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ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS: THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON STAFF RETENTION AT VISTA CHARTER ACADEMY

Karrie E. Munster, Ed.S.

Western Michigan University, 2022

Culture is a social narcotic to which practically all of us are addicted - we feel good when we belong to a group (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). This action research paper will explain organizational culture, social-emotional well-being of school employees, and examine the connection between organizational culture in a school setting and its impact on staff retention at Vista Charter Academy. The study will focus on educators at Vista Charter Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan; all of whom were impacted by the unforeseen COVID-19 school closure during the timespan of their employment. The literature review indicates there are a variety of factors impacting staff retention in schools and many of these correlate to organizational culture. Therefore, it is important for more research involving organizational culture's impact on staff to be studied.

Keywords: organizational culture, climate, culture, servant leadership, appreciative leadership, collaboration, social-emotional well-being, uMap™, empowerment, emotional intelligence, emotional safety.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE IN SCHOOLS: THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL
CULTURE ON STAFF RETENTION AT VISTA CHARTER ACADEMY

by

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A specialist project submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Specialist in Education
Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Western Michigan University
June 2022

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Members of a culture will help to shape one another, and the culture, in turn, will evolve into a unique group of individuals who share certain characteristics and take some pride in being set apart from those outside the group (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). Organizational culture is most often referred to as the way things are done, or the values and behavior typical to a group. An organizational culture is a working method based on a system of values held by every staff member or employee in an organization (Sadiartha & Sitorus, 2018). As Reeves (2009) explains it, culture is reflected in the behavior, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals and groups. Staff engagement has been shown to be a key predictor of productivity and profitability of an organization, especially in times of job uncertainty. A school leader who can build a trusting environment and create a sense of collaboration will ultimately reduce uncertainty. Furthermore, these actions have an increased, positive effect on productivity and morale within the organization, which positively impacts the overall culture. Orr and Cleveland-Innes (2015) introduce the Positive Principle in which relational leaders' positive effect, caring, shared meaning, and purpose fuel change efforts. This approach quells the uncertainty and embraces the idea of staff engagement and group belonging. In addition, job satisfaction reflects the feelings of a person towards work and everything he or she faces within the workplace environment (Sadiartha & Sitorus, 2018).

Satisfaction with one's job holds strong alignment with staff retention. Job satisfaction is a pleasant emotional state where the employee sees his or her contributions to the whole. Job stressors create a negative impact on job satisfaction and staff retention. Research conducted on teacher stress and burnout has shown that these two phenomena have a negative impact on staff

retention. Howard and Johnson (2004) point out that from an organizational standpoint, significant loss of skilled and experienced teachers is happening through resignation and early retirement for all levels of the teaching profession.

The single greatest barrier to significant positive organizational change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what leaders really value. An organization's culture should be clearly understood by its leadership to help them make the best strategic decisions in line with its objectives, mission, and goals. Positive organizational culture must be incorporated in decision-making by school leadership, which should embrace a strong vision for the best and most desirable results. More than ever before, it seems that we need educational leaders who can honor continuity and stability, yet work toward developing new possibilities (Cranston, 2018). While positive organizational culture is challenging and time-consuming, it is necessary for the social-emotional well-being of staff. This is particularly true in schools and other organizations where the word "culture" is used as a rhetorical talisman to block leadership initiatives, to stifle innovation, and to maintain the status quo (Reeves, 2009).

Background

Charter Schools

In the state of Michigan, a charter school is a tuition-free public school that offers parents a choice regarding their child's educational experience. Like district public schools, charter schools are required to adhere to all federal, state, and local education, health, and safety rules and regulations. Charter schools can operate alone or be run by a management organization. In the case of those operated by management organizations, like National Heritage Academies, the management firm often provides central support to several schools, so each individual school can focus their energy on teaching and learning.

Charter schools in Michigan are held to the same standards as other district schools; however, charter schools also report to an authorizer who determines if the school is meeting the goals in its charter. An authorizer is an entity that monitors the performance, finances, and organizational stability of charter schools, and has the authority to close schools that do not meet required standards. In Michigan, charter schools can be authorized by the following:

1. A state or public university;
2. Community college;
3. A K-12 local education agency;
4. An intermediate school district.

Nationally, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) eliminates the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) provision and reverts to state standards. However, Michigan requires all charter school teachers to be certified.

National Heritage Academies (NHA) is a charter school management company that operates over 100 schools across nine states serving over 60,000 students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. PrepNet Virtual Academy, NHA's remote virtual school, provides an online school experience for students in grades K-12. Any student who meets the proper age and residency requirements can apply to attend. It is customary for charter schools to hold random, public lotteries to accept students if they receive more applications than they have available seats.

Geographic Location

Vista Charter Academy is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is in the southwest lower region of Michigan. In the 2020 census, the city of Grand Rapids had a population of 198,197 people, making it the largest city in West Michigan. Grand Rapids is the second largest city in the

state of Michigan, behind Detroit. Grand Rapids is the central city of the Grand Rapids metropolitan area, which has a population of 1,383, 918. Grand Rapids is located on the Grand River, which is about 30 miles east of Lake Michigan. This urban city is home to five of the world's leading office furniture companies, hence one of its nicknames, "Furniture City," and due to the expansion of microbreweries, *USA Today* has dubbed it "Beer City" (2014). The city and surrounding communities are economically diverse, with professions mainly in the health care field, information technology, automotive, aviation, and consumer good manufacturing industries, to name a few (USA Today, 2014).

Staff Demographics and Supports

Vista Charter Academy's system of support consists of a Director of School Quality (DSQ) who oversees nine schools and has principals as direct reports, a building principal who oversees Vista Charter Academy and deans directly report to her, and finally, four deans who oversee wings with teachers/staff as direct reports. Vista has 29 general education teachers, eleven academic interventionists, four English Language teachers, and four specials teachers. The Special Education team is comprised of four teachers, as well as a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, a school social worker, and three special education paraprofessionals. The rest of the staff at Vista Charter Academy is rounded out by four behavior specialists, an office administrator, and the school's registrar.

Vista provides a mentor program for novice teachers or teachers who are new to National Heritage Academies (NHA). Vista's mentoring program is one that shows a great deal of benefit for all involved, as it matches effective or exemplary teachers with those teachers who are new to the profession, new to NHA, or choose to have a mentor. Novice teachers will have a mentor for

three years or until rated effective and able to manage without one. However, these teachers can request to keep their mentor for a longer period if they choose.

Vista delivers professional development for staff throughout the school year on various educational topics. Most of these sessions are chosen by the Leadership Team based on goals per the school’s vision. Sometimes, staff seek professional development opportunities outside of those offered, and are granted permission and funding to attend. At Vista, the evaluation tool is NHA’s Classroom Framework Evaluation. The evaluation cycle consists of two formal observations during the school year, one announced and one unannounced. Throughout the year, deans set goals, observe, collect evidence, and conference with each direct report.

Student Demographics and Achievement

This action research will take place at Vista Charter Academy, which is one of the schools belonging to National Heritage Academies (NHA). The school building opened in 1996 and currently serves 703 students in Young 5s through eighth grade. In the tables that follow, student demographic data for the 2019-2020 school year and academic proficiency data for the 2018-2019 school year at Vista is shown.

Table 1

Student demographic data from Vista Charter Academy 2019-2020 (N=703)

Ethnicity	Percentage of Students
Asian American	2%
African American	26%
Hispanic	62%
White	9%
Other	1%

Table 2

Student proficiency data for M-Step test 2018-2019 (N=703)

Table 2 - continued

Subject	Elementary Students (3 rd -5 th grades)	Middle School Students
Reading	40%	43%
Math	38%	32%

Surrounding District Demographics

As a charter school, Vista is its own school and district. The surrounding public-school district is Grand Rapids Public Schools, (GRPS). GRPS is Michigan’s eighth-largest public-school district and the third-largest employer in the City of Grand Rapids, serving nearly 15,000 students with over 2,800 employees, including 1,084 teachers. The student population represents more than 80 countries with over 70 different languages spoken. GRPS has 26 schools serving students in either PK-5th grade or PK-8th grade, as well as nine high schools, and 13 theme schools, each with a customized curriculum and unique academic offerings. In addition, the Diocese of Grand Rapids offers 26 Catholic elementary schools and two high schools in the area. Hence, there are many educational institutions, public and private, for which parents can choose to send their children for their instructional needs.

Instruction and Curriculum

Vista Charter Academy is dedicated to developing students through accessible and rigorous instruction that empowers them to become their very best. The belief is every student can succeed given the right balance of challenge and support, coupled with personalized instruction, and experiential learning. Vista Charter Academy’s well-rounded curriculum incorporates college-prep academics and a focus on moral character, preparing students for a lifetime of educational and personal success. Vista’s model for achieving student success begins with the way classroom instruction is structured. The approach at National Heritage Academies includes a blend of one-on-one teaching, small group instruction, and time for independent

practice. Vista's teachers invest in each student by tailoring plans, setting goals, and meeting individual needs. This framework creates smaller learning environments within the classroom, and ensures students are appropriately supported to meet their individual learning goals. Safeguarding individual student support also allows teachers to track their students' progress and adjust instruction to promote academic success.

Moral Focus

Vista Charter Academy combines academic curriculum for each subject area with Moral Focus virtues to ensure growth of the whole child. Virtues such as respect, perseverance, compassion, and courage are essential to what students need to succeed and is an essential part of what is taught at Vista every school day. Moral focus virtues help students learn the importance of making good decisions and doing the right thing in life. Moral Focus is heavily integrated into everything at Vista, including the creation of a class contract where students agree how to treat their teacher, each other, and celebrate each monthly virtue, and recognize students who live out the Moral Focus every day. NHA's Moral Focus curriculum sets Vista apart from the surrounding school districts and sets up successful decision-making.

