ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

As the nation grapples with a bevy of pressing social and economic issues, schools are facing some deeply troubling truths: Education has played a role in maintaining systemic racial injustice. Schools have not been designed to meet the needs of diverse learners. Mental health issues plague many youth, and many students feel distinctly unsafe and unwelcome in schools. However, trends in youth activism and research in the realm of school climate and social-emotional learning are reinvigorating the field by highlighting the potential for schools to act as hubs of community and youth empowerment. The field of education is uniquely poised to respond to current cultural challenges in a manner that provides a blueprint for collective transformation.

In October 2017, the National School Climate Center and Facebook for Education came together with a diverse group of education leaders, researchers, and student activists to hold a summit on the current state of education in America. The intention of the day was to provide a venue for sharing individual experiences and insights into crucial concerns in the field. The day was also meant to collectively re-envision the future of education as an arena for cultivating school communities that support the health and development of the whole school and the whole child. As a way to acknowledge the resolution necessary to embark on wholesale changes, organizers named the summit Communities of Courage.

To identify how systemic structures and policies can better align with the needs of students, summit attendees took part in a series of panel discussions and small focus groups. Attendees shared strategies, programs, and policies that had been adopted within their school communities that centered student needs and improved school climate overall. We reviewed the content of these discussions and analyzed them for common themes that were expressed across groups as being essential for achieving meaningful, lasting change in school communities. Such change was defined as work towards ensuring all students felt safe, included, and engaged at school. Enhancing student representation in policy-making, reforming discipline to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, and supporting holistic wellness were some types of initiatives that attendees said could lead to positive school community transformation. The themes surfaced during Summit proceedings can be found in a companion report: “Connecting Communities of Courage Summit Re-Cap” at https://bit.ly/2GbNOL2
The focus of this work is to draw attention to those who work hard every day to ensure their school climate remains positive. In this report, we not only highlight the successes experienced by districts and schools and the promising practices that resonate most with members of the school community, but also important insights on the challenges school communities face in dealing with age-old problems and emerging risks. By sharing these key lessons with the field, we hope to further knowledge on effective practices for positive school climate and illustrate consistent gaps to guide future research and implementation efforts.

Methods

After the Communities of Courage Summit in 2017, we gathered together to explore the work being done in six school districts across the country to advance students’ feelings of safety, inclusion, and engagement. These districts represent a voluntary, but diverse sample selected from our contacts at the National School Climate Center. The districts included were:

- Center City Public Charter Schools, Washington, D.C.
- Monroe-Woodbury School District, Orange County, NY
- Parkway School District, St. Louis County, MO
- Schuylkill Technology Centers, Schuylkill County, PA
- Simpson County Schools, Simpson County, KY
- West Sonoma Union County High Schools, Sonoma County, CA

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, while observations were completed manually. Post data collection, we transcribed all audio recordings, and analyzed all observation notes and transcripts for common experiences across districts as well as divergent insights.

Utilizing existing research in the field of school climate, we developed school and classroom observation protocols, as well focus group and interview protocols, in order to assess schools’ systemic efforts to make create school communities of courage where students, staff, and the larger school community feel safe, included, and engaged. Each district helped us identify a diverse set of schools in terms of demographic profiles, school type, and school level. In spring of 2018, we visited two to three schools in each district. At each site we conducted the following:

- A school observation to assess elements of overall school climate.
- Two classroom observations to examine classroom instructional practices, support resources, peer interactions, and staff-student interactions
- Interviews with school and district leadership focused on decision-making, mission/vision, and other relevant contextual matters
- Separate focus groups with students and staff examined their perceptions of safety, inclusion, and engagement
## DISTRICT PROFILES

### Center City Charter Network
Washington, D.C.

**Mission Statement**
Center City Public Charter Schools empower our students and families for lifelong success by building moral character, promoting academic excellence, and generating public service throughout Washington, D.C.

**Highlights:**
- Dual Focus-Character Education and Academic Excellence
- Morning Meetings-Whole School
- Inclusion School Model

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### Monroe-Woodbury Central School District
Orange County, NY

**Mission Statement**
Monroe-Woodbury Central School District is committed to academic achievement and success for all students in a safe environment. In partnership with families and our community, the district’s mission is to promote confidence, inspire a passion for learning, and to prepare students to become responsible global citizens.

**Highlights:**
- Student Representation at Board Meetings
- Comprehensive Inclusion Program
- SEL Targeted Professional Development

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Mission Statement
The mission of the Parkway School District is to ensure all students are capable, curious, caring and confident learners who understand and respond to the challenges of an ever-changing world.

Highlights:
• Character Education
• Project Parkway-Whole Community Engagement
• Restorative Justice Training

Mission Statement
The mission of the Schuylkill Technology Center is to enable the student to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and values necessary to become a life-long learner and a productive citizen of a global economy by developing an educational pathway for excellence driven by a partnership with education, business, industry, government, family, and the community.

Highlights:
• Project-based learning
• Student Ambassador Program
• Exceptional inclusion of students with disabilities
### Simpson County Schools

**Simpson County, KY**

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**Mission Statement**

To develop all children to their fullest potential and prepare them for the next level of life.

**Highlights:**
- Collaborative Community Leadership
- Student Ambassador Program
- Whole Child Wellness

### West Sonoma Union County High Schools

**Sonoma County, CA**

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**Mission Statement**

The mission of the West Sonoma County Union High School District is to provide high quality instruction as student achievement is our top priority.

**Highlights:**
- Student Representation at Board Meetings
- Integrated Wellness Curriculum
- SEL Integration in Curriculum
LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

This section highlights the key lessons learned from across the six participating school districts. It provides insight into common strengths that can serve as models to other school communities, and challenges that were represented across sites in creating safe, inclusive, and engaging schools.

Lesson #1: Innovative, Collaborative and Courageous Leadership Galvanizes School Community Engagement

Collaborative leadership, otherwise known as both the formal and informal structures that comprise shared leadership, has long been an important topic in education research and practice (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Ogawa and Bossert, 1995; Pounder et al., 1995), and is recognized as a leadership approach more aligned to the needs and challenges of modern American schools (Leithwood and Mascall 2008; Hallinger and Heck 2010; Wahlstrom and Seashore-Louis 2008). Collaborative leaders (or leadership teams) actively recruit and integrate diverse voices from the school community into school policy-making and daily practices.

Across multiple districts we visited for this study, we met leaders who invested in strengthening their schools by engaging members of their school community to play critical roles in making lasting improvements. The working style of these diverse leaders was characterized by a focus on continuous innovation, openness to feedback, and prioritizing the well-being of students and all school constituents. In addition, these leaders were willingness to take bold stands on issues that might “stir the pot” or break with standard ways of operating in order to prioritize a positive schooling experience for all students and community members.

