

March 2012

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### Recommended Citation

Cleveland, Roger; Chambers, Jennifer; Mainus, Cretia; Powell, Norman; Skepple, Rose; Tyler, Tiffany; and Wood, April (2012) "School Culture, Equity, and Student Academic Performance in a Rural Appalachian School," *Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 9 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/kjectl/vol9/iss1/4>

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# School Culture, Equity, and Student Academic Performance in a Rural Appalachian School

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**Abstract**

The authors provide an overview of a culture-equity audit conducted in a rural Appalachian school. The purpose was to collect information that would assist the school to optimize student academic performance. School culture is critical to establishing successful school learning environments. It provides one of the most significant foundations for successful student achievement (Cleveland, Powell, Saddler, & Tyler, 2008). Some studies suggest that educational leaders could play significant roles in culture building (Deal, 1990, 1994; Levine, 1989; Parish & Aquila, 1996; Pritchard et al., 2005). A culture audit provides an opportunity to learn about the culture of a school or district. Equity audits use quantitative indicators to examine teacher quality and programmatic inequities in schools systematically (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006). Culture audits provide critical data to reveal educational inequities among diverse school groups. Unfortunately, equity audits alone may not sufficiently capture the idiosyncrasies of exclusive school cultures that contribute to more subtle discrimination and poor student achievement. A culture-equity audit may be conducted for this reason. Researchers from a regional American university in the mid-west conducted an equity-culture audit for a rural Appalachian school with the aim of supporting student achievement. This article provides an overview of the audit and recommendations for reform.

Keywords: school culture, audit, student performance, rural Appalachian schools

**Introduction**

The body of educational research citing the critical role of school culture in determining school success is overwhelming. Leading educational scholars stipulate that three of the top five factors influencing school success relating to culture are: (1) parental and community involvement, (2) safe and orderly environment, and (3) collegiality and professionalism. Stolp and Smith (1994) define school culture as historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, in varying degrees, by members of the school

community. School culture influences the ways in which individuals interact in schools.

Different schools have different cultures. School culture is a critical ingredient in the establishment of successful school learning environments. The school culture provides the most significant educational foundation for successful student achievement (Cleveland, Powell, Saddler, & Tyler, 2008). A school with a wholesome culture knows what it believes and where it is going (Rooney, 2005). School culture is extremely powerful, and we cannot ignore the culture of the schools if we want to improve academic success for

all students. Culture influences every facet of schools (Deal & Peterson, 1994, 1998).

In order to establish a climate that is comfortable, friendly, and approachable for all, it is crucial that educators look at the culture of the school. This culture can be inadvertently imposed on people. However, some may not embrace these attitudes. Schools can do their part by welcoming and respecting the diversity of all stakeholders. An academically effective school is distinguished by its culture: a structure, process, and climate of values and norms that channel the staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning (Sapher & King, 1985).

Creating schools with a culture of positive relationships have long been a characteristic of success. However, creating a culture that stresses significant relationships will require significant change in many high schools around the country (Hyslop, 2004). Caring school communities let positive relationships build the school culture around diversity and a variety of different perspectives. Students perceive school culture as a shared commodity, rather than an entity owned by the faculty and administration. Cultures are developed every day in the life of the school (Sapher & King, 1985).

Studies in administration underscore the important role of educational leaders as culture builders (Deal, 1990, 1994; Levine, 1989; Parish & Aquila, 1996; Pritchard et al., 2005). The role of the school culture is to provide cues for how teachers should behave in relationship to the expectations of the organization based on students' need for belonging in the school. This culture comprises the external and internal factors that have evolved over time in the school, and includes the assumptions, values, and norms that develop over time.

### **Transmitted Patterns of Meaning**

Stolp and Smith (1994) define school culture as historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, in varying degrees, by members of the school community. This system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act. A related concept, organizational culture, can loosely be defined as the shared assumptions, beliefs, and "normal behaviors" (norms) of a group. Organizational culture is a powerful influence on the way people live and act, and the way they define what is "normal" and how to sanction those who are not "normal" in organizations. Similarly, school culture influences the ways in which individuals interact in schools. To a large degree, what we do is determined by our culture and the cultural contexts in which we interact. This is especially true in schools since almost everyone associated with a school arrives with preconceived notions of what is acceptable and what is not.

