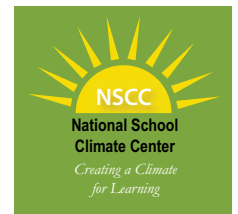# The School Climate Challenge

*Narrowing the Gap Between School Climate Research and School Climate Policy, Practice Guidelines and Teacher Education Policy*

**A White Paper presented by**



**National School Climate Center (NSCC)**



**Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE)**

**and**





National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) at
**Education Commission of the States (ECS)**

Educators have recognized the importance of school climate for a hundred years.

# Contents

# School Climate Council

✦ *Howard Adelman*, Co-director and Professor, School Mental Health Project, Center for Mental Health in Schools, Department of Psychology, UCLA

✦ *Janice E. Arnold-Jones,* Representative, House District 24, Albuquerque, New Mexico

✦ *Victor Battistich*, Associate Professor, Center for Character & Citizenship, College of Education, University of Missouri, St. Louis

✦ *Amy Berg,* Research Director, Coalition for Community Schools, Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington D.C.

✦ *Marvin Berkowitz*, Sanford N. McDonnell Endowed Professor of Character Education and Co-director, Center for Character & Citizenship, College of Education, Univ. of Missouri, St. Louis

✦ *Cathryn Berger Kaye,* M.A., CBK Associates, International Education Consultants

✦ *Samuel Chaltain*, Executive Director, Five Freedoms Project, Washington, D.C.

✦ *William Cirone*, County Superintendent, Santa Barbara County Education Office, Santa Barbara, California

✦ *Jonathan Cohen*, President, Center for Social and Emotional Education; Adjunct Professor in Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, *Co-chair*

✦ *James P. Comer*, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry and Founder, School Development Program, Yale Child Study Center, Yale Univeristy School of Medicine, Connecticut

✦ *Lou Ann Evans*, Member, State College Area School District, Pennsylvania

✦ *Ann Foster,* Executive Director, National Network for Educational Renewal

✦ *J. Martez Hill,* Deputy State Superintendent, Mississippi Department of Education

✦ *Gary Homana*, Student, Education Policy & Leadership, College of Education, University of Maryland — College Park

✦ *William H. Hughes*, Superintendent, Greendale School District, Greendale, Wisconsin

✦ *Nicholas Michelli,* Presidential Professor in Urban Education, Doctoral Program in Urban Education, City University of New York

✦ *Terry Pickeral,* Executive Director, National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) at the Education Commission of the States*,* Denver, Colorado, *Co-chair*

✦ *Mary Lou Rush*, Executive Director, Center for Students, Families and Communities, Ohio State Department of Education

✦ *Margaret Jo Shepherd*, Project Director, Center for Social and Emotional Education; Emeritus Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University

✦ *Linda Taylor,* Co-director, School Mental Health Project, Center for Mental Health in Schools, Department of Psychology, UCLA

✦ *Arnold F. Fege*, Director, Public Engagement and Advocacy, Public Education Network, Washington, D.C.

✦ *Paul Vierling,* State of Hawaii

Research confirms what teachers and parents have claimed for decades: a safe and supportive school environment, in which students have positive social relationships and are respected, engaged in their work and feel competent, matters.

## Preface

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing appreciation that school climate, the quality and character of school life, fosters — or undermines — children's development, learning and achievement. Research confirms what teachers and parents have claimed for decades: a safe and supportive school environment, in which students have positive social relationships and are respected, engaged in their work and feel competent, matters. A growing number of reports, studies and legislation emphasize the importance of positive school climate in reducing achievement inequities, enhancing healthy development and promoting the skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for 21st century school — and life — success. This paper targets school leaders regarding the gap between findings from school climate research and school climate policy and practice, including teacher education and community support and engagement.

## Introduction

In order to begin framing the position of the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) on school climate, and to formulate ways to meet the policy, practice and teacher education challenges, CSEE and ECS convened a "thinkers meeting" (April 2007) and a "professional judgment group" (October 2007) of national experts. This paper outlines recommendations made by this School Climate Council for policymakers and teacher educators.

