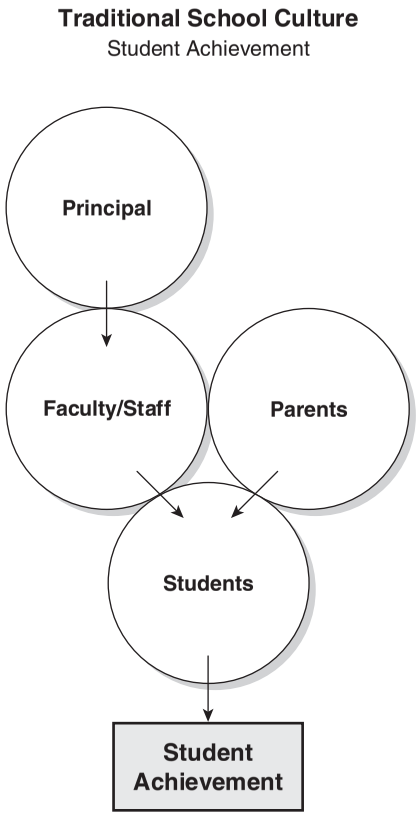
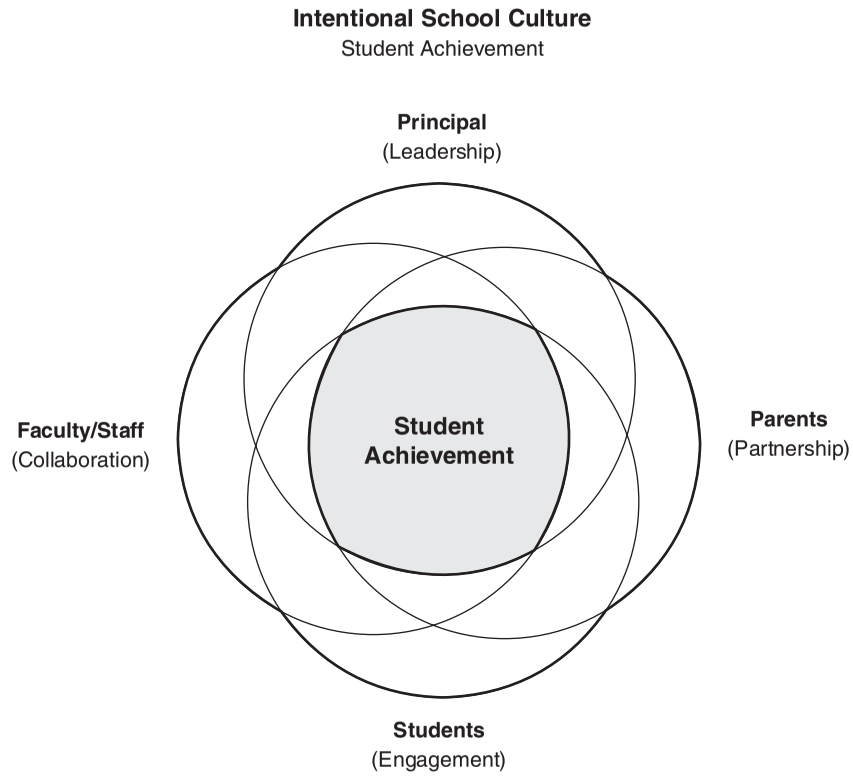
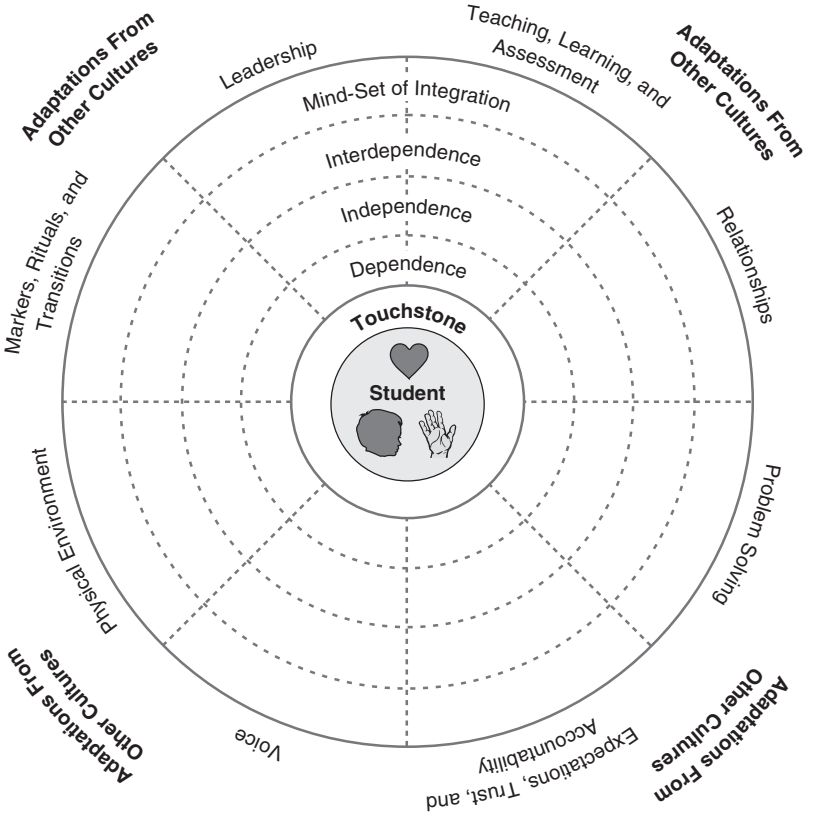

