

Chapter Seven Culture, Missions, and Theories of Action

An administrator at the Academy of the Pacific Rim, reflecting on his feelings when he first learned about the charter school movement several years ago, still bubbles with enthusiasm:

When I found out about charters, I had this “aha moment”! It was like, “WOW! This is great!” A school, you know, a *public* school without any fees, tuition, enrollment, etc., but [you could] have the *culture* work like independent schools . . . [with] high expectations, [the idea that] you’re going to college, and all of that!

And over at Roxbury Prep, one of the codirectors declares,

So for us, the culture is driven by what happens inside of the classroom. A lot of schools, very high-achieving schools that I think are fabulous, spend a lot of time on culture, on building culture, and on explicitly teaching culture. We do some of that with our advisory class and with our Community Meeting. But I would say the culture of Roxbury Prep . . . is defined by what happens inside of the classroom.

These charter school leaders use the word “culture,” but what exactly does it mean? It is such a frequently used yet elusive term in the world of schools and organizations (c.f. Lieberman, 1988; Meyerson, 2008; Peterson & Deal, 2002; Sarason, 1971; Tushman & O’Reilly, 2002). Certainly, every school or organization has a culture, so the important question is, what kind of culture is it? Is the culture productive, coherent, and supportive? Or is it dysfunctional, divisive, and toxic? Does the culture support or subvert the organization’s work and mission? Is the culture broadly understood, or are there conflicting and competing subcultures within the organization? As seen in the previous chapter, the nonprofit management and effective schools literatures work with similar definitions of culture. Edgar Schein (1985), an emeritus professor at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, offers one of the most widely cited definitions of culture:

[Culture is] a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 9)

Schein is saying that as organizations evolve, culture helps them manage two important issues—how to interact and react to the external environment surrounding the organization, and how to inculcate individuals into the organization’s set of beliefs and values.

School researchers articulate culture in similar ways. Peterson and Deal (1999), for example, note that cultures build up over time and can create powerful expectations about professional norms. Peterson (2002) describes school culture:

Every organization has a culture, that history and underlying set of unwritten expectations that shape everything about the school. A school culture influences the ways people think, feel, and act. Being able to understand and shape the culture is key to a school's success in promoting staff and student learning. (p. 10)

Today, a preponderance of consultants and tools are available to examine and potentially transform a school's culture. Multiple resources, such as the School Culture Triage Survey (Wagner & Masden-Copas, 2002), the School Culture Survey (Richardson, 2001), and the *Shaping School Culture Field Book* (Peterson & Deal, 2002), are available to diagnose, develop, improve, or alter a school's culture. There is even a Center for Improving School Culture¹ ready to help schools bring about cultural change.

Taken together, then, these perspectives on culture establish a basic fact: culture is the marinade, the soup in which operational elements such as the people, the structures, and the systems operate and in which instruction, an important task of these schools, floats. While these elements help define the culture, it is also true that culture helps define these elements. The circularity and interactivity between a school's culture and the elements within it indicate the level of an organization's coherence and internal alignment with the mission.

This concept of strategic coherence appears throughout this book. As business strategist Michael Porter (1996) observes,

Strategy is creating fit among a company's activities. The success of a strategy depends on doing many things well—not just a few and integrating among them. If there is no fit among activities, there is no distinctive strategy and little sustainability. (p. 75)

The aim is not simply coherence for coherence's sake, for one can have an organization that coheres around goals yet might not achieve the mission. It is, rather, a set of goals and activities that cohere strategically around the mission that helps define who these schools are, what they do, and how they do it.

The Importance of Culture

Why is culture important? In the charter school context, culture is important for several reasons. First, many argue that student performance reflects school culture and that when a school immerses students in a context where learning and achievement are valued, they are more likely to learn and achieve (e.g., Barth, 1990; Elmore, 2004; Lieberman, 1988; Peterson & Deal, 2002).

However, establishing a causal relationship between culture and student achievement is challenging at best. The empirical literature instead offers *correlations* between school culture and student achievement. For example, one study of eighty-two middle schools in Virginia found

significant positive relationships between student achievement and teacher professionalism, academic pressure, and community engagement (the latter having the strongest positive correlation; Tschannen-Moran, Parish, & DiPaola, 2006).

