
Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change¹
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Study Guide²

This study guide is designed as an easy reference to the key ideas and themes in each chapter of the book as well as to explicitly link ideas to practical applications for leaders in school settings. This guide offers the reader of *Building Strong School Cultures* materials to enhance understanding and to support group discussion and individual reflection about the ideas in the book.

¹ Kruse, S. D. & Louis, K. S. (2009). *Building Strong School Cultures: A Guide to Leading Change*. Thousand Oaks CA: Corwin Press.

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Chapter 6

Schools are not autonomous—they are positioned in districts that provide a legal, policy and resource context that deeply affects the work of schools. Effective district/school relationships can create conditions that foster PCOLT, school improvement and reform.

Key Themes:

The ideas in this chapter explore why understanding a district's culture is important for school-based leaders, and how to find allies and partners within the district office to support school improvement efforts.

Why does district culture matter? Like principals, district leaders face new challenges in today's educational landscape. District roles and staffing are changing even more rapidly than schools as a result of state and federal accountability legislation. There is increasing evidence that district cultures have an enormous impact on schools and their performance.

Three challenges have emerged. Districts need to...

- *Respond to state initiatives* -- while remaining responsive to local goals,
- *Provide support to schools and teachers* --while pressing for needed culture change, and
- *Differentiate support to schools to maximize achievement* -- while maintaining some equity in resource allocation.

Facing these challenges has changed the district/school relationship and culture. In many places these changes have not been openly acknowledged or discussed. While everyone agrees that:

- *All schools are different.* They have different student populations, different teachers, and different resources, even when the district-allocated budget is equitable; and
- *All schools are supposed to be equally good,* but there are no clear guideposts for what that means, aside from state tests.

There is little agreement, however, on how these differences should be addressed. As districts try to make sense of these tensions, new policies and practices emerge that challenge the status quo, particularly the expected relationship between district and school personnel. This is why understanding the district's culture as well as the culture of individual school is a key component of intensified cultural leadership.

Finding allies and partners within the district office: Perhaps you work in a setting where there is open and trusting collaboration among all district and school-based staff, and where key district leaders have been in place for some time. In that case, much of this chapter will be of little relevance to you. On the other hand, you are more likely to be in a typical setting where change is occurring both in personnel and policies – and where disagreements occasionally mushroom into burdensome and time-consuming negotiations. What we suggest is that a common school leader response to this more typical setting -- to limit school-district contacts to the necessary minimum -- is unlikely to be productive in the new era of standards and accountability.

Creating alliances: Alliances occur around mutual interests and cooperative activities; they are strengthened when progress is made toward shared goals. They are part of building trust in leadership. They are also part of building networks of support for leadership and change. By identifying potential benefits of a district/school alliance, a

leader can engender support for purposes and directions. Some of the potential benefits of developing alliances with district leadership include:

- *A broader and more diverse base of support:* When alliances are formed they can expand the base of support for improvement initiatives. The broader a leader's foundation of support the more likely they will be to attract other influential allies.
- *Greater reserves of leadership:* As leadership is diversified and intensified across and within schools, the pool from which support and energy can be drawn grows as well. Having a larger pool from which to draw assistance and collaboration can enhance the district and school's ability to respond productively to new circumstances.
- *Opportunities for compensatory leadership:* As leaders we all have strengths and weaknesses; joining forces with others increases overall capacity. When school and district leaders come together to solve the problems are practice, the resulting choices are more likely to "fit" and create shared cultural values.
- *Greater resilience in the face of adversity:* When the leadership knowledge and skill set are deepened through alliances, schools become better able to address problems.
- *Greater range and intensity of connections:* Allies often come to the table with their own partners and associates. By developing allies in one area of the organization or community, leaders gain access to the resources and relationships of others. In turn, this increases the potential of the district and school to respond when necessary.

Why are these ideas important?

