BOURNE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

SCHOOL CULTURE SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING

DATE: NOVEMBER 19, 2012

TIME: 6PM

PLACE: BOURNE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING

AGENDA

1. Accept Minutes
2. PR and Outreach discussions
3. Discuss T.E.L.L. Mass
4. Discuss School Culture Article
5. Discuss future recommendations to School Committee
6. Future agenda items

"The listing of matters is those reasonably anticipated by the Chair which may be discussed at the meeting. Not all items listed may in fact be discussed and other items not listed may also be brought up for discussion to the extent permitted by law."

Members:

Heather DiPaolo
Anne-Marie Siroonian
Matthew Stuck, Chairman

Bourne School Committee
Culture Sub Committee
November 19, 2012

Meeting convened at 6:15pm
Members Present: Matthew Stuck, Anne-Marie Siroonian, Heather DiPaolo
Also present: Liza Bar, Lauri Gilbert

Review Minutes: Minutes accepted as presented by Heather and seconded by Anne-Marie. Unanimous approval.

Anne-Marie made a recommendation to move Agenda Item 4 to agenda item 1.

PR and Outreach discussions: Looked at more ways of celebrating what is happening in our schools in regards to student achievement. We do a great job in communicating how well our sports teams and theatre program do, but what about the other successes of our students and teachers in the district? Heather brought up the PTA Science fair and how wonderful it is but the press has never been aware of it. Notifying the press should be a norm for all and any groups in our district. Perhaps a distribution list for the media. Should be part of the culture to notify media. Need to focus on a process that is simple for every organization, club, etc. No District PR plan right now (plan should include lead time, point of contact info.) Perhaps an electronic means, i.e. facebook, blogs. Heather will put together a process plan for PR and present at next meeting.

Discuss School Culture Article: Chapter from book entitled *Culture In Question.* Some common threads is the "nondiscussables." How do we create a culture for people to bring those nondiscussables out into the open. Effective change takes three to five years at least. More opportunity for good discussion to take place in an open forum would help, also more avenues for voices to be heard. Each building has a culture and need to have more discussion in order to be a part of the decision making. What venues exist or can exist for collaborative discussion or what open forums currently exist?

T.E.L.L. MASS: 'Time for collaboration with colleagues' was low scoring, as was 'atmosphere of trust,' & 'teachers raising issues and concerns. Support for more discipline was also a common trend. Professional development may not be as poignant as well as collaborative time. Need to create time windows in schedules for teachers to collaborate.

Essential question: How do we build trust? Look at ways to foster and increase trust, what are the steps (small or big), what are the contributing factors? Clarity of process is important. SC member coming to a faculty meeting to discuss what some of the focus is in our culture meetings.

Future Agenda Items:
Discuss PR Outreach Process List
Plan SC Outreach to employees
Discuss how best to improve trust
Explore what venues exist to encourage collaboration

Meeting adjourned at 7:45
Next Meeting Date: December 17, 2012 at 6pm in the Central office

11

CULTURE IN QUESTION

Roland S. Barth

The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

—Alvin Toffler

PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT—and the most difficult—job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture of a school. The school's culture dictates, in no uncertain terms, "the way we do things around here." Ultimately, a school's culture has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have.

The culture of a school is quite apparent to the newcomer. In one school, a new teacher stands up in a faculty meeting to express her views to the others on, say, pupil evaluation. Her contribution is received with mockery, cold stares, and put-downs: "Big deal. I've been doing that for twenty years." "Who does she think she is?" As the new teacher very quickly learns, the culture at her school dictates that newcomers must not

speak until they have experienced, for at least two or three years, the toil of the old-timers. "That's the way we do things around here." And she learns that cruel and unusual punishments await those who violate the taboos of the school.

In another school, a high school student is tormented by his peers for studying on the day of the football game. And indeed, the culture in all too many secondary schools dictates that learning is not "cool" on Saturdays—or on any day of the week, for that matter.

