THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
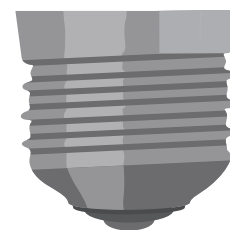**EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM**

COMING BACK TO CLIMATE

HOW PRINCIPALS USE SCHOOL CLIMATE DATA TO LEAD IMPROVEMENT

The immediate impact of COVID-19, school reopening challenges, distance learning, and renewed attention to racism in our society touches everyone, especially our students. School climates that are safe and nurturing are essential to help students navigate the history they are living.

Even in "routine" years, the principal's attention to climate matters for wellness, and it matters for outcomes.[1][2] School climate is a critical factor supporting the quality of student learning, particularly in times of stress.[3][4][5] As a result, districts across the nation have dedicated considerable resources to tools used to assess climate,* most often surveys that ask how students, parents, or staff are experiencing the school.[6] Climate data has untapped potential as a tool not only to describe perceptions, but also to energize improved experiences.

Driving Equitable Outcomes

Creating Leadership Routines

Choosing the Right Starting Point

Improving student learning based on climate data

This toolkit is for principals, rooted in the experiences of fellow school leaders who are taking concrete, accessible action with climate data. The Aspen Education & Society Program convened principals, districts, and research partners to identify opportunities to enhance that action. Our initial series of school visits and interviews ran into the COVID-19 detour, but continued virtual collaboration has strengthened our belief that climate data is useful for building transparency and insight, deepening relationships, and inspiring collective action. Several strategic themes emerged as valuable opportunities for principals:

1. Using climate data to drive toward equitable outcomes

2. Creating routines to lead with data

3. Choosing the right starting points

The strategies and tools offered under each theme are based on in-school observations and input from our research partners, consulting experts, students, and faculty. We're especially grateful to our partners, and the teams from Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), and Tulsa Public Schools (TPS) for providing visibility into their schools. **Each reference and link points principals to research and tools that can be used in school this fall.** The year ahead will be rich with opportunities to deepen principals' repertoire for welcoming students into school.

---

* For our purposes here, we define school climate as encompassing how members of the school community experience and perceive many different aspects of the overall school environment, such as relationships, safety, policies, and procedures. As described in a recent RAND report, social and emotional development, school climate, and classroom climate are interdependent and synergetic.[7]
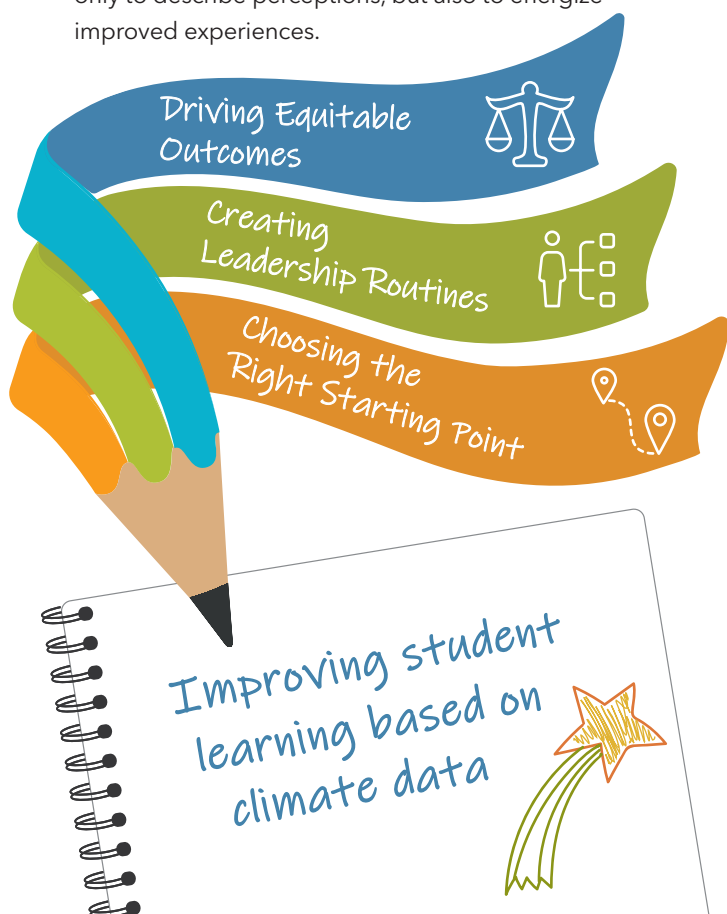
1 CLIMATE DATA AS A TOOL FOR EQUITY

