Growth Culture

A New Approach to School Improvement

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At 7:45 on a Wednesday morning in April 2018, superintendent PK Diffenbaugh gathered educators from across Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) to do something almost unprecedented in American education. For the next nine months, they would spend their time working with the Oakland-based non-profit Pivot Learning to "grow" their school and district culture by learning how to apply the latest research on adult development to their lives, relationships, and practice.

For Diffenbaugh, this work was a natural outgrowth of his doctoral work with Dr. Robert Kegan and Dr. Lisa Lahey at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In their groundbreaking book, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization,* Kegan, Lahey, and their co-authors describe the organizational cultures of three successful companies: Bridgewater, a financial services firm; Decurion, a movie theater, real estate, and senior living company; and Next Jump, which runs an eCommerce marketplace. To spur high performance, each company had built an organizational culture that prioritized the adult development of their staff. The authors identified the key features of their organizational cultures and placed them into three interlocking categories: *Home:* a sense of community and trust; *Edge:* the challenge, development, and growth every employee needs to succeed; and *Groove:* the everyday practices, rituals, systems, and routines baked into the life of an organization.

For the past six years, Drs. Lahey and Kegan and their colleagues at Way to Grow INC have been evangelizing their research with other for-profit companies like WellMed and Google, and to doctoral students such as Superintendent Diffenbaugh and Laura Flaxman of Pivot Learning. Together, Pivot Learning and Monterey Peninsula School District decided they wanted to see if the ideas and practices of a Deliberately Developmental Organization could help schools and districts deal with some of their most pressing challenges. There were three ideas that drove the design of the pilot: 1) the idea that if the adults in schools and districts are not learning and growing in deep and powerful ways, then they will not be equipped to provide those types of learning opportunities for others, such as students; 2) the idea that schools and districts have been trying to address their problems of adult learning and professional development in technical ways that may ignore the root causes of the problem; and 3) that we know that surfacing and challenging limiting assumptions and mental models is essential for developing practitioners, yet schools and districts are not designed to help adults do that.

Through a generous grant from the Silver Giving Foundation, Monterey Peninsula became the first school district in the nation to take on this work at scale. In this case study, we will describe this pioneering work, assess its impact, and address its implications for the education sector.

Why Culture?

When most people picture Monterey, they think of fancy resorts, pristine beaches, and some of the most famous golf courses in the world. But a few miles away from this opulence is Monterey Peninsula Unified, a high poverty, largely Latino district where over seventy percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and thirty percent are English Learners. Because of the huge wealth gap in the region, many of the working-class families who staff the resorts, golf courses, and farms are priced out of local housing.[1] One out of every ten MPUSD students is homeless or housing insecure and the district has a growing number of foster youths. While the district has seen some improvements in college and career readiness, there are still significant student achievement gaps. On the 2018 state assessments the district was 36.5 points below the state standard for reading and 70.5 points below the state standard for mathematics. In addition, 11.6% of students were chronically absent in 2018.

Like many high poverty districts nationally, MPUSD had been through a painful carousel of leadership change. When Diffenbaugh arrived, he was the seventh superintendent in ten years and quickly found that this constant leadership churn had "damaged relationships and ruined trust inside the district."

[1]   Hannah Melnicoe, "Crisis on the Coast: The Bay Coastal Foster Youth and Homeless Student Populations." (Oakland, CA: Pivot Learning, November 2018).

Cultivate Culture to Solve School Challenges

For decades, school districts in the United States have faced a multitude of challenges, including closing achievement and opportunity gaps, closing the gaps in performance between U.S. students and their international counterparts, and keeping pace with 21st-century growth and innovation. As a result, educators face perennial fluctuations in curriculum, instructional strategies, accountability decrees, state tests, school climate initiatives, and more.

Brown et al. offer some ways in which schools as ever-changing organisms can promote some measure of stability by promoting and supporting academic excellence and systemic equity for all students.[2] In their study, many of the schools cultivated a culture of joyful learning, not only for students but also for teachers. A culture where teachers also experience joyful learning improves school morale and climate, which are linked to teacher retention.[3] Systems with healthy cultures exhibit a strong sense of community, high levels of trust, the ability to give and receive feedback, an appropriate level of challenge on the job, and a feeling that everyone is learning and growing at work.