Problem Statement

Teachers must be motivated to remain in their positions and their reasons may vary. However, according to Maslow (1943), teachers' basic needs, and psychological needs must be met before their self-fulfillment needs can be attained. If a lower-level need is missing, it is possible that this factor may contribute to why teachers leave a particular school, or the profession. If a teacher's basic needs and psychological needs are met, they are more likely to remain in their position than if these needs are missing. Factors such as a safe, collegial environment where teachers feel they have an input in decision making, and where there is a

supportive administrator, all fall into basic and psychological needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1) may be beneficial in providing an explanation as to the reason why teachers remain. A teacher will only be able to achieve his or her full potential when the lower-level needs are present and fulfilled (Marston, 2014).

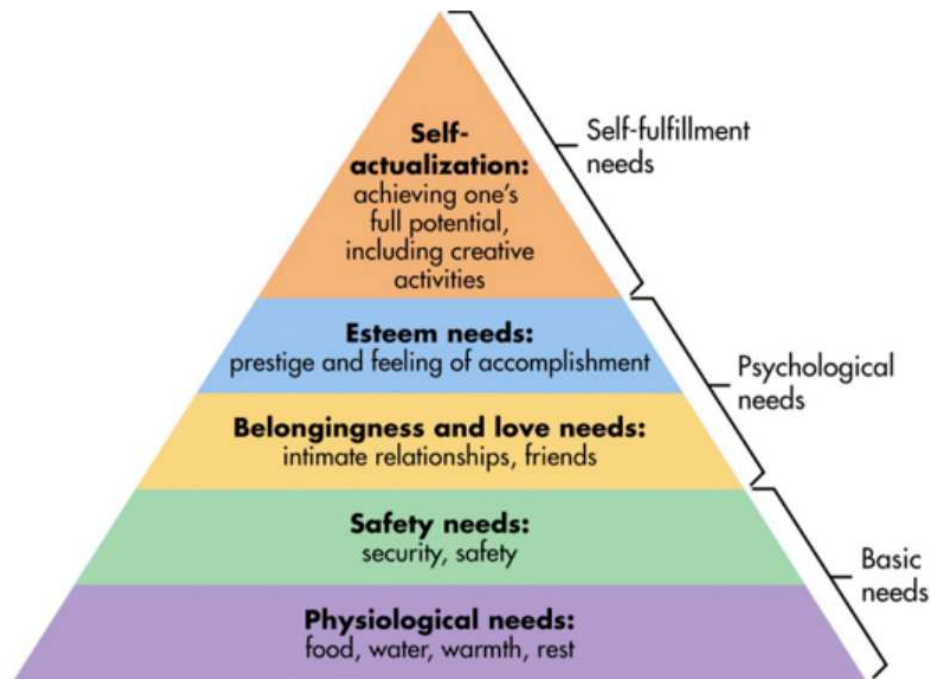


Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory.

Educational Staff Erosion

Teachers play an indispensable role in American society, educating young people on a variety of topics. Educators are asked to wear many hats in their daily professional lives. In addition to these instructional responsibilities, educators' roles have expanded beyond academics and into facilitators of social and emotional well-being, while also filling unforeseen needs within the school setting. Teachers have taken on the inherent duties of social worker, mental health support, substitute teacher, playground supervisor, child welfare advocate, and so many more duties that have fallen outside the scope of their job descriptions. Despite its significance, the profession is experiencing a major workforce shortage as teacher retention becomes

increasingly difficult. A study by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics found that 17 percent of new teachers leave their jobs within the first five years (NCES, 2021). This statistic of novice teachers leaving is particularly distressing because it is evidence that high teacher turnover negatively affects student achievement due to inconsistency of instruction. It is essential that educational leaders develop teacher retention strategies to turn these figures around.

Reasons for Educational Staff Erosion

Loeb and Myung (2010) show that many teachers are not just leaving one school for another. Instead, they are leaving the field altogether. The Michigan Education Association (MEA) and Launch Michigan conducted the 2021 Michigan Educator Survey through Emma White Research to understand why the teacher shortage in Michigan is exacerbating. The data from the 5,133 Michigan educators who participated found that lack of support from policy creators and lawmakers was the number one reason for educators leaving the field. Following closely behind are these reasons:

1. Excessive workload;
2. Low compensation;
3. Lack of respect for the teaching profession.

Participants noted that there is a perceived lack of support from parents and the community, as well as from within school leadership. Lack of empowerment opportunities and support from school leadership ranked even with compensation. Strong organizational culture that promotes a supportive leadership team and empowerment opportunities for educators are key factors in mitigating staff erosion.

Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2007) report 260,000 people leave the profession every year, contributing to a nationwide teacher shortage. To determine why the American education system struggles to maintain a steady workforce, governmental and nongovernmental bodies have conducted various studies and surveys (Tolliver, 2018). The following reasons have been cited for teachers leaving their jobs:

1. Lack of compensation;
2. Teacher preparedness;
3. Dissatisfaction with working conditions.

Research suggests a correlation between teacher retention and higher pay grades. Those who earn a salary of at least \$40,000 annually in their first year are more likely to return the following year compared with those who earn less (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2007). According to the Learning Policy Institute (2018), teachers with alternative certification instead of a traditional university degree are 25 percent more likely to leave their jobs. Training plays a significant role in job satisfaction. Toropova, Myrberg, & Johansson (2021) found that job satisfaction among educators has many important and far-reaching implications. Job satisfaction contributes to teacher well-being as satisfied teachers are less susceptible to stress and burnout. In addition, there is evidence that students of teachers who are content with their job also feel physically and mentally healthier (Toropova et al., 2021). Moreover, satisfied teachers offer higher instructional quality and better learning support for students. Finally, satisfied teachers demonstrate stronger job commitment and are less prone to leave the profession, which is especially crucial in times when teacher turnover is high.

The Michigan Educator Survey (2021) found that COVID-19 was another reason that teachers are leaving the education profession. Although, instruction was still in varied form, as

the new paradigm of hybrid schooling demanded educators navigate both in-person and online instruction in some schools, to complete virtual instruction in others. While in other schools, educators facilitated traditional face-to-face instruction with students. Regardless of the instructional setting, teachers were feeling the strains by school leadership, decreasing community support, and physical and mental fatigue. Bartlett (2021) notes that in spring 2020 grace reigned for teachers with flexibility and forgiveness because the nation was in unprecedented circumstances; in contrast, fall 2021 found education slowly progressing back to the systematic protocols of traditional schooling and the consequence of this transition is an exodus from the educational field. Teachers “were inundated with a constant stream of criticism, particularly when they raised safety concerns” (Bartlett, 2021, p. 49). According to Carver-Thomas, Leung, and Burns (2021), the transition to online learning models has had a steep learning curve, with most district leaders saying this has been a primary contributor to some teachers’ decisions to retire earlier than expected. The shift to distance learning impacted veteran teachers who, typically, rely on a body of lessons and materials designed for in-person learning, which they have amassed over their years of teaching. The distance learning platform makes it everyone’s first year of teaching all over again. Teachers are working much harder because they are having to recreate resources and change them into a digital format, or modify for students to work independently in a virtual setting without the hands-on help of a teacher.

The Impact of Educational Staff Erosion

Improving teacher retention serves to improve the entire educational system (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Teacher turnover is costly, as new teachers must be recruited and trained. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2007) report that the cost per departing teacher can range from \$9,000 in rural areas to \$21,000 in urban districts—money that could be spent on new scholastic

programs or technology for students. This study from 15 years ago highlights that teacher erosion is not a new problem facing education. A study by Sorenson and Ladd (2020) report that 26% of teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching. Each exiting educator costs the district nearly \$21,00 upon their exit from the district. The costly manner of teacher erosion can have a considerable impact on a district's annual budget. Higher retention means less financial strain and more investment in the tools children need to learn.

In addition to the financial impact to a district, teacher erosion also causes loss for those people left behind. Losing experienced teachers has a direct impact on students (Shachar, Gavin, & Slomo, 2010). A beloved school staff member can serve as a role model or mentor for students. For some children, the departure of such a figure can be discouraging and result in a loss of engagement. The students may become less inclined to participate in class, leading to a drop in achievement scores. Losing educational staff also increases reliance on substitute teachers, who tend to have less experience and lesser credentials compared with full-time educators. Qualified teachers know how to create lesson plans that adhere to a prescribed curriculum while keeping students engaged and excited. Most substitutes may be less equipped to create engaging lesson plans. When teachers leave mid-year, substitutes may struggle to successfully take over where a full-time teacher left off.

High turnover rates create constant flux, making it significantly more difficult to institute changes in education policies (Fullan, 2007). Experienced teachers who are familiar with the needs of a school and its students are best poised to provide knowledgeable advice and insight on how to meet those needs. When educators leave the schools, these voices are lost, and education policy suffers, as senior education administrators no longer receive their feedback on different

initiatives. Reducing turnover is an integral step toward shaping school policies that are informed by firsthand insights into school and local communities.

The disparities in teacher retention also result in inequalities in public education that leave select students behind. For instance, LPI reveals the turnover rates at Title I schools, which serve low-income students, are 50 percent higher than average. There are, likewise, differences according to location, with turnover rates higher in the south and lower in the northeast, where salaries tend to be higher. Given the drawbacks of high turnover, children in Title I school districts are more adversely affected than their counterparts.

To increase staff retention, school leaders should incorporate social-emotional learning, tools, and supports to create and cultivate positive organizational culture within schools. A significant proportion of teachers must cope with daunting challenges during their careers, which can manifest as symptoms of burnout, as well as job dissatisfaction (Fernet, Trépanier, Austin, and Levesque-Côté, 2016). As a result, school staff members quit, making attrition a focus-worthy problem. Organizational culture can be increased through interventions, social-emotional learning tools, and adjustments of motivational styles from school leaders (Fernet et al. 2016). Reeves (2009) lays out four imperatives of cultural change within schools: (a) leaders must define what will not change; (b) organizational culture will change with leadership actions; speeches and announcements are not enough; (c) use the right change tools for your system; and (d) change in culture requires relentless personal attention and “scut work” by the leader.

