



Reframing and Understanding Staff Resistance to Advance Positive School Climates

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Introduction and Background

Efforts to improve school climate can face many challenges. Working with staff who may be resistant to change is one common challenge school leaders may face in their daily work. Beyond the practical implications, resistance that leaders experience can feel demoralizing and seem like an impossible obstacle to overcome. Resistance is best defined as behavior designed to shield individuals from the impact of either real or perceived change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Burnout, lack of trust, and fear are just a few of the many reasons that school staff may appear resistant. Individual behaviors such as being critical, disengaging, withholding information, and failing to follow through on agreements may occur. In this sense, behaviors can provide leaders with vital insights into the root causes of resistance. These insights can inform school climate efforts.

It is important to note that resistance should not be interpreted as the result of individual failings. Rather, school and district leaders should consider the current circumstances under which they are asking school staff to make changes. Leaders are more likely to address the real issues at play in the implementation of their school climate initiatives if they reframe and understand the root causes of resistance.

Work to improve school climate can be exceptionally challenging because it requires staff members to shift practices and deeply held beliefs and ideas about power, discipline, bias, identity, and the role of caring relationships in schools. The multifaceted concept of school climate can be described as follows:

School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, and organizational structures. A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and . . . support[s] people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.
(Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182)

Research shows that when students feel connected to their schools and have access to physically and emotionally safe and engaging environments, academic and social outcomes improve, especially for students from historically and currently marginalized populations (Ancheta et al., 2021; Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Traditional school systems, on the other hand, are punitively oriented and adult-centered, and they frequently fail to consider the perspectives of youth and the community. These deeply ingrained ways of being and doing are social and historical legacies of the American educational system. As a result, it comes as no surprise that shifting beliefs, mindsets, and behaviors can be difficult.

This guide examines some common reasons for resistance, such as burnout, a lack of trust, and fear, as well as actionable strategies for leaders to mitigate the effects of resistance. Questions are provided throughout as opportunities to reflect on the best approaches to engaging with staff.

Understand and Reframe Resistance

How can school leaders gain a new and possibly more fruitful understanding of staff resistance to change?

The authors of this guide have worked in a variety of educational settings, including classroom teaching, school administration, and local and state education agencies advancing school climate initiatives. Based on our observations, understanding and responding to resistance is something many school and district leaders continue to find difficult even though responding effectively is crucial to moving school climate initiatives forward.

In the same way that we might consider the impact of safe and supportive learning environments (or their absence) on student achievement, we should also consider the current conditions under which school staff are asked to develop and implement new skills. Leaders managing change initiatives should consider how they can create favorable conditions for school staff to support the initiative at hand. However, the goal does not need to be to eliminate resistance but rather to recognize it as a source of information as well as a natural and expected response to change.

Leaders who approach the phenomenon of resistance with openness and curiosity have the best chance of bringing more people along in their efforts. Further, some sources of resistance may illuminate important gaps in initiative implementation. In other words,

There are times when resistance is a problem. Paradoxically, at other times resistance is valuable and necessary for the success of people and organizations. . . . Resistance in the form of problem identification and process modification is beneficial to overall success. (Dolph, 2017, p. 8)

Leaders who are intentional in their approaches and anticipate resistance are better prepared to move through it in the process of improving school climate.

Common Reasons for Resistance

Burnout

Burnout is a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by long periods of stress. Although burnout has long been recognized as a problem in education, the current social, economic, and political climate, as well as the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have only exacerbated these trends. Throughout our work in the field, we hear time and again leaders pointing out the persistent burnout in their staff.

Despite these observations, well-intentioned principals and district office personnel continue to promote various school climate initiatives, such as restorative practices, culturally responsive teaching, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Continuing to move forward with initiatives without addressing burnout can lead to underwhelming results, contributing to further burnout and staff demoralization.

This creates a feedback loop in which poor change conditions result in less than ideal outcomes. This contributes to initiative fatigue and distrust of new efforts. Burnout-related resistance can occur as a way for staff to conserve their energy and well-being or even as an act of self-preservation. Change efforts will have limited impact unless leaders address the need to create positive and healthy working conditions for school staff.

Addressing burnout in a meaningful way necessitates a long-term, schoolwide, and structural approach, especially since “while many well-intended efforts to support educator well-being have been implemented, these efforts have tended not to address the underlying issues associated with stress, burnout, and retention or with health and well-being” (Pate et al., 2023, p. 4). Such efforts are frequently focused on placing blame on individuals rather than addressing the daily working conditions that school staff face. If school leaders hope to create sustainable positive school climates, they must first address the well-being of those who do the work.

Questions to Consider

- » What is the current mood and energy among staff members for engaging in current or future initiatives? Are they exhibiting signs of burnout?
- » What initiatives (and how many) are being actively implemented? Is it possible that staff may be suffering from initiative fatigue?
- » What are the mental health and well-being needs of staff? What supports might address their needs?
- » Is there enough time and support for staff to implement what they are being asked to implement? How might we think creatively about finding the necessary time and space required?

