

State of Connecticut
GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Testimony before the Education Committee
Submitted by Steven Hernández, Esq., Director of Public Policy and Research
Connecticut Commission on Children
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Honorable Co-chairs, Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, Ranking and other esteemed members of the Education Committee:

My name is Steven Hernández, Attorney and Director of Public Policy and Research for the Connecticut Commission on Children. I am here to offer the Commission's testimony in support of:

- ✓ • **S.B. No. 476; An Act Concerning The Academic Achievement Gap;**
- **H.B. No. 5562; An Act Concerning Special Education; and**
- **H.B. No. 5564; An Act Concerning School Safety.**

I will focus the bulk of my testimony in support of House Bill 5564, *An Act Concerning School Safety*.

"School climate matters." According to Amrit Thapa at the National School Climate Center, the promotion of positive school climate impacts every aspect of a child's educational experience. "Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention."

Mr. Thapa cited national and global research documenting the correlation between positive school climate and student motivation to learn, a mitigating effect on socioeconomic distress, and diminished aggression, violence and sexual harassment.

The Center draws a clear connection between the quality of school climate and improved academic outcomes as well as student personal development and well-being. I have attached the National Center for School Climate's Research Brief to my submitted testimony, and would be happy to supplement that with relevant research.

This January, Secretary Duncan at the U.S. Department of Education released a variety of resources on school climate and safety. He noted that "positive school climates also enhance safety in the school and community by increasing communication among students, families, and faculty, and reducing violence and bullying." Those resources may be found at ED.GOV and I would gladly provide them to the Committee.

Recognizing that bullying intervention and positive school climate (a form of prevention) go hand in hand, in 2011, through the leadership of this committee, the general assembly revised our anti-bullying laws to strengthen our efforts to improve school climate and prevent and address school bullying.

The law required—among other things—that each school board develop and implement a safe school climate plan, that each superintendent appoint a district safe school climate coordinator, and that the principal of each school serve as a safe school climate specialist.

After 12/14, when the state and the world was touched by Newtown, the state again led the way in making the necessary connection between positive school climate and school safety. School climate is to school safety as bullying is to individual student safety, and your bill today is the next step in making that connection.

In addition to establishing a safe travel to school grant program and providing a clearinghouse for information and assistance through the 2-1-1 Infoline program, HB 5564 would authorize the Department of Ed. to approve or reject local and regional school climate plans. Your bill would also require the analysis of student perspectives and opinions, which would be a key part of a school-based climate assessment survey.

As such, your bill is about leadership, accountability, and including the student voice as both the consumer and inheritor of your best efforts.

The Commission would recommend additional modest but important changes to our school climate law intended to strengthen the definition of bullying, and improve bullying enforcement, by clarifying areas in the law that parents, principals or the SDE find confusing or contradictory. In no way are these changes intended to dilute the definition of bullying or its enforcement, but they are aimed at diminishing both technical and interpreted hurdles with the dual goal of protecting our kids and improving their learning environment.

Specifically, we recommend strengthening the role of the school climate committee to align with its new role in working to help improve school safety, giving that committee the ability to use school climate surveys to create a strategy for positive school climate, and allowing the school principal to focus on intervening in and investigating acts of alleged bullying.

We further recommend clarifying the meeting requirement with parents at the conclusion of a bullying investigation, as principals and Superintendents have reported that the paragraph could and has been read to require that this meeting be held at the same time, with both the bully and the victim in the same room. As we know, research does not support putting the families of the bully and the target together.

I have attached these and other recommendations to my testimony, along with an analysis and rationale for each. The Commission would welcome the opportunity to assist in any way that we can to improve student safety, school climate, and to reduce incidents of bullying on our state.

