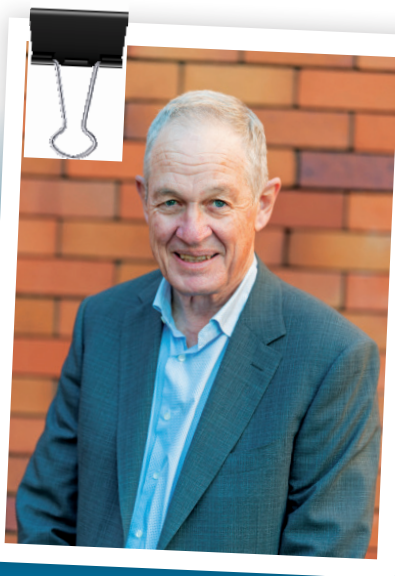


Always take the weather with you

Each person contributes to a school’s climate, making us all Ministers for Climate Change, writes Dr Stephen Brown, Managing Director of The Brown Collective.



Dr Stephen Brown is the Managing Director of The Brown Collective, focused on the formation of educational leaders and partnering with schools, networks and system to enable sustainable impact. The organisation reflects both his collective experience over 40 years in policy, strategy and leadership development – and that of the remarkable global network he has developed during this career.

Positive, toxic, poor, nurturing – these are all prefixes that are used interchangeably to describe organisational culture or climate. They apply to organisations ranging from political parties and international sporting teams, to government departments and schools. Such ill-disciplined and ill-informed commentary does add to the difficulty for school leaders in gaining clarity around a contested broad concept of organisational culture.

In the context of schooling, culture and climate are often used interchangeably without definition and distinction to describe arguably two of the most important aspects of enabling a positive and productive school.

Although there is an acceptance of the importance of school culture to enabling school improvement, there is no agreed definition or construct of school culture and its distinctiveness or relatedness to school climate. Without such nuance, it is challenging to identify how school cultures can be augmented to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes (ACER, School Improvement Tool, 2023).

School culture and climate are distinctive, different but inextricably linked concepts. These concepts are what can be described as on the ‘two sides of the same coin’ (Hart, N, 2022).

An organisation’s culture is typically described as “the way things are done around here”. Culture is also about belonging, connection and being in relationship with others. It is “a social narcotic of which all of us are addicted”. We feel good when we belong or relate to a group and or tribe. It is an organisation’s anthropology – a system of interactions that governs how work gets done (Auron, M, 2025). Edgar Schien (1992) notes that culture is essentially a social indoctrination of unwritten rules that people

learn as they learn to navigate and connect with groups expressed in the workplaces as teams, peers and factions.

What are the components of any school culture? Many school leaders struggle when they try to describe the various elements of a positive school culture. It’s tricky to define and parsing its components can be challenging (Shafter, L, 2018). School culture can be described as the set of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions and behaviours within a school community.

Drawing on the foundational work of Schein (1992) and influenced by the perspectives of Vivian Robinson (2017), Dan Coyle (2018), Fiona Roberston (2020), and Siobhan McHale (2020), these appear to be the fundamentals of organisational culture applicable to a schooling context:

- *Values and Beliefs*: the core principles that guide the school’s mission and vision. In the case of a Catholic School founded on a certain charism such teachings would be and must be foundational to the culture of that school. How it then animates these will be through various mediating factors primarily stimulated, facilitated and stewarded by leadership.
- *Norms and Expectations*: these are the unwritten rules in relation to how members of the school community are expected to behave. For example, attendance as school social, sporting and cultural functions and activities.
- *Symbols, Rituals and Artifacts*: displayed and deified things which give an insight or eyes to the soul of a school. These could include school honour boards, acknowledgment of the various community and cultural groups through ceremonies. A school’s culture does shape long term



A school’s culture shapes long term behaviours and beliefs within its ecosystem.

Image: Shutterstock/Jandrie Lombard

behaviours and beliefs within its ecosystem, influence decision making approaches, decisions made, its identity and the way in which it is seen by various stakeholders.

What then is a school’s climate?

A working definition of a school’s climate is the current atmosphere or operating environment of the school, as experienced by students, staff, guests and others would have a felt experience or a form of interaction with the people at the institution. This could range from various forms of communication, workplace relations between staff, quality of leadership and simply, how it “feels” to be associated with and to work in that school. A positive school climate is typically characterized by respectful relationships, a sense of belonging, and a safe environment. Conversely symptoms of a negative, toxic or poor school climate are bullying, lack of student voice, low staff morale and a disengaged community.

There appears to be consensus that school climate relates to individual

perceptions and beliefs and the present or immediate (ACER, School Improvement Tool, 2023). What can leaders or schools do to nurture school climate? Each school has a unique culture and prevailing climate, so any strategy adopted needs to be enabled after careful diagnosis. Such an appraisal should be on behalf of enabling a positive and productive learning environment for everyone.

The legendary band, Crowded House in their iconic hit song, *Weather with You*, evoke the importance of individual agency, mindset, responsibility, reciprocity and accountability for the collective, existing climate of any school and indeed organisation. In essence the song uses the concept of weather as a metaphor for a personal emotional state, highlighting that a person’s internal feelings are a constant companion, and external changes won’t necessarily alter their overall emotional state. In general, such an evocation reminds everyone that they are responsible for creating the around them – its energy, its emotional qualities, its positivity or negativity, and its happiness and or indeed its misery.

Every person who connects with any school is a ‘Minister for Climate Change’. When everyone accepts this important portfolio, then a school environment is created in which everyone thrives. School climate is not passive – it is something by their practices, engagement, mindsets, energy, resilience and mindfulness that each person creates.

A school culture is influenced by the character of the individuals that make up its collective. Individual character is implicit and subjective, and stems from an individual’s values, principles, beliefs and history.

The etymology of the work ‘culture’ is from the Latin word ‘Cultus’ meaning ‘to care’. Mark Twain notes that “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it”.

School leaders need to apply continuous care to a school’s culture and climate. Without attention and nurturing climatic conditions, shadow cultures will emerge and impact any school. School climate cannot be denied! **EM**