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in brief

PACER’S Unity Awards: Nominate A Deserving Individual Who Is Going Above and Beyond To Prevent Bullying is celebrating student leaders who help create inclusive places in their community, schools, and online. The nomination deadline is April 15th, click here to learn more!

In partnership with International Observatory of Violence in Schools, the SWAPv (Student Wellbeing and Prevention of Violence), Flinders University, Adelaide, and the Chaire de recherche: Sécurité et Violence en Milieu Educatif, Laval University, Quebec the National School Climate Center (New-York) has become a co-sponsor of the International Journal of School Climate & Violence Prevention (www.ijvs.org/index.php).

Understanding and Promoting Wellness in K-12 Schools:
Findings from a National Survey

There is growing interest in the overlapping spheres of wellness, SEL, character education and mental health. It’s about time! Educators and parents have long known that children are always learning socially, emotionally and civically as well as cognitively, and building healthy relationships are necessarily “cognitive” as well as “noncognitive”.

Since our inception, NSCC has always translated research into practical guidelines for teachers, administrators and parent leaders. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) recently asked NSCC to set in motion a national conversation about what schools can do to further student wellness. Collaboratively we surveyed independent school heads in America about a range of wellness related questions as well as with regard to the following three specific areas: (i) college admission (ii) adolescents’ healthy sexual, social and emotional development, and, (iii) student psychiatric disorders.

We learned a great deal! Here are some of the highlights:
• School heads reported many students are anxious (over 80%) and/or depressed (over 45%)!
• The most important challenges that complicated educators furthering student wellness were time and training.
• On average, 75% of educators expressed great interest in learning more about how they can promote student wellness: School-wide, instructionally and relationally.
• Independent schools are involved with school wide, instructional and relational improvement efforts that are designed to promote wellness and social, emotional and civic competences, but efforts tend to be fragmented (e.g. educational, risk prevention and health/mental health promotion efforts are not coordinated) and too often minimal.

The message is clear that schools need more specific guidance on how to best support student’s mental health, wellness and social-emotional competencies while in school. NSCC has always been focused on this.

Click HERE to see the full report from NAIS. For more information about this new resource or to become a pilot school, contact Jonathan Cohen, at jonathancohen@schoolclimate.org.
Recently, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), replacing the much-contested No Child Left Behind Act that was enacted in 2002. ESSA is an important move forward in terms of supporting students’ achievement regardless of race, income, language spoken, etc. It focuses on preparation of students for college and career readiness and requires states to use at least one “indicator of school quality or student success” that “allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance” alongside academic data in their accountability systems. Safety and school climate are specifically noted as two of five suggested areas states and schools can prioritize to meet this requirement. NSCC has been at the forefront of this work for many years, and we are excited to continue supporting this education focus as the passage of ESSA is confirmed. We are committed to providing the latest guidelines, research-based tools, and insights gained over our two decades of work promoting positive school climates and prosocial education in thousands of schools nationally and around the globe. This newsletter is one of many ways we aim to meet the needs of our schools.

With this issue of School Climate Matters, we’re excited to highlight:
1. School Climate Inclusive Policies by Randy Ross, Senior Consultant, and Jessica Savage, Policy and Legal Director
2. Dr. Kathleen Porreca (Principal), Cody Huisman (Assistant Principal), and Ms. Susan Hawes (Social Studies teacher) offering a reflection on the past two years of work with NSCC and promoting youth leadership within the community and the importance of giving students “a voice”.
3. An overview of the Qualities of Sustainable and Independent Learner which was created to measure the independence of students with learning problems.

As always, please be in touch with us at newsletter@schoolclimate.org with your thoughts and feedback.

Best wishes,

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder, National School Climate Center

Start an Upstander Alliance Team At Your School Today!

BullyBust launched the Upstander Alliance to empower youth in the effort to prevent harmful harassment, teasing, bullying, and cyberbullying across our schools today. We know that students can positively change the way we communicate with the right tools and supports.

The Upstander Alliance provides free resources to help student teams, in collaboration with adult moderators at the school, create targeted community-wide engagement projects focused on preventing bullying and raising awareness. Through the Alliance, team members will have access to detailed tools for creating and sustaining their group, opportunities to connect with artists, experts, and youth leaders who are making a difference, and will also be able to share their experiences with other Alliances across the country.

