

Making the Case for the Importance of School Climate and Its Measurement

WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On November 30 and December 1, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center hosted a Webinar titled “Making the Case for the Importance of School Climate and Its Measurement.” During the session, the presenter, Dr. David Osher, Principal Investigator for the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenter could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (sssta@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

Please note the content of this summary was prepared under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students to the American Institutes for Research (AIR). This Q/A summary does not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does it imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

Q1. How do the school climate models fit into the overall school reform models where less appears to be more?

As one chooses models, one has to think about whether or not there are key elements that one focuses on. That’s one of the reasons that, in some of my work, I focused on the conditions for learning— because I think those are the things that may be very consistent with what schools who are concerned with school reform are focusing on.

Similarly if one looks at the work that the Consortium in Chicago School Research did where they look at the five elements of essential support, they’ve really tried to distill down to those things that their research in Chicago suggests are connected to improved academics, improved attendance and things like that. So I think that if one is trying just to connect to the current notions of school reform, one may want to find some parsimonious models.

On the other hand, there are other things going on that talk about community as well as school reform. And if you think about the Department of Education’s focus on Promise Neighborhoods, then other elements of school climate become very important as well. And so I think these are strategic choices that have to be made at a local level.

One needs to see school climate as a piece of how one realizes, in an efficient manner, the aspirations of schools. For example, if one is concerned about improving attendance, those aspects of school climate that address conditions for learning become particularly important. If one is concerned with creating a healthy community that goes beyond the school, there may be other aspects of climate that you might want to measure. If there’s an underlying takeaway

measure I would give here, it's that one can and should connect school climate to efficient, smart approaches to school reform where you only focus on a few things but climate is a key condition and that the same time one can look at other issues as well.

Q2. There seems to be an under emphasis on developmental outcomes, and the Safe and Supportive Schools framework only mentions academic outcomes. But your later slide started to hint at developmental outcomes...

Developmental outcomes are equally important and there is a good deal of research that suggests connections between school results and non-academic developmental outcomes. I think that this question, as well as the prior question, reflects the interesting tension. Right now, many educators feel pressured to produce demonstrated academic achievement and so they're focusing on academics. An emphasis on school climate can temper things and both help realize academic achievement, but at the same time, provide an environment that is more developmentally appropriate to young people.

Q3. What can parents do to improve school climate?

I think it's important for parents to know that school climate is important and it's important for parents to communicate that to the school. It is important for parents to insist that not only are their students academically supported and engaged, but their children are also in environments where they do feel safe and supported. A colleague of mine once said that schools will be better when parents moving into a community ask the realtor to not only tell them about test results, but to tell them about school climate results.

Q4. Are there proven approaches to address school climate issues?

There are proven approaches to address school climate issues. In a few weeks, the Center will do a webinar on how you can use your school climate data to help you identify effective and proven interventions and how to make sure you get the right interventions that are likely to work in sustaining your own community. (Please see the archived webinar recording for *Using Data to Identify Programmatic Interventions* here: <http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=9&eid=1502>)

Q5. How would you emphasize that improving school climate does not need to cost much money in budget cutting times?

The reason you want to improve climate is because you want to use your academic resources more effectively. When school climate is strong, more students attend and less students drop out. When school climate is strong, it's more likely that young people are focused on learning and not focused on distracting and teachers are able to differentiate learning and not focus on dealing with the distractions.

In many schools in this country, I ask principals and assistant principals what percentage of time do they spend on discipline and what percentage of time do they spend being instructional

leaders and they tell me 80% on discipline, 20% at best on instructional leadership. You want a school climate to reverse those percentages.

Part of the reason why addressing school climate is important is it helps people use resources more efficiently. For example, if you're running a school with 50 classrooms and you have a climate that contributes to the fact that 20-30% of your students have poor attendance and another 30% are coming in tardy, then what's happening is that you're not using well your investment into those facilities. In addition, you won't produce the kinds of academic results you want because the kids who are not coming to class are not learning all that they need to learn and the kids coming in late are disrupting the flow of learning. If you're paying teachers and paying for their professional development, you want them to have an environment where they have the ability to teach well and students have the ability to learn. So it's using your resources wisely.

- Q6. You mentioned there were several surveys that have been used with appropriate psychometrics, can you provide some examples (names of surveys that have been used)? Does the center have any survey templates or sample surveys they can share?**

On the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center website, you can find a growing list of (vetted) surveys by simply clicking on School Climate Measurement in the "Topics" section of the website springboard. On that page, you'll see there is a compendium (or list) that describes the surveys' respondents, what kinds of research reports are related to verify the surveys' validity, and other information on how you can access the surveys - whether it's public or not. And if anybody would like to submit a survey, feel free to nominate one and we will go through the process with the Department of Education to (vet) it.