Lack of Trust

In schools, relational trust is defined as “the day-to-day social exchanges in a school community. It supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 12). Trust is a core resource in school improvement and is essential in creating safe and supportive educational communities. Environments that value trust experience lower stress, higher productivity, greater engagement, and less burnout. Adults and students alike thrive in environments that foster trust and are thus conducive to the development of adult–student relationships and administrator–staff relationships.

A lack of trust often leads to an interpersonal environment in which people’s intentions and motives are scrutinized, misinterpreted, and treated with suspicion. Less trust leads to fewer positive interactions, and staff are less inclined to contribute ideas and solutions and work collaboratively (Fisher & Phillips, 2021). As a result, there is less shared investment in the vision and goals of the community. A positive school climate begins with staff relationships rooted in trust. These trusting relationships are the foundation of any successful change effort. When present, staff are more likely to authentically engage and align themselves with school goals.

For example, when a teacher needs support, their colleagues seek to understand and approach with kindness and compassion. This is more likely once trust has been developed. Staff are then more likely to take risks with one another as they try new practices.

Questions to Consider

- » What has happened in the past to either build or break trust?
- » What staff feedback do we collect to determine levels of trust?
- » Do we have shared practices to create and maintain authentic relationships?
- » How do we acknowledge and rebuild trust that has been broken?
- » What are the agreed upon behaviors/actions that we commit to in order to maintain continued trust?

“Meaningful, lasting change happens within community and is carried by trust. Attend to building community and growing relational trust throughout the course of the change process, including when new members of the community are introduced into the work. This involves creating opportunities for interpersonal connections, designing shared spaces that center belonging and that invite people to bring their full selves to the work, practicing active listening, and taking action that is responsive to community interests.”

(Valdez et al., 2023, p. 6)

Fear

In many cases, fear of change within current practices and systems can lead to resistance, particularly in school climate improvement efforts. Fear can manifest itself in a variety of ways, one of which is fear of failure. Historically, educators have been conditioned to believe that their most important role is to improve student outcomes as measured by standardized test scores. As a result, failure can have high stakes and, in some cases, stigmatize the entire school and community. In some ways, new initiatives can elicit a fear of failure, which can manifest as a sense of loss—specifically, loss of the status quo and how things have always been done.

For example, efforts in a school to move toward nonpunitive discipline and reduce suspensions may cause apprehension about losing a long-established practice—writing office discipline referrals. When school staff lack the ability to engage with students in a nonpunitive manner, resistance may arise.

Many people resist change because it forces them out of their “comfort zone” (Maag, 2001). People often seek stability and consistency, and when these are disrupted, they may feel threatened. Fear of not knowing what will happen next or of a new school climate initiative can cause stress. A fear-based culture can have an impact on the motivation, productivity, emotional states, and commitment of those who work daily to support students (Ağalday & Yiğit, 2022). This can inhibit opportunities to adopt improved practices that can lead to outcomes for students that are more equitable and a safe and supportive learning environment. Leaders can view fear as an opportunity to ensure the needs of staff are met rather than as an immovable barrier to their work.

Questions to Consider

- » How might fear be present in the behaviors of school staff?
- » What plans are in place to communicate with school staff clearly and consistently?

- » What supports are in place for school staff as they learn about and adopt new practices? Are these supports sufficient for the changes being asked of staff?

Strategies for Decreasing Resistance

Personal Leadership

Personal leadership consists of actions and decisions that are the result of individual school and district leaders' mindsets, biases, and beliefs. These mindsets, biases, and beliefs must be critically examined on a regular basis. The process of challenging one's own beliefs and assumptions and their impact on the interpretation or understanding of people, places, or things is known as critical self-reflection. Unexamined biases and beliefs can unintentionally drive decision-making, leading to inequitable outcomes. Unconsciously, a school or district leader may interpret "resistant behavior" among staff members differently based on their social identities, resulting in differential treatment.

Leaders' identities and personal histories influence their perspectives about what is most important. Education leaders are more likely to be clear about the relationship between the gaps in their understanding and issues of equity when they understand the perspectives and biases they bring to their leadership, and they are thus likely to become more effective in facilitating the change required for positive school climates.

The primary responsibility of classroom teachers, counselors, and support staff is to create environments in which students and their families feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe. Similarly, school and district leaders must create safe and supportive learning environments for their staff as they question current practices, try new ones, and engage in individual and collective learning and sense-making. Individual leaders' decisions have a significant impact on the experiences of staff as they are engaged in a process of continuous improvement and have the potential to mitigate the effects of burnout, lack of trust, and fear.

Shared Vision and Shared Leadership

Resistance is reduced when there is a shared vision and leadership because it creates a balance of power, resulting in an equal partnership that distributes the workload, builds trust, and addresses fears. Because the work is being done with the team rather than to or for the team, all members feel empowered to carry out the work of leadership. Voice, choice, and agency help to mitigate the effects of burnout, lack of trust, and fear while also fostering meaningful partnerships.

