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School Climate and Pro-social Educational Improvement: Essential Goals and Processes that Support Student Success for All

National School Climate Council

There is growing federal and state support for school climate improvement and pro-social education. The National School Climate Council has developed a consensus statement about the foundational importance of intentional pro-social instruction and school climate improvement efforts. In addition, this consensus statement outlines a core set of research-based systemic, instructional and relational goals as well as processes that underscore, characterize and shape both effective school climate improvement and pro-social instructional efforts. Research, policy, practice and teacher education implications are outlined.

This commentary by the members of the National School Climate Council on pro-social[1] educational improvement is based on three essential understandings that were consensually developed. First, K-12 education is always social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual in nature. Policy, practice and teacher education leaders need to insure that K-12 education includes intentional, strategic and research based pro-social instruction as well as intellectual content-based teaching and learning. Second, children and schools require the support of the "whole village." Schools function best in communities connected together and helping each other. Finally, all school improvement efforts, including school climate improvement, are necessarily a continuous process of learning and development.

Today, education policy and accountability systems are not aligned with these three sets of understandings. Federal and state education policies are primarily focused on content-based intellectual or cognitive student learning. Schools do not regularly measure and support student pro-social learning and school-family-community partnerships. The nature and power of current local, state, and national annual accountability systems (focused almost exclusively on content-based student learning) highly discourages school leaders from embracing continuous models of learning and development, especially in the realms of pro-social learning and school climate improvement.

School climate reform and intentional pro-social instruction are increasingly recognized, endorsed, and supported by federal agencies and districts across the country as prevention strategies that reduce inappropriate peer interactions (e.g., bully-victim-bystander behavior), truancy, and high school dropout rates. A growing body of research supports the position that these systemic and instructional efforts support school—and ultimately life—success (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012).

Educators are often confused about the similarities and differences between pro-social efforts and school climate improvement. This commentary delineates current positions and best practices pertaining to the goals and interventions that support pro-social instruction and school climate improvement efforts for all school community members. There is a critical interdependence of academic success and pro-social education to develop the whole child. Only by fully addressing school climate improvement and pro-social education will educational

aspirations be reached for all students. There is compelling and incontrovertible evidence supporting what is outlined below as a position statement.

The following propositions are presented as a set of research-based recommendations and are aligned with: the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) *Whole Child Initiative*, Character Education Partnerships' *11 Principles of Effective Character Education*, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)'s theory of change, National School Climate Council's *National School Climate Standards*, Coalition for Community Schools' *Models of Community Schools*, and the federally funded Center for Mental Health in Schools' three-component policy framework. These three sets of goals and the outlined processes support all students having equal opportunities to succeed at school and in life.

These evidence-based improvement goals and processes must inform and shape policy. The Council plans to develop detailed guidelines and provide specific examples to demonstrate in practice how to implement the three overlapping practice goals pertaining to systematic or school-wide processes, pedagogy, and relational management practices. Two propositions underlie this effort.

<div align="center">PROPOSITIONS</div>

CORE ASSUMPTIONS

There are three necessary core assumptions that provide the foundation for effective school-wide pro-social or *whole child* instructional and school climate improvement efforts that ensure all students have equitable access to success (ASCD, 2014; Brown, Corrigian & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012; CASEL, 2012; Cohen, 2006):

1. School leaders must provide pro-social instruction, governance, and management infrastructure; they must also address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students to support healthy development*(*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009). Individual student engagement is a critical element in providing successful educational experiences for all students (National Research Council, 2003).

2. Improvement efforts must be focused on universal, comprehensive, pro-active strategies rather than reactive targeted interventions. To do so requires school community stakeholders to come together to develop a shared vision, asking themselves, "what kind of school do we want ours to be?" This creates the foundation for them to become engaged and motivated to work together. Meaningful school community member involvement allows for the development of a shared vision with associated core values—this is an essential foundation for any and all school improvement efforts (Cohen, 2006; Fullan, 2011; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).

