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# REPORT

## Creating and Sustaining a Positive and Communal School Climate: Contemporary Research, Present Obstacles, and Future Directions

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# NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative

The Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) is a research-focused initiative that brings together the nation's best minds to increase the safety of schools nationwide. The initiative was a response to disturbing, high-profile incidents of school violence. Schools are mostly safe places — but when violence does occur, it can have far-reaching ramifications. CSSI is an investment in developing knowledge about the root causes of school violence, developing strategies for increasing school safety, and rigorously evaluating innovative school safety strategies through pilot programs.

CSSI projects aim to:

- 1) Identify and understand the potential root causes and consequences of school violence and its impact on school safety.
- 2) Increase the safety of schools nationwide by developing a solid foundation of knowledge and best practices that can be sustainably implemented through individualized school safety programs, policies, and activities.
- 3) Help identify matters internal and external to the school that may result in harm to students, teachers, staff, and schools.
- 4) Implement programs, policies, and practices that improve school safety and climate, focus on the school environment, or enhance educational and other outcomes for students and schools.
- 5) Identify effective strategies to respond to and resolve safety issues faced by schools and students.
- 6) In collaboration with key partners from education, law enforcement, behavioral/mental health, and social work, develop and test a comprehensive framework for school safety.

The initiative is focused on K-12 public schools, including public charter schools. CSSI projects require close collaborations between educators, researchers, and other stakeholders in the school community to ask the right questions, prioritize challenges, identify solutions, collect data, and make sense of the findings.

Through projects funded under the CSSI, NIJ works to produce knowledge that can be applied to school safety across the nation and for years to come. For more detailed information on the initiative see [NIJ.ojp.gov](https://www.nij.gov), keyword: CSSI.

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# Executive Summary

Although school-related deaths, violent victimizations, and overall school crime have declined over the past two decades, crime and victimization in schools are still a cause for concern (Roberts et al., 2015). As attention to school safety has increased over the past two decades, research has highlighted a variety of school-related factors shown to influence school disorder. Among these is school climate, the importance of which has been recognized for over a century (Perry, 1908; Dewey, 1916). Interest in school climate continues to grow, particularly as recent federal initiatives reflect increased recognition of the importance of school climate for positive youth development (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, 2014).

School climate has a clear impact on all members of the school community. Students in schools with a positive and communal climate demonstrate stronger academic achievement and engagement, better socio-emotional health, and lower levels of absenteeism, truancy, dropping out, and victimization (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Payne et al., 2003). They also display lower levels of substance use and aggression, are subjected to fewer suspensions and expulsions, and engage in fewer deviant and criminal acts (Payne, 2008; Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, teachers in a school with a positive and communal climate experience higher levels of efficacy, morale, and satisfaction, and lower levels of absenteeism, turnover, and victimization (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Gottfredson et al., 2005; NSCC, 2007; Payne et al. 2003). It is clear that this type of school climate has great influence on the safety and success of a school and the behavioral and academic outcomes of its students.

Unfortunately, the benefits resulting from a positive and communal school climate have not been translated into effective educational practices. This “translation gap” — the gap between school climate research and policy — stems from several problems. One is the lack of an agreed-upon definition of school climate (NSCC, 2007). Researchers define school climate in countless ways and continue to debate the key components of a positive and communal school climate. While many focus on the relationships among school community members and the commonality of the school’s goals, norms, and values, there is no consensus on a universal definition. Without a clear definition that fully articulates exactly what constitutes school climate, school leaders are left without a roadmap for school climate improvement, and the translation gap continues to widen.

A second matter that contributes to the gap between research and policy stems from this lack of a universal definition. Because there is disagreement on what constitutes school

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climate, there is also disagreement on how it can best be assessed. This has led states, districts, and schools to use tools that have not been tested for reliability and validity or have come up short in this area, and that do not capture the comprehensive nature of school climate, either in terms of components or in terms of school community members (Cohen, 2013). It is imperative that school climate is assessed using reliable and valid instruments that capture all elements of school climate and recognize the voices of all school members. Results from such an assessment can provide useful and accurate data to inform the school improvement process.

Another area that has not been fully explored is the process that links school climate to its beneficial outcomes. Some have proposed that a positive and communal school climate leads to a greater sense of belonging, which, in turn, leads to more prosocial behaviors: Schools with such climates meet the needs of both teachers and students, who therefore become more attached to other school community members, more committed to the school's mission and goals, and more likely to internalize school norms and rules (Payne, 2008). This process is key for schools because students who are well integrated are not only more likely to have a positive learning experience but are also less likely to engage in deviance and crime. Although research has begun to document the relationship between positive and communal school climates and school bonding, more work is needed. Understanding the mechanisms that underlie this relationship is vital as school leaders work to develop successful school improvement plans.

A lack of school climate leadership also plays a role in the gap between school climate research and policy. Having strong and defined leadership roles at the state, district, and school levels is integral for school climate policies and practices to

be effectively developed and implemented (NSCC, 2007). In addition, many school climate improvement efforts are generally isolated within a narrower focus, such as student health or school safety, rather than holistically implemented into larger school-wide changes that include a focus on accountability, school community norms and beliefs, and other dimensions of school climate (NSCC, 2007).

It is abundantly clear that creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate would lead to beneficial improvements in students' academic and behavioral success. By engaging in a school climate improvement process, education leaders at the state, district, and school levels can increase the safety and success of all members of the school community. To this end, the following policy and research recommendations are proposed:

***Recommendation One: Defining School Climate.*** Education researchers, policymakers, and leaders at all levels — federal, state, district, and school — should adopt a definition of school climate that focuses on relationships among school community members, the goals and norms of the school, and school member participation. A positive and communal school climate emphasizes trusting and supportive relationships among all members of the school community, a common set of goals and norms, and a sense of collaboration and involvement within the school community. This leads to a sense of safety and bonding and allows a focus on effective teaching and learning that, in turn, results in students' academic and behavioral success.

***Recommendation Two: Assessing School Climate.*** Education researchers, with support from policymakers, should develop measurement instruments that comprehensively assess the climate of a school by surveying all members of the school community — students, teachers, administrators, additional staff, parents, and

members of the larger community — on all school climate dimensions, including relationships, norms and goals, and collaboration and involvement. Proper multilevel collection and analysis of data should be ensured by using measures of school climate that refer to school conditions external to the individual and measures of student bonding that refer to internal feelings and beliefs. The reliability and validity of all instruments should be certified by using previously tested measures from assessment tools such as the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI; Cohen et al., 2009), the Effective School Battery (ESB; Gottfredson, 1999), and What About You (WAY; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1999). New measures that need to be developed to assess school climate elements or survey school community members and that are not included in previously tested measures should be pilot tested to ensure they are psychometrically sound.