Second, culture is important in the charter school context because the schools in this study began as start-ups. They are not conversion schools—nothing existed before these schools received their charters—and therefore, at least initially, they developed their cultures purposefully, making them their own. Creating culture or influencing an existing one is not an easy task; doing either can be an uphill battle, but they are battles that differ. With a start-up, the focus is on establishing core beliefs and values, while in an existing school the task is to change beliefs and values. Regardless of the situation, the cultures in these five schools offer insights for all school leaders. Furthermore, culture is important to these schools because they stand alone—namely, they are not part of districts or charter management organizations and thus they are solely responsible to their customers and to themselves. The only formal external influence they encounter is the Massachusetts Department of Education, which requires the schools to go through a reauthorization process every five years. Finally, culture is important because it is a powerful vehicle that fosters the realization of a school’s mission. Culture both defines and unites an organization around common goals and desired outcomes.

There are several useful ways to begin to understand a school’s culture. One is to consider the set of beliefs and values conveyed in the school mission statement, another is to explore the school’s “theories of action” (Argyris & Schön, 1974) or “theories of change,” which also express certain assumptions about activities that lead to the attainment of the school’s goals. Another perspective on the culture of these schools emerges from the values expressed by organizational members. This chapter sets the stage for discussions in the following chapters about how human resources, systems, and structures enable these schools to sustain and manage their cultures. After all, every school and organization has a culture, and every school has people, structures, and systems that operate within that particular culture. However, what is striking about these five schools is the degree of coherence and strategic alignment among the various elements of the organization and the stakeholders’ consistent values and assumptions.

Organizational Missions

What is a mission and what are the characteristics of a good one? Oster (1995) declares that “among nonprofits, mission statements typically identify both the audience and product or service being offered. They answer the twin questions: What are we producing and for whom?” (p. 22). Drucker (1989) poses the same questions in slightly different terms and adds a third: What business are you in? Who is your customer? What does your customer value?

Strong mission statements serve three functions: (1) they describe why the organization exists and what it does; (2) they motivate and send a signal to the individuals involved in the organization; and (3) they help frame the evaluation of the organization’s products (Oster, 1995). To summarize, then, effective mission statements are memorable and easily and quickly understood by multiple constituencies. They describe, in unambiguous terms, an organization’s goals and serve as a guide to establish metrics or benchmarks of the organization’s output and

impact. So how does this nonprofit language apply to the mission statements of this study's schools?

Missions in Schools

Like culture, having a mission statement for a school is a rather unremarkable thing. A mission statement may express what a group or an individual, at one point in time, thought their school or organization stood for. On the wall of the school office or in the handbook of nearly every K–12 school in America, one can usually find the school's mission statement. Many are vague, leaving the understanding of the school's purpose open to multiple and possibly conflicting interpretations.

For example, one middle school mission statement declares, "We will respect ourselves and one another, appreciate individual differences, and encourage one another to reach our potential." This statement does not go far in answering Oster's question of what the school is producing. The statement of a Boston public middle school that shares the same general student population as Roxbury Prep expresses the desire "to develop ethically and academically successful world citizens with input and ownership by students and parents." Many such well-intentioned mission statements fall short on providing specificity, clarity, and easily defined, measurable outcomes. Indeed, they succumb to a common tendency "to make the mission statement into a kind of hero sandwich of good intentions" (Drucker, 1990, p. 5).

Now consider the following mission statements from the schools in the study:

Academy of the Pacific Rim Mission

The Academy's mission is to empower urban students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to achieve their full intellectual and social potential by combining the best of the East—high standards, discipline and character education—with the best of the West—a commitment to individualism, creativity and diversity.

Boston Collegiate Mission

The mission of Boston Collegiate Charter School is to prepare each student for college.

Community Day Mission

Our mission is to provide a kindergarten through grade eight school that will draw upon our considerable experience in working together as a community to develop and implement a curriculum that discovers and supports the special characteristics and unique learning styles of each student. We will engage that student in meaningful learning experiences for the purposes of clearly stated goals in the areas of understandings, knowledge, skills, habits and social competencies. The curriculum will be embedded in the reality of city life and will reinforce the positive aspects of our city: its culture, art and economy, its working class history and strong work ethic.

MATCH Mission

The MATCH Charter Public High School prepares Boston students to succeed in college and beyond.

Roxbury Prep Mission

Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, a public school that serves grades 6–8, prepares its students to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college.

Using the criteria established above—specificity, clarity, and measurable outcomes— three of these mission statements receive high marks: Roxbury Prep, MATCH, and Boston Collegiate. These three missions are clear, specific, and lend themselves to outcome measurement. It is possible to determine whether students are prepared for college by examining their admission rates and their desire to attend. While MATCH’s “and beyond” may present some challenges in measurement, retention and completion rates would certainly lend a degree of understanding to whether the students were successful in college. Roxbury Prep’s mission statement is noteworthy for its scope and clear ambition, although it is perhaps not so immediately useful because the school would need to wait ten years (in the case of sixth graders) to determine whether it was successfully meeting its mission.

