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Governance Brief

Climate for Achievement, Issue 4

How boards change school climate

School climate is one of eight state priorities that every school district must address in its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). The Climate for Achievement series is designed to help school boards and superintendents explore the priority area of school climate. The first three issues summarized current requirements for climate in the LCAPs and definitions and components of school climate; reviewed the research on the relationship between school climate and student outcomes; and discussed how districts can measure climate. This issue focuses on actions boards can take to focus on and improve school climate.

The barriers

California education has seen a variety of reform efforts over the decades. Unfortunately, not all reform efforts delivered promised results, and many were abandoned before they could bear fruit. Change efforts often fail because they are:

- » Poorly conceptualized or not clearly understood by stakeholders.
- » Too big or too fast for staff to manage.
- » Under-resourced.
- » Pursued in isolation.
- » Lacking a long-term commitment.¹

Boards, leading with the superintendent, have the power to overcome these barriers to school improvement efforts, like improving school climate. To overcome these barriers boards should focus their governing work in the following five areas:

1. *Establish the current reality of school climate—measure and discuss*

A critical first step for the board is to understand the current climate conditions in their schools. It is broadly agreed that measurement of school climate should address perceptions of personal safety, healthy relationships, instruction and learning, and the organizational environment.² However, the instrument should be aligned to the local definition of school climate. It is also generally agreed that perception data should be collected from students, staff, and parents, although the district may wish to broaden the number of stakeholders providing feedback. Once data have been collected, analyzed, and organized, the board may want to consider asking staff to engage stakeholders in discussing and reaching conclusions about what that data means.³ This needs to become a regular, cyclical process.

2. *Set clear direction for school climate*

Setting direction for the district is a key board responsibility that research has connected to district improvement and raising student achievement. The board sets direction through a series of connected governance decisions: ensuring consistent mission and values, establishing and revising policies, and setting clear and measurable goals.

Ensure mission and values are consistent with research-based school climate principles

Boards will want to review their foundational documents to make sure they include principles consistent with the research on school climate. School governance is ultimately values-based work, and the board should not underestimate the importance of how mission and values serve as the basis for changing school climate.

Review and revise policies that impact school climate

When establishing or revising policies related to school climate, boards should ensure that the policies provide clear and consistent guidance.

Clarity for expectations might include:

- » The local commitment to creating and sustaining a healthy climate in all schools.
- » How school climate will be defined. The board may adopt a particular climate framework.
- » How and when climate will be measured, including the categories of content and the stakeholders that must be included. The board may adopt a specific school climate survey tool or service.

Consistency in accountability might include:

- » How and when school climate data will be shared with the community.
- » How and when school climate data will be displayed and reported to the board. The board may wish to include a sample display in the policy.

Set clear measurable goals for improving school climate

Boards lead school climate improvement by requiring specific school climate goals⁴ in their LCAPs. The goals should contain enough specificity to clarify what will change. *Fight Crime's* recent study of first year (2014) LCAPs from California's 50 largest districts⁵ revealed that:

- » Forty-four of 50 districts had no goals for improving school climate survey results for safety, connectedness or climate in general. Five of these had no climate improvement goals.
- » Only six of the 50 districts had specific numerical goals for changing climate survey results.
- » Twelve of the 50 districts included goals for climate survey results for all three populations identified in the LCFF statute: staff, parents, and students.

Working with the superintendent and staff, the board can ensure the school climate goals are focused on the most important measures, have numerical goals that can be measured, and address staff, parents, and students.

3. Align school climate improvement with other key systems

To ensure school climate improvement is not pursued in isolation, boards should ensure that school climate improvement efforts are connected to other improvement efforts. School climate involves at least four interdependent domains of school life.