***Recommendation Three: Exploring School Climate.*** Researchers, with support from policymakers, should further explore the process leading from a positive and communal school climate to its beneficial outcomes, as well as the factors that influence the creation of such a climate. This should be done through the collection and analysis of data from a nationally representative sample of schools. This sample should include public, private, and parochial schools and should be stratified by location and level. All members of the school community should be surveyed. In addition, onsite observations should be conducted by researchers to gather data supplementary to the survey responses.

***Recommendation Four: Improving School Climate.*** Every district and school should create a climate team, comprising representatives from all school community groups, including students, teachers, administrators, additional staff, parents, and members of the greater community. These teams should be supported by strong and clearly defined climate leadership at the federal, state, district, and school levels. The school climate teams should engage in the following activities: (1) participation in professional development opportunities to learn about school climate research and best practices; (2) evaluation of state, district, and school policies in light of this research and their own school’s goals; (3) regular assessment of the current school climate through surveys of all school community members; and (4) implementation of school climate improvement efforts at both the district and school levels that are incorporated into every facet of the school’s function — curricular choices, extracurricular activities, rules and policies, and the school’s goals and mission — and include every member of the school community. Further, these teams should use a data-driven decision-making process to guide the school climate improvement efforts.

Although the school climate improvement process is complex and will likely involve different considerations for each district and school, following the policy recommendations outlined above will go far to help schools create and sustain a positive and communal climate. Doing so will increase the safety and success of the nation’s schools and the academic and behavioral success of the nation’s youth.

# Creating and Sustaining a Positive and Communal School Climate: Contemporary Research, Present Obstacles, and Future Directions

## Introduction

Although school-related deaths, violent victimizations in school, and overall school crime have declined over the past two decades, delinquency and victimization rates in schools are still a cause for concern. In 2013, 37 per 1,000 students experienced violent victimizations at school, compared with 15 per 1,000 students away from school. During that same year, 7 percent of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon such as a gun or knife at school, 5 percent of students reported carrying a weapon to school, and 8 percent of students reported being in a physical fight at school. In addition, 22 percent of students reported being bullied at school, with 33 percent of bullying victims reporting being bullied at least once or twice a month (Robers et al., 2015). Surveys of public school teachers and principals also indicate the continual presence of crime and disorder. Throughout the 2011-2012 school year, 10 percent of public school teachers reported being threatened with injury by a student and 6 percent reported actually being physically attacked by a student. During the 2009-2010 school year, 85 percent of public school principals recorded one or more crime incidents and 60 percent reported these incidents to the police. In terms of seriousness, 74 percent of public school principals recorded one or more violent incidents and 16 percent recorded one or more serious violent incidents. Throughout this same year, 44 percent of public school principals recorded one or more thefts and 23 percent reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily or weekly basis. In response to these incidents, 39 percent of public schools took at least one serious disciplinary action against a student; of these, 74 percent were suspensions, 20 percent were transfers, and 6 percent were removals with no services provided (Robers et al., 2015).

Aside from the obvious costs of school crime on personal injury and property damage and loss, school crime and disorder are costly because they reduce the ability of schools to carry out their educational mission. Teachers in disorderly schools spend a large proportion of their time coping with behavior problems rather than in academic instruction, resulting



in lower levels of student academic engagement, academic performance, and eventually graduation rates. Indeed, during the 2011-2012 school year, 38 percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their ability to teach (Robers et al., 2015). Fear of victimization in schools also influences students' attendance, such that students are more likely to avoid school activities or places, or even school itself, due to fear of attack or harm (Hutzell and Payne, 2016).

As attention to school violence and safety has increased over the past two decades, research has highlighted a variety of school-related factors shown to influence school disorder. Among the factors that might be improved in efforts to reduce school crime and disorder is school climate, the importance of which has been recognized for over a century (Perry, 1908; Dewey, 1916). Systematic scientific study of school climate began in the 1950s, as organizational researchers investigated the effectiveness of different school practices and environments (Cohen and Geier, 2010). Recognition of schools as a primary agent of socialization grew; along with the family, schools provide an early introduction to and continual reminding of society's norms and values to children and adolescents (Eccles and Roeser, 2011).

Interest in school climate continues to increase, particularly as recent federal initiatives reflect growing recognition of the importance of school climate for positive youth development. In the foreword to a U.S. Department of Education (ED) report on school climate and discipline, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan set forth three guiding principles for school improvement. The first of these was for schools to "take deliberate steps to create the positive school climates that can help prevent and change inappropriate behaviors" (U.S. ED, 2014, p. ii). In addition, ED has created a program

called Safe and Supportive Schools, which supports the development of statewide school climate assessment systems and the evaluation of school climate improvement processes. Schools that receive grants under the Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students Program — part of Safe and Supportive Schools — are required to use these funds to implement and maintain strategies created to improve school safety and promote students' physical and mental health and prosocial behavior, in part by ensuring a healthy and supportive school climate (U.S. ED, 2010). Similarly, ED's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Division examined how to use school climate as a data-driven concept and process to increase students' prosocial behavior and improve students' social and emotional health. As part of this focus, ED's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Division allocated more than \$155 million for the development of statewide school climate assessment and improvement systems to support schools in the creation and maintenance of positive and communal school climates (Cohen, 2013).

Different definitions of school climate abound, including the "inner workings of the school" (Ma et al., 2001, p. 256), "shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between the students, teachers, and administrators" in which "tacit rules delineate parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school" (Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 272), and "the quality and character of school life, including norms, values, and expectations that a school accepts and promotes" which "in turn, create an environment that dictates whether the staff, students and parents feel safe (emotionally, socially, physically), welcome and respected" (Aldridge and Ala'l, 2013, p. 47). The National School Climate Council (NSCC), a group of educational practice and policy leaders and researchers, defines school climate as "based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal

relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (NSCC, 2007, p. 5).

Ultimately, school climate is a broad concept with many components, for example:

- The National School Climate Center details four essential areas of focus: Safety, Relationships, Teaching and Learning, and Institutional Environment (Cohen, 2013).
- The U.S. ED’s Safe and Supportive Schools model presents three interrelated domains: Safety, Student Engagement, and School Environment (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

As with the overall definition, there is no consensus surrounding what elements are essential to defining, measuring, and improving school climate.