Prior to our visits, a number of districts, including Monroe-Woodbury and Schuylkill Technology Centers, had committed to the school climate improvement process. School leaders in these districts said doing so required them to confront conflicts and challenges within their schools head-on, and take the time to listen to feedback from the teachers, staff, and students on the collective vision for the schools’ mission. Principals at both Schuylkill Technology Centers and Monroe-Woodbury said that staff had expressed frustration with leadership, and that leaders had to recognize and address staff concerns as a crucial initial step in improving school climate throughout the district.
Similarly, engaging staff and students directly in guiding the school climate improvement process arose as a recurring theme in our interviews with school administrators. In terms of how this is reflected in the process of crafting policies, one leader said,

“Every policy we make or every time we create a rule or anything like that, the students are always at the center of it. We’re here for them. That’s why we’re here. So when you make a policy, it has to be beneficial for the students, and if it’s not, then it shouldn’t be a policy.”

Methods for engaging all constituents in the decision-making process varied across districts, but leaders consistently sought to hone in on collective values and advocate for all stakeholders. At West Sonoma County Union High School District, for instance, leaders rallied on behalf of transgender students and made an official statement that they were protected by California state law in the face of a declaration from the U.S. Department of Education saying otherwise. By addressing controversial issues directly, administrators reaffirmed their commitment to supporting all students and student groups equally, underscored a value for inclusion, and modeled courageous action for staff, students and other stakeholders.

In a similar vein, some leaders discussed the necessity of adhering to principles even when it meant challenging the internal status quo. At Center City Public Charter Schools, one school leader made significant staffing changes after observing that some team members were not equally committed to the character education and academic excellence components of the school’s mission. The ability to let staff go for this sort of reason is often unique to the charter system. However, positive school climate transformation is definitely accelerated and more readily sustained when school administrators are willing and able to prioritize a dedication to safe, inclusive and engaging schools for all students as a baseline requirement for employment at their schools.

In districts that had undertaken major initiatives, such as school climate improvement, teachers and students in focus groups said they felt supported by administration. Additionally, administrators expressed the importance of relationships and having an open-door policy for all school stakeholders. When asked who they went to when they had a problem, students at these schools often cited their direct connections with principals and other administrators and their ability to approach them when faced with interpersonal issues.

“When we did the social justice training, it was everybody. It was every bus driver, every cafeteria worker...anybody that was going to step foot as an adult in the middle school. They’re a part of every PD (professional development) and everything we do.”

-Middle School Principal at Parkway School District
Extending leadership to the greater community represents another aspect of collaborative leadership. In our study, Simpson County Schools embodied this practice. According to Simpson Schools Superintendent,

“We look for partnerships at every angle, realizing we can’t do this in isolation and be an island. We’ve got a board who’s elected by the community that are all different and unique, but ultimately, all they care about is doing what’s best for our students. We’ve got five community organizations that donate $10,000 a year to a scholarship fund where all of our students can have tuition-free, dual college-credit classes.”

By actively cultivating relationships with all stakeholders, seeking and utilizing their input, and holding fast to the commitment to bettering school communities in the face of adversity, school leaders can use challenges as opportunities for growth.

**Key Takeaways**

» Effective leaders/leadership teams prioritize safety, inclusion, and engagement by focusing on creating and maintaining positive relationships with all stakeholders

» Effective leaders/leadership teams embrace challenges and address conflicts in order to create a hospitable environment for positive school climate policies and practices to take hold

» Exemplary leaders collaborate with all stakeholders in the school community

**Lesson #2: Committed and Trusted Adults Are Necessary Catalysts for Change and Central to Student Success**

Teacher and staff commitment has long been considered one of the most important factors in the success of students and schools (Fox 1964; Huberman 1993). A committed teacher is one whose behavior is consistent with their philosophy of education and is characterized by a strong desire to be an effective teacher, a recognition that teachers do more than just relay facts, an acknowledgment and appreciation for the worth of each individual, and a fulfillment of professional obligations (Fox 1964). Teacher and staff commitment have been linked to overall work performance, ability to innovate and to integrate new ideas into practice, absenteeism, and staff turnover, as well as having an important influence on students’ achievement in and attitudes toward school (Firestone 1996; Graham 1996; Louis 1998; Nias 1981; Tsui & Cheng 1999). Our findings from the six districts we observed for this study echo that teacher commitment profoundly impact students’ experience of school life, underscoring the role of teachers in making a school’s climate positive for every student.

“If you make kids feel loved you get to know them, and you know their name. I know every kid’s name, that’s how kids feel included.”

- Elementary School Staff at Parkway School District
As the primary agents of instruction and school climate, schools entrust teachers with the weighty task of providing both academic guidance and social-emotional support to all students. Teachers are also key players in achieving meaningful and lasting change at schools. To be committed to the process of evaluating and improving their schools, teachers must first wholeheartedly buy in to the initiatives proposed by their administration.

We observed that buy-in was usually helped when healthy relationships between staff and administrators were already in place. As part of the school climate improvement process at Schuylkill Technology Centers, for instance, school personnel benefited from several professional development programs focused on student safety during emergencies. In focus groups, teachers cited support from administration as being critical for implementing these initiatives.

At other districts where character education or similar initiatives had been launched, such as in Center City Public Charter Schools and Parkway School District, teachers noted that collaborating with each other fuels their ability to develop new and creative strategies for engaging students and integrate them as innovative classroom practices. Similarly, at West Sonoma Union County High Schools, teachers discussed the gratification they experience from informally collaborating and learning from teachers who focus on content areas different from their own. In several districts, teachers said such practices are critical to sustaining progress in school climate improvement.

Minor adjustments in classroom space or process can put student experience in the foreground, integrate their social and emotional processing of material into the curriculum, facilitate deeper conversations and engagements with material, and contribute to a positive school climate. At Parkway School District and West Sonoma Union County High Schools, for instance, teachers allow students to sit in a circle for class discussions. In these classes, the majority of students show engagement by actively participating throughout the class. At Parkway School District, many teachers start the days with morning meetings to discuss anything that might be on students’ minds, including current events and their personal lives.

Most teachers in these districts referred to either their colleagues or their students as their greatest sources of pride. This underscores the dual commitment of these educators to their fellow teachers and administrators as well as their students.
While initiative fatigue is a real concern for schools endeavoring to reform their culture and climate (Reeves 2006), our findings suggest that this may be alleviated when teachers themselves feel safe, included, and engaged. Both personal commitment and a positive, supportive professional environment must be present to ensure teachers do their best on a daily basis. When teachers are invested in making an impact on students’ lives and also feel appreciated and accepted in their schools, they are continually present, develop strong relationships with students and other teachers, and experiment with and refine their approaches to engaging students. These actions are at the heart of the sustainability of efforts to revolutionize education.

