

# School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice, and Teacher Education

JONATHAN COHEN

*Center for Social and Emotional Education  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
City University of New York*

ELIZABETH M. MCCABE

*Center for Social and Emotional Education  
George Washington University*

NICHOLAS M. MICHELLI

*City University of New York*

TERRY PICKERAL

*National Center for Learning and Citizenship  
Education Commission of the States*

**Background/Context:** *Educators have written about and studied school climate for 100 years. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. However, school climate is more than individual experience: It is a group phenomenon that is larger than any one person's experience. A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support*

*people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment. School climate refers to spheres of school life (e.g. safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the environment) as well as to larger organizational patterns (e.g., from fragmented to cohesive or “shared” vision, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unrecognized). These definitions were collaboratively developed and agreed upon at a consensus-building meeting of national practice and policy leaders organized in April 2007 by the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, and the Center for Social and Emotional Education.*

**Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study:** *This article examines the relationship between school-climate-related research findings on the one hand and educational policy, school improvement practice, and teacher education on the other.*

**Research Design:** *This article uses several research methods to understand the current state of school climate research, policy, practice, and teacher education: historical analysis, a review of the literature, a national State Department of Education policy scan, and a national survey (N = 40) of building, district, and state educational leaders about school climate measurement and improvement practices.*

**Findings/Results:** *A review of the literature reveals that a growing body of empirical research indicates that positive school climate is associated with and/or predictive of academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, students’ healthy development, and teacher retention. There is a glaring gap between these research findings on the one hand, and state departments of education, school climate policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education practice on the other.*

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** *We detail how the gap between school climate research, policy, practice, and teacher education is socially unjust and a violation of children’s human rights. We now have research-based guidelines that predictably support positive youth development and student learning. If we do so, we are supporting children, educators, parents, communities, and the foundation for democratic process, but as a country, we are not doing so. Our children deserve better. A series of detailed recommendations are suggested for policy makers, practice leaders, and teacher educators to narrow this gap and support student’s healthy development and capacity to learn.*

There is a glaring gap between school climate research findings on the one hand and policy, school improvement practice, and teacher educator efforts on the other. This gap undermines K–12 students’ ability to learn and develop in healthy ways.

Educators have recognized the importance of school climate for 100 years (Perry, 1908). However, it was not until the 1950s that educators began to systemically study school climate. The development of scientifically sound<sup>1</sup> school climate assessment tools spurred a research tradition that grows to this day.

There is not one universally agreed-upon definition of school climate. Practitioners and researchers use a range of terms, such as *atmosphere*, *feelings*, *tone*, *setting*, or *milieu* of the school (Freiberg, 1999; Homana, Barber, & Torney-Purta, 2006; Tagiuri, 1968). Some writers have focused on the subjective nature of school climate, and others have suggested that it is an “objective” facet of school life.

We suggest that school climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.<sup>2</sup> However, school climate is more than individual experience: It is a group phenomenon that is larger than any one person’s experience. School climate, or the character of the school, refers to spheres of school life (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the environment) and larger organizational patterns (e.g., from fragmented to cohesive or “shared” vision, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unrecognized).

A complex range of internal and external factors color and shape individual and, most important, collective experiences of school life—consciously and in unrecognized ways that we all pay attention to, remember, and attribute meanings to school experience as a result of our own internal experiences (e.g., fears and hopes) as well as interpersonal experience with students, school personnel, and family members. For example, if the majority of students come from families that have a pronounced view of school (positive and/or negative), this will naturally color students’ experiences of school. In an overlapping manner, the school does not exist in isolation. The nature of school life is naturally affected by the district and community (local, state, and national) that it operates within.

A multitude of factors color significant group trends that in turn shape the quality and character of the school or school climate (Freiberg, 1999). Although there is not one list of factors that shape the quality and character of school life, virtually all researchers agree that there are four major areas that clearly shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the (external) environment. Although some

state departments of education equate school climate with safety, the character of school life is clearly a function of multiple dimensions. And more often than not, there is not a consensus within schools about the climate. As we detail next, differences between school groups (e.g., adult and students) are fairly common and potentially provide an extraordinary springboard for community building and a democratic process.

This article summarizes recent school climate research findings. We describe how state department of education policy, school improvement practice, and teacher education is and is not aligned with this research. The field now has research-based school-climate-related guidelines that predictably reduce school violence and promote learning and school success in ways that lay the foundation for adults to be able to love, work, and participate in a democracy. Yet, we are not translating these research findings into policy and practice guidelines. When educators and policy makers know, with some certainty, how we can improve schools and learning, it is our moral responsibility to act on that knowledge. We suggest a series of “next steps” for practitioners and policy makers to consider.

## RESEARCH

100 years ago, Perry (1908) was the first educational leader to explicitly write about how school climate affects students and the process of learning. Although Dewey (1927) did not write explicitly about school climate, his focus on the social dimension of school life and the notion that schools should focus on enhancing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that support engaged democratic citizens implicitly touched on what kind of environment or climate the school reflects. These and other very early educational writings about school climate were, in essence, case studies. Empirically grounded school climate research began in the 1950s, when Hapin and Croft (1963) initiated a tradition of systemically studying the impact of school climate on student learning and development. Early systematic studies of school climate were also spurred by organizational research and studies in school effectiveness (Anderson, 1982; Creemers & Reezigt, 1999). Early school climate studies tended to focus on observable characteristics, like the physical plant and condition of the school (Anderson, 1982).

Over the last three decades, educators and researchers have recognized that complex sets of elements make up school climate. There is not one commonly accepted “list” of the essential dimensions that color and shape school climate. A review of research, practitioner, and scholarly writings suggests that there are four major aspects of school life that color and shape school climate (Cohen, 2006; Freiberg, 1999). Table 1

summarizes these four areas and “subdimensions” of these four spheres and linked indicators.