Although there is a lack of agreement, most definitions emphasize the importance of relationships among school community members as well as the importance of shared school goals, norms, and values. School climate experts agree that it is a group phenomenon reflecting the character of school life and patterns of school members’ experiences. School climate can be thought of as the “sum of the experiences, norms, values, relationships, practices, and structures of a school” (Peguero and Bracy, 2014, p. 412). Importantly, collective action is a necessary component: A positive and communal school climate must be actively created and sustained by all members of the school community (NSCC, 2007).

Despite the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition, research clearly demonstrates a relationship between school climate and a variety of outcomes. For instance, a common purpose and a set of shared values among school

members have been highlighted as an important element in obtaining high levels of student achievement and low levels of school disorder (Gottfredson, 2001). Furthermore, school environments that promote supportive relationships between teachers and students can protect those students from high-risk behavior (Gregory et al., 2012). In addition, a collaborative school culture, in which teachers share responsibility and commitment to the students and the school, is more effective for both student achievement and prosocial behavior than the individualistic culture that characterizes many schools (Payne et al., 2003).

In general, a positive and communal school climate demonstrates many beneficial outcomes for all members of the school community. Such schools have lower levels of school violence (Johnson, 2009; Steffgen et al., 2013). Students in these schools demonstrate better socio-emotional adjustment, stronger academic achievement, and lower levels of dropping out and absenteeism (Bear et al., 2015; Klein et al., 2012; Peguero and Bracy, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). The students also engage in less substance use and delinquent behavior and experience less victimization and fewer suspensions and expulsions (Bear et al., 2015; Klein et al., 2012; Thapa et al., 2013). Ultimately, the climate of a school affects that school’s ability to regulate its students’ behaviors, such that school crime and disorder will be lower when the climate is “more socially cohesive and has a shared sense of values and beliefs” (Zaykowski and Gunter, 2012, p. 435).

Unfortunately, the benefits resulting from a positive and communal school climate have not been translated into effective educational processes. There is a large gap between the empirical research findings surrounding school climate and the policies and practices aimed at school improvement (Cohen et al., 2009). This “translation gap,” the gap between research and practice,

stems from several problems. The first, as presented above, is the lack of consensus regarding the definition of school climate (NSCC, 2007). The second problem derives from disagreement on the definition of school climate and on how it can best be assessed. This, in turn, has lead states, schools, and districts to use instruments that have rarely been tested for reliability and validity or have come up short in these areas (Cohen, 2014; Ramelow et al., 2015). They have also used instruments that do not adequately measure the comprehensive nature of school climate, either in terms of its components or in terms of school community members (Cohen, 2013). Similarly, many states, districts, and schools have not established standards for linking empirical data to improvement plans (NSCC, 2007); thus, it is unclear whether any improvement efforts are based on research findings and recommendations. Finally, these school climate reform efforts are generally isolated, with a narrower focus on student health or school safety rather than holistically implementing school culture reforms as part of larger schoolwide changes, such as accountability policies, school community norms and beliefs, and other elements of school climate (NSCC, 2007). Indeed, a recent review of state education departments' school policies "revealed significant shortcomings in how [school] climate is defined, measured, and incorporated into policies" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 187).

It is clear that school leaders are invested in creating and sustaining positive and communal school climates and that governmental support for school climate improvement continues to increase. Unfortunately, it is also clear that school leaders are unsure of what school climate improvement looks like on a day-to-day basis. Because of the lack of consensus on how to define and measure school climate, there is also a lack of knowledge surrounding policies and practices that effectively create, support, and sustain a positive and communal school climate

(Cohen, 2014). Additionally, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the link between a positive and communal school climate and the beneficial outcomes that result for students, teachers, and the entire school community (Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008).

This white paper will span and address these nuanced topics. The differing definitions of school climate will be presented and discussed first, followed by an examination of the problems surrounding the assessment of school climate. The beneficial outcomes associated with a positive and communal school climate will then be explored, as will the process through which these outcomes occur. School climate improvement issues will then be presented, and the report will conclude by offering specific school climate policy and research recommendations.

## What Is School Climate?

As presented in the introduction, research has demonstrated a translation gap between findings on the beneficial outcomes from a positive, communal school climate and the actual policies and practices implemented in schools. One major reason for this gap is the lack of a national consensus on what exactly constitutes school climate. Researchers define school climate in countless ways and continue to debate the key components of a positive and communal school climate. A recent scan of state ED school policies showed that the school climate policy statements of 36 states provided definitions that were lacking in specificity and purpose, likely due to the perplexingly large span of definitions that abound in empirical work (Cohen et al., 2009).

In a recent document on school climate and discipline, ED defined school climate as the "extent to which a school community creates and maintains a safe school campus; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and

physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community” (U.S. ED, 2014, p. 5). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention referred to a positive school climate as one with “caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making; and shared positive norms, goals, and values” (CDC, 2009, p. 7). Others have defined school climate as the “quality and character of school life [that] involves social, emotional, and academic experiences of students, family members, and school personnel,” which “can be summarized as the collective beliefs, values, and attitudes that prevail at school” (Wang et al., 2014, p. 361) and “the quality and character of school life, including norms, values and expectations that a school accepts and promotes,” which “in turn, create an environment that dictates whether the staff, students and parents feel safe (emotionally, socially, physically), welcome and respected” (Aldridge and Ala’l, 2013, p. 47).

Perhaps the most important element of school climate is the relationships between all members of the school community: “If there is a common thread to creating a positive school climate, it is the importance of relationships — student to student, teacher to student, teacher to family, administrator to staff, school to community. Perhaps it is simplistic to conclude that something as inherently comprehensive and complex as school climate boils down to such subjective considerations as people and relationships, but that may be closest to the truth” (Noonan, 2004, p. 56). After a decades-long study of Chicago schools, Bryk and colleagues (2010) concluded that trusting relationships are the “glue” that binds together an effective school climate. Thus, supportive and collaborative relationships are an essential part of a positive and communal school climate and lead to many beneficial academic and behavioral outcomes.

In addition to relationships, many of the definitions make reference to the values, beliefs, and norms of a school community, which shape and are shaped by the nature of relationships and interactions in the school. Interactions among all members of the school community “set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school” (Koth et al., 2008, p. 96). Thus, school climate can be viewed as a “product of social interactions among students and teachers, [that] is influenced by educational and social values, and has been shown to relate to social situations within classrooms and to school as a whole” (Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013, p. 600).