As a further testament to the impact of committed teachers, students at every district in our study consistently referenced having an adult they could trust at school, which made them feel safe at school. This resource is also well-established in education and psychological research, as positive relationships with school staff have been shown to play a protective role for students. Students are more likely to graduate if they are involved in supportive relationships with peers, family members, or school staff (America’s Promise Alliance and Center for Promise 2015). Connectedness with teachers is also associated with lower levels of suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Borowsky, Ireland, and Resnick 2001; Resnick et al., 1997) and increased feelings of safety and attendance (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, and Truong 2018) in students remaining in school. Furthermore, students with positive views on seeking help were more likely to approach adults for support with mental health issues (Pisani et al. 2012).

In our study, many students noted that teachers approached them when they noticed that something did not seem right with them. In discussions about what makes a great teacher, a common element was being able to discuss what was going on in their lives outside of school. Students expressed feeling more supported by teachers who “treat them like family” and “always have their back” with both academic and personal support.

Students also relayed that a great teacher is “kind,” “active,” “has high standards,” “enforces the rules but is also fun,” and “flexible.” When asked what classroom activities were most engaging, students frequently cited discussions and other interactive activities, such as games. They expressed that they enjoy when teachers play along and “laugh with us.” In a testament to the power of enthusiasm in encouraging a love of learning, one student noted that teachers at her school bring “pizazz to the
teaching.” Another student echoed this sentiment, saying, “they just add a lot of energy to this school.” Indeed, when asked what motivated them to do well in school, students often cited that their teachers inspired them to put forth their best effort.

By investing in relationships with students as both an educator and someone students can relate to as humans, teachers can not only deepen their connection to students, but also impact their feelings of safety, inclusion, and engagement. Enhancing these dimensions of school life is a key element of supporting the whole child to achieve academically and beyond.

Key Takeaways
» Teachers are central agents of positive school climate
» Positive relationships among teachers are just as important as those between teachers and administration
» Teachers are motivated when given the freedom to experiment in the classroom and encouraged to collaborate with other teachers
» Students not only feel safer at school when they have adults who they trust, they are also more motivated to do well in school
» Dynamic relationships between teachers and students instill work ethic and leave room for play
» Students are responsive to teachers’ energy and enthusiasm for the material

Lesson #3: Confronting the Challenge of Conflict
Deepens Trust among Students and Teachers

Researchers and practitioners have often linked peer violence and bullying behavior to the challenges schools face in resolving conflicts constructively. Often, the way schools have dealt with conflict has led to punitive practices and unresolved issues among the students involved. (Johnson and Johnson 1996). Previous studies have found that students involved in peer conflicts such as violence and bullying experience an array of negative social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Flannery, Wester, and Singer 2004). Taking into account this connection, there is clear need for positive and effective conflict resolution strategies. Dealing with conflict is an inevitable element of school life, and the manner in which it is done has a significant bearing on students’ experiences of their school. Students must be provided with the appropriate tools to effectively deal with discord. Throughout site visits, we found that students responded best when conflict was normalized and addressed candidly.
Parkway School District chooses to tackle conflict in their classrooms through the vehicle of character education. Character education seeks to support the social, emotional, and ethical development of students in concert with academic instruction. The implementation of character education on a district-wide level is essential to educators at Parkway School District, so much so that the district altered their mission statement to read “All students will become capable, curious, caring and confident learners who understand and respond to the challenges of an ever-changing world” (Parkway School District). Character education is vital to the academic, social, and emotional learning success of district students. Leaders realized that in order to enhance students’ social and emotional skills, staff had to be adequately prepared to address and acknowledge conflict. This required school officials to understand sources of conflict and develop effective tools and teaching practices for conflict resolution.

Students at an elementary school in Parkway School District said that strong relationships with adults help them navigate the complexities of conflict resolution. In a focus group, students discussed how learning about respect had empowered them to deal with bullying, because everyone should be treated fairly. One stated that it was important to “always stick up for each other,” and “don’t be a bystander. You should always help people out.” Another stated that she had been bullied, but overcame the issue by approaching the principal to assist in mediating the conflict. “You [can] just go right up to her [the principal] and work it out. At the end, I had three new best friends, because I talked it out and we’re all friends now.”

Students at a middle school in Parkway School District reiterated the sentiment that when adults model respect towards them, it assists them in coping with interpersonal conflict. Students noted that the staff exhibits a high level of respect toward them by building in “cool down time.” Built-in “cool down time” and other restorative measures allow students to take ownership of their feelings while also processing their actions and emotions in healthy ways before attempting to address the issues at hand.

Other districts have integrated conflict resolution skill building with slightly different strategies but similar results. At Schuylkill Technology Centers, one teacher discussed a practice they had recently begun which they called “circling up.” This looked like gathering as a class on a Monday morning to discuss an ongoing concern in the classroom, what had worked previously, and other ways they could approach it in the coming week. Then, on Fridays, the class would again circle up to assess how their new tactics had worked.

At one campus of Center City Public Charter Schools, students expressed confidence that they could also approach teachers and administrators to help them manage conflicts that occurred outside of school. One student noted that even if they were wrong in a situation, they knew they could count on teachers to listen
“without judging or making us feel like we’re wrong.” Another agreed, “they’re not going to put us under the bus because we did one thing wrong, because they know who we truly are. They know us better than we know ourselves.”

These students’ statements reflect deep confidence in school staffs’ desire to genuinely listen and assist as well as an understanding that conflict is normal and can be effectively negotiated without shame. In fostering the development of these integral life skills, teachers and administrators provide students with a safe platform to work through interpersonal difficulties and grow as people.

**Key Takeaways**

- Conflict resolution requires key SEL skills, such as self-regulation and empathy, and it can be taught to children as early as elementary school
- Trusted adults aid students in building their confidence in conflict resolution
- Simple practices, such as “circling up”, create a safe environment for students to talk through conflicts

**Lesson #4: Project-based Learning and Service Learning**

**Stimulate Greater Inclusion and Engagement**

Some districts have placed an emphasis on project-based and service learning as a way to keep students engaged in school. Project-based learning and its not-too-distant cousin service learning are designed to engage students in the investigation of real-world problems. This is achieved by placing them in genuine, problem-solving environments that make connections between abstract phenomena in the classroom and real-life experiences (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; MaKinste, Barab, and Keating 2001; McGrath 2004).

