

School Culture: An Invisible Essential

Joanne Rooney

I sensed that the Louis Pasteur School¹ was special as soon as I walked through the front door. The secretary greeted me warmly and pointed me to a table holding a coffeepot, cups, and a plate of doughnuts. The bulletin board behind her desk was filled with student art; her desk was awash in papers, notes, and telephone messages. Pat, the school's principal, hugged a 1st grade birthday girl before smiling to me in welcome.

A tour of the school confirmed my first impression. The resource center was abuzz with kids reading in all kinds of postures. Some students worked on computers in pairs; others conversed in small groups. Busyness was everywhere, and learning was palpable.

As we walked the halls, it became clear to me that Pat was a constant presence in the building. She greeted students by name and chatted with teachers who stopped her with "Do you have a minute?" One preteen boy greeted us with a high five and reminded Pat that he had not been tardy all month. Pat was interested in all of them.

During our meeting, Pat talked about her efforts to raise student achievement—especially that of minority learners, who constitute 40 percent of Pasteur's student body. She had instituted monthly parent nights to help parents see the value of reading to their children at home and to encourage families to participate in the school's activities. She worked with the parent-teacher council to find ways of bringing the community into the school. But even before I talked with Pat about her work and her aspirations for Pasteur, I had recognized that I was in a good school. I had not checked classrooms for best

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practices, nor had I studied the disaggregated data from the last set of state tests. But I could almost taste what Pasteur was about during my visit, much as a tourist might gain a sense of a new city by wandering its streets. The faces of the students expressed the school's culture more eloquently than any vision statement displayed in a lucite frame. A sense of wholesomeness and kid-centeredness wrapped itself around me as soon as I entered the building.

Too often, the opposite is true. In some schools, students walk in straight, silent lines monitored by stern teachers. The art on the walls is more likely to come from the photocopier than from the creative energy of children. The main office is dominated by warning signs about name badges, security checks, and sign-in procedures. Such signs convey a very different message from that sent by the welcoming coffee and doughnut offered in the Pasteur office.

Literature about good schools defines culture as the context in which everything else takes place: "the way things are done around here." A school with a wholesome culture knows what it believes in and where it is going. Pasteur's culture was discernibly

healthy, and it was clear that Pat's beliefs, integrity, and spirit determined, to a great extent, the richness of that culture. Pat's aims were to foster student learning and build healthy relationships among everyone in the school. These values pervaded every cubic inch of Pasteur's environment.

Pat and I recently worked together on a Midwest Principals' Center event. We struggled with the difficulty of asking principals, overworked and "overmet," to attend yet another meeting. But it was important to us to affirm for them that their work makes or breaks their schools. We wanted to

tell them that what their hearts know about school culture is as vital as what their brains know about best practice.

As Pat and I talked, our conversation wandered. We found that we both loved a special book: *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint Exupery. This small classic contains a profound understanding of human

relationships—the foundation of all healthy school cultures. The author captures something we all instinctively know with simple and direct words: "That which is essential is invisible to the eye."

Louis Pasteur had captured this "essential," and, although it may be invisible to the eye, it is clearly apparent to those with heart. ■

¹This school name is a pseudonym.

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