On the other hand, Community Day and the Academy of the Pacific Rim offer more expansive mission statements that include information about *how* they intend to achieve “full intellectual and social potential” or engage students in “clearly stated goals in the areas of understandings, knowledge, skills, habits and social competencies.” Actually measuring these particular outcomes will be more challenging than for the other three charter schools. Perhaps sensing this, administrators from the Academy of the Pacific Rim and Community Day both offer a more action-oriented translation of their school’s mission into specific and easily measurable outcomes. At the Academy of the Pacific Rim, for example, when asked about the school’s mission, one administrator stated:

Everything is focused on that particular goal [of academics]. . . . We’re not trying to be everything for everybody, so we don’t have a vocational program and we don’t have a strong sports program. We don’t have all these interests that might compete when it comes down to academics. I think being clearly focused on academics first, and everything [else] coming second, makes it much easier. . . . We’re very clear and everything revolves around that.

Another administrator at the same school makes the connection to college as an outcome measure even more overt:

Ultimately we want to prepare them for college and then living in a global world. I think our measures of doing that are how many of our alumni are going to graduate from college and what are they going to do [after they graduate]. . . . Those are probably the

best measures that we have, since what's the most tangible for people is college prep and college success.

While Community Day does not specify the exact levels of their “clearly stated goals in the areas of understandings, knowledge, skills, habits and social competencies” in their mission statement, in practice, achieving their mission relates closely to the Massachusetts Curricular Frameworks and to results on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). The executive director—who brought nonprofit management experience to the job—explains:

I always managed through specific, measurable goals and objectives . . . so it kind of amazed me that [in] schools . . . there wasn't a more specific orientation towards what are your goals or standards that you need in every grade [and] how do they link, one to the other?

Thus, in these schools, teachers and administrators articulate their mission in very similar ways. The common language, shared understanding, and core of beliefs are remarkable in these organizations; nothing is ambiguous about the work of these schools. A teacher at Roxbury Prep, for example, attributes the success of the school to the fact that the “mission of the school is very explicit,” while a Community Day teacher notes that mission permeates everything: “From everything everybody does, more so than any school I've taught at before, everybody here is on the same page and everybody wants the students in the school to be successful.” Finally, an administrator at the Academy of the Pacific Rim stresses the reverence for, indeed almost sanctity of, the mission while discussing various changes and midcourse corrections the school has undertaken, noting that whatever happens in the school “has always been guided by the mission.”

Espoused Values: Theories of Action and Intended Impact

An approach that offers a different perspective on the culture and organizational assumptions made about these schools is to explore their “theories of action.” A theory of action can serve as a roadmap to a particular destination. Childress (2004) suggests that “a theory of action represents the organization's collective beliefs about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes” (p. 1). Similar to a theory of change or intended impact as articulated in the nonprofit and for-profit worlds,² a theory of action describes what conditions must be present and what activities need to occur in order to achieve a desired outcome. Some organizational consultants argue that focusing on intended impact or a theory of action helps develop clarity about outcomes: “Another approach . . . is to help an organization's decisionmakers develop clarity, not about mission, but about what we call ‘intended impact’ and ‘theory of change’” (Colby, Stone, & Carttar, 2004, p. 1).

What, then, do the decisionmakers in these five schools articulate as their theory of action regarding “improved outcomes for students”? When asked directly about their school's theory of action, leaders provided the following responses via email:

Academy of the Pacific Rim

We believe that all students can learn to the highest academic standards/expectations. We believe that this requires hard work, and that it may take some students longer, and some students may require more support, but with effort, all students can achieve. (Codirector)

Boston Collegiate

We believe that combining high academic and behavioral expectations with tremendous support; ensuring consistency, order, and structure throughout the school; and, ensuring that all teachers are outstanding and supported will prepare students to excel in college and beyond. (Executive director)

Community Day

We believe that in order to ensure opportunity for our students, it is necessary to hold all stakeholders (students, faculty, and parents) to high standards. We do everything we can to maintain our focus on these standards while supporting the individual needs of each student. (Executive director)

MATCH

If a school creates a culture in which teachers are freed from behavior management issues and organizational operations to focus on teaching and kids are focused and trying reasonably hard to learn, then students will achieve academic success. (Founder)

Roxbury Prep

When students are provided a safe, structured environment and teachers provide rigorous, engaging classes that are aligned with standards and reflect content expertise, all children can make tremendous academic progress and be prepared to enter, succeed in, and graduate from college. (Codirector of curriculum and instruction)

Looking across these schools, the similarities in their theories of action are striking, even though they describe work in different cities, at different grade levels, and with different populations. Academy of the Pacific Rim and Community Day stress the need for student support and accommodation; one is a 5–12 school in Boston while the other serves K–8 children in Lawrence. Boston Collegiate, Roxbury Prep, and MATCH all mention the work of teachers, while Roxbury Prep and Community Day specifically stress the importance of standards alignment. Taken together, these theories of action indicate the belief that the collective action of individuals working within a school around a shared mission will lead to desired student outcomes. These statements reflect a culture of agency that assumes the mission is achievable and the belief that school personnel have the skills and ability to bring the mission to fruition.

