A Center Report*

Designing School Improvement to Enhance Classroom Climate for All Students

(September, 2011)

Abstract

Everyone agrees that schools should ensure a positive school climate. Less agreement exists, however, about what this means and how to accomplish it. This is especially so when the call is for developing a safe and supportive environment that also is nurturing and caring and that provides all students with an equal opportunity to succeed. Equity concerns are heightened when schools are viewed using the lens of how they interface with students who are struggling academically, acting out, and experiencing conflictual relationships with school staff and peers. Findings suggest that general strategies designed to enhance school climate often are insufficient for changing the perceptions of such students. This report draws on recent literature to briefly (1) discuss the construct of school climate and (2) outline ways to approach improving school climate that account for the full range of students enrolled in a school.

Designing School Improvement to Enhance Classroom Climate for All Students

> School climate *emerges* from the complex transactions that characterize daily classroom and schoolwide life and reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, traditions, and practices that constitute the school culture.

The construct of *climate* is used as a marker for judging the quality of school life. Research relevant to understanding the construct has established a strong association between a variety of factors and the functioning of students and others at a school.

Everyone agrees that schools should have a positive school climate. There is less agreement, however, about *what this means and how to accomplish it*, especially when the call is for developing a safe and supportive environment that also is nurturing and caring and that provides all students with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Equity concerns are heightened when schools are viewed using the lens of how they interface with students who are struggling academically, acting out, and experiencing conflictual relationships with school staff and peers. Findings suggest that general strategies designed to enhance school climate often are insufficient for changing the perceptions that such students have about their school.

Our intent here is to draw on recent literature to briefly (1) discuss the construct of school climate and (2) outline ways to approach improving school climate that account for the full range of students enrolled in a school.

Exploring Schoolwide and Classroom Climate

Concern for improving school climate draws on a variety of strands of theory and research. Major examples include the extensive literatures on school effectiveness and that explore the impact of environmental conditions on the cognitive and social-emotional development and functioning of children and adolescents. Robust associations are regularly reported between negative environmental conditions and student, staff, and school problems (e.g., problems related to academic achievement, school connectedness and engagement, interpersonal relationships, staff and student morale). References over the last decade have burgeoned (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 2005, 2006a b; Berliner, 2010; Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Cornelius-White, 2007; DeAngelis & Presley, 2011; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2007; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998, 2000; Rutter & Maughan, 2002; Whitlock, 2006).

The primary focus of research and practice related to the *school effectiveness* has been mainly on improving *general* conditions for

learning and teaching. Considerably less attention has been paid to *specific* conditions for enabling success at school of students who are struggling and vulnerable.

The long-standing call related to improving environmental conditions at home and at school is twofold: (a) enhancing nurture and care and (b) reducing exposure to and countering the impact of nonnurturing environments. These matters have become building blocks in the U.S. Department of Education's *Promise Neighborhoods* initiative and its initiative for *Safe and Supportive Schools* (e.g., see Komro, Flay, Biglan, & Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium, 2011; Theokas & Lerner, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In this context, Biglan, Flay, and Embry define nurturing and environments broadly as follows:

> By nurturing, we mean any act, process, or condition that promotes and supports optimal developmental outcomes within a given environmental context. We define environments to include the social, economic, and physical conditions of a neighborhood or community. We intend the framework to be comprehensive and inclusive to guide the creation of social, economic, and physical conditions within communities that will promote and support optimal educational, social, behavioral, and physical health outcomes among youth (cited in Komo, et al., 2011).

Terminology

What happens at schools is best understood in transactional terms. Thus, a school's impact is a function of the fit between what the staff and other stakeholders bring to the situation and the situational factors that must be addressed. For example, a school's stakeholders bring a set of assimilated knowledge, skills, and attitudes, a current state of being (demographic status; immediate physiological, cognitive, and emotional states), and available institutional resources. The situation presents a host of demands and stressors which differ in terms of contextual factors such as locale, level of schooling, and student readiness. There are considerable variations among schools and in classrooms with respect to the number of students who show up motivationally ready and able to cope with what happens. There also are wide resource disparities among schools due to school budgets and differences in family income and support for school learning. At any given juncture, the situational demands and stressors may or may not be a good fit with what the school and home can mobilize effectively.

Schoolwide and classroom *climate* are terms used to capture the overall quality of what emerges from the complex transactions. The terms capture the temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived qualities

of the immediate setting and reflect the influence of underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, traditions, and practices that constitute the school *culture*. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by the surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

From a psychological perspective, it is the perception of actors rather than of observers that is key in understanding the positive and negative influences of school and classroom climate on stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, parents, and other involved parties). And perceptions of climate probably are heavily influenced by relationships with peers and colleagues. Given all this, it is not surprising when contrasting perceptions are reported related to the climate in a particular school and classroom.

Schoolwide and classroom climate sometimes are referred to as the learning environment (as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, and milieu). This term underscores the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning. In practice, of course, climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and fluctuate daily and over the school year. Depending on perceived quality, the impact on students and staff can be a benefit or a barrier to learning.

Some schools feel friendly, inviting, and supportive, others feel exclusionary, unwelcoming, and even unsafe.

The feelings and attitudes elicited by a school's environment are referred to as school climate.
Alexandra Loukas

A Multi-dimensional Construct

Researchers tend to view school climate as a multidimensional construct. For example, in early work on the topic, Moos (e.g., 1979) proposed grouping the various related concepts as follows:

(1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other);

(2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and

(3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Because of the complexity of measuring the construct, many studies have limited their focus to the impact of a narrow set of factors on students, mainly stressing such matters as:

(1) the nature of relationships between teachers and students;

(2) the nature of relationships between students;

(3) the extent to which student autonomy is allowed in the decision-making process;

(4) the extent to which the school provides clear, consistent, and fair rules and regulations.

From a transactional perspective, four levels of interaction have been emphasized as critical shapers of school climate: 1) interactions among students, 2) interactions between school personnel and students, 3) interactions among school personnel, and 4) interactions between the school, families, and community (e.g., Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004). The transactions between students and school personnel tend to be the most studied.

Others have expanded the emphasis on relationships and personal functioning; they add quality considerations related to the physical milieu and resources and practices related to instructional and student/learning supports. Examples include school size and ratio of students to staff, safety and comfort, and quality of interventions.