Some researchers have provided more in-depth discussion regarding what constitutes school climate. The National School Climate Council (NSCC, 2007, p. 4), composed of researchers working to narrow the translation gap between research and policy, states:

School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment.

The NSCC continues by identifying what they consider to be the four essential spheres of focus: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment (Cohen and Geier, 2010). Safety refers to the rules and norms of the school, and concerns physical as well as socio-emotional safety. The focus on relationships covers respect for diversity as well as student and adult social support. Teaching and learning refers to social, emotional, and civic learning, support for learning, and the professional relationships found in the school. Finally, the institutional environment deals with the actual physical surroundings.

Others present a narrower definition, however, arguing that perceptions of safety and the culture surrounding teaching and learning are factors associated with school climate rather than components of school climate. Payne and colleagues (2003, 2008) define a positive and communal school climate as one with supportive relationships among all school community members, a common set of goals and norms, and a sense of collaboration and involvement. Such a climate has a strong sense of community, in which members care about and support one another; these members actively contribute to the school and feel personally committed to its mission, goals, and norms. This, in turn, leads to more positive perceptions of safety and a stronger focus on teaching and learning by all school community members, which then allows for greater student academic and behavioral success.

Thus, it appears that the main reason there is no consensus regarding what school climate entails is a disagreement on the breadth of the definition. Virtually all scholars agree that school climate includes the quality of relationships among school community members and the degree to which a sense of common school norms and values exists. However, while some scholars additionally include safety, teaching and

learning, and the physical environment as elements of school climate (Cohen and Geier, 2010), others argue that these constructs are, in fact, separate factors that both influence and are influenced by school climate (Payne, 2008). This difference must be reconciled before the field can coalesce around a common definition.

Although there is no agreed-upon definition, most consider school climate to be a “group phenomenon that is larger than any one person’s experience” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). It is the totality of all school community members’ experiences and incorporates the relationships in the school and the goals, norms, and values of the school community. This understanding, however, is not enough. Without clear definitions that fully articulate exactly what constitutes school climate, and what are the important elements to consider, school leaders are left without a roadmap for school climate improvement, and the translation gap continues to widen.

## How Is School Climate Assessed?

Another concern that contributes to the translation gap between school climate research and policy stems from this lack of a universal definition: Because there is disagreement on what exactly constitutes school climate, there is also disagreement on how best to measure it. This, in turn, has caused school leaders to make “poor choices in terms of school climate measurement at the state level” (NSCC, 2007, p. 7), including creating their own assessment tools that suffer from severe limitations. There is a strong need for sound and comprehensive measurement of school climate in order to inform the choices made by school leadership. Unfortunately, the current state of school climate assessment is lacking. Now that a series of recent federal initiatives

recognizes the importance of school climate and, further, calls for proper needs assessment data as a guide for school climate improvement (U.S. ED, 2010), these limitations must be addressed.

An important aspect of solid needs assessment is the use of psychometrically sound measurement tools. This requires that a measurement instrument be high in both reliability (i.e., the extent to which the instrument produces similar results when used repeatedly) and validity (i.e., the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure). Many of the surveys used to measure school climate have not been tested for these qualities. Further, those that have been tested for reliability and validity have frequently come up short (Cohen, 2014; Ramelow et al., 2015). Indeed, a recent study concluded that only three of 102 school climate measures met the American Psychological Association’s reliability and validity standards (Cohen, 2013). In addition, even when reliable and valid measurement tools are available, many schools use homemade surveys because other instruments are too long or too costly (Bear et al., 2015). Unfortunately, using unreliable and invalid tools can lead to inaccurate and useless information, waste time and money, and ultimately harm the school improvement process.

In addition to being psychometrically unsound, school climate assessments often do not include the many different members who make up the school community: students, teachers, administrators, and additional staff — such as guidance counselors, administrative assistants, and custodians — along with parents and members of the greater community (Bear et al., 2015). The lack of a comprehensive survey of all school community members is problematic for two reasons. First, there is not always consensus about the nature of a school’s climate; that is, discrepant perceptions of school climate do occur between groups in a school.

For instance, teachers and students can have different perceptions of the school climate, depending on characteristics of the individual, the classroom, and the school (Mitchell et al., 2010, Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013). Others suggest that parent perceptions of school climate are also important to consider (Bear et al., 2015). A second problem with the lack of a comprehensive assessment occurs if studies rely on data from only one group of respondents; that is, if a study’s measures of both school climate and potential outcomes are obtained by surveying only students or only teachers. This may cause the assessment to suffer from shared method variance, in which the relationship between these measures is inflated simply as a result of coming from the same respondent (Klein et al., 2012). Thus, it is important for data to be collected from different sources — from all members of the school community — to ensure that a variety of perspectives is attained, allowing for a comprehensive assessment to be conducted.

Similarly, the majority of instruments neither accurately account for nor comprehensively assess the multidimensional nature of school climate (Bear et al., 2015; Ramelow et al., 2015). As discussed previously, researchers have suggested multiple elements of school climate, including relationships, rules and norms, and physical surroundings. However, few instruments assess more than one of these components at a time, let alone all of them (Klein et al., 2012). Most surveys focus on one specific element, such as relationships or rules and norms, despite clear evidence that school climate is multifaceted. As with the inclusion of all school members in the assessment, it is important to include all components of school climate as well. Failing to do so will result in inaccurate results that ignore the holistic nature of the school climate concept.

Many school climate assessments also fall short when they fail to measure school climate at the appropriate level of analysis or fail to recognize the multilevel nature of the school itself. Because school climate is a group phenomenon that encompasses the character of the overall school community, it should be measured and analyzed at the school level (Payne et al., 2003). Unfortunately, many studies assess school climate at the individual level (Wang et al., 2014). Indeed, given that many of the benefits resulting from a positive and communal school climate are individual-level outcomes, such as student academic achievement or delinquent behavior, school climate should ideally be studied in a multilevel hierarchical framework. This would allow assessments to take into account characteristics of the individual, classroom, and school as a whole (Payne, 2008; Ramelow et al., 2015). Unfortunately, most evaluations do not do this.

Finally, most assessments of school climate do not take into account its dynamic nature. School climate is not a static condition but, rather, it changes over time (Thapa et al., 2013). Further, as the nature of the school climate shifts, so too do the associated outcomes (Wang and Dishion, 2011). It is important that future work examine the dynamic nature of school climate, as this could be helpful when focusing on the school improvement process.

