

CHAPTER 79

Advancing a Positive School Climate for Students, Families, and Staff

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Getting Started

School, along with home and neighborhood, is the primary environment that impacts child developmental outcomes. Schools with a positive climate, where children feel welcome and look forward to attending, families like to visit and volunteer, and staff like to work, are environments that promote learning and healthy growth (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; Noblit, Malloy, & Malloy, 2001). The adults in a child's life are the central factors in the impact of those primary developmental environments. For example, the adults in a child's school—principal, teachers, and other staff—create and sustain the climate in the school (Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Olweus, 1993). Likewise, a child's parents or guardians are the central force in the home environment. When school personnel reach out to families to get them involved in the school, a bridge is built between these two primary environments that influence academic and developmental outcomes (Johns, 2001; Noblit et al., 2001).

This chapter will first define and discuss the importance of a positive school climate. The central focus, however, is how school practitioners can grow a welcoming and positive climate for students, families, and staff. A burgeoning body of literature describes the nature and effects of school climate, as well as assessment and intervention strategies. Two goals have guided the writing of this chapter: first, to synthesize this literature into four practice principles to guide intervention planning and programming; second, to present three proven programs—a school climate assessment instrument, a comprehensive school improvement program, and a bully prevention program—each of which covers aspects of these practice principles.

What We Know

School Climate

School climate is how a school makes individuals feel. Aspects of the school environment interact in complex ways to affect how students, staff, and family members feel about a school. Anderson (1982) asserted there are three dimensions to school climate: (a) the physical building and material aspects; (b) the social interactions; and (c) the belief system, values, and shared meanings. Augmenting this structural definition, Hoy and Tarter (1997) compared the climate of a school to the personality of an individual. Haynes et al. (1997) offered a definition that captures the inputs and outputs of school climate: “the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children's cognitive, social, and psychological development” (p. 322).

Research over the past two decades has demonstrated the importance of the social environment in schools. School environments where students feel welcomed, supported, cared for, and hopeful about their performance and potential have positive effects on student behavior, well-being, and academic performance (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). A meta-analysis investigating the factors that affect student learning found many important factors were aspects of school climate, such as: (a) classroom management, (b) student—teacher social interaction, (c) school culture, (d) classroom climate, and (e) parental involvement policy (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1997). Poor outcomes have likewise

been associated with negative school climates. For example, victimization from bullying in school has been associated with low self-esteem, depression, and suicide (Smith & Brain, 2000). Positive school environments are especially important for the success of children from lower income and/or ethnically diverse families (Haynes et al., 1997; Johns, 2001). Similarly, it has been asserted that when African American and immigrant families feel that they and their children are welcome and the school staff care about all children, positive school – family relationships can lead to better outcomes for students (Johns, 2001;Thompson, 2003).

A group of students who are at especially high risk from a negative school climate are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and students who are questioning their sexual identities. These students are disproportionately victimized by bullying and teasing, and research reveals that schools often fail to protect them from verbal harassment and violence (Thurlow, 2001). This widespread problem has been linked to higher rates of dropping out, substance abuse, depression, and suicide among sexual minority students (Johnson & Johnson, 2000). There are a growing number of students who have gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender parents who likewise face struggles when the school climate does not welcome active participation by all family constellations (Ryan & Martin, 2000). (See also Chapter 83.)

What We Can Do

The practice principles detailed here were gathered from literature either describing the nature and effects of school climate or reporting on programs to improve school climate. The complexity and diversity of school climates make creating a one-size-fits-all school climate program impossible. Cook and Payne (2002) asserted that the nature and dynamics of individual schools are so varied that for change-oriented programs to be successful, they must be modified to fit the needs of each school. Therefore, these practice principles are offered as a guide in the process to formulate an assessment strategy that fits the current context, then identify programming activities that respond to the specific needs of any one school or district.

Principle 1—Ongoing Assessment

Any system needs ongoing feedback to create positive change. Standardized test scores and student behaviors are distal student outcomes of school climate and do not provide effective feedback to promote positive change in the social environment of a school. Therefore, the first step toward improving the climate in a school is to utilize reliable and valid assessment instruments to gather data about the current state of the school climate. This data can be gathered from the school staff in order to assess the school as a working environment (see Principle 2). Data should also be gathered from students and families in order to assess the learning climate that grows out of that working environment. Below are examples of several research-based school climate instruments with proven reliability and validity.

