



School Climate Research Summary:

Perry was the first educational leader to explicitly write about how school climate affects students' and the process of learning (Perry, 1908). The systematic study of school climate grew out of organizational research and studies in school effectiveness (Anderson, 1982; Creemers & Reezigt, 1999; Kreft, 1993; Miller & Fredericks, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983). Although there is not one commonly accepted definition for school climate, the vast majority of researchers and scholars suggest that school climate, essentially, reflects subjective experience in school (Cohen, 2006).

Over the last two decades, educators and researchers have recognized that there are complex sets of elements that 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 ten essential dimensions that color and shape our subjective experience in schools: Environmental; Structural; Safety; Teaching and Learning; Relationships; Sense of School Community; Morale; Peer Norms; School-Home-Community Partnerships: (mutual support and ongoing communication; Learning Community (Cohen, 2006; Freiberg, 1999).

Over the last two decades there has been an extraordinary and growing body of research that attests to the importance of school climate. School climate – not surprisingly and by definition – has a profound impact on individual experience. Two aspects of school climate (commitment to school and positive feedback from teachers) have been shown to affect students' self-esteem (Hoge, et. al, 1990). The social emotional climate of schools is predictive of mother's reports of their school age children 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, et al., 1980; Rutter, et al, 1979). And, a series of studies have shown a relationship between school climate and student absenteeism (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reid, 1983; Rumberger, 1987; Sommmmer, 1985) as well as being 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; Najaka, et. Al., 2002; Rand Corporation, 2004; Wang, et. al., 1993). Recent research reviews have shown that effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts are correlated with safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Catalano, et. al. 2002; Greenberg, et. al. 2003).

Safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climate tends to foster great attachment to school as well as providing the optional foundation for social, emotional and academic learning (Blum, et. al., 2002; Osterman, 2000). One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate is relational and how "connected" people feel to one another in school. There is a growing body of research that suggests that connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes (McNeely, et. al., 2002; Whitlock,

2006) and violence prevention (Karcher, 2002a, 2002b) and as a protective factor in risky sexual, violence, and drug use behaviors (Catalano, et. al, 2004; Kirby, 2001). In fact, these research findings have contributed to the US 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 has promotes – or complicates – meaningful student learning. 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 (Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss et al., 2002). Moreover, when such activities are presented in a supportive, collaborative environment, they encourage students to build upon 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 et al., 2001).

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 with a civic mission and that encourages trusting relationships throughout all members of the school community (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning, 2003; Wentzel, 1997)

School climate promotes – or complicates – students' ability to learn. On the one hand, this is common sense. To the extent that students feel safe, cared for, appropriately supported and lovingly “pushed” to learn, academic achievement should increase. And, in fact, this is what a series of studies from America and abroad has shown. Positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust or a climate for learning (Ghaith, 2003, Kerr, 2004; Finnan, et. al, 2003). In addition, a series of studies have shown that school climate is directly related to academic achievement (Brookover, et. al, 1977; Brookover, 1978; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Freiberg, 1999; Good & Weinstein, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Griffith, 1995; Madaus, Airasian, & Kellaghan, 1980; Rutter, 1983; Rutter, et al 1979; Shipman, 1981).

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 induction, to be effective, must be induction 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. The implications of 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 and Lee, 2005).

School climate – by definition – reflects students, school personnel and parents social, emotional and ethical as well as academic experiences of school life. Over the last decade,

research studies from a range of historically somewhat desperate 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; Durlak & Weissberg, 2005).

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If you are interested in a recent review that describes the troubling gap between school climate research on the one hand and State Department of Education school climate policy and school improvement practice as well as teacher education guidelines, see Cohen, J., McCabe, L, Mitchell, N.M & Pickeral, T. (2009). School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice. Teachers College Record, Volume 111: Issue 1: (January). (Available on: <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=15220>)

[Please note: If you are aware of additional research about school climate, please do let us know (jonathancohen@csee.net). We are invested in this school climate research summary being comprehensive and also, learning from you! Thank you.]

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