Mitigation of Educational Staff Erosion

School leaders can introduce policies to address these factors impeding teacher retention. Organizational culture is an issue at the forefront of schools, and many school leaders are researching the best practices to implement within school communities to build organizational

culture and retain staff. Vista Charter Academy seeks to provide an environment in which staff feel emotionally safe, valued, and empowered. Even with all the studies and research about the positive effect of organizational culture on staff retention in schools, many schools are not implementing research for social-emotional learning for staff.

Improving teacher retention can directly benefit school systems and students. As principals, superintendents, and other education policy makers try to lower turnover rates and keep high-quality educators, teacher retention strategies have emerged. Education leaders should focus on the areas of mentorship, compensation, and teaching conditions. Teachers who are assigned mentors in their first year are more likely to return in their second year (Drago-Severson, 2012). Mentorship programs pair new teachers with experienced ones, providing new teachers with access to advice on navigating the daily challenges of the profession. Vista's mentor program matches effective or exemplary teachers with those teachers who are new to the profession, new to NHA, or choose to have a mentor. Novice teachers will have a mentor for three years or until they are rated effective and are deemed to be able to manage without one.

Mulholland, McKinlay, and Sproule (2013) theorize that when teachers are adequately paid, they are more likely to remain in their positions. Promotion schemes and pay raises can be part of important teacher retention strategies. Professionals need to see the potential room for growth in their field. Working conditions in schools can be affected by access to technology and supplies, as well as basic amenities such as air conditioning. School districts can consider increasing their budgets for these expenses to improve overall satisfaction among their teachers.

Purpose Statement

In response to this problem of educational staff erosion, the purpose of this action research is to investigate the impact that organizational culture has on staff retention in schools.

The action research will use surveys to examine staff member's views of organizational culture, how they connect leadership styles to the school's culture, and the effect the implementation of uMap™, a social-emotional learning tool, has on staff retention.

An email will be sent to a pool of 20 potential participants who have been employed at least one year and have been retained in their current role, or comparable capacity, at least one year at Vista Charter Academy. This email will detail the number of questions on the survey, the topics and types of questions addressed, the voluntary nature of participation and confidentiality of answers. It will also include a timeline for completion of the survey by those who choose to participate.

The survey will be created and sent out electronically through a website called Survey Monkey. To retain confidentiality for participants, there are no personal identifiers in the survey, nor in the survey collection process. The collected surveys will go directly through Survey Monkey and not through participants' school emails to ensure privacy within responses. Surveys will be submitted to Survey Monkey, and data will be collected and analyzed.

After the survey data is collected, the results will be analyzed to identify trends in responses. Participants' responses will give information about their years of service and signal their feelings in regard to positive organizational culture, connection using uMap™, and retention at Vista Charter Academy. The survey information submitted by participants will be used in conjunction with a needs assessment to formulate a systematic plan to address organizational culture and staff retention at Vista Charter Academy.

Research Question

- What impact does positive organizational culture have on staff retention at Vista Charter Academy for the next school year?

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Culture and Climate

“Climate is the main leverage point for any culture, which means that if school leaders want to shape a new culture, they should start with an assessment of the climate” (Gruenert, 2008, p. 58). The relationship between climate and culture is very tight knit as illustrated in Table 1. Gruenert (2008) provides the following analogy that aids to clarify the distinction between the two: “If culture is the personality of an organization, then climate represents the organization’s attitude” (p. 58). Drago-Severson (2012) makes this point clear when she writes, “Leadership supportive of adult development makes schools better places of learning for adults and children” (p. 7). If the culture is ineffective, then there are most likely climate issues that were ignored before they became embedded in the culture. Artifacts of the school’s culture are encompassing of all the senses. Everything staff members see, feel, hear, and touch are all pieces of the organization’s culture.

Table 3

Some differences between climate and culture

Culture	Climate
...is the group’s personality.	...is the group’s attitude.
...gives Mondays permission to be miserable.	...differs from Monday to Friday, February to May.
...provides for a limited way of thinking.	...creates a state of mind.
...takes years to evolve.	...is easy to change.
...is based on values and beliefs.	...is based on perceptions.

Table 3 - continued

...can't be felt, even by group members.	...can be felt when you enter a room.
...is part of us.	...surrounds us.
...is "the way we do things around here".	...is "the way we feel around here".
...determines whether or not improvement is possible.	...is the first thing that improves when positive change is made.

Note. This chart contrasts the terms culture and climate to delineate between the definitions of each.

Staff members' reactions to the school's artifacts are influenced by the culture because artifacts tap into the belief systems and help to decide preferences, dislikes, who to trust, when to speak up, dress code, and how to teach. The culture provides information about unique customs for the school and how staff should respond to these scenarios. In schools, new teachers have their own ideas about how to teach due to their schooling and prior training experiences. If the culture in their first job does not embrace these ideas, new teachers will soon learn that to fit in, they will need to assimilate to the set paradigms. Since new teachers want to feel like experienced teachers and be part of the group, they are vulnerable to the school's culture and all the pre-existing beliefs set before them. Powers, Farewell, Maiurro, and Puma (2019) align with this by noting that employees of an early childhood education center expressed that setting their own personal and professional goals and having co-workers hold them accountable to their goals helped them to grow.

In "*The Culture Check-In Survey as told by Rising Leaders*" (2021), participants were asked the following questions that revolve around themes presented by clients, including those in the education field:

1. Have people lost connection to their colleagues and/or their organization?;
2. How do they feel leadership teams/management performed through the pandemic?;
3. How important is creating a “sense of belonging” to employee retention new versus before the pandemic?;
4. Are employees headed for the door?

This study was conducted in March 2021 to gauge employees’ views of organizational culture in a semi, post-pandemic, “new normal.” Fifty-three percent of the 500 participants answered that sense of belonging and good team relationships ranked as top culture contributors. These participants felt connection to purpose and how their role connects to the vision of the organization, meaningful connections to one or more of their colleagues, and a feeling that their contributions mattered were most important. Ranking just below these marks were staff feeling empowered in their job, being supported both personally and professionally, and emotional safety to have their voice heard. This provides an example of the high priority placed on the components of organizational culture among contributing members of a staff. A new staff member’s ability to assimilate to the established belief system gives staff a sense of belonging, which plays a major part into organizational culture.

Organizational Health

The health of an organization is critical to the entire infrastructure’s effectiveness and is a lofty component of the culture. In comparing organizations to biotic factors, organizations have the possibility to become sick in the same way that organisms do (Powers et al., 2019). There may be ill organizations, but if all sub-systems of the organization operate efficiently and in tandem, the organization is deemed healthy and able to fulfill its vision and mission. Howard, Giblin, and Medina (2018) wrote about occupational stress and mentioned that “poor

organizational culture was positively correlated with the presence of psychophysiological symptoms, whereas colleague support was negatively correlated with psychophysiological symptoms” (p. 261). In a healthy organization, school employees are protected against the pressures from the outside. In the school, communication is timely and efficient, and the interactions between teacher-student, teacher-teacher, and teacher-principal are intentionally planned. In contrast, unhealthy organizations are represented by pressure on the school staff, principals who encompass poor managerial skills and limited leadership abilities, and problematic communication with peer conflict among co-workers with low expectations to correct these conflicts.

Asfaw and Chang (2019) assert that employee engagement, an employee’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work, is associated with their overall health and the overall culture of the school. It is from this culture that staff have either a strong desire to stay and moved toward a shared vision or leave and find a place that better suits their needs. In a study conducted by Cemaloglu (2009), he finds,

A healthy organization is a structure which not only sustains its life within its own borders, but also continuously interacts with its environment, receives input from and gives output to the environment, uses its abilities to overcome problems and sustains its living in this process (p. 497).

Hill (2003) defines organizational health as an organization’s ability to function effectively, to cope adequately, to change appropriately and to grow from within. Hill’s research included schools and central administrative departments as he worked to assess their level of organizational health as defined above. The 80-question survey used in this study included the following 10 dimensions that measure the systems within a school organization:

1. Goal focus-the ability to have clarity, acceptance, and support for goals and objectives;
2. Communication adequacy-the extent of open two-way communication;
3. Power equalization-the ability to maintain a relatively equitable distribution of influence between team members and their leader;
4. Resource utilization-the degree to which the leader knows and can coordinate the talents of team members with minimal stress;
5. Cohesiveness-the clarity of a person, group, or organization's sense of identity;
6. Morale-the feeling of well-being, satisfaction and pleasure;
7. Innovativeness-the ability to be and to allow others to be inventive, diverse, creative and risk-taking;
8. Autonomy-a person, group, or organization's freedom to manage those things they believe should be within their sphere of influence;
9. Adaptation-the ability to tolerate stress and maintain stability while coping with external demands;
10. Problem-solving adequacy-the ability to perceive problems and to solve them with minimal energy.

These dimensions support the analysis of data collected, so that all staff can work toward the shared vision and mission of the school, which is the basis of organizational culture.

Organizational culture has been studied for years. Most of the early research worked to define what culture and climate mean in the context of organizations and moved on to the broader scope of how these two topics actually fit into the development of staff vision and alignment of values. Bellot (2011) contends the rise in research about organizational culture was that a hard numbers-driven management of institutions could and should be improved with, or

even replaced by, an approach that stressed a kinder, more humane understanding of human values and culture. Orr and Cleveland-Innes (2015) explain, “Appreciative leaders trust the people they work with enough to step back and allow their staff, co-constructors of the organizational future vision, to get to work” (p. 238). While much research continues to be done, there are some tenets that have been solidified. Two such tenets are that organizational culture is socially constructed based on shared experiences and each organization’s culture is unique and constantly changing. According to Bellot (2011),

Organizational culture is the pattern of basic assumptions which a given group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems...it is the assumptions which lie behind values and which determine the behavior patterns and the visible artifacts such as architecture, office layout, dress codes, and so on (p. 31).

