

Opportunity or Mandate: Superintendent Beliefs about School Climate Assessment

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School climate is important for continuous improvement. California's LCFF requires districts to report on school climate and use data to inform decision making. Qualitative data, derived from an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study, explored three belief constructs and sub-groups by response patterns. Education leaders have a range of beliefs that influence policy implementation, and they need quality data to guide meaningful change in efforts to meet increasingly diverse needs of students. To capitalize on the opportunity inherent in the LCFF, leaders must believe it is important, have the capacity to use data, and trust the data.

Keywords: School climate assessment, education policy, school accountability, superintendent beliefs, LCFF

School climate has emerged as an important measure of a healthy school environment among advocates, educators, researchers, and policy makers. This trend is evident in California's 2013 education financing and accountability policy, Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which mandated school climate assessment. School districts, under the leadership of the superintendent, are now expected to use school climate indicators to guide continuous improvement efforts through a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). While these policy changes demonstrate the state's interest in school climate, there is a need to better understand education leaders' perspectives towards collecting and using school climate data to facilitate changes to improve the health of school environments. This manuscript presents the qualitative findings from a mixed methods study that explored superintendent beliefs towards school climate assessment in California.

Background

Education and public health researchers have documented a relationship between health and education outcomes. Mortality rates decrease with years of educational attainment, and educational success is more prevalent among students who are healthy and who are educated in healthy environments (Basch, 2011; Berliner, 2009, 2013, 2014; Krueger et al., 2015; Olshansky et al., 2012; Pomeranz & Chang, 2017; Telfair & Shelton, 2012; Venkataramani et al., 2016). One lens used to broadly explore healthy school environments is school climate.

Many studies have examined how school climate influences health and academic outcomes. Positive health and education behaviors were more common in school environments where academics were engaged and students felt safe and connected. These healthy environments led to positive mental health, lower rates of violence, and higher achievement in math and English (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Burton et al., 2014; Espelage, et al., 2014; Gase, et al., 2016; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Kraft et al., 2016; Low & Van Ryzin, 2014; McMahan et al., 2009; Wang & Degol, 2016). Conversely, school environments negatively perceived by students have lower achievement in academics, higher rates of absenteeism, poor mental health, and increased risky health behaviors such as substance use and limited physical activity (Doumas, et al., 2017; Richmond, et al., 2015; Van Eck, et al., 2017).

School climate data are increasingly desired for research, practice, advocacy, and accountability. Evaluating schools based on data has increased since the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The follow up, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), expanded data collection by inviting schools to assess outcomes using multiple measures. In California, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) overhauled the public school accountability system by decentralizing leadership and shifting accountability expectations from a single measure of success (standardized achievement test) to multiple measures, including school climate. Local districts are expected to collect primary data on school climate, submit a summary of findings to the publicly available state dashboard, and use data to codify continuous improvement efforts in their Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) (CDE, 2017).

Central to California's policy is the conviction that mid-level leaders can effectively collect and use data strategically to leverage state resources and facilitate school improvement efforts (Fullan, 2005; Fullan 2011; Fullan, 2014). The role of district leadership is fundamental to this process. Guided by the superintendent, education leaders are responsible for creating and sustaining systems to collect, analyze, and use school climate data to guide change (Datnow & Park, 2014; SCCWG, 2017). Many factors influence how data will inform decision making, including beliefs towards data processes and data use (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Henig, 2012).

Previous studies suggest that leaders use data differently based on their resistance, skepticism, acceptance, or enthusiasm towards the data (Buske & Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2018). If the LCFF and subsequent LCAP are going to lead to significant changes in educational environments, education leaders need to believe in the process and the data.

Conceptual Framework

Superintendent beliefs are important, varied, and they have practical implications. This study embraced a conceptual framework that beliefs influence the potential for data to guide continuous improvement and decision making. One comprehensive framework for understanding data driven decision making (DDDM) captures the relationships between using data and why data are being collected, organizational contexts that influence how data are collected, and what guides data processing (Coburn & Turner, 2011). This study explored beliefs as a key influence on the organizational contexts that guide assessment practices and processes. Under California’s LCFF, local education agencies are expected to provide the leadership and direction for school climate assessment. To maximize the opportunity, leaders need to believe that school climate assessment is important for continuous improvement, they have the capacity to use data to guide change, and they can trust the data obtained (AERA et al., 2014; Bertino, 2014; Bosworth, 2018; Buske & Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, 2018; Coburn & Turner, 2011; Datnow & Park, 2014; Gannon-Slater et al., 2017; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; SCCWG, 2017).

