Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI):
A brief history of development

In 2002, the President and board chair of the National School Climate Center (then called the Center for Social and Emotional Education) recommended that the Center develop a school climate survey that would recognize student, parent/guardian and school personnel “voice” and the social, emotional and civic as well as intellectual dimensions of student learning and school life.

Following scientifically sound and established protocols that support the development of reliable and valid surveys, Jennifer Allen (then, director of education) and Jonathan Cohen began by meeting with fourteen educators, school-based mental health professionals and parent leaders to develop a list of conceptual questions around school climate as well as social, emotional and civic learning.

This work resulted in the first version of the CSCI (version 1.0) (then called ASSESS, Assessment of Social and Emotional Safety in Schools). Based on the work done thus far, it was suggested that the CSCI evaluate the following six factors or variables:
This first version was circulated to a group of colleagues to begin the process of clarifying, which questions were clear and understandable and which were not. This resulted in a second version of the tools being developed.

In 2003, Professor C. Hovner at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health piloted the school climate instrument with 261 school staff. This pilot study resulted in a number of suggestions about shortening the survey as well as how to operationalize some of the questions for greater clarity. Jennifer Allen, MAT and Sandra Sandy, Ph.D. (Research Director) then worked together to operationalize the survey items based on Professor Hovner’s suggestions, thus producing a third rough draft of a seven-factor survey.

Over the following months, we spent time editing and producing the fourth edition of ASSESS, which included eight versions for students (lower elementary; upper elementary; middle school and high school), school personnel (one version) and parents (elementary; middle and high school).

In the Spring of 2004, we conducted 24 focus groups with (i) students, (ii) parents, and (iii) school personnel to insure that adults and children of various ages consistently understood what the questions were aiming to learn. The findings from these focus groups resulted in significant revisions of the survey. We also re-named the survey the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI).

Beginning in December 2004 we began a second major wave of pilot testing where we asked students, teachers/staff/administration, and parents/guardians to note which items, if any, were unclear. In 2005 and 2006, we administered the CSCI to a group of K-12 schools and then completed factor analytic studies as well as telephone interviews with the principals who have used the CSCI. This study helps to identify strengths and weaknesses of the tool. This resulted in the CSCI, version 2.0 being developed (Chang, Sandy & Cohen, 2005).

An unpublished paper in 2006 (Sandy, Cohen, & Fisher, 2006) summarized our work to date.

In 2006, we asked three survey development experts to review all of the steps that we had taken and to (i) critique the scientific soundness of our work and (ii) make recommendations about how we could and should continue to develop the CSCI in a reliable and valid manner. Here is a summary of their comments (for a complete report of their findings, please write to jonathancohen@schoolclimate.org).
"The Center for Social and Emotional Education has developed a sound survey - the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory - that will go a long way towards helping schools to accurately evaluate their school climate and the effectiveness of their interventions, in this most critical area."

Kathy Burgoyne, Ph.D.
Senior Director of Capacity Building, Research, and Evaluation
Comprehensive Health Education Foundation

“The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) is being developed in a scientifically sound manner. The initial validity and reliability evidence is strong and studies are in accord with technical standards in the testing and measurement profession. Schools will be able to use this tool for social, emotional ethical and academic needs assessments as well as program evaluations.”

Madhabi Chatterji, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Measurement, Evaluation and Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

“I have reviewed the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) surveys and the activities that have been conducted and planned to validate these surveys. The CSCI has been developed in a scientifically sound manner. I believe that the CSCI will be a valuable tool for practitioners to improve K-12 schools.”

Chrys Dougherty, Ph.D.
Director of Research, National Center for Educational Accountability

In late 2008, we developed the third version of the CSCI. This new factor analysis was based on work we did with 16 schools in South Carolina and 64 urban, suburban and rural middle and high schools (37,523 students) in Ohio.

This third version of the survey could be completed under 20 minutes (and typically 15 minutes) and measures 10 dimensions of school climate for students and parents along with two additional dimensions for staff related to working environment. An unpublished paper in 2009 summarized our work to date (Stamler, Scheer, & Cohen, 2009).

The CSCI, version 3.0 has been administered to hundreds of schools and is – in part – the foundation for the new Iowa School Climate Measure. (NSCC recently completed a collaborate project with the Iowa State Department of Education on their federal Safe and Supportive Schools program.)