Based on their review of the literature, Cohen and Geier (2011) conclude that "virtually all researchers suggest there are four essential areas of focus: *Safety* (e.g. rules and norms; physical safety; social-emotional safety); *Relationships* (e.g. respect for diversity; school connectedness/engagement; social support – adults; social support – students; leadership); *Teaching and Learning* (e.g. social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; support for learning; professional relationships); and the *Institutional Environment* (e.g. physical surrounding)."

In their research review, Hopson & Lee (2011) suggest that:

> Although researchers present competing ideas about the most important dimensions of school climate, most agree that climate is determined by perceptions of safety, relationships within the school, goals related to teaching and learning, and the learning environment, which encompasses school structure and feelings of connectedness to school.

School climate – by definition – reflects students', school personnel's, and parents' experiences of school life socially, emotionally, civically, ethically as well as academically.
Cohen & Geier

How was school today?

Well, if it's true we learn from our mistakes, I had a great day!

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Growing Interest in Enhancing School Climate

Increasing interest in specifically enhancing school climate is reflected in the efforts of such groups as the *Alliance for the Study of School Climate* and the *National School Climate Center* and in the U.S. Department of Education's initiative for Safe and Supportive Schools.

Based on a review of several decades of research (Cohen & Geier, 2010), the National School Climate Council defines school climate and a positive, sustained school climate in the following ways:

> 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 National School Climate Center also has developed a set of school climate standards as a framework for schools to develop "a positive and sustainable school climate" (National School Climate Council, 2010).

With respect to the bases for such guidelines, Cohen & Geier note:

> Over the past two decades, research studies from a range of historically disparate fields (e.g. risk prevention, health promotion, character education, mental health, and social-emotional learning) have identified research-based school improvement guidelines that converge predictably to promote safe, caring, responsive and participatory schools.

The Alliance for the Study of School Climate's focus is on helping schools improve the quality of their climate through conducting research to understand what creates healthy schools and providing schools with ideas, assessment instruments and other resources, and services (Alliance for the Study of School Climate, 2011). Additional research articles on school climate are available on the Alliance's website (see:
http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/research/#climate_research)

What Researchers Report

Considerable research stresses the impact of school climate. The emphasis is on matters such as academic achievement, school connectedness and engagement, interpersonal relationships, and staff and student morale. In addition, explorations of the construct focus on many specific concepts seen as shaping school and classroom climate. Examples include social system organization; social attitudes; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; how staff transact with each other; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Some attention also is paid to the transactions with students' families. And implications are suggested for school improvement efforts.

Often discussed factors associated with negative school environments and climate are violence, bullying, limited academic and extracurricular activities, unfair discipline practices, and inadequate books, supplies, and other resources. Positive school environments are described as manifesting caring and supportive relationships among teachers and students, using effective and collaborative teaching strategies, and demonstrating teacher commitment to student well-being and parent involvement (Hopson & Lee, 2011; Rumberger 1995; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Appendix A provides a few examples to illustrate the nature of what is reported in the research literature. As noted already, analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and positive outcomes in academic behavioral, and emotional domains. Such associations have been used to highlight the importance of school climate in general. Specific associations explored include student connectedness, engagement, self-efficacy, cooperative learning, achievement, attendance, safety, self and peer behavior, relationships and collaboration with peers and staff, health, social and emotional development, graduation rates, teacher retention, school improvement, overall quality of school life, and more (e.g., see Battistich and Hom 1997; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a; Erickson, Mattaini, & McGuire, 2004; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Loukas & Murphy, 2006; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton; McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Resnick, Bearman, Blum. et al. 1997; Ruus, Veisson, Leino, Ots, et al., 2007; Schapps, 2005; Thomas, Bierman, Powers, et al., 2010; Whitlock 2006; Wilson, 2004).

For example, it is widely emphasized that positive school environment and school connectedness are associated with positive academic performance and less risky adolescent behaviors; not surprisingly, all this is associated with positive relationships between students and school staff members. Strong associations with achievement levels also are reported for classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction and less disorganization and conflict. Conversely, findings suggest that experiencing school climate as negative can have long-range adverse effects (e.g., students dropping out, teacher burnout, mental health problems). Implications for practice emphasize strategies that enhance perceptions of safety, school connectedness, positive interpersonal relationships between students and school staff, feelings of self-determination, a psychological sense of community among stakeholders, and more.

It is important to note that some research suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against. At the same time, some findings suggest that broad-band strategies for improving school climate may be insufficient to engaging and re-engaging struggling students, especially those from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against. As Jennings and Greenberg (2009) stress:

> Emotionally challenging events that teachers typically face often involve interactions with students who are not emotionally well regulated, including those caught in anger, anxiety, and sadness. These students, at highest risk of developing behavioral disorders and emotion regulation difficulties, are the very students in greatest need of a supportive relationship with their teacher.

In addition to enhanced social and learning supports, a range of specific school and classroom climate strategies probably are necessary for reaching students who are struggling academically, acting out, and experiencing conflictual relationships with school staff and peers.

Given the correlational nature of school and classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. Big questions remain to be answered (e.g., Are there specific environment or climate features that impact student outcomes? How much of the effect is due to reducing stressors? What are the specific implications for policy and practice?).

Examples of Researchers' Conclusions

From: Cohen & Geier (2010). *School Climate Research Summary*.

"Some of the most important research that elucidates the relationship between school climate and school improvement efforts emerged from a multi-year study of schools in Chicago. Bryk and his colleagues found evidence that schools with high relational trust (good social relationships among members of the school community) are more likely to make changes that improve student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In their most recent summary of this work, Byrk and his colleagues (2010) detail how the following four systems interact in ways that support or undermine school improvement efforts: (i) professional capacity (e.g. teachers' knowledge and skills; support for teacher learning; and school-based learning communities); (ii) order, safety and norms (labeled as 'school learning climate'); (iii) parent-school-community ties; and (iv) instructional guidance (e.g. curriculum alignment and the nature of academic demands). These dimensions shape the process of teaching and learning. The authors underscore how their research has shown relational trust is the 'glue' or the essential element that coordinates and supports these four processes, which are essential to effective school climate improvement (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010)."

Bryk, A. S. & Schneider, B. L. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications.
Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

From: Wang & Holcombe (2010) *Adolescents' perceptions of school environment, engagement, and academic achievement in middle school*.

