

Achievement and School Culture

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



About Dr. Muhammad

Anthony Muhammad, PhD, has over 20 years of experience in public education. He 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 assessments more than double in five years. With this experience as a backdrop, Dr. Muhammad began researching, writing, and talking about collaborative leadership and school culture. His most recent book is *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*.

For schools interested in transforming school culture to promote student achievement, Dr. Anthony Muhammad cites four strategies for creating positive environments that are aligned with the goal of successful learning for all students. In his research, he has found that highly effective schools establish a culture that allows and encourages staff to:

- Confront facts and identify problems,
- Build leadership across the school community,
- Promote goal attainment, and
- Use the language of problem solving.

Once a school has committed to examining and transforming its culture, a good first step is to assess the current environment in relation to these factors. You can begin this task by using the *Self-Study Survey: Achievement and School Culture* developed by SCOE. This survey is designed to be completed by individual staff members, then reviewed and discussed as a group. From these discussions, the staff can move to identifying priorities and determining next steps for improving the school's culture.

Background ... To develop a common frame of reference before a group discussion, ask staff to read the SCOE Bulletin from December 2010 on Achievement and School Culture, then view the video clips of Dr. Muhammad's presentation. You can find these resources online at www.scoe.org/publications.

Online resources

This Self-Study Activity Guide was developed as a professional development resource related to the December 2010 issue of the SCOE Bulletin highlighting the connection between achievement and school culture.

You can download the SCOE Bulletin and this activity guide, view video clips of Dr. Muhammad's presentation, and access the Self-Study Survey at www.scoe.org/publications.



Activity ...

- Distribute the *Self-Study Survey: Achievement and School Culture* (also available on the SCOE website) to all staff as a group, or in department or grade-level teams.
- Prior to discussion, participants should complete the survey individually.
- After selecting a group recorder, review and record the survey responses of the group. Identify the common themes or response trends within each section of the survey.

Discussion ... Consider using one or more of these discussion questions as a way to identify commonalities in the group's response to the survey.

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of our school's culture?
- How can we develop more coherence in our work with students and with each other?
- How does our school solve problems?
- Are we effectively managing the variables we can control—i.e., how the curriculum is organized, instructional strategies, daily schedules, pacing, grouping, etc.—to ensure high levels of learning for all students?

Next Steps ... Beginning with the most common responses in the four sections of the survey, prioritize the issues that should be addressed first. (All responses are important, but prioritizing identifies the key items in order of concern and/or need.) Based on the group's prioritization, determine the next steps for analyzing the priority issues.

- What actions can we take to build on the strengths and overcome the weaknesses of our school culture?
- What do we need in terms of support and resources to move forward in addressing the key issues we have identified?