What constitutes a strong school culture, and why does it matter? A strong culture is grounded in a common philosophy that is evident in the moral vocabulary, rituals, discipline, academic expectations, and relationships among students, teachers, and the larger school community. In schools, culture is often referred to as “the way we do things around here.” School culture is represented by the stable, underlying factors that shape the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors at that institution. A school’s culture becomes observable as it guides the behavior of members of the community and helps organize and shape the school community and environment on a subconscious level.

According to research from around the world, a strong school culture is linked to numerous positive academic and civic outcomes – from short-term assessment performance to long-term civic engagement and educational attainment.

The purpose of the School Culture Survey Initiative is twofold: to identify the alignment of a school’s mission with its practices, and to determine whether a school’s enactment of practices align with those we know support academic achievement and civic formation. To this end, the Institute is developing a survey instrument that draws upon existing tools while also adding items of our own that elaborate factors identified by research as important. The survey will explore a school’s academic emphasis and academic identity-formation; whole student-development (in particular, the practices associated with strong citizenship formation such as an open classroom); mission, rituals, and sense of community; and trust and support between adults across the school community.

Although this instrument builds upon existing tools, it stands to make a significant overall contribution to the measurement, study, and understanding of school culture – in both the short and the long term. Previous school culture surveys have not included measures of holistic and civic formation. Additionally, the role of rituals has seldom been measured or studied. Finally, incorporating a wide variety of stakeholders and an emphasis on crosscutting the various school sectors will make this instrument of utility to all schools.

Each participating school will receive a personalized report outlining its results on the five domains articulated above and additional, sub-domains that the survey captures. As the Institute’s database of survey responses grows, each school can see how it compares to other schools completing the survey – within the same sector, as well as across all schools in general. These reports can be used by each school as deemed appropriate, whether simply as an advertising point to stakeholders or as a means to initiate conversations about improving school culture.

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