- *Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ)*—The OCDQ (Hoy & Tarter, 1997) assesses school climate from the perspective of teachers and principals and includes high school, middle school, and elementary school versions. The OCDQ is described in the Tools and Practice Examples section.
- *School Success Profile (SSP)* and *Elementary School Success Profile (ESSP)*—The SSP and ESSP are assessment instruments developed for individual and school-level practice in schools. The SSP (G. L. Bowen & Richman, 2001) measures middle and high school students' perceptions of their social environments, including school, family, neighborhood, and peer group. The ESSP (N. K. Bowen, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004)

measures elementary school students' perceptions of their social environments including school, and it collects data from parents or guardians and primary teachers. For more information on the SSP and ESSP, please see <http://www.schoolsuccessprofile.org/>

- *Inventory of School Climate-Student (ISC-S)*—The ISC-S (Brand et al., 2003) was developed as an outcome measure for the evaluation of school improvement programs. However, it measures multiple dimensions of school climate from the student perspective—such as teacher support, clarity of rules, participation in decision making, and safety problems—and could be used as an assessment tool for intervention planning.

Principle 2—Adults Are the Key

Students display the state of the climate in a school through their behavior, socioemotional functioning, and academic performance. However, it is the adults in a school who create and maintain the climate. Focusing school climate change efforts on changing the students, without also working to make changes in the work environment and relationships among staff, is much like treating the symptoms while ignoring the problem. Therefore, assessment of the school climate and resulting change efforts should start with the adults.

- School administrators and principals who are committed to change efforts provide a foundation for success. Likewise, building commitment and motivation by teachers and parents or guardians to make changes in the school climate is key (Olweus, 1993).
- Similarly, growing a more welcoming climate for families and increasing family involvement starts with school staff who reach out to provide opportunities for families to participate in the life of the school. This can be something as simple as notes home about positive accomplishments of students whose parents typically hear from the school only when their child is in trouble (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Another effective strategy is to engage the parents or guardians who are already involved in the school community to reach out to families who are not. This can be particularly important for some immigrant families, who for cultural reasons may need to be empowered to participate in the school process (Johns, 2001).
- When teachers expect students will do well and communicate to students a belief that they can meet those learning expectations, students perform better. This factor is especially important in building a school climate that is welcoming and supportive of ethnically diverse students and families (Thompson, 2003).
- For teachers, the school is a workplace. An environment where teachers feel valued and their opinions and input are included in the decision-making process results in teachers who create a welcoming and supportive climate for students (Hoy & Tarter, 1997). (Additional information about engaging parents in their child's education may be found in Chapters 15 and 47 and in Section 9.)

Principle 3—Open and Inclusive Governance Structure

An open and inclusive governance structure and decision-making process sets the stage for all stakeholders in the school to feel empowered to participate in the life of the school. This is in contrast with the traditionally hierarchical top-down way schools are often still organized.

- Successful school improvement programs are frequently organized around an inclusive decision-making structure, which seeks ongoing input from staff, students, and families. Built on an ecological and developmental perspective, successful school climates seek to promote healthy development and successful learning by recognizing, strengthening, and promoting the interconnectedness between the social environments of school, home, and community (Noblit et al., 2001).
- Creating and sustaining an open and inclusive decision-making process requires collaborative and inclusive leadership from principals and other administrators who seek and use input from teachers, families, and students in making decisions about the management of the school. In accomplishing this goal, principals will be more likely to be successful, for example, if they encourage creativity and independence on the part of school staff and respect their professionalism, individual skills, and talents (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001).

Principle 4—Safe and Welcoming

Bullying and teasing are universal school problems, and reducing bullying should be a part of any successful school climate change effort (Smith & Brain, 2000). However, it is not enough to make the school safe. Rather, the school should feel welcoming to all students and families.

- Implement a schoolwide bully prevention program. In the Tools and Practice Examples section, the Olweus Bully Prevention Program (Olweus, 1993) is described. (Bullying and associated problems are further discussed in Chapters 39-45.)
- Establish fair and consistent rules. The rules for behavior should be clearly communicated to all students and staff, and those rules should be applied in a consistent and fair manner (Welsh, 2000).
- Promote caring and trusting relationships. Teachers who care about students and families and reflect that in their behavior and interactions contribute to a positive climate. School staff who care about each other and feel comfortable being open and honest with each other set a stage for a welcoming climate for staff and students alike (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001).
- Personalize relations with students and families. School staff should make the effort to have personal relationships with students and families. Strive to see each student as an individual, with hopes, fears, aspirations, and struggles. This seems difficult, given the workload of school staff today, but it can be seen not as more work but a different approach to the work. This can also be a broad principle or a targeted strategy. As a targeted strategy, a school can organize a program to recruit staff to volunteer to each reach out to one at-risk student in a personal way and provide a safe and caring source of encouragement and support (Shore, 1997).
- Recognize and celebrate diversity. School assemblies and celebrations provide opportunities to share and enjoy the cultural food, customs, history, talents, and interests of the various groups within the school community. This is vital to making all students and families feel welcome as schools become increasingly diverse (Johns, 2001).