From the perspectives of school leaders, these theories of action reflect assumptions and beliefs that create conditions under which their goals will be achieved.

Assumptions and Operating Norms

Another means of exploring the culture of schools is to examine commonly held values and expectations about the ways that schools and the individuals in them conduct the business of teaching and learning. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1983), in *The Good High School*, eloquently makes this point about all schools:

Schools must find ways of inspiring devotion and loyalty in teachers and students, of marking the boundaries between inside and outside, of taking a psychological hold on their members. . . . I do believe that good schools balance the pulls of connection to community against the contrary forces of separation from it. . . . The protection and solace good schools offer . . . may also be partly approached through ideological clarity and a clear vision of institutional values. (pp. 322–323)

Noteworthy assumptions and values in these five schools include high expectations for students regarding their work ethic and behavior, high expectations for families and how they support the students, and high expectations for teachers and their commitment to the job. Permeating the culture of all these schools is dedication to continuous improvement and pride in being adaptable organizations. The following section examines these values, as evidenced by comments from individuals working within the schools and researcher observations.

High Expectations for Students

In all of the classrooms in all of these schools, the expectations for student engagement and behavior are palpable. Students are expected to work hard, behave, and participate at all levels. As described in the chapter on the Academy of the Pacific Rim, for example, students in their PREP program are required to do some kind of internship or other program for each of the three summers they are in high school. This sends a message to the students that they must participate in the world at large and gain experience beyond the school's walls. At MATCH, the founder takes pride in the fact that his school's culture establishes high behavioral expectations:

We think that if you show that you really care about each individual, you then are in a comfortable position to create high expectations both about classroom decorum but also actually about doing your work.

Expectations for students relate not only to behavior but also to the level and amount of work they do. At Roxbury Prep, a seventh-grade teacher describes how the school tracks classes according to ability while still holding the same high expectations for all levels:

I really hold extremely high expectations for all of my students. We have three different sections—703, which in a tracking system could be considered the high group, 702 the middle group, and 701 the lower group. The expectations I have for 703 are the same for

701, and I just make sure that I provide all the support to make sure all students can meet these high expectations.

This same teacher goes on to say that he sometimes must defend his level of expectations to parents who suggest the program is too rigorous:

I had a parent question me and say she felt the curriculum was designed more for high school. I said no, I have high expectations. I said lets . . . look at the high schools we are trying to get our students to go to. There is a lot of catching up to do and the competition for proficiency at these high schools is going to be high. I would be remiss as a teacher for not equipping my students with the tools they need to be competitive at that level and also to get to college.

At Community Day and Roxbury Prep, the assumption is that eighth graders will gain admission to a secondary school of their choice; at the high schools, that graduates will go to college. An Academy of the Pacific Rim administrator speaks for the secondary schools:

College prep is what we do. There's a lot of language in the middle school, but . . . it intensifies in the high school. In ninth grade they go on a college field trip . . . [and] there's information nights for parents. The tenth through twelfth grades attend our college fair. In the eleventh and twelfth grades, the students have specific SAT classes that we provide and pay for. They have college counseling class once a week that runs in the eleventh- and twelfth-grade year. We have seminars, one-on-ones with the college counselors. . . . From the very beginning, at sixth grade, we're unapologetically college driven.

High school choice or college attendance is a nonnegotiable expectation established at these schools early in each student's academic career. Class time is sacred, and the limited time they have to achieve these goals creates a sense of urgency and the need for students and teachers to stay focused.

The schools also deploy precious resources in the service of students' achieving their secondary school choice or college attendance, which illustrates a coherent strategy to meet their goals. Academy of the Pacific Rim, for example, deploys two full-time college counselors for a high school with fewer than two hundred students. Boston Collegiate has a full-time director of College Advising and Alumni Programs and also a College Readiness Committee that solicits feedback from graduates about the quality of their preparation for college and then reviews and adjusts the school's curriculum based on this feedback. At the eighth-grade level, Community Day makes families aware of their choices for high school. While noting that Lawrence High School is a choice, the individual responsible for secondary school placements also mentions that Community Day graduates attend other regional schools that participate in a statewide school choice program, parochial schools, and vocational schools. This individual believes that her role is "to help families by laying out those options and being able to help them craft a list that seems most appropriate for their child." The other middle school in the study, Roxbury Prep, also commits funds to support a graduate services coordinator. And at both Community Day and

Roxbury Prep, the placement coordinators collect data on the performance of their graduates in high school and college.

