

# TAKING THE TEMPERATURE OF YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE

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## SUMMARY

Classical Christian education is having a national and international impact on the educational landscape. New schools are starting, and existing schools are growing. As schools grow and mature, the family culture that started the school can be challenged and subtly changed. Leaders who see this will “take the cultural temperature” and use this insight in their future planning.

### “I THINK WE MAY HAVE AN ENROLLMENT PROBLEM”

Enrollment consists of two things: retaining existing students and recruiting new ones. School leaders too often focus on one but not the other. Most leaders will focus on a new promotion technique to add more students—but these efforts may be too little and too late. The experts will tell you that marketing and promotion is a year-round effort that must be well coordinated and filled with rich content that continually draws potential families into a deeper relationship with their future partner. On the flip side, retention is the summary of all experience and attitudes: is the existing

parent still convinced that your school is positively the best of all possible choices? This is where culture is a critical factor.

A school that has been faithful to its call to be classical and Christian has an equally faithful core group of families that establish the culture. This culture conveys God's love and His desire to see the next generation trained to bring Christian influence to the world.

In this way, others are added to the core and the school grows numerically while simultaneously building a faculty that buys into the vision. The board and the administration are synchronized in mission and approach. The school grows, adds grades and programs; everything is as it should be. The transition from grammar to logic goes well, and then comes the challenge of rhetoric.

Building the rhetoric program is more than adding teachers and courses, of course. The “upper school” has its own set of challenges because parents and students are thinking about college, and what they often desire is to get into a “good” school. Will the house system help students become more attractive college applicants? How about a more robust and competitive athletics program? What about dual enrollment with a nearby

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college? debate, mock trial, or both? How about a service requirement for graduation?

The school pushes on, and it proudly marches its first graduates across the stage. “Okay, we made it this far—let’s just keep the lower school feeding the upper and we’ll grow again.”

But not everyone got the memo, and some families leave for a larger private school or for a public school. They all have their reasons: “We’re letting our son make his own decision,” “Our daughter’s interests are not well served here,” “The tuition is impacting what we can do for college,” etc. Because the stated reasons are fairly subjective and personal, they are hard to argue against. But the board that lacks a thoughtful macro view might see simply a plateau, or the beginning of a slight turndown. This is the point at which greater insight and wisdom are critical.

Proverbs 15:22: “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”

## WE NEED TO BETTER UNDERSTAND OUR FAMILIES AND THEIR CONCERNS

The wise leaders know that something is happening. Everyone has a theory and an anecdote but consensus is missing. “It’s not the same as when we started, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

A simple and objective assessment of culture can be helpful. We use a two-step process: a written survey followed by an on-site interview process. We have applied these techniques twice in the last six months alone, at two different schools, and the resulting insights have helped those boards separate the wheat from the chaff.

The survey questions were designed to get parents and staff thinking about their original experience and what they have experienced since then. Here they are:

1. What is the primary reason you chose “Faithful Classical”?
2. Did you come to a tour or an open house?
3. How did you hear about the school?
4. Are your expectations for your children being met in the following areas:
  - a. Spiritual health—is their faith being nurtured by teachers and other leaders?
  - b. What is the spiritual orientation of the teachers and other leaders?
  - c. Academics—are they too rigorous or not rigorous enough?
  - d. Culture—do you feel a sense of belonging and connectedness? Does your child?
  - e. Are resources managed and stewarded well?
- f. How are your children’s relationships with other students? Are the teachers keeping you informed?
5. In what areas do you think Faithful Classical could improve the student’s overall preparation? Academic preparation? Life preparation?
6. What changes would you hope to see in a future Faithful Classical?
7. Are you comfortable with and clear about the direction of Faithful Classical?
8. School family—what does it mean to you, and does Faithful Classical embody it?
9. How would you explain the distinctives of Faithful Classical to someone—what makes it different from other private or Christian schools?

Well over 50% of the families took the time to respond, and they did not hesitate to write very specific answers. The answers were compiled, and we reviewed and analyzed them before the on-site interviews.

The interviews were with individual parents and one or two consultants. The parents were promised anonymity so that they felt comfortable sharing openly. We ensured that enough time slots were available so that everyone who wanted to be interviewed could be scheduled. In that sense, parents self-selected. We made

sure, however, that every division was represented and that we had new families to interview as well as ones who had been part of the school for a longer time.

Spanning two full days, we conducted over forty interviews with parents and teachers (the latter both as parents, where applicable, and in their teaching role). Each interview lasted about thirty minutes, following this format:

- What brought you to Faithful Classical and how have your expectations been met?
- Is your child (or are your children) thriving as you hoped? If so, how? If not, what are the issues?
- What about the school gives you hope and confidence about the future?
- What are your concerns or questions?

## THE PROCESS IS THE PRODUCT

We prepare a final report, debrief the leadership, and hold a town hall for all constituents of the school. By the time of the town hall, the leadership should have had time to digest the work and have drawn some conclusions about near-term actions and longer-term planning. Generally, the consultants will not uncover something at that final stage that has not already been mentioned or thought of. The survey and the interviews will help the leadership understand the depth or trends of the concerns, providing focus on the most critical issues first.

As important as these tactical steps are, don't overlook the process itself. Parents and teachers frequently told us how grateful they were for the opportunity to express their concerns in an honest and confidential setting. Their consistent message was, "The board must really care about the families and our future if they are going to the effort and expense of bringing in outside counsel to hear us."

## A LEARNING AND ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

The board and administration then have some questions to process and pray about as they plan next steps.

- Do we agree with the findings? Are there some people who don't understand what we are trying to do?
- Do the suggestions strike at the core of the mission? If not, what can we implement sooner than later?
- What are the communications issues?
- Are there underlying leadership or organizational issues?
- How do we use these insights in our future planning?

Great leaders are courageous, humble, and passionate about improving their partnership with parents. They lay down their presuppositions and lower their guard in service to a genuine desire to hear the truth as expressed orally and in writing.

The resulting implementation plan should be specific and well communicated to the stakeholders—they need to know, and they need to help. Turning the ship requires a high degree of cooperation and trust. It is often helpful to keep external advisors involved to aid in holding the board accountable for the promises being made.

## EPILOGUE

Taking the temperature of the culture can be a scary thing. It implies that you might learn things that you wish were not the case. Worse, you may have to change things, which is hard. It is expensive and takes time. "Can't we do this survey and assessment ourselves and

save the expense of bringing in outsiders? Consultants don't even know our school, and the process seems straightforward enough."

All of this is true (although it's also true that "outsiders" can often draw out insights that stakeholders might not reveal to "insiders"). But leaders who invest in a serious process will be open to the changes that need to be made. Theodore Roosevelt is quoted as having said, "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

Bless your stakeholders by taking the temperature of the school's culture.

