

## School Climate Policy and Practice Trends: A Paradox

by [Jonathan Cohen](#) — February 28, 2014

*There has never been more federal and state support for school climate reform efforts in America. Paradoxically, most practitioners are not sure what school climate improvement means on day-to-day basis. This commentary details three factors that contribute to school climate reform being more of an idealized goal than an actual school improvement practice today: (i) confusion about what constitutes an effective school climate improvement process in general; (ii) confusion about how school climate reform is similar and/or different from PBIS; and, (iii) educational policies and accountability systems that actually discourage principals and superintendents from actively supporting school climate improvement efforts.*

School climate is increasingly recognized as a school improvement strategy with the potential to increase school connectedness, academic achievement, prosocial education (e.g. social emotional learning and character education) and high school graduation rates, while reducing bully-victim-bystander behavior.

The recent January 8, 2014 ([www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html)) disciplinary guidelines issued by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice build on recent support and/or endorsement for school climate reform from the Institute for Educational Sciences, SAMHSA and CDC. And a growing number of State Departments of Education (Connecticut, Georgia, Minnesota and Massachusetts) and large and small districts (from Chicago to Westbrook, Connecticut) are developing school climate policies and/or laws that support students, parents/ guardians, school personnel and even community members learning and working together to create safer, more supportive, engaging and flourishing K-12 schools. And, a majority of the states that have applied for ESEA waivers to opt-out of the current NCLB accountability system include school climate and/or prosocial education as part of their desired alternative accountability system.

But there is a paradox: the vast majority of school leaders do not know—concretely—what school climate reform means and/or feel challenged by current educational policies and accountability systems. Although the vast majority of school leaders conceptually appreciate the importance of school climate and feeling safe, supported and engaged (not to mention, at least some of the time, having fun!) there are several important reasons why a recent survey (conducted by the Character Education Partnership, the National Dropout Prevention Center and the National School Climate Center) revealed that 9 out of 10 educators reported a “strong” to a “very strong” need for detailed and practical school climate practice guidelines. In other

words, what are independent evaluations of school climate surveys that can help us to select one? What tasks/challenges should be addressed during the continuous process of school climate improvement including planning, evaluation, action planning, and implementation and beginning anew phases? Are there school climate standards? Where can district and/or state leaders see sample school climate policies and/or work with school lawyers who are knowledgeable about effective bullying prevention and/or dropout prevention and/or school climate policies and laws? What are the range of ways that school leaders can engage students as well as parents/guardians, school personnel and community members to be co-learners and co-leaders in the improvement process? Where are there helpful leadership development programs that support learning and professional learning communities in these areas? In fact, these kinds of detailed and research-based school climate policy, practice and leadership development guidelines and resources exist!

I suggest there are three major factors that contribute to school climate reform being more of an idealized goal than an actual school improvement practice today: (i) confusion about what constitutes an effective school climate improvement process in general; (ii) confusion about how school climate reform is similar and/or different from Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS); and, (iii) educational policies and accountability systems that actually discourage principals and superintendents from actively supporting school climate reform.

#### DEFINITIONS

Educators began to focus explicitly on the climate for learning over one hundred years ago in Brooklyn, New York (Perry, 1908). And in the 1950's educational researchers began to study systematically how larger systemic or school wide practices interacted with instructional and person-to-person relationships (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). As my colleagues and I recently summarized (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013), over the last 30 years there has been a growing and terribly robust body of empirical research demonstrating that school climate matters in a range of ways (noted above). However, there has never been a national consensus about how to define (i) school climate, (ii) a positive and sustainable school climate, (iii) effective policies and practices that support a positive and sustainable school climate, and (iv) an effective school climate improvement process.

The National School Climate Council ([www.schoolclimate.org/about/council.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/about/council.php))—a non-partisan group of school climate and prosocial educational research, policy and practice leaders—has consensually developed and recommended research based definitions in these three spheres.

A growing number of states and districts are adopting or adapting the Council's suggested school climate standards (National School Climate Council, 2009) as well as suggested definition of *school climate* as referring to the character and quality of school life shared by the patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Council, 2007).

Equally important is how we understand *an effective school climate improvement process*: An intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent, coordinated and democratically informed process of students, parents, school personal and community members learning and working

together to address three essential questions (National School Climate Council, 2012): (1) What kind of school do we want ours to be? (2) What are our current strengths and needs (garnered through the use of reliable and valid surveys)? And, (3) given this “vision” and our current reality, what are the most important school-wide and/or instructional and/or one-on-one goals that we can and need to work on together?

#### POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT AND SCHOOL CLIMATE REFORM

There is confusion about how these two improvement efforts, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) and school climate reform, are similar and/or different. Some State DOE’s suggest that they are one and the same. And, the recent US DOE announcement also confuses rather than clarifies this issue. As my colleagues (Dorothy Espelage, Stuart Twemlow, Marvin Berkowitz and James Comer) and I have recently written, PBIS and school climate reform are similar in a number of ways: (i) they are school wide efforts; (ii) they are focused on supporting positive change; (iii) they support student learning; (iv) they support student-family-school personnel and community partnerships; (v) they are data driven; (vi) they appreciate that adult behavior and “adult modeling” matters; and, (vii) they are both focused on advancing policies and procedures that support effective practice.

However, we suggest that they are actually much more different than they are similar: First, the goals are different: As noted above, the goals for school climate improvement efforts are to support students, parents/guardians, school personnel and even community members learning and working together in a democratically informed manner to foster safe, supportive, engaging and flourishing schools that support school—and life—success. This is a much broader, positively stated and collaborative set of goals than the PBIS goal to *“prevent the development of problem behaviors and maximize academic success for all students.”*

Second, school climate reform uses a different data set to support learning and guide action planning: student, parent/guardian, school personnel and even community member perceptions of how safe the school is (e.g., rules and norms as well as how safe people feel socially and physically), relationship patterns (e.g., respect for diversity, social support), teaching and learning (e.g., support for learning and prosocial education) as well as the environment. PBIS, on the other hand, focuses on individual student disciplinary related data (e.g., disciplinary referral, suspensions, expulsion rates), which is aggregated and analyzed to determine effectiveness.

Third, PBIS is based on a behaviorally informed model that is narrowly focused on providing supports to prevent, teach, and reinforce desirable behavior. We appreciate that PBIS also strives to consider how to modify the environment and adult behavior (adult modeling) in helpful ways. However, we are concerned that it does so in a disempowering authoritarian fashion rather than democratically and collaboratively. On the other hand, school climate reform supports the development of social emotional learning and intrinsic motivation through engaging community members to be co-learners and co-leaders who consider and work on the three essential questions noted above.

Fourth, rather than being an adult driven or “top down” effort, school climate reform is a much broader, systemic effort grounded in a democratically informed process of engaging students, parents/guardians, school personnel and even community members in being co-learners and co-leaders (under the leadership of the principal).

Fifth, school climate reform not only recognizes that adult modeling “counts” but also explicitly focuses on and supports adult learning as a foundational element of effective school reform. Adult learning and professional learning communities is an explicit and foundational dimension of an effective school climate reform process (National School Climate Council, 2012).

Sixth, PBIS’s policy efforts focus on supporting the design and implementation of effective interventions to change student behavior. School climate reform on the other hand is focused on supporting policies that shape systems – the school community – and using data as a “flashlight,” not a “hammer.”

School climate reform promotes school connectedness and prevents bully-victim-bystander behavior because it is a powerful, effective strategy that engages youth to be co-learners and co-leaders together with school personnel. PBIS is a top down, behaviorist model that rests on extrinsic motivation and is not an effective engagement strategy. PBIS uses a systems approach to shape individual (student) behavior, whereas, school climate reform uses a systems approach to shape systems as well as instructional and one-on-one processes. Nonetheless, I believe that PBIS and school climate improvement are not “either/or”: when PBIS is well implemented, I believe that it can support positive school climate improvement efforts. But, it is not the same as school climate reform.

#### EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Current educational policies and accountability systems tend to focus narrowly on student cognitive learning. They not only negate the essential importance of students’ prosocial learning, adult/educator learning, and professional learning communities – an essential foundation for school climate reform – but also discourage school leaders from embracing a model of continuous improvement. In fact, schools, like people, will never be perfect. All school reform is based on the idea that we can and need to be continuous learners. When schools are graded annually and (from the perspective of school leaders) punitively, principals and superintendents are discouraged from planning and thinking about a multi-year improvement cycle.

#### NEXT STEPS

It certainly is a positive step that the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice along with many federal, state and district leaders are finally focusing on the shameful rates of high school dropouts and the “high school to prison pipeline.” Beginning to issue guidelines that support preventative as well as health-mental health improvement efforts are necessary to address that “pipeline” as well as bully-victim-bystander behavior and to support student learning.

Building on this positive step, there is a serious need for more detailed school climate improvement related guidelines and professional development, both pre and in-service, to support classroom, building, district and state leaders learning about effective school climate improvement policies and practices. And, they exist! Our Center and others offer detailed practice guidelines and tools, including model district and state level policies, from which practitioners and policy makers can learn to implement meaningful, holistic school climate reform, rather than piecemeal efforts.

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