*Climate data, utilized appropriately, supports equitable outcomes for the community by asking how students, parents, or staff are experiencing school. Gathering feedback once or twice annually has value, but students are only **truly** heard through nurturing relationships and shared decisionmaking. Leaders may have the numbers, but the community has the **meaning**.*

The stressors of physical distancing due to COVID-19 and striving against institutionalized racism make it imperative to enlist students and families in a shared vision of care, rather than trying to "fix" students.[8] This requires a shift from asking "How do we get more students to feel engaged?" to "How do our practices disengage students, and what improvements can we make?" Reviewing data but excluding the community may unintentionally exacerbate historical disenfranchisement, especially for communities of color. Below are a few ways school leaders are melding climate data as a tool for equity into their daily work.

Include climate data in school improvement plans

Whether state and federal systems require it, climate is a key indicator for school success.[9] Even if not required, the staff and students can craft their own goals for the school. When school climate goals are enshrined as a high-stakes goal, it ensures attention and sends the message that the school is taking responsibility for improving student experiences. In DC Public Schools, principals have the option to select climate indicators as part of their Comprehensive School Plans.
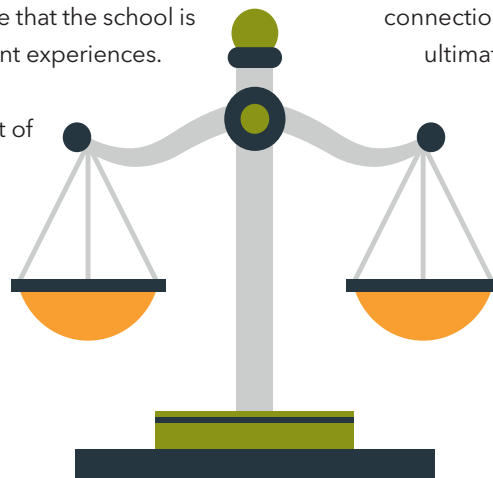
Create a "climate council"

Sharing leadership with students, parents, and staff is a climate investment in itself. For students, it's also an authentic leadership learning opportunity. The group serves the function of surfacing unique perspectives, challenging existing assumptions, and moving the discussion of data outside of an "echo chamber" of repetitive patterns.

Share the research base

Leaders start with "why": stating the value of climate data and building the expertise of their community by sharing the research foundations, like those referenced in this toolkit. Shared reading or presentations convey connections to the school's vision and ultimate goals.

Equity requires dialogue

The principal is the lead facilitator in the building, inviting constituents to discuss data in small groups in classes and meetings. Leaders cultivate a culture of care, mindful of the deeply personal realities families bring to the conversation—analysis protocols can be especially helpful here.[10] TPS leaders use question banks such as the *Community Conversation Planning Guide* in TNTP's *COVID-19 School Response Toolkit* for reopening.[11]

> "It's critical that we hear student voice in the data. We've created a focus group of students from different grade levels to share with us their thoughts and feelings on the school climate questions. We have had the student focus group speak to our Academic Achievement Team and present to our entire staff."
>
> —K-8 Principal, Cleveland Metropolitan School District

2 CLIMATE DATA AND LEADERSHIP ROUTINES

Whether beginning the school year in person, remotely or in a hybrid format, principals enter the school year with opportunities to incorporate school climate data into staff and student meetings, dashboards and bulletin boards, newsletters, and announcements. Bringing climate data into continuous improvement cycles signals an investment in conditions for learning.[12] The principal is the lead learner: "Here's what we're hearing about our school climate. We're going to work together to get even better so our students can achieve." This message comes to life in routines, key documents, and messages.