The three belief constructs explored in this study were conceptualized in a theoretical construct map, which is a visual representation of the range of perceptions associated with each construct (Wilson, 2004). The construct map, displayed in Figure 1, shows each of the three beliefs in a continuum of low endorsement to high endorsement.

Figure 1

Construct Map

Constructs

		Importance	Capacity	Trustworthiness
Endorseability	High	Strongly believe in the importance of capturing multiple perspectives, using data to support change, and evaluating schools based on standardized assessments. School climate is absolutely essential to education reform.	Strongly believe they can make decisions using data, lead others in using data, use data to meet parent and community needs, use data to inform change in schools.	Strongly believe data are meaningful and adequate; that they are selecting instruments that are valid and reliable; believe data will help make decisions that will guide change.
		Believe in the importance of capturing multiple perspectives, using data to support change, and evaluating schools based on standardized assessments. School climate is essential to education reform.	Believe they can make decisions using data, lead others in using data, use data to meet parent and community needs, use data to inform change in schools.	Believe data are meaningful and adequate; that they are selecting instruments that are valid and reliable; believe data will help make decisions that will guide change.
		Do not believe in the importance of capturing multiple perspectives, using data to support change, and evaluating schools based on standardized assessments. School climate is not essential to education reform.	Do not believe they can make decisions using data, lead others in using data, use data to meet parent and community needs, use data to inform change in schools.	Do not believe data are meaningful and adequate; that they are selecting instruments that are valid and reliable; believe data will not help make decisions that will guide change.
	Low	Strongly do not believe in the importance of capturing multiple perspectives, using data to support change, and evaluating schools based on standardized assessments. School climate is absolutely not essential to education reform.	Strongly believe they cannot make decisions using data, lead others in using data, use data to meet parent and community needs, use data to inform change in schools.	Strongly do not believe data are meaningful and adequate; that they are selecting instruments that are valid and reliable; believe data will not help make decisions that will guide change.

Note. Buckner-Capone, 2019.

Methods

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used in this research. In this approach, the quantitative data collection and analysis preceded the qualitative, which were collected for the purpose of deepening the understanding of the quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An online survey was used to collect quantitative data, followed by semi-structured interviews.

The study population, district and county superintendents, was selected as they are the highest level local leader responsible for meeting the school climate assessment accountability expectations. In the first, quantitative phase of the study, survey invitations were emailed to all superintendents included in a publicly available database (1,055) and 298 responded (28.2% response rate). The survey, developed using the NRC Assessment Triangle and the Four Building Blocks of instrument design (NRC, 2001; Wilson, 2004), included 37 items with Likert style response choices across the three constructs. The purpose of the survey was to capture the range of superintendent beliefs and current school climate assessment practices.

Following quantitative data collection and preliminary analysis, a purposive sample of 25 potential qualitative participants was generated through recommendations made by experts and key informants known by the researcher. The list was finalized based on publicly available regional and district demographic data to include leaders from different regions and communities, and districts with diverse student enrollment. Ultimately, eight superintendents participated in the qualitative component of the study. District characteristics and the number of years in superintendency for qualitative participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Qualitative participant overview by community, pupil demographics, and experience

	Urbanicity	Enrollment	Enrollment Demographics			Years in Position
			English Learners	Free & Reduced Price Meals	Race/ Ethnicity	
True Believers						
A	Suburban	~7,000	9%	38%	42% White, 38% Hispanic, 6% Asian	3
B	Urban	~2,000	50%	97%	98% Hispanic, 2% White	4
C	Urban	>20,000	unavailable	unavailable	38% Hispanic, 30% Asian, 20% White	1
Still Questioning						
D	Urban	>10,000	45%	73%	60% Hispanic, 30% Asian	4
E	Rural	<500	21%	99%	58% Am Ind, 27% Hispanic, 12% White	6
F	Rural	~2,000	64%	98%	52% Hispanic, 39% White	3