When schools succeed so does the district. The reverse is also true: in successful districts, individual school leaders find improvement efforts easier to implement and manage. The ideas are simple—strong cultures within schools and districts are mutually beneficial. We offer the following keys to creating strong district/school cultures:

- *Clarify expectations bilaterally*—You can begin to do this by creating a clear mutual understanding of what is expected. Stating your vision, listing the goals by which results will be measured, and providing unambiguous messages about the ways in which you plan to act all contribute to building trust.
- *Establish common values and priorities* – and negotiate arenas of acceptable difference. The principle of “we’re all different but we’re all expected to be good” requires a common core, but with almost everything else available for customization. Be clear about what you want to sign on for in the district’s agenda. If the district’s agenda is unclear, find the areas of agreement.
- *Design opportunities for communication and mutual learning* – If school leaders are to meet goals, members of the administrative team must learn together. Dialogue concerning “the good, the bad and the ugly” should be honest, open and regular whenever possible.
- *Build trust* – Open communication is an important underpinning of trust, but you also need to make sure that you are seen as a reliable team member whenever it is possible.
- *Coach and model a culture of professionalism* –You can actively work to model the behaviors you expect of others, and provide by example, a bridge between the

expectations of the district and school. You can also develop stories that describe how the work of the district and the school will build on each other, and reinforce the school's goals and tell them to them district staff and your teachers.

- *Plan and think strategically* – Because setting clear directions and measures of progress are fundamental to school improvement, school leaders need to employ strategic planning and thinking in tactical and deliberate ways. Strategic assessments of your school's context (uniqueness) and progress (toward common goals) should be part of the regular and on-going dialogue between you and the district, and should help keep everyone "on track" in balancing any tensions that exist.

Questions, Discussion and Reflection Activities for Chapter 6

Individual Reflections

- Do a quick diagnosis of the district's culture. You may want to use the survey tool on page 8 of this study guide. Answer the following questions:
 - What is the level of trust and/or conflict among staff?
 - Are district-wide instructional and curricular decisions openly discussed?
 - Does central office staff value each other and do they work together well?
 - Are district-wide communication structures open and honest?
 - Is learning something in which everyone is engaged or is it what the kids do?
 - Who makes most of the decisions in the district? What happens if people don't agree with a decision that has been made?
 - Do people seem to like working here? Who, if anyone, seems to be dissatisfied?
- Once you have answered the questions above, list the issues you have discovered about your district culture.
 - Where are the allies for your school culture efforts?
 - Where are the barriers?
 - Where are district resources that would be helpful in supporting your efforts?
 - Who has knowledge that can support your work?
 - Who has contacts that can support your work?

Group Discussion: (Use your individual reflections to help guide group discussion)

- This chapter addressed why understanding a district's culture is important and how to find allies and partners within the district office to support school improvement efforts. Discuss what you can do almost immediately to improve/intensify your relationship with the district:
 - List the knowledge and skills that you already have that will support you in moving forward.
 - List 3-5 action steps you can take to begin your work.
 - List 3-5 people or groups of people you can engage in this effort.
 - List the ways these ideas and people support the core vision and goals of your school.
- What is story of school-district relationships in your setting?
 - Are the themes in your school story aligned with the themes in the district's story?
 - How might your stories become more aligned to foster increased community, learning and trust?
 - What would the benefits of a more aligned story be?
 - What might a new district/school culture story offer to those that hear it?
 - What would the key themes be? Why?

Diagnosing Your District Culture

Consider the following items.

Assess the relationship of district and building leadership efforts.

In my district...			
	Always	Sometimes	Never
A high level of trust exists between central office staff and building leadership teams.			
Communication is regular, clear and focused on school and student success.			
Central office staff view learning about new initiatives and ideas as part of their role.			
Decision-making is open and transparent.			
When problems arise in the district, the central office can be counted on to help.			
Central office staff offers opportunities for professional learning and development.			
Instructional and curricular matters are a prominent topic of discussion.			
People like coming to the district office for events; they are always worthwhile.			
Central office staff supports school improvement agendas and efforts.			
Resources are provided to support school culture change efforts.			

- Where are your sources of internal support?
- Where might reaching out to external mentors and coaches be needed?
- In what areas is the district succeeding? Why?
- What makes those efforts more successful than others?
- How might those characteristics be developed within or across other efforts?
- What can you do in the coming weeks to begin strengthening ties with district leadership or to make existing ties more explicit and focused on school improvement efforts?

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