For more information, visit www.bullybust.org/upstander/
We feel like we have a voice. This was 8th grader Liz’s immediate response when questioned at a school board meeting about how the CAST project is impacting Elm Middle School students. In the second year of CAST, Elm’s 7th and 8th graders are participating in open discussions about school climate, bullying versus conflict, and connecting with the community. While the work is far from finished, two pieces of the project in particular are proving to be empowering for students.

Last summer, a group of a dozen Elm students gave up their free time to sit through a handful of Community Scale meetings to strategize data collection from Elmwood Park residents. With a plan in place, those students attended four outings: two busy neighborhoods of businesses and civic organizations, a concert in the park, and a Sunday morning farmer’s market. Their confidence grew with each survey that they collected, about 50 in all. Then, in November, four of those students presented their work as well as other accomplishments of Elm’s CAST project to the entire school board and a lecture room full of audience members. As they took turns at the microphone, the adults beamed with pride; these students had found their voice. An administrator pointed out later just how remarkable this was considering the students that spoke. Each of the four students, in their own way, had been at risk at some point in their Elm experience, but working on this project had turned them into leaders.

A second initiative highlighted at the board meeting was Elm’s new Positivity Task Force (unofficially and affectionately called the Happiness Project). Groups of 8th grade students have 13 days to design and implement a project to positively impact the Elm climate. Students study data gathered through the CAST survey, focus on an area of interest and then create a unique project. Some spread joy—bubble wrap for popping, positive quotes, or a flash-mob, call-and-response routine. Others are more substantive—addressing problematic behavior in the bathrooms and treating each and all with respect. Each group heads into a new direction, but the students are always energetic, engaged and invested in making Elm a warm and welcoming place.

While school climate change is inevitable and unpredictable, at least for now, the most important segment of Elm’s school community, the kids, are having a voice.
As a new principal coming into a school with a poorly perceived school climate, Carter Welch of Jerome Harrison Elementary School in North Branford, CT focused on strategies to improve the school climate. One of the key ways he did this was mobilizing youth, opening the school’s doors to the larger community, and building school-community partnerships. Jerome Harris Elementary School did not have any formalized youth engagement or leadership programs efforts beyond Boy and Girls Scouts, Rotary, and other various pockets of involvement. As a result, the school partnered with NSCC and implemented the Community Scale and School-Community Partnership Process. As a team, they formed a mentoring program where students from the district’s high school worked with the elementary school students.

**Community Scale**
During Winter 2015, Jerome Harris Elementary School implemented NSCC’s Community Scale and youth-led School Community Partnership Process, giving voice to community members to complement school improvement planning. The purpose is two-fold: 1) To gauge how community members perceive the school-community partnership and 2) to gauge the interest level of community members/leaders in actively supporting school improvement goals. Encouraging youth-adult partnerships is a core component of this work. With a staff member serving as moderator and mentor, students act as action researchers by connecting with and interviewing up to 15 different sectors of the larger school community. Such groups include faith based, law enforcement, media, civic organizations, philanthropic groups, business leaders, elected officials/policy makers and social service groups. NSCC then generates a summary report of findings with a series of suggested next steps advising students how to present findings to their school community and participating community members/leaders. In addition, students brainstorm potential ways community members can partner with the school community to support improvement goals.

**Rollout**
Jerome Harrison Elementary School was faced with the challenge of having elementary students (K-3) be action researchers and go out into the larger community. He created a core leadership team consisting of the principal, one elementary school teacher, a high school teacher, one elementary school parent, and two high school student leaders. The core team trained all high school mentors participating in the project. This training consisted of helping students understand the school climate and the Community Scale and School-Community Partnership Process and developing students interviewing, presentation, and leadership skills.

**Outcome**
As a result of the project, Jerome Harris Elementary School expanded their support families by establishing a parent forum series around behavior, civic/social expectations, academic support, and experiential learning. Finally by using the Community Scale, the school has organized forums bringing together members, such as local doctors, dentists, and nurses to support healthcare and such as local psychologists and therapists to support the school with student behavior and social challenges. Community members have come to classes, school wide events, and PTO/forum meetings.

