School Climate Improvement:
Trends, Challenges and Opportunities

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I. **Introduction**:

❖ Overview: (i) Definitions; (ii) Practice and Policy Trends; (iii) Policy Resources; (iv) Surveys; (v) Readiness and Process measures; (v) Road Maps and (vi) Leadership development.

❖ School climate: Growing federal, state and district level interest and support (Appendix A and C)

❖ But a paradox! Almost 90% of practitioners report a "high" to "very high" need for detailed guidelines and tools.

❖ Supporting interest in school climate reform:
  ✓ Growing empirical support (see Appendix B)
  ✓ The 49 State Anti-bully laws (see policy resources below) (Appendix C)
  ✓ Growing concern about high school dropout rates and the "high school to prison pipeline"

II. **School climate**:

❖ "Climate", "culture", "supportive learning environments" and "conditions for learning" – similar and/or different?

❖ Definitions:
  ✓ *School climate*: The quality and character of school life: based on patterns of student, parent and school personnel's' beliefs, expectations, norms, relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices and the environment (National School Climate Council, 2007)
  ✓ A *positive and sustainable school climate*:
  ✓ An *effective school climate improvement process*: an intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent, and coordinated effort to strengthen school learning environments. Democratically informed decision-making constitutes an essential foundation for the school climate improvement process.

❖ PBIS and School Climate: Similar and/or different?
  ✓ *How are they similar*: They are both (i) school wide efforts; (ii) focused on supporting positive change; (iii) support student learning; (iv) support student-family-school personnel and community partnerships; (v) data driven; (vi) appreciate that adult behavior and "adult modeling" matters; and, (vii) focused on advancing policies and procedures that support effective practice.
  ✓ *How are they different*?
    (1) Different goals! PBIS – to "*prevent the development of problem behaviors and maximize academic success for all students.*" Vs. to support students, parents/guardians, school personnel and even community members learning and working together in a democratically informed manner to foster safe, supportive, engaging and flourishing schools that support school – and life – success.
    (2) Different data sets: PBIS - limited disciplinary related data (e.g. disciplinary referral, suspensions, expulsion rates vs. student, parent/guardian, school personnel and even community members perception of how safe the school is (e.g. rules and norms as well as how safe people feel socially and physically), relationship patterns (e.g. respect for diversity, social support), teaching and learning (e.g. support for learning and prosocial education) as well as the environment.
    (3) The model: PBIS is based on a behaviorally informed model is focused on students' problems and –-in many ways – extrinsic motivation. School climate reform supports the development of intrinsic motivation through engaging community members to be co-learners and co-leaders in the improvement process.

(4) Top down (PBIS) vs. bottom up (school climate reform):

(5) Adult learning, PLC's and adult modeling (a component of PBIS; a major focus for SC reform):

(6) Using data as a "hammer" vs. a "flashlight" - PBIS's policy efforts focus on supporting the design and implementation of effective interventions to change student behavior. School climate reform on the other hand is focused on supporting policies that shape systems – the school community – and using data as a "flashlight," not a "hammer."

III. **Five Essential Processes to Promote Positive School Climate**

❖ *Educational Leadership* (Appendix D)
   ✓ Principal leadership: on the power and challenges of transparent, democratically informed leadership
   ✓ Student leadership: www.schoolclimate.org/bullybust/upstander

❖ *Engaging the whole school community*: Roadmaps? Metrics?

❖ *Assessment*:
   i) *Readiness* assessments: All schools are 'ready' and every school presents with its own set of strengths and needs (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/assessments.php)
   ii) *Comprehensive* school climate assessment: Recognizing student, parent/guardian assessment as an engagement strategy as well as an improvement index and 'snapshot' of the school. (See Appendix D - *Independent reviews of school climate surveys* below)
   iii) *Process* or "end of stage" assessments: On the value and importance of learning from the continuous process of improvement (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/assessments.php)
   iv) Community *Scales* and furthering meaningful *School-Community Partnerships*: A practical and meaningful strategy that supports community members/leaders understanding and furthering the schools improvement goals (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/community-scale.php)

❖ *Policies*: (see policy guidelines and Appendix C Below)

❖ *Practice*:
   (i) School wide or systemic interventions
      ✓ Road Maps, benchmarks, guidelines and tools:
         • CASEL: www.casel.org/guide
         • Character Education Partnership: www.character.org/more-resources/11-principles/
         • National School Climate Center: www.schoolclimate.org/climate/process.php
      ✓ Beginning to proficient: Understanding and addressing the tasks/challenges that shape an effective process of (i) planning and preparation, (ii) evaluation, (iii) understanding evaluation findings and action planning, (iv) action planning, (v) beginning anew. (Appendix F)

   (ii) Teaching and learning: Promote prosocial education (e.g., character education, social-emotional learning, and mental health promotion efforts): (a) being a living example, (b) via classroom management strategies; (c) via a number of pedagogic strategies (e.g., cooperate learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009), service learning (Kaye, 2010), and, moral dilemma discussions (Berkowitz, 1981); and, (d) actual prosocial curriculum (Brown et al., 2012).

