Handbook of Prosocial Education

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CHAPTER 9

School Climate and Culture Improvement

A Prosocial Strategy That Recognizes, Educates, and Supports the Whole Child and the Whole School Community

Jonathan Cohen

I don't really like school. I am bored. And I do not feel so safe here. I have to stay close to my guys. I feel like all the teachers care about is that there is no trouble and that we do good on tests. I don't see the point. Who cares about these tests? I don't. What's the point, anyway? I don't know what kind of job I am going to get when I get out of here anyway.

—Jose, a ninth-grade student

I like school. The teachers really seem to care about what I think. I don't like all the tests we have, but we learn about stuff that is connected to my life. It's cool. It's hard sometimes. But, I can see how this stuff we are learning matters. It's not all book stuff. The teachers let us do all kinds of things including working in the neighborhood. And, I have never felt so safe about making mistakes. That is very cool! I used to think it was bad to make mistakes. For the last few years, my teachers make it . . . actually . . . a good thing to make mistakes. They want us to learn from them. I like that.

—Jayvon, a tenth-grade student

The majority of Americans have a shared vision that K–12 education needs to support children's ability to love, work, and participate

effectively in a democratic society (Cohen, 2006). In fact, this was an essential foundation that John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and many of the other "founding fathers" dreamt of for our country: that American public education would support children developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for an engaged and effective citizenry. It is easy to imagine that Jose's and Jayvon's experience of feeling safe, supported, engaged, appropriately challenged, and connected to school will powerfully shape their learning, development, and evolving capacity to love, work, and participate in their community.

Prosocial education is an idea—like "school climate"—that encompasses a broad range of educational endeavors explicitly focused on supporting the development of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that will help K–12 students love, work, and participate in a democratic society. In this chapter, I suggest that when school communities measure and work to improve school climate and culture,* they are supporting school, family, and community members in educating the whole child and the whole school community. In essence, I suggest that school climate is a concept that powerfully and effectively supports data-driven prosocial school reform. I briefly review and summarize how practitioners and researchers have historically defined school climate. I summarize past and current school climate research, policy, and assessment as well as improvement practice. Finally, building on the work of the National School Climate Council, I make a series of recommendations for policy makers, practice leaders, and teacher educators.

This chapter rests on two sets of understandings. The first is that *the essential common denominator that provides the foundation for prosocial education*—which includes the topics addressed in this volume such as character education, social- emotional learning, civic education, risk prevention, health promotion, and community schools—is twofold: (1) intentionally teaching K–12 students a core set of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills, knowledge, and dispositions, and (2) supporting the school community to work together to create a healthy, safe, connected, and engaged climate for learning and positive youth development.

The second understanding that provides the basis for this chapter is that school climate is a useful concept to organize and support prosocial school reform that intentionally promotes social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning as well as systemic efforts to create a climate for learning. As I will detail below, a growing body of research suggests that there are five major reasons why practitioners find "measuring and im- proving school climate" a useful concept and practice that supports children develop- ing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for love, work, and effective participation in a democratic society:

1. Using school climate as an organizing concept recognizes the essential social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual aspects of learning and school improvement efforts. It is well known that what is measured in public education is "what counts." Delineating educational standards (or goals) rests on measurement. When we measure school climate in valid and reliable ways, we are—by definition—recognizing the prosocial aspects of learning and school improvement efforts. As such, we are powerfully sup- porting the tenets of teaching the "whole child," an initiative originally developed by John Dewey (1897); Felix Adler (as cited in Radest, 1969); Maria Montessori (as cited in Standing, 1998); Arthur Perry (1908); and more recently Lawrence Kohlberg (1984; development as the aim of education) and Nel Noddings (1984, 1995). Such tenets are currently being spearheaded by ASCD's (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) Whole Child Initiative and supported by a growing number of educational leadership organizations (e.g., American Association of School Administrators, 2009; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, 2006).

2. Supporting shared leadership and learning. A growing body of research and practice calls for education leaders—teachers, principals, and superintendents—to be- come more transparent about their goals and to ensure that all education stakeholders participate in building a high-quality learning environment (National Middle School

*In this chapter, I will use the terms *school climate, school culture, supportive learning environments,* and *conditions for learning* as overlapping terms.

Association [NMSA], 2003). As many have noted (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Kokolis, 2007), measuring and improving school climate not only supports transparent, democratically informed leadership and learning, but it also helps to actualize virtually all of the tenets of the National Middle School Association's "This We Believe" statement and supports student learning and positive youth development.

3. Promoting school–family–community partnerships. As I will detail below, comprehensive school climate improvement practices, by definition, include "the whole village." There is a growing body of research that underscores the notion that meaningful school reform in general and prosocial education in particular needs to involve effective partnerships between students, parents and guardians, school personnel, and, ideally, other community leaders (Blank & Berg, 2006; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Fullan, 2010, 2011; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010; Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005).

4. Promoting student engagement. There is a growing body of research that reactivates and underscores the notion that when students are engaged in meaningful learn- ing and work, the result is that achievement, positive youth development, and school connectedness are all enhanced. When students become involved in the process of understanding comprehensive school climate findings and are supported in developing "change projects" that grow out of this data, we are promoting the skills and dispositions that support engaged citizenry and student engagement in particular (Cohen, 2006; Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987; Reed, 2008).

