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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ADULT LEARNING

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Schools can support and nurture effective adult learning through the following promising strategies:

1. Shared leadership provides the optimal foundation for successful professional improvement efforts.

2. Engage the entire adult school community in creating a shared vision.

3. Promote professional development through effective policies and supports.

4. Consider developing professional learning communities.

5. Use available resources to address identified needs.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate and Adult Learning

First, this brief summarizes research about the inter-relationship between positive school climate and adult learning as well as a summary of helpful and research-based adult learning strategies. Second, this brief examines a series of strategies that schools can consider that support adult learning in ways that promote student learning and achievement as well as positive and sustained school climates.

School Climate and Adult Learning: The school's climate supports or undermines educators' capacity to be adult learners, which in turn has an important impact on their capacity to promote student learning and achievement. In fact, school climate has a powerful effect on teacher retention rates (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Research also underscores and supports the notion

that a collaborative school climate and collegial adult climate focused on the well-being and growth of all children provides an

essential foundation for effective teaching and supportive learning environments (Cohen, et al. 2009).

The school climate improvement process – by definition – is an intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent process of educators (and other school personnel), students, parent/guardians and even community members learning and working together to promote prosocial learning and safer, more supportive, engaging and democratically informed schools. Adult learning is an explicit and foundational component of the school climate improvement process (National School Climate Council, 2012).

Adult learning provides an essential foundation for effective teaching and teacher retention. We know that successful building leaders influence student achievement through two important pathways: (i) supporting and helping to develop teachers; and, (ii) setting directions for the school through the development of shared goals (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe & Meyerson, 2005). To develop the competencies that educators need to promote K-12 students' healthy development, capacity to learn and achieve, they must be vital, ongoing adult social, emotional and civic learners themselves. In fact, educators – and parents – are always teaching social, emotional and civic lessons through their behaviors and interactions: intentionally, consciously, systematically and helpfully - or not!

Professional development, school climate and adult learning: Over the last decade, research has underscored what many educators have long known: one shot or "drive by" PD workshops that are developed by building or district leaders are not helpful (Stein, Smith & Silver, 1999). Professional development (PD) research has begun to reach a consensus about the *content*,

context and *design* of high quality professional development (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hawley & Valii, 1999). We have learned, for example that:

- Helpful PD is designed based on active participation by educators in identifying their needs and in establishing job-embedded PD plans that meet those needs through collaboration, assessment, observation and reflection rather than abstract discussions (Killion & Roy, 2009).
- A healthy school climate is necessary for collaborative, job-embedded PD to be successful. Healthy school cultures that nurture a professional, collegial climate for teachers correlate strongly with increased student motivation and with teacher productivity and satisfaction (Deal & Peterson, 2009, Marzano, 2003).
- The context of PD work also matters: PD is more effective when schools develop an intentional plan that is a coherent, ongoing part of the school's reform efforts, rather than being an isolated, one-shot workshop (Killion & Roy, 2009).

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

1. Principal Leadership: The principal can and needs to explicitly and actively encourage educators to identify, pursue and share their own adult learning objectives. Successful professional learning communities (PLCs) will require a shift in the traditional leadership role from leader-centered (top-down) to shared leadership. Principals need to lead from the center rather than the top.

Principals can and need to also understand and support fellow educators in addressing to what extent they are working, teaching and learning

within a climate of blame and/or distrust vs. a more trusting, collaborative problem solving "no fault" framework that provides the optimal foundation for learning and school reform efforts.

2. Engaging the whole community of educators and related school personnel: School leaders need to consider how to facilitate the development of a shared vision of what it means to be a vital and ongoing educator/ learner/ teacher. This process provides the foundation and ability for educators to make it an explicit and agreed upon social norm that we are all invested in being ongoing learners as well as teachers.

3. Policies and supports for professional development: Districts develop policies and supports that explicitly value and promote a model of adult learning that fosters collaboration and job-embedded PD that is focused on student development as well as effective student instruction.

- PD that focuses on student learning and supports teachers developing and experimenting with instructional skills to teach specific kinds of content has a very strong and positive impact on practice (Blank, de las Atlas, & Smith, 2007; Wenglingksy, 2000).
- Adult, active learning that includes "hands-on" work such as project-based learning or action research focused on identified instructional issues or student needs supports meaningful and helpful PD work.
- Effective PD must also consider *how* teachers learn: active learning opportunities allow teachers to transform their teaching and not simply add a new strategy on top of the old (Snow-Renner & Laure, 2005). Teaching practices and student learning are most likely to be transformed by PD that is sustained,

coherent and intensive, rather than episodic, fragmented and a one-shot experience (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). In fact, PD that lasted 14 or fewer hours showed <u>no</u> effects on adult learning. And, the largest effects were for PD efforts that were between 30 and 100 hours spread out over six to twelve months (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss & Shapley, 2007).

4. Professional Learning Communities (PLC's): With the support of building leadership, educators need to consider developing PLC's. In PLC's, educators learn and work together, engaging in open and honest conversations and practice that is focused on effective instructional practices. Teachers learn from each other: learning, trying out and reflecting. PLC's need supportive leadership, mutual respect, a commitment to learning, and a climate that supports risk taking, innovation and a "no blame" climate. Building such a truly collaborative culture requires attention to the following foundational factors:

- *Setting, describing and modeling expected norms and practices*: Establishing core ethical and performance values with associated behaviors for all members of the school community sets expectations that can reinforce positive assets and transform negative aspects of school culture (Lickona & Davidson, 2005, Brown & Sapora-Day, 2008).
- *Building trust*: Trust, respect, and collegial interaction among teachers and administrators can make or break school reform efforts because change efforts involve risk, and a sense of safety is necessary to look at issues clearly and experiment with new practices (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Westbrook & Hord, 2000).
- *Empowering teacher leadership*: School leaders need to solicit and use teachers'

insights and input if meaningful collaboration is to happen. Creating a listening atmosphere promotes a culture of shared leadership and collective learning. Tokenism leads to loss of trust and resistance to change (Killion & Roy, 2009). Japanese Lesson Plans (Lewis, 2002; Hurd & Lewis, 2011) as well as Critical Friends Groups (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2001) are two wonderful models that support this work.

- *Centering on student development*: Focusing on the development of the whole child and remembering to ask, "Is it better for kids?" rather than being consumed by test scores, personality clashes, and comparisons with other schools sets the conditions for collaboration and learning communities which impact child well-being and performance (Westbrook & Hord, 2000; McCloskey, 2011).

5. Study groups and individual adult learning: Educators and school-based mental health professionals need to consider what they want and need to learn more about to support their own learning. Study group guidelines and materials, for example, in the School Climate Resource Center (http://scrc.schoolclimate.org) and/or Critical Friends groups are two examples of resources and frameworks that can powerfully support meaningful adult learning that will not only enhance educators' ability to support student learning, prosocial education and positive school climates, but their own inclination to continue to be an engaged teacher/learner!

Summary

Meaningful adult learning supports educators being even more effective teachers to K-12 students. And, an effective school climate improvement process – by definition – supports educators considering what they want and need to learn more about to effectively educate students and support safe, supportive, engaging and flourishing classrooms and schools. In this brief, we have summarized research about the inter-relationship between positive school climate and adult learning as well as a summary of helpful and research-based adult learning strategies. This research informed the series of strategies that classrooms and schools can consider that support adult learning in ways that promote student learning and achievement as well as positive and sustained school climates.

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