



March 2015

# Governance Brief

## Climate for Achievement, Issue 1

*How research defines school climate*

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

### School Climate in LCAPs

In 2013, Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation enacting the Local Control Funding Formula, redistributing K-12 school funding to address the greater resource needs of three targeted student populations: English-language learners, students from low-income families, and foster youth. The legislation requires districts to develop LCAPs that align district budgets to eight priority areas (See Table 1) identified in the statute, including "School climate, as measured by all of the following, as applicable:

- A. Pupil suspension rates.
- B. Pupil expulsion rates.
- C. Other local measures, including surveys of pupils, parents, and teachers on the sense of safety and school connectedness."<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1:** Priority areas defined by the Local Control and Accountability Plan

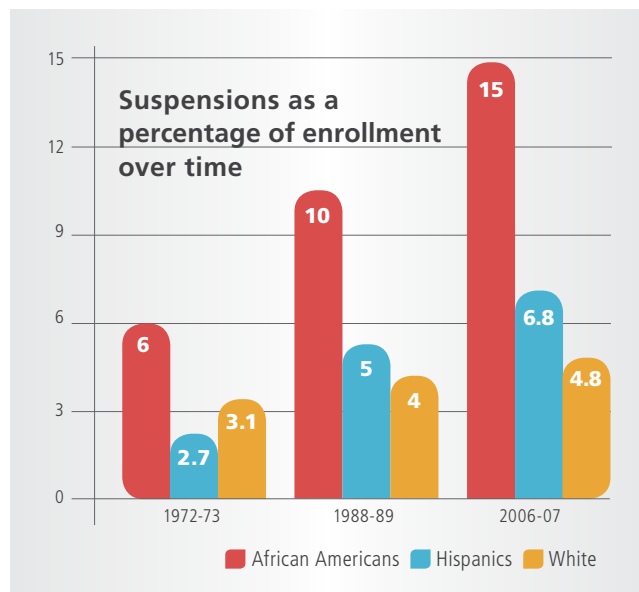
Priority domains	Priority areas
Conditions of Learning	Basic Services
	Implementation of Common Core
	Course Access
Pupil Outcomes	Student Achievement
	Other Student Outcomes
Engagement	Parent Involvement
	Student Engagement
	School Climate

The local data on district and school student suspension and expulsion rates are important for the board to review and study. CSBA's 2014 Fact Sheet, *The Case for Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions*, highlights two lenses through which boards may want to view this data.<sup>2</sup> First, are the suspensions and expulsions demographically disproportionate? That is, do some subgroups of students receive more suspensions or expulsions than other subgroups? (See Fig. 1) Second, are the suspension and expulsion rates increasing as a percentage of enrollment over time, for any subgroups of students?

The inequitable experience between student subgroups is not limited to issues of discipline. A 2013 report by West Ed found that in addition to the persistence of a racial achievement gap, there is also a racial school climate gap. Students from different racial backgrounds report different perceptions. These differences exist not only between schools, but within schools. In other words, schools serving large numbers of racial subgroups cannot fully explain

this climate gap as resource problem alone.<sup>3</sup> As districts continue to develop their LCAPs, many student advocacy groups are focusing on the issue of equity, and ensuring that all students experience a positive school climate.

**Figure 1**



In meeting the “other local measures” requirement in the legislation, school boards and superintendents have an opportunity to develop the definition and indicators of healthy school climate that account for the unique context of their district. Districts will continue to improve the design of their LCAPs over the next several years. This process of change will allow the board and superintendent to provide greater clarity and specificity in answering three questions: 1) How do we define school climate? 2) What will we measure? 3) How will we measure it? There is a significant and growing body of research on school climate to help boards in that effort.

