

### **V. Aligning state/district policy with building practice:**

What is this? Educational policy shapes school practice. Effective school reform and sustained school improvement efforts need to include State and district level policy that focuses on substantive ‘safe and civil school’ practices. In other words, state and district level policy needs to include research-based definitions, measurement systems and related professional development that recognizes and supports the instructional, systemic, crisis preparedness and assessment related issues outlined above.

Why it is important? Effective school reform needs to include policy that supports effective building practice. Aligning policy and practice powerfully shapes behavior.

#### Common barriers:

- ✓ State policy is being driven by NCLB that is “grounded” in reading and math scores (and to a lesser extent, reports of physical violence) and the social, emotional, ethical and civic dimensions outlined above do not “count”.
- ✓ State “school climate” and “supportive learning environment” policy is generally not aligned with current research based definitions, measurement systems and related technical assistance and professional development support.
- ✓ State “bully-victim” policy tends to focus on a “no tolerance” framework focused on the bully and does not recognize the importance of the witness behavior.
- ✓ Current programs do not focus on the critical importance of developing proactive skills that not only prevent violence but also promote safety and human and academic growth.

#### Key learning that staff needs to understand and be able to do:

##### Learning objectives

- District and building leaders understand current educational policy that has bearing on the nature of instruction, systemic interventions designed to create a safe climate for learning, school climate assessment and improvement.
- District and building leaders reflect on and determine the outcomes (e.g., student competencies; responsibilities of families, communities, etc.; the climate of schools and communities; etc.) of enhanced policies and practices (e.g., safer and more effective school and community environments, greater connection between schools and communities, etc.)
- Identify the existing policies and programs oriented to these outcomes (e.g., standards, assessments, accountabilities, safe and drug free programs, dropout prevention practices, resiliency-building strategies, etc.) and assess whether they are sufficient to support effective practices
- Identify the existing practices that are most effective within the state and nationally;
- Determine if we should design and implement a policy and practice demonstration project to surface more relevant information for developing a policy agenda and identify specific effective and preferred practices to achieve the anticipated outcomes;
- Determine if we want to develop a comprehensive policy that captures the variety of practices and outcomes (e.g., school improvement, student

performance, etc.) or a set of policies that address specific practices and outcomes;

- Execute the policy and practice demonstration project or the policy agenda that supports the practices (through professional development, leadership and collaborations) to achieve the anticipated outcomes.
- Develop leadership teams that develop expertise in and focus on these objectives.

Tasks that need to be considered to actualize this process:

*Reflecting and raising awareness about:*

- ✓ How, in theory, research should shape policy, which in turn suggests practices designed to actualize the policy.
- ✓ What are current state and district policy that drives educator and student behavior?
- ✓ To what extent are current school policies appropriately shaped by research?
- ✓ To what extent is there an ongoing discussion about how policy and practice are aligned?

*Critically evaluating resources and making recommendations about*

- ✓ How current state/district level policy is and/or is not aligned with building practice.

*Skill building:*

- ✓ Being able to conduct an assessment of existing state policies, district policies and effective practices (what the Education Commission of the States calls “*islands of excellence*”). This review and analysis provides both a base-line for comparison to future progress and demonstrations of existing effective alignment (or lack thereof); it is our suggestion that this analysis also encounters existing work in a state and increases our ability to ensure “relevance” to the specific state.
- ✓ Identify the outcomes desired on students (and others and institutions) from the effective practice so that there is alignment between the practice and the student (and other) outcomes; this may seem elementary but it is surprising that many advocates of a specific practice focus on the practice characteristics without the connection to the anticipated outcomes;
- ✓ Determine the research-based policy elements (i.e., responsibilities, accountabilities, encouragement, support, reward, sanctions, etc.) that directly lead to the quality practices and outcomes. These analyses allow school leaders to determine if there is a need for *enhanced* policies or *new* policies (or the *elimination* of a policy);
- ✓ Making a decision on which of the following paths to take to advance these alignments; the choices include (a) implementing a policy agenda; (b) designing and implementing a *policy and practice demonstration project* to test, enhance and authenticate the alignment between policy and practice; and/or (c) conducting additional research or analyses of existing research to ensure the alignment of policy, practice and outcomes.

Indicators that a school is successfully focusing on this goal and related methods: Policy and practice are more aligned.

Additional Resources: We have listed some resources in the text above. Here are additional resources that may be helpful. Please let us know what other resources you have found helpful and would like us to share with other educators ([jonathancohen@csee.net](mailto:jonathancohen@csee.net))

*Organizations and web sites:*

Education Commission of the States: [www.ecs.org/](http://www.ecs.org/)

*Books and papers:*

Adelman, H., & Taylor, L. (2005). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2, Summer, pg 201-237.

Cohen, J., McCabe, L, Mitchelli, N.M & Pickeral, T. (in press). School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice. *Teachers College Record*

Kress, J. S., Norris, J. A., Schoenholz, D. Elias, M. J., & Siegel, P. (2005). Bringing together educational standards and social and emotional learning: Making the case for educators. *American Journal of Education*, 111(1), 68-89