

Snapshot #2

Improving School Culture Centennial High School

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

Making an effort to build and improve the school culture through a long-term data-based school improvement effort is supported by findings from the effective schools research. Identified in *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984), those findings include:

At the SCHOOL level:

2.1 EVERYONE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING.

2.2 STRONG LEADERSHIP GUIDES THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM.

2.3 THE CURRICULUM IS BASED ON CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.

2.8 THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY INSTRUCTION.

2.9 INCENTIVES AND REWARDS ARE USED TO BUILD STRONG MOTIVATION.

2.10 PARENTS ARE INVITED TO BECOME INVOLVED.

2.11 TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS.

2.12 THERE ARE PLEASANT CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING.

In addition to this research base, there is a growing effort to apply the knowledge of organizations toward the improvement of schools. A primary concept in this knowledge base is that of "culture," the intangible, pervasive elements which represent the organization-wide pattern of getting things done. Stewart Purkey and Marshall Smith ("Too Soon to Cheer? Synthesis of Research on Effective Schools," *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*, December 1982, pp. 64-69) define the school's culture as "a structure, process and climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning." Jon Saphier and Matthew King ("Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures," *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*, March 1985, pp. 67-74) cite 12 norms of school culture which, if strong, contribute to the instructional effectiveness of a

school. These include:

1. Collegiality
2. Experimentation
3. High expectations
4. Trust and confidence
5. Tangible support
6. Reaching out to the knowledge bases
7. Appreciation and recognition
8. Caring, celebration and humor
9. Involvement in decision making
10. Protection of what's important
11. Traditions
12. Honest, open communication

SITUATION

Centennial High School is located in a suburb of Portland, Oregon, and serves 1,483 students in grades 9-12. There are few minority students at the school and 12 percent of students are involved in the free and reduced lunch program.

The school has been involved in long-term, data-based school improvement since 1983 as first a pilot then participant in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory ONWARD TO EXCELLENCE (OTE) program. In the program, the school followed a ten-step process to use student performance data in a collegial effort to set schoolwide improvement goals, with successes measured by changes in the levels of student achievement, behavior and attitude.

CONTEXT

In 1983, when school administrators at Centennial High School agreed to undertake the improvement process, the school faced such problems as reduced resources, increased pressures for excellence and low staff morale. A teachers' strike had been narrowly averted just days before the school adopted the OTE process.

Using this process, the school established a leadership team to manage school improvement. The team included the principal, a central office representative and key teachers. The team collected data on student performance, worked with full faculty to determine a single schoolwide priority improvement goal and to select and implement practices supported by research which would contribute to meeting the goal, and monitored progress toward meeting the schoolwide goal. The school has worked through this process each year since the approach was adopted in the 1983-84 school year.

In 1984 and 1986, information on the school's application of the OTE approach was collected through interviews with selected administrators and staff and staffwide questionnaires. According to this information, the use of the ONWARD TO EXCELLENCE process at Centennial High School contributed to improving the school's culture.

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PRACTICE: IMPROVING THE SCHOOL CULTURE

The establishment of the leadership team and the involvement of staff in school improvement vastly increased the collaborative, cooperative, collegial efforts in the school. The leadership team itself represented an opportunity for teachers to work together in a decision-making capacity as they worked to move the school through the improvement steps. They met frequently to learn new skills, collect and share data on the school and develop ways the rest of the staff could work together to focus on school improvement. Teachers were directly involved in leading the improvement effort.

In another move toward staff involvement, an existing communications network was redesigned to facilitate collegial work. The school had for several years had a Faculty Senate in which representatives from departmental content areas met occasionally to learn of new requirements from the principal and discuss other administrative matters of schoolwide significance.

In the course of working through the OTE process, the principal and leadership team restructured the Faculty Senate. Each leadership team member was assigned one group of faculty and became responsible for creating and keeping open a two-way communication system between all staff and the leadership team. These groups met periodically, and the leadership team representative then reported back comments, decisions or concerns.

This approach created a mechanism for information to reach all staff quickly and for systematically collecting staff feedback on improvement issues. The faculty senate groups were also used in the process of setting a schoolwide improvement goal, involving all staff in deciding the focus for school improvement.

There are now at Centennial three key expectations that are shared schoolwide:

1. Improvement efforts are of high priority, should be ongoing and should be driven by the results of effective schools research.
2. All staff can and should be involved in school improvement efforts.
3. The focus of school improvement is to improve student performance.

All staff have been informed about the need for improvement, understand that improvement is of high priority, have been introduced to the effective schools research as a resource for improving instruction and student performance, and have in some way been involved in the improvement process.

Information collected in 1986 supports these statements:

- Every staff member was aware of and cited either in interviews or written questionnaires the areas of student performance which have been the focus for improvement.
- Staff cited a new belief across the school that "we are working in an organized way."
- The process has had an effect that is "more than just improving selected goals--it gets people working together toward common goals."
- Managed school improvement has been "a catalyst for change," has "provided a meaningful process for involving others and building ownership," and has resulted in decisions becoming shared responsibilities.

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