Despite these problems, there are a few measures that have been developed in a psychometrically sound way and that comprehensively assess school climate. Perhaps the best of these is the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), which surveys students, parents, and school staff about the four dimensions of school climate put forth by the NSCC: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and the institutional environment (Wang et al., 2013). Helpfully, the report generated from this instrument provides recommendations

and research-based guidelines that portray a clear path to school climate improvement (Cohen et al., 2009). In addition, ED has just released its own assessment tool (ED School Climate Survey), which measures three domains of school climate: engagement (cultural and linguistic competence, relationships, and school participation), safety (emotional safety, physical safety, bullying/cyberbullying, substance abuse, and emergency readiness/management), and environment (physical environment, instructional environment, physical health, mental health, and discipline).

This instrument is on the Safe Supportive Learning website at <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls>.

It is important to also acknowledge that other ways of measuring school climate exist. These include observations and walk-throughs, audits and checklists, and official data such as academic grades and disciplinary records. Although these strategies have both advantages and disadvantages, they would aid in the creation of a holistic picture of school climate. Thus, using many methods to assess school climate would be the best approach (Kohl et al., 2013).

As discussed, ED's Safe and Supportive Schools program funds the development of statewide school climate assessment systems and the evaluation of school climate improvement processes (U.S. ED, 2010). Given this and other recent federal initiatives, it is imperative that school climate is assessed using reliable and valid instruments that capture all dimensions of school climate and that recognize the voices of all school community members. Results from such an assessment can provide useful and accurate data to inform the school improvement process, which is the ultimate goal.

## What Are the Outcomes Associated With School Climate?

Despite the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition, research clearly demonstrates a beneficial relationship between school climate and a variety of outcomes. Unequivocally, the social relations in a school, the cultural system of values and norms, the management structure, and the interactions among school community members all have great influence on the success of a school. A strong body of work has examined the impact that the different elements of a positive and communal school climate have on a variety of outcomes. The majority of this research is of relatively high methodological quality, particularly with regard to the size and representativeness of samples and the analyses performed; the clearest weaknesses of some of this work are those surrounding school climate assessment, as discussed in the previous section.

One essential element is the supportive relationships between teachers and students, which can lead to many educational benefits for those students, including higher academic achievement, school engagement, and graduation rates, along with decreased truancy and dropping out (Aldridge and Ala'l, 2013; Barile et al., 2012; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Gregory et al., 2012; Hopson and Lee, 2011; McCoy et al., 2013; Peguero and Bracy, 2014). These trusting and supportive relationships can also protect students from high-risk behavior: Students who have healthy and respectful relationships with their teachers display fewer problem behaviors, fewer bullying behaviors, lower levels of victimization, less frequent fighting with other students, and decreased engagement in violent behaviors (Aldridge and Ala'l, 2013; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Gregory et al., 2012; Hopson and Lee, 2011; Johnson, 2009; Peguero and Bracy, 2014; Wang

and Dishion, 2011). Clearly, positive relationships between teachers and students are essential to students' academic and behavioral success.

Supportive and cooperative relationships within the student body and among the faculty are also integral. When there are cohesive and trusting relationships between students, those students display better socio-emotional health and experience lower incidents of problem behaviors and victimization (Aldridge and Ala'l, 2013; Sapouna, 2009; Wang and Dishion, 2011). In addition, a collaborative faculty culture, in which teachers share responsibility and commitment to the students and the school, leads to higher levels of student achievement and prosocial behavior (Johnson, 2009). Thus, beyond the importance of healthy student-teacher relationships, establishing and sustaining supportive relationships among the students and within the faculty is a critical element of a positive and communal school climate.

Other vital components of school climate are the rules and norms of the school. Clear rules, fair rule enforcement, a common purpose, and a set of shared values among school members have all been highlighted as important elements in obtaining low levels of school disorder (Aldridge and Ala'l, 2013; Gottfredson, 2001). The communication of clear behavioral norms in a school — that is, a clear picture of what types of behavior are acceptable and expected and what types of behavior are not — is associated with lower rates of victimization and violence (Johnson, 2009). In addition, when adults in the school seek student input in the development of rules and policies, students in that school display fewer risky behaviors, including substance use and violence (Hopson and Lee, 2011). When students are clearly aware of these rules and believe that they are fairly enforced, schools have fewer instances of truancy and dropping out, lower suspension rates, and lower levels of



crime and victimization (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Gottfredson et al., 2005; Gregory et al., 2012; Johnson, 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). As with relationships, the rules and norms of a school are vital components of school climate.

Research has also illustrated the many beneficial outcomes of an overall positive and communal school climate for all members of the school community. Again, this research displays relatively high methodological quality, aside from the issues surrounding school climate assessment. Students in schools with a positive and communal climate demonstrate better socio-emotional health and stronger academic achievement and school engagement (Bear et al., 2015; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Hopson and Lee, 2011; Klein et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2013; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013; NSCC, 2007; O'Malley et al., 2015; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang, 2009; Wang et al., 2014). These students also display lower levels of absenteeism, truancy, and dropping out (Barile et al., 2012; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013; NSCC, 2007; Peguero and Bracy, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). They are less likely to be victimized and are less afraid to attend school (Bear et al., 2015; Gottfredson et al., 2005; Johnson, 2009; Payne et al., 2003; Phaneuf, 2006; Wang et al., 2013), and they demonstrate lower levels of substance use and aggression and are subjected to fewer suspensions and expulsions (Bear et al., 2015; Cohen and Geier, 2010; Klein et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2013; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013; NSCC, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013). Finally, these students engage in fewer acts of deviance, delinquency, crime, and violence (Hopson and Lee, 2011; Klein et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2013; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013; Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008; Steffgen et al., 2013; Wang, 2009; Wang and Dishion, 2011). It is clear that a positive and communal school climate can act as a “protective factor for learning and positive

life development of young people” (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 360).

School climate also impacts the adults in the school community. Teachers in a school with a positive and communal climate display higher levels of efficacy, morale, and satisfaction (Cohen and Geier, 2010; NSCC, 2007). They also experience lower levels of absenteeism and victimization (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Payne et al., 2003). Additionally, schools with positive and communal climates have greater levels of teacher retention and lower levels of teacher turnover (Cohen and Geier, 2010; NSCC, 2007).