Beyond allocating precious staff resources to fulfill their mission of high school choice or college attendance, the schools in our sample organize field trips to visit high schools or college campuses. In these ways, the schools demonstrate a coherent strategy to achieve their goals. A teacher at Roxbury Prep, for example, describes with pride and enthusiasm his recent trip to Amherst College with his middle school students, even though it could be five years before these students begin the college application process. The placement coordinator at Community Day takes students to visit secondary schools that she decides are appropriate for them. She explains how she chooses which high schools to visit:

I work on that choice because it's not fair to send a child who has absolutely no chance, for example, [of] getting into Phillips Academy to visit there. That would be cruel. So I work with the head of school and the teachers [to] craft what seems to be possible options. . . . I say to the kids all the time, the better high school you go to, the better college you go to, the better job you have. That's just reality. But what I'm really looking for is for each child to attend the school that is right for them.

In addition to these direct actions, the schools communicate their high expectations for students in some subtle and subliminal ways. One approach is through role modeling. The forty-five college-graduate tutors who make up the MATCH Corps offer an intriguing example. Because MATCH students develop strong professional and personal relationships with the tutors, they always have access to informal information about life after high school. If a student wants to know what college is like or what to expect, a tutor can tell stories, answer questions, or give hints about how to survive. Furthermore, there is a conscious strategy to recruit MATCH Corps members from top-ranked public and private colleges, thus sending a message that such achievement is not only possible but expected. Other schools send not-so-subtle messages by naming classrooms for the teachers' alma maters, such as Cornell 8 or Dartmouth 10, and by displaying college materials throughout the halls of the schools.

High Expectations for Families

Expectations about college or choice of secondary school are made clear not only to students but also families, sometimes even before a student applies or enrolls in the charter school. One codirector of Roxbury Prep describes this deliberate process:

When families come for information sessions, which means they're just filling out applications and have a 50/50 chance of getting in through the lottery, we start really at that moment. . . . We explain the school—we state all the great things . . . and then we say that the way we've been successful is that the school is incredibly strict and incredibly well structured, and the school's incredibly demanding academically. We say, "I don't know how many of you have more than fifteen minutes of homework a night, but now you're going to have two-three hours of homework a night. And, I don't know what it's like in your school hallway, but in our school hallway it's silent. And, I don't know

what you normally do on Saturday, but each time you need it, you will spend a Saturday in school.” We’re just very clear about it. . . . You may agree or disagree with the way that we do things, but we’re going to be really clear about it and that just is who we are.

These schools also host activities to help parents fill out secondary school or college applications and financial aid forms. As an Academy of the Pacific Rim parent observes, with a sense of amazement in her voice, “They really try to help the parents with the process. We come in and they help you with the financial aid forms. . . . They have a night where all the parents come in and they’ll . . . sit with you at the computer and help you do the form!” Going even a step farther, Community Day *requires* parents to attend a parent night at which area high schools set up tables where families can get additional information. Last spring eighteen high schools were represented at the fair.

This emphasis on secondary school or college admission and persistence is important, because the national charter movement is awaiting data about the long-term impact of these schools. As recently as 2007, Gill and his colleagues (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2007) from the RAND Corporation note that there is “as of yet almost no evidence on the long-term effects of charter schools on the academic attainment of their students, including effects on high school graduation and college participation” (p. 110). They comment further on the importance of the mission and culture of these schools: “As small schools that are intended to operate with a strong sense of academic mission, charter schools may be likely to affect students’ identification with school and academic ambitions more than their scores on state achievement tests” (p. 110).

High Expectations for Staff

“Expectations,” as Elmore and his colleagues (2004) note, “are collective in nature and they characterize the shared norms and values of school participants developed to get the work of the school done. They are formed out of relationships among individuals, and they operate in often powerful ways to shape individuals’ behavior and values” (pp. 139–140). In keeping with that viewpoint, these five schools set extremely high expectations for staff.

