each committee was also charged with making and hanging posters displaying the rules for each area. School leadership accepted responsibility for making copies of the rules available to staff. Staff, in turn, could inform students and also enforce the rules. Copies were not made available nor were they widely distributed. The faculty, as a group, was not adequately informed

regarding the rules and consequences. Most posters displayed were gone, resulting in minimal awareness of CHAMPS concepts among faculty. Further, implementation of CHAMPS, as a school-wide discipline plan, was mostly nonexistent, due to lack of consistent administrative follow through and enforcement.

The principal's lack of follow through also had affected communication in the school. Lack of clear communication strategies and structures contributed to low teacher/staff morale. This, in turn, contributed directly to minimizing the quality and effectiveness of the teaching and learning environment at Henry Elementary School. Audit surveys indicated that 58% of staff members felt devalued and ignored. However, staff interviews indicated that there were two opposing views about communications from school leadership.

Positive observations regarding communication was evidenced by the ability of many staff to verbalize the principal's philosophy toward students which states, "Students first, every day, no matter what." Audit survey respondents indicated at a rate of 70% that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the school sends out regular communications to the community including invitations to attend key events. However, ineffective communication methods and structures detracted from the teaching and learning environment at Henry Elementary School.

Among audit survey respondents, 60% indicated that they either "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" with the following statement: "There is open and honest communications among faculty, staff and leadership". This statement was rated by 27% of respondents as "agreed" or "strongly agreed", with the remaining responses rated as "not sure." Moreover, 54% of audit survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement: "There is an open line of communication between faculty, staff, and leadership," while 34% rated this as "agreed" or "strongly agreed."

Another weakness in communication occurred at the student level. School leadership failed to communicate high school-wide behavioral expectations to guide student conduct and foster a safe and orderly learning environment. The absence of a school-wide discipline approach and the inconsistent application of consequences for misbehavior had a negative influence on the culture/climate of Henry Elementary School. Discipline, another theme identified in the Henry Equity-Culture audit, was one of the major concerns negatively affecting the culture/climate of Henry Elementary School. Forty-percent of audit survey respondents indicated they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that a school-wide system of applying disciplinary consequences was in place at the school, and 32% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that a school-wide system was in place, while the remaining respondents were "unsure."

Stanley Middle School

In fall 2007, an independent team of researchers, conducted an Equity-Culture audit for Stanley Middle School, a middle school located in the Southeastern part of the United States. The Equity-Culture audit team activities included a review of the documents collected from the school's portfolio/profile, formal and in-formal, interviews, informal discussions and classroom observations with 145 students, 56 teachers, 26 parents, 7 student support staff, and the leadership team. During the audit, the team identified a number of pressing concerns, particularly (a) a lack of consistency in instructional practices and classroom management, (b) disparities in expectations for student performance and teacher efficacy, (c) insufficient

coordination of improvement efforts, (d) poor communication, and (e) ineffective models for inclusion.

Interviews with leadership, teachers, students, parents, and multiple classroom observations, suggesting inconsistency in quality instruction was a major concern at Stanley Middle School. Audit team members observed huge discrepancies in the quality of instruction occurring at Stanley Middle School. Sound instruction combined with good classroom management techniques were observed in some classrooms. Many teachers were using traditional lecture, differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching and modeling as effective tools. Some had students engaged in group activities and other forms of cooperative learning. One teacher engaged children in a game as a means of reviewing content.

Conversely, in several classrooms, observers noted class disruptions. Some teachers had not planned for instruction, were disorganized, and were not prepared to deal with high energy children. These teachers' classrooms were characterized by too much unnecessary movement, lack of classroom protocols, and excessive use of inappropriate language by the students. In many of these classrooms, learning goals were not posted, and there was a general lack of purpose or focus.

"The normal youngster instinctively searches for substitute satisfactions if taught the wrong way. This natural defense of the normal individual presents itself as a "discipline problem" (Redl, pp. 286, 288). Contrary to widespread belief, discipline in the classroom originates with the teacher, not with the students. The teacher's self-awareness and ability to relate with students directly affects his or her skills in classroom management. The well-trained teacher understands that curriculum and class presentations are to be designed to meet specific developmental growth needs of the students in the class. Teachers with minimal skills and without this understanding are routinely confronted with increased discipline problems from even the most normal of students in the classroom. "Boredom and fatigue" in classrooms are prime contributors to low morale and to a pervasive negative school culture (Redl, para.3, 288). This combination of volatile ingredients provides the conditions for classroom disruptions and discipline problems. Poor teaching strategies and poor curriculum planning generate increased discipline problems in a classroom.