Bevans et al. (2007) conducted a study about organizational health in schools that looked at the association among school and staff-level predictors of staff-perceived organizational health. The results of the multilevel analyses showed that school and staff-level characteristics are important predictors of organizational health. School-level characteristics were categorized as student enrollment, student attrition, faculty turnover, and the ratio of students receiving free/reduced meals. Staff-level characteristics include gender, race/ethnicity, age, and occupational role within the school. In this study, it was predicted that these would impact the staff members’ perceptions of organizational health at the participants’ schools. The findings of

this study suggest that providing targeted supports to younger, less experienced staff, such as helping them to form positive connections with other staff members through peer mentoring, grade-level meetings, or informal gatherings was critical to the organization's health. These activities could aid in reducing a staff member's perception of low affiliation. In turn, this show of connection and engagement among staff members can increase the quality of relationships among the school's staff and help to reduce feelings of job dissatisfaction and increase workforce retention rates.

One of the research elements that participants were asked to rate involved collegial leadership. Schools with high collegial leadership have principals who are friendly, supportive, open, and express genuine concern for staff (Bevans et al., 2007). School administrators are charged with fostering healthy environments in the school setting and sometimes equate personal job performance to the overall health and culture of the school. Due to this, school administrators may feel compelled to report out higher levels of organizational health than other staff members. These analyses support the notion that the more positive the perception of organizational health, the higher the association with staff retention.

Occupational Stress

Workers may feel insecure about their jobs for many reasons. Some of these reasons include contingent or uncertain employment arrangements, economic downturns, a desire by employers for flexibility, low sense of control by workers, organizational restructuring such as mergers, acquisitions, school closings, reorganization, changes in employee fit with the job role, and relationships with supervisors (Asfaw & Chang, 2019). These insecurities can lead to employees feeling a sense of occupational stress in the workplace. Occupational stress occurs when an individual's job demands exceed his or her perceived resources (Howard, Giblin, &

Medina, 2018). This occupational stress is associated with poor mental and physical health. Factors such as poor working conditions, poor job satisfaction, and low levels of job control all contribute to the phenomenon of occupational stress (see Figure 1). Fernet et al. (2016) addresses emotional exhaustion realizing that “it is a key dimension of burnout, and teachers are particularly vulnerable to this psychological state” (p. 482). It is often characterized by a school employee’s negative emotional response to one’s duties associated with their position or work-related demands.

Figure 2

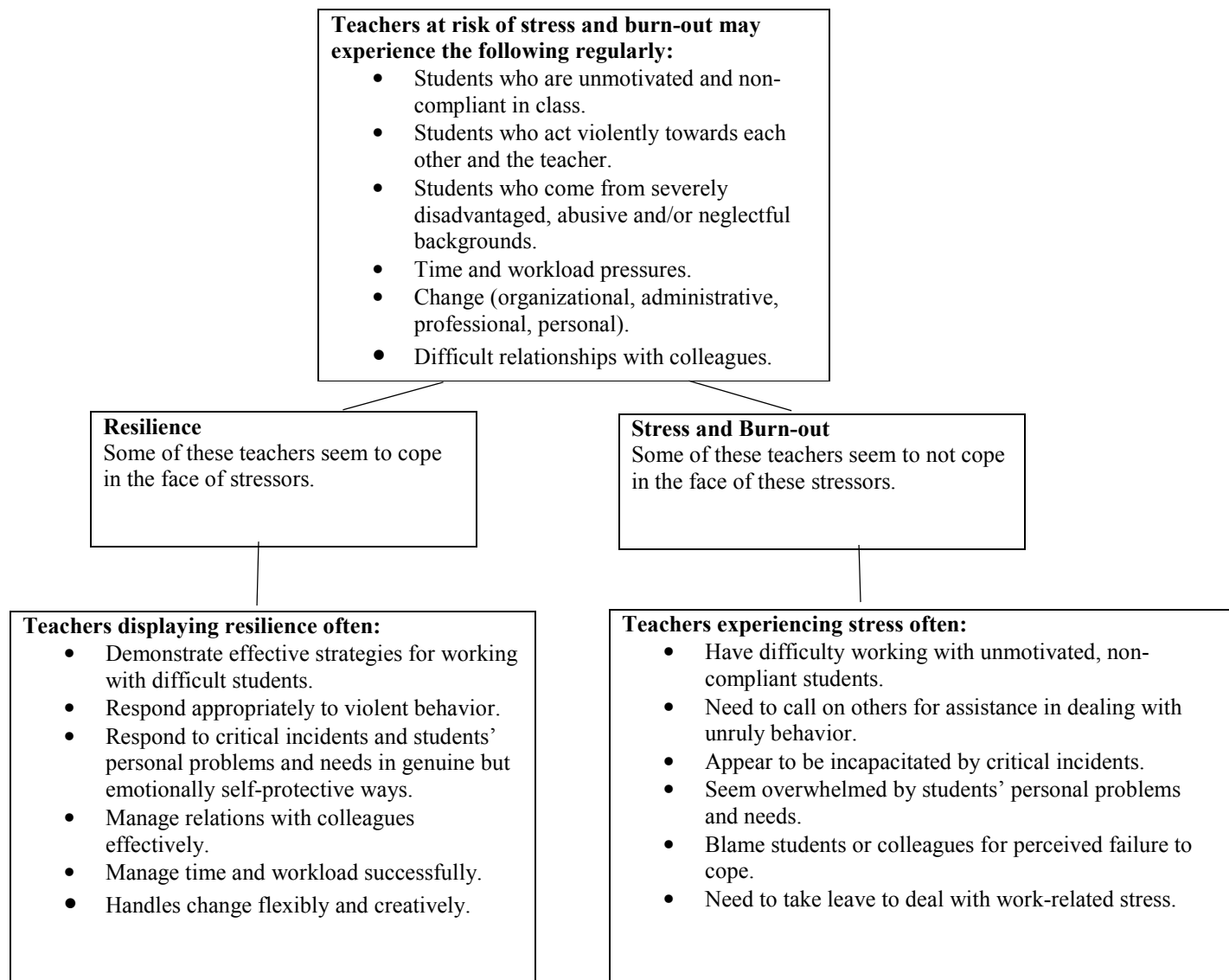


Figure 2 - continued

Teacher stress and burn-out. Note: Identifying teachers at-risk of stress and burn-out who are displaying resilient and non-resilient behavior. (Based on Otta, 1986; Dinham, 1993; Able, 1999; Kyriacou, 2001).

Howard, Giblin, and Medina (2018) conducted a study that found a relationship between occupational stress and poor health in public school teachers. In this study, teachers who reported low levels of job satisfaction and low levels of job control had a higher probability to report illnesses, as well as poorer workplace climates. Occupational stressors can influence the stress response system in the human body, which can lead to changes in a person's immune and central nervous systems. Howard et al. (2018) explains that these changes in body systems have shown to produce, or intensify existing, physical and mental illnesses such as the following:

1. Gastrointestinal (GI) issues;
2. Heart disease;
3. Anxiety;
4. Depression;
5. Musculoskeletal pain.

Low levels of job control combined with high levels of job demand increased the risk for coronary heart disease, suggesting health can be affected if employees do not feel they have access to, or control over, the tools necessary to complete a task.

In the school environment, psychological and physical health conditions can be costly as these illnesses often result in increased absenteeism and a productivity reduction by employees. The teaching profession is especially impacted as absenteeism and productivity loss directly impact the learning environment for the students, the school district, and school community. The

ripple effect of poor organizational culture can morph into teacher absence from illness that can lead to inconsistent instructional practices, which affects the level of student achievement in the impacted classrooms.

Recruitment and Development

Organizational culture has been associated with staff retention, particularly in school settings. Loeb, Kalogrides, and Beteille (2012) found that schools can control the quality of their staff by recruiting quality teachers, retaining quality and removing low-quality teachers, and focusing on professional development of the school's workforce. Beginning teachers face many challenges when it comes to aligning with an existing culture in a school. The way in which beginning teachers look at career culture can have an impact of their retention from one year to the next. Coldwell (2016) states that "In the first year, many teachers were unsure about whether to stay or leave, although a significant minority intended to stay in teaching for the long term, and a very small minority intended to leave" (p. 614). Many first-year teachers are likely to leave the profession due to feeling pressured by administrators and struggling with the demands of the job (Coldwell, 2016).

Macken and Hyrkas (2014) found that an abusive supervisory style characterized by sustained verbal and non-verbal hostility towards direct reports, predicts degraded counterproductive work performances and reduced organizational culture. King, Roed, and Wilson (2018) posit that "perceived inadequacies in the support provided by administrators to new teachers impacts the teachers' immediate and efficient integration into their new roles in the school" (p. 479). This could breed toxicity and emotional responses among staff members, which can result in negative consequences with staff, students, and the entire organization. A

strained workplace with poor organizational culture has a negative impact on teacher retention, especially for the first-year teachers coming into the situation.

In contrast, the importance of meaningful work, work-life balance, access to a mentor, and adequate orientation were found to be beneficial in retention efforts (Macken & Hyrkas, 2014). It is important for administrators to recognize personal characteristics in their direct reports. Stauffer and Maxwell (2020) found that there are significant factors that motivate and require organizations to change. Identification and implementation of successful strategies for improving work culture and supporting personal, as well as professional, growth is also essential for staff retention. Successful workplace advocacy for first-year teachers requires administrators who understand the importance of these intrinsic factors in the lives of their staff so that recruiting and retaining dedicated and qualified professionals is a widely used strategy.