Since Carter Welch’s school climate improvement and school-community partnership efforts, he has reported an increase in student attendance by 28%, increase in teacher attendance by 21%, and an increase in students’ sense of community by 52%.

**CARTER WELCH** received his administration certification, Ed.D, and superintendent certification at the University of Connecticut. He is currently enrolled in a PreK-3 leadership program through the University of Connecticut and serves on the CAS (Connecticut Association of Schools) school climate committee. He is principal of Jerome Harrison Elementary School which was recently awarded “Exemplary School Climate” distinction by CAS.
You have been asked to revise a district attendance policy to move from a punitive to a positive approach. Should the revised policy address the underlying school and community context behind high absenteeism? Should it address student and staff engagement? Should the district’s core values be linked to expected behaviors of students and staff? If so, then school climate improvement goals and practices should be included in the new policy.

What are “school climate inclusive policies?”

Two approaches: Adapting a single, district-wide, comprehensive school climate policy is one approach. Adapting current, targeted policies to support school climate improvement is another. These policies target an area of school life impacting school climate, directly or indirectly. Adapting targeted policies may offer a more feasible, manageable starting point as the school community learns about school climate.

Which targeted policies could be strengthened to improve school climate? Examples include bullying/harassment, discipline/codes of conduct, attendance, family engagement, athletic, and even dress code policies. However, here is one caveat. Some existing, targeted policies may not be “ready” to be adapted to include school climate. For example, many current discipline/code of conduct policies still use “zero tolerance” language and/or practices. A policy may need to be completely re-written in order to meaningfully support school climate improvement.

How can school climate inclusive policies address the three school climate improvement goals: Systemic, Instructional, and Relational? Collaboratively developed policies that identify a continuous process of school climate improvement begin to address the Systemic goal. Delineating objectives within all three goal areas, even naming specific instructional and relational practices, supports successful implementation.

Why incorporate school climate concerns into district-level, targeted policies? Three among many reasons: (1) Research shows improved school climate supports academic achievement and positive youth development, specifically reducing “bully-victim-bystander” behavior and high school dropout rates. (2) Given leadership turnover, school climate inclusive policies move schools/districts beyond reliance on individual leaders’ support for such changes. (3) Targeted policies can be revised to embrace equity in school climate both by aligning them with state/federal civil rights laws and guidelines and by identifying equitable programmatic approaches, such as Restorative Practices and Culturally Responsive Education.

Include specific practices that nurture a positive school climate. Equally critical improvement practices include data collection with disaggregated analysis, professional development, and effective dissemination to the wider community.

How do we incorporate school climate concerns into our targeted policies? Here are several specific examples of policy sections into which you can incorporate school climate:

(1) In the PURPOSE section: Insert language describing a dual purpose, with school climate improvement as one. For example, the Purpose section in a bullying/harassment policy could include “to support improvements in the overall school climate, thereby encouraging the conditions that reduce negative behaviors.”

(2) In the DEFINITIONS section: Include the National School Climate Council’s definition—“School Climate means the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of students’, parents’/guardians’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.” An alternative definition, adapting the Council’s language, defines an equitable school climate as responding “to the wide range of cultural norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, leadership practices, and organizational structures within the broader community.”

(3) In the PRACTICES or POLICY IMPLEMENTATION section: Include specific practices that nurture a positive school climate (e.g. Social-Emotional, Restorative, and Culturally Responsive practices). Equally critical improvement practices include data collection (e.g. school climate survey and incident data) with disaggregated analysis, professional development, and effective dissemination to the wider community.

For further information, please contact Randy Ross (rross@schoolclimate.org) or Jessica Savage (jsavage@schoolclimate.org).
Safety Without Suspension
2008 article mentions many schools that are reducing their number of suspensions and expulsions through a comprehensive approach called School-wide Positive Behavioral Support. This approach is based on the assumption that when educators across the school actively teach, expect and acknowledge appropriate behavior, the proportion of students with serious behavior problems decreases and the school’s overall climate improves.

Zero Tolerance and School Safety
http://www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/zero_tolerance.html
Most school administrators strive for firm, fair, and consistent discipline applied with good common sense. Unfortunately, in some higher-profile cases the ‘common sense’ part is missing from the equation. Students need consequences, but they must be appropriate to the context of the situation, the disciplinary and academic history of the student, age appropriateness, and related factors.