5. Finally, we now have sets of evidence-based policy guidelines and tools that can support schools, districts, and states to effectively promote a positive, sustained school climate. The National School Climate Council has created the National School Climate Standards that set the bar for social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning and school climate improvement efforts (National School Climate Council, 2011). And, as I explain below, we also have a growing number of valid and reliable school climate measurement tools as well as research-based road maps and field-tested practice guidelines that

support district and school board leaders (Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, & Hutchison, 2009) as well as schools, built on their unique history, community, strengths, needs, and goals to create a climate for learning (Beland, 2003; Cohen & Pickeral, 2009; Eyman & Cohen, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

SCHOOL CLIMATE: PAST AND PRESENT

What is school climate? Educators and researchers have been studying school climate for over a hundred years (Perry, 1908). Although Arthur Perry, a principal from Brooklyn, New York, did not use the term *school climate*, he was focused on it, and his work anticipated current instructional and school-wide improvement trends in a number of important ways. I believe that he was the first to focus on the "atmosphere" of the school. He explicitly recognized and focused on the school as a system and unit of analysis: foundational aspects of what we now refer to as school climate. In an overlapping and prescient manner, an ecological or systems perspective informed Perry's work. He was attuned to the fact that the school operates within larger systems: the school community, neighborhood, state, and nation. And, finally, he was influenced by and aligned with the important and often neglected educational work of Felix Adler (1892). Adler was a contemporary of John Dewey, and to my knowledge he was the first educator to establish a K–12 course that focused explicitly on ethical and civic (and implicitly social-emotional) learning. For Perry and Adler, the school was a setting that should intentionally focus on promoting the skills and dispositions that support children in developing moral character and the building blocks for an engaged democratic citizenry.

Over the last sixty years, there has been a growing tradition of studying school climate, school culture, and supportive learning environments (e.g., Anderson, 1982; Carter, 2011; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Comer, 2005; Deal & Peter- son, 2009; Freiberg, 1999; Power et al., 1989). There is not one universally agreed upon definition of school climate. The majority of researchers have used the term to refer to people's subjective experience of school life (see Cohen,

McCabe, et al., 2009 for a recent review of these issues). Beginning with Perry (1908), practitioners and researchers have used a range of terms such as *atmosphere, feelings, tone, setting,* or *milieu* of the school (Barber & Torney-Purta, 2008; Freiberg, 1999; Homana, 2010; Tagiuri, 1968). Moos (1979) suggests that it is useful to distinguish actual and perceived climate. Virtually all researchers and scholars suggest that it is most useful to conceptualize school climate as grounded in subjective experience: an amalgam of many individual, interpersonal, and group influences and how the person "weights" them in conscious and unrecognized ways.*

Virtually all school climate scholars and researchers think about school climate as group trends. In other words, the unit of analysis is not the individual, but group trends and the school as a whole. Individual perceptions form the foundation for school cli- mate assessment, but we are not focused on what one given person thinks and feels. Rather the focus is on what groups of students and/or parents and guardians and/or school personnel think and feel about school life.

Some scholars and researchers have argued that it is useful to distinguish "climate" and "culture" (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sadh, 1998; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). The National School Climate Council (2007) suggests that it is useful to consider *school climate, school culture, conditions for learning,* and *supportive learning environments* as overlap- ping terms. Some differ and suggest that it is conceptually useful to distinguish these terms. A U.S. Department of Education publication (2007), for example, suggests that culture is a subset of school climate. They suggest that school culture most helpfully refers to those characteristics that are directly changeable by the conscious effort of people in the organization without needing any physical changes or changes in the organizational structure. These characteristics called *school culture* comprise the values and normative structures of the organization, including its mission and how it actual- izes its values inherent in the mission through relationships. Higgins-D'Alessandro

*There have been some researchers, like Van Horn (2003), who suggest that school climate is not

a subjective perception of the school by its participants but rather a characteristic of the school, "with school participants having the role of informants" (p. 1002). While Van Horn's study addresses the issue of the appropriate unit of analysis for school climate, it is framed primarily as a theoretical and methodological debate that centers on whether individual variance is best interpreted as informant "error" due to limited knowledge, experience, or bias or whether it represents systematic differences deriving from respondent or school characteristics.

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and Sadh (1998) suggest that *school culture* should refer to the norms and relation- ships within the school, which in turn inform and shape behavior. In their view, school culture is the active ingredient of school climate that creates school change. I would suggest that what is most important is that practitioners and researchers be clear and explicit about how they are defining these terms.

The National School Climate Council is a group of practice and policy leaders com- mitted to narrowing the gap between school climate research on the one hand and school climate policy, practice, and teacher education on the other (National School Climate Council, 2007). The council developed the following consensually created defi- nition of *school climate* in a way that recognizes current research and practice:

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life 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 an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment. (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 5)

Over the past three decades, educators and researchers have worked to identify specific elements that make up school climate. Although there is not one list that summarizes these elements, virtually all researchers suggest that there are four major areas that are essential to pay attention

to: *safety* (e.g., rules and norms, physical safety, social-emotional safety); *relationships* (e.g., respect for diversity, social sup- port among adults, social support among students, school connectedness/engagement, leadership); *teaching and learning* (e.g., social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning; support for learning; professional relationships); and the *institutional environment* (e.g., physical surrounding).

This list overlaps with recent research by Osher and Kendziora (2010), who found four major factors in their school climate research: safety, challenge, support, and social-emotional learning. Brand, Felner, and their colleagues have also conducted extensive, sound school climate research for many years (e.g., Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Burns, & Bolton, 2008; Felner, Aber, Cauce, & Primavera, 1985; Felner, et al., 2001). The factors (in the following parentheses) that have emerged from their work overlap with and support the four major factors noted above: safety (clarity of rules and expectations, disciplinary harshness, safety problems); relationships (negative peer interactions, positive peer interactions, participation in decision making, support for cultural pluralism); teaching and learning (teacher support, instructional innovation/ relevance, student commitment/achievement orientation); and the institutional environment (student commitment) (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003). Other research has underscored how the climate of the classroom colors and shapes school climate (Aber, *Brown, & Jones, 2003;* Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Over time, research will help to refine, redefine, and further develop accurate definitions of school climate and how to most effectively assess it.

