Preface

Culture means a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, and truths they accept.

Character can mean one of two things: (1) that which someone really is—their nature as formed by habit or (2) the expression of a person's unique individuality.

S chools are made. This book is about how they are made well. By telling the stories of twelve very different but equally extraordinary schools from all across the country, this book explains how school cultures are made, how they form student character, and, ultimately, how great school cultures harness student character to drive achievement.

All schools have a culture. No school is without one. School culture shapes what occurs within the building and what happens without—whether for good or for ill. The key questions are simply what are the particular sources of your school's culture and what effect does it have on your school's outcomes.

Answering these questions well and having the means to harness school culture to drive positive outcomes, I believe, is *the* school leadership question of the next ten years.

Given the rate of change in our society at large and the speed with which recent high school and college graduates are expected to compete with their peers *worldwide* for the same jobs and opportunities, it has become the essential duty of all school leaders to create environments that overwhelmingly

give students both the academic skills and the personal where-withal to compete successfully in a global economy.

This book profiles twelve outstanding schools that together provide a roadmap for anyone wishing to create a great school culture. In the detail of what these schools do and through the study of how they do it, the reader of this book will learn in practical terms how great school cultures are made and what is required to harness the transformational power of school culture to drive outstanding student outcomes.

FROM GOOD TO GREAT

The twelve extraordinary schools profiled later in these pages demonstrate that a school's faculty and administration, given the right priorities and a proper coordination of effort, can purposefully create a school culture that dramatically improves the lives of the children entrusted to their care. Further, these schools show that children who benefit from these environments experience a renewed sense of self and an individual sense of purpose that can then be tapped to drive remarkable student achievement.

Although it may be surprising that a particular school culture would produce equally good athletes, good citizens, good artists, and good scholars, it turns out to be very common that a schoolwide focus on what it means to be good—a culture of character—is at the root of many schools being great.

In its simplest formulation, the schools highlighted here teach us that if children are taught to be good, they can learn to be great. The level of accomplishment regularly achieved in these schools is astounding, but it would not be possible without the moral excellence that precedes it. Seriousness and hard work are required to do well in school, but for the faculty and administrations of the schools profiled here, it is their schoolwide attention to *student happiness* first that makes this level of achievement possible.

What happens to students in these schools happens *on purpose.* And so these schools are celebrated for the remarkable

degree to which they purposefully shape their school cultures to achieve very certain outcomes. But there is more here.

No matter how well *intentioned* our school systems may be, the absolute priority in schools today is not placed first on the individual well-being—let alone on the *intended* happiness—of each individual student. The schools profiled here quite simply teach that schools are for children; structured in any other way, they lose their *purpose.* These schools also teach us that to be effective, school cultures have to be *intentional.* School cultures have to be purposefully constructed to produce very particular outcomes. If they are not intentional, if they are not explicit about what they want to achieve and how they intend to achieve it, then they invite every form of mixed message to dilute their overall mission or diminish their ability to execute on it.

And that's the point. The risk of not purposefully focusing on school culture is that you risk inviting every possible alternative to what you ultimately want for your school.

Although this single observation should be sufficient to get schools and communities focused on creating great school cultures that form strong character, there are three reasons why this topic that is so important to the success of our children gets lost among other discussions.

THREE FALSE STARTS

First, the academic and popular literature on schooling has almost a cultlike fascination with the role of school leadership in driving great outcomes. To the detriment of our understanding about school climate and culture, we have focused almost exclusively on leadership. However important the role of the school principal may be, we must not forget that the primary job of all senior leaders is to create the proper *work environment* and then effectively *motivate* those who work there. Too much of the discussion surrounding school principals has failed to recognize the many elements outside of school leadership that shape a school environment, let alone how the

workers in that environment are best motivated. Most especially, this discussion surrounding school principals has failed to notice that in every school in the world, the greatest amount of work is done—or should be done—by *students,* and so it is *they* who most need to be motivated by the environment.

Second, school culture is often presented as a topic of such complexity that it cannot possibly be managed to yield certain outcomes. This is simply untrue. "School-Level Factors," as Robert Marzano (2003) and others have rightly identified them, are a well-understood subset of the total number of influences on student outcomes. School-level factors, however, drive teacher-level effects, and in the end, it is overall teacher quality that is the single most accurate indicator of a student's performance in school (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). If school cultures do not create environments in which teachers are intrinsically rewarded for their hard work and so willingly contribute their very best efforts, then the school will miss the mark. This book aims to fix this mistake.

Third, but perhaps most importantly, the discussion of school culture as it is presented here is intended as an antidote to so much discussion of character education as it is popularly understood. However well intended, what passes for character education is often so hopelessly thin and so irregularly supported that it has little lasting effect on the moral formation of students and even less impact on the broader activities they engage in across any given school day. Although some of these shortcomings can be overcome through better program design, it is the strong opinion of many people featured in this book that character education programs often unintentionally (and unknowingly) undermine their stated purpose. In this book, we argue that to work at all such programs must first be entirely reoriented to a greater good. By making the low goals of "disciplined behavior" or "caring kids" their main objective, these efforts typically miss altogether the fundamental truth that human happiness is the greatest catalyst of human excellence. In stark contrast to so much "character education programming," the schools featured here demonstrate that

when schools are properly ordered, they naturally become centers of both happiness and excellence.

Consistent with this way of thinking, the schools profiled in this book demonstrate a very simple but profound truth: Schools become great by creating a culture in which confident children joyfully strive to accomplish worthy goals in concert with their friends. What is more, the children in these schools understand why this striving is good and what this requires of them and their fellow students. On the other hand, too many efforts at character education just aim for a more mild-mannered school. In so doing they tear at the heart and soul of what makes real teaching and learning such a passionate exercise.

Taken altogether, the schools profiled here remind us what great schooling looks like and what concrete steps we can take to create many more great schools like them.