



## CHAPTER 4

# Know Your Culture

*Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed; the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day.*

— FRANCES HESSELBEIN,  
FORMER CEO OF GIRL SCOUTS OF THE USA

When Shannon started as the librarian at Van Meter Community School, her main goal was to build a community within the library and within her school. She wanted to create a place for the students, teachers, families, and members of the community to come to connect, learn, share, and be heard. “I was looking for opportunity anywhere I could find it,” she remembers. “It wasn’t that our community wasn’t engaged, but the library wasn’t a focal piece in the school and in the community. I knew we could do more, I just had to find it.” In chapter 1 we discussed the many ways that a librarian can build relationships, but building a community is different. Communities are certainly about relationships, but they’re

also about culture. They are about tradition, rituals, and history. Culture drives so much of how schools approach challenges and opportunities and it connects the past and present in ways that honor where that community has been but, at times, can create barriers for where you want to go.

We recognize that every school has their own unique community and that not every strategy and idea will work in every location. This chapter focuses on identifying and embracing the uniqueness of your individual community.

## Identifying Culture

Not long ago, Bill walked into a building of a school district in Colorado that was looking for some help as they planned to evaluate their library program. School was in session and the bustle of students and sound of collaboration filled the hallways. Kids were engaged in their learning and there was a vibe, just a feeling in the air, that was energizing. During a break, the librarian of that school offered to show him around and, as they walked, she talked about the relationships that she had with her students and teachers. She shared that this was the only building that she had ever been in and that she started in the classroom and had eventually moved into the role of librarian. She was a longstanding part of the school community but was having trouble making changes to her program. “I feel like I’m in too deep,” she told him. “They all trust me, but all of my teachers just want me to check out books and read to kids. I know I can do so much more but I don’t know how to get past that and to a point where I can be more beneficial to the school.”

This conversation illustrates the conflict that occurs for many librarians. This school has a strong culture, and they are successful. By all accounts, the culture of the building is a

positive space where learning happens, and kids are engaged. But there's also often an underlying culture that, once identified, can help our libraries make an even bigger impact on the work of the school.

As Bill and the librarian continued their conversation, it shifted to the idea that there is an unspoken culture that is found in schools and identifying and uncovering that can be the first step toward making that next step in the library program. For this librarian, who had been embedded in this school for many years, that underlying culture was invisible, until she was intentionally looking for it.

Over the next few weeks, she and Bill met through a series of video calls and tried to define her approach. They came up with a series of questions to answer and strategies to utilize in her quest to uncover the underlying culture. Here's an abbreviated list:

- Become an impartial observer and try to see the interactions as someone outside the building might.
  - How do the teachers in my building treat each other? Are there overt or underlying conflicts and resentments?
- Ask questions and listen to kids.
  - What are their favorite activities or events that happen at the school?
  - Who are their school “heroes”?
- How are common areas utilized?
  - Do those in your building come together during planning periods, before or after school (or other down times)?

- Where do most small group meetings occur? In classrooms, the lounge, the library, or somewhere else?
- Many schools have a climate survey. Can you get the results?

These and many more questions and strategies can help to look beyond the surface of a school and get to the actual culture that permeates the school. For a librarian, the culture of the school is everything. Librarians must have their fingers on the pulse of their schools and recognize the capacity for change that a building has. It's not what's evident; it's what's underlying that's important. This type of analysis is a common strategy for administrators who are looking to make changes and can be seen as a leadership approach as well. You can't know how to get where you're trying to go if you don't know where you are.



*Librarians must have their fingers on the pulse of their schools and recognize the capacity for change that a building has.*

## Being Responsive to the Community

Recognizing how a community is unique and having one's finger on the pulse of a building is crucial for librarians who seek to become the heart of the school. To do this, librarians have many roles that they can play but the most important has to do with what Eric Sheninger and Tom Murray describe as a "Culture of Yes" in their book *Learning Transformed*. Here they suggest that "you must develop a mindset for change..." beginning with "... a reflection of why change is so hard and an assessment of why previous change has failed in your school..." (Sheninger and Murray, p. 39). Due to the uniqueness of your community, there

is no one right way to do this. However, keep in mind that, to a certain extent, your school, and what goes on in it, is a reflection of the community that it serves and is made of.

