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ABSTRACT

Chapter 8 of a revised volume on school leadership, this chapter defines school climate and suggests ways to improve the learning environment at the school building level. School climate is defined as the feeling an individual gets from experiences within a school system. More specifically, climate is the composite of norms, expectations, and beliefs characterizing the school social system as perceived by its members. Although experts differ over measurement techniques, several systems for characterizing organizational climate (by measuring staff communication patterns) have been devised. Two helpful instruments are the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire and the National Association of Secondary School Principals school survey. Effective schools research findings show the influence of school climate on morale and educational outcomes. As a first step to improving school climate, principals must understand the cyclical, self-perpetuating nature of organizational climate and consider their role in the change process. Numerous climate improvement models exist, including organizational development, behavior modification, the Reaching Success through Involvement Program, and school climate improvement teams. Scanning the literature for administrator-generated articles can also provide practical suggestions. (MLH)

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> There is a subtle spirit that exists in a school, both in the minds of the teachers and students and in every act, which may never be exactly described or analyzed, but which even the most inexperienced observer recognizes when he enters a school or a classroom.
>
> L. J. Chamberlin

Ask any student, teacher, or administrator; indeed, ask anyone who has spent even a short amount of time in different schools: each has its own distinct "feel" or "personality" that can be recognized soon after entering its doors.

Some schools are perceived as "good" schools—desirable and perhaps even exciting places to work and learn. Others are perceived as just the opposite—places where one would probably not spend much time were it not for legal or financial compulsions to do so. Still other schools are considered "ordinary" by most observers—not particularly exciting, but not particularly threatening, either.

For decades, this "subtle spirit" of a school was generally called "school morale" by researchers and practitioners. In the past twenty-five years or so, however, it has generally been called "school climate."

Although it is easy to see that each school has its own particular climate, researchers and practitioners have had a difficult time agreeing among themselves as to the exact meaning of the term. Fritz Steele and Stephen Jenks define *school climate* as "what it feels like to spend time in a social system—the weather in that region of social space." Wilbur Brookover and his colleagues conceive of *climate* as "the composite of norms, expectations, and beliefs which characterize the school social system as perceived by members of the social system." Andrew Halpin and Don Croft call *school climate* the organizational "personality" of a school. "'Climate' is to the organization," they state, what "'personality' is to the individual." To James W. Keefe and his colleagues, school climate is "the relatively enduring pattern of shared perceptions about the characteristics of an organization and its members."

Two comments by Jean Stockard highlight the problems associated with defining and studying school climate. First, she notes that there are differences among psychological, group, and organizational climate; all too often, "conclusions are made about effects on the aggregate level without adequate

controls on the individual level." Second, she notes that students (and we can reasonably extend her comments to include teachers) "within the same classroom and school can have different perceptions of the environment in which they work." Put another way, although everyone in a school works within the same school climate, perceptions about that climate will vary from individual to individual.

Given the wide range of definitions of school climate, we can readily understand Carolyn S. Anderson's comment on the subject:

> The field of climate research in many ways is reminiscent of the seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant based on the one part each could touch, and who each claimed to possess the definitive image of an elephant.

Nevertheless, school administrators should not be discouraged by the lack of consensus among researchers and practitioners about what constitutes school climate. At the practical level of initiating school improvements, it is not necessary to arrive at an ideal definition of school climate. Rather, as will be seen in the section on "Improving School Climate" below, it is only important that the administrators and staff at a particular school or in a particular school district determine what matters so far as their own particular needs are concerned.

Of course, it isn't just the school that has its characteristic climate. Both classrooms and school districts also have their "personalities." The climates of the classrooms in a school contribute to that school's overall climate, just as the climates of the various schools in a district contribute to the district's overall climate.

In this chapter discussion centers on climate at the school building level, for two reasons. First, most research to date has focused on this level. Second, the school has a more defined and independent climate than the district or classroom. On the one hand, connections between the individual school and the school district are loose enough so that the district's impact on school climate is necessarily limited. On the other, the individual classroom's ties to the school are tight enough to ensure that overall school climate can profoundly influence the climate of the individual classroom.

# Measuring School Climate

Although there is vague agreement among researchers on what constitutes healthy school climate, there is little consensus on how climate should be measured. Several systems for characterizing organizational climate have been devised. Most of these systems focus on measuring patterns of interaction and communication among the school's staff members, particularly between teachers and administrators.

# Halpin and Croft's OCDQ

One of the earlier school climate assessment instruments was developed in 1962 by Andrew Halpin and Don Croft. Their "Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire" (OCDQ) focused on "the social interactions that occur between the teachers and the principal." Halpin and Croft recognized "the importance of other components" of school climate, but chose to start with the social component with the hope of dealing "with the others at a future time." Their OCDQ, meanwhile, has become the most commonly used instrument for measuring school climate.

Halpin and Croft examined elementary schools in the development of their OCDQ. They collected data from 71 schools in 6 different regions of the country, with climate descriptions from 1,151 respondents.

The items composing the questionnaire were selected for their ability to indicate consistencies in faculty members' perceptions within their schools and to allow for comparisons among different schools. From teachers' descriptions of their school experiences and from previous research, Halpin and Croft constructed a set of simple statements, such as "Teachers seek special favors from the principal" and "The principal schedules the work for the teachers." Respondents indicated to what extent these statements applied to their schools.

