Ensuring emotional and physical safety is critical to improving school climate. Indeed, many educators understand the concept of school climate as linked to, if not the same as, bullying. In 2010, the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued a clarification of the distinction between “bullying” and “discriminatory harassment.” (http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.html) Still, most school districts do not make a clear distinction between bullying and discriminatory harassment in their policies and procedures.

Federal civil rights laws and OCR guidance require districts to respond differently to harassment (such as racial, sexual, and disability-based harassment) than to bullying. Paying careful attention to discriminatory harassment of these and other “legally protected classes” first of all protects students, but also protects school districts from potential liability. School officials have the responsibility to eliminate a “hostile environment” resulting from discriminatory harassment. Our services emphasize achieving this through the implementation of equity-centered school climate reform.

We recognize that when civil rights issues arise in a school district, state and federal agencies may become involved. NSCC offers both consultation and professional development services to support districts in addressing these civil rights issues. Our School Climate and Civil Rights team includes our new Senior Consultant, Randy Ross, M.S., M.A., and Jessica Savage, Esq. Randy has over a decade of experience working in this field. Jessica is an experienced attorney with an extensive background concerning sexual harassment in the workplace. She is currently completing her M.A. in education and policy at NYU.

NSCC consults with school districts to develop comprehensive bullying/harassment policies. We also guide Districts to implement effective investigations procedures and strategies to work with concerned government agencies. In addition, NSCC offers assistance to school districts in developing incident tracking systems to prepare for OCR’s new data collection requirements for the 2015-2016 school year.

Our professional development emphasizes training for educators, including staff and leadership in school districts, on best practices for preventing discrimination, bullying, and harassment. The goals include preventing legal violations, responding to potential costly litigation, and, most importantly, eliminating victimization of students and other members of the school community.
Welcome to 2014: A new year full of opportunities to learn and teach together.

One of the important areas that we have become more and more involved with is helpful ways to set limits and discipline children. It is shocking that we—as a nation—have known for over a decade that punitive and zero tolerance policies and practices do not help! In fact, they powerfully contribute to students dropping out of school and the “school-to-prison pipeline”. And, there is growing recognition that school climate improvement efforts are perhaps the most important way that we can prevent students from dropping out of school.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Education echoed this sentiment with the announcement and release of School Climate and Discipline resources (http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html?exp=1) highlighting school climate reform as a specific and essential strategy to reverse the startling rates of harsh punishment practices. In support of these principles, we are working with a growing number of district, state and national leaders to develop school climate policy and practice guidelines that prevent students dropping out of school as well as bully-victim-bystander behavior.

With this issue of School Climate Matters, you’ll see the scope of our work continues to grow in support of this shift, including expansion of policy services providing dedicated guidance for schools and districts nationwide investigating incidents of bullying and harassment.

We’re also excited to bring you the following thoughts and perspectives, which highlights this important theme—from the development of advisory sessions expanding honest communication between students and school personnel in Tenafly, NJ led by NSCC’s Education Director, Richard Cardillo (p.3) to the critical research findings highlighting varying perceptions of social-emotional security and school safety (p.6).

Finally, Director of Center for Leadership and Bully Prevention, Jim Dillon, provides an insightful analysis of zero tolerance policies and its damaging effects on the social and emotional growth of youth (p.4).

We hope this issue will spark discussion and prompt you and your students to think about ways you can incorporate these resources into your classrooms to create the most inviting school environment for all.

Finally, I hope you will consider attending our 2nd annual Policy Institute (http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/policy-institute.php) and/or our 17th annual Summer Institute (http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/si.php). Our policy institute will support district and state leaders developing school climate informed policies and/or laws that support the whole school community supporting the whole child. And, our Summer Institute will support school teams and individuals developing plans that integrate the Common Core Standards with prosocial education and school climate improvement efforts.

As always, please share your stories, comments, and ideas for future issues with us at newsletter@schoolclimate.org.

Thank you and all the best for a safe and healthy start to 2014.

Best wishes,

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder
National School Climate Center
One benefit of adapting a holistic approach to school climate improvement efforts is learning plans cannot be accomplished in a “vacuum”. Our actions to attain an improved school climate will always be greater than the sum of its parts. It's great to have one hour a week dedicated to specific activities or a curriculum that emphasizes social-emotional aspects of our school. It’s always a good “kick start” to have specific days or weeks dedicated to school safety, anti-bullying efforts, respect for all initiatives, and other important topics. Additionally, a school with designated roles for matters of school climate makes a strong statement about priorities. However, it’s not until we infuse the entire school community (and the broader community as well) into our school climate improvement efforts that we will start to “move the needle” and make lasting and sustainable progress to ensure all members of the school community feel safe, supported, and celebrated. When the beneficial work of school climate improvement becomes a mindset of “this is how WE do things here”, we guarantee ourselves a thriving educational community.

