



Comprehensive School Climate Inventory®

Creating a Climate for Learning

## State Department of Education School Climate-related Policy: A Summary

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In theory, research shapes policy, which in turn dictates school improvement practice. In practice, this relationship is often more complicated and rarely so logical. In fact, this is just what we have discovered: there is currently a significant gap between school climate research on the one hand and State Department of Education school climate related policy.

As we have summarized elsewhere, (see school climate research) shows that safe, caring, connected, participatory and responsive school climate is associated with and/or predicts positive youth development, effective risk prevention efforts and academic achievement.

Our national State Department of Education school climate policy scan focused on the following questions:

- How is school climate defined and measured at the State level?
- What types of climate policies do State Departments of Education administer?
- How are the policies organized and led?
- Finally, we have questioned: what more can states do to effectively promote positive school climate?

This national policy scan was lead by Libby McCabe, MS and Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D. in partnership with the Education Commission of the States (Terry Pickeral, Jennifer Piscatelli, et al)

*Methodology:* To learn about state climate policies, we scanned legislative documents, official policies, and state websites. The primary goal of the scan was to glean information about states' use of standards, measurements, accreditation systems, and other programs to promote positive school climate.

Once sufficient data was compiled, we created a set of indicators to assess states' current policies. The criteria included measurement quality, in terms of research basis, availability to schools, and linkage to assistance teams or systems; leadership; standards quality, in terms of prescription level, relationship to climate assessments, and definition which incorporates the subjective experiences of those in schools; and integration into academic planning and accountability.

These criteria are based on: (a) CSEE researchers' understandings of what policy characteristics and conditions would likely promote effective climate practice and (b) common elements in states with progressive, comprehensive school climate policy. These criteria helped to organize the state data into the following synthesis.

In sum, few states demonstrate effectiveness in these key indicator areas, based on the policy documents reviewed for this analysis. In general, climate-related policies were found in the health, special education, and safety arenas or within the general accountability systems.

We will now synthesize the findings from the scan along the following six lines:

1. How is school climate defined and measured?
2. To what extent is climate integrated into academic policies?
3. To what extent is school climate-related Leadership defined?
4. What health, special education, and safety programs include climate as a program goal or element?
5. In what ways do quality and improvement standards include climate?
6. To what extent is technical assistance provided to support improved school climate?

## **A Summary Of The National School Climate Scan**

*Definitions:* There is not one universally agreed upon accepted definition of school climate. Practitioners and researchers use a range of terms such as "atmosphere" or "feelings" or "tone", "setting", or "milieu" of the school (Tagiuri, 1988). In essence, school climate refers to our subjective experience in school.

Although different researchers and practitioners use somewhat different labels and lists, most agree that research suggests that the following dimensions essentially color and shape subjective experience in schools or school climate:

1. Environmental (e.g. cleanliness; adequate space and materials; inviting aesthetic quality;
2. Structural (size of school; curricular and extra-curricular offerings);
3. Safety (social-emotional as well as physical;
4. Teaching and Learning: (e.g. high expectations for student achievement; all learning styles honored; help provided when needed; learning linked to "real life"; use of praise/reward; opportunities for participation; varied teaching methods; instructional leadership; creativity valued; social-emotional as well as academic learning valued/taught; varied "intelligences" appreciated; connections across disciplines);
5. Relationships: (positive and "connected" 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);
6. Sense of School Community (e.g. students/adults feel and demonstrate sense of community in the school);
7. Morale (e.g. students are engaged learners; staff are enthusiastic about their work; students connected to one or more adults; students/staff feel good about school);
8. Peer Norms: (e.g. students/staff: feel learning is important; are invested in caring; appreciate importance of being able to say "no"; expect collaboration/cooperation);
9. School-Home-Community Partnerships: (e.g. 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); and,
10. Learning Community (e.g. standards and measures used to support learning and continuous improvement; professional development systematic and ongoing; data-driven decision making linked to learning; school systems evaluated).

While most states use “climate” or “culture” as a generic term associated with “conduciveness to learning” in their policy documents, fourteen state definitions demonstrated the complexity of positive school climate as an important variable itself, and developed prescriptive definitions.

Generic definitions of “climate” and “culture”, such as “a climate conducive to student achievement”, tend to leave readers with vague notions of what positive school climate looks and feels like, and do little to transfer definitions into effective practice. On the other hand, the more prescriptive definitions describe characteristics of positive school climate, such as “respect for diversity”, “collective decision-making”, “a sense of community”, specific indicators of “physical safety”, and others. These specific definitions provide clearer objectives and lead to measurable outcomes for schools.

Six use climate definitions supported by CSEE and many prominent researchers in the field (Anderson, 1982; Cohen, 2006; Freiberg, 1999). To align school climate definitions with current thinking, State Departments of Education would optimally be defined as the subjective experiences of the students, staff, and parents; yet standards appear to use more objective definitions, which focus on safety, conduciveness to learning, and environmental health. Interestingly, this is how school climate tended to be defined in the 1950’s, 60’s and early 1970’s.

