



# ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT OF THE 7 HABITS ON SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Study by Susan M Baile, Ph.D  
Summary by Dean W. Collinwood, Ph.D.



**▼ SNAPSHOT**

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| <p><b>ORGANIZATION NAME</b></p> <p>Public schools and school districts and one university in the United States as follows:<br/>2 schools in Pennsylvania<br/>6 schools in Indiana<br/>10 schools in California<br/>18 schools in Georgia<br/>1 university in Georgia</p> <p>Date of study: July 1998</p> <p><b>INDUSTRY</b></p> <p>Education, including K-12 and university</p> <p><b>PURPOSE OF STUDY</b></p> <p>To determine if <i>The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People</i> training course is useful as an organizational-change tool</p> | <p><b>METHODOLOGY</b></p> <p>Interview 140 employees and students at the target educational institutions; record their responses regarding the organizational impact of the <i>7 Habits</i></p> <p><b>RESULTS</b></p> <p>Value of <i>7 Habits</i> in improving organizations confirmed. Areas of greatest positive impact were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Workplace Satisfaction</li> <li>2. Communication Between Employees</li> <li>3. Teamwork</li> <li>4. Organizational Goal Focus</li> <li>5. Conflict Management/ Collaboration</li> <li>6. Organizational Resilience</li> </ol> <p><b>KEY WORDS</b></p> <p>Education, organizational improvement, schools, school districts, colleges</p> |
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## Preface

For nearly two decades, individuals across the globe have regarded Stephen R. Covey's best-seller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*<sup>1</sup> as a motivational and philosophical foundation for personal change. Less often has it been seen as a useful tool for organization improvement. Yet, notwithstanding the book's subtitle "Powerful Lessons in Personal Change," FranklinCovey, which handles the *7 Habits* training program worldwide, knows that, under the right conditions, the *7 Habits* course can be, and often is, a powerful organizational change agent. Just as individuals use the principles embodied in the training to eliminate dysfunctional personal habits, organizations use the principles to jettison ineffective collective practices. Alas, unlike some organizational improvement tools (e.g., *The 4 Disciplines of Execution*), the *7 Habits* training course does not contain a set of built-in metrics to measure collective change. Thus, although FranklinCovey has amassed thousands of testimonials about the value of the *7 Habits* for personal change, its usefulness as a change agent for organizations has not been equally documented.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Free Press, 1989 and 2004.

However, from time to time, research-based evidence of the positive organizational impact of the *7 Habits* appears. Such was the case when, in 1997, California University of Pennsylvania started a series of training sessions in FranklinCovey's *7 Habits* course. For her dissertation, Joyce A. Hanley, a doctoral student at a nearby university, studied the effects of the training on the faculty, staff, and students. She found statistically significant ( $p > .001$ ) perceptions of positive change in behavior on all seven habits and documented widely recognized improvements in the campus's culture.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, in a study involving several schools and colleges in the United States, Susan M. Baile, a senior consultant at FranklinCovey and former professor of communications at the University of Hartford, found credible evidence that training in the *7 Habits* can and does produce positive improvements in the organizational culture of schools and colleges. Baile's study was completed in July 1998 under the title "A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Training in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People on Educational Organizations."<sup>3</sup> What follows is a summary of Baile's methodology and findings.

### The Methodology

Baile initially identified 12 schools, school districts, and colleges where the *7 Habits* had been taught to "relatively high percentages" of teachers, professors, staff, and administrators. She then conducted telephone interviews to determine in a preliminary way whether or not these campuses had experienced organizational changes as a result of the training. Six schools or districts were eliminated because they could not meet the criterion. The resulting six subject organizations represented

schools comprised of students and employees of varying social class and racial backgrounds. Some were urban, some were rural; some were small, some were large. The final six schools, school districts, and universities included in the study were:

