



# SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SHARED LEADERSHIP

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School leaders can build broad engagement through the following promising shared leadership strategies:

1. Set clear parameters to create balanced power and establish leadership as a partnership.
2. Engage all stakeholders in working together toward a shared purpose.
3. Ensure all participants share responsibility and accountability.
4. Recognize and embrace diverse perspectives in the group.
5. Teach and value inner strength in all participants in shared leadership.

## Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

## School Climate and Shared Leadership

A positive school climate improves student achievement and a sense of belonging. This year, more than ever, school leaders need efficient, low-cost and effective ways to boost school achievement. We know that important factors in a positive school climate are also significant mediators of learning: empowerment, authentic, engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation. Being intentional in our practices and co-leading on a positive school climate is a strategy that pays off long term for youth, faculty and school districts – with stronger student achievement within a productive, safe learning environment – a good return on investment of human and financial resources.

In order for safe, equitable, engaging and high-quality school climates to become the norm in American schools, schools must encourage, support and reward shared leadership. Shared Leadership is when teachers, staff, parents, students and principals collaborate to solve problems. Working together to create an engaging school climate that accelerates student learning is *common sense*. Where shared leadership exists with youth and adults working collaboratively, there is a student-focused school. Shared leadership means a shift from the formal leader to a shared leadership model resulting in shared power and decision-making. Instead of a single individual leading to success, other individuals, who are partners or group members, are invited to share the responsibility for leadership and develop a positive school climate.

A principal should not work in isolation. Successful schools require the substantial engagement of those who make it a community. Roland Barth wrote, *“Teachers have extraordinary leadership capabilities, and their leadership is a major untapped resource for improving our nation’s schools”* (Barth, 1990). When teachers are included throughout the decision-making process, they are more likely to implement and sustain change with fidelity to quality practice. For example, when teachers, students, staff and parents are included in deciding what the behavioral expectations and interventions will be school-wide, they are more likely to ensure that they are consistently used in classrooms, hallways and schoolyards effectively.

Leaders willing and able to tap the wealth of knowledge and skill sets of everyone in the school develop an engaging school climate. The school becomes a place where (1) students learn more and are connected to the adults in the schools; (2) adults in the school collaborate and create a sense of belonging through shared

responsibility; and (3) inclusiveness is both a vision and practice to ensure everyone is engaged. Shared leadership recognizes that not just a person in a formal leadership position has leadership capabilities, but also the quiet or reserved colleague that provides a research summary on evidence-based instructional practices; the lead custodian who makes sure things are ready to go for the assembly, notices a student’s sense of school, and finds a place for a student with an interest in facilities; the student who comes up with a plan for addressing bullying in the hallway; or the outgoing team member that develops and leads activities so students are engaged and valued in the school. The skilled principal nurtures and capitalizes on the leadership in everyone in the school community – making them better as a team than as individuals.

## Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

The following five strategies lead to and sustain shared leadership in schools and address some of the challenges school leaders, teachers, students and community members may experience co-creating positive school climates.

### 1. Think Partnership

A balance of power is the platform for shared leadership. Shared leadership is a partnership. Teachers, staff, parents and students are equal partners. Creating this balance of power is probably one of the hardest aspects in shared leadership. Effective school leaders know this, and they set clear parameters so the authority of the leaders is real, empower all members of the group, and ensure what is developed or decided in the work team is carried out. They model a positive school climate in their words, actions and beliefs, beginning with the climate they maintain between administration and school staff.

## **2. Ensure Shared Purpose**

Shared Leadership requires a shared purpose or goal, in this case, an engaging school climate. Each school member, with their own divergent opinions, must understand that the prize at the end of the year is strong student learning in a positive school climate. Teachers, staff, parents and students use different strategies to contribute to a school's climate, but through shared leadership these divergent pathways share a sense of purpose and focus. More can be accomplished when education stakeholders work together toward a shared purpose rather than working on their own agenda. This also requires education stakeholders to share strategies and outcomes of quality school climate with their peers and constituents.

## **3. Commit to Shared Responsibilities**

Shared leadership works when all the participants share responsibility and accountability for the work of the partnership. Each person in the partnership must take an active role and be accountable for effectively completing their individual responsibilities. Empowering teachers, staff, students and parents to work and collaborate towards a common goal makes them aware of their responsibilities and the important role each one of them plays in the work. Shared leadership requires hard workers willing to do their part to build an engaging school climate from decision-making to implementation and monitoring progress.

## **4. Build Respect and Responsibility**

Shared leadership means respect and responsibility to consider different and new ideas and strategies. Each person in the school brings with them experiences, skills and ideas that are valuable to co-create a quality school climate. The partnership must recognize and embrace the differences in the group. Collaboration and networking linked to respect

and shared leadership build a strong, cohesive team that can work well together to accomplish a goal.

## **5. Honor Grit Leaders**

Teachers, staff, parents, students and principals need grit, especially those who believe in shared leadership. Sharing leadership requires courage and resolve. Teaching inner strength - what our parents called "grit" - and valuing those character traits as much as we do academic ability is key. Paul Tough (2012) makes the case that resilience, perseverance and optimism (among other non-cognitive traits), are as necessary for academic success, or in the case of shared leadership, persistence for students and adults facing tough challenges, such as poverty or a lack of strong cognitive skills. Shared leadership requires each of us to have moral and performance character. Moral character is about ethical traits such as honesty, generosity and chastity. Performance character refers to traits that enhance personal effectiveness: self-control, persistence, grit, and optimism. Grit ensures shared leadership is a partnership with vitality and spirit, weaving youth and adults and their relationships into a school climate that makes students run **to** school rather than leave it as fast as they can. Shared leadership gives them the strength, leadership skills and belief in collaboration to handle the adversity that comes to us all.

## **Summary**

Teachers, staff, students, parents and principals working together are a powerful leadership lever. Systemic problems or a troubled school climate are usually too big and too numerous for one person to address and change alone. Schools need to recognize and develop leadership among many different kinds of individuals representing all education stakeholders to effectively model and develop a school climate that engages adults and students in a shared mission that improves

student development.

Shared leadership can come from principals who empower teachers to become leaders and from teachers who collectively take responsibility for the well being of the school (Barth, 1990). What we have found is shared leadership that engages staff, parents, and students becomes a force multiplier in school climate work. Just as we have high expectations that all students can learn, principals must have high expectations that students, parents, teachers and staff can lead. If all education stakeholders are to effectively lead together, then there must be a substantial change made in the ways we think and feel about our personal and shared leadership responsibilities in the school. These collaborations can create schools that effectively engage and meet the needs of all students. If we do not empower one another to become leaders, we are missing out on a great opportunity to improve our schools, our students, and our community.

## References

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