Healthy cultures can also produce significant gains in student achievement. Researchers have found that schools with a positive school climate have shown favorable academic results in reading and mathematics.[4] While national education reform efforts have largely focused on improving teacher effectiveness as a vehicle for improving student achievement, Banerjee et al. encourage education leaders to examine the role of school culture and teacher job satisfaction as essential levers for student success.[5] There is also significant research that shows a strong connection between student and adult learning.[6] Ultimately the goal of improving school culture is to make schools significantly better places for both adults and students to learn.

Diffenbaugh spent his first two years as superintendent working to restore trust with his teachers and staff and build a shared sense of mission on behalf of the district's students. Noting that "districts are some of the worst places for adult development almost by design," he viewed the work to build a "Deliberately Developmental Organization" and a "Growth Culture" as the next stage of MPUSD's evolution into a high-functioning and high-performing school district.

To a great extent, Diffenbaugh is right about our education system's failure to focus on culture and adult development. A powerful body of research supports the importance of healthy cultures to school and district improvement. Similarly, there is evidence that even the best improvement initiatives can be sabotaged by toxic and compliance-based cultures. Yet, despite Peter Drucker's aphorism that "culture eats strategy for breakfast", education system leaders rarely focus their attention and resources on improving district culture and the adult development of their educators and other staff. The education sector is far more focused on technical solutions such as new intervention programs and professional development initiatives than the social learning and well-being of educators and the organizational cultures that can determine the success or failure of any initiative.

Districts such as Long Beach, Garden Grove, and Sanger Unified School Districts are evidence of places where strong adult cultures correlate with success in student outcomes.[7] However, there is limited evidence of an explicit connection because of the challenges in quantitatively assessing district culture and demonstrating cultural improvement.

In Monterey Peninsula, Diffenbaugh and Pivot Learning took this challenge head on. They began their work with a qualitative assessment of the district's culture, administered a "Growth Culture" survey to all district staff, spent a year working with a cohort of schools and the district's human resources department on the best practices in adult development detailed in *An Everyone Culture,* and then re-administered the survey district-wide to assess the impact of this work in the pilot schools and department.

[2] Kathleen Brown, Jen Benkovitz, A.J. Muttillo, Thad Urban, "Leading Schools of Excellence and Equity: Documenting Effective Strategies in Closing Achievement Gaps," *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 1 (2011): 57–96.

[3] Lisa Daugherty, "How Perceived Behaviors of Administrative Support Influence Teacher Retention Decisions" (Dissertation, University of the Rockies, 2012).

[4] Neena Banerjee et al., "Teacher Job Satisfaction and Student Achievement: The Roles of Teacher Professional Community and Teacher Collaboration in Schools," *American Journal of Education* 123, no. 2 (February 2017): 203–41; Brown et al., 2011; Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson, *Shaping School Culture* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2016); Glenn Latimer, review of *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and their Effects on Children,* by Michael Rutter, Barbara Maughan, Peter Mortimore, and Janet Ouston (Eds.), *Educational Studies,* 1980; Tami Smith et al. 2014. "Positive school climate: What it looks like and how it happens." Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

[5] Banerjee et al., "Teacher Job Satisfaction and Student Achievement."

[6] Anthony Bryk, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Thomas Guskey, Evaluating Professional Development (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press, 2000).

[7] Jane David and Joan Talbert, *Turning Around a High-Poverty District: Learning from Sanger* (San Francisco: S.H. Cowell Foundation, 2013); Helen Duffy et al., "Building Capacity for Accelerated Reform: The Fresno–Long Beach Learning Partnership as a Leadership Strategy." (California Collaborative on District Reform, November 2010); Joel Knudson, "You'll Never Be Better Than Your Teachers: The Garden Grove Approach to Human Capital Development." (California Collaborative on District Reform, September 2013).

What is a Growth Culture?

The interrelated dimensions of Home, Edge, and Groove are essential to the design of a deliberately developmental organization. For leaders, it is critical to understand the meaning of these dimensions, how they relate to each other and the work necessary to close the gap between how employees experience the current culture and their aspirations for a culture that improves personal and professional growth.