## The evolution of school climate research

The study of school climate is not new. Educators have been aware of its importance for nearly a hundred years,<sup>4</sup> but it was not until the 1950s that researchers began to systematically study it.<sup>5</sup> In the last 30 years, the attention given to school climate research has accelerated and expanded, involving organizations including the Center for Disease Control, the Institute for Educational Sciences, and the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this long history, as recently as 2007, one researcher noted that it was “difficult to provide a concise definition for school climate.” Even the National School Climate Center’s own website admits that “there is not a national consensus” about which characteristics of climate

are critical to measure.<sup>7</sup> Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that many researchers agree that school climate involves at least three separate dimensions: a physical dimension (clean and safe buildings, etc.), a social dimension (how people interact with and treat each other), and an academic dimension (quality instruction, support for learning, and high expectations for students).<sup>8</sup> In addition, over the years, researchers have used a range of terms for school climate that are different but overlapping in meaning, including “school culture” and “the learning environment.”<sup>9</sup> School climate has been defined as:

- » “a place where students and teachers like to be”<sup>10</sup>
- » “the conditions or quality of the learning environment, which are created and maintained by the values, beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and the physical setting shared by individuals within the school community”<sup>11</sup>
- » “supportive learning conditions and opportunities that promote achievement and prepare [students] to succeed in college, career, and adulthood”<sup>12</sup>
- » “an environment that reflects a commitment to meeting and developing the academic, social, and emotional needs of every student.”<sup>13</sup>

Given this history, it is easy to understand why a survey conducted by the Character Education Partnership, in cooperation with other organizations, revealed that 90% of educators responding to a survey reported that their need for detailed and practical school climate guidelines was either strong or very strong.<sup>14</sup>

## Dimensions of school climate

This lack of full agreement on an exact definition notwithstanding, there is an emerging consensus among those leading the school climate research effort about the core elements of school climate. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) has been focusing on improving school climate for more than 15 years. The NSCC suggests that “School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.”<sup>15</sup> NSCC advocates a framework with the four main dimensions.<sup>16</sup>

**1. Safety:** Clear rules and norms are effectively communicated and fairly enforced. Adults and students feel safe from physical harm, verbal abuse, and exclusion.

**2. Relationships:** There is respect for individual differences at all levels of the school. Adults listen to and get

to know individual students. Student peer relationships are healthy and positive.

**3. Teaching and learning:** Teachers use effective research-based practices of instruction and support for student learning. Curriculum goes beyond the academic sphere, engaging students in opportunities for social and civic learning, conflict resolution, ethical decision-making, and more.

**4. Institutional Environment:** The physical environment is clean and orderly. There are adequate resources for learning and an expectation for participation in school life for students, parents, and staff.

A fifth dimension, professional leadership and relationships, is unique to school staff alone. School leaders create a positive work environment with a clear vision and support for staff and particularly for staff development. School staff relations are marked by collegiality and cohesiveness.<sup>17</sup>

### District Spotlight: Students defining climate

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District has engaged their students directly in building a positive climate. In October 2014, the San Gabriel Valley Tribune reported that approximately 400 students from Wedgeworth Elementary School performed a ‘flash mob’ demonstration at the Puente Hills Mall in Industry, California, that was focused on anti-bullying.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of a framework based on concepts like the NSCC’s above, Community Matters uses people as its organizing principle. Their model identifies five groups that contribute to school climate: leadership, staff, students, parents and community.<sup>19</sup> Other frameworks are similar to NSCC’s model, but combine them in different ways, and some are more complex than others. Table 2 summarizes the components of three different models. The NSCC includes engagement and equity/ respect for diversity in ‘relationships’ whereas the Quality School Framework calls it out specifically. Culture is just one aspect the QSF, so it addresses teaching and learning elsewhere in its framework.

Boards can convene and lead conversations about school climate. The framework a district chooses may not be as important as adopting one that the board, superintendent and staff mutually support. The framework is important because it becomes the basis for establishing a common language for improving school climate. That is the first step to improving school climate for school boards. They must help define — in district values, policies and other governing documents — the elements of climate, so that

the professional staff has clarity about what must be measured and addressed. Only then can they acquire or develop tools to collect data that will measure the degree to which the district is achieving the climate it seeks.

### Questions for board members

- » As a board member, when I walk through our schools, how do I perceive the school climate?
- » When I talk to students and parents, how do they describe their school experience?
- » How does our district define school climate?
- » What do our policies say about school climate?
- » Do district leaders and school principals talk about school climate?

**Table 2:** Comparing climate frameworks

	NSCC	NCSSLE	CA DOE QSF
Safety / Discipline	✓	✓	✓
Relationships	✓		✓
Teaching & Learning	✓		
Institutional Environment	✓	✓	✓
Engagement		✓	✓
Professional leadership & relationships	✓		✓
Equity / Respect for Diversity			✓
Developmental Support			✓
High expectations			✓
Physical Health			✓

**NSCC:** National School Climate Center<sup>20</sup>

**NCSSLE:** National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments<sup>21</sup>

**CA DOE QSF:** CA Department of Education Quality School Framework: Culture<sup>22</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 California Education Code 52060
- 2 California School Boards Association. (2014). Fact Sheet: The Case for Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions. West Sacramento, CA.
- 3 Voight, A. (2013). The racial school climate gap. San Francisco: Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.
- 4 Cohen, J. (2014). School climate policy and practice trends: A paradox. Teachers College Record. [www.tcrecord.org](http://www.tcrecord.org)
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- 12 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/cc/index.asp> accessed on 1/29/2015
- 13 Alliance for Excellent Education. (2013.) Climate change: Creating and integrated framework for improving school climate. Washington, D.C.
- 14 Cohen, J. (2014). See endnote 4.
- 15 <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/> accessed on 1/30/2015
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- 17 [http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/documents/dimensions\\_chart\\_pagebars.pdf](http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/documents/dimensions_chart_pagebars.pdf) accessed on 1/30/2015
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- 19 <http://community-matters.org/our-approach/whole-school-climate-framework>
- 20 <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate> accessed on 1/30/2015
- 21 <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate> accessed on 1/30/2015
- 22 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/cc/> accessed on 1/30/2015



April 2015

# Governance Brief

## Climate for Achievement, Issue 2

*Why school climate matters*

### Why school climate matters

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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%.<sup>3</sup>

Recent research has made this climate-achievement connection even more compelling. The 2013 report by WestEd, *Climate for Academic Success*,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup>

## 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1: Positive school climate benefits

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



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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

## 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](http://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.
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June 2015

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 climate<sup>2</sup>, 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Table 2 provides sample parent items for the four dimensions of school climate.<sup>6</sup>

**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.<sup>7</sup> Table 3 provides sample items for school staff.<sup>8</sup>

**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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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	<a href="http://cal-schls.wested.org">http://cal-schls.wested.org</a>	Required
Comprehensive School Climate Inventory	National School Climate Center	<a href="http://schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php">http://schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php</a>	Required
School Climate Assessment Instrument	Alliance for the Study of School Climate, CSU, Los Angeles	<a href="http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate">http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate</a>	Required
High School Survey of Student Engagement	Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, Indiana University	<a href="http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/index.html">http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/index.html</a>	Use of HSSSE survey items by schools, districts, and researchers is permitted without charge. <sup>12</sup>
School as a Caring Community Profile-II	Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, SUNY Cortland	<a href="http://www2.cortland.edu/centers/character/assessment-instruments.dot">http://www2.cortland.edu/centers/character/assessment-instruments.dot</a>	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/](http://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.
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- 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.



July 2015

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 goals<sup>4</sup> 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 districts<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>
- » **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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>
- » **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.<sup>9</sup>

## 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.<sup>10</sup>

The board may want to discuss with the superintendent establishing a school climate team.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Surveys conducted by the National Network of Schools in Partnership revealed that schools often construe partnerships too narrowly.<sup>13</sup> 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

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- 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.
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- 8 U.S. Department of Education, 2014 (See Endnote 3).
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- 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](http://www.schoolclimate.org))
- 12 Gemberling, K., Smith C., & Villani, J. (2000). *The key work of school boards guidebook*. Alexandria, VA: National School Boards Association
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