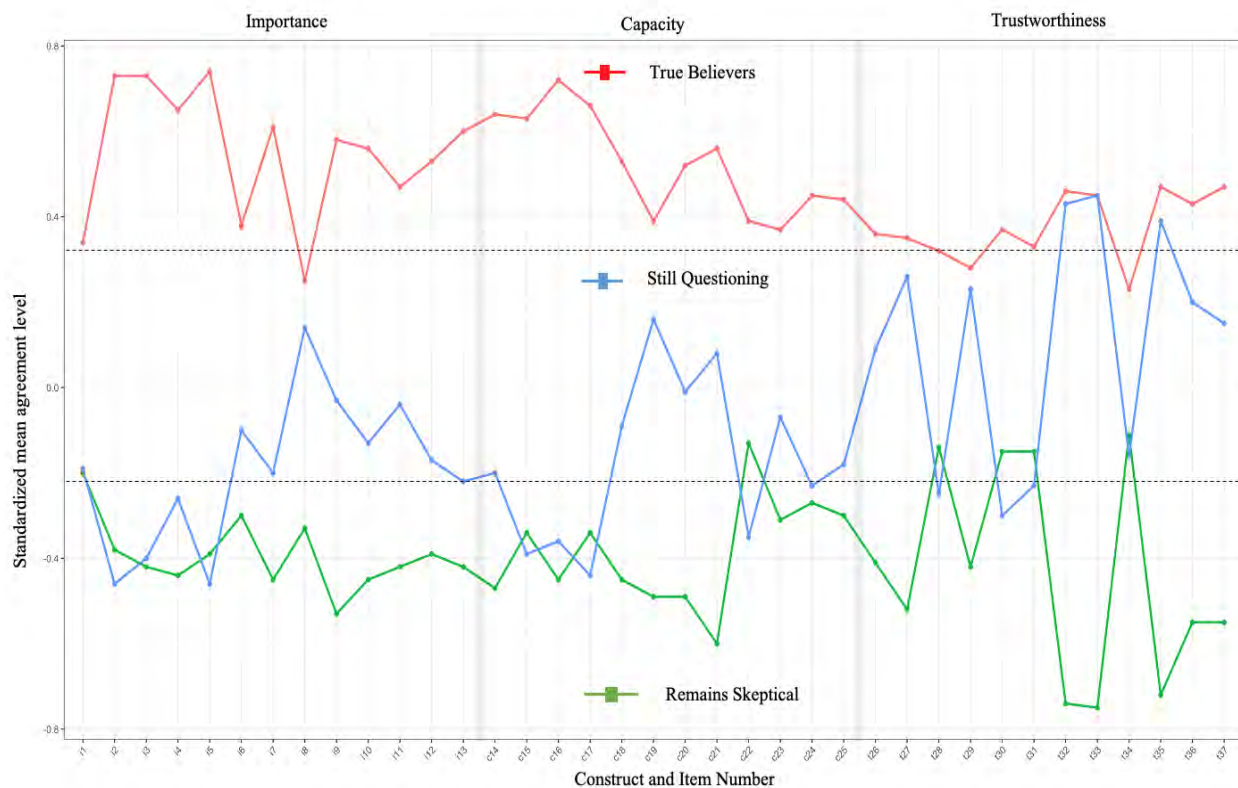
Remains Skeptical						
G	Rural	>20,000	14%	67%	70% Hispanic, 20% white, 4% Asian	8
H	Urban	>20,000	21%	72%	70% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 6% White	4

The interview protocol was developed in alignment with the construct map (see Figure 1) to capture variation in beliefs, narrative explanations, and contextual examples drawn from respondent experiences. The questioning format was consistent for each construct and included an overarching general question, followed by probing questions to invite in-depth sharing of perspectives and experiences. The final protocol was adapted to include probing questions designed to deepen the interpretation of the quantitative data obtained during the first phase of the study. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes in length and were conducted over the phone. All interviews were digitally recorded and saved on a password-protected laptop accessible only to the researcher.

