



# SCHOOL CLIMATE

## Through Students' Eyes

*By involving students in collaborative action research, school leaders gain vital information to guide school improvement.*

**Bill Preble and Larry Taylor**

**W**hat would you think if your own children—or students in your school—made the following comments?

Students in this school drop out because they're pushed off to the side. They are not seen as the kids who will succeed, and because of that, no one even tries to help them succeed.

—12th grade student

ESL students get picked on at this school more than other kids. It depends on your religion and your culture, too. After 9-11, Muslim kids started to get picked on a lot. My friend who is Muslim came here and got smacked around because she was wearing the scarf.

—10th grade student

I get picked on because I walk funny . . . one kid calls me "duck" and "waddle" and he quacks at me. My mom called the school and they told him not to do it any more, but he still does when teachers aren't watching. He bullies everybody when teachers aren't looking.

—6th grade student

Students' stories can offer profound insights into school climate issues that affect the quality of education. When we couple these stories with simple descriptive statistics from school climate surveys, such as the percentage of students and teachers who agree with statements like "I feel safe at this school," we have a valuable source of information to shape school improvement.

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With our colleagues at Main Street Academix ([www.msanh.com](http://www.msanh.com)) and our students at New England College, we have been conducting research on school climate and helping educators develop respectful schools for nearly 10 years. We have worked with hundreds of schools and thousands of teachers and student leaders across the United States to understand the positive and negative effects of school climate and its links to bullying, harassment, discipline systems, dropout rates, teaching practices, and teacher and student success. Here's what we learned from our work in one school district that used our student-led action research process to guide school improvement.

### **The Need for Change in Sullivan County**

In 2002, several students and their families sued Sullivan County School District, a Tennessee district whose student population is more than 96 percent white. The primary lawsuit resulted from the mock lynching of a black student by white students in the hallway of one high school. Because of the seriousness of these problems, the U.S. Department of Justice joined concerned students and their families in their complaints against the district. The courts ruled in their favor, finding that the district had been deliberately indifferent to pervasive racial harassment and violations of civil rights in its schools.

In response to the court decision, Sullivan County's leaders took action. As director of schools John O'Dell said,

At first we were a little defensive, but then we tried to put ourselves in the shoes of these students. I thought, what if I were one of only a handful of white students in a school of more than 1,000 African American students? How would I feel, especially if someone tried to choke me?

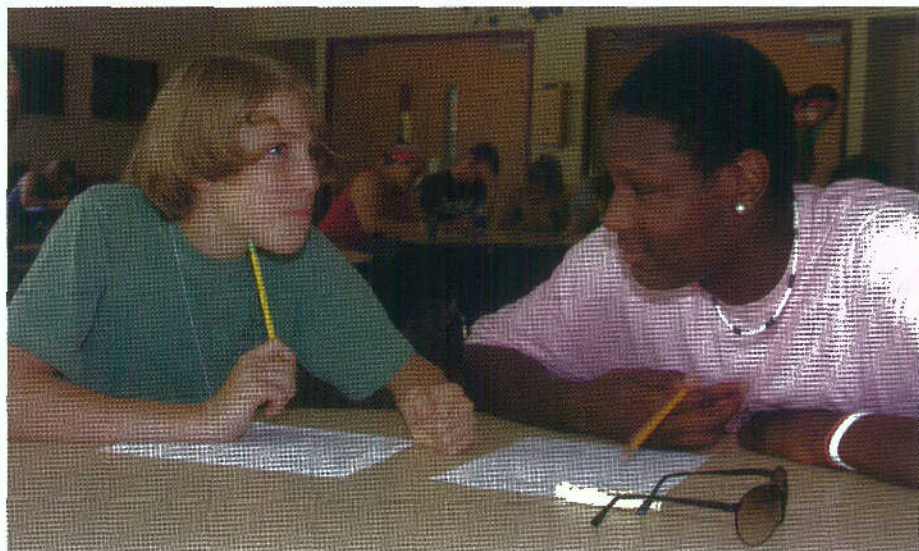


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## **Educators need to think about a broader spectrum of evidence than test scores.**

"We decided that we needed to face up to the fact that we had some problems in these schools and that we needed to address them head-on," said Janie Barnes, the district's compliance coordinator. "We saw it as a chance to do what was right and to ensure that every student was safe and free from harassment of any kind."

