NEWSLETTER

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DEVELOPING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

As the new principal at Southside High School, Mr. Mendoza was met with many challenges. Despite the solid efforts of the previous administration to increase academic achievement, the school failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress for the second year in a row. Parent and community perception surveys conducted by Mr. Mendoza's predecessor indicated broad dissatisfaction with the school and a general sense that it had not been doing enough to assist its low achievers. A series of newspaper articles chronicled the failures, drawing attention to the dismal test scores and high dropout rate. In addition, Mr. Mendoza identified safety as a major concern. In fact, within his first week at the school, a fight broke out and three students were led off in handcuffs by police, creating yet another media stir in the local news. What to do?

Schools leaders are often placed on the "hot seat" when negative images of the school, its staff, or its students appear in the local media. Such reports can strongly affect a school's public and image and, in turn, impact the climate both in the community and within the school itself. Sometimes these perceptions are not based on fact; however, they could suggest that the school climate should be examined closely.

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement at Learning Point Associates provides technical assistance to schools, districts, and states. Many schools that contact The Center are seeking strategies to enhance their school climate. This month's newsletter examines the research base behind school climate and what school administrators can do to create a positive school climate that enhances the learning environment and improves perceptions among students, staff, parents, and community members.

Decades of research support the role of a positive school climate on teaching and learning. "Positive school climate promotes student learning, academic achievement…positive youth development and increased teacher retention" (National School Climate Center, Center for Social and Emotional Education, and National Center for Learning and Citizenship at Education Commission of the States, 2008, p.7).

This newsletter takes a look at the topic of school climate and sets out to determine:

- What is school climate?

- How can schools assess their school climate?

- What are some practical examples of how schools are assessing school climate?

- What resources are available to support schools interested in improving or enhancing their school climate?

What Is School Climate?

School climate is a term that is used often by educators, researchers, and the media but is rarely defined consistently. For example, here are two definitions of school climate taken from the literature:

- "The physical and psychological aspects of the school that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place" (Tableman, 2004, p. 2).

- "School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures" (National School Climate Center, Center for Social and Emotional Education, and National Center for Learning and Citizenship at Education Commission of the States, 2008, p.5).

Establishing a common understanding about the definition of school climate among building staff is the first step in identifying the extent to which the school climate is positive and conducive to learning. The next critical step is to assess the existing school climate and identify a plan of action.

Assessing School Climate

Measuring student achievement is fairly straight-forward. State standardized tests and regular benchmark tests are routinely scored, disaggregated, and analyzed to provide a picture of how well students have mastered subject matter. On the other hand, assessing school climate can require a review of multiple data sources. Some potential data sources include:

- **PERCEPTION SURVEYS** gather data on how teachers, students, and parents feel about their school. Perception surveys can assess the extent to which the school's climate is viewed positively by students, parents, and faculty. Survey data can be used to call attention to areas of weakness and can complement other, more specific or objective school climate data. Survey data also can offer information on how the community perceives the school; if students believe the school is safe and meeting their needs; and/or if parents, students, and teachers have a sense of pride in the school. Survey data often reveal perceptions about the school administration that can assist principals in reflecting on their own practice.

- **STUDENT DISCIPLINE RECORDS** such as office referrals, suspension records, and expulsion records can provide useful information on school climate, especially if the data are detailed. These records can provide information on the number of students referred for discipline; whether any one subgroup is disproportionately referred for discipline, suspended, or expelled; and if frequent offenders may benefit from more intensive support or intervention. Student discipline records also can supply data about which rules are most frequently violated and which teachers most frequently refer students. These data can help inform the identification of research-based strategies to improve the school climate.

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- **ATTENDANCE RECORDS** can reveal tardy and absentee patterns by subgroup, season, teacher, or subject. These data can inform educators about which students may need additional support to attend school regularly. Records regarding participation in extracurricular activities and schoolwide activities can show whether students are broadly represented or whether activities tend to be limited to a small subgroup of students. Student attendance and participation in school activities also may provide important indicators of the school climate.

Each of these data types can reveal different aspects of the climate in the school. When considered together, they can help drive strategies to build a positive school climate.

Examples of School Climate Assessments

During the past four years, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement has worked with schools across the country on issues of school climate. A number of common themes have emerged during our analyses of school climate data. This section provides two examples of schools that have used data to develop and implement strategies to improve school climate.

Example 1 — Disproportionality in Suspensions

The challenge: The suspension and discipline records showed that there was an overrepresentation of African-American males in out-of-school suspensions. Yet, the school's discipline system only required suspension for serious offenses or persistent discipline infractions. Concerned about why so many more African-American males were being suspended, the principal decided to administer a survey to all students to gain insight on possible causes. The survey results showed that many students felt certain teachers were more likely than others

to be overly punitive with regard to discipline procedures in general. African-American males reported feeling that they did not belong. How did this school respond?