The school community of Tenafly Middle School in Tenafly, NJ embraced this concept in their desire to create a solid and well-integrated Advisory Program for their 6-8th grade students. Substantial research proves the importance of developing better communication with students and adult mentors, including school support staff. Tenafly Middle School’s Leadership Team in conjunction with their Advisory Support Committee, knew they needed to create a distinct advisory program and knew it would help students feel more connected, increase attendance, lower (already low) rates of discipline issues, and support greater academic growth. However, they did not want to embrace a “cookie-cutter” model of advisory. Rather, their approach looked at the entire school environment and sought ways to incorporate an advisory program into this “bigger picture”. In the words of a member of their school Leadership Team, “We already know that the work of attending to the social/emotional/civic needs of our students is a key part of all classroom instruction and school-wide protocols. What we wanted to do was underscore how important we thought this concept was by dedicating a portion of a school day specifically to enhancing what we presently have in place.” While it would have been much easier to implement scripted advisory lessons, Tenafly Middle School, with the assistance of the National School Climate Center, chose a much more innovative approach.

Beginning September 2013, the Middle School Leadership team and the Advisory Support Committee met regularly to: explore the current status of school climate improvement efforts, discuss advisory lesson topics and brainstorm how to best integrate advisory lessons with other school programs. Though time consuming, they have produced a strong Advisory Program that is leaps and bounds beyond a simple use of the “flavor of the week” approach adapted by many other schools. This is a wonderful example of ensuring that we continuously support a strong connection between student support sessions (such as Advisory) and the beneficial effects on school climate improvement.
Shakespeare’s insight should be very relevant to how we educate our students. Unfortunately, he points in a direction that is the opposite of where school discipline policies are taking schools.

Let’s extend his metaphor for how a play prepares for its first public performance. Weeks and weeks of preparation and rehearsal allow time for the actors and crew to make mistakes, struggle with their lines, get their timing right and improve the play. They do this without the public watching and evaluating them. Mistakes are expected and are considered an essential part of the process of improving the overall production.

This idea rings true because adults have one thing in common: they have all done something in their youth they regret—something reckless, thoughtless, and often hurtful. They also realize many chances were needed to get it right. This is why we, as a society, have traditionally drawn a line between adulthood and childhood. We have recognized that the same level of expectation and accountability for children and adults makes no sense and is ultimately unfair to those who are in “rehearsal” for how to live.

Students are going to make mistakes and need support to learn from them. They can’t be expected to learn how to step onto the stage of life without “rehearsal” or to get it “right” the first time around. Our role is to support and not make final judgments during this time. That line is designed to protect students and prepare them for what is to come.

Many young people can easily interpret our society’s response to their behavior as a rejection, not just of what they did, but of who they are.

This line, however, is being erased more and more in many discipline policies in schools and society. Young people, who make many of the transgressions that most adults have made, are now facing life-altering, severe consequences that did not exist previously. This is tantamount to asking an actor to step onto the stage and perform without benefit of rehearsal and being held to same level of accountability of someone who has spent years preparing for the same role. Students pay a harsh price for slipping up in “rehearsal”; they are given a limited opportunity for starting over and trying again. Many young people can easily interpret our society’s response to their behavior as a rejection, not just of what they did, but of who they are.

Zero tolerance policies and the trend towards criminalizing transgressions, condemn and punish the very students who need the support to learn more responsible ways of interacting with others. In addition, many schools delegate their responsibility for these students to law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. The goal behind this trend is to remove these students from schools, stigmatize them, and condemn them. These students are transformed from people who have problems to being the problem. Our society is telling our youth to get it right the first time or else!

It is a false dichotomy to imply that anything less than condemnation and severe punishment for young people who transgress means the transgressions are condoned. In reality,
students who are accepted and supported by the adults are more likely to feel remorse, accept help and commit themselves to changing their behavior than those who are just condemned and punished.

Students who are accepted and supported by the adults are more likely to feel remorse, accept help and commit themselves to changing their behavior than those who are just condemned and punished.

Schools are also under tremendous pressure to devote more and more time to academic instruction and less and less time to meeting the needs of the whole person. Not only are schools not giving students the time to rehearse, they are not even giving them a script to learn or telling them what their role is. The pressure to achieve academically makes it harder for those students who struggle to feel that school is a place for them, a place that is designed to help them succeed in life.

