



How to Create a Culture of Achievement in Your School and Classroom

by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Ian Pumpian

Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2012

This book begins by using the image of a tree in an illustration about culture. Like the roots of a tree, much of the culture of an organization is not readily visible. But those “roots” are critical to its health and growth. Borrowing from Margaret Wheatley in *A Simpler Way* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler), the authors note, “But the underlying elements, those that are not readily observed, are equally essential, and include the relationships, identity, and connections (Wheatley, 1998)” (1). A diagram of a tree clarifies the authors’ thesis, noting what is above and below the organizational surface (ground) of school culture. Above ground are structures with five pillars, patterns with service cycles, processes with organizational principles, and tools for action research (4).

A focus on achievement and on an academic priority orientation is an essential ingredient in an effective school or classroom, but it is much less effective if the culture of the school is not in alignment with the academic rigor. Culture is developed by the mission, vision, and core values of the school and the transmission of these from paper into the life of the school. “Culture develops and grows up through an accumulation of *actions, traditions, symbols, ceremonies, and rituals that are closely aligned with that vision*” (6). The case is made for intentionality of culture in much the same manner as an academic focus is intentional.

The dilemma of schools is identified as a part of education. The students bring the cultural setting of the family to the school with their beliefs, traditions, and mores, and these may not be consistent with the culture of the school. The authors propose that schools should be a “respectful mediating” experience in the life of every student. And this occurs through a school culture that respects the students’ various backgrounds and gives students opportunity to sense that they are included. There is an interesting comparison in this public school model to the Christian school with its well-defined sense of mission and a singular avowed worldview orientation. The concept of “respectful mediation” is grounds for an interesting discussion within the Christian school, whether it has an open or closed admissions policy.

The culture of achievement must be common to the purposes of the school and its sense of educational, civic, and in the case of Christian schools, spiritual responsibilities. The authors paraphrase David L. Goetsch and Stanley B. Davis, in *Quality Management for*

Organizational Excellence (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2010): “People often define quality using specifications, standards, and other measures. It is useful for organizations to pay attention to the ways that their customers define quality” (11). A shared definition of quality is important because it becomes part of the culture. A significant task of school leadership is to ensure that the common definition is both understood and lived out in the daily operation of the school. The institution of a common vocabulary is a uniting factor within the school, and it has both an empowering and enabling result within the school culture. The authors refer to the Malcolm Baldrige categories of standards as an example of proven organizational responses (12). The Baldrige group gives awards in various sectors for outstanding performance. In education it has seven areas where excellence is to be demonstrated:

1. “Leadership”
2. “Strategic Planning”
3. “Customer Focus”
4. “Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management”
5. “Workforce Focus”
6. “Operations Focus”
7. “Results”

Chapters 2 through 6 of the book develop each of the five pillars of a quality school culture. These are the essentials to building a culture that sets the stage for student achievement, teacher success, and a reputation for quality for schools—a culture that satisfies both parents and the community. The five pillars are listed below (2):

1. “Welcome”
2. “Do no harm”
3. “Choice words”
4. “It’s never too late to learn”
5. “Best school in the universe”

The “welcome” pillar begins with the question, “Can our school be so welcoming, so inviting, and so comfortable that every person who walks through our doors believes they are about to have an amazing experience?” (17). If the answer is not an emphatic yes, then it is clear that the school leadership has work to do. There are three Rs for staying open and becoming a school that is sustainable over the years: reputation, reenrollment, and results. The authors discuss Joe Pine and James Gilmore’s research into the “experience economy” (*The Experience Economy* [Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2011]): “To be successful today, organizations must create memorable experiences for their customers, and the memory itself becomes the product, in addition to the specific good” (18). The reality of the sense of welcome that students and parents experience, even in those first moments on the school campus, will have a lot to do with their choice and satisfaction.

The authors cite an interesting example of school culture. When Douglas Fisher was a consultant and was on a campus tour led by students, he asked where the smart kids were on campus. The students

took him to the gifted classrooms. One student noted that she had a friend in one of the classes there. He then asked, “Where are the stupid kids?” (22) and they took him to the special education wing. No one noted having a friend in those classes. He deliberately used the word *stupid* to get a sense of the school culture. There are both organizational principles such as *greet everyone with a smile and look at them*, and then there are established routines—which the authors call service cycles—to imbed the principles in the school culture.

