

Measuring and improving school climate:

A school improvement strategy that supports the whole child and the whole school community

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D.

Center for Social and Emotional Education;
Teachers College, Columbia University;
National School Climate Council.

A Student Services Symposium: Supporting Students to Success:
Harrisburg, PA May 17, 2010



Goals

1. To learn about and consider **current school climate theory and research**
2. To learn about **school climate policy standards** that integrate research from school reform, social emotional learning, character education, community schools, risk prevention and health/mental health promotion.
3. To learn about **practice guidelines that support school communities actualizing school climate standards: Tasks** and challenges that support students, parents/guardians and school personnel learning and working together to create even safer, more supportive, engaging and helpfully challenging schools.



Think about . . .

Your experience right now?

Your experience as a student?

Your vision of a “great” school?

**School Climate Matters:
A 100 year-old Educational Tradition**



School Climate

**Definition*:
School Climate**



School climate refers to the character and quality of school life.

It is based on patterns of people’s experience of school life and reflects*:

- norms, goals, values
- interpersonal relationships
- teaching, learning
- leadership practices
- organizational structures.

* National School Climate Council
(see Appendix A)



What Does a Positive School Climate Look Like?

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development & learning necessary for a productive, contributing & satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes:

- **norms, values** and **expectations** that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe

- People are **engaged and respected**

- Students, families and educators **work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision**

- **Educators model and nurture** an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction from learning

- **Each person contributes** to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment*

* National School Climate Council (see Appendix A)



Reflecting – a three minute break

- What do you think?

- What do you agree with thus far?

- What do you want to argue with?

- What do you aspire to?



School Climate: Key Dimensions

- 1) **Safety:** Rules & Norms, Physical Security, Social-Emotional Security
- 2) **Relationships:** Respect for Diversity, Social Support – Adults, Social Support - Students
- 3) **Teaching and learning:** Support for Learning, Social and Civic Learning, Professional Development, Leadership
- 4) **Environmental:** School Connectedness/Engagement, Physical Surroundings



School Climate: Where are we now?

- **Most building, district and state leaders appreciate the importance of school climate**
- **Yet, there is a serious gap between research, policy and practice guidelines:**
 - ✓ Not measured with reliable and valid tools
 - ✓ We do not use school climate findings to support safe schools, student learning, positive youth development and school improvement efforts



School Climate: Where are we now? (cont.)

Safety:

- ✓ Lethal shootings – bystander data (Pollack, et. al., 2008)
- ✓ Roughly 1 in 3 students feel that school is unsafe*
- ✓ One in three students do not feel comfortable asking questions in class*
- ✓ Zero tolerance policies and practices have an extensive 20 year history, yet there is scant evidence of efficacy (APA, 2008)

(*Quaglia Institute, 2008)



School Climate: Where are we now? (cont.)

Relationships:

- ✓ **Less than 50%** of students believe their teachers care about them as individuals*
- ✓ **Less than 50%** feel that they have a teacher who they can talk to if they have a problem*
- ✓ **2 out of 3** students believe that students do not respect one another*
- ✓ **20% of students** feel that they are never recognized for their accomplishments*
- ✓ **Roughly 1 in 3** students feel that school is not preparing them for the future*
- ✓ **As students move from middle to high school, all of the problems noted above are exacerbated***

(*Quaglia Institute, 2008)



School Climate: Where are we now? (cont.)

- **School-home-community partnerships:**

- ✓ Essential, but a serious challenge!

- **Learning and teaching:**

- ✓ The American paradox – the best and the worst



School Climate Research

I. **Academic Achievement :**

Positive school climate is strongly correlated and/or predictive of **high quality teaching** and **student academic achievement**

II. **Risk Prevention and Health Promotion:**

Effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts are positively correlated with **safe, caring, participatory** and **responsive school climate settings**.

III. **Individual Experience :**

A positive school climate affects student's **self-esteem** and **self-concept** in positive ways

IV. **Teacher Retention:**

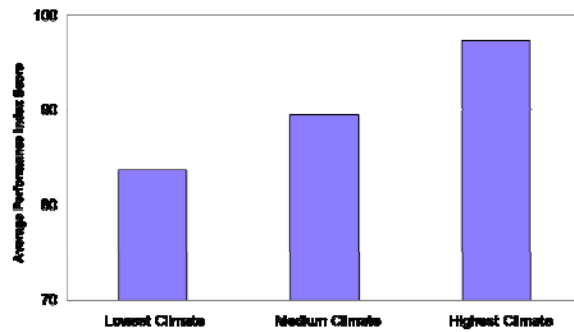
Positive school climate is associated with **greater teacher retention**

For a summary of empirical school climate research, see:
www.csee.net/climate/schoolclimate/ &
Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009.



