

Benches in the Bathroom



Leading a Physically,
Emotionally, and Socially
Safe School Culture

EVISHA FORD

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About the Author



Evisha Ford, EdD, is founding executive director of the iCan Dream Center (<https://icandreamcenter.com>), a therapeutic school in Illinois that serves the needs of neurodiverse learners and their families. Dr. Ford began her career working with inner-city homeless youth in Chicago, providing therapeutic intervention and linkages to community resources. She partnered with various community agencies to build their capacity to support the needs of vulnerable youth via training, resource development, and program evaluation. Chicago Public Schools recruited Dr. Ford, which launched her path in education. She is a former assistant superintendent, director of special education, and assistant professor of educational leadership.

Dr. Ford is a sought-after thought leader and consultant for social-impact organizations across the United States and internationally. She specializes in trauma-compassionate leadership, program design, cultural and racial equity, developing continuums of service for diverse learners, and a variety of other topics relevant to effective school and nonprofit leadership.

Additionally, Dr. Ford serves as president of the board for the United Way Blue Island Robbins Neighborhood Network. In March 2018, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority named Dr. Ford Woman of the Year. In July 2018, she was honored as one of the influential 100 Black Women in Chicago for her educational contributions. In the winter of 2019, she received the Paige Award for her impact in the special needs community. In July 2019, the Professional Women's Network recognized her as a community igniter. In July 2022, she received the Dream Maker Award from the Bronzeville Children's Museum of Chicago. Dr. Ford's most significant and

generous award came from her two sons, Nolan and Josiah, who have repeatedly named her “best mom ever.”

Dr. Ford’s passion for marginalized youth began at an early age. She earned a master’s degree in social work from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and completed doctoral studies in educational leadership at Aurora University in 2010. Her research focus was students with disabilities, youth resilience, and systemic injustice.

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Introduction

Benches in the bathrooms are an antidote for teacher burnout.

It sounds like a ridiculous statement, doesn't it? Depending on the environment you work in, you may or may not be used to the idea of bathrooms having benches at all. But when I was the assistant superintendent in a public school district, I gave a board member a tour of our newly renovated elementary school. We reached one of the women's restrooms and walked inside. She looked around briefly and asked, "Where are the benches?"

I glanced around the room. Toilets? Check. Sinks? Check. Soap dispensers? Running water? Mirrors? TP? Checks all around. Benches? No check.

The board member saw the confusion on my face. She explained, "Yes. The benches—where teachers can go to cry."

After that conversation, I did some thinking about what the board member had said, and I had one of those *aha moments*. There are very few private spaces in most work environments, especially in schools. Even fewer are those secret places where a teacher can let off some steam and stress of the day. Yes, life is hard, and sometimes we must cry. I realized that if there hadn't been another option for me (that is, my supervisor's sofa), I'd have spent some time myself on the benches that my district eventually added to the restrooms.

It's no wonder educators are stressed. In addition to asking them to teach, influence, and guide students toward a successful future, leaders also ask educators to steer students through the social and emotional upheavals of growing up. And sadly, in some cases, this also means navigating trauma, including domestic violence, abuse, poverty, and neglect, to name only a few of the environments in which many students live. Educational administrators and teachers see all of it.

Like most who dedicate their lives to others via social services professions, many teachers emotionally invest in their students, and this investment takes a great deal of energy; it's taxing.

In addition to the stress that results from witnessing the traumas students may face and helping to guide them academically, emotionally, and socially—often with the lived experience of trauma—educators, and teachers especially, must contend with day-to-day logistic responsibilities that make their profession demanding. These responsibilities include preparing lessons, grading, testing, and meeting accountability requirements, to name a few. If you add a lack of administrative support to this mix, along with extra duties—too much parent involvement, too little parent involvement, and the necessity of addressing individual and unique student needs—the job becomes even more stressful. Do you now or have you ever felt overworked? (Yes, that's a rhetorical question.) Overwork seems to be so ingrained in the field of education that it's a part of the culture in many organizations. It's culturally acceptable, perhaps interpreted as a badge of honor. In some places, administrators might even expect it.

