

# School Climate and the Safe School: Seven Contributing Factors

by James Noonan

When there is no newsworthy story of school violence, it is easy—maybe too easy—to forget that *creating* school safety continues to be a very real and very pressing issue facing teachers, administrators, and school communities. In fact, the related but distinct concepts of *school safety* and *school climate*, generated not that long ago by a tragic succession of school violence, are close to becoming buzzwords. On the contrary, the climate of a school has always been, and continues to be, essential to a school's success in educating its children and preparing them for a life beyond its corridors. In addition, a school that acknowledges the complexity inherent in its climate and takes clear steps toward creating one conducive to learning is a school that will inevitably become a safer school.

A thorough assessment of a school's climate can be a complex and tiresome process, consisting of a mixture of observation, surveys, interviews, and focus groups, but anyone who has spent any time in a school knows that there is a simpler, if less scientific, way to evaluate a school's climate. Entering a school for the first time, newcomers willing to trust their instincts can make initial judgments—for better or for worse—in a matter of minutes. How does it look? What do we see on the walls and in the hallways? What messages do the bulletin boards send us? What noises and voices do we hear in the hallways and classrooms? What games are played on the playground? When a dispute breaks out, in the classroom or on the playground, how is it resolved? From every public space to every dusty corner, what does it *feel* like? Like children, adults are overwhelmed with sensory stimuli, and we arrive at often surprisingly swift conclusions.

After spending some time charged with assessing and improving school climate, I too have reached some conclusions. Each aspect of a school has something to teach us about its climate. School climate is reflected in every interaction and in every decision adults and students

make. Try though we may, adults cannot escape the shadow we cast. We should acknowledge our influence and work to ensure that it is a positive one.

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Accepting that few lists are comprehensive, but acknowledging that they still have value, here then are seven important factors that contribute to a healthy school climate:

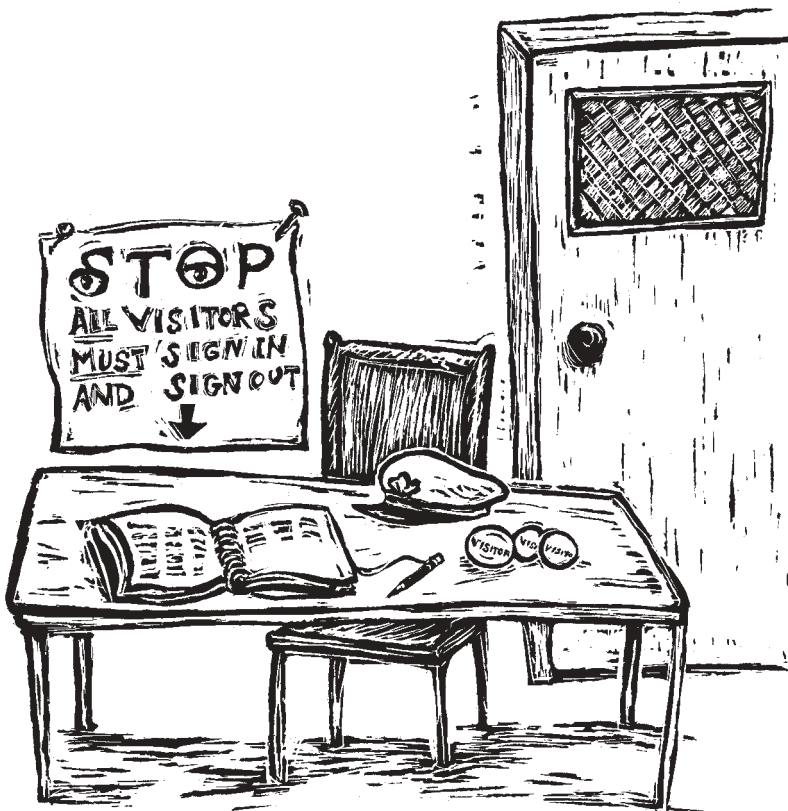
*Models.* Adults are teachers in more ways than one, and the way that has the greater impact is less what we say than what we do. We must act as good models, offering a balance between setting reasonable limits and providing opportunities for authentic choices, between holding up clear expectations for children to reach and extending a hand to help. Students who feel that they are noticed and valued are more motivated to work hard and care about themselves and others (Noddings 1996). It means having small enough learning communities, where students do not get lost in the mix, where adults speak the same languages as the students (both literally and figuratively), and where adults are deeply motivated to build and nurture individual relationships with their students and their students' families.

