OhioTIF

Doing Whatever it Takes: Taking a Closer Look at Building a District Culture of Collective Efficacy

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To help understand what it takes for schools to be successful, we can analyze all the typical report card measures. We can explore student dispositions, such as engagement with class work and hopefulness about the future. And we can even assess parent engagement.

But that doesn't tell the whole story of a school.

At a recent *SOAR* Learning and Leading Collaborative, the keynote speaker, Kenneth Williams, boldly proclaimed that "culture eats structure for lunch." Based on the premise of his new book (co-authored by Tom Hierck), *Starting a movement: Building culture from the inside out in professional learning communities* (Williams & Hierck, 2015), Kenneth asked the audience to discuss what this meant.

The bottom line: You can have all the structures in place that, on paper, should be a recipe for school success. But if you don't have the culture to support the structures, you don't have much.
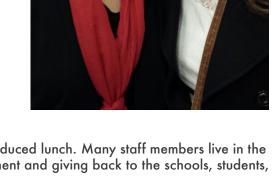
Culture dictates and supports structures—not vice versa. Without culture, structure alone does not move the needle forward on learning.

BLOOM-VERNON SCHOOLS: A STRONG AND GUIDING CULTURE THAT RESULTS IN SUCCESS

My colleague, Diane Stultz, and I recently set out for Bloom-Vernon Local School District to support their implementation of formative instructional practices (FIP), as part of the district's participation in the Ohio Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) project.

Located in rural Ohio, Bloom-Vernon is a small district with two schools and under 1,000 students—64 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Many staff members live in the community and were once students there, so they have a sense of commitment and giving back to the schools, students, and their families.

The district has been implementing formative instructional practices (FIP) for a while—and they do it really well. We had the honor of observing a few teachers at the elementary level, and noticed teachers and students engaging in FIP as a process as opposed to isolated strategies.

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All four FIP components were visible in Bloom-Vernon—learning targets were clear to teachers as well as students, evidence of learning was collected and documented, feedback was effective and students responded by adjusting their thinking, students took ownership of their learning—and Diane and I had to challenge ourselves to find an entry point to help the team.

But what we experienced before and after our classroom visits is what really stuck with us. In Bloom-Vernon, we witnessed far more than sound FIP structures in place. Theirs was a culture of student-centered learning and collective efficacy.

Said a Bloom-Vernon administrator:

> Our teachers do what it takes for our kids. If we asked them to climb the roof of the school, they would do it without even questioning us why."

By definition, collective efficacy is the shared belief that teachers have about their joint influence over student achievement levels and their own professional growth (Dr. Wayne K Hoy Collective Efficacy Scale (CE-Scale). These beliefs are important because they influence teachers' expectations for student learning and the level of persistence that educators exercise in supporting struggling learners.

During our visit, district leaders provided a brief *task analysis*, or their assessment of the difficulty of the teaching context (e.g., students' home lives, student motivation, community environment, etc.). Despite the challenging teaching context, they reported high levels of *group competence*, or their assessment of the skill of the entire teaching staff. These two components (task analysis and, more importantly, group competence) are what make up *collective efficacy* (Goddard, 2002).

HIGHER LEVELS OF SATISFACTION

In fall 2014 and spring 2015, teachers in Ohio TIF districts were invited to participate in a survey about their experiences as educators, professional growth, and school climate during the current school year. The survey included questions about four main aspects of staff members' experiences at work:

1 Climate and professional growth

2 Empowerment

3 Collective efficacy

4 Thriving

Bloom-Vernon's 35 teachers (approximately half of the district's staff) reported higher levels of all measures than the other 25 districts polled.

The staff at Bloom-Vernon acknowledges the obstacles they face, but they are committed to addressing the basic needs of students and have a "no excuses" attitude when it comes to results for students. During our visit, they talked about controlling what they can control, tackling student challenges, and how to make the learning environment special. These observations from Bloom-Vermon remind us of Kenneth Williams's comments from his keynote at the *SOAR* event, when he referenced "expecting ALL students to get to the bar or better."