The *Home* dimension of Kegan and Lahey's framework refers to creating conditions of trust where employees feel supported and challenged. Districts and schools are highly hierarchical organizations where people often place a premium on titles and positional authority. At Decurion, everyone in the organization (from the high school students working their first job in their cinemas to the senior leadership team members) is expected to share responsibility for running the business. Decurion's culture opposes attachment to titles and roles, as these traditional markers lead people to hoard information and wisdom instead of sharing it for the good of the collective. In contrast, leaders at Decurion work hard to create a trusting learning community where the senior leaders are learning just as much and just as visibly as the newest employee and where everyone is also expected to share their "hard-earned wisdom."[8]

Edge is described as an operating belief that all adults have the capacity to grow. In schools and in other organizations, people tend to hide evidence of their weaknesses. A Growth Culture "enables people to value their growing edge and to experience themselves as still valuable even as they are screwing up—potentially even more valuable, if they can overcome [their] limitations, they are exposing."[9] At Bridgewater there is quite a bit of attention paid to the fit between a person and their role. A good fit does not mean what it might in an ordinary culture. Instead it is more likely to mean, "She will run into plenty of useful trouble and she will know how to use her trouble to learn and grow."[10] In schools, Edge could be displayed by the adults regularly engaging in powerful learning experiences that are visible to students, and modeling what it means to be committed to lifelong learning and growth.

Groove is defined as the systems, structures, and regular practices that are built into the daily life of the organization. In education, teachers spend exhaustive time attempting to maintain a good image in the presence of principals, or what Amy Edmondson calls "managing" interpersonal risk.[11] The evaluation ritual is typically structured in ways that put teachers on the defensive because the bulk of their superior's feedback centers on what they need to improve. Next Jump offers a notable exemplar for schools attempting

to create developmental practices that nurture growth, not just efficiency. Next Jump creates an atmosphere where people "grow in an environment of constant practice, failing, and feedback."[12] Their motto is *Better Me + Better You = Better Us.* In order to get better together, they invest in everyone by providing feedback as a way to demonstrate genuine care. One example of this is the app that Next Jump developed for giving instant feedback to everyone on staff. Every employee of the organization is included in the app, and peers, supervisors, and direct reports can all share their perspectives and rate their colleagues' performance. The equivalent in school districts and charters would be district and school administrators utilizing groove practices of receiving regular feedback from other leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

Measuring Culture

So how does one measure something as intangible as "Growth Culture" in a school district? For all the education sector's focus on measurement, assessments of adult learning and culture are rarely seen outside of the occasional teacher satisfaction survey.

Pivot Learning worked with MPUSD leadership to conduct a multifaceted baseline assessment of their culture including focus groups, observations, and a district-wide survey. This process began with meetings with the Superintendent and his cabinet to develop an understanding of Growth Culture. Additionally, because it is important for culture work to complement other initiatives, it was crucial to clarify the alignment between this work and existing district priorities, so the work was viewed as complementary.

With the support of district leadership and stakeholders including the school board and teacher's union, Pivot partnered with the district and Way to Grow, an organization founded by the authors of *An Everyone Culture,* to administer an online survey to all 1,100 employees of MPUSD.

8   Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization.* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2016), 37.

9   Robert Kegan, Lisa Lahey, Matthew Miller, and Inna Markus, "The Deliberately Developmental Organization." *Way to Grow INC, LLC,* (2014): 6.

10 Kegan et al., "The Deliberately Developmental Organization," 7.

11 Amy Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 119.

12 Kegan & Lahey, *An Everyone Culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization,* 18.

Known as the Growth Culture Indicator (GCI), the survey has 28 questions designed to measure a respondents' perceptions of the current state of the organization's culture and their aspirations for the future. The questions are organized by the three domains of culture: *Home, Edge,* and *Groove.* Respondents provided a rating from 1 to 5, with 1 reflecting strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree.[13] Questions included:

Home: To what extent do people reveal to other people the areas in which they might be struggling?

Edge: To what extent are the mistakes people make treated as opportunities to learn?

Groove: After a project ends, to what extent does each team member receive feedback about the way she or he approached the project?

MPUSD was the first school district in the nation to provide the GCI survey to all employees. Of the 1,100 employees, 785 took the survey, for a remarkable response rate of 71 percent. The data was disaggregated by department, school, role, tenure, and ethnicity.