In support of S.B. No. 476, An Act Concerning The Academic Achievement Gap, we note that research shows that full-day kindergarten helps improve student outcomes and close achievement gaps. According to the National Education Association, Full-day

DRAFT PROPOSAL: An Act Concerning School Climate and Safety

Sec. 10-222d. Safe school climate plans. Definitions. School climate assessments. (a) As used in this section, sections 10-222g to 10-222i, inclusive, and section 10-222k:

(1) "Bullying" means (A) the repeated use by one or more students of a written, oral or electronic communication, such as cyberbullying, directed at or referring to another student attending school in the same school district, or (B) a physical act or gesture by one or more students repeatedly directed at another student attending school in the same school district, that: (i) Causes physical or emotional harm to such student or damage to such student's property, (ii) places such student in reasonable fear of harm to himself or herself, or of damage to his or her property, (iii) creates a hostile educational environment at school for such student, ~~(iv) infringes on the rights of such student at school,~~ or (iv) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school. "Bullying" shall include, but not be limited to, a written, oral or electronic communication or physical act or gesture based on any actual or perceived differentiating characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, academic status, physical appearance, or mental, physical, developmental or sensory disability, or by association with an individual or group who has or is perceived to have one or more of such characteristics;

(2) "Cyberbullying" means any act of bullying through the use of the Internet, interactive and digital technologies, cellular mobile telephone or other mobile electronic devices or any electronic communications;

(3) "Mobile electronic device" means any hand-held or other portable electronic equipment capable of providing data communication between two or more individuals, including, but not limited to, a text messaging device, a paging device, a personal digital assistant, a laptop computer, equipment that is capable of playing a video game or a digital video disk, or equipment on which digital images are taken or transmitted;

(4) "Electronic communication" means any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photoelectronic or photo-optical system;

(5) "Hostile educational environment" means a situation in which ~~bullying the use of communication or physical acts or gestures among students is~~ sufficiently severe or pervasive to interfere with a student's educational ~~alter the conditions of the school climate;~~

(6) "Outside of the school setting" means at a location, activity or program that is not school related, or through the use of an electronic device or a mobile electronic device that is not owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education;

(7) "School employee" means (A) a teacher, substitute teacher, school administrator, school superintendent, guidance counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse, physician, school paraprofessional or coach employed by a local or regional board of education or working in a public elementary, middle or high school; or (B) any other individual who, in the performance of his or her duties, has regular contact with students and who provides services to or on behalf of students enrolled in a public elementary, middle or high school, pursuant to a contract with the local or regional board of education; and

(8) "School climate" means the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults.

(b) Each local and regional board of education shall develop and implement a safe school climate plan to address the existence of bullying in its schools. Such plan shall: (1) Enable students to anonymously report acts of bullying to school employees and require students and the parents or guardians of students to be notified annually at the beginning of each school year of the process by which students may make such reports, (2) enable the parents or guardians of students to file written reports of suspected bullying, (3) require school employees who witness acts which may constitute ~~of~~ bullying or receive reports of acts which may constitute bullying to orally notify the safe school climate specialist, described in section 10-222k, or another school administrator if the safe school climate specialist is unavailable, not later than one school day after such school employee witnesses or receives a report of ~~bullying~~ such acts, and to file a written report not later than two school days after making such oral report, (4) require the safe school climate specialist to investigate or supervise the investigation of all reports of acts which may constitute bullying and ensure that such investigation is completed promptly after receipt of any written reports made under this section, (5) require the safe school climate specialist to review any anonymous reports, except that no disciplinary action shall be taken solely on the basis of an anonymous report, (6) ~~include~~ require a school-based bullying prevention and school climate prevention and intervention strategy, as defined by section 10-222g, for school employees to deal with bullying, (7) provide for the inclusion of language in student codes of conduct concerning bullying, (8) require each school to notify the parents or guardians of students who commit any verified acts of bullying and the parents or guardians of students against whom such acts were directed not later than forty-eight hours after the completion of the investigation described in subdivision (4) of this subsection, (9) require each school to invite the parents or

