



SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL
CHARTER SCHOOL

Cultural Analysis

I. Introduction

Organizational culture is the shared collection of values and norms by people and groups in an organization that control the way they interact with each other and the outside world. Culture is the composition of an organization's artifacts, espoused values, and tacit assumptions, which are defined below:

- 1) An organization's artifacts (physical environment, curricula, dress code, organizational history, etc.) are the sole tools by which a casual observer assesses a culture.
- 2) An organization's espoused values are those values advocated by management and leadership. One can see those espoused values in mission statements, principles, slogans, etc.
- 3) An organization's tacit assumptions support an organization's true, real culture, and yet are largely invisible to all, as they include individual beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, feelings, etc. ¹

Ideally, South Bronx Classical's artifacts, espoused values, and tacit assumptions are aligned and consistent in every interaction involving employees, scholars, parents, and the outside world. This article attempts to succinctly articulate South Bronx Classical's culture.

II. Historical Framework

To effectively understand South Bronx Classical's culture, it is important to understand the school's founding. Doing so sheds light on the purposeful values and principles on which the school was founded and that currently are core to its culture.

¹Tharp, Bruce M., "Defining "Culture" and "Organizational Culture" From Anthropology to the Office."

SBCCS was founded in 2006 by Lester Long, the current Executive Director. After a poor performance in high school, Mr. Long worked full-time as a construction worker while attending a community college at night, where he did well enough to transfer to Dartmouth College. After graduation Mr. Long began a seven-year career in investment banking, a field requiring rigor, tenacity, and precision. In 2001 Mr. Long decided to change careers to “pay forward” the transformative education he received, and joined the New York City Teaching Fellows. He spent four years teaching in a struggling public school in the South Bronx. Teachers, parents, and administrators lacked the tenacity and mission-alignment all great organizations share. Mr. Long was disappointed by the entrenched schedules, hiring restrictions, disorder, and lack of urgency.

To become a part of the solution, Mr. Long accepted a Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, during which he visited the best urban schools in the country and more fully developed his vision. Drawing on his background in finance and education, he proposed a school of high academic rigor with a highly structured and supportive environment where students could develop essential academic and character skills.

Currently in its sixth year of operation, South Bronx Classical remain a mission driven organization, a testament to the clarity and focus of the mission statement and dedication to the mission by staff, parents, and scholars. The culture that has developed is one that allows scholars to achieve academic success and become respectful and productive citizens of their community.

III. Artifacts

South Bronx Classical’s culture is evident in the organization’s artifacts and are plainly visible to staff, scholars, parents, and visitors alike.

Professional Dress and Communication: Faculty and staff are professionals and therefore dress and act as such. Men wear shirts and ties, and women wear slacks, skirts, or dresses. Scholars wear a uniform of shirt, tie and slacks or skirts and jumpers. A culture of respect is evident in the way staff and scholars communicate with each other. Scholars must address adults as ‘Mr.’ and ‘Ms.’ and express their opinions respectfully. Staff address scholars by first name or ‘ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’ when addressing larger groups. Staff collaborate freely to exchange ideas and best practices, review data, share successes, and discuss and resolve challenges. The school encourages staff to express their thoughts and opinions to leadership. In addition, the school has an open door policy, inviting visitors to tour and assess the school. Throughout South Bronx Classical’s history, many critical decisions were driven by community-wide open and honest communication.

College Banners: Going to college is not assumed for our scholars, but once they enter our school they begin a deliberate path to college. To create such a culture, a college-preparatory ethos must be visible in our school's environment and culture. By the age of 5, our scholars can define the term college, see one hundred college banners per day, and know their own predicted year of college graduation. Through a focus on academic achievement and character development, our scholars learn what it will take for them to stay on the college path.

War Room: Objective and critical reflection is essential to academic achievement. Our school's main conference room is purposefully and clearly labeled as the 'War Room'. Here data is posted on scholar performance, attendance and tardiness, standardized tests, cumulative scholar behavior, and At-Risk scholars. Additionally, school's paradigms are posted so that successes, failures, and evidence of needs for improvement are ever-present when faculty and staff meet. The War Room is a place for staff to analyze data and strategize on how to improve their curriculum, instruction, execution, behavior management, and ultimately scholar achievement.