Complement benchmarks with formative checks

Consider short, formative data cycles based on a few community-selected climate indicators. Add them to surveys and classroom exit slips for a quarter or year. This is the real-time information needed for teacher teams or community groups to determine what is changing, for which students, and what adjustments are needed. Existing data are another option— compare climate trends to attendance or disciplinary data.

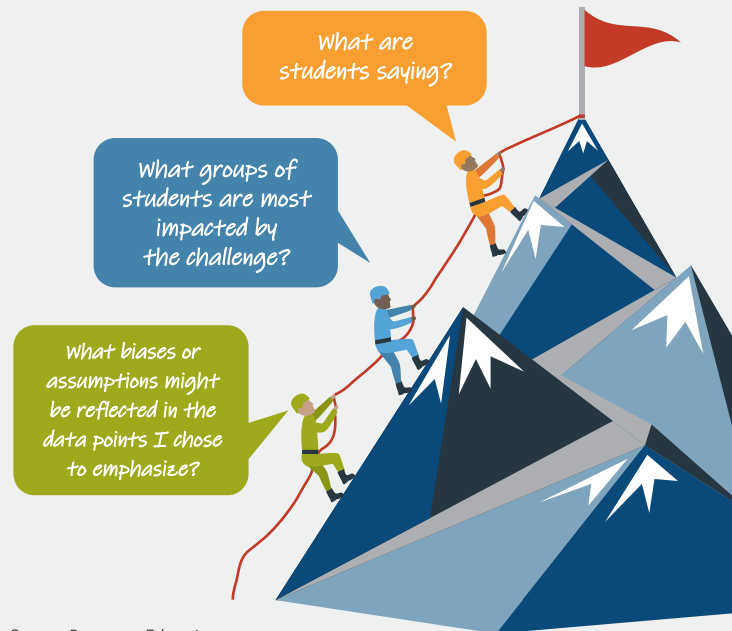## Include climate data in community milestones

Schools validate the importance of safety and care when the leadership team facilitates regular reflections on climate data. Data updates can be integrated into town halls, advisory, staff meetings, and parent sessions. School leaders can use visual reports to increase accessibility across language and literacy backgrounds.

Name climate as a budget investment

Investments and reductions signal priorities. Even in challenging post-pandemic fiscal scenarios, the leader (or local school budget team) can connect decisions about staffing and resources to the climate data—"This is still our goal."

DC Public Schools and Panorama are preparing a facilitation guide that will help school leaders engage their communities in school data, using questions such as:

What are students saying?

What groups of students are most impacted by the challenge?

What biases or assumptions might be reflected in the data points I chose to emphasize?

Source: Panorama Education, https://www.panoramaed.com/

Discuss climate data in hiring, coaching, and observations

Human capital functions are among the highest priorities for school leaders. Each phase of the talent pipeline is an opportunity to reflect on climate data during in-service, with teacher teams, and during interviews. The principal can also introduce the faculty to resources like the Building Equitable Learning Environments library for climate priorities like teacher care and belonging.[13] The same exchanges can happen within school teams.

> "Data collection requires on-the-ground, constant investigations, and weekly meetings with teachers and parents…we are constantly interfacing with stakeholders to ensure we are moving in the correct direction. The feedback is that we haven't been overcommunicating—rather the parents appreciate the constant updates and connections."
>
> **—Principal, DC Public Schools**

3 CLIMATE DATA STARTING POINTS

School climate can be assessed whether school is taking place virtually or in person. Districts are in the midst of collecting additional data from students and families that are especially helpful in understanding how students are experiencing disruptions and distance learning (e.g., health and computer access, online participation, overall wellness). The principal's challenge then becomes: where do I start? There are a few inquiry-based starting points that principals can use to prioritize key data and take meaningful action.