Resources
Appendix A
Information about school climate as well as bully prevention policies and laws

• State Database: Policies/Laws for school climate & bully prevention www.schoolclimate.org/climate/database.php
• Bellizio, D. (2012). December 2012 Policy Update: School Climate and Bully Prevention Trends State-by-State Assessment. *School Climate Brief,* Number 6, 2012 (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v6.pdf)

Appendix B
Information about the history and related understandings

• Brown, P.M., Corrigian, M.W., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (Eds) (2012). *The Handbook of Prosocial Education.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield

• 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.

• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/AdolescentHealth/pdf/connectedness.pdf

• Cohen, J. (2012). Measuring and improving school climate: A pro-social strategy that recognizes, educates and supports the whole child and the whole school community. *The Handbook of* Prosocial *Education*. Edited by P.M. Brown, M.W Corrigian and A. Higgins-D'Alessandro. Rowman & Littlefield

• Dary, T. & Pickeral, T. (ed) (2013). *School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability*. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1, NY: National School Climate Center. www.schoolclimate.org/publications/practice-briefs.php

• National School Climate Council (2007). *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy*. On: http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/policy-briefs.php (Leading author)

• National School Climate Council (2009). *National School Climate Standards: Benchmarks to promote effective teaching, learning and comprehensive school improvemen*t. National School Climate Center (www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php)

ª National School Climate Council (2012). *The School Climate Improvement Process: Essential Elements*. *School Climate Brief*, No. 4. Available online at: http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/schoolclimatebriefs.php

Information about current research findings

• Cohen, J., McCabe, E.M, Michelli, N.M & Pickeral, T. (2009). School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice. *Teachers College Record,* Volume 111: Issue 1: pp. 180-213. (Available on: www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=15220)

• Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Higgins-D'Alessandro & Guffey, S. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research,* 83,2, doi:10.3102/0034654313483907 (http://rer.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/04/18/0034654313483907.full.pdf+html?ijkey=lPFDtiKJJYWkE&keytype=ref&siteid=sprer) Available on: http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/research.php

Appendix C
Policy recommendations for developing effective school climate policy:
Part A - Conceptual Principles and Goals that School Climate Policies Should Include

POLICY PRINCIPLES	POLICY GOALS
School Climate is a Required Component of the School's Improvement Plan	The school district understands the research on school climate, values the context of schools, and commits to ensuring that school climate is a required component of each schools improvement plan. The school district adopts school climate standards as well as effective school climate assessment strategies, best practices and tools. The school district advocates for school climate as both a preventative strategy and intervention to ensure schools are safe, equitable, inclusive and engaging for students and adults. The school district establishes the infrastructure to effectively assist and support its schools' adoption of school climate improvement strategies.
School Climate Professional Development	The school district provides professional development for school leaders, teachers, support personnel, and school staff to increase their school climate knowledge and skills.
School Climate is Effectively Measured and Results are Shared with Education Stakeholders	The school district is committed to funding and utilizing effective school climate assessments in all schools on a continuous basis and sharing the results and implications with school leaders, staff, students, teachers, parents and community partners.
School Climate Supports Multiple	The school district values the participation of all school members and creates multiple

Pathways to Meaningful Participation	pathways with options to meet the varying interests, schedules, financial resources, cultural backgrounds, and language needs within the school community. The school district creates diverse curricular and extra-curricular activities, organizations and collaborations that reflect the diversity of the student body.
All Students and Adults in the School are Engaged in Creating and Sustaining Quality School Climate	As a result of the annual school climate assessments everyone in the school understands their individual and collective responsibilities to ensure their school climate is safe, equitable, inclusive and engaging for students and adults to do their best work.
All Adults Recognize the Importance of Personalization as Key to Student Success	There is a particular focus on the quality of relationships within the school community between students and adults.
Diverse Parents and Community Members are Engaged in Creating and Sustaining Quality School Climate	The school district values the contributions of diverse parents and community members and ensures they are appropriately and effectively engaged in creating and sustaining a quality school climate within both the school and the community.
Students are Appropriately Engaged and Supported in Their Responsibilities to Co-create and Sustain Quality School Climate	The school district is committed to engaging students representing the diversity of the student body as positive contributors to a safe, equitable, inclusive and engaging school climate. The school district will provide guidance, professional development and technical assistance to schools to effectively engage students throughout the school climate improvement and sustainability process.
Students and Adults Assume Leadership Roles in Creating and Sustaining a Quality School Climate	The school district understands that a positive school climate is not solely the result of a "top-down" mandate, but rather also a "bottom-up" process that ignites all members of the school community to be co-leaders and learners in an effort to achieve a more positive school climate.
School Climate is an Essential Component of Bullying & Harassment Prevention	The school district values that all students have a right to a safe, equitable, inclusive and engaging school climate promoting mutual respect and acceptance. The school district prioritizes prevention and requires that schools incorporate school climate standards, assessments, and youth engagement into their bullying/harassment policies, strategies, programs, and partnerships, while also addressing federal/state civil rights and bullying laws.
School Climate is an Essential Component of Disciplinary Policies and Practices	The school district revises its discipline policies and codes of conduct to include and emphasize school climate language, prevention efforts, restorative practices, and keeping students in the classroom.
Identification and Allocation of Adequate Funding to Support School Climate Improvement Efforts	Districts understand that the adoption of a comprehensive school climate policy is just the first step in the improvement efforts and that a meaningful source of funding will be needed to support and sustain these efforts.

Part B - Proposed Framework for Creating District-Level School Climate Policy

I.   **Policy Statement**

All schools must support and promote teaching and learning environments in which each and every student achieves academically and socially, has a strong and meaningful voice, and is prepared for democratic life and successful transition into the 21st century workplace. A positive school climate is an essential element of achieving these goals. Rigorous implementation of the following set of guiding principles and systemic strategies will promote these desired outcomes.

The [insert] Board of Education (the Board) adopts this Policy, guided by the fundamental belief that each and every school community member should be treated with dignity, should have the opportunity to learn, work, interact and socialize in physically, emotionally and intellectually safe, respectful and positive school environments, as well as the opportunity to experience high quality relationships. Schools, therefore, have the responsibility to promote conditions designed to create, maintain and nurture positive school climate.

This Policy sets forth the framework for an effective and democratically informed school climate improvement process, which includes a continuous cycle of (i) planning and preparation, (ii) evaluation, (iii) action planning, and (iv) implementation, and serves to actualize

the expectations of the five National School Climate Standards,[1] as detailed herein.[2]

The Board recognizes that there is no single best way to improve school climate. Each school needs to consider its history, strengths, needs, and goals. This Policy will support and promote the development of research-based action plans that will create and/or sustain physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe, equitable learning environments that foster social, emotional, ethical and academic learning.

II. **Definitions**

"*School Climate*" means the quality and character of school life: based on patterns of student, parent and school personnel's' beliefs, expectations, norms, relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices and the environment.[3]

An "*Effective School Climate Improvement Process*" is one that engages all stakeholders in the following six essential practices:

(1) Promoting decision-making that is collaborative, democratic, and actively involves all stakeholders (e.g., school personnel, students, families, community members) with varied and meaningful roles and perspectives where all voices are sought and heard;

(2) Utilizing psychometrically sound quantitative (e.g. survey) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) data to drive action planning, preventive/intervention practices and implementation strategies that continuously improve all dimensions of school climate, including regularly collecting data to evaluate progress and inform the improvement process;

(3) Tailoring improvement goals to address the unique needs of the student, and the broader school community. These goals shall be integrated into overall school improvement efforts thereby leveraging school strengths to address evidence-based areas of need, while sustaining the improvement process over time;

(4) Fostering adult learning in teams and/or professional learning communities to build capacity building among school personnel and develop common staff skills to educate the whole child;

(5) Basing curriculum, instruction, student supports, and interventions on scientific research and grounding in cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological theories of youth development. Interventions include strength-based programs and practices that together represent a comprehensive continuum of approaches to promote healthy student development and positive learning environments as well as address individual student barriers to learning; and

(6) Strengthening policies and procedures related to: (a) climate informed teaching and learning environments; (b) infrastructure to facilitate data collection, analysis, and effective planning; (c) implementation of school climate improvement plans; (d) evaluation of the school climate improvement process; and (e) sustainability of school climate improvement efforts.

"*Positive Sustained School Climate*" is one that fosters youth development and the learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society and includes:

(1) Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe;
(2) People (adults and students) who are engaged and respected;
(3) Students, families and educators working together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision;
(4) Educators who model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning; and
(5) Each person contributing to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

"*School Climate Committee*" means the committee appointed at a specific school building by the School Climate Specialist to perform the duties described herein. [*See Section IV below*]

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[1] Standards represent goals. When states or districts adopt or adapt standards, they are creating a "bar" that schools need to actualize in order to support student learning, achievement and positive youth development. The National School Climate Standards were developed by NSCC, the National School Climate Council and many other educational, school board and community leaders. http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php.

[2] School Climate improvement is more encompassing than any individual program that might be implemented as a strategy for improving one or more dimensions of school climate.