In yet another school, a teacher encounters trouble managing a class full of difficult youngsters. Within a few days, every other teacher in the building knows of her problem—and volunteers to help. In the same school, when a student is experiencing difficulty with an assignment or a new concept, several fellow students step in to assist. "That's the way we do things around here."

The school culture is the complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization. The culture is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act.

Every school has a culture. Some are hospitable, others toxic. A school's culture can work for or against improvement and reform. Some schools are populated by teachers and administrators who are reformers, others by sheep, others by educators who are gifted and talented at subverting reform. Some school cultures are indifferent to reform.

And all school cultures are incredibly resistant to change. This is precisely why school improvement—from within or from without—is usually so futile. Yet unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of a school, all "innovations" will have to fit in and around existing elements of the culture. That is, they will be superficial window dressing, incapable of making much of a difference.

To change the culture requires that we be first aware of the culture, the way things are here. This means crafting and using wide-angle, microscopic, and telescopic lenses, and honing our skills at observing. What do you see, hear, and experience in the school? What don't you see and hear? What are the indicators, the clues that reveal the school's culture? What behaviors get rewards and status here? Which ones are greeted with reprimand? Do the adults model the behavior they expect of youngsters? How do leaders react to critical situations? Who gets to make decisions? Do parents experience welcome, suspicion, or rejection when they enter the school?

Nondiscussables

An important part of awareness is attending to "nondiscussables." Nondiscussables are subjects sufficiently important that they get talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and taboos that these conversations take place only at the parking lot, the restroom, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home. We are fearful that open discussion of these incendiary issues in polite society—at a faculty meeting, for example—will cause a meltdown. The nondiscussable is the elephant in the living room. Everyone knows this huge pachyderm is there, right between the sofa and the fireplace, and we go on mopping and dusting and vacuuming around it as if it did not exist.

Each school has its own nondiscussables. For one, it is "the leadership of the principal." For another, "the way decisions get made here." For all too many, it is "race" and "the underperforming teacher." Schools are full of these land mines from which trip wires emanate. We walk about carefully from day to day, trying not to detonate them. Yet by giving these nondiscussables this incredible power over us, by avoiding them at all cost, we issue that underperforming teacher a hunting license to continue this year as he did last year, taking a heavy toll on countless students and other teachers. We perpetuate poor leadership on the part of the principal, and we force ourselves to live with all the debilitating tensions that surround race.

The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of its nondiscussables: the fewer the nondiscussables, the healthier the school; the more the nondiscussables, the more pathology in the school culture. And, of course, to change the culture of the school, its residents must name, openly acknowledge the existence of, and address the nondiscussables—especially the nondiscussables that impede learning.

Changing the Culture

It has been said that a fish would be the last creature on earth to discover water, so totally and continuously immersed in it is he. The same might be said of school people working within their culture. By the time that beginning teacher waits the obligatory three years to speak out in a faculty meeting, she too is likely to be so immersed in the culture that she will no longer be able to see with the clarity of a beginner important aspects of the school's culture, such as patterns of leadership, competition, fearfulness, self-interest, or lack of support.

To change the culture requires that we bring in more desirable qualities to replace the existing unhealthy elements of the culture. This is where possession of clear personal and collective visions is so important. Two educators, Saphier and King, identified a dozen healthy cultural norms: collegiality, experimentation, high expectations, trust and confidence, tangible support, reaching out to the knowledge bases, appreciation and recognition, caring celebration and humor, involvement in decision making, protection of what's important, traditions, and honest, open communications (Saphier and King, 1985). The authors believe that these qualities of a school's culture dramatically affect the capacity of a school to improve.

Thus, to change a school's culture requires the courage and skill not to remain victimized by the toxic elements of the school's culture but rather to address them. As one colleague put it, "How do I find the courage within myself to do what I must?" And, finally, culture building requires the skill to transform elements of the school's culture into forces that support rather than subvert the purposes of the school, even though, all the while, no one may be giving us "permission" to do so. Of course, all these acts of culture changing and culture building violate the very taboos of many school cultures themselves—this is why culture changing is the most important, most difficult, and most perilous job of school-based reformers. School cultures cannot be changed from without; they must be changed from within.

