Achievement and School Culture

Exploring the connection between highly effective schools and their faculty culture

If schools are serious about reform, they must look at transforming school culture first. ◆

In October, SCOE's Leadership Assistance Center began a professional development series focused on the theme of *Leading the Learning for Equity and Excellence.* Over the course of this school year, the series will bring five nationally recognized experts to Sonoma County to share their thoughts about how local schools can meet the challenge of ensuring academic excellence for all learners, with particular focus on students who are underperforming.

Education practitioner Anthony Muhammad, Ph.D., began the series with a presentation that focused not on programs or students, but on the human dynamics of the adults who are key to maximizing student achievement. A well-respected and sought-after education consultant, Dr. Muhammad first became known for his work as a middle school principal in Southfield, Michigan, where he oversaw the transformation of a low-performing school. Implementing the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model, he and his staff saw student proficiency on state tests more than double in five years.

With that experience as a backdrop, Dr. Muhammad began researching, writing, and talking about collaborative leadership and school culture. The thesis of his most recent book, *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*, and his belief that schools must "redefine the norm" of school culture served as the basis for his presentation at SCOE.

This SCOE Bulletin introduces some of Dr. Muhammad's ideas about the importance of transforming school culture. In sharing this information, we invite Sonoma County educators to explore and discuss the characteristics of effective school culture and how it connects with the goal of success for all students.

Anthony Muhammad, Ph.D.

CIRCLE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Dr. Muhammad's conviction about the need to transform school culture grew from his awareness of the 21st century challenges facing our society and its economic system. Consider these facts:

- Our country is no longer home to industrial plants filled with high-paying, low-skill jobs.

- Successful companies need employees who have academic skills, social skills, and common sense.

- One in five students does not graduate from high school.
- Students who don't graduate from high school are more likely to require intensive support from public agencies.

These and other 21st century realities form a circle of responsibility that is interconnected with the goals and purpose of public education. Schools today are expected to provide a complete, coherent system of education and ensure that all children are served. Across the country, educators have established academic standards and developed accountability systems, but they're working in settings where resources have been reduced and community safety nets are not always working.

Top-down leadership is not the formula for success in today's struggling schools, says Muhammad. Rather than referencing an organizational chart with a hierarchical configuration, he believes that a more effective structure can be developed by emphasizing a school's culture. He cites the work of Kent D. Peterson of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who defines school culture as "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols, and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school." It is the unseen human factor that affects the day-to-day practices and behaviors in a school.

School cultures can be difficult to analyze and change, yet doing so holds the greatest potential for improving our public schools and aligning them to 21st century needs. Muhammad believes that, if schools are serious about reform, they must look at transforming school culture *first*.

TRANSFORMATIVE SCHOOL CULTURES

Anthony Muhammad studied school culture at 34 school sites across the United States—11 elementary, 14 middle, and 9 high schools. He concluded that, at all levels of the system, positive school cultures are ones where:

- Educators have an unwavering belief in the ability of all students to achieve success—and they pass that belief on to others in overt and covert ways.
- Educators create policies and procedures and adopt practices that support their belief in the ability of every student.

How can we transform our school cultures to reflect these ideas? Four strategies identified by Dr. Muhammad provide a road map.

1 Confront facts and identify problems
Highly effective schools seek out and confront the facts and identify the problems that are hampering their success. They gather demographic and achievement data about their students, understand their community and family structures, and shape their instructional programs to address identified needs. State and local data is not only sought out, it is used to validate instructional practices. Most important, these schools move swiftly from identifying the problem to taking the steps that make a difference for students.

2 Build leadership across the school community
Highly effective school cultures support and recognize leaders across the learning community, actively involving support staff, teachers, principals, and district officials in the essential work of the school. Leadership is distributed throughout the organization to ensure attainment of the school's

For further discussion …

SCOE has developed several online resources for schools interested in examining the link between achievement and school culture.

Our **activity guide** and **self-study survey** provide a starting point for staff discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of your school's culture and its impact on student learning. These resources can be used as time allows in whole-staff meetings or by grade-level and department teams.

Online video clips highlight portions of Anthony Muhammad's presentation at SCOE and provide another opportunity to promote dialogue on this important topic.

Find these resources along with a PDF version of the Bulletin at **www. scoe.org/publications**.

mission and goals. All members of the school leadership team have:

- High levels of intrinsic motivation,
- A personal connection to the school and community,
- High levels of flexibility in working with students, and
- Willingness to confront opposing viewpoints in order to resolve problems.

At highly effective schools, everyone speaks with one voice about the school's work. Staff collaborate to ensure the success of every student—academically, socially, and emotionally. In other words, everyone is on the bus and moving toward achievement of common goals.

3 **Promote goal attainment**
A positive school culture provides the setting for achieving goals. This is because instructional staff have a clear understanding of the standards and outcomes expected of their students. They also recognize the purpose and importance of monitoring student progress over time and are prepared to intervene as necessary to ensure that all students are successful.