Establishing a Supportive School Climate and an Effective Approach to Discipline
http://www.centerii.org/handbook/Resources/9_J_Establishing_a_Supportive_School_Climate.pdf
This excerpt from a report gives action principles to districts and schools to manage school and classroom climate and promote positive behaviors.

Breaking School Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement
Study provides a better understanding of who is expelled from public secondary schools, and the impact of those removals on students’ academic performance.

Climate Change: Implementing School Discipline Practice That Create a Positive School Climate
Middle and high school students subjected to harsh school discipline policies and practices such as suspensions and expulsions are more likely to disengage from the classroom and course work, and increases their chances of dropping out, according to this new report from the Alliance for Excellent Education. The report recommends implementing measures that address discipline in fair and equitable ways so that schools and districts can improve school climate and ensure that all students graduate from high school ready for college and a career.

Fact Sheet: Creating Positive School Discipline
http://www.dignityinschools.org/sites/default/files/Fact_Sheet_RestorativeJustice_PBIS.pdf
Fact sheet showing actual state reports on the effects of positive behavior interventions on school climate and practices to improve and promote positive behaviors within the classrooms and schools, and the community.

Measure Your School Climate
NSCC offers our Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), a nationally-recognized school climate survey that provides an in-depth profile of your school community’s particular strengths and needs, so your school can target initiatives where they are needed most.

Also announcing, our CSCI Community Scale—a new community-focused survey will aim to recognize the “voice” of community members and leaders and complement the current three versions of the CSCI that look at student, parent/guardian, and school personnel. To learn more about next steps to assess your school community’s climate, please visit www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php.
Qualities of Sustainable and Independent Learner (QSIL 2.0) is a scale developed by the collaborative efforts of National School Climate Center (NSCC) and Winston Preparatory Schools (WPS), located in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. The scale was developed to understand students’ social-emotional strengths as well as their needs so that school personnel, parents, and students could work together to improve students’ skills. It is administered to students, teachers and parents. Students make a self-assessment of their skills, whereas teachers/parents make assessment of their students/children’s skills. All the questions in the survey follow the Likert scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree.


The Winston Preparatory Schools have been using the scale to facilitate the independence of middle and high school students with learning problems. The school administers the scale twice a year to students, teachers and parents. In addition, starting this winter, NSCC is also piloting the scale with regular education students in three other schools: Montessori school of San Antonio (TX), The Williams schools (CT), and East Cooper Montessori Charter school (SC).

This scale was developed along with Winston Preparatory School originally to measure the independence of students with learning problems. It will now be piloted among general education students with the goal of making the scale valid and reliable to indicate emotional learning capacity.

The data collected from these schools will be used for further refinement of the scale so that the tool can be used for both regular as well as special education students. The ultimate goal is to establish the tool as a reliable and valid indicator of social emotional learning capacity, to ensure that more students graduate with the specific skills needed to reach their greatest level of success beyond schools. It is a valuable resource for educators to use in collaboration with students and their families to guide strength-building and educational goals.

For more information about QSIL, please contact athapa@schoolclimate.org.

AMRIT THAPA, PH.D. (Research Director) received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Economics from Sri Sathya Sai University, India, and a Ph.D. in Economics and Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Prior to NSCC, Amrit worked as a researcher at the Schott Foundation for Public Education and was a Teaching Fellow for the Program in Economic Policy Management (PEPM), School of International & Public Affairs, Columbia University. His current research focuses on school climate and economics of education.
NSCC is an organization that helps schools integrate crucial social and emotional learning with academic instruction to enhance student performance, prevent drop outs, reduce violence, and develop healthy and positively engaged adults.

For more than a decade, NSCC has worked together with the entire academic community—teacher, staff, school-based mental health professional, students, and parents—to improve total school climate.

We continue to help translate research into practice by establishing meaningful and relevant guidelines, programs and services that support a model for whole school improvement with a focus on school climate.

NSCC’s vision is that all children will develop the essential social, emotional, and intellectual skills to become healthy and productive citizens.

NSCC’s mission is to measure and improve the climate for learning in schools to help children realize their fullest potential as individuals and as engaged members of society.

NSCC achieves this through:

- Advocacy and policy
- Measurement and research
- Educational services