The paper is organized into five sections:

✦ Background information and data on the history of school climate research and the current status of school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education requirements and resources
✦ Main principles or goals for school climate policy
✦ Assumptions that undergird school climate policy, practice and teacher education and professional development programs
✦ Challenges and changing needs that call for policy, practice and teacher education reform along with a series of recommendations that address the different challenges and needs
✦ Summary of recommendations for policymakers, practice leaders and teacher educators.

## Background

Educators have recognized the importance of school climate for a hundred years[1]. However, it was not until the 1950's that educators began to systemically study school climate. The development of scientifically sound school climate assessment tools spurred a research tradition that grows to this day.

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 and 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[1]. The terms "school climate," "school culture" and "learning environment" have been used in overlapping but sometimes, quite different ways in the educational literature. This paper does not address the history and usage of these terms. As we detail below, sustainable, positive school climates powerfully promote student achievement and positive youth development.

When students as well as parents, educators and community members walk into a school, they quickly begin to form judgments about the experience of living and working in that school. Will this school help to motivate my child to do well academically and learn to be a "life-long learner"? How safe is the school? Is the physical environment (e.g. temperature, cleanliness, size) supportive of learning? How respected and "connected" do students feel? Are teachers and students engaged in interesting and meaningful work? Is there a culture of intellectual rigor? To what extent are people in the school promoting the social, civic, emotional and ethical as well as cognitive skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for learning and effective participation in a democracy? The ways in which groups of students, parents and school personnel answer these questions reflect group norms and values that have a profound impact in creating — or undermining — a climate for learning.

Positive school climate needs to be actively created and sustained by members of the student, parent and school personnel groups in school, and supported by the community at large. When the school community works together to understand and improve school climate, collective action powerfully supports positive youth development and learning and promotes the underlying 21st century skills and dispositions for healthy adult relationships, and the capacity to work and participate in a democracy[2].

Positive school climate also promotes student learning. Positive school climate powerfully affects student motivation to learn[3]. For example, activities like community service-learning and student councils value student engagement and enhance the learning environment by providing students with opportunities to participate in the learning process and construct their own knowledge of social and government systems[4].

Moreover, when such activities are presented in a supportive and collaborative learning environment, they encourage students to build upon one another's ideas in productive and engaging ways[5]. Together, the experience realistically represents the social situation that they may find themselves part of in the greater civil society[6]. In an overlapping manner, positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust[7].



Positive school climate powerfully affects student motivation to learn.

Positive school climate, by definition, is characterized by strong collaborative learning communities. Research shows that this improves teacher practice as well as student learning through dialogue and collaboration around engaging classroom instruction[8].

In other words, when students, in partnership with educators and parents, work to improve school climate they promote essential learning skills (e.g. creativity and innovation skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, communication and collaborative skills) as well as life and career skills (e.g. flexibility and adaptability, initiative, social and cross culture skills, productively and accountability, leadership and responsibility) that provide the foundation for 21st century learning [9].

School climate promotes — or complicates — students' ability to learn and achieve academically. This is common sense. To the extent that students feel safe, cared for, appropriately supported and lovingly "pushed" to learn, academic achievement should increase. And, in fact, this is what a series of studies from the United States and abroad has shown. Positive school climate is directly related to academic achievement[10].

Over the last three decades, a growing body of research attests to the profound impact features of school climate have on individual experience. Two aspects of school climate (commitment to school and positive feedback from teachers) have been shown to affect students' self-esteem[11]. The social-emotional climate of schools is predictive of mother's reports of their school age children's alcohol use and psychiatric problems[12]. Research has also revealed a relationship between school climate and student self-concept[13]. A series of studies have shown a relationship between school climate and student absenteeism[14] and rate of student suspension[15].

Research also indicates that positive school climate is a critical dimension of effective risk prevention, health promotion efforts and learning[16]. Recent research reviews show effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts are correlated with safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climates[17]. Finally, recent studies show the length of school attendance has the highest correlation with health even after socio-economic status and other variables are taken out. School climate may be a factor in dropout rates and therefore related to lifelong health[18].

Safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate tends to foster greater attachment belonging to school as well as provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional and academic learning[19]. One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate is relational, i.e., how "connected" people feel to one another in school, and how connected the school is to the community. In fact, the extent to which students feel attached to at least one caring and responsible adult at school is an area of increased attention among school climate researchers. School connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes[20], violence prevention[21] and as a protective factor in risky sexual, violence, and drug-use behaviors[22].

These findings contributed to the development of the Safe and Drug Free Schools network by the U.S. Department of Justice (2004) and the U.S. Department of Education. A growing number of state departments of education now emphasize the importance of safe and caring schools.

School connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes.

School climate has a profound bearing on teacher education and retention. One of the most powerful statements on the connection between school climate and issues affecting teacher education is The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future's Induction into Learning Communities. This monograph defines school climate in terms of a learning community and correctly argues that induction, to be effective, must be induction into a healthy school climate. Teacher education programs are sometimes criticized because of the high attrition rate among beginning teachers. The common placement of new teachers in the most challenging settings with little support predictably propels high attrition. Preparing school leaders, who understand the critical role of a school climate that promotes collaboration and learning communities, and teachers who understand the importance of such a climate, has implications for teacher education[23].

We are still learning why positive school climate leads to academic achievement and positive youth development. In broad strokes, it seems that positive school climate leads to a greater focus on and attunement to what students need to learn and teachers need to teach[24]. But, there are complex sets of forces that shape the quality and character of each school and we have much to learn about the specific needs of different types of schools. What is clear is that school climate matters.

In sum, 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, as well as effective risk prevention, positive youth development and increased teacher retention. However, these research findings are not consistently reflected in current educational policy, practice and teacher education efforts[25]. It is to these topics that we now turn.

State departments of education have not yet adequately responded to these important findings. In fact, a recent state department of education school policy scan reveals significant shortcomings in how climate is defined, measured and incorporated into policies[26]. This is especially problematic as state policy has become increasingly influential in guiding school reform efforts. The National School Climate Center at CSEE and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at ECS



...too often, school climate improvement efforts are fragmented and short-lived...

completed this scan, which is available at www.csee.net/climate/pdf/policyscan_link.pdf.

This critical gap in research and policy in terms of school climate is a result of several problems[27]:

- ✦ The first major problem is inconsistency and inaccuracy in terms of school climate definition.
- ✦ Second, while there are superior options, state policymakers have made poor choices in terms of school climate measurement at the state level.
- ✦ The third problem is a lack of defined climate-related leadership at the state level.
- ✦ Fourth, many states continue to isolate school climate policy in health, special education and school safety arenas, without integrating it into school accountability policies, or the beliefs of the community at large.
- ✦ Finally, many states have not yet created quality or improvement standards, which can easily link data to improvement plans and technical assistance.

We do not understand why there is such a gap between research and policy here. These issues, in combination with underdeveloped implementation planning, will hinder schools' abilities to promote positive school climate through policy.

There are two, overlapping dimensions shaping school climate related practice: Assessment and school improvement guidelines. First, school climate is not regularly evaluated with measures developed in a scientifically sound manner and that comprehensively assess all of the dimensions that shape experience in schools, as well as assess K-12 students, parents and school personnel. Accountability, which depends on reliable assessment procedures, is a national educational policy in the United States. Second, it is unclear to what extent school climate improvement efforts are aligned with research findings. We are not aware of systematic studies of these efforts. Our impression is that too often, school climate improvement efforts are fragmented and short-lived even when they are aligned with research-based guidelines. The national policy scan (described above) reveals a growing state- and district-level interest in evidence-based school climate improvement efforts. However, research-based guidelines are not included in the vast majority of state- or district-level policy and practice guidelines.