Students pursue solutions to problems by asking questions, debating ideas, forecasting, planning, gathering and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, communicating ideas, and creating work products (Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Mergendoller, Maxwell, and Bellisimo 2006). This process leads to deeper understanding of the ideas being taught (Thomas 2000). Empirical evidence suggests that students educated in this manner retain content knowledge and skills longer than other students (Prince and Felder, 2006), and also show increased engagement, motivation, and communication (Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Mills and Treagust 2003). Most importantly, project-based learning provides students with autonomy over their learning by offering choices regarding the process for problem-solving. These choices are crucial to student success as they foster interest that will drive their pursuit of learning in the long run (Bell 2010).
We found several districts provided opportunities for such project-based learning and service learning, and as a result experienced significant engagement of both students and their wider communities. At Schuylkill Technology Centers, students come from 12 different “sending districts” to take part in vocational training for a portion of the school year. Students choose a trade such as masonry, carpentry, or culinary, and partake in an immersive 5-month stint at one of Schuylkill Technology Center’s schools. During this time, they spend most of the day in a shop working on projects in their trade of choice, building skills while also studying an accompanying curriculum. Small classes allow students to take advantage of significant one-to-one support from teachers, as well as work with small teams of fellow students to complete hands-on projects. Notably, Schuylkill Technology Centers has a high population (40%) of individuals with disabilities, highlighting the significant potential for inclusion that is inherent in education environments centered around interactive learning.

During focus groups, students spoke of the gratification they experienced as a result of physically creating things in school, as well as the numerous opportunities they had to build relationships by assisting newer students, tackling new challenges, and collaborating on projects both within and between individual shops. At one Schuylkill Technology Centers campus, for instance, students from masonry and carpentry shops worked together to build a new restaurant for the school’s culinary program to showcase student creations to the school and community. Students also took part in renovations of local community organizations, including an American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and a firehouse.

Students at all districts spoke about how the opportunity to help others, especially their peers, inspired engagement and positive feelings about their schools. At one middle school in Simpson County Schools, for example, a Student Ambassador program recruits current students to act as envoys for students who are new, whether they come from other districts or are transitioning from elementary to middle school. The Student Ambassadors welcome new students as they enter the school and show them around the building. Student focus group participants at Simpson County Schools said they enjoyed aiding other students in acclimating to their new environment, as well as the opportunity to simply cultivate new connections with others. The engagement of students in enhancing their own learning along with school climate is an area ripe for further exploration.
Indeed, even very young children exhibit eagerness to work in service to their fellow students. At an elementary school at Parkway School District, students take part in a variety of service learning projects. At a weekly “school culture” assembly, a video displaying a kindergarten class’s efforts to create and promote a comprehensive school recycling program showed the young children’s enthusiasm for “greening” their community. In a separate kindergarten classroom, one student acted as a health aide by accompanying any students who fell while on the playground to the nurse’s office. Older students were engaged in more complex environmental projects, such as assisting in maintaining the school’s garden.

Because schools are intrinsically social places, myriad opportunities exist for connecting students with each other, their environment, and the community at large. Districts took advantage of these opportunities by creating a variety of platforms for students to participate in hands-on activities that boosted confidence in both technical and interpersonal skills. Incorporating interactive and service learning provides a means for schools to create a more robust educational experience that also imparts the value of kindness and compassion.

**Key Takeaways**

» Project-based and service learning increase inclusion and engagement within and beyond school communities by providing opportunities for diverse types of learners to build skills

» Service learning provides a direct path to community engagement, as partnerships with community organizations can be utilized to engage students beyond the classroom.

» Interactive learning also opens the door for students to build self-efficacy and leadership skills
Lesson #5: Social-Emotional Learning Integration Enhances Classroom Practice

Fittingly, the benefits of interactive and service learning reflect those of integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the classroom. SEL is best adopted as part of the fabric of everyday school life. Several districts embodied this in their daily classroom practice.

At one school in West Sonoma Union County High Schools, students said the classroom activities they felt most engaged in involved group work and team bonding, whether through games or more structured academic work. In a range of classes, from culinary to civics to fitness and conditioning, students experience ample opportunities to socialize within the classroom. Students noted that many teachers allowed them to choose groups, which added to their motivation to do well.

In other classrooms, we witnessed the more formal weaving of SEL skill building into the curriculum itself. At a school in West Sonoma Union County High Schools, Mr. Carpenter taught U.S. history using the Socratic method, which involves students physically gathering into two concentric circles. The inner circle responds to questions about a historical text assigned for reading and engages in civil discourse with each other. The outer circle of students listens and takes notes on the discussion, and are encouraged to move to an open seat in the inner circle if they would like to add to the discussion. Mr. Carpenter noted that on the first day of class, he takes time to establish a culture of listening with his students. He does this by emphasizing the importance of respecting divergent viewpoints and critical thinking in gaining perspective on why events of the past unfolded the way they did. He also encourages students to assess their own belief systems and why they endorse their viewpoints. All of these elements—active listening, demonstrating respect for others, and reflecting on personal beliefs and thoughts—represent direct methods for cultivating higher order SEL skills. Providing a venue for students to use their voices also offers a key step towards achieving equity in schools.

At the district level, schools that have adopted SEL/character education as a platform for shaping their mission, such as Parkway School District and Center City Charter Public Schools, have advanced the vision of equity...
by recruiting students to vote on core school values. In classes such as English/Language Arts, teacher's prompt students to consider how those values are or are not reflected in the texts being studied. By introducing students to thinking about values and encouraging them to act accordingly, these schools vertically align character education/SEL instruction with the rules, norms, and practices of school life. In recruiting student voice to select these values, schools empower their young people to guide the learning and development of their school communities.

Key Takeaways

- Integrating the teaching of SEL skills into daily school life enriches classroom climate
- Students are eager for opportunities to shape classroom and school climate
- Allowing students to teach each other through interactive learning enhances engagement and encourages the development of SEL skills

Lesson#6: Representation of All Student Voices is Key to Striving Towards Equity

As school systems continue to struggle with the challenges of improving outcomes, many have decided to ask students for feedback. As this practice has developed, the idea of “student voice” has increasingly been discussed in education research as a potential avenue for improving both student outcomes and school climate (Carbonaro and Gamoran 2002; Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003; Rudduck and Flutter 2000). Student voice describes the many ways in which students have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will shape their school experiences and that of their peers (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie 1993; Levin 2000). In practice, “student voice” may consist fundamentally of students sharing their opinions, identifying problems, or offering solutions. Through such dialogue, student voice can raise difficult issues that may be ignored by school staff who prefer not to confront controversy. It can also involve students collaborating with staff to address problems in their schools. Partnering with students to identify school problems and offer solutions sends the message that students possess exclusive knowledge and perspectives about their schools (Kushman 1997; Levin, 2000; Mitra 2001; Rudduck, Day, and Wallace, 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994). Research notes that student voice can act as a vehicle for change in schools, including helping to improve teaching, curriculum, and teacher-student relationships (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003; Oldfather 1995; Rudduck & Flutter 2000). Such research also suggests that student voice efforts can benefit those who participate through improved academics (Oldfather 1995; Rudduck & Flutter 2000) and engagement, (Oldfather 1995), and an increased understanding of their own learning styles (Johnston and Nicholls 1995).
Efforts to increase student voice can create meaningful experiences that help to meet the developmental needs of students, particularly those who otherwise may not find significance in their school experiences. Enhancing student voice can help instill in them a belief that they can improve themselves and the institutions that affect them, develop the skills and knowledge to work toward developing these beliefs, and establish meaningful relationships with staff and peers (Mitra 2004). Across multiple school districts we visited, we observed that when pathways for student voice were opened, students and teachers alike were invigorated by novel opportunities to engage with the school’s climate. Students expressed that these opportunities were inherently motivating. The diverse examples of programs, classroom practices, and groups offering students choice and voice demonstrate that students are highly responsive to opportunities to collaborate and re-design school life.

