**Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate
and Classroom Management**

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Examining School Climate: Defining Factors and Educational Influences

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Characteristics of schools, such as the physical structure of a school building and the interactions between students and teachers, are two diverse factors that both affect and help to define the broad concept of school climate. School climate has been researched for many years and continues to be examined and redefined as a result of its significant influences on educational outcomes. The elements that comprise a school's climate are extensive and complex. As a result, researchers have identified the following factors that influence school climate:

➢ number and quality of interactions between adults and students (Kuperminc, Leadbeater and Blatt, 2001)
➢ students' and teachers' perception of their school environment, or the school's personality (Johnson, Johnson, & Zimmerman, 1996)
➢ environmental factors (such as the physical buildings and classrooms, and materials used for instruction)
➢ academic performance (Johnson & Johnson, 1993)
➢ feelings of safeness and school size (Freiberg, 1998)
➢ feelings of trust and respect for students and teachers (Manning & Saddlemire, 1996)

Clearly, school climate is multi-dimensional and influences many individuals, including students, parents, school personnel, and the community. Additionally, school climate can significantly impact educational environments, as Freiberg (1998) notes, "school climate can be a positive influence on the health of the learning environment or a significant barrier to learning" (p.22). Although this broad term has been researched for many years, a sole definition has yet to be formulated.

Assessing School Climate

Many researchers have developed measures of school climate. Examining these measures and the attributes specifically assessed provides further detail into the nature of school climate. These assessments consider multiple factors and individuals within the school system using direct measures, such as surveys and interviews, and indirect measures, such as disciplinary and attendance records (Freiberg, 1998). The *School Climate Survey* contains seven dimensions of school climate and specifically assesses students' perceptions in the following areas:

- ➢ achievement motivation
- ➢ fairness
- ➢ order and discipline
- ➢ parent involvement
- ➢ sharing of resources
- ➢ student interpersonal relationships
- ➢ student-teacher relationships (Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993).

The *Charles F. Kettering Ltd. (CFK) School Climate Profile* is also widely used to measure school climate. This survey is comprised of four sections and is given to teachers, administrators, and students. Part A, the General Climate Factors, is comprised of the following eight subscales:

- ➢ respect
- ➢ trust
- ➢ high morale
- ➢ opportunity for input
- ➢ continuous academic & social growth
- ➢ cohesiveness
- ➢ school renewal
- ➢ caring (Johnson et al., 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1993, 1997).

Further scales have been created assessing issues such as security maintenance, administration, guidance, student activities, and teacher-principal interactions (Hanna, 1998). Additional measures include the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (Keefe & Kelley, 1990), the Organizational Climate Index (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2002), and the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (Halpin & Croft, 1963).

Why is School Climate Important?

Research shows that school climate can affect many areas and people within schools. For example, a positive school climate has been associated with fewer behavioral and emotional problems for students (Kuperminc et al., 1997). Additionally, specific research on school climate in high-risk urban environments indicates that a positive, supportive, and culturally conscious school climate can significantly shape the degree of academic success experienced by urban students (Haynes & Comer, 1993). Furthermore, researchers have found that positive school climate perceptions are protective factors for boys and may supply high-risk students with a supportive learning environment yielding healthy development, as well as preventing antisocial behavior (Haynes, 1998; Kuperminc et al., 1997). School climate research suggests that positive interpersonal relationships and optimal learning opportunities for students in all demographic environments can increase achievement levels and reduce maladaptive behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Regarding the roles of teachers and administrators, Taylor and Tashakkori (1995) found that a positive school climate is associated with increased job satisfaction for school personnel. Finally, student perspectives are

important during the transition from one school level to another. Attending a new school can be frightening for students and this apprehension can adversely affect students' perceptions of their school's climate and learning outcomes. Therefore, research has shown that providing a positive and supportive school climate for students is important for a smooth and easy transition to a new school (Freiberg, 1998).

Previous school climate research supports the conclusion that many factors comprise this complex concept. Furthermore, school climate can play a significant role in providing a healthy and positive school atmosphere. Freiberg (1998) notes, "the interaction of various school and classroom climate factors can create a fabric of support that enables all members of the school community to teach and learn at optimum levels" (p. 22). It has been found that a positive school climate can yield positive educational and psychological outcomes for students and school personnel; similarly, a negative climate can prevent optimal learning and development (Freiberg, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1993, 1997; Kuperminc et al., 1997; Kuperminc, Leadbeater & Blatt, 2001; Manning & Saddlemire, 1996). Manning and Saddlemire (1996) conclude aspects of school climate, including "trust, respect, mutual obligation, and concern for other's welfare can have powerful effects on educators' and learners' interpersonal relationships as well as learners' academic achievement and overall school progress" (p. 41). What children learn about themselves in school through interactions is equally important as the academic knowledge they receive. School climate, if positive, can provide an enriching environment, both for personal growth and academic success.

How Can School Climate be Improved?

Educators and parents have multiple options to enhance school climate and students' overall educational experience. The following is a list of possible interventions to improve school climate:

➢ Increased parent and community involvement
➢ Implementation of character education or the promotion of fundamental moral values in children
➢ Use of violence-prevention and conflict-resolution-curricula
➢ peer mediation
➢ prevention of acts of bullying (Peterson & Skiba, 2001)
➢ Teachers and principals treat students fairly, equally and with respect
➢ Provide a safe environment for staff and students (Harris & Lowery, 2002)
➢ Personalization through adopt-a-kid programs, honoring most-improved students, and block scheduling (Shore, 1995).

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