*Consistency.* The school staff must be vigilant in sending coherent and consistent messages to students and families. A school must be determined in its pursuit of teachers who are not only effective but project qualities that are most desirable in students: eagerness to learn, willingness to collaborate, and appreciation for diverse points of view, among others. The school that attracts such teachers and, more than that, then minimizes staff turnover is more likely to create an effective learning community. Each time a new teacher is introduced to a school—as with all kinds of group membership—there is a period of adjustment, tentativeness, and mistake making, but the better a group of professionals gets to know one another, the better its members will be able to work as a team, drawing on their individual expertise and strengths. Functional teams are essential to school climate, both for what they can accomplish and for the message they send about the importance and effectiveness of collaboration (Brion-Meisels and Selman 1996).

*Depth.* It is important to build beyond—while not ignoring—first impressions. Mission statements, school pledges, and schoolwide rituals are important components of a school's climate, especially considering that they are often a visitor's first impression of the school. However, they certainly cannot stand alone, and if they are not held in place by more substantive structures reflected in resources such as books, songs, curriculum, and classroom rituals and practice—including critical reflection

on group behavior—then the message sent by a mission statement will collapse quickly, revealing a hollow promise. “Pledges and posters” programs can promise much but often have little lasting impact on a school’s climate unless they carry over into the way that adults and children conduct their relationships.

*Democracy.* Sharing power in an environment that has traditionally been structured as a top-down hierarchy can be a frightening and difficult transition, but a democratic classroom and school need not be a radical change. In order to become proficient leaders and decision-makers outside school, students require practice and guidance (Schimmel 1997). Educators should challenge themselves to create a democratic climate in their classrooms and in their schools, recognizing that shared decision-making can take many guises. Holding short, focused meetings in elementary and middle schools each week allows students opportunities to make decisions as simple as poster placement or as complex as creating a system of accountability that reduces teasing on the playground (Charney 1993).



*Community.* Most people working in a school will tell you that no school can ever have too much help. In fact, the less insular a school community is, the more positive its climate is likely to be. Traditionally, schools close their doors at the beginning of the school day and keep them closed until students come barreling out at the end of the day. However, families in particular, as well as such community members as neighbors, businesses, and other groups, have an investment in the success of the school. Communities are interdependent entities, and in order to maximize the many talents and shared stakes of community members, a school must open its doors and create opportunities for as many people as possible to become involved. Classroom volunteers, parent committees, student teachers, and community service-learning all can make positive and lasting contributions.

*Engagement.* Many skills are inherent in the practice of community service-learning. Undertaken well and consistently, it can profoundly affect a school and its students (ECS 2003). With the opportunity to identify problems and become agents of change, students take charge of a part of their education and in the process often alter the perception of adults both in and outside the school (Hart 1998). This reformed perspective—viewing children as problem solvers instead of problems—has the happy side effect of building students' sense of purpose and of what is possible. Creating a community of students empowered to make changes and emboldened by their own success contributes to a climate where service to others is valued and where that value has significant carryover.

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*The kinds of flowers planted in the schoolyard affect the way visitors and community members perceive the school*

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*Leadership.* Engaging school staff, families, community members, and students in creating and maintaining a positive school climate requires a strong school administration supported by a core of staff and families. A successful administrator must be willing to take the risks necessary to transform a climate and provide ongoing support to those engaged in the process (Fullan 2002). Some of the most important roles of the administrator include articulating a shared vision and sense of purpose for those in the school and serving as a strong role model—from the way adults relate to children and families, to the way community members are invited and welcomed to the school, to the way decisions are made. Even seemingly minor decisions like the kinds of flowers planted in the schoolyard, the furniture in the office and the faculty room, or the diversity and presentation of student work in the hallways affect the way visitors and community members perceive the school. Nothing in a school is too small not to contribute to its climate, and a skilled administrator recognizes that.

If there is a common thread to creating a positive school climate, it is the importance of relationships—student to student, teacher to student, teacher to family, administrator to staff, school to community. Perhaps it is simplistic to conclude that something as inherently comprehensive and complex as school climate boils down to such subjective considerations as people and relationships, but that may be closest to the truth. The development of strong and sustainable relationships will contribute more to a healthy and safe school than metal detectors ever will, and our ability to teach our students how to develop supportive relationships of their own is as essential a skill as math and reading.

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