It is critical to create structures for continuous feedback to foster shared vision and leadership. Empathy interviews, staff surveys, and regular check-ins can all help to increase staff voice and reduce resistance. Street Data, qualitative data gathered from the margins that include stories, artifacts, and observations, can provide context-specific insight into what is and what is not working in school climate improvement initiatives. Staff participation in the data collection process and agency in making informed decisions are also needed for carrying out an assets-based plan of action (Dugan & Safir, 2021).

Making Change Manageable and Purposeful

Focusing on making change manageable and purposeful is one strategy for addressing resistance. Initiative fatigue can occur when multiple programs and projects are implemented at the same time, some of which may or may not result in noticeable change. It is crucial to take a step back and assess which initiatives are having an impact and which are not. This concept can be described as de-implementation, which is defined as "abandoning existing low-value practices" (Van Bodegom-Vos et al., 2017, p. 495). This can help to alleviate some of the resistance that may arise due to burnout, lack of trust, or fear as well as create the space necessary to prioritize implementing initiatives that are well suited to the school and community.

Another approach is to start small, stay consistent, and concentrate on programming that has a positive impact. Small victories encourage school staff to actively participate in the implementation process, which builds

trust over time. This can be accomplished by piloting initiatives in a few schools within a school district. By taking smaller scale actions such as aligning existing initiatives and systems or distributing school leadership duties, school leaders can build evidence rooted in their specific contexts that the practices will result in positive change (Panero & Talbert, 2013). This process serves as a proof of concept that may also help to build more staff support for the school climate initiative at hand.

Consistency and attention to the initiative over time provides a sense of safety, making it more likely that school staff will invest their time and effort into learning new skills necessary to develop positive school and classroom climates for their students. Commitment over time allows individuals to see the impact of their work, allowing them to gain confidence.

A third strategy is to capitalize on existing momentum. Before looking for the next school climate initiative, consider current practices that have established support. When both new and experienced staff are convinced of a system's efficacy, leaders should capitalize and build upon that support and momentum (Raible, 2016). As a result, the feeling of having "another thing" added to one's workload is minimized. Initiative fatigue is reduced by focusing on the deep and meaningful implementation of fewer initiatives, which may allow more staff to authentically engage in school climate improvement efforts.

Leadership Scenario

Consider the scenario below with the lens of critical self-reflection. What feelings and assumptions arise? Reflect on your leadership practices as you consider the situation detailed below.

Greenwood Middle School is led by Principal Rodriguez and is located in a suburban California school district in a racially and linguistically diverse community that has a

large population of students from migrant worker families. Previously, Principal Rodriguez was a classroom teacher for 16 years, during which time she developed positive relationships with many members of the school staff and the community. She attended PBIS conferences and trainings in the summer before taking over as principal, researched best implementation practices, and consulted with colleagues who had successfully implemented PBIS at their schools. In addition to school climate assessments, student focus groups and family members revealed that they felt behavioral expectations were not always clear and were applied inconsistently.

Principal Rodriguez shared a vision and clear plan of implementation with her school staff at the beginning of the school year. Given her positive relationships with school staff, she was surprised to encounter opposition. Some teachers questioned whether PBIS was the right approach because their suspension and expulsion rates were lower than average districtwide (but still higher than average for the state). Others wondered when they would be evaluated on how well they implemented the new initiative and when they would have the time to learn about new practices. Other staff members were seen with their arms crossed, while still others remained silent and unengaged. Principal Rodriguez was left wondering how she should proceed after the meeting ended.

Questions to Consider

- » Which of the reasons for resistance—burnout, lack of trust, or fear—might be most at play in this scenario?
- » How might Principal Rodriguez have introduced PBIS to her school staff differently?
- » What questions should Principal Rodriguez ask next to learn more about why staff members seemed to exhibit resistance?

Summary

Leaders in schools and districts who want to improve school climates must first address the underlying causes of resistance. These root causes include burnout, a lack of trust, and a fear of loss, which are all structural elements of the working conditions that school staff face. The most important function of education leaders is supporting staff members as they learn, take risks trying new practices, and engage in a process of continuous improvement. Although many factors influence any staff member's experience in a given context, attending to personal leadership, shared vision, and shared leadership and making change meaningful and purposeful are high-leverage strategies for bringing about positive change. Resistance to change within schools is a natural and expected phenomenon that can provide a more holistic perspective and thus more meaningfully inform the most effective next steps.

Recommended Resources

The resources below can support school and district leaders as they address the root causes of resistance through a systems approach and cultivate healthy working conditions for school staff.

- » [Rethinking Resistance: New Insights Into an Ongoing Inquiry](#)
- » [Connecting Teacher Practice With Social and Emotional Learning](#)
- » [Creating a Culture of Care: A Guide for Education Leaders to Develop Systems and Structures That Support Educator Well-Being](#)
- » [Participatory Systems Change for Equity: An Inquiry Guide for Child-, Youth-, and Family-Serving Agencies](#)
- » [Intensive Supports for Educator Well-Being – Van Ness Elementary School](#)

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