Tools and Practice Examples

Each school interested in improving school climate must find and modify proven programs to fit their needs. A comprehensive approach for any one school, covering all four practice principles, may require combining two or more proven programs. For example, a school might use a school climate assessment instrument, then implement both a comprehensive school improvement program and a bully prevention program. Examples of each of these types of programs follow. Any one of these programs would improve the climate in a school, but in combination they represent a multifaceted approach that matches the complexity of the climate of a school.

School Climate Assessment Instrument

Ongoing assessment utilizing reliable and valid instruments is the first school climate practice principle stated previously. Measuring school climate involves assessing the perceptions of the school environment by school staff, students, and parents or guardians. However, the second practice principle asserts that it is the adults in a school who most strongly influence its climate. Therefore, when assessing school climate as part of intervention planning, it is critical to gather data from the principals and teachers, because it is within those relationships that effective change needs to start. The perceptions of students and parents or guardians are also important to assess. However, their perceptions should be seen as indicators of the state of the school climate and/or used as outcome measures.

The Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) is a school climate assessment tool completed by school staff. The OCDQ has different versions for elementary, middle, and high schools, has been rigorously developed, and has demonstrated reliability and validity. (For detailed information on these instruments, see Hoy & Tarter, 1997.) Interpretation and scoring information, as well as free downloadable copies of all three versions of the instrument, can be found at http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/whoy/instruments_6.htm.

The OCDQ takes 15 minutes for teachers and principals to complete, and includes 34 to 50 multiple-choice questions. The OCDQ measures six important features of school climate. Three of these features describe the principal: (a) supportive behavior, (b) directive behavior, and (c) restrictive behavior. Three of these features describe the teachers: (a) collegial behavior, (b) intimate behavior, and (c) disengaged behavior. Scores on these six school climate features reveal the level of openness and disengagement of the staff relationships in the school. These six scores can then be plotted on a chart providing a graphic depiction of a school's climate. Hoy and Tarter's (1997) book about these instruments include intervention strategies and examples for utilizing these measures to improve the climate in a school.

Comprehensive School Improvement Program

Aspects of all four practice principles can be addressed with a comprehensive school improvement program. Many such programs have been described, including (a) Success for All, (b) Accelerated Schools, (c) Coalition of Essential Schools, (d) Project ACHIEVE, and (f) the School Development Program (SDP). However, the SDP stands out for two reasons. First, an initial and central goal of the SDP is to improve school climate, and second, extensive research supports climate change as a consistent SDP outcome (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; Noblit et al., 2001). The SDP does not present a scripted approach to change; rather, it is process oriented with a structure that is intentionally flexible to meet the needs of a specific school. Those

processes and flexible structure include (a) a collaborative governance structure, (b) three guiding principles, and (c) three key operations.

The literature supporting the effectiveness of the SDP includes anecdotal accounts, qualitative case studies, and randomized experimental evaluations. For example, Johns (2001) anecdotally described the program's effectiveness in schools serving large populations of immigrant students, particularly in engaging immigrant families. Noblit, Malloy, and Malloy (2001) presented eight qualitative case studies that illustrated the variety of what the program can look like in response to local needs. They reported that the SDP (a) created a positive learning and working environment, (b) increased parent involvement, (c) improved teacher satisfaction, (d) increased sense of community, (e) strengthened school–community ties, (f) improved school reputation, and (g) bridged racial divisiveness and unified multiethnic communities. Two randomized experimental evaluations of the SDP have been completed. Findings in the first included positive improvements in school climate and supported the SDP theoretical model (Cook, Habib, et al., 1999). The second study found significant school climate changes in both students' and teachers' perceptions (Cook, Murphy, et al., 2000). Additionally, students' mal-adaptive beliefs about problem behaviors improved, acting-out behaviors were reduced, and gains were found in academic achievement.

The SDP includes three elements: (a) three guiding principles, (b) three teams, and (c) three operations. (For a detailed description, see Comer, Ben-Avie, Haynes, & Joyner, 1999.)