Traditional School Culture
Student Achievement
Principal
Faculty/Staff
Parents
Students
Student Achievement


Intentional School Culture
Student Achievement
Principal
(Leadership)
Faculty/Staff
(Collaboration)
Student Achievement
Parents
(Partnership)
Students
(Engagement)

THE INTENTIONAL SCHOOL CULTURE



Touchstone	Eight Gateways
Four Mind-Set Model	Other Cultures

"This has proven to be the most remarkable work we have committed ourselves to at our school. Our children made a mid-year shift showing less aggression and more cooperation. Our discipline made a similar shift from punitive to restorative. We are growing, learning, and trying new things, and I feel that it will only get better here. Teachers have commented on the change, and our newfound perspective on teaching, that words like love, compassion, honesty, kindness, and integrity have become a part of our daily vocabulary."

—Denver public school teacher

1

Building an Intentional School Culture

Excellence in Academics and Character

To anyone who takes a close look at what goes on in classrooms it becomes quickly evident that our schools do much more than pass along requisite knowledge to the students attending them (or fail to do so, as the case may be). They also influence the way those students look upon themselves and others. They affect the way learning is valued and sought after and lay the foundations of lifelong habits of thought and action. They shape opinion and develop taste, helping to form liking and aversions. They contribute to the growth of character and, in some instances they may even be a factor in its corruption. Schools in aggregate do all this and more to and for the students they serve. Moreover and here is the important point, they do much of it without the full awareness and thoughtful engagement of those in charge.

—William Jackson, Robert Boostrom, and David Hansen, *The Moral Life of Schools* (1993)

This book is about school culture: what it is and how to shape it. We make two central and related arguments: first, that a school's culture has a significant impact on the lives of students, including on their character and academic development, and second, that the four tools we present can help a school both understand and deliberately shape its culture.

To consistently build excellence for students, families, and for the community, a school must have an intentional culture based on shared values, beliefs, and behaviors. As educators, we tend to focus on improving our school's curriculum, teacher training, and school leadership. Though we have made significant gains in these areas, we must look at the untapped potential of building an intentional school culture, for it is the school culture that serves as the medium for growing our students and teachers.

