

Castle Hill Middle School: From Failing to First Rate

City: **Large** (Bronx, NY, New York City Public Schools)

Size: **Medium** (709 students and parents, 90 staff members)

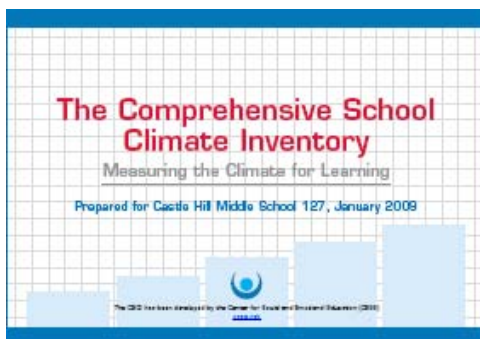
Demographics: **Diverse** (45% Hispanic, 40% African-American, 13% Asian and 2% Caucasian)

Castle Hill Middle School has undergone many changes over the years. Back in the 80s, it was a bedlam of poor performance, bad behavior, and erratic discipline. In the 90s, the school experienced some improvement through instatement of a new administration, and its divide into three separate “academies”. By 2005, it was stable, but there was still a long way to go.



Hoping to truly turn the school around, the school hired **Harry Sherman**, a former youth minister, financial analyst and MBA. Harry was young, intuitive and practical. During the next few years, he split the school into six specialized academies, developed new extracurricular activities and adapted a school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. He worked closely and openly with **Bryant Jackson**, Castle Hill’s Assistant Principal, and his leadership team, and together they began to see that their collaborative efforts were improving the school – greatly.

Mr. Sherman began to realize, however, that although the leadership team had established clear expectations and considerable surface level change, they were still falling short of addressing some of the more **pervasive, systemic issues of school life**. They weren’t reaching certain students. There was still a big problem with recidivism. Some staff members were clearly unhappy. They had anecdotal understandings of which programs were working, but lacked the concrete knowledge that would help them assess *real* value and effectiveness. To do that, they needed a comprehensive baseline measure of the entire school climate, not just accountability-based assessments.



In 2008, CSEE visited with Mr. Sherman to talk about how his school could reach that next level of connection with the **Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI)**. The CSCI school climate survey would provide Mr. Sherman with a whole school profile that provided detailed information on the areas he wanted to understand most: How do kids really feel? Does the staff feel supported and are they working as a team? Do parents feel connected to the school community? And most importantly, is this a safe environment that supports student learning and healthy development? Measuring 12 essential dimensions of school climate in four broad categories - **safety, teaching and learning, relationships** and the **environment**, the CSCI results would give Mr. Sherman a comprehensive, 360° profile of the school’s climate for learning, along with practical supports for translating that research into action.

Assistant Principal **Bryant Jackson** coordinated the survey administration process, rolling out the survey to students during universal classes and to staff members during professional development time. Reaching parents was a challenge. “But we were relentless in letting parents know we need the data to help improve the school for the children,” Mr. Jackson said, having sent letters home, called parents, and pulled them from the hallways into the computer lab. His goal was to get as many students, staff members and parents to complete the survey as possible, so their report would be truly representative of the community’s perspectives and needs.

Two weeks after they finished administering the survey, Mr. Sherman and Mr. Jackson held the report in their hands: 150 pages of rich data –broad overviews, in-depth findings across populations and sub-groups, areas of strength and need, ratings across individual questions – with explanatory text to make this information instinctive and clear. There was a lot to celebrate in the report: **extremely high social support** and **school connectedness, positive leadership** and **professional relationships**. The data also brought to light areas of need that could be boosted through leveraging particular strengths, such as social emotional security.

With the findings as a guiding tool, CSEE and Mr. Sherman’s leadership team had an initial planning session about the key data points and initial ideas. “In terms of action planning and reacting to it, the ability to see the school climate ratings across students, staff and parents, was something we’d never had before,” Mr. Sherman said.

“The access to **really differentiated results** about what our different populations, grades and academies thought gave us a **deep view** that we never had before.”

– Harry Sherman

A month later, Mr. Sherman and the team were able to use that data to meaningfully improve the school. In partnership with our Center, they developed a school-wide campaign to prevent bully-victim behavior and promote upstander behavior. They launched **Bully Awareness Month** to leverage their biggest school climate strengths (connectedness and social support) to improve an area of need (social emotional security). Through a school-wide essay contest, they were able to hear from every student population in the school and open up a dialogue about how, together, they can support one another and celebrate their diversity. Teachers addressed this issue at the classroom level through bully-themed lesson plans and activities and the leadership incorporated the messaging into their existing PBIS supports to create an integrated, comprehensive program aimed at building awareness and promoting prevention. In addition, the school began using arts education (e.g. drama) to explore bully-victim-witness behavior in the school and engage students in meaningful upstander efforts.

Mr. Sherman’s continued focus on a **positive school climate** has turned the school around. Now equipped with data that is truly representative of his community’s particular strengths and needs, he is improving the climate for learning at Castle Hill even more, in ways that directly impact academic performance, dropouts, teacher retention and bullying. In 2009, **Castle Hill Middle School scored an “A”** on the **New York City School Progress Report** and a **“Well Developed”** on the **School Quality Review.**”

“Understanding our school climate is a door that’s been opened,” Harry said. We congratulate Mr. Sherman and his dedicated leadership on all they’ve done to make Castle Hill a positive, safer place for learning and look forward to working with them through the school climate improvement cycle.

To learn more about how your school or district can benefit from the CSCI, [click here](#).