"We found that teachers can best promote students' positive identification with school and stimulate their willingness to participate in their tasks by offering positive and improvement-based praise and emphasizing effort while avoiding pressuring students for correct answers or high grades.... Conversely, results from our study demonstrate that the presence of competitive learning environment decreases school participation, undermines the development of a sense of school belonging, and diminishes the value students place on school.... Students who are competent but either alienated from school or less intrinsically motivated may need more autonomy support in the form of more interesting and relevant activities and decision-making opportunities in order to become engaged with learning. On the other hand, students who are passive or anxious about exercising autonomy or attempting novel tasks may need more structured scaffolding of tasks, more guidance, and more explicit instruction in effective strategies before they fully engage with classroom learning.... We found that students who reported being encouraged to interact and discuss ideas with each other in class reported higher levels of school identification and use of self-regulatory strategies. Moreover, students are more likely to participate in school and bond with school when teachers create a caring and socially supportive environment...."

It is extremely costly and time-intensive to transform schools where the prevailing environment has created a lackluster or, worse yet, a hostile climate. As we have indicated, there is little agreement about how best to proceed to improve the climate.

Those who focus mainly on the construct of school climate tend to place a high policy on assessing school climate. Given the realities of severe budget cuts, however, overemphasis on expending significant resources on assessment is premature. After all, most stakeholders already are painfully aware when their school's climate is unsatisfactory. And, given the experiences with achievement testing, hopefully, policy makers have learned that overinvesting sparse resources in measurement means leaving too little for capacity building.

With respect to making things better, we suggest that the first and foremost necessities for improving schools involve enhancing resources as much as feasible and increasing supports for *capacity building*, especially strengthening personnel competence, at every school.

Keeping the Focus on Enhancing School Improvement

Probably everyone has an image of an ideal school climate. Chances are the image is rather utopian. As such, the image is an aspiration and can only be approximated by broadly focusing on improving many facets of the education system.

We all want schools to be good. Based in part on the research on school effectiveness, there is growing consensus about what constitutes good schools and classrooms. Exhibits 1 and 2 offer a series of syntheses that encapsulate prevailing thinking. Such thinking and all school improvement policy and practice, of course, are influenced by politics, economics, social philosophy, and a host of legal and pragmatic factors. Fundamentally, school climate is dependent on and emerges from how school improvement is defined, planned, and implemented.

Students' feelings of being part of the school community and cared for by the members of that community create the conditions for healthy development and avoidance of risk behavior.
Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart

Ultimately, given our society's commitment to equity, fairness, and justice, school improvement means doing the best at every school for *all* students. For school staff, equity, fairness, and justice start with designing instruction in ways that account for a wide range of individual differences and circumstances. But, the work can't stop there if we are to assure all students an equal opportunity to succeed at school. Teachers and student support staff must be prepared to design all facets of classrooms and what goes on schoolwide with a view to accommodating and assisting all students and especially those who are not motivationally ready and able to profit from instructional improvements.

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Exhibit 1

A Synthesis of Principles/Guidelines Underlying Good Schools and Teaching*

The following are widely advocated guidelines that provide a sense of the philosophy for school efforts to address barriers to development and learning and promote healthy development. This synthesis is organized around concerns for (1) stakeholders, (2) the teaching process, and (3) school and classroom climate.

(1) With respect to *stakeholders*, good schools and good teaching

- employ a critical mass of high quality leadership and line staff who believe in what they are doing, value the search for understanding, see errors as valuable sources of learning, and pursue continuing education and self-renewal,

- involve all staff and a wide range of other competent, energetic, committed and responsible stakeholders in planning, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing renewal,

- identify staff who are not performing well and provide personalized capacity building opportunities, support, or other corrective remedies.

(2) With respect to the *teaching process*, good schools and good teaching use the strengths and vital resources of all stakeholders to

- ensure the same high quality for all students,

- formulate and effectively communicate goals, standards, and quality indicators for cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development,

- facilitate continuous cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development and learning using procedures that promote active learning in-and out-of-school,

- ensure use of comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches (e.g., approaches that are extensive and intensive enough to ensure that students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and develop in healthy ways),

- make learning accessible to all students (including those at greatest risk and hardest-to-reach) through development of a full continuum of learning supports (i.e., an enabling component),

- tailor processes so they are a good fit in terms of both motivation and capability and are no more intrusive and disruptive than is necessary for meeting needs and accounting for distinctive needs, resources, and other forms of diversity,

- deal with students holistically and developmentally, as individuals and as part of a family, neighborhood, and community,

- tailor appropriate measures for improving practices and for purposes of accountability.

(3) With respect to school and classroom *climate*, good schools and good teaching

- delineate the rights and obligations of all stakeholders,

- are guided by a commitment to social justice (equity) and to creating a sense of community,

- ensure staff, students, family members, and all other stakeholders have the time, training, skills, and institutional and collegial support necessary to create an accepting and safe environment and build relationships of mutual trust, respect, equality, and appropriate risk-taking.

And, in general, good schools and good teaching are experienced by all stakeholders as user friendly, flexibly implemented, and responsive.

*Synthesized from many sources including the vast research literature on good schools and good teaching; these sources overlap, but are not as restricted in their focus as the literature on effective schools and classrooms – see next Exhibit.

Exhibit 2

**A Synthesis of Characteristics of Effective Schools and Classrooms
that Account for *All* Learners***

Effective Schools

- Commitment to shared vision of equality
  >High expectations for student learning
  >Emphasis on academic work that is
    meaningful to the student

- Daily implementation of effective processes
  >Strong administrative leadership
  >Alignment of resources to reach goals
  >Professional development tied to goals
  >Discipline and school order
  >A sense of teamwork in the school
  >Teacher participation in decision making
  >Effective parental outreach and involvement

- Monitoring student progress through
  measured indicators of achievement
  >Setting local standards
  >Use of national standards
  >Use of data for continuous improvement of
    school climate and curricula

- Optimizing school size through limited
  enrollment, creation of small schools within
  big schools (e.g., academies, magnet
  programs), and other ways of grouping
  students and staff

- Strong involvement with the community
  and with surrounding family of schools
  >Students, families, and community are
    developed into a learning community
  >Programs address transitions between grades,
    school, school-to-career, and higher education

Effective Classrooms

- Positive classroom social climate that
  >personalizes contacts and supports in ways
    that build trust over time and meets learners
    where they are
  >offers accommodation so all students have
    an equal opportunity to learn
  >adjusts class size and groupings to
    optimize learning
  >engages students through dialogue and
    decision making and seizing "teachable
    moments"
  >incorporates parents in multiple ways
  >addresses social-emotional development

- Designing and implementing quality
  instructional experiences that
  >involve students in decision making
  >contextualize and make learning authentic,
    including use of real life situations and
    mentors
  >are appropriately cognitively complex and
    challenging
  >enhance language/literacy
  >foster joint student products
  >extend the time students engage in learning
    through designing motivated practice
  >ensure students learn how to learn and are
    prepared for lifelong learning
  >ensure use of prereferral intervention
    strategies
  >use a mix of methods and advanced
    technology to enhance learning

- Instruction is modified to meet students'
  needs based on ongoing assessments using
  >measures of multiple dimensions of impact
  >authentic assessment tools
  >students' input based on their self-evaluations

- Teachers collaborate and are supported with
  >personalized inservice, consultation,
    mentoring, grade level teaming
  >special resources who are available to come
    into the classroom to ensure students with
    special needs are accommodated
    appropriately

*Synthesized from many sources including the vast
research literature on effective schools and classrooms.

