Preface

Schools today are under pressure to increase student achievement, meet the needs of all students, solve the problems of society, and remain fiscally responsible. Sounds like a pretty simple mission, right? It's an understatement to say that working in a school has become increasingly complex and stressful. One result of this increased stress in many schools has been a gradual deterioration of the work environment or climate. With the emphasis on increasing academic performance, some schools have forgotten about the emotional issues of their teachers and students.

This book has been designed to help principals as they begin to think about and make plans to improve the climate and ultimately the culture of their schools. In designing this book, we have relied on several information sources. First, we examined research related to the importance of a positive climate and culture in relation to student achievement. Researchers are in agreement that a positive school climate and culture, in which there are high expectations for students, is one of the key ingredients of student success. We also used information we have gathered over the years from our work with principals, and we include here some of the strategies they have found to be helpful in improving the climate and culture of their schools. Finally, we have used our own experiences in helping to turn around school cultures. Together, we have almost 30 years of experience as school principals. In most of the schools we have worked in, we have been able to improve the working and learning conditions of both staff members and students through our ability to improve both the climate and culture of each school. We share this experience with you in this book.

One of the aspects of this topic that can be confusing for principals is identifying the difference between school *climate* and school *culture.* We offer some researchers' perspectives on this question in Chapter 1, but we want to offer our perspective here as well.

In general, the climate of a school refers to the feel or tone of the school. The climate is really based on how the school feels from day to day. Since the climate is somewhat variable, it can be influenced by interventions

somewhat rapidly. For example, if a school principal perceives that staff meetings are dull and boring and decides to use music as a way to make meetings more energized, the impact is almost immediate. The climate of the meetings will be improved.

School culture, on the other hand, is more stable or grounded than climate. Since the culture is more stable or ingrained than the climate, it may take several long-term and consistent interventions to make a shift in the culture. Relative to the smaller effort that a principal may put forth to improve faculty meetings as discussed in the previous example, he or she may have to use music in staff meetings consistently over a long period of time, and couple that with participation activities and other strategies, in order to begin to change the school's culture around meetings. To improve the culture related to meeting participation may take a year or longer of consistent and focused intervention. When the new meeting behavior becomes an internal part of how the staff perceives and operates its meetings, a change in culture has occurred.

This book is designed to fill a specific niche: improving the climate and culture related to the *adults* in the school. We have found that working with the teachers and other staff members is an important place to start with school climate and culture efforts. Once the staff members are on track, efforts with the students can begin. Student climate and culture interventions are not discussed in this book, even though many of the strategies presented are likely to trickle down to the students once they have been used with staff.

Since we understand the difficulties in changing culture, we wanted to provide this book as a guide for others who are attempting to change their school cultures. The book has been designed to be practical rather than theoretical in nature. We did provide some of the background and theory in the first two chapters so you can understand the context we are coming from in looking at the concepts of climate and culture. The bulk of the book contains practical, proven activities and strategies that will work to improve the climate and culture of a school. We have provided a wide variety of ideas for you to consider. All of these activities and strategies will work in schools, but you need to select the ones that you are most comfortable with and that you think will work best for your school. In the end, keep moving forward to make your school all it can be.

Good luck as you work to improve the climate and culture of your school—it is a journey worth taking!

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