In highly effective schools, goal attainment is promoted across the organization. Staff work together in professional learning communities to monitor student progress. Formative assessments, instructional strategies, re-teaching ideas, and flexible grouping structures are actively discussed. The focus is on what's best for students and what needs to be done to reach academic goals.

Here, Muhammad's research coincides with what other education researchers have found—schools making a difference have the common elements of 1) a guaranteed viable curriculum, 2) a system for monitoring results, and 3) internal accountability.

When a school has these three elements and a culture that promotes goal attainment, the principal's responsibility is to build staff coherence about student needs and effective methods for meeting those needs. The principal is present in the classroom, monitoring instruction and offering meaningful support in the form of lesson feedback,

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instructional coaching, provision of resources and personnel, and holding staff accountable for results.

4 **Use the language of problem solving**
Healthy school cultures use the language of problem solving and promote communication that encourages the expression of ideas and opinions. When conflicts arise, leadership teams and the school faculty recognize the role they play in solving problems and the importance of finding solutions. A prescriptive view of problems emerges and staff are ready to seek solutions by asking:

What are the central issues of this problem?
Why do you think that happened?
What do we do about it?
Who do we need to get involved to solve this problem?

Muhammad notes that the staffs in effective schools may demonstrate anger, frustration, and despair, but their resolve to solve problems and work together for the best interests of their students carries them through. He believes that cultural health—or its opposite, toxicity—is determined by what happens in the day-to-day interactions among staff when conflicts arise. Healthy schools see problems and conflict as a regular part of life; they don't detach from issues and assign blame to others.

In his studies, Muhammad noted that successful schools follow a process of acknowledging issues, analyzing problems, hypothesizing responses, addressing issues, and monitoring results. Organizational trust is built into the language of collaboration and problem solving.

LEARNING FOR ALL

As we move deeper into the 21st century, schools in the United States are confronting a wide array of challenging issues. Work patterns and cultures that were once the norm simply aren't effective today.

Highly successful 21st century schools are distinguished by shared leadership that is focused on a common mission and specific student learning outcomes. At these schools, staff regularly examine their beliefs, practices, and norms of behavior toward one another and their students—and they make adjustments as necessary. There is greater job satisfaction among staff, improved

relations with stakeholder groups, and higher levels of student achievement.

Anthony Muhammad believes that all school communities must reflect on and improve their operational cultures to mirror this new model. He encourages educators to take on the task of cultural transformation as an essential step toward the goal of success for all students. ◆

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Today's schools must go to where their students are culturally and linguistically with the aim of bringing them where they need to be academically.

Instructional program elements

Outcome information

Demographic information
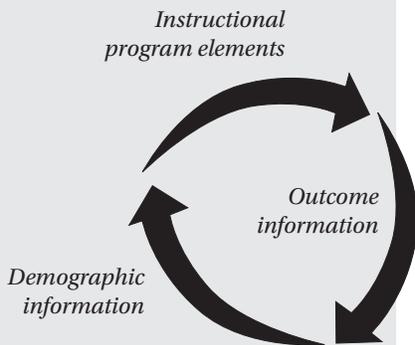
A model for culturally responsive schools

The American education system must do a better job providing an equitable education for all students, says Sharroky Hollie, Ph.D., executive director of the Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning (www.culturallyresponsive.org).

Hollie, the second speaker in SCOE's *Leading the Learning for Equity and Excellence* series, urges schools to consider new ways of thinking about students caught in the achievement gap. He calls these our "underserved students"—that is, students who are not successful academically, socially, and/or behaviorally *because the school as an institution is not being responsive to them.* If schools can develop a better understanding of the cultures and languages that make up this community of underserved students, they will have greater success.

Hollie is critical of stereotypes associated with racial groups in schools, pointing out that "there is no relationship between a person's skin pigment and their ability to solve math problems." He believes that it is vitally important for educators to appreciate the home culture of their students, including the ways they use language, interact with one another, and approach learning. He calls on schools to be more responsive to underserved students by:

- Acknowledging the legitimacy of the cultural heritages among all of the school's learners,

- Teaching students to appreciate their own and other cultural heritages,

- Using a wide variety of instructional strategies in order to reach out to diverse cultures, and

- Focusing on the individual student.

Using data to create culturally responsive classrooms

Culturally responsive schools use the information they collect about students—their cultural heritage, language, parent education, socio-economic status, attendance patterns, and family configurations—to create education programs that match student needs. These schools adjust the organization of the curriculum, instructional time, assessment practices, instructional strategies, classroom groupings, family involvement, and professional development in response to the information they collect.

In these schools, teachers don't believe that a "one size fits all" curriculum is effective, so instruction undergoes constant adjustment. They use the *output* data from performance tasks, parent surveys, curriculum-based measures, and state and local assessments as *input* for making ongoing improvements to their instructional programs that are fine-tuned to their specific student population. This is a continuous and equitable process that respects and reaches out to all students. ◆