Data were analyzed sequentially and concurrently. Quantitative data analysis included latent class analysis (LCA), which was used to explore response patterns across the constructs. Figure 2 shows the LCA results, with three subgroups identified by response patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed first by construct and then case-by-case to further understand the response patterns that were revealed in the LCA.

Figure 2

Latent Class Model



Note. Latent Class Modelling was derived using Mclust package in R. Latent Class Analysis was used to identify homogenous groups that share response patterns within a heterogenous group. A series of models were fitted to determine the appropriate number of classes. The three classes are depicted in the figure. Latent class modelling included 180 out of 298 complete survey responses collected from superintendents in the first phase of the study. Construct identifiers, i=importance, c=capacity, t=trustworthiness precede the item number that corresponds to the instrument.

Qualitative data were analyzed using MAXQDA 2018 qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). The coding process was deductive, beginning with a provisional start list of codes identified from the extant literature and included in the construct maps (Miles, Huberman, Saldaña, 2014). Codes were first categorized by construct (importance, capacity, and trustworthiness), followed by the sub-group categories identified in the LCA (true believers, still questioning, and remains skeptical). Once data were organized according to the provisional start list, descriptive and in vivo coding further informed sub-codes within the provisional categories.

Findings

Findings from qualitative analysis revealed that varied beliefs exist and patterns appear to align with the LCA. The three distinct subgroups of superintendents based on belief patterns were labeled true believers, still questioning, and remains skeptical. As Table 1 shows, each group included superintendents with a range of experience, serving in urban and rural areas, and serving schools that varied in enrollment and pupil demographics. Due to the sample size, some demographics were omitted in reporting to ensure respondent confidentiality. The similarities and differences in the three subgroups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Summary of subgroup characteristics

True Believers	Still Questioning	Remains Skeptical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Favorable response patterns across all three constructs - School climate assessment is essential for continuous improvement - Data can absolutely guide change - Evaluation and standardization important, but labels or ranking not helpful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inconsistent response patterns across all three constructs - School climate assessment may or may not be essential for continuous improvement - Important to meet state accountability expectations - A standardized tool may not capture local experiences and evaluation may lead to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less favorable response patterns across all three constructs - School climate assessment may positively contribute to continuous improvement, if policy and practices are authentic - Data can guide change if interest is genuine - Standardization is not necessary, formal evaluation may heighten

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have capacity to use data - Trust data 	<p>unfair labels and comparisons</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have capacity to use data - Trust data 	<p>competition and potential for gaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have capacity to use data - Trustworthiness of data questioned
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True believers

This group was characterized by their favorable endorsement of school climate assessment for continuous improvement. Each of the three cases in this group were consistently coded with positive beliefs in their responses across all three constructs.

Superintendent A: Data-Rich

Superintendent A was data driven. They saw data as an effective and important approach to demonstrate need, rationalize investments, and to create energy and commitment to change. When explaining this perspective, they said,

Why are we doing this, really becoming a data-rich school district? Because if you don't have a needs assessment with data, you don't know where you have a baseline and you don't know where you need to get. You can't have real goals and you can't monitor improvement... If it's about what we think, it's not really what we know, and we can't really improve if we're not using multiple data sources to inform us moving forward.

Superintendent A believed it was important to involve others in the process, that leaders can and should use data to facilitate change, and it was essential to use tools (surveys) with evidence of validity and reliability. They said it was important to use a tool “That measures what it is supposed to.” They went on to explain, saying, “I want to make sure that it does it all the time... The instrument needs to have consistent results for us to move forward and implement things, but also so there is trust from the community.”

Despite the favorable perspectives, Superintendent A also explained a challenge with data-informed decision making. “Definitely resources. We see an area and sometimes we have—we know what the best solution is, but we can't afford the best solution and so we put on a band-aid and kind of do the best we can knowing that if we had additional resources, we could do a better job.”