The presence of existing adult trauma compounds the stress of witnessing students' trauma and the routine demands of the teaching profession. That's right, people's private lives don't cease to exist when they walk into work. The stress that stems from trauma educators may have experienced themselves (past or present) affects how they interact with one another and their students. It affects the energy they have, what kind of support they need, and how they function. Ultimately, it affects students and the quality of the care and guidance they receive in school.

The consequences of stress in an educational setting vary and are often severe for the educators themselves and their students. The consequences for teachers include diminished productivity stemming from high daily stress, burnout that may lead to leaving the profession early, and reduced student outcomes. Consider the following.

- Forty-six percent of teachers in the United States report high daily stress during the school year (Niroga Institute, 2021).
- Many teachers who leave the profession do so before retirement age (Loewus, 2021).
- Teachers' stress leads to a lessened ability to offer high-quality instruction and the behavior supports students may need, resulting in lower academic achievement and increased disruptive behaviors in students (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018).

What's more, the credentialing process for administrators and teachers focuses on pedagogy, compliance, and preparation for instructional leadership. As an assistant professor, I was tasked with developing and aligning graduate course work for national accreditation. There were no requirements for the inclusion of stress-coping strategies for educational practitioners. Educators can anticipate spending their entire teaching careers (however long those careers last) with no formal training to help them manage the inevitable stress and trauma that come with this profession. It's no wonder teachers experience burnout and compassion fatigue, and eventually retire early, quit, or suffer through the workday or school year.

Lack of training, guidance, and support contributes to a crisis of teacher attrition and turnover in schools, resulting in a disservice to students. In a worldwide study on factors that influence teacher retention, researchers discovered that teacher attrition rates are as high as 50 percent in the first five years of teaching (Gunn & McRae, 2021). The same study notes, "Healthy and supportive professional working environments that value new teacher contributions and honor the notion of personal health and well-being in and out of the classroom are crucial" (Gunn & McRae, 2021). This kind of support creates a climate and culture that permit teachers to thrive in their instructional environment and career (Beck & Servage, 2018).

I entered my first leadership role almost by accident. After completing my leadership credentials, I was being mentored for leadership in a department in desperate need of an overhaul when the director's wife suddenly became quite ill. For three months, I assumed additional responsibilities so the director could tend to his wife's needs. One day I arrived at work to find a note with his passwords and a message stating, "Not sure when I will return." He never returned fully, and at age twenty-seven, I became the director of special education. This appointment came just in time for the state to take notice of the antiquated practices in the department, which positioned me to lead substantial changes (that is, addressing placement options for students with disabilities and the integration of these students in the less-restrictive learning environments of their typically developing peers).

During my tenure, I created or overhauled five programs. I got into the rhythm of staffing, designing physical learning spaces, and identifying curriculum. After the state dismissed the district from their oversight, I continued to innovate on behalf of vulnerable students. At one point, I noticed a gap for students and created yet another program design. The superintendent did not see the need for the program, nor did he approve it; I left the school district at the end of that year.

I used the program design the superintendent rejected as a blueprint and founded a nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the needs of marginalized youth. I went on to become an assistant professor and department program leader.

I contributed to the development of two graduate programs for school leaders and thoroughly enjoyed mentoring educators who were hopeful for school-leadership roles. Simultaneously, I poured my knowledge and experience into fine-tuning my nonprofit. Later, I served as an assistant superintendent; I spent five years in that role before I made my departure from leadership in public education to focus my efforts on the nonprofit I founded, the iCan Dream Center (<https://icandreamcenter.com>).