At a middle school in Parkway School District students take part in WIN Wednesdays, during which they are able to choose from a variety of extracurricular classes, some of which were conceived of by students themselves. Classes include diverse topics, from ukulele to yoga. Students opined that the interactive aspects of these classes made them fun and engaging, with several noting that WIN Wednesdays were the school activities in which they felt most engaged. Meanwhile, at a high school in Parkway School District, several female students started a group called Miss Interpretation, with the purpose of empowering their fellow female students. One action the group took was to decorate the girls’ bathroom with positive and inspiring messages, which a student in the focus group stated was very rewarding and well-received by others.

Project Parkway, another effort to activate students as agents of restorative justice and equity, convenes a group of students to provide feedback on current initiatives and future directions for the district. As part of this project, the district began training middle school students to run restorative circles with their classmates. Students began to reckon with major issues in these circles, such as how to attain sufficient racial representation among district teachers. A counselor who moderated the circles noticed and spoke directly to the assistant superintendent, who then arranged a meeting with the superintendent. The involved students then met with the superintendent and voiced their concerns to him. This example of cutting through red tape and putting students in direct contact with upper administration is an example of the relative simplicity of creating avenues for student voice to be heard.
Other districts took additional formal measures to ensure that student voice is integrated into core school frameworks. For instance, at both Monroe-Woodbury and West Sonoma County School districts, students are invited to attend board meetings and consult with board members about issues facing their schools. At West Sonoma and Simpson County Schools, students and parents are offered the opportunity to join hiring committees that take part in the interview process for teacher candidates. At Simpson, some of the students invited had IEPs, demonstrating simultaneous efforts at engagement and inclusion. Finally, Monroe-Woodbury district took exemplary measures towards inclusion and representation of students with disabilities. One program pairs general education students and students with disabilities, with the general education students assisting their partners in reading comprehension. Monroe-Woodbury also hosted a “Disabilities Week,” in which individuals with disabilities came to speak to students about challenges they faced and how they lead rich, fulfilling lives.

These endeavors illustrate that involving students in decision-making within schools can take many forms without requiring a tremendous investment of resources. In fact, all that is truly needed is openness to change on the part of leadership, and the intentionality to make improvements in favor of students’ best interests and self-direction. When students are shown that their voices are a priority to administration, they respond with novel ideas and action towards bettering their school community.

**Key Takeaways**

- In practical terms, prioritizing equity requires that administrators offer students opportunities to co-create their school community.
- Involving students in district decision-making practices such as the teacher hiring process is a simple way to encourage student voice.
- Intentional creation of regular opportunities for students to use voice has benefits for students and school communities and is a precursor of equity.

**Lesson #7: Peer-to-Peer Support Structures**

*Instill Leadership Skills and Strengthen Student Bonds*

Another area that proved important to students was opportunities to connect with peers in novel ways. In particular, students showed great enthusiasm for activities that allowed them to support other students. Peer support systems in schools are generally flexible structures in which students are trained to offer emotional and social support to fellow pupils in coping with and preventing distress (Cowie and Jennifer 2008). Peer support can go beyond one-on-one interactions, looking like a cooperative community founded on mutual trust, respect, and open communication. Peer support encompasses an array of activities such as mentoring, active listening, conflict resolution, befriending and the promotion of students’ rights. Although a variety of school support systems exist across all school levels and types, students who support peers usually report that they benefit from the process. They express feeling more confident in themselves and a greater appreciation for others. For at-risk students, utilizing a peer support system can be a way to feel more positive about themselves, their school, and social and academic challenges. Teachers also report that the school climate becomes safer and more caring following the establishment of peer support activities and that peer relationships improve (Cowie et al., 2002; Cowie and Sharp 1996; Cremin 2007; Hurst, 2001; Naylor & Cowie, 1999).
Throughout the various site visits, we documented many examples of the benefits of peer support structures. At Simpson County and Monroe-Woodbury Schools, for example, the Student Ambassador program partnered upper-class middle school students with incoming 6th graders so that the older students can welcome the younger ones, physically guide them throughout the building, and answer any questions regarding the school. This aids in easing the often difficult transition between elementary and middle schools. In focus groups at these schools, students consistently named this practice as one that made them feel safe and cared for.

Both Monroe-Woodbury and West Sonoma County Schools implemented anti-bullying ambassador programming. These programs educate students in how to actively and safely resist bullying by teaching...
peaceful intervention skills. Students voiced that they felt it was a positive initiative, and that they had witnessed significant decreases in bullying at their schools. Also beneficial is an anti-bullying curriculum that elucidates the roles all students play in bullying and how they can shift from being passive bystanders to active upstanders.

Finally, an initiative being introduced this year at Schuylkill Technology Centers involves creating peer support groups for issues impacting students, such as the loss of a parent. Allowing students the space to cope and support each other provides a venue for enhancing mental health, as will be discussed in the next section. This shift in culture and the roles students play in redressing social issues that affect them shows the power of expanding their ownership within the school setting. When given the right tools, the training, and the trust of leadership, students can be powerful agents for change within and beyond their school communities.

Key Takeaways

» Students find deep satisfaction in providing support to other students, and utilizing students as an internal resource can help alleviate challenges with mental health, transitions between schools, and more

» Expanding student ownership through mentoring opportunities enhances equity efforts

» Creating opportunities for students to support each other bolsters school wide SEL integration efforts

AREAS FOR GROWTH

While the districts profiled in this report exhibited promising growth and dedication to continued improvement, as with any other long-term change effort, there were also areas that clearly still needed to be addressed. Many of these issues have also garnered attention on a national scale, as they have affected large swaths of the United States and therefore the schools within them. Nonetheless, some schools provided practical methods for addressing such disruptions to the learning environment. The role of schools in transforming these issues into opportunities for enhancement is an area rich for further investigation.