Theory and Research-based Assumptions

Based on the existing literature and given the realities of current resources (e.g., personnel, dollars, space, facilities, etc.), we stress the following assumptions in pursuing work designed to ensure school improvement and school climate efforts address all and not just some students:

- School climate emerges from the ongoing transactions among key stakeholders and between them and the school environment.

- Stakeholder perceptions are the critical criterion for evaluating school climate.

- Stakeholders need to develop a sense of personal responsibility for the school's mission, appreciation of individual differences, commitment to independent and cooperative functioning and problem solving, and a desire to generate a psychological sense of community.

- Besides improved learning, policies and practices must stress improved strategies for enabling equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at school.

- A unified and comprehensive system of stakeholder supports is essential to minimizing barriers to learning and teaching and keeping students engaged.

- The wider the range of options that can be offered and the more the stakeholders are made aware of the options and have a choice about which to pursue, the greater the likelihood that they will perceive the school climate as positive.

- For struggling students (and their parents), the school climate is unlikely to be perceived as good as long as the student is not engaged effectively with the school. Thus, interventions must be designed to enhance the student's (and other key stakeholders') intrinsic valuing of what the school can contribute to her or his well-being.

- School personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, school and student support staff) are unlikely to perceive the climate positively unless they feel they have a sense of job satisfaction.

- Support for school improvement capacity building, especially enhancing personnel competence, should be the first priority**.**

> **Support for school improvement capacity building, especially enhancing personnel competence, should be the first priority.**

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A Few Specifics Related to Improving Schools in Ways that Promote a Positive School and Classroom Climate

Analyses of practice and research suggest that a proactive approach to developing positive school and classroom climates requires careful attention to (1) enhancing the quality of life at school and especially in the classroom for students and staff, (2) pursuing a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social and emotional learning, (3) enabling teachers and other staff to be effective with a wide range of students, and (4) fostering intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching.

With respect to all this, the literature advocates

- a welcoming, caring, and hopeful atmosphere

- social support mechanisms for students and staff

- an array of options for pursuing goals

- meaningful participation by students and staff in decision making

- transforming the classroom infrastructure from a big classroom into a set of smaller units organized to maximize intrinsic motivation for learning and not based on ability or problem-oriented grouping

- providing instruction and responding to problems in a personalized way

- use of a variety of strategies for preventing and addressing problems as soon as they arise

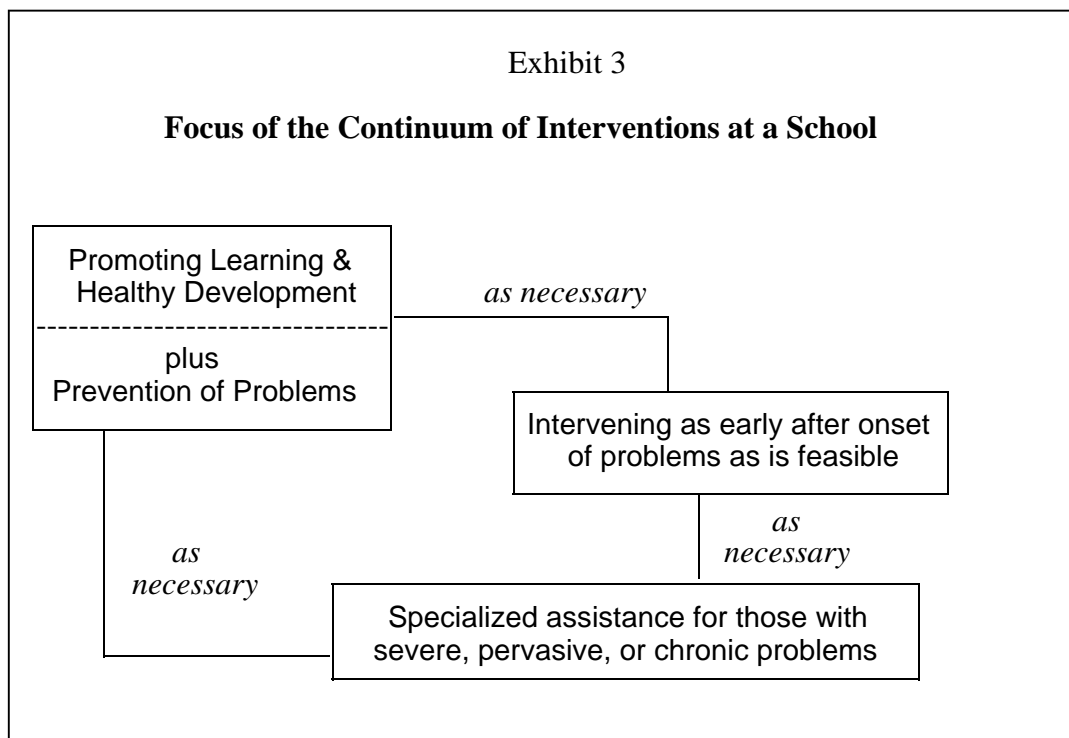- a healthy and attractive physical environment that is conducive to learning and teaching.

For more discussion of practices, see Blum (2005), Brophy (2004), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009a,b), Center for Mental Health in Schools (2011a), Lehr and Christenson (2002), National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004), Tableman (2004), Weiss, Cunningham, Lewis, and Clark (2005).

Framing the Work

A school that pursues equity of opportunity for all students strives to develop a full continuum of interventions. Such a continuum extends from (1) promoting assets and preventing problems, through (2) responding to problems as early as feasible after they appear, and extending on to (3) narrowly focused treatments and specialized help for severe/chronic problems (see Exhibit 3).