Superintendent B: It's All Good

Superintendent B believed that school climate and school climate assessment were very important and that people in schools could make a significant difference in the school environment. They strongly endorsed the concept of continuous improvement and believed standardization was important. They said, “So, these days everything we do is standardized. We are looking at things through the same lens; whether it is instruction or the results of assessments it is the same lens.”

Superintendent B believed that they could learn from all data and that all data were good and useful. They said, “We have a growth mindset... Even when the data is negative, it is still good because it is telling us something. And when it is good, then it is validating that we are doing

the right things.”

Superintendent C: Important for the Whole

Consistent with the previous two leaders in this subgroup, Superintendent C also believed school climate assessment was important. They explained that through school climate, assessment leaders can gain insights about problems in the community, which could invite collaboration between schools and communities leading to substantial change. They said, “I think that assessing school climate and understanding school climate is a really important thing for administrators and teachers and parents because it is so interconnected to all of the other indicators of health, whole child, and whole community.”

Superintendent C believed that standardization was necessary because people will make comparisons and if the tool is standard, the comparison may make more sense. They believed that if assessments were only locally relevant, the comparison may be confusing and inaccurate. They said, “I think standardizing solely at the local level may cause more confusion and harm because of individual natural tendency to want to compare or maybe to learn from each other.”

Superintendent C also believed there were challenges with data interpretation and identified this as an important area for capacity development. They said, “I think one of the biggest challenges is when there is a reliance on numbers or trying to oversimplify a very complex set of data and information and I think that when it happens, it is harmful.”

Still Questioning

The still questioning group was characterized by their inconsistent response patterns across the three constructs. In contrast to the true believers, the three cases categorized in the still questioning group were coded with a range of favorable and less favorable endorsement of school climate assessment for continuous improvement.

Superintendent D: Changes Every Year

Superintendent D explained that school climate was important, but they also felt it was complex. They believed it was important to assess so schools knew what was going on in experiences at school and could make changes for improvement. They said,

We have to establish a climate and culture that is supportive and that meets the social and emotional needs of students if we are going to be able to make any gains academically. So, we are constantly having to assess and take the pulse of the school to see where improvements need to be made in order to make sure that the students are safe—both physically, but also mentally.

Something that contributed to the complexity conveyed by Superintendent D was a belief that using data to evaluate schools was not helpful or necessary because each school is dynamic, thus influencing experiences and perceptions. They said, “Every school is going to be unique in regards to the circumstances surrounding the school. And, it will fluctuate from year to year depending on the unique needs of the students.”

Superintendent E: Watch, Listen, Learn

Superintendent E believed that both school climate and school climate assessment were important, but explained that school climate surveys were not the only useful information. They said, “As administrators, you’ve got to build relationships and you’ve got to understand the landscape and, you know, see what the heck is going on within your school walls and make some decisions there. It’s just a lot of observation and listening. Those tools are good to use, but just for me, you can learn a lot by talking to the staff and get a lot of community input too.”

Superintendent E explained that all data could provide learning and they trusted the survey data because they believed the responses were honest and therefore an accurate reflection. They said, “They are pretty honest statements and I trust that the kids are taking it and they’re being pretty honest about it.” Superintendent E also explained some of the challenges school leaders have with parents and communities, saying: “It’s hard to get a hold of them, it’s hard to talk to them. There is such a substance abuse problem ... the parents are a big part of that. They just feel that it is the school’s responsibility to deal with everything, you know. And they don’t want to deal with anything.”

Superintendent F: Rural and Size Matters

Similar to the other two leaders categorized in the still questioning subgroup, Superintendent F believed that school climate assessment was important, but they felt it was different in rural areas and small districts. They believed that policy makers and state education leaders needed to understand the challenges with policy implementation at local levels. For example, anonymity may not be possible with some survey data and specifically with disaggregation for analysis. They said,

Mandates—like what you’re discussing—they shake out differently in small counties... They are not as easy to administer sometimes. You know, for example, with things like the California Healthy Kids Survey, it is difficult, particularly in [a] smaller district, where there are only 400 kids, you have to be really careful when you get down to those grade level assessments because you lose the anonymity factor... When the state says, thou shalt, it makes it a little difficult when all they put forward is a one size fits all measure.