As a librarian, it's important to not only know the school, but as we mention in chapter 1, those which it serves. When you seek to change culture, it's critical to know what internal and external forces are at play. You must also recognize that communities change. Each year a new group of students joins and helps to shape your community. As leaders, this means that you, as a librarian, must be able to shift to identify and meet those needs while, at the exact same moment, help to shape the culture of the school.

Again, this is where it becomes imperative that you connect with your administrator to make sure you are on the same path. Building principals and district level leaders are constantly evaluating and considering strategies for school climate and culture. Review the strategies for building relationships that we outlined in chapter 3 to build that trust. For the librarian, make yourself an ally that is supporting the whole school. For the administrator, recognize that your librarian is one of the few people in the school that connects with every student and supports every teacher. They know the school differently than you do. Utilize their knowledge and support each other in those whole school efforts.



*The capacity to lead others is strengthened when one's own well-being is nurtured.*

In today's world, that often means that we need to support our students' digital wellness and social emotional needs. It means that we must be in tune with our teachers and the adults in our community to recognize when there are those who are

struggling. This is all part of the culture in which we participate. It's part of the fabric that makes up our schools and we help to create that fabric through the programming and opportunities that we create. However, sometimes it's easy to forget that we must also take care of ourselves. There are certainly many times where leadership requires self-sacrifice, but we must be able to recognize those moments when we need to step back and look at our own needs. The capacity to lead others is strengthened when one's own well-being is nurtured. Be sure that you are aware of your own needs so that you can be more effective in your own leadership.

Plain and simple, this is hard stuff. Culture is ever changing and, if you are in tune to it, you will be able to identify and even predict what's coming next. One note of caution, being responsive obviously isn't in just one area of a librarian's work. Whether you are building your collection, bringing digital tools and technology to the table, or supporting best practices in the classroom, every part of the work that you do will constantly be in beta. It will shift from year to year, month to month, and kid to kid. The key is to make a habit out of observing, identifying, and responding so that you are able to stay one step ahead and help to shape that culture every day for all of your learners.



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Regardless of your strategy, it's important to remember the overall goal. As Allison Zmuda and Violet Harada remind us in their book *Librarians as Learning Specialists*, “the goal is not to increase collaboration but to improve student performance.” It's

also not to force greater participation in professional learning, create a makerspace, or have a respected program. (Zmuda, p. 31) The overall goal has to remain student learning and to meet the objectives identified by the school community.

## Creativity, Exploration, Discovery

Shannon often talks about how the role of the library has changed over time but she also recognizes that the purpose, in many ways, has stayed the same. In today's classrooms, there are so many pressures on students and teachers to get through content that needs to be covered while designing engaging learning experiences, showing growth in skills and knowledge, and applying understanding to new situations. We are obviously painting with a very broad brush and we know amazing things happen in classrooms. However, one of the many things that can happen for students in libraries is the opportunity to create, explore, and discover.

We may be preaching to the choir here, but it bears repeating that the experiences libraries can offer outside of the classroom curriculum can bolster students' creativity and help them explore the topics that interest them. We want to reiterate that, in this case, it's not just about makerspaces or genius hour. It can be as typical as helping students find that "just right" book, or something more advanced like 3D printing or robotics. The key here is that the library is this place. It's a place for discovery and exploration where the librarian, the library space, and the programming that happens there supports student learning and self-discovery.

An example of embracing creativity and discovery comes from elementary school librarian Michelle Colte Carlson, who brings a sense of wonder, fascination, and a love of learning to her library every single day.



**Figure 4.1.** Students explore coding in the library using drones.



## LIBRARIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Michelle Colte Carlson, Librarian at Daniel Inouye Elementary School in Wahiawa, Hawaii*

“Would you be willing to visit my school?” This simple query has never failed me and continues to bring opportunity to my kids. I visit Geek Fests, craft fairs, and “Keiki Cons” to find makers of all types who are willing to share their creations with students. A Pokémon artist was our “artist in residence” at our Big Draw Family event, and one gentleman brought his GIANT wooden jenga, marble maze, and Connect 4 for kids to play at our Cardboard Challenge build. A local police officer and comic book artist even took the time to help our fourth graders develop comic book characters. Internally, my students can sign up to teach “lunch-time pop-ups” in the makerspace and most recently, I’ve invited “Maker Moms” to lead activities during



recess or in conjunction with class projects. Inviting makers to make—that’s my new strategy for connecting kids with information.

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Take note, Michelle is not trying to be the expert or facilitate all of these experiences. Rather, she relies on her community and her network to create the opportunities. This kind of exploration and self-discovery helps her students to identify their own interests and carry that into their classroom learning experiences while at her school and as they move out of elementary.