Schools Struggle to Effectively Address Socio-Political Issues

In focus groups across numerous districts, particularly at the middle and high school level, students frequently expressed that ongoing social and political issues took a toll on relations at school, and that administration did not do enough to address them. For instance, students from several districts discussed that in choosing to not stand during the pledge of allegiance, they experienced backlash from some of their fellow students. One student stated that a security guard had questioned her motivation and that she felt uncomfortable speaking with him, as he had not made any previous attempt to get to know her.

Similarly, a few students mentioned that racial incidents had caused problems at their schools. One student said that someone who ran for the school board had openly endorsed racist views, and that the lack of definitive response from school administration made her feel unsafe. At one district, students expressed that racial tensions between the neighborhood community and the school were evident
(which an administrator acknowledged), but no consensus had been reached as to how to approach the situation.

Other issues of bias enveloping the country at large were also encountered in this study. One principal mentioned that undocumented parents of students attending her school had called to ask if she would report them to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In a separate district, a principal stated,

_Honestly, you take the situation from 12 months ago with the inauguration. I don’t think the news media and the politicians, right or wrong, whatever side you’re on, they had no idea how much impact it had on our 8-to 12-year-olds and above because I only had those age groups in my building, but it was painful. We had kids crying in my school because they feel like their parents are getting deported. We have some kids who are talking about, “We should build a wall.’ And other kids who are from that area in the world, their feelings are hurt. So I mean, it was very challenging. I can’t even tell you how blown away I was by how an election of a president created inside this little building, such chaos. And what a shame. What a shame._

In the face of this divisive social environment, many schools are at a loss in terms of how to deal with the fallout. Meanwhile, other social issues plaguing the country have shed further light on the lack of mental health resources in school communities. One district felt the impact of our nation’s drug epidemic, having lost several students to heroin overdoses within the past three years. Two suicides also rocked one school community.

Indeed, encouraging thinking about ethics and individual responsibility to contribute to the greater good is essential for students to achieve mastery of higher order SEL skills. When schools integrate SEL directly into curriculum, as in the manner of Dan Carpenter’s civics class (see above) of Analy High School, they prepare students to engage with difficult topics in a thoughtful and constructive way. Students are sensitive to the socio-political climate, and schools can and should teach them how to become active and engaged citizens.

Most often, when students expressed discomfort about issues that had arisen in their schools to us, they said that they wished for administration to simply “say something.” Confronting such issues at school provides a venue for students to safely deal with issues they encounter in the rest of their lives, while also establishing that school is a place for healthy dialogue.

The Parkland school shooting in February 2017 acted as such a catalyst for schools and their students to advocate for greater safety. In all districts we assessed, administrators and teachers supported students in conducting a walkout in solidarity with the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Students spoke of the gravity of the incident, and how important it was to be able to stand together as a student body in support of each other and against violence in schools. Teachers and administrators acknowledged their pride in students’ courage and commitment to keep each other safe. Allowing
the protest to be student-led provided a means for students to not only reckon with the shooting, but also to reclaim power in shifting the narrative to collective action and support in the face of seemingly insurmountable tragedy.

When school leaders and teachers take the initiative to address socio-political issues head-on, they encourage students to do the same. Even if some issues cannot be solved within schools, creating a forum that encourages discussion around difficult topics and emphasizes the development of values in doing so undoubtedly supports students in feeling safe, included and, engaged at school. The rationales for teaching students to discuss these controversial issues in schools are varied. In contrast to other institutions, schools are particularly suitable sites for discussions of issues as they have a much greater capacity for teaching students to reason out loud about the disagreements that arise in democratic societies. Schools’ greater capacity lies in the fact that they contain more ideological diversity than generally found in other arenas. There is also evidence to support the idea that discussions of socio-political issues in schools can enhance democratic thinking. For example, research shows a positive association between discussion of complex policy issues and the development of accepting attitudes (Avery 2002). Discussing these issues also appears to increase civic knowledge, support for democratic ideals, participation in political discussion, and political engagement (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schultz 2001; Andolina et al. 2003).

Turnover of Leadership Takes a Significant Toll on School Climate

Another well-known issue that disrupts the learning environment in schools is the frequent turnover of leadership, particularly principals. Principal turnover is worrisome because of the essential role that they play in leading long-term systemic school improvement efforts (Fullan 2001). Frequent change in leadership can make it difficult for schools to execute new policies and programs, and to make commit to improvement (Miller 2013). Research also indicates that principals have an important impact on student learning. They are often tasked with hiring effective teachers (Baker and Cooper 2005; Brewer 1993; Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, & Ikemoto 2012), setting the vision and expectations for the school (Brewer 1993; Day, Gu, and Sammons 2016; Eberts and Stone 1988; Hitt and Tucker 2015; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008), creating a positive organizational culture (Hallinger and Heck 1996), supporting teachers’ professional learning (Printy 2008), and providing strong instructional culture (Day et al. 2016; Eberts & Stone 1988; Hitt & Tucker 2015; Robinson et al. 2008) and managerial leadership (Grissom & Loeb 2011).

We heard from teachers, students, and administrators that turnover significantly impacted their experience of school life. One principal spoke about the difficulty of undertaking the school climate improvement process as upper administration was constantly reshuffling. In a different district, a teacher made a direct connection between the state of the school’s climate and its numerous changes in leadership, stating, “This is my seventh year. I’ve gone through...six principals. So you can see...the climate, there’s no consistency.”
Students also attested to the difficulty they had in adjusting to new administrators. In one district students said that the new vice principal had not taken the time to get to know them, but acted as an authoritarian figure in the hallways by urging students to get back to class.

**SEL Instruction Becomes Increasingly Challenging as Students Move up through Middle School and High School**

Throughout the course of this study, we observed a variety of novel approaches to SEL instruction, including character education, the teaching of a growth mindset, and student mentoring. There was tremendous enthusiasm and effort to instill SEL at the elementary level, and some consistency was seen at the middle school level, but we noted a general trend of explicit SEL content and instruction gradually dwindling through the middle and high school years. This trend is in line with existing research, which has focused on elementary and, to a lesser extent, middle schools, where developing social and emotional skills is often integrated as part of the educational mission and early intervention is possible. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger 2011).

At several of the sites we observed, the introduction of values education was seamlessly integrated into early elementary lessons. Discussions of kindness, respect, and being a good friend often came up organically, such as when a teacher encouraged students to “help your friends,” if a peer did not know an answer. Upper elementary English language arts classes in districts where character education had been implemented provided ideal venues for further exploration of values, as well as goal-setting, decision-making, and other increasingly sophisticated SEL dispositions. Some schools also offered a physical space for “cool-down” time, further instilling in students the importance of self-regulation and emotional control.

In middle school, however, schools began to shift focus from SEL to more traditional academic demands and diversified extracurricular offerings. In fact, we noticed that in schools where students lamented the preoccupation with state assessments, there often seemed to be less focus on SEL programming.

Conversely, at Center City Public Charter Schools, we observed a dual focus on academic excellence and character education. This model highlights values as they relate to achievement. For instance, perseverance is taught as a means for achieving goals, getting into a college of choice, and so forth. Weaving critical SEL skills into standard curricular instruction therefore is possible, and a helpful supplement for developing students’ focus and motivation to succeed.

The findings herein highlight the gaps in knowledge that undermine effective social emotional learning in practice. While many sites aim to develop the whole child, successfully doing so necessitates understanding which social emotional needs, challenges, and opportunities
for growth can and should be directed along students’ educational and developmental trajectories. Effective social emotional learning in high school may benefit from the incorporation of a developmental framework that parallels its practice with the processes of adolescent growth and transition (Comer 2005).

School Community Engagement Remains a Challenge

Recruiting parents and communities to be involved in school life is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the job for teachers and administrators. All of the districts visited for this study made noteworthy efforts to engage parents and their communities, particularly in smaller districts, such as Simpson County and Schuylkill Technology Centers. Much like SEL instruction, however, we observed a general downward trend in engagement in upper grade levels. In addition, much of this community outreach took the form of standalone events rather than ongoing programming or other continuous partnerships.

Whether such events took the form of school business or leisurely gatherings, all stakeholders acknowledged that a variety of factors influenced parental involvement. Scheduling conflicts, physical distance, and language barriers were commonly cited obstacles. Districts that were successful in engaging parents and the greater community adopted a culturally attuned approach to outreach. They sought to “meet parents where they are,” encourage them to ask questions, and solicit their contribution to school life.

For example, at Monroe-Woodbury, principals invite parents to come to schools during the day and have coffee with them so that they can discuss new curriculum offerings. Monroe-Woodbury also hosts multicultural events in which parents are invited to speak about their cultures and learn about those of other families. Foregrounding parents’ interests is a direct way to show that they matter to schools. As stated by one district leader,

“We think about ‘how can we authentically engage parents so that they’re the ones speaking at the event?’ What we’ve noticed is...when parents or students are organizing the thing, people will show up.”

Engaging parents via the school climate improvement process was another successful method for encouraging participation. Center City Public Charter Schools took this a step further by administrating school climate surveys, and subsequently partnering with a local organization dedicated to help families understand the use of student data in improving academic achievement. This shows the power of framing engagement with parents as a collaborative process in enhancing students’ education. By centering engagement efforts on the student or parent rather than the school itself, schools can overcome the challenges of keeping parents actively involved in students’ education.
MEASURING AND TRACKING PROGRESS ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN STUDENTS

Another aspect of SEL education that is not widely enough implemented is the measuring and tracking of SEL competencies in students. Few districts had incorporated any sort of structured assessments around the development of core SEL skills. As mentioned previously, several districts that took part in this study had only recently begun implementing a school climate improvement plan, and hence were in the early stages of utilizing data to drive systemic change. In order to accurately survey how and when SEL dispositions are cultivated in individual students and to understand general developmental trends, schools must establish the appropriate metrics and methods of using those metrics.

Two districts did have some form of SEL assessment in place. At Parkway School District, a section on elementary student report cards detailed progress on a set of SEL standards established by grade level. At West Sonoma Union County Schools, the California Healthy Kids Survey is administered on a biannual basis to assess SEL skills. As more states continue to get on board with SEL as a major component of school climate, state level surveys and metrics are likely to increase as well. Using existing reporting methods for measurement may be the simplest way for schools to adopt SEL metrics and communicate them to parents. As is the case with SEL instruction, embedding mechanisms for tracking the development of SEL skills within the core frameworks of school life represents a sustainable way to encourage ongoing development of this crucial educational component.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Creating School Communities of Courage: Lessons from the Field focused on how six school districts throughout the United States engaged in efforts to make their school communities more safe, inclusive, and engaging. In doing so, these districts employed different strategies to successfully make students the center of school climate improvement efforts. In some instances, these strategies were a result of a single dedicated adult or part of a siloed SEL programmatic effort; while in other instances, these strategies were a fundamental part of the mission, built into the fabric of the relationships that comprise the school community. The lessons we learned in each district, and the observations we noted across each site, can help inform policymakers, practitioners, and researchers about effective and promising practices to make schools safer, inclusive, and more engaging. Based on our findings, several implications emerge for future consideration in research, policy and practice:
Research must identify the elements of school climate and SEL that have the greatest impact on schools and the aspects where school communities struggle most.

Currently, many school districts either do not collect data on school climate and student SEL measures or are not using it to its potential. This has led to a lack of national data on these measures. Yet, research can be a critical driver of both policy and practice for school improvement and student success. Having valid and reliable data that can be evaluated across school communities can help policymakers identify what and where school communities need the most support. This data can also inform school districts as they develop programs, strategies, and practices to improve school climate and student SEL skills.

We must enhance our understanding of the forces that drive school climate improvement and SEL development.

We know that a positive school climate and development of SEL skills lead to positive educational, social, economic, and psychological outcomes in students. There is less consensus, however, on the factors that influence school climate improvement and SEL development. Research that attempts to link these school climate metrics to broader social, psychological, economic, policy, and other contextual factors, will aid in the development of more targeted interventions that address the source of negative climate and poor SEL development in schools. We must better understand the relationship between school climate and SEL in driving student success and well-being. School climate and SEL have often been considered independent of one another by researchers and school practitioners, but both are fundamental components to building safe, inclusive, and engaging school communities. A positive school climate can be the grounds for the development of SEL in students, while the development of SEL can create more positive learning environments for all students. Exploring school climate and SEL as complementary pieces can help develop more comprehensive education programs and practices that acknowledge and reinforce this relationship. Further research, evaluation, and measurement endeavors are critical in this regard.

All levels of government policy must support efforts that make schools safe, inclusive, and engaging.

While effective implementation and efficient use of resources are critical, policymakers must recall that the anticipated goal of school climate improvement is achievement and well-being for all students. As such, policies should also be focused on strengthening the resources that foster
School districts must identify ways to engage all members of the school community in school climate improvement and SEL efforts in schools.

School districts must appreciate the diversity and strength in their teachers and staff, as well as families, business and other community leaders, as valuable assets for improving SEL and climate in schools. They must identify ways to empower these members as important contributors to SEL and school climate improvement. This can be accomplished by providing a wide range of opportunities at the district, school, and community levels that take into consideration the differing assets and necessities of these members, while helping them remain connected to each other through collaboration and partnership. School leaders can advance community roles in school climate improvement and SEL development initiatives. They can also hold school leaders and staff accountable for engaging with families, and other school community members. Offering staff professional development opportunities that allow them to consider best practices in a group environment can be a significant way to develop capacity and increase staff engagement.

School districts should evaluate their school climate and SEL development efforts often and consistently.