guardians of a student who commits any verified act of bullying and the parents or guardians of the student against whom such act was directed to a meeting to communicate to such parents or guardians the measures being taken by the school to ensure the safety of the student against whom such act was directed, and policies and procedures in place to prevent further acts of bullying, (10) require each school to invite the parents or guardians of a student who commits any verified act of bullying to a meeting, separate and distinct from the meeting required in section (9) of this paragraph, to discuss specific interventions undertaken by the school to prevent further acts of bullying, (11) establish a procedure for each school to document and maintain records relating to reports and investigations of bullying in such school and to maintain a list of the number of verified acts of bullying in such school and make such list available for public inspection, and annually report such number to the Department of Education, and in such manner as prescribed by the Commissioner of Education, (12) direct the development of case-by-case interventions for addressing repeated incidents of bullying against a single individual or recurrently perpetrated bullying incidents by the same individual that may include both counseling and discipline, (13) prohibit discrimination and retaliation against an individual who reports or assists in the investigation of an act of bullying, (14) direct the development of student safety support plans for students against whom an act of bullying was directed that address safety measures the school will take to protect such students against further acts of bullying, (15) require the principal of a school, or the principal's designee, to notify a school resource officer or the appropriate local law enforcement agency when such principal, or the principal's designee, believes that any acts of bullying may constitute criminal conduct, (16) prohibit bullying (A) on school grounds, at a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function or program whether on or off school grounds, at a school bus stop, on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education, or through the use of an electronic device or an electronic mobile device owned, leased or used by the local or regional board of education, and (B) outside of the school setting if such bullying (i) creates a hostile environment at school for the student against whom such bullying was directed, (ii) infringes on the rights of the student against whom such bullying was directed at school, or (iii) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school, (17) require, at the beginning of each school year, each school to provide all school employees with a written or electronic copy of the school district's safe school climate plan, along with a written or electronic copy of school-based bullying intervention and school climate improvement strategy developed pursuant to Sec. 10-222k and (18) require that all school employees annually complete the training described in section 10-220a or section 10-222j. The notification required pursuant to subdivision (8) of this subsection and the invitation required pursuant to subdivision (9) of this subsection

shall include a description of the response of school employees to such acts and any consequences that may result from the commission of further acts of bullying.

(c) Not later than January 1, 2012, each local and regional board of education shall approve the safe school climate plan developed pursuant to this section and submit such plan to the Department of Education. Not later than thirty calendar days after approval of such plan by the local or regional board of education, the board shall make such plan available on the board's and each individual school in the school district's Internet web site and ensure that such plan is included in the school district's publication of the rules, procedures and standards of conduct for schools and in all student handbooks.

(d) On and after July 1, 2012, and ~~biennially~~ annually thereafter, each local and regional board of education shall require each school in the district to complete an assessment using the school climate assessment instruments, including surveys, approved and disseminated by the Department of Education pursuant to section 10-222h. Each local and regional board of education shall collect the school climate assessments for each school in the district and submit such school climate assessments to the department.

(e) For the purpose of collecting and sharing school-based best-practices or successful strategies to improve school climate, not later than January 1, 2016, and every two years thereafter, each local and regional board of education shall update the safe school climate plan developed pursuant to paragraph (c) of this section and submit such plan to the Department of Education, to include summaries of school-based bullying intervention and school climate improvement strategies along with district-wide climate improvement initiatives and anti-bullying policies.

Sec. 10-222g. Prevention and intervention strategy re bullying and school climate. (a) For the purposes of section 10-222d, the term "school-based bullying intervention and school climate prevention-improvement and intervention-strategy" may include, but is not limited to, (1) implementation of a positive behavioral interventions and supports process or another evidence-based model approach for safe school climate or for the prevention of bullying identified by the Department of Education, (2) school rules prohibiting bullying, harassment and intimidation and establishing appropriate consequences for those who engage in such acts, (3) adequate adult supervision of outdoor areas, hallways, the lunchroom and other specific areas where bullying is likely to occur, (4) inclusion of grade-appropriate bullying education and prevention curricula in kindergarten through high school, (5) individual interventions with the bully, parents and school employees, and interventions with the bullied child, parents and school employees, (6) school-wide training related to safe school climate, (7) student peer training, education and support, ~~and~~ (8) promotion of

parent involvement in bullying prevention through individual or team participation in meetings, trainings and individual interventions, and (9) culturally competent school-based curriculum focusing on social-emotional learning, self-awareness and self-regulation. Funding for this strategy may originate from public, private, federal or philanthropic sources.