While teachers are hired because they have a deep commitment to the job (described more fully in the next chapter), once they are actually on the job the schools work hard to intensify that commitment and to create cultural norms of professionalism, shared ownership of problems, and a strong work ethic. According to one Academy of the Pacific Rim teacher, these expectations account for the school’s success: “I think, in general, the high academic standards and high level of professionalism among teachers and students is something that sets the school apart from many charter schools . . . it sets it apart from many . . . urban schools in general.” A teacher at Community Day makes a similar comment:

You work hard consistently, and it’s not something where you can just kind of rub off your shoulder and say, “Oh, I don’t care.” If you do that, you don’t end up being here very long. . . . The teachers’ work ethic kind of leads down to the kids, kind of bleeds down to them . . . so I think part of the success is our hard work that fans out to the kids, and the kids see that and they try to produce the same thing in a lot of ways.

Several methods are employed to build high expectations for staff. One example of this is to encourage 60- to 80-hour teacher workweeks, which are common. Describing the interview process at Roxbury Prep, one codirector notes that he looks for a candidate's reaction to his description of a long workweek: "I also look at people's reaction when I say it's a 60-hour workweek. If that makes your jaw drop, then no matter how good you are, you are done. Because I feel like that's what it takes. You have to be willing to do it." A Boston Collegiate teacher has a similar perspective:

People work long hours. . . . You know, usually I get here at 7:30 AM . . . and I'll leave between 5:00 and 7:00 PM. So 11-hour days are pretty common. . . . It takes a lot of hours to give the kind of feedback that students need, to make that feedback immediate enough that it's relevant when they get the papers back or they get the work back.

No one, teacher or administrator alike, suggests that working at these schools is an easy job. The intense commitment to do "whatever it takes" can take a toll, as another Boston Collegiate employee admits:

It's a challenge having all of these extra things that we do. Extra groups, tutoring, Homework Club, detention, progress reports, report cards. We wrote a paragraph for each kid for their report card. It's hard. And I spent a lot of hours here every day doing things that are not grading or planning my class. And that's really hard. I think the biggest challenge for a teacher is that time-management kind of work/life balance.

A Roxbury Prep teacher also notes the extensive time commitment and observes that it is part of the culture:

There's no competition of who works the most, but . . . this is the blessing and the curse of Roxbury Prep. It's my fifth year, I'm teaching only three classes and I'm still here on Saturday or Sunday getting prepared. I think people are here all the time—early, late—and it's become almost this self-righteous thing that we like to brag about while still knowing it is not healthy and probably not self-sustainable in the end. I also think in order to really believe in that mission, you have to understand that you're going to have to be working sixty-seventy hours a week . . . it doesn't make sense that you're going to teach six hours a day and go home and that's it.

While some may argue that all schools in Massachusetts feel the pressure to increase student performance and have their children do well on the MCAS and on No Child Left Behind measures, the culture of urgency is different for these schools because they face the prospect of closure every five years as part of the charter renewal process (although charter school critics correctly point out that charter closures for poor performance are rare).

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Another value that helps move these schools toward high academic outcomes as measured by standardized tests is a commitment to continuous improvement. An axiom in these schools is,

“Desired outcome = actual outcome + continuous improvement.” These schools constantly ask, “What could we do that would better serve our students? How can we improve?”

Organizational scholars talk about the peril for nonprofits in either resting on their successes or being unwilling to subject their products constantly to concrete measurable assessment (c.f. Christensen, 2006; Drucker, 1985; Letts, Grossman, & Ryan, 1999; Oster, 1995; Porter, 1980). Those who study organizations note that the successful organizations—those that endure and continue to make strong contributions to society—are those dedicated to continuous improvement. Successful nonprofits are never static, Drucker (1980) says, since the “focus is always on improving the product, improving the process, improving the way we work, the way we train. And you need a continuing strategy for doing so” (p. 60). Porter (1996), a business theorist, comments similarly: “The operational agenda is the proper place for constant change, flexibility, and relentless efforts to achieve best practice” (p. 78).

Nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and in this case, high-performing charter schools, study their processes and work hard to make modest and sometime major adjustments to meet their desired outcomes. An administrator at the Academy of the Pacific Rim states this attitude clearly: “If something’s not working, then we use the data to figure out what will work, so people, I think, ultimately remain open-minded with that goal as the prize.” These schools are never satisfied; they constantly assess their effectiveness, they plan new programs, and they rethink their work to make changes that will better serve students’ needs.