Understanding about school climate is largely absent in teacher education efforts. School climate is an often overlooked factor in explaining student achievement. In fairness, beginning teachers don't see themselves as playing a significant role in school climate. Some programs, those connected with the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) for example, include preparing new teachers to be "stewards of best practice"[28]. This concept needs to extend beyond excellent pedagogy to taking responsibility to enhance the climate of the schools and classrooms they work in. Similarly, the idea of "nurturing pedagogy" is explicit in NNER programs. Nurturing pedagogy, based on the work of Nel Noddings and others, has to do with the quality of interaction and respect between teacher and pupil, an important aspect of school climate. Still, in large measure, there is a significant gap between school climate research and the education of teachers. Even when relevant curriculum is present, it is not explicitly linked to school climate. Teacher education programs are often prescribed by state regulation, accreditation standards or the limited number of credits available. It is much more likely for programs to directly address subject matter on which the students of their graduates will be tested — primarily mathematics and English language arts. This is especially true as we continue to measure the quality of schools and, through value-added assessments, the quality of schools and colleges of education on the basis of standardized test scores.

There are other very important outcomes of education that are more difficult to measure, including, for example, preparing students to be active participants in our democracy. In this role, schools can help foster the knowledge, skills and dispositions young people need to develop into politically and socially responsible individuals. Considering a positive climate for citizenship education more comprehensively and globally also raises questions about how schools can most optimally promote these important learning activities beyond the classroom environment. Encouraging active and collaborative learning on authentic projects is most effective in an environment with a civic mission that encourages trusting relationships throughout all members of the school community [29]. It is only within a healthy school climate that we are likely to achieve these ends, and finding a means to assess these outcomes is important.

This situation presents many questions for policy, practice and teacher education leaders:

- ✦ What policy options are available for state policymakers and education leaders to ensure school climate is a critical component of accountability and school improvement systems?
- ✦ How can we integrate research-based information about school climate into the preparation and credentialing of teachers, school-based mental health professionals and school administrators?
- ✦ What are the basic components of research-based school climate improvement efforts?
- ✦ How can building, district and state school leaders learn from one another to further research and understanding about effective school climate improvement efforts?

## Principles

While there are many important ideas about school climate, the following four principles are considered fundamental in the field of school climate and in the education community:

✦ 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.

## Assumptions

✦ School climate is grounded in people's experience of school life — socially, emotionally, ethically and civically as well as academically. Hence, school climate assessment and improvement efforts need to explicitly recognize and address the social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as academic dimensions of school life.

✦ Meaningful ongoing social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as cognitive learning by district and school administrators, teachers and other staff is foundational to effective and sustained school climate improvement efforts.

✦ Evidence-based school climate assessment and improvement efforts involve a specific and unique body of knowledge, practice and attitudes, which must be included in the curricula of prospective teachers, school-based mental health professionals and school administrators.

✦ Professionals who educate teachers, school-based mental health professionals and school administrators must have experience with evaluating and improving school and classroom climate.

✦ Due to the complex nature of school climate problems that need to be addressed, school-home-community partnerships and educator-mental health professional partnerships are essential.

✦ Data-driven school climate improvement systems need to recognize and track prosocial behavior as well as barriers to school climate improvement efforts.

✦ Effective school climate improvement efforts model a democratic process and provide extraordinary opportunities for all members of the school community to learn and practice skills and dispositions that provide the necessary foundation for active and ongoing citizenship.

✦ Effective school climate needs to be a central characteristic of school accountability and assessment systems.

✦ State departments of education have a responsibility to provide leadership for schools to understand the principles and characteristics of effective school climate.

✦ School climate needs to be an integral component of quality education systems, practices and professional development, thus ensuring sustainability and leadership.

✦ Effective school climate does not happen in a vacuum, isolated from the community climate and support.

## Changing Needs and New Challenges:

There is a glaring gap between school climate research findings on one hand and policy, practice and teacher education on the other. The United Nations 1948 Convention on the Rights of Children decrees that governments have a responsibility to ensure that every child has equal access to a quality education adapted to meet the child's needs. To actualize this goal, schools must respect the inherent dignity of the child, create a climate of tolerance, respect and appreciation of human differences, and bar tolerance of bullying and disciplinary practices that harm or humiliate.