RESEARCH

Over the past forty-some years, there has been a growing body of empirical research confirming that school climate matters (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Bryk et al., 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Cohen, McCabe, et al., 2009; Comer, 2005; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Freiberg, 1999; National School Climate Council, 2007; Pollack, Modzeleski, & Rooney, 2008; Power et al., 1989). Positive and sustained school climate predicts and/or is associated with increased academic achievement, positive youth

development, effective risk prevention, health promotion efforts, and teacher satisfaction and retention (for detailed summaries of this research, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Cohen, McCabe, et al., 2009; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Freiberg, 1999). As a result of this research, several government and state insti- tutes, including the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug- Free Schools, and a growing number of state departments of education, now emphasize the importance of safe, civil, and caring schools, school connectedness, and/or positive school climates. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education is currently examining ways to use school climate and culture as an organizing data-driven concept and process that recognizes the range of prosocial educational processes that protect children and promote essential social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning (Jennings, 2009).

We are still very much in the process of learning why positive school climate indirectly or directly predicts 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 develop in healthy ways and learn, and what teach- ers need to teach (Comer, 2005; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001; Ingersoll, 2006). There are clearly 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 (Brown, Roney, & Anfara, 2003).

A recent and important educational analysis of twenty school systems from around the world found that virtually all schools are involved with some kind of improvement efforts. This study looked at how differing levels of performance can and should shape improvement goals (Mourshed et al., 2010). Their major findings included the fol- lowing notions: (1) that all school communities can work to foster meaningful school improvement efforts; (2) that we need to think systemically and about combinations of interventions; (3) that schools functioning at different levels (e.g., poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent) need to focus on different improvement goals; and (4) that

it is essential to consider (a) what mobilizes the whole community to learn and work together, (b) how we can helpfully assess "where we are" and "what would be useful next steps to consider," (c) what cluster of instructional and school- wide implementation goals and efforts will "work" for "our school," and (d) how we can support a successful and sustained effort.

These findings are important examples of school climate–related research questions that need to be addressed. These findings, like Fullan's recent work (2010, 2011), underscore the fact that efforts to promote student learning and positive youth development are necessarily grounded in a systemic perspective that recognizes the needs of all students and mobilizes everyone in the community to learn and work together to create a higher-functioning school.

POLICY

In theory, research about effectiveness and efficacy as well as best practices shapes policy, which in turn dictates school improvement guidelines. In practice, this relation- ship is typically more complicated and rarely so logical (Hess, 2008). There is currently a significant gap between school climate research on the one hand and school climate–related policy in state departments of education on the other hand.

In 2007, the Education Commission of the States and the National School Climate Center (NSCC) conducted a school climate policy scan of state departments of education. As we have detailed (Cohen, McCabe, et al., 2009), this national scan revealed a criti- cal gap between research and policy in terms of school climate that was due to five factors. The first major problem is *inconsistency and inaccuracy* in terms of school climate definitions. With few exceptions (e.g., Ohio), most states failed to use research-based criteria to define school climate, and many suggested that school safety and school climate were synonymous. Second, while there are superior options, state policy makers have made poor choices in terms of school climate *measurement* at the state level. In other words, many states recommended only assessing safety (i.e., a critical aspect of school climate, but only "one leg" of the elephant) and/or did not specify that

survey instruments need to be reliable and valid. The third problem is a lack of defined climate-related *leadership* at the state level. Fourth, many states subsume school climate policy under the umbrellas of health, special education, and school safety, without integrating it into school accountability policies or the mores and 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 (Cohen, McCabe, et al., 2009).

A more recent scan of school climate and bully prevention policy reveals good and bad news. The good news is that there is growing interest in aligning school climate policy with research. The bad news is that there continue to be significant gaps between school climate and bully prevention research on the one hand and current policy on the other (Piscatelli & Lee, 2011).

As noted above, the National School Climate Council (2011) has developed school climate standards. The National School Climate Standards provide a research-based framework and benchmark criteria for educational leaders (school boards, state departments of education, superintendents, principals, and after-school leaders) to support and assess district and school efforts to enhance and be accountable for school climate. These standards provide districts and states with the guidelines they need to develop policy that will help to close the critical gap between research, practice, and policy described above. This framework comprises five standards (and sixteen indicators and thirty related sub- indicators) that support effective school climate improvement efforts:

Standard 1. The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing, and sustaining a positive school climate.

Standard 2. The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the develop- ment and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowl- edge, dispositions, and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged.

Standard 3. The school community's practices are identified, prioritized, and supported 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 re-engage those who have become disen- gaged, and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.

Standard 4. The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically.

Standard 5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities, and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice. (National School Climate Council, 2011, p. 3)

PRACTICE

There are two overlapping dimensions that shape school climate–related practice: assessment and school improvement efforts. School climate assessment and improvement efforts support two foundational goals: intentionally promoting social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual learning, and the whole school community learning and working together to support positive youth development and student learning.