- Q7. You mentioned the importance of subgroup data. Could you comment on two problems I have seen in this area? One is the limited nature of participant identification. So just the categories and the lack of translation on languages other than English and sometimes Spanish. This is critical for understanding school climate issues for immigrant and refugee populations for example.**

I have argued in my work that you want to translate surveys into almost any language possible because people tend to experience emotions in their native language; and so if you really want to get a sense of whether people are safe or not, ask them that question in their native language. Some surveys had been translated into many languages, and some municipalities and districts have rules that make that happen. In other cases, it doesn't happen. And so I think that challenge is a really important one.

In terms of subgroups, I think it is important to identify what are the key subgroups that are of interest to you in your districts, and then you can control what data are collected. And I'll give you a negative example. For me right now, I do surveys in a lot of places, and we use No Child Left Behind categories because those are the ones that people normally count as well as a few others. One category is whether or not a student has an educational disability. That's interesting but if you look at results, the results for young people who have emotional behavioral disorders

are highly different from young people with learning disabilities which are highly different from people with orthopedic disabilities and conflating them together really misses information. So if I could have my way, I would probably try to identify what are the types of data that one can collect and report out at the subgroup level.

At the same time let me give you a caveat which is that I think the best surveys are ones that students feel are being done confidentially. And what one can do to ensure that - at least what we do - is we have reporting rules. So for example, when we do school reports if there are less than ten young people in a category, we will not report out a demographic category because we don't want people to feel that they're being isolated. What we do in those cases is we try to sum up at a district level and so forth so one can get a sense of how groupings are doing.

So anyway the takeaway here is that the more granular you can be, the better; and at the same time, that level of granularity ought to be defined by your needs as well as by what you anticipate are the types of demographics that would affect student outcomes.

- Q8. I suspect that perceptions of problems in school climate can differ from the real extent of problems. In other words, I perceive that the severity of problems is greater than the real extent. Have you seen schools or districts apply positive social norm theory to help promote positive norms and behaviors and use data to increase peer pressure to enhance behaviors and attitudes that improve climates?**

The simple answer is yes. And let me add that I think that one should see school climate surveys and other data as really screening to identify problems. Once you've identified a problem, it's important to dig down in greater depth. But to get to the other point, there are an increasing number of people who are really focused on the promotion of assets in young people and appropriate behaviors and measuring the results of those not just trying to count negative things, but really to count positive things. The experience of many people would suggest that the best surveys combine positive and negative data as well as positive and negative questions to get a realistic picture of climate. But I think the point in this question is very important and too often I think climate is just focused on negative things.

- Q9. In your experience and your knowledge, how many teachers and administrators actually understand the positive/negative outcomes of a poor or healthy school climate and low and high academic achievement?**

I think many more than would appear to be the case from public policy. I very infrequently meet principals who are not concerned with school climate and academic achievement. It's not just people who are interested in climate. I really encounter teachers who wouldn't say that issues of climate and student support are not important, but there is either a feeling that they don't have permission to address it or if they invest their efforts in this, it's going to take away from addressing academics. They don't know a way of integrating the two priorities. And so, I would suggest that the problem is less awareness of the importance of climate than it is awareness of what one can efficiently do to address climate at the same time that one's addressing other expectations and an issue of policy.

So for example, in one major city in this country that actually collects climate data among other things, the message to principals is still that 90% of your scores that you're going to be evaluated on are on academic results and 10% are on issues of climate. Now if you're a principal, what are you going to do in terms of how you focus your energy? If you want to change things for many principals in that district, you also have to have policy that supports them in doing things.

Q10. How may school climate data reshape a Title I program and improve student achievement?

David Osher: One of the reasons the communications issues is important is that what gets counted and measured (and reported out in a transparent and meaningful way) is acted upon. Climate data can get people's attention, and in the case of Title I, whole school issues. Climate data can get at what's happening at the classroom level to hinder or facilitate learning and retention of information and can get at whether the teacher is doing things like pulling children out of the classroom for bad behavior which reduces those children's instructional time. The data can also help identify where the strengths are and where the problems are so that one can address them.

Oftentimes, well-intentioned adults do not understand how all students or some students experience the school environment— in part because they cannot walk in those students' shoes, and in part because students may not feel comfortable giving an honest answer to those adults. If one uses confidential surveys to get answers, one may get more accurate answers.

Sandy Keenan: I would add that what we're seeing with our grantees is that once they use the school climate data to identify areas in most need of improvement, it's prompting them to do some resource mapping in the schools. Title I programs are included in this resource mapping strategies to look at how to integrate some of these supports in the most cost-efficient and staff time-efficient ways.

David Osher: Practitioners in school desire integrative frameworks. You can have lots of programs, but they may not connect; therefore, people in the school experience fragmentation and burnout because of fragmentation. School climate data, if used well by school climate teams, can help people integrate activities in ways that are synergistic.