Competence in constructive management of behavior in the classroom is equally as important for a teacher as is the ability to teach curriculum to students. Schools plagued with chronic classroom behavior have teachers and leadership with little or no understanding of the importance of these two necessary competences. A teacher can be highly knowledgeable in curriculum instruction but if the behavior of students in a disruptive classroom prevents acquisition of this academic content, little or no learning can occur.

Such chaotic classroom behavior elevates the stress levels of teacher and administrators, as well as students. All of these negative environmental factors contribute to the perpetuation of a negative school culture. Every teacher must have command of a range of classroom management strategies, designed to preclude disruptive student behavior. These classroom management strategies should be comprised of a series of teacher interactive techniques designed to constructively respond to emotionally destructive, socially disruptive and physically destructive student behavior in a classroom. Each school should have a well defined research and strength based educational philosophy of constructive classroom management. This

constructive management philosophy will serve as the institutionalized basis and format for all teachers, staff and administrators to follow when responding to issues and problems concerning discipline in the school. This management philosophy can provide "thoughtful and purposeful" interaction guidelines for relating with students. This institutional management philosophy can also provide the basic consistency necessary to minimize many problems created by miscommunication and ineffective communication among teachers, staff and leadership at the school.

Prior to the start of a class, an important teacher "crisis prevention" strategy is to be well prepared for the lesson and for the activities that have been scheduled. Emotionally and psychologically, students derive a degree of support from predictable routines and structures in a classroom. In order to feel a sense of emotional comfort and security, some students require a greater degree of structure than others. A competent, well trained teacher understands these differentiated psychological and emotional student needs and is able to successfully incorporate this insight into the daily management of the classroom (Long, 2007, pp. 313, 315). It is the responsibility of the various levels of leadership in a school to provide the necessary professional development resources, administrative support and professional modeling that reinforces constructive teacher classroom management competency.

This lack of consistency in instructional practice and classroom management techniques resulted in low academic performance, as evidenced by formative assessments and state assessment results. Moreover, the inconsistency created inequities in terms of all students having an opportunity to receive a quality education.

Although many staff, students, and parents expressed that Stanley Middle School had high standards and held high expectations for staff and students, high expectations were only evident for some students and some groups of students. Furthermore, discrepancies existed in the standards and expectations teachers held both for themselves and their students. Expectations were sometimes superficial and inconsistent from room to room and from student to student.

The lack of instructional and classroom management consistency in a school is primarily due to the fact that no educational philosophical parameters have been successfully established by school or district leadership. Without the establishment and the general acceptance of such philosophical parameters, inconsistencies in instruction and classroom management strategies will pervade the culture of a school.

Schools are relatively "complex" organizations, as stated by noted special educator, Dr. Larry K. Brendtro, in his eloquently written Re-Educating Troubled Youth in discussing the positive relationship between the "nature of the school organization and climate", and its "profound outcome on the educational effort". The educational viability of a school is greatly dependent on the manner in which it is "structured and managed" (Brendtro, 1983, pp. 93, 97). The existence of a culture that is conducive to productive learning is primarily the task of a school's leadership and its ability to establish constructive administrative best practices that are consistent with successful pedagogical best practices.

When asked about expectation levels, all stakeholder groups gave mixed replies. Some teachers stated that they have high expectations, but based on observations of classrooms, examination of some student

work, and review of documents, high expectations were only evident for selected students and groups of students. In one student's words, "It depends on what teacher you have."

Based on interviews with multiple stakeholder groups, three tracks of students existed at Stanley Middle School (i.e., students with disabilities, "normal" kids, and "advanced placement" kids). Audit team members were told that very different expectations existed for children based on their teachers' perception of the track the students were assigned. This was especially true for students with disabilities. Although students with disabilities were readily accepted into the majority of regular classes, there was a general belief expressed by some staff that these students were not capable of learning at high levels.

Further, during interviews, some teachers expressed a belief that students with behavioral problems are scheduled in the same classes in an apparent attempt at damage control (i.e., putting all the rotten apples in the same barrel) to minimize the actual number of classes with disruptive students. The teachers who maintained this practice had resulted in creating a very poor teaching and learning environment in these classes. The research team was concerned that the practice communicated the belief that not all teachers and students deserved the best possible teaching and learning opportunities.