Since the late 1960s, James Comer has been an important and wise voice attuned to the developmental needs of the child and the power of the school community to meet those needs or neglect them. His School Development Program began with two low-achieving schools in New Haven in 1968 and a "preventative psychiatry" model that has grown to become one of the most important school reform movements in America. Over the years the School Development Program has been implemented in hundreds of schools in more than twenty states, the District of Columbia, Brazil, Ghana, Jordan, Paraguay, the Philippines, and South Africa, and it continues to expand (Child Study Center, 2012).

In the mid-1970s, Lawrence Kohlberg, a half dozen teachers in the Cambridge and Ridge high schools, and some of his students and postdocs (Power et al., 1989) began to apply frameworks and classroom-based interventions informed by moral development (moral

dilemma discussions; Colby, Kohlberg, Fenton, Lieberman, & Speicher-Dubin, 1977) to the school as a community. The "Just Community" approach has two major features: direct participatory democracy and a commitment to building community, characterized by a strong sense of trust and openness (Kohlberg, 1985; Kohlberg & Higgins, 1987; see chapter 8C in this volume). An organizing idea is to not only involve students in moral discussions about issues in school but to also support them in becoming "change agents" who help to plan activities and to solve problems.

In the late 1970s, Wayne Hoy (Hoy & Miskel, 1978; Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991) became an important researcher and teacher in the area of school climate. And in the late 1970s and the 1980s, Eric Schaps, Vic Battistich, Marilyn Watson, and others at the Developmental Studies Center (Battistich, 2003; Schaps, 2007; Schaps & Solomon, 2003) designed a number of democratic classroom community-building and social- emotional learning efforts that were grounded in developing a safe and supportive school climate. These school climate efforts as well as instructionally based efforts have become some of the most respected and widely used evidence-based interventions and curricula in America.

Over the last dozen years, a growing number of national education- and student- focused organizations have recognized the importance of school climate and social, emotional, ethical, and civic as well as intellectual learning. There have been two other organizations that have done a great deal to promote an appreciation of the fundamental importance of school climate: the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the National School Board Association (NSBA). Although both GLSEN's and NSBA's surveys are not comprehensive (they only recognize student voice and do not evaluate all of the dimensions that the National School Climate Council recommends), they are important school climate–informed efforts. Since 1999, GLSEN has conducted annual national school climate–informed surveys that have cast a glaring light on the homophobia that profoundly and disturbingly results in nine out of every ten LGBT students being bullied (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Since 1997, the National School Board Association's "Key Works of

School Boards" has recognized the fundamental importance of school climate in a variety of ways. The NSBA has taken a leadership role in conducting large-scale school climate–informed evaluations that highlight how many students feel unsafe and how many experience racism (Perkins, 2006). This work echoes the findings of other researchers who have found that a significant number of students do not feel safe in school (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003; Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2010; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2002). Perhaps the single most common reason that students do not feel safe in schools is due to cruel, mean, and bullying behavior, which the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2011) has recognized as a "major public health crisis."

ASSESSMENT

There is a range of ways that schools can measure school climate. Observational strategies, checklists, walk-throughs, focus groups, surveys, behavioral reports, attendance rates, grades, and achievement scores have all been used as measures of school climate. The National School Climate Council (2007) has recommended that K–12 schools *initially* use school climate surveys that recognize (1) student, parent or guardian, and school personnel "voice" and (2) all of the major dimensions of school climate (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment). In addition, the council recommends that these measures be valid and reliable instruments. These recommendations overlap with what the U.S. Department of Education has recommended to state departments of education in their recent Safe and Supportive Schools grants program. However, assessing school climate or the use of valid and reli- able instruments is not yet common practice today.

There is a very small but growing number of independent evaluations of school climate measures. Gangi (2009) recently studied and compared 102 school climate surveys; she judged that few met all the following criteria: possess a gauge of relationships (especially faculty relationships), safety (physical and emotional), teaching and learning, and external environment; have viewable test items (that researchers

are able to view); and are direct measures (e.g., questionnaires) of primary and secondary education levels (elementary through high school). She reported that there were only three that met the American Psychological Association's criteria for being a reliable and valid school climate survey: the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI; National School Climate Center, 2002); the School Climate Inventory-Revised (SCI-R; no author, no date); and the School Climate Assessment Instruments (SCAI; Western Alliance for the Study of School Climate, 2004). In 2011, the Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington studied seventy-two (1) social-emotional learning measures and (2) school climate surveys for middle schools. They reported that ten met their criteria for being reliable and valid (Haggerty, Elgin, & Woolley, 2011). They identified eight individual measures;* one tool that measures risk and prevention factors† (and the actual prevalence of drug use, violence, and other antisocial behaviors among surveyed students); and one school climate measure.‡

The U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools grants pro- gram is contributing to more and more states developing school climate assessment systems that are reliable and valid. Most schools develop their own school climate survey, which means that their decisions are based on un-validated measures. Many schools and twenty-one states only assess one aspect of school climate: safety. As a result, some schools use measures that only focus on safety (e.g., Cornell, Sheras, & Cole, 2006). This is inadvertently unhelpful for several reasons. On the one hand, many safety-related surveys focus on bullying. And when adults (educators and parents/guardians) are asked to what extent they believe that bullying is a problem in their school, they report that it is a "minor" problem or a "moderately severe" problem, but students typically report that it is a "severe" problem (Cohen, 2006; Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, 2010). Interestingly, when educators are asked to what extent they believe that "mean and/or cruel" behavior is a problem in their schools, they typically report that it is a major problem (J. A. Freiberg, personal communication, April 19, 2010). And, on the other hand, how we feel about being in school, the quality and character of school life or school

climate, is not only colored and shaped by how safe we feel; it is also shaped by how supported, engaged, help- fully challenging, and joyful (or not!) school life is.