We now have a series of research-based guidelines that predictably promote a K-12 climate for learning, respect, tolerance and safety. These guidelines also include a set of instructional guidelines focused on promoting social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as academic learning[30]. In other words, there is a growing body of empirical support for the notion that we can intentionally promote students' social, emotional and ethical as well as cognitive capacities and dispositions, and also create a climate for learning. However, creating safe, caring, connected, participatory and responsive schools is a complex, ongoing process that will involve somewhat different considerations, needs and goals for every school.

Outlined below are changing needs and challenges for policymakers (Table 1), practice leaders (Table 2) and teacher educators (Table 3).

## Table 1. Changing Needs and Challenges for Policymakers

| Needs and challenges | Recommendations |
| --- | --- |
| ▪ The field lacks a commonly accepted definition of school climate. | ▪ Hold series of consensus meetings with policy, research and practice leaders. |
| ▪ Current state policy is not aligned with school climate research. | ▪ Create a set of policy options for state policymakers and education leaders to consider, adopt and/or adapt. |
| ▪ Fragmented programming and school improvement efforts are common at building, district and often state levels. | ▪ Use school climate assessment and improvement efforts as a method to coordinate education-mental health as well as home-school-community initiatives. |
| ▪ Several school climate assessment procedures exist, some of higher quality than others. | ▪ Formulate standards for school climate assessment procedures, evaluate existing assessment procedures by the standards and prepare guidelines for selecting a school climate assessment procedure. |
| ▪ Current school accountability systems do not currently include school climate. | ▪ School accountability systems need to expand and explicitly address school climate. |

Effective school climate improvement efforts model a democratic process and provide extraordinary opportunities for all members of the school community to learn and practice skills and dispositions that provide the necessary foundation for active and ongoing citizenship.

## Table 2. Changing Needs and Challenges for Practice Leaders

| Needs and challenges | Recommendations |
|---|---|
| ▪ Practice leaders are not aware of current, scientifically sound findings and resources that support school climate assessment and improvement efforts. | ▪ Create a series of national meetings and publications.<br>▪ Create a national cadre of practice leaders that review, analyze and disseminate research-based information on school climate. |
| ▪ Educational leaders are not systemically learning from one another about common barriers, solutions and best practices linked to school climate assessment and improvement efforts. | ▪ Create a network of 100 school districts and college/university partnerships committed to measuring and improving school climate to develop "centers of excellence" that others can learn from.<br>▪ Create learning forums that support school and districts leaders learning from one another.<br>▪ Support the development of a growing 'bank' of case studies written by and/or with school leaders. |
| ▪ The field does not yet have a fully developed and tested data-driven school climate improvement system. | ▪ Build on existing school climate data-driven tracking systems to create a national resource that will support practice and research.<br>▪ Based on school climate improvement data, develop systemic improvement prototypes of what schools need to do every day. |
| ▪ There is still a great deal that the field does not know about effective school climate assessment and improvement efforts. | ▪ Create a national school climate research center. |
| ▪ While there are many recent reports calling for significant changes in education systems, there is rarely an associated analysis of the critical role school climate plays in (1) allowing schools to under-perform and (2) transforming school climates to be more conducive to student achievement and success. | ▪ Secure a place on national commissions and agencies that develop reports on school change and improvement, encouraging an analysis and inclusion of effective school climate in their recommendations. |
| ▪ Scientifically sound school climate assessment tools do not regularly recognize and evaluate the role of school boards and the community. | ▪ New tools need to be developed to recognize the role of the school board and the community in school climate improvement efforts. |
| ▪ Practice leaders often treat schools as though they were institutions isolated from parents and community members at large. | ▪ Use the community schools or engagement models to expand effective school climate practice beyond the school building and into the community through networking, communities of practice, town meetings and public dissemination of school climate evaluations and data. |