Teacher recruitment plays a large part into staff retention being successful. Candidate selection should be considered in the overall context of organizational culture. This is echoed in research conducted by King et al. (2018) where they found that it is not enough to attract and recruit people, but they must also be retained. The individual skills, knowledge, and abilities of these new staff members ought to be leveraged to add to the overall culture and increase staff retention chances. Bush and Middlewood (2005), suggest four considerations be made when hiring new teachers:

1. How many and what types of people are needed?
2. Which of these needs can be satisfied by transfer and development of existing staff and where should staff need to be recruited externally?
3. Anticipated problems in recruitment (for example, due to the school's location or higher wages offered by other local employers).

4. The need for a recruitment timetable, so that posts do not remain vacant unnecessarily.

Teacher development is critical to student success, as well as staff retention. Drago-Severson (2012) speaks of this by writing, “To improve teaching and learning, principals are being asked to adapt from a management role to that of primary teacher-developer and architect of collaborative learning organizations” (p. 4). This coincides with retention as Loeb and Myung (2010) impress upon leaders that retention has many factors that can be partially controlled by the actions of a supervisor. They write that “teachers’ decisions to stay, leave, or transfer schools after the first year of teaching, more than anything else, relied on whether they could be effective with their students” (p. 474). Teacher development plays a role in the perception of effectiveness. Therefore, it is vital that a leader provides information to teachers in a timely manner to gauge student impact. As Bush and Middlewood write:

This strategic overview sets the context for trying to ensure that the organization is consistently staffed by the appropriate people to enable it to achieve both its immediate and longer-term goals. Neglecting effective recruitment and selection in this context, and simply reacting to an employee’s departure by automatically replacing the person with another of the same type, can have risks which may not become immediately apparent. For example, poor recruitment and selection can raise the possibility of high staff turnover. This is not only damaging in terms of the constant process of obtaining new employees, but may lead to staff demotivation and low morale (Bush & Middlewood, 2005, p. 127).

Job satisfaction has long been recognized and studied as an important factor across a variety of fields due to its effect on an individual’s organizational commitment, performance, and

intention to stay within an organization (O' Connor, 2018). Job satisfaction can pertain to any aspect of a job and is an important part of organizational culture. Low job performance due to job dissatisfaction has been closely linked with turnover rates in education. High rates have been shown to have a significant negative influence on organizational learning, perceived organizational or leadership support, and job involvement (O'Connor, 2018). School leaders should also be cognizant of the significant financial cost for organizations when staff are not retained.

Role of Leadership

“We search eagerly for leadership yet seek to cage and tame it. We recoil from power, yet we are bewitched or titillated by it” (Burns, 1979, p. 9). This quote from Burns helps us to understand that leadership is a complex commodity with its own set of attributes and underpinnings. Leadership, particularly distributed leadership, has a major impact on the school staff's overall mental health and well-being. In a 2009 study completed by Louise Rowling, she evaluated five years of implementation of *MindMatters* school mental health promotion. She identified the key role of leadership and its influence on staff. Rowling (2009) concluded a school that prescribes to leading with the staff's social and emotional well-being at the forefront would have the following:

1. Health and well-being as an aspect of its strategic plan;
2. Dedicated school-based resources allocated to health and well-being related strategies;
3. A communication plan that works for all staff;
4. Some mechanism to report health and well-being curriculum to stakeholders;
5. Clear success pathways in the school for all staff health and well-being policies.

A school who effectively does this has a leadership team that can present current, accessible information on key health and well-being issues, articulate connections among diversity, learning, and well-being with mental health, and employ team structures across the school to build rapport among co-workers on the staff. As Burns (2003) writes,

Like grandmasters, we must attempt to take in the whole board. We must account for situations and structures that shape human beings, that limit and extend their possibilities, and also for the human capacity to shape and even to transform their lives and world (p. 34).

These themes of team-building, connection, and education of social-emotional learning pedagogy frequently have a significant bearing on organizational culture.

There is a myriad of reasons as to why staff retention in schools can be problematic. Leaders must understand the role they play in the organizational culture of schools. Holmes, Parker, and Gibson (2019) suggest that teachers do not leave, but instead they are exiled by broken decision-making systems, lack of support by school leaders, and by policy priorities that do not focus on student learning and developing professional learning communities. Cemaloglu (2009) echoes this by saying, “bullying leads to severe problems such as an increase in employee turnover, a lack of morale in employees and a decrease in employee performance” (p. 496). In these scenarios, a lack of respect by leadership causes educators to feel underappreciated and they leave because leadership has not shown them that they are valued enough to be asked to stay and teach the following year. This aligns with the study conducted by *Become Unmistakable* (2021), which found that participants consistently rated manager performance lower over the course of the pandemic. The largest discrepancies that attributed to this paradigm regarded lack

of attention to personal safety by leaders, lack of attention to employee emotional wellbeing, not setting clear expectations, and lack of communication and transparency.

Researchers have begun to focus on exploring administrative roles, especially that of the principal, in addressing the critical issue of teacher retention and attrition (Holmes et al., 2019). Their study showed that working conditions are consistently cited as factors that contribute to teachers' decisions to leave or remain at a school. Surveyed participants to this study indicated that principal leadership was critical in creating sustainable, positive, school culture. Furthermore, these educators indicated that rather than leave bad schools, staff are leaving bad principals. As Burns (1979) says,

It lies not only in recognizing that not all human influences are necessarily coercive and exploitative, that not all transaction among persons are mechanical, impersonal, ephemeral. It lies in seeing that the most powerful influences consist of deeply human relationships in which two or more persons *engage* with one another. It lies in a more realistic, a more sophisticated understanding of power, and of the often far more consequential exercise of mutual persuasion, exchange, elevation, and transformation-in shore, of leadership (p. 11).

Teachers play a profound role in student achievement, but principals, and school leaders, have a major impact on the retention of those teachers. Therefore, a highly effective principal can influence student achievement by retaining effective teachers. As Grogan (2013) asserts, “a true leader must possess an understanding of the different types of leadership and utilize combinations of each in order to make change a reality” (p. 66). In certain circumstances, a leader must welcome differences, while at other times, a leader must have the ability to

motivate others to dive deeper within themselves, and still other times have the ability to be directive and authoritative in coaching on curricular alignment and appropriate instructional rigor.

Leadership Styles

Leadership styles play an important role in the principal's ability to effectively influence the retention rates in a school. There are many leadership styles. Most school leaders take on a hybrid approach as they find what fits as they piece together components from various styles, and there is not a one-size fits all style that is deemed to be most effective. However, the intricacies of two different styles, transactional and transformational, can be inspected for the purpose of comparison of effect on organizational culture in schools.

Transactional Leadership. A study done by Cemaloglu (2009) finds that transactional leadership is comprised of three dimensions:

1. Conditional reward;
2. Management with exceptions;
3. Laissez-faire approach.

Conditional reward has the principal determining the tasks and targets for staff. Teachers and staff know the reward they will receive when the set target is achieved. In management with exceptions, the principal monitors the staff and intervenes when mistakes or errors are made. The principal's purpose is to avoid deviations from shared goals, and to determine and correct the problematic areas. The actions of the principal in laissez-faire approach of transactional leadership are to leave the staff to their own decision-making and avoid his or her administrative responsibilities. Under this leadership, employees come under stress because those with good

performance receive higher payment while those with low performance are left with punitive measures from the principal.

Transformational Leadership. Conversely, on the opposite end of the leadership style spectrum lies transformational leadership. As Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) assert, “Transformational leadership is the favored style of leadership given that it is assumed to produce results beyond expectations” (p. 14). According to Cemaloglu (2009), transformational leadership has four facets:

1. Idealized impact (charisma);
2. Motivating with suggestion;
3. Intellectual warning;
4. Individual support.

Idealized impact is the process where the principal and staff collaboratively create a mission and vision together. Simple emotional elements are used to create a sense of belonging and a powerful common feeling of purpose in motivating with suggestion. Intellectual warning entails school leadership developing the intellect and to be reasonable and careful in solving problems (Coldwell, 2016). The last component is individual support, which is the ability to elevate employees and create individual visions for them to help empower their futures. Cemaloglu (2009) ultimately asserts that the result of encouraging acts of principals such as motivation, efficient communication, problem solving, participating in decision, direction, and rewarding, which are observed in transformational leaders, positively impact the organizational health in school settings. Transformational leadership invites employees to be a part of the process and with that comes stronger engagement and a deeper sense of belonging, which both support a more positive organizational culture.

Servant Leadership. Kowalski (2010) talks about servant leadership saying that administrators who embraced this concept deliberately serve others, primarily by placing the needs, aspirations, and interests of others above their own (p. 201). Kowalski goes on to say that service-oriented principals are ethical. These people are neither selfish nor serve only school employee interests. Instead, they are ethical in decision-making and committed to serving student, employee, community, and school interests (p. 201).

Educational leaders play a pivotal role in affecting the climate, attitude, and reputation of their schools. They are the cornerstone on which learning communities function and grow. With successful school leadership, schools become effective spaces of learning, places where students are not only educated but challenged, nurtured, and encouraged. On the other hand, poor or absent school leadership can undermine the goals of an entire educational system. When schools lack a strong foundation and direction, learning is compromised, and students suffer. Marzano et al. (2005) writes that

“Servant leadership also has a unique perspective on the position of the leader within the organization. Instead of occupying a position at the top of a hierarchy, the servant leader is positioned at the center of the organization. This implies that the servant leader is in contact with all aspects of the organization and the individuals within it as opposed to interacting with a few high-level managers who also occupy positions in the upper strata of the hierarchy” (p. 17).