3. Any form of school improvement is a continuous process that requires ongoing review by school leadership and members of the whole school community. This should use social, emotional, civic, and quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Twemlow & Sacco, 2013).

GOALS AND PRACTICES

Learner-centered classrooms foster high levels of engagement and have been shown to decrease dropout rates, disruptive behavior, and student absences (Rumberger & Roternund, 2012; Cornelius-White, 2007). Research and experience indicate that the three overlapping goals and practices shape effective pro-social instruction and school climate improvement efforts:

1. School-wide goals that promote physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe, supportive, and engaging climates for learning.

2. Instructional efforts that are culturally responsive and designed to imbed social, emotional, and civic learning into instruction as an integral component of academic experience.

3. Processes that promote meaningful relationships among students, faculty, and staff.

School-Wide Goals

Educational leaders. District and building leaders need to endorse and lead improvement efforts (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). They need to strive to lead in a transparent democratically informed manner (Berkowitz, 2011; DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycoc, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).They also need to engage and include the whole school community (students, parents/guardians, community members, and school personnel) to become co-leaders in improvement efforts (Morton & Montgomery, 2011; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004; Sheridan, Warnes, & Dowd, 2004).

Indicators of success. Indicators must include both academic outcomes (e.g., grades, portfolios) as well as the social, emotional, and civic outcomes essential for school and life success (e.g. school climate findings; markers of engaged school community members; indicators of student personal and pro-social development). There must be broad understanding that academic outcomes cannot be satisfactorily achieved for all students without a deep, intentional connection to these social, emotional, and civic outcomes. Learning increases in classrooms that engage students by allowing them to take ownership of the learning process. Such ownership can only take place in environments that are characterized by supportive relationships and that provide safe and trusting learning environments (McCombs, 2004).

Improvement goals are tailored to the unique and contextual needs of the students and the individual school community (Espelage, & Poteat, 2012; McCabe & Trevino, 2002).

Policies. District level (and ideally state level) policies support the integration of pro-social and civic instructional efforts and a continuous process of school climate improvement, with full understanding of the dimensions of school climate (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).

Adult learning. Adult and professional learning communities are supported in order to build capacity and sustain efforts through continuous improvement (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Giles, & Hargreaves, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Codes of conduct. Students, parents/guardians, faculty, and staff have a real voice and contribute authentically to the development of codes of conduct governing them.

Pro-social education. Pro-social education is an explicit and valued goal (Brown, Corrigian & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012; Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik & Elias, 2003), holding equal value to academic goals, and an integral part of the educational process.

Pedagogy

All educators should focus on the four ways that pro-social instructional efforts can be furthered:

1. Being a helpful living example, role mode, and moral compass (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Blesky, Vandell, Burchinal, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Owen, & The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2007).

2. Managing classrooms and offices in dignified and democratically informed ways that focus on student engagement, co-leadership, and restorative practices (Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014).

3. Utilizing pedagogies that promote pro-social instruction and provide personally relevant learning experiences that have authentic opportunities to contribute meaningfully (e.g., cooperative learning, class meetings, consensus building, conflict resolution/mediation, service learning, empathy building, team building, and moral dilemma discussions). When done well, studies have shown evidence of academic achievement-related benefits from infusing pro-social instruction, including: improved attendance, higher grade point averages, enhanced preparation for the workforce, higher graduation rates, enhanced awareness and understanding of social issues, greater motivation for learning, and heightened engagement in pro-social behaviors (Ainley, 2012; Brown, Corrigan & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012).

4. Utilizing pro-social educational design models of curriculum development that support the conscious, thoughtful and strategic infusion of pro-social goals, assessments, and learning tasks into existing academic curriculum, emphasizing student-centered learning (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich & Gullotta, 2015). In addition, there are many evidence-based, pro-social curricula that have been developed, evaluated, and can be implemented (e.g., Blueprints, What Works Clearing House, and CASEL's *Safe and Sound*).

