

“Building a safe, caring and inclusive school culture means teaching it minute by minute, day by day, integrating it into discipline practices and curriculum, using instructional models that provide practice in social and relationship skills and, most importantly, modelling it.”

– Vicki Mather, Executive Director  
The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities

**T**o what extent do character and citizenship education initiatives depend on school culture? How can they shape and change school culture? Why does culture matter?

Some educators assert that schools with a healthy culture are already successfully “doing” character and citizenship education, even though they may not explicitly identify it as such.<sup>1</sup> Others argue simply that school culture is a necessary component of any kind of school improvement initiative: “In study after study, where culture did not support and encourage reform, it did not happen ... if you don’t have a strong and healthy school culture, none of the rest will matter” (Peterson 1998, p. 1). Both positions agree that a successful effort to change what happens in the school environment is directly linked to school culture.

## Exploring the Culture of the School

What is school culture and how does it relate to character and citizenship education? The “culture” of a school encompasses all conditions, expectations, beliefs and behaviours prevalent within that school community. A school’s culture reflects values and attitudes of its members and the nature of relationships within that environment. Values and attitudes are more significant for a school culture if they are shared. Although individual members of the school community construct their own meaning for core values, the act of sharing gives these values significance in the school culture.

Although the two terms “school culture” and “school climate” are often used interchangeably, school climate refers mostly to the school’s effect on students, and the feelings and opinions about the various aspects of the school and how it operates, as perceived by students, teachers and administrators. School culture, on the other hand, refers more to ways members of the school community work



together. School climate, which takes less time to change, influences school culture. Research consistently shows that making changes to an organizational culture is about a seven year process.

The Alberta School Boards Association defines a safe and secure school culture as “one that is physically, emotionally and psychologically safe characterized by:

- caring
- common values and beliefs
- respect for democratic values, rights and responsibilities
- respect for cultural diversity
- respect for law and order
- common social expectations
- clear and consistent behavioural expectations
- appropriate and positive role modelling by staff and students
- respect for individual differences
- effective anger-management strategies
- community, family, student and staff involvement” (1994, p. 16).

Before schools begin to make changes to strengthen culture, they need a complete and realistic picture of existing school culture. Assessment can help schools and jurisdictions understand and describe current school culture while identifying desired changes and results. Assessment needs to be a collaborative process centred in the school environment. It may begin with students, parents, staff and community members identifying values that they believe are inherent to a positive school culture.

## Conducting Assessments of School Culture

Cultural scans, surveys or audits provide opportunities for collaboration and dialogue, and starting points for reflection on the existing culture of the school. These surveys, based on a synthesis of the research literature, offer a series of questions to help assess school culture with regard to character and citizenship. Answers to these questions should be grounded in and supported by evidence gathered from the environment and the interactions that take place within that environment. Any gaps that become apparent when working through the survey may provide useful starting points for defining and strengthening the school’s culture, and planning initiatives and activities that can support and enhance character and citizenship education.

It is important to have a wide representation from all members of the school community participate in assessment activities because responses to the surveys will differ depending on who completes them. There is much information to be gained by seeking out multiple perspectives. For example, research about bullying and

harassment clearly demonstrates that adults in the school do not witness a large majority of this student behaviour. To get the most accurate picture of the school climate, it is essential to gather data from students.

Cultural assessments can also be revisited at different intervals during an initiative and can provide useful data for ongoing planning and implementation of initiatives.

*See Appendices B-1, B-2 and B-3 for sample tools for conducting cultural assessments with students. These student survey instruments, as well as detailed instructions for administering these surveys, are also located on The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities Web site at [www.sacsc.ca](http://www.sacsc.ca).*

## Beginning with Indicators

Developing indicators can be another useful strategy for exploring school culture. Indicators describe what a positive school culture looks like, and can be used to assess strengths and challenges within current school culture. Students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members discuss and negotiate a list of indicators, such as core values, behaviours and actions important to them.

By assessing school culture against indicators, staff can define and plan instruction and assessment to best meet the needs of students, staff and community. Safe and caring school outcomes are developed around nine essential components of safe and caring schools:

- a caring and respectful environment
- a safe and secure environment
- effective discipline procedures
- focus on teaching and learning
- equity, fairness and tolerance
- use of supportive strategies
- behaviour management and skills development
- staff development, roles and responsibilities
- positive school-community relationships.

