

# THE New Standards FOR

New school climate standards from the National School Climate Council help school communities assess where they are—and move to where they want to go.

**C**urrent education standards focus narrowly on reading, math, and science learning. As fundamentally important as those standards are, they do not incorporate the essential social, emotional, ethical, and civic dimensions of student learning. School climate does. A growing number of districts and state departments of education are in the process of adopting school climate standards.

## Climate Change Framework

In early 2009, the National School Climate Council was asked to develop school climate standards. With the help of scores of educators, school board leaders, school-based mental health professionals, and others, the council has developed standards (and a series of linked indicators and subindicators) that present a vision and framework for a positive and sustainable school climate (National School Climate Council, 2009):

1. The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged.
3. The school community's practices are identified, prioritized and supported to (a) promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical, and civic development of students; (b) enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and schoolwide activities; (c) address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage those who

- have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.
4. The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice. (p. 3)

The standards provide a framework to define what schools need to do to help students develop in healthy ways that will support their success in school and life. Education and school board leaders have often been leery about standards. School leaders—understandably—do not want top-down mandates from people who may not understand their school communities' history, strengths, needs, and goals. School climate standards, however, are by definition grounded in the contexts of each school's goals and needs.

Using school climate data to drive school improvement has a number of powerful advantages:

- Schools can measure their climate reliably, validly, and practically (e.g., by using a survey that takes less than 20 minutes to complete). These data are important because what's measured is what garners attention and funding.
- School climate data can be used to support a number of strategies that promote student learning, including social, emotional, and civic learning (i.e., character education and social emotional learning); student engagement and student leadership; and school-home-community partnerships.

# Learning



- School climate data support the coordination of educational, risk prevention, and health and mental health promotion efforts (which is one of the most common challenges to school reform efforts).
- A focus on school climate informs and supports professional learning communities.
- The process of gathering school climate data can mobilize students, parents and guardians, and school personnel to learn about a school's strengths and needs and to work together to develop instructional and systemic implementation efforts that are supported by the whole school community.

## Lessons Learned

The National School Climate Council has learned five lessons about how school leaders and school communities can work together to support transformational school climate reform.

## THE PRINCIPAL MUST LEAD

School climate improvement efforts need to be fully supported and led by the principal. More-demarcated, classroom-based professional development efforts do not always require the same degree of principal involvement. But principals need to be explicit and ongoing leaders in school climate reform efforts. This is aligned with research findings about school reform (DeVita, Colvin, Darling-Hammond, & Haycock, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

## MEASUREMENTS ARE KEY

School climate data provides the anchor as well as the direction for school climate improvement efforts and the actualization of the school climate standards. School climate measurement options include walk-throughs, behavior (e.g., incident) reports, and focus groups. The National School Climate Council (2007) recommends the use of valid and reliable surveys that recognize the voices of students,

parents and guardians, and school personnel and that assess all of the major areas of school climate (i.e., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment). Although there are hundreds of school climate surveys, only a handful meet these criteria (Gangi, 2009).

The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/practice.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/practice.php)) is one example of a tool that not only meets these criteria but also is yoked to a series of text and Web-based resources designed to support building leaders, leadership teams, and school communities.

The Center for Social and Emotional Education developed a five-stage school climate process that is based on its work with hundreds of schools across the country, the National School Climate Council's recommendations, and educational research.

#### SCHOOLS NEED ROAD MAPS

The vast majority of principals recognize that school climate matters (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Many principals, however, are not sure how to best support effective school climate improvement efforts. The Center for Social and Emotional Education developed a five-stage school climate process that is based on its work with hundreds of schools across the country, the National School Climate Council's recommendations, and educational research. Each of the stages is characterized by a series of specific tasks and challenges. Following are a couple of examples from the first and third stages (Cohen & Pickeral, 2009).

**Preparing and planning for the next phase of school improvement.** This stage of the process supports recognizing past successes and current challenges and prepares a school community for evaluating its climate. Stage one tasks help schools actualize the first school climate standard (developing a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate) and the fifth standard (developing meaningful and engaging practices, activities, and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice).

Developing a shared vision of what kind of school community students, parents and guardians, and school personnel want is a foundational step for school reform (Elmore, 2004; Noddings, 2007). It is also a foundation for democratically informed communities: What kind of place do we want to live in? How do we want to be treated and to treat others? What norms, rules, and laws seem right, fair, and just?

The following two essential questions engage students, parents, and school personnel and help foster a shared vision of what kind of school they want theirs to be: What is an ideal school? And what are the essential skills, knowledge, and dispositions that students should know and have when they graduate from 12th grade?

The Center for Social and Emotional Learning has posed those questions to thousands of students and adults in school communities. Their answers are virtually aligned with their schools' mission statements, but typically a tremendous gap exists between the mission statements and what currently receives the most funding and attention. School leaders can use the essential questions to engage members of the community in imagining what kind of school they want, mobilizing members of the school community to help one another learn about their strengths and needs, and to then work together to prioritize improvement goals and meet them.

