
Culture Building: Not Just for Science Fairs Anymore

Educators in one Colorado middle school have taught hundreds of students how to incorporate healthy life skills into their everyday behaviors.

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Canon City Middle School (CCMS) in Canon City, Colorado, serves students in grades 6-8 whose socioeconomic backgrounds vary widely. The culture at the school is built upon two carefully chosen words—honor and consideration. This is a school where administrators and staff are committed to providing healthy learning experiences for students.

What Is School Culture?

Culture is defined as the way in which a group of individuals chooses to act and behave based upon the belief systems in place. School cultures do not happen by accident. They are created by people within the setting—either the adults or, in the absence of adult intervention, the students. School cultures are as unique to each building as personalities are to people; they become the cohesion that brings the school together as it performs its mission (Patterson, Purkey, & Parker, 1986). By building continuity within a culture, a school provides a stable foundation from which all other work is built.

Culture building is about schools being safe and healthy places of learning. It is about creating safe and healthy learning environments, stronger family bonds, and healthier relationships across communities. It is about changing the minds of America's youths and those with whom they work.

Why Build Culture?

A number of years ago, the staff at CCMS recognized a need for change. Students were using aggressive tactics in an effort to meet their own needs. Bullying was an established behavior, one that was tough to subdue, much less eliminate. The staff determined that the need for implementation and practice of culture-building skills for staff and students lay in four areas:

- To meet the safe-schools goal of the educational improvement plan;
- To provide a communication model for all staff, parents, and students;
- To offer students an opportunity to make healthy life choices and participate positively in their own education—academically, socially, and emotionally; and
- To eliminate behavioral choices that create academic obstacles.

If students allow social and emotional factors to impact their lives negatively, academics will suffer. By sharing specific coping skills and tools that can strengthen relationships, students can more fully focus on academic progress. They also develop long-lasting, healthy relationships. The result is a community of healthy kids growing into even healthier adults.

What Does Culture Building Look Like?

In the summer of 2003, all school staff—55 members—were trained in the principles of the Discovery Program (Larsen & Timpson, 2001), a communication model that includes five core areas: effective groups and teams, anger management, transactional analysis (Harris, 1969), problem-solving, and assertiveness training. William Glasser's choice theory plays an integral role in social and emotional development and provides the basis for this

communication model.

In turn, that same year, school staff trained 650 middle school students in the same language. The annual training is supported in various ways throughout the year and focuses on establishing a culture in which students proficiently use appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication techniques. The goal is to establish a familiar model of behavior.

Training new staff members is a continuous priority and each summer, all newly hired staff attend formal training sessions financed through the district's office of curriculum and instruction. Additionally, all new students are trained at the start of the school year and are provided opportunities to practice their newly acquired skills. Returning students participate in intensive review sessions of the communication model.

Students reinforce these skills through interactive, kinesthetically oriented activities and games. The team that designs the activities trains staff to facilitate them. The result is a large group of students and staff practicing life skills in a way that is fun and promotes healthy risk taking.

Throughout the school year, students receive a clear message that culture building is a permanent fixture, that the adults in the building take the environment very seriously, and that the goal is to create a healthy place in which to learn.

What are the Results of Culture Building?

- CCMS reading and writing state-assessment scores are on a constant increase;
- CCMS has maintained a 95 percent attendance rate since the culture-building project was first initiated;
- Teachers trained in the communication model write 66 percent fewer office referrals than their untrained cohorts; and
- Ninety-four percent of parents surveyed feel the school climate is safe and orderly.

In addition to the statistical changes, teachers are commenting, for example that “the language is coming easily now that I have taught it” and “the kids are wonderful, especially in the hallways.”

Creating Cultural Change

Improvement in test scores, attendance rates, and discipline referrals did not occur by accident. Despite the obstacles evident in all change processes, effective change at CCMS started with full support from the administration and the many talented educators who joined the effort.

Cultural change requires the support and development of faculty and staff who advance themselves in the process. Once the majority of the adult population is actively engaged, an overwhelming majority of students will readily follow suit.

Here are the steps in the path to creating cultural change:

1. Begin with a committed administration;
2. Create a culture-building team—including administrators, teachers, support staff, counselors, and parents—that will develop culturally oriented goals;
3. Create a three- to five-year action plan;
4. Educate and involve the entire staff (certified and classified alike);

5. Educate and involve all students and parents; and
6. Provide ongoing support for all parties.

Culture building is a sizable undertaking for any setting, whether it is within the educational arena or not. It is an ongoing project that requires sensitivity, tenacity, creativity, and analytical skills. We can choose to work in an environment that supports healthy behaviors or we can work in one that ignores them. Either way, our students will continue whichever model of behavior that we introduce.

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