Learning more about how safe people feel in school *is* often a very useful step for schools to take *after* they have learned about school climate in general. If the school climate assessment for example reveals that feeling unsafe is a meaningful problem in school, it is typically terribly helpful to discover where the "hot spots" (or locations) are where bully–victim behavior occurs, as well as why so many students and adults act as bystanders rather than "Upstanders" or socially responsible members of the com- munity when they see bully–victim behavior occurring.

*The ASEBA System (Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL], Teacher Report Form [TRF], and Youth Self- Report); the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale: Second Edition (BERS); the Developmental Assets Pro- file; the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment; the School Social Behaviors Scale (SSBS); the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales; the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; and the Washington State Healthy Youth Survey.

†The Communities That Care Youth Survey.‡The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory.§This is a fairly common step used by many bully prevention programs (Olweus, 2007) as well as positive behavioral support–related programs (e.g., Bambara & Kern, 2004).

It is also important that school climate evaluations result in a report that is comprehensible to school leaders and include practical suggestions that will guide action planning and improvement efforts. As obvious as this may seem, it is often not so obvious. Over the last decade, the National School Climate Center has worked with thousands of schools to support them in creating a climate for learning and for promoting social, emotional, ethical, and civic education. We have been surprised to discover that many school climate assessment tools do not result in a report. Too often when a report is provided, the findings are not presented in ways that are comprehensible or helpful to educators. For example, there are often instructions about how school leaders can tabulate findings, but no guidelines that support understand- ing the meaning and limitations of the findings. In a related problem, most school climate assessments today are not directly linked to "next steps" that will support meaningful school climate improvement efforts, or they result in a simplistic prescription about "what the school *should* do

next." School climate evaluations that are free or that involve only a minimal fee characteristically do not include a detailed report (Cohen, McCabe, et al., 2009).

We suggest that school climate survey developers cannot and should not tell school communities what to do. As attractive as this idea may be to some in the short run (and we have worked with many principals who have initially requested that we tell them what to do), it is unhelpful for two important reasons. First, outside school climate evaluators do not and cannot fully understand the school community as well as the community members themselves. Comprehensive school climate findings are typically multifaceted and complex. Members of each school community appreciate the history, current strengths, needs, and goals of their school in ways that outside evaluators never can. Second, the process of struggling to understand what the findings mean, "digging deeper" to grapple with discrepant findings (e.g., that the adults view bullying as a "mild" or "moderately severe" problem while the students view it as a "severe" prob- lem), prioritizing goals, and developing an action plan fosters meaningful community engagement in the process. When students, parents or guardians, and school personnel are engaged, we have established a foundation for successful school climate reform: the "whole village" learning and working together. When this does not occur, the school climate report tends to, literally or figuratively, "sit on a shelf," and it becomes a dead document rather than a catalyst for engagement, learning, and positive change.

School climate survey developers are not always outside vendors; they can also be members of the school community. This is an important and complicated issue for a number of reasons. School, district, and/or state leaders typically have a "vision" about what kinds of school improvement they believe are most important. And as a result they may want to develop their own measures to understand and focus on particular aspects of the improvement process. This may be one of the reasons why so many school leaders advocate developing homegrown measures. The wish to save money is another clear factor here. We suggest that whether the evaluator is an outsider or not, it is essential that assessment strategies be valid and reliable. In other words, a school

climate survey needs to have been developed over time in a manner that ensures that it means what the evaluators want it to mean and measures what they decide needs measuring (e.g., how safe or "connected" people feel) consistently and accurately.

School climate assessment needs to be one step in a continuous school climate improvement process. Ideally, the assessment process results in a report that details narratively and numerically the findings in ways that highlight areas of agreement (e.g., that there is no physical violence in our school or that too often diversity is not appreciated), areas of disparate findings (e.g., that the adults perceive bullying as a mild to moderately severe problem but the students report that it is a severe problem), and possible "next steps" that the school may want to consider to promote a more positive school climate.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The other fundamental piece of school climate practice is continuous school improvement efforts. All school climate–informed improvement efforts are based on an explicit or implicit model of change, an implementation strategy, and resources (e.g., school climate standards) or tools (e.g., surveys, school climate road maps, protocols, and rubrics). Curiously, the vast majority of school climate practitioners have not made their model and implementation strategies explicit (Griffore, Phenice, Schweitzer, & Green, 2010). Higgins-D'Alessandro suggests that most interventions of any kind do not make their theories of change explicit (Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2010). She also suggests that some don't even know they have an implicit theory of change and that it is the job of the internal or external evaluators to explicate models and theories of change through open discussion with practitioners who confirm the models and then test them.

School climate improvement is necessarily a continuous process that practitioners have understood in a variety of ways. Virtually all school reform theorists and practitioners use some version of the problem-solving cycle as the foundation for their road map for improvement: developing operationally definable goals, using measurable strategies to actualize these goals, measuring to what extent "we" have actualized

these goals, and based on these findings revising the goals and methods. Here is information about several important school climate–informed improvement models.

One of the "grandfathers" of current school climate improvement efforts, James Comer, first described the development of the nine-component school transformation model over thirty years ago (Comer, 1980). These nine components include three guiding principles—consensus, collaboration, and a no-fault framework (or investment in focusing on learning and problem solving rather than blaming)—and the following six elements: a parent team, a school planning and management team, a student and staff support team, a comprehensive school plan, assessment and modification, and staff development. And in a series of subsequent publications (e.g., Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1999; Joyner, Comer, & Ben-Avie, 2004), Comer and his colleagues have detailed how educators, parents, and mental health professionals can use discussion and critical reflection to understand and support children's capacity to develop in healthy ways and learn.