The sixty-four item OCDQ was divided into eight subtests: four tapping the characteristics of the faculty as a group, and four pertaining to characteristics of the principal as a leader. The group behavior subtests were intended to measure *disengagement, hindrance, esprit,* and *intimacy.* The leader behavior subtests were intended to measure *aloofness, production emphasis, thrust,* and *consideration.*

Of these eight characteristics, Halpin and Croft discovered that esprit (teachers' morale) and thrust (the extent to which the principal motivates teachers by setting a good example and personally moving the organization) possessed special significance. Halpin states that the combined OCDQ scores for these two characteristics is "the best single index of authenticity." Authentic behavior, as he conceives it, is reality-centered, open, and essentially honest. Esprit indicated the authenticity of the behavior of a school's teachers as a group, while thrust did the same for the principal's behavior.

Halpin and Croft discovered that the organizational profiles of their seventy-one elementary schools could be arrayed along a continuum from "open climate" (what Halpin and Croft considered to be ideal) at one end through "closed climate" at the other. In the open climate, members experience high esprit but have no need for a high degree of intimacy. The leader scores high on thrust but does not have to emphasize production, since teachers' productivity is already high. The behavior of both the principal and the teachers is "authentic." In contrast, the closed climate is "the least genuine" one. What the principal says and does are two separate things. Teachers are disengaged, esprit is low, and group achievement is minimal.

Halpin and Croft are careful to point out that their continuum, while it

is useful for purposes of classification and convenience, has certain shortcomings. As Halpin notes, "the ranking scheme is, at best, only an approximation, and the use of a continuum. . . oversimplifies the facts." He acknowledges that, even though the climate types were predicated on the research, "in a genuine sense, we did not discover these Organizational Climates; we *invented* them."

Researchers have pointed out other limitations of the OCDQ. Kelley suggests that its primary usefulness is in measuring school morale, rather than school climate as a whole. And I. Philip Young and Katherine Kasten point out that the OCDQ focuses exclusively on teachers' perceptions and, consequently, does not yield objective data: "What is measured by the instrument, then, is not a nonobjective school climate, but the objective perceptions that organization members have of the school climate."

Despite its limitations, the OCDQ has its uses. As Anderson points out, "the instrument has had tremendous heuristic value and has promoted a broad-based interest in school climate within elementary and secondary education."

## A Revision of the OCDQ

One weakness of the OCDQ, say Wayne Hoy and Sharon Clover, is that it fails to specify meaningful gradations in the climate ratings of schools that fall between the polarities of "open" and "closed." To produce an instrument of superior clarity, Hoy and Clover replaced the eight dimensions of the original OCDQ with only six dimensions—three bearing on the principal's behavior (supportive, directive, or restrictive), and three relating to the behavior of the teachers (collegial, intimate, or disengaged).

In place of Halpin and Croft's bipolar (open-closed) classification, the revised OCDQ illuminates four contrasting types of school climate, based on the relative candor and responsiveness of both principals and teachers: *open* (supportive principals and collegial or intimate teachers), *engaged* (restrictive or directive principals and collegial or intimate teachers), *disengaged* (supportive principals and disengaged teachers), and *closed* (restrictive principals and disengaged teachers).

The authors say a pilot test revealed this schema to be more useful and accurate in characterizing school climates than that of the original OCDQ, since the middle gradations between "open" and "closed"—ambiguous in the original instrument—were clearly associated in Hoy and Clover's revision with perceived patterns of behavior on the part either of the teachers or of the principal.

## Other Climate Instruments

Although school climate instruments vary widely in questions asked and in areas of school climate on which they focus, most of them resemble the OCDQ in format. First, researchers decide what particular areas of school climate they want to study. Next they develop a questionnaire designed to yield

data on those particular areas. Then they administer the questionnaire to the appropriate parties (depending on what is being studied from what viewpoint, the appropriate parties may be students, teachers, administrators, or any combination thereof).

Typically, the questions are either true/false or multiple choice. In the latter case, respondents are often presented with a statement and asked to respond along a continuum. For example, this statement might be included on a questionnaire addressed to teachers: "The principal is available and able to help when I have a discipline problem with one of my students." Possible answers would range from "always" to "never." When the questionnaires have been completed, the researchers analyze the data and derive conclusions about the climates of the schools studied.

## NASSP's School Climate Survey

An example of an assessment instrument designed for use by school personnel is the National Association of Secondary School Principal's School Climate Survey. The instrument is founded on a comprehensive model of the school environment developed by NASSP's Task Force on Effective School Climate. Formed in 1982, the task force sought to develop a set of school climate measures that would have psychometric validation and also be useful to practitioners. The School Climate Survey is one of several instruments in a battery called the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments. Other instruments measure student, teacher, and parent satisfaction.

As described by James W. Keefe and colleagues, this model of the school environment encompasses a wide range of input and output to the process of school improvement. At the broadest level, the model takes into account the larger cultural setting in which education occurs by considering societal ideologies (such as the American "success ethic"). At the district/community level, say the authors, the model measures three areas of influence on school climate: (1) local beliefs, attitudes and values; (2) organizational characteristics (including the physical environment, the formal organization, and the personal relationships and behavioral norms); and (3) characteristics of groups and individuals, including socioeconomic status, racial makeup and location, job performance and satisfaction, and parent and community satisfaction and support.

