



**Commentaries**  
on the  
**National School Climate Standards**  
**Benchmarks to promote effective teaching, learning and**  
**comprehensive school improvement**

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## Overview

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. 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.

The National School Climate Center, a growing number of State Departments of Education and recently, the United States Department of Education believe that when school communities work to measure and improve school climate we mobilize the “whole village” to support the whole child developing these abilities that provide the foundation for school and life success.

One of the most important goals that the National School Climate Council suggested in the 2007 *School Climate Challenge* ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/policy.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/policy.php)) was that the country needs school climate standards. When a State Department of Education develops standards, they are setting a “bar” that all schools need to achieve. In 2009, the Council was asked to develop these standards.

The School Climate Standards ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php)) were developed by the National School Climate Council ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/council.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/council.php)) and scores of other educators, mental health professionals, family, school board and other community leaders to delineate a set of benchmarks that districts and/or States can adopt or adapt.

The following five Standards (and a series of linked indicators and sub-indicators) present a vision and framework for a positive and sustainable school climate:

1. The school community has both a shared vision and a plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged.
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 reengage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.
4. The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

These benchmarks provide a framework to begin to define what we can and need to do to support children and

adolescents developing in healthy ways and learning.

We have invited a group of building, district, State and national educational leaders to comment on the following five questions:

- 1) Do we need national school climate standards? Why or why not?
- 2) What do you most value and agree with about these standards? Is they're something important that is, in your view, missing?
- 3) What do you most dislike and disagree with about these standards?
- 4) How could standards like these be used most helpfully to support student learning, positive youth development and the promotion of skills, knowledge and dispositions that support an effective and engaged citizenry? And,
- 5) What are the most important recommendations you would make to teacher educators, school leaders, teachers/ others who seek to implement the standards?

We hope that these commentaries spur discussion, reflection and debate. When we measure and work to improve school climate we are: (i) Recognizing the essential social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as intellectual aspects of learning and our school improvement efforts; (ii) Supporting shared leadership and learning; (iii) Promoting School-Family-Community Partnerships: and, (iv) Promoting student engagement.

We hope that States and Districts will consider adopting or adapting these standards in order to 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.

Jonathan Cohen

President of the National School Climate Center

Co-chair of the National School Climate Council

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# National School Climate Standards

## A Critique

Gene R. Carter

The 21st century demands a highly skilled, educated work force and citizenry unlike any we have seen before. The global marketplace and economy are a reality. Change and innovation have become the new status quo while too many of our schools, communities, and systems use models designed to prepare young people for life in the middle of the last century. We live in a time that requires our students to be prepared to think both critically and creatively, to evaluate massive amounts of information, solve complex problems, and communicate well, yet our education systems remain committed to time structures, coursework, instructional methods, and assessments designed more than a century ago. These demands require a new and better way of approaching education policy and practice—a whole child approach to learning, teaching, and community engagement which nurtures children so that each child is healthy, safe, engaged in learning, supported by caring adults, and academically challenged. This doesn't just happen. It takes a —"whole school" to nurture the —"whole child."

A whole school is one that collaborates with its community to deliberately build and sustain a positive school climate. It is one that understands school climate is grounded in people's experience of school life—socially, emotionally, ethically, and civically, as well as academically – and intentionally seeks to monitor, assess, and strengthen the comprehensive school environment for students, staff, and families

So how does a school create a positive climate that is capable of nurturing the whole child? A logical first step is to take the pulse of the school's current climate. But measurement alone will not fix school climate. Incorporating school climate measures into a broader and richer accountability system is one way to ensure schools use scientifically sound data to make improvements. Valid and reliable indicators of school climate and student achievement can provide a more complete and accurate picture of how schools are doing. Some states have developed school climate assessment as an additional and complementary form of accountability. But in my view, there remains a missing ingredient—a set of national benchmarks, so nothing is left to chance and *each* child across *each* of our schools, districts, and states develops and learns in a safe, supportive climate

The set of National School Climate standards presented here establishes a baseline of conditions for a learning environment for each child in a way that too often is left to chance and that supports ASCD's vision for what is possible when we educate the whole child. These standards provide the impetus for educators, policymakers, parents, community leaders and others to transform the quality and character of school life so that each child can develop his or her strengths and restore his or her unique capacities for intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual learning. When we commit to educating the whole child within the context of whole schools and whole communities, we commit to designing learning environments that weave together the threads that connect academics, the mind, body, and spirit—connections that tend to be fragmented without a coordinated, data driven planning and implementation process guided by standards such as these.

A school climate that reflects these standards both integrates technology effectively into curriculum and instruction and supports student understanding of the rights and responsibilities inherent in ethical use of 21st century tools. Too often the transformations occurring as a result of technology are under-emphasized or not acknowledged in schools creating a void of adult guidance and modeling of appropriate use. In a whole child school that promotes positive school climate, technology should be in the forefront, promoting students' active learning process; encouraging investigation and inquiry; complementing research-based best practices in curriculum, assessment, and the teaching and learning partnership; and preparing students for additional education, meaningful work and participation in civic life.

A challenging curriculum, assessment, and instructional program for every child in the 21st century require an emphasis upon authenticity and real-world connections. Students should be able to see the purpose of their curriculum content and its relevance to themselves as individuals, to the community, and to the world they inhabit. Additionally, by involving students in collaborative action research, school leaders can gain information to guide school improvement. These National Standards bring balance to the role of academic challenge, engaging instruction, and student voice in influencing the learning

environment for each student.

Schools and communities committed to educating the whole child work together to ensure the physical and emotional safety as well as the security of each child. Every school has students who feel invisible, alienated, and alone. The extent to which schools and communities are willing to face that reality determines the real safety of the learning environment. The courage to accurately assess climate across all stakeholders and to act purposefully on that assessment presents a defining moment for leaders committed to equity and achievement for all students.

However, the school health and learning connection is not as strong as it should be within these standards (i.e., health literacy, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills that students learn through a high-quality, sequential and developmentally appropriate program). An integrated school, parent, and community approach that enhances the health and well-being of students is essential to promote effective teaching, learning and comprehensive school improvement and cannot be separated from climate overall. Health and wellness should be included in the standards definition of climate.

A recurrent priority for the success of these standards will be that any school climate team operates collaboratively with all stakeholders within the learning organization and the community it serves; making sure that its work complements—rather than works at cross purposes with—the activities associated with the school’s improvement plan or district-wide strategic planning processes. The standards team must engage the stakeholders in community conversations to determine local strengths and challenges and develop next steps for improvement. Hopefully, an action planning matrix to guide and support plans for standards implementation will ensue.

Perhaps most significant, I hope the National School Climate Standards serve as a catalyst for ensuring the longevity and value added to the structural, organizational, policy and human interaction pattern associated with true and successful national school climate transformation.

**Gene R. Carter** is the Executive Director and CEO of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), ASCD is a nonprofit, nonpartisan professional association with more than 175,000 members in 135 countries and more than 60 affiliates. It is one of the largest education organizations in the world. Dr Carter has worked as a private and public school teacher, public school administrator, superintendent of schools, and university professor. Dr. Carter serves on the Board of Directors of Norfolk Southern Corporation, the American Bar Association Advisory Commission of Public Education, the America-Israel Friendship League Education Advisory Committee, the Education Commission of the States Advisory Board, National Commission on Service Learning, the National Commission on Asia in the Schools, and the Longview Foundation Board of Directors. Dr. Carter has received many honors and awards. In 1991, he was awarded the Distinguished Alumni Award from Teachers College, Columbia University. He was presented the “Annual Leadership for Learning Award” in 1990 by the American Association of School Administrators. In 1988, he was selected the first National Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Administrators. He is listed in Who’s Who Among Black Americans. In 1984, 1990, and 1993, The Executive Educator magazine named him one of the top 100 Executive Educators in North America. Dr. Carter has written numerous articles and book chapters concentrating on educational issues and topics. He is the coauthor of *The American School Superintendent: Leading in an Age of Pressure* (Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1997).

# Can Standardizing Climate Ensure Safety?

Mary Grenz Jalloh, M.S., M.P.H., CAS

With over 12 years of experience working with school districts on safety issues, it has been clear to us that often schools want the quick and simple answer to a complicated problem. Sometimes the quick answer is related to visible strategies: more metal detectors, more armed staff to patrol, locked doors – approaches that make it difficult to maintain an engaging environment for our children. Who wants to go to school when you feel you are entering the door of a prison, and need to be inspected in a similar manner? While I am aware that there are issues of violence and weapons in schools, the need is to make a change in systems, in a manner such as outlined by the National School Climate Center (NSCC) in the National School Climate Standards. Now, I can't say that I necessarily think "standards" is the way to make it happen, however, I know that educational systems respond to concrete guidelines or rubrics to drive practice. While my hope would be that the logic of taking a systemic approach to having a more affirming and positive school climate would be the aspiration of all in schools, I recognize that with competing demands it is necessary to formalize what this means and how it can be done in a more concrete way. The National School Climate Standards give a roadmap for helping to do just that. Of course, I would say, look also at what you are already required to do by law and regulation in your state. For example, in New York, the school safety legislation, SAVE, requires you to have regularly updated codes of conduct and safety plans. Both of these could easily incorporate the five standards outlined by NSCC:

- Having a shared vision for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate
- Set policies in place to support this vision
- Identify the school's practices to be put in place to support this vision
- Create an engaging environment for staff, students and family members, a safe environment socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically
- Ensure that the school vision, policies and practices promote a commitment to social justice.

Most of all, we need to see our work as a calling, one which will drive all of us to work together for the promotion of a more just society, where the rights and responsibilities of civic engagement are experienced by all.

