

Creating School Communities of Courage: Lessons from the Field

Executive Summary



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In October 2017, the National School Climate Center and Facebook for Education convened a diverse group of education leaders, researchers, and student activists to hold a summit on the present state of education in the United States. The purpose of the day was to offer a place for sharing different experiences and understandings regarding critical matters in the field, and together re-envision the future of education as a ground for cultivating school communities that strengthen the health and development of the whole school and the whole child. To identify how systemic structures and policies are not serving the holistic needs of students, summit attendees participated in a series of panel discussions and working groups. These insights were documented in our Connecting Communities of Courage Summit Re-Cap¹. The Summit Re-Cap documents the day's proceedings, provides a list of attendees and presenters, and summarizes the key themes from the day.

After the Summit, a group of researchers went into the field to observe what a sampling of schools and districts committed to building more safe, inclusive and engaging communities were actually doing and what they were learning. The focus of this report is to highlight the successes experienced by districts and schools and the promising practices that resonate most with members of the school community, as well as the challenges school communities face in dealing with age-old problems and emerging risks. By sharing these critical lessons with the field, we hope to further the knowledge base on effective practices for school climate improvement and social emotional learning (SEL) development, as well as illustrate consistent gaps so as to guide future research and implementation efforts in these areas.



Methods

Members of the research team at the National School Climate Center (NSCC) set out 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 based on our contacts at NSCC. 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

¹For more information on what constitutes Courageous Conditions and a practical guide for sustaining the transformation of schools, please see the Summit Re-Cap which can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/2GbNOL2>

In spring of 2018, we traveled to two to three schools in each district. First, we performed a school observation to assess elements of overall school climate. We then conducted classroom observations at each school to examine classroom instructional practices, support resources, peer interactions, and staff-student interactions. Third, we conducted interviews with school and district leadership. Finally, at each school, we facilitated separate focus groups with students and staff focused on issues of safety, engagement, and inclusion. Observation notes and transcripts were reviewed by the team and scanned for common themes.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Here, we summarize the key lessons learned from across the six participating school districts in the hopes of providing insight into common strengths that can serve as models to other school communities.

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

- Effective leadership creates and maintains positive relationships with stakeholders
- Innovating within school communities requires leadership to embrace challenges
- 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

- 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

- Conflict resolution requires key SEL skills, such as self-regulation and empathy
- Trusted adults aid students in building their confidence in conflict resolution
- Simple practices can create a safe environment for students to talk through conflicts

Lesson #4: Project-based and Service Learning Stimulate Greater Inclusion & Engagement

- Project-based/service learning increase inclusion and engagement beyond school
- Service learning provides a direct path to community engagement
- Interactive learning helps students build self-efficacy and leadership skills

Lesson #5: Social-Emotional Learning Integration Enhances Classroom Practice

- 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 others via interactive learning enhances engagement

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

- Prioritizing equity entails schools offer student chances to co-create school community
- Involving students in decision-making practices is a simple way to boost student voice
- Creating opportunities for students to use voice benefits school communities

Lesson #7: Peer-to-Peer Support Structures Instill Leadership and Strengthen Student Bonds

- Utilizing students as an internal resource can alleviate challenges with mental health
- Expanding student ownership through mentoring opportunities enhances equity
- Creating opportunities for students to support each other bolsters SEL integration

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.

Schools Struggle to Effectively Address Socio-Political Issues.

- Ongoing socio-political issues are taking a toll on relations at school.
- Many schools are at a loss on how to deal with issues stemming from this divisiveness.
- Creating a forum that encourages discussion around difficult topics and emphasizes the development of values supports students in feeling safe, engaged, and included.

Turnover of Leadership Takes a Significant Toll on School Climate.

- Principal turnover can disrupt the learning environment and derail long-term systemic school improvement efforts.
- Leadership turnover impacted the daily experience of school life for both staff and students.
- Staff and students both faced challenges in adjusting to new administrators.

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

- While there was tremendous effort to instill SEL at the elementary level, we observed a general trend of explicit SEL content and instruction gradually dwindling through the middle and high school years.
- There remain gaps in development knowledge that undermine effective SEL in practice.
- Developing the whole child necessitates understanding which SEL needs, challenges, and opportunities for growth can and should be directed along students' educational and developmental trajectories.



School Community Engagement Remains a Challenge.

- Recruiting parents and communities to be involved in school life is one of the most challenging aspects of the job for teachers and administrators.
- Despite the challenge, districts made noteworthy efforts to engage parents and their communities.
- Similar to SEL instruction and programming, 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.

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.
- We must enhance our understanding of the forces that drive school climate improvement and SEL development.
- We must better understand the relationship between school climate and SEL in driving student success and well-being.
- All levels of government policy must support efforts that make schools safe, inclusive, and engaging.
- School districts must identify ways to engage all members of the school community in school climate improvement and SEL efforts in schools.
- School districts should evaluate their school climate and SEL development efforts often and consistently.

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. As teachers are the primary ambassadors of school climate, it is crucial that they, too, embody this authentic commitment to students' well-being. School climate improvement is an evidence-based method that supports this type of systemic change by building deeper trust and commitment to the improvement process in school networks. 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. Students are eager to affect change in their school communities. They simply require the trust of the adults who support them to do so. Uniting 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.