**Table 1. Four Essential Dimensions of School Climate (and some of the elements included within each)**

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<b>Dimension</b>
<b>I. Safety</b>
a. <i>Physical</i> (e.g., crisis plan; clearly communicated rules; clear and consistent violation response; people in the school feel physically safe; attitudes about violence)
b. <i>Social-emotional</i> (e.g., attitudes about individual differences; students' and adults' attitudes about and responses to bullying; conflict resolution taught in school; belief in school rules)
<b>II. Teaching and Learning</b>
a. <i>Quality of instruction</i> (e.g., high expectations for student achievement; all learning styles honored; help provided when needed; learning linked to “real life”; engaging materials; use of praise/reward; opportunities for participation; varied teaching methods; instructional leadership; creativity valued)
b. <i>Social, emotional and ethical learning</i> (e.g., social-emotional and academic learning valued/taught; varied “intelligences” appreciated; connections across disciplines)
c. <i>Professional development</i> (e.g., standards and measures used to support learning and continual improvement; professional development is systematic and ongoing; data-driven decision making linked to learning; school systems evaluated; teachers feel that this is relevant and helpful)
d. <i>Leadership</i> (compelling and clearly communicated vision; administrative accessibility and support; school leaders honor people at school)
<b>III. Relationships</b>
a. <i>Respect for diversity</i> (positive adult-adult relationships between/among teachers, administrators, and staff; positive adult-student relationships; positive student-student relationships; shared decision-making; common academic planning opportunities; diversity valued; student participation in learning and discipline; peer norms linked to learning, cooperative learning, conflict-violence prevention; being able to say “no”)
b. <i>School community &amp; collaboration</i> (mutual support and ongoing communication; school-community involvement; parent participation in school decision-making; shared parent-teacher norms vis-à-vis learning and behavior; student family assistance programs)
c. <i>Morale and “connectedness”</i> (students are engaged learners; staff are enthusiastic about their work; students connected to one or more adults; students/staff feel good about school and school community)
<b>IV. Environmental-Structural</b> (cleanliness; adequate space and materials; inviting aesthetic quality and size of school; curricular and extracurricular offerings)

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School climate has a profound impact on individual experience (Comer, 1980). Two aspects of school climate—commitment to school and positive feedback from teachers—have been shown to affect students' self-esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990). The social-emotional climate of schools is predictive of mothers' reports of their school-age children's alcohol use and psychiatric problems (Kasen, Johnson, & Cohen, 1990). Research has also revealed a relationship between school climate and student self-concept (Cairns, 1987; Heal, 1978; Reynolds, Jones, St. Leger, & Murgatroyd, 1980; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, &

Ouston, 1979). A series of studies have shown that positive school climate is associated with significantly lower levels of absenteeism. (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reid, 1982; Rumberger, 1987; Sommer, 1985) and is predictive of rate of student suspension (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

A growing body of research indicates that positive school climate is a critical dimension linked to effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, as well as teaching and learning (Cohen, 2001; Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2002; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Recent research reviews have shown that effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts are correlated with safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climates (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003).

Safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate fosters greater attachment to school and provides the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Osterman, 2000). One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate is relational and involves how “connected” people feel to one another in school. In fact, school connectedness, or to what extent students feel attached to at least one caring and responsible adult at school, has become an area of growing research and attention. School connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Whitlock, 2006) and violence prevention (Karcher, 2002a, 2002b), and as a protective factor in risky sexual, violence, and drug use behaviors (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterie, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Kirby, 2001).

These school climate research findings have contributed to the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), the U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Drug-Free Schools network, and a growing number of state departments of education emphasizing the importance of safe and caring schools.

School climate also promotes—or complicates—meaningful student learning. School climate powerfully affects student motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993; Goodenow & Crady, 1997). For example, activities like community service and debates enhance the learning environment by providing students opportunities to actively participate in the learning process and construct their own knowledge of social and government systems (Homana et al., 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). Moreover, when such activities are presented in a supportive, collaborative environment, they encourage students to build on one another’s

ideas on projects (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Together, the experience realistically represents the social situation that they may find themselves part of in the greater civil society (Bandura, 2001; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). In an overlapping manner, positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust (Ghaith, 2003; Finnan, Schnepel, & Anderson, 2003; Kerr, Ireland, Lopes, Craig, & Cleaver, 2004). Positive school climate, by definition, is characterized by strong collaborative communities. Research shows that this improves teacher practice through dialogue and collaboration around engaging classroom practice (Talbert, 2002).

To say that school climate promotes or complicates students' ability to learn and achieve academically is, on one hand, common sense. To the extent that students feel safe, cared for, appropriately supported, and lovingly "pushed" to learn, academic achievement should increase. In fact, this is what a series of studies from the United States and abroad have shown (see e.g., Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1977; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Freiberg, 1999; Good & Weinstein, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1999; Madaus, Airasian, & Kellaghan, 1980; McNeely et al., 2002; Rutter, 1983; Rutter et al., 1979; Sherblom, Marshall, & Sherblom, 2006; Shipman, 1981; Whitlock, 2006).

Considering a positive climate for citizenship education more globally and comprehensively also raises questions about how schools can most optimally promote these important learning activities even beyond the classroom environment. Encouraging active and collaborative learning on authentic projects is most effective in an environment that has a civic mission and that encourages trusting relationships among all members of the school community (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003; Comer, 2005; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Wentzel, 1997).

School climate also has bearing on teacher education and retention. One of the most powerful statements on the connection between school climate and issues affecting teacher education is the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future's *Induction Into Learning Communities*. This monograph defines school climate in terms of a learning community and correctly argues that to be effective, induction must be into a healthy school climate. The connection between this conception of induction and retention is made. Teacher education programs are sometimes criticized because of the high attrition of beginning teachers. Preparing school leaders who understand the critical role of a school climate that promotes collaboration and learning communities and teachers who understand the importance of such a climate has implications for

teacher education (Chauncey, 2005; Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005).

As noted earlier and outlined in Table 1, a complex variety of factors and forces shape the quality and character of school. However, it is clear that one of the single most important “forces” is the school leader: the principal. There is compelling research support for the notion that after the classroom teacher, the building leader is the most important “force” that shapes student learning (Wallace Foundation, 2006). From a wide range of educational and organizational development findings, it is well known that the leader of an organization sets the tone and explicit or implicit norms of behavior. To what extent do principals really recognize and honor the teaching and learning in the building (Hagstrom, 2004)? To what extent do people—students and teachers alike—trust that it is safe to make mistakes and/or to differ from others (Kramer & Cook, 2004)? To what extent does the principal care about and substantively support the development of a shared vision, or “goal agreement” (Khademian, 2002; Maranto & Maranto, 2006; Senge, 2006)? The answers to these questions profoundly shape the character of the school on the one hand, and learning and behavior on the other.

We are still very much in the process of learning why positive school climate predicts academic achievement and positive youth development. In broad strokes, it seems that positive school climate leads to a greater focus on and attunement to what students need to develop in healthy ways and learn, and what teachers need to teach (Comer, 2005; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001; Ingersoll, 2006). But in fact there are clearly complex sets of forces that shape the quality and character of each school, and we have much to learn about the specific needs of different types of schools. What is clear is that school climate matters.

In sum, there is a compelling, and growing, body of research that underscores the importance of school climate. Positive school climate promotes student learning, academic achievement, school success, and healthy development, as well as effective risk prevention, positive youth development efforts, and increased teacher retention. However, these research findings are not reflected in current educational policy, practice, or teacher education efforts. It is to these topics that we now turn.

## POLICY

State departments of education have not yet responded adequately to these important findings. In fact, a recent state department of education school policy scan revealed significant shortcomings in how climate is defined, measured, and incorporated into policies. This gap is especially problematic because state policy has become increasingly influential in



guiding school reform efforts. The CSEE and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at Education Commission of the States carried out this scan. We now summarize the five major areas that we examined in this national policy scan. (1) To what extent is school climate recognized and defined? (2) To what extent is school climate measured? (3) To what extent is there climate-related leadership at the state level? (4) To what extent have states included school climate in their general accountability systems? (5) To what extent is climate-related technical assistance a part of the state accountability systems?

## THE POLICY CONTENT

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) pushes states to broaden their accountability systems and link them to state technical assistance policies. NCLB's focus on schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) has led states to experiment with new ways of improving schools. By labeling schools rather than students as "failing," states must view educational improvements as schoolwide efforts. Recent trends like using comprehensive school reform (CSR) and school-based management models are examples of transferring the improvement unit of analysis from individuals, or groups of individuals, to schools. School climate fits well into this policy-supported movement because climate is a holistic concept; it can only be measured or changed from all angles and elements of a school.

The sanctions and technical assistance associated with NCLB apply only to schools that receive Title 1 funds. Therefore, the decisions that states make regarding how to help "failing" schools improve affect the most "in-need" students. These policy decisions provide opportunities for important issues like school climate to become state, district, and school-level priorities in schools needing attention.

Although the policy context provides a rationale for studying state policy at this time, this scan was not limited to accountability policies. Instead, the scan focused broadly on climate-related policies in all state education departments. Regardless of the demands of NCLB-influenced accountability, states are largely responsible for educational funding and regulatory policies. The level of state influence naturally varies according to level of centralization, yet overall trends in recent decades reveal state dominance over school policy.

## METHODS

This study entailed document analysis and descriptive statistical methods. The authors searched for climate-related policies in state legislative

documents, state standard sets, and documents linked to states' accreditation and NCLB evaluation and support systems. The legislative documents were gathered using LexisNexis, and the standards and other state documents were located through State Department of Education Web sites. Policy details were stored in a database created by the authors.

The researchers developed four criteria to assess states' climate policy status: organization of programs or policies, measurement of climate as endorsed or supported by the state departments of education, definitions of climate used in policy documents, and infrastructure and resources to support technical assistance for climate policy implementation. Rubrics were created for each criterion to assess the states on several subfactors. For example, the measurement rubrics listed types of assessments ranging from scientifically validated climate assessments to informal checklists. Table 2 lists the criteria and subindicators used in the rubrics. Descriptive statistics were computed showing the quantity and percentages of states meeting key criteria on the rubrics.

**Table 2. Rubric Indicators Used to Assess the Four Criteria**

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Subindicator(s) used to develop rubrics</b>
Organization	Inclusion/exclusion in accountability system Inclusion/exclusion in special education programs or policies Inclusion/exclusion in health programs or policies State-level leadership
Measurement	Type of measurement used (scientific soundness, format) Availability of measurement Measurement linked/not linked to technical assistance
Definition	Level of accuracy Breadth of definitions Level of prescription in standards definitions
Technical Assistance	Contact person/office provided Resources made available for implementation assistance Measurement linked/not linked to technical assistance

For each subindicator, binary nominal coding was used to assess presence or lack of presence for the subindicators. Because the codes were all binary, each state could have or not have the qualities of interest for each subindicator. For example, several characteristics of definitions were listed, and for each subindicator, states were investigated in terms of whether the state policy documents showed any evidence of those characteristics. Occasionally, states were temporarily labeled as "somewhat" if the evidence showed partial evidence of certain subindicators. As a result, there are numeric values for each subindicator, signifying presence, lack of presence, and partial presence (when applicable) across all states.

Missing data were only recorded and considered in the analysis when lack of existence in one category precluded the state from consideration in a different subindicator. For example, states that showed no evidence of quality or improvement standards could not be assessed in terms of the characteristics of their quality or improvement standards, and for those characteristics, the state would be coded as missing data. However, for initial categories that did not rely on existence in other categories, coding data as missing was not necessary because the researchers were fortunately able to collect data on all states.

## FINDINGS

One important issue in state climate policy is that many states have left climate out of their general accountability systems. As summarized in Table 3, although 22 states have integrated climate policy into their improvement and accreditation systems, 6 did so only partially, and the remaining 22 consider climate solely a health, special education, or school safety issue. The later categorization contradicts current thinking about how school climate is related to whole school improvement and academic achievement.

**Table 3. Findings by Subindicator**

Subindicator	Number of states coded as "presence"	Number of states coded as "partial presence"	Missing data
Inclusion/exclusion in accountability system	22	6	N/A
Inclusion/exclusion in special education programs or policies	9	0	N/A
Inclusion/exclusion in health programs or policies	11	0	N/A
State-level leadership	18	0	N/A
Scientifically sound measurement	1	0	21
Criterion referenced, non-scientifically-sound measurement	3	0	21
Informal checklists linked to standards	7	0	21
Informal surveys	12	0	21
Alignment to standards without protocols provided	6	0	21
Measurement available	26	0	21
Measurement linked/not linked to technical assistance	18	0	21
Definitions found in climate policies	42	0	N/A
Accurate definitions	6	0	8
Broad, inclusive definitions	12	0	8
Prescriptive standards	14	0	22
Resources made available for implementation assistance	8	0	8

As noted earlier, school climate is directly related to academic achievement. Contrary to this important finding, some states focus all or most improvement efforts on curricular reforms through additional testing, teacher professional development in math and literacy, and academic resources, ignoring the role of climate. When states exclude climate from their measures of school quality systems, schools are not required to demonstrate their competence with measuring and promoting positive school climate. It is thus up to local officials to take the initiative to pursue climate policies. Given the high stakes of schools not aligning their policies to state frameworks, schools are unlikely to pursue school climate policies voluntarily to a great extent.

On the other hand, many state health, special education, and school safety arenas incorporate school climate policies and programs. Nine states administer Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai et al., 2000) program or the School-Wide Information System (SWIS) program, and 11 states administer coordinated school health programs (CSHPs).<sup>3</sup> Both of these models refer to positive school climate as one of many program outcomes. Less frequently, states incorporate school climate objectives into their character education (seven states), truancy programs (four states), dropout prevention activities (three states), and violence prevention policies (six states).