"It is difficult to foresee what the schools of the new millennium will look like. Many of our schools seem en route to becoming a hybrid of a nineteenth-century factory, a twentieth-century minimum security penal colony, and a twenty-first-century Educational Testing Service. I prefer a different future. If you want to predict the future, create it! This is precisely what school people now have the opportunity—the imperative—to do. . . . There is no more important work."
—Roland Barth, Harvard University professor (2001), p. 213

A school's culture—whether vibrant, adaptive, and thriving, or toxic and dying—affects everything associated with the school. Many educators do not intentionally shape their school's culture because they feel that they lack the tools to do so. A school culture therefore tends to haphazardly unfold, sometimes in response to parental pressure, a principal's personality, and/or educational fads. This is true even at new schools, where staff members may pay attention to the design of both the building and the curriculum, but fail to design for an effective school culture.

The graphic organizer presented previous to page 1 shows the relationship between the four tools for shaping school culture: the school touchstone, the Four Mind-Set Model, the eight gateways, and lessons from fields outside of education. The bulk of this book is dedicated to exploring these four tools, which ultimately cultivate a student's intellect (head), competence (hand), and compassion (heart).

The school touchstone is a short statement that expresses the core qualities—both academic and ethical—that a school community seeks to develop in its members, and it serves as a guide for daily thinking and action. The Four Mind-Set Model depicts four different mind-sets—dependence, independence, interdependence, and integration—for approaching the work of schooling. The eight gateways represent eight entry points for shaping a school culture; they include teaching and learning, student voice, and the physical environment of the school. Finally, knowledge of how organizations and fields outside of education have shaped their cultures can inform the shaping of a school's culture. Taken

as a whole, we believe that this work provides insights for both understanding and deliberately shaping school culture. A poster in one of our schools reads, "If the educators don't take the lead in shaping their school's culture, then other forces will." Given the impact that a school's culture can have on a student's life—both present and future—the stakes are simply too high to leave its shaping to chance: adults need to thoughtfully and deliberately create the kind of educational environment in which every student can flourish. Paul Houston and Stephen Sokolow (2006) write in *The Spiritual Dimension of Leadership*:

> Whether [or not] you realize it, your intentions set up an energy field around themselves. You strengthen that field by what you think and what you envision. You strengthen it by what you write and what you say and by enrolling people through collaborative processes. The more explicit you make your intentions and the more time and energy you give to implementing them, the more you increase the likelihood of seeing your intentions actually manifest in reality. Intention is not only a principle: It is a power, a force. (p. 2)

"Community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideals. It lifts both teachers and students to higher levels of self-understanding, commitment and performance . . . thus providing them with a unique and enduring sense of identity, belonging and place."

—Thomas Sergiovanni, author (1994)

The Importance of School Culture

On one level, few would question that a school's culture has a strong impact on both the students and the adults. As Harvard professor Roland Barth suggests, its influence is undeniable: "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" (Barth, 2002, p. 7). However, few educators seem to appreciate just how important culture is and actually take steps to intentionally shape it. There is now a growing set of data supporting the importance of this kind of work.

Michael Fullan (2005) notes that of the 134 secondary schools in England that were part of the 2004 Hay Group study, the "successful schools had a much more demanding culture—hunger for improvement, promoting excellence, holding hope for every child—while the less successful schools had less of a press on improvement and were more forgiving if results were not forthcoming" (p. 58).

In *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) make the case, empirically, that the top academically performing schools in their study of Chicago public schools also

score high on a measure they call "relational trust." This concept relates to how well each key stakeholder in a school community—students, parents, teachers, and administration—believes that members of the other groups are fulfilling their role obligations. It is also a strong proxy for the quality of relationships within a school, a central aspect of school culture.

"When a school has a positive, professional culture, one finds meaningful staff development, successful curricular reform, and the effective use of student performance data. In these cultures, staff and student learning thrive. In contrast, a school with a negative or toxic culture that does not value professional learning, resists change, or devalues staff development hinders success. School culture will have either a positive or a detrimental impact on the quality and success of staff development."