*Supporting Safe, Secure and Caring Schools in Alberta* (Alberta Learning 1999) examines these nine components and provides a scan that assists staff to determine the current situation in their schools. Analysis of each factor helps staff review efforts. Like other school-culture assessment tools, this scan needs to be completed by a variety of school stakeholders if it is to generate accurate data.

Another example of indicators that could be used for assessment are those relating to The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities. The *Attributes of a Safe and Caring School* were developed from a series of provincial roundtable discussions.

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The attributes describe how members of a safe and caring school community foster climate, support learning and promote services to others. The attributes detail how members of the school community:

- foster a safe and caring climate
- work cooperatively
- provide activities and programs
- develop behavioural guidelines
- choose and distribute resources.

*See Appendix E for a description of these attributes.*

A faith-based school might develop additional sample indicators such as:

- opportunities for prayer and reflection
- parish involvement
- commitment to social justice and service learning
- permeation of gospel values across the curriculum.

Another strategy for gathering information about a school culture is to develop a set of exploratory questions and conduct a cultural audit through interviews, group discussion and examination of school documents and policies.

*See Appendix B-4 for a sample framework for a school cultural audit.*

### Building a Healthy School Culture

Once schools have a thorough understanding of current culture, they can begin setting goals and implementing changes. Improvement is a gradual and ongoing process. Initiating change and working to improve school culture requires collaborative planning and thoughtful identification of the principles on which any initiative will be based. These principles must be identified, agreed upon and internalized through processes that include staff, students, parents and other community members.

Building a healthy school culture begins with defining what a healthy school culture looks like. Saphier and King assert that “Cultures are built through the everyday business of school life. It is the way business is handled that both forms and reflects the culture” (1985, p. 72). They identify 12 norms that need to be strong in order to create a healthy school culture:

- collegiality
- experimentation
- high expectations
- trust and confidence
- tangible support
- reaching out to the knowledge base

- appreciation and recognition
- caring, celebration and humour
- involvement in decision making
- protection of what's important
- traditions
- honest, open communications.<sup>2</sup>

Of the 12 norms, Saphier highlights collegiality, experimentation and reaching out to the knowledge base as most strongly associated with improved student achievement.<sup>3</sup>

## Collaborative Problem Solving

A collaborative problem-solving process extends initial exploration of school culture and leads the way for developing an action plan. This process helps staff, administrators, parents, students and community members explore differences and search for solutions to support individual and group needs. Collaborative problem solving focuses on mutual gains and increases likelihood of reaching agreement on potentially divisive issues.<sup>4</sup> Commitment to collaborative problem solving encourages collective action.

Although problem-solving models vary, all are built on a collaborative process that includes the following basic stages.<sup>5</sup>

**Preparation**—identify key individuals or groups to participate, establish commitment to collaborative process and make necessary arrangements with representative members.

**Direction setting**—establish expectations, determine guidelines and communicate ground rules for process, build support for shared planning, decision making, leadership, and identification and discussion of shared problems, issues and concerns.

**Generating and analyzing options**—generate and analyze options, and gain consensus on plan of action.

**Implementation**—outline and clarify action plan, anticipate potential problems and methods of handling them, establish monitoring and evaluation plan.

**Monitoring and refining**—monitor what has worked, and adjust parts of the action plan that are not successful.

Collaborative problem solving emphasizes group leadership and requires participants to demonstrate strong interpersonal communication skills.



## Leading for Change

The development of a strong school culture begins with the school principal. The principal “sets the tone for the entire school, models behaviours that encourage and support other staff members, and helps them develop positive interactions with students” (Alberta Learning 1999, p. 53). The principal is more than just an instructional leader. He or she is also a change leader who focuses on improvement of school culture. Change leaders share five characteristics:

- moral purpose
- an understanding of the change process
- the ability to improve relationships
- a desire to create and share knowledge throughout an organization
- the ability to generate coherent reform.<sup>6</sup>

As principals and other school leaders develop plans to change school culture, they consider the following principles of effective leadership.<sup>7</sup>

### **Take responsibility for student learning**

#### **Challenge assumptions.**

School leaders help staff members question assumptions about how much they can affect student learning. Volumes of research demonstrate that what happens in school makes a difference in student achievement. Leaders share findings and talk with staff about these studies.