Schools should be places where the academic and the social are meaningfully connected and integrated with students’ lives. They should be safe places for making mistakes—places for learning.

Instead of zero tolerance policies, schools need to have zero rejection policies: every student should be accepted as a person and viewed as capable of learning and living a full and productive life, no matter what he/she might do.

Jim Dillon has been an educator for over thirty-five years, including twenty years as a school administrator. While he was the principal of Lynnwood Elementary in New York, he developed the Peaceful School Bus Program, designed to prevent bullying and it was subsequently published as a book, The Peaceful School Bus (Hazelden). The program is now being implemented in schools across the country. He is also the author of No Place for Bullying: Leadership for Schools that Care for Every Student (Corwin). He is the director of the Center for Leadership and Bullying Prevention, a part of Measurement Incorporated. He makes presentations, conducts workshops and consults on a variety of educational topics, including instruction, classroom management, leadership, and supervision. He has presented at many local, state, and national conferences.

Guidelines for Promoting Positive Discipline:

- **Well-communicated policies:** Discipline procedures are more effective when they are clearly connected to core values for how people should treat each other. Students will be more likely to demonstrate responsible behavior when they can see and understand how the rules, limits and expectations are designed to support the learning of all students.

- **Partnering as a Community:** All students on some level need to be involved in developing guidelines for behavior including rules, limits and positive expectations.

- **Providing Examples:** Although it is important to specify and clarify what students should NOT do, schools need to also have positive expectations for how all members of the school community treat one another.
Safety Rules & Norms

Safety Rules & Norms is a critical dimension measured by the CSCI. Literature on this topic provides evidence that schools in which rules are effectively enforced or schools with better discipline management have lower rates of student victimization and student delinquency (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). One of the most important explicit or implicit norms in schools relates to “witness-related” behaviors: either being a passive bystander who, knowingly or not, supports bully-victim behavior, or being an upstander who, directly or indirectly, says “no” to bully-victim behavior (Fonagy, Twemlow, Vernberg, Sacco, & Little, 2005). Another factor that shapes how safe people feel in schools is the way rules are consistently enforced. Consistent enforcement of school rules and availability of caring adults have been referred to as “structure and support” (Gregory et al., 2010). Research shows that structure and support are linked to lower suspension rates and more student willingness to seek help in bullying situations (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011).

CSCI 3.0 Findings

The NSCC Research team analyzed data from CSCI 3.0 consisting of 763 Elementary school students, 2179 Middle school and 6,176 High School students. The median score was calculated for each factor where the highest score was 5 and lowest score was 1. The Safety Dimension comprised three indicators: 1) Rules and Norms, 2) Sense of Physical Security, and 3) Sense of Social-Emotional Security. Based on the analysis for the Safety dimension, students generally scored lower on all the above factors related to “safety” compared to school personnel and parents. Students of all levels felt less safe in schools than what school personnel and their parents perceived. The mean of the median score for “Sense of Physical Security” for Elementary students was 3.42, compared to 4.04 and 3.91 for school personnel and parents, respectively. Likewise, the mean of the median score for ‘Sense of Physical Security’ for Middle/High students was 3.42, compared to 3.71 and 3.91 for school personnel and parents, respectively.

Comparatively, middle and high school students felt less safe than the elementary schools. Among the three factors, “Sense of Social-Emotional Security” consistently received the lowest score. For the student population, the mean of the median score for this factor was 2.92. However, the mean of the median score for “Rules and Norms” and “Sense of Physical Security” were 3.77 and 3.42, respectively. Averaging score for elementary, middle and high school levels, the mean for the “Rules and Norms” for student, school personnel and parents were 3.77, 4.09 and 3.82, respectively. In other words, among the three populations, school personnel perceived better presence and enforcement of the rules and norms on school safely than what the students and parents perceived.

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.
Web Resources

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
Report excerpt supports districts and schools managing school and classroom climate efforts.

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 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 school climate practices in classrooms and schools.

StopBullying.gov New Bullying Prevention Training Center
StopBullying.gov’s new Bullying Prevention Training Module provides core resources for parents, school administrators, mental health professionals, and more. Eleven new, audience-specific user guides are also available to help users lead community bullying prevention efforts. Guides were developed in collaboration with over 40 partner organizations from the public and private sectors.

CSCI RESEARCH FINDINGS (page 6) References:
CSCI stands for Comprehensive School Climate Inventory. NSCC has recently launched CSCI 4.0. There are four major dimensions in CSCI: 1) Safety, 2) Teaching and Learning, 3) Interpersonal Relationships, and 4) Institutional Environment. For research and findings related to each of these dimensions see Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D’Alessandro (2013).
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