



SCHOOL CLIMATE RESEARCH

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Research highlight the following promising strategies for school climate improvement efforts:

1. Engage all stakeholders as active participants and agents of change.
2. Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support.
3. Create school networks to share best practices and discuss challenges.
4. Engage students at all stages of the process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts.
5. Create and share tools and information with teachers, administrators, staff and parents.
6. Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

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 Research

As early as a century ago educational reformers had recognized that the distinctive culture of a school affects the life and learning of its students (Perry, 1908; Dewey, 1916). However, the rise of systematic empirical study of school climate grew out of industrial/organizational research coupled with the observation that school-specific processes accounted for a great deal of variation in student achievement (Anderson, 1982; Kreft, 1993). Since then the research in school climate has been expanding systematically, and many countries are showing a keen interest in this field.

There is empirical evidence being documented on various aspects of school climate in several languages (for a summary, see Benbenisty & Astor, 2005; Cohen et al., 2009 in English; Debarbieux, 1996 in French; and Del Rey, Ortega & Feria, 2009 in Spanish).

The research on school climate overlaps with several fields, including social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; positive youth development, mental health, and healthy relationships; school connectedness and engagement; academic achievement; social, emotional, and civic learning; teacher retention; and effective school reform. Further, it must be understood that both the effects of school climate and the conditions that give rise to them are deeply interconnected, growing out of the shared experience of a dynamic ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009). In general, the research on school climate can be categorized on four or five essential areas of school climate: Safety, Relationships, Teaching and Learning, Institutional Environment, and the School Improvement Process (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, in press).

The rising interest and attention in school climate reform efforts in recent years is due to the following three factors (Thapa et al., in press). First, there is a growing body of empirical research that supports the notion that context matters: group trends, for example, norms, expectations, and belief systems shape individual experience and learning as well as influence all levels of relationships. Second, there is an increasing awareness that school climate reform supports effective violence prevention in general and bullying prevention efforts in particular. As a result, local, state, and federal interest in school climate reform as an effective, data driven and evidence-based process is emerging. Third, research-based prosocial educational

efforts are being given tremendous attention in recent years. These efforts include character education, social emotional learning, mental health promotion efforts, service learning and civic engagement, and others (for a compendium of the wide-range of interventions, see Brown, Corrigan, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012). Moreover, school climate reform is a process that necessarily focuses on and supports students, parents/guardians, and educators in considering how effective current prosocial educational efforts are and how we can strengthen these instructional and intervention efforts.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that there are a number of limitations that influence current school climate research findings, concerned with definitions, models, and experimental methodologies. For example, comprehensive reviews by both Anderson (1982) and Freiberg (1999) highlighted that defining school climate was complicated by the fact that practitioners and researchers used a wide range of school climate definitions and models that were often more implicit than explicit in nature. Naturally, how we define school climate has implications for what we measure. There is not a national or international consensus about how to define "school climate," a "positive and sustained school climate," or the "school climate process" and the dimensions that need to be regularly measured in school climate research and improvement efforts. To some extent, this has stymied and continues to stymie the advancement of school climate research so necessary to inform school improvement efforts. In addition, it hampers the development of the field in general and measurement practices in particular.

School climate matters. Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk

prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention. There seems to be an abundant literature on school climate from different parts of the world that document a positive school climate having a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993), mitigating the negative impact of the socioeconomic context on academic success (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009), contributing to less aggression, violence and sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010; Karcher, 2002), and acting as a protective factor for the learning and positive life development of young people (Ortega, Sanchez, Ortega Rivera, & Viejo, 2011). Furthermore, it is found that quality of the school climate contributes to academic outcomes as well as the personal development and well-being of pupils (Haahr, Nielsen, Hansen, & Jakobsen, 2005; OECD, 2009).

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Following are some school climate practices and recommendations that can be implemented to effectively use the research summary and advance school climate research. These practices have evolved from the lessons learned and challenges identified during the recent School Climate Improvement Project (SCIP) in Queens, New York.

- Engage all members of the school community, including teachers, students, parents, administrators as active participants and agents for successful school climate improvement implementation.
- Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support to ensure school climate reform is sustainable.
- Create school networks to share best practices and provide a forum to discuss

challenges openly and honestly. While a number of schools feel isolated in their school climate reform efforts, networking ensures that schools continue to learn from each other to improve teaching, learning, and overall leadership activities.

- Engage students at all stages of the school cycle improvement process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts. This includes students as action researchers to collect and analyze school climate data.
- Create and share tools and information for teachers, administrators, staff and parents to promote a positive school climate.
- Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

Summary

School Climate research is clearly evolving. The field demands rigorous and empirically sound research that focuses on relating specific aspects and activities of interventions to changes in specific components of school climate. We also need empirical evidence based on sound research techniques on how both interventions and climate affect specific socio-moral, emotional, civic, and cognitive development and the teaching and learning of both students and teachers. Understanding the interactions of these processes in the contexts of interventions will enable schools to successfully adapt interventions that have been shown to promote one or more of these positive outcomes. We need to translate these researches into smarter educational policies to transform low performing schools to better schools and to enhance the quality of lives of our students. The research in school climate points out the need for the individuals, educators in every school community and policy makers to work hand-in-hand to achieve these essential goals. Six effective practices are offered to support school climate integration and sustainability.

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