



November 30, 2010

A Policy Review of the Rochester City School District's Reform Efforts

Winning Hearts & Minds: Role of Culture in School Improvement

CGR Report to the Community

Rochester City School District Reform Efforts

Fourth of a 5-part series

Winning hearts & minds: Role of Culture in School Improvement

As the media tell the story, a war over education policy is being waged between anti-teacher, test-loving, business-minded crusaders and pro-union, anti-testing, defenders of children. The film *Waiting for Superman*, the *Los Angeles Times* release of test scores by teacher, and policy changes spurred by Race to the Top have fueled the conflict.

The District of Columbia's Michele Rhee is a role model for hard-charging reformers. Rhee's style is confrontational and unapologetically "top down." In her view, entrenched acceptance of failure demands urgency, not consensus. She changed evaluation structures, fired principals and teachers, and closed schools. Fear was a legitimate tool to motivate action. The record suggests that Rhee made headway before DC voters showed her boss, Mayor Adrian Fenty, the door and effectively ended her tenure. The sustainability of her reforms is unknown.

This education "culture war" forms the context in which Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard came to RCSD. From the start, he has been broadly critical of the district. Profoundly bureaucratic, it hasn't put student achievement at the center. Schools and their leaders have neither been empowered nor held accountable. Complacency has dominated many schools and central office departments. Echoing other voices in the nation and the community, Brizard sees our failing schools as a civil rights issue—generations of Rochester children, denied an effective education, are denied access to the nation's middle class.

While his outspokenness has been popular outside the district, many insiders have felt unfairly criticized. Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski and others have charged that Brizard is blaming teachers for the district's problems and is too dictatorial. Central office staff have felt targeted not just by Brizard but by Acting Superintendent William Cala before him.

Culture matters. While there is no "culture policy" to discuss, in many ways, culture change is *the* work of district reform. And it is difficult to achieve. An attack on organizational culture is personal for everyone involved, thus is more politically charged and more likely to ignite an emotional reaction.

While this administration gets high marks for putting new structures in place to change the cognitive choices of teachers and other staff—new data tools, a revised curriculum, new assessments, etc.—these can only achieve their maximum impact if the values, beliefs and reflexes of the staff are aligned with the district's core values. Getting there will require a collective willingness to move past polarized mantras, and to acknowledge that the future is unclear, but the status quo is not an option. For district leadership, this requires more effort to engage the hearts and minds of RCSD staff, focusing everyone on teaching and learning.

What is culture? Why does it matter?

Organizational culture is the "way we do things"—the sum of the values, beliefs, behaviors and attitudes in a workplace. Often unspoken and unexamined, it governs how people perceive, act and make decisions. The policies and rhetoric of the Superintendent, the Board of Education, Central Office and the unions work together to forge a cultural identity across the district. While more than the sum of its parts, the district's culture is influenced by the individual cultures of schools, peer groups and departments. Thus, even staff members in schools with effective cultures find district culture can be frustrating, chaotic, disrespectful and apathetic. In an effective culture, members have a shared sense of purpose and shared goals—"It's all about the children" is more than a catchphrase.

Culture amplifies or dampens every other factor affecting outcomes:

- A system of accountability will be met by a collective sense of responsibility in a good culture and by finger pointing in a bad culture.

- When resources are in short supply, a good culture will spur sharing, careful resource management and collaborative solutions. A bad culture will spur hoarding and pointless complaints.
- Policy is debated on its merits in a good culture. In a dysfunctional culture, mandates are viewed with suspicion and participants are quick to question the motives of the policymakers, not the policies themselves.

Every child is a work of art. Create a masterpiece.

When the Board of Education hired Superintendent Brizard, the Rochester community was outraged by a 39% graduation rate and stark “achievement gaps”—the difference in achievement between student “sub-groups” like African-Americans, Latinos, students with disabilities, English Language Learners and their white, general education peers. The district’s vision—***Every child is a work of art. Create a masterpiece.***—puts the focus on the student. This demands a focus on changing the beliefs and day-to-day practices of many adults in the system. Our discussion of culture centers on the “core values” identified in the strategic plan:

Achievement, Equity, and Accountability.

Achievement

Superintendent Brizard, supported by the Board of Education, has made a number of decisions that shine a bright light on the primacy of student achievement. Achievement can be directly promoted as a cultural value by celebrating effective school leaders, recognizing star teachers and publicizing schools that have demonstrated progress.

Promoting a positive culture takes more than celebration, however. District leadership has pursued a number of policies that promote a culture of achievement in more subtle ways.