School Climate and Performance Index Score

School Climate and Performance Index Score



Source: EMS, CSIE, 2006-07

Highlights:

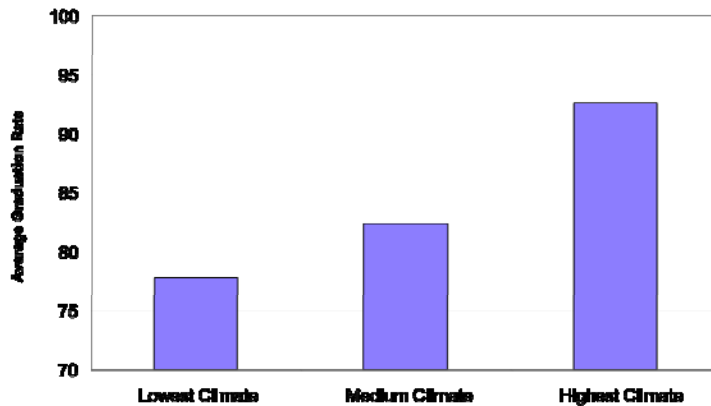
- Climate relates positively with the performance index

7



School Climate and Graduation Rate

School Climate and Graduation Rate



Source: EMS, CSIE, 2006-08

Highlights:

- Climate scores for high schools have a direct relationship with graduation rates

8





School Climate Policy

Standards: Defining goals and setting the bar

- National School Climate Council
- Pennsylvania State Department of Education
- U.S Department of Education



School Climate Policy (cont.)

National School Climate Standards: Benchmarks to Promote Effective Teaching, Learning and Comprehensive School Improvement

- 1) The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
- 2) The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage students who have become disengaged.



School Climate Policy (cont.)

- 3) The school community's practices are identified, prioritized and supported to (a) promote learning and positive social, emotional, ethical, civic development of students, (b) enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and school-wide activities; (c) reduce barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.
- 4) The school community creates an environment where all member are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
- 5) The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and commitment to social justice.



School Climate Policy (cont.)

Pennsylvania School Climate Standards:

- 1. The education community has a shared vision and coordinated plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate. All members understand their individual role while applying a systemic approach to developing a positive school climate.**
- 2. The education community provides a safe and secure learning environment that promotes health and wellness.**
- 3. The education community promotes an environment that recognizes and understands diversity and builds positive citizenship where all members are welcomed, safe, engaged, and supported.**



School Climate Policy (cont.)

4. The education community meaningfully and proactively engages its larger community* to create and sustain positive school climate.
5. The education community & its partners provide a nurturing learning environment that specifically promotes the acquisition of social, emotional, behavioral, civic, ethical, & academic competencies.

www.education.state.pa.us



School Climate Policy (cont.)

Pennsylvania Interpersonal Skills Standards

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life successes.
2. Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships and respect for cultural diversity.
3. Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behavior in individual, family, school, and community contexts.

www.education.state.pa.us



Reflecting – a three minute break

- What do you think?
- What do you agree with thus far?
- What do you want to argue with?
- What do you aspire to?



School Climate Practice

Actualizing school climate standards:

Measurement Options?

Improvement Strategies?



Measuring school climate

Options:

- Available school data: Attendance & suspension/disciplinary rates
- Focus Groups
- Surveys: comprehensive or single focus
- Observational methods
- Interviews
- “Town hall” discussions
- Study circles
- Participatory action research (with students)



