



April 2015

Governance Brief

Climate for Achievement, Issue 2

Why school climate matters

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School climate is one of eight state priorities that every school district must address in its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). This Climate for Achievement series is designed to help school boards and superintendents explore the priority area of school climate. The first issue summarizes current requirements for school climate in LCAPs and provides an overview of the research that defines and identifies the various components of school climate. Future issues will focus on methods and tools for measuring school climate, and the actions school boards can take to improve school climate. This issue reviews the research on the relationship between school climate and students outcomes.

Positive school climate improves academic achievement

The connection between student achievement and school climate has been studied for decades. A 2007 study by the American Institute of Research found that not only are climate and achievement positively correlated, but improving school climate is related to gains in student scores on statewide achievement tests.¹ In fact, between 1977 and 2009, there were at least fifteen correlational studies showing that school climate is directly related to student achievement in elementary schools, middle schools and high schools. Researches have also found that a healthy school climate not only contributes to better student achievement in the short term, but that its benefits seem to persist over time.² A 2014 researcher concluded that an increase of one standard deviation in school climate could improve the probability of a school attaining Annual Yearly Progress by 81%.³

Recent research has made this climate-achievement connection even more compelling. The 2013 report by WestEd, *Climate for Academic Success*,⁴ offers important research on school climate and student achievement. The

study was designed to account for the different student populations the schools serve by defining success in a new way. Instead of using a standard measure like overall API scores, this study defined success as whether schools performed better than predicted. In other words, they identified schools that were either beating the odds (BTO), given the students they serve, or chronically underperforming (CU)—performing worse than would be predicted for the students they serve.⁵ The research included a sample of 1,715 public middle and high schools in California and drew upon three kinds of data from five key sources.

- a. **Academic data:** California Standards Test: English and math scores between 2007-08 and 2010-11 and California High School Exit Examination: 10th-grade math scores
- b. **Demographic data:** California Basic Educational Data System: student enrollment and demographic data and the Personnel Assignment Information Form (PAIF): teacher ratio, distribution, experience, and status data.
- c. **School climate data:** California Healthy Kids Survey results

The California Healthy Kids Survey is a 115-item climate survey that asks student perceptions about school safety, support and engagement, school violence, and substance abuse. Those results were combined with school truancy data to generate a school climate index (CSI) for each school. The CSI for each school was then compared with its academic performance data.

Key Findings

If the average school had a CSI at the 50th percentile, CU schools had a climate rating at the 14th percentile, while BTO schools were ranked at the 82nd percentile. “By social science standards,” according to the report, “these are dramatic differences.” Other findings:

- » A school with a climate rating two standard deviations higher than the average school was more than 10 times more likely to beat the odds.
- » Enrollment may have an important role to play. BTO schools have significantly smaller enrollments and CU schools had significantly larger enrollments.
- » Differences between CU and BTO schools in the distribution of resources, teacher-student and administrator-student ratios, and teacher credentialing, experience and tenure were not statistically significant.

In the simplest terms, this study found that when schools scored very high in school climate, their students performed better than would be predicted. This is an important finding for school boards and school leaders, suggesting that improving school climate may be more than just one of eight state priorities to address in LCAPs. Improving school climate may be a viable overarching strategy for raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap. This argument is strengthened when we consider how research has connected school climate to other outcomes beyond academic achievement.

Positive school climate improves other student outcomes

In addition to academic benefits, multiple researchers have documented a range of positive correlations with a healthy school climate, including student connected-

ness, student engagement, cooperative learning, attendance, safety, relationships and collaboration with peers and staff, health, and social and emotional development.⁶ In its 2012 research summary, the National School Climate Center cites multiple positive correlations from dozens of researchers in the areas of social/emotional well-being, physical health and safety, and time and motivation to learn (Table 1).⁷

Healthy school climate improves staff outcomes

Because teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-student relationships are a part of how school climate is defined, it is clear that teachers play a critical role in improving school climate. However, teachers also benefit from a positive school climate—it can have a dramatic influence not only on how they feel about being at school, but on how they teach as well. There is evidence that positive school climate can help retain teachers; researchers have found that positive school climate is associated with teacher job satisfaction and teacher attrition.⁸ Studies have also found that positive school climate is correlated with strengthening teachers’ beliefs that they can improve student outcomes as well as minimizing emotional exhaustion and feelings of low personal accomplishment for teachers.⁹ The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future highlights the importance of including school climate in teacher induction processes because of the clear impact that school climate has on teaching and learning.¹⁰

