Creating Equitable School Climates

How states and districts are weaving equity into their efforts to improve climate.

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School climate is an imprecise but useful metaphor. Like prevailing weather patterns, school climate is a dynamic system with innumerable components. It alludes to the big picture, addresses children in their fullness as human beings, and determines whether students are "tourists or citizens" in their schools, as education professor Jerome Freiburg puts it.[1]

Just over a decade ago, the National School Climate Council created the now most widely used definition: "School climate is the quality and character of school life and is based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experience of school life. It reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures."

This definition has usefully directed educators' attention to climate's importance, identifying participants by their stakeholder status—student, parent, school staff.[2] We believe it is time to expand the term to reflect an intention of giving all children access to positive school environments. Our expanded definition recognizes that equitable school climates are central to education equity, and it calls on educators and policymakers to deepen awareness of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic differences:

> An equitable school climate supports each student's path to a prosocial identity by being culturally responsive to the patterns and wide range of norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, leadership practices, and organizational structures within the school and broader community.

School life in an equitable school climate exhibits a quality and character that fosters the full access of students, families, and staff to the following:

■ effectively supported high expectations for teaching, learning, and achievement;

- emotionally and physically safe, healthy learning environments for all;

- caring, courageous, self-reflective relationships among and between peers and adults; and

- multiple, culturally responsive pathways to participation that meaningfully enhance academic, social, emotional, civic, and moral development.

Our definition acknowledges the profound impact of deep societal inequities—how a middle class, African American child may experience school climate very differently than a white, middle class child in the same school does or how working class Latinx parents or guardians with limited English experience the climate of their school community (see box 1). These differences may be called "microclimates," though there is hardly anything "micro" about the negative experiences of climate for people within them.

Another metaphor—the groundwater effect—is useful for describing the impact of structural inequities on school climate. It asks why half the fish are floating belly up in one lake (the education system) and the same phenomenon can be observed in other lakes (child welfare, health care, criminal justice, housing). The answer: All lakes are connected through the groundwater.

Educational leaders attempt to "fix" educational inequities from individual and education system perspectives. Our definition of equity calls on leaders to look beyond the schoolhouse door to societal divides such as racism and poverty as the source of inequities in student outcomes:

> [H]ow do we use our position(s) in one system to impact a structural racial arrangement that might be deeper than any single system? To "fix fish" or clean up one lake at a time simply won't work—all we'd do is put "fixed" fish back into toxic water or filter a lake that is quickly recontaminated by the toxic groundwater.[3]

The groundwater approach empowers us to name school and societal circumstances colliding in students' lives. Trauma-informed school practices intersect with family engagement, foster care, and mental and physical health care. Discipline intersects with the juvenile justice system. Social-emotional learning (SEL) intersects with academic and career readiness.

As explained elsewhere in this issue, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are significant obstacles to learning and development even in thriving schools. Positive youth development becomes nearly impossible with repeated trauma, unless schools work collaboratively

Box 1. Climate and Coronavirus

The coronavirus pandemic further laid bare the profound inequities within school communities. Equitable access to resources—food, housing, health care services, mental health/trauma support, and technology—becomes even more critical at such times, both for learning and for reducing social isolation. These "laid bare inequities" show the importance of schools serving their communities beyond academic responsibilities.

Equitably serving communities requires schools to capitalize on existing relationships, facilitate access to resources, and thus become community hubs. The national network called Communities in Schools (CIS) offers an example of bringing local community resources into schools.

After this pandemic subsides, state boards of education should explore school districts' differing approaches to serving their communities. What worked well? Or not so well? We recommend state boards consider policies to support the expanded role of schools as resource hubs. Such policies are critical to prepare for future crises while improving school climate. Anecdotally, we are seeing that schools working to improve their climate may be better positioned to respond effectively to their communities in an extended period of crisis. —*RR, PB, KHB*

with other community systems. This collaboration must be guided by a balanced understanding that, while ACEs may undermine students' learning and lay siege to their emotional well-being, their resilience arises from being supported as individuals within a nurturing, organized, engaging, and equitable school climate.