Make Way for Instruction

If achievement is to be a central value of the district’s culture, then instruction must be a priority. Several changes have reinforced this:

- The district started classes before Labor Day, and closes for inclement weather less often than in the past.
- The longstanding practice of sending middle school students home after mid-term and final exams was ended, recapturing lost instructional time at grade levels where data indicate the most need.

HOW DID WE GET HERE? Present to varying degrees, these mindsets shape current culture.

- **Passion gives way to “moral martyrdom”**—Facing the demoralizing effects of poverty, staff work in challenging, often unsafe, environments and confront the results of illogical decisions, broken systems, poor management and lethargic bureaucracy. Without clear standards for performance, effective supports to guide their actions, or meaningful feedback on their work, resignation sets in: “In this setting, with these kids, we’re doing the best we can.” Passion can ebb away as even great teachers feel disrespected by a dysfunctional system and the lack of recognition for their talent.
- **Diffusion of power yields mixed message on goals and priorities**—There are multiple leaders in the district—the Board of Education, the Superintendent, his Cabinet, and the leaders of the unions. Add to this, the power of each school’s leadership and each teacher’s classroom authority. Inevitably these leaders will disagree about priorities and goals, making systemic culture hard to address.
- **Playing defense, feeling defensive**—In schools, spontaneous and urgent needs present themselves all day long. Planning is critical, but often feels futile because circumstances force continuous adaptation. It is easy to simply “play defense,” letting external pressures shape actions. Bemoaning what can’t be controlled—and perhaps, some things that can—can become a reflex.
- **More, please**—More money, more staff, more experience, more computers, more books, more programs: the default for decades has been to assume that more is better, that asking for more is a solution. The real inequities that do exist in schools, and the sacred “it’s for the kids” have made it hard to challenge this attitude of entitlement. While more may well be better, the lack of “more” can’t be an excuse.
- **This, too, shall pass**—Curriculum materials are purchased, introduced with fanfare, then slowly fall into disuse. Superintendents come and go, as do principals and community task forces. Reforms are recycled: Do small schools work or not? Is school-based budgeting wise or disastrous? Are middle schools or 7-12 schools best? If another “reform” is waiting just over the horizon, why buy into this one?

- Low performing schools are being closed. An expensive and disruptive choice, it asserts the belief of district leadership that the culture of these schools was so un motivating that starting over was the best solution—and that there can be no excuses for poor achievement.
- The Rochester curriculum and benchmark assessments were created to forge a common language for the necessary work of improving teaching and learning. Coordinated use is the next step. All levels of the district need to develop a shared understanding of what quality instruction and student work look like. (CGR's next policy review will address emerging changes in evaluation systems.)

Poverty Can't Be an Excuse

Smart, experienced, honorable people believe that until we address poverty, we cannot have successful urban schools. Others argue that until we fix education, we have no chance of addressing poverty. In Rochester, high-achieving, high-poverty schools like School #19, Expeditionary Learning schools, and a few charters provide evidence that education can break the link between poverty and poor achievement. These schools don't ignore poverty—they shape their programs to respond. These models have made achievement an all-encompassing cultural value.

CGR's survey of RCSD personnel in spring 2010 found that 65% of teachers and 30% of principals agree that "schools can't accomplish much" until the community addresses poverty. This statistic illuminates part of the culture shift that must occur.

Central Office Exists to Serve Schools

District leaderships speaks of "flipping the hierarchy,"

shifting power to schools and placing central office in a service role. There are pockets of excellence, but transforming departments to view customer service and problem solving as their *raison d'être* has been a slow and uneven process. The Equitable Student Funding model launching in 2011-12 will further transform the relationship between schools and central office as principals become customers who can influence departments through their budgetary decisions.

Equity

Nothing erodes shared values more quickly than inequity. All participants in the system—teachers, principals, students, parents, staff—want to feel that they are offered opportunities equal to those of their peers. Conscious effort toward achieving equity demonstrates that it is a cultural value held by leadership.

Giving Every Child an Opportunity

In a school filled with difficult students from troubled families, there is a temptation to "write off" the most challenging students. Changing the practices and policies that let children fall through the cracks is fundamentally a moral issue.

- Out-of-school suspension removes troubled students from view. Forcing in-school detention asserts the value of every child. It is controversial, however. Many responsible voices declare that this approach is simply unworkable, even if the rationale is clear.
- The district commissioned an audit of special education by the Council of Great City Schools, made the results public and committed to equalizing placement and changing instructional practices.