—Kent Petersen, author (2002), p. 10

Perhaps more important, Bryk and Schneider also demonstrate that high relational trust is predictive of academic success. In other words, schools with improving relational trust also tend to see improving test scores. On the other hand, the authors found that schools with persistently low trust had "virtually no chance of showing improvement" in either reading or mathematics (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

In *Improving School Climate and Culture*, Gonder and Hymes (1994) noted that the research has found a strong link between a positive school climate and high staff productivity and student achievement. In fact, a review of the research on the effect of school climate on student achievement shows that climate or culture has a great influence on a student's chance for success. Furthermore, a Kentucky study of twenty schools on the relationship of school climate to the implementation of school reform found that school climate was a significant factor in implementing successful school reform (Bulach & Malone, 1994).

Similarly, after looking at longitudinal data on school reform, researchers from the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools at the University of Wisconsin–Madison noted that the importance of school relations is often overlooked:

> Our research suggests that human resources—such as openness to improvement, trust and respect, teachers having knowledge and skills, supportive leadership and socialization—are more critical to the development of professional communities than structural conditions. . . . [T]he need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in schools have [sic] received too little attention. (Byrk, A., & Schneider, B., 2002, p. 8; Reprinted with permission)

Laneer Middle School: The Shaping of a School Culture

In what follows, we present a picture of what deliberately shaping a school culture might look like. The story of Laneer Middle School is a composite,

based on our experiences at numerous schools. In the narrative, you will be introduced to the major tools the school staff and administrators used in the process. Throughout the rest of the book, we explore in much greater depth both the nature of those tools and how to use them.

Laneer Middle School is considered a good school. Its state test scores have risen over the past five years, partly a result of the many new efforts by the staff and principal. They implemented the new district literacy and math programs and hired math and literacy coaches. The school formed faculty study groups that focus on using student assessment data to drive instruction and purchased software to provide disaggregated feedback on student performance. The administration has attended numerous conferences to learn more about instruction and assessment. All these efforts have paid off.

However, the school's scores had plateaued during the past two years. The staff had become frustrated, believing they simply couldn't work any harder at what they were presently doing. They were maxed out. After reviewing the many changes they had made, the staff realized there was one fundamental aspect of their school they hadn't fully explored: creating an intentional culture. Their efforts to align teaching and assessments defined part of their culture, but what if they could align all aspects of their school culture toward a common goal? The principal contacted the Office of Character and School Culture for assistance.

Laneer's principal met with Jeanine Mains, a former school principal, in a small office on the third floor of the administration building where Jeanine shared recent literature and data linking school culture to school improvement. The principal asked, "The culture of Laneer includes everything. How do you work with everything?" Jeanine reassured her that there was a road map to approach this work in stages, and she described the four tools that can be used to intentionally shape the culture of Laneer. What follows is a brief account of a two-year journey toward shaping an intentional school culture. It does not, of course, reflect the many bumps along the way, but it does illustrate the steps in the process of building a school culture.

" 'All for one and one for all' is the goal of positive interdependence. It occurs when students understand that their individual success depends on the success of all other members of their group and that the combined talents of the group can attain a goal beyond the reach of any of its separate members."

—Performance Learning Systems, Cooperative Learning (2004)

The staff of Laneer read and discussed background information on school culture, met with Jeanine to ask her questions, reached consensus to take on this work, and then formed a committee to move it forward. The committee began a deep analysis of their current school culture. They reviewed past school satisfaction surveys from students, staff, and parents to discern perceived strengths and weaknesses. Jeanine asked the staff to respond to the School Culture Survey (10 minutes) and the Eight Gateway Survey (30 minutes). Some teachers elicited student, parent, and staff input by inviting them to

respond on posters to the following questions: "What I want to preserve at Laneer Middle School" and "What I want to change." The student council also interviewed students regarding their experiences at Laneer. They asked questions such as, "What is the most powerful tradition for you at LMS?" and "How many adults do you think care about you?" Some of the responses were surprising. After two months of compiling and synthesizing data, the School Culture Committee identified the following patterns, mind-sets, and weakest links at Laneer Middle School.

1. Faculty members are highly independent in how they function at school; their lowest scores on the Rubric for Faculty Interdependence were in the areas of speech, trust, psychological safety, and collaborative decision making.

2. Faculty members make an unspoken attempt to keep students in highly dependent roles because most teachers believe that it is easier to control students when they are not given too much independent responsibility.

