

ADULT PROFESSIONAL CULTURE:

the sine qua non of school improvement

Our learning at RBT, supported solidly by the research in the bibliography attached, is that there will be no sustainable improvement in student results and no elimination of the achievement gap until leaders and teachers succeed in making strong the norms of behavior between adults listed below.

Many other elements of school practice count, and count heavily (good curriculum; community support; resources; school structures like induction and teacher leadership and common planning time; and others.) But no matter how well these important areas are structured, they will not accomplish on their own what we need for students unless the adults act as profiled below.

Only leaders can make this so. And it has to start from the top.

“School culture” has many meanings. The meaning we focus on here is the culture for the adults, not the students, because the professional relationships of the adults have a tremendous bearing on what life is like for students. The adult culture is the main shaper of the school’s capacity as an organization to learn and improve its results for students. (See bibliography)

Literature on adult culture in schools legitimately considers many dimensions of “the way we do things around here,” including stories and story-tellers, heroes and villains of the past, traditions and celebrations that people look forward to (or dread,) and the degree to which there is celebration, community, and opportunities for human contact with one another. But in our work we have found certain observable norms of interaction between adults to be central to the culture of a school that gets results for students. Those are the ones we will describe below.

Appreciation and recognition for example, is certainly important in any organization’s “culture.” But it is not as central as the regular behavioral norm of “examining student work together non-defensively and deciding how to re-teach what some students didn’t get the first time we taught it.”

APPENDIX A

Visible Practices of a Strong Adult Professional Culture

LEARNING ORGANIZATION

1. Frequent teaching in the presence of other adults (Public Teaching)
 2. Safety to take risks, be vulnerable in front of colleagues
 3. Constant learning about High-Expertise Teaching
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TEAMS & DATA

4. Deep collaboration and deliberate design for interdependent work and joint responsibility for student results
 5. Non-defensive self-examination of teaching practice in relation to student results
 6. Constant use of data to re-focus teaching
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PASSION AND PRESS

7. Urgency and press to reach all students and do better for our disadvantaged students
 8. Commitment to implement “Smart is something you can get” in classroom practice, class structures, and school policies and procedures
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HUMANE CARING ENVIRONMENT

9. Human environment of caring, appreciation and recognition, getting to know one another, traditions we look forward to
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CRITICAL FEEDBACK

10. Demanding and high standards for development *towards* high expertise teaching for all teachers
11. Honest, open communication and ability to have difficult Conversations
12. Environment of Reflection with Habits of Mindful Inquiry