At the local level, the most common understanding of school climate improvement equates it to bullying prevention. Since 50 states have laws to reduce bullying, many leaders believe they are already improving school climate. While insufficient by itself, prevention aimed at reducing "bias-based bullying" implicitly recognizes inequities and thus offers an entry point to a more comprehensive understanding of equitable school climate.

State Approaches

How can a focus on equity and school climate be merged in practice at the school level? At the National School Climate Center, we use the Five-Stage School Climate Improvement Cycle as a concrete road map, which includes a focus on equity, summarized in Stage Five. As coaches in the center's School Climate Leadership Certification program, we collectively have guided 70 education leaders in six states to use this model in their schools (box 2).

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states were to select a nonacademic indicator of school quality or student success as part of their accountability systems. Only eight chose to incorporate school climate survey data into school ratings: Idaho, Illinois, Georgia, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Iowa. Six more use these data to guide school improvement efforts: Arizona, Arkansas, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Missouri.[4]

In addition, some states and local school systems are incorporating equitable climate principles in their planning and training. They are moving closer to serving the needs of all students to meet the tests of life—not only a life of tests.

Five state examples provide a window into some dynamics and options for educational leaders who see equity and school climate improvement as essential to their mission: Minnesota, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland.

Minnesota. In 2014, the Minnesota state legislature established a School Safety Technical Assistance Center within the department of education to implement statewide bullying prevention. The law required schools and districts to engage in safe, supportive schools programming and districtwide, evidence-based SEL. The center provided training, technical assistance, and guidance to support district efforts.

With the legislation's sunset in 2019, the center was renamed the School Climate Center. With ongoing state support and federal School Climate Transformation Grant funding, climate initiatives were implemented in nine mostly rural districts, including districts with high American Indian populations. The center offers professional development for culturally responsive SEL, equitable discipline policies emphasizing restorative practices, and improving district capacity for culturally sustaining mental health services.

Craig Wethington, director of the center, notes that the state's ESSA plan "mentions school climate and our center in response to the state's requirement to reduce bullying and harassment, improve conditions for learning, and reduce disciplinary removal from the classroom. The center's equity focus comes from other sources, such as the state's achievement and integration program, workforce diversity efforts, and early childhood investments."[5]

A key element that other states can take from Minnesota's experience: Build on what you already have in bullying prevention and infuse equity across multiple initiatives.

Connecticut. On July 1, 2019, An Act Concerning School Climates went into effect. The legislation built on and modernized previous antibullying legislation. It was also an opportunity to broaden research-based SEL responses within overall school climate. The act establishes a "social and emotional learning and school climate collaborative." According to Michelle Cunningham, one of the three leaders, "Equity in school climate improvement, particularly through social-emotional learning, is an explicit, not implicit, goal of this group. By having diverse voices at our table and given time for us to become educated about school climate and social emotional learning, we hope to make real

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Box 2. Five-Stage School Climate Improvement Cycle

01 PREPARATION

- Build racially and ethnically inclusive, representative school climate improvement teams incorporating administrators, staff, students, family members, community stakeholders, school resource officers.

- Coordinate closely, or even merge, with school improvement teams, Schoolwide Positive Behavior and Intervention teams, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support teams, and those who work in local social service agencies, business, and arts councils, among others.

- Use ongoing team-building activities to facilitate courageous conversations.

02 ASSESSMENT[a]

- Seek, collect, and disaggregate data, including school climate and bullying surveys.

- Perform a data audit at least annually, examining not only academic achievement and growth but also curricula relevant to students' lives, discipline, student and staff attendance, family engagement.

- Assess other factors critical to equitable school climate: trauma, poverty, home-lessness, incarceration.

03 ACTION PLANNING[b]

- Using stage two data to explicitly address equity, create an action plan with goals, actions, and benchmarks for success.
- Include as initial steps sharing data with students, staff, families, and community members.
- Ask questions: Do our plans for improving family engagement account for cultural differences in expectations about schooling? What about challenges such as parents' language differences, time off from work, transportation, and childcare issues? How does our school's professional development plan help administrators and staff address in culturally responsive ways racial, gender, sexual orientation, and other related concerns in instructional and curricular practices, bullying incidents, and staff-student conflicts?

