

The Weather or the Climate?

“Are we dealing with the weather or the climate?” That’s the question an old friend asked me as I was describing life in today’s classrooms. We were out hiking, and my friend, who is not an educator, became genuinely curious about the state of education and how we managed the challenges of teaching *all* students.

I raised his question with the teachers when I first welcomed them back for this new school year. Reflecting on the answer provided a useful way to think about how we ought to approach schooling. Weather is the condition of the atmosphere over a short period of time, while climate is the prevailing weather conditions over a long period. When we focus on the weather conditions in the classroom, it is often reactive. Focusing on climate, and more importantly climate *change*, is proactive. If we can change the climate, we can preempt some of the bad weather that would otherwise rain on our classrooms. Here are some examples of how climate change works in schools:

- Years ago, before students with special needs were included in mainstream classrooms, teachers were constantly reacting to widely varying “weather” conditions that would invariably occur when these students were placed in mainstream classrooms with no accommodations. “Inclusion” established a support system that fostered the growth and achievement of these students within the regular education classroom. “Inclusion” represented a climate change. Students with special needs failed to thrive in classrooms before we set about changing the climate in schools to become inclusive environments.
- When a school experiences a whirlwind of student misconduct, that school needs to change its culture and climate. Certain behaviors are just not likely to occur in certain climates – just as it is unlikely to get a snowstorm in the tropics. In other words, a respectful school climate creates safe weather conditions. For example, our middle school has created just such a climate by employing their mascot, BERT. BERT stands for, and highlights the importance of, Belonging, Empathy, Respect, and Trust.
- The likelihood of academic failure is also influenced by a school’s climate. It is much easier to respond to failure in a positive school climate than a negative one. Teachers know that it is inefficient, and often counterproductive, to react to an individual student’s failure or frustration without looking at underlying causes. Their goal is to anticipate and preempt failure. Similarly, it is inefficient for a school to react to problem areas without setting up structures that anticipate and preempt problems. Currently, we are implementing a strategy called Response to Intervention, which is a practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to students’ needs. This is a climate change because it requires a change in school culture that makes the response to declining performance an automatic part of each school’s structure – and not solely dependent on the work of individual teachers.

- Teachers are steadily shifting away from a climate that is highly independent (in which they close the door to the outside world) to one which is highly collaborative (in which they share student work and best practices). Our profession has been moving away from the idea that individual teachers should find individual solutions to dust-ups in the classroom. It began moving toward becoming a collective endeavor when standards-based reform took root. This reform essentially asked us to agree upon what all students should know and be able to do, regardless of the class in which they sit. It required a culture of collaboration. This, too, was a climate change. Teachers are now increasingly working within professional learning communities. They are comparing results of common assessments, using this data to inform their instruction, drawing on each others' talents, and crafting best practices. In general, teachers in this changed climate feel a collective responsibility not just for the students in their classroom, but for all students in their grade level or content area.

Trying to change the weather is exhausting and inefficient, like putting out one fire after another. Trying to change the climate may be challenging, yet it is what schools ought to be doing. Wayland teachers have embraced this challenge.

Mark Twain said that, "Climate is what we expect, weather is what we get." I would also argue that what we expect is what we get. In the short time I have been in Wayland, I have learned that educators throughout the Wayland schools, on a daily basis, are working to build a climate of high expectations, one that embraces the needs and learning styles of all students. They are doing so with great skill and with joy – even when they find students under the cloud of an occasional stormy day. Their commitment to their students is about having students thrive, in every way, within a positive school climate – one that they work beautifully to create.

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Wayland Town Crier Column
Submitted: September 30, 2011