Acknowledge challenges of COVID-19 and racism

When students don't find safe space for difficult conversations about real life, authentic engagement suffers. Schools can first seek to listen and validate community experiences and needs. TransformEd and Achievement Network provide specific prompts that seek to understand and advance climate components.[14] [15]
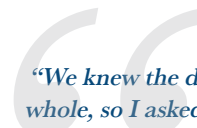
> "*We knew the district tracked trends by race for the system as a whole, so I asked the same questions about our school," said one leader. "We were disappointed to see that black students didn't feel the same sense of care from us. But this enabled the community to take action to address the implications of racialized outcomes.*"
>
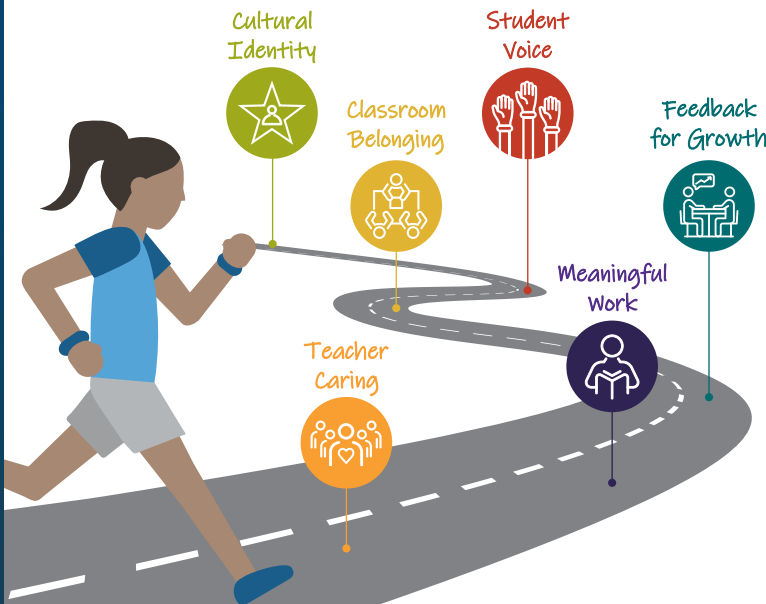> —**Principal, DC Public Schools**

Prioritize safety

One junior high school principal in TPS organizes school climate data on safety, supportive relationships with adults, and belonging. "These areas speak so clearly to how our students feel at school." In the Aspen Education community, we recognize these as foundations for achievement.[16] [17] Turnaround for Children suggests focusing on Relationships, Routines, and Resilience as a way to mitigate the impact of stress created by the uncertainties of the world. Their team provides accessible tools that support relationship building and personalizing experiences for students so that they feel respect, value, and care.[18] [19]

Cultural Identity · Student Voice · Classroom Belonging · Feedback for Growth · Meaningful Work · Teacher Caring

Make Check-ups Consistent and Convenient

Full climate surveys early this year might not be practical, so principals can lead the adoption of free, focused tools like the PERTS Copilot tool (see insert) that gather immediate insights into how students are experiencing instruction. Given the right data and resources, reflective practitioners improve conditions for learning. [20]

Apply an equity lens

Look for trends and distinctions across grade bands, from classroom to classroom, among stakeholder groups (e.g., parents and students, staff and parents), and check intersections with demographic data and academic data. Measuring against national trends has value, but so do trends within the school and over time. TransformEd partners with school leadership teams to identify trends in student perceptions of the school climate, examining which subgroup reports are lower on key indicators like safety and belonging. TransformEd then works with the school leadership team to identify evidence-based strategies that can ensure equitable school environments for every student.

