

## **THE DECATUR STORY: Reinvention of a School Corporation Culture and Climate: The Personality of School Governance**

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*This is the fourth in a series of articles to be published in 2007 that addresses reinvention of the Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township.*

As described in the three previous issues of this journal, in February 2001 Indiana University's School of Education offered to facilitate fundamental school transformation in the Indianapolis Metropolitan School District of Decatur Township. The first article indicated that school transformation differs from school reform in that it entails changing the paradigm of education from the factory model of schools, which uses fixed time and standardization to focus on sorting students, to an information-age model of schools, which uses flexible time and customization to focus on successful learning for all students. This kind of change requires a change in the culture and climate of an entire school district. Since culture and climate are closely intertwined, we will address them together and use the term "culture" to refer to both.

There are two stages of culture change for transforming the paradigm of education. First, an appropriate culture must be built for the transformation process to be successful. Second, during the transformation process, the participants may decide that the culture of their new schools should be different in some additional ways. In this article, we will focus on the first kind of culture change and only touch briefly on the second.

### **A Culture for Transformation**

During Decatur's Journey Toward Excellence, we have found the following six cultural beliefs to be essential to the success of the transformation process. These beliefs are stated from the perspective of a participant in the transformation process.

**1. Children's interests first.** All of our decisions about what changes to make should be based first and foremost on what is best for children. Each of us has a stake in what happens in Decatur's schools: teachers,

parents, administrators, support staff, and much more. While we should not forget the interests of our own group, putting the interests of children first is the most important part of our culture for transformation.

### **2. Viewing the change process as an invention process and a learning process, and openness to new ideas, thinking in the ideal, and systemic thinking.**

Paradigm change requires invention. The new paradigm has not been invented yet. Many pieces of it have, but we need to draw on them to invent what is best for *our* school. This means we all have a lot to learn – about our needs, about what we value together for education, about what methods and tools are available out there for us to build into our invention, about how to work well together, and much more. To learn these things effectively, we must be open to new ideas, for they are the essence of invention. We must also think in the ideal, for otherwise we are limiting ourselves to mediocrity. We can always compromise on the ideal later as practical constraints dictate. And we must think systemically, for everything is interrelated and interdependent in a complex system like a school. When we make a fundamental change in one part of our school, it will become incompatible with other parts, and they will work to change it back. To be successful, the change process must be a process of learning and invention. These beliefs are a critical part of our culture.

**3. Broad stakeholder involvement, collaboration, and ownership. Everyone is valuable.** If only a few people learn, the rest are not as likely to understand, value, and support the changes that result. We don't like being told what to do. We don't like being told what kind of car to buy or what clothes to wear. Since we hope to create a new paradigm of schools that

all of us value, we must all participate in its invention. Not just administrators. Not just teachers. All stakeholders, including support staff, parents, grandparents, employers, community agencies, churches, and much more. We must not just participate and collaborate – we must also develop a sense of ownership and commitment to what we are inventing (see our Summer 2007 article in this series). And we will never forget that everyone is valuable. These beliefs are central to our culture for transformation.

**4. Participatory leadership, leading through vision and empowerment of others, humility and trust.** Stakeholder ownership requires a different kind of leadership than we are used to in schools. The industrial-age paradigm of leadership – the top-down, bureaucratic, command-and-control style of leadership – kills stakeholder ownership. The information-age paradigm of leadership is one that develops a shared vision among stakeholders and empowers them to become leaders in pursuing that shared vision (see our Spring 2007 article in this series). It is a kind of leadership that is born of humility and is grounded in building trust. It also requires providing the stakeholders with the knowledge and tools they need to be successful in their leadership roles. It is participatory leadership, and it is an integral part of our culture.

**5. Decision making through consensus building, with disclosure and good communication.** Participatory leadership requires a different style of decision making. Decisions must be made by building broad consensus for the decisions. Typically, different individuals have very different views about what should be done. Usually, there is *some* merit in every viewpoint. By sharing perspectives and surfacing the assumptions upon which our views are founded, we are able to evolve our thinking to a decision that is better than any of us could have made individually. This is an important part of learning together and openness to new ideas (#1 above). And it is not just different from autocratic decision making; it is also different from democratic decision-making. Democratic decision making does not entail a learning process for all. It is majority rule, with winners and losers. Consensus-building requires learning, and when consensus is reached, there are no losers. But for the consensus-building process to work, all participants must agree to disclose any and all disagreements or reservations they may have about an emerging

consensus. Without this disclosure, there is false consensus, and commitment will suffer. Consensus-building also requires good two-way communication. These beliefs are all important parts of our culture for transformation.

**6. Self-criticality.** It is not enough to reach consensus. We also need to know if it works. Evaluation is an important part of invention. We must continually evaluate our decisions to see how they can be improved. We also need to know if the way we are collaborating works. We must continually reflect on our change process and activities to see how they can be improved. We must also continually evaluate our own thinking and behavior on a personal level, and be open to criticism. These beliefs are also important parts of our culture.

### **A Culture for the New Schools**

The culture and climate of the new schools is a different issue from the culture for the transformation process. However, we anticipate that many of the same beliefs will hold. At the same time, it is important for the stakeholders who are designing their new schools think about what culture they want for their respective schools, and plan how to create that culture. We expect that the culture will include such beliefs as customization to meet each individual learner's needs and cultivate their individual talents, diversity of options in terms of both what to learn and how to learn it, the creation of highly engaging student work, self-direction for both students and teachers subject to shared vision and team consensus, parents as partners in their children's learning, respect for others, well-rounded development for all students, service to the community, and much more.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is difficult to change. It requires a lot of small-group discussion about the beliefs that stakeholders want to underlie their culture. And this requires a lot of time – always a precious commodity in a school system. However, based on our experience in Decatur's Journey Toward Excellence, culture change is crucial to a successful transformation process. Decatur, in its continuing partnership with Indiana University, is broadening this culture and building on it to help each school's stakeholders evolve their thinking about education and build broad consensus for transforming the time-based, sorting-focused, standardized, factory model of schools to an attainment-based, learning-focused, customized model of schools

that will provide a quantum improvement in helping all children to reach their potential.