The *iCan Dream Center* is a school serving neurodiverse learners almost exclusively. Initially, it served high school and postsecondary learners, but in year seven, I expanded the center to serve early childhood students, preK through third graders. The iCan Dream Center went from a small but mighty team of four serving a couple dozen students to a team of over fifty, with an enrollment of one hundred learners and a daunting and growing waiting list. My staff has survived growing pains, teacher shortages, and tragedy, in part, because of a deliberate culture of wellness. The iCan Dream Center educator-turnover rate defies all the research about therapeutic school environments, which can be particularly stressful and ripe for burnout (Hemati & Moradi, 2021).

This book is for K–12 school and district leaders. I leverage research-backed theory and strategies along with my own experiences, particularly those experiences of starting a nonprofit school dedicated to therapeutic efforts, to offer a guide for leaders to mitigate the impact of stress on the educators they serve. Most future leaders enter the field (and subsequently leadership) with confidence they can make a positive impact. Their greatest opportunity to do so might be in reducing the chaos to clear a path for better instruction and targeted student services. Effective leaders take a *universal design approach* (that is, an approach that seeks to ensure everyone is successful) and front-load the work environment with supports that allow *all* teachers to thrive regardless of the nature of their personal experiences or the traumas in their backgrounds.

Educators cannot take the stress and trauma out of the school environment. That's here to stay. So yes, sometimes they must find a bench or sofa, supply closet, or that spot under a tree or the steps out back, and cry. It's good to have these spaces—more so if a caring leader designates them as private, safe spaces. However, educators need more than benches in the bathroom where they can go to release tension, stress, and frustrations; they need to create environments that reduce the need for the benches. Leaders need to develop a culture in schools that nurtures its members with empathy, sustained support, and opportunities for growth. Leaders need to develop a schoolwide culture of wellness. I wrote this book to help school and district leaders do just that.

About This Book

Wellness and self-care are vital for all educators to help combat the stress and chaos at work (and in their personal lives). There are many excellent books on self-care for educators that promote individual well-being and guide them toward establishing healthy wellness habits. While this book touches on educator self-care and the development of healthy habits, its focus is to help K–12 educational leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and all others who lead, whether at the district, school, or department level in a variety of leadership roles) establish a culture of wellness as a critical step in combating teacher burnout and attrition. Educational leaders are well positioned to engineer a culture of wellness within their departments and schools because they set the tone by modeling, influencing, and establishing the behavioral expectations of the individuals they serve. A leader who's committed and focused on establishing and maintaining a safe, comfortable working culture for others will find answers here. By integrating information on trauma-informed care, compassion, and authentic leadership, and by using the team- and organization-level strategies in the later chapters, educational leaders can transform the culture of their school or district. The steps to transformation are small, and the changes take time, but they lead to a culture where teachers feel valued, healthy, happy, safe, and successful at work. This ensures teachers will stay the course and continue to dedicate themselves to students who need them.

I've divided this book into seven chapters and an epilogue. The book's narrative arc moves from a broad examination of organizational culture and what a well culture is, to an in-depth look at the role stress plays in toxic cultures. It offers a culture-building framework for leadership and specific strategies to use at the team and organization levels. It also offers a real-life example of a principal implementing and sustaining a culture of wellness. It is best to read the book from beginning to end to derive the most value; however, it is also possible to work through the content in any order that suits your needs. Following is a description of each chapter.

Chapter 1 defines organizational culture and the impact that culture has on the performance of its members. It details the factors that influence culture within a K–12 education context. It looks closely at what a culture of wellness in schools is not, then clarifies what it is, and offers a framework to guide the development of a well culture through the integration of the key contributing modes I examine in this book. Finally, it examines sustainability and the critical behaviors for sustaining a school culture of wellness.

Chapter 2 explores the nature of the work environment as a source of toxic stress and identifies some of those sources of stress, such as racism, abusive leadership, bullying (including cyberbullying), sexual harassment, and boundary issues. The chapter shows how repeated and harmful occurrences can trigger further stress in those most vulnerable due to previous life experiences, and how this compounded stress impacts and impairs how and what teachers and administrators do.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of trauma-informed care as a foundation for proactive extension and trauma-compassionate leadership. You will learn how this approach transforms the work environment to one that acts and feels more like a high-functioning family, where the individual is valued over numbers and checked boxes, which is all too prevalent in many schools.