3. The majority of parents were more involved with their child's elementary school than with Laneer. Here, they drop their child off at school and assume (or hope) that the school will educate their child. A few parents are overly involved with their child's education by demanding specific teachers, rescuing their child from having to take responsibility for his or her behavior, and by regularly insisting on project time extensions. Some parents have figured out healthy and effective ways to partner with their child's middle school.

4. At Laneer, as at most schools, "time on task" is the constant and "learning" is the big variable. For instance, some students need more time to understand algebraic thinking while other students need less. In reviewing its culture, the staff began to ask how mastery learning could become more of the constant and time the variable.

5. Students noted the bare walls. Their elementary schools' walls had been covered with student work and interesting educational displays.

6. The Eight Gateways Survey revealed the following insights: teachers have a wide range of academic and behavioral expectations of students; much of the problem solving does not get to root causes; students have almost no voice in the school; the school's explicit traditions are wanting, while student-created traditions of hazing and bullying are prevalent; and the principal is in a double-bind because the staff wants her to take care of issues, yet the staff wants to have a voice in what and how things are done.

7. The most widely agreed-on concern was that although the school had a mission and vision statement, "how" things were done varied enormously throughout the school. For example, teachers, students, and parents had virtually no shared agreement about homework. Some teachers believe that homework reinforces academic knowledge and teaches important skills

such as time management, whereas other teachers feel that assigning homework is a waste of time. As a result, many students do their homework in a perfunctory manner and turn in very low quality work. Similarly, the staff is not on the same page regarding student behavior. One teacher ignored an eighth grader who punched another kid in history class, even though it happened right in front of him. Yet when a seventh grader pushed a kid into a locker, he was suspended for two days by the assistant principal. This lack of shared norms is an enormous source of conflict for the whole school community.

The faculty reviewed this information and met with Jeanine to develop a school touchstone to define how things are to be done at Laneer. After looking at touchstones from other schools and other organizations, such as Toyota, the staff agreed to the following set of priority values.

The Laneer Touchstone

At Laneer Middle School we take the high road.
We weave the vitality, caring, and intelligence of students,
parents, and teachers to excel in scholarship and character.
We deal with the root causes of our issues by engaging in
courageous conversations. We have a stake in the well-being of
others and give our best in and out of the classroom.
This is who we are even when no one is watching!

The draft of this touchstone was shared with students, parents, and staff. After it was finalized, the school held an assembly where the students and staff discussed the use of the touchstone in daily life and were then invited to sign the large touchstone banner. This powerful ceremony included student and teacher speakers who shared personal life stories associated with the touchstone qualities. Shortly thereafter, the school promoted the Laneer touchstone in many creative ways, including classroom posters, student ID cards, refrigerator magnets for parents, newsletters, and morning announcements.

Teachers connected the touchstone qualities to their subject content. The seventh-grade history course, for example, highlights the courageous conversations of our founding fathers that led to the Declaration of Independence. The science teacher refers to how most scientific discoveries today are team efforts and underscores the importance of tapping into the vitality, caring, and intelligence of the group. The School Culture Committee developed rubrics for each of the touchstone qualities. These rubrics were used to enhance the self-awareness of students and have helped guide discussions between teachers and students.

Eventually, the Laneer touchstone guided all school activities, including after-school clubs and programs, field trips, and parent-teacher interactions. These shared school norms of "how we do things" at Laneer Middle

School fundamentally altered the old school culture. Now everyone at Laneer is stretched to speak and act in more thoughtful, responsible, and caring ways. Although this work took some effort, the school has benefited from students, staff, and parents working out of a purposeful and shared school culture.

"Teachers who have worked together see substantial improvements in student achievement, behavior, and attitude. Teachers in a junior high school traced their students' remarkable gains in math achievement and the virtual elimination of classroom behavior problems to the revisions in curriculum, testing, and placement procedures they had achieved working as a group. In schools where teachers work collaboratively, students can sense the program coherence and a consistency of expectations, which may explain the improved behavior and achievement."

