

memorandum

Date: October 2015
To: School Climate Alliance
From: REL West Reference Desk Team
Re: Summary of resources on school climate for schools and districts

Request: Could you provide resources on school climate for schools and districts?

Response:

We have prepared the following memo with 1) references on school climate resources for schools and districts and 2) organizations to consult. Citations include a link to a free online version, when available. All citations are accompanied by an abstract, excerpt, or summary written by the author or publisher of the document. We have not done an evaluation of the methodological rigor of these resources, but provide them for your information only.

References

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Retrieved on October 16, 2015, from <http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/books/osfi/prologue.pdf>

Abstract: This study is based on longitudinal data from 200 public elementary schools in Chicago. Data sources include individual student test scores in reading and math on the Iowa tests of basic skills from 1990 to 1996; school administrative records to obtain a value added index of school improvement; Consortium on Chicago School Research school surveys from principals, teachers, and students; and other data from the U.S. Census, Chicago Housing Authority, and the Chicago Police Department. Findings reveal five “essential supports” required for school improvement: (a) school leadership, (b) parent and community ties, (c) professional capacity of the faculty, (d) school learning climate, and (e) instructional guidance. These structures are all inextricably linked. Other key findings include (a) schools with strong leadership were seven times more likely to improve in math; (b) improvement in test scores depended on a focus by adults on instruction; (c) schools with strong parental involvement were 10 times more likely to improve in math; (d) 15% of truly disadvantaged schools (lowest levels of collective efficacy and religious participation, and the highest crime rates) showed significant improvement; and (e) disadvantaged communities that

were well organized were able to improve. These “Lessons from Chicago” highlight important implications for urban settings.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved on October 15, 2015, from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf>

Excerpt: Efforts to improve child and adolescent health typically have featured interventions designed to address specific health risk behaviors, such as tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, violence, gang involvement, and early sexual initiation. However, results from a growing number of studies suggest that greater health impact might be achieved by also enhancing protective factors that help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse health and educational outcomes. Enhancing protective factors also might buffer children and adolescents from the potentially harmful effects of negative situations and events, such exposure to violence. Protective factors include personal characteristics such as a positive view of one’s future; life conditions such as frequent parental presence in the home at key times (e.g., after school, at dinner time); and behaviors such as active participation in school activities. School connectedness is a particularly promising protective factor. This publication defines and describes the components of school connectedness and identifies specific actions that schools can take to increase school connectedness.

Cohen, J., McCabe, L., Michelli, N. M., and Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate: Research, policy, teacher education and practice. *Teachers College Record*, 111, 180–213. Retrieved on October 13, 2015, from <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=15220>

Abstract: Educators have written about and studied school climate for 100 years. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. However, school climate is more than individual experience: It is a group phenomenon that is larger than any one person’s experience. A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment. School climate refers to spheres of school life (e.g. safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the environment) as well as to larger organizational patterns (e.g., from fragmented to cohesive or “shared” vision, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unrecognized). These definitions were collaboratively developed and agreed upon at a consensus-building meeting of national practice and policy leaders organized in April 2007 by the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, and the National School Climate Center at the Center for Social and Emotional Education.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: This article examines the relationship between school-climate-related research findings on the one hand and educational policy, school improvement practice, and teacher education on the other. *Research Design:* This article uses several research methods to understand the current state of school climate research, policy, practice, and teacher education: historical analysis, a review of the literature, a systemic national State Department of Education policy scan, and a national survey (N = 40) of building, district, and state educational leaders about school climate measurement and improvement practices.

Findings/Results: A review of the literature reveals that a growing body of empirical research indicates that positive school climate is associated with and predictive of academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, students' healthy development, and teacher retention. There is a glaring gap between these research findings on the one hand, and state departments of education, school climate policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education practice on the other.

Conclusions/Recommendations: We detail how the gap between school climate research, policy, practice, and teacher education is socially unjust and a violation of children's human rights. We now have research-based guidelines that predictably support positive youth development and student learning. If we do so, we are supporting children, educators, parents, communities, and the foundation for democratic process, but as a country, we are not doing so. Our children deserve better. A series of detailed recommendations are suggested for policy makers, practice leaders, and teacher educators to narrow this gap and support student's healthy development and capacity to learn.

Fredricks, J., McColskey, W., Meli, J., Mordica, J., Montrosse, B., and Mooney, K. (2011). *Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: A description of 21 instruments*. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2011–No. 098). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast. Retrieved on October 15, 2015, from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>

Excerpt: This report reviews the characteristics of 21 instruments that measure student engagement in upper elementary through high school. It summarizes what each instrument measures, describes its purposes and uses, and provides technical information on its psychometric properties.

Schueler, B. E., Capotosto, L., Bahena, S., McIntyre, J., & Gehlbach, H. (2013). Measuring parent perceptions of school climate. *Psychological Assessment, 26*(1), 314–320. Retrieved on October 15, 2015, from http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/11143738/PAS_Schueler%20et%20al_FINAL_for%20distribution.pdf?sequence=1. Also see related article at <http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/understanding-parental-views-of-school-climate-frequently-asked-questions-about-a-new-survey-tool>

Abstract: Parents' attitudes about their children's schools matter. Their views can shape their children's attitudes about school, affect their levels of family-school engagement, and influence their residential and school enrollment decisions. This paper describes the development of a survey scale to assess parent perceptions of the climate of their child's school. Our comprehensive scale development process incorporated feedback from academics and potential respondents from the outset of the design process to enhance scale quality. We conducted three studies with national samples of parents (n = 385; n = 253; n = 266) to gather evidence of scale score reliability and valid score inferences based on convergent/discriminant validity. Through confirmatory factor analysis we identified a theoretically grounded factor structure that fit the data well. Interestingly, we found no evidence that parental response patterns distinguish between academic and social elements of school climate. Furthermore, we found that parents of younger children, on average, had a more positive perception of the school's climate than parents of older children. We conclude by discussing how researchers and Pre-K –12 schools and districts can use the scale to aid school improvement efforts.

Shindler, J., Jones, A., Williams, A. D., Taylor, C., & Cadenas, H. (2009). *Exploring the school climate-student achievement connection: And making sense of why the first precedes the second*. Alliance for the Study of School Climate, California State University, Los Angeles. Retrieved on October 15, 2015, from http://web.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/research/School_Climate_Achievement_Connection_v4.pdf

Excerpt: Many educators view school climate and student achievement as separate considerations. For some, the idea of promoting a high quality climate can seem like a luxury in the face of the current high stakes assessment climate in which student achievement gains are the paramount consideration. However, the results of this study suggest that climate and student achievement are related. In fact, the quality of the climate appears to be the single most predictive factor in any school's capacity to promote student achievement.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Higgins-D'Alessandro, A., & Guffey, S. (2012). *School climate research summary: August 2012* (School Climate Brief No. 3). New York, NY: National School Climate Center. Retrieved on October 15, 2015, from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v3.pdf>

Abstract: Over the past two decades, researchers and educators have increasingly recognized the importance of K-12 school climate. This summary builds on the 2010 and 2009 school climate research summaries (Cohen & Geier, 2010; and Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009) and details how school climate is associated with and/or promotes safety, healthy relationships, engaged learning and teaching and school improvement efforts. The review includes 194 citations related to the topic of school climate, and details the outcomes associated with a positive school climate. Sections of the brief are devoted to providing evidence of the relationship between school climate and academic outcomes, and school climate as an important factor in the successful implementation of school reform programs.

Voight, A. & Hanson, T. (2012). *Summary of existing school climate instruments for middle school*. San Francisco: REL West at WestEd. Retrieved on October 13, 2015, from https://relwest.wested.org/system/resources/21/RELW_Memo_PUBLIC_SC3-3-1_20120918.508.pdf?1351537047

Excerpt: This information memo provides an annotated list of extant surveys used to assess school climate, classroom climate, or teacher effectiveness that are designed for use in middle schools. The purpose is to assist educators to select or design surveys to assess school climate in middle schools, with a particular focus on assessing student engagement and teacher characteristics associated with higher student achievement.

Organizations to Consult

California Safe and Supportive Schools

<http://californias3.wested.org/tools/research>

From the website: This website is a resource for supporting California schools in the important task of fostering positive school climates as part of school improvement plans. It provides access to a wealth of information and a wide range of publications, tools, trainings, and other technical assistance to support data-driven school climate improvement.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

<http://www.casel.org/>

From the website: CASEL is the nation's leading organization advancing the development of academic, social and emotional competence for all students. Our mission is to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Through research, practice and policy, CASEL collaborates to ensure all students become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of society.

National Center of Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/>

<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate>

From the website: The Safe Supportive Learning Website is designed to provide resources and information to help make school climate improvements. In particular, resources and information on this site are sorted by:

- School climate topics and subtopics
(School climate topics and subtopics can be found on the home page, topic drop down on the top of each page and on the "Topics and Research" drop-down menu.)
- Roles
(While most resources and information could be beneficial to all, there are some materials specific to particular roles in making improvements to the learning environment.)
- Education level
(While engagement, safety and environment, are the cornerstone for safe supportive learning environments for all students, developmental and system differences lead stakeholders to approach learning environment improvements differently.)
- See "Making the Case for the Importance of School Climate and its Measurement," a webinar presentation: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/events/webinar/making-case-importance-school-climate-and-its-measurement>

National School Climate Center

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/>

From the website: Our goal is to promote positive and sustained school climate: a safe, supportive environment that nurtures social and emotional, ethical, and academic skills. NSCC is an organization that helps schools integrate crucial social and emotional learning with academic instruction. In doing so, we enhance student performance, prevent drop outs, reduce physical violence, bullying, and develop healthy and positively engaged adults. For more than a decade NSCC has worked together with the entire academic community—teacher, staff, school-based mental health professionals, students and parents—to improve a climate for learning. We help translate research into practice by establishing meaningful and relevant guidelines, programs and services that support a model for whole school improvement with a focus on school climate.

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings Used in the Search

“School climate”; “school connectedness”; “school environment”

Search of Databases

EBSCO Host, ERIC, PsychInfo, PsychArticle, Google, and Google Scholar; U.S. Department of Education websites

Criteria for Inclusion

When REL West staff review resources, they consider—among other things—four factors:

- **Date of the Publication:** The most current information is included, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- **Source and Funder of the Report/Study/Brief/Article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols.
- **Methodology:** Sources include randomized controlled trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, and policy briefs. Priority for inclusion generally is given to randomized controlled trial study findings, but the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: numbers of participants (Just a few? Thousands?); selection (Did the participants volunteer for the study or were they chosen?); representation (Were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?).
- **Existing Knowledge Base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is limited or nonexistent. In these cases, we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, and other sources.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by educators and policymakers in the Western region (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory West (REL West) at WestEd. This memorandum was prepared by REL West under a contract with the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES), Contract ED-IES-12-C-0002, administered by WestEd. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.