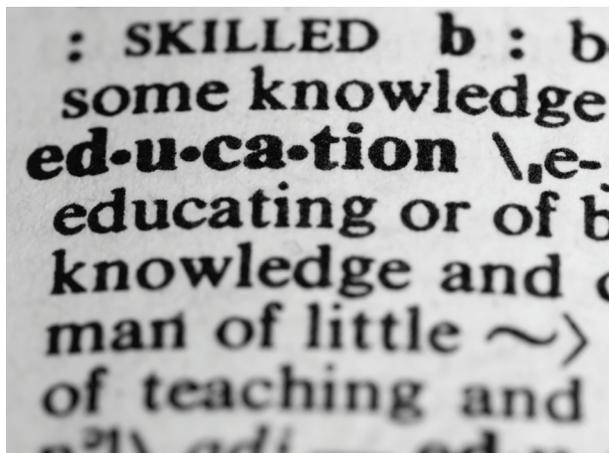
**Blacklick Valley School District** in central western Pennsylvania. The two schools involved with the *7 Habits* training were Blacklick Valley Junior/Senior High School with about 450 students, and the Elementary Center with approximately 390 kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6) students.

**Concord Community Schools Corporation** near Goshen, Indiana. Included were four elementary schools, one junior high school, and one senior high school serving over 4000 students.

**Santee School District** northeast of San Diego, California. The district's schools included one K-6 school and nine K-8 schools, with a total student population of 8400.

**Floyd County Schools** in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in northwest Georgia. The district serves approximately 9500 students and employs more than 1100 administrators, teachers, and support staff in ten elementary schools, two middle schools, four high schools, and one vocational/technical high school.

**West Side Elementary School** in Marietta, Georgia. West Side is the smallest of six elementary schools in the Marietta City School System and serves 450 children.



<sup>2</sup> Joyce A. Hanley, "The Effects of 7 Habits Training on Perceived Change at California University of Pennsylvania," doctoral dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, unpublished manuscript, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Susan M. Baile, "A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Training in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People on Educational Organizations," FranklinCovey, unpublished manuscript, July 1998.

**Georgia State University.** Georgia State is an urban university in the heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia. The Building Services department was the unit of the campus that was included in the *7 Habits* study. Building Services consisted of three units: custodial, grounds, and campus services.

Once these six organizations were selected, Baile then visited the campuses and conducted in-depth, on-site interviews with some 140 individuals. Among the interviewees were classroom and resource teachers, guidance counselors, students, secretarial/support staff, superintendents and assistant superintendents, board members, custodial staff and supervisors, program directors, and a variety of administrative staffers. All interviewees had completed the *7 Habits* training. Interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 1 hour, and all interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

The resulting 1376 pages of transcriptions were analyzed, and comments were notated and categorized by type of perceived impact on the organization. Baile allowed respondents to say whatever they wished about the organizational influence (or lack thereof) of the *7 Habits* and presumed nothing, positive or negative. Baile recognized that it would be entirely possible that an organizational effect attributed to the *7 Habits* could have been



caused by some other influence. But Baile took respondents at their word; if a person said that the *7 Habits* had been responsible for a specific organizational change, then she accepted the statement at face value, thus allowing those “on the ground” in an organization to interpret their world as they saw it.

## Results

Initially, 18 impact categories emerged from the respondents’ comments, but many of them were later found to be overlapping in substance. Combining the redundant categories produced a set of six distinct categories—that is, six organizational conditions that interviewees believed had been impacted in some way by the *7 Habits* training. The six impact categories Baile documented were:

1. Workplace Satisfaction
2. Communication Between Employees
3. Teamwork
4. Organizational Goal Focus
5. Conflict Management/Collaboration
6. Organizational Resilience

## Workplace Satisfaction

As the famous Western Electric Hawthorne Studies<sup>4</sup> showed in the 1920s and 1930s, workplace satisfaction is dependent on many factors, including such things as the color of paint on office walls and the intensity of lighting in work areas. Baile’s interviews showed that workplace satisfaction in the educational organizations she studied depended largely on interpersonal relations. Specifically, interviewees told her that because of the *7 Habits*, the school and college workplace environment had become more emotionally positive and less stressful. Further, interviewees believed

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<sup>4</sup> Western Electric, *Western Electric Hawthorne Studies*, Harvard University, various years.

that workers were more emotionally connected to one another and that the organizations as a whole were emphasizing the value of work/life balance more than before the *7 Habits* training.