ON LANGUAGE

Words matter, particularly in matters of culture. Board of Education members are in the public eye and have the power, through their words, to strengthen district culture or to tear it down. The Superintendent's public comments—and some thought to be private—are combed for nuance and hidden meaning. He faces two destructive temptations. First, he is encouraged by external publics to be more sweeping in his criticism of the past and more expansive in his description of current reforms than might be appropriate for his internal audience. Second, he will be tempted to announce changes and initiatives before improvement plans are ready. Over time, actions do speak louder than words. Yet words can quickly erode trust and damage morale. Moreover, words without accompanying actions can reinforce a sense of futility.

Union leaders should also recognize the power of their words and a responsibility to use them carefully. Private conversations between labor and management can often become heated and disagreements can often spill out in public. When in negotiations (which, in a sense, is all the time), the temptation for a union leader is to vilify district leadership, attempting to enlist public support. By eroding confidence in the leadership, angry words can undermine the values that are, in fact, shared by leadership and teachers.

- Use of the Datacation system enables and expects a focus on every child's path to graduation. It pushes high schools to be proactive in reclaiming students who drop out, or better yet, preventing them from doing so.

Matching Funding to Need

The distribution of challenges and resources has been anything but fair among schools. The normal difficulties of urban education can seem insurmountable if compounded by inequity.

- The Equitable Student Funding model is a major step for the district. It aims to rectify the significant inequities in terms of staffing and other resources across schools serving similar populations, by linking funding more directly to students.
- The distribution of special education students and English language learners has also been quite uneven. As new schools opened this fall, the district made an effort to ensure that students with special needs were more evenly distributed than in the past. A districtwide plan to equalize placement will emerge over the next few years.

Accountability

Culture plays a particularly important role in accountability systems. Adults held accountable for student achievement can be empowered—or demoralized.

In the current culture, accountability has often been understood as punishment instead of as collective responsibility. The data systems and evaluation structures that enable accountability are one part of the equation, and how the system supports the paradigm shift is another.

Changing Roles

As a new definition of student success becomes a more significant part of measuring adult job performance, the “rules of the game” are changing for all staff. RCSD's plan significantly recasts the role of principals, who as of next year will have more autonomy over budgets, programming and staffing at their schools. With this authority and flexibility comes accountability for decision-making and for learning. Empowering principals will require a corresponding change in the way central office staff conceive of and do their work.

The emerging changes in roles and expectations must

HOW RESPONSIVE IS CENTRAL OFFICE TO SCHOOLS?

The district's strategic plan called for the creation of stakeholder “satisfaction” surveys by 2009 as measures of district success. This has not happened, although RCSD endorsed CGR's April 2010 districtwide survey of teachers and school leaders.

Principals and assistant principals graded central office in terms of its overall responsiveness to their schools' needs, and graded specific departments and functions on three dimensions: timeliness, effectiveness and professionalism:

- Central office earned an overall C–.
- Departments and functions varied; most received C's, with a handful of B's and D's.
- 50% of principals and assistant principals responding to the survey agreed that “Support for my school from Central Office is improving.”

A survey is a tool to improve customer service. Department-specific results have been shared internally, and used to differing degrees. The Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning used her department's average ratings as impetus to ask untenured staff to reapply for their jobs, create a sense of urgency around reevaluating the services they provide schools, and place a new focus on communication with schools.

be communicated clearly. With targeted and effective supports to build capacity, accountability will be empowering, not demoralizing. Follow through will be critical. The cultural value of accountability will be strengthened if expectations are clearly defined, effective support is provided and individuals at all levels are held responsible for results.

Has there been progress?

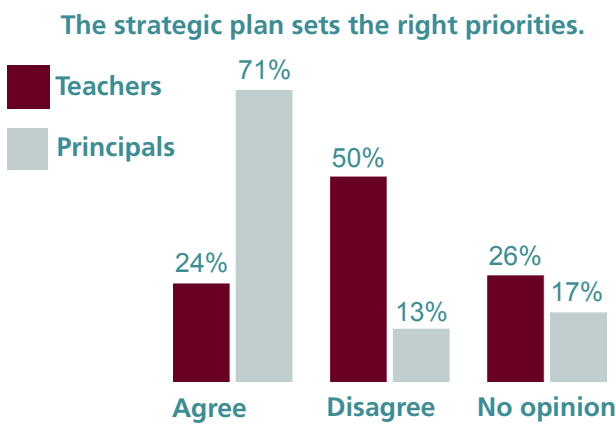
There is no benchmark for measuring “culture change,” but there are indicators to consider.

- The plan to repeatedly and publicly survey teachers and administrators twice a year serves to hold central office and leadership accountable, and demonstrates a respect for the opinions of those in classrooms and schools.
- Building data and performance management systems serves to underscore the primacy of results. Well-designed systems are critical. Accountability systems, if perceived to be based on faulty data, will build resentment and erode positive culture.