School climate can also moderate the relationships between other factors and students' academic and behavioral success, such as student demographics and peer affiliations, family poverty and structure, and neighborhood poverty and crime. For example, although boys are more likely to engage in problem behaviors, school climate can moderate the effect of gender, such that boys are less likely to engage in these behaviors when they attend schools that have a positive and communal climate (Hopson and Lee, 2011; Sapouna, 2009). Similarly, although schools that predominantly serve racial and ethnic minority students tend to have lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of delinquency and victimization, school climate buffers the severity of this relationship, such that a positive and communal school climate has a stronger impact on academic and behavioral outcomes in these schools (Hopson and Lee, 2011; Payne, 2012; Stewart, 2008). Finally, the impact that deviant peers have on a student's own delinquency can be counteracted by school climate: The positive correlation between deviant peer associations and a student's level of problem behavior is weaker for students who attend a school with a positive and communal school climate (Wang and Dishion, 2011).

A moderating effect is also seen with regard to poverty, such that the beneficial impact of a positive and communal school climate on academic achievement and delinquency is greater for students who come from lower income households and students who attend high-poverty schools (Hopson and Lee, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013). Similarly, school climate acts as a protective factor against the impact that high-risk family structures have on academic achievement: Students from homeless or single-parent families display academic grades that are similar to students from two-parent families when they attend schools with a positive and communal school climate (O'Malley et al., 2015). Finally, school climate moderates the impact of neighborhood crime, in that students attending schools in high-crime neighborhoods are likely to display better academic achievement if the school is characterized by a positive and communal school climate (McCoy et al., 2013). Thus, beyond the direct beneficial impact on students' academic and behavioral success, a positive and communal school climate may also serve as a moderating protective factor against the influences of certain individual, family, and neighborhood characteristics.

## How Does School Climate Lead to These Outcomes?

Although the benefits of a positive and communal school climate are clear, the process that links school climate to these benefits has not been fully explored (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Payne, 2008). *Why* do schools with more positive and communal climates exhibit higher levels of student academic achievement and teacher effectiveness and lower levels of crime and victimization? Researchers are still learning why such a climate leads to these beneficial outcomes. Understanding the mechanisms that underlie this relationship is vital as school leaders work to develop successful school improvement plans.

Many have proposed that a positive and communal school climate leads to a greater sense of belonging which, in turn, leads to more prosocial behaviors: Schools with such climates meet the needs of both teachers and students, who therefore become more attached to other school community members, more committed to the school's mission and goals, and are more likely to internalize school norms and rules (Barile et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2009; Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008). Hirschi's (1969) social control theory provides a possible link between school climate and school disorder: Students in a school with a positive and communal climate appear to be more bonded to the school, as shown by students' attachment to prosocial school community members, commitment to educational investment, involvement in school activities, and belief in school rules and norms. As the members of the school create a positive and communal school community, the climate becomes warmer, more inclusive, and participatory. Students' feelings of belonging and attachment increase, as does their commitment to school and their levels of belief in and internalization of school norms and rules. They feel as though they belong in the school, as though they are valued and accepted (Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008).

A similar concept has been suggested — that the mechanism linking positive, communal school climates to beneficial outcomes is school connectedness, which is defined as student perceptions of belonging and closeness with others at school (CDC, 2009). School connectedness is a strong predictor of student behavior, influencing everything from academic achievement to violence and substance use (NSCC, 2007). Similar to Hirschi's (1969) attachment element, when members of a school community feel connected to each other, students experience academic and behavioral success. As with school bonding, a limited amount of research has revealed that the relationship between school climate and

student aggression and victimization is dependent upon school connectedness (Wilson, 2004).

This process is key for schools, whether looked at through a school bonding or a social connectedness lens. Students who are well integrated are not only more likely to have a positive learning experience but are also less likely to be deviant. Those who have prosocial attachments, who invest greater effort into school, who are involved in school activities, and who believe in the norms and rules of the school are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior. Indeed, much research supports the finding of low school bonding and school connectedness leading to student misbehavior (CDC, 2009; Gottfredson et al., 2005; Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008).

Although some researchers consider school connectedness or bonding a component of school climate (NSCC, 2007), others argue that it is separate: School bonding represents the link between a positive and communal school climate and its beneficial outcomes (Payne et al., 2003; Payne, 2008). This is particularly evident when considering where each concept lies in relation to the individual. School climate refers to the existence of a social organization that is external to the individual; that is, the existence of trusting and supportive relationships, collaboration, and participation, and a set of shared norms and goals. School bonding or connectedness, however, refers to the internal processes that result from the existence of a positive and communal climate in the school: the personal attachment to the school, the individual commitment to education, and the internalized belief in school rules. Therefore, school climate is external to the individual, whereas student bonding is internal. From this point of view, a positive and communal school climate enhances the connectedness and bonding that students and adults feel toward the school,

which, in turn, leads to positive and healthy behaviors.

Although research has begun to document the relationship between a positive and communal school climate and school bonding or connectedness, more work is needed. It seems as though a caring and participatory school climate fosters greater connection, attachment, and commitment among school community members, which then provides a strong foundation for academic learning and prosocial behaviors. However, far more research is needed in order to truly understand these relationships and the processes that link these various concepts.

## What Influences School Climate?

Some factors have been highlighted as influencing the nature of a school's climate. Positive and communal school climates are more likely to occur in smaller schools with lower student-teacher ratios (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Payne, 2012). In addition, schools with lower faculty and administrator turnover and lower student mobility are more likely to experience positive and communal school climates (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010). Classroom factors also influence the larger school climate. Students report more communal school climates when their teachers use fewer exclusionary discipline strategies and more positive behavioral strategies; similarly, consistent enforcement of rules by the teacher is associated with a more positive school climate (Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013). Finally, students in smaller classes also report more positive and communal school climates (Koth et al., 2008).

There is also a small but solid body of work showing discrepant perceptions of school climate that are dependent upon individual-level factors. Within the student

body, female and white students are more likely to report a positive and communal school climate (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013). Among the faculty, older teachers with more experience tend to report more positive and communal school climates, as do female and white teachers (Mitchell et al., 2010; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013).

With these findings in mind, researchers and educational leaders can begin to identify what promotes the creation and maintenance of a positive and communal school climate. School improvement policies and practices can focus on reducing class size and the student-teacher ratio as well as stabilizing staff turnover (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010). In addition, professional development surrounding classroom management could improve the school climate (Mitchell et al., 2010). Finally, given that gender and ethnicity are predictive of perceptions of school climate, it may be helpful to implement strategies aimed at enhancing the school experience of those with the most negative perceptions (Koth et al., 2008; Mitchell, 2010).