Comments from respondents on workplace satisfaction included the following from a Santee school teacher: “I think [*7 Habits*] developed a positive attitude throughout the entire school district. It seemed that before people started going through this training, a lot of things had a negative impact on certain areas, and I feel that it has really brought us a more positive attitude towards the people and the way work is going. It has totally changed.”

From a teacher at Concord High School: “I think the staff got to the point where I think we were just so stressed, burned out...and then, all of a sudden, there came this new energy and a new sense of—a new good feeling about—really working on what we do.” From a school principal: “[*7 Habits*] brought some cohesiveness. Maybe we had a certain amount of that, but I noticed a real tight bonding of staff while we went through the FranklinCovey program.” From a school board member: “[After the *7 Habits* training] if you didn’t agree with something, the board members didn’t take it personally. That’s a big thing that has changed. You don’t look at it as a personal thing; you look at it as, okay, this is an idea.” From an elementary teacher who was frustrated that some of her students’ personal circumstances made it unlikely that they would succeed in school: “Once you realize that you’re in that situation, and that the root of the problem is outside your ‘Circle of Influence’ [a key *7 Habits* principle], you move in a different direction that doesn’t involve your psyche so much.”

## Communication Between Employees

Comments from respondents on this *7 Habits* impact category included specific references to more open communication, more understanding of other people’s views, more consideration for others, a greater willingness to be influenced by alternative viewpoints, and more trust between fellow employees. From one Blacklick Valley teacher: “I think we got

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it is now.”

*High School Principal*

a better understanding of the people we work with. I mean, we had such a gap between the elementary and the high school. We’ve never seen them; they’ve never seen us. So during the FranklinCovey training we had, we were able to come together and have discussion and see how each of us feels.”

Baile reported that the most frequently mentioned explanation for improved communication was that the *7 Habits* had provided a common language. From a school board member: “Once we got the language, then we could use it. It’s like learning to speak Italian. We learned to speak Italian, so to speak, and then when we had opportunities, we could now talk Italian freely and openly, not just stumbling through it.” From an administrator at Concord: “Because of the language, if there’s a



conflict or something, you can talk about 'seeking first to understand' [a key *7 Habits* concept] then they know exactly where you're coming from." From an administrator at Santee: "I think that I see more of an openness in the office, and we're much more able to come forward with feelings or ideas about different things with other employees. The lines of communication seem much better." From a principal: "We developed a code of ethics for the first time, based off of the training that we went through with FranklinCovey. And we decided these are our standards, and this is the code that we're going to stay with, and we're going to respect this." And finally, another principal said of her staff: "They've grown, and we can trust one another. That trust was not there like it is now. And even now, if there isn't trust, we're not afraid to voice that. I don't think we have an atmosphere anymore, in this school system, of fear and concern that people are out to get people."

### Teamwork

Baile's respondents made numerous comments about the increased sense of teamwork they felt after taking the *7 Habits* training. Specifically, they reported a heightened sense of interdependence or "we-ness," as well as a greater commitment to shouldering personal responsibility for work assignments. They also reported an increased expectation that other workers, like themselves, would become more accountable for their actions.

*"7 Habits has given us a shared vision."*

*Teacher, Blacklick Valley*

From a respondent at Georgia State University: [As a result of *7 Habits*] the staff changed. They changed. It's just like I said, it's more of 'us' and

not 'me.'" From a teacher: "We have spent way more time in previous years complaining about how nobody's going to help us. We are in it on our own. We are all by ourselves. But we don't feel like that now because we came together, and we've got, you know, the backing of the administration...and



we're working our way toward solutions. It's been a really big thing, just the feeling that we're all in it together." From a teacher at the Concord schools: "[*7 Habits*] made us individually look at ourselves as to what our roles are here...and I really believe it made us look at each one of us, ourselves, and think, 'How can I improve myself to make it easier for these children?'" From an administrator: "The thing is more that our whole community has been established. People don't mind telling you what your faults are if it's to improve everybody."