**Mary Grenz Jalloh** is the Founder and Executive Director of the New York State Center for School Safety, a government coordinating agency for school violence prevention. Ms. Jalloh has served as a health education consultant for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, Department of Health in NY, American Cancer Society, Carolina Hospitals, the Girl Scouts, and the University of North Carolina. Previously she was an administrator at a county health department in North Carolina, and a member of the faculty at the University Of Missouri School Of Medicine. She is the author of a textbook in rural sociology, co-author of book chapters on school violence prevention, and parenting education; curricula on safe school planning, and violence prevention for educators; and author of numerous journal articles on health education, violence prevention, and youth development. Ms. Jalloh holds graduate degrees in public health (M.P.H., University of NC – Chapel Hill), rural sociology (M.S., University of Missouri), and education (C.A.S., SUNY- New Paltz). She is a certified health education specialist (CHES), and is a certificated school business administrator (SBA) in New York State.



# National School Climate Commentary

Eileen Santiago & JoAnne Ferrara

From our perspectives as an elementary school principal and a teacher educator involved in a collaborative partnership with one another, we see an urgent need for a set of National School Climate Standards. This need has become more pressing given the significant amounts of time young people are spending in schools before the instructional day has begun, during school time, and after school hours. At our school, for example, many of our students start their day at 7:50 in the morning, arriving for breakfast, and return home as late as 5:45 p.m. as a result of their participation in after school programming. Therefore, one can easily surmise that as students' "in school time increases" there is a parallel expectation that school personnel assume some of the responsibilities of parenting and that schools expand their roles by supporting programs, services, and practices that will promote positive youth development and provide safe havens for children throughout the year. With many schools facing high dropout rates, drug usage, school-related violence, and bullying behaviors, the National School Climate Standards provide a roadmap for helping schools address these challenging issues and for helping them "reinvent" themselves in the process.

The proposed National School Climate Standards provides a detailed and valuable description of what a positive school climate actually entails in terms of scope, relevance, and implementation. Another valuable aspect of these standards is their reference to responding positively to the growing diversity of our students and families, and the role that all faculty and staff play in creating a culture of respect and caring. Although the spirit of the school climate document reflects a commitment to many of the tenets of effective character education, a more explicit connection between the two overlapping fields of knowledge would be helpful and serve to better inform and guide the work of educational practitioners and policy makers.

As public education embraces an increasing diverse student body, with many of its students growing up in a waning economy, often facing unstable or uncertain personal and familial circumstances, there is a need to develop a deeper and broader view of educational intent and purpose with a focus that is not only oriented toward achieving high academic standards but on providing the important missing ingredients of schooling. These ingredients include fostering a true sense of engagement with ones community, sustaining caring relationships with others, and developing citizens who are able to live in accordance with ethical, civic, and humane values that are universal in nature.

It is our opinion that the National School Climate Standards should be endorsed at the national level through various governmental agencies (e.g. Office of Drug and Violence Prevention), within related fields of higher education, and through professional associations involved with children, families, and the community (e.g. National Coalition for Community Schools, ASCD Whole Child Initiative, and the Character Education Partnership). In taking a lead advocacy role, the National School Climate Council would seek such endorsements, assist with lobbying for the enactment of appropriate legislation, and possibly partner with these organizations to promote the Standards both nationally and locally. The Council would also help communities become increasingly knowledgeable about the Standards via a comprehensive web site, a well developed media plan, and the publication of various companion resources including "tool kits for teachers, school administrators, and policy makers", "highlights of best practices", and "parent information materials". By reaching various key audiences nationally, this level of endorsement would provide momentum at local levels throughout the country. The National School Climate Standards could then be adopted by school policy makers, district and building administrators, teachers, and community leaders to help shape and guide school implementation initiatives. These Standards would gain further legitimacy and acceptance if accompanied by exemplars from the field of education thereby, highlighting the successful work that is taking place across the country, representing a range of schools and student populations.

In implementing the National School Climate Standards, it is important to consider the following:

- Adopting the National School Standards as an important component of school improvement and reform.
- Linking the National School Climate Standards to a belief in Whole Child Education and aligning the school's mission, organization, programs, services, and practices to these standards and philosophy.
- Incorporating the National School Climate Standards as part of any preparation program for administrators, teachers, mental health providers and social workers so that their work reflects this knowledge and understanding.



- Providing in-service professional development for educators, social workers, and mental health practitioners so that their work reflects this knowledge and understanding.

Finally, it is critical to note that implementing these standards will require much more than simply purchasing any commercially packaged program. Instead, what will be required is true collaboration and leadership among a myriad of professionals working together to support students and all members of the school community.

**Eileen Santiago** is the principal of the Thomas A. Edison School, a K-5 Title I elementary school in Port Chester, New York, a school whose population consists of a high percentage of children growing up in poverty and many recent immigrants of limited English speaking backgrounds. Edison has staged an impressive turnaround since 1998, when under her leadership, she and her community partners received federal support (through the office of Nita Lowey) to develop one of the first full-service community schools in Westchester County. Edison has achieved national recognition over the past 10 years being recognized as a Sharing Success School by the State Education Department in 2001, as a National School of Character by the Character Education Partnership in 2003, for closing the achievement Gap by the State Education Department in 2006, and as a U.S. Department of Education STAIR Dissemination Model for its inclusive instructional practices and wrap around services for children in 2009. Dr. Santiago began her teacher career in 1977 as a bilingual/ESL teacher in New York City. She completed the program in elementary education at Barnard College and later earned an advanced degree in educational administration from City College. She received a doctorate in curriculum and teaching from Teachers College, Columbia University shortly before beginning her career as an administrator in Westchester County and in her role as principal of the Thomas Edison Community School over the past fourteen years, Dr. Santiago has received recognition for her “trailblazing efforts in education” from the Hispanic Women Leaders of Westchester, and from SER of Westchester and Port Chester’s Board of Education for her work on behalf of children and families. More recently, Dr. Santiago was awarded an honorary doctorate from Manhattanville College for her innovative work in forging partnerships in education and for her work in developing the college’s first Professional Development School, an initiative which would later draw six districts within the county to form similar partnerships with the college in their quest to better prepare teachers for meeting the challenges of diversity and for taking advantage of the opportunities which it presents. Dr. Santiago sits on various boards reflecting these concerns, interests, and passions, including the Teacher Center Policy Board of Central Westchester, the Manhattanville College Professional Development School Advisory Board, and Washington D.C.’s Character Education Partnership. She has written numerous articles, presented at national conferences, and was featured in a 2009 Association for Curriculum and Development (ASCD) pod-cast describing the work of community schools and advocating for “Whole Child Education”. In doing so, she has been able to share her wealth of knowledge and experience with educators locally, nationally, and internationally.

**JoAnne Ferrara** is the chair of Curriculum and Instruction at Manhattanville College. She has served as an elementary school teacher in both general and special education settings. In addition to her classroom experience, she spent several years as a school administrator in the New York City Department of Education. As a result of her work in classrooms with new and veteran teachers, she brought a new vision for field-based teacher education to Manhattanville College. In this model, teacher candidates work in both elementary and secondary schools alongside their professors and classroom teachers to develop pedagogical skills and enhance content knowledge. In 2002 she founded the School of Education’s first Professional Development School Partnership with a local elementary school in Westchester County. She strongly believes in the power of school/university partnership to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing teacher education candidates with authentic experiences in classrooms. Dr. Ferrara presents regularly at state and national conferences, her research interests include professional development schools, “whole child education, community schools, and new teacher induction.

# School Climate Standards and Dialogue

John Devine

1. Do we need school climate standards? For me, it is axiomatic that schools need climate standards because climate standards really define the essence of what education should be in this country. When schools inculcate respect they have a chance of achieving all of their other goals. Without this inculcation, we might as well put the word “school” in scare quotation marks because they are not worthy of the name of a school. In other words, inculcation of respect and of social, emotional, and civic learning is of the essence of education and without it education is something other than it purports to be. It is the sine qua non condition. The definition of school climate is quite concise and the framework for the outline is quite comprehensive.
2. What do I most value and agree with about the standards? Is there something important that is missing? The standards set very high goals and envision a broad sweeping agenda. I can imagine a new principal being overwhelmed and asking her(him)self how in the world is all of this to be accomplished given all the other competing agendas. Yet no one can argue that anything in the five standards should be omitted. At the risk of making the standards even more demanding, I think it would be important in order to achieve these lofty goals for teachers to be aware that the children come to the school from a home culture that may be and often is quite different from the often middle-class ethos of a typical American school be it in suburbia or in the inner-city. Students come not just from different ethnicities and quite different cultures but also from differing speech communities and social classes. If these are not recognized students can easily feel intimidated and alienated from the dominant school culture. I have in mind here the ground-breaking sociolinguistic work of Shirley Brice Heath (*Ways with Words*, 1989).
3. What do you most dislike with the standards (see #2 above).
4. How could standards like these be used most helpfully to support student learning and positive youth development? I think the broad range of practices and the set of policies that the standards envision could be brought into a sharp focus. Perhaps that focus should be what it has always been in the long history of education in our Western culture: the person of the teacher and in the principal in his/her role of master teacher. Insofar as the standards point the way to social and emotional and civic learning, they are really asking the teacher to serve as a role model in the sense of a mature, responsible adult who interacts with youth and guides the adolescents through this highly charged liminal phase of their lives. This requires teachers to be more than mere academic instructors; it means that teachers become more than mere instructors. This means that teachers have to set behavior standards for their own lives so they are not teaching hypocritically and it means setting standards for students not just in academics but also in daily behaviors that are acceptable in the larger society. It means drawing the line, at times, for youth. It means informing youth about what language is and is not acceptable in this school. And it means turning infractions of school rules into teaching moments. And doing all this in a respectful way with students so that “teachable moments” become truly “learning moments.”
5. What are the most important recommendations you would make to teachers /school leaders who seek to implement the standards? Begin where the student is. Whether you are teaching algebra or English language or social studies or SEL/respect before making your own presentation to the student, before presenting the “lesson plan” interest yourself in the student’s point of view. You say that the student is too immature to have a view? Then take it upon yourself to find a new language with which to communicate with the student and be genuinely curious about what she/he thinks about basic math or basic politics. In other words in all things promote dialogue with the students and avoid the lecture.

