




IMPROVING
**SCHOOL
CULTURE** THROUGH
TEACHER GROUPS



With the creation of staff groups, teachers can become full partners in leading a school

BY BENJAMIN HELFAT WITH
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School culture or school climate is one of the most talked about, but least tangible, terms in K–12 education today. School culture, and especially teacher climate, can be one of the hardest aspects of my job as a relatively new principal. Despite following best practices from educational literature, it can be difficult to get a real pulse on the staff. I wonder how teachers feel and whether my efforts to improve teacher climate are making a difference.



Last year, our school completed the first year of a pilot program called RELATE (Realizing Educational Leadership and Teaching Excellence). This program brought a group of eight teachers together every other week, co-led by an outside psychiatrist and a senior teacher. Group members were asked to talk about their needs and concerns at school. The group is a safe space for teachers and serves as a model for how to facilitate successful student groups in and out of the classroom.

After a year of these group meetings, I am seeing a new school culture take root. Teachers in the group take more initiative and have become leaders in the community. It is clear that this program has improved our school culture.

Boston Adult Technical Academy

I have been the principal at Boston Adult Technical Academy for three years. We are a public school for students from ages 19 to 22. Most of our students are working or have other obligations that compete with school. Our teachers do not only teach; they also function as social workers, friends, and sometimes disciplinarians. They regularly work more hours than their union contracts require.

I know my staff is overworked and underpaid, and because of that, I know that I must take any steps I can to keep them happy and satisfied in their jobs. It's essential that I foster a climate in which staff support each other, so that teachers have the energy to help their students.

When Adam Silk, contributor to this article and founder of RELATE, approached me a year ago, I was already trying to build a positive staff culture. My door was open for teachers, I organized staff celebrations, and I tried to make professional development opportunities engaging and useful. I wasn't sure how effective these strategies were.

Silk offered to run a staff group. This was not foreign to me, as I had run "critical friends" groups. This group, however, had a twist: I was not allowed to participate or know what was discussed. This immediately upset me. I kept imagining a clandestine meeting where the staff were planning to mutiny. As we talked, I gradually understood his reasoning—success depended on teachers feeling they could speak without fear of administrative retribution.

He asked me to choose teachers for the group and provide a space and time to meet. He would run the group with a teacher

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facilitator and would check in every few weeks about logistics, but not content. As the year progressed, I knew the group was meeting, but I heard little about it. When talking with teachers in the group, I would ask how it was going, and all said they enjoyed it. I knew nothing else. I continued my staff culture initiatives, and Silk continued his.

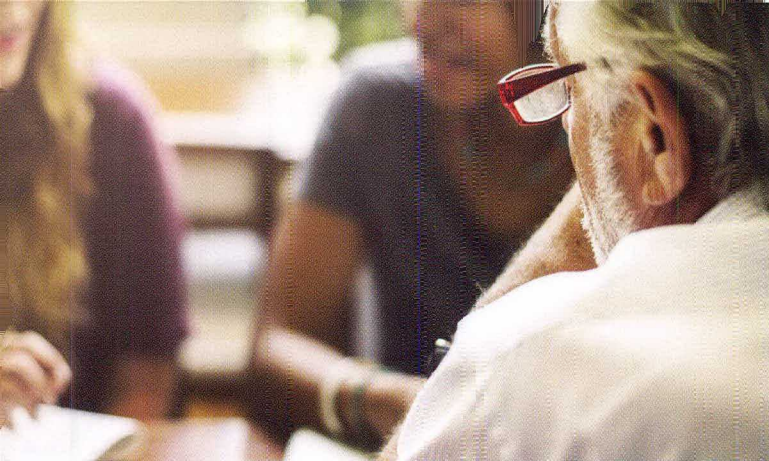
The RELATE Project

RELATE is currently running groups in three Boston schools. It aims to address a hole in teacher training. Educators are not traditionally taught how to create safe and lively groups. In medicine and psychology, this training has existed for decades. RELATE adapts those programs for educators.

These are not therapy groups. Teachers discuss their work, not their personal lives. As teachers discuss professional challenges, staff cohesion and morale improve. The hope is that as teachers become more effective group leaders, schools will become safer and academically successful.

Some teachers approach these groups with skepticism, but several factors improve teacher buy-in. Principals' support is crucial, and so is letting teachers know that they are not being evaluated in these groups. Crafting a group agreement at the start of the year also helps build cohesiveness and trust.

All groups go through periods of strain, and skillful leaders help teacher groups get through hard times. They point out that the group's growing pains mirror classroom situations teachers often face. Teachers



watch their group leaders deal with challenges and learn how to support classes through their difficulties.

The First-Year Experience

Halfway through the year, some teachers from the group approached me with ideas to improve the school. Some of these were small, such as a request to reorganize some structures within the math team. Others were bigger, involving school direction and administrative transparency. Some conversations were tough, forcing me to examine my leadership practices. But they were all respectful. Teachers were finding their voices and using them so we all could improve the school together.

Before the RELATE group started, I typically got two types of feedback from teachers. One type was respectful and reserved, rarely hitting controversial areas. The second type came from an angry teacher, lashing out at me clearly without intending to improve me or the school.

The meetings with RELATE-trained teachers were different and felt like a new stage in our school's cultural development. Teachers were speaking up to improve our school. The meetings were constructive and positive. They were the first example for me of a "school that learns."

A Sustainable Program?

RELATE is designed to minimize reliance on outside staff and money. First-year groups are co-led by an outside facilitator with expertise in group leadership and an in-house senior educator. That first year is an apprenticeship for the in-house leader, with time set aside for discussions with the outside leader. In the second year, the in-house leader leads the group alone, but continues to meet with the outside leader for supervision and support.

The ultimate goal is to build a network of in-house group leaders who can help each other when challenges arise in their groups. They will also coach and mentor new facilitators, decreasing the school's dependence on outside consultants.

Teacher and School Climate

One of the most significant examples of our emerging positive staff climate came last June. As the year was ending, my

Instructional Leadership Team asked to run a few reflective meetings to debrief the year and get a jump on the work of the next year. I was not going to be able to plan these meetings or attend all of them. A few teachers (ones who participated in the teacher group) said that was fine, as long as I would consider all of the feedback that was given at the meeting.

I attended some of these meetings as an observer. I heard things that were critical of my work over the year, and I also heard how we could improve. The feedback was not personal; rather, it was truthful feedback about their experiences this year. I realized that this type of feedback would not have come from a meeting I had led. It had to be done by a teacher leader—it was a great example of distributive leadership.

Looking back on the year, I am thankful for having this program in my school. The effects on teacher climate, while subtle, were important. This program became the catalyst for teachers becoming full partners in leading our school. RELATE has now expanded at Boston Adult Technical Academy. The first group is now facilitated by two of its founding teachers, who consult with Silk regularly. He is co-leading a new group with a new co-leader. By now, over half of my staff is in a group.

I often tell teachers the best indicator of their success in the classroom is that they are no longer needed. The students have learned the skills they need, and they are independently learning and growing. Could this also be true about "schools that learn"—that they will no longer need administration to provide so much leadership? 🇺🇸

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