Three Guiding Principles

First, the No Fault Principle is intended to keep the process focused on solving identified problems and not expend time or energy assigning blame for the existence of a problem. Second, the Consensus Decision-Making Principle directs the focus on what is best for the students and guides the school community to engage in open dialog to reach consensus on all important decisions about plans, programs, and activities at the school. Third, the Collaboration Principle reinforces the No Fault and Consensus Principles and affirms all involved to work as a team and include all interested parties.

Three Teams

First, the School Planning and Management Team includes the principal and representatives from among the teachers, parents/guardians, and school staff and is the executive decision-making body for the school. The goal of this team is to create an inclusive governance structure where all stakeholder groups are informed and included. Second, the Student and Staff Support Team includes the principal and all staff with expertise on the health and well-being of the student body, such as social workers, psychologists, counselors, special education teachers, and the nurse. The central goal of this team is to promote a positive social environment in the school, by identifying individual-, group-, and school-level needs and implementing appropriate prevention or intervention activities. The Parent Team includes parents/guardians and selects members to serve on the School Planning and Management Team. The goal of the Parent Team is to increase parent participation in the social and academic aspects of the school. Critical to the success of this team is to engage families who have not previously participated in the school by reaching out to uninvolved families across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines (Johns, 2001).

Three Operations

First, the Comprehensive School Plan is the master plan for the school covering both school climate and curriculum planning. It should be based on assessment data and developed, implemented, and monitored by the School Planning and Management

Team with input from the other two teams. Second, Staff Development should provide opportunities for staff to build supportive and trusting working relationships while including content on the six developmental pathways for healthy student growth: cognitive, physical, language, psychological, ethical, and social (Noblit et al., 2001). The third operation is Assessment and Modification. An SDP school should collect ongoing assessments about how staff, students, and families are doing. Such data provide critical feedback to modify the planning and activities of the school. Ongoing assessment should include all levels, from individual student needs to student and staff perception of the social climate.

Implementation of the SDP will look different from school to school. In all schools, however, creating an open and inclusive governance structure and processes, as part of growing a welcoming school climate, takes time and nurturance.

Bully Prevention Program

As stated in the fourth practice principle, for a school climate to be welcoming and supportive, it must first be safe for all students. Bullying and teasing have been shown to be universal problems in schools, occurring with similar dynamics in nearly all schools across geography and culture (Smith & Brain, 2000). Therefore, bullying should be expected to exist in most schools with varying degrees of frequency and severity. It seems clear that a school interested in creating a more positive climate for all students should assess and intervene to reduce teasing and bullying. An increasing number of bully prevention programs have been developed in many countries, with many of these programs evolving from the seminal research of Dan Olweus. His 1993 book *Bullying at School*, and Web site, <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>, provide excellent descriptions of the dynamics of bullying and teasing, and detailed information on his proven Olweus Bully Prevention Program. This program is also a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration model program, with information available at:

http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/template_cf.cfm?page=model&pkProgramID=20.

The Olweus program includes intervention components at the school, classroom, and individual levels, recognizing the complexity of school climate. Echoing the first practice principle, Olweus stresses the importance of getting the principal's support and making all adults—teachers and parents or guardians—aware of the problem and involved in the solution. Two core components of the program that Olweus identifies at the school level are: first, to present findings from the Bully/Victim Questionnaire to the staff, students, and parents or guardians to raise awareness of the problem and increase involvement in the solution and, second, to provide adequate supervision during unstructured times such as recess and lunch to immediately reduce opportunities for victimization. Two core classroom-level components are to clearly state and enforce classroom rules against bullying and teasing and to hold regular classroom meetings to discuss the classroom climate. Core components at the individual level are serious talks between school staff and bullies and their parents or guardians and, separately, between staff and victims of bullying and their parents or guardians. Such talks, which should be focused on stopping the bullying, are critical to program success.

Key Points to Remember

- The social climate of a school grows out of the perception of the school as workplace for staff and a learning place for students and families. That climate has a direct effect on student behavior, socioemotional functioning, and academic performance.

- The climate in a school is especially important to the developmental and academic outcomes of vulnerable or at-risk students, such as culturally or ethnically diverse, economically dis-advantaged, or sexual-minority students. Schools and their climates are complex and varied; planning effective school climate change must be tailored to the needs of each school and district.
- Four key principles in positive school climate change include (a) utilizing ongoing assessment measures, (b) recognizing that the adults create and maintain the climate, (c) building an open and inclusive governance structure, and (d) making the school safe and welcoming to all students and families.
- School climate change is complex and may require a combination of proven programs and a sustained effort by committed and motivated members of all stakeholder groups.

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