In order to know the culture of a certain school or district it is necessary to audit the institution. The knowledge and understanding of the culture can be obtained through an in depth culture audit. It is not an easy task to conduct a cultural audit, so one can define and describe the culture because of perception of the individual involved in the institution. Culturally competent educational organizations value diversity in both theory and practice and make teaching and learning relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures (Klotz, 2006). Educational leaders must be equipped with the necessary tools to assess how well policies, programs, and practices align with the needs of diverse groups and prepare people to interact globally. The "culture audit" is a valuable organizational assessment tool to guide strategic planning for diversity and global competence. Educational leaders could be better prepared to manage diverse schools if they use the

four pillars of success—individual, family, community, and institution.

Equity audits involve using quantitative indicators to examine teacher quality and programmatic inequities in schools systematically (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006). Culture audits provide critical data to reveal educational inequities among diverse school groups. However, equity audits alone may not sufficiently capture the idiosyncrasies of exclusive school cultures that contribute to more subtle discrimination and poor student achievement. For this reason, a culture-equity audit was conducted. Culture audits provide a more comprehensive approach to assessing how the overall school culture responds to the cultural and achievement needs of diverse groups in the school and the school community (Bustamante, 2006).

Considerable diversity exists in rural areas that can be attributed to the size and variety of the community. Communities of rural areas must be viewed using a different lens that is sensitive to the differences and influences on the local schools. Education has emerged as an important and sometime controversial developmental strategy to help rural communities establish an economic base that can sustain community members above the poverty level and provide an adequate tax base for essential community services. Rural communities that seek to attract industries paying high wages must have an appropriately trained skilled labor force. Good schools also attract industries seeking to relocate in communities that offer a high quality of life (Van Hook, 1993).

Rural communities must have educated and visionary leaders to advocate for economic development in order to successfully adapt to an increasingly technical and competitive world. In contrast, there is concern that rural communities educate their youth only to lose them to

urban centers with more opportunities. Young people from rural areas who plan for higher education are as interested in remaining in their community as others; the ongoing exodus appears to be the result of the lack of realistic opportunities for young people in their communities rather than a desire to leave. Leaders are needed to increase cohesion within the community and to increase their potential to provide incentives for those with higher education to want to participate and interact within their own community (Wilkinson, 2008).

Some rural communities have had to fight against overwhelming economic and social odds to keep their schools and communities viable. The viability of rural communities has become threatened as the rural population decreases with the migration of the young and often better-educated workforce. The importance and the impact of community values and traditions on education attainment is that rural poverty rates tend to be greater than metropolitan poverty rates. Further, education is a significant indicator of rural distress. In some cases, motivated students do leave the area, buying into the benefits of modernity, or attempting to shed the skin of the stereotypes that follow them wherever they go.

The culture audit serves as a comprehensive means for assessing school-wide cultural competence by identifying strengths and need areas to guide strategic planning efforts. A culture audit involves collecting data from multiple sources in order to assess how well organizational policies, programs, practices, rituals, artifacts, and traditions reflect the perspectives of diverse groups. The researchers provide an overview of the audit as a case study incorporating school improvement strategies and reform efforts.

## The Rural Appalachian School Audit

In acknowledgement of the influence of school culture, researchers from a University in the Southeastern region of the United States conducted an equity-culture audit for a rural Appalachian school with the aim of supporting student achievement. An equity-culture audit is an assessment of the existing culture of the school with an emphasis on strengths and weaknesses with respect to achievement, goals, and objectives. Equity and culture audits assess such attributes as learning environment, discipline, classroom management, leadership, coordination, collaboration, instructional equity, cultural competence, equitable access to the curriculum, and relationships. The data from these audits assist schools to make decisions about next steps to develop school culture, and improve academic achievement.

### Procedures

In the case of the rural Appalachian school, the culture assessment team activities included a review of the documents collected from the school's portfolio/profile, the school web site, formal and informal group interviews with students, teachers, parents, student support staff, and school level leadership. The assessment team also conducted classroom observations, walkthroughs, and surveys. An intensive process included the following actions:

- 53 teachers interviews
- 19 classified staff interviews
- 4 administrator interviews
- 105 student interviews
- 27 parent overviews
- 26 classroom observations
- 53 walk-throughs
- 61 faculty/staff surveys

- 750 pages of archival analysis

In addition, the research team collected data from document reviews, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and walkthrough observations. These qualitative measures gave researchers information about the cultural competency and climate of the school. The research team reviewed several documents as part of a prior site visit. The documents included the school's comprehensive school improvement plan, school's mission statement, behavior reports, the school report card, master schedules, surveys, and a map of the school.

These documents provided researchers with background information regarding the culture of the school. The researchers used a designated walkthrough observation form to provide a consistent view of classroom climate, learning activities, student engagement, and teacher effectiveness. The researchers conducted their observations unobtrusively. The team posed some relevant questions to help the school develop a culture that would support high-level student achievement.