The “do no harm” pillar is said to be a defining element of school culture particularly as it utilizes its tools of classroom management and discipline. The goal of the school and the rules of the school and their enforcement have a great deal to do with the culture of achievement at the student level. Healthy cultures see the rules as a function of the educational—teaching and learning—process, not as a means to enforce classroom or school conformity. The goal of all schools should be teaching young people to be responsible, respectful, and law-abiding, and for those of us in Christian schools, to be a testimony for Christ’s name in all that we do everywhere we are.

The concepts of restoration, prevention, and punishment are significant aspects of developing a “do no harm” culture. Matthew Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, and David W. Johnson in their 2011 research in Chicago Public Schools (*Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools* [Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago], 43) found that “the best predictor of the school’s safety was the achievement of students within it” (39). This safety is not just physical, but emotional and spiritual. The orderly nature of the school and the classroom promotes an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and that, in turn, creates a sense of safety and well-being for all students.

“Choice words” is the third pillar. The education profession is transmittal, and most of what is transmitted is through language. Language that is uplifting, positive, and reinforcing assists students (and parents) to be both hopeful and optimistic about their future. The image that students see of themselves in the classroom is largely shaped by the language and paralinguistics of the teacher. The authors list three goals of teacher language according to Paula Denton, author of *The Power of Our Words* (Turner Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007): “(1) help students develop self-control, (2) build community, and (3) foster academic skills and knowledge” (77). Language, especially teacher language, affects the mind-set of achievement. “In classrooms where students are collaborators and their experiences are valued and valid, they grow into thinkers and productive members of the community” (86).

“It’s never too late to learn,” pillar four, is based on the educator attitude of presumption of competence. Competence is not perfection, but the basic abilities are in place for one to succeed (101). The profession of education is committed to the work of taking students from “I do not know, understand, or

grasp” to the place of “I do know, understand, or grasp.” This is the presumption of competence on the part of the teacher toward the student—the “you can learn” axiom—and the teacher’s confidence—the “I can teach you” axiom. Teachers and administrators who take this approach with every student see dramatic things happen in the student-teacher relationship; this is the dominant strand of the achievement culture.

The “best school in the universe” is the pillar of efficacy, the aspect of the school’s culture that the school can achieve its mission. The faculty and school leadership agree that each staff member is committed to making the school a great place to work, a great place to teach, and the best place to learn. The best place is both a status and a pursuit, and that pursuit is daily (153).

Christian schools should have an intentional commitment to a culture of achievement that includes each of the outcomes the school is dedicated to providing. If these outcomes are not clearly stated at your school, they should be! They should be stated and measured annually. ACSI has a sample set of outcome tools available to assist you in this process. The five pillars discussed by the authors are foundational to building a school culture of achievement. They are worth the time of the board, the administrative leadership, and the faculty to contemplate within their school setting. Here are a few beginning thoughts for considering what might need intentional adjustment in your school’s culture:

1. As you think about a *culture of achievement* on the campus and in the classrooms, what are the features that your school is doing well? In which areas is there a need for notable improvement? Choose one area and add it to your school improvement plan.

2. As you think about the “welcome” pillar, how well does your school assist new families to adapt to your school? What structures (service cycles) are in place for each level of student, and student developmental needs, to be addressed and for students to be made comfortable in the school?
3. Does your school keep data on the three R issues of the school? What is its reputation in the community? What is the reenrollment percentage year by year, and what are the results that you are achieving? These results should include academic results but also student development, including the spiritual results from the students’ school experience.
4. What is the language of *quality* within the school? Does everyone on the school staff define it in the same way? What are the words of quality that are common to the school classrooms, including bulletin boards, the website, and communications? Can those descriptors of quality be validated?

Language, especially teacher language, affects the mind-set of achievement.

Derek Keenan, EdD
Vice President, Academic Affairs
ACSI