All the programs represented by the continuum are integrally related. Therefore, it seems likely that the impact of each can be exponentially increased through organizing them into subsystems and then integrating them as appropriate (Adelman & Taylor, 2006 a,b).

Focusing only on a continuum of intervention, however, is insufficient. It is necessary to organize programs and services into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the content purpose of the activity. Thus, pioneering efforts across the country not only are striving to develop a full continuum of programs and services, they are framing the content by clustering the work into a circumscribed set of arenas of intervention (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011b).

Exhibit 3

Focus of the Continuum of Interventions at a School

Promoting Learning & Healthy Development
----
plus
Prevention of Problems

as necessary

Intervening as early after onset of problems as is feasible

as necessary

as necessary

Specialized assistance for those with severe, pervasive, or chronic problems

With respect to organizing content, in our work with schools we stress six clusters:

(1) Direct strategies to (a) facilitate instruction and (b) enable learning in the classroom (e.g., personalizing and improving instruction in general and specifically for students who have become disengaged from learning at school, with specialized assistance as necessary for those with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)

(2) Supports for transitions (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)

(3) Increasing home and school connections

(4) Responding to, and where feasible, preventing crises

(5) Increasing community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)

(6) Facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

Good direct instruction is essential but insufficient to enhancing school climate

As illustrated in Exhibit 4, the result of combining the continuum and the six arena example is a unifying, comprehensive, and cohesive framework that captures many of the multifaceted concerns schools, families, and neighborhoods must address each day (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a,b; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).
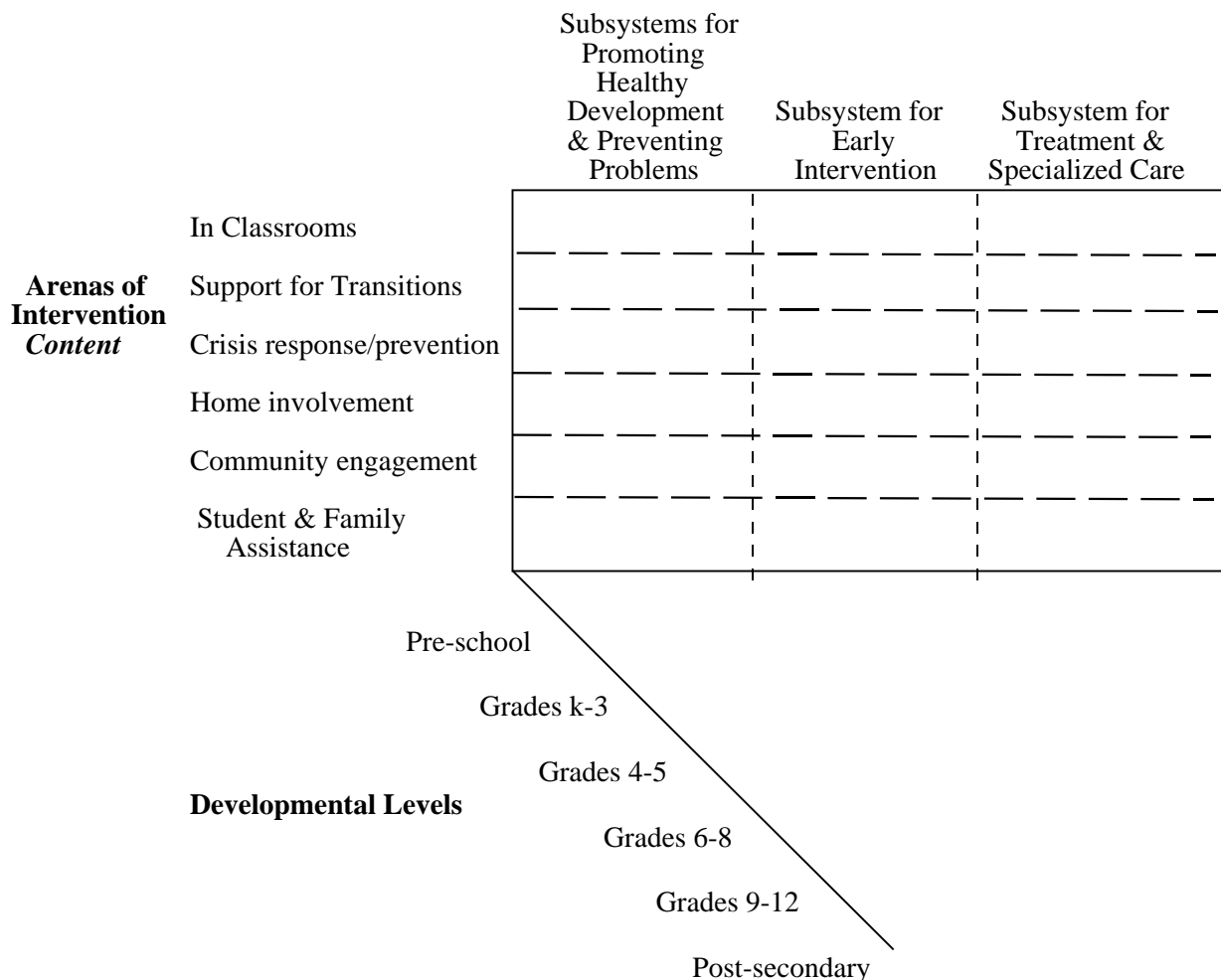
This framework can be used to weave together school, home, and community resources in ways that enhance effectiveness, achieve economies of scale, and provide a base for leveraging additional financial support. (See Appendix B for more on the six arenas.)

Note: As a guidance resource for intervention capacity building, the basic matrix illustrated in Exhibit 4 is formatted as a tool for mapping and analyzing resources to fill gaps, enhance cost-effectiveness, and plan priorities for system development. See http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/tool%20mapping%20current%20status.pdf

Exhibit 4

A Unifying Intervention Framework to Aid Schools, Families, and Neighborhoods in Providing a Comprehensive and Cohesive System of Supports

Integrated Intervention *Subsystems*

	Subsystems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Subsystem for Early Intervention	Subsystem for Treatment & Specialized Care
In Classrooms			
Support for Transitions			
Crisis response/prevention			
Home involvement			
Community engagement			
Student & Family Assistance			

Arenas of Intervention *Content*

Pre-school

Grades k-3

Grades 4-5

Developmental Levels

Grades 6-8

Grades 9-12

Post-secondary

Some Special Concerns Improving schools requires a critical mass of stakeholders who feel like valued members contributing to the collective identity, destiny, and vision and who are committed to being and working together in supportive ways. Some straightforward considerations for capacity building include enhancing a school's culture of *caring and nurturance* and *collaboration and collegiality*.