**John Devine** is an urban anthropologist who has studied and worked in inner-city schools for many years. At New York University he founded and directed the School Partnership Program, a tutoring, mentoring and research initiative that operated very successfully in several NYC public schools. His ethnographic research attempts to identify political and ideological patterns underlying structural violence and to investigate institutional responses for preventing violence. He is the author of an award-winning ethnography, *Maximum Security: The Culture of Violence in Inner-City Schools* (The University of Chicago Press, 1996) and co-author of *Making Your School Safe: Strategies to Protect Children and Promote Learning* (Teachers College Press, 2007). President Clinton appointed him as the chair of the Academic Advisory Council of the *National Campaign against Youth Violence*. He is a faculty member at the National School Climate Center.

# National Association of School Psychologists' Response to the National School Climate Standards

## 1. Do we need national school climate standards? Why or why not?

Yes. One of the most significant factors that impacts student learning is the atmosphere in which learning takes place. The atmosphere for learning is described as a school's climate. Research has demonstrated that the degree in which a school's climate reflects certain discrete factors that contribute to positive learning significantly influences the capacity and ease in which students are able to learn and retain knowledge and information in those settings.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has long advocated for making positive school climate a priority for educators, including adding school climate indicators to accountability measures. School psychologists work with administrators, teachers, and families to identify strengths and risk factors in a school climate and to implement strategies that promote a positive climate and support learning.

A review of the literature conducted by staff at the Yale Child Study Center yielded a list of 15 key components that characterize school climate (Haynes, Emmons, Ben-Avie, & Comer, 1996). The ingredients of a healthy, supportive school climate include: achievement motivation, collaborative decision making, equity and fairness, general school climate, order and discipline, parent involvement, school-community relations, dedication to student learning, staff expectations, principal leadership, physical appearance of the school building, sharing of resources, caring and sensitivity, student interpersonal relations, and student-teacher relations.

To be most effective, these ingredients must be combined and fostered in an intentional, purposeful, and meaningful way. The establishment of National School Climate Standards promotes that effort by raising awareness in the educational community as to how these attitudes must be promoted in both policy and practice in the same way that we promote standards associated with literacy, numeracy, science, and social studies. Without an intentional effort to recognize the importance of school climate in the learning process, a school's climate will continue to be treated as ancillary to the purpose and mission of schools.

## 2. What do you most value and agree with about these standards? Is there something important that is, in your view, missing?

These standards reflect several important ideals that are critical to advancing a better understanding of the importance of school climate to learning:

**A.** School's need to have an awareness of the importance of educating the "whole child". This theme resonates throughout these standards and is prioritized in Indicator 2.1: *"Policies and mission and vision statements that promote social, emotional, ethical, and civic, as well as intellectual skills and dispositions are developed and institutionalized."*

**B.** School's must focus on school climate as a priority for the whole "community" of learners. It is not sufficient for individual students, teachers or families to focus on the importance of nurturing and promoting a positive school climate for learning, there must be a system-wide, comprehensive, full community approach. This belief is articulated in Indicator 1.1: *"School policies and practices support school, family, youth, and community members working together to establish a safe and productive learning community."*

**C.** Schools must be purposeful in their collection, reporting, and evaluation of school climate indicators and make the collection and analysis of associated data informative and transparent. Every student and parent in America should have access to an accurate assessment of a school's climate when reviewing the school's accountability data. For a long time schools have provided the public with student outcome data associated with academic core subjects. However, data associated with school climate has been inconsistently reported leaving students and their families only partially informed as to the realities of the learning environment in a given school. The value of collecting, reporting and analyzing school climate data is first emphasized in *Indicator 1.2: "Schools gather accurate and reliable data about school climate from students, school personnel, and parents/guardians for continuous improvement and share it regularly with the school"*

community.”

The National School Climate Council weaves each of these three ideals throughout the document, connecting them in whole or part to the other standards. This interconnectedness reflects the degree in which these ideals are valued and considered integral to the promotion of positive school climates.

One concern about this document is that the importance of recognizing and responding to a person’s individual cultural and linguistic backgrounds does not receive this same treatment. The first substantial consideration of how an individual’s cultural heritage should be considered as part of this discussion does not occur until Indicator 5.1: *“Student and staff model culturally responsive and ethical behavior. This reflects continuous learning that builds knowledge, awareness, skills and the capacity to identify, understand, and respect the unique beliefs, values, and customs, languages, and traditions of all members of the school community.”* Cultural awareness and responsiveness cannot be considered an “after thought” but must be integrated into all policies and practices so that they become instinctive versus reactive and integral to understanding and promoting positive school climates.

### **3. What do you most dislike and not agree with about these standards?**

Generally, these school climate standards are broadly focused and adoption of these standards by educational communities would likely have a positive effect on student learning. The only area that they don’t seem to address relates to the reality of systems change. Adoption of school climate standards and work towards attainment of these standards is a process that evolves over time and requires both basic knowledge and skills by all involved, as well as more specialized expertise by some. For example, all teachers will need to understand how they model and promote these standards as part of their daily classroom routines. However, it is unlikely that these practices will reach all of the students and families and for some, the more specialized knowledge and skills of school professionals will be required in order to ensure that every student and family are positively engaged and included in the school community.

Within the standards that address operational considerations such as Indicator 3.3: *“School leaders develop and sustain a comprehensive system of learning supports by ensuring an appropriate operational infrastructure that incorporates capacity building measures”* there is little attention paid to the importance of having specialized professionals available who are knowledgeable and highly trained to deploy the more intricate strategies and interventions needed for a comprehensive focus on school climate. Explicit recognition of the breadth of supports that may be needed seems prudent.

### **4. How could standards like these be used most helpfully to support student learning, positive youth development, and the promotion of skills, knowledge and dispositions that support an effective and engaged citizenry?**

These standards could be used in a variety of helpful ways to support student learning and overall positive youth development. On the most basic level, they could be used by advocates to help raise public awareness of the importance of school climate within the context of school accountability and improving student outcomes. They would form a research based framework and provide national guidelines for policy makers and administrators to use in developing or revising their existing school climate standards and policies. They would help support districts in establishing a rationale for measuring student outcomes in areas beyond traditional literacy and numeracy measures, such as reducing school violence and substance abuse, and increasing school attendance and school engagement. These standards would underscore and support recommendations that NASP has long advocated for such as the provision of information and staff development training about research that addresses tolerance, effective strategies for addressing harassment and discrimination directed toward any student, and ways to improve the school climate (NASP, 2006b).

### **5. What are the most important recommendations you would make to teacher educators/school leaders/teachers/others who seek to implement these standards?**

Effective implementation of a comprehensive school climate model requires every individual and stakeholder to commit to the values and principles reflected in these standards. Careful and purposeful planning is critical to the success of the

model. School leaders need to realize accomplishment of these standards takes time, that it is important to recognize and acknowledge the small steps that are taken towards these goals, and to value growth over time as the measure of success. Educators, specialized instructional support personnel like school psychologists, and school leaders implementing these standards play a critical role in promoting a positive school climate that will result in healthy academic environments and positive outcomes for staff, families and students.

NASP represents more than 25,000 school psychologists who work with students, educators, and families to support the academic achievement, positive behavior, and mental wellness of all students, especially those who struggle with barriers to learning (NASP, 2008). The National School Climate Council's new standards will provide structure and guidance to school psychologists and other school personnel as they work to lower barriers to learning by increasing the awareness and focus on establishing and maintaining positive school climates.

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**National Association of School Psychologists** (NASP) represents school psychologists and supports school psychologists to enhance learning and mental health for all children and youth. The NASP is the premier source of knowledge, professional development, and resource empowering school psychologists to ensure that all children and youth attain optimal learning and mental health.



# Reaction to National School Climate Standards

Jo Ann Freiberg, Ph.D.

## 1. Do we need national school climate standards? Why or why not?

Yes, the need for National School Climate Standards is unequivocal. The time has come. No. It is long overdue that “standards-based” education extends beyond reading, writing and mathematical prowess. Test scores alone do not tell the full story of an individual’s ability to function successfully in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The world community, of which American children are but members, must be made of thoughtful and ethical human beings who recognize the richness of diversity and the value of collaboration to make the world community both peaceful and prosperous for all. Setting national standards for school climate is an important and essential step forward in this direction.

21<sup>st</sup> century American education is often framed from the perspective of the “new three Rs,” rigor, relevance and relationships. In the current “climate” of NCLB and high stakes testing, “rigor” has been overemphasized, never mind not truly understood. Somehow “relevance” and “relationships” have taken a back seat to the subject matter content. The research is substantial and conclusive: without a solid foundation of meaningful relationships among students, their peers and adults in school, students become disengaged and see their studies as lacking relevance. Relevance and engagement are closely tied, if not synonymous. National School Climate Standards bring rigor, relevance and relationships back in focused balance and can be an essential tool to make this happen. For decades, as the political winds blow, so do the standards for what children should know after attending American public schools. With the advent of “standards-based” (academic) education, there has been a clearer direction toward the curricular content of a schooling program with respect to the cognitive domain. Standards for the affective domain currently lag behind, even though gauging student success depends upon exiting engaged, informed, ethical and intelligent young adults. Educators need concrete goals and strategies based upon them to guide practice in any arena. In their absence, there is no focus. Consequently, by setting national school climate standards, there is a far better chance that schools will be able to inform their practice in real terms beyond subject matter standards-based practice.

## 2. What do you most value and agree with about these standards? Is there something important that is, in your view, missing?

Although not missing, there is not yet an emphatic enough tie between positive school climate, school safety and school violence, widely conceived. Community members, including parents/guardians of students expect above all else that children be “safe” while at school. Everything pales in comparison. School safety is usually thought of primarily in terms of physical concerns. However, children’s perspectives, as well as parents/guardians who live vicariously through their children’s pain, know how important is emotional and intellectual safety. Violent schools are those that are not safe, and the continuum of violence begins with the seemingly innocent instances of mean-spirited acts (teasing, name-calling, exclusion, laughing at, making fun of, etc.). A positive school climate is one in which even inevitable acts of meanness, much less “bullying” are not accepted or tolerated. In ordinary schooling language and practice, those who do not yet understand the contents and importance of “school climate” are similarly ignorant about the overlapping and inextricably linked concepts of climate, safety and violence. For those who will be using the school climate standards as neophytes, it will help immeasurably to make the links among these related concepts explicit so that schooling practice will improve.