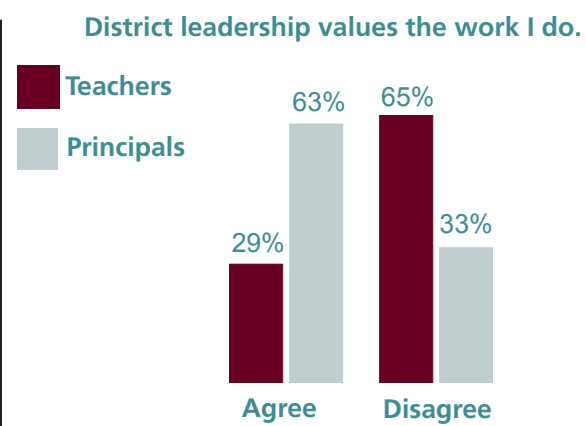
- Signs of collaboration between leadership and the teachers union are promising. The teacher-written RCSD curriculum, the emerging development of an incentive pay pilot at East High School, the new district-charter partnership, and an expressed willingness to collaboratively explore ways of measuring the results of teachers' work are all hopeful.
- Granting CGR inside access, as we report to the community, signals a significant shift in district leadership's willingness to model the use of feedback, collaboration and accountability. In a dramatic change from the defensive posture of previous administrations, CGR has routinely been included in high-level meetings and in schools. Frank criticism of policy and action has been welcomed, not spurned.

Teachers Need Convincing

Few successful leaders believe that change can happen without conflict. Nor is an accountable and goal-oriented culture likely to exist without friction. Nonetheless, one measure of success will be evidence that support for the leadership's strategic direction is rising, not falling. These two survey responses provide a baseline.



Engaging principals, who are expected to lead the school improvement effort, is key to the strategic plan. This appears to be on track. Yet such a large proportion of teachers disagreeing with the plan's priorities is problematic and suggests the need for more effort toward achieving a shared vision and shared values.



Two-thirds of teachers feeling undervalued merits attention, as it potentially undermines systemic change. However, many open-ended survey comments show support for the current direction and a desire for a more collegial relationship between teachers and leadership.

What needs to happen next?

Again, **culture matters**. Paying attention to culture doesn't mean pandering or watering down expectations and accountability. The goal is solid relationships with staff, so that constructive changes are considered on their merits, rather than viewed through a personalized lens of conflict.

About CGR's Policy Review Series on RCSD's Reform Efforts

The Center for Governmental Research (CGR), a nonprofit, nonpartisan, independent consulting organization, has been engaged by the Rochester NY Board of Education and private funders to assess the Rochester City School District's (RCSD) progress in implementing its strategic plan for district reform. This newsletter is the fourth of a five-part series of policy reviews that focus on key levers of the plan. The first reviews addressed curriculum, school innovation, and use of data; the next will focus on effective educators. CGR's goals in producing each policy review are to:

- Inform the community about the complexities of district reform;
- Hold the district accountable for implementing its plan; and
- Support the district in its process of internal improvement.

Changing culture is about increasing the number of people who act in ways that exemplify the core values. For RCSD, this means adults need to be accountable for the achievement of each student. Structures encourage people to choose certain behaviors. Good relationships among leaders and staff attract people to those behaviors.

Walk the Talk

A shared vision and shared values are built on trust. Trust is earned through experience. Leadership will build trust by following through on promises made and by competent execution of structural changes, design and implementation of new systems, and key personnel decisions.

Trust is eroded when reality doesn't match rhetoric. For example, we are concerned about the attention being paid to teacher effectiveness without corresponding, immediately visible actions focused on quality instruction. Even before comprehensive plans are in place, opportunities to be concrete and instructionally focused abound. Furthermore, central office staff must view every school request as a chance to earn or lose trust.

Win Hearts, Not Just Minds

The pace of change within the Rochester City School District has taxed key decision makers and their staffs. Executing the ambitious plans—the portfolio plan, the data warehouse, the Rochester curriculum, Autonomous Schools, Equitable Student Funding, etc.—may leave the “soft side” of execution unaddressed or undernourished. Yet, as observed above, a supportive culture will **amplify** the impact of these structure changes while an unsupportive culture can greatly **dampen** their effectiveness.

The perception that the Superintendent and his key staff do not value people and are “anti-teacher” breeds suspicion and ill will. Reorganization and school closures exacerbate these perceptions. Even staff members who support these changes are easily alienated by a lack of consideration for the emotional impact of changes.

