



SCHOOL CLIMATE MEASUREMENT AND ANALYSIS

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Schools can effectively assess and analyze school climate efforts through the following promising strategies:

1. Select research-based tools that match the local context.
2. Be intentional about planning for and preparing stakeholders to engage in school climate improvement efforts.
3. Engage all stakeholders in co-leading and co-learning.
4. Integrate school climate improvement efforts with current initiatives.
5. Communicate results in meaningful ways that resonate with varying audiences.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rate.

School Climate Measurement and Analysis

Extensive research supports that a healthy school climate is essential to positive student development, and directly links to other key indicators for success, such as academic achievement, graduation rates, effective risk prevention, and teacher retention (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Thapa, Cohen, Higgins & Guffey, 2012). When children feel safe, supported, and engaged they are better able to learn and are more fully equipped with the skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.

Today, school climate assessment has become an increasingly important and valued aspect of district, state, and federal policy. Recognizing that effective school climate improvement efforts are grounded in valid and reliable data, the Federal Department of

Education launched the Safe and Supportive Schools grant in 2010 to provide 11 states with federal assistance that supports the development of rigorous school climate measurement systems. States like Connecticut and Georgia have strong legislation and practice efforts in place that focus explicitly on school climate reform¹. These efforts have helped to make school climate, including effective and valid/reliable assessment, a clear priority within our education system nationwide.

An essential step to school climate improvement is gaining a clear understanding of each school's particular strengths and potential areas of need through an iterative, data-driven process of feedback from the entire community – students, parents/ guardians, school personnel, and ideally the wider community members. This data then becomes a springboard for a collaborative, community-wide process of improving the school climate, and creating targeted action plans and sustained efforts focused on the areas that will most benefit the school. Choosing an effective school climate instrument can be challenging. However, there are a number of essential factors to consider when determining the assessment tool that best fits a particular school's needs:

- **A strong research-base** – An effective school climate assessment tool will have well established reliability and validity, with additional external confirmation of its strength through third-party evaluators and research studies.
- **Vigorously field-tested** – It is essential that the assessment tool has a strong track record across multiple settings, have a long-standing history, and have undergone a

process of refinement and revision to keep the tool current with the latest research in the field.

- **Measures core populations** – School climate assessment tools ideally assess all stakeholder groups, in order to fully represent a comprehensive profile of each school's particular climate. The core stakeholder groups include students, parents/ guardians, all school personnel (administrators, educators, certified and non-certified staff), and potentially the wider community, if possible.
- **Easy to administer** – It is ideal to have a tool that is easy to administer, offers multiple options for distribution (i.e. paper and online), and takes approximately 15-20 minutes to complete for most populations to achieve the highest possible response rates.
- **Additional features** – It is important to consider the needs of your particular community when choosing a school climate assessment tool. For instance, does the tool come in the predominant languages used by your parent and/or student populations? Is it possible to customize aspects of the tool to measure particular sub-groups that are significant to your community? What type of reporting is provided, and how quickly will it be provided to you? Exploring these types of questions with your leadership team prior to choosing a tool can help ensure that the school climate assessment process provides beneficial data that supports a process of lasting, whole-school improvement.
- **Supports** - School leaders often benefit from having resources available to guide them in this work. Guidelines and tools are useful to assist in understanding how to use school climate data to set in motion effective improvement efforts. Recent independent evaluations of school climate measures have also noted the most reliable and valid tools

¹ See NSCC's Policy Database for a full listing of the latest school climate and bully prevention legislation in each state nationwide:

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/database.php>.

in the field based on a number of criteria. You can find these summaries at:

- In 2011, the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments compiled a compendium of student, family, and staff surveys to assist educators and education agencies in locating a valid and reliable needs assessment that suits their needs. The full listing of surveys can be found at: <http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133>.
- In a 2010 study of 102 school climate surveys, only three met the *American Psychobiological Association* criteria for being reliable and valid. NSCC's Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) was one of these three. The review can be found at: <http://gradworks.umi.com/33/88/3388261.html>.
- In a 2011 study of 73 middle school measures, ten were identified and recommended as being reliable, valid and aligned with SEL research. The CSCI was the only school climate measure recommended.²
- In a 2012 study of 125 school climate measures as possible tools to gauge Principal performance, the CSCI was one of only three comprehensive (student, parents and educator) measures recommended.³

² Haggerty, Kevin P., Elgin, Jenna, Woolley, Andrew (2011). *Social-emotional learning assessment measures for middle school youth*. Report commissioned by the Raikes Foundation, (pp 1-59). Seattle: Social Development Research Group.

³ Clifford, M., Menon, R. Condon, C & Hornung (2012). *Measuring School Climate for Gauging Principal Performance: A Review of the Validity and Reliability of Publicly Accessible Measures*. American Institute for Research.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Data can be incredibly useful for assessing student needs, increasing educator effectiveness and improving stakeholder relationships. Not surprisingly, school climate data is also only as useful as the process dedicated to interpreting and communicating results. Creating a strong foundation for this work with a collaborative leadership team will support meaningful engagement from the pre-survey administration period to the post-survey evaluation period.

Here are some essential points to keep in mind:

- **Focus on buy-in:** All survey participants should be aware of the purpose and value of the survey prior to administration, so that the school will receive authentic data to help drive decisions that will benefit the entire school community. When school climate data is used as a “flashlight” and not a “hammer,” stakeholders will be more fully engaged, and the findings will be more useful for long-term improvement. School leaders also need to consider key preparation and planning issues before administration, such as: how representative their leadership team is, and to what extent stakeholders work and learn in a culture of blame or distrust as opposed to a more collaborative problem solving culture. For instance, are parents/guardians, students and personnel present to lend their unique perspectives? Differing viewpoints can create powerful discussions, and builds a transparent culture where members feel valued, trusted and engaged in the school community.
- **Reach all stakeholders:** It is important to engage all stakeholders in the process of “shedding light” on the collective work that is to be done. Students, parents/guardians, school personnel and ideally community members can and need to be co-learners and co-leaders (under the direction of the principal) for school reform efforts to be

successful. For example, before moving forward with outreach, determine any potential obstacles to engaging a particular group (or sub-group), and formulate plans for reaching out to them directly. This will create an opportunity for new levels of engagement, and set the tone for the type of collaboration the school will encourage once the action-planning phase begins.

- **Integrate data with existing work:** Building on past efforts and being intentional about integrating any new plans with current efforts will provide the best foundation for lasting success. This avoids inconsistencies in mission and focuses the team and community to ensure any proposals are directly connected to school-wide impact. Specifically, how do we use our current strengths and challenges to focus future planning? How do we connect feedback with our current school data (suspension rates, incidents reports, etc.) to make informed decisions? Goals discussed in this manner prevent leadership teams from working in an isolated environment, and ensure the complete profile of a school environment is focused towards learning and growth.
- **Communicate results effectively:** Surveys will produce findings that will speak to each population group differently. Breaking information into an easy to comprehend manner while addressing the diverse goals/issues of each population will likely increase future engagement. All groups should feel they have the necessary information and background to respond to results and an organized and consistent way to present ideas. An open forum for communication also provides the opportunity for leadership teams to present a realistic mapping for next steps and discussion of appropriate and timely benchmarks.

Summary

Effective school climate assessment is an essential part of the ongoing improvement process that drives school reform. Engaging the entire community in a collaborative dialogue to understand the particular strengths and needs of a school and develop targeted action plans from this data can be truly transformative. Through an intentional and iterative data-driven process, schools will be able to direct their resources in the most beneficial ways, and will have a better mechanism for benchmarking for improvement over time. District, State, and Federal policy continue to underscore the value of quality school climate assessment. Its influence on the development of healthy, positive learning environments will likely continue to grow in the years ahead due to strong research support for school climate as an important component of student success.

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