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Governance Brief

Climate for Achievement, Issue 3

Measuring school climate

School climate is one of eight state priorities that school districts must address in Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs). The first issue summarized current requirements for climate in the LCAPs and provided an overview of the research that defines and identifies various components of school climate. The second issue summarized research findings regarding the positive relationship between school climate and student outcomes. The fourth and final issue will review the actions school boards can take to improve school climate. This issue concentrates on how districts can measure climate and includes references to school climate resources and tools.

School climate data

Most school board members are familiar with a variety of data presented to them in the course of their governing work. This includes student demographic and academic data as well as some operational data and financial reports. School climate data consists largely of two kinds of data—disciplinary data and perception data.

Disciplinary data

Districts are required to monitor and report student disciplinary data in their Local Control Accountability Plans.¹ Specifically, they must include:

- » **Suspension rates:** The number and percent of students who are suspended once, twice, and three or more times.
- » **Expulsion rates:** The number and percent of students who are expelled.
- » **Truancy rates:** The number and percent of students who are truant.

Suspension, expulsion, and truancy rates should be disaggregated by significant subgroups and reported in multiyear displays to reveal trends.

Perception data

The most common method for collecting perception data is through surveys, but surveys are not the only option. The use of focus groups to collect perception data is also a valuable practice. In-depth discussions with small groups can provide an understanding of the reasoning behind answers collected by surveys. However, for many school districts, and especially very large ones, using surveys can be an efficient and effective means of collecting and aggregating input from large numbers of people.

What and whom to ask about climate

There is no national consensus on which specific questions should be included when collecting data about school climate², but there is wide agreement that there are four general domains that need to be investigated: safety, relationships, teaching & learning, and the physical/institutional environment. As for determining whom to ask about school climate, The National School Climate Center proposes that school climate is “based on patterns of students’, parents’, and school personnel’s experience of school life.”³ Based on this definition, districts need tools to ask about and collect the experiences of three key groups.

Students

One of the core tenants of the Local Control Funding Formula was to improve equity for all students. Some research has shown that within schools, different groups of students can have dramatically different perceptions about school life and classroom learning.⁴ Therefore, in

order to achieve equity, districts need to understand how different groups of students experience life at school. Table 1 provides sample student items for measuring school climate.

Table 1. Sample student items	
Safety	I feel safe at my school.
Relationships	I have a friend about my own age that really cares about me.
Teaching & Learning	My teachers make learning interesting.
Environment	The teachers at this school treat students fairly.

Parents

What parents think about school climate matters for three key reasons. First, parent perceptions are likely to influence their children’s perception about life at school. Also, parent perceptions of school may influence their willingness to engage; some research has shown a correlation between positive school climate and higher levels of parent involvement. Finally, parent perceptions of school climate can influence where parents decide to live, which directly affects where their children attend school.⁵ Table 2 provides sample parent items for the four dimensions of school climate.⁶

Table 2. Sample parent items	
Safety	Discipline is not a problem at school.
Relationships	Teachers treat students with respect and dignity.
Teaching & Learning	The quality of instruction meets or exceeds my expectations.
Environment	Communication from school is timely and effective.

Staff

The perception of staff is a critical component of school climate because the experience of being in school involves students and teachers interacting together. Teachers are constantly contributing to and even co-creating the experience that everyone in the school community is having every day. In addition, positive school climate has been correlated with a range of positive outcomes for staff. A 2014 WestEd report cited nine different studies between 1995 and 2008 that found a relationship between healthy school climate and lower teacher burnout, greater job satisfaction, greater retention, higher productivity, improved effectiveness, and more.⁷ Table 3 provides sample items for school staff.⁸

Table 3. Sample staff items	
Safety	Physical fights among students are rare.
Relationships	Adults in our school treat students with respect.
Teaching & Learning	The principal has an overall good understanding of the students’ needs.
Environment	The school is generally clean.

Selecting survey instruments

When selecting tools for measuring school climate, boards would want to ensure that instruments recommended by staff meet some basic criteria.

Validity and reliability

A valid survey means that questions and response options are likely to tell district leaders what they need to know. A reliable survey is one that produces consistent results over time and across respondents. Over the last few decades, a variety of survey instruments have been developed that meet both these criteria, but not all are based on a contemporary definition of school climate.⁹ For this reason, it is important for boards and superintendents to reach agreement on the definition and characteristics of school climate before selecting or designing a survey instrument. While online survey tools are widely available, constructing valid and reliable survey tools is best done by professionals.

Scope

The scope of topics covered can vary widely depending on the focus of the climate survey. For example, a 2012 WestEd report provides a comparison of twenty state and national school climate surveys for middle schools.¹⁰ Table 4 below, an excerpt from the WestEd report, shows the range of subtopics addressed by each of six survey instruments. Each of the six instruments include items that address:

- » Classroom order and fairness of rules
- » Expectations and support for learning
- » Positive peer relationships
- » Teacher-student relationships
- » Safety, bullying, & victimization

By contrast, only the Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey and the School Climate Assessment instruments address administrative leadership and student extracurricular activities. Likewise, only the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys and Inventory of School Climate instruments have items that address students' respect for diversity.

Length

Length of survey instruments is determined by the number of items per topic. Survey instruments can vary widely in the number of items used to assess different domains with different stakeholder groups. The total number of items in the surveys included in Table 4 range from 50 to 133. However, a survey doesn't need to be long to meet the standards of reliability and validity. For example, in a national study measuring parent

Table 4. Comparing the scope of six middle school survey instruments

Domains	ASCCS	SCHLS	CSCI	ISC	PLES	SCAI
Classroom order & fairness of rules	■	■	■	■	■	■
Community relations & involvement	■	■				■
Expectations & support for learning	■	■	■	■	■	■
Administrative leadership	■					■
Parent involvement & support	■	■			■	
Physical surroundings and resources			■		■	■
Positive peer relationships	■	■	■	■	■	■
Respect for diversity		■		■		
Safety, bullying, & victimization	■	■	■	■	■	■
School connectedness		■	■			■
Student emotional & social competency	■		■	■	■	■
Student extracurricular activities		■			■	
Student voice & involvement	■	■		■		■
Student substance use	■	■			■	
Teacher-student relationships	■	■	■	■	■	■

Key

ASCCS: Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey
SCHLS: California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys
CSCI: Comprehensive School Climate Inventory

ISC: Inventory of School Climate
PLES: Pride Learning/Teaching Environment Survey
SCAI: School Climate Assessment Instrument

perceptions of school climate, researchers found that a 7-item survey produced nearly identical results compared to a longer 22-item survey.¹¹ Table 5 shows the number of items measuring positive peer relationships for five middle school surveys. Note that for the Inventory of School Climate, the number of items in this area account for 20% of the total instrument, while they account for only 5% of the total items in the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys.

School climate instrument options

As boards consider the potential use of school climate instruments, they will want to ensure they understand the purpose of the instrument, and the cost of its use. Commercial products will likely require permission and license agreements, but there are open source instruments that may serve local need. (See table 6.) Most importantly, boards will want to know how well the instrument is aligned to how the board has defined school climate.

Table 5: Comparing the number of items focused on positive peer relationships for five middle school climate surveys

Instrument	Subdomain: Positive peer relationships	No. of total items	% of total items
ASCCS	Peer climate	5 of 69	7%
Cal-SCHLS	Peer-caring relationships	3 of 106	5%
	Prosocial peers	2 of 106	
CSCI	Student-to-student relationships	7 of 63	11%
ISC	Positive peer interactions	5 of 50	20%
	Negative peer interactions	5 of 50	
SCAI	Student Interactions	10 of 57	18%

Table 6: Sample commercial and open-source instruments

Instrument	Organization	Website	Permission
California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys	California Dept. of Education with WestEd	http://cal-schls.wested.org	Required
Comprehensive School Climate Inventory	National School Climate Center	http://schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php	Required
School Climate Assessment Instrument	Alliance for the Study of School Climate, CSU, Los Angeles	http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate	Required
High School Survey of Student Engagement	Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University	http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/index.html	Use of HSSSE survey items by schools, districts, and researchers is permitted without charge. ¹²
School as a Caring Community Profile-II	Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, SUNY Cortland	http://www2.cortland.edu/centers/character/assessment-instruments.dot	May be duplicated without permission of the authors (last revised January, 2003).

An extensive list of school climate survey instruments is available at Safe and Supportive Schools website.

Questions for board members

- » Are we currently using a school climate survey instrument, and, if so, how often?
- » What domains are addressed by the instrument, and how well does this align to how we have defined school climate?
- » Do we survey students, parents, and staff?
- » What is the participation rate for students, parents, and staff?
- » How are the results reported to the board and how are they used by staff?

Endnotes

- 1 California Education Code 52060
- 2 Schueler, B. E., et al., (2014). (See endnote 3.)
- 3 www.schoolclimate.org/climate/ accessed on 3/23/2015
- 4 Voight, A. (2013). The racial school climate gap. San Francisco: Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.
- 5 Schueler, B. E., et al., (2014). See endnote 3.
- 6 www.ndlead.org/Page/385 accessed on 3/25/2015
- 7 Hanson, T., & Voight, A. (2014). The appropriateness of a California student and staff survey for measuring middle school climate (REL 2014–039). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- 8 <http://svy.mk/1QJY4Dg> accessed on March 25, 2015
- 9 Gage, N. (2012). The meriden school climate survey-student version: Reliability and validity. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Florida, Gainesville, FL
- 10 Voight, A. & Hanson, T. (2012). Summary of existing school climate instruments for middle school. San Francisco: REL West at WestEd.
- 11 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.
- 12 HSSSE and the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) must be cited/referenced in documentation and publications.