Bulletin Boards (scholar work and data): Bulletin boards are used to showcase scholars' exemplary work and achievements, setting high expectations for scholars and when they meet those expectations we publicly celebrate and display their work. Consistent with the school's mission and standards of excellence, only students who have demonstrated mastery in the content area have their work displayed on the bulletin boards. Scholar reading goals and growth are displayed outside each classroom, ensuring that staff and scholars are always focused on reading comprehension growth. Faculty track which standards each scholar masters throughout the year and post those data outside their classrooms, so scholars and their parents know when they have mastered a skill and can celebrate the accomplishment. Scholars who have demonstrated a character pillar (trustworthiness, citizenship, respect, responsibility, fairness, and caring) are celebrated as Scholars of the Month, posted in each grade's hallway.

Structured, Clean and Organized School Environment: Good organizations organize well. Consistent with the broken windows theory², scholars are more likely to act disorderly and misbehave if their environment is disorderly. For this reason, scholars are provided with a structured, clean, and organized school environment in which they can focus on learning. The school is vigilant in keeping classrooms, offices, copy rooms and common spaces uncluttered, efficient, and orderly and ensuring that the community takes pride in its appearance and upkeep.

² Wilson, James Q., Kelling, George L., "Broken Windows": The "broken windows" theory states that setting norms in urban areas by monitoring and maintaining the environment reduces disorder, from milder anti-social behavior such as littering to more serious crimes.

IV. Espoused Values

An organization's espoused values are found within its mission, principles, and motto.

Mission:

South Bronx Classical Charter School prepares K-5th grade students in the South Bronx to excel in college preparatory middle schools. Through a classical curriculum and highly structured setting, students become liberated scholars and citizens of impeccable character who achieve proficiency in and advanced mastery of New York State Performance Standards.

Principles of Practice:

South Bronx Classical faculty and staff are committed to ensuring the academic success of their scholars by providing a structured and supportive learning environment, focusing on the fundamental goals of early education, and providing the key classical elements critical to the success of each scholar. South Bronx Classical's Principles of Practice consist of those practices which help us achieve our mission:

Rigorous Classical Curriculum: Great instruction requires a great curriculum. South Bronx Classical has developed standards-based scopes and sequences, cohesive and interrelated unit plans, and detailed and flexible lesson plans, all in an organized and modular format, for all subjects and grades. The school's curriculum is classical, sequential, systemic, and provides a strong framework. All 3rd to 5th grade scholars receive Latin instruction, which improves their vocabulary. Scholars in 4th and 5th grades receive debate instruction, which teaches them how to use respectful discourse as a means to disagree and develop their critical thinking and emotional maturity. Scholars in all grades receive Character Education as the development of respectful, compassionate, productive citizens is mission-critical. An organized and rigorous standards-based curriculum is only the first step to creating educational excellence.

Data-Driven Instruction: Teachers regularly and rigorously assess scholars and use that data to inform further instruction and curricular revision. Strong test results may stem from effective instruction, but effective instruction always stems from a culture of data analysis. To that end, teachers meet weekly to discuss scholar data and create actionable steps for future instruction. Moreover, leadership uses data to inform all decisions.

A Structured Environment: The school believes that the old adage "a place for everything and everything in its place" provides wisdom regarding the organization of things, people, and time. "Structure" is not merely composed of discipline and schedules, but profoundly impacts the entire organization's choreography. All children can achieve academic success when given a rigorous and organized curriculum, effective data-driven

instruction, and a supportive and structured environment. All of these areas require organization and structure.

South Bronx Classical is in session for 191 days per year, from 7:50am to 4:30pm, as compared to the public school schedule of 183 days per year, from 8am to 3pm. Those additional hours and days result in 1.6 years more of instruction. A clear code of conduct coupled with administrative support, allows teachers to teach and scholars to learn. Positive behavior is modeled by all staff and taught explicitly through weekly Character Education classes. The school strictly enforces disciplined behavior through transparent expectations shared with families and scholars at orientations and throughout the year.

