Handbook of School Violence and School Safety
International Research and Practice
Shane R. Jimerson, Amanda B. Nickerson, Matthew J. Mayer, Michael J. Furlong

Gauging the System

Meagan O’Malley, Kristin Katz, Tyler L. Renshaw, Michael J. Furlong
Published online on: 05 Dec 2011

Accessed on: 26 Oct 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms
This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.
The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Abstract

Researchers and educators are giving increasing scrutiny to systems-level constructs that contribute to safe, supportive, and effective schools, including school climate. School climate is a multifaceted construct that is commonly conceptualized as school community members’ subjective experiences of the structural and contextual elements of a particular school. Although all schools strive to provide a caring and supportive school climate, climate itself is not the ultimate objective. Rather, climate conditions facilitate students’ physical and emotional safety, academic success, social engagement, and personal well-being. This chapter first discusses school climate definition and measurement issues. It then examines what is currently known about the positive correlates of school climate and offers guidance and strategies to assess climate at the school level.

Trends in School Climate Measurement and Intervention

The early part of the 21st century experienced a wave of public policy governing the teaching of discrete academic skills—a focus that largely eclipsed concurrent interest in the contexts in which these skills are learned. Indeed, children learn discrete academic skills in complex,
interwoven ecological systems that are layered with interpersonal interactions, some of which may make them feel unsafe, insecure, or ineffective. During this same period of public scrutiny on academic skills development, mounting empirical evidence found that the context in which learning occurs is powerful. When the school context is unsupportive, it may interfere with, or undermine altogether, the larger educational goals of learning to read, write, and perform mathematics on the global level, as well as societal goals of developing emotionally healthy, productive community members. As a response to this imbalance, scholars are increasingly calling for a deliberate, purposeful focus on the ecological systems in which children learn (e.g., Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Connoley & Gutkin, 1995).

In response to the scholarship around contextual factors in learning, federal agencies have begun to focus on ways that schools can enhance students’ short- and long-term psychosocial outcomes through intervention at the school systems level. Reducing risk-taking behavior and violence remains a paramount concern. However, the focus of policy is shifting to the measurement of system-level variables, particularly relationships and connectedness, that are implicated in improved short- and long-term psychosocial outcomes. This shifting focus is motivated by concern to prevent or minimize harm to students, but also by scholarship identifying and refining school-based constructs that are associated with positive youth development. School climate is one such construct, with a growing number of studies indicating that its dimensions are associated with positive youth outcomes and modifiable through purposeful educational practices (e.g., Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; see also Blum & Libbey, 2004 [Journal of School Health special issue on school engagement]).

The purpose of the present chapter is to elucidate the relation between school climate and multiple student safety indices and to frame school climate as a construct worthy of central focus for school safety teams. In the first section, a discussion of core school climate definitional issues is followed by a brief review of the correlates of school climate, highlighting relations between the construct and general student outcomes, general staff outcomes, and school safety outcomes. The second section examines the assessment of school climate, summarizing current measurement methods and outlining practical procedural approaches. The final section presents implications of school climate for school violence and safety, discussing critical issues and providing recommendations to enhance future scholarship and practice.

Defining School Climate

Scholars from the National School Climate Council (NSCC, 2009) proposed what is probably the most often cited definition of school climate: “the quality and character of school life … [It] is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures” (p. 5).

As the NSCC’s definition illustrates, there are numerous elements that comprise the structural or contextual nature of any given school’s climate. It is therefore challenging—and probably unproductive—to define a single school climate “archetype.” Rather, it is assumed that school climate elements vary from school to school, and even within schools over time, as the construct reflects local values, educational practices, and personal interactions that contribute to “spheres of school life” as well as to “larger organizational patterns” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). It follows, then, that school climate can be conceptualized as the collective, subjective appraisal of individuals’ experiences with their own local school environment, and that the elements upon which such appraisals are based may vary across schools, classes within schools, social groups, and individuals (e.g., Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010). Elements that may be considered include tangible environmental components (i.e., availability and quality of physical resources) and/or intangible one (i.e., relationships, quality of leadership).
Reflecting the growing consensus over the broad definition of school climate, policy makers have begun to synthesize school climate-related scholarship for the following three purposes: (a) to determine the components of school climate that should be included in content standards, (b) to examine models for use in assessing school climate, and (c) to consider needs and concerns regarding accountability for meeting school climate standards (Jennings, 2010). In late 2009, a team of leading school climate scholars, policy makers, and related stakeholders drafted a proposed federal model for school climate that includes three first-order “pillars” labeled (a) engagement, (b) safety, and (c) environment. Relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation are subsumed under engagement. Safety includes emotional safety, physical safety, and substance use. Finally, environment includes the physical environment, academic environment, wellness, and disciplinary environment (Jennings). Subsequently, the U.S. Office of Education’s Safe and Drug-Free Schools Office (2010) issued the Safe and Supportive Schools grant program (CFDA #84.184Y) for states to develop, validate, and implement school improvement efforts related to the three pillars of school climate.

Correlates of School Climate

Evidence for the impact of school climate on students, staff, and school safety is so compelling that, in their comprehensive review of the literature, four of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine’s (2004) 10 recommendations for enhancing school engagement were directly linked to school climate issues. Following is a summary of findings from a number of domains that support the theoretical and practical importance of the school climate construct.

Student Outcomes

A large body of research supports the impact of school climate factors on student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes. For instance, students’ perceptions of positive school climate are positively and significantly related to academic motivation, school connectedness, attitudes toward learning, and prosocial attitudes and behaviors (e.g., autonomy, efficacy, democratic values, conflict resolution skills; Brand et al., 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Moreover, children who perceive positive climates at their schools achieve higher scores on measures of academic achievement—including tests in language, reading, and math, and overall grade-point-average (Brand et al., 2003; Wilms & Somer, 2001). These trends hold across U.S. and international studies (Jia et al., 2009; Wilms & Somer, 2001), as well as across age groups (Roeser, Eccles, & Strobel, 1998). Finally, students who attend schools with positive climates engage in fewer risk-taking and violent behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997), have fewer discipline referrals and school suspensions (Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Welsh, 2000), and report feeling safer at school and more willing to report potential threats to safety (Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2009; Welsh, 2000). Taken together, these findings suggest that students who have positive subjective appraisals of their school environment—or school climate—are more likely to enjoy school, perform well academically, have positive peer relationships, and act and feel safer than students who have negative or neutral perceptions of their local school climate.

School Staff Outcomes

While fewer studies have explored staff perceptions of school climate, empirical findings demonstrate equally robust positive outcomes across several domains. For example, teacher perception of school climate has been shown to be positