

POLICY BRIEF

School Climate and Student Achievement

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Overview

The concept of “school climate” has been defined in a wide variety of ways in the education research literature over the last thirty years [1]. It has been equated with “the ecology of the school,” “a safe and healthy school setting,” “classroom participation structures,” a “caring school environment,” and the “culture of the school.” In recent years, school “climate” has been equated with “personalization.” More specifically, this involves making impersonal secondary schools more personalized for students by transforming the learning environment through reduced class size, theme-based curricula, and newly developed advisory programs.

Although much research has been conducted based on the assumption that more positive school climates equate to higher student academic achievement, little research has been conducted that makes this link outright. Research on safe and adequate schools is built on the plausible corollary that unsafe environments and inadequate facilities make teaching and learning more difficult [2]. Research on improving school culture

assumes that altering school climate requires attention to the beliefs and values among the people within the school-community [3,4,5,6]. Research on altering classroom culture or climate believes that building classroom participation structures on students’ cultural and linguistic resources will improve students’ learning [7,8,9,10,11,12,13,].

Currently, school climate is most often equated with “personalization.” In other words, contemporary research focuses on transforming impersonal secondary schools into more personalized learning environments for students. These transformations are orchestrated through reducing school size and class size, incorporating theme-based curricula, and developing advisory programs, for instance [14,15,16,17,18,19].

A review of the research on school climate suggests that attention to school culture and personalization matters tremendously in the school, to the students and at the teacher-community level.

A Synthesis of this Wide Range of Studies Produces the Following Findings:

Efforts to improve schools must address and change educators' beliefs, values and attitudes. However, these elements of the "culture of the school" can not be addressed in isolation. Robust educational change requires educators to simultaneously attend to the power of existing *technical* considerations such as school schedules, school size, course sequences, curriculum and instruction as well as the *political relations* between the school, the broader community, state and federal policies [2].

Unsafe, deteriorated, and overcrowded schools threaten the chances that students will develop social values of integrity, discipline, and civic-mindedness and allow little enthusiasm for lifelong learning. Overcrowding reduces students' ability to pay attention and achieve academically [2].

Addressing overcrowding by putting students on year-round, multi-track schedules with fewer days of school does little to solve the problem. Students who attend year-round schools suffer interrupted and lost instructional time; limited access to advanced courses and specialized programs; ill-timed breaks and correspondingly limited access to extracurricular activities and enrichment programs. These factors coalesce to contribute to students' poorer academic performance in schools with unhealthy school climates.

In addition to improving school facilities and safety, within-classroom interactions must be attended to as well. Modifying the structure of teacher-student interaction to include small group discussions, individualized instruction, and multiple ways of displaying knowledge encourages students, especially those from linguistic and cultural minority backgrounds, to participate more actively in classroom lessons and thereby improves their learning.

Creating teacher professional communities at schools can result in increased student achievement by allowing teachers the time to make important modifications to their practice. Ongoing teacher learning is critical to raising student performance and can happen through the creation of teacher study groups, professional learning opportunities grounded in the evaluation of student work; and in environments where teachers are working with their colleagues to refine pedagogy, assessments and curricula [20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29].

Linking the technical, cultural and political dimensions of school improvement involves treating issues of shared governance and professional development in conjunction with changes in teachers' beliefs, teaching practices and curricula. This multidimensional approach helps ensure that reforms will be broadly supported by staff, parents and community members.

A relationship between personalization and academic outcomes has been found when students' perceptions of attempts to personalize schools by reducing class and school size have been elicited [30,31,32]. A robust body of evidence has long shown that reducing class and school size, especially in large, urban schools, correlates with increased academic achievement of students, particularly low-income and minority students [17,33].

On average, the more students report a high level of personalization, the more likely they are to embrace higher expectations for themselves and, more importantly, to score better on the CST English language arts examination, have higher weighted grade point averages, and an increased probability that they are "on-track" relative to A-G requirements for high school completion [34]. However, innovations in isolation,

such as advisory periods, seem to have a negative correlation with students' academic achievement. This finding suggests that

educator-student *relationships* matter more than *formal structures* to improve school climate [34,35].