Bringing opportunities for creativity to students is not new for library programs. Amy Johnson illustrates these kinds of opportunities that are a part of the library makerspace program in Parkway Schools.



## LIBRARIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Amy Johnson, Digital Learning Specialist for Parkway Schools  
in Chesterfield, Missouri*

In Parkway, our library makerspaces have created an avenue to enhance the opportunities for students to be inspired creators and explorers. Librarians provide open-ended prompts and a variety of digital and non-digital tools where students can use their imaginations to design, code, and build various solutions. In this personalized approach, students are able to explore their individual interests and abilities in a welcoming environment.

As student needs change, our librarians began to explore how their makerspaces could help students with their emotional needs and gain empathy for others. They began to explore how “making” can foster social emotional learning, equity, and global sustainability.

- At Parkway West High School, the librarians made “DIY to Donate” as an option in their makerspace where students could create cards for children in the hospital or make placemats for a food bank. Each month had a theme to support a cause.
- Parkway South High School dedicated a day of their makerspace during February and offered supplies such as buttons, metal stamping, key chains, posters, and vinyl designs to create something to celebrate Black History Month.
- Sorrento Elementary School recycled water bottles and combined them with 3D printing to create art in the style of glass artist Dale Chihuly that hangs throughout their building.



**Figure 4.2.** Student-created “Chihuly” artwork with recycled water bottles and a 3D printed connector.

In each of these examples, creating for a cause has empowered the students to create with a caring purpose and helped them to see how their outreach impacts others.

## Future Ready and ISTE Standards Connections

When we talk about developing culture, there are a few wedges of the Future Ready Librarians® Framework that we could be addressing. The most obvious is the Collaborative Leadership wedge which is the basis for much of this book. However, we would be remiss if we did not specifically point out three more and make connections to the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders that overlap with these wedges.

The first of these is Personalized Professional Learning and should be a focus of both the librarian and the administrator. If you make a concerted effort to be an observer and listener, you will be more effective in knowing what your teachers know and what they need to know based on the curriculum and building goals. There are multiple entry points here but what we encourage you to consider is rethinking how you define “professional learning”. Just like our students, we are learning all the time and it isn’t relegated to staff meetings or trainings. If you meet with a grade level team and help them with a new digital tool, form a strategic approach to critical thinking, or co-plan a lesson that brings in elements of media literacy and digital citizenship, that’s professional learning that’s just in time and tailored to the needs of that group. For librarians, don’t forget any newsletters that you might author, blogs you might curate, or articles that you pass along. Each one of these supports that culture and allows for a more robust connection between libraries and classrooms. For administrators, you already know that you have great influence over your classrooms

and your teacher, but to foster cultural changes, you also have to be a coach, a supporter, a learning partner, and be in tune with the overall attitude in the building. In the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders, this is highlighted in two places in Standard 3.3.

### **3.3.a. Empower Educators**

*Leaders empower educators to exercise professional agency, build teacher leadership skills and pursue personalized professional learning.*

### **3.3.c. Inspire a Culture of Innovation**

*Leaders inspire a culture of innovation, creative problem-solving, and collaboration that allows the time to explore and develop teaching practices using digital tools.*

As a building leader (whether administrator or librarian), your role is to empower your teachers and sometimes that means pushing them to learn and try things outside of their comfort zone. If you're strategic and work together, you can develop the strategies that will, in time, create the culture you're looking for.

The second of the wedges we see a direct connection to is that of Community Partnerships. In the context of culture, we like to approach this as an opportunity to influence both the internal culture of the school as well as that of our surrounding community. Earlier we referred to the fact that the school is a reflection of the community. In fact, every partnership that is fostered brings with it a tighter, more direct connection with the school and an investment is made in both sides. These partnerships can absolutely have an impact on your culture when managed and sought out. A word of caution though, all community partnerships should help to meet the learning goals of the school with the spirit of making meaningful connections. Just because an opportunity exists, does not mean it's the best for your school or your students. There are times that partnerships might even go against the cultural shifts that you're trying to create. For

example, if you partner with a vendor to bring in a reading program that tracks and directs students in their reading based on data, that could provide a big win for increasing reading levels. However, it could also counteract your desire for a culture of discovery and exploration through reading and taint your relationship with your community when it comes to developing lifelong readers. As a leader, you must weigh the benefits and downfalls of each partnership and take a thinking partner to evaluate those partnerships on a strategic level. These considerations are also highlighted in the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders in standards 3.2 and 3.4.

