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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

Jonathan Cohen, Arnold Fege & Terry Pickeral

Abstract

In this commentary, the authors call upon educational leaders to think broadly and anew about the responsibility that the federal as well as State Departments of Education have for the well being of children and families. The authors detail six recommendations that will help to close the current gap between school climate research, policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education: (1) Define school climate in ways that are aligned with recent research; (2) Recommend that schools routinely and comprehensively evaluate school climate, recognizing student, parent and school personnel “voice” as well as all of the major dimensions (e.g. safety, relationships, teaching and learning and the environment) that shape school climate; (3) Adopt standards for positive school climate as well as school climate assessment procedures; (4) Use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability; (5) Encourage teacher preparation programs that give teachers and administrators the tools to evaluate classroom, school climate and take steps to use these findings to promote a climate for learning in our schools; and, (6) Increase research on the evaluation and dissemination of resources focused on improving school climate.

Americans are looking to schools 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. An essential component of education that has long been recognized but not included in accountability systems is the school climate. Although educators have talked about and focused on school climate for over a hundred years, there is not one nationally accepted definition for this term.

In 2007, the Center for Social and Emotional Education and the Education Commission of the States formed a National School Climate Council: a diverse group of practice and policy leaders devoted to narrowing the socially unjust gap between school climate research and

school climate policy and practice (National School Climate Council, 2007). This Council (2007) has recommended that school climate¹ be defined as “the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures.” It is common sense that how we feel (e.g., safe; connected to others we feel care; engaged in learning and teaching) matters. There is a compelling body of research that underscores the importance of school climate. Positive school climate promotes student learning, academic achievement, school success, and healthy development. It also promotes effective risk prevention, positive youth development, and increased teacher retention (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Freiberg, 1999). And a growing number of major educational reform leaders have underscored the fundamental and profound importance of school climate and how students, parents, school personnel, and community leaders work together to support positive youth development and student learning (Comer, 2005; Goodlad, 1997, 2008; Sizer, 2004; Senge, et al., 2000). However, these research findings are not consistently reflected in current educational policy, practice, and teacher education efforts.

John Goodlad is a leading educational researcher and theorist who has published influential models for renewing schools and teacher education. Goodlad (2008) asks us: “Where do we go from here?” He cites two major lessons emerging out of the past half-century of misguided school reform:

First, we will never have the schools our democracy requires until primary responsibility for them returns to their community contexts. Second, we will never have them until community leaders, educators and policymakers agree on the democratic purpose of public schooling and work together toward its advancement. A common mission, unlike a common mandate, promotes creativity and innovation. And where do we begin when faced with challenges such as renewing the nation's system of schooling?

While it is important to assess student academic performance, solely reporting on test scores does not provide the public sufficient information about the quality of teaching and learning in the school or the school district. By providing a comprehensive picture of student and school performance, both academic and non-academic, we can offer far more effective learning strategies. These strategies are based on the academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs of the student. School climate and environment are at the apex of this evaluative process.

The American people want K-12 schooling to prepare children to become effective and responsible citizens (Rose & Gallup, 2002; Public Education Network, 2004; International Education Association Civic Index Study, University of Maryland, 2005). In fact, we now have research based guidelines that support educators and school communities promoting the skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for school – and life – success (American Psychological Association, 2003). Educational research from a number of

¹ The terms “school climate”, “school culture,” and “learning environment” have been used in overlapping but sometimes quite different ways in the educational literature. There have been recent thoughtful discussions about the school culture and climate (e.g. Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). In this paper we use these terms interchangeably.

historically disparate areas such as character education, social emotional learning, risk prevention, health/mental health promotion, safe and drug free schools, physical health, exercise, nutrition and childhood obesity, and civics education have shown that when we engage in the following two overlapping strategies we support school – and life – success: (1) intentionally promoting K-12 students’ social, emotional, and civic as well as intellectual competencies; and, (2) educators, students, parents/guardians, and community leaders working together to create safe, caring, responsive, and participatory schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Cohen, 2006; Zins, et al., 2004). But, NCLB’s narrow focus on linguistic and mathematical tests has tragically resulted in schools becoming a life of tests rather than a place where children learn to face the tests of life (Elias, 2001).