#### **Create small victories.**

Leaders demonstrate patience and take a long-range view. They also identify, achieve and celebrate smaller objectives that provide evidence of growth along the way.

#### **Celebrate success.**

Leaders find ways to recognize individual teachers for students’ accomplishments, teaching teams for reaching student achievement goals, and the whole staff for evidence of improving student performance.

### **Create a collaborative culture**

#### **Cultivate effective teams.**

Schools plant seeds of collaborative culture when they develop capacity of teachers to work together. All teachers are assigned to teams focused on student learning. Team structure (e.g., course, grade level, interdepartmental, vertical) is less important than having all staff participate as a part of teams with student learning as the focus.

#### **Provide time for collaboration.**

A school is more likely to have a collaborative culture if there is a master schedule with a consistent time each week for teams to work together during the school day. Principals need to protect collaborative time for teamwork just as teachers protect instructional time for students.

## **Ask each team to develop operational protocols.**

Teachers may benefit from establishing protocols to guide their work. Team protocols outline commitment of members to one another in carrying out their work.

## **Monitor and celebrate the work of teams.**

School leaders do more than provide teachers with time to meet in their teams; they monitor the work of teams, collect and review documents and artifacts produced, and celebrate successful completion of group tasks.

## **Emphasize common goals**

### **Find common ground.**

School leaders acknowledge differences but concentrate on identifying a few “big ideas” for others to rally around. They generate support for big ideas by helping everyone understand best practices and presenting information that allows staff and community to assess how the school measures up to those practices.

### **Ask for commitments.**

A school community that identifies specific actions and behaviours expected of members is more likely to create a healthy culture than one that focuses on failures. School leaders help groups shift the focus from shortcomings of others to their own sphere of influence, asking each group’s members to share what they are prepared to do to bring critical concepts to life.

## **Focus on results**

### **Develop targets and timelines.**

When schools focus on a few critical goals and establish benchmarks to monitor progress toward those goals, they are more likely to focus energies on well-researched innovations aligned with their goals.

### **Be selective.**

Effective school leaders are a buffer between staff and well-intentioned groups or individuals (e.g., lobby groups, media, etc.) who want to press agendas on schools. School leaders understand that not all ideas for school improvement are practical or desirable, and recognize limits to a staff’s capacity to implement meaningful change.

## **Students’ Role in a Caring Community**

School staff and parents play important roles in shaping school culture, but for meaningful change to occur, students must be an integral part of the process. The best way to do this is to create a caring, supportive community in the classroom and school, so that students feel a sense of acceptance and belonging.

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There are many reasons why students should be meaningfully involved in their schools, including the following.

- Students can be a part of preventing as well as solving problems.
- Students can learn to tackle real-world problems and establish relationships with others through their involvement and participation in school leadership activity.
- Giving back to a community helps students develop empathy and tolerance for other points of view.
- Students have valuable ideas regarding school safety, leadership and responsible citizenship.
- Student involvement creates a sense of ownership for the well-being of the school community.
- Confident and connected students have fewer problems with drugs, alcohol, eating disorders and smoking.
- Student involvement encourages students to advocate for themselves, personally and collectively.

From the moment students come together in a school or a classroom, they begin to form a community. They work together on projects, spend time together at recess or during lunch, and begin to establish beliefs about each other based on their initial perceptions and ongoing interactions. Promoting a caring and supportive community is an ongoing process that takes time, energy and commitment. It not only involves daily modelling of positive character traits and exemplary behaviour but also requires a solid commitment to establishing meaningful relationships with others (both in the classroom and in the larger school community), encouraging dialogue between all involved (students, teachers, support staff, parents, board members), and making a genuine effort to listen to and understand others.

To start the process of connecting and caring, teachers create opportunities in the classroom to help students get to know each other as unique and worthwhile individuals. Teachers also get to know each child. “When a teacher and students know a child’s story, relationships begin” (Van Bockern and Wenger 1999, p. 216).