School is a place where the students feel a strong sense of belonging, so much so that many don't want to leave for the summer. Further, the staff share that same sense in that they are so rooted in the betterment of kids and the community as a whole that they often provide shoes, clothes, and coats for students in need.

BLOOM-VERNON EDUCATORS ARE GETTING IT RIGHT

Teachers work together in teams to plan and implement lessons that are best for kids.

Teachers and administrators fulfill needs of the whole child as best as they can.

Administrators are extremely supportive of the teachers and the students they serve.

The school district is the hub of the community and is respected/supported by the community.

COLLECTIVE EFFICACY IN ACTION AT BLOOM-VERNON SCHOOLS

Beliefs are shaped in part through interactions with others at work. All four types of interactions that can positively impact collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Chen, 2014) were evident at Bloom-Vernon:

INTERACTIONS THAT IMPACT COLLECTIVE EFFICACY	WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE AT BLOOM-VERNON
1 Mastery experiences Experiences that are perceived to have produced successful outcomes have the greatest impact on efficacy beliefs. Professional development experiences that result in quick wins, early successes, and relevant evidence of student learning—both for individuals and teams—are examples of ways that mastery experiences can be strategically incorporated into professional development.	FIP is part of the school culture. Teachers bring FIP and Designing Sound Assessments (DSA) modules to life in their classrooms one strategy at a time in teacher-based teams. They also provide students with mastery experiences.
2 Vicarious experiences Collective efficacy increases when teachers have the opportunity to observe someone successfully model a skill. Peer observations, co-teaching arrangements, and bringing instructional coaches into the classroom all provide opportunities for vicarious experiences.	Vicarious experiences are part of the professional development action plan for FIP. For example, the 5th grade teacher's class built a rubric with the FIP Lead (who is the 4th grade math teacher).
3 Social persuasion Through conversations and attending trainings, teachers can gain confidence in their ability to set and achieve goals. Encouragement, specific performance feedback, and strengths-based coaching provided by a respected colleague or mentor are all effective forms of social persuasion.	Administrators and teachers all embrace the processes of FIP. It isn't just something "to do", or isolated strategies. As a pedagogy, FIP is at the core of teaching practices and beliefs about students.
4 Cultivating a growth mindset Teachers who believe all students can learn and that all teachers can improve their teaching are more likely to promote positive collective efficacy beliefs.	Wrap-around services are a huge part of what Bloom-Vernon provides. They help meet kids' basic needs so that they can meet their academic needs. They also have a growth mindset for the staff: "We are constantly trying to improve. We know we aren't perfect. We want to be better for our kids."

SOURCES

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During our visit to the district, we also enjoyed lunch with the FIP Lead, elementary and high school principals, and high school assistant principal. Diane and I did not expect this—but breaking bread together is part of how the school treats the people who walk through its doors. In that respect, it was easy to see how staff and students quickly become part of the Bloom-Vernon family.

We were able to sit and have rich and meaningful dialogue with all four of these instructional leaders about their vision for the district. No one came in to find the principals to put out any fires, nor were the principals compelled to check their mobile devices at any point during our conversation. The fact that these key players could step away for a relatively large chunk of time without disruptions, incident, or emergency speaks volumes about the collective efficacy of their staff and the general culture of the school.

STRONG CULTURE → ENGAGED STAFF → BETTER STUDENT OUTCOMES

During his keynote, Kenneth Williams emphasized the importance of real teams: "Real teams are interdependent. Individuals cannot do their work without their teammates." In places like Bloom-Vernon where the odds are against student achievement, having a staff with collective efficacy is essential to having a positive school culture.

Like student experience, staff experience—in particular collective efficacy—is also a measurement that really matters.

You don't have to be the wealthiest or the biggest district, have the most involved parents, or start with students who already meet the benchmark. Your community doesn't need to be the most diverse or have the most places of commerce. But in order to propel learning for all children, your school needs to be infused with a culture that stands for doing what is best for students.

As one staff member at Bloom-Vernon put it:

❝ Our kids come here, and they know that we are happy to have them here and that they are safe."