Another “missing” aspect emanating from the standards and could mean the difference between adoption and implementation or not, is making the direct tie between the standards and supporting academic achievement. In the current political, and economic national climate, schooling must be about academic achievement, whether or not this is how it ought to be. And, another national priority is known as RTI (Response to Intervention). If the standards could be (eventually) aligned with RTI, there would be more likelihood that states, districts and individual schools would embrace adoption and implementation.

## 3. What do you most dislike and not agree with about these standards?



For me in the daily work that I do to assist schools in improving their school climate, I have found that doing so rests solidly upon having a very clear sense of exactly what it is that must be “improved.” Although there is not consensus about any definitional distinctions between school culture and school climate, there certainly are concrete benefits of doing so in practice. Consequently, the one aspect of the school climate standards that I most dislike/not agree with have to do with the lack of distinguishing school culture and climate. My strongest recommendation for future iterations/modifications in the standards would be to make the following distinction, which will help school personnel know upon what they must focus their improvement efforts.

Culture and climate are often taken to be the same concept and in the National School Climate Standards as currently articulated explicitly combine them. Again, I would argue that they are not synonymous and, importantly, should be distinguished so that improvement in this wide arena can be achieved.

## School Culture

The culture of a school can be defined in two related, albeit distinct ways: as descriptive goals or as positive goals. In both cases, the “culture” of a school is about the wide standards and norms that embrace what the school stands for. So, in the first meaning, a school culture is what is *descriptive* of the school. In other words, when a school community member (student, parent/guardian, faculty/staff member) *describes* what is distinctive of the school, what the school values or stands for in practice, how others might see it or what is characteristic, this would be to understand the school culture *as it is*. For example, it was widely reported in the days after the Columbine High School shooting tragedy, the school supported a “jock” culture, which meant, “sports ruled!” In the words of teachers at Columbine immediately after the rampage, this was confirmed with the additional description of the school as hosting a “culture of homophobia.” This is definitely a *description* and few, if any, would argue that this is what the culture of this or any school *ought* to be. This leads to the second way in which school culture can be articulated.

In the second meaning of the term ‘school culture’, description is not relevant. Instead, the mission or vision of the school is what matters. School culture is not about what the school *is*, but rather *what the school is striving to become*. In twenty-first century [public] schools, in virtually every school district and school, there is an articulated school mission: a lofty set of goals toward which the district and school is aspiring. In this second meaning of culture, what the school *ought* to be is central (the wider and lofty norms, standards, expectations and values). The mission/vision should set the tone for what the school or district hopes *will be* the description and should be working toward becoming reality for each and every school community member.

Most, if not all, schools experience a gap (and often a substantial one) between the *descriptive* sense of school culture and the second sense of school culture as *goal*. The vehicle that is used to close the gap between these two meanings of culture (working toward arriving at the second or *mission* sense) is school *climate*.

## School Climate

Simply defined, climate boils down to the nature of the interrelationships among the people in the school community physically, emotionally and intellectually; ***how the people within the school community treat one another*** (adult to adult interactions, adult and student interactions and student to student interactions) through their actions, verbal and non-verbal exchanges, tone of voice and the use or abuse of inherent power advantages (often known as “bullying”). And, far too often, “[s]chool climate is ‘much like the air we breathe’ – it tends to go unnoticed until something is seriously wrong.” (Jerome Freiberg, 1998) Climate is the “engine” that functions to close the school culture gap. When school community members treat one another appropriately and with dignity/respect, it is possible to have the description of the school culture actually be synonymous with the stated school mission (vision).

## 4. How could standards like these be used most helpfully to support student learning, positive youth development and the promotion of skills, knowledge and dispositions that support an effective and engaged citizenry?

In two important, distinct, but related ways. First, having “adopted” national school climate standards requires schools to give targeted attention to this oft ignored arena. Giving such attention is on its own a huge step forward from where things currently stand. Second, concrete strategies that can be implemented in classrooms and the wider school environment must be developed. By their very nature, the five standards are both broad and vague. Because this is such uncharted territory for the majority of schools and educators, meaningful implementation will be greatly enhanced when teachers and other school faculty/staff members know “what to do.” For example, pairing every individual student with an adult “mentor” in school is one such concrete strategy. There are hundreds of these strategies, but unless some high leverage ones are part of the articulated standards (fleshing out the indicators and sub-indicators), true implementation may remain ephemeral.

**5. What are the most important recommendations you would make to teacher educators/school leaders/teachers/others who seek to implement the standards?**

My strongest recommendation that will help schools improve their school climate according to the five standards is not worrying about diving in and “doing it all” initially, but begin instead by engaging in school climate assessment to find out “where you are.” Existing school and district improvement plans are created based upon data that guides those same improvement plans. Most of these plans are focused primarily on academic goals because that is the kind of data that is collected. School and district goals are based on assessed deficiencies that are gleaned from the data that brings this to light. School climate improvement ought to be based on nothing less. For example, schools/districts do not arbitrarily determine that short or long term focus will be placed on improving reading abilities of students if all/most students are proficient in reading. Diving head first into a swimming pool where the depth is not known is foolish. This is a fitting analogy for improving academic outcomes as well as school climate. The five school climate standards now outline the content of what needs to be assessed. Collecting the data is the first critical stage in the improvement process. This step above all else cannot be underestimated. Improving school climate is very much a “process,” and once the data is gathered, then realistic goals can and should be set coupled with concrete and doable strategies that will in fact be implemented. Regular formative assessments to find out progress should be a part of this process (as happens in academic areas) and goals and strategies altered as appropriate.

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# National School Climate Standards:

## New Tools for Building Respectful Schools

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*The overarching vision that has driven school reform for the past decade under NCLB has been a hyper-focus on school accountability and student academic performance, as measured by standardized testing. This narrow view of schooling, learning, and student success has, in many cases, proven to be detrimental for schools, teachers, and students (Darling-Hammond, 1991). It is time that we broaden our vision for public education.*

Far too many of our schools have become joyless assembly-lines for test preparation. Students across the country tell us the same things; that they are bored, stressed, or disengaged from what they encounter as ‘school’. Teachers tell us they are forced to follow ‘canned’ curricula for which they have little ownership and even less passion. In many schools, test scores which once rose as a result of all this extra attention, now seem to have plateaued. As one superintendent recently observed, “I have done everything they told me to do to get our test scores up, and to some degree we have succeeded, but we never really seem to break through. I have become convinced that until we address our school climate issues, we will never get our students where we want them to be.”

We need National School Climate Standards to help American schools refocus and regain a balanced view of what is important in our schools. The most positive effect of introducing a set of National School Climate Standards, in our view, would be to reaffirm the common-sense idea that the “context” for learning matters. We agree with H. Jerome Freiburg who said that “*school climate is much like the air we breathe—it tends to go unnoticed until something is seriously wrong.*” (Freiburg, 1999). The time for noticing is now.

Of course academic learning is important, but our research, and the research of many others, has shown a powerful connection between school climate and positive academic results (Preble & Newman, 2006; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Every student we talk with tells us that when they are being bullied or when they are afraid at school, they cannot focus on learning. It is the classic “fight or flight” response. In the new parlance of brain-based learning, this “downshifting” of the brain makes thinking impossible when the environment for learning is unsafe, un-nourishing, or uninviting to you as a person. If all schools actively worked to address issues of school climate, schools would become more respectful, more personal, more engaging, and more effective places for learning.

As we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we need stop and reflect on what really matters in our schools, what we want to achieve for our children and what it means to have a ‘rigorous and successful’ school. Our deepest educational thinkers, Michael Fullan, Seymour Sarason and John Goodlad, all allude to the futility of top down school reform. We have known for eons that you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink. Change does not happen from the outside; change is not something that can be imposed on people. After decades of failed and exceedingly frustrating and time consuming school reform initiatives, we should never underestimate the ability of schools to resist even the most well-intended change! In human institutions such as schools, lasting and meaningful change must come from within the school and community, employing the single most powerful resource schools have—the energy, ideas, expertise, and good will of the individuals within in the school community.

These National School Climate Standards are promising in our view because they offer a systemic, context centered approach to school improvement. But we must use our knowledge of the change process in schools to inform the way we think about and utilize the national standards to assure their successful implementation. We believe these National School Climate Standards should serve as guideposts for a systematic collaborative change process in our schools. The process of reflecting on each standard, collecting various types of data to assess where the school currently stands in respect to each standard, and developing a local school climate improvement plan to address the school's strengths and needs can be an exciting, self sustaining, community-wide experience. The act of doing this would, in and of itself, meet Standard #1 relating to School Leadership and Vision.

There are many effective "action research" models for improving schools and school climate, reducing bullying, and improving school safety (Cohen, 2009, Preble, 2009, Olweus, 1993, 1999, 2001). These can serve as roadmaps for any School Climate Improvement Team. Over a decade of experience doing this work in schools has convinced us that bringing together a diverse, broadly representative School Climate Improvement Team made up of school leaders, parents, community members, and teachers can be effective. But the process changes dramatically when a school chooses to also include the 'true experts' on school climate---a diverse, representative team of students. Student leaders we have worked with have proven to be an effective force, and powerful allies for assessing and improving school climate (Cash, 2008).

Developing a plan for improving school climate is about much more than finding ways to curb unruly or disrespectful student behavior or reduce bullying and harassment. Truly respectful schools focus proactively on building strong personal and supportive academic relations among teachers and students. Respectful schools are committed to engaging students actively in learning, valuing the whole child through more personalized education, and empowering students to be active participants in shaping their learning environment and their community.