Recognize that relationships are motivating. Visible, frequent actions that demonstrate a concern for the perspectives and feelings of building-level staff will build engagement. Leaders must explicitly cultivate reciprocal relationships with teachers. The Superin-

CHANGING CULTURE A SCHOOL AT A TIME

- **School-wide Positive Behavior Supports** (SW-PBS) is a coordinated, proactive approach to building a learning-focused positive culture. It aims to change the daily cycle of chronic negative behavior by students and punishment by teachers. After a pilot in three schools, SW-PBS is expanding to 22 schools. Research-based and data-driven, this approach helps schools define and explicitly teach positive behaviors—down to how to enter a classroom, how to act in the hallway, how to behave in the cafeteria. Staff set up school-wide systems that acknowledge and reinforce positive behavior.

East High School, one of the pilot SW-PBS schools, saw a drop in disciplinary referrals, and multiple sources report a visible improvement in culture. East also shifted to small learning communities, invested in collaborative relationships, and is developing an incentive pay pilot based on team goals.

- **Kaizen** is a process-improvement technique pioneered in business. It engages a team to identify a problem and target solutions. It's heavy on measures, timelines and workplans—not the usual language of schools. Charged with making the strategic plan concrete, the Chief Strategy Officer decided to see how this applied to Charlotte High School. While too early to assess outcomes, the process identified immediate and long-term actions the school can take to increase the graduation rate, and a protocol for ongoing improvement. The school team noted the significance of central office asking them for solutions, and providing collaborative guidance and support rather than disconnected mandates.

- **The Disproportionality Project** is a state-funded partnership working with 10 schools to unpack and change their culture around special education. RCSD's numbers are troubling: a state high 19% of students are classified special ed. Black and Hispanic males are over-represented, receive disproportionate suspensions, and have abysmal outcomes. The work begins with facilitated dialogue to identify root causes linked to adult beliefs and behaviors.

tendent, school chiefs, administrative staff, and the Board should all assign a high priority to establishing and maintaining strong relationships with school staff members, earning trust.

Validate the emotional effects of change. Significant change is emotionally disruptive and may involve a grieving process for the involved staff. The goal of a closure or any reorganization is to create chances for

a fresh start in a new setting. Key to successful “re-engagement” will be visible, effective communication with affected staff, and providing opportunities to discuss the challenges involved in the transition. For the district at large, simply publishing a list of current staff placements after reorganizations could alleviate the sense of chaos.

Expand informal visits to schools to explain and support the change process, and to gather input. Top leaders could co-teach, invite dialogue in the teachers’ lounge, and attend staff meetings. Connect through existing groups such as school-based planning teams, PTAs, and staff meetings. Model and expect that top-level staff seek the engagement of secretaries, custodians, teachers and security officers.

Talk the Talk

While “actions speak louder than words,” actions misunderstood can loudly “say” what is unintended.

Directly and frequently inform staff of the reasons behind decisions; warn of impending changes. Be honest about not having all the answers, and don’t let that prevent or delay frequent communication. Equip principals with resources and talking points about upcoming developments. This will help build a common language and an informed workforce. Staff may still disagree with unpopular decisions, but at least they will understand that there is a rationale and will feel respected.

Provide detailed examples of sought-after improvements. Follow up to see if they’re happening. This applies to all levels of the organization. Define “good service” from central office and demonstrate how this can be measured. Don’t just tell principals to create schedules to maximize student learning, share examples and templates. Don’t just lament the lack of rigor in lessons, instead monitor the use of the pacing guides, begin a video bank of high-quality lessons, and create an online library of student work exemplars. Create opportunities for schools to learn from each other.

Convey how the moving parts of the strategy are related. Every communication about any topic should place it in the context of the big picture goals. The district’s new strategy map addresses this, but needs to be intentionally and creatively shared among staff. Include informal leaders like paraprofessionals and secretaries who can be engaged as advocates.

Create opportunities to talk to—rather than about—teachers:

- Create a regular “from the desk of the Superintendent” memo to teachers.
- Continue visits with school faculties, and structure visits to facilitate two-way dialogue, capture the learning and share outcomes; participate in events at more schools.
- Plan venues for the Superintendent and Rochester Teachers Association leadership to listen to teachers together and discuss differences and commonalities; use social media for public dialogues on key topics.
- Make student work and instructional strategies the focus of many of these conversations.

Race to the Top Watch

Race to the Top’s goal is to instill urgency and build structures that will change practice. Locally, we’ll see new teacher and principal evaluation systems and the creation of support teams that will work in hands-on, aggressive ways to help each school improve itself. Sustaining the momentum beyond the funding is all about culture change—whatever gets done has to change the mindset and habits of adults.