Hawkins and Catalano (1992) developed the federally funded Communities That Care program, which includes a student/parent/educator/community member risk prevention effort based on a five-stage school climate–informed improvement process: (1) getting started; (2) organizing, introducing, involving; (3) developing a community profile; (4) creating a community action plan; and (5) implementing and evaluating the community action plan. (For information about this program and the research that supports it, see https://preventionplatform.samhsa.gov/Macro/CSAP/dss_portal/Templates_redesign/start.cfm.)

Brand, Felner, and his colleagues developed the "HiPlaces Model" of school improvement, which is grounded in the following nine research-based dimensions that serve to organize an examination of the various and complex elements existing in a school: (1) empowering decision makers at all levels; (2) reengaging families in the education of their children; (3) connecting schools with communities; (4) foster- ing health and safety; (5) creating small personalized communities for learning; (6) developing well-prepared teachers; (7) implementing

deep, integrated, standards- based instruction; and (8) maintaining an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, all of which supports (9) achieving success for all students (Brand et al., 2003). They suggest that these nine dimensions impact and influence each other to strengthen the conditions existing in a school. The central position of "success for all students" reminds school community members, policy makers, and the research community that in addition to serving as one of the nine interrelated dimensions, success for all students is the overarching goal of national and local level school reform initiatives. And, at a second level, they identified the following five crosscutting components that provide the context for operationalizing each of the nine dimensions and assessing its level of implementation: (1) structural/organizational conditions, (2) attitudes/ norms/expectations, (3) skills/knowledge base/preparation, (4) climate/experiential conditions, and (5) procedures and practices (Brand et al., 2008). Together the nine dimensions common to high-performing schools and the five components for analysis and implementation create an implementation matrix, which allows for the close examination of the implementation elements necessary for each of the interrelated dimensions (Brand et al., 2003; Brand et al., 2008).

The National School Climate Center has developed a five-stage school climate improvement model that synthesizes research and best practices from a range of prosocial educational as well as risk prevention and health promotion efforts: (1) preparation and planning for the next phase of school improvement; (2) evaluation; (3) understanding the evaluation findings, engagement, and developing an action plan; (4) implement- ing the action plan; and (5) reevaluation and beginning the cycle anew (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Pickeral, 2009). Each of these five stages can be defined by a series of tasks or challenges. Here are several examples from the first and third stages of the school climate improvement efforts (Cohen & Pickeral, 2009). For example, three (of the six) tasks and challenges that define the first stage of preparation and planning include (1) forming a representative leadership team for school climate improvement and establishing ground rules collaboratively, (2) building support and fostering "buy-in" for the school climate improvement process, and (3) working to establish "no-

fault" framework and promoting a culture of trust.* These are overlapping but separate challenges that support the whole school community coming together in a democratically informed manner to understand current needs and strengths and to develop and carry out an action plan for improvement. The underlying assumption here is that it truly does take the "whole village" to raise and support healthy children who will become successful in school and in life.

Forming a representative leadership team underscores this profound idea: it does take a village to raise a healthy child. A representative leadership team positions the principal to effectively "reach out" to ensure that all members of the school community become involved with these improvement efforts. Fostering "buy-in" is an essential and often challenging task. In our development institutes for school climate reform professionals (www.schoolclimate.org/programs/si.php), we have found that this is one of the most pressing challenges that school leaders experience. Today, what is measured and hence what counts is reading, math, and science scores, as well as rates of physical violence. Educators are often concerned that any new initiative will be perceived as the latest "flavor of the month." Having a series of conversations about essential questions—for example, "What do we want our students (or children) to know and to be when they graduate from high school?" or "What is our mission/vision statement, and how is our current educational practice (e.g., assessment, instruction, and/ or school-wide improvement efforts) aligned with and substantively supporting this mission/vision?"—can help members of the community to actualize the first school climate standard: developing a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing, and sustaining a positive school climate.*

Moving from a culture of blame to a more collaborative and trusting one or what James Comer (1980) first called a "no-fault" framework is another critical and inherently challenging task that colors all school improvement efforts. A no-fault framework refers to an understanding that (1) we all make mistakes, (2) people certainly need to take responsibility for their mistakes, (3) but rather than focusing on blame, the focus is on learning from these mistakes and considering how we can now best work together to improve school life for our students.

Promoting trust and collaborative working relationships provides an essential foundation for school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). The growing interest in professional learning communities, appreciative inquiry, and collaboratively forming meaningful codes of conduct for adults as well as students are all overlapping efforts that recognize how fundamentally important trusting and collaborative relationships are to learning, teaching, and positive youth development (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Hord, Roussin, & Sommer, 2009). Often, however, relationships in schools—adults with adults, adults with students, and students with students—are colored by distrust and an in- clination to blame. In fact, "blaming" is a common response when bad things happen for a variety of psychosocial reasons. For more information and guidelines that can support your school in moving from a culture of blame to a no-fault framework, see www.schoolclimate.org/guidelines/schoolclimateimprovement.php.