04 IMPLEMENTATION[b]

- Develop careful implementation processes, monitoring for unintended consequences, such as students of color feeling isolated or targeted rather than supported.

- Consider carefully who is implementing each step. Ask equity-informed questions: Are school staff choosing students who fit their picture of high-achieving "student leaders"? Are LGBT students, students of color, and their allies working on bullying prevention activities? How are parents/guardians engaged in sharing school climate data and the resulting action plan with other families, while attending to language and cultural differences?

05 REEVALUATION

- What could we do better at each stage of this process to keep a laser-like focus on equity?

- How diverse, inclusive, and representative is our school climate improvement team?

- How can we improve response rates from all stakeholder and diverse groups to our school climate surveys?

- How well are we implementing our action plan for equity-focused professional development?

Source: National School Climate Center.
a. Stage two may require investigation into data factors not immediately available. Support from the district central office to dig into areas such as adverse childhood experiences, foster care, and other data sets may be needed. Exploring these data leads to a more complete understanding of what shapes students' physical, social, and emotional safety in and out of school.
b. Stages three and four could include steps to learn about general and community-specific factors. Professional development on these factors offers an opportunity to bring together other agencies with school staff.

progress through listening to and learning from each other."[6]

Other states may likewise want to set up a diverse statewide school climate advisory group to identify what is being done and what is needed to further the mission of equitable school climate.

New Jersey. Mark Biedron served on the New Jersey State Board of Education from 2012 to 2017. As board president beginning in 2014, he ensured that social and emotional learning became part of the New Jersey Department of Education's strategic plan. "It is incumbent on the state board to dive into how we're doing education…and how important school climate and culture really is in turning around school districts," Biedron said.[7]

He championed school climate improvement, with an emphasis on SEL and character development, as a cornerstone of education in New Jersey. "The quality of education you receive should not be based on your zip code," he said. "We all have…deep-seated racial issues in our personal histories and cultural DNA that make it hard to understand where a person with a very different history is coming from. It is educators' responsibility to recognize this and learn to overcome it."

In 2017, the board adopted the commissioner's SEL competencies. These form the basis for New Jersey's approach to SEL school guidance.[8] New Jersey's experience highlights the importance of board members educating themselves about school climate and equity as they define the overall mission for their education systems.

Pennsylvania. The state launched its School Climate Leadership Initiative in 2016 to support schools and districts interested in improving school climate. Partnering with the National School Climate Center and working through regional resource centers for districts, called Intermediate Units, the initiative leverages a network structure to build leadership capacity to do this work at the school and district level.

Although school climate efforts are not mandated, the Pennsylvania Department of Education encourages the use of its school climate survey, which is based upon AIR's Conditions for Learning survey (see article, page 23). About 20 percent of Pennsylvania's schools voluntarily use this survey. Recent state legislation requiring school safety and assessment criteria to include trauma-informed education,

behavioral health, suicide prevention, bullying prevention, and substance use is expected to increase participation.

Department leaders see school climate as a lever for broad school improvement, with their equity focus extending into continuing education. It encourages SEL and restorative practice training as best practices for school climate improvement. Also, an interagency work group is collaborating to inform a statewide trauma plan.

David Hutchinson, the immediate past president of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, said that while local school board members are aware of issues such as school safety, antibullying, and more recently SEL, they are less aware of school climate as a proactive, preventive strategy. The association adopted an equity policy and made a strong commitment to providing technical assistance for local districts struggling with equity.

"School climate is a long-term effort where improvement…[is] necessary to help students get the kind of skills they will actually use," Hutchinson said. "For local board members, there does not seem to be an obvious connection between equity and school climate. You can't have equity without attention to climate, and you can't have a good school climate without attention to equity."[9] Hutchinson would like local boards to be very "intentional about tying equity to school climate."

In Pennsylvania, state education agencies and local school boards play essential roles in promoting equitable school climate. Both need to take "the long view" that promoting equitable school climates requires.