Standard #2 calls for the school to develop the 'whole child' (socially, emotionally, ethically, and academically) and to "reengage" those students who have become disengaged in their education. Who better than parents, teachers, and groups of both engaged and disengaged students to review, critique and offer suggestions for new policies and systems of care and support to address these issues?

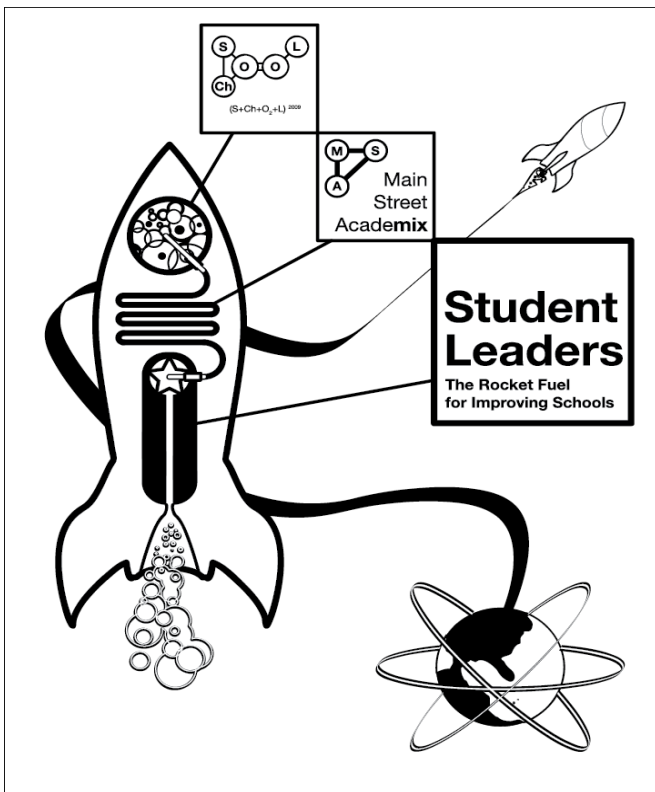
Standard #3 provides the essential link between respectful, effective teaching practices and positive school climate. As teacher educators, we were pleased to see this standard included in the National Standards. Too often school climate has been viewed narrowly as school violence prevention, anti-bullying, or behavioral support for improving student discipline. While these issues are very important, we believe that positive school climate is about much more than stamping out or redirecting "disrespectful" behavior and attitudes. It must also include the things teachers do every day to make learning more orderly, engaging, personal, and inspiring to their students.

After over a decade of school climate research and assistance to schools, we know that engaging, personalized, and empowering teaching practices and learning opportunities can be the rocket fuel for improving school climate. Respectful, engaging teachers are those who know their students' names, backgrounds, interests, strengths, and needs. They are teachers who are flexible, adaptive, and willing to provide students with meaningful project options and choices. They make a point of connecting their subjects to the real world. Respectful, inspired teachers have always been the most powerful force for offering meaningful school experiences to students and building successful schools. Standard #3 allows schools to explore

the connection between school climate and effective, respectful pedagogy.

Standard #4 asks schools to consider how safe, supportive and welcoming their school environment is for every student, parent, teacher, and community member. We helped facilitate a review of early drafts of these standards with over forty “equity and diversity” experts from throughout New England. This group recommended that “each community should be encouraged to approach the implementation of these standards as an opportunity to co-create them, using strategies that encourage the community to ‘live’ or ‘symbolize’ their meaning.” The process of reviewing, assessing, planning for improvement, and re-designing our schools to fully meet these climate standards should itself become an opportunity to live the spirit of Standard #4. When school leaders and community representatives assemble their School Climate Improvement Team with diverse representation, they have an unparalleled opportunity to create an inclusive and welcoming community within which this important work will be done.

The work we do to help schools improve school climate centers on student leadership and empowerment. Our school climate improvement philosophy and a process we call SafeMeasures is based on the idea of empowering diverse teams of students to serve as local “experts” on the climate of respect, safety, engagement, and opportunities for success for all students within their school. Students offer a ‘reality check’ for schools—students are remarkably effective at casting light on “the status quo,” something that needs to happen in many of our schools today if we are to successfully move schools forward.



This was the logo for our 2009 Teen Leadership Summit tee-shirt



After many years of learning about school climate from students, we also know that many elements of school climate happen *when grown-ups aren't around*. This begs the question, how can adults fully understand school climate issues and “fix” school climate when much of what constitutes school climate is out of their sight and therefore their reach? This fact makes Standard 5, which addresses civic engagement and social justice issues an excellent opportunity for engaging students as leadership partners.

The conversations we had with equity experts over an initial draft of these standards made it clear that *social justice* must be at the core of a respectful, effective school.

The equity and diversity review team recommended that the best way to ensure that the needs of all members of the school community are heard and addressed is to invite members of all racial, ethnic, social and academic groups to the table to define and explore school climate issues.

We feel it is also important to invite students or groups who have previously been excluded or marginalized within schools to be involved in the process. When those who may have traditionally been excluded have a seat at the table, they see that their needs may finally be understood and efforts to address their concerns undertaken. The invitation for these individuals to participate can be an opportunity for them to regain their hope, their spirit, and their voices (Wessler & Preble, 2003). We have found that becoming an active participant in the process of regaining one's dignity and self-respect can be a transformative experience and can change students' lives (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003).

Obviously, we can't expect Caucasian students working alone to adequately understand or address the unique challenges faced by students of color in schools. Similarly, we can't ask academically talented and engaged students to come up with viable and effective solutions to address barriers to engagement and learning faced by disengaged students. The act of inviting the full range of students to serve as partners in school reform represents the essence of Standard #5. When students who have never before been invited to serve as experts and leaders for school improvement are empowered to work with teachers and administrators to re-design their schools—schools which may have been failing them and students like them for decades—this is an act of empowerment and social justice.

Seymour Sarason's book, *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (1993), concluded that successful efforts to reform our schools have all had something in common; they involved some kind of shift in “power relations.” Empowering students to join with adults from diverse communities to promote social justice in their schools is both the right thing to do and an effective use of ‘roles’ and power relations as school reform strategies.

We should not fool ourselves, however, into believing that the act of establishing and disseminating National School Climate Standards is enough in and of itself. There needs to be support for schools leaders, teachers, and students to help make these standards come alive. Our primary goal must be the effective **implementation** of policies, systems of care and support, pedagogies, technologies, and human connections that will enable these standards to come to life in each school.

We hope that national educational leaders will create a National Center for School Climate Support, along with regional centers, to help ensure effective implementation of these standards. They must offer schools effective technical assistance, conduct research on best practices, and disseminate effective strategies for improving school climate in all types of



communities and schools.

Another key need is the creation of a wide range of valid and reliable School Climate assessment tools that schools can use to measure the nature of school climate within their schools. These tools should be aligned with the National Standards and allow for comparisons with other schools, but we believe they should also be multifaceted, flexible instruments that each school and community could “customize” to fit their unique interpretation of the national standards. This would promote ownership, dialogue, and empowerment of local schools and districts.

As teacher educators, we know that it is also critical that teacher education programs begin immediately to explore the kinds of teacher training and degree programs that will be required to allow new teachers, and teachers returning for graduate degrees and certificates, to develop the educational philosophies, classroom management skills, and pedagogical approaches required to create safe, respectful, engaging, and personalized learning experiences for each of one’s students.

Finally, School Climate improvement must not be viewed as an “add-on” or another layer in the already overloaded palate of school reform initiatives. The standards clearly show how school climate is embedded in all that a school does day-in and day-out to achieve student learning and growth. These standards should serve as the foundation for achieving our ideals for schools—acknowledging the centrality of positive school climate in assuring every child has the knowledge, skills, and personal qualities to grow into contributing community members as adults. These National School Climate Standards represent a set of beliefs about what our schools should be and the promise that our schools must fulfill for all of our students, everyday, in everything we do. We believe that these standards can serve as essential tools for broadening the mission of every school in the nation and for informing the dialogue about what it means to be a truly respectful and effective school.

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**Rick Gordon** is a consultant for Main Street Academix and the Director of Long Range Planning for Compass School. He also conducts professional development with higher education faculty in New York and New England, and teaches School Leadership courses at Antioch New England Graduate School and New England College. Rick has a PhD. in Social and Multicultural Foundations of Education from the University of Colorado-Boulder. He was Founding Director of Compass School, a grade 7-12 school that has scored highest on a national survey on Respect, Safety, and School Climate. He was Co-Director of The Critical Skills-Education by Design Program at Antioch New England Graduate School and has worked extensively with schools and higher education on Service Learning (including editing the well received *Problem Based Service Learning Field guide: Making a Difference in Higher Education*). Rick has long experience in Experiential Education with Outward Bound and Interlocken, and has traveled extensively around the globe leading programs for youth.

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# Feedback on National School Climate Standards

John Eller

I had the opportunity to review the final draft of the National School Climate Standards that were developed for schools, policy makers, and others interested in making schools good places for learning by all who interact there.

The standards are organized into five general areas with each area sub-divided into indicators and sub-indicators. This organizational scheme seems to work well and in general, the standards are clear and easy to understand. From a school or district perspective, I think the standards could be easily understood by school leaders and staff members and the indicators help provide specific details and almost action steps to help in their implementation.

Since many schools are under pressure to improve student achievement under NCLB, each standard should have some connection to improving student learning. There is plenty of research to back up the assertion that a positive, supportive climate helps increase the chances that students will learn more effectively. This aspect could be woven into the sub-indicators of each of the standards. Having this information in the standards would help ground them and provide some school leaders with the reasoning/rationale they need to move this initiative forward.

Another attribute that might be helpful is to provide more reference to some of the specific outcomes that will be measured in the sub-indicators that call for some kind of assessment. I speak to this in standard 5 but in reflection this aspect could be built into either the sub-indicators or some other type of follow-up document.

