

## **The Challenge of Assessing School Climate**

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**Using school climate data, education leaders can get a picture of the whole child and the whole school.**

Think about how you feel right now as you read these words. Are you distracted? Worried? Sad? To the extent that this is the case, these feelings would naturally affect your ability to concentrate, reflect, and make judgments about what you're reading. And you're an adult with well-developed coping and concentration strategies! Common sense tells us that students who feel safe, connected, and engaged in school are more likely to learn well.

In the last 30 years, a growing body of research has confirmed the importance of the learning climate for children and adolescents. Compelling empirical research shows that a positive and sustained school climate promotes students' academic achievement and healthy development. Not surprisingly, a positive school climate also promotes teacher retention, which itself enhances student success (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2007; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, in press; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Yet our knowledge of the effects of school climate on learning has not been translated into our current accountability systems. Although No Child Left Behind is full of rhetoric about the importance of character education and supportive learning environments, it only requires accountability systems to measure reading, math, physical violence, and (recently) science scores. These are all meaningful indicators of education quality, but education policy makers have become increasingly aware that NCLB-type accountability is too narrowly focused.

For that reason, states and school districts have become interested in using school climate data as a complementary form of assessment, one that not only *measures* learning but also *supports* it. Schools can use climate data to promote meaningful staff, family, and student engagement—and to enhance the social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills and dispositions that contribute to success in school and in life.

## **How to Measure Climate**

Schools can assess school climate in a variety of ways—for example, using focus groups; observational methods; interviews; town hall discussions; study circles; participatory action research; and student, staff, and family surveys.

School climate is best evaluated with surveys that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner and are comprehensive in two ways: (1) recognizing student, parent, and school personnel voice and (2) assessing all the dimensions that color and shape the process of teaching and learning and educators' and students' experiences in the school building. Although there are hundreds of school climate surveys today, there are few that meet these two criteria (Cohen et al., 2009).

Virtually all researchers and the National School Climate Council (2007) agree that four major factors shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment. The Center for Social and Emotional Education's (CSEE) Comprehensive School

Climate Inventory is one survey instrument that schools can use to systematically measure how they are doing in each of these areas. [Figure 1](#) lists dimensions of school climate (as well as indicators and examples of survey items) from the inventory. Further information on how to access and use the inventory is available at [www.csee.net/climate/csciassessment](http://www.csee.net/climate/csciassessment).

Figure 1. Four Essential Dimensions of School Climate

Dimension	Major Indicators and Sample Questions
<b>Safety</b>	
<b>1. Rules and norms</b>	<p>Clearly communicated rules about physical violence and verbal abuse and clear and consistent enforcement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In my school, there are clearly stated rules against insults, teasing, harassment, and other verbal abuse.</i></li> <li>• <i>Adults in the school will stop students if they see them physically hurting each other (for example, pushing, slapping, or punching).</i></li> </ul>
<b>2. Physical safety</b>	<p>Sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I feel physically safe in all areas of the school building</i></li> <li>• <i>I have seen other students being physically hurt at school more than once (for example, pushed, slapped, punched, or beaten up)</i></li> </ul>
<b>3. Social and emotional security</b>	<p>Sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I have been insulted, teased, harassed or otherwise verbally abused more than once in this school.</i></li> <li>• <i>There are groups of students in the school who exclude others and make them feel bad for not being a part of the group.</i></li> </ul>

<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	
<b>1. Support for learning</b>	<p>Supportive teaching practices, such as constructive feedback and encouragement for positive risk taking, academic challenge individual attention, and opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills in a variety of ways.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My teachers show me how to learn from my mistakes</i></li> <li>• <i>My teachers encourage me to try out new ideas (think independently).</i></li> <li>• <i>My teachers help me figure out how I learn best.</i></li> </ul>
<b>2. Social and civic learning</b>	<p>Support for the development of social and civic knowledge and skills, including effective listening, conflict resolution, reflection and responsibility, and ethical decision making.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In my school, we have learned ways to resolve disagreements so that everyone can be satisfied with the outcome.</i></li> <li>• <i>In my school, we talk about the way our actions will affect others.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>	
<b>1. Respect for diversity</b>	<p>Mutual respect for individual differences at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Students in this school respect one another's differences (for example, gender, race, culture).</i></li> <li>• <i>Adults in this school respect one another's differences (for example gender, race, culture).</i></li> </ul>
<b>2. Social support—adults</b>	<p>Collaborative and trusting relationships among adults and adult support for students in terms of high expectations for success, willingness to listen, and personal concern.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Adults in my school seem to work well with one another.</i></li> <li>• <i>If students need to talk to an adult in school about a</i></li> </ul>

	<i>problem, there is someone they trust who they could talk to.</i>
<b>3. Social support—students</b>	<p>Network of peer relationships for academic and personal support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Students have friends at school they can turn to if they have questions about homework.</i></li> <li>• <i>Students have friends at school they can trust and talk to if they have problems.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Institutional Environment</b>	
<b>1. School connectedness/engagement</b>	<p>Positive identification with school, sense of belonging, and norms for broad participation in school life for students and families.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I feel good about what I accomplish in school.</i></li> <li>• <i>I think my parents/guardians feel welcome at my school. My school encourages students to get involved in other things than schoolwork (for example, sports, music/drama clubs).</i></li> </ul>
<b>2. Physical surroundings</b>	<p>Cleanliness, order, and appeal of facilities and adequate resources and materials.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>My school is physically attractive (pleasing architecture, nicely decorated, etc.).</i></li> <li>• <i>My school building is kept in good condition.</i></li> <li>• <i>My school has up-to-date computers and other electronic equipment available to students.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Source: Adapted from <i>The 12 Dimensions of School Climate Measured</i> by Center for Social and Emotional Education, n.d., New York: Author. Copyright by Center for Social and Emotional Education. Available: <a href="http://www.csee.net/climate/pdfNew/dimensions_chart_pagebars.pdf">www.csee.net/climate/pdfNew/dimensions_chart_pagebars.pdf</a>. Used with permission.</p>	