School climate, then, is conceived of as the mediating variable between these inputs and the outcomes of schooling, which are defined in terms of student satisfaction and productivity. But the relationship among these elements is reciprocal. That is to say, the climate of a school both influences and is shaped by these inputs and outcomes.

Three assumptions are behind this model. First, the quality of a school environment is a longitudinal concern, because deeply ingrained traditions and habits are difficult to change. Second, a consensus about what is and what is not important among the three major school stakeholder groups (students, staff, and community) is an important indicator of a healthy climate. And third, stu-

dents are the primary concern of the school.

According to the examiner's manual, the School Climate Survey "is normed for use with students in grades 6-12, and for use with teachers, and parent or citizen groups." The manual recommends that all major stakeholder groups, rather than a single group, be assessed, so that the groups' perceptions can be compared. The survey solicits respondents' perceptions on ten subscales: teacher-student relationships, security and maintenance, administration, student academic orientation, student behavioral values, guidance, student-peer relationships, parent and community-school relationships, instructional management, and student activities.

## Reviews of Climate Instruments

To help leaders choose among the bewildering array of school climate assessment instruments currently available—many of them with untested psychometric properties, formats, and reporting procedures—several guides review and rate the instruments. For example, Judith Arter is the author of a "consumer's guide" to the major tests and surveys that can be used to assess school and classroom climate. Arter categorizes the instruments selected for review according to the psychosocial and physical characteristics they measure. These characteristic are classified under four general headings: relationships, personal development, system maintenance and change, and physical environment. She also tells how to select a climate assessment instrument and then lists researchers and research projects, books and articles, and training materials.

After this excellent introduction, the main body of the guide consists of an appendix containing the individual reviews of educational climate assessment instruments. These reviews are grouped as follows: (1) classroom climate instruments; (2) school climate instruments; (3) other educational climate instruments; (4) higher education climate instruments; (5) naturalistic, case study, and observational approaches; and (6) classroom interaction analysis. Other appendices provide a summary table of instrument characteristics, a reference list of organizations and climate research reviews, and a checklist for selecting a measure of educational climate.

Having examined school climate assessment instruments from twenty-two school improvement projects around the country, Denise C. Gottfredson and her colleagues present indepth reviews of twenty of the best instruments (in terms of sound psychometric development). Most of the instruments are surveys, but they do include some interview formats. Covering all grade levels, the instruments come mainly from school districts and state departments of education. Review criteria include the school characteristics assessed, ease of use, and the reliability and validity of the various scales included in each assessment instrument.

Cottfredson and her colleagues single out a small group of instruments as having the most promise for yielding reliable and valid measures of important school characteristics. Among assessments relying on teachers and other

adult school staff, the authors commend the Connecticut State Department of Education's School Effectiveness Questionnaire and Interview. For schools wishing to assess a broader range of school characteristics, the Organizational Health Description Questionnaire (OHDQ), School Assessment Survey (SAS), Climate Effectiveness Inventory (CEI), and Effective Schools Battery (ESB) are most highly rated, depending on the content desired.

## Limitations of Climate Instruments

School climate assessment tools are useful for comparing one school's climate with another's, for measuring changes in a school's climate over time, and for pinpointing areas in which a school's climate needs improvement. Still, they have limitations. For one, they cannot directly measure what is actually going on in the school; rather, they measure the respondents' *perceptions* of what is going on. Although this is not a fatal flaw (virtually every researcher in the field acknowledges that the perceptions of an organization's members about what is happening in that organization are important), it is a factor to be kept in mind when using school climate measurement instruments. To cite another drawback, no analysis of data derived from a school climate measurement instrument can provide the "feel" for what is happening in a school that comes from directly observing students, teachers, and administrators in action.

In short, instruments used to measure school climate can be useful tools for educators and administrators interested in improving a particular school or the schools within a district. For such a tool to be truly effective, however, it must be employed in conjunction with the skilled leader's direct observation of members of the school community as they go about their tasks of administration, teaching, and learning.

# The Importance of School Climate

Does it really matter whether a school has a "healthy" climate? Is it worth taking the trouble to try to improve climate? What would be the rewards of such an undertaking?

Certainly the satisfaction and morale of students and staff are higher in schools with healthy climates than in schools with unhealthy ones: indeed, many instruments designed to measure school climate do so indirectly by measuring satisfaction with the school. But is there any hard evidence that climate influences the final outcomes of education—how much and how well children learn? A large body of research on the characteristics of effective schools—briefly reviewed in this section—indicates that it does.

Two of the best known studies are those conducted by Brookover and colleagues and by Rutter and colleagues. Brookover's team studied 91 elementary schools chosen at random from the 2,200 elementary schools in Michigan with fourth- and fifth-grade students. Altogether, 11,466 students, 453 teachers, and 91 principals participated in the study.

From school records and from questionnaires administered to the students, teachers, and principals, the researchers obtained data on "input" into the school system. Data included both demographic variables (such as the socioeconomic status and racial composition of a school's students) and school climate variables (such as students', teachers', and principals' perceptions of their abilities to function successfully within the school). In addition to measuring such "input" into the schools, the study measured certain "outcome variables": the achievement scores of the fourth-grade students on state-administered math and reading tests, measures of the students' self-concepts of academic ability, and measures of students' sense of "self-reliance."

Despite problems posed by high levels of correlation between climate and the economic and racial composition of the student bodies, the authors demonstrated that their climate variables had a stronger influence on achievement than did the racial and economic ones. "Although it is not sufficient proof," they concluded, "these analyses suggest that school climate rather than family background as reflected in student body composition has the more direct impact on achievement."