Establishing a no-fault framework and promoting a culture of trust is another essential and daunting task. Most schools are colored by distrust and blame (Comer, 2005).

Empirical research has recently underscored what school leaders have long known: distrust undermines any school reform (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Byrk & Schneider, 2002). No single protocol addresses this challenge, but the Center for Social and Emotional Education has developed guidelines ([www.schoolclimate.org/guidelines/schoolclimateimprovement.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/guidelines/schoolclimateimprovement.php)) and a series of tools and rubrics (Cohen & Pickeral, 2009) to support school leaders' efforts to raise awareness about this issue and to help people develop effective, collaborative problem-solving skills and teaming abilities.

**Understanding assessment findings, engagement, and action planning.** There are two types of school climate findings: consistent findings and discrepant findings between the three major groups in schools: students, parents, and school personnel.

Consistent findings may confirm perceptions or offer a surprising result. For example, when everyone in the community rates the external environment as being poor (as is often found in economically disadvantaged urban schools), no one is surprised. But one unexpectedly consistent result that we often discover is that everyone in the school community reports that respect for diversity is much more problematic than school leaders believed.

Typically people are most surprised by discrepant findings. Two of the most common discrepant findings are that students report bully-victim-bystander behavior to be a severe problem, although adults report that it is a

mild or moderately severe problem. And secondly, educators report that they believe they are doing an excellent job of being intentional social, emotional, and civic (SEC) teachers, whereas students and parents often rate SEC teaching and learning as being much more problematic. To the extent that school leaders have begun to promote a “no fault” collaborative problem-solving culture, these discrepant findings provide truly exciting opportunities to engage students as well as parents and school personnel. What does this discrepancy mean? How can students become action researchers to learn, for example, why people so often act as bystanders (as opposed to upstanders) when witnessing bullying behavior (Eyman & Cohen, 2009)?

### SUPPORTIVE POLICIES MATTER

The essential question that underlies the second school climate standard is, How can we develop school policies that support our shared vision? School policies can and must provide guidelines and benchmarks for effective practice that support learning; social, emotional, ethical, and civic development; and engagement, and they must address barriers to learning and teaching.

### EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES MUST BE ALIGNED

Leaving no child behind is an essential goal. But to make it a reality, educators must understand the barriers to learning and align all academic and social-emotional practices.

Measuring school climate and using the resulting data to shape effective practice supports school success by:

- Ensuring that students feel safe socially, emotionally, and intellectually, and physically (Aladjem et al., 2010; Devine & Cohen, 2007)
- Providing social, emotional, civic, and intellectual learning (Beland, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004)
- Facilitating student engagement and service learning (Newman, 1992)
- Addressing barriers to learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2005)
- Fostering school-home partnerships (Epstein et al., 2009)
- Promoting professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)
- Developing norms that promote social and civic responsibility and social justice (National School Climate Council, 2009).

These research-based educational strategies support student learning and achievement. But they are not often used because they don't immediately increase reading and math

### STAGE ONE: Preparing and Planning

- Forming a representative school climate improvement leadership team and establishing ground rules collaboratively
- Building support and fostering “buy in” for the school climate improvement process
- Establishing a “no fault” framework and promoting a culture of trust
- Ensuring that the team has adequate resources to support the process
- Celebrating successes and building on past efforts
- Reflecting on Stage One work

### STAGE TWO: Evaluating the Data

- Systematically evaluating the school's strengths, needs, and weaknesses with any number of school climate and other measurement tools
- Developing plans to share evaluation findings with the school community
- Reflecting on Stage Two work

### STAGE THREE: Developing an Action Plan

- Understanding the evaluation findings
- Identifying areas of consensus and discrepancy to promote learning and engagement
- Prioritizing goals
- Researching best practices and evidence-based instructional and systemic programs and efforts
- Developing an action plan
- Reflecting on Stage Three work

### STAGE FOUR: Implementing the Action Plan

- Coordinating evidence-based pedagogic and systemic efforts that have been designed to promote students' social, emotional, civic, and intellectual competencies and to improve the school climate by working toward a safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school community
- Instituting the instructional and schoolwide efforts with fidelity, monitoring those efforts, and attempting to learn from successes and challenges.
- Planning and participating in social, emotional, and civic learning (adults in the community)
- Reflecting on Stage Four work

### STAGE FIVE: Reevaluation and Development of the Next Phase

- Reevaluating the school's strengths and challenges
- Discovering what has changed and how
- Discovering what has most helped and hindered the school climate improvement process
- Revising plans to improve the school climate
- Reflecting on Stage Five work



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intellectual aspects of student learning.

scores in the first year of improvement efforts. They do over a three- to five-year period!

## Conclusion

Measuring school climate is a way to recognize the essential social, emotional, and civic as well as intellectual aspects of student learning. The act of measuring school climate also acknowledges and validates all school community members' perceptions of their school's current strengths and needs. Those data can be used to educate and mobilize the community to learn and work together to support student learning and positive youth development. **PL**

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