E. B. White, a fellow Maine gardener, once observed, "A person must have something to cling to. Without that we are as a peavine sprawling in search of a trellis." We educators are especially in need of a trellis, to keep us up off the ground in the face of the cold rains and hot winds that buffet the schoolhouse. In this chapter I'd like to consider with you what I believe is the trellis of our profession and the most critical element of any school's culture: an ethos hospitable to the promotion of human learning.

Learning Curves off the Chart

It has been said that running a school is about putting first things first: leadership is determining what are the first things, and management is about putting them first. I would like to suggest that the "first thing," the most important feature of the job description for each of us educators, is to discover and provide the conditions under which people's learning curves go off the chart. Sometimes it's other people's learning curves: those of students, teachers, parents, administrators. But at all times it is our own learning curve.

Schools exist to promote learning in all their inhabitants. Whether we are called teachers, principals, professors, or parents, our primary responsibility is to promote learning in others and in ourselves. That's what it means to be an educator. That's what sets us apart from insurance salesmen, engineers, and doctors. To the extent our activities in school are dedicated to getting learning curves off the chart, I'd say what we do is a calling. To the extent that we spend most of our time doing something else in school, I'd say we are engaged in a job.

It is the ability to learn prodigiously from birth to death that sets human beings apart from other forms of life. The greatest purpose of schools is to unlock, release, and foster this wonderful capability. T. H. White put it this way:

> "The best thing for disturbances of the spirit," replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder in your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your monies to a monster, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it, then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the poor mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you." [White, 1993, p. 228]

A Community of Learners

"Our school is a Community of Learners!" How many times do we see and hear this assertion, now so common in America's schools? For me it is both an ambitious, welcome vision and an empty promissory note. The vision is, first, that the school will be a community, a place full of adults and youngsters who care about, look after, and root for one another, and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need as well as times of celebration. Every member of a community holds some responsibility for the welfare of every other and for the welfare of the community as a whole. Schools face tremendous difficulty in fulfilling this definition of a community. More are organizations, institutions, or bureaucracies.

As if community were not ambitious enough, a community of learners is ever so much more. Such a school is a community whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning. The condition for membership in

the community is that one learn, continue to learn, and support the learning of others. Everyone. A tall order to fill, and one to which all too few schools aspire and even fewer attain.

As I reflect back on the recent years of school reform, I interpret the meaning of this remarkable period in our nation's educational history as an invitation—nay, a demand—to examine every school policy, practice, and decision and ask of it the question, What, if anything, of importance is anyone learning as a consequence of doing that? Who learns what from ability grouping? Who learns what from letter grades of A, B, C? Who learns what from having twenty-six youngsters in a class? Who learns what from the annual practice of principals' evaluating teachers? God didn't create these and the myriad other school practices that now so clutter schools' cultures. We did—because at some time someone believed that this policy, practice, or procedure was capable of getting someone's learning curve off the chart.

A central responsibility of the school-based reformer is to take fresh inventory of these and other habituated practices so encrusted in our schools' cultures and to categorize them. Some, perhaps the practice of giving individual instruction or giving youngsters immediate feedback on their work, seem undeniably associated with promoting learning. They need to be retained. Others, such as ability grouping or parent nights, we may need to study; we need to become practitioner researchers and examine these practices to determine just what effect, if any, they are having on people's learning. Still other practices, perhaps faculty meetings or intrusive announcements over the loudspeaker, in many schools appear to contribute to no one's learning—may even impede learning—and need to be scrapped. A final category is for those activities that must continue to be carried out by a school, but in a more successful manner. We'll call this category "invent a better way."