Effective leaders build and sustain reciprocal family and community partnerships and leverage those partnerships to cultivate inclusive, caring, and culturally responsive school communities. This is an essential component of effective leadership. To build these community

networks it is essential that school leaders are visible in their schools and community, which can be done in fun ways like having a float in the city's parade or sponsoring a neighborhood movie night at school. Leaders must develop trust and create a sense of transparency and shared purpose with parents, staff, community members, and students.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Glint Employee Engagement Survey

National Heritage Academies sends out Glint Employee Satisfaction surveys twice per school year, fall and spring, to each of its employees. There are questions based on the overall company, but most questions are geared toward opinions and feedback at the specific school level. Glint surveys measure employee opinion in real time, with customizable surveys that span employee engagement, manager, team effectiveness, and culture. Glint gives managers, leaders, and the human resource team on-demand access to employee feedback and an understanding of key opportunities. Interactive dashboards display a breakdown of the organizational health of the school and identify areas that need attention. School leaders see survey results specific to their own role and across engagement programs, which give insight into the health of their own teams. The reports and analytics associated with this survey help uncover key findings, predict problem areas, and create action within their own teams. In a healthy organization, this means that managers can quickly implement strategies to boost employee engagement and build stronger teams.

Historically, staff retention has been an issue at the forefront for school leaders at Vista Charter Academy. Despite the attention that staff retention receives from executives at National Heritage Academies and Vista's leadership team, teacher retention has been a difficult task to accomplish. The data from the 2014-2018 surveys with Vista's former Leadership Team showed that the organizational culture in the building was incredibly low and staff members expressed a lack of trust for the leadership team in the Likert scale questions as well as written comments. There was a period in which the teacher turnover rate outweighed the teacher retention rate. A

multitude of factors contributed to causing the problem of retaining staff. Some of the contributing factors were:

1. Low rates of staff engagement;
2. Lack of autonomy;
3. Compensation;
4. Benefits were not at market value with neighboring public-school districts.

Most prominently, though, data showed that poor organizational culture created by school leaders was the foundational cause of staff erosion at Vista Charter Academy based upon Glint Employee Satisfaction surveys. School leaders need to realize that staff input is critical to success and movement toward the shared vision; however, this was not the prevailing mindset at Vista Charter Academy during these years. The staff was often left with no voice due to lack of emotional safety to speak up. In the years 2014-2018, staff retention and morale were low, which contributed to staff erosion at Vista Charter Academy and some leaving the education field altogether.

Exit Surveys

Throughout National Heritage Academies, the People Services department conducts exit surveys via phone for every employee who makes the choice to separate from the company or schools. The exit surveys completed by staff members who made the decision to leave Vista Charter Academy had two consistent themes. These exit surveys showed the overall reasons for staff departure were:

1. The way negative ways they were treated by the school leadership team;
2. The lack of culture and connectedness to each other within the Vista community.

Data gathered found that the perception of those choosing to leave Vista Charter Academy felt that the school leadership team lacked the emotional intelligence and the ability to lead the staff towards a shared vision. Empowerment opportunities were not readily available to staff members, micromanagement predominated over autonomy, staff members and their accomplishments were humbled instead of celebrated, and work-life balance tipped heavily in the direction of work. This, ultimately, led to many dedicated and gifted staff members choosing to permanently leave Vista Charter Academy.

Organizational Culture Needs Assessment

Staff Engagement

In 2019, a new principal was introduced to the school. At Vista Charter Academy, organizational culture continues to be a high priority issue for the current leadership team. An organizational culture needs assessment was conducted at Vista in May 2021 through observation of staff members' interactions, notes from one-on-ones between deans and teachers, and anecdotal data from conversations with Vista Charter Academy's leadership team members. Throughout the needs assessment, Vista's well-being, specifically in the area of staff engagement, was evaluated as it relates to culture by using the following questions:

1. Are faculty encouraged to discover their strengths?
2. Are faculty given opportunities to develop their strengths?

Meaning. The sense of connection to something more than one's own self is a large part of meaning in an organization. In examining this at Vista, the following questions guided the assessment:

1. Are the mission and vision of the organization explicit?
2. Do they drive the way of work for faculty?

3. Do they contribute to faculty connection to be a part of something bigger than themselves?

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2018) posit that colleagues within a shared technical culture have common purpose, expertise, and strategies for problem analysis and solutions. This shared vision is what makes or breaks most schools. It is the idea that all members are working towards the same overarching goal.

Connection. At Vista, school leadership members have gotten creative in the cultivation of building relationships and rapport among the staff. When assessing the relationships and connection among colleagues at Vista Charter Academy, these questions are considered:

1. Are faculty connected to mentors, peers, parents, and community in ways that are energizing and purposeful, creating a sense of belonging?
2. Who is responsible for ensuring faculty build meaningful relationships?

As Ott and Cleveland-Innes (2015) write, “leaders are considered to be role models of appreciative inquiry in their relationships with others and participate along with other staff and colleagues in the inquiry process” (p. 237). Connection and sense of belonging pave the way for staff members to avail themselves to the inquiry process. There tends to be a more positive correlation between a sense of connection and the willingness to ask questions or go beyond what one knows for the sake of moving towards shared goals of the whole school.

Health. Without health, it is difficult to find an overall positive state of wellness and positive organizational culture in a school. Fernet et al. (2016) addresses emotional exhaustion realizing that it is a key dimension of burnout, and teachers are particularly vulnerable to this psychological state (p. 482). In assessing Vista’s health, the following guiding questions were used:

1. Do leaders promote wellness among faculty?
2. Is teacher planning protected?
3. Are teachers allowed lunches without duties or student supervision?
4. Does your school have a wellness coach or any services for the promotion of adult well-being?

Organizational Culture Survey for Vista Staff

Targeted Participant Pool

The maximum number of participants recruited for this research was 20 staff members at Vista Charter Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan with the goal of having 10 staff members complete the study's survey. The justification for the number of participants recruited is that there are 29 classroom teachers and 46 educational staff members currently employed at Vista. From this group, the employees' years of service range from novice to veteran whose service exceeds 17 years. The inclusionary criteria for participants that make up this sample will be teachers who have been retained at Vista Charter Academy over the course of at least two school years. So, 20 current staff members will be recruited, with the intent that at least 10 will voluntarily participate by taking the organizational culture survey. Exclusionary criteria for this study would be any educational staff members at Vista who have worked less than one year or who have not been retained for employment for the coming year.

Survey Questions

The ten-question survey probed the participants to gauge their understanding and definitions as they relate to the term organizational culture. As a baseline for qualification and inclusionary criteria, the first question sets the tone to measure the teachers' longevity as an educator at Vista Charter Academy. Thereafter, the survey questions focus on organizational

culture as it specifically pertains to Vista. The survey provides questions that can be answered by choosing preset responses, as well as open-ended inquiries in which participants provide anecdotal responses to a prompt or question.

1. How long have you worked at Vista?
2. In your own words, define what organizational culture means at Vista.
3. The following characteristics define organizational culture for me (click all that apply):
 - autonomy;
 - sense of belonging;
 - fun;
 - clear communication;
 - trust;
 - positive relationship with your dean/principal;
 - consistency;
 - empowerment opportunities
4. The organizational culture has shifted during my time at Vista.
5. If you answer “agree” to Question 4, please describe the shift you have experienced.
6. I feel that I might not belong at Vista when something negative happens to me at work (e.g., when I get developmental feedback from my manager, when I have a negative social interaction with a peer, when an idea I share is not utilized, etc.)
7. If salary was not a factor, I would stay at Vista for the next three years.
8. Staff retention is important at Vista.
9. The uMap™ tool has given me an opportunity to learn more about, and become more invested, in my co-workers.

10. How likely is it that you would recommend uMap™ to a friend or colleague?

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Organizational Culture Needs Assessment

Staff Engagement

Meaning. After the analysis of assessing meaning at Vista, this was an area where some ambiguity arises. At Vista Charter Academy, meaning was the category in which the school should focus, and it was the area identified where the most organizational growth can be made. To delve further into this, it was noted that the leadership team members work very hard in their individual roles within the school. However, it was sometimes difficult to identify an established vision statement or the shared vision at Vista. In this case, where a clear and concise vision statement does not exist, the path to reaching the goals of that vision became more difficult to navigate. At Vista, the four deans had a clear vision for the grade-level wings. The shared vision among the instructional deans, which was consistently communicated to the staff members, was making gains in academic progress that result in increased achievement scores on state assessments. The educational staff associated with each of these wings was committed to moving their respective teams along. However, for each wing, the measurable indicator or assessment, the definition of success, and the paths to reach the goals were different. There was no vision statement for the whole school, currently, which decreased the sense of meaning as it applies to the whole school.

Goals and shared vision were important for the leadership team, but it also transcends to individual educators. Staff members were allowed to set their own goals based on the classroom framework, which is the evaluation tool used throughout the 100-plus schools within National Heritage Academies. Collaboration in creation of these goals and having these goals honored in

professional development or growth plans was a great way to increase organizational culture in the school. Goal setting was a fundamental practice at Vista. Each year, the initial one-on-one that took place between the principal and deans, as well as among the deans and teachers, began with goal setting. Together, the teacher and deans reviewed NHA's classroom framework evaluation tool and identified areas where the teacher would like to grow. At Vista, staff members began the year by choosing two goals. Upon completion or achievement of a goal, the goal setting process took place again, and the goals were reset. This allowed conversation and collaboration for teachers and their dean in order to choose a goal in a different category. One important responsibility of a dean was to provide resources, supports, and observations that guided each of their direct reports toward positive progress in achieving each teacher's individual goals. There were occasions at Vista in which one goal was preset for each teacher or educational staff member as a non-negotiable mandate. This was due to following Vista's 100-day plan and the predetermined goalsetting was done to streamline the process in hopes of reaching a school-wide goal from that 100-day plan.

Connection. Each wing had meetings throughout the year and there were scavenger hunts, fun teamwork challenges, and competitions intertwined. School leaders at Vista believed that knowing both the personal and professional sides of employees was integral to building the culture. For that reason, Vista partnered with *Become Unmistakable*, a consulting firm in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to garner support in this area. Through this relationship, Vista bought 100 licenses for a product called uMap™ (see Figure 2), which is a tool that employees complete to share their job responsibilities, personal goals, the employee's important people, professional goals, favorite things, preferred ways of recognition, and more. Each staff member's uMap™

printout was then posted in the copy room for other employees to deepen their knowledge and learn more about the rest of their co-workers.