## Using School Climate Data to Educate the Whole Child

The phrase "All children can learn," although true, does not tell the whole story. All children *do* learn—all day, every day—through their experiences with the adults and the world around them. School staff, families, and community members are all teachers; their actions determine the degree to which students feel healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. Do these factors sound familiar? They are the five essential elements for educating the whole child, as identified in ASCD's whole child initiative [www.wholechildeducation.org](http://www.wholechildeducation.org) (Commission on the Whole Child, 2007).

Comprehensive school climate data can powerfully support the tenets of the Whole Child initiative by providing meaningful information about how healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged students feel. When schools use these data to create positive learning environments, they are helping their students develop the social-emotional competencies and ethical dispositions that predict success in school and life (Cohen, 2006). Here are three important ways in which educators can use school climate data to support education for the whole child.

### Guiding School Improvement Efforts

We know that school improvement requires coordinated, sustained, and intentional efforts to create learning climates that promote students' social, emotional, ethical, and intellectual abilities (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Devine & Cohen, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2003). By providing a range of formative information about both the academic and the nonacademic aspects of school life, school climate data gives school leaders scientifically sound information to gauge and direct these efforts.

Often, the most interesting findings of a school's climate survey are the surprising discrepancies in perception among various groups, which can be used as a springboard for meaningful improvement efforts. For example, when parents and school personnel report that bullying is a mild problem but students report that it is a severe problem, school leaders clearly need to look more deeply into students' experiences and enlist students in developing strategies to make the school a safer place. Or, when educators report that they believe social, emotional, and civic education is a vital part of student learning but students and parents do not, school leaders may need to promote dialogue among the groups to reach agreement about the school's mission and goals.

### Supporting Shared Leadership and Learning

A growing body of research and practice calls for education leaders—teachers, principals, and superintendents—to become more transparent about their goals and to ensure that all education stakeholders participate in building a high-quality learning environment (National Middle School Association, 2003). When students and others in the school community work together to understand school climate findings, dig deeper, prioritize goals, and create an action plan, they take part in a democratically informed process of school improvement.

In addition, such a process helps students develop the skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for engaged citizenry: for example, learning how to listen to ourselves and others, being responsible, thinking critically and reflectively, solving problems in creative and nonviolent ways, communicating clearly; participating in discussions and arguing thoughtfully,

and collaboratively working toward a common goal (Cohen, 2006).

For example, when a group of juniors at Manhattan Bridges High School helped assess their school's climate, they discovered a number of problems and needs: too few counselors, unclean and crowded bathrooms, less-than-appetizing food in the cafeteria, a lack of engagement from parents, bullying from students at other schools on campus, and unequal levels of respect among students and between students and teachers.

Working with their teachers and CSEE staff, the students identified the two areas of greatest concern to the student population: quality of food in the cafeteria and hygiene in the bathrooms. The students decided to organize a health awareness day to share essential facts about nutrition, exercise, and cleanliness with the whole school community. They launched a Cleanest Bathroom Contest, gave out fresh fruit from a local market along with a nutrition and exercise tip sheet, and sold green support bracelets to fund future health-related projects aimed at keeping Manhattan Bridges fresh, healthy, and strong. One student leader, Diana Coronado, summarized her experience by saying, "A positive school climate means being a community and acting like one, helping others approach their goals, being available for each other, and making that community a safe place."

### Promoting School-Family-Community Partnerships

Effective school-family-community partnerships support students' learning, achievement, and health development (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). Comprehensive school climate assessment, by definition, recognizes how families and community members see the school's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. In fact, one of the powerful advantages of school climate assessment is that it positions school leaders to say with sincerity, "We understand what you believe are our current strengths and needs, and we need your help and support in working together to make our school community even better for our children."

CSEE recently worked with a suburban school district that was concerned about growing social and physical violence in its middle and high schools. The community, historically white and middle to upper-middle class, had seen a growing number of immigrants from Central America in the last 10 to 15 years. The social and physical violence in the schools mostly consisted of fighting between U.S.-born students and Central American immigrants. Although school leaders were aware of this growing rift and had taken meaningful steps to recognize and celebrate cultural and language differences, they had been unable to promote meaningful and open dialogue among the adults in the community. A high percentage of the Central American families never attended school functions.

When the middle school assessed its school climate, school leaders took extraordinary steps to ensure that the Central American families would complete the survey. The survey results revealed that many parents in this community did not feel welcome at school. Many did not speak English. Some who were undocumented feared that if they appeared in school they would be deported. Many had little schooling themselves and assumed that the teachers would be in charge and would not need or want their input. These findings enabled school and parent leaders to actively reach out into the Central American as well as the white community to address these concerns and underscore the need for families and educators to be partners.

## A New Kind of Accountability?

When we use only academic achievement data to understand learning and school improvement efforts, we are ignoring a fundamental truth: The goals of education go far beyond linguistic and mathematical learning. Today, more and more districts, states, and networks of schools are using school climate data to help define school success. We believe that this is a substantive step forward for public education—one that supports the whole child and the whole school community.

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