Since a good school climate can lead to a good school culture, there should be some reference to this aspect in the document. The culture of a school is important because it communicates the importance and permanence of a set of behaviors or expectations. In improving a school climate we want to make sure it becomes an integral part of the permanent structure or culture of the school. Mentioning this at various points in the document would help readers see the long-term aspect of school climate.

In this section, I will go through the individual standards and assess my perceptions of their strengths and challenges.

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

This standard is clear and crucial to the success of building effective school climates. It focuses on the vision needed in order to dedicate the resources of the school to this important goal. The sub-indicators are also very clear and communicate the importance of people from all parts of the school community working together to transform the school climate.

An import aspect of this standard is the overt effort focused on assessing the school climate. The sub-indicators here really emphasize the use of multiple data sources in assessing the impact and effectiveness of the climate efforts. They also advocate using these assessments to make adjustments in the school climate if needed.

The indicators and sub-indicators are clear and easy to understand. As I said earlier, it would be easy for someone reading these to use them as a roadmap for a school transformation effort.

The only thing I see that is missing is the inclusion of faculty as recipients of positive school climate. In order for faculty to be able to deliver a positive school climate they need to experience it themselves.

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

This standard is also very sound and well-grounded. It does a good job in tying together both academic and social-emotional aspects of climate development. Many people see climate efforts as fluff or “touchy-feely” efforts when in fact we know that without a good climate, students cannot learn academic skills effectively.

As with the earlier standards, the sub-indicators here are clear and easy to follow. In the middle set of sub-indicators, they focus on policy development. This is important because without policy many efforts can die in the vine.

*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 reengage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.*

The standards and the indicators are very clear. They seem to me to be proactive and capacity-building in nature. There are also references to research in some of the sub-indicators. All of these aspects help increase the credibility of the standards and the sub-indicators. I found this area to be the most meaningful for me since I believe in the importance of practice and follow-up. In sub-indicator 3.3 there is evidence of the importance of follow-up when it talks about infrastructure. As I mentioned earlier, the sub-indicators listed here are clear and action-oriented.

The one aspect I see missing is the leadership's responsibility to implement these same ideas with the staff members. If a school wants to improve its climate it needs to make sure all stakeholders are able to experience a positive climate as well. When the staff experiences it they are better able to provide it for their students.

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

The list of sub-indicators for this standard is considerably smaller than the other standards. This area seems to be focused on making the positive school climate a part of the culture of the school. I also noticed that the responsibility of the leadership to model and implement positive school climate is missing from this standard. This is an essential part of the institutionalization of the positive climate into the school culture. There should be more sub-indicators that talk about the importance of:

- \*Modeling of effective climate behaviors by the adults in the school
- \*The importance of integrating these aspects into the school culture
- \* The structures that are in place to resolve conflict
- \*The importance of holding overt celebrations related to the school's progress in improving school climate
- \* The ability of the students to begin to teach some of the attributes of the school's climate and culture to other students, adults, parents, and other community members.

*5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.*

This standard is different than the others because it makes a commitment to specific aspects of the climate and culture. It might benefit from some specific outcomes such as:

- Evidence that students are utilizing conflict resolution strategies to manage the climate
- Evidence of the impact of students providing public service
- Evidence of the impact of implementing social justice practices in the school

All in all I think the standards and the sub-indicators of the standards are well-written and very clear and specific. You seem to have addressed the basic areas needed for a school or school district to be successful in their quest to positively impact the climate for the students. The major piece you should consider adding is indicators for the adults (teachers, administrators, support staff) so they can both experience and learn from these standards. In the long run it would directly benefit the students. If the adults are not in a positive climate it is almost impossible for them to provide such an environment for the students.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide some brief feedback about these important standards.

John Eller

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## Commentary on the National School Climate Standards: Using an Equity Lens to Reconsider the Standards

By Randy Ross and Elizabeth A'Vant

(Incorporating suggestions from Elizabeth Brach, Phyllis Hardy, and Susan Reddit)

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive....

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase  
bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
like a shadow or a friend.

Excerpt from “Kindness,” in *Words Under the Words*,  
by Naomi Shihab Nye, 1994

The National School Climate Standards ultimately remind us of our deepest yearnings for who we want our children – not only our personal children – to become as human beings. They remind us who we want to be as adults living and working in and for schools. Yes, we want our children to gain knowledge, to learn with their minds, hands, mouths, ears, and limbs. Yet we also want them to be kind human beings, capable of deep empathy for others, for those who are like them and for others who may appear different. The Standards give this yearning a pragmatic, rather than poetic, voice.

We need the National School Climate Standards because this yearning has been so buried within our narrowly focused, achievement-oriented educational system. We have in recent years learned, based on significant research, that improving school climate also improves achievement. Others have argued that critical point, so here we state our view that nurturing a school climate, of kindness, empathy, and equity is, in and of itself, a worthy goal.

The Standards give pragmatic voice to this yearning by recognizing that collaborative, inclusive teams within the whole school community are central to school climate improvement efforts. To develop and impose plans from the outside or from district leadership is antithetical to improving school climate. Positive language – such as welcoming, supported, safety and social justice – is prominent throughout the Standards. Their recognition that teaching and learning are integral to school climate may be a revelation to those who would marginalize these concerns as whole school therapy.

On September 17, 2009, 30 equity advocates from around New England met in Providence, RI for a full day meeting to review Draft #7 of the Standards. The New England Equity Assistance Center of The Education Alliance at Brown University sponsored the day, which New England College co-sponsored. Bill Preble, from New England College, and Rick Gordon have mentioned this equity review in their Commentary, “National School Climate Standards: New Tools for Building Respectful Schools.” The Equity Review Team members are listed in Appendix A: “How These Standards Were Developed.”

The day of dialogue and deliberation was structured around two approaches. In the morning, groups met to discuss each of the five standards. In the afternoon, “affinity” groups met to discuss the Standards from the perspective of five specific equity concerns: race/ethnicity, English language learners, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. In both sessions, a “carousel” format was used. After an in-depth discussion with detailed notes written on chart paper, each group commented on every other groups’ notes, adding their own emphasis to particular points. To ensure that discussion notes were complete, at the end of the day Table Hosts engaged in a final de-briefing. The team from New England College then compiled the group discussion notes, later sent to all participants for comment.



## Equity Review Team Recommendations

Although the September 17th meeting's focus was to explore equity concerns, comments ranged from criticism of the language as too vague to questioning the order of the Standards. The need for supporting materials to aid in implementation was also raised, a concern since addressed through Jonathan Cohen's and Terry Pickeral's detailed, practical guide, *The School Climate Implementation Road Map* (November, 2009).

In comparing Draft #7 with the final version of the National School Climate Standards, it is apparent that many of the Equity Review Team's concerns were addressed. For example, the final Standards version:

- Consistently uses the more inclusive term "school community" in each Standard, replacing vague terms, such as "people," or limiting terms, such as "students and staff."
- Rearranges the order of the Standards into a more logical flow, tied to an implementation process.
- Mentions disaggregating data (Standard #1) so that perceptions and experiences of school climate can be seen more clearly through an equity lens.
- Defines many terms, included as a Glossary in Appendix C

Despite the inclusion of these and other Equity Review Team recommendations in the final version, some important issues remain unaddressed. Five of these concerns are explained below.

### One: Relevance of Civil Rights Laws to School Climate

Standard #5, which specifically focuses on social justice, remained essentially unchanged despite a strong call, especially from afternoon discussions, for specific groups to be named. The Equity Review Team recognized the tension between naming specific groups and the possibility of offending groups that might not be named. At the same time, there was strong concern about the on-going practice in educational dialogue of maintaining invisibility through generic language, thus continuing to marginalize groups whose needs may be unique.

Many members of the Equity Review Team expressed strong concern about the lack of awareness of how civil rights laws create an important context for viewing school climate through an equity lens. Harassment, a form of bullying with civil right implications, is a key aspect of the safety embedded in Standard #4. According to the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights:

Harassment does not have to include intent to harm, be directed at a specific target, or involve repeated incidents. Harassment creates a hostile environment when the conduct is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent so as to interfere with or limit a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by a school. When such harassment is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, it violates the civil rights laws that OCR enforces (US Department of Education, 2010).

As we all too tragically know, one group of students for whom safety has become literally a matter of life and death include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. At the time the Standards were released in 2010, LGBT students were protected under some, but not all, state laws. Since that time, however, both the US Justice Department and the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights have clarified that LGBT students are protected under the language of Title IX, which covers sex discrimination, including sexual harassment (US Department of Education, 2010).

### Two: Culturally Responsive School Climate

A culturally responsive school climate builds on student's culture, language, and life experience; recognizes and gives respect to the funds of knowledge in all families, and demonstrates that educators understand how deeper layers of culture influence teaching and learning. (Garcia & Ortiz, 2008; emphasis added)

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Learners make up a growing proportion of students in our nation's schools. In some states they are already the majority of students or soon will be. The need to engage these students through

culturally responsive teaching practices is hinted at, but easily missed in the vague language of Standard #5.

While Standard #3 focuses on practices to enhance engagement in the teaching/learning process, it does not even hint at the strong connection between engagement and culturally responsive practices (Bazron, Osher & Fleischman, 2005). This is hardly a fringe idea. Extensive scholarship, numerous journals, and highly regarded researchers have explored these issues for decades. The National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) has held annual conferences for two decades and the New England Conference on Multicultural Education (NECME) will hold its 16th annual conference in Fall 2011.

In Spring 2011, the Connecticut State Board of Education will pass a “Position Statement on Culturally Responsive Education.” The Statement emphasizes both culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. It also describes the importance for all students, not just CLD students, to experience a culturally responsive education.

This body of knowledge, known as culturally responsive education, will also better prepare all students to enter a diverse workforce and compete for jobs with their counterparts in a global economy. Opportunities are needed to examine personal biases, gain understanding of the complex life issues faced by others, and to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to work with and live alongside others from different cultural backgrounds (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2011).

A frequently used phrase in the Standards is “social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement.” We suggest that this list should be edited to read “culturally responsive social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement.”