Overall, the district's results were typical of other organizations with respondents aspiring to work in an environment that has more elements of "Growth Culture" than the status quo. The chart to the right reflects this trend. The blue bars reflect how district employees currently viewed their district. The orange bars show their aspirations for the future. In all three areas *(Home, Edge, and Groove),* district employees aspired for additional growth and challenge, more trust and support, and more structures and systems that build a Growth Culture.

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[13] Andy Fleming and Claire Lee, "Growth Indicator Survey" (Way to Grow INC, LLC, Atlanta, GA, 2017).

FIGURE 1: GROWTH CULTURE PRE-SURVEY RESULTS MPUSD

Edge / Home / Groove — Present and Future
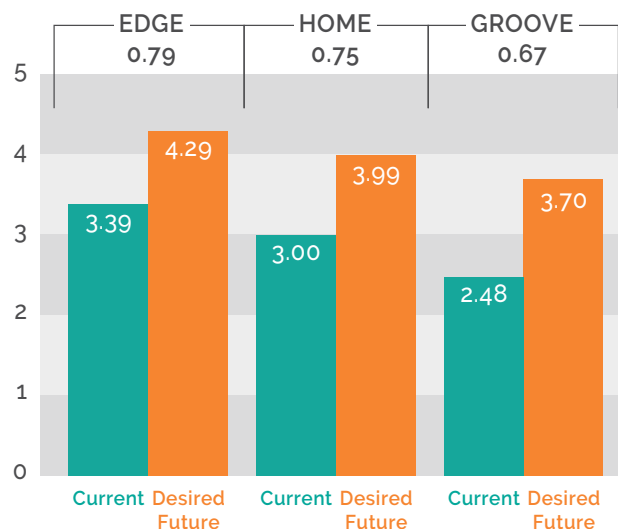
For PK and his leadership team, the survey, focus group, and interview results illuminated some fascinating data and trends. For example, mid-career teachers who had worked in the district between five and ten years perceived the culture differently from newer and veteran teachers. The lowest scores came from the classified staff who serve as custodians, classroom aides, and secretaries who are historically excluded from professional learning opportunities. This suggests that adults in different roles, and at different points in their careers, may need different supports and opportunities for development, and that everyone would like more opportunities to grow.

Survey data was also disaggregated by school site. Figure 2 shows how various elementary schools rated on *Home, Edge,* and *Groove.* One school, Monte Vista Elementary was a clear outlier. For example, Monte Vista staff rated their current Edge state higher than most schools' aspirational state. When the Way to Grow and Pivot teams saw the Monte Vista data, an immediate follow-up question was whether Monte Vista had positive student results as well. The answer was a definitive "yes." District leaders shared that the school had improved dramatically after the appointment of Joe Ashby as principal and that his approach to school leadership aligned with Growth Culture principles. Upon his arrival at Monte Vista, Joe established distributive leadership teams of various stakeholders that evaluated and made action-oriented decisions around culture, instruction, data, student learning, and more. The teams met regularly and shared developments with the whole school community, including parents and

students. Joe also implemented consistent monthly PLCs and staff development that focused on improving instruction, PBIS and community engagement. Joe's actions prior to the survey had already built a culture within his school where it was safe for both adults and students to take the kinds of risks and make the kinds of mistakes that lead to powerful growth.

