



Alliance for Education Solutions

www.AESimpact.org • (916) 421-2874 • AESimpact@gmail.com

A Convergence of Findings on Successful School Reform

The School Climate and Student Achievement Connection

Overview

A decade of well-intentioned education reform efforts focused primarily on improving standards, curriculum and test scores has yielded only marginally successful results, particularly in low-income communities of color. However, a convergence of recent research findings, if embraced by California, holds promise for significantly improving all of our schools.

Outcome studies (*Chenoweth, 2010; Parrett and Budge, 2012; Jones, et.al., 2010; Fullan, 2010*) continue to find school climate and culture to be the single most indispensable ingredient of effective school reform.

Key Research Findings

- School climate is the most powerful predictor we now have of student achievement levels. "There is an almost perfect correlation between school climate measures and student achievement scores." (*Shindler, 2013; WestEd 2012*)
- Among the eight core dimensions of school climate (appearance and physical plant, faculty relations, student interactions, leadership/decision-making, discipline environment, learning environment, attitude and culture, school-community relations), the quality of a school's discipline environment is most closely related to student academic progress.
- Improving school climate requires changing counterproductive adult assumptions and practices. Caring, consequence driven disciplinary practices can replace punitive, student alienating disciplinary practices without in any way jeopardizing school safety and order. In fact, they are superior by any outcome measure.
- No instances of successful school turnaround were found that did not address school climate.
- School climate can be reliably measured.
- Teaching and organizational practices can be reliably divided between those that promote mostly a success psychology and those that promote mostly a failure psychology (*Shindler, et. al., 2010*). Practices that promote a failure psychology are significantly overrepresented in underperforming schools with large majorities of students of color.
- This overuse of practices that have been clearly shown not to work raises significant social justice issues, and is another systemic example of the inequitable access to effective teaching documented in the recent *Learning Denied* report by the Education Trust West (*January 2012*).

So Now What?...Data Alone is Never Enough

"Most advocates (and most policymakers) pay too little attention to the central problem that has long-plagued school improvement: Implementation. With few notable exceptions, they neglect its practicalities. However accurate their critiques, and however appealing their proposals, they show a remarkable naiveté about how people and institutions actually behave, and how to get from here to there."

- Evans, The Human Side of School Change, 2001

The history of education reform in the U.S. is replete with examples of promising practices that never quite “took hold.” To avoid a similar fate this time around, and to make maximum use of this powerful new data, leaders at all levels of the educational system will have to demonstrate “change savvy” (Fullan, 2010). Additional data to assist such leaders includes the following:

- Assessment that includes examination of current mind sets and working assumptions is a necessary first step. High quality school climate assessment processes have been developed that provide both a diagnosis of learning environment strengths and weaknesses and a prescription for change.
- Specific practices have been identified that are relatively common in high performing schools but almost never present in underperforming schools, and vice versa, providing guidelines for both what to stop doing and what to start doing.
- Effective classroom management choices are the single most predictive element in the level of the school's climate, and can be improved through existing teacher training and professional development mechanisms.
- Higher functioning schools are defined by a sense of belonging and community.
- Successful turnaround principals can be found in many areas, including Sacramento, and can serve as mentors for both district and teacher training programs.

References

Chenoweth, K. and Theokas, C., (2011) *Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*, Harvard Education Press

Evans, R (1996) *The Human Side of School Change*, Jossey Bass

Dufour, R. and Marzano, R. (2011) *Leaders of Learning: How District, School and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement*

Fullan, M., (2009), *Motion Leadership: The Skinny on Becoming Change Savvy*, Sage Publications

Hahnel, C. and Jackson, O., (2012) *Learning Denied: The Case for Equitable Access to Effective Teaching in California's Largest School District*, Education Trust-West

Parrett, W. and Budge, K., (2012) *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*, ASCD

Shindler, J., (2013) *Blueprint for Improving School Climate*, Alliance for Education Solutions (AES)* Collaboration

Jones, A., Shindler, J. et.al., (2010) *Exploring the School Climate - Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second*, Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC)**

-0-

**The Alliance for Education Solutions (AES) is a solution-focused advocacy and research organization committed to the full utilization of all available resources to improve low-performing schools. To join these efforts, request more information or discuss opportunities to implement school culture reforms, contact AES at:*

www.AESimpact.org • 916.421.2874 • AESimpact@gmail.com

***The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) exists to help schools improve the quality of their climate. In addition to on-going research to understand what creates healthy schools, ASSC provides ideas, resources, and services to schools seeking to examine and improve their effectiveness. ASSC may be reached at:*

www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate • 323.343.5824 • JShindl@calstatela.edu