In another landmark study, a team of researchers led by Michael Rutter followed the progress of a group of children from London's inner city through the first three years after they entered secondary school, comparing behavior and performance at the beginning of the period to those at the end. After allowing for such variables as student socioeconomic status and family background, the researchers still found that students "were more likely to show good behavior and good scholastic attainments if they attended some schools than if they attended others."

Rutter and colleagues suggested that differences in school climate contributed to these differences in student performance. They found that the combined effect on school outcomes of the school process variables they measured was much stronger than the effect of any individual process variable.

> This suggests that the *cumulative* effect of these various social factors was considerably greater than the effect of any of the individual factors on their own. The implication is that the individual actions or measures may combine to create a particular *ethos*, or set of values, attitudes and behaviours which will become characteristic of the school as a whole.

Findings by these two studies have been corroborated by a number of subsequent studies. To cite just a few examples, Judith Warren Little, in her case study of six urban schools (three elementary and three secondary); Peter Coleman, in his study of nine British Columbia elementary schools; and Carol Ann West, in her study of elementary schools in Paterson, New Jersey, all found significant correlations between school climate and student performance. And John E. Roueche and George A. Baker III, analyzing data the U.S. Department of Education collected from thirty-nine award-winning schools from the 1982-83 Secondary School Recognition Program, reached the following conclusion:

Although the schools differ and, therefore, reflect climate factors in different ways, the data show that these schools have many of the same characteristics reflected in literature on school climate. For instance, a sense of order, purpose, and coherence prevails among the schools—they establish clear academic goals and well-articulated curricula. Furthermore, they are led by strong principals who generally use specific, concrete strategies to emphasize and work toward increased time on academic learning. Finally, in the schools, the principals and faculties recognize and reward student achievement and effort.

Pointing out that the relationships between school climate and school effectiveness are highly complex, Thomas J. Sergiovanni makes the following generalizations:

1. School improvement and enhanced school effectiveness will not likely be accomplished on a sustained basis without the presence of a favorable school climate.
2. However, favorable school climate alone cannot bring about school improvement and enhanced school effectiveness.
3. Favorable school climates can result in more or less effective schooling depending on the quality of educational leadership that exists to channel climate energy in the right directions.
4. Favorable school climates combined with quality educational leadership are essential keys to sustain school improvement and enhance school effectiveness. Corollary: Unfavorable school climates hinder school improvement efforts and school effectiveness regardless of the quality of its educational leadership.

Put another way, although a favorable school climate does not *guarantee* school effectiveness, it is a necessary ingredient for such effectiveness. Improving school climate is, then, a worthwhile undertaking.

# Improving School Climate

Many principals would like to improve the climates of their schools but do not know how to proceed. They may understand quite well how to elicit changes in particular programs or policies. Yet how can they change something as pervasive and powerful as school climate?

As a first step, principals should gain an understanding of the cyclical and self-perpetuating nature of organizational climate. Then they should consider the process of changing climate and their place in that process. Finally, they might listen to the practical suggestions of researchers and practitioners to gain ideas to apply in their own schools. Each of these steps toward improving school climate is discussed in turn.

## The Stability of Climate

Every organization develops norms of behavior that dictate how members of the organization are expected to behave. Each individual learns, through interacting with others in the organization, just what is considered appropriate behavior and what is not. When a person behaves in accordance with the norms, the norms are confirmed and reinforced.

In this cyclical fashion, norms reinforce and perpetuate themselves. And the behavior that the norms dictate is what creates, in the minds of individuals, the organization's climate. Thus, climates, too, are self-perpetuating.

A useful analogy is that of human personality. Each person has a self-image that dictates how that person behaves. Behavior consistent with the self-image reinforces the self-image, which then dictates future behavior.

Habits and patterns of behavior become firmly entrenched in this way and are difficult—though not impossible—to change. Habits of behavior or of thought can be changed, for example, by forcing oneself to behave or think differently for a time, until new patterns become established. The key is to break the self-reinforcing cycle of self-concept and behavior.

Changing organization norms—and the climates they create—is exactly analogous. The change agent must somehow intervene in the self-perpetuating cycle of norms and behavior and establish a new "self-concept" for the school. Once established, the new norms will to a large extent reinforce themselves. The same tendency that makes it difficult to replace a bad school climate with a good one also makes the good school climate, once it is established, tend to perpetuate itself. A useful conceptualization of this stability of a good school environment is provided by Edward Wynne, who studied some 140 schools in the Chicago area. The "good" schools Wynne found were like well-tended gardens:

> In an efficient garden, weeding is easier once the food crops are well rooted. A mature and vigorous crop chokes out the weeds. So too in highly coherent—or good—schools, the vitality of the total environment stifled occasional surges of inefficiency: Students kept peers from breaking rules; teachers went out of their way to help colleagues solve professional problems; things seemed to work out without obvious conflict and stress.

We can take Wynne's analogy a step further. A neglected plot of land doesn't turn into an efficient garden overnight: weeds must be cleaned out, and food crops must be planted and cared for. Months will elapse before the gardener can reap the harvest of his or her labors. Similarly, a negative school climate cannot be suddenly transformed into a positive one, nor can the transformation take place without a lot of hard work.