Regularly assessing the school environment as well as students’ SEL capabilities can lead to continuous improvement in the implementation of school climate and SEL initiatives, which can ultimately improve student success and well-being. Unfortunately, not all schools make
WELLNESS: MOVING BEYOND SEL

Wellness has only recently become a focus in some schools, partly in response to concerning trends in the mental and physical health of young people and increased awareness of the need for thoughtful action on the part of the education community. Excellent examples of standalone initiatives were observed at all districts; however, much like means for engaging parents and the community, these often existed in isolation and were not consistently practiced or applied across schools.

From a mental health standpoint, students at multiple districts expressed that they felt something was lacking in the support they received from schools. The presence of guidance counselors was cited as the only resource provided in some cases. In other cases, add-on initiatives left something to be desired. In student focus groups, for instance, students discussed how mental health awareness campaigns did not actually teach coping skills or inform them deeply. At one school, a flyer that was distributed about depression as part of mental health awareness week simply stated ‘It’s OK to Not Be OK.’ One student commented, ‘You haven’t necessarily told me how to get help. I’m not the type of person who can just go to a trusted adult for help. So they’re kind of saying “It’s Ok to not be OK,” and I’m like, “What else?”’

In terms of physical wellness, a similar pattern emerged. Healthy eating was often encouraged via campaigns, posters, or other limited initiatives, but not grounded in everyday practice. In an interesting trend, students produced a nearly unanimous response to ‘If you could change one thing about your school, what would that be?’ That response was a resounding, ‘Lunch!’ Students felt that they did not have healthy or satisfying options at their disposal on a regular basis.

Conversely, some schools made strides in incorporating wellness into their core frameworks. At the Schuylkill Technology Center, culinary shops adopted a nutrition curriculum to accompany cooking instruction. At Parkway School District, yoga and meditation classes were available to students. In a bid to help younger children be more physically active, the elementary school implemented twice daily recess. Simpson County Schools offers dance classes for its students as well.

West Sonoma County Union High School District exhibited perhaps the most robust endeavors at integrating wellness into daily life. An overhaul was conducted of both health and physical education curricula so that they were aligned and informed each other. Freshmen students are graded based on health outcomes, such as cardiovascular fitness. Local nonprofits were also consulted to develop modules on dating violence, sexual health, and other lifestyle topics, with from the community speaking to classes on some of these issues. This multifaceted approach addresses wellness needs on a variety of fronts, utilizing interactive elements as well as standard curriculum.

Finally, Simpson County Schools addresses wellness via the lens of supporting the whole child. In addition to guidance counselors, a team of social workers and school psychologists collaborate to serve students. Access to family resource and youth service centers complement these wellness offerings. By cultivating a network of support via school professionals and the community, Simpson County Schools offers a lesson in synergistically fulfilling multiple needs: anchoring wellness in school practice, creating a strong system of mutually reinforcing supports, and integrating the community.
CONCLUSION

The process of reforming schools to be centrally concerned with the needs of the whole child essentially turns the old paradigm on its head. Rather than relying on a burdened bureaucracy to devise, plan, act, and enforce policies that reflect the best interests of students, the students themselves must be the central driving forces of change. In order to elevate the needs of students above all else, the students themselves must be at the core of reform efforts. The first step in this process must be for schools to ensure that adults employed in the service of students are wholeheartedly committed to putting the needs of the whole child first.

What distinguished exceptional districts involved in this study from the rest was leadership that demonstrated such commitment every step of the way, from how they interacted with students and teachers to the comprehensive, carefully selected methods they utilized to evaluate and improve the climate in their schools. When leadership “walks the walk” by not only taking risks and innovating in their schools, but also creating relationships with all stakeholders and showing that they truly care, they are able to win the hearts, minds, and dedication of students and teachers. This is another key piece of achieving and sustaining lasting change.

In addition, districts that exhibited high levels of coherence in aligning mission, collaboration among all stakeholders, and steps taken towards change across individual schools also had the strongest and most vibrant communities. Our findings underscore the importance of district-level support in school revitalization efforts. In order for students to feel safe, included, and engaged, congruence in curriculum and programming as well as holistic support and encouragement of innovation must be maintained on the district level. When districts are dedicated to achieving collective change by honoring the voice and presence of all stakeholders, they can truly bring this vision to life.

As teachers are the primary ambassadors of school climate, it is crucial that they, too, embody this authentic commitment to students’ well-being. In focus groups students regularly mentioned that when teachers expressed care for their lives outside of school, it made them feel safe and engaged, and motivated them to do well in school.

That students recognized teachers’ empathy as being central to their motivation to succeed in school is a testament to the power of SEL skills and their power to transform relational dynamics and, ultimately, communities. Perhaps the greatest goal in instilling and exhibiting these skills is to manifest trust in all stakeholders.

In practice, it is this trust that can act to remodel schools as student-centered incubators of proactive, fully engaged constituents. When teachers trust leadership and each other, they are open and willing to adopt novel practices for engaging students in the classroom and beyond. When leadership trusts teachers and staff, they endow them with the confidence to experiment with new ways of enhancing the school experience of and to stay the course when things do not go as planned. When all adults trust students, they dignify the role of students in schools and elevate their voices, giving them the power to reshape policy and practice.
School climate improvement is an evidence-based method that supports this type of systemic change by building deeper trust of the process in school networks. Recent research indicates that school climate improvement provides the structured approach necessary to identify previously overlooked factors sustaining the opportunity gap and subsequently dismantle them (Kostyo, Cardlchon, and Darling-Hammond, 2018). By gathering feedback from various stakeholders, administrators can obtain an accurate assessment of their schools’ climates. In addition, recruiting feedback from students about their personal experience of school life is a crucial first step in empowering them to change it. By utilizing student data to intentionally shape school climate, leadership and teachers are actively centering student experience as a metric of success. It is this centering of experience that breathes life into the process of school reform.

As students learn through all of their experiences at school, increasing opportunities for interactive and service learning represents another means to add invaluable depth and dimension to education. Whether these opportunities take place within school or in the community, students are edified by the chance to work with their hands and hearts to authentically create things and change the lives of others. Expanding pedagogic practice beyond the traditional “teacher lectures, student listens” model also stimulates students’ desire to learn by allowing them to contribute more deeply. The desire of students to demonstrate leadership is a natural outgrowth of such opportunities. When they are offered the ability to take responsibility for the tone of school life by voicing their opinions and taking part in change efforts, students gladly step up to the challenge.

When schools recognize this, they can alleviate the burden of initiative fatigue by empowering students to sustain the momentum. Students are eager to affect change in their school communities. They simply require the trust of the adults who support them to do so. Unitig school climate improvement efforts with fully integrated SEL instruction creates a framework that elevates students as agents of change and centers fulfilling the needs of the whole child as the goal of education.
REFERENCES


