

An Analysis by Scott Jones of:

*The Intentional School Culture:
Building Excellence in Academics and Character*

Charles Elbot and Dave Fulton (2005)
Office of Character and School Culture
Denver Public Schools

As the character education movement continues to gather momentum throughout the country and more schools continue implementing programs to develop the character of their students, more “how-to” books continue to hit the market. Thomas Lickona and Matt Davidson have just published their study *Smart and Good High Schools* and schools interested in developing a character education program have an increasing amount of literature to turn to for guidance. Charles Elbot and David Fulton continue this development with their 2005 book *The Intentional School Culture: Building Excellence in Academics and Character*. This work outlines the development of character education implementation in 18 schools of the Denver Public School system. The authors use their experience with the schools to draw several conclusions about how to implement a character education program and include many examples of the work these schools produced in their journeys. This is where the authors’ central purpose of the publication lies. Elbot and Fulton maintain that the use of their character education plan, with adjustments within each school, allows for a systematic development of a quality character education program.

The strongest part of the authors’ program development is for each school to develop a touchstone to serve as the launching point for the program. Using an example from the Honda Corporation, Elbot and Fulton argue the touchstone idea is different than the average mission statement. While a mission statement develops the purpose and vision of the organization, the touchstone serves as the “how” in achieving the purpose of the organization. When applied to schools, these touchstones, according to the authors, give the school a new sense of purpose, especially if all the stakeholders in the school culture develop the touchstone collaboratively. If this is done as suggested by the

authors, then the school accomplishes “stakeholder buy-in,” a central idea in all character education programs.

Fulton and Elbot continue their discussion about the touchstone with the importance of creating specific rubrics to measure how each of the stakeholders should act if they follow the guidelines set forth by the touchstone. The most practical part of the touchstone section of the book is the inclusion of examples from the 18 schools the authors worked with during their work to develop these programs. By having these examples at their disposal, schools looking to follow the touchstone method for developing a character education focus have some solid models to observe as part of their own brainstorming for their own plans.

Another strong part of the book is the willingness of the authors to develop honest assessments of schools and their cultures. As Elbot and Fulton develop their ideas of the 4 wisdom model (dependence learning, independence learning, interdependence learning and integrated learning) they give examples they have observed of teaching to each of these models and school cultures that lead to teaching to each of these models. Principals and teachers who read this part of *The Intentional School Culture* will most likely find examples of themselves in these descriptions at both the lower model levels (dependence and independence) and, hopefully, at the higher levels (interdependence and integrated). Unfortunately, according to the authors, too many schools they have observed tend to lead to teaching at the lower levels. While they admit that this might be happening because of the fundamental nature of the school setting in America (teachers tend to be their own little islands in individual classrooms), if a school culture is to transcend beyond the classroom and become integrated into the lives of the people at the school,

then schools must address this problem and develop “outside the box” thinking in order to develop a great school culture.

After their discussion concerning the goals of learning, the authors move the book’s discussion to how a school can purposefully work to achieve academic and character excellence. The Elbot and Fulton identify eight things a school can do to create an environment that allows for this development. While each of the eight “gateways” is not revolutionary in their scope, each offers schools several solid examples of ideas that can lead to this purpose. Using the assessment surveys found in the appendix, stakeholders in a school’s culture can identify their strengths and weaknesses, which allows them to develop strategies to move forward. From the use of class meetings to develop *relationships* among the people in the school to developing a service learning program to develop student *voice*, the authors allow readers a chance to read about how the examples lead to the intended goal of intentionally creating an excellent school culture. Again, Elbot and Fulton state that each school’s situation is inherently different from any other school and these are only attempts to offer suggestions for any school hoping to intentionally develop a positive school culture.

Even though the authors try to maintain that each of the “eight gateways” is equally important, a two of these gateways seem to stand out as more critical to the development of the school’s culture. Elbot and Fulton give special attention to the development of relationships, especially between teacher and student, as critical to the process. In fact, this is one of only two gateways to receive outside scientific evidence to support its importance. The other gateway to receive such treatment by the authors is the gateway of leadership. The authors argue that strong leadership within the school is a

must if the touchstone is to permeate throughout the school's culture. They also maintain that it is the leader's responsibility to prioritize the implementation of the gateways since not all eight can be done at once. It seems to not be by accident that Talbot and Fulton start their discussion of the eight gateways with relationships and end it with leadership. The other six seem to be strongly related to these two very important spokes on the wheel of the intentional school culture.

While the book has much overall strength to it, there are a few shortcomings worth mentioning. First, the authors seem to miss a chance of developing the central relationship in the school, the teacher to the student. During their discussion of the touchstone and what it can mean to a school's culture, the authors never fully develop how the touchstone could actually guide day-to-day behavior among teachers and their students. Discussing how teachers within these 18 schools were able to use the touchstone to guide their classrooms and the behavior within them could serve as valuable information for practitioners looking to take character education in their schools and classrooms to a higher level.

Another shortcoming of the work is the utopian setting created by the authors' discussions. This is not just a shortcoming of this book, but seems to be a problem throughout books of this nature. It is understandable that the authors want to portray their plan in the most positive light possible, but when a school runs into problems, as all schools do, the book no longer can serve as an effective guide for implementation. If the authors would have included some discussion as to how some of the school they worked with overcame some of the obstacles, then as other schools using the book as a

model for their own program would have problem solving ideas automatically at their disposal.

The authors also miss an opportunity to present their plan with benchmark results that could help schools place their implementation goals in perspective. Elbot and Fulton do include a wonderful two-year timeline in the book for schools to follow. However, this timeline serves as only a suggestion. It is possible that it could take a school more time than the suggested outline to achieve full implementation. With the possible timeline adherence problems, it would have been a wonderful idea to include examples from several of the schools as they progressed toward their goal of full character education implementation. The authors could have been accomplished by including pre-test compilations of the self-assessments found in the appendix. Follow these samples with a compilation of the same survey at key points during the implementation plan, and again at the end of the process. This would show the various stages of progress each school made during the plan and which areas needed more work at particular times. Schools hoping to replicate this implementation plan in their own schools could develop a level understanding how other schools succeeded and struggled with the various steps. Combined with a full discussion of overcoming problems as discussed earlier, the authors would have not only shown how to implement the program, but also how to get through the problems of implementing the program at an individual school.

Even with these shortcomings, Elbot and Fulton have successfully outlined how they were able to get 18 schools in the Denver Public Schools system to directly address their school cultures. The result is an easy-to-read how to guide for other principals and teachers to follow when they choose to address their own school cultures. The book

offers many already made handouts, rubrics, assessments and other information for assessing and implementing a program similar to that undertaken by these schools. Elbot and Fulton have made a significant contribution to the study of character education and its implementation in school throughout the United States.