Even if the climate policies housed in health, special education, and safety are strong in content, their isolation from general accountability is disconcerting. Schools, especially those receiving Title I funds, are under tremendous pressure to abide by state and federal academic regulations. It is therefore logical to consider climate as an integral element of achievement, a part of the academic picture.

## DEFINITIONS

Thirty-six states' climate policy statements relied on vague, meaningless definitions of school climate. For example, 30 states commonly referred to positive school climate as one that is "conducive to learning" without prescribing characteristics that can be translated into measures or program goals. Only six states included the term *subjective experiences* in their climate definitions. State officials are likely challenged by the seemingly wide array of climate definitions used; there could appear to be little consensus or clarity about what climate is.

There is a set of dimensions commonly found in the climate research literature that includes subjective perceptions of the environment, safety, teaching and learning, relationships, sense of community, morale, peer norms, school-home relations, and learning and community. Twenty-one

states select one of the dimensions of climate, such as safety or sense of community, and create policy based only on that dimension, whereas only 12 states reference broad, inclusive definitions. Both of these errors—using none of the dimensions or selecting only one—mislead practitioners who interpret the policies. Without using accurate, prescriptive language in documents, climate policies are unlikely to transform practice effectively. Further, valid measurement is hindered when practitioners have unclear notions of what climate is.

## MEASUREMENT

Although several scientifically sound measures are currently available to states, only one state department of education, Rhode Island, has formally endorsed or mandated use of a research-proven climate assessment. Other state climate measurement methods include criterion-referenced, yet not research-proven, assessments (3 states); informal checklists linking observations to climate standards (7 states); informal surveys (12 states); and alignment to standards (without specified protocols; 6 states). For example, six states require schools to demonstrate their alignment to indicators such as “an emphasis on student achievement” or a “sense of community.” Not only are these constructs difficult to measure without validity testing, but the thousands of administrators in each state will interpret “alignment” differently.

The fact that 29 states have made available or mandated climate assessments, yet only one refers to those supported by research, is problematic. A recent survey of 40 school leaders from across the United States revealed that many principals develop their own “homegrown” school climate questionnaire (MMS Education, 2006; see the next section, School-Climate-Related Practice, for detail). This is also problematic because there is no way of really knowing whether these surveys are reliably evaluating what school leaders hope is being assessed.

## LEADERSHIP

Climate-related leadership at the state level is generally underdeveloped. Strong, clearly defined leadership roles are a precursor to effective climate policy design, implementation, and evaluation at the state level. Only nine states have established specific positions for experts leading climate-related policies and programs, and another nine include climate in state leaders’ lists of responsibilities. In fact, it is difficult to identify which offices house climate specialists in many states. Revisiting the policy context, even if states emphasize school climate in their accountability

systems, an ambiguous leadership infrastructure will likely hinder the creation and dissemination of helpful resources for schools attempting to measure or improve their school climate conditions.

Fifteen states have infused climate indicators into their leadership standards, which are used to guide assessment of potential and existing school leaders. For example, one state's leadership standards have an entire climate standard, with substandards describing a leader's ability to promote collegiality and a positive learning environment. Leadership standards appear to be a promising way for some states to develop school-level leaders with climate expertise, yet they should be supplemented with state-level leadership to promote coherence and consistency. And again, the use of standards to assess leaders should be guided by valid, reliable instruments.

## QUALITY AND IMPROVEMENT STANDARDS

Twenty-two states have incorporated school climate into their accountability standards by including climate standards in their quality and improvement standards sets. The meanings of these standards differ in each state based on several factors. First, the usage varies. Although the quality standards are predominantly used for accreditation evaluation for all schools in a given state, improvement standards are generally used to assess and assist those schools that have been identified as in need of improvement under NCLB and its related state policies. Twelve states have included climate indicators in their improvement standards, and 10 states have included climate indicators in their quality standards. Both of these types of standards are different from student outcome standards, which rarely include school climate indicators in any state. Second, climate standards differ based on depth. Whereas seven standards sets include an entire detailed and specific climate standard, 15 include minor references to climate within other standards topics, such as community involvement. Finally, the standards' levels of influence vary based on the state policy and political context. Although some accountability policies are considered high stakes, meaning that the consequences for not meeting quality or improvement standards are quite serious, other accountability policies have lower stakes, with some even being voluntary benchmarks.

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The climate-related technical assistance that states provide to schools as a part of their accountability systems is frequently tied to the data gleaned

through assessments linked to quality and improvement standards. In the case of school climate, 10 of the 12 states with climate-included school improvement standards, and 8 of the 10 states with climate-included school quality standards, link the data to technical assistance by creating school-specific improvement plans if climate appears to be a major ailment in a given school. This fact highlights the importance of improving the measures used to assess school climate in the first place. Very little information about the content of climate-related technical assistance was located during this scan.

One important finding was that the breadth and depth of climate-related technical assistance was stronger for the PBIS, SWIS, and CSHP programs than it was for the climate initiatives embedded in general accountability policies. Health, special education, and school safety climate-related policies often have systematic ways to answer school leaders' and teachers' questions regarding program implementation and the intricacies of measurement. For example, six of the nine state PBIS programs are linked to internal and external reference lists, including practical implementation guides and background reading for site program leaders, whereas only two of the accountability-embedded climate policies did so. At the very least, those resources should be referred to in policy statements within the accountability arena or, better yet, the climate-based technical assistance resources should be consolidated into user-friendly centers for school climate issues and concerns that cross departments.

Many state accountability systems are designed to align standards, measures, and technical assistance for schools that show signs of weakness in areas such as school climate. This method will only foster positive school climate if (1) the standards and measures are based on sound definitions of school climate; (2) the measures used to design school improvement and technical assistance plans are scientifically sound; and (3) state departments of education have the leadership and practical skills to translate data into innovative policies. In this way, deficiencies in the first set of policy elements (definitions, measurement, and leadership) are inherently linked to the later set (standards and technical assistance).

Making school climate a greater priority in states will require more than increasing or changing the nature of policy documents. It is unlikely that a federally influenced state policy will affect classrooms if implementation plans are not prepared to ensure accurate interpretation and evaluation at the district and local levels. It is important to consider districts' and schools' capacity to implement the policy dimensions (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O'Toole, 1990); the variance in administrators' interpretations and cognition of the policy content (Spillane, 1998); and the

coherence between the state policies and local objectives and existing programs (Honig & Hatch, 2004).