Similar to Superintendent E, they trusted the survey data because students were familiar with the surveys, and they believed that the answers were honest. In addition, Superintendent F believed the state had vetted the survey that was being used in the district. They said, “It is fairly consistent. I think that the students are pretty comfortable with this, once they have done it the first time, so, I think they are fairly honest when they take this survey. I know it is vetted. So, I believe the results that we get.”

Remains Skeptical

Two cases were categorized in the remains skeptical sub-group. This group was characterized by their generally low (or skeptical) endorsement of school climate assessment as a key driver for continuous improvement. The respondents in this group described their leadership

as an authentic approach to using data to continuously improve, but they were openly critical of the intent and authenticity of the policy and practice.

Superintendent G: Communities Influence Schools

Superintendent G believed that both school climate and school climate assessment were important, but they were skeptical of the purpose, the intentions, and the use by others. They suggested that data could be used by schools or the community to misrepresent school experiences:

Well, school climate can go badly if you have people that are trying to go after your school system. They say it's unsafe and... sometimes yeah, okay—you've got problems with fights, suspensions, whatever. But, often times unsafe is coded language—that there are too many minorities in your school so I want to transfer out because your school is unsafe. So, the data—you always have to be mindful of who is using it and for what purposes. Whether it is to improve the school or really just make public schools look bad.

In another instance, they shared a concern for data manipulation. The example provided was based on the reporting of suspension rates. The participant disclosed that some school districts were showing a decrease in rates, when in actuality, they were just changing the label. “So, school districts, they're showing a reduction in school suspension rates, but they're still doing in-school suspension, but they're calling it, like a study hall.” They go on to say, “So, on paper, their numbers have come down. You see how the system can be gamed.”

In relationship to obtaining data that were trustworthy, Superintendent G explained “In the neighborhood—and there's a lot of trauma there—you could have a lot of violence at that specific school site that you know, might be perceived as reliable data and valid, but it's in the context of the greater neighborhood.” They expressed concerns about school climate assessment because they believed schools were routinely blamed for larger societal challenges. They said, “I think schools are blamed for a lot of social problems. We're not capable of handling a lot of these problems. So, sometimes the data, if you're just looking at school climate—yeah, there are issues there... if you look at schools alone. You need to look at neighborhoods and communities.”

Superintendent H: Teaching and Learning

Superintendent H believed that school climate and school climate assessment were important, but expressed some areas of concern in data use and authenticity particularly when data do not align with community perceptions. They suggested that not all leaders were prepared to handle the community response, which may affect the authenticity of data reporting. They said,

Well, let's just say that you're in a community that really thinks it has its act together and thinks it's all good and positive and the school climate survey results come back to say that it is not. Well, what that means then is that you are going to have to weather some controversy from the results as you seek to make your school or school district better as a result of the findings.

Superintendent H also questioned the extent to which the school climate assessment expectations

were genuinely implemented to support schools in their primary charter of teaching and learning. They said, “If you want them to do a good job, in a particular job in a particular area, don’t tell us to do a 4.0 job there and then add in another 15 things just because they’re nice to have.” Ultimately, Superintendent H opined that the potential and actual use of data had to be intrinsically motivated:

You can tell me, as a superintendent that I need to assess school climate and I will do that. If my motivation is to make my school district better for the kids that I serve, then it’s going to happen regardless because of the information at hand. But, if you tell me that I have to do that and then you’re going to pinch me until I stop, pinch me until I change my behavior, that’s a different thing all together, because my instincts were not going to take this seriously.

They went on to say “Schools are better for accountability measures for academics, but there has been a lot of by-product in bad things, or less than productive things, that have occurred because we have chased numbers instead of learning.” Superintendent H explained that comprehensive systemic change would require resources and collaboration, otherwise, the mandate to assess school climate begs the question of the true purpose and intent of the policy. They posed the question, “Did a legislator legislate something because he or she feels like this month it should be something like health or safety?”

