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ASCD BLOG

School Culture Versus School Climate



[Steve Gruenert](#) [Todd Whitaker](#)



Cultivating a healthier school culture involves shifting both attitude (climate) and personality (culture).

SCHOOL CULTURE



Abstract

Differentiating Between
Climate and Culture

Shifting from Climate to
Culture

Perceptions Versus Values
and Beliefs

Climate Is Around Us—
Culture Is Part of Us

Editor's note: In their recent book, [School Culture Rewired: Toward a More Positive and Productive School for All, 2nd Edition](#) (ASCD 2023), authors Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker dissect the intricate dynamics of school culture and climate. The authors guide educators through the nuanced differences between these concepts, shedding light on the gradual evolution of culture and the instantaneous shifts in climate. Delving into the challenges of cultural transformation, they emphasize the elusive nature of culture compared to the tangible aspects of climate. Gruenert and Whitaker underscore the pivotal role of culture as the school's identity and "brand," shaping everything from daily routines to the broader school environment. This exclusive book excerpt drawn from Chapter 2: "Culture Versus Climate," provides a glimpse into the authors' deep exploration of school culture and its profound influence on educational settings and experiences.

Differentiating Between Climate and Culture

One of the best ways to understand the concept of school culture is to contrast it with the concept of school climate. Though both are important, a school's climate is both a window into its culture and a learned response that the culture teaches new members. Figure 2.1 shows some ways of distinguishing between the two concepts.

FIGURE 2.1

Some Differences Between Climate and Culture

Culture ...	Climate ...
Is the group's personality.	Is the group's attitude.
Gives Mondays permission to be miserable.	Differs from Monday to Friday, February to May.
Provides for a limited way of thinking.	Creates a state of mind.
Takes years to evolve.	Is easy to change.
Is based on values and beliefs.	Is based on perceptions.
Can't be felt, even by group members.	Can be felt when you enter a room.
Is part of us.	Surrounds us.
Is "the way we do things around here."	Is "the way we feel around here."
Determines whether improvement is possible.	Is the first thing that improves when positive change is made.
Is in your head.	

Source: *School Culture Rewired: Toward a More Positive and Productive School for All, 2nd Edition* by Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker, Arlington, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2023 ASCD.

Shifting from Climate to Culture

Whereas a change in climate can occur instantly, a change in culture is necessarily a slow evolution. If, starting tomorrow, a heretofore distant principal decides to act in a positive and friendly manner,

others may quickly adopt similar behavior and the school climate will have suddenly changed. If the principal soon reverts to her previous attitude, the force of the school culture will strongly encourage everyone else to revert as well; if, however, she sticks to the new attitude for the long run, then positivity and friendliness will slowly become entrenched as a part of the school culture. It can be hard to tell precisely when a shift from climate to culture—that is, from short-term behaviors to long-term expectations—occurs. School leaders who decide to implement cultural change should understand that the culture will take many years to reflect new beliefs that guide behaviors as though they are second nature. Leaders can build structures and change procedures to shape the new culture, but they often try to do too much too soon; the real test will come when nobody is looking.



“ A school’s climate is both a window into its culture and a learned response that the culture teaches new members.

Perceptions Versus Values and Beliefs

One of the things that makes culture so difficult to change is that it's so hard for us to pinpoint—it is always easier to describe what you do (climate) than why you do it (culture). Visitors to a school are often the ones who can sense the school's culture the most. For example, substitute teachers may feel the uniqueness of each school's culture better than staff do, because they have such a breadth of reference points to which they can compare it. Similarly, new employees will initially notice the differences between their new school and previous ones; however, as they begin to fit in—as the culture teaches them and reinforces how to act at faculty meetings, when to show up at work, how to dress, when to send a kid to the office, and so on—the uniqueness of the new culture will gradually dissipate as it becomes “the new normal.”

Climate Is Around Us—Culture Is Part of Us

Culture provides a school's identity and image—its “brand.” Though teachers may criticize what their school does, they probably wouldn't tolerate outsiders criticizing their school. Cultural artifacts are all around us—in the trophy case, in the alignment of desks in classrooms, in the amount of time provided for lunch, in the types of student data we collect, and in what we laugh at. Culture tells us when to be tense and when to relax—and it rewards us for acting appropriately, usually in the form of greater security, more self-

esteem, or access to inside information. Like culture, climate is not a problem that needs to be solved; rather, it simply indicates the type of culture we may have, and it allows us to diagnose the effects of any strategies we might use to change the culture.

This post is excerpted from [School Culture Rewired: Toward a More Positive and Productive School for All, 2nd Edition](#) by Steve Gruenert and Todd Whitaker, Arlington, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2023 ASCD.



Steve Gruenert is the department chair of the educational leadership department at Indiana State University (ISU). He helped design the Indiana Principal Leadership Institute, has coordinated the Principal Preparation Program at ISU, and has been a princip...

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Todd Whitaker has been fortunate to be able to blend his passion with his career. Recognized as a leading presenter in the field of education, his message about the importance of teaching has resonated with hundreds of thousands of educators around the...

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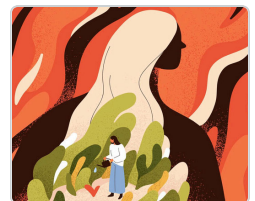
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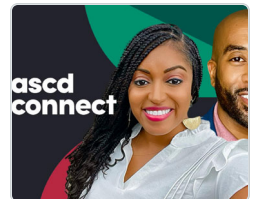
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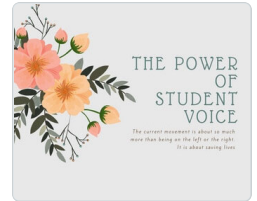


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