Chapter 4 encompasses the importance of developing a leadership philosophy and offers two philosophy-backed leadership styles: (1) servant and (2) transformational. Both styles have aspects grounded in serving and empowering others, attributes vital to positive culture shifts. Together they inform a people-first approach.

Chapter 5 features strategies for change at the team or department level—that is, the places where suboptimal team conditions may exist and where leaders have more influence over those conditions than they might at an organizational level.

Chapter 6 contains organizational strategies that expand ideas on how leaders can further create a culture of wellness in an entire organization. This involves institutionalizing a culture so wellness is embedded in the fiber of the organization, not just experienced in well-led pockets. Changes at the organizational level may appear especially daunting and even impossible, but moving beyond behaviors that indicate a paralyzing fear of change can move organizations beyond what leaders think is possible. Organizational strategies focus on changing culture by reducing or preventing stress and chaos in the school's systems. These strategies are at the heart of designing a culture of wellness within an educational organization.

Chapter 7 presents an example of a real high-functioning, healthy culture by introducing a middle school where the leader purposefully applied strategies for cultural change you'll find in this book. The middle school created and has sustained a positive environment. The resulting culture has retained thriving teachers—without attrition—for over a decade.

In addition to the information and strategies, each of the first six chapters opens with a relatable story of educator stress and the factors that contributed to that stress. (While each of these stories is based on a real-life situation, I have changed names and minor circumstantial details.) Each chapter closes with an interactive element called *The Culture Within*. This element invites readers to synthesize

the book's content through an examination of their own thoughts, values, and perceptions that guide their outward behaviors as school and district leaders, because leader-led systemic culture change often starts with leader reflection and mindset change. Explore The Culture Within sections and activities as a group activity (such as a book study) or reflect on them individually. Some chapters also offer separate reproducible tools that allow readers to build on chapter content.

Regardless of the size or type of your school or organization, you can bring about culture change because it's the leadership—including *you*—not the structure or function of the school that creates, transforms, and sustains organizational culture. School principals are in a position to influence the daily experience of the educators in their building. Department heads can positively affect the practitioners on their team. Central office administrators and leaders of social-impact organizations can alter the fabric of the organization and the systems within, resulting in critical and positive impact. Using the team and organizational strategies you will find in this book, you will, over time, instill trust through transparency and engage (or re-engage) teachers with their purpose to inspire an environment of wellness to benefit all who enter it.

If you are reading this book, you care enough to be an effective, successful leader. I *love* that! The world needs more people like you—people who are dedicated to making an impact in the world. I wrote this book for you. The work ahead may seem larger than your current capacity. However, I assure you this is doable, and I will shine a light on your path. So, turn the page and let's get going.

CHAPTER 1

Cultures of Wellness

Not everything that weighs you down is yours to carry.

—Anonymous

In late spring of 2020, Kim, a teacher colleague, contacted me out of the blue about work-related stresses she was experiencing. Kim, who taught with all her heart and soul, sounded distraught and conflicted and needed to talk to someone about it. She couldn't speak to anyone at her workplace. I simply asked her, "What do you want to do?" Despite her conflicted feelings, she replied with finality, "Leave public education entirely." Our conversation revealed Kim was exhausted, disengaged, and depressed. Her students and her personal life were suffering because of this. She concluded by telling me her school environment was toxic.

Yep, *toxic* was the word she used. It wasn't the pay, the long hours, or misbehaving students. It was the toxic environment. Kim had been a credentialed teacher for more than ten years and had planned on teaching until she retired, but her school environment was so stressful she decided to leave midcareer.