Table 1: Positive school climate benefits

Students’ social and emotional well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » learning and positive life development of young people » a wide range of emotional and mental health outcomes » middle school students’ self-esteem » mitigating the negative effects of self-criticism » better psychological well-being » more positive self-concept
Students’ physical health and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » frequency of substance abuse and psychiatric problems » lower levels of drug use and fewer self-reports of psychiatric problems in high school students » less aggression and violence » less harassment and sexual harassment
Students’ time and motivation to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » decreased student absenteeism in middle school and high school » lower rates of student suspension in high school » a powerful influence on the motivation to learn

In addition, school reform efforts can be impacted by stakeholder assumptions related to school culture. These include assumptions that adults have about students, and assumptions that everyone in the school community has about: leadership and decision-making; adult roles and responsibilities; best practices and structures for educating students, and the value of change.¹²

These findings are supported by the Lighthouse Inquiry, which identified seven conditions necessary for productive change. Three of the seven are directly related to the school climate experienced by teachers: 1) strong commitment and engagement in shared purpose focused on improving student outcomes; 2) structural support for teachers that enable and encourage collegial sharing and accountability; and 3) teacher professional development that is research-based, focused on student performance, and embedded in the daily life of the school.¹³

Summary

An extensive and growing body of research continues to demonstrate the importance of school climate. Improving school climate has been associated with improving student academic achievement and students' social/emotional health, as well as their physical health and safety. Positive school climate is correlated with improving student motivation to learn as well as time in school. Teachers in schools with healthy school climate enjoy teaching more and experience less emotional exhaustion, and develop stronger beliefs about students' abilities to learn. Finally, positive school climate is correlated with more effective school reform efforts.

With the significant and wide-ranging benefits so well-established, school boards can have confidence that an inquiry into school climate might yield enormous benefits to everyone, and to student most of all.

Up next: *Climate for Achievement* issue 3 will focus on the indicators for monitoring school climate and some of the resources and tools used to collect school climate data.

Questions for school boards

- » Has the board talked about school climate and its connection to student achievement?
- » To what extent are the outcomes correlated to school climate in the research relevant for the students in our schools?
- » Have we looked at differences in school performance across the district through the lens of school climate?

- » How would our teachers perceive the connection between school climate and prior efforts to raise student achievement?
- » Should we discuss the possibility of improving school climate as a strategy for improving outcomes for our students?

Endnotes

- 1 American Institute of Research. (2007). School climate and connectedness and student achievement. Washington, D.C.
- 2 Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Higgins-D'Alessandro, A., & Guffey, S. (2012). School Climate Research Summary: August 2012. *School Climate Brief*, No. 3. National School Climate Center, New York, NY. www.schoolclimate.org/climate/research.php
- 3 Brockberg, K. H. (2014) The infrastructure of school culture: Measuring commitment, discourse, efficacy, and sensemaking in adequate yearly progress. *World Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 1, (1).
- 4 Voight, A., Austin, G., and Hanson, T. (2013). A climate for academic success: How school climate distinguishes schools that are beating the achievement odds (Full Report). San Francisco: WestEd.
- 5 Beating the odds (BTO) schools were defined as schools performing at least .25 standard deviations above the predicted score given their student population. Chronically underperforming (CU) schools were defined as schools performing at least .25 standard deviations below their predicted scores given their student populations.
- 6 Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2011). Designing school improvement to enhance classroom climate for all students. Los Angeles, CA. <http://bit.ly/1DXnPzk>
- 7 Thapa, A. (2012). (See endnote 2).
- 8 Schueler, B. E., Capotosto, L., Bahena, S., McIntyre, J. and Gehlbach H. (2014). Measuring parent perceptions of school climate. *Psychological Assessment*. Vol. 26 (1), 314-320.
- 9 Thapa, A. (2012). (See endnote 2).
- 10 National School Climate Council. (2007) The school climate challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy.
- 11 Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S. and D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*. Vol. 83 (3) 357–385.
- 12 Hinde, E. (2004). School culture and change: An examination of the effects of school culture on the process of change. *Essays in Education*. Vol. 12.
- 13 Delagardelle, M. (2008). The lighthouse inquiry: Examining the role of school board leadership in the improvement of student achievement. In T. A. Editor, *The future of school board governance: Relevancy and revelation*. (pp. 191-223) Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Education.