—Morton Inger, author (1993)

The staff chose to develop specific shared agreements for themselves on such areas as a commitment to teamwork and created rubrics for each agreement. They began with self-assessments, but once trust was built, they engaged in peer reflections. Twice a year, the staff—including the principal and the custodians—provided anonymous feedback on how well each person was upholding the shared agreements. (Only the individual saw his or her results.) This feedback has helped create more consistency among the staff.

As the use of the touchstone organically grew throughout the school community, the faculty began a systematic review of how each of the three partners (faculty and staff, students, and parents) could think and act in more highly integrated ways, as presented by the Four Mind-Set Model. Because teachers functioned in primarily independent ways, the faculty discussed ways in which they could collaborate. They then discussed how to cultivate more independent and interdependent student responsibility. One teacher shared how those parents who worked out of the interdependence paradigm created all sorts of teaching and learning possibilities for her seventh-grade art students. She also shared her desire for more parents to act interdependently, asking "Wouldn't it be neat if all parents asked not what Laneer Middle School could do for them, but asked what they could do for LMS?"

The faculty decided to focus on increasing student ownership of their learning. Too many students sat passively in classes waiting to be "filled" by their teachers (dependence). Since most teachers approached students from an authoritarian position, teachers looked at other models of teaching, such as cooperative learning, coaching, and service learning. After much discussion, they reached some general agreements on the kinds of situations in which students of each grade level (sixth, seventh, and eighth) would have little input, situations that were open to negotiation, and areas over which students could independently make decisions.

Teachers also provided guidelines for parental involvement with homework. These guidelines reaffirmed that homework was the job of

students, not parents. Parents can help promote good study habits, but students should be the ones doing the work, as well as remembering to take the necessary materials home and then back to school. Students must manage their time and learn how to schedule their evenings so they can complete their assignments. They must also develop a sense of what high-quality work looks like. Each school year, parents should become less involved with their child's homework.

As the first year of creating an intentional school culture came to a close, the school reviewed what it had accomplished and looked to the next year. There was general agreement that an in-depth look at their school culture had revealed many hidden beliefs and practices that kept them from fulfilling the school's mission, vision, and goals. Everyone agreed that having a shared school touchstone was providing alignment and coherence for how things were being done. Teachers enjoyed using curricular content to reinforce parts of the touchstone.

However, two staff reflections, based on shared agreements, proved to be more controversial. After exploring individual concerns, the staff reached a consensus to continue with this practice (of staff reflections) even though it created a certain amount of discomfort. For instance, it had been hard for the principal to deal with the feedback that she had been less than respectful in some of her interactions with staff. She learned that on numerous occasions she had cut someone off in mid sentence by a curt response. Everyone agreed that the agreements and the feedback process created a powerful means of uplifting adult behavior, which also made the staff better role models for students.

Teachers also felt that their shared intention to cultivate greater student independence and interdependence had enormous potential. A seventh-grade teacher stated that when she had given her students additional freedom on their projects, she had been pleasantly surprised by the results. She proclaimed, "When I started to trust my students more, and gave them more responsibility—as well as held them accountable—they did amazing work."

Based on this success, the faculty decided to explore how using the eight gateways the next school year could encourage even more students to take responsibility for their learning.

The first gateway the faculty explored was the physical environment of the school. How could it be shaped to encourage more independent student thinking and acting? The faculty decided to designate an outside deck as a place where eighth graders could hang out and even eat lunch together. It would be considered their own special space. The eighth graders, however, had to behave responsibly. Leaving trash, fighting, or otherwise behaving inappropriately would be grounds for losing this privilege. The staff felt that this independence and increased responsibility would be good preparation for high school.

Each of the three grades was given a hallway bulletin board for grade-level student communication. The school also could add three minutes to

the end of the school day during which all students and staff picked up trash, organized lockers, and left the facilities as clean and tidy as when they found them at the beginning of the day.