From a supervisor at Georgia State: "When problems arise with the guys, normally, they would call me because I am the person to see to that. But now they are taking it upon themselves to correct the problems. When I know about it, the problem has been solved."

From a principal at Concord: "It's also very interesting that the kids that have taken the class, or teachers who have been trained, will hold us accountable for the material. We'll have conflict—like with the master schedule—and we'll say we

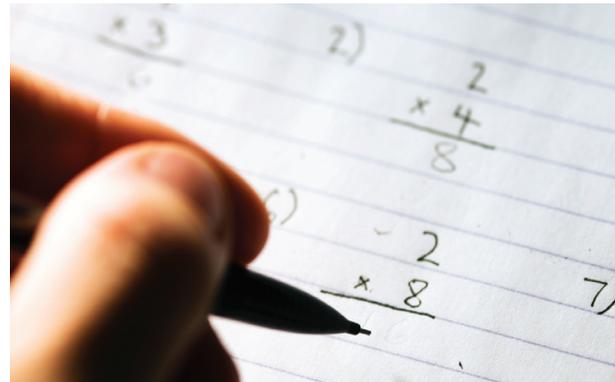
just can't do this or that, and people will say, 'Well, can't we at least come up with a Third Alternative?' Well, are you just going to look at them and say, 'No, I don't believe in that material?'" From a teacher: "It's easy to talk about [7 Habits] because it has been so effective.... We're just proactive; we plan it and we do it. It's not that we have to clear it through the office, because they have let go of a lot of power that is traditionally held by administration. It really is our job to make the decisions, carry through, and then evaluate and decide if we are going to do that again or restructure."

### Organizational Goal Focus

Baile found her interviewees frequently commenting on the improvement in organizational goal focus they sensed after the 7 Habits training. Specifically, they noticed that there was a greater focus on common goals and a greater desire to prioritize in order to achieve core objectives.

From a Santee administrator: "[After 7 Habits] we're focused much more on which wall we're working on rather than what rung on the ladder." From a Georgia State manager: "One of the things I've tried to stress with all my people is that in the past, we've focused mainly on doing things right. That's still important, but now I'm trying to get people to think about doing the right things, and I think that has really been an important change." One administrator noted how his team now spent the majority of their meeting times talking about long-term strategic planning. Before 7 Habits, he said, "We really had, or at least we really took, very little time to plan for the future."

From a teacher at Blacklick Valley: "More than a common language, I think [7 Habits] has given us, first of all, a shared vision." An elementary staff member reported this event: The staff had been going "around and around" in an unsuccessful attempt to decide how to handle the breakfast program at the school. But then, one of them, recall-



ing what they had been taught at the 7 Habits training about "beginning with the end in mind," reminded the others, "You know, what we're here for is the children. If we keep that in mind, then I think the rest of it will work out." Within five minutes of that reminder, the group had reached a workable solution. From an administrator: "The biggest change I saw was that people got into 'what do we value?' and 'let's go from there.' And that was a big move."

Contract negotiations can often produce an acrimonious work environment. Referring to that setting, the superintendent at Blacklick Valley observed, "We all have the same objective—number one, the kids; number two, treating each other as human beings and creating that good, positive climate through interpersonal relationships. Now, what happens when people can see that it is a contract that both sides can live with? Maybe neither side is totally happy, but both sides are happy with the