Discussion

This study confirmed the importance of school climate assessment, although responses varied from unequivocal to critical. Findings revealed a confidence in self-capacity to use data to guide change, despite needed resources and less confidence in the capacity of others. Results also showed a range of perspectives relating to trusting the data, with respondents reporting absolute trust, to questioning the quality of data collection and interpretation processes. It is evident that beliefs influence how school climate data are collected and used to support continuous improvement efforts. If superintendents believe school climate assessment is important, regardless of a policy mandate, they will use data to guide school improvement.

Ultimately, this research revealed underlying complexities of data informed decision making and education policy. First, policies are not created in a vacuum, nor are they free from historical context and experience. Results suggest distrust in accountability systems. For decades, standardized data were used to rank and penalize schools, and even among the most ardent believers of data informed decision making, there were undertones of questionable trust in using data to authentically support continuous improvement. The extent to which education leaders and policy makers genuinely intend to foster the use of school climate assessment data and other measures of accountability to guide changes in public schools remains unknown, but this study suggests that education leaders may not fully trust the political intentions.

Second, there was variation in the degree to which actual data were trustworthy. Many believed that data were trustworthy because of familiarity or history using the instrument, results were consistent with their own perceptions, or because they felt like the responses were honest. Furthermore, some participants believed that the state will or has vetted instruments. Recommendations for statewide vetting of instruments had been proposed to state leaders (SCCWG, 2017), but no formal state vetting process has yet to be implemented.

Third, study results suggest a need for additional support and resources for school personnel and local leaders in assessment literacy and data use. Leaders need to know how to analyze and present data in ways that will invite collaborative approaches to solving problems and supporting continuous improvement. Additionally, they need to have the knowledge and capacity to critically evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and overall stability of data collection tools. Some of the assumptions guiding local leaders' trust in the data may be misguided because many instruments lack current evidence of effectiveness, including validity and reliability. School climate researchers have developed many tools to assess school climate for correlational studies and to inform policy and practice recommendations. However, critical considerations for practical application include a need for cohesiveness in terminology, consistency in the variables being measured, and a standard expectation for the psychometric rigor of instruments (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Konold et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016; Zullig et al., 2015). Clearly defining what will be measured, followed by the development and use of psychometrically developed tools that are consistent with the standards for educational testing and assessment (NRC, 2001) are important considerations for research, but fundamental to the use of these tools in accountability frameworks and practical decision making. Robust assessment literacy among education leaders is necessary to identify and use high-quality assessment instruments and to further develop capacities to use data to inform decision making and facilitate continuous improvement efforts.

Importantly, this study contributes a district and superintendent perspective to the literature on data driven decision making in education and draws attention to the role of beliefs in policy implementation. This study is limited in scope and generalizability due to the small sample size of qualitative responses and the focus on a specific component of California policy. Future research is needed to determine the extent to which the belief patterns identified in this study relate to other school climate assessment policies and other education leaders (e.g. school principals). In addition, future research will need to consider the unique nuances of 2020. Given the complexities associated with the past year, including the challenges that schools have faced in providing quality education while responsibly navigating the pandemic, the realities of school climate assessment as a measure of accountability and school success may be radically different than in previous years.

The COVID-19 global pandemic forced education systems to adapt in ways that were previously unimaginable and the successes (and failures) of these efforts will be seen for the next decade. Underscoring this experience is the reality that education outcomes were unequally distributed before the pandemic and the disparities are only expanding (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). In addition, researchers are already measuring an increase in mental health diagnoses and crises among our nation's youth, with many of the most vulnerable at highest risk (e.g. homeless, foster youth, low income, LGBTQ, EL learners) (Fish et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). The success of public schools is closely tied to the physical, mental, and emotional health of students and the current realities have accelerated the need for education leaders to gain access to quality data that can support their efforts in leveraging resources to support the needs of vulnerable student populations. School climate assessment provides one such avenue for leaders to gain deeper understanding of the pupil experience.

This study confirmed a consistent belief that school climate plays an important role in school experiences and that school climate assessment can be useful in guiding continuous improvement efforts. However, the findings caution: in order to capitalize on the opportunity inherent in the policy, leaders must believe in the policy and process, have the capacity to collect and use data, and they must trust the data.

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