Caring and nurturance begin with welcoming and providing social support. An ongoing welcoming and supportive culture sets the

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stage for collaboration and collegiality. And as Hargreaves and others have noted, collaboration and collegiality are fundamental to morale and work satisfaction and to the whole enterprise of transforming schools to meet the needs of individuals and society. *Collaborative cultures* foster collaborative working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable. Note, however, collegiality cannot be mandated. When it is *mandated*, the result often is *contrived collegiality* which tends to breed inflexibility and inefficiency. Contrived collegiality is administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable (Hargreaves, 1994).

Given the importance of home involvement in schooling, attention also must be paid to creating a caring atmosphere for family members. Increased home involvement is more likely if families feel welcome and have access to social support at school. Thus, teachers and other school staff need to establish a program that effectively welcomes and connects families with school staff and other families to generate ongoing social support and greater participation in home involvement efforts.

The aim in all this is to promote feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness

Also, just as with students and their families, school staff need to feel truly welcome and socially supported. Rather than leaving this to chance, a caring school develops and institutionalizes a program to welcome and connect new staff with those with whom they will be working. And it does so in ways that effectively weaves newcomers into the organization.

Another specific focus is on barriers that can get in the way of stakeholders working together. Problems related to working relationships are a given. To minimize such problems, it is important for participants to understand barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such barriers.

The aim in all this is to promote feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness (e.g. Deci, 2009; Deci &Flaste, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1985; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2009). Such feelings and attitudes are engendered by ensuring there are mechanisms and strategies that effectively provide support, promote self-efficacy, and foster positive relationships. The degree to which a school can create the desired atmosphere seems highly related to its capacity to prevent and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems. And, an obvious connection exists between all this and sustaining morale and minimizing burnout.

A Note About Creating a Caring Context for Learning

By this point, it should be evident that creating a caring context for learning requires considerable commitment on the part of all concerned. Teaching can be done in any context. Whenever a surrounding environment tries to promote learning, the process can be called teaching. Teaching occurs at school, at home, and in the community at large. It may be formalized or informally transmitted. Teaching in no way guarantees that learning will take place. Teaching in an uncaring way probably does guarantee problems will arise.

From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching are experienced most positively when the learner cares about learning and the teacher cares about teaching. *Moreover, the whole process benefits greatly when all the participants care about each other.* Thus, good schools and good teachers work diligently to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community Such an atmosphere can play a key role in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems and promoting social and emotional learning and well-being.

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets. And when all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned. This means a focus throughout on fostering positive socio-emotional and physical development.

Caring begins when students (and their families) first arrive at a school. Classrooms and schools can do their job better if students feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. A key facet of welcoming encompasses effectively connecting new students with peers and adults who can provide social support and advocacy.

On an ongoing basis, caring and a positive school climate are best maintained through use of personalized instruction, regular student conferences, activity fostering social and emotional development, and opportunities for students to attain positive status. Efforts to create a caring classroom climate benefit from programs for cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mentoring, advocacy, peer counseling and mediation, human relations, and conflict resolution. Special attention is needed to promote practices that enhance motivation to learn and perform, while avoiding practices that decrease motivation and/or produce avoidance motivation and that focuses on mobilizing unmotivated students (and particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). Clearly, a myriad of strategies can contribute to students feeling positively connected to the classroom and school.

A special problem that arises in caring communities are rescue dynamics. Such dynamics arise when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. It is important to minimize such dynamics by establishing procedures that build on motivational readiness and personalized interventions.

Concluding Comments

Ultimately, all stakeholders have a significant role to play in ensuring schools change in ways that enhance school climate and account for the full range of students and other key stakeholders at a school. It seems unlikely, however, that all this can be attained in the absence of a fundamental shift in school improvement policy and practice.

Current policy and plans for turning around, transforming, and continuously improving schools are too limited because they focus mainly on improving instruction and how schools manage resources. This state of affairs deemphasizes the necessity for directly addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students as a primary facet of improving schools, enhancing school climate, and ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

As our research stresses, the essential shift needed in school improvement policy and practice is a move from the prevailing two- to a three- component functional framework. The third component provides a unifying concept and umbrella for developing a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students (see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011c).

Clearly, enhancing school and classroom climate is a demanding process. At the same time, it is clear that leaving things as they are is not an option. A shift in school improvement policy and practices is essential in meeting society's commitment to public education, public health, and civil rights.

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Appendix A

A Few Examples to Illustrate School Climate Research Findings

As noted in the body of this brief, although the findings are correlational, analyses of research do suggest the importance of practices that yield a positive school climate. For example, practices that enhance a sense of school connectedness and positive relationships between students and school staff are associated with positive outcomes in academic behavioral, and emotional domains.

Research also suggests that broad-band strategies for improving school climate may be insufficient to engaging and re-engaging struggling students, especially those from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against. Thus, more strategies for improving school and classroom climate must be designed to reach such students (especially enhanced social and learning supports).

Examples Reporting Impact on Behavioral and Emotional Problems

(1) From Spangler Avant, Gazelle, & Faldowski (2011).

Working from a transactional classroom model, the investigators studied "the ability of classroom emotional climate to moderate anxious solitary children's risk for peer exclusion over a 3-year period from 3rd through 5th grade." Sample size was 688. The refer to classroom emotional climate as "the affective tone of the multidirectional interactions among teachers and students in the classroom. These interactions are conceptualized as the primary mechanism through which children experience opportunities to develop social skills and competencies relevant to their role as classmate and student in the school context...." In a supportive emotional climate, teacher and students interactions are characterized by a general positive affective tone and low conflict with the teacher responsive to students' needs, students granted autonomy appropriate to their age, and student disruptive and off-task behaviors minimal and/or managed efficiently.

    The researchers report "a positive relation between anxious solitude and peer exclusion in the fall semester of each grade. However, in classrooms with supportive versus unsupportive emotional climates, this relation demonstrated a different pattern of change from fall to spring semesters." In supportive emotional classrooms, "children with high versus low levels of anxious solitude experienced relative elevation in fall peer exclusion, but this disappeared by the spring, such that spring peer exclusion levels were equalized among children who differed in anxious solitude." "Anxious solitary children appeared to become increasingly protected from peer exclusion as they remained in classrooms with highly and moderately supportive emotional climates over the course of the school year."