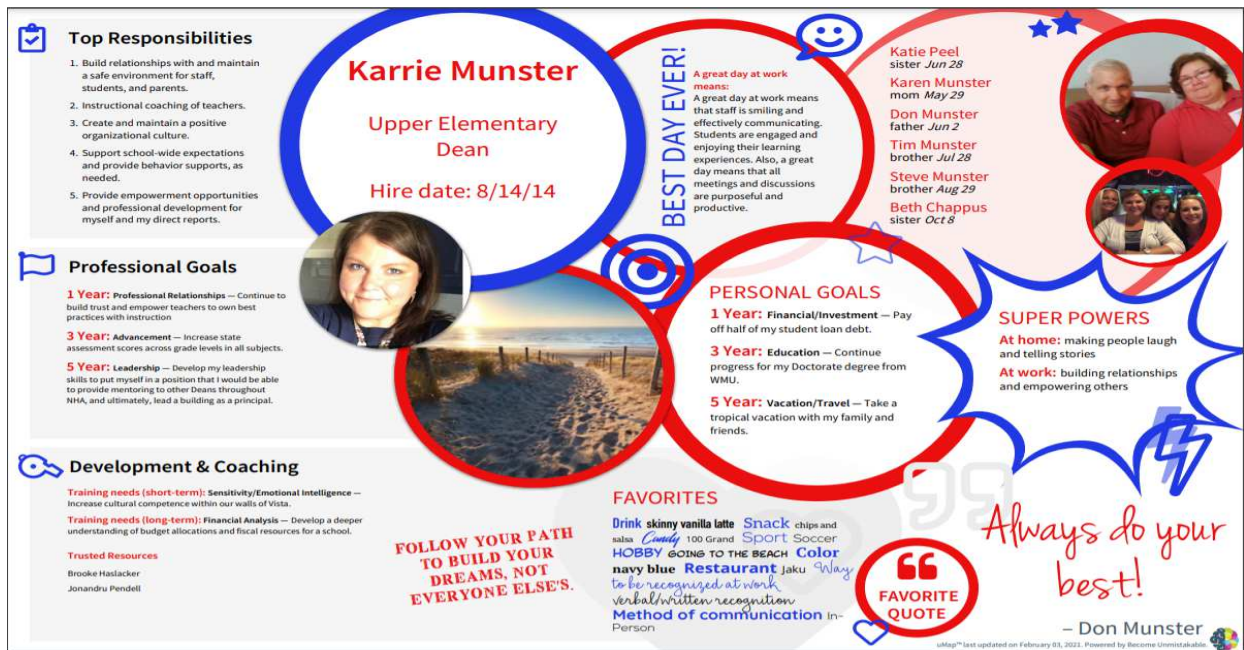


Figure 3. uMap™, an organizational culture connection tool, from Become Unmistakable.

Vista also has a Sunshine Committee that helped celebrate staff members' life milestones, provided comforts in times of need, or brought in donuts to express gratitude or build morale. Upon completion of this organizational culture needs assessment, one of Vista's strengths was the ability for staff members to build relationships with one another, and that culture trickles down throughout various departments in the building. Members of Vista's leadership team made conscious efforts to create opportunities for departments and grade-level teams to interact. One way the leadership team accomplished this was by intentionally planning for teachers and staff from different grade-levels and departments to have lunch times that coincide with each other. For example, the first-grade team ate lunch at the same time as teachers and support staff from fifth and seventh grades; a majority of Vista's staff enjoyed eating together in the staff lounge. At Vista Charter Academy, there was also a committee called the Fun Squad, formerly referred to as

Staff Engagement Committee. This group of people planned for, and set up, monthly gatherings for all staff to be a part of, if they choose.

Health. One of Vista's professional norms was to see a need and fill a need. There were times when things came up and people sacrificed planning periods or lunches, for which the leadership team was grateful and people were appreciated, and sometimes compensated. With that said, the vast majority of teachers' time was sacred and treated as such. Teachers were given planning time each day, with one planning period set aside per week for one-on-ones or grade level meetings. Teachers were given duty-free lunches and the leadership team created a coverage schedule for indoor recesses to make sure this time was protected, as much as possible.

Vista's leadership team analyzed data from surveys, as well as anecdotal data collected at weekly one-on-one discussions to continually adjust in an effort to help improve the health and wellness of Vista's teachers. The leadership team valued the input of all staff and tried new innovations based upon the feedback received from the staff to protect their highest-valued assets, the educators at Vista Charter Academy.

Organizational Culture Survey for Vista Staff

Survey Outcomes

The survey was sent out to a participant pool of 20 Vista educators who have been employed at least one year and were retained for at least one year. Out of this population, 12 participants completed the organizational culture survey. The responses and anecdotal data were collected via the anonymous Survey Monkey link found in the email sent to the participant pool. Of the 12 participants, three people have worked at Vista less than three years, five participants have worked at Vista four to eight years, and four have worked at Vista from 9-20 years.

Question number two prompted the participants to define organizational culture as it applies to their work at Vista Charter Academy. Participants answers were all different; however, there were some common themes that arose in the answers provided. Among the themes in the definitions were sense of belonging, shared vision or norms, and support.

Table 4

Definitions of organizational culture at Vista	
Participant Number	Response
1	To me organizational culture includes the individuals as well as how the system or organization supports each other. The culture can be influenced by either an individual, by small subgroups or leaders. All members and groups have influence over the building and maintenance of the organization's culture.
2	The culture of our organization drives our ability to retain staff members for longer periods of time.
3	Organizational culture at Vista means subscribing to a set of norms that are intended to maintain a balanced culture.
4	Organizational culture at vista is the feeling of belonging and family in both students and staff.
5	Like-minded individuals coming together to create a safe and encouraging learning environment for staff and students.
6	Knowing you can depend on others, trust the people you work with, and feeling like family.
7	Teams working together towards an end goal. It also means getting to know people you don't directly work with
8	A sense of belonging at work and feeling valued!
9	Shared (or similar) beliefs and values, common goal

Table 4 – continued

10	Organizational culture at Vista means that we are focused on being people, team, and outcome oriented. I believe that at Vista we are focused on each of these areas because we want to establish a school community that promotes academic and personal growth with the staff and students. We want our staff and students to feel physically and emotionally safe.
11	It's the way we do things here, the way we treat each other, etc.

After participants used their own experiences and words to define organizational culture at Vista, question three offered an opportunity to apply this in the context of preset characteristics of organizational culture. For this question, participants were given the following set of characteristics:

1. Autonomy;
2. Sense of belonging;
3. Fun;
4. Clear communication;
5. Trust;
6. Positive relationships with dean/principal;
7. Consistency;
8. Empowerment opportunities.

The prompt allowed participants to apply the characteristics to their definition of organizational culture. The results of this prompt show all participants agreed that one crucial characteristic of organizational culture is a positive relationship with the leadership team at Vista Charter Academy. The results show that closely following positive relationships with dean/principal were sense of belonging, clear communication, and trust. Of the eight, preset characteristics, each was

chosen by at least 75% of those educators at Vista participating in the organizational culture survey.

As participants answered questions four and five, they were asked to reflect on organizational culture during their years of service at Vista Charter Academy. Question four prompts the participants to gauge the organizational culture and whether it has shifted during employment at Vista. The participants had an option to choose agree, neither agree nor disagree, or disagree. Unanimously, participants of the survey answered that the organizational culture has shifted during their time at Vista.

The follow-up question, as shown in Table 5, prompted participants to provide explanation of the shift in organizational culture they have experience during their years of service at Vista Charter Academy.

Table 5

Describe the organizational culture shift at Vista	
Participant Number	Response
1	When I arrived the culture at Vista was very management/directive based. People performed in order to avoid gaining negative attention, and were separated into small groups of co-workers. Now I believe that the whole school community is more supportive of each other. People are more open to sharing, helping, and supporting each other. There is also just a genuine sense of care for each other. It is not watching your own back anymore; now we watch out for each other in a positive proactive way.
2	I have experienced an increased amount of trust.
3	I feel that the organizational culture has shifted in that students and parent input is not always highly regarded. On the other hand, I do feel that the deans are more supportive, understanding, and tolerant of the concerns that are brought to their attention by staff.

Table 5 - continued

- | | |
|----|---|
| 4 | The positive shift I have seen at Vista in the past few years comes from the trust and honesty from the leadership. Higher staff retention is one of the obvious signs of the positive shift in organizational culture here. |
| 5 | There was a spirit of connectivity and belonging that began to develop when we welcomed our new principal and adopted the Husky as our mascot. The new principal's practices and implementation of policies encourage unity and belonging for both staff and students. |
| 6 | Positive to negative and negative to positive |
| 7 | I have seen our staff move from a sense of family to not really knowing who you can trust. We are making our way back to the feeling of family and trust. |
| 8 | My dean communicates with the entire wing and makes everyone feel like a part of the team. I feel like I am understanding why things happen because most of the time we get the reasoning and the why. |
| 9 | The leaving of previous principal/deans really turned our culture around! |
| 10 | With many changes in leadership in the time that I have worked at Vista, there is not always been a common goal or belief system. What we value has also changed. |
| 11 | Over the course of my four years at Vista we have changed leadership and have really come together as a team. We are intentionally focused on making Vista the best place to be and I feel that we have the leadership and staff that have created this positive shift. |
| 12 | More fun, more relaxed within the building. Still a lot of micromanaging from the outside. |

The participants' answers for questions four and five provided detailed perspective for the shift that each participant experienced with organizational culture over their employment at Vista. Question 6 sought to weigh in on each person's intentions for yearly retention. Specifically, the prompt for this asked the participants if each would stay at Vista for the next three years, if salary was not a factor in their individual decision-making process. The results of this question shed light into the impact of the characteristics of organizational culture. Of the 12 respondents, 11 stated that they would return to work at Vista Charter Academy for the next three years, when the consideration of salary was removed.