I suspect many educators out there are just like Kim—exceptional, devoted, and experienced—halfway through their careers and feeling unable to continue their work. Why? Because they can't find *a bench in the bathroom*, nor do they have any confidence they will find an educational work environment where they don't need a bench to retreat to. Kim left teaching to help herself in a way she could not achieve in her workplace. What caused her to leave is what educators commonly refer to as *burnout*.

Kim leaving education was "the icing on my already-baked cake" that prodded me to action. I had grown tired of witnessing good educators leave the field due

to preventable anguish. That year, I was fortunate to hire a few excellent educators at the iCan Dream Center who needed a soft place to land after feeling beat up. This narrative was becoming too familiar. The state board of education then commissioned me to develop a full-day workshop on cultures of wellness for school leaders; however, I wavered on moving forward due to the time commitment. Kim's story was the nudge I needed to remind me that students' lives were hanging in the balance. I asked myself, "How can leaders inspire a culture of wellness and self-care using their position and expertise to reduce the stress and chaos that causes burnout?" Ultimately, much of my research to answer that question for the workshop I translated into this book.

When I first asked myself how leaders could inspire a culture of wellness and self-care, I felt the enormity of what they would have to do. It was like the proverbial elephant in the room with me—maybe even an entire herd! Thinking about implementing cultural change in an organization can feel daunting. Leaders must first take the courageous step of self-reflection and own their contribution to less-than-ideal school environments to implement the necessary changes. However, articulating that step, how to do it, and what following steps to take can be an enormous task. The study of organizational climate and culture provide some sense of how to clarify where to start.

The Impact of Organizational Climate and Culture

When people think of an organization's culture, they likely tend to picture aspects of its climate. The *climate* of an organization denotes what people feel about an organization or how they feel in it, that is, "the sense, feeling or atmosphere people get in the organization on either a day-to-day basis or just generally" (Wilkinson, n.d.). However, an organization's *culture* tends to encompass much beyond casual human awareness. There is no single definition of organizational culture. Preeminent scholar on organizational culture Edgar H. Schein (1985) describes *culture* as a group's shared assumptions that they develop and use as they adapt to external challenges and integrate experiences of confronting those challenges internally. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM; 2016) says *organizational culture* is "the glue that keeps an organization together. It is the silent code of conduct; it's more about how things get done, rather than what gets done."

So an organization's shared values and beliefs dictate what its employees are going to say, do, and feel about how the work gets done. When the climate or environment staff experience is deeply negative (as in Kim's story), students are the ones who bear the brunt. Even when teachers decide to remain in the system,

it is difficult (if not impossible) for them to thrive professionally. When teachers don't have the bandwidth to pursue ideas, implement strategies, or even show up emotionally, students are at a disadvantage.

Ask yourself, "Is my school climate positive, and is my school culture healthy?" Though largely unseen, a school's culture—its professed and often unspoken values—has a significant impact on how staff behave, think, and treat others. In short, organizational culture impacts the success of all teaching and learning efforts that occur within a school. Kent D. Peterson (2002), educational consultant and professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, defines *school culture* as "the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the 'persona' of the school" (p. 10).

Leaders of any organization are vital to the introduction, development, and sustainability of the culture—good or bad. Regardless of the intentions of its leaders (and the leaders who follow), what behaviors ultimately occur and persist within the organization will either redefine or sustain the culture over time. In ideal cases, the culture is encouraging, safe, and supportive. In other cases, it is every bit as toxic as what Kim experienced, and that toxicity is felt by a group's members every day. So how do leaders expose and address those often-unseen components—the elements of culture that affect a workplace's climate and the well-being of its members?

Elements of Organizational Culture in Your School

While the elements of culture contributing to your team, school, or district's climate will take some work to discover, getting a reading on the atmosphere is a great starting point for identifying culture, and an early step in working to develop a culture of wellness. Think of this atmospheric quality as your organization's "heartbeat," the elements of its atmosphere that are palpable, that can be felt, and give activities in the organization a certain rhythm. Every organization has a heartbeat: department stores, gas stations, museums, banks, and yes, schools. Your school has a culture, and this culture has a heartbeat. Can you describe this heartbeat? Can you feel it? More importantly, how do your teachers, students, and staff perceive the heartbeat?