Key Findings

- Address unsafe, deteriorated, and overcrowded schools.
- Create and support professional development that leads to learning through teacher professional communities.
- Support multi-dimensional—technical, political, and cultural—approaches to school improvement.
- Preserve class-size reduction and consider school-size reduction policies—particularly for schools serving low-income and minority youth.
- Create and support efforts to improve teacher-student relationships.

Chief Obstacles to Policy Implementation

A key obstacle to improving our understanding of the links between school climate improvement and students' academic achievement has been the lack of adequate funding to support needed time and structures within schools and districts. This includes efforts to improve school safety and facilities, teacher professional development, and student-teacher relationships. Another obstacle is inadequate support to examine the links between new initiatives and school climate and student achievement. There has

also been a lack of documentation of school and district efforts across the state to improve school climate and culture in innovative and comprehensive ways. Improved efforts to discern what efforts are taking place and to study closely those efforts in ways that document their impact (or lack of impact) on students' academic achievement on a range of measures will be significantly helpful in overcoming these obstacles.

Courses of Action (Policy Recommendations)

Preserve Smaller Classes and Consider Smaller School Size

Substantial state funds have already been allocated to reduce the class sizes of students in K-3rd grade classrooms. These funds are currently under threat in the state's looming budget crisis. But our review of the literature suggests that reducing class sizes and even reducing the size of schools can help improve school climate and improve

student achievement. Protecting such class-size reductions and thinking long-term, about opportunities or incentives to reduce class sizes in the secondary levels as well as school size K-12 would be improve steps taken by the state government.

Create Incentives for Teachers to Remain In Schools—Particularly Those Serving Low-Income and Minority Students

As schools attempt to create more personal environments for students and build tighter relationships between teachers and students, issues of student and teacher mobility disrupt their efforts. Containing student mobility is a massive issue, but encouraging teachers to remain at their schools sites for longer periods could be facilitated through carefully constructed incentive programs.

Create and Support Teacher Professional Development Programs that Encourage the Development of Teacher Professional Communities Within Schools and Districts

While teachers should have professional freedom to choose the type of professional development that works best for them, evidence suggests that teachers learn more and are able to transfer their learning to practice more effectively when they have a cohort of other teachers to support ongoing learning. Not all professional development supports the creation of cohorts of teachers who can continue to support each other through teacher professional communities at their local sites. Professional development that is crafted in this way should receive greater support and attention from the state.

Support District, School, and Teacher Professional Development Efforts to Improve the Rigor and Relevance of Classroom Teaching Practices (e.g., Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Assessments), Particularly For Low-Income and Minority Communities

As teachers work in professional learning communities to improve their practices, particular attention should be paid to issues of rigor and relevance for all students.

Students report more engagement when their schoolwork asks more of them cognitively and connects to their prior worldviews and experiences. Teachers need time to create such connections for students and incentives to do so.

Study the Link between School Culture and Student Achievement

Research on connections between school climate and achievement should be supported. Initiatives to improve school climate already occur in many districts, schools, and community agencies through the incorporation of programs such as advisories, addition of social and emotional counseling, reduction of school and class sizes, adoption of externally development programs into schools (e.g., comprehensive school reform models), etc. But it is likely that not all of these programs raise student achievement. Funds should be made available to program developers, university researchers, and local educational agencies (LEAs) directly to conduct carefully constructed studies of such programs to ascertain their impact (if any) on improving school culture and student achievement. Moreover, studies need to determine not simply if there is an impact, but, if so, how these programs are developed, implemented and sustained.

Find Schools with “Best” Reform Practices and Reform Processes

Schools interested in engaging in educational reform need a range of models and examples of school improvement efforts that raised student achievement. We recommend providing California schools with a variety of models of educational reform practices and planning processes that improved student outcomes. Compiling a list of such schools and funding opportunities for schools to visit and learn from these model schools offers reforming

schools examples of planning processes and procedures for simultaneously addressing school structures, policies, practices and cultures. Schools on the list should be those that documented their planning efforts in a variety of ways so that visiting schools can consider concrete examples of plans and processes to change structures, practices and school cultures.

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