## Can the Principal Make a Difference?

When we consider the self-perpetuating nature of organizational

climates and consider further that the principal is a member of the school's organization, it is reasonable to ask whether the principal's power to change a school's climate is greater than the climate's power to change the principal. Some authors have argued in the negative. In their view, a principal's efforts to significantly change school climate can only lead to frustration and defeat.

The idea that principals *do* have the power to change school climate and school effectiveness has a multitude of advocates. Fred Hechinger, who wrote the foreword to a book by James Lipham, is characteristic:

> I have never seen a good school with a poor principal or a poor school with a good principal. I have seen unsuccessful schools turned into successful ones and, regrettably, outstanding schools slide rapidly into decline. In each case, the rise or fall could readily be traced to the quality of the principal.

Whether the principal alone should carry the responsibility for creating an effective school or a healthy climate is open to debate. It is likely, though, that the actual power of the principal to influence the climate of a school lies somewhere between inefficacy and total responsibility. The principal is indeed subject to the norms and other socializing forces of the school; but, as Edgar A. Kelley notes,

> the principal is most responsible for the climate of the school and for the outcomes of productivity and satisfaction attained by students and staff. The simple truth is that others respond, directly or indirectly, to what the principal does as well as to what he does not do.

Kelley concludes that the principal's major role in exercising leadership for climate improvement is "to provide the staff with the information, the expectations, the support, and the supervision so that the staff is able to serve as mediators and transmitters of the principal's expectations." In the process, principals must continuously guard against feelings of complacency or self-validating futility.

Nevertheless, the principal cannot bring about changes in the norms of a school by himself or herself. As will be seen in the next two sections, the principal must enlist the help and support of others both inside and outside the school if he or she is to effect any meaningful changes in the school's climate.

## The Process of Change

Of the numerous models that exist for improving a school's climate, we have selected several, grouped under the following headings: organizational development, behavior modification, a program called Reaching Success through Involvement, school climate improvement teams, and other collaborative approaches to improving school climate.

### Organizational Development

One promising system for eliciting change in school climate is that of

organizational development (OD). "In essence," says D. D. Warrick, "OD changes the norms of an organization." Richard Schmuck and Philip Runkel designed a text on OD in the schools "to help establish the organizational climates that nurture personal fulfillment" in the schools.

OD is basically a strategy for eliciting organizational change that utilizes—at least initially—an outside "cadre" of OD specialists. The specialists educate the members of the organization in such areas as communication skills, problem-solving, conflict resolution, decision-making, and goal identification. They attempt to get the members of the organization "to examine their communication patterns, their customary ways of working together in meetings, or the ways in which people are linked together to get their daily work done." By the time an OD intervention is complete, state Schmuck and Runkel,

> cognitive and affective change should have occurred; norms, roles, influence patterns, and communication networks should have become more receptive and responsive—indeed, the very culture of the school should have become different.

OD appears to be a powerful method for effecting change in organizational climate because it intervenes in the norm-behavior cycle and sets it on a new track. Although OD is best carried out with the help of specialists, many OD techniques and exercises (as found in Schmuck and Runkel's book) can be used without special training.

Gary and Denise Gottfredson describe the use of an organizational development model to improve the climate of an inner-city school. As they wistfully observe, "most educational researchers develop, pilot, and evaluate techniques [for school climate improvement] in schools where it is easiest to conduct their research." But what about schools in serious trouble—inner-city schools plagued by violence, low student and teacher morale, high teacher turnover, and mutual mistrust resulting from (and perpetuating) poor communication among administrators, teachers, and students?

The Gottfredsons chose such a school for a test run of their Program Development Evaluation (PDE) method, an integrated approach (based on OD theory) to analyzing organizational problems and intervening to solve them. In applying the PDE method, researchers collaborate with school personnel to set measurable school improvement objectives, select interventions to achieve these goals, identify obstacles to implementation, and develop benchmarks to monitor progress in coping with these obstacles. According to the authors, PDE surpasses similar school improvement methods in its detailed attention to the obstacles that commonly thwart implementation.

The obstacles that the researchers encountered at this school included a tendency by administrators to cover up problems rather than attempt to solve them, and a consequent lack of teacher trust in the administration's willingness to follow through with its part of any agreement. Researchers also had to cope with a self-validating "yes, but" problem marked by a litany of objections from teachers and administrators alike that the new procedures would be impossible

to apply.

The researchers addressed this situation first by reaching agreement among staff and administrators on what practices would be desirable regardless of obstacles. Then, in a separate step, all concerned were called upon to examine the perceived obstacles and develop specific plans to overcome them. The researchers noted that by limiting the range of discussion to a single issue at a time, they were able to keep the "yes, but" problem under control; also, by getting teachers and administrators to collaborate in problem-solving, channels of communication and trust were restored as they collectively developed a set of benchmarks to signal levels of progress. The resulting policies and plans were written down and disseminated throughout the school, along with decisions about who was to take what specific steps, and when.

By the end of the three-year project, teams at this inner-city school had implemented major innovations in classroom management and instruction, had revised schoolwide discipline policies and practices, and had launched several innovations aimed at increasing parent involvement and decreasing student alienation. Although the school still has a long way to go, indicators of teacher morale have risen as the staff's perceptions of the administration have become more positive; meanwhile the school has become measurably safer and more orderly.

## Behavior Modification

Another approach to improving school climate utilizes "behavior modification" to break the norm-behavior cycle. Peter Mortimore describes this approach in an interview in *Educational Leadership* (see "On School Effectiveness. . .").