Distributing an anonymous climate survey is one way to get a sense of how your teachers, students, and staff experience the school environment. The U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) developed a free survey to assess the perspective of various stakeholders. The anonymity of the survey is important as it will yield more authentic responses, particularly in an environment that may feel unsafe.

Some questions I adapted from the survey that may be beneficial as a starting point are as follows. How would your teachers answer each question on a scale of 1–10?

- This school emphasizes showing respect for all cultural beliefs and practices. Do you feel like you belong?
- Relational aggression and harassment can be frequent problems at school. Do you feel safe physically, socially, and emotionally?
- This school would like to make implementing proactive strategies to manage student and staff stress levels a priority. Do you feel safeguards are in place to mitigate your stress?

The act of gathering insight from your team members is one way to show that you value their experiences and input in determining the path to a culture of wellness. Additionally, your team members' answers to your survey questions will show you trends in perception in your organization's culture and allow you to prioritize as you plan changes or make further inquiries. Culture isn't necessarily something on the lobby walls or that you include in your mission and vision statements and annual reports. However, you may find some clues to culture in the core values and the condition of the school walls and what adorns them.

Organizational culture is distinct to each institution. The culture in one school is different from that in another school because of the people who work there; the community in which the school exists, the leaders, teachers, and support staff are also unique and express the culture in many different ways. What are the underlying attitudes and influences within your school? What traditions do you celebrate? What do your staff meetings look and feel like? Is there joy in the atmosphere?

Take a school's dress code, for example. When was the last time you walked the halls outside parent-teacher conferences and saw dresses and ties? How would you feel if you walked into a school today and saw teachers and administrators wearing suits, ties, skirts, and heels? That was a different culture from another time, but seeing it now would speak loudly about the culture of that school, wouldn't it?

In many school environments, teachers come to school dressed comfortably and relaxed. Teachers, service providers, and administrators wear more casual clothes and often sport special holiday attire. You've seen it: costumes, pumpkin earrings, that sort of thing. Seasonal attire is a part of school culture. I admit I used to cringe when I saw it. Now, however, I've come to embrace it and even participate! Yes, dress codes can be a subtle but influential part of an organization's culture.

Another subtle but critical component of culture is work expectations. In addition to the approximately six hours a day a teacher spends in a classroom

with students, there's additional time they need for preparation and planning, email and communications, grading, professional development, and extra duties that arise, like lunch duty or heading up a special program or curricular project. Do your teachers have ample time during the school day to get the work done? Or do you expect teachers to take work home to complete during the evenings and weekends?

Regardless of what the organization's culture looks like, and regardless of whether the organization is a high school, elementary school, charter school, private school, or an alternative or therapeutic school, the following two concepts are resolute.

1. The behaviors and attitudes staff demonstrate come from the top (that's you, the leader) and trickle down—*always*. It's educational leaders who have both the ability and, more importantly, the responsibility to foster a culture of wellness teachers so desperately need in education.
2. Individual coping is important in creating a positive school climate; however, most critical to sustainability is a comprehensive and schoolwide commitment (National Education Association, 2018).

Employing that one educator—that one shining star, who is by nature resilient enough to cope with workplace stress is great. Leaders need to find as many of those teachers as they can. However, as an educational leader, your job is to reduce and eliminate the toxicity in the environment so *all* teachers can thrive and shine brightly.

What are some specific attributes to look for when assessing the culture in your own school? What would those attributes look like when functioning in a way that is supportive (rather than deleterious) to members of the school community? Terrence E. Deal, the Irving R. Melbo professor at the University of Southern California Rossier School, and Kent D. Peterson (2016) offer a list of these attributes that includes norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, and symbols and stories that I embrace and expand on in this book.