Let me offer an example. Kim Marshall, a friend of mine and a principal in the Boston public schools, is a very conscientious staff developer, yet he was having a dreadful time with the time-consuming, anxiety-producing practice of annually evaluating teachers according to the system's protocol. He wrote, "Evaluation had become a polite, if near-meaningless matter between a beleaguered principal and a nervous teacher. . . . I had been trying to do a good job evaluating the thirty-nine teachers at the Mather School, but I had to face the fact that my efforts were a sham. Were my evaluations of teachers having an impact on student learning? Very doubtful. Were they having an impact on teachers' learning? Precious little. My learning? No. Were they wasting everyone's time? You bet."

His attempts to connect teacher evaluations with someone's learning curve soaring revealed an educationally bankrupt practice deeply embedded in the culture of his school—and of his school system. Even so, for many reasons we can't just "scrap" the evaluation of teachers. It's important that all of us be evaluated from time to time, including school teachers (and authors!). Having discussed this nondiscussable and having carefully examined and categorized this sacrosanct school practice in terms of its capacity to promote learning, my friend found the courage to make some changes; he invented a better way. (For further discussion of the limitations of the conventional forms of teacher evaluation by the principal, and for a better, if more demanding, way, one which can promote both learning and community, see Marshall, 1996.)

I believe that residing in all the stakeholders in schools—parents, teachers, students, principals—are wonderfully fresh, imaginative ideas about how to invent a better way. It takes moral outrage at ineffective practices, confidence that there is a better way, and the courage and invention to find it and put it into the place of what needs to be scrapped.

As noted earlier, all of us who work in and around schools now not only have the world's permission to take this inventory and act on the findings; the world is demanding these efforts of us. If this is the meaning of school reform, I'd say it is long overdue and to be welcomed by school practitioners. Whose learning curve goes off the chart by doing that? This is a revolutionary question whose time has finally come.

At-Risk Students

I have observed over the years that unhealthy school cultures tend to beget "at-risk" students. One definition of an at-risk student that has special meaning for me is "any student who leaves school before or after graduation with little possibility of continuing learning."

I remember visiting a high school just after the last spring exams and before graduation. As I approached the school grounds, I saw a group of students standing around a roaring fire, to which they were heartily contributing. I went over and asked, "What's up?"

"We're burning our notes and our books," replied one. "We're outta here!"

On further conversation, I learned that these students were not occupants of the bottom ability group, but rather A and B and C students, many headed for college.

That little incident continues to trouble me. I wonder how many students not so labeled are in fact at risk, with little possibility of continuing

learning? How many graduate from our schools and exult in the belief that they have learned all they need or intend to know?

One reason why those youngsters were burning those books, literally, and why so many other youngsters burn their books, figuratively, at the conclusion of our treatment of them in schools is that, lurking beneath the culture of most schools (and universities) is a deadening message. It goes something like this: Learn or we will hurt you. We educators have taken learning, a wonderful, God-given, spontaneous capacity of all human beings, and coupled it with punitive measures. We have developed an arsenal of sanctions and punishments that we inextricably link with learning experiences. "Johnny, if you don't improve your multiplication tables, you're going to have to repeat fourth grade." "Mary, if you don't improve your compositions, I'm not going to write a favorable recommendation for college." "Sam, if you don't pass this next test, I'm calling your parents in." "Tom, if your state-administered standardized test scores don't improve, you don't graduate." And so it goes. What the students burning their books are really saying is, "You can't hurt me any more." But so closely have we coupled learning and punishment that the students throw one into the fire with the other. School cultures in which students submit to learning, and to the threats of punishment for not learning, generate students who want to be finished with learning when they graduate from school. And, of course, this plays out for adults as well: the state tells the teacher or principal, "Unless you complete fifteen hours of continuing education credits this year, we will not renew your certification." Learn or we will hurt you.

A challenge of immense proportion to our profession is to find ways to uncouple learning and punishment. We must change the message from "Learn or we will hurt you" to "Learn or you will hurt yourself."