### Relevant Questions

Because of the study's methodology, the research team assisted the school to respond to the following questions:

1. How would the school look if all stakeholders developed a sense of urgency to focus on an instruction program that was rigorous for all students in a culture where continuous improvement is embedded, ongoing, and a natural part of the learning process?
2. What would the school look like if all staff fostered and promoted an atmosphere of high expectations and

accountability for all stakeholders within a culture of trust and the belief that all children can learn at high levels?

3. How different would the school look if all teachers engaged students in hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences?
4. How different would the school look if “learning, not teaching” became the school’s focus?

Answers to these questions helped school leaders to articulate worthwhile solutions. Respondents were empowered to develop new conceptualizations of instruction by grappling with concepts of inquiry-based learning and paradigm shifts such as “learning as the focus.”

At the end of the desk audit and site visit, the team provided an evaluation report and their findings to the school’s leadership.

#### Themes and Findings

The audit results were intended to provide the leadership of the school with “big idea” issues that they could address in order to fulfill their mission of providing its students a world class, quality education. Themes that emerged from the analysis of audit data included the following:

1. Need for professional development training on classroom management
2. Incidence of differentiated instruction
3. Need for increased parent and community engagement
4. Culturally responsive teaching.

#### Classroom Management

The assessment team discussed some concerns about classroom management at the school. Classroom management was not a school wide issue. However, discipline reports provided by the administration indicated there were a high number of minor disruptions and incidents in classrooms. In

addition, these disruptions occurred in classrooms in which higher-level courses were taught. These minor disruptions can negatively affect instructional time and pull administrators from more important tasks in the building. The assessment team advised that these incidences of disruptions should be addressed in order to improve overall student achievement. The school leadership took corrective action to achieve this goal following the evaluation report.

#### Instruction (Differentiation)

Classroom walk-throughs found that some teachers used differentiated instructional strategies to diverse learners in some classrooms. However, this was not the case in all classrooms. Analysis of the walk-through data indicated that approximately forty-percent of the teachers were using differentiated instruction in classrooms. Most students were well behaved in the classrooms. However, the team could not determine the extent of student engagement in the learning process. Student cooperation and compliance are not sole indicators for student engagement in high quality, student-centered instruction. Instructional differentiation is critical at the secondary level, because an overreliance on stand and deliver lecture correlates with lower student academic achievement.

#### Parent & Community Engagement

The findings also suggest parent and community engagement may be lower than needed to establish and maintain effective school-community partnerships. The leadership and staff are well aware of limited parent and community engagement. When asked how they engaged parents and students at risk, teachers were identified a variety of strategies, but were unsure how to apply them. There was wide recognition and agreement among the faculty and staff that there is a need for greater parental

involvement and engagement in school activities and projects. Students reported that the automated calling system and parent access to their grades on Infinite Campus provided some support for their parents. A review of the website indicates that there are different sets of information that may or may not be up to date. Many teachers reported a desire for the students, family, and community to be engaged in aspects of the school outside of a couple of sports events. However, they were unable to identify specific practices to accomplish this end.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Teachers in the school indicated that they had limited knowledge about culturally responsive teaching. Very few staff understood the instructional concept “culturally responsive pedagogy” or “cultural competency.” There was additional questioning regarding the necessity of these practices due to the limited number of students of color in the student population. These learning concepts are research based and have been proven to assist student achievement regardless of culture of identification. Using students’ cultural experiences and background to connect with new content is an effective instructional strategy. The assessment team did not see artifacts in the classroom that addressed or celebrated diversity. Many teachers discussed the positive impact of participating in the study of Ruby Payne’s work on the culture of poverty. However, many teachers were unable to explain how

they modified their instructional practices after they studied the material.

### **Summary**

The authors discussed procedures used in a culture-equity audit that was conducted in a rural Appalachian school. The purpose of the audit was to provide some information that will help the school to develop and implement long-range comprehensive improvement plans. A qualitative case-study methodology provided a framework for collecting anecdotal, aural, and written material (Burgan & Bilked, 2003). The researchers conducted interviews and surveys with students, parents, faculty and staff, and administrators respectively. They observed classroom interactions, conducted walk-throughs, and analyzed pages of archival material. In addition, they provided some guided questions to provide a sense of direction to intended school improvement goals. Themes and findings emerged after the data were analyzed. They related to classroom management, differentiated instruction, parental involvement, and “culturally responsive pedagogy” or “cultural competency.” The team provided an evaluation report, and findings to the school’s leadership at the end of the audit. There is a need for further investigations on the effect of school culture on student academic achievement in rural Appalachian and other schools as classrooms become more diverse.

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