In summary, most State DOE are not using a definition of school climate that is aligned with current research-based thinking about the range of factors that color and shape school climate. Naturally, this is a critical issue as our definition shapes how we measure.

*Measurement:* In American education, measurement shapes classroom and school practice: what is measured is what counts. And, it is clear that without sufficient data at the school level, state technical assistance teams and/or district and school level personnel cannot respond with targeted reforms.

There are several research driven climate assessments available to States (see Cohen, 2006 for a recent review). Yet there is little evidence from the reviewed documents of State formal or informal promotion of these instruments.

The most common way states measure climate is through informal checklists and surveys linked to accreditation or improvement status. Twelve states use such instruments, which are not directly linked to state climate standards, while seven states have informal assessments aligned to the content of climate standards. Six other states claim that climate is measured in terms of the alignment of school practice and standards without using a standardized protocol.

There is evidence of only one state recommending use of a research proven climate measure. In light of the U.S. Department of Education emphasis on research-based evaluation and educational practices, this was a striking discovery.

Ten states use criterion-referenced climate surveys developed either by state officials or outside researchers, which have not yet been validated by peer-reviewed studies. Examples include the *Mississippi Safe and Orderly School Climate Instrument* and Victoria Bernhardt’s climate survey of the Data Analysis for Comprehensive School-wide Improvement toolkit.

Twenty-six states make climate assessments available to schools through online instruments, routine schedules, or other means to embed assessment into school operations. Many states include recommended or mandated assessments in their annual reviews, which greatly enhances their availability. The fact that roughly one half of all states make assessments available, yet they are not research proven measures, suggests a need for states to incorporate new instruments.

In summary, although one state does recommend research-based assessment methods, most do not. And, there is almost no guidance provided about the pros and cons of existing and scientifically sound assessment tools.

*Organization/location of policies.* When school climate is left out of academic policy, and instead housed in health, special education, and school safety departments, states leaders communicate a division which contradicts current thinking about the role of school climate in academic achievement. Since climate is a whole school reform issue, it should be treated as an essential ingredient of academic improvement planning.

The standards, measurement, and technical assistance which constitute much of improvement policy will likely continue to exclude climate as an important element of reform if it is seen as a separate, supplemental issue. This point is especially important since state accountability policies (which will be detailed later) currently have unprecedented influences due to NCLB. While many of the climate-related policies housed outside of the academic arena can be effective in promoting positive school climate, they could be more effective if integrated into the dominant state academic policies.

Organizational location may be the major differentiating factor for state climate policies, which frequently determines variations in the other five indicators. It dictates the assumptions underlying climate policies, the types of professionals who develop and evaluate climate policy, and final products presented to schools (measures, standards, planning documents, etc.). Less than half of all states (nineteen) integrate their climate policies into the general, academic divisions, while the remainder locates them separately in their health, safety, and special education departments. Five others distribute their climate policies throughout the departments.

In summary, roughly half of all states continue to administer climate policy outside of general academic divisions, while half demonstrate integration into the academic arena. This distinction often guides the other aspects of climate policy identified in this scan.

*School climate-related Leadership:* Strong leadership at the state level, through clear definition of roles and contact information, is a precursor to wide reaching state climate policy. The types of personnel assigned to lead climate initiatives vary widely. For example, states which place their climate initiatives in the academic accountability and instructional planning departments tend to place an instructional leader in charge of climate policy; while states which house climate policy in the health arena allow a school health expert to lead regarding climate issues. In both arenas, however, it can be concluded that assignment of a specific individual or group of individuals to lead on climate issues is rare. Only nine states have a climate specialist, and an additional nine include climate leadership as one of many roles allotted for certain individuals.

Thirteen states have chosen to link climate to leadership at the school level by including evidence of climate support in professional leadership standards. This method assumes school leaders should be assessed based on their foci on school climate, and their abilities to promote positive school climate. Quite interestingly, many states which did not include climate in their school quality or improvement standards did so in their school leadership standards, inferring that climate is perceived as a leadership issue in many State Education Departments.

In summary, few states have created climate-related leadership positions at the state level. Some states have chosen to promote decentralized climate leadership at the school level through leadership standards with climate indicators. In all, however, climate-related leadership is underdeveloped in most states.

*Health, special education, and safety climate-related programs.* The most common ways states incorporate school climate within the health, special education, and school safety arenas are through PBIS and SWIS programs (eleven states) and Coordinated School Health Programs (CSHP), which have a school environment element (eleven states). For both program designs, State Departments of Education appear to be administering them consistently and according to original program designs. For example, most state PBIS offices are linked to the original PBIS site, and cite similar research literature and frameworks. For both PBIS/SWIS and CSHP, climate is one of many goals and outcome measures.