- » **School environments:** Positive school climate improves when interactions among students and between student and staff are safe, respectful, and emotionally supportive.⁶
- » **Curriculum and instructional practices:** In core content areas, the district may want to assess the degree to which students are exposed to culturally relevant pedagogy.⁷ Beyond core academic content, Local Education Agencies may want to offer students a range of competencies in social and emotional learning, including self-awareness, self-management, resilience, and responsible decision-making.
- » **Staff professional development:** Ensure all staff have training in school climate. Content of training should include modeling the values of healthy school climate, fair and equitable treatment of all students, promoting appropriate behavior, and responding to student misconduct.⁸
- » **Student behavior and discipline practices:** Boards will want to ensure that the schools implement research-based strategies that promote positive student behavior—thereby improving the perception of order and safety at school. Examples include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and Restorative Justice programs. The policies should include the importance of minimizing out-of-class time.⁹

4. Provide resources to support improving school climate

In the budget process, the board can ensure that resources are dedicated to improving school climate, including funding for climate measurement, staff positions responsible for leading climate improvement work, and professional development for all staff. The *Fight Crime* report mentioned previously revealed that of the fifty districts studied:

- » Three included funding for climate surveys in their LCAPs.
- » Thirty-three provided a specific number of support staff responsible for improving school climate.
- » Twenty-one included dedicated funding for Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, Restorative Justice, or other discipline programs.
- » Eleven included professional development of culturally relevant pedagogy.¹⁰

The board may want to discuss with the superintendent establishing a school climate team.¹¹ This team should be:

- » Comprised of administrators teachers and other staff.
- » Supported by professional development regarding research and best practices in improving school climate.
- » Empowered to study the alignment of school climate policy and practice.

5. Create partnerships

Establishing partnerships is identified as a key activity of effective boards.¹² Surveys conducted by the National Network of Schools in Partnership revealed that schools often construe partnerships too narrowly.¹³ Schools can accelerate the work of improving school climate by engaging community stakeholders in a collaborative effort to create the conditions of improving school climate. Boards lead this work by establishing the purpose of partnerships and policy, ensuring partnership work is assigned to district staff, and including partnership development in annual goals.

The opportunity

The LCFF and LCAPs provide an opportunity for boards to be creative in working with superintendents to drive district improvement. This *Climate for Achievement* series has attempted to provide boards with a high-level overview of the research on school climate, including how it is commonly defined (Issue 1), its relationship to raising student achievement, (Issue 2), how school climate is measured (Issue 3), and herein, how boards can lead the effort to improve school climate through their governance role. The growing research and literature base for improving school climate provides boards with a clear set of principles and recommendations that can be applied locally to improve school climate for all

students. Although just one of eight priorities identified in the LCFF statute, improving school climate may be a highly effective overarching strategy for improving student achievement and district performance.

Endnotes

- 1 Hinde, E. R. (2004). *School culture and change: An examination of the effects of school culture on the process of change*. Essays in Education. Winter: Vol. 12.
- 2 www.schoolclimate.org/climate accessed on 1/29/2015
- 3 U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding principles: A resource for improving school climate and discipline*. Washington, D.C.
- 4 U.S. Department of Education. (2014). (See Endnote 3).
- 5 Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. (2015). *Analysis of school climate in local control accountability plans (LCAPs) for California's 50 largest school districts*. Washington, DC: Lee, B., Christeson, W. Klein M.
- 6 United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: a guide to managing threatening situations and creating safe school climates*. Washington, D.C.
- 7 Educators 4 Excellence. (2014) *The equity movement: Implementing the school climate bill of rights*. New York, NY.
- 8 U.S. Department of Education, 2014 (See Endnote 3).
- 9 Educators 4 Excellence. (2014).
- 10 Fight Crime (2015). (See Endnote 5).
- 11 The Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2009). *School climate guide for district policymakers and education leaders*. New York, NY: Pickeral, T. Evans, L., Hughes, W., and Hutchison, D. (www.schoolclimate.org)
- 12 Gemberling, K., Smith C., & Villani, J. (2000). *The key work of school boards guidebook*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association
- 13 Sanders, M. (2006). *Building school-community partnerships: Collaboration for student success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.