The results from question six also lead into question seven, which asked participants to rate how important staff retention is at Vista Charter Academy. The participants' responses to that question showed a high level of importance for staff retention. This was indicative of positive change brought on by Vista's school leadership team. The school leadership team's intentional planning for collegiality and creating a sense of belonging carried over into the staff's perception that staff retention is of the highest importance at Vista.

The intentional creation of staff connection opportunities and, subsequent sense of belonging that was gained from these experiences, was aided by a social-emotional connection tool called uMap™. The school leadership team was given the opportunity to pilot this tool in partnership with Become Unmistakable, an organizational culture consulting business in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Become Unmistakable granted Vista the use of 100 licenses so each employee could create their own uMap™. The information provided by each employee gave insight into their personal and professional personas. Each employees' completed uMap™ was printed out by Vista's school leadership team and posted in the copy room for all Vista employees to read and learn about each other. Questions nine and ten on the survey prompted participants to

analyze the effectiveness of this tool as well as the likelihood of their recommendation of the product to others outside of Vista Charter Academy. Question 10, the final on the survey, asks the following question: How likely is it that you would recommend uMap™ to a friend or colleague? The result of this question shows many of the participants of the survey, 75%, would be likely to recommend this tool, which further shows the importance of connection in regard to positive organizational culture.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Every organization has its own culture. The culture of any organization includes group norms, shared perceptions, espoused values, and consensus around goals and objectives. Culture includes the way people interact with each other, how they solve problems, and how they justify themselves. When these emotional needs are tended to by leaders, stressors are decreased, and organizational culture begins to increase and become positive. Vibrant cultures have high levels of performance because they create internal cohesion, attract talented people, and inspire employees to go the extra mile. The leaders of such organizations practice values-based leadership and care about the well-being of all their employees.

The culture of a group of people reflects the values and beliefs of the current leaders and the institutional legacy of the values of past leaders that are embedded in the structures, policies, systems, procedures, and incentives of the group. In some instances, culture is stronger than the leader and either limits or ignores leaders who do not fit into the culture. In short, culture could be described as the way organizations show progress and get things done. Leadership has a direct correlation to the organization's culture. Ineffective leaders cause stress and division. In contrast, effective leaders can cultivate, establish, and maintain a culture of collaboration and shared vision.

Sullivan and Glanz (2013) aptly posit that no matter what the developmental level of the staff member or the interpersonal orientation of the supervisor, the person receiving feedback should be involved in generating ideas and solutions for the situation under discussion. At Vista, this was accomplished frequently, and it was considered an area of strength. Each of the deans on Vista Charter Academy's leadership team gave the opportunity for direct reports to self-assess

their development and discover their strengths in one-on-ones. Empowerment opportunities were created for those who showed the desire to develop their identified strengths. For example, there was a fourth-grade teacher at Vista Charter Academy who showed highly skill with math planning. She was given the opportunity to facilitate a team meeting with the third-grade team who needed some expertise in how to tackle the new math curriculum's scope and sequence.

Accomplishments were the key lever for motivation in some employees and celebrating those achievements can act as a unifying force for an organization. A quote from Ott and Cleveland-Innes (2015) supports the presence of positivity and accomplishments saying, "appreciative inquiry unapologetically and deliberately focuses on the positive in organizations in ways that unleash creativity and new possibilities for both the organization and its employees and, in doing so, sets itself apart from other leadership and organizational change theories" (p. 236). At Vista Charter Academy, school leaders celebrated short-term and long-term successes of the organization and individuals. In Vista's School Improvement Plan (SIP) and the school's 100-day plan, there were several goals set for achievement, enrollment, and engagement. These goals were reviewed weekly in the principal's newsletter. Upon completion or attainment of a goal, the school was recognized verbally or through a whole staff celebration. Annually, NHA recognized the efforts of teachers and interventionists in the attainment of the school's achievement goals. This was done through DSQ nomination for Teacher of Excellence or Interventionist of Excellence awards for individual staff members whose data shows success.

Grogan (2013) states that "Exemplary leaders enable others to act. They foster collaboration and build trust. This sense of framework goes far beyond a few direct reports or close confidants. They engage all those who must make the project work and, in some way, all who must live with the results." (p. 68). Engagement is the first step into creating buy-in, buy-

in leads to motivation, and motivation creates hard work that leads to student success. When people feel empowered to make decisions, they will inherently do so. It is in this decision-making process that teachers can take back control of their classrooms. Grogan (2013) writes about the importance of relationships in leadership. When relationships are founded on trust, direct reports are more likely to take risks, and make systematic changes. We lead with the intent to enable others to lead as well.

Organizations value the people whom they trust to hire and pour revenue into. Leaders are recognizing the importance of empowering, valuing, and retaining those direct reports who are committed to an organization's vision, employees as people first and not commodities.

Recommendations

Work-life balance

Occupational stress, which is characterized by an employee's negative emotional response to work-related duties or demands, directly impacts the organization's culture in a negative way. Howard et al (2018) write that it can affect the body's stress response system, which leads to changes in the immune system and produces or exacerbates mental and physical illness. Work-life balance was a topic on Vista Charter Academy's employee engagement survey that showed up annually as an area that required attention and needed improvement. Howard and Johnson (2004) address the idea that direct action is the best way to combat this as they write these "coping strategies most frequently adopted by teachers include: taking action to deal with problems; keeping feelings under control; seeking support from colleagues and/or the principal; having significant adult relationships outside work; organizing time and prioritizing work tasks; being competent" (p. 401). Occupational stress can be mitigated by the leader setting parameters

for school-related communication outside of contractual school hours. Physically and mentally healthy employees have a greater impact on student achievement and success. This recommendation prioritizes employee well-being for this to occur.

Recommendation: Prioritize the importance of work-life balance by creating a set time where school leaders cut off work communication for the day.

1. At monthly wing meetings, school leaders should facilitate a discussion based around the importance of work-life balance. Grade-level teams will get into groups and brainstorm suggestions on how to achieve this and how the dean can support those ideas.
2. Members will share out, and the dean will support in the form of setting communication parameters. to preserve the integrity of home time. Non-emergency communication will cease at a collaboratively set time, and responses will not be expected until the next business day after that point.
3. This will be done with fidelity for one month and then each wing will slowly add in other ideas that were generated during the initial meeting to meet the staff's needs for work-life balance support.

Wellness Program

Improving the health and wellness of Vista Charter Academy's staff serves to protect their highest valued assets, the employees. Fernet et al (2016) addresses emotional exhaustion realizing that "it is a key dimension of burnout, and teachers are particularly vulnerable to this psychological state" (p. 482). Employee health and well-being is vital to positive organizational culture. Asfaw et al (2019) noted that job insecurity can negatively affect workers' health, attitude, and work morale, and also examined if workplace support systems, such as supervisor support, could mitigate these reductions in employee engagement. Accountability to co-workers

in an organization with a positive culture helps to make a wellness program successful. As Powers et al (2019) stated in their research, participants in the study having co-workers hold them accountable to their goals aided in their health and wellness challenges. This wellness program also provides an opportunity for Vista's staff to build connections, establish new and deepen existing relationships among staff members.

Recommendation: Implement a voluntary employee wellness program for all staff at Vista.

1. A survey is sent to all staff members assessing their job stress level, as well as interest in well-being exercises and health challenges. Based on the data gathered, invite all interested members to learn about the program. Elements of the program include the use of a co-worker as an accountability coach, psychological and physical wellness articles that will be shared, and fitness challenges.
2. Accountability partners are assigned and check-ins with each other occur weekly. Articles about stress relief strategies are shared via email weekly. Fitness and weight loss challenges are established as a healthy outlet for job stress. Participants keep a journal to collect data to address components of the wellness program.
3. Upon completion of the first 30 days, a survey will be sent again, addressing the same topics as the first. Employee engagement, health and wellness, and job stress will be re-evaluated at this time. The benefits and pitfalls will be weighed to gauge longevity of this program.

Engage Employees with uMap™

Employees are much more likely to come together as a team at companies with a strong culture. A positive culture facilitates social interaction, teamwork, and open communication. This collaboration can lead to some amazing results. Maintaining a positive company culture is a

guaranteed way to boost employee morale. Employees will naturally feel happier and enjoy their work more when they work in a positive environment. Building a positive organizational culture does not mean employers should completely scrap everything their company stands for. Rather than expecting employees to do a complete 180 degree change, employers should work on enhancing the current culture of the organization. It is important to seek feedback by asking employees what they do and do not like about their current culture and work environment. Leaders should use these suggestions to help create a positive organizational culture that is appropriate for their staff.

Collegial relationships are an essential element to a positive company culture. When employees barely know their colleagues and rarely interact, a positive organizational culture is difficult to achieve or to foster growth. Leaders need to provide employees with opportunities for social interactions. In accomplishing this, the sense of connection is heightened, and staff members become invested in each other's lives, personally and professionally.

Recommendation: Utilize uMap™ as a connection tool and to deepen sense of belonging among co-workers.

1. Vista Charter Academy will set a line item for Become Unmistakable in their annual budget for purchase of, support for, and trainings associated with the uMap™ tool. This line item could come from ESSER funds, an allocation request for school board funds, or GVSU funds for professional development.
2. Partner with Become Unmistakable to conduct a formal uMap™ training session during a staff meeting or professional development day prior to the beginning of the school year. The training will work to help Vista Charter Academy's staff understand the purpose of the uMap™, the neuroscience and brain-based research behind the uMap™, the details of

each tile that employees fill out, and how the sense of belonging and connection is vital to a positive organizational culture.

3. Each employee fills out their uMap™ with professional goals, personal goals, important people in their lives, the top responsibilities as each employee interprets them for their job description, how they like to be recognized, their favorite quote, a brand icon, and their favorite things.
4. Vista Charter Academy's leadership team will create an action plan to utilize, post, and celebrate each employee's uMap™ throughout the school year.

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