

IS YOUR CULTURE REALLY WORKING?

A 5-Minute Culture Checkup for School Leaders

Five observable signs that reveal whether your culture is taking root - or whether you are still carrying it.

Culture is easy to describe when everyone is sitting in a meeting talking about it. The better test is what happens on an ordinary Tuesday when nobody is talking about culture at all.

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKUP

This is not a culture scorecard and it is not a pass/fail test. It is a way to notice patterns. For each signal, choose the description that most closely matches what you see most often - not what you hope is true on your best day.

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PEOPLE PARTICIPATE WITHOUT BEING PUSHED

Buy-in is visible when people choose to take part even when participation is voluntary, routine, inconvenient, unfamiliar, or not personally appealing.

Which sounds most like your school?

1	Compliance-only Participation depends mostly on requirements, reminders, supervision, or consequences.	[]
2	Selective People engage when the activity appeals to them, but participation falls away when it does not.	[]
3	Willing People regularly choose to participate even when they do not have to.	[]
4	Owned People participate willingly and help invite, encourage, or bring others into the experience.	[]

WHAT DID YOU NOTICE THAT LED YOU TO THIS RATING?

FROM THE FIELD

Card Draws, **Super Happy Fun Time**, and dozens of other Micro-Inclusions were part of what I came to think of as a **Joy-Based Culture**. One of the clearest tests came when a team consequence could have become confrontational. Instead, players participated with smiles and laughter. We had not removed accountability; we had changed how accountability was experienced. Joy can turn an ordinary or uncomfortable moment into a shared one. When people willingly participate - even when they would not have chosen the activity themselves - you are seeing evidence that the culture belongs to them too.

LOOK FOR THIS: What do people choose to participate in when nobody is making them?

CONFLICT DOESN'T BECOME ORGANIZATIONAL RESIDUE

Healthy culture does not eliminate disagreement, frustration, or venting. The question is whether conflict can be processed or whether it becomes part of the permanent landscape.

Which sounds most like your school?

1	Entrenched Unresolved conflicts linger, become personal, divide people, or repeatedly consume attention.	[]
2	Lingering People remain functional, but some conflicts continue beneath the surface and are difficult to move beyond.	[]
3	Recoverable Hard conversations happen and people usually return to productive routines.	[]
4	Trusting People can challenge one another clearly while preserving dignity, respect, and the ability to work together.	[]

WHAT DID YOU NOTICE THAT LED YOU TO THIS RATING?

FROM THE FIELD

Difficult conversations are inevitable. **Micro-Inclusions** help build the relational deposits before those conversations ever happen: small, repeated signals that say, *I see you. You belong here.* Then **Finesse-Based Leadership** matters in the moment. Clarity does not require overreaction. When we say what needs to be said while protecting the other person's dignity, the relationship has somewhere to go afterward. I have had unnerving conversations with coaches, educational assistants, players, and students. The relationships did not always return to exactly what they were, but when dignity and trust survived, they could evolve rather than collapse.

LOOK FOR THIS: When people vent or disagree, does the issue eventually move - or does it become part of the culture?

PEOPLE CARRY THE CULTURE WITHOUT YOU

This is not simply whether the school can operate when the principal is away. The deeper question is whether people carry the shared culture without leadership continually reinforcing it.

Which sounds most like your school?

1	Leader-carried Shared expectations and cultural priorities weaken without repeated leadership attention.	[]
2	Supported Some cultural routines continue, but leaders still do most of the reinforcing.	[]
3	Shared Staff or students reinforce important language, expectations, rituals, or standards with one another.	[]
4	Carried forward People protect, teach, adapt, and pass the culture to others - even when leadership attention is elsewhere or after leaders leave.	[]

WHAT DID YOU NOTICE THAT LED YOU TO THIS RATING?

FROM THE FIELD

Student-Led Teams taught me that one of the best signs of culture is the leader becoming less

THE PLACE GIVES MORE ENERGY THAN IT TAKES

A healthy culture does not remove hard work. It reduces avoidable friction and creates more opportunities for people to experience the moments that make the work worth doing.

Which sounds most like your school?

1	Depleting Turnover, transfers, stress leave, recurring conflict, withdrawal, or constant crisis management suggest the work may be taking more than the system gives back.	[]
2	Strained The mission matters, but sustaining it requires heavy individual effort and some people are wearing down.	[]
3	Sustainable Systems, relationships, and shared ownership reduce unnecessary friction and preserve energy for the work.	[]
4	Renewing People generally want to be there, challenges feel manageable, and the culture regularly reconnects people with why they chose the work.	[]

WHAT DID YOU NOTICE THAT LED YOU TO THIS RATING?

FROM THE FIELD

For most of my career, I wanted to get to school or practice - not because every day was easy, but because I knew there would probably be a moment that reminded me why I chose the work. I call them Magic Moments: the student who suddenly gets it, the reluctant kid who joins in, the team that solves something without the coach, the laugh that changes the energy in a room. Those moments are not entirely accidental. Micro-Inclusions create more opportunities for connection and joy. Student-Led Teams give ownership back to students and allow educators to return to teaching and coaching. Finesse-Based Leadership keeps unnecessary conflict from consuming the day. A sustainable culture does not just protect people from burnout. It creates more opportunities to experience the moments that made them want to become educators in the first place.

LOOK FOR THIS: Who is carrying the heaviest part of your culture right now - and are they still experiencing enough of the work that gives them energy?

YOUR CULTURE SNAPSHOT

Don't add the five ratings into one grand total. The pattern - and the evidence behind it - matters more than the score.

Signal	1	2	3	4	Evidence / first thought
The Language Spreads	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
People Participate Without Being Pushed	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
Conflict Doesn't Become Organizational Residue	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
People Carry the Culture Without You	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____
The Place Gives More Energy Than It Takes	☐	☐	☐	☐	_____

START WITH THESE QUESTIONS

- Where is our culture strongest right now - and what evidence makes us say that?
- Which signal received our lowest rating - and who appears to be carrying the cost?
- Where did we hesitate between two ratings? What does that uncertainty tell us?
- What is one small change that could help people carry more of the culture themselves?

TRY THIS WITH YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Have each person complete the five ratings independently - including the evidence that led to each rating. Do not compare answers until everyone is finished.

Then ask: Where did our answers differ most - and why?

The goal is not to decide who is right. Different ratings may reveal that people are experiencing the same school from very different positions. That difference may be the most useful information the checkup gives you.

LET'S CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

If one of these five areas stood out, I would be interested in hearing what you are seeing in your school.

These are the kinds of questions I explore with educators and leadership teams: how culture becomes visible in everyday behavior, how leaders create the conditions for connection and accountability, and how systems can make culture more sustainable rather than becoming one more initiative to maintain.

One simple next step:

Bring the Culture Checkup to your leadership team. Complete it independently - including the evidence behind your ratings. Then start with the place where your answers differ most.

Want to compare notes? Visit thomasbwalls.com and let's continue the conversation.

ABOUT TOM WALLS

Tom Walls is a veteran international teacher, coach, speaker, and author whose work focuses on practical leadership, culture, connection, and the small repeatable behaviors that help people buy in. His central belief is simple: **Culture is a system, not a slogan.**

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