Another pressing concern for Stanley Middle School leadership was continuous monitoring was not used effectively to evaluate and modify strategies/activities designed to impact teaching and learning at the individual teacher and student level. School leadership had not created nor implemented an effective inclusion model for students with disabilities. This has resulted in extremely low levels of achievement for certain groups particularly for students with disabilities. These practices created wide achievement gaps between students with disabilities and other school populations.

Another area of challenge noted by the auditors was communication. Interviews with multiple stakeholder groups identified ineffective communication as a major deterrent to improved learning opportunities. As evidenced by interviews with school leadership, teachers, support staff, parents, and students, school leadership did not practice or model effective communication strategies internally to staff and externally to parents/the community. In addition, district leadership had not developed and implemented a clear and focused two-way communication plan. This would have ensured that the communication among all stakeholders was sufficient to foster effective, continuous dialogue centered on improving the teaching and learning environment. Many respondents, including some parents, indicated that information was not always received in a timely manner.

Communication was also an issue between some support staff and the students. Some staff members had not established positive relationships with the students. Students indicated that they were not always talked to in a positive caring manner when they had interactions with some office personnel. Parents also indicated that they were not always greeted in a welcoming, professional, and timely manner when they contacted and/or visited the school.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the audit team also observed a number of strengths at Stanley Middle School, including (a) the presence of collegiality and collaboration, (b) teacher efficacy, and (c) stability. Audit team members observed that Stanley Middle School teachers liked each other and related well in daily interaction. Moreover, Stanley

set aside planning time to provide collaboration.

Similarly, team members observed pockets of excellence objectives in some classrooms. Some teachers were prepared, and learning objectives in some classrooms were clearly stated. Further, students were told what they were learning and the purpose for which they were learning it. Moreover, some students were engaged in cooperative learning, and some teachers demonstrated excellent ability to motivate and teach the students.

Stanley Middle School's culture was further bolstered by its relatively stable staff and leadership. In terms of faculty, turnover was generally limited to only five positions each year. Additionally, the school principal had served in her position for the last nine years. Having stable consistent leadership is one of the essential prerequisites for establishing a successful organization and a strong environment for learning.

Conclusion

When effectively conducted, Equity-Culture audits and the practices that result, hold significant benefits for all stakeholders. In the case of students, Equity-Culture audits can result in improved student performance by (1) identifying the factors that significantly contribute to dropout and retention rates, (2) determining the nature and efficacy of instructional practice, (3) examining the fidelity of the school's intervention programming. Similarly, Equity-Culture audits are an invaluable tool for school leaders. Equity-Culture audits enable school leaders to facilitate the dialogue essential to school improvement, identify conditions that support and thwart school improvement efforts, and glean insight into the true expectations of each major stakeholder.

Kentucky provides a unique opportunity to utilize Equity-Culture audits, as a result of the conditions established by its educational policy and sociopolitical climate. For example, the Kentucky Center for School Safety, an agency of the Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, publicly acknowledges the role of school culture in school-wide prevention planning. The assessment of school culture is central to the Equity-Culture audit process. Similarly, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), through its "Standards and Indicators of School Improvements," demonstrates an understanding of the significance of school culture, while espousing the importance of the relationship between school culture and school improvement.

According to KDE, a school's school improvement plan should include: (1) a defined evaluation process that informs instructional practice, (2) the use of culture audits to support equitable learning environments, (3) the identification of a school's perceived strengths and limitations in instructional and organizational effectiveness using collected data, (3) the use of data to initiate and continue improvement in school and classroom practice, and (4) leadership that supports an equitable learning environment through the use of culture audits. Consequently, Henry Elementary School and Stanley Middle School showed great foresight when requesting the Equity-Culture audits. Each school discovered a number of strengths, as well as challenges to inform their school improvement efforts. In the case of Henry Elementary communication, limited oversight, evaluation,

An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional

growth. Increasingly, education leaders are required to (1) assess, (2) analyze, (3) improve, and (4) monitor school culture.

Equity-Culture audits are an invaluable tool and viable resources for meeting the demands of today's educational landscape.

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Roger Cleveland is Assistant Professor, College of Education, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at Eastern Kentucky University.

Norman W. Powell is Director of Teacher Education Services and Associate Professor, College of Education, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at Eastern Kentucky University.

Sterling Saddler is Interim Associate Dean for Administrative Affairs College of Education, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Tiffany S. G. Tyler is Director of Workforce Development and Education Programs at Nevada Partners.org in Las Vegas, Nevada.