Sec. 10-222k. District safe school climate coordinator. Safe school climate specialist. Safe school climate committee. (a) For the school year commencing July 1, 2012, and each school year thereafter, the superintendent of each local or regional board of education shall appoint, from among existing school district staff, a district safe school climate coordinator. The district safe school climate coordinator shall: (1) Be responsible for implementing the district's safe school climate plan, developed pursuant to section 10-222d, (2) collaborate with the safe school climate specialists, described in subsection (b) of this section, the board of education for the district and the superintendent of schools of the school district to prevent, identify and respond to bullying in the schools of the district, (3) provide data and information, in collaboration with the superintendent of schools of the district, to the Department of Education regarding bullying, in accordance with the provisions of subsection (b) of section 10-222d and subsection (a) of section 10-222h, and (4) meet with the safe school climate specialists at least twice during the school year to discuss issues relating to bullying and school climate in the school district and to make recommendations concerning amendments to the district's safe school climate plan.

(b) For the school year commencing July 1, 2012, and each school year thereafter, the principal of each school, or the principal's designee, shall serve as the safe school climate specialist and shall (1) investigate or supervise the investigation of reported acts of bullying in the school in accordance with the district's safe school climate plan, (2) collect and maintain records of reports and investigations of bullying in the school, and (3) act as the primary school official responsible for preventing, identifying and responding to reports of bullying in the school.

(c) (1) For the school year commencing July 1, 2012, and each school year thereafter, the principal of each school shall establish a committee or designate at least one existing committee in the school to be responsible for developing and fostering a safe school climate and addressing issues relating to bullying in the school. Such committee shall include at least one parent or guardian of a student enrolled in the school appointed by the school principal.

(2) Any such committee shall receive and analyze the results of the school climate assessments completed pursuant to Sec. 10-222d(d) and other reported data in the

aggregate on incidents of bullying, collected in accordance with the provisions of subsection (b) of section 10-222d, and use these data to (A) identify patterns of bullying among students in the school, (B) monitor the progress of school climate improvement and identify any strengths and weaknesses at the school with respect to school climate improvement, (C) (A) receive copies of completed reports following investigations of bullying, (B) identify and address patterns of bullying among students in the school, (C) review and amenddevelop, in consultation with the safe school climate specialist, a school-based bullying intervention and school climate improvement strategy school policies relating to bullying, providing annual recommendations to the school climate coordinator on improving school climate, (DD) review and make recommendations to the district safe school climate coordinator regarding the district's safe school climate plan based on issues and experiences specific to the school, (EE) educate students, school employees and parents and guardians of students on issues relating to bullying and school climate, and (FF) collaborate with the district safe school climate coordinator in the collection of data regarding bullying, in accordance with the provisions of subsection (b) of section 10-222d and subsection (a) of section 10-222h, and (G) perform any other duties as determined by the school principal that are related to the school-based bullying intervention and school climate imporovement strategy prevention, identification and response to school bullying for the school.

(3) Any parent or guardian serving as a member of any such committee shall not participate in the activities described in subparagraphs (A) and (B) of subdivision (2) of this subsection or any other activity that may compromise the confidentiality of a student.

NEW SECTION: Within available appropriations, the Office of Early Childhood, in collaboration with the State Department of Education, may offer a competitive grant for up to three Alliance School Districts to develop and implement a 3-year-old to third grade strategy for social emotional well-being and health, with a focus on instructional tools and family engagement. Funds for this grant may originate from public, private, federal or philanthropic sources.

Section-by-Section analysis

DRAFT PROPOSAL: An Act Concerning School Climate and Safety

Overview

These changes are intended to strengthen the definition of bullying and improve bullying enforcement by clarifying areas in the law that parents, principals or the SDE find confusing or contradictory. In no way are these changes intended to dilute the definition of bullying or its enforcement.

Proposed change to Sec. 10-222d (a) (1) (A) (iii) and Sec. 10-222d (a) (5):

What it does — This change clarifies the phrase “hostile environment” in the definition of “bullying”, making it more similar to definitions used in CA, NJ, NY and other states which also intend to protect the educational environment of targeted students. *As such, this does not delete the definition of bullying from our law; it simply removes the redundant term from the definition of bullying to avoid confusion.*

Why the change — Bullying occurs when repeated acts or communications against a student “(1) Causes physical or emotional harm to such student or damage to such student’s property, (2) places such student in reasonable fear of harm to himself or herself, or of damage to his or her property, (3) creates a *hostile environment* at school for such student, (4) infringes on the rights of such student at school, or (5) substantially disrupts the education process or the orderly operation of a school.”