Actions:

- The principal looked closely at discipline referral data to determine which teachers were making the most referrals in order to confirm (or refute) the students' perceptions.

- In the event of a disproportionate number of referrals from certain teachers, the principal conducted individual teacher conferences to determine if there were additional supports or strategies that might be provided to the identified teachers. For example, the principal considered assigning a teacher mentor to assist with the implementation of the professional development strategies in the classroom.

- All teachers were provided with professional development on classroom management and cultural competency.

- To help African-American males develop a sense of belonging in the school, the school leadership team implemented an in-school mentoring program in which students who had experienced more than one suspension were paired with a trained staff member who would greet the student each day, check homework, review expectations for the day, and set daily and weekly goals. The principal, school counselor, parent/guardian, and student also met to discuss a mentoring plan and outline expectations and parameters.

Example 2 — Teacher Satisfaction

The challenge: The principal was concerned about high teacher turnover in a building that had struggled to meet state benchmarks. A survey of teachers revealed that many felt isolated and overwhelmed with work. Teachers reported a lack of communication from the administration and stated that they were unsure of how best to meet the learning needs of students.

Actions:

- The principal rearranged the weekly schedule to implement common planning time for grade-level or subject-area teachers. This time was used to collaborate on planning and to provide mutual support for job-embedded professional development.

- The principal restructured weekly faculty meetings to include time to address teacher questions and concerns.

- The principal conducted weekly walk-throughs focused on specific instructional topics and provided immediate written or verbal feedback to teachers. The principal always highlighted positive practices as well as areas of need. Common needs across the faculty were identified for future conversations.

Resources and Tools That Support Examining School Climate

The Center is often approached by schools, districts, and states that are seeking support and tools for assessing school climate. In this section we provide some examples of tools and resources. Some are free of cost and some are fee-based.[1] Conducting a Web search could generate additional resources. Following are several examples.

- **MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS** developed a school climate toolkit that is available free of charge on the district's website. The "Creating a Positive School Climate for Learning" toolkit contains checklists, rubrics, surveys, guiding questions, and strategies on a variety of school climate topics. The topics include using data to assess school climate, behavior, attendance, health, safety, cultural competence, family and community involvement, and operational

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1. The inclusion of tools and resources in this section does not imply endorsement by The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

systems. Website: http://sss.mpls.k12.mn.us/Positive_School_Climate_Tool_Kit.html

- **WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION** has a variety of survey instruments available online. Specifically, the "Student School Climate Survey," designed for students in Grades 3–12 and the "Staff School Climate Survey" for teachers and instructional support staff. The tools were developed by REL Midwest at Learning Point Associates. The survey asks for student perceptions of belongingness, expectations, and fairness. The staff survey includes questions about communication, educational beliefs, and respect. Websites: http://goal.learningpt.org/winss/scs/sample.htm and http://goal.learningpt.org/winss/staff/sampques.asp

- **CALIFORNIA HEALTHY KIDS SURVEY** includes surveys for Grade 5 and for Grade 7 and above, as well as for staff. Topics covered in the surveys include: healthy choices, school connectedness, safety, resilience, and afterschool time. The Center contacted the developers of the survey, and readers of this newsletter are approved to use the Adobe PDF of the survey free of charge. However, they must acknowledge that the content was developed by the California Department of Education. Website: http://www.wested.org/chks/pdf/cscs_0809.pdf

- **WESTERN ALLIANCE FOR THE STUDY OF SCHOOL CLIMATE** at California State University, Los Angeles, developed a survey for adults titled "Classroom Climate Quality Analytic Assessment Instrument." The instrument addresses the topics of student interaction, discipline environment, learning assessment, and attitude and culture. The Alliance also has an instrument, "School Climate Quality Analytic Assessment Instrument," that addresses appearance and physical plant, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decision making, discipline environment, learning environment, attitude and culture, and school-community

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relations. Permission is required to reproduce the surveys. Website: http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment.html and http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/classroom_survey.html

• **AMERICAN SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY** from The Center for the Study of School Climate is a 25-question survey designed to collect information on the views and perspectives of students in Grades 4–12, teachers, administrators, and community members regarding their school learning climate, bullying, and perceptions on race. Website: http://schoolclimatesurvey.com/html/surveys.htm

Conclusion

Creating a positive school climate takes the work and commitment of the entire school community. Using survey data as well as detailed, disaggregated discipline and attendance records can help to hone in on issues. When examining the data, it is important to foster and maintain an atmosphere of open communication in which everyone is valued and decisions are made collaboratively. A climate of distrust, chaos, or disrespect impedes student and staff motivation and may limit the extent to which students achieve. On the other hand, a positive school climate can be viewed as the foundation of safety, pride, respect, trust, and motivation on which a school can build the structure of high academic achievement for all students.

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