Mortimore uses an example of a school in which the norm is for students to tear down student paperwork that is displayed on the walls. Mortimore emphasizes that changing such a norm would take time. If teachers wished to have work displayed on the walls, that would be a new departure, and students wouldn't be used to it. The teachers "would have to prepare the students beforehand, and they should expect some failure at first."

Eliciting change in norms is often a "two steps forward, one step back" proposition. It takes a constant emphasis on new behavior and a deemphasis on old. The new behavior must be "held in place" at first by special effort, until it becomes established and accepted. Once established, it will begin to change the more stable and underlying norm of behavior. Eventually, the new norm will become the accepted norm.

When teachers first put work on the walls, the result is predictable: The work is torn down. But the teachers "insist" on the new behavior and monitor the halls to make sure it is not torn down. Less and less work is torn down, and more and more students see work displayed. The students get used to having the work on the walls, and used to getting punished, perhaps, for tearing down work.

More importantly, some students begin to recognize displayed work

as a behavior associated with different norms or values. They begin to perceive a different value system beneath the patterns of behavior in the school. They then begin to behave in ways consistent with the new norm system.

Several principles for improving school climate can be derived from this example. First, the new norm system must be clearly conceived and communicated and then uniformly applied throughout the school. The principal should maintain high and consistent expectations for children's behavior and achievement and should make sure that everyone knows these expectations. "Assume," state Wilbur Brookover and his colleagues,

> that all children can and will learn whatever the school defines as desirable and appropriate. Expect all children to learn these patterns of behavior rather than differentiate among those who are expected and those who are not expected to learn. Have common norms that apply to all children so that all members of the school social system expect a high level of performance by all students.

Second, the new norm system should be consistently enforced. The new behaviors expected should be "held" in place until the new norm system takes root. Failure to behave properly "should be followed by immediate feedback and reinstruction rather than positive reinforcement," as Brookover and his coauthors state. Reinforcement and praise should be given when behavior is appropriate.

Third, the move toward the new norm system should be undertaken gradually. Too much change at once should not be expected. Insistence on too much too fast may provoke revolt. "Most major change processes in education probably fail because they are too 'rushed'," states James Lipham. "Educational change is a time-consuming process; a major change takes many months, even years."

Fourth, the climate improvement program should be designed and implemented with the participation of others. Climate improvement must be a collective undertaking with staff members' full support and understanding. Goals should be clearly understood, and new patterns of behavior should be consistently enforced. By involving staff members in the decision-making process, as discussed in chapter 7, the school's personnel can approach the change process as a united, instead of a fragmented, group.

## Reaching Success through Involvement

A third approach to improving school climate is Reaching Success through Involvement (RSI), developed at Vanderbilt University. At last count, RSI had been implemented in fourteen schools in five states, was being adopted by Tennessee for implementation in eighteen schools, and was in the process of being implemented in ten other schools in four states.

As explained by Willis J. Furtwengler, RSI is a long-term (twelve to thirty-six months) strategy for school improvement. Its eleven steps run from recognition by the principal and assistant principals of their responsibility for

the school's overall effectiveness, through formation of a teachers' planning council, development of inservice programs, collection of data to assess progress being made, and (at the end of each year) election of new members of the planning council

According to the theory behind RSI, educational organizations are dynamic social systems, and a strong learning culture can be created by purposeful changes in social agreements among members of the systems. Students are viewed as members of the organization, rather than clients, and should therefore participate in changing the culture and climate of the school.

A data analysis instrument, "The School Report Card," is used to provide ratings for three components of school productivity (academic achievement, socialized behavior, and public image); six components of school culture (structure and order, social acceptance, mission and vision, academic emphasis, and problem-solving); and school climate, defined as "the way teachers, administrators, and students feel about what they have agreed—explicitly and implicitly—to do in the school and about the actions taken pursuant to those agreements."

Perhaps the most striking features of RSI are (1) its focus on continuous planning and action throughout the school year and (2) its emphasis on involvement of *all* members of the school community. For instance, the planning council (consisting of administrators and teachers) and a student leadership group take part in a three-day retreat to focus on leadership training and problem-solving activities. At the retreat, task forces (with student representation) are formed to solve specific school problems. During the year, each task force holds four half-day meetings to assess the progress it is making and see what further work needs to be done.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data from the study support the conclusion that the RSI strategy of student involvement is a promising way to solve many problems in schools. Changes in the culture and climate at these schools were directly related to decisions by staff and students to solve specific problems in the following six areas: academic achievement, human relations, school spirit and pride, building and grounds, school image, and involvement.

## School Climate Improvement Teams

A model for school climate improvement described by Donna H. O'Neal and her colleagues uses a team approach. The model's seven stages begin with appointing a climate improvement team consisting of administrators, teachers, students, and parents. The succeeding steps include assessing areas in need of improvement, determining goals, developing a plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating the plan. After evaluating the plan, the program enters its final stage—modifying the plan, reorganizing the climate improvement team, and, in effect, beginning the process all over again.

A key feature of the model outlined by O'Neal and associates is its detailed planning. In the planning stage, specific objectives are stated, strategies for meeting those objectives are determined, resources needed are

identified, specific individuals are assigned responsibility for carrying out the strategies and using the resources, and timeliness for achieving the goals are given.