Measuring school climate

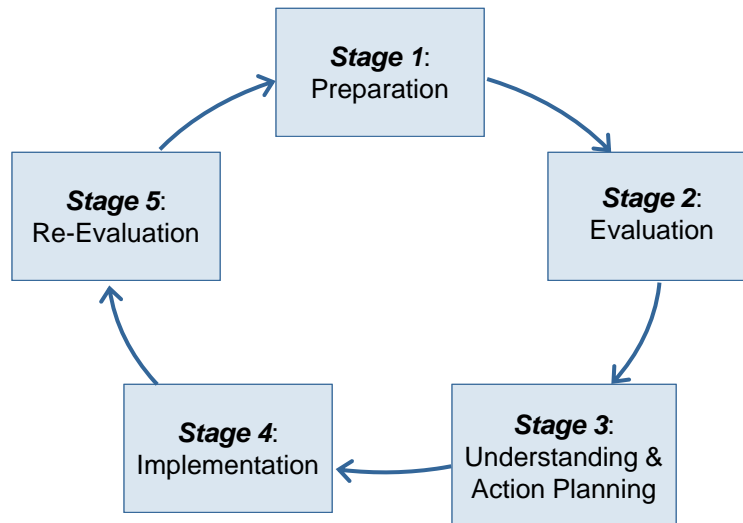
Suggested Method of Assessing School Climate*:

- Scientifically developed and comprehensive measures: Reliable and valid
- Recognizing student, parent and school personnel “voice”
- Assessing all of the dimensions that color and shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning and the environment
- Resulting in a comprehensive and helpful report

* National School Climate Council



School Climate Practice



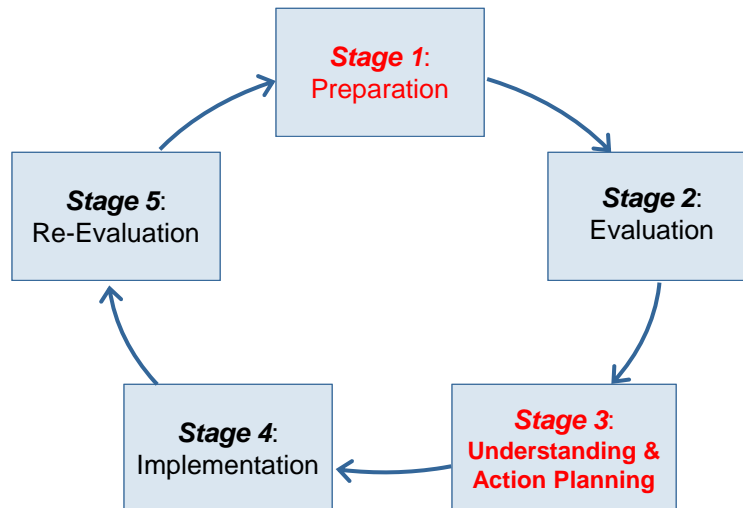
The Stages & Process of School Climate Improvement

A School Climate Implementation Road Map

- Each stage of the five stage improvement process is defined by a series of tasks & challenges (see handout for details).
- Guidelines, tools to understand and master each of these tasks and challenges.



School Climate Implementation Process: Examples



School Climate Practice: (cont.):

Stage I: Planning and Preparation

- *Forming a representative SC improvement leadership team* and establishing ground rules collaboratively.
- *Building support and fostering “Buy In”* for the school climate improvement process.
- *Establishing a “no fault” framework* and promoting a culture of trust.
- *Ensuring your team has adequate resources* to support the process.
- *Celebrating successes* and building on past efforts
- *Reflecting on Stage One work*



School Climate Practice (cont.):

Stage III: Understanding, engagement and action planning

- ✓ *Understanding the findings: consensus and discrepancies*
- ✓ *“Digging deeper” – Further learning and engagement*
- ✓ *Prioritizing goals*
- ✓ *Research evidence-based instructional and school-wide implementation options*
- ✓ *Action planning*



Reflecting – a three minute break

- What do you think?
- What do you agree with thus far?
- What do you want to argue with?
- What do you aspire to?



Next steps?

- ❖ What do you want most of our children to know and to be able to do when they graduate from high school?
- ❖ How can we best recognize, measure and support the development of these skills, knowledge and dispositions?
- ❖ **What can and do you want to do now to actualize what is most important for our children and our school communities?**

Acknowledgments

- The National School Climate Council
- CSEE's Staff and Board of Trustees
- The hundreds of classroom, family, building, district and state leaders and, most importantly, the children and adolescents who have been my teachers.



Thank You!

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D.

President, The Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE)

1841 Broadway, New York, NY 10023

(212) 707-8799; F (212) 957-6616

Jonathancohen@csee.net

Co-chair, National School Climate Council

Adjunct Professor in Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

Adjunct Professor in Education, School of Professional Studies, City University of N.Y.