A *hostile environment* is defined as a situation in which bullying among students is sufficiently severe or pervasive to alter the conditions of the school climate.

Superintendents and school principals find the definition of *hostile environment* confusing because, as written, it requires a principal to *first* find that school climate is impacted by the behavior directed at the individual student to *then* determine whether a student has been bullied. Bullying may impact school climate, but impacting the individual student should be enough to find that bullying occurred.

The phrase *among students* in the definition of hostile environment also makes it more difficult for the principal to determine that bullying has occurred because, as written, it is unclear whether it refers to the bully and the target or among students generally.

It is recommended that the word “bullying” be replaced in the definition of “hostile environment” because it is confusing to principals to find the word bullying used in its own definition as it seems to create a second definition of bullying.

Proposed change to Sec. 10-222d (a) (1) (A) (iv):

What it does — This change strikes the source of confusion, which at best repeats that a student has rights which are protected by federal and/or state law, avoiding what may be an unnecessary administrative step at the school level.

Why the change — The State Department of Education, Superintendents and school principals find this definition vague and confusing because it does not refer to any specific rights. The provision has been interpreted by some schools to refer to rights under state and federal protected class categories, in which case this provision is unnecessary, as these rights are protected through alternate federal and state laws.

Proposed change to Sec. 10-222d (b)(1):

What it does — This change promotes timely notice by clarifying that notice on the process for making anonymous reports should be provided at the beginning of each school year, when it is most useful to parents and guardians.

Why the change — Parents have reported that they did not know that there was a process for students to anonymously report “acts of bullying” because they had never received such information, or the information was provided into the school year.

Proposed change to Secs. 10-222d (b)(2), (3) and (4):

What it does — This change promotes reporting of witnessed incidents by school employees by removing discretion from school employees in deciding whether a witnessed act is bullying. These changes also clarify that this is a determination that the school climate specialist must make upon investigation.

Why the change — The requirement in this section that school employees report or investigate bullying is vague because it allows a school employee to decide whether an act is bullying before deciding whether or not to report the act.

Proposed changes to Secs. 10-222d (b)(6); 10-222g; and 10-222k(b)(2)(C):

What it does — These changes promote accountability by focusing on improving school climate on a school-by-school basis. This approach places the responsibility of creating an anti-bullying and climate strategy on the individual

school's climate committee. This promotes prevention at the school level by creating a more active role for the school climate committee. This also promotes parent and community participation and transparency by removing the requirement that reports of investigations be released to the Committee, which is currently interpreted by schools to violate the non-disclosure provisions of FERPA.

Why the change — The State Department of Education reported that school district plans do not tell us what each school is doing to respond to its school climate surveys to reduce incidents of bullying and to improve school climate generally. Furthermore, a school climate committee that has the ability to use school climate surveys to create a strategy for positive school climate would allow the school principal to focus on intervening in and investigating acts of alleged bullying.

Proposed changes to Secs. 10-222d(b)(9):

What it does — These changes protect the safety of the bullying target by clarifying that these meetings should be held separately. The recommended change also clarifies that the parents of the target should receive both information about specific measures being taken to protect the target, along with policies and procedures in place to protect the target and intervene with the bully.

Why the change — Principals and Superintendents reported that the paragraph requiring meetings with the parents of the bully and the target was being read as requiring that this meeting be held at the same time, with both the bully and the victim in the same room. Research does not support putting the families of the bully and the target together.

Proposed change to Secs. 10-222d(b)(15):

What it does — These changes promote the use of school resource officers to address acts that may rise to the level of a crime, if they are an available resource at a school, promoting diversion and intervention where possible. The word bullying is removed from this section to make clear that a principal does not need to wait to determine, after investigation, whether specific act were bullying in order to seek the involvement of law enforcement where there may have been a crime.

Why the change — After Newtown, many schools have chosen to employ school resource officers to promote safety and to build relationships between students and public safety officials.

Proposed change to Secs. 10-222d(d):

What it does — These changes would improve school safety and would allow school climate committee's the data they need to improve climate by annualizing the climate assessments. Climate data is essential to multi-tiered intervention logic, as well as other research-based bullying interventions.