To its credit, NCLB does include a number of important and socially responsible components. For example, NCLB’s insistence that educational professionals be responsible for insuring that all children learn and that we cannot and should not “blame” students, families, and/or the community for school failure is positive and socially responsible. And, NCLB does recognize one aspect of school climate: safety. But, NCLB’s Unsafe School Choice Option (USCO) only recognizes physically dangerous moments and simplistically suggests that schools are either “safe” or “persistently dangerous.” As Gastic (Gastic, 2007; Gastic & Gasiewski, 2008) has recently underscored, this one-dimensional measurement does not recognize the range of social and emotional as well as physically dangerous moments, or the important differences that students, school personnel, and parents or guardians typically report about how safe they feel in school (Cohen, 2006). Nor does it recognize, identify, or evaluate schools that incorporate models of positive school environment and climate. USCO is based on a deficit, rather than asset paradigm of change and improvement.

Measuring and improving school climate is a scientifically sound strategy that schools, districts, and State Departments of Education can use to further these instructional and systemic goals (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009).

We believe that President Obama, U.S. Education Secretary Arnie Duncan and their educational team are invested in systemic change that will not only provide economic security, but also fortify our democracy. Virtually all community, educational, and parent leaders appreciate how promoting students’ sense of safety, engagement, and “connectedness” supports student academic progress and a strong democracy. Today we do have reliable and valid methods of assessing school climate and using this information to promote safe and civil schools as well as effective social, emotional, and civic learning.

We encourage federal policies that identify, support, and reward quality school climate and at the same time encourage those strategies to be employed at the state level and made part of the states’ education accountability systems. These strategies should be comprised of a number of fundamental elements: school climate standards; best practices; measurement; assessment; teacher and administrator professional development; engaged students; parents and community; local decision-making; and adequate funding. Almost every reform effort that Congress and the Administration propose related to renewing the quality of low performing schools depends on the quality of school and community climate. We need a

recalibration of input and measured outcomes in the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

The four principles and six recommendations that we outline below have emerged from the work of the National School Climate Council (2007).

Our work is grounded in the following four principles:

- School climate is an essential element of successful schools to promote student achievement, preparation for democratic life, and preparation to be successful in the 21st century workplace.

- School climate evaluations need to be carried out with tools that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner and are comprehensive in the following two ways: (1) K-12 student, parent, and school personnel “voice” is recognized; and (2) all of the major dimensions of school life (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching, and learning, the (external) environment) are assessed.

- Comprehensive school climate assessment provides data that should be used as a springboard for community-wide understanding, school improvement planning, and implementation efforts as well as accountability. Currently, there are research-based guidelines that recognize the unique nature of each school’s history, strengths, needs, and goals and provide benchmarks and a road map for school improvement efforts.

- School personnel, whether they are aware or not, are school climate leaders. Students, parents and community leaders naturally follow their lead. Therefore, emphasis on school personnel training in classroom and school climate is pivotal for educational reform.

We recommend the following:

- 1) Define school climate in ways that are aligned with recent research.

- 2) Recommend that schools routinely and comprehensively evaluate school climate, recognizing student, parent, and school personnel “voice” and “connectedness” as well as all of the major dimensions (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching, learning and the environment) that shape school climate and use the information to continuously improve the teaching and learning environment.

- 3) Adopt standards for positive school climate as well as school climate assessment procedures.

- 4) Use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability.

- 5) Encourage teacher preparation programs that give teachers and administrators the tools to evaluate classroom, school climate and take steps to use these findings to promote a climate for learning in our schools.

6) Increase research on the evaluation and dissemination of resources focused on improving school climate.

Recommendation 1:

Define school climate in ways that are aligned with recent research.

Although most State Departments of Education and school districts recognize the importance of school climate, many states do not define it. Many other states define school climate as “safety” – an essential but inadequate definition of school climate. Synthesizing current research, the National School Climate Council consensually developed the following definitions for school climate and a positive and sustained school climate.

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures.

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators’ work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators’ model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment, including those community members who may not have any children in school.

We recommend that the U.S. Department of Education as well as State Departments of Education use the consensually developed definition above as the definition of school climate and a positive and sustained school climate.

Recommendation 2:

Recommend that schools routinely and comprehensively evaluate school climate, recognizing student, parent, and school personnel “voice” and “connectedness” as well as all of the major dimensions (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching, and learning and the environment) that shape school climate and use the information to continuously improve the teaching and learning environment.