Faculty Development: Faculty Development is necessary to consistently and effectively improve instruction. The school strives to be an organization where staff receive high quality, highly effective support. Throughout the year, SBCCS teachers receive critical support and feedback from the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, their Grade Team Leader, Mentor (informal feedback), and outside consultants. Consistent with its mission, the school provides three tiers of teacher feedback: Observation Feedback, the Teacher Rubric, and the Individual Professional Improvement Plan, which provides teachers with a framework to reflect on their performance, create measurable goals for their own professional development, develop their practice, and ultimately improve scholar achievement.

Family Engagement: Just as the school supports our scholars and parents, families must support the school they chose. Teachers and staff must engage our scholars' families, but families must be accountable for their children's education by engaging with teachers and staff. They do this by communicating frequently with staff and adhering to the school's non-negotiables: scholars are in school on time every day and ready to learn; scholars are in a complete and clean uniform every day; parents must provide a quiet area for their scholars to complete homework; and parents must ensure that their scholars get a good night's sleep. SBCCS also has an active Family Advisory Council, which is made up of a group of dedicated parents who act as a liaison between parents and administration and fully support the school's mission.

Motto:

An organization's motto represents the distillation of all it seeks to do. South Bronx Classical's motto is "One Great School", which was developed to most succinctly and objectively describe the school.

One: Within the charter world, particularly at our high-performing level, it is rare to have a non-CMO school. While the school is exploring an expansion plan (to 8th grade) and replicate, it is already among the very best stand-alone schools in New York City. Being a small school not within a CMO network differentiates it from

the larger networks and in itself creates a strong sense of community. If the school does expand and replicate, each school must be independently sustainable and academically successful.

Great: A culture of deep, critical, and objective self-reflection is a means for constant improvement and, ultimately, achieving greatness. Scholars' academic achievement and test results, financial success, and high parental demand demonstrate this.

School: South Bronx Classical is a school, not a social services firm (some schools fall into this). While some parent outreach is done and is important, it is always done with scholars' academic best interests in mind. Organizations can easily become distracted by gimmicks and slogans. South Bronx Classical is completely centered around our mission, and does not attempt to be all things for all people.

V. Core Values

South Bronx Classical was founded on and has further developed the principles of practice that are outlined above. Inherent in these principles of practice are the school's core values, which are often difficult for outsiders to see in practice because they consist of our leadership's thoughts and feelings on the values that are most important to the school, its mission, and its culture.

Accountability

At SBCCS, staff are accountable for the execution of their roles, which ultimately ensures that our focus remains mission-aligned and in the best interest of our scholars. Parents are accountable for scholars' education by adhering to the school's non-negotiables. Progress is made only when all stakeholders are accountable for their actions and achievement of their goals.

Innovation

Much of the school was built on the best practices of other high-performing charter schools. A culture of introspection is paramount to success. Staff should always ask, "is this best for my scholar?", "how can I improve?" and "what are other schools and educators doing really well?" A stagnant organization is ripe for failure and therefore the school must be innovative. to go from good to great.

Professionalism

Educators should be as highly-esteemed as professionals are in other respected fields medicine or law and should conduct themselves with as much professionalism and integrity. A culture of respect is grounded in the professionalism of staff and scholars.

Rigor

The school's ambitious mission requires precise and efficient action. Faculty approach large projects and small tasks, whether important and seemingly inconsequential, with a level of attention and exactitude that is a prerequisite for the school's and its scholars' success.

Tenacity

Teaching and molding scholars into "citizens of impeccable character" is incredibly challenging and difficult work. The relentless pursuit of the school's mission is absolutely critical to the success of its scholars. Staff must have grittiness and a "do whatever it takes" tenacity to get the job done, just as our scholars must develop and maintain a "no excuses" attitude towards their own education.

Transparency

The school is accountable to its authorizer, the Board of Regents, the families in the community, and most importantly, the scholars. To ensure that all staff are doing the best job possible for their scholars, our actions, concerns, and ideas must be fully transparent. Internally, this means that staff are objective in data analyses and conversations about scholars. Externally, education and business practices should be visible and explicable to all parties who have a vested interest in South Bronx Classical's success.

Urgency

The school's mission compels all staff to be acutely responsive to the scholars' needs. To ensure that all scholars are academically successful and are respectful, productive and independent citizens of impeccable character, all staff must be urgently active. This means that no task is insignificant.