CONCLUSION

Principals are returning to lead schools through disruption, stress, and ambiguity that deeply impact students and staff. This is a moment for bold and divergent action to provide care in the face of the extreme vulnerability and variation we will see in the fall. Attention to climate data, whether driven by immediate crises or by enduring research, is a powerful factor in the cycle of school improvement. It provides a window into essential elements of the teaching-learning relationship. A combination of quantitative data and thoughtful conversations can energize student agency and amplify voices that are often marginalized.

The Aspen Education & Society Program will continue this exploration with school leaders, systems leaders, researchers, policymakers, and especially students.

The research on school performance calls for further attention to the potential of the principal and the value of school climate. The research on school performance calls for further attention to the potential of the principal and the value of school climate as the conditions in which students find a sense of community and access rigor. Principals have a vantage on systemic design and practical impact that can often outpace central office learning cycles on how to collect data, how to report findings, and how to translate knowledge into action. What we also know is that students are coming back to school with a new perspective on what school should be. These insights can direct district resources to the practices that help principals elevate their communities. Inclusive dialogue and reflection are accelerants for equitable experiences, schools that excel, and students who thrive.

OUR PARTNERS

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

is proud to collaborate with the following partners:

CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

educationfirst
experience | quality | results

TURNAROUND FOR CHILDREN

EDUDREAM
CHAMPIONS OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

TNTP
reimagine teaching

UCHICAGO Consortium on School Research

NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

transforming education

END NOTES

1 Johnson, S.M., Kraft, M.A., & Papay, J.P. How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement. Project on the Next Generation of Teachers Harvard Graduate School of Education. 2012.

2 Hirsch, E., Emerick, S., Church, K., & Fuller, E. Teacher working conditions are student learning conditions: A report on the 2006 North Carolina teacher working conditions survey. Center for Teaching Quality. 2007.

3 Sebastian, J., & Allensworth, E. The influence of principal leadership on classroom instruction and student learning: A study of mediated pathways to learning. Educational Administration Quarterly, 48(4), 626–63. 2012.

4 Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. How leadership influences student learning. The Wallace Foundation, 45-50. 2004.

5 Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. Applied Developmental Science, 24(1), 6–36. 2018.

6 Bryant, G., Mainelli, A., Crowley, S., & Davidsen, C. Finding your place: The current state of K-12 social emotional learning. Tyton Partners. 2020.

7 Schweig, J., Hamilton, L.S., & Baker, G. School and classroom climate measures: Considerations for use by state and local education leaders. RAND Corporation. 2019.

8 Achievement Network & Transforming Education. Head & heart: An expanded approach to meeting students' needs as schools reopen. June 2020.

9 Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success. Learning Policy Institute. 2018.

10 The ATLAS data analysis tool and others from the School Reform Initiative can be used with groups of varying ages.

11 TNTP. 5 essentials for engaging families and community partners in reopening efforts. 2020.

12 The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program. Integrating social, emotional and academic development: An action guide for school leadership teams. March 2019.

13 The Building Equitable Learning Network curates a library of research based guides.

14 Achievement Network & Transforming Education. Head & heart: An expanded approach to meeting students' needs as schools reopen. June 2020.

15 Transforming Education. Surfacing & addressing barriers to student learning: 8 recommendations for exploring, discussing, & acting on school climate data. August 2020.

16 The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program. Webinar recap: "Recap: How schools ensure social connections during physical isolation. 2020.

17 Wiener, R. Student belonging is essential to success. Education policies must ensure school is a place where every child belongs. The74. December 2019.

18 Turnaround for Children. Return to school guidance: Wellbeing & connection. 2020.

19 Turnaround for Children. Resources for the three Rs: Relationships, routines and resilience. 2020.

20 Gripshover, S. & Paunesku, D. How can schools support academic success while fostering healthy social and emotional development? PERTS, Stanford University. 2019.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program. Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action. May 2018.

REL Midwest. Integrating a Focus on Equity into Social and Emotional Learning. 2018.