School Culture Audit: A Tool for School Improvements

by Susan Shevitz, Ed.D.  |  Issue: Too Jewish? Not Jewish Enough?

We all know it when we see it: a school with a powerful culture. People just seem “to belong,” to know what is expected and to do it. There is consistency in the values expressed by the words and actions of all the people involved –from the children to the teachers, board, parents and administrators. Some school cultures support productive teaching and learning and clearly convey their Jewish and educational philosophies; others do not do this, at least not consistently.

When we are part of a culture we take it for granted; it is “just the way we do things here.” How often, when in a familiar place, do we question the obvious? It is when we are in an unfamiliar, foreign environment that we become aware of the seemingly commonplace: how formal people are, their habits and customs. Culture is transmitted to new people and shapes everything that goes on. This is true in schools, as well. Unless there is a dedicated effort to stop and think about the culture and what it is conveying, it perpetuates itself; its core beliefs continue to be expressed though in ever evolving ways. To use an example: consider the individualism that is deep within American society in our understanding of identity (the individual is the unit whereas there are societies where the group is the basic unity), how we organize our space (members of families expect to have separate bedrooms), who our heroes are. Think about the triumphant individual, whether he is John Wayne coming into town to restore order, the batter who breaks an important record, or the scientist who receives a major award for an important discovery; in all these cases we can imagine an alternative situation where it is the group that might have been the unit to share space, handle civic problems or be rewarded for the work that was carried out by many people in a particular lab. For a wide range of reasons, based on political theory, patterns of settlement, historical circumstances and much more, the “I” usually trumps the “we” in this society. But until we stop to think about this, we take it for granted and organize ourselves placing heavy emphasis on the individual.
The same dynamic operates in schools. Basic assumptions about the nature of learning, Judaism, children, teaching and much else form the core of the culture and are repeatedly expressed in what the school does. Unless the school stops to assess its culture, these patterns are replicated in many different ways. Schools need to periodically assess their cultures to be sure they are moving in the directions they want. They need to grapple with the questions: what values and beliefs are being expressed, directly and indirectly? Are they the ones we want to be expressing or are there changes that we can make in our culture that will improve the quality of the education we offer and the community we forge? And if there are modifications that the school wants to make, how can it go about achieving them?

PEJE has developed a protocol to help schools answer these questions. It is a straight-forward approach to investigating the school's culture. Members of the school community become, in a sense, anthropologists. Through observation and analysis, they come to recognize the values the school is expressing and how its culture both fosters and constrains its decisions and actions. This awareness is the starting point for the school to become more intentional about its culture and to use it to support improvement.

Schools would do well to think about their culture at specific times: in its early years as its patterns are being formed, during transitions when the culture may be more malleable, or when, despite many attempts, it can’t seem to solve a basic problem. It is best used when there is stability and a commitment to improvement.

The PEJE protocol, now in its preliminary form, can be done in 2 or 3 sessions with a facilitator and a group consisting of a cross section of the school's stakeholders. PEJE will be piloting the protocol during the 2007-08 school year in a limited number of schools. For more information about using the protocol, be in touch with Susan Shevitz (shevitz@brandeis.edu) or Bonnie Hausman at PEJE (bonnie@PEJE.org).

The conceptual framework for this approach to school culture is derived from the work of Edgar Schein, Seymour Sarason and Terrence Deal.

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Too Jewish? Not Jewish Enough?

At some point, most day schools find themselves confronted with the question, Are we too Jewish? If we confine Jewish studies to fewer hours in the school day, will more students come? Authors here agree that the “Jewish” part of the school’s mission and identity should be proudly front and center in defining a day school’s raison d’etre.