### **3.2.a. Create a Shared Vision**

*Leaders include a wide range of perspectives from the community to develop and sustain a vision for using technology to advance student learning and success.*

### **3.4.d. Establish Strategic Partnerships**

*Leaders establish partnerships that support the strategic vision, achieve learning priorities, and improve operations.*

Community partnerships are critical to the success of a school's cultural health with both students and staff and can pay big dividends if intentionally harnessed and fostered.

The final wedge we want to suggest has a strong influence on your school culture is that of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. In looking at the three edges of that wedge, they are all potential culture changers if used appropriately.

1. **Curates Digital Resources** encourages librarians to seize the opportunity to find and promote high quality digital resources that can help to inspire both teachers and students to utilize the wealth of digital information and tools that schools can access. The choices we make about the tools and resources that we provide to students and teachers must be intentional and deliberate. They

must consider student privacy and responsible usage and promote equitable access for students. This encourages administrators to recognize and actively promote digital citizenship practices and equity of access to resources that can also be found in indicator 1c in the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders: “Leaders model the use of technology in inclusive, healthy ways to solve problems and strengthen community” (ISTE, 2024).

2. **Builds Instructional Partnerships** invites librarians and teachers to connect around student learning and curriculum through intentional lesson design and delivery to go beyond dissemination of information. This may mean co-teaching, coaching, or common lesson planning, but in all cases, what it does mean is that there must be dedicated time. For administrators, we would encourage you to take a look at your schedule and the way times are allocated. Librarians can be key classroom contributors to learning, but not if they can’t meet with and plan with teachers. The partnership between librarian and teacher can be deep and meaningful if given time and attention and when positively approached and celebrated, will contribute to a culture of learning and innovation in the school.
3. **Empowers Students as Creators** supports librarians’ efforts to bring experiences that promote discovery, collaboration and creations both in the classroom and through library programming. We’ve already given some attention to this above, but it bears repeating here. When we give our students the opportunity to explore and create, we also improve our culture by offering new and exciting experiences. Indicator 3c of the ISTE Standards for Education Leaders states that leaders “inspire a culture of innovation, creative problem-solving, and collaboration that allows the time to explore and develop

teaching practices using digital tools” (ISTE, 2024). This connects nicely with this wedge because it provides that space for teachers to experiment, get comfortable with, and plan the implementation in their classroom of digital tools. Librarians should be seen as the conduit to bring that awareness, training, and excitement into these activities and given time to find, curate, and co-develop lessons with teachers.

These three, along with the Collaborative Leadership wedge, further strengthen the role librarians play in developing innovative culture that can bring about meaningful change to schools. Leaders are constantly evaluating their culture and the partnerships that they develop with their communities are an integral piece of it. There’s no single program or initiative that is going to solely change the culture of a school. Rather, it’s a series of small steps moving in a combined direction that makes the cultural shift and it will only occur if you know your culture.

## #LeadingLibs Challenge

Recognizing the culture that is part of your community is critical to being an effective member of that community. Through the library you can help foster a culture that influences and serves as the heart of the school and a safe and welcoming place for your readers, creators, gamers, makers, writers, musicians, and every other learner in your community. The challenges for this chapter focus on making connections both in and out of your school and encourage you to identify and recognize the culture and your role in its creation through flexibility, responsiveness, and leadership.

- Poll your students about what kinds of things they are interested in and personalize their experiences through a balance of books, digital tools, and experiences.

- Start a student group focused on connecting with their community and bringing positive change that they want to the school.
- Create a learning experience for all learners (kids and adults) that allows them to be creative (maker night, STEM showcase, etc.).
- Reach out to three community leaders (government, business, etc.) and invite them to visit the school library (could be a special event, or maybe make them the event).
- Design a space inside your library meant to cater to adults. Invite them to use it during planning time or at lunch.
- Connect a student with a book or resource that fosters social-emotional connections and helps them explore who they are.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can librarians position themselves as cultural influencers, and how might this perspective impact your interactions with your community?
2. There are many strategies for identifying the underlying culture in a school. Reflect on which strategies might resonate for you and share your thoughts on how they might be applied in diverse school settings.
3. How can the practices of creativity, exploration, and discovery contribute to a more innovative learning environment? How might librarians further empower students as creators in your local context.