### **Three: Language of Deficits or Language of Strengths?**

Several Standards emphasize the importance of addressing “barriers to learning and teaching” and the need to “reengage those who have become disengaged.” The Glossary (Appendix C) describes barriers to learning as “external and internal factors that interfere with academic and social success at school. They stem from a variety of widely recognized societal, neighborhood, familial, school, and personal conditions.”

The concept of “barriers” is an advance over the blame game that labels some students (often poor and/or of color) as lazy or their parents as “not caring about education,” etc. The concept recognizes that there is a complex, multi-causality to the risk factors that make success more difficult to achieve for some students than for others. Mental health concerns have received sparse attention in schools and this understanding of internal barriers to learning brings such concerns to the forefront.

However, we see serious cultural bias in the wording of the definition, which implies a deficit, rather than a strength, perspective. For example, CLD students who speak a language other than English generally are viewed as having a deficit, not a strength to nurture and build upon. Is the barrier perhaps more in the school than in the child? Schools could provide a dual language program and even encourage students whose first language is English to enroll along with students whose first language is Spanish. Why is knowing Spanish, Khmer, or Russian an interfering factor, rather than a strength?

The deficit perspective also is one factor that increases disproportionality where CLD learners are more frequently placed in special education. This situation causes major fiscal problems and, equally important, leads to serious “barriers to learning” for many CLD students.

The solution to “barriers” is seen as providing “learning supports.” Certainly, learning supports, such as appropriate support for students with real special education needs and those whose first language is other than English, are critically necessary. However, how culturally responsive are those learning supports? Do they use existing strengths students and families have?

Refugee, immigrant, and African American families have a rich history of surviving challenges that many others have

never faced. Beyond survival, many of these families have led action movements and organized to engender change for social justice (a key focus of Standard #5). Schools can inspire resilience among students of any color or family history who faced challenges of poverty and discrimination by sharing stories of both survival and activism.

Do teachers and administrators recognize that awareness of cultural difference and experiences of discrimination are important aspects of effectively designed learning supports? Sadly, most do not, yet these understandings are central to improving school climate for all students.

#### **Four: Families in the School Community**

Family engagement is vital to student success. Emphasis on family involvement and the role that families play in developing and sustaining a safe, caring, respectful, and positive school climate needs to be emphasized and underscored in the Standards. Family engagement is critical in developing positive school culture especially in less advantaged urban schools.

Student success is often closely related to families' cultural capital, "the skills to negotiate the education system and knowledge of the norms of behavior that govern schools" (Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005). Enhancing this cultural capital is a way of valuing the educational involvement of families, in whatever ways they are able to engage. It is also central to counter-acting the deficit perspective that limits educators' appreciation of CLD students (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Here is where we often see a "culture clash" between school personnel and students. A significant cultural gap exists between students and the predominantly white, middle class, female education force, most of whom are unfamiliar with the cultural norms of CLD students attending urban schools. Lack of cultural insight negatively impacts interpersonal relations between school personnel and students' families.

Positive, respectful interpersonal relationships based on trust are extremely important in serving CLD students and their families. As we identify and attempt to meet the needs of the "whole child," effective family and community engagement is imperative and should be emphasized within the Standards.

#### **Five: Culturally Diverse Norms**

The Standards side step issues of cultural difference in norms about educational and behavioral expectations. Misinterpretation of student behavior and ineffective practices to manage off-task and/or non-compliant behavior may also result from a cultural disconnect, or even from implicit stereotypes. To assist in overcoming this reality, schools must actively involve families in the school community so that differing perceptions of behavior and school's disciplinary responses can be openly discussed. Professional development is essential to help staff reflect on their cultural perspective and unconscious stereotypes about CLD students and their families

Disproportionality in discipline is a serious issue and one of the factors underlying the school-to-prison pipeline. Such disciplinary practices can be revealed through careful data collection, but resolving them requires developing trusting relationships among students, parents, and school personnel. Standard #5 addresses social justice, and mentions the need to align discipline procedures with learning and respect. However, there is far too often a profound disconnect between social justice and culturally unresponsive, even discriminatory, discipline practices.

#### **Final Thoughts**

While the National School Climate Standards, in our view, would be greatly strengthened by a more careful inclusion of equity concerns, overall they are a very important first step toward supporting student learning, positive youth development, and promoting skills, knowledge, and dispositions that support an effective, engaged citizenry. Supplemented by the Road Map and other materials from the National School Climate Council, states and districts will need to tackle the difficult, daily work of inclusively engaging all members of the school community in the process of envisioning, setting policies, creating effective professional learning communities, evaluating and re-evaluating school

climate and improvement efforts. Benchmarks that include culturally responsive indicators need to be included in this continuous re-evaluation cycle.

These goals call for leaders to move outside their comfort zones of talking and meeting with those who are like them and speak the same language (literally and figuratively). School climate cannot be improved without conscious effort to step outside of our comfort zones to invite to the table, listen to, and resolve differences with those who have been unheard or even invisible.

While the principles of school climate improvement can be taught through presentations, readings, and discussions, deeper understanding of the practices, especially with an equity lens, will be enhanced through embedded professional development, technical assistance, and on-going feedback. This calls for cadres of skilled school climate improvement professionals with deep understanding of culturally responsive practices to assist in embedded professional development and supervision of pre-service teachers. Programs such as those at the ten Equity Assistance Centers that provide services at no cost to districts and states can serve as one source.

We began this Commentary with a commentary on kindness from Arab American poet, Naomi Shihab Nye. In the spirit of her words, we remind ourselves and any who may feel challenged by our critique, to conduct with kindness and civility a much needed dialogue on how to incorporate an equity-centered, culturally responsive approach in our school climate improvement efforts.

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## Coda: Reflections and next steps

In theory, research shapes policy. And policy, in turn, dictates school improvement practice. The reality demonstrates that this relationship is often more complicated and rarely so logical (Hess, 2008). In fact, this is just the challenge that the National School Climate Council highlights: there is a terrible gap between school climate policy on the one hand and school climate policy, teacher education, and practice on the other hand (National School Climate Council, 2007). This gap – inadvertently – undermines students’ abilities to learn, solve problems nonviolently, actively engage in their learning and develop in productive, civically-focused, and socially/emotionally healthy ways (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

The National School Climate Standards (2009) present a vision and framework for safe, supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and (as much as possible) joyful schools. Ever conscious of the necessity of having our methods model the practices we proscribe, we have been quite careful of ensuring that these School Climate standards exist in a continuum of various efforts. They complement national standards for Content, Leadership, and Professional Development and the Parent Teacher Association’s National Standards for Family School Partnerships. It is increasingly clear that any and all school reform cannot take place in isolation from a number of contributing factors (Proefriedt, 2010). Thus, the National School Climate Standards will effectively serve as both conduit and complement for ongoing academic, teacher-training, student engagement and community involvement standards as well.

We are grateful to contributors – local, district, state and national educational leaders - who have shared their insights, criticisms and suggestions about the Standards. Both individually and collectively, all have assisted in advancing the ongoing dialogues that are vital to sustaining continuous improvement in the area of school climate. We would like to reflectively summarize their comments and suggest a series of next steps.

All of the contributors believe that we need school climate standards. In a variety of overlapping ways, they underscore that when we measure school climate, we are recognizing essential social, emotional, ethical and civic as well as intellectual aspects of learning. In an equally important way, the commentaries underscore that when we recognize student, parent/guardian and school personnel ‘voice’ in the school climate assessment process, we are potentially mobilizing the whole school community to learn, set goals and work together in a democratically informed manner. From a variety of perspectives – the school building, the district, the state and the nation – their remarks deepen our understanding about how these standards will set helpful benchmarks for learning and for our school improvement efforts.

Several commentators underscored how the Standards support adult social, emotional and civic learning and the fundamental importance of educators being helpful “living examples”. Devine, in particular, highlights the concept of teachers re-visiting the concept of “serving as role models”. Although this is far from an innovative idea, Devine’s and the National Association of School Psychologists’ commentaries underscore that it is an important example of an essential dimension of school life that is not measured and hence, often undervalued. Again, this is a strong example of how the School Climate Standards work in tandem and reflect current trends in educational policy, practice and reform. The centrality of the role of the teacher in creating measurable, accountable, sustainable and replicable change is well documented (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). It is incumbent on us, as we prepare future iterations of our work, to highlight consistently the role of both school administrators and teachers in laying the firm foundation for school climate improvement. If, as Pianta asserts, “Teachers who report the highest level of burnout...reported the lowest levels of implementation, dosage and quality (of social/emotional and school climate tools)”, we are charged to ensure that “the messengers” avail of the “message” too.

There are also a number of concerns and/or criticisms that our commentators make. We list below the primary ones.

1. There is a need to emphasize importance of technology (Carter) in the implementation of School Climate Standards. The last few years have seen an exponential growth in the devastating results of technology usage on school climate. Cyberbullying and its resultant effects on a students’ sense of safety in schools has flourished and “...evidence suggests that victimization is associated with serious psychosocial, affective, and academic problems” (Tokunaga, 2010). This being the case, we need to explore methods of positively using technology to combat the destructive and negative overtones of its improper application.



2. It is essential to emphasize health and wellness more explicitly (Carter). Interestingly and importantly, this has also been a suggestion that the U.S. Department of Education has made about school climate surveys: they currently do not evaluate wellness and this would be an important addition. One of the essential and inherent elements of the School Climate Standards is to create a learning environment where a student feels that s/he “matters”. A sense of belonging and a sense of being valued are critical building blocks to establishing a healthy environment where the wellness of each member is sought. Recent research regarding perceptions of interpersonal mattering to others illustrates that it is related to higher self-esteem and social support, lower depression and academic stress, and greater psychosocial well-being and wellness (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). These findings help to promote the notion that wellness and mental health need to be important measurements in the use of school climate surveys. There are now a growing body of reliable and significant studies on the reliability and validity of measurements to analyze a students’ sense of belonging and wellness in school and its effect on learning (Waters & Cross, 2010). The School Climate Standards need to reflect this as an essential element in creating effective and comprehensive school improvement.