The second stage in the NSCC's school improvement model is assessment: under- standing how students, parents/guardians, school personnel, and ideally community

members feel and think about the school's social, emotional, and civic strengths and needs. The third stage of the school climate improvement process—understanding the findings, engagement, and action planning—includes extraordinary opportunities for community learning and engagement. We suggest that the third stage of the improvement process includes six steps: (1) understanding the findings, (2) "digging deeper" into the findings and using them to foster engagement, (3) prioritizing goals, (4) re- searching evidence-based instructional and school-wide improvement practices, (5) developing an action plan, and (6) reflecting on this work to both learn in the present as well as to record "lessons learned" for the next time your school is focusing on

this stage of the improvement process. Here is an important example from this process: digging deeper. Some school climate findings are no surprise. By definition, when everyone in the community agrees (e.g., that there is no physical violence or that physical resources are woefully inadequate), people are not surprised. Everyone agrees! Typically, though, comprehensive school climate findings reveal some discrepant findings.

As Comer (1980) pointed out decades ago and recent empirical and ethnographic research has underscored (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011), if the school community is moving away from a "culture of blame" and toward a "no-fault" frame- work, discrepant findings provide wonderful opportunities to engage youth as well as families and educators.* This is a primary goal for NSCC's school climate improvement process: engaging youth in a democratically informed manner that supports their social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning and empowerment. In either of these examples, we can support students being our teachers; they clearly know something we don't. We can also support them in becoming participatory action researchers—learning, for example, why people in the school community "fall into" the role of passive bystander (and hence a part of bully–victim related problems) or an "Upstander": someone who—directly or indirectly—says no to bullying and victimization. When students are integral members of the school climate assessment and improvement process, they can become "change agents"—understanding the findings, identifying a focus that is meaningful to them, and with the support of educators developing a project to improve the school.

When school improvement plans grow out of stage-three-related work, there is a wide range of instructional and/or school climate improvement practices (stage 4) that can support a safer school, healthier relationships, and more engaging and effective learning and teaching. Here are two simple but important examples related to school connectedness and bullying.

Feeling connected to school in positive and meaningful ways is increasingly recognized as a fundamentally important school climate factor that supports learning and positive youth development (CDC,

2009). In fact, it is common for school leaders to realize that not every student is connected to at least one caring and responsible adult. This is one aspect of "school connectedness" and is perhaps the single most important risk prevention step that schools can take (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). When this becomes an explicit goal and educators take the following five steps, they are affecting the climate of the school in profound ways:

*If there is a predominant culture of blame in the school, leaders will be anxious. They will anticipate that an angry parent or union representative will use findings to "nail" school leaders.

 (1) all of the teachers meet for a sixty- to ninety-minute meeting; (2) all of the students names are put on index cards, which are taped to a wall; (3) teachers are given "dots" which they are asked to "paste" next to each student that they feel connected to; (4) quickly seeing which students have no dots, the group facilitator or principal asks who is most connected to this student; (5) plans are made for this educator to reach out to this student and do his or her best to make a meaningful connection. This is a simple educator/school strategy that can support no children being left with- out adult support and "connection."

Norms and codes of conduct are some of the most important factors that color and shape the climate of a school. Phil Brown and his colleagues at the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University have focused on codes of student conduct based on core ethical values as a method for vitalizing social norms (for details see http://www. rucharacter.org/page/codeofstudentconduct or contact the National School Climate Center). A focus on norms is an organizing and foundational component to virtually all school climate improvement and prosocial improvement efforts (e.g., Beland, 2003; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2006; Comer et al., 1999; Felner et al., 2001; Hawkins & Catalano, 1992; Power et al., 1989; National School Climate Council, 2007; Schaps, 2005; Rodstein, case study 8C in this volume).

One of the most important implicit or explicit norms is whether it is acceptable for students and adults to be passive bystanders in the face of problems (be it garbage in the hallways, seeing someone in tears, or bully–victim behavior) or whether the school has a social code for

adults as well as students that it is important to be an Upstander—someone who notices what is "not ok" and directly or indirectly takes responsible steps that respond to the problem. Being an Upstander is really another word for being a responsible member of the community.

Growing out of his doctoral work decades ago, Ron Slaby was, to my knowledge, the first person to develop the notion of bully–victim–passive bystander behavior (Slaby, Wilson-Brewer, & Dash, 1994). A number of years later, Stuart Twemlow and colleagues (e.g., Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco, Gies, & Hess, 2001) independently developed the same notion and a linked set of curricular and school-wide improvement tools. Their work has helped to make the role of the "witness" something that a growing number of educators are attuned to. Slaby has wisely suggested that another way of labeling this for students is "being a hero." Heroes stand up for justice. Slaby suggests that this is a particularly meaningful "hook" for middle and high school students. Schools can decide to take a series of school-wide, classroom-based, individual and school–family– community related steps to move from a culture of passive bystanders to a culture of Upstanders. When schools do this, it has profound implications for lethal violence prevention (Pollack et al., 2008); bully prevention; and the promotion of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for democracy (Eyman & Cohen, 2009).

All of these tasks take time. Often school leaders want to move ahead quickly and just administer a school climate survey and be told what to do. Given how extraordinarily busy school leaders are, this is an understandable wish. However, as I have noted above, it is fundamentally unhelpful in the end. There is growing awareness that when principals and superintendents do not address the tasks that support creating a school-wide understanding, buy-in, and co-ownership of the school climate improvement plans, these efforts tend to fail or stop when the money stops, when the principal no longer sees it as essential for his or her vision of where the school should be headed, or when a principal leaves (Mourshed et al., 2010; Southern Regional Education Board, 2010; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010).