## How Can School Climate Be Improved?

It is abundantly clear that creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate would lead to improvements in school safety and success. Indeed, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that the first principle of school improvement should be for schools to “take deliberate steps to create the positive school climates that can help prevent and change inappropriate behaviors” (U.S. ED, 2014, p. ii), as schools that foster these climates can improve student learning and school safety. Unfortunately, this knowledge and support have yet to lead to successful school improvement policies and practices, mainly because school leaders do not know what this process should look like on a day-to-day

basis (Cohen, 2014). Therefore, the solid research on the benefits of a positive and communal school climate is not reflected in current school policy and practice. This translation gap, the gap between school climate research and policy, exists for several reasons that can be addressed in order to improve school climate.

Two factors that have led to the translation gap are the previously discussed lack of a universal definition of school climate and the many concerns surrounding assessment (NSCC, 2007). These limitations must be addressed, now that a series of recent federal initiatives recognizes the importance of school climate and calls for proper needs assessment data as a guide for improving school climate (U.S. ED, 2010). Educational researchers and leaders form a consensus regarding the definition and fundamental components of a positive and communal school climate. Additionally, it is imperative that school climate is assessed using reliable and valid measurement instruments that capture all dimensions of school climate while also recognizing the voices of all school community members. Results from such an assessment can provide useful and accurate data to inform the school improvement process. Another factor in the translation gap is a lack of school climate leadership among state policymakers (NSCC, 2007). Having strong and defined leaders at the state level who recognize the importance of school climate in the success of their state’s schools is vital for school climate policies and practices to be effectively developed and implemented. These leaders should discuss what options are available to ensure that school climate is an integral part of the school improvement process and work to integrate the strong body of empirical research into this process (NSCC, 2007). Along these lines, state policymakers should avail themselves of the resources that could be provided to them by academic and research institutions, relying on experts in the field of school climate who could guide them through

the maze of school climate definitions and assessment tools as they develop a successful improvement plan (Cohen et al., 2009). Leadership at the district level is also important in the facilitation of a positive and communal school climate. These leaders should engage in a systematic review of their mission statements, accountability procedures, and other district policies and activities to ensure that these elements are supportive of the creation of such a climate (Pickeral et al., 2009).

An additional area of concern in this research-to-policy gap is that school climate improvement efforts are generally isolated within a narrower focus on issues of student health or school safety, rather than being holistically implemented into schoolwide changes that include school community norms and beliefs, accountability policies, and other elements of school climate (NSCC, 2007). Evaluation research clearly shows that the most effective reforms are ones that are incorporated into every facet of the school's educational function — curricular choices, extracurricular activities, rules and policies, even the school's goals and ultimate mission — and that include the entire school community — students, teachers, administrators, families, and the larger community — in the school improvement process (Cohen, 2013; Cohen and Geier, 2010).

The adults in the school form the backbone of this improvement process. Therefore, as called for by ED, schools should provide training and support to school personnel as they work to create a positive and communal school climate (U.S. ED, 2014). At the heart of this effort lies the principal, who has direct influence over school-level conditions. If principals engage teachers in decision-making processes and encourage faculty innovation and collaboration, they can create a professional culture of trust and support which, in turn, can increase teachers' satisfaction and commitment.

These positive attributes “ripple out” to the students, who then display greater academic and behavioral success (Price, 2012). Thus, principals are integral to the school climate improvement process.

Equally important is a school's faculty. If teachers invest time and effort to foster a positive and communal climate, both in their classrooms and in the school overall, they can directly influence their students' academic and behavioral success. Thus, teacher education and professional development programs should highlight the importance of creating and sustaining such a climate (Bryk et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2009; Mitchell and Bradshaw, 2013).

Of course, students are the ultimate beneficiaries of a positive and communal school climate and should be full participants in the school improvement process, particularly as these policies and practices directly impact them. As students become co-leaders in this reform, they are given opportunities to practice leadership skills and to have their voices heard (Cohen, 2013). This would, ultimately, lead them to become more connected to the school community, thus creating anew the cycle between school climate, school bonding, and school safety and success.

In response to the concerns previously discussed, some researchers and policymakers have developed frameworks under which standards to guide a school climate improvement process can be created. The National School Boards Association (NSBA) developed the Key Work of School Boards framework with eight focus areas to guide school boards (Pickeral et al., 2009):

- Vision
- Standards
- Assessment

- Accountability
- Alignment
- Climate
- Collaboration and Community Engagement
- Continuous Improvement

These broad action areas provide a beginning framework under which school leaders can create policies and practices to improve school climate.

The NSBA also created the Iowa Lighthouse Project, which highlighted seven conditions that superintendents and other district and school leaders can focus on in order to create a positive and communal school climate. These are (Pickeral et al., 2009):

- Shared Leadership
- Continuous Improvement and Shared Decision-Making
- Ability to Create and Sustain Initiatives
- Supportive Workplace for Staff
- Staff Development
- Support for School Sites Through Data and Information
- Community Involvement

Based on these two frameworks, the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE) developed a series of recommendations for district and school leaders working to create and sustain a positive and communal school climate (Pickeral et al., 2009). These include:

- Creating district and school climate teams and allowing these teams to participate in professional development opportunities to learn about school climate research and practice.

- Evaluating district and school policies and practices in light of school climate goals.
- Regularly surveying all members of the school community to gather perceptions of the current school climate.
- Ensuring that school climate improvement efforts happen at every level of the district and school and include every member of the school community.

The NSCC (2009, p. 3) suggests five standards for effective school climate reform efforts:

1. The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing, and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. The school community sets policies specifically promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions, and engagement; and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage students who have become disengaged.
3. The school community's practices are identified, prioritized, and supported (a) to promote learning and positive social, emotional, ethical, and civic development of students; (b) to enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and schoolwide activities; (c) to address barriers to learning and teaching and to re-engage those who have become disengaged; and (d) to develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity-building mechanisms for meeting this standard.
4. The school community creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel

safe in school socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically.

5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities, and norms that promote social and civic responsibility and a commitment to social justice.

Each of these standards is supported by a series of indicators and sub-indicators that flesh out the details involved (NSCC, 2009). In addition, the NSCC provides a five-stage School Climate Improvement Roadmap — with tasks and challenges identified for each stage — to further support schools in creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate (Cohen, 2013).

The school climate improvement process should be “an intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent, coordinated and democratically informed process of students, parents, school personnel and community members learning and working together to address three essential questions: (1) What kind of school do we want ours to be? (2) What are our current strengths and needs ...? and (3) Given this ‘vision’ and our current reality, what are the most important ... goals that we can and need to work on together?” (Cohen, 2014, p. 2). This process should be based on a problem-solving cycle that continually uses research on best practices and needs assessment data to inform improvement choices. By engaging in a school climate improvement process, education leaders at the state, district, and school levels are ensuring the safety and success of all members of the school community.