In sum, there is a significant gap in research and policy in terms of school climate, which derives from several problems. The first major problem is inconsistency and inaccuracy in terms of school climate definition. Second, state policy makers have made poor choices in terms of school climate measurement at the state level, although there are superior options. The third problem is a lack of defined climate-related leadership at the state level. Fourth, many states continue to isolate school climate policy in health, special education, and school safety arenas without integrating it into school accountability policies. Finally, many states have not yet created quality or improvement standards, which can easily link data to improvement plans and technical assistance. These ailments, in combination with underdeveloped implementation planning, will hinder schools' abilities to promote positive school climate through policy.

The fact that many policy makers have chosen not to incorporate climate policies and programs into their accountability systems is understandable in the context of NCLB. Because school climate is not measured under NCLB, states are less likely to focus on school climate than they are on tested curricular subjects like math, reading, and science. In this case, what is measured is what counts, and those NCLB-based outcomes have become states' focus for policy formulation.

States bear much of the financial burden of the consequences for schools if they do not meet AYP. Specifically, states must pay for, administer, and evaluate school improvement plans for underperforming schools; fund or contribute to funding for school choice obligations, supplemental services, and corrective action for schools that do not meet AYP; and perhaps compensate for potential losses of Title 1 funding if schools underperform or are negligent within NCLB regulations. To avoid these potential financial burdens, states are motivated to make their own assessment strategies aligned with those of NCLB. Further, because assessment drives policy, state policies increasingly mirror federal policies. It is therefore our conclusion that even if leaders in state departments of education and state legislatures value school climate as an outcome and as a means to bolster student achievement, NCLB provides incentives to ignore those values in their policy formulation.

#### SCHOOL-CLIMATE-RELATED PRACTICE: ASSESSMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

There are two overlapping dimensions that shape school-climate-related practice: assessment and school improvement guidelines.



## ASSESSMENT

Educational practice is driven by what we measure. Today, we primarily measure reading and mathematical achievement and, to a greater or lesser extent, physical safety. There is a growing awareness that we need to measure the social, emotional, ethical, and cognitive dimensions of school life. Evaluating school climate provides one window into the social, emotional, ethical, and academic dimensions of K–12 school life. In fact, school leaders appreciate the fundamental importance of school climate. The CSEE recently commissioned a national survey of 40 school leaders (principals, superintendents, state departments of education, and national level leaders) from across the United States (MMS Education, 2006).<sup>4</sup> Over 90% of the school leaders interviewed indicated that school climate was an area of interest and focus. In fact, 82% stated that school climate was an “extremely important” or “very important” topic. Importantly, 79% of the school leaders who used school climate evaluations discovered that they generated positive school improvement change. The majority of those interviewed believed that interest in school climate and scientifically sound ways of assessing school climate would significantly increase over the next 5 years.

Although there are hundreds of school climate measures, school leaders are not using scientifically sound assessment tools that are comprehensive in two ways: evaluating most or all of the dimensions that researchers believe color and shape school climate, and recognizing the three major groups in school communities: students, parents, and school personnel (Cohen, 2006; Freiberg, 1999). In fact, most school climate measures have not been developed in a scientifically sound manner. In our center’s recent national survey (MMS Education, 2006), we found that 59% (19 of 32) district- and building-level administrators interviewed had participated in school climate surveys. Of those, 37% had developed the instrument in-house. They were not scientifically sound assessment tools.

There are four school climate measures that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner and recognize K–12 student, parent, and school personnel experience. Two focus on demarcated facets of school climate. The CharacterPlus (2002) measure focuses on character education-related issues (e.g., community participation, character education policy, identifying and defining character traits). A series of reliability and some validity studies have been conducted on this measure. However, this work has not been published in a peer-reviewed journal. The K12 School Climate and Diversity Surveys focus on bullying and how members of the school community manage differences (e.g., gender,

race, sexual orientation). This work has been reported in a chapter (Holt & Keyes, 2003).

There are two school climate measures that not only evaluate K–12 student, parent, and school personnel experience but also assess virtually all the dimensions that scholars believe color and shape school climate: High Performance Learning Community Assessments (HiPlaces Assessments) and the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI). The HiPlaces measure takes administrators and teachers 120 and 75 minutes, respectively, to complete and has been developed in a scientifically sound manner (e.g., Felner et al., 2001). This measure is organized around the notion that the following eight dimensions ensure success for all students: (1) empower decision making at all levels; (2) reengage families in the education of their students; (3) connect schools with communities; (4) foster health and safety; (5) create small, personalized communities for learning; (6) develop well-prepared teachers; (7) implement deep, integrated standards-based instruction; and (8) maintain emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The report and recommendations are linked to structural/organizational conditions, attitudes/norms/expectations, skills/knowledge base/preparations, and climate/experiential conditions.

The CSCI takes 15–20 minutes to complete and has been developed in a scientifically sound manner (Stamler, Scheer & Cohen, 2008). The CSCI is organized around the following four school climate dimensions: safety (physical and social-emotional), relationships (respective for diversity; morale; leadership; home-school partnerships), teaching and learning (quality of instruction; social, emotional, and ethical learning; professional development; leadership), and the (external) environment. The CSCI report includes three sets of recommendations and research-based guidelines: (1) 10 process recommendations (how to do it); (2) 5 action recommendations (where to start); and (3) 10 sets of programmatic recommendations, which provide detailed guidelines and instructional, systemic, and other recommendations linked to the 10 factors that make up the CSCI. Too often, tests—be they an individual student’s psychoeducational test findings or school climate findings—are not fully understood or used to foster a meaningful process of learning and improvement. As a result, the CSCI is linked to a School Climate Portal, which includes research-based information, guidelines, tools, and mini-learning communities related to the five stages of school climate improvement: (1) planning, (2) evaluation, (3) understanding evaluation findings and collaboratively developing an action plan, (4) implementing the action plan, and (5) reevaluation and planning for the next cycle of school climate improvement.

## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GUIDELINES

There is not one accepted set of school climate improvement practice guidelines. At the state level, we suggest that Ohio has the most developed school climate guidelines (Ohio State Department of Education, 2006). This resource includes nine guidelines with linked, operationally defined benchmarks.

A growing number of major educational centers and coalitions are calling for safe and caring schools, including the Learning First Alliance. The Learning First Alliance (2001) comprises the national elementary, middle, and high school principal associations; the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD); the National Associations of Colleges of Teacher Education; teachers; chief state school officers; school boards; the National PTA; and the Education Commission of the States. They have suggested four key dimensions that promote a climate of learning: (1) a supportive learning community; (2) systematic approaches to supporting safety and positive behavior; (3) involvement of families, students, school staff, and the surrounding community; and (4) standards and measures to support continual improvement based on data.