Another team-based process for improving school climate is described by Eugene Howard and his colleagues. Their process places the emphasis on strengthening the positive aspects of a school's climate:

> The traditional approach to school improvement is to identify problems and then attempt to solve them. Such an approach can result in improvement; however, it will not result in excellence. Excellence comes by making what is working well work even better and by spreading successful practice.

The eight-step process begins with the appointment of a School Improvement Management Team, which then collects baseline data for use in measuring the results of the project over time. The third step—making faculty, students, and parents aware of the improvement plan—is achieved through workshops and other activities. Assessing the school's climate is the next step (the authors append the CFK, Ltd., School Climate Profile and other instruments for this purpose).

At the fifth step, say Howard and associates, "faculty, parent, and student leaders . . . brainstorm ideas on promising practices for improving the school's climate" and then "prioritize the ideas for an action plan." Next the School Improvement Management Team forms a task force for each priority identified in step 5. As the task forces initiate and carry out activities, the team, in step 7, supports and manages the task forces' work. Finally, the team evaluates the process, comparing new data on the school's climate with those collected step 2.

## Other Collaborative Approaches

Virtually all the models for improving school climate reviewed in this section can be described as collaborative approaches. That is, they involve all members of the school community both in identifying problems and in designing and implementing the climate improvement plan. Two other collaborative models are described by Patricia Duttweiler and by Gordon Donaldson, Jr. and Theodore Coladarci.

Duttweiler describes the Learning Climate Improvement Process designed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to help schools identify aspects of their learning climate in need of improvement. The program uses a participatory, problem-solving format that involves all members of the school community in addressing the perceived problems.

The Learning Climate Inventory, an instrument designed by SEDL, is first used to gather and measure the perceptions of a school's climate held by administrators, teachers, other school staff, students, and parents. The inventory consists of items derived from research on effective schools that focus on the following areas: collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, in-

structional leadership, high expectations for students, developing a safe and orderly environment, curriculum and instructional practices, monitoring school progress, and involving parents and the community.

Results of this inventory are then presented to the assembled members of the school community, who identify those aspects of the learning climate that were perceived as satisfactory and those in need of improvement. Members of the school community decide how many of these aspects can be reasonably addressed in a school improvement program and then form committees to develop an action plan for each identified problem. The action plan should clearly identify the problem, set specific goals and a time-line for reaching those goals, and establish evaluation procedures for determining when each goal has been reached.

According to Duttweiler, the strength of the Learning Climate Improvement Process lies in its emphasis on involving the entire school community in school assessment and improvement based on the latest and best research findings.

Models for improving school climate necessarily rely on subjective data—the perceptions of various school constituencies about the school in which they work. Donaldson and Coladarci have seized upon this inherent subjectivity to develop a recursive school improvement model based on collaborative self-assessment. The authors' intervention in four rural Maine school districts had three objectives: (1) to make school members aware of the importance and utility of systematic data collection; (2) to help school members see their perceptions of school life as significant sources of data about school life; and (3) to help school members understand the complex ways in which their views, if consciously changed, can interact with other members' views and attitudes to change the quality of school life for everyone.

First, school staff were consulted to determine aspects of school climate they regarded as most problematic; on the basis of this, a locally specific set of school climate instruments was developed for the district, which administered these surveys to teachers, students, and parents, analyzed the results, and prepared a report. Next, school staff members were convened to review the results. The consultants showed them how to approach the data, looking for themes, contradictions, and possible policy implications. Thereafter, school members met to discuss findings and to devise a plan of action for climate improvement.

From this project in which researchers assisted four school districts, three "lessons" were learned. First, staff and citizens are more receptive to survey results when they have had a hand in developing the instruments. Second, most were eager to read and discuss their own school climate assessments; motivation was not a problem. Third, the staff development that results from the process itself may produce greater climate improvement than the specific action strategies that the program produced.

Each particular school or school district must decide which approach toward school climate improvement best fits its needs and circumstances. A

method good for one school or district might not work in another. What does seem clear is that *no* approach is likely to work unless the administrators involved can engage the active support of other members of the school community.

## Practical Suggestions

Practicing educators and administrators tend to view school climate in terms different from those used by researchers such as Halpin and Croft. Practitioners are quite understandably more concerned with what to do to improve organizational climate than with precise measurement and description of climate. In this pragmatically oriented literature, school administrators have recounted their schools' successful efforts to improve "climate," though usually they use climate in a rather general way and frequently mean it to be analogous to morale.

These administrator-generated articles definitely accentuate the positive. The administrator, whether superintendent or principal, is viewed as a leader whose actions can shape (and improve) the attitudes of staff, students, and community. The emphasis in most of this literature is on action rather than on analysis or reflection.

For example, William Maynard describes efforts to improve school climate in Cleveland High School in Seattle. Like many others on improving school climate, this article lacks a clear definition of what a good school climate is, but as evidence of improvement Maynard cites the pride that once alienated and apathetic students now have in their school and a significant fall in the absentee rate. Maynard began by selecting a school climate improvement team of students and faculty to develop projects and ideas to improve the school. Such ideas included a student "who's who" committee, hall murals painted by students and focusing on the theme "We've got pride," and an increase in shared decision-making in school. It is of note that Maynard, unlike early researchers, sees student morale as a central determiner of school climate.