Teachers exhibited student work and created opportunities for student voice in novel ways. Student council meetings were videotaped and run the next day on several hallway monitors. Student art work, student writing, various projects, and elegant solutions to math problems were displayed for all to review. In these and other ways, the staff (and students) deliberately shaped the physical environment to encourage more student ownership in their own learning. This led to more pride and, eventually, higher-quality work.

In a similar manner, the school explored how each of the other seven gateways could contribute to moving students from dependent mind-sets to being more independent and interdependent. This process of teachers thinking together and striving to reach shared goals resulted in the staff gaining access to working in more highly collaborative ways. When working through these issues, the staff noted that some of their "problem-solving processes" were ineffective because faculty and staff had a great deal of pride in being perfect. This pride made it difficult at times to admit particular weaknesses. However, once their "foolish pride" was named and exposed, there began a process of becoming liberated from this obstacle. Teachers began joking about their own hidden areas of weakness that they had previously covered up. Teachers even began to say to students, "I don't know the answer to your question. Let's find out together." Eventually it became common to hear teachers apologize to students when they had made a mistake.

The school now continues to systematically and intentionally build its culture. This has required an initial investment of energy, but the investment is paying off. Students are showing more ownership in their learning. Old and tired traditions have been eliminated, and new ones have been established. Previously vexing issues are being addressed at the root level, resulting in increased staff confidence and energy. The school looks cleaner and brighter, and there is an abundance of positive energy that has ignited student voice. And the state test scores, which had been flat for two years, have begun to rise!

RESOURCE A: SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEY

Laneer Middle School Culture Survey

Exit this survey >>

1. Laneer Middle School Culture Survey

This 10-minute survey is designed to identify strengths of your school culture as well as areas to be further developed. All responses are anonymous, and results will be shared with school staff. Thank you for taking the time to provide this valuable feedback.
NOTE: Open a new browser window for each person taking the survey on the same computer.

1. Our school is heading in the right direction.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

2. I like working in this school.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

3. We are effectively moving students toward meeting district academic goals. (Scores are improving on CSAPS and on other assessments.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. The principal fosters constructive dialogue. (He/she brings issues to the faculty and invites their input.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

5. Our school fosters student engagement in academic learning. (For instance, teachers differentiate instruction, encourage student participation, offer choices in assigments when possible, and promote hands-on learning.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

6. I feel safe speaking to the principal—either privately or publicly—about school issues, including those that might be awkward and/or unpopular.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

7. Our school effectively engages parents/guardians. (For instance, we regularly send communications home—including positive phone calls, invite parents/guardians to school events, and provide specific guidance for how to support their children academically.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

8. Our staff has a voice in decision making.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

9. As a staff, we follow through on things we commit to. (For instance, we follow through on our discipline policy and teach our curriculum with fidelity.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

10. As a school, we actively promote our shared values. (For instance, we regularly reference the school touchstone or creed.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

11. As a staff, we effectively collaborate with one another. (For instance, we regularly review student work together, share ideas and teaching resources, and volunteer to serve on school committees.)

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

(Continued)

(Continued)

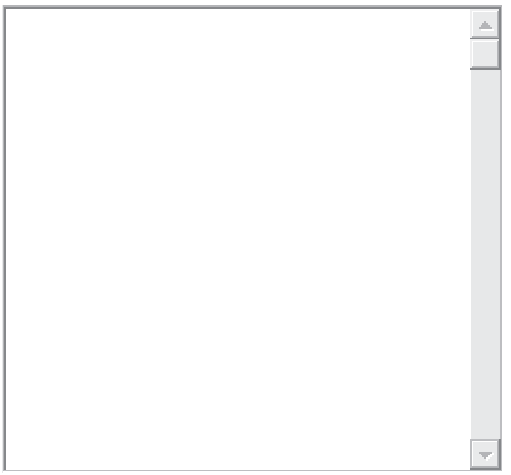
12. The staff in this school trust one another.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

13. There is a culture of respect at this school among students, staff, parents, and the administration.

Strongly Disagree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Agree 5
○	○	○	○	○

14. What do you like best about working at this school?



15. What is the most important issue facing the school?

16. The support I need to help my students learn more is . . . (Try to be realistic!)

Done >>