The creation of the Homework Club at Boston Collegiate (described in detail in chapter 3) is a perfect example of the culture of continuous improvement. Despite the fact that the Homework Club is now a common part of daily life at Boston Collegiate, at one point it did not exist. The club originated when teachers came together and noted how getting homework done was a huge battle in every class. Describing the process, one teacher recalls:

It became this brainstorming session and . . . another teacher . . . suggested, “Why don’t we just collect homework in the morning and go through it? Whoever hasn’t done it stays.” It was this period of [asking], “Can we do that? How would that work? It sounds great. Would that be a task that would just take up so much time that it wouldn’t be worth it? . . . What’s the worst that could happen? . . . They’re not doing their homework, so why not try it? It would mean some phone calls . . .” And it worked. And then, obviously, it’s evolved from there. Now we can’t even imagine not having Homework Club.

The commitment to continuous improvement has other benefits as well. For one, it demonstrates to teachers and staff that their views, ideas, and voices matter. Continuous improvement presents an opportunity for buy-in and ownership. As one teacher notes, “There’s very much the feeling within the school that if you have a good idea, you can do it, you can make it happen . . . you just need to build a consensus and as soon as you have that, it’s going to take off.”

Another advantage to a culture of continuous improvement is that a school can jettison something that is *not* working. For example, in MATCH’s original charter they took the name

Media and Arts Technology High School. Early school documents reflect the technology priority:

Bridging the Digital Divide. Technology is not taught as a separate subject, but directly integrated into math, English, science, history. For example, students studying the presidential election have filmed public service announcements about federal policy issues, produced personal radio diaries exploring character, and conducted telephone polls about the Presidential debates all in addition to, not instead of, traditional debates, essays, and readings. (MATCH Charter Public High School, 2001, p. 5)

However, after several years, the school dropped its emphasis on the role of technology in favor of a greater emphasis on preparation for college. By the 2006-07 school year, the school's annual report no longer referenced integrating technology into instruction. Instead of being the Media and Arts Technology High School, the school henceforth was known simply as MATCH. Drucker (2006) endorses this continual reassessment of activities in an organization:

Every product, every operation, and every activity in the business world should be put on trial for its life every two or three years. Each should be considered the way we consider a proposal to go into a new product, a new operation or activity. . . . One question should be asked of each: "If we were not in this already, would we now go into it?" And if the answer is "No," the next question should be: "How do we get out and how fast?" (p. 4)

Nimbleness

Hand-in-hand with a commitment to continuous improvement is a sense of nimbleness—an innate agility that enables schools to move and to make changes quickly, if necessary. Nonprofit scholars describe this agility as being

much like a navigator guiding a vessel on a long-term journey. Constantly sensing the shifting winds and currents and constantly adapting the course, the executives of successful organizations use the ideas and learning generated by their organization to fine-tune their strategies (Kaplan & Leonard, 2005, pp. 18–19)

It is one thing to espouse continuous improvement, but without action it is meaningless. Being nimble is something that not all schools, and especially those existing within a larger district bureaucracy and management system, can necessarily institute. However, the schools in this study are small and self-managed, which means they can make and implement decisions quickly. Indeed, when asked what practices they employed that were not replicable for traditional schools, a charter administrator responded,

The nimble way that we're able to address issues. For example, our schedule, for a very long time, had been set at 8:25, one bell rings. . . . We decided in October that we needed to have the bell ring three minutes earlier because . . . we actually needed a quick passing period. *In one day* we made a decision as a leadership team, we re-did the bells, and we sent out an email saying that at 8:22 a bell would ring. It was so easy to do.

However nimble, each of these schools has a clear commitment to and a reverence for the school's mission. Stakeholders at Community Day, as well as at MATCH and the other schools, describe ways their schools have changed while maintaining a focus on their founding missions. One administrator sums up the commitment to the mission while endorsing a nimble view of continuous improvement: "I think one of our great strengths is that we have been true to our mission and guided by our mission through all of the changes."

Coherence and Strategic Alignment in Schools

To a remarkable and impressive degree, the administrators, teachers, and parents in each of the five study schools coherently describe the mission of their particular school. How is this coherence achieved? Through clarity of purpose and through the mechanisms of choice.

These schools work hard to send clear messages about what to expect at their schools. From parents' nights to culture handbooks for teachers and summer sessions to introduce new faculty and students to the school's culture and value systems, nothing is left to chance. Critics might argue that these schools' laser-like focus on student outcomes is too narrow. Some legitimately point out that such a singular focus restricts students' free time and limits their choice of extracurricular activities. Others suggest that their theories of action are too instrumental and ignore children's social and emotional needs. As one critic declared during a case discussion of the KIPP charter schools, "They are stealing children's childhood!!" However, these schools do not entertain these concerns, as they are unequivocal in their goals for students and in their strategies for achieving them.