FIGURE 2: GROWTH CULTURE PRE-SURVEY RESULTS MPUSD

The Outlier: Monte Vista Elementary School

EDGE/HOME/GROOVE — Location by ES
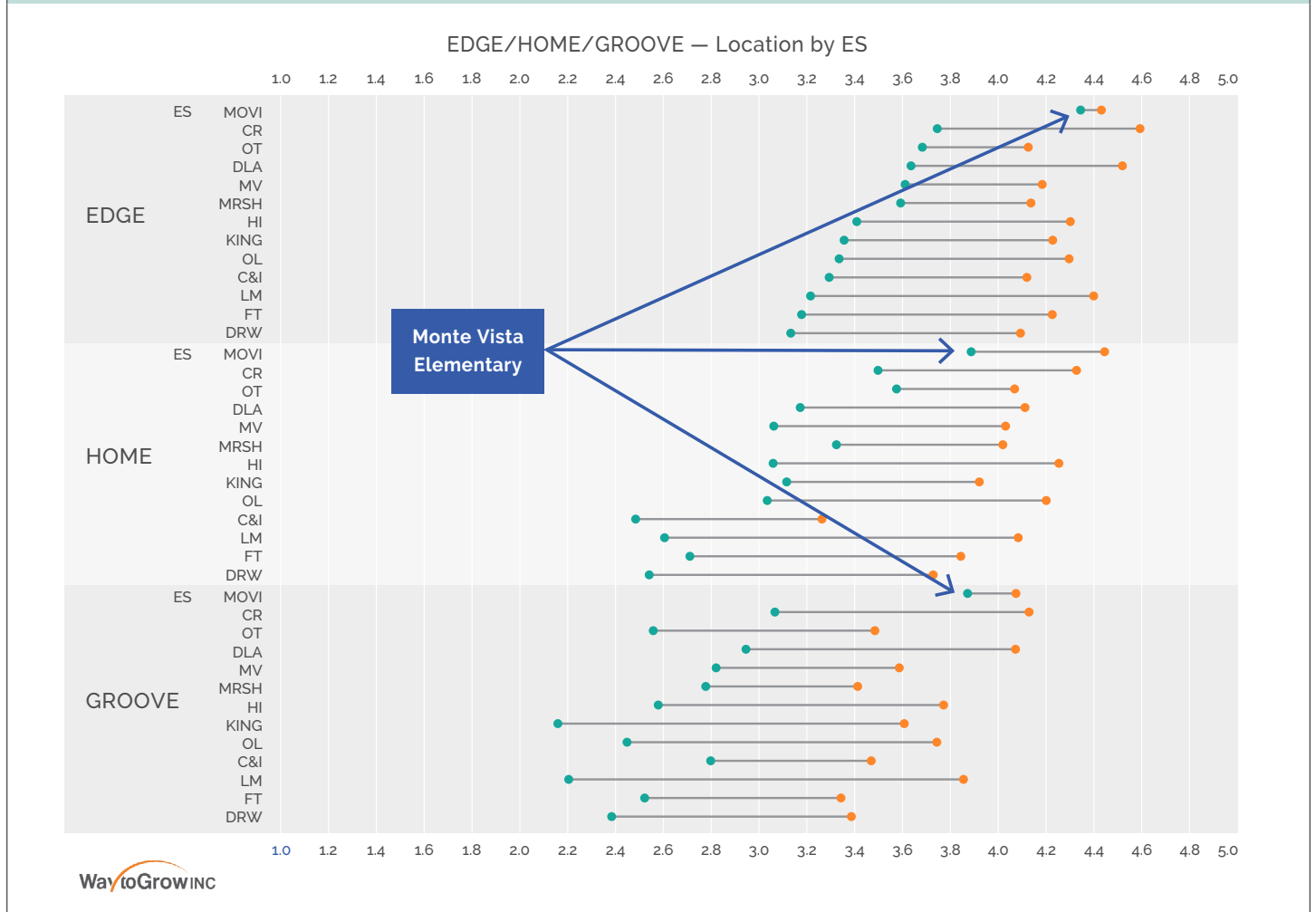
Growth Culture Pilot

Once Pivot had worked with the MPUSD team to analyze the survey data, the district put out a call for school and district departmental teams interested in participating in the Growth Culture pilot. Five teams asked to participate, including the Human Resources department, Monte Vista Elementary School, Highland Elementary School, Marina Vista Elementary School, and Los Arboles Middle School. The teams met once or twice a month for a calendar year.

During the pilot, each team looked at their school or departmental data and chose areas of the GCI that displayed the greatest need and potential for growth as their problems of practice. Four areas that were common across multiple teams were:

1. **Home:** To what extent do you feel that people in your school/department other than your director/supervisor are invested in your development?

2. **Edge:** In about how many of your team's meetings does at least one person mention his or her efforts at self-improvement?

3. **Groove:** To what extent are people in your school/department trained in a method for giving improvement-related feedback to each other?

4. **Groove:** In meetings in your school/department, to what extent is time set aside to share feedback about people's self-improvement efforts?

