



# Your Most Crucial Resource

## How Culture Can Empower Teachers

By Dr. James L. Drexler

**I**t's the economy, stupid!" In the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign, James Carville, the lead political strategist for Bill Clinton, coined the phrase to keep everyone focused on what he saw as the most significant campaign issue.

Speaking to Christian educators, I'd like to borrow from Carville: "It's the culture, stupid!"

The culture of our Christian schools is critically important. By culture, I mean the norms, beliefs, values, rituals, stories, practices, and artifacts of a school: in other words, "how we do it here." Ideally, the culture of a school flows from and is consistent with the mission and purposes of the school.

What happens, though, when the *professed* beliefs of a school (mission statement, philosophy of education, educational objectives) don't match with the *controlling* beliefs (practices and processes), as Donovan Graham describes in *Teaching Redemptively*? For example, a Christian school can profess that all children are unique image-bearers of a creative God, but if the practices in the classroom are anticreative, then students hear the real message since actions speak louder than the words. The *processes* we use in our Christian schools become part of the *content* and can, in fact, supersede the professed content (Graham 11–18). This relates not only to students, curriculum, and discipline, but to professional educators, too.

Research consistently demonstrates that the most significant variable in learning and achievement for students

is the quality of their teachers. Experience tells us that when teachers work in isolation, both the culture of the school and the learning of students suffer. Growth—for students, teachers, and the school—is a collaborative endeavor, one that is crippled when teachers are treated in less than professional ways. As Hargreaves and Fullan write, "Successful and sustainable improvement can therefore never be done *to or even for* teachers. It can only ever be achieved *by and with* them" (45).

Collaboration and collegiality reflect biblical norms of community. The Bible teaches we are created for community (Genesis 1:26–27; 2:18), redeemed for community (Ephesians 2:11–22) and destined for an eternity in community (Revelation 5:9–10). Yet many of our Christian schools still isolate teachers and employ a top-down, bureaucratic, transactional school leadership that deprives teachers of status, meaningful input, and authority while also withholding much-needed leadership support from a frequently overworked administration.

To create a consistent, positive culture that improves our teachers, Christian schools must boldly seek ways to inject *professional capital* into their teaching, learning, and culture.

Hargreaves and Fullan use the economic principle of capital and apply it to schooling in describing the three parts of *professional capital*—human, social, and decisional. Just like monetary capital, professional capital

must be circulated and shared to be effective, so the second and third parts of professional capital are key.

First, they describe *human capital*: the skills, knowledge, expertise, experience, and talents of each individual teacher in your school. Human capital includes knowing the subject, using a variety of pedagogical strategies, understanding how children learn, understanding the unique culture of your school and school families, and having the passion and commitment to help students learn. Each teacher has some level of human capital, of course, but in most schools this capital is not circulated, invested, or shared with others.

Second, *social capital* is how “the quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships among people affects their access to knowledge and information; their senses of expectation, obligation, and trust; and how far they are likely to adhere to the same norms or codes of behavior” (90). Social capital is a collective capacity that develops as teachers have the time, space, and authority to interact about teaching and learning. In this, the sum is more than the parts. Schools with the high degree of trust and loyal relationships that create strong social capital will innovate and improve. In these situations, human capital improves, teachers grow, students learn, and the faculty will stay for years.

The last part of professional capital is *decisional*. Simply put, decisional capital is the ability and authority to make discretionary judgments even where there are no fixed rules. Decisional capital is sharpened through social capital and accumulated through experience, reflection, and collaboration. It calls for shared or distributed leadership among the professionals in the school.

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. Shalom is not just the absence of conflict; it also includes the notion of flourishing. When we are at peace with God, with ourselves, and with others, we become what God intends us to be. If we want our Christian schools to flourish, our students and teachers to thrive, and our cultures to be strong, we must change our practices.

- The entrenched patterns of individualism, isolation, competition, and standardization tend to institutionalize schools in conservative and risk-averse behavior, and student learning suffers. Developing and circulating professional capital through professional learning communities (PLCs) is a new pathway for structuring schools, and the research shows that when PLCs are implemented, student learning increases. (You can learn more about how PLCs work and how they can

improve learning, enhance professionalism, and transform your school in *Nurturing the School Community* and by consulting [www.allthingsplc.info](http://www.allthingsplc.info), the Web home for Solution Tree, the experts in PLCs.)

- Teachers must be viewed and treated as professionals. Expectations need to be high and accountability needs to be real, but the same goes for respect, support, and the freedom to grow, learn, and innovate.

## Effective and successful principals understand their influence on learning is indirect, mediated through teachers.

- Christian school leadership must move from a top-down, bureaucratic, and transactional model to a shared servant-leadership approach that empowers teachers. Recent research demonstrates that effective and successful principals understand their influence on learning is indirect, mediated through teachers. The wise school leader, therefore, will encourage teachers toward professional capital, support their learning and development as professionals, empower them to share leadership, and establish professional learning communities that help everyone thrive.

Nothing strengthens the vitality of your school like a consistent, biblically rooted culture.

### Works Cited

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