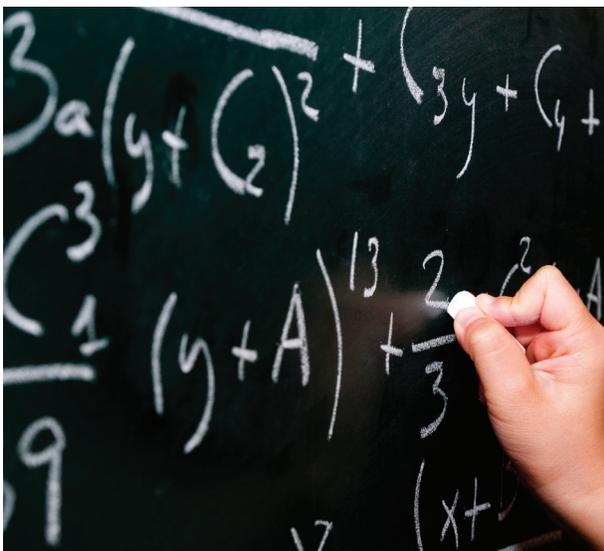
**"Now we're interacting and make decisions collaboratively."**  
*School Superintendent*

outcome. Did FranklinCovey do all that? I think it did an awful lot of that. Some of the groundwork had been laid, but we needed something to bring it together."

## Conflict Management/Collaboration

Baile interviewed many respondents who had positive things to say about the impact of the *7 Habits* on conflict resolution. Specifically, they reported that the employees at their schools were showing more signs of effective collaborative behavior. One teacher said that help with conflict resolution was “one of the major things that, every time I think of what FranklinCovey has done, is number one.”

From a superintendent: “The interactions that [the teachers] have with one another, the collaboration that is going on, is a change. Where before they were operating in isolated boxes...now we’re opening doors and interacting, and articulating curriculum and making those decisions collaboratively.” From a district administrator involved with grant writing: “Rather than saying one school’s going to get more than the other, or one school’s going to do better than the other, they saw themselves as sister schools who could make more improvement by coming together. And they’re doing that now.” From an elementary principal: “Well, before [7 Habits], a lot of the decisions that had to be made, I just made, and told those people that it affected. It would always come back that someone else was affected that I didn’t realize, and that kind



of fouled things up.” He went on to state that he had begun to share decision making in the context of staff meetings in which everyone could participate.

From the West Side principal: “There was a shift somewhere in the *7 Habits* training. I began to assume good faith out of a meeting. It probably came out of the ‘win-win’ [a key *7 Habits* concept] part.” From a school secretary: “I feel that the management here has drastically changed in terms of working for win-win solutions. Now when we go into problems, we’re both looking for what can make everyone feel respected when we’re done, and I think it has worked.” From a teacher: “I think

*“7 Habits had a drastic effect on the behavior of the kids. We reduced violence 88 percent.”*

*High School Principal*

win-win is now an option that we didn’t consider before. I know this year I have been on a school-wide committee to choose a social studies textbook for next year. And finding a win-win solution meant that we chose different companies for different grade levels, because we couldn’t find one company’s textbook that would have met the needs of every elementary grade level.”

From a special-education teacher who described the atmosphere with parents at a series of tense meetings: The meetings were “very high anxiety and very confrontational, with a high sense of urgency” on the part of the parents and the advocate they had brought in. [After *7 Habits*], the meetings had evolved to the point that the parents no longer felt the need for an advocate; and once, when the special-education teacher had arrived late for a meeting, the child’s father, who she had expected might

be upset by her late arrival, had instead stood up and walked around the table to welcome her warmly.

Baile recorded several instances in which interviewees reported improvements in how they handled parental complaints as a result of the *7 Habits*. One principal explained: “What I do have this year is fewer parents coming to me to complain about teachers...and I think that some of that is perhaps that they are more satisfied with the treatment they have gotten, and they feel less like they have to go to someone else.”