During these sessions, they learned about the dimensions of Growth Culture and best practices in adult development. Because Growth Culture is developed through the interplay of Home, Edge, and Groove, each session focused on elements of all three. In broad strokes, the pilot mirrored the instructional practice of gradual release. Pivot facilitators would model Growth Culture leadership practices. Participants would spend time in the pilot sessions trying out different activities or practices, and then they would be the facilitators of the work back at their sites and with their full teams.

In the first sessions, most of the activities were designed to build a sense of community and trust essential to Home, as well as to give participants strategies and tools to do the same back at their sites. Pivot spent time working with the teams to develop a shared understanding of vulnerability and authenticity along with identifying barriers and opportunities to build Home into their site or department culture.

After establishing the trust and community of Home, the teams worked with Pivot on improving Edge. These sessions include learning and practicing strategies for having difficult conversations, for giving and receiving feedback, and for setting personal and professional goals tied to individual improvement. For example, participants used the Situation, Behavior, and Impact (SBI) tool, a framework for giving feedback in which the feedback giver describes the situation or context, clearly identifies the behavior of the recipient of the feedback, and describes the impact of that behavior, ideally in personal terms. Tools such as this one—and many others—are not unique to Growth Culture, but aid in the development of it.

For Pivot, thinking of Groove as a way of moving towards implementation is helpful. Once the participants had experiences with building Home and Edge, what are the specific practices that they will implement back at their sites? In other words, how will their daily, job-embedded practices change both individually and collectively as a department or school?

With Growth Culture, there is a process of introducing the concepts, recognizing areas of individual improvement, identifying growth goals, and implementing new practices that must all occur before any impact can be seen on organizational culture and student performance. While the process described above worked for MPUSD, there are other potential starting points such as the "developmental sprint" that Way to Grow employs, a shorter but more intense period of time where a small number of participants work on a high leverage individual skill related to the organization's most mission critical work.

At the conclusion of the pilot, participants were asked about their experiences and were overwhelmingly positive about their learning and growth as individuals and teams. As one participant stated:
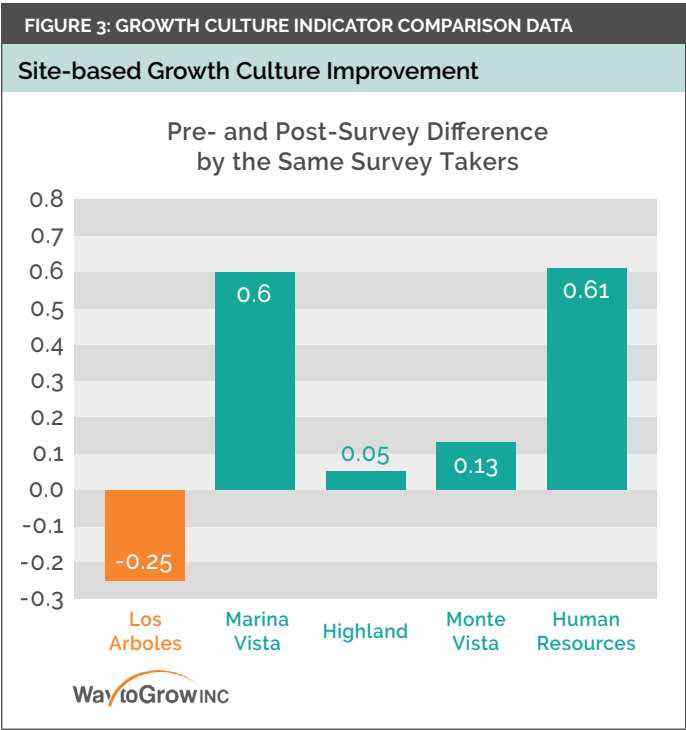
"The work we have done has made such a difference in how we relate to each other, how we share with each other and how to grow as a staff… It is authentic and organic and gives each of us a sense of belonging and acceptance to do the job. In my work, it helped me to reflect and work with others on a much deeper level."

The last phase of the pilot included administering and reviewing the post-survey, reflecting on the process (reflection being another important Growth Culture element), and planning for their next steps—and refinement—of this work.

