



## Establishing Ground Rules for School Success

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Our communities depend on citizens who have developed the integrated, critical thinking that is required to meet the challenges of an interconnected world. Students need genuine experiences living, studying, and working within cultures different from their own home community. They need to learn to apply knowledge and skills within the context of a global community, deepening their understandings and increasing their ability to think critically and solve problems. If every student is to become a productive, successful adult, we must create schools that provide an education which is both rigorous and relevant, within a school climate that nurtures the development of each individual as an engaged participant in a vibrant community.

A quality education is one that intertwines individual achievement outcomes with educating for the common good. Public education means that we strive to create responsible, competent citizens who understand that creating a better world is the responsibility of each and every citizen. Using the skills and knowledge gained from the core curriculum in order to better our world through experiences such as service-learning puts education in a meaningful context. It is this meaningful context that forms the basis of a school climate which ensures academic and behavioral success for all students

Significant bodies of work have established the importance of school climate in achieving our educational goals. A positive, safe, caring environment that fosters meaningful learning develops more successful students and productive citizens. The evidence of the impact school climate has on positive student outcomes is abundant. The Search Institute, for example, documents the following outcomes related to a school climate that establish a caring atmosphere for students:

- Higher grades, engagement, attendance, expectations and aspirations, a sense of scholastic competence, fewer school suspensions, and on-time progression through grades
- Higher self-esteem and self-concept
- Less anxiety, depression and loneliness
- Less substance abuse<sup>1</sup>

Students need to be engaged in centers of learning that value who they are and what they have to say, offer physical, emotional, and academic support, and challenge them to grow into successful citizens who contribute meaningfully to the world around them. This, however, is a complex process. It looks different from one state, district, and even school to another. To effectively develop school climate that consistently produces a caring, positive environment conducive to teaching and learning, we need replicable models and a clearer definition of the elements that establish and sustain this type of climate. The elements that are identified as critical variables that comprise a school's climate vary from one definition to the other, though a literature review conducted by the Center for Social and Emotional Education gleaned ten essential dimensions that must be addressed.<sup>2</sup>

In response to this thorough study of how to consistently develop an effective school climate, a set of five National School Climate Standards were developed by the National School Climate Council.<sup>3</sup> These standards are not prescriptive, but rather provide a framework through which schools can systematically address local issues around school climate with the security of knowing their efforts are supported by research. It is through widespread use of these standards on a national level that we will be able to make significant progress within each local school district.

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<sup>1</sup> Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, J. (2007). *School Climate Research Summary*. New York, NY: Center for Social and Emotional Education.

<sup>3</sup> National School Climate Council (2009). *National School Climate Standards: Benchmarks to promote effective teaching, learning and comprehensive school improvement*. National School Climate Center ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php))

As schools are faced with increasing demands for accountability, it has become clear that school initiatives must be able to demonstrate how programmatic efforts will result in positive changes in student performance. However, as noted in the research on the importance of school climate, student performance is either hindered or improved by the school climate, which sets the tone for the policies, practices, and beliefs within which school functioning is grounded.

We know that there are particular strategies that are used in successful schools which result in a school climate that meaningfully engages students, develops civic skills, and creates a strong sense of belonging. One of the most effective strategies for impacting students' academic, civic, and social-emotional outcomes is service-learning. Making service-learning methodology part of how we "do" education serves as an effective means of implementing school reform initiatives to actively engage students in their academic growth. By offering young people meaningful ways to understand and apply academic skills, a greater sense of ownership on the part of the students is developed and schools are better able to meet the mandates required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. It is also a critical component that both requires and helps to create "quality environments where students develop the skills and dispositions that support their ability to work, love, and contribute to a vibrant and participatory democracy necessary to confront the changes and transitions that lie ahead."<sup>4</sup>

While each of the standards are critical for building a successful school climate, of particular importance for the service-learning field are Standards 3 and 5:

- Promoting practices that promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical, and civic development of students and student engagement as well as addressing barriers to learning.
- Developing meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

These standards effectively address the need to develop school climate which supports the strategies that best promote student success across the realm of core competencies that are

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, J., Ferge, A., & Pickeral, T. (2009). Measuring and improving school climate: A strategy that recognizes, honors and promotes social, emotional, and civic learning. The foundation for love, work, and engaged citizenry. *Teachers College Record*, Retrieved June 25, 2009, from <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=15698>.

needed to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace and a global citizenry. As noted in the standards identified above, a core element of a thriving school climate is providing students with opportunities to be meaningfully engaged. The most effective schools not only provide safe spaces, but also offer opportunities for young people to build social-emotional and cognitive learning skills through experiences such as service-learning. Young people taking civic action on issues that matter to them is an important and powerful way to engage them in the democratic process, while simultaneously increasing academic performance in core content areas. It is by taking positive action through the application of academic knowledge and skills that our youth will gain the necessary skills and attitudes that are so crucial to lifelong community involvement and success in the workplace.

As noted in the National School Climate Standards, another important element is to provide opportunities for students to develop a sense of community. Connecting the classroom experience to the larger community in service-learning experiences fosters a sense of belonging to both the school and community-at-large. Many schools utilizing service-learning methodology over the years have documented the positive effect these experiences have on attendance rates, school climate, and students' motivation and self-responsibility.

As schools work to incorporate the National School Climate Standards, it is imperative that decisions be strategically made that develop a holistic approach, making changes across the system that will result in a climate that is engages students and staff meaningfully, nurtures supportive relationships, and makes positive connections to the community. Schools that most effectively provide an environment that develops safe, successful, and healthy students involve all stakeholders in this process. Change will only happen effectively when the school climate is co-created by the youth and adults throughout the school and community. Shared vision and ownership will result in a school climate that positively shapes our children's – and our communities' – futures.