Less frequently, some states have approached climate through bullying and harassment policies and programs, character education, truancy and drop out prevention, and violence prevention/conflict resolution.

In sum, within the health, special education, and safety arenas, State Education Departments administer and recommend a wide variety of climate-related programs, with PBIS/SWIS and CSHP the most common program designs.

*Academic accountability: Quality and improvement standards and school climate:* In an era of standards-based reform and stringent accountability, state standards are highly influential in shaping school practice. The distinction between quality and improvement standards frequently predicts use of the climate standards. Quality standards often lead to ongoing or incremental assessment for all schools in a state during accreditation procedures, and the improvement standards predominantly focus on those identified as in need of improvement under NCLB, and therefore are more influential in low-performing schools.

Of the thirty states which currently use quality or improvement standards in their accountability systems, twenty-two integrate climate in some way. The depth of climate integration varies widely, with some states allocating an entire standard toward elements of climate or culture and others including climate as a sub-indicator of broader concepts such as leadership or community involvement.

Ohio is the only state with comprehensive school climate standards separate from other types of standards. Ohio's standards are based on a holistic definition of climate and link benchmarks to sub-standards.

While almost half of all states integrate climate into their process standards, what this means varies widely. Most standards sets focus on only one or perhaps two of the existing climate definitions (such as teaching and learning or safety). Therefore, districts' and schools' responses to meeting the standards are driven by how climate is defined within the standard.

In addition, the level of stakes associated with standards varies, and the variation is largely determined by the political and historical landscape and capacity of states. For example, schools in states which have long linked standards to accreditation status may feel more pressure to abide by quality standards, since the potential consequences of not meeting the guidelines could be severe (such as loss of autonomy or funding). On the other hand, some decentralized states place less emphasis on accreditation or improvement status systems, so the stakes of falling short on some standards are lower. Some standards sets (e.g. Ohio's climate standards) are entirely voluntary, which likely limits their breadth and depth of impact.

In sum, among the twenty-two states which include climate in their improvement and quality standards, designs, purposes, and levels of influence all vary. Further, twenty states have not yet developed quality or improvement standards and focus solely on student outcome data to determine school status.

*Academic accountability: Technical assistance and school climate:* Ideally, technical assistance teams are provided by State Departments of Education to support positive school climate and whole school improvement for schools who demonstrate needs through accountability measures. Even if schools have access to research driven measurements, if the state does not follow those assessments with interpretation assistance, action plans, and general guidance regarding application of the results, the data will not be used optimally.

Of the twenty states, which do link measures to assistance, the most common method was to use surveys and visitation data to create plans for improvement during accreditation or NCLB status evaluations. Naturally, any discussion of state assistance must be viewed in the context of differential state capacity. Less developed State Education Departments, which often lack financial and organizational capacity, may not have adequate resources to provide the services discussed above.

In summary, virtually no State Departments of Education currently provide comprehensive technical assistance that is grounded in school climate evaluations. The twenty states that do provide assistance linked to measurement focus on NCLB academic (e.g. reading and math) and/or safety (physical safety) related dimensions of school life. As important as these dimensions are, they represent “one leg” of the proverbial elephant. This is not aligned with current research findings. It is important to note that there are a number of States (e.g. New York) that are current developing research-based measures and assistance related plans.

*Looking forward: Next steps for state policy and school climate*

During our policy scan, we observed windows of opportunity through which states can more adequately integrate school climate. First, states can replace vague suggestions about measuring climate with concrete recommendations about research proven climate surveys. If states offer specific examples of sound climate instruments, schools and districts are more likely to comply with their mandates and recommendations.

Second, states which have not yet incorporated climate indicators into their quality and improvement standards could do so in future revisions. Many states require schools and districts to create their own improvement plans based on the quality and improvement standards and self-assessment data. Therefore, schools which have identified negative school climate as an impediment to improvement could incorporate school climate assessment and policy into their improvement plans.

Third, states could improve their approaches to school climate improvement by standardizing their definitions of school climate to more closely mirror the definitions climate experts use. Without fully comprehending what positive school climate is, states will continue to make fragmented policies that never fully address climate problems and solutions.

Finally, states should include climate policies in their general academic accountability arenas. It is clear that including climate policies in the academic and accountability arenas appears to garner greater school and district attention, especially in this standards-based policy environment, and emphasizes the proven relationship between climate and academic achievement. Climate is not a supplemental element of schooling outside of teaching and learning. Rather positive school climate is an essential factor in student achievement. As states assess schools' improvement efforts and overall quality, in terms of academic improvement, climate should be directly involved.

In the context of NCLB, districts are also in a unique position to assist schools in need of improvement. In fact, districts—rather than states—have financially and structurally supported most of the school improvement efforts (Goertz, 2005). While districts must frequently follow the improvement plans designed by states, there is substantial flexibility in most state policies. Districts can in a parallel way use research proven assessments, develop climate policies based on sound definitions, and integrate climate policy into general academic accountability.

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