Post Survey Results

In the late fall at the conclusion of the pilot, and 15 months after the first administration of the first GCI, Way to Grow administered a "post survey." Of the approximately 1,100 employees, 675 took the survey, for a response rate of 61.4 percent. Overall there was a slight improvement in employees' perception of the culture across the entire district and a slight closing of the gap between current reality and aspirations.

For the pilot, all sites showed improvement except for Los Arboles, which experienced a change in principal leadership during the pilot. Figure 3 shows the comparison data:

FIGURE 3: GROWTH CULTURE INDICATOR COMPARISON DATA

Site-based Growth Culture Improvement

Pre- and Post-Survey Difference by the Same Survey Takers

Los Arboles	Marina Vista	Highland	Monte Vista	Human Resources
-0.25	0.6	0.05	0.13	0.61

WaytoGrow INC

Within this group, the two most notable standouts are Marina Vista Elementary School and the Human Resources Department. The Human Resources Department showed improvement of 61 percent in the GCI, between the first and second surveys, as compared to a slight decline of 2 percent in all the other district level departments. In the pre-survey data the Human Resources Department did not really stand out from the other district departments. However, in the post-survey data you can see that the Human Resources Department was by far the strongest department

as measured by the GCI. The Human Resources Department attributed their growth to a number of practices including five of their eleven staff being part of the pilot. They also indicated that as part of the Growth Culture pilot, they began having much more deliberate and open conversations that addressed a wider range of issues and challenges. The planning and facilitation of team meetings became much more collaborative. One team member said that people in the department "no longer saw mistakes as the end of the world but rather a chance to learn and improve together."

FIGURE 4: POST GROWTH CULTURE SURVEY RESULTS FOR MPUSD DISTRICT DEPARTMENTS

Post-Survey Human Resources Department: Current and Desired Perceptions of Culture vs. Other District Departments
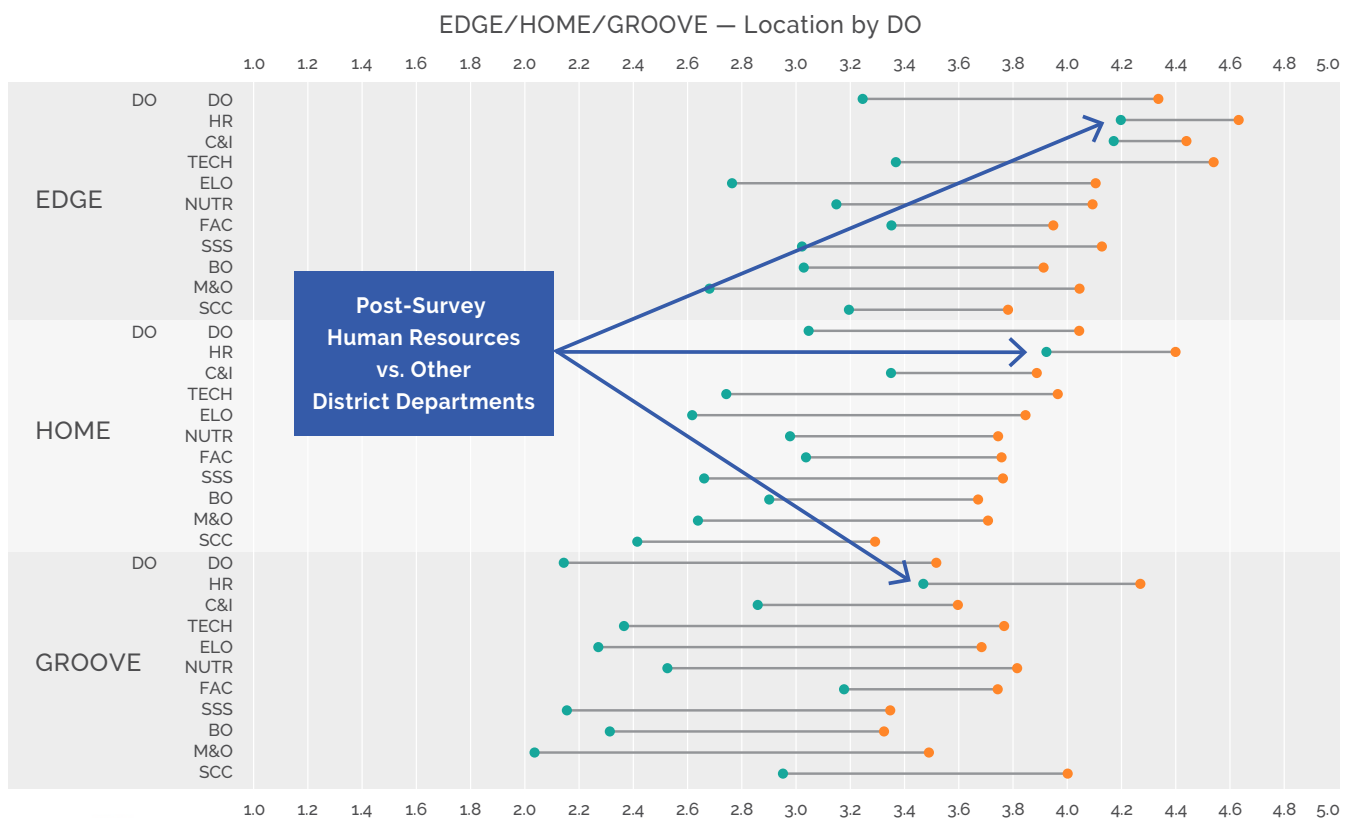
FIGURE 5: GROWTH CULTURE INDICATOR PRE- AND POST-ANALYSIS						
Pilot Teams' GCI Focus Areas: Post-Survey Growth						
	Los Arboles Difference (n=18)	Marina Vista Difference (n=13)	Highland Difference (n=18)	Monte Vista Difference (n=11)	Human Resources Difference (n=6)	**Average Difference**
Groove: To what extent are people in your school/department trained in a method for giving improvement-related feedback to each other?	0.14	1.46	0.39	0.55	0.67	**0.58**
Edge: In about how many of your team's meetings does at least one person mention his or her efforts at self-improvement?	0.18	0.92	0.25	0.55	0.50	**0.43**
Groove: In meetings in your school/department, to what extent is time set aside to share feedback about people's self-improvement efforts?	0.00	0.62	0.15	0.55	1.17	**0.36**
Home: To what extent do you feel that people in your school/department other than your director/supervisor are invested in your development?	-0.10	0.92	0.21	0.36	0.17	**0.29**