What is measured is what counts in public education. Measuring school climate is a practical and realistic strategy that recognizes the essential social, emotional, and civic as well as intellectual dimensions of learning and school life. In fact, these dimensions provide the foundation for school – and life – success.

There is growing interest in measuring school climate. A number of states (e.g., Ohio), large districts (Anchorage, Chicago, New York), and charter school systems (e.g., California) are beginning or planning to include school climate assessments as a regular facet of school life.

Education leaders, community members, and other stakeholders need to utilize the corresponding data on their school’s climate and employ effective strategies to continuously improve the teaching and learning environment.

Recommendation 3:

Adopt standards for positive school climate as well as school climate assessment procedures.

Standards set the “bar” for what schools must achieve. One of the major recommendations that the National School Climate Council wrote about in *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the Gap Between School Climate Research and School Climate Policy, Practice Guidelines and Teacher Education Policy* (www.schoolclimate.org) was the importance of developing national school climate standards. The Council is now in the final phase of developing these standards.

The National School Climate Standards present a vision and framework of a positive and sustainable school climate. This framework is grounded in five standards² that support effective school climate improvement efforts:

- 1. The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.*
- 2. The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged.*
- 3. The school community's practices are identified, supported and prioritized to (a) promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students, (b) enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and school-wide activities; (c) address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.*
- 4. The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.*
- 5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.*

³

We recommend that the U.S. Department of Education and State Departments of Education review these standards and consider endorsing them.

Recommendation 4:

Use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability.

² The Council is engaged in the process of receiving reactions, concerns, and recommendations from local, state, and national school leaders, researchers, and teacher educators. These five standards are linked to a series of indicators and sub-indicators. If you are interested in learning more about this work, please write to jonathancohen@csee.net.

School climate assessment recognizes the social, emotional, and civic dimensions of learning. We recommend that comprehensive, reliable, and valid school climate assessment become an additional measure of accountability.

Recommendation 5:

Encourage teacher preparation programs that give teachers and administrators the tools to evaluate classroom and school climate and take steps to utilize these findings to promote a climate for learning in our schools.

Understanding about school climate is largely absent in teacher education efforts. School climate is an often overlooked factor in explaining student achievement. One of the most persistent problems in education is the instability of the teaching force. Two of the most often cited factors for leaving teaching are directly related to school climate: poor administrative support and lack of faculty influence.

We suggest that school and classroom climate need to become a more explicit and research-based dimension of teacher education. We recommend that programs for educators should explore the importance of a “shared vision” of education in promoting positive climate. Teacher education programs and programs for school leaders seldom focus on the purposes of education, and if they do, they are left at a level of generality as to be meaningless. We need to help teachers and leaders expand their conceptions of the purposes of education in a democratic society. When time is taken to discuss these purposes rather than simply listing them in a school mission statement, a shared vision emerges that contributes to both relationships and community.

Programs for educators should include specific instruction relating to social, emotional, and civic education. By studying social, emotional, and civic education, future teachers will be better able to shape their relationships with other professionals in the school and the community, and be empowered to change relationship patterns in a positive way. Similarly, they will learn to engage in teaching their students so as to promote social, emotional, and civic abilities and thus help them become a positive force in the community.

Recommendation 6:

Increase research on the evaluation and dissemination of resources focused on improving school climate.

There are many areas of school climate that are in need of further research and consensus. Although we have learned a great deal about aspects of school life (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching, learning, and the environment) that color and shape school norms, values, relationship patterns, teaching, and learning, there are many others that we are just beginning to learn about. We know, for example, that there are very strong correlations between student retention/graduation rates and school climate. But, we do not fully understand the entire individual, relational, classroom, school wide, and school-home-community factors that are at play here. Do some cultural groups respond differently to different school climate variables? Are there some variables of school climate that are most directly related to positive educational outcomes? We know, for example, that the nature of how building and district leaders exercise leadership is a powerful force that shapes school climate, but we

have not really studied how this important force interacts with a host of other forces that also shape climate.

We recommend that Departments of Education support school climate research and the development of guidelines, policies, practices and infrastructure resources to assist states to understand, integrate and sustain quality school climate.

In conclusion, we call upon educational leaders to think broadly and anew about the responsibility that the federal as well as state governments have for the well being of children and families, and about how that responsibility is best fulfilled. Today, there is a glaring and socially unjust gap between school climate research, policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education.

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