Q11. Are there states or at least districts that are excelling in disciplinary environments?

My perspective is that excelling in disciplinary environment is not just creating an environment that is safe and orderly, but it's creating an environment where students feel engaged so there has to be self-discipline. There are districts that are starting to do this, and those districts are ones that are using well social-emotional learning, positive behavior supports, and/or restorative justice and relational approaches to discipline—or some integration of them. This is research out there on programs that are doing that work.

Q12. Is improving school climate best approached in general terms or is it more effective to focus on improving the climate for specific populations of schools for whom the climate is most challenging, like our LGBT or ELL students?

I think the answer is both. The way you get to improved school climate is group by group as well as looking universally. What I think is very important in terms of the kind of school climate survey one does, the interventions one chooses, but also how one communicates data is to look at subgroups and not just look at overall data. And so it's one thing to say that most students at our school feel safe; it's another thing to look at particular subgroups to see if they feel safe or not.

Q13. What are the measures for opportunity for social and emotional growth?

I'll give you some examples of measures for opportunity for social and emotional growth. One could ask students whether or not their classes provide them with an ability to learn about how to understand and manage their emotions. Someone's been working on developing scales for that and doing what is called "cognitive labs" where you work with young people to find out how they answer questions; at least young people down to grade 2 can talk about those issues and you can find out whether there is an opportunity to learn. You can ask students whether or not there's an opportunity to practice and be coached on things where they can use voice and things like that. Or ask if they are learning how to empathize with each other and things like that. What is probably important both in the social-emotional learning area and also in academic areas is to find out from students whether or not they are receiving the types of learning that adults *think* they're giving.

Q14. How do we create a participatory framework when people are overworked and overwhelmed?

At the state and district level, there's a lot of pressure put on folks at the school level to do things and it creates that atmosphere of being overwhelmed. Part of the thing to do is try to figure out how one can reduce that. A second point is that people don't go into schools or teaching because they don't want to help kids or want to be in a frustrating environment. They want to be in a place where there are good opportunities and conditions for learning and teaching – build on that aspiration. The third thing is to find a way of doing this that is both efficient and cohesive with other things going on. School climate shouldn't just be another thing to do, another burden. School climate is something that can support the things we're doing right now and do it better with perhaps less burnout.

Many years ago, I went across the country to schools with a team of experts, practitioners, and researchers. When we were in schools that had really good school climate, one of the things that people observed is that the teachers worked hard, but didn't look fried. So I think the important thing is to create conditions where people can realize their aspirations and talk about doing things and support them in finding ways to integrate good climate into the work that they're already doing.

Sandy Keenan: I would add that in our 11 grantee states as we work with districts and schools, we're encouraging them to look first at those existing teams that already exist in the building and are already meeting on a regular basis to talk about teaching and students. Figure out those teams that can most effectively do the climate work, so that you're not adding on. We do have two other archived webinars on creating school climate teams – very good information contained in those related to this topic ([School Climate Teams, Part I](#) and [School Climate Teams, Part II](#)).

Q15. May school climate data be used to inform interventions in an RTI framework? If yes, how?

Very much so. How young people experience the school is part of the data one can collect from an RTI perspective and one can intervene at a 3-tiered level. For example, one of the things they're doing in Cleveland at AYP meetings is to use a triangle that really looks like an RTI triangle. On one side, they're looking at academic data, but at the same time, they're looking at conditions for learning data. They don't talk about them as being separate; they understand the connections. And there are those things that you do at a universal level to create places where all students are more likely to feel safe. And then you can use subgroups to identify those students feeling less safe or less connected. Think about what kinds of interventions you can do for those subgroups. Think about a "transition academy" for 9th graders. And then one can still use the data, including the data being collected as people interact with students who are at the greatest level of need, and find out how they experience the school climate. Oftentimes, those are the young people who experience the school climate as being the worst. They may need additional support so that they can feel safe or connected.

Note: RTI stands for "Response to Intervention." These are teams within schools that are looking at students that are having difficulty in the learning environment and looking at how they respond to different levels of intervention.

Q16. How often should data be collected to review progress?

In most places, people use those data annually, and I think that's appropriate. At the same time, in thinking about school turnaround and things like that, I think people can collect that data on a more regular basis. For example, one way of doing this if you are concerned about the amount of time and effort might be annually doing this on a census basis where you survey everyone, but doing some monitoring during the year perhaps with a shorter set of items and a sample of students and teachers so you can see whether or not you're getting improvements in the areas that you've identified.

Q17. Role of support staff?

Sandy Keenan: We do have on our website new modules that were developed for school bus drivers related to engaging students in positive relationships and dealing with bullying behavior on school buses. We've had an amazing response to the modules and training and in the last 5 months have learned that over 100,000 bus drivers across the country have been trained with



those modules. So we encourage folks to review those materials at:
<http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=9&eid=436>.