Maryland. With its state legislature's backing, the Maryland State Department of Education designed its accountability system under ESSA to include a reliable, valid school climate survey of students and educators. Fully administered in spring 2019, initial findings became available in December 2019. The department provides domain and topic area results, with student subgroup data, but does not release data associated with the individual survey questions. Guidance and training on how to use the state survey findings is left to local districts.[10]

The lack of an association of data with specific survey questions makes acting upon the data difficult, said Donna Blaney, supervisor of the testing and reporting unit at Montgomery

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County Schools. "For instance, the physical environment topic describes the degree to which students feel the school is kept clean, comfortable, and in good repair. An overall score does not support…clear direction to building service staff. If they are in an old building yet it is clean, there is no way to know that the students are… commenting on the age of the building, [its] cleanliness/uncleanliness…or both."[11]

The district will continue to use their own school climate surveys of students, staff, and parents so that principals "are able to act on the data…aware of what the survey questions are asking," Blaney said. Also, timing of survey implementation is critical so principals can use the findings to inform school improvement.

Maryland's experience highlights the desirability of balancing states' needs to use school climate surveys for accountability with districts' needs to use the data for school climate improvement.

Recommendations for State Boards and Other Leaders

Educate yourself. Increase individual and board understanding of how the various inequities intersect to affect students' experiences. Convene an advisory group of diverse stakeholders knowledgeable about equity issues pertinent to your state. Engage experts reflecting the state's demographics and differing areas of expertise (health, environment, housing) in decisions affecting education policy.

Recommend an equitable school climate improvement cycle to districts. A concrete process to improve equitable school climate, potentially with the guidance of a certified School Climate Leader, will be helpful.

Require reliable, validated school climate surveys for students, staff, and families. States and districts should be cautious in using survey data for annual accountability purposes, given that sustainable improvement requires at least three to five years. Allow at least three cycles of annual collection, analysis, action planning, and implementation before directly connecting results to accountability measures.

Develop policies that guide local data usage and technical assistance. School leaders should time surveys and release of findings to meet overall planning needs. Training to use quantitative data (e.g., climate surveys) and

qualitative data (e.g., focus groups) for action planning and implementation should be carried out with stakeholder involvement and consideration for the importance of providing clear and transparent information regarding the intent and use of the data. Critical to equity is disaggregating data by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Disaggregated data, so important for planning, includes not only school climate surveys but also bullying, discipline, and attendance records.

Build on what you have. All states have anti-bullying laws, which often incorporate an equity focus through their definitions. These laws offer a launching pad from which to expand the focus from bullying to equitable school climate.

Equity should be front and center. When equity is embedded across multiple laws and state-led initiatives, it is more likely to become a focus in a state's school climate efforts. In schools, equity needs to be central to prosocial disciplinary responses—such as restorative practices and culturally responsive, schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports—as well as SEL and trauma-informed approaches.

Even as states attempt to support equity and school climate in varying ways, their approaches to equity rest primarily within education. We remain concerned that even these steps will prove insufficient for the monumental task at hand. We propose that a wide range of levers, across systems, be employed to create true equity for all students. ■

[1]H. Jerome Freiburg, "Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline," PowerPoint presentation, 2012.
[2]Jonathan Cohen and Dorothy Espelage, "Creating Safe, Supportive, and Engaging K-12 Schools in the United States," in Cohen and Espelage, eds., *Feeling Safe in School: Bullying and Violence Prevention around the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Press, 2020).
[3]Deena Hayes-Green and Bayard Love, "The Groundwater Approach: Building a Practical Understanding of Structural Racism" (Greensboro, NC: Racial Equity Institute, 2019).
[4]Alyson Klein, "How Does School Climate Figure Into State ESSA Plans?" *Education Week* (October 21, 2018).
[5]Craig Wethington, personal communication, December 18, 2019.
[6]Michelle Cunningham, personal communication, January 15, 2020.
[7]Mark Biedron, personal communication, January 8, 2020.
[8]New Jersey Department of Education, "Keeping Our Kids Safe, Healthy, & in School," web page, https://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/sandp/sel/.
[9]David Hutchinson, personal communication, January 14, 2020.
[10]Mary Gable, personal communication, January 14, 2020.
[11]Donna Blaney, personal communication, January 20, 2020.

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