The Lifelong Learner

Why are these youngsters who literally or figuratively burn their books so much at risk? I read recently an estimate that fifty years ago, high school students graduated knowing perhaps 75 percent of what they would ever need to know to be successful in the workplace, the family, and the community. Today, the estimate is that graduates of our schools leave knowing perhaps 2 percent of what they will need to know in the years ahead—98 percent is yet to come. We all know the figures: knowledge doubles every three years; computer technology changes in eighteen months; the borders of Russia won't hold still. Yet today's graduates leave high school knowing far more than they ever did back in the fifties. The notion that we can

acquire once and for all a basic kit of knowledge that will hold us in good stead for the rest of our lives is folly.

Business leaders tell us that the skills and abilities their employees will need in the twenty-first century include the following: teamwork, problem solving, interpersonal skills, oral communication, listening, personal development, creative thinking, leadership, goal setting, writing, organizational effectiveness, computation, and reading. Every one of these skills, of course, requires continual lifelong learning. The students who burn their books and their notes and celebrate the conclusion of their learning will be relegated to the periphery of the twenty-first century. And business leaders will continue to lament that they must spend $25 billion each year trying to teach recent graduates what they didn't learn in school.

Those who will thrive in the years ahead, in contrast, will be those who have, during the school experience, become active, voracious, independent lifelong learners—who will always be moving toward that 98 percent yet to come. The nature of the workplace, the nature of our society, and the nature of learning mean that we are all going to be expected to learn as we go along, or we won't survive.

I believe, therefore, that the most important requirement for graduation—whether from fourth, ninth, or twelfth grade—is some evidence that this youngster is becoming or has become an independent, lifelong learner. The telling questions to evaluate are, What evidence is there of enduring intellectual passion in this student? Is there evidence that this student is imbued with the qualities and capacities of the insatiable, lifelong learner? Is the student capable of posing questions, marshaling resources, and pursuing learning with dedication, independence, imagination, and courage?

So if your school has succeeded in getting 95 percent of its students scoring at the 95th percentile on standardized tests, and, at the same time, students are leaving a teacher, a grade, or the school "burning their books" saying "I'm done with this stuff; I'm outta here!" then you have won a battle and lost the war. The price of the short-term success is long-term failure. Enhancement of performance has led to a curtailment of learning. The school has failed in its most important mission. If the first major purpose of a school is to create and provide a culture hospitable to human learning, the second major purpose of a school is to make it likely that students and educators will become and remain lifelong learners.

These days, we use standardized tests to measure everything about everybody, from proficiency in pronouns to the causes of the Civil War. Yet it is disheartening to me that we have not identified as important nor attempted to measure to what extent our teachers, our classes, and our schools are turning out lifelong learners. When students arrive at school

at age five, most carry within them the magical powers of lifelong learning. They are explorers, question-askers, inquirers, and risk-takers, and they are excited about finding answers. To paraphrase Pablo Picasso, every child is a learner. The problem is how to remain a learner once he grows up.

If we want to know how well we are doing with second or eighth graders in creating and sustaining lifelong learners, how do we find out? I doubt that standardized tests have much value in measuring or predicting the lifelong learner. There are better ways. One good way is to observe closely what students choose to do on their own time. After the bell rings at three o'clock—or on weekends, or over the summer—in what activities are youngsters engaged until bedtime? They will tell us. Are they going for walks in the woods, collecting and categorizing leaves and flowers and insects? Are they mapping their city street? Are they reading in the library? Are they campaigning for a local candidate? Are they learning to play a musical instrument? Or are they only watching television and hanging out? If it's true that character is what you do when no one is looking, then learning is what you do when you're not graded for it.

Asked seriously, the question, What do students do on their own time? reveals information that would probably alarm parents, educators, and the general public—as it should. When we come to believe that what our schools should be providing is a school culture that creates and sustains students' learning, that this is the trellis of our profession, then we will organize our schools, classrooms, and learning experiences differently. Show me a school whose inhabitants constantly examine the school's culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I'll show you students who graduate with both the capacity and the heart for lifelong learning.

REFERENCES

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Saphier, J., and King, M. "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures." *Educational Leadership,* Mar. 1985, pp. 67–74.

White, T. H. *The Sword in the Stone.* New York: Philomel Books, 1993.