Defining & Designing a School’s Culture

People who study organizational culture attribute as much as half of the difference in a company’s profits to effective culture. Author James Hesket who writes about culture says, “In many organizations, culture is the most potent and hard-to-replicate source of competitive advantage…and it ranks among the most important of all competitive advantages.” The impact of culture in any organization, whether it is a family, a school, or a multi-national corporation, is both measurable and malleable. Colorado Academy has taken that to heart.

For the past year, faculty, staff, students, parents, and alumni have been part of an on-going project on school culture. While CA’s indicator of success is not profits, it is turning out well-educated, well-prepared, and well-rounded students, and students who exhibit a specific set of traits that their own community has deemed to be critically important.

Head of School Dr. Mike Davis described the project at the beginning of the year as one that would:

- Sustain a culture that is highly supportive of student learning and achievement
- Improve ethical and moral instruction of children and young adults
- Reaffirm shared core values
- Create a culture of “growth through practice” around character and well-being, service, and leadership
- Employ a design-thinking approach toward creating the healthiest possible student and faculty culture.

With the help of 25-year veteran educator Dave Mochel, an expert on social, cognitive and emotional growth, the Colorado Academy community, with participants as young as eight years old, has participated in hours of work, written hundreds of words to define what they value most — those concepts will, from here forward, get significant attention in and out of the classroom. They are Courage — which encompasses both responsibility...
CA by the numbers

Pupil/Teacher Ratio 9:1
Average class size: 16
Maximum class size: 21

Pre-Kindergarten: 25-30 students with three full-time teachers and access to specialists in art, music, PE, technology, library, and science 1-to-3 times a week.

Kindergarten: Two classrooms of 20-22 students, each with two full-time teachers and access to specialists in art, music, PE, technology, library, science, robotics, and Spanish 2-to-3 times a week.

1st grade: Three classrooms of 15-17 students, each with a full-time teacher and access to specialists in art, music, PE, library, science, robotics, and Spanish 2-to-3 times a week.

2nd-5th grades: Three classrooms of 16-20 students, each with a full-time teacher and access to specialists in art, music, PE/kinesiology, technology, library, science, robotics, and Spanish 2-to-3 times a week.

Middle School: Students cycle through daily classes of math, English, social studies, French or Spanish, art elective, science and athletics. Class sizes range from 11 to 21, depending upon the period, with the average class size at 17.

Upper School: Students cycle through daily classes of math; English; social studies; French, German, Spanish or Mandarin; art elective; science; and athletics. Class sizes range from 5 to 20, depending upon the period, with the average class size at 16.

and grit, and Kindness, which encompasses gratitude and inclusivity.

Why? Davis says, “Our jobs are quite special: we have the privilege of sharing in the evolution and growth of human beings. Is it not incumbent upon us then, to use every tool and intention available to create a culture where students are taught not only core subjects and 21st century skills, but also those traits we think will help them now and in the future to be productive, responsible, respectable contributors to the world?”

The work at CA, according to Mochel, “is built on the understanding that character is a result of individual practice and culture is a result of collective practice. Mathematically, CA takes students from addition and subtraction to algebra and calculus. Imagine what is possible in terms of courage and kindness if we are equally intentional about that area of a child’s development. Further, imagine the culture that is created if these skills are focused on in every area of school life. By involving students, parents, teachers, and alumni in this work, CA is building a strong foundation upon which this work will continue to grow.” President-elect of CA’s Parent Association, Mona Ferrugia, says, “I am excited to be involved in the work CA is doing to define what character qualities are most important to our community. The process we completed over the past year brought us to the table and gave us an opportunity to articulate the heart and soul of the school culture. Going forward, I can only begin to imagine the positive ripple effect as the entire CA community practices speaking the same language of respect.”

Mona Ferrugia, CA Parent Association President-elect

*Introduction to The Culture Cycle: How to Shape the Unseen Force that Transforms Performance, FT Press, 2011.*