Why the change — Having frequent, accurate and uniform assessments of school climate is essential to implementing research-based bullying interventions at the District, School and student level.

Proposed change to Secs. 10-222d(e) (NEW):

What it does — These changes would improve school climate and safety by promoting accountability at the school and District level, and the sharing of best practices statewide.

Why the change — Superintendents and school principals reported that it would be helpful to know what Districts and school are doing to improve school climate. Under current law, there is no requirement that District update their school climate plan based on learning from implemented programs or interventions or state and national best practices.

Proposed change to Secs. 10-222g(9) and NEW SECTION (NEW):

What it does — This change would promote school choice in improving school climate through access to resource and culturally competent curricula which focuses the most recent science on social-emotional learning, self-awareness and self-regulation.

Furthermore, a NEW SECTION would promote innovative prevention and positive school climate in the early years by promoting a 3-3 model for social emotional well-being, beginning in up to three of our districts which show persistent gaps in academic achievement.

Why the change — In the past few years, as research-based climate improvement and bullying intervention has taken hold, so too have the options available to schools to improve climate through a state-of-the-art interventions and trainings. The State Department of Education reports that it would like the flexibility to access innovative programs and private and philanthropic resources to provide assistance to school schools and districts that agree to pilot innovative programs.



SCHOOL CLIMATE RESEARCH

February 2013
By Amrit Thapa

Research highlight the following promising strategies for school climate improvement efforts:

1. Engage all stakeholders as active participants and agents of change.
2. Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support.
3. Create school networks to share best practices and discuss challenges.
4. Engage students at all stages of the process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts.
5. Create and share tools and information with teachers, administrators, staff and parents.
6. Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate Research

As early as a century ago educational reformers had recognized that the distinctive culture of a school affects the life and learning of its students (Perry, 1908; Dewey, 1916). However, the rise of systematic empirical study of school climate grew out of industrial/organizational research coupled with the observation that school-specific processes accounted for a great deal of variation in student achievement (Anderson, 1982; Kreft, 1993). Since then the research in school climate has been expanding systematically, and many countries are showing a keen interest in this field.

There is empirical evidence being documented on various aspects of school climate in several languages (for a summary, see Benbenisty & Astor, 2005; Cohen et al., 2009 in English; Debarbieux, 1996 in French; and Del Rey, Ortega & Fera, 2009 in Spanish).

The research on school climate overlaps with several fields, including social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; positive youth development, mental health, and healthy relationships; school connectedness and engagement; academic achievement; social, emotional, and civic learning; teacher retention; and effective school reform. Further, it must be understood that both the effects of school climate and the conditions that give rise to them are deeply interconnected, growing out of the shared experience of a dynamic ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009). In general, the research on school climate can be categorized on four or five essential areas of school climate: Safety, Relationships, Teaching and Learning, Institutional Environment, and the School Improvement Process (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D'Alessandro, in press).

The rising interest and attention in school climate reform efforts in recent years is due to the following three factors (Thapa et al., in press). First, there is a growing body of empirical research that supports the notion that context matters: group trends, for example, norms, expectations, and belief systems shape individual experience and learning as well as influence all levels of relationships. Second, there is an increasing awareness that school climate reform supports effective violence prevention in general and bullying prevention efforts in particular. As a result, local, state, and federal interest in school climate reform as an effective, data driven and evidence-based process is emerging. Third, research-based prosocial educational

efforts are being given tremendous attention in recent years. These efforts include character education, social emotional learning, mental health promotion efforts, service learning and civic engagement, and others (for a compendium of the wide-range of interventions, see Brown, Corrigan, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2012). Moreover, school climate reform is a process that necessarily focuses on and supports students, parents/guardians, and educators in considering how effective current prosocial educational efforts are and how we can strengthen these instructional and intervention efforts.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that there are a number of limitations that influence current school climate research findings, concerned with definitions, models, and experimental methodologies. For example, comprehensive reviews by both Anderson (1982) and Freiberg (1999) highlighted that defining school climate was complicated by the fact that practitioners and researchers used a wide range of school climate definitions and models that were often more implicit than explicit in nature. Naturally, how we define school climate has implications for what we measure. There is not a national or international consensus about how to define "school climate," a "positive and sustained school climate," or the "school climate process" and the dimensions that need to be regularly measured in school climate research and improvement efforts. To some extent, this has stymied and continues to stymie the advancement of school climate research so necessary to inform school improvement efforts. In addition, it hampers the development of the field in general and measurement practices in particular.