As part of the final legal settlement of the court cases, the school board asked Main Street Academix to develop a plan to assess the current racial, social, and academic climate in each of the 30 Sullivan County schools and to use these baseline data to monitor and guide a four-year improvement plan. District leaders embraced the idea of collecting and using new kinds of data

to better understand what was happening in their schools and committed themselves to doing whatever was needed to change the attitudes and behavior that were hurting students in these schools.

### **Revealing Blind Spots**

Our work collecting and using qualitative and quantitative school climate data to improve schools is based on our belief in the power of perception to shape attitudes and behavior. When teachers or principals perceive their schools to be safe and respectful places, they may be blind to problems going on right under their noses—and therefore be unresponsive. Students repeatedly tell us, "School climate is what happens when grown-ups are not around." Data that reveal and compare adult and student perceptions of school climate are often a real eye-opener.

One morning we went to one of Sullivan County's four high schools to share the school's initial school climate data with the principal. The data consisted of simple descriptive statistics—the percentage of students and teachers who agreed or disagreed with

specific statements related to peer respect and belonging; student-adult relationships; the presence of racist language, graffiti, or behavior; the use of certain pedagogical practices; and so on.

The principal invited us into his office. We sat down, opened the report, and began to review his school's climate data. After 10 minutes, we thought the man was about to explode. "This is not my school!" he exclaimed angrily.

We turned to the next page of graphs and asked, "Is this your school?" He paused, looking carefully at the data, and said slowly, "Yeah, this looks more like my school." We pointed out that those data showed the perceptions of his college-bound students, whereas the first graphs had shown the climate perceptions of *all* his students. We then showed him some data that revealed equally dramatic gaps between the perceptions of his school's teachers and students. He was shocked, but he became more interested in understanding the data. We spent the next hour discussing the very different perceptions of school climate among the various stakeholder groups in his school.

This principal loves his students and his school. After he calmed down, we could see that he was thinking deeply about the story of school climate that was unfolding before him. Since that morning, he has been engaged and excited about using data and working with student leaders to improve his school. He joined and helped lead our district leadership team as a key advocate of the student-led action research process in Sullivan County.

The journey of this school administrator illustrates what can happen when educators work with colleagues to interpret data collected as part of collaborative, student-led action research. Often, an examination of the data engenders

*cognitive dissonance*—the feeling of uncomfortable tension that comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time. For example, a teacher looking at the data in Figure 1 (p. 39) may think, "I feel that our students treat one another with respect, but I see that only 48 percent of all students and 34 percent of non-college-bound students agree. What's that all about?" Reviewing such comparisons often results in heated discussions about the meaning of the data and ultimately

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leads to new ideas about what the school needs to do to improve.

Cognitive dissonance is a powerful motivator. Over and over again, we have seen dissonance lead to tension, discussion, and reflection and then jump-start a process of energized leadership and action by teachers, administrators, and students.

### **It Starts with Students**

The data that laid the foundation for change in Sullivan County came from student-led action research. Why start with students? The growing literature on "youth-led, participatory research" (Ozer et al., 2008) shows that it is a developmentally appropriate strategy for increasing youth voice and student engagement in improving schools (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003). Inviting young people to serve their schools and communities as

partners in action research creates an exciting sense of student ownership and control. As students help ameliorate the problems identified in the research, they learn a great deal—and they teach adults a good deal as well.

Beginning in 2003, we have helped Sullivan County implement a collaborative, student-led action research process developed by Main Street Academix. The process involves the following three stages:

### **Stage One**

We begin by creating a district-level adult leadership team to guide the process. We work with principals and teachers from each school to recruit and select diverse teams of student leaders to serve as the subjects of interviews and focus groups. Selecting truly diverse students for these roles—athletes, Goths, academically successful students, those who struggle academically, and so on—is a crucial part of the process.

Undergraduate and graduate students (in the case of Sullivan County, students from New England College) conduct student interviews and focus groups with students in grades 3–12. We use college students because young people speak more freely and frankly about their school experiences to other young people. We then invite the students who were the subjects of the interviews and focus groups to take on new roles as

researchers. We train these students to help administer schoolwide adult and student school climate surveys.

Students explain the purpose of the surveys to their peers and describe how the results will be used to better understand and compare student and teacher perceptions of school climate and respect in their school. When peers lead the data-collection process in this way, students take the surveys seriously, and we get great data.

### Stage Two

Main Street Academix compiles the results of the surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and we schedule a time to work with the principal and a school-level adult design team to share these results with the student leaders. Students review their school's data and select the areas that they believe represent the most serious problems.

Student leaders then help the adult design team present the school's results to their teachers. One especially powerful role the student researchers play is to select the most potent student and teacher quotes from the qualitative data and to read these words aloud to teachers. These stories and quotes are often provocative and grab the teachers' attention, making them more interested and more willing to look deeply into their survey results. For example, one student commented,

School isn't taken seriously here because teachers don't care at all on a personal or even one-on-one helpful level. Doing well academically is not encouraged here at all, and coming to school on a daily basis is a joke for some students.

In each school, the teachers use the qualitative and quantitative data to sort out the most powerful issues. They prioritize problem areas and set goals for improvement. When students and teachers compare their respective goals,



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## “School climate is what happens when grown-ups are not around.”

they almost always find a lot of agreement on what needs to change. It becomes natural for them to come together and work toward these common goals.

### Stage Three

This is the most important stage. Teachers and students develop meaningful action steps to address needs indicated by the data. Students, teachers, and administrators divide into teams to work on one particular goal. They brainstorm ideas as a team and then review a menu of research-based best practices provided by Main Street Academix. They select a final set of strategies that make the most sense to them and develop action projects and plans to address the problems revealed by their school's data. Teachers and

students work together to implement these action projects, with student leaders playing meaningful leadership roles.

As people become involved in analyzing their data, identifying their own needs, and offering their own solutions to these problems, the levels of defensiveness and resistance lessen, and engagement in the process grows. In hundreds of schools in which we have implemented this process, educators and students have come together, looked at data, identified common problems, and developed solutions that they were willing to work on together.

### Widening the Focus

The most exciting thing about Sullivan County's journey is the way the issues of school climate have quickly melded with issues of students' overall personal development and academic success. Sullivan County schools have done remarkable things to reduce harassment in their schools. They have adopted new harassment policies and disciplinary processes to fight hate speech, racial and sexual harassment, and bullying of all kinds; provided antibias training for all

teachers, administrators, bus drivers, substitute teachers, and teachers' aides; and established student unity teams to fight intolerance, bullying, and bigotry in high schools and middle schools. But the initiative in Sullivan County soon grew beyond bullying and harassment to become a much more comprehensive discussion about effective schools, respectful teaching, and student learning. School instructional initiatives that resulted from the process included

- Learning how to meet the different needs of all learners through differentiated instruction.

- Using hands-on, manipulative-based mathematics instruction for learners who struggled with abstract concepts in mathematics.

- Establishing positive expectations for respectful behavior in every classroom.

- Showcasing and celebrating students' academic work in the hallways and at parent-teacher meetings.

- Catching students being good and acknowledging positive behavior rather than focusing solely on punishing misbehavior.

- Developing peer-tutoring and reading-buddies programs between younger and older students.