**Next steps in the development of the CSCI:** NSCC is involved with the following steps to make the CSCI an even more helpful tool:

- Recognizing the “voice” of the community and supporting the “whole village” to support the “whole child.” The NSCC has recently developed a new community
scale to compliment and extend our current student, parent/guardians and school personnel scales. In addition, we have developed a detailed student leadership/service learning guide that supports middle and high school students (under the supervision of an educator) to take the community version of the CSCI to various sectors of the community (Faith based, Law enforcement, Parent/family, Civic organizations, Philanthropic, Youth leaders, Higher education, School board, Business, Elected officials/policy makers, Health/Mental health, the Arts and Media) to both understand how community members perceive safety, relationships, teaching and learning and the institutional environment of the school but to also build meaningful ‘bridges’ between the school and community (National School Climate Center, 2011).

✔ Continuing reliability and validity testing: As noted above, this is an unending process and NSCC is committed to further studying the CSCI in ways that will support its becoming an even more reliable and valid tool.

The CSCI has recently been the focus on three independent evaluations. The first was a recent comparative study of 102 school climate surveys revealed that the CSCI was one of only three that met the American Psychological Associations criteria for being a reliable and valid school climate survey (Gangi, 2010). The second was the 2010 independent evaluation by Social Development Research Group (University of Washington) of 72 (i) social emotional learning measures and (ii) school climate surveys for middle schools reported that ten met their criteria for being reliable and valid. The CSCI was one of these ten measures and the only school climate measure that was recommended (Haggerty, Elgin & Woodley, 2010). In late 2010, the third independent valuation of the CSCI development process was conducted by Professor Ann Higgins-D’Alessandro and two of her doctoral students (Guo, Choe & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2011):


The National School Climate Center has recently launched version 4.0 of CSCI (CSCI 4.0_). This version has an additional dimension on ‘Social Media’ for all three populations. The NSCC’s research team is currently conducting the validity and reliability of this version of CSCI.

✔ School Climate Implementation Road Map: Promoting Democratically Informed School Communities and the Continuous Process of School Climate Improvement. Throughout the development of the CSCI, NSCC has been focused on how school climate data can be used to support the whole school community learning and
working together to support children’s healthy development and capacity to
learn. This Road Map synthesizes our understanding in this area. The NSCC Road
Map summarizes our school climate improvement model and implementation
strategy. It includes a series of tools (e.g. rubrics and protocols) that are
designed to support K-12 leadership teams addressing and mastering the tasks
and challenges that define each of the five stages of the school climate
improvement process. (To learn more about this Road Map, see:
www.schoolclimate.org/climate/process.php)

✔ School Climate Resource Center: School climate data is only helpful to the extent
that it is understand and used to bring the whole school community together to
learn and work together to create an even safer, more supportive, engaging,
helpfully challenging and joyful school for students to learn and teaches to teach.
NSCC’s School Climate Resource Center (SCRC) is a web-based resource that
supports continuous learning and school climate improvement efforts. The SCRC includes:
• A School Climate Implementation Road Map: Information about the tasks and
challenges that shape the improvement process as well as guidelines and tools
(protocols or learning activities) designed to support teams addressing these
tasks;
• Learning modules: Modules designed to support local study groups of
educators understanding and being able to address the tasks that shape the
improvement process as well as how to further pro-social instructional efforts;
• Connect – A Social forum: A forum designed to support school personnel and
parents learning from one another about common barriers and best practices;
• School climate standards: A section about the standards and a growing number
of measurer options and evidence-based strategies designed to actualize the
indicators that define the five national school climate standards.
• General information about school climate: Summaries of research, policy,
measurement tools and practice guidelines.

To learn more, see: http://scrc.schoolclimate.org/.

Conclusion: Survey development is – literally – an unending process. Today, the CSCI is
one of the most recognized and comprehensive school climate measures that assesses
to what extent students’, parents’ and school personnel feel safe, “connected’ and
engaged in school life. Developed over ten years of research and field-testing, the CSCI
is a scientifically reliable and valid survey tool that thousands of schools, districts,
networks of schools and several State Departments of Education (Ohio and Iowa) have used.

Contact Information:
Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D.
President, National School Climate Council
jonathancohen@schoolclimate.org

References:
(Note: If you would like to receive copies of any or all of these papers, please write to Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D. at the email noted above.)


National School Climate Center (2011). School Climate Improvement and the Importance of Recognizing Community Voice: NY, NY


Survey. Internal report to Center for Social Emotional Education (now known as the National School Climate Center).