Relational and Management-Related Practices

All school personnel should participate in professional development opportunities that promote meaningful student-teacher relationships, and that further students' feeling safe (physically, emotionally, and intellectually), supported, connected, and engaged in school life and learning. They should also plan for a school climate that embodies a genuine pervasive sense of community for everyone. Such a climate encourages members to demonstrate high moral character and civic engagement.

All instructional staff and curriculum experts should participate in professional development opportunities that enhance whole child education. Staff should continuously seek to improve instructional practices to insure that those practices are rigorous, engaging, culturally responsive, and afford meaningful opportunities for all students to contribute to their learning and community.

IMPLICATIONS

This consensually developed commentary raises a series of questions and implications for future research, policy, school improvement, and teacher education practices. Researchers can and must critically evaluate the systemic, instructional, and relational research support for the framework provided here. Schools, like people, are complex systems. There is growing consensus that multiple factors necessarily shape effective school-wide and instructional efforts. There must be support for hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) or multilevel models of research design[2]. There must also be support for the further development of HLM informed methods.

Second, policymakers and educational leaders need to grapple with the complexity of effective pro-social instruction and school wide improvement efforts. School climate policy reform efforts represent meaningful and positive examples of how some states (e.g. Connecticut, Georgia, Minnesota, and Ohio) and districts (e.g. Chicago, IL and Westbrook, CT) are working to

do just this. It must be noted, however, that the U.S Department of Education's implication that school climate improvement and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) negate certain critical differences (Cohen, 2014). Additionally, state and federal accountability systems that focus on reporting attendance/dropout rates, arrests, achievement gaps, and bullying also focus on *indicators* of the quality of school climate, rather than climate itself. And most current accountability systems use data as "hammers," rather than a "flashlight". This punitive accountability lens is unhelpful and counterproductive. Accountability systems can and need to recognize, measure, and support a continuous process of learning and development.

Finally, many K-12 educators and leaders are very aware that educators—like parents/guardians—are always teaching social, emotional, civic, ethical, and cognitive lessons (good or bad) regardless of their content areas and roles. The only question is whether those lessons are being taught consciously, carefully, and thoughtfully. Thanks to generations of risk prevention information, health and mental health promotion efforts, and educational research it is now well known that pro-social instruction supports both school *and* life success. Academic instruction in isolation from pro-social instruction tends to have limited impact. When academic instruction is yoked to school wide efforts that ignite the intrinsic motivation of students, parents/ guardians, school personnel, and community members to work together toward a common goal, a transformation process is set in motion that promotes safer, more supportive, engaging and higher achieving schools.

Notes

1. The term *pro-social* represents the collective summary of programs and practices that have traditionally been described under a variety of overlapping titles: character/moral education, social/emotional learning, ethical learning, civic education, service learning, community service, mental health promotion, and moral community development. The term *pro-social education* is intended as a shorthand stipulation that represents the overlapping titles mentioned here. *Pro-social instruction*, like *whole child education*, is a term intended to build bridges between social emotional learning, character education, civic and democratic education, service-learning, mental health promotion efforts, etc.
2. HLM-informed statistical models and analyses are based on the notion that we can and need to identify, operationally define, and measure many factors that influence one another over time. The units of analysis, for example, are usually individuals (at a lower level) who are nested within contextual/aggregate units (at a higher level).

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Author: *The National School Climate Council* (http://schoolclimate.org/about/council.php) The National School Climate Council includes the following members: Howard Adelman, Marvin Berkowitz, Cathryn Berger Kaye, Martin J. Blank, Philip M. Brown, Patricia Ciccone, Jonathan Cohen, James P. Comer, Peter DeWitt, Arnold F. Fege, Ann Foster, Jo Ann Freiberg, Ann Higgins-D'Alessandro, Gary A. Homana, Rebecca Sipos, David Hutchinson, William H. Hughes, Peter S. Jensen, Molly McCloskey, Linda Jeanne McKay, Nicholas Michelli, Carol Nixon, Derek Peterson, Randy Ross, Sean Slade, Linda Taylor, and Stuart Twemlow.

Corresponding author: Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D. - jonathancohen@schoolclimate.org