    In classrooms with unsupportive emotional climates, results did not conform to expectations that children with high anxious solitude would experience stable or increased peer exclusion over time. In these classrooms, anxious solitary boys were less accepted by peers, and anxious solitary girls were more victimized and displayed more depressive symptoms. Conversely, these risks diminished in emotionally supportive classrooms."

(2) From Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, and Pianta (2007).

In another study guided by a transactional model emphasizing classroom conditions and student at risk attributes, this these researchers report observations conducted on 955 children in 888 third-grade classrooms. One aspect of their analyses found those at risk for school problems particularly benefitted from higher classroom quality within more demanding instructional contexts. They conclude: "Behavioral engagement in the classroom is multidetermined, in part by classroom conditions that afford opportunities for engagement and in part by children's attributes that place them at risk for school problems."

(3) From Way, Reedy, & Rhodes (2007).

Way and colleagues studied the effects on the rate of change in psychological and behavioral adjustment of changes in student perceptions of "four critical dimensions of school climate (i.e., teacher support, peer support, student autonomy in the classroom, and clarity and consistency in school rules and regulations)." The focus was on a sample of 1,451 middle school students. The researchers reported that all four dimensions of perceived school climate declined over the 3 years and were associated with declines over time in psychological and behavioral adjustment. They also noted gender and socioeconomic class differences. They conclude that interpersonal, organizational, and instructional "climate" of middle schools "strongly influences students' adjustment across multiple domains" and may be "as important in shaping psychological and behavioral adjustment as the transition from elementary school to middle school."

(4) From Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak (2010).

Findings similar to those of Way, et al., are reported by Wang, et al. Following a sample of 677 students from 8 schools from 6th through 8th grade, they indicate that "the proportions of students reporting a positive school climate perception decreased over the middle school years for both genders, while the level of problem behavior engagement increased. The findings suggested that students who perceived higher levels of school discipline and order or more positive student-teacher relationships were associated with lower probability and frequency of subsequent behavioral problems."

(5) From Turner, Midgley, Meyer, Gheen, Anderman, Kang, & Patrick (2002).

These investigators report on a study with a sample of 1,197 sixth grade students in 65 classrooms. They indicate that "Students reported using avoidance strategies significantly less in classrooms perceived as emphasizing learning, understanding, effort, and enjoyment. ...Students reported lower incidences of avoidance strategies in classroom in which teachers provided instructional and motivational support for learning. In those classrooms, teachers helped students build understanding, gave them opportunities to demonstrate new competencies, and provided substantial motivational support for learning."

(6) From Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt (2001).

This study pursued research based on previous findings that "the negative psychological changes experienced by many young adolescents are associated with a developmental mismatch between the needs of these adolescents and the opportunities afforded them by their school environments.... Low income and ethnic minority students are more likely than others to attend schools with few resources and become increasingly likely to experience academic difficulties as they progress from primary through secondary school.... In a sample of sixth and seventh graders, self-critical youth who perceived their school as an orderly place where all are treated fairly and have equal opportunities for learning, and where student-student and teacher-student relationships are positive did not show the same increases in internalizing and externalizing problems as self-critical youth with negative perceptions of school climate.... The findings of the present study add to a growing body of knowledge pointing to the promise of intervening in school settings to prevent maladjustment in young adolescents...."

(7) From LaRusso, Romer, & Selman (2008).

Positive school climates have been found to have favorable effects on adolescent health risk behaviors and mental health outcomes. However, the mechanisms by which teacher behavior may promote such effects in high schools have not been extensively studied. Based on social control theory and a social developmental-contextual model, it was predicted that by respecting students' points of view and decision making capabilities, teachers can help build respectful school climates that encourage healthy norms of behavior. Structural equation modeling with a

nationally representative sample of 476 youth ages 14–18 supported the model. Adolescents who reported higher teacher support and regard for student perspectives in their high schools were more likely to see their schools as having respectful climates and healthy norms of drug use which was associated with lower levels of personal drug use. Students in such schools also reported greater social belonging and fewer symptoms of depression.

Example of a Study Reporting a Moderating Impact on the Negative Effects of Poverty

From Hopson & Lee (2011).

This research examined whether the effect of positive perceptions of school climate can moderate the association between family poverty and grades and behavior. The sample was 485 of 639 middle and high school students in one school district serving predominantly non-hispanic white (86%), with 52 percent eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program. They found no significant difference in the behavior of students from poor and higher income families among students who provided the most positive ratings for climate. That is, positive perceptions of school climate were associated with positive grades and behavior. They conclude that perceptions of school climate moderated the association between poverty and poor grades and behavior, such that students from poor families who perceive a positive school climate exhibit similar behaviors to their peers from higher income families. Moreover, they suggest that "the disproportionately strong association between school climate and behavior for students from poor families suggests that climate plays an especially important role for these students."

Examples of the Differential Impact on Students Who Are and Are Not Doing Well at School

(1) From Dotterer & Lowe (2011).

The study aims to examine differences between struggling and non-struggling students. Results indicated that psychological and behavioral engagement mediated the link between classroom context and academic achievement for fifth grade students without previous achievement difficulties. These findings support the assertion that enhancing classroom context with high quality instruction, positive socia/emotional climate, and reducing student-teacher conflict can increase students' engagement, which in, turn, enhances academic achievement.
   However, for students with previous achievement difficulties psychological and behavioral engagement did not mediate the link between classroom context and academic achievement. Among the struggling learners, classroom context was related significantly and positively to behavioral engagement. Struggling students who were in classroom characterized by high instructional quality, positive social/emotional climate, and less conflict with teachers, were observed as being more attentive during class and engaged in learning. However, behavioral engagement was not in turn related to academic achievement.
   These results suggest that improving classroom quality may not be sufficient to improve student engagement and achievement for students with previous achievement difficulties. Additional strategies may be needed for these students (e.g., small group rather than whole class instruction, early intervention to promote feelings of belonging and competence)

(2) From Hughes, Cavell, & Willson (2001).

Using a sample of behaviorally at-risk nine year old children, researchers found that teacher preferences for children affect children's peer relationships in the classroom. "These findings have implications for improving the peer status of low-accepted and aggressive children. ...Interventions that focus directly on the affective quality of teacher-student interactions may be a helpful adjunct or alternative to skills-trining approaches. By increasing supportive teacher-student interactions, classmates may be more likely to interpret a child's behavior in a more favorable light. ..."