## Recommendations

Based on the matters discussed, this report proposes the following policy and research recommendations:

### ***Recommendation One: Defining School Climate***

Education researchers, policymakers, and leaders at all levels — federal, state, district, and school — should adopt a definition of school climate that focuses on relationships among school community members, the goals and norms of the school, and school member participation.

A positive and communal school climate emphasizes trusting and supportive relationships among all members of the school community, common goals and norms, and increasing collaboration and involvement within the school community. This leads to a sense of safety and bonding and allows a focus on effective teaching and learning which, in turn, leads to students’ academic and behavioral success.

### ***Recommendation Two: Assessing School Climate***

Education researchers, with support from policymakers, should develop measurement instruments that comprehensively assess the climate of a school by surveying all members of the school community — students, teachers, administrators, additional staff, parents, and members of the larger community — on all school climate components, including relationships, norms and goals, and collaboration and involvement.

The survey instrument conducted with students should also include measures of school bonding — attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief — in order to fully assess the process leading from a positive and communal school climate to the beneficial outcomes (see Recommendation Three). Proper multilevel collection and analysis of data should be ensured by using measures of school

climate that refer to school conditions external to the individual and measures of student bonding that refer to internal feelings and beliefs.

The reliability and validity of all instruments should also be certified by using previously tested measures from assessment tools, such as the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI; Cohen et al., 2009), the Effective School Battery (ESB; Gottfredson, 1999), and What About You (WAY; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1999). New measures that need to be developed to assess school climate elements or survey school community members and that are not included in previously tested measures should be pilot tested to ensure they are psychometrically sound.

### ***Recommendation Three: Exploring School Climate***

Researchers, with support from policymakers, should further explore the process leading from a positive and communal school climate to its beneficial outcomes, as well as the factors that influence the creation of such a climate. This should be done through the collection and analysis of data from a nationally representative sample of schools. This sample should include public, private, and parochial schools and should be stratified by location and level. All members of the school community should be surveyed. In addition, onsite observations should be conducted by researchers to gather data that can supplement the survey responses.

### ***Recommendation Four: Improving School Climate***

Every district and school should create a climate team comprising representatives from all school community groups, including students, teachers, administrators, additional staff, parents, and members of the greater community. These teams should

be supported by strong and clearly defined climate leadership at all levels — federal, state, district, and school — and should avail themselves of help from researchers and experts from academic and other institutions.

The school climate teams should engage in the following activities:

1. Participation in professional development opportunities to learn about school climate research and best practices.
2. Evaluation of state, district, and school policies in light of this research and their own school's goals.
3. Regular assessment of the current school climate through surveys of all members of the school community.
4. Implementation of school climate improvement efforts at both the district and school levels that are incorporated into every facet of the school's function — curricular choices, extracurricular activities, rules and policies, and the school's goals and mission — and that include every member of the school community.

Further, these teams should use a data-driven decision-making process to guide their school climate improvement efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Although school crime and violence have declined over the past two decades, crime and victimization are still a cause for concern (Roberts et al., 2015). Among the factors shown to influence school disorder is school climate, which has a clear impact on all members of the school community. Students in schools with a positive and communal climate demonstrate stronger academic achievement and engagement, better socio-emotional health, and lower



levels of absenteeism, truancy, dropping out, and victimization (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Payne et al., 2003). They also display lower levels of substance use and aggression, are subjected to fewer suspensions and expulsions, and engage in fewer deviant and criminal acts (Payne, 2008; Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, teachers in a school with a positive and communal climate experience higher levels of efficacy, morale, and satisfaction, and lower levels of absenteeism, turnover, and victimization (Cohen and Geier, 2010; Gottfredson et al., 2005; Payne et al., 2003). It is clear that this type of school climate has a great influence on the safety and success of a school and the behavioral and academic outcomes of its students.

Unfortunately, the benefits resulting from a positive and communal school climate have not been translated into effective educational practices. This “translation gap,” the gap between school climate research and policy, stems from several problems. One is the lack of an agreed-upon definition (NSCC, 2007). Researchers define school climate in countless ways and continue to debate the key components of a positive and communal school climate. Without a clear definition that fully articulates exactly what constitutes school climate, school leaders are left without a roadmap for school climate improvement and the translation gap continues to widen.

A second matter that contributes to the gap between research and policy stems from this lack of a universal definition. Because there is disagreement on what constitutes school climate, there is also disagreement on how it can best be assessed. This has led states, districts, and schools to use tools that (1) have not been tested for reliability and validity or have come up short in this area and (2) do not capture the comprehensive nature of school climate, either in terms of components or in terms of school community members (Cohen, 2013).

Another area that has not been fully explored is the process that links school climate to its beneficial outcomes (Payne, 2008). Understanding the mechanisms that underlie this relationship is vital as school leaders work to develop successful school improvement plans. A lack of school climate leadership also plays a role in the gap between school climate research and policy. Having strong and defined leadership roles at the state, district, and school levels is integral for school climate policies and practices to be effectively developed and implemented (NSCC, 2007). In addition, many school climate improvement efforts are generally isolated, with a narrower focus on issues of student health or school safety rather than holistically implemented into larger schoolwide changes, such as focusing on accountability policies, school community norms and beliefs, and other dimensions of school climate (NSCC, 2007).

It is abundantly clear that a positive and communal school climate leads to beneficial outcomes for all members of the school community. Although the school climate improvement process is complex and will likely involve different considerations for each district and school, focusing on the issues that lead to the translation gap between school climate research and policy would go far in aiding schools in the creation and maintenance of a positive and communal climate. The following issues can be addressed by adhering to the policy recommendations outlined in this white paper:

1. Adopting a definition of school climate that focuses on relationships among school community members, the goals and norms of the school, and school member participation.
2. Developing psychometrically sound measurement instruments that comprehensively assess the climate of a

school by surveying all members of the school community on all school climate dimensions.

3. Exploring the process leading from a positive and communal school climate to its beneficial outcomes as well as the factors that influence the creation of such a climate.
4. Creating district and school climate teams comprising representatives from all school community groups,

and supported by strong and clearly defined climate leadership, to engage in evidence-based school climate improvement activities.

Accomplishing these steps will improve all school members' perceptions of safety and allow a strong culture of learning and teaching to flourish. Creating and sustaining a positive and communal school climate guarantees the safety and success of the nation's schools and the academic and behavioral success of the nation's youth.

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