Some attempts have been made to synthesize a research approach to school climate (description, analysis) with the pragmatic, action-oriented approach. One notable example is CFK Ltd.'s School Climate Profile, included in the *Handbook for Conducting School Climate Improvement Projects*, by Eugene Howard and colleagues. The School Climate Profile, say the authors, can be used to assess "people's perceptions of what are and what should be the positive climate factors and determinants in a school."

The four components of the Climate Profile questionnaire are meant to measure general climate factors (such as "respect," "high morale," "continuous academic and social growth," and "caring"), program determinants (such as "opportunities for active learning," "varied reward systems," and "varied learning environments"), process determinants (such as "improvement of school goals," "effective communications," "involvement in decision making," and "effective teaching-learning strategies"), and material deter-

minants ("adequate resources," "supportive and efficient logistical system," and "suitability of school plant").

Willard Hopkins and Kay Crain recount how efforts at climate improvement at Fairfield (Ohio) High School were in large part responsible for dramatic improvements in the school's American College Testing scores, in foreign language, math, and science enrollment; and in attendance—all accompanied by decreased failure and dropout rates. Changes that directly or indirectly contributed to these results included increased emphasis on homework, a core curriculum for college-bound students, parental involvement in scheduling students' classes, and a system for recognizing outstanding student achievement. In addition, Fairfield, like Cleveland High School, emphasized student involvement in decision-making.

Frank Clark has listed "practical and specific suggestions" for improving school climate. These include suggestions like forming a teacher advisory board, instituting a student forum, and issuing a variety of feedback forms for staff and students. An example of one feedback form is the "Quick Reply Form" on which a staff member is able to express an important concern that needs a reply within forty-eight hours. According to Clark, "When working smoothly, it's an excellent form, all but eliminating critical feelings from the staff."

Floyd Coppedge and Lois Exendine say that school and classroom climates can best be improved by implementing behavioral reinforcement strategies at the classroom level. Healthy classroom environments are the crucial components of a healthy school climate, they say. Rather than relying on the conventional, simplistic strategies of verbal and written praise for students, teachers should strive to create a classroom climate that in itself is reinforcing. This environment should involve all students, provide intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, and promote active learning in a stimulating, scholarly atmosphere. In such an environment, students can receive positive reinforcement from the following sources:

- a rich and stimulating curriculum
- teaching methods that allow students to actively assimilate and use new information
- a firm but humane system of classroom management that rewards good behavior as well as curbing disruption
- human relations skills that emphasize mutual respect
- consistent, supportive evaluation that provides useful feedback to students without stigmatizing them

Establishing such a supportive environment is not easy, Coppedge and Exendine acknowledge, but principals can help by providing teacher supervision and inservice training to encourage these kinds of reinforcement practices in classrooms. The resulting enhancement of classroom climates will carry over to the school as a whole.

Attempts to improve school climate need not adopt an all or nothing approach. Many times, a school can make significant improvements simply by focusing on a few key problem areas. Timothy F. Brown describes one high

school faced with three chronic problems: smoking on campus, truancy from selected classes, and schedule changes (students changing their schedules frivolously after classes had already started). The school launched a two-pronged attack on these problems: first, setting up and enforcing rules to alleviate these particular "symptoms" of a poor school climate, and, second, forming working committees to involve students, parents, and teachers in getting at the root causes of the problems and figuring out long-term solutions.

At Clarkston Junior High School (Clarkston, Michigan), efforts at improving school climate emphasize improving students' perceptions of themselves and of their relationships with faculty members and administrators. Vincent F. Licata, assistant principal, lists a number of ways in which the junior high school has sought to improve those perceptions. These include a ' school mission that emphasizes that every student will receive at least one success experience a year," a Teacher Advisor Group program ensuring that "each student has one special adult within the school who knows and accepts him/her," and playnights in which faculty members and students can play sports together during the evenings.

Robert L. Eichholtz suggests that when it comes to improving school climate, attention to even the smallest of details can help. One simple suggestion he offers is for the school's principal to make it a point of getting to know every student by name. Such a little thing as being recognized by the principal when walking down the halls can have a salutary impact on a student's attitudes and behavior.

It appears from the literature, then, that there are as many ideas on what a healthy school climate is and how to achieve it as there are ideas on what, in individuals, constitutes a healthy personality and how to achieve it. Yet the actual experiences of school leaders suggest that this lack of agreement and the lack of any hard data concerning the effectiveness of school climate improvement efforts may not be insurmountable problems. What seems to be true in practice is that almost any approach to climate improvement undertaken with energy and optimism helps enormously to improve school morale, communication, and relationships with staff. students, and community.

# Conclusion

School climate is the feel an individual gets from his or her experiences within a school's social system. This feel or "subtle spirit" is the "global summation" of the individual's perceptions of how school personnel and students behave and interact. These behaviors, in turn, are largely determined by the underlying norms in the school, which dictate what kinds of behaviors and interactions are appropriate. Norms are largely self-perpetuating: the behaviors they define tend to reinforce and confirm the norms that gave rise to them.

Improving a school's climate depends on understanding the norm-behavior cycle and how to intervene in it properly with behavior modification or organization development techniques. Numerous instruments for measuring

school climate have been developed that can help administrators diagnose their climates before they attempt change. The experiences and suggestions of other administrators can also help school leaders understand climate and how it might be improved.

A healthy school climate is important because it is associated with higher student achievement, better behavior, and better attitudes. A large amount of research shows that the structures of social interaction and behavior in the school influence the student outcomes of the school. Thus, improving climate appears to be not only a worthwhile but an essential undertaking.