Achieving coherence in these schools is also possible because they are schools of choice. As discussed in the subsequent chapter, "The Right People," no student, family, or teacher is *required* to attend, support, or work in these schools. Students who attend these schools do so because they or their families want what these schools offer. Thus, as Oster (1995) observes, "A clear mission statement can limit struggle within an organization, both because it attracts people with similar ideas and because it makes clear the basis on which decisions will be made" (p. 23).

Finally, two other factors that contribute to the coherence around mission found in these schools include school size and policies around entry points for new students. These five schools are intentionally small. For example, in 2007-08, the Community Day student body totaled just over 330 in grades K-8, while MATCH had 220 students in grades 9-12, the Academy of the Pacific Rim enrolled 472 in grades 5-2, Boston Collegiate had 412 in grades 5-12, and Roxbury Prep weighed in with 187 students in grades 6-8. These populations are all below the mean size for comparable Massachusetts schools. For example, the average size of a K-8 school in Massachusetts is 429 students, while the average secondary school size is around 880 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). We know from extensive work by Lee and others (Lee & Ready, 2007; Lee & Smith, 1995; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995) that small schools tend to be more coherent. Coherence is about creating a student community small enough so that each child is known well by the adults in the school and the children know each other.

Another factor that helps maintain cultural coherence derives from school policies that govern admissions. All of these schools prefer to admit students only at certain grade levels. For example, the Academy of the Pacific Rim will only enroll new students in their fifth and sixth grades; Roxbury Prep admits only new sixth graders (and no students in other grades) up until February 15 of each year. MATCH admits students only into the ninth grade, while Boston Collegiate admits new students throughout grades 5–8; their high school students must have attended Boston Collegiate’s middle school. Community Day will admit new students in any of their K–8 grades, depending on various factors, including cohesion of the class, size of the class, and openings in other grades, but after the K–1 year, this rarely happens.

Restricting the grade level of admission is a key feature in maintaining cultural coherence. These schools admit students who are at the formative stages of learning about the school’s culture. Even a ninth grader at MATCH is likely to attend more fully to cultural norms when older students are near. This practice helps both students and staff inculcate newcomers easily into the existing culture.

Lessons for Replication

Several lessons about culture and coherence presented in this chapter are important for those wishing to adopt or transfer similar elements to their charter and noncharter schools. Though it may already be evident to the reader, several practices of these charter schools will not easily transfer to traditional public schools because of the degree of school-site autonomy present in these schools. For example, depending on a district’s organizational structure and size, having an intentionally small school or controlling points of entry may not be possible. Districts may not have the building capacity or enrollment patterns that allow for limited enrollment. Furthermore, the notion that a school could deny entry to a student in an upper grade would unlikely be acceptable in most district systems. On the other hand, several traditional districts, such as Boston’s and New York’s, are noticing the advantages of autonomy. Through their respective Pilot Schools and Empowerment Schools, these cities now recognize the advantages of giving greater autonomy to at least some of their schools.

The nimbleness to make changes quickly would be another characteristic of these schools that may not easily transfer to district schools because of the collateral impact of a change. In a larger district, for example, extending the required school day for tutoring could impact citywide bus schedules and union contracts. However, *within* the school building, acting nimbly to implement improvements fully endorsed by staff should not present problems.

Many other features about these schools related to culture, mission, and theories of action *are* within the reach of all school practitioners. Specifically, the notion that a mission is a vehicle to communicate the purpose of an organization is good management practice. Making efforts to ensure that the mission and purpose of a school are understood clearly by the entire organization is essential for any school, charter or noncharter. Unfortunately, such initiatives and discussions do not occur as frequently as they should. The creation or re-creation of mission statements can be an appropriate place to begin the process of defining a school’s purpose, but the work does not stop there. Leaders, with their actions and words, communicate the mission and purpose of a

school every day in every venue. Faculty meetings and community forums where all opinions about the purpose of the school are voiced and respected are also an ongoing requirement for a coherent culture. These conversations may not be easy, but they are essential to creating a shared culture. The bottom line is consistent and open communication.

Conclusion

Culture, that seemingly invisible yet enormously powerful influence on organizations, plays a large role in the success of these five schools. The energy generated by urgency, coupled with the high demands placed on stakeholders and a laser-like focus on mission, makes these schools intense yet enormously rewarding places to study and work. The importance of coherence across the schools, combined with the work ethic and a commitment to continuous improvement, produces strong student outcomes.

Notes: Chapter 7

1. See <http://www.schoolculture.net>.
2. See, for example, <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/node/115>.

This document is part of a larger research document, *Purpose, People, and Planning: Inside Five High-Performing Urban Charter Schools* by Katherine K. Merseth, with Kristy Cooper, John Roberts, Mara Casey Ticken, Jon Valant, and Chris Wynne.

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