There is another reason to even more forcefully emphasize health and wellness as meaningful evaluative tools in a fully developed school climate initiative. This derives from the growing data demonstrating the superior effectiveness of prevention and intervention as opposed to punishment and castigation. Just as it is extremely cost ineffective to ensure school climate wellness and safety through metal detectors and law enforcement presence in schools, it is equally counterproductive to address issues of wellness and safety from a deficit rather than an asset base. When school security is our only means by which we attempt to achieve school safety, disastrous consequence to a students’ sense of wellness occur. The “topsy-turvy” nature of this approach led one study to assert that “...the funds we spend on school security are substantially more than what is spent on school nurses/health practitioners, nearly double the expenditures for parent and community support, and over three times as much as the amount spent on school psychologists” (Youth United For Change & Advancement Law Project, 2011).

3. Dynamic implementation of National School Climate Standards is integral to advancing comprehensive school climate improvement. Santiago & Ferrara’s commentary underscores that School Climate standards alone are not enough. Our task is continued hard work that makes a sustained commitment to adult social, emotional and civic learning and student- educator-parent/guardians and ideally community leader partnerships. As well, the standards need to emphasize the importance of recognizing and responding to people’s cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

We cannot rest on past efforts, “canned” or “pre-packaged” approaches, or re-tooled remnants of both character education and values clarification from the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s. The essential nature of schools and the ultimate aim of schooling have vastly changed. Our efforts must keep pace with that change. Our adaptation of standards must reflect a desire to create an environment that nurtures the creation of youth who are able to thrive socially, emotionally, civically and academically in the 21st century. Our leadership in this arena must reflect the ability to “think globally but act locally”. Our model cannot be a “one-size-fits-all”, stagnant tool. Rather, we need to ensure that “we bloom where we are planted”. We need to embrace the richness of cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, gender and racial differences. We must learn to celebrate the plurality of faces and voices. And we must serve as a paragon of collaboration and partnership in creating effective and socially just school reform. It will truly “take a village” (well beyond the school walls) to accomplish this work.

Creative, dynamic and shared leadership that finds its source on the district level is a powerful area to explore in advancing the adoption of school climate standards. The importance of district leadership has been established for a variety of educational reforms, including school, family, and community partnerships (Sanders, 2009). We need to mobilize the various (and already existing) programs on a district level to invite students, parents, community leaders, faith-based communities, law enforcement, businesses and community-based organization to the table.

4. The National Association of School Psychologists commentary underscores that the standards do not fully address the reality of systems change on the micro or macro level. In other words, this is necessarily a long term, challenging process that will need to involve the whole school community and beyond. Many of our contributors underscored the importance of avoiding engaging in this work as an “add-on”. Our aim is not to “make more work”. Our aim is to infuse the work that we already do with richness, vibrancy and efficacy that comes from paying attention to the primacy of school improvement in achieving school success. And this work cannot be done “from time to time” or only by a few.

What we are about is not “window-dressing”. We need to be aware of the need for deep systemic change, more on the level of a “movement” rather than a “change” in practice.. We must be cognizant that our work will, by its very nature, need to model a way of doing things that mirrors and exemplifies those qualities which define effective school improvement. Quite simply, our medium must reflect the best parts of our message.

This focusing of our work through the lens of systems change will inherently underscore the social justice praxis of school climate work. Preble & Gordon’s commentary highlights the invitation that we extend to students for sharing and leading this work as “an act of empowerment and social justice”. Indeed, the School Climate Standards at their very core, embrace an effort to create youth, as Freiberg states, “...made of thoughtful and ethical human beings who recognize the richness of collaboration to make the world community both peaceful and prosperous for all.”

Inevitably (and fortunately) the logical progression of school climate improvement work will be substantive and deep systems-changing work as well. How could it not be? Powerful efforts to address the nature of how we treat each other, how we share power with each other (see Preble’s comments), and how we collaborate equitably could produce nothing less than meaningful systemic change. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring”. Our promotion of effective teaching, collaborative leadership, dynamic learning and comprehensive school improvement will undoubtedly create ripples that affect an ever-widening arena.

In an effort to align the equity lens of our implementation efforts more deeply with the School Climate Standards, the commentary by Randy Ross and Elizabeth A’Vant provides a most necessary call for culturally responsive practices. As stated previously, we must “be the change” we want to see in our schools by adapting methods and practices to promulgate the National School Climate Standards that are celebratory of diversity, asset based, culturally responsive and equitably engaging. This is a very opportune time for all of us to reject the divisive rhetoric prominently used in school reform efforts today and embrace perspectives that choose to view “barriers to learning” as potential “opportunities to create systems” for deeper and more meaningful inclusiveness in our efforts. Repeatedly and consistently we must ponder whether we call on the best of every group to enrich our practices. Are we remaining both culturally sensitive and culturally responsive in how we engage all who participate in school climate improvement?

Ross & A’Vant underscore the strong connection (indeed, the centrality) of a culturally responsive approach to school climate improvement. We will have made great progress when our suggestions around these civil and human rights issues influence both pedagogical and school climate practices.

The knowledge that school climate change requires a “deep dive” that will result in systems changes underscores the centrality of relationship building in our work. We need to embrace processes that sustain interpersonal relations in group identities (Brion-Meisels, L., Brion-Meisels, S., & Hoffman, 2007). This will then lead to addressing the structures by which we are organized and examine their part in either advancing or hindering school climate improvement growth (Ravitch, 2010).

5. Eller suggests that the School Climate Standards do not adequately emphasize the importance of the school principal as a model of school leadership and the inclusion of faculty (and all school community staff) as recipients of positive school climate. We need not implement a “physician, heal thyself” approach in promoting the centrality of principal leadership regarding school climate improvement. Yet, studies do report the impact that transformational leadership has on school climate. Indeed, there is a direct correlation between positive school climate and the amount (and quality) of principal leadership (Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010). In addition, the first School Climate standard indicates that “the school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.” Thus the principal not only needs to model and lead a positive school climate but must model and lead a “shared vision” which includes sharing power and leadership to successfully integrate and sustain a positive school climate.

6. Various commentators (Devine, Santiago/Ferrara, Freiberg, and Preble) commented rather forcefully on the need to develop teacher initiatives to increase their sense of what is needed to experience and promote school climate improvement. This is all the more salient when research attests to the success of school improvement efforts as related to teachers’

attitudes and perceptions (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small & Jacobson, L., 2009). Once interventions are instituted that support teachers' efforts and leadership, there will be a positive revitalization of school climate settings (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009).

7. Several commentators noted that it would have been useful to emphasize even more than we did that positive school climate is associated with and predictive of academic achievement. Indeed, there is a growing body of scientific data offering objective assessments of neighborhood environment and students' self-reported school and neighborhood safety. These assessments are strongly associated with (both positive and negative) academic performance (Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, P, 2010). More and more evidence demonstrates that sustained and significant attention to the "whole child" will result in academic gains.

8. There needs to be a more deliberate link between the SC Standards and a growing national movement entitled "Response to Intervention". As Jo Ann Freiberg suggests, if the School Climate Standards could be (eventually) aligned with RTI, there would be more likelihood that states, districts and individual schools would embrace adoption and implementation.

9. Two commentaries (Jo Ann Freiberg and John Eller) also criticized the Council's decision to use the terms "school climate" and "culture" (as well as supportive learning environments and conditions for learning) interchangeably. In fact, this was an early debate within the Council when we developed the consensual definition of school climate and a sustainable and positive school climate. Various authors have and do define all of these terms in a variety of ways. The Council suggests that the consensually developed definition integrates these different points of view. Also, we suggest that what is most important – whatever term we use – is that we are very specific about the measurable dimensions. Although Einstein wisely suggested "not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" in K-12 education "what is measured is what counts".

Our commentators also made valuable suggestions about next steps. We have been urged to consider:

- an action-planning matrix to guide and support plans for implementation (Carter).
- ongoing work that needs to be done in the areas of teacher-education, professional development and teacher training (Preble & Gordon).
- a comprehensive web site that includes best practices and tools (protocols and rubrics) to support effective SC improvement efforts
- a more explicit connection between the tenets of character education and school climate (Santiago & Ferrara). As these are overlapping fields of knowledge, it will support practitioners and policy makers to be clear about the similarities and differences.
- a network of "sites of excellence" (Santiago & Ferrara). (We might note that the Character Education Partnership has worked on just this endeavor for years: recognizing National Schools of Character- [www.character.org/nsoc](http://www.character.org/nsoc))
- even more specific measurement strategies that allow practitioners to assess the more detailed indicators and sub indicators that 'flesh out' each of the five standards. (Eller)
- vigilant efforts to assure that our practices and systems reflect a deep respect of cultural sensitivity, equity for all constituents, and an asset-based approach that celebrates and embraces diversity. (Ross & A'Vant).

We appreciate these recommendations. Presently, we are building a web-based School Climate Resource Center that addresses virtually all of the suggestions that have been made here. This powerful tool will be a tremendous resource serving as a guide to best practices, a clearinghouse for new ideas, a forum for the sharing of ideas, a compendium of the latest research and a center for both teacher and student led activities that are both practical and user-friendly.

At the same time we are implementing National School Climate Center strategies and resources in several states and schools to better understand the realities of school climate efforts, continuously improve our strategies and resources, and develop enhanced products for our many constituents.

Whenever there is opportunity to advance truly transformational work, there is also the tendency to "speed it up" and at-

tempts to prescribe quick fixes that will inevitably suffer without sufficient buy-in from all stakeholders. This is the case as we endeavor to advance the work of school climate improvement. Freiberg cautions us well by admonishing that “Diving head first into a swimming pool where the depth is not known is foolish”. We need to measure. We need to assess. We need to research. Above all, we need to leave time to relate. And, in a very powerful manner, we need to “take the lead” from our students. Let us rely on their innate and (much more than we think) highly refined sense of justice. Let us embark on this work realizing that this is a process.

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