When students are members of a nurturing, caring classroom where they receive respect and feel their contributions are valued and honoured on a daily basis, they develop a feeling of responsibility to the group and their membership in it. Positive behaviours and actions of respect and caring gradually become part of their daily lives and part of their character.

Alberta Education’s resource *Working Together for Safe and Caring Schools, Grades 7–12: Resource Manual for Students, Staff and Parents* (2003) was developed as a collaborative project with the Calgary Board of Education. The goal of this project was to encourage students to take a leadership role to promote safe and caring schools.



The manual introduces the five dimensions of safe and caring schools: Student Involvement and Leadership, Relationships, Physical Security, Emotional Wellness, and School and Community Connections. It discusses the importance of each dimension and offers sample strategies for strengthening each dimension. It offers practical ideas and strategies for getting started, staying on track and evaluating the initiative. It also contains an inventory of tried-and-true strategies used by schools in the implementation of their own safe and caring schools initiatives. A PDF version of this resource can be downloaded at [www.education.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/authorized\\_resources.asp](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/authorized_resources.asp).

## Developing Social Skills

Getting along with others is a key component of a strong community, and an essential skill for life. While many students come to school with some social skills already in place, most students benefit from direct teaching of appropriate social skills such as thinking before acting, listening, establishing and maintaining friendships, dealing with feelings, accepting consequences, and dealing with peer pressure.

These skills and specific behavioural expectations should be defined, modelled, taught and reinforced. Through consistent modelling, teaching and reinforcement of positive social skills, teachers, other school staff and parents help to enhance students' self-control, respect for rights of others, and sense of responsibility for their own actions. These essential skills are a foundation for responsible, global citizens.

There are numerous ways to teach social skills and communicate behavioural expectations in the classroom. Using a variety of strategies addresses different learning preferences. Consider strategies such as the following.

- Model social skills through daily interactions with students and all members of the school community by consistently speaking politely and respectfully, and demonstrating kindness.
- Display a chart of classroom expectations or rules.
- Role-play skills in different scenarios.
- Use cooperative games.
- Hold class meetings.
- Read literature that highlights character development by analyzing character behaviour.
- Use journal-writing activities to encourage reflection.
- Provide direct instruction about specific social behaviours.

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## Endnotes

1. Yero 2002.
2. From Jon Saphier and Matthew King, “Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures,” *Educational Leadership* 42, 6 (1985), p. 67. Reprinted by permission. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a worldwide community of educators advocating sound policies and sharing best practices to achieve the success of each learner. To learn more, visit ASCD at [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org).
3. Richardson 1996.
4. Kouzes and Posner 1995.
5. Adapted with permission from *Caring and Respectful Schools: Toward School<sup>PLUS</sup>—Ensuring Student Well-Being and Educational Success* (pp. 12, 79), by Saskatchewan Learning, 2004, Regina, SK: Author.
6. Fullan 2002.
7. Adapted from Rick DuFour and Becky Burnette, “Pull Out Negativity by Its Roots,” *Journal of Staff Development* 23, 3 (2002), [www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/burnette233.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/burnette233.cfm) (Accessed November 9, 2004). Excerpted with permission of the National Staff Development Council, [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org), 2005. All rights reserved.

There are many resources available for direct teaching of positive social skills to students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Most programs will include the following steps.

1. Identify what social skill needs to be taught.
2. Introduce the skill to students through stories, video, discussion or role-playing.
3. Identify components or steps involved.
4. Model components or steps of the skill.
5. Create opportunities for students to practise and reinforce the skill through other activities.
6. Acknowledge and celebrate independent use of the skill.
7. Provide opportunities and support to help students apply skills across environments and situations.

The Alberta Education resource *Supporting the Social Dimension: Resource Guide for Teachers, Grades 7–12* (2002) provides support for the teaching and learning of social skills and behaviours across Alberta Education’s grades 7–12 programs of study. It includes guidelines, objectives and sample strategies for enhancing social competency skills in five focus areas: personal growth and goal setting, health and well-being, appearance and manner, ethical behaviour, and accountability. A PDF version of this resource can be downloaded at [www.education.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/authorized\\_resources.asp](http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/safeschools/authorized_resources.asp).