## Table 3. Changing Needs and Challenges for Teacher Educators

| Needs and challenges | Recommendations |
|---|---|
| ▪ Since school climate is a relatively recent focus, it is not surprising that many teacher educators are unaware of the contemporary work on school climate and that the work has not been included in teacher education programs. However, research has been conducted on the relationship between characteristics of school climate and individual variables among students and teachers. New measures of school climate exist. | ▪ A small but representative sample of the curriculum and course offerings in primary and secondary teacher education programs can be examined to determine where opportunities for students to learn about the components of school climate presently occur. Recommendations for introducing 'school climate' as an organizing term with the supportive research and for providing perspective teachers with the opportunity to learn and practice the components of a positive school climate should build on relevant components of existing teacher education programs.<br><br>▪ Working with and through one of the national associations for teacher education and professional development, create a document for distribution to teacher educators that presents the contemporary case for 'school climate' with a scientifically defensible analysis of the research base. This document might also contain recommendations (above) for educating teachers on the importance of a supportive school climate that includes field-based experience in assessing school climate and participating in efforts to improve the climate in a school. |
| ▪ An understanding of the importance of the social and emotional mind, and the facilitative interaction between cognitive, emotional and social competence has growing support in U.S. psychology, but is not yet widely known or accepted by educators, including teacher educators. | ▪ A comprehensive K-12 social, emotional and ethical learning curriculum based on the best available knowledge about social, emotional and ethical learning, the development of social and emotional competence and ethical dispositions, and interactions between emotional, cognitive and social learning can serve as a prototype for educators to adapt to the particulars of individual schools, school districts and/or states. A social, emotional and ethical learning curriculum can parallel the academic curriculum in form. Since significant dimensions of school climate are social, emotional and ethical, a research-informed curriculum that specifies social, emotional and ethical learning outcomes by age can help educators create a facilitative social and emotional climate in schools. It is important to note that good social and emotional learning curriculums exist but each is either limited in age range, the scope of the content or has a limited research base. |

Advancing citizenship education across disciplines helps teachers and administrators learn more about social and political issues, and the challenges of moral and ethical questions.

## Table 3. Changing Needs and Challenges for Teacher Educators (cont.)

| Needs and challenges | Recommendations |
| --- | --- |
| ▪ Armed with contemporary evidence that the quality of the teacher is the most significant variable influencing student achievement, teacher educators are engaged in new and sustained efforts to improve the quality of teacher education. Improvements are evident in efforts to provide deep content knowledge in teacher preparation programs; develop and transmit the pedagogical knowledge base for teaching; design a range of clinical learning experiences for teachers in addition to classroom practical (lesson study, case method study, analytic study of student work samples); and create induction periods incorporating peer collaboration and systematic mentoring for teachers prior to certification. | ▪ Case-method learning, as used in schools of business, law and medicine, but underdeveloped in schools of education, is an ideal way to help both pre- and in-service teachers learn about school climate. Imagine a collection of case studies created from schools with different climates that can be analyzed and discussed from multiple perspectives. Also imagine a summary of research on school climate and relevant research on social, emotional and ethical learning that accompanies the collection of cases. Finally, imagine guided instruction to accompany the cases that lead students to proficiency in assessing school climate and constructing recommendations for producing changes in climate. Building on a series of learning modules that are now being developed, it is recommended that a Web-based "learning center" be developed on the National School Climate Center site. |
| ▪ There is a growing interest in social, emotional and academic education at a pre- and in-service level, but a lack of university-based course offerings exists in this area. | ▪ It is recommended that an online, distance-learning model be developed, building on the City University of New York-CSEE four-course, graduate-level sequence. |
| ▪ In addition to teacher education, there is a complementary and broad need to educate all school staff about school climate and the range of social, emotional, ethical, civic and academic education. | ▪ It is recommended that pre- and in-service educational resources be developed for school staff members in addition to teachers and administrators. School mental health staff, school safety agents and the range of support staff all play a critical role in shaping school climate. |
| ▪ There is a common interest in promoting citizenship education in schools across the country, but few educators are prepared to engage their students in educational experiences that foster the knowledge, skills and dispositions young people need to become active and contributing citizens. | ▪ There is no one way to design and implement a comprehensive and effective citizenship education program in our colleges and universities. However, effective citizenship education programs include certain components to help teachers and administrators commit to the civic mission of schools. For example, required foundational courses, such as those including topics on First Amendment issues, allow pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in discussions and deliberations that help them understand the methods and issues in teaching for responsible citizenship. Advancing citizenship education across disciplines helps teachers and administrators learn more about social and political issues, and the challenges of moral and ethical questions. And, engaging college students in high-quality service-learning activities fosters connections between what they are learning in the classroom with real concerns in the community — providing the skills and understanding that will support and guide their own teaching. We can and need to support teacher educators' understanding of how they can intentionally and helpfully promote the skills and dispositions that practically support participation in a democracy. |

