



REL research digest

WEST

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Tracking Middle Grades Climate Data to Inform School Change

A growing body of research shows that positive school climate is a key lever for students' academic and social development and success. An alliance of California schools and districts has teamed up with school climate experts and state education agency personnel to put this research into practice in the middle school environment.

In addition to educators representing 20 schools in 10 districts, members of the Middle Grades School Climate Alliance (MGSCA) include a team from REL West at WestEd that provides technical assistance and data analysis, as well as key California Department of Education staff. Over the past three years, these stakeholders have worked together as a professional learning community to:

- » Develop a shared knowledge base related to assessing middle school climate;
- » Develop a building-level school climate indicator system;
- » Develop and participate in workshops on how to use climate data;
- » Conduct student focus groups ("listening circles") to assess student perceptions of school climate and school improvement needs; and
- » Analyze local data to assess areas of school climate that need attention and make plans to address them.

REL West team leader Tom Hanson, a senior research associate in WestEd's Health &

Human Development program, reports that: "All of these activities have resulted in greater and more intensive use of school climate data to drive a continuous cycle of assessing needs, implementing improvement projects, and monitoring progress."

Measuring school climate

Early in the MGSCA's work, alliance members recognized the need for an inventory of the different types of climate-related data that schools and districts already collected, along with guidance on ways to strategically align those data to generate information they could use, says Hanson. "We wanted to create a map of the indicators of various dimensions of school climate that could be measured and tracked, such as teaching and learning practices, parent engagement, and disciplinary actions." Accordingly, REL West and district data managers worked together to populate district-specific data-inventory templates, which were disseminated to school staff.

A key data collection tool used by all alliance schools and districts is the core module of

REL West Research Digest keeps educators and others abreast of the research, data analysis, and technical assistance carried out by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West), including joint efforts with eight state and regional research alliances of education stakeholders in the West Region states of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah. In addition to providing abstracts of selected REL West research reports, the twice-yearly digest may include descriptions of upcoming REL West work, services, and events in the West Region, or publications developed by other researchers.

Visit the REL West website featuring:

- Collaborative work with Research Alliances
- Free reports on state issues
- Events that connect research, policy, and practice

<http://relwest.wested.org>

the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), which is administered yearly. Developed in 1998 by WestEd for the California Department of Education, the survey elicits student perceptions of safety, connectedness, and other factors associated with school climate and student well-being.

In addition to using the core module of the CHKS, individual alliance members work with REL West researchers to develop customized supplemental survey modules to address site-specific high-priority issues. For example, Rancho Viejo Middle School in the Hemet (CA) Unified School District worked with REL West to develop a monthly survey focused on student perceptions of bullying behaviors and other measures of student well-being. Survey results are distributed to all staff and are used to plan activities like special focus groups or assemblies to investigate and address issues. Additionally, in response to alliance member interest, REL West compiled an annotated list of surveys that measure classroom-level aspects of school climate associated with academic achievement, such as teacher characteristics and student engagement.

Six middle schools in the West Contra Costa County (CA) Unified School District are among the MGSCA members that administer the CHKS yearly. In addition to the survey, through the efforts of Associate Superintendent for Operations Wendell Greer, the district has appointed a climate and safety officer at each middle school. These officers give the school improvement efforts a more collegial feel and give students the sense that they have an on-site advocate for their well-being, says Greer. The number of suspensions and expulsions has dropped considerably. Greer notes that the categories of climate data and the visual representations that are part of the survey have made it much easier for all stakeholders—from

students to policymakers—to grasp the significance of climate reports and see the progress made. "Whatever the investment in resources to improve school climate," says Greer, "it's well worth it."

Developing the knowledge base

In addition to providing technical assistance focused on systematic collection, analysis, and use of climate data, the REL West team has conducted several studies for the MGSCA, to build the knowledge base related to school climate measures. Recently the team investigated the appropriateness of the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (Cal-SCHLS), the California Department of Education's system for measuring middle school climate. Cal-SCHLS comprises three surveys: the CHKS (administered to students) and corresponding surveys for teachers and parents. Partly as a result of this REL West study, the CHKS underwent its most significant reworking ever, resulting in one of the most encompassing and valid school climate surveys in the country. (See the full report on this study at: <https://relwest.wested.org/resources/51>.)

In the coming year, alliance members will implement and gauge the short-term impact of student listening circles, a carefully structured process in which educators listen to students' perceptions about school conditions and practices. Such collaborative problem-solving supports positive school climate in several ways, including promoting positive adult-student communication and action.

With the long-term goal of supporting broader use of climate data to improve middle-school teaching and learning, alliance members' experiences will be used to develop a demonstration model that all state middle schools can use, says Hanson. "Alliance members are gathering lessons on how comprehensive measurement systems can be used to assess school climate in individual middle schools. They are learning from one another about how to use school climate data effectively for continuous school improvement. Our California Department of Education members can disseminate these alliance-developed tools and practices statewide."

For further information about the work of the Middle Grades School Climate Alliance, contact Tom Hanson at thanson@WestEd.org or at (562.799.5170).

School climate resources from REL West and others

REL West

The Appropriateness of a California Student and Staff Survey for Measuring Middle School Climate

This study found that the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey validly and reliably measures student and teacher perceptions of distinct school climate domains, such as safety and connectedness, meaningful participation, bullying and discrimination, and caring staff–student relationships. (September 2014)

Speak Out, Listen Up! Tools for Using Student Perspectives and Local Data for School Improvement

Developed in collaboration with Washoe County (NV) School District, this toolkit provides educators with purposeful and systematic ways to engage and empower students to address local school-improvement problems. (July 2014)

U.S. Department of Education

Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline

This guidance document draws from emerging research and best practices to describe three key principles and related action steps that can help guide state and local efforts to improve school climate and school discipline: (1) Create positive climates and focus on prevention. (2) Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors. (3) Ensure fairness, equity, and continuous improvement. (January 2014)

Directory of Federal School Climate and Discipline Resources

Designed to be used in conjunction with the *Guiding Principles* resource guide, this is an extensive directory of pre-K–12 school climate and discipline resources, including research, training products and tools, and guidance on federal policy and federal initiatives. (January 2014)



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California Comprehensive Center

A Climate for Academic Success: How School Climate Distinguishes Schools That Are Beating the Achievement Odds

Using data from over 1,700 California public middle and high schools, this study found that schools that substantially outperformed demographically similar schools over a multiyear period had much more positive levels of school climate than other schools. (2013)

Recently added to our webinar archive:

Speak Out, Listen Up! Listening to Student Voice

Presented by REL West and the Nevada Education Research Alliance

This webinar examined the benefits of including student input in school improvement efforts. Participants learned about tools that have been found effective in eliciting student ideas, and heard from educators and students about how these tools have impacted school improvement efforts in the Washoe County (NV) School District and elsewhere.

December 4, 2014; 47 minutes

Link to archived webinar and downloadable webinar materials:

<https://relwest.wested.org/events/301>

Understanding and Promoting Data Literacy in Teacher Preparation Programs

Presented by REL West and the Nevada Education Research Alliance

In this webinar, national data literacy expert Ellen Mandinach presented research and promising practices for how teacher preparation programs can adjust courses and instruction to ensure that graduating teachers are data literate and prepared to use data effectively.

October 17, 2014; 103 minutes

Link to archived webinar and downloadable webinar materials:

<https://relwest.wested.org/events/291>

REL and IES Publications

REL West

School Mobility, Dropout, and Graduation Rates Across Student Disability Categories in Utah

This study found that, as a group, Utah students with disabilities had poorer high school outcomes than their general education classmates; they had higher dropout rates and lower rates of high school graduation. However, outcomes varied by disability category, highlighting the differences among students with disabilities.

(November 2014)

The Characteristics of Long-Term English Language Learner Students and Struggling Reclassified Fluent English Proficient Students in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah (Series of three companion reports)

Analyzing separate data for each state, these companion studies identified the characteristics of each state's long-term English learner (EL) students, as well as those EL students who eventually were reclassified as fluent English proficient but struggled to pass their state English language arts content tests. The results can help educators understand how these two groups of low-performing EL students differ from the EL student population as a whole in each state.

(October 2014)

REL Appalachia

The Effects of Increased Learning Time on Student Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes: Findings from a Meta-Analytic Review

This review of rigorous research studies found that increased learning time sometimes, but not always, had a positive effect on student outcomes. Findings also showed it can benefit students at risk of academic failure; for instance, increased learning time improved literacy outcomes for students performing below standards and improved the social-emotional skills of students with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

(July 2014)

What Works Clearinghouse

Teaching Strategies for Improving Algebra Knowledge in Middle and High School Students

Geared toward teachers and administrators, this practice guide provides three recommendations for teaching algebra to students in middle school and high school. Each recommendation summarizes and rates supporting evidence and includes implementation steps and solutions for common roadblocks.

(April 2015)

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