From a high school principal: “Our behavior has improved drastically. The first year this administration took over, we reduced violence in our building 88 percent. We had up to 65 kids the year before who were suspended for fighting, and we dropped our numbers down from 65 to 8 or 10 kids.” He acknowledged that several factors contributed to the improvement, but concluded, “There’s no doubt in my mind [*7 Habits*] had a drastic effect on the behavior of the kids.” Many teachers also reported changes in how they handled misbehaving children in the classroom, citing an increased interest in trying to understand the problem from the child’s perspective before enacting some kind of discipline or solution to the problem. From a teacher and union leader: “Well, I would wager this is one of the few school districts in the state, maybe even in the nation—it just seems like we have an extraordinarily unique situation—where I know I can go in with the superintendent and negotiate a contract. Now, for teachers to feel that strongly about their superintendent and the way everybody interacts, I think is a pretty positive thing.”

### Organizational Resilience

Organizations faced with (often externally imposed) changes tend to lose a sense of control. The organizational confidence to move ahead seems to wane. Baile’s interviewees reported, by contrast, that the

*7 Habits* training had strengthened their schools and helped them implement change without losing focus.

From a superintendent: “I would have to say that it was the FranklinCovey training that we all went through that helped make that [change] process move the way that it did...it’s just a general sense of creating a climate that I think effectuates change.” From the assistant director of Building Services at Georgia State: “We’re doing things that traditionally shake some people’s foundations, and we get results that other people in our organization can’t right now. And we’re primed to do really great things. I mean, I see it. I envision it. I know it’ll happen.” From a teacher involved in a plan to bus 67 of their elementary students to tutor younger children in two other schools: “If you haven’t studied Covey, you don’t know that that’s not a nice thing to do; we tackled an enormous thing...and to even conceive of that was an enormous thing.” From a district board member involved in constant change-related decision making: “I go to most of the seminars and conventions and so forth, and I talk to other board members, and I start telling them about our board, they don’t even believe me. They say it couldn’t happen on a board, and I say, ‘Well, it certainly does.’”



From an administrator who had been involved in contract negotiations involving the politically charged topic of class-size reductions: “Having been employed in this district for 22 years, I was sitting in my office last summer when [the contract negotiations] were occurring, and I was in awe, just in awe of the fact that people were putting so much time dedicated to doing something good beyond themselves for the district and the children. And I honestly sat there and looked across the parking lot, and said, ‘Wow, that is magnificent.’” Concurring with his assessment, a teacher added: “That was super, and we could never have done that before [7 Habits], and I have never, ever seen anything energize the public school system like that.” Another said of the same event: “It’s just a whole different way, and I think the mind-set is probably the best leftover that we have, because it just feels like ‘bring us another problem—we can handle it!’”

“I have fewer parents coming to me to complain about teachers.”

*School Principal*

## Conclusion

Baile found that in the six organizations she studied, respondents overwhelmingly made positive comments about the perceived impact of the 7 Habits training on the organization. Indeed, Baile reported no negative comments about the 7 Habits training in the schools under study. We do not know why the six schools not selected for inclusion in the study could not report organizational influences from the 7 Habits. No doubt, individuals who had taken the training experienced changes in their personal approach to the workplace, but for some reason, the organizations as a whole could not affirm an institutionwide impact. However, for the remaining schools and col-

leges, participants reported significant functional improvements in six areas: (1) workplace satisfaction, (2) communication between employees, (3) teamwork, (4) organizational goal focus, (5) conflict management/collaboration, and (6) organizational resilience. The responses Baile analyzed endorse the utility of the 7 Habits for improving organizational culture. An administrator from Concord told of a highly regarded high school teacher who stood up in a meeting and said, “This is the best training I’ve ever had in all my educational experiences. I’ve got my bachelor’s and I’ve got my master’s, and I’ve got some coursework beyond my masters, and I’ve gotten more out of this training than anything since I’ve been in education.” Having experienced the work conditions in a school where the 7 Habits principles had been “ingrained in the culture,” another teacher summed up her feelings by declaring: “I’m not willing to go back to the old ways.” Thus, for the schools and colleges included in this study, there is a strong perception by the participants that the 7 Habits, when taken by large numbers of employees and supported by the administration, has the power to improve organizational culture in ways important to teachers, students, parents, administrators, and district board members.

## Authors

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