In brief, measuring and improving school climate is a scientifically sound data- driven strategy that recognizes the essential social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual aspects of learning and prosocial school improvement efforts. School communities can use this data to build learning communities that work together in democratically informed ways to support prosocial development and student learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How can we use measuring and improving school climate as organizational strategies that will further our prosocial goals for children? The following recommendations emerged from a series of consensus-building meetings with members of the National School Climate Council (2007) and the continuing work of council members (Cohen, Fege, & Pickeral, 2009).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Policy makers 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:

1. define school climate in ways that are aligned with recent research;

2. recommend that schools routinely evaluate school climate comprehensively, recognizing student, parent, and school personnel "voice" and that it is necessary to assess all of the major dimensions (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment) that shape school climate;

3. consider adopting or adapting the National School Climate Standards that reflect and suggest norms and values that support democratically informed learning, teaching, and school improvement efforts;

4. use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability;

5. ensure that credential options maintain high-quality school climate–related standards for educators and school-based mental health professionals in general, and administrators in particular;

6. 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 and development in our schools; and

7. increase support for research on the evaluation and improvement of school climate.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE LEADERS

Practice leaders, including building, district, and state leaders, must become aware of scientifically sound ways that they can measure and improve school climate. Although

*Classroom climate is similar to but different from school climate. A school can have an overall positive school climate, but a given class may be unsafe, "disconnected," or not engaging. And a school that, as a whole, has a very poor school climate may have certain classrooms that have very positive climates.

the majority of educational leaders appreciate the importance of school climate, they often use "homegrown" school climate surveys that have not been developed in scientifically sound ways. In fact, homegrown surveys as well as focus groups and other school climate assessment methods can be assessed for validity and may show high reliability. Naturally, whatever school climate evaluation method practitioners use, it is essential that it actually measures what it claims to measure (i.e., it is a valid method) and does so in a consistent manner (i.e., it is a reliable instrument).

Practice leaders need to do the following:

1. Learn about the range of comprehensive school climate assessment tools that have been developed in scientifically sound ways and encourage and support their use. As noted above, Gangi's (2009) and Haggerty, Elgin, and Woolley's (2011) recent independent reviews of assessment tools provide some guidance that practitioners can use to identify possible measures.

2. Learn about the range of ways that 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 for school climate improvement efforts. This may include a focus on breaking the bully–victim–bystander cycle (e.g., Craig, Pepler, Murphy, & McCuaig-Edge, 2010; Eyman & Cohen, 2009) or integrating social, emotional, and civic learning into the curriculum as

discussed throughout this handbook.

3. Create networks of schools and communities committed to evaluating and improving school climate to develop "centers of excellence" that others can learn from.

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

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

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

7. Participate in and contribute to workshops and conferences as presenters as well as learners; teach your successes and keep your mind open and excited.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORSAND RESEARCHERS Teacher educators typically are also researchers; informally and/or formally, teacher educators are involved in learning and teaching. In any case, it is most important that teacher educators and researchers work together (U.S. Department of Education, Of- fice of Safe and Drug-free Schools, 2007). In an overlapping manner, it is recommended that they partner with one of the professional teacher education organizations, departments, colleges of education, or other educational networks to create a committee to evaluate the status of knowledge about and experience with school climate ideas in pre-service and in-service teacher education in order to accomplish the following goals:

1. In collaboration with policy leaders to assess the scientific merits of existing school cli- mate 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 (these three tasks are first and foremost the responsibility of research- ers). Distribute this information to teacher educators throughout the country along with guidelines for incorporating the research into a teacher education curriculum.

2. 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.

3. Support the creation of a prototype K–12 social, emotional, civic, and ethical learning curriculum that can be used by states and school districts on a par with a state or district academic curriculum. This handbook should provide information on a range of such programs that may be helpful.

4. 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).

5. Support the purpose of education in a democratic society and how we can use evaluat- ing 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.

In conclusion, I suggest that measuring and improving school climate is an important, research-based strategy that supports and furthers prosocial education as it recognizes, educates, and supports the whole child and the whole school community working and learning together. In fact, there is a growing appreciation that the country needs to expand measures of school quality (Schwartz, Hamilton, Stecher, & Steele, 2011). And the U.S. Department of Education Safe and Supportive Schools grants program is beginning to powerfully support a focus on school quality becoming more of a reality for America's children. But today, too many students feel like Jose: school is not a safe, engaging, and helpfully challenging place for them to learn and grow up. For Jose, the norms, goals, values, and relationships at school undermine his ability to learn.

I have suggested and described why school climate assessment and improvement efforts are a useful concept and practice that support children developing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for love, work, and effective participation in a democratic society. When we measure and work to improve school climate, we are (1) recognizing the essential social, emotional, ethical, and civic as well as intellectual aspects of learning and our school improvement efforts; (2) supporting shared leadership and learning; (3) promoting school–family–community partnerships that engage everyone in the community to learn and work together; and (4)

promoting student engagement. We now have sets of policy and practice tools and guidelines that will narrow the socially unjust gap between school climate research, policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education. For too many years, American public education has focused on one leg of the proverbial elephant: reading and math scores. As important as linguistic and mathematical competences are, it is unfair and I suggest socially unjust that we are not recognizing the whole child and the whole school community. In fact, others and I have suggested that this is in violation of children's rights (Cohen, 2006; Greene, 2006, 2008). Measuring and improving school climate is a practical, prosocial strategy that supports all children developing in healthy ways and being able to learn in school and throughout life.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Character Education Partnership: www.character.org

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: www.casel.org

Comer School Development Program: http://www.schooldevelopmentprogram.org/index.aspx

National School Climate Center: www.schoolclimate.org

National School Climate Council: http://www.schoolclimate.org/about/council.php

Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations: www.qisa.orgWhole Child Initiative: www.wholechildeducation.org

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