School climate reflects patterning students', school personnel's, and parents' social, emotional, ethical, and academic experiences of school life. Over the last decade, research studies from a range of historically somewhat disparate fields (e.g., risk prevention, health promotion, character education, mental health, and social-emotional learning) have identified research-based school improvement guidelines that predictably create safe, caring, responsive, and participatory schools (American Psychological Association, 2003; Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg, Durlak, Taylor, Dymnicki, & O'Brien, 2007). The School Climate Resource Center of the CSEE National School Climate Center synthesizes this research and provides a series of guidelines, tools, and mini-learning communities to support data-driven decision-making and learning linked to a five-stage model of school climate improvement.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, when school communities purposively engage in the process of school climate improvement, we are promoting the student—and adult—skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for participation in a democracy. Effective school climate improvement efforts are necessarily a community-wide effort. School personnel, students, and parents must learn and work together to plan for the school improvement process. All members of the school community must let one another know what they think is working best in school and what the

school needs now. There must be a process for the school community to understand what these evaluation findings mean. If parents and educators believe that social bullying, for example, is a mild to moderately severe problem, but students report that it is severe, this needs to be understood. (In fact, when this occurs, we are potentially promoting student and parent participation, and hence school connectedness.) In an overlapping manner, to the extent that all members of the school community have a voice in prioritizing implementation goals and action planning, sustained implementation efforts have a much greater likelihood of actually transforming schools.

We suggest that these are steps that all schools can and need to engage in. Although rhetoric about “school community” may be more prevalent in Deweyesque schools, more traditional schools can, and often do, empower staff, parents, and students to intentionally consider “our community” in any number of helpful ways.

In Table 4, we list the underlying skills and dispositions that we believe are required for participation in a democracy. These are the same skills and dispositions needed for students and adults to understand school climate findings and set in motion the process of school climate improvement. These are social, emotional, ethical, and cognitive capacities. In fact, students are always learning social, emotional, and ethical “lessons” from teachers and parents. Sometimes, adults “teach” these lessons consciously, purposively, and helpfully. Sometimes, we are not aware of the social emotional lessons we are teaching. We do know that there is a core set of social emotional competencies and ethical dispositions that provide the foundation for student learning and violence prevention and that these are the same skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for adults to be able to love, work, and participate effectively in a democracy (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Michelli, 2006).

**Table 4. Skills and Dispositions Required for Participation in a Democracy**

<b>Essential Skills</b>	<b>Essential Dispositions</b>
Ability to listen to ourselves and others	Responsibility or the inclination to respond to others in appropriate ways
Ability to be critical and reflective	Appreciation of our existence as social creatures who need others to survive and thrive
Ability to be flexible problem solvers and decision makers, including the ability to resolve conflict in creative, nonviolent ways	Appreciation of and inclination toward involvement with social justice
Communicative abilities (e.g., being able to participate in discussions and argue thoughtfully)	Inclination to serve others and participate in acts of good will
Collaborative capacities (e.g., learning to compromise and work together toward a common goal)	

In sum, there is a significant gap between school climate research and practice that derives from several problems. First, school climate is not regularly evaluated with measures that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner on the one hand, and comprehensively (e.g., assessing all the dimensions that shape subjective experience in schools and assessing K–12 students, parents, and school personnel) on the other. In American education, if it is not measured, it does not count. Second, it is unclear to what extent school climate improvement efforts are aligned with research findings. We are not aware of systematic studies of these efforts. Our impression is that too often, school climate improvement efforts are fragmented, short-lived, and not aligned with research-based guidelines. Our national policy scan (described above) reveals that there is growing state- and district-level interest in evidence-based school climate improvement efforts. However, research-based guidelines are not included in the vast majority of state- or district-level policy and practice guidelines.

#### THE EDUCATION OF EDUCATORS

Understanding about school climate is largely absent in teacher education efforts. School climate is an often overlooked factor in explaining student achievement.

In large measure, programs to prepare teachers and other educational professionals, especially school leaders, have not attended to what we know about school climate as an important factor in the satisfaction of teachers and in promoting student learning. Why is job satisfaction of teachers important? One of the most persistent problems in education is the instability of the teaching force. Significant attrition plagues the profession. It is estimated that by the fifth year after entry, 46% of teachers have left the profession (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003)—which is actually a low estimate. The attrition rates for some programs, especially alternate route programs, are much higher, approaching 60% (Boyd, Lankford, Grossman, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006). Not only does this mean that students consistently get inexperienced teachers, but it also means that the expense of preparing teachers is elevated when we consider attrition. Why do teachers leave teaching? Two of the most often cited factors by Ingersoll (2001) in his research identifying reasons for leaving teaching are directly related to school climate: poor administrative support and lack of faculty influence.

In fact, there is a growing body of research that confirms a relationship between teacher retention and school climate. Naturally, a variety of

factors contribute to teacher retention or lack of it. Teacher turnover is strongly correlated with the individual characteristics of the teacher (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Barkanic & Maislin, 1998). But one of the largest studies that used data from the National Center for Educational Statistics revealed that school-climate-related factors—such as inadequate support from school administrators, student discipline problems, and limited faculty input into school decision making—contributed to higher rates of turnover after controlling for the characteristics of both teachers and schools (Ingersoll, 2001). (Low salary was the other major factor that contributed to poor teacher retention.) A growing body of additional studies from special education and general education confirm that school climate is a significant factor contributing to, or minimizing, this problem (Billingsley, 2004; Brownell, Miller, & Smith, 1999; Davis & Jordon, 1994; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Shann, 1998).

We argue that school climate is directly related to these factors. In a school with a healthy school climate, administrators know how to support teachers in their work, and such support is perceived and appreciated by teachers. In a school with a healthy school climate, teachers believe that they are influential in affecting what happens in the school; they have “agency.” These two qualities are specifically included in our list of elements involving school climate:

- *Relationships*: Positive adult-adult relationships between and among teachers, administrators, and staff; positive adult-student relationships; positive student-student relationships; shared decision-making; common academic planning opportunities; diversity valued; student participation in learning and discipline.
- *Sense of school community*: Students and adults feel and demonstrate sense of community in the school.