(3) From Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan (2011).

Focusing on the classroom environment from a motivational perspective, in a series of studies these investigators studied the convergence of a mastery goal structure and 4 dimensions of classroom social climate (teacher academic support, teacher emotional support, classroom mutual respect, task-related interaction). Separate adolescent samples were used and differed considerably (by racial and demographic characteristics, grade level, and educational contexts). Studies 1, 2, and 3 (Ns = 537, 537, and 736, respectively) showed that "mastery goal structure items occupied a central space among the climate items and overlapped partially with the areas formed by respect and academic and emotional support items."

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Note: Prevailing approaches to measuring classroom climate use (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and/or (3) naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative assessment techniques (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999).
The Journal of of Psychoeducational Assessment has articles that analyze, discuss, and review instruments that are used to assess school climate. See http://jpa.sagepub.com/search?fulltext=school%20climate&sortspec=date&submit=Submit&and orexactfulltext=phrase&src=selected&journal_set=spjpa

   To view an instrument designed for assessing school climate, see the Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) *School Climate Survey* online at – http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/school_survey.html

   For an example of a recently developed instrument, see the *Comprehensive School Climate Inventory* (CSCI) distributed by the National School Climate Center -- http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php .

Appendix B

Programs Organized into Six Arenas Reflecting the Activity's Content.

An emphasis at all times is on enhancing feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to others at school and reducing threats to such feelings.

(1) Direct Strategies to Enable Learning in the Classroom

Examples
- Personalizing instruction and providing specialized assistance as necessary
- Opening the classroom door to bring available supports in (e.g., peer tutors, volunteers, aids trained to work with students-in-need; resource teachers and student support staff work in the classroom as part of the teaching team)
- Redesigning classroom approaches to enhance teacher capability to prevent and handle problems and reduce need for out of class referrals (e.g. personalized instruction; special assistance as necessary; developing small group and independent learning options; reducing negative interactions and over-reliance on social control; expanding the range of curricular and instructional options and choices; systematic use of prereferral interventions)
- Enhancing and personalizing professional development (e.g., creating a Learning Community for teachers; ensuring opportunities to learn through co-teaching, team teaching, and mentoring; teaching intrinsic motivation concepts and their application to schooling)
- Curricular enrichment and adjunct programs (e.g., varied enrichment activities that are not tied to reinforcement schedules; visiting scholars from the community)
- Classroom and school-wide approaches used to create and maintain a caring and supportive climate

(2) Crisis Assistance and Prevention

Examples
- Ensuring immediate assistance in emergencies so students can resume learning
- Providing Follow up care as necessary (e.g., brief and longer-term monitoring)
- Forming a school-focused Crisis Team to formulate a response plan and take leadership for developing prevention programs
- Mobilizing staff, students, and families to anticipate response plans and recovery efforts
- Creating a caring and safe learning environment (e.g., developing systems to promote healthy development and prevent problems; bullying and harassment abatement programs)
- Working with neighborhood schools and community to integrate planning for response and prevention

(3) Support for Transitions

Examples
- Welcoming & social support programs for newcomers (e.g., welcoming signs, materials, and initial receptions; peer buddy programs for students, families, staff, volunteers)
- Daily transition programs for (e.g., before school, breaks, lunch, afterschool)
- Articulation programs (e.g., grade to grade – new classrooms, new teachers; elementary to middle school; middle to high school; in and out of special education programs)
- Summer or intersession programs (e.g., catch-up, recreation, and enrichment programs)
- School-to-career/higher education (e.g., counseling, pathway, and mentor programs; Broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions; students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education)
- Broad involvement of stakeholders in planning for transitions (e.g., students, staff, home, police, faith groups, recreation, business, higher education)

(cont.)

Arenas (cont.)

(4) Home Involvement in Schooling

Examples
- Addressing specific support and learning needs of family (e.g., support services for those in the home to assist in addressing basic survival needs and obligations to the children; adult education classes to enhance literacy, job skills, English-as-a-second language, citizenship preparation)
- Improving mechanisms for communication and connecting school and home (e.g., opportunities at school for family networking and mutual support, learning, recreation, enrichment, and for family members to receive special assistance and to volunteer to help; phone calls and/or e-mail from teacher and other staff with good news; frequent and balanced conferences – student-led when feasible; outreach to attract hard-to-reach families – including student dropouts)
- Involving homes in student decision making (e.g., families prepared for involvement in program planning and problem-solving)
- Enhancing home support for learning and development (e.g., family literacy; family homework projects; family field trips)
- Recruiting families to strengthen school and community (e.g., volunteers to welcome and support new families and help in various capacities; families prepared for involvement in school governance)

(5) Community Outreach for Involvement and Support

Examples
- Planning and Implementing Outreach to Recruit a Wide Range of Community Resources (e.g., public and private agencies; colleges and universities; local residents; artists and cultural institutions, businesses and professional organizations; service, volunteer, and faith-based organizations; community policy and decision makers)
- Systems to Recruit, Screen, Prepare, and Maintain Community Resource Involvement (e.g., mechanisms to orient and welcome, enhance the volunteer pool, maintain current involvements, enhance a sense of community)
- Reaching out to Students and Families Who Don't Come to School Regularly – Including Truants and Dropouts
- Connecting School and Community Efforts to Promote Child and Youth Development and a Sense of Community

(6) Student and Family Assistance

Examples
- Providing extra support as soon as a need is recognized and doing so in the least disruptive ways (e.g., prereferral interventions in classrooms; problem solving conferences with parents; open access to school, district, and community support programs)
- Timely referral interventions for students & families with problems based on response to extra support (e.g., identification/screening processes, assessment, referrals, and follow-up – school-based, school-linked)
- Enhancing access to direct interventions for health, mental health, and economic assistance (e.g., school-based, school-linked, and community-based programs and services)
- Care monitoring, management, information sharing, and follow-up assessment to coordinate individual interventions and check whether referrals and services are adequate and effective
- Mechanisms for *resource* coordination and integration to avoid duplication, fill gaps, garner economies of scale, and enhance effectiveness (e.g., braiding resources from school-based and linked interveners, feeder pattern/family of schools, community-based programs; linking with community providers to fill gaps)
- Enhancing stakeholder awareness of programs and services

Note: Capacity building is essential in all six arenas. This includes staff and stakeholder development, establishment of operational support mechanisms, and provision of essential resources.