- Initiating community-based learning and service learning programs.

At first, some educators struggled with the concept of building respectful schools through empowering students. After all, weren't the kids the problem? But after some initial challenges, and after looking carefully at their school climate data, Sullivan County principals and teachers began to routinely bring students into their discussions. Teachers saw how genuinely moved and motivated students were when asked to serve on student leadership teams. They saw students building closer bonds of friendship as they worked together to

solve school climate problems. As the work went forward, many teachers and principals concluded that collaborative action research was an empowering approach to school improvement. Buy-in across the district grew.

### The Student Achievement Connection

After four years, about two-thirds of the schools in Sullivan County had made significant, measurable improvements in school climate. In spring 2006, we

**FIGURE 1. Comparisons of Student and Teacher Perceptions**

	Percentage who "agreed" or "strongly agreed"		
	Non-College-Bound Students	All Students	Faculty
I feel physically safe being who I am at my school (free from threats, harassment, or violence).	46%	58%	80%
Students are willing to step forward and help when they see others getting picked on or harassed.	45%	42%	55%
Girls are treated with respect by boys at this school.	41%	45%	32%
Boys are treated with respect by girls at this school.	32%	50%	40%
I think students mostly treat one another with respect at this school.	34%	48%	68%
When teachers act to help students who are harassed, it really works.	40%	45%	81%
When principals and other administrators act to help kids who are harassed, it really works.	51%	57%	75%
Students' work is displayed publicly and celebrated by teachers.	29%	47%	82%
Teachers make it clear to all students what is expected to be successful.	70%	83%	94%
Adults in my school invite students to help make decisions about school rules and discipline procedures.	24%	31%	25%

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analyzed the relationship between school climate and student academic performance on Tennessee's state achievement tests in the district's schools. We found a greater increase in academic achievement in the schools that had made significant improvement in school climate than in those that had not improved school climate (Preble & Newman, 2006).

Our findings in Sullivan County are consistent with other recent research on the connections between school climate and learning reported by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Its review of more than 700 studies indicates that when school climate measures go up, students' performance on statewide tests in reading, mathematics, and writing also goes up (CASEL, 2008; Viadero, 2007).

Although the Justice Department ended its mandate that Sullivan County address the problem of harassment and improve school climate in 2007, the school board voted to continue to conduct collaborative action research and keep working to improve school climate and respect. In the past year, we have trained 28 school climate leadership teams made up of more than 125 Sullivan County principals, teachers, and support staff to facilitate this student-led, collaborative action research process in the future. More than 300 student leaders have been engaged in powerful leadership roles.

In 2007–08, these school-based leadership teams of students and teachers collected a third round of school climate data to check the sustainability of their efforts. All schools are now setting new goals for continued improvement and have designed a new set of improvement projects to keep moving forward and to sustain the gains made in years past.

### Deeper Than Test Scores

Sullivan County's experience demonstrates that involving students and teachers in using school climate data can be a powerful strategy for changing attitudes and behavior. One district superintendent attending a recent statewide conference expressed the need for this kind of data:

We have tried everything we can think of academically to raise our test scores over the past five or six years. Yet, while we have made some improvement, we seem to be stuck. Until we address the school climate issues that we know are going on in our schools, I don't think we will ever reach our full potential as a school system.

We believe that he's right. Because students learn best when they are physically and emotionally safe, school climate is an essential component of school success. When it comes to data, educators need to think about a broader spectrum of evidence than test scores. They also need data that enable them to see deep into the heart and soul of their schools and the lives of their students. **EL**

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### EL online

To learn more about how schools assess school climate, see "The Challenge of Assessing School Climate" by Jonathan Cohen, Terry Pickarel, and Molly McCloskey in this month's *EL online* at [www.ascd.org/portal/redirect.jsp?ProductID=109023](http://www.ascd.org/portal/redirect.jsp?ProductID=109023).





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