Why is there a significant gap between school climate research and the education of teachers? Teacher education programs are often prescribed by state regulation, accreditation standards, or the limited number of credits available. It is much more likely for programs to directly address issues on which the students of their graduates will be tested—primarily mathematics and English language arts. This is especially true as we continue to measure the quality of schools and, through value-added assessments, the quality of schools and colleges of education on the basis of standardized test scores. In urban areas, where colleges supply a large number of teachers for a particular system, there is pressure to focus on the adopted curriculum in areas to be measured at the expense of

everything else. There are other very important outcomes of education that are more difficult to measure, including the critical role school climate can have in shaping a population that understands and lives by democratic values. It is only within a healthy school climate that we are likely to achieve these ends, and finding a means to assess these outcomes is important. But we are reminded of what Albert Einstein is alleged to have said, “Not everything we count counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” Because school climate is a relatively recent focus of interest, it is not surprising that many teacher educators are unaware of contemporary work in this area and is not part of teacher education programs or standards for such programs.

We suggest that two additional steps will support and further teacher education in this area: social, emotional, and ethical curriculum guidelines, and case method learning resources.

By definition, school climate recognizes the social, emotional, ethical, academic, and environmental dimensions of school life. Improving school climate necessarily implies promoting students’—and adults’—social, emotional, and ethical abilities and dispositions. But educators do not have a comprehensive K–12 social, emotional, and ethical learning curriculum based on the best available knowledge about social, emotional, and ethical learning, the development of social and emotional competence and ethical dispositions, and interactions between emotional, cognitive, and social learning. When this is developed, it can serve as a prototype for educators to adapt to the particulars of individual schools, school districts, and/or states. Because significant dimensions of school climate are social, emotional, and ethical, a research-informed curriculum that specifies social, emotional, and ethical learning outcomes by age can help educators create a facilitative social and emotional climate in schools. (It is important to note here that some good social and emotional learning curricula exist, but each is limited in either age range or in the scope of the content, or has a limited research base.)

Case method learning, as used in schools of business, law, and medicine but underdeveloped in schools of education, is an ideal way to help both preservice and in-service teachers learn about school climate. Imagine a collection of case studies created from schools with different climates that can be analyzed and discussed from multiple perspectives. Imagine also a summary of research on school climate and relevant research on social and emotional learning that accompanies the collection of cases. Finally, imagine guided instruction to accompany the cases that leads students to proficiency in assessing school climate and constructing recommendations for producing changes in climate.

## IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The United Nations 1948 Convention on the Rights of Children decrees that governments have a responsibility to ensure that every child has equal access to a quality education adapted to meet the child's needs (United Nations, 1948). To actualize this goal, schools must respect the inherent dignity of the child, create a climate of tolerance of, respect for, and appreciation of human differences, and bar practices of bullying and disciplinary practices that harm or humiliate. We now have a series of research-based guidelines that predictably promote a K–12 climate for learning, respect, tolerance, and safety. These research-based guidelines also include a set of instructional guidelines focused on promoting social, emotional, ethical, and “academic” learning (American Psychological Association, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Cohen, 2006; Weissberg et al., 2007; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). In other words, there is now a growing body of empirical support for the notion that we can intentionally promote K–12 students' social, emotional, ethical, and cognitive capacities and dispositions, as well as create a climate for learning. There is not one way or one curriculum that furthers these goals and research-based interventions. However, these research-based guidelines are not integrated into current policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education efforts. We suggest that this is a violation of children's rights.

What can and should we do to close the glaring gap between school climate research findings on the one hand, and policy, practice, and teacher education on the other? We have three sets of suggestions pertaining to policy, school practice, and teacher education.

### POLICY

First, we suggest that policy makers use the vast climate resources available to them by research and academic institutions. Officials do not need to feel overwhelmed by the complexity of defining and measuring school climate. The recent proliferation of academics and research centers specializing in climate problems and solutions ensure that policy makers can call on experts for advice. It is up to policy makers to pursue, or at least to be open to partnerships with, nongovernmental organizations, which can guide them through research-based policy development.

Collaboration across sectors is increasingly common in other educational policy areas such as teacher recruitment, professional development, test development, and others. Only a few examples of cross-sector



partnering exist in climate policy, such as Rhode Island's university-non-profit-government collaborative. Of course motivation, capacity, and open-mindedness are prerequisites for such team building.

As policy makers respond to the details of NCLB's likely reauthorization, and as they continually adjust their accountability systems in future years, it is vital that climate is included as a critical component. State standards, including quality and improvement standards, influence practice in an unprecedented way. It would be harmful for the 26 states that have, until now, excluded climate to continue to isolate climate policy in the health, special education, and safety arenas. State legislatures should not pass standards sets without adequately infusing climate indicators. Policy makers can present compelling arguments to legislators and other officials, based on the plentitude of research findings, linking school climate to academic achievement.

Policy makers should also realize that what is measured under NCLB drives policy at the state level, and there are positive and negative implications of this relationship. If NCLB's reauthorization was to broaden the types of outcomes used to assess schools, states could develop policies that respond to a greater variety school improvement needs. School climate should be measured by all schools, especially if they are underperforming, and the data produced should inform school improvement strategies.

The narrow policy focus stemming from NCLB is especially disconcerting; the school improvement guidelines differentially impact schools in high-need communities because the financial consequences of not meeting AYP apply only to Title I schools. This NCLB-state policy relationship is inadvertently depriving high-poverty schools the opportunities to raise student achievement through climate policies and programs. Schools that rely most heavily on state programs and policies deserve to have greater access to climate initiatives.

Federal agents, such as education department officials and federally funded technical assistance centers, can play important roles in state policy. One of these roles can be a broker of information about effective policy across states. Another federal role is to support experimentation with climate initiatives to improve low-performing schools. The federal government can continue to allow state flexibility while still highlighting significant needs. In short, we recommend that educational policy be developed and funded to support scientifically sound school climate assessment and improvement efforts. The fact that most states do not have such policy is clearly one of the important reasons that there is such a gap between research and practice today.

## SCHOOL PRACTICE

Educational policy shapes practice. It is most important that school climate be evaluated in an ongoing manner with measurement tools that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner. Although measures that evaluate one or two of the three major school audiences—students, parents, and school personnel—can provide a useful snapshot of school life, these measures are dramatically less useful to set in motion of process of substantive school climate improvement. By definition, school climate or social, emotional, ethical, and academic school improvement is necessarily a community-wide effort: students, parents, and school personnel learning and working together. As such, there are compelling reasons for practitioners to learn about comprehensive school climate measures.