Norms

Norms are a compilation of an organization's values, beliefs, and rituals. They serve as a guide to language, thinking, behavior, and interactions members expect in a social group. Positive, supportive norms in a school might include the following, which are applicable to all educators in the school.

- Be willing to take on responsibilities.
- Feel a sense of responsibility for student learning.
- Be conscious of costs and resources use.

- Speak with pride about the school and your team.
- Share useful information and new ideas.
- Tell stories that recognize the contributions of others.
- Work hard and have fun. (Deal & Peterson, 2016)

Values and Beliefs

According to Deal and Peterson (2016), *values* dictate the school's priorities while *beliefs* guide how people interact with their environment and often hinge on faith rather than evidence. An example of a belief at the iCan Dream Center is that students perform better when the community of educators connect with and address the critical needs of families. The organization values its parent coach enough to prioritize her salary in the budget. She meets with the family of each enrolled student to invite them into the iCan Dream Center community. The parent coach informs a social worker of the family's needs so the social worker can link each family to community resources if needed. One way a leader can assess the values of the organization is by analyzing the organization's budget and noting what that budget prioritizes. A leader can also look at reoccurring agenda topics as well as the actions the community chooses to celebrate.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Organizational rituals are routines with deeper significance (Deal & Peterson, 2016). These reoccurring activities have special meaning and historical context. Examples include welcoming students on the first day of school with applause, gifting new team members with school spirit wear, or setting time aside in meetings to acknowledge special accomplishments. Ceremonies are communal events which bind people together and often serve as an affirmation of unwritten values (Deal & Peterson, 2016). An example of a ceremony at iCan Dream Center is our annual Friendsgiving gathering where students are invited to bring a dish that represents a family tradition. This highly anticipated annual celebration affirms our commitment to honor diversity. Though it is not written as an explicit organizational value, it is embedded in the fabric of our organization.

Stories and Symbols

Telling and retelling stories "shape the patchwork of the culture" (Deal & Peterson, 2016, p. 82). Stories in an organization become meaningful symbols for the group. These symbols can represent problems, the standard for viable solutions, or outcomes to celebrate. Data discussions inundate and dominate schools, with educators' goal to improve student outcomes. While these important discussions

have a place, educators may be missing opportunities to improve the experience of both learning and working by using stories to shape the culture that affects teachers' performance and students' experience.

What a Well School Culture Is Not

A well school culture is not a toxic culture. Toxic work cultures are unhappy places. Perhaps more than they can be seen, toxic cultures can be felt by all who enter, including students, parents, and guests. Working in a toxic culture makes what might be easy work difficult. Few feel safe enough to speak up in toxic cultures; fear is pervasive.

Deal and Peterson (2016) cite circumstances that unlock what constitutes a toxic culture through the school staff behaviors and beliefs. For example, in toxic cultures, staff view students as the problem, subcultures are critical of change, there is a lack of resource sharing, and suggestions for improvement are met with staff complaints. Gerald Ainomugisha (n.d.), a thought leader on corporate culture, posits the following list, which is not remotely exhaustive, of features of a toxic work environment.

- Low workplace morale
- An absence of effective communication
- Fear of supervisors
- Policies put ahead of people
- High staff turnover
- Cliques and groups are a source of tension
- A lack of delegated authority, so decision making is in the hands of few and often inaccessible employers

Can you identify any of the characteristics from Ainomugisha's (n.d.) list in your school? Notice a commonality among the characteristics—each creates a situation that magnifies and breeds negativity in people rather than drawing on and supporting their strengths. Toxic workplaces can become self-perpetuating.

Preventing, or in some cases healing, a toxic culture is *why* your leadership matters. You are the hero of your organization's story. The villains are the inevitable stress and chaos that can propagate within the walls of your school if left unchecked. When left on its own, stress turns toxic and sickens you, your educators, staff, and students. The cure is intentional, authentic leadership dedicated to ensuring those around you have the support they need to thrive. It's about designing an environment that treats employees like valued family members, where leaders