School climate matters. Sustained positive school climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk

prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention. There seems to be an abundant literature on school climate from different parts of the world that document a positive school climate having a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993), mitigating the negative impact of the socioeconomic context on academic success (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009), contributing to less aggression, violence and sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010; Karcher, 2002), and acting as a protective factor for the learning and positive life development of young people (Ortega, Sanchez, Ortega Rivera, & Viejo, 2011). Furthermore, it is found that quality of the school climate contributes to academic outcomes as well as the personal development and well-being of pupils (Haahr, Nielsen, Hansen, & Jakobsen, 2005; OECD, 2009).

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Following are some school climate practices and recommendations that can be implemented to effectively use the research summary and advance school climate research. These practices have evolved from the lessons learned and challenges identified during the recent School Climate Improvement Project (SCIP) in Queens, New York.

- Engage all members of the school community, including teachers, students, parents, administrators as active participants and agents for successful school climate improvement implementation.
- Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support to ensure school climate reform is sustainable.
- Create school networks to share best practices and provide a forum to discuss

challenges openly and honestly. While a number of schools feel isolated in their school climate reform efforts, networking ensures that schools continue to learn from each other to improve teaching, learning, and overall leadership activities.

- Engage students at all stages of the school cycle improvement process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts. This includes students as action researchers to collect and analyze school climate data.
- Create and share tools and information for teachers, administrators, staff and parents to promote a positive school climate.
- Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

Summary

School Climate research is clearly evolving. The field demands rigorous and empirically sound research that focuses on relating specific aspects and activities of interventions to changes in specific components of school climate. We also need empirical evidence based on sound research techniques on how both interventions and climate affect specific socio-moral, emotional, civic, and cognitive development and the teaching and learning of both students and teachers. Understanding the interactions of these processes in the contexts of interventions will enable schools to successfully adapt interventions that have been shown to promote one or more of these positive outcomes. We need to translate these researches into smarter educational policies to transform low performing schools to better schools and to enhance the quality of lives of our students. The research in school climate points out the need for the individuals, educators in every school community and policy makers to work hand-in-hand to achieve these essential goals. Six effective practices are offered to support school climate integration and sustainability.

prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention. There seems to be an abundant literature on school climate from different parts of the world that document a positive school climate having a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993), mitigating the negative impact of the socioeconomic context on academic success (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009), contributing to less aggression, violence and sexual harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010; Karcher, 2002), and acting as a protective factor for the learning and positive life development of young people (Ortega, Sanchez, Ortega Rivera, & Viejo, 2011). Furthermore, it is found that quality of the school climate contributes to academic outcomes as well as the personal development and well-being of pupils (Haahr, Nielsen, Hansen, & Jakobsen, 2005; OECD, 2009).

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

Following are some school climate practices and recommendations that can be implemented to effectively use the research summary and advance school climate research. These practices have evolved from the lessons learned and challenges identified during the recent School Climate Improvement Project (SCIP) in Queens, New York.

- Engage all members of the school community, including teachers, students, parents, administrators as active participants and agents for successful school climate improvement implementation.
- Focus on long-term programming, impacts, infrastructure and support to ensure school climate reform is sustainable.
- Create school networks to share best practices and provide a forum to discuss

challenges openly and honestly. While a number of schools feel isolated in their school climate reform efforts, networking ensures that schools continue to learn from each other to improve teaching, learning, and overall leadership activities.

- Engage students at all stages of the school cycle improvement process to build capacity and sustain reform efforts. This includes students as action researchers to collect and analyze school climate data.
- Create and share tools and information for teachers, administrators, staff and parents to promote a positive school climate.
- Establish a school climate policy agenda to support quality practices built on research.

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This School Climate Practice Brief is one of 11 briefs presenting the latest in research and best practice for effective school climate reform from leading experts. All School Climate Practice Briefs can be found at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/practice-briefs.php>