Practice leaders — building and district leaders — must become aware of scientifically sound ways they can measure and improve school climate.

## Summary of Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers must become more aware of school climate research and the importance of positive school climate. There are compelling reasons why K-12 schools need to evaluate school climate in scientifically sound ways and use these findings to create a climate for learning. Policies are needed to:

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

✦ 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.

✦ Create standards for school climate assessment procedures and guidelines for selecting a school climate measure.

✦ Use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability.

✦ Ensure credential options maintain high-quality school climate related standards for educators and school-based mental health professionals in general and administrators in particular.

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

✦ Increase research on the evaluation and improvement of school climate.

## Summary of Recommendations for Practice Leaders

Practice leaders — building and district leaders — must become aware of scientifically sound ways they can measure and improve school climate. Although the majority of educational leaders appreciate the importance of school climate, they often use "home grown" school climate surveys that have not been developed in scientifically sound ways. And, this data is not used systemically to build community and improve school climate. Practice leaders need to:

✦ Learn about the range of comprehensive school climate assessment tools that have been developed in scientifically sound ways, encourage and support their use.

✦ Learn about the range of ways these evaluation findings can be used to build community in general, promote student, parent and community participation in particular, and create evidence-based instructional and systemic action plans.

✦ Create a network of schools and communities committed to evaluating and improving school climate to develop "centers of excellence" others can learn from.

✦ Consider joining learning forums where they can be teachers and learners together regarding common barriers and solutions to school climate improvement efforts.

✦ Contribute to ongoing action research that will support continuing efforts in the field to learn about best practices.

✦ Contribute to the development of case studies that illustrate the complexity of school climate improvement efforts.

## Summary of Recommendations for Teacher Educators

Partner with professional teacher education organizations to create a committee to evaluate knowledge about and experience with school climate variables in pre-service as well as in-service teacher education to:

✦ Utilize the same, or a similar, committee in collaboration with policy leaders to assess the scientific merits of existing school climate research, eliminate inadequate studies and, through logical and empirical means, summarize the valid findings about the effects of school climate on outcomes for students and teachers. Distribute this information to teacher educators throughout the country along with guidelines for incorporating the research into a teacher education curriculum.

✦ In collaboration with school leaders interested in incorporating school climate policy into practice, create guidelines for in-service professional development based on school climate research and practice.

✦ Support the creation of a prototype K-12 social, emotional and ethical learning curriculum to be used by states and school districts on par with a state or district academic curriculum.

✦ Create pre- and in-service materials to support the education of "non-educator" school staff (e.g. mental health professionals, school safety agents and support staff).

✦ Support the purpose of education in a democratic society and demonstrate how we can use evaluating and improving school climate as a springboard to develop the skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for active citizenship and school climate improvement.

✦ Include school climate assessment in practice by using the results from school climate assessment in the teacher and administrator education curriculum.

## Conclusion

In theory, educational research shapes policy, which dictates teacher education requirements and school improvement practice guidelines. We have detailed a glaring gap between school climate research findings and policy, school improvement practice and teacher educator efforts. Current accountability systems that exclusively focus on reading and math scores have reinforced this gap. This gap undermines K-12 students' ability to learn and develop in healthy ways. We have suggested a series of specific steps that support policymakers, practice and teacher education leaders to narrow this gap. And, in doing so, we are strengthening the school community and students ability to learn the 21st century skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for school — and life — success. Measuring school climate and using these findings to build community and further learning and positive youth development will — literally — make a difference for the future of America: our children.



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