Evaluation is necessarily only one step in an ongoing process of learning and school improvement. What matters most is how we understand and use evaluation findings to set in motion vital learning communities that support evidence-based social, emotional, ethical, and academic learning. We now have literally hundreds of empirical studies that underscore that we can translate research findings into safer schools that promote achievement over a 3–5-year period. Today, our challenge is to support the process of “scaling up” these research-based guidelines with hundreds and thousands of schools (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Coburn, 2003; Cohen, 2006; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). We strongly concur with Maurice Elias and colleagues (2003) that we need to generate a series of case studies that demonstrate in “real life” how schools are using evidence-based strategies to create a climate for learning. Case studies will aid school climate/teacher education efforts, and it is to this topic that we now turn.

## TEACHER EDUCATION

What should we do in programs to prepare educators to ensure more positive relationships within schools and create a sense of school community? We have several recommendations. Programs for educators should explore the importance of a “shared vision” of education in promoting positive climate. Teacher education programs and programs for school leaders seldom focus on the purposes of education, and if they do, they are left at a level of generality as to be meaningless (Michelli & Keiser, 2005) We need to help teachers and leaders expand their conceptions of the purposes of education in a democratic society. When time is taken to discuss these purposes rather than simply listing them in a school mission

statement, a shared vision emerges that contributes to both relationships and community.

Programs for educators should include specific instruction relating to social and emotional education. By studying social and emotional education, future teachers will be better able to shape their relationships with other professionals in the school and be empowered to change relationship patterns in a positive way. Similarly, they will learn to engage in teaching their students so as to promote social and emotional abilities and thus help them become a positive force in the community. As we outlined earlier, we also believe that developing a research-based K-12 social, emotional, and ethical learning curriculum will provide an essential foundation for this work.

Explicit understanding of the elements of school climate should be part of the curriculum for educators. Such instruction provides a way of helping educators understand the organizational structures and patterns that effect a sense of well-being in educational settings. In adopting these recommendations, we believe that educators will be more likely to work toward positive school climate. Outcome of such work could be enhanced academic learning for students and improved retention of teachers in schools.

There are many areas of school climate that are in need of further research and consensus. How can we effectively develop a nationally accepted definition of school climate? Although we have learned a great deal about aspects of school life (e.g. safety, relationships, teaching, and learning) that color and shape school norms, values, relationship patterns, teaching, and learning, there are many others that we are just beginning to learn about. There are also many questions that we are just beginning to address. Can we demonstrate, for example, that student retention and graduation rates are shaped by school climate? Can we demonstrate any change in the achievement gap based on school climate? Are there cultural variations that relate to school climate? That is, do some cultural groups respond differently to different school climate variables? Are there some variables of school climate that are most directly related to positive educational outcomes? Are different variables related to different outcomes? We know, for example, that the nature of how building and district leaders exercise leadership is a powerful force that shapes school climate, but we have not really studied how this important force interacts with a host of other forces that also shape climate.

Educators have appreciated that school climate matters for 100 years. In this article, we have not addressed all the complex historical and political factors that have colored the history of school climate. We have summarized recent trends in research, policy, practice, and teacher

education, and in doing so, we have underscored the glaring gap between research on the one hand, and school climate policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education on the other.

In closing, it is worth remembering that the American people want public schooling to prepare children to become effective and responsible citizens (Rose & Gallup, 2002). So often, students feel that schools are, tragically, a place where they are learning to take tests that are not fun, and certainly less rather than more meaningful and engaging. This does not need to be so. There does seem to be a growing awareness that school climate matters.

Our impression is that a growing number of state and district leaders are considering sound methods of measuring and, most important, improving school climate. Measuring school climate can set in motion a schoolwide democratic process of understanding and decision making as well as promote a climate for learning. We are authentically supporting students and other members of the school community to come together to make schools a safe place where we can learn, teach, and grow together. In doing so, we promote students', parents', and educators' ability to make schools more meaningful and engaging, and sometimes even fun! Today, we have not translated school climate research findings into policy, school improvement practice guidelines, or teacher education efforts. In our view, this amounts to a violation of human rights. We know how to effectively support student learning and positive youth development. If we do so, we are really supporting children, educators, parents, communities, and the foundation for democratic process. But as a country, we are not doing so. Our children deserve better.

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### *Notes*

1. In this article, when we refer to measurement tools that have been developed in a scientifically sound manner, we are referring to those that are conceptually grounded in the literature, that have been reviewed by experts in the field for content relevance and representativeness, and that have been subject to a range of empirical testing and analysis to establish accepted levels of reliability and validity.

2. This definition of *school climate* and *sustainable and positive school climate* emerged from a series of collaborative discussions with Joan Stamler and a group educational policy and practice leaders (Victor Battistich, William Cirone, Jonathan Cohen, James Comer, Ann Foster, William Hughes, Molly McCloskey, Nicholas Michelli, Terry Pickeral, Jennifer Piscatelli, Ann Rautio, Merle Schwartz, and Margaret Jo Shepherd). This meeting was orga-

nized by the Center for Social and Emotional Education and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States on April 26 and 27, 2007. It was designed to reach a consensus about how to define school climate and how to narrow the gap between school climate research on the one hand, and school climate policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education on the other. In October 2007, we convened a “professional judgement group” (Howard Adelman, Janice E. Arnold-Jones, Amy Berg, Marvin Berkowitz, Cathryn Berger Kaye, Martin J. Blank, Samuel Chaltain, Lou Ann Evans, Arnold F. Fege, J. Martez Hill, Gary Homana, Mary Lou Rush, Linda Taylor, Hon. Ron Tupa, and Paul Vierling) that validated this definition as well as review and refine a series of detailed recommendations for policy and practice leaders.

3. PBIS: <http://www.pbis.org>; SWIS: <http://www.swis.org/>; CSHP: <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/CSHP/>.

4. For a copy of “Summary of Findings: Interviews With Education Leaders About School Climate and School Climate Surveys” (prepared by MMS Education, April 2006) please write to [jonathancohen@csee.net](mailto:jonathancohen@csee.net). This report details the survey methodology used and detailed findings.

5. See <http://www.csee.net>.

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JONATHAN COHEN is the president of the Center for Social and Emotional Education; adjunct professor in psychology and education, Teachers College, Columbia University; adjunct professor in education, City University of New York; and co-chair of the National School Climate Council.

ELIZABETH M. MCCABE is a Senior Program Development Associate, Phipps Community Development Corporation.

NICHOLAS M. MICHELLI is Presidential Professor in Urban Education, City University of New York.

TERRY PICKERAL is executive director of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States. He is also a co-chair of the National School Climate Council.