[3] National School Climate Council (2007). The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy. On: http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/policy-briefs.php.

"*School Climate Coordinator*" means the Superintendent or the certified administrator appointed by the Superintendent to oversee the implementation of the district's School Climate Plan and perform the duties described herein. [*See Section IV below*]

"*School Climate Specialist*" means the certified administrator appointed by the School Climate Coordinator at a specific school building to oversee the implementation of the district's School Climate Plan within the building, oversee the implementation of the School Climate Improvement Plan within the building, and perform the duties described herein. [*See Section IV below*]

"*School Climate Improvement Plan*" means the building-specific plan developed by the School Climate Committee using the School Climate Survey data and developed in accordance with the process described herein. The goal of the Improvement Plan is to improve school climate on a global level and actualize The 12 Dimensions of Climate[4] and The National School Climate Standards. [*See Section VI below*]

"*School Climate Survey*" shall mean a well-established reliable and valid survey, [approved by the [insert state] State Department of Education, if applicable] with additional external confirmation of its strength through third party evaluators and research studies, that is vigorously field tested, measures the core district populations (including students, parents/ guardians, all school personnel, administrators, educators, certified and noncertified staff) and, when available, the wider community, and is easy and quick to administer. It shall also be administered in the predominant languages used by the population being surveyed.[5] [*See Section V below*]

"*School employee*" means (1) a teacher, substitute teacher, school administrator, school Superintendent, guidance counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse, physician, school paraprofessional or coach employed by the Board; or (2) 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 Board.

III.   **Applicable Standards**
   A. For School Employees
   B. For Students
   C. For Board Members
   D. For Persons Contracted to Provide Services to the Board
   E. For Other Participants in the School Community
IV.   **Roles and Responsibilities**
   A. School Climate Coordinator
   B. School Climate Specialist
   C. School Climate Committee
V.   **School Climate Surveys**
VI.   **School Climate Improvement Plans**
VII.   **Professional Development**
VIII. **Codes of Conduct**
Note: A framework of restorative practices, aimed at keeping students in the classroom, should be included.
This proposed school climate policy must be aligned with existing Codes of Conduct, as well as other existing policies, such as Bullying Prevention and Discipline policies.
IX.   **Funding**
X.   **Accountability**

For further information and/or technical assistance: contact Jessica Savage, Esq.– NSCC Legal & Policy Director at jsavage@schoolclimate.org or (212) 707-8799, extension 27

Appendix D
Independent reviews of school climate surveys
• Clifford, M., Menon, R, Gangi, T., & Condon, C. & Hornung, K, (2012) *Measuring School Climate for Gauging Principal Performance: A Review of the Validity and Reliability of Publicly Accessible Measures*. American Institute of Research, www.air.org

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[4] http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/documents/dimensions_chart_pagebars.pdf.
[5] Faster, D. & Lopez, D. (2013). School climate and assessment. In Dary, T. & Pickeral, T. (ed) (2013). School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1, New York, NY: National School Climate Center.

• Gangi, T.A. (2009). *School climate and faculty relationships: Choosing an effective assessment measure*. Doctoral Dissertation, School Psychology Program, St. John's University, New York.

• Haggerty, K., Elgin, J. & Woolley, A. (2010). *Social-Emotional Learning Assessment Measures for Middle School Youth*. Social development Research Group, University of Washington. Supported by the Raikes Foundation. July 30, 2010

Appendix E
Information about school climate leadership development

• Education Leadership Coalition on School Climate (2012). *National School Climate Leadership Certification – Supporting Individuals, Teams, and Schools to Lead and Achieve School Climate Reform* (first edition). New York, New York. www.schoolclimate.org/programs/certification.php

• National School Climate Center (2012). *School climate resource center*: scrc.schoolclimate.org

Appendix F – An example of levels of proficiency
(From the NSCC Readiness Assessment)
1.3 Reflecting on core values in order to create the shared vision

Nothing in place (0): No school climate efforts are being considered at this time.

Getting started (1): The school is embarking on a school climate improvement process without a clear sense of the end goals and what type of community they want to develop.

Partially in place (2): School leaders understand core values within small groups. But, it is unclear to what extent others in the school community really understand and/or agree with these values and vision. There are not clear plans to "reach out" to all school community members.

Mostly in place (3): There is a genuine commitment to engage educators and parents /guardians in a collaborative process of learning about the schools strengths, weaknesses, challenges, barriers and needs as a basis for creating a shared vision. Goals are developed to understand and then disseminate the shared vision.

Fully in place (4): School leaders practice individual and collegial reflection on their ethical practices and core values. The team actively looks for and takes advantage of opportunities to create, refine, and promote the shared vision; and assess their plans and actions in relation to it. Students, staff, parents and community members are integral and valued members of this process.

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