As noted earlier, each team chose four areas of *Home, Edge,* and *Groove* to work on during the pilot. While the different sites had varied levels of change on the overall survey, they displayed more consistent growth in their focus areas, as displayed in Figure 5.

Monte Vista, Marina Vista, and the Human Resources department experienced the most growth in all four areas. All of the sites experienced growth in the first two areas of Groove (0.58) and Edge (0.43).

Implications

The Growth Culture pilot in MPUSD is the first example nationally of a school system measuring its culture and systemically piloting strategies to improve that culture over time. Although the pilot is completed, all of the pilot teams are still moving forward with their Growth Culture work. Additionally, other sites including one high school are beginning to adopt Growth Culture practices with the support of the district and staff. The district is committed to continuing to convene and support the pilot group as a community of practice and is exploring the possibility of beginning a second phase of the Growth Culture pilot with a different cohort.

Districts, school networks, and Charter School Management organizations could benefit from taking a similar approach as MPUSD. Reinventing schools and districts should start by examining and reshaping school cultures and the deeply held beliefs and values of our educators related to continuous improvement and growth. Working with the leadership and conducting a baseline assessment can help leaders investigate hidden assumptions within these systems. This is a first step towards building a strong and healthy culture that will support the district or network's key priorities and goals related to equity. Identifying key leaders and early adopters who can pilot this work and build a sense of efficacy and momentum is critical. System leaders must then leverage their internal capacity and the momentum from any pilot efforts to embed Growth Culture systemically into professional learning policies and practices.

The education reform community would benefit from recognizing the tremendous potential of focusing on culture as a root cause of both the successes and failures of reform strategies. A focus on culture provides a basis from which to support and grow the adults who are responsible for transforming our schools. Read more about the implications of Growth Culture in schools on page 10 in Andy Fleming's commentary, "The Potential for Growth Culture to Transform Education."

There is no single program or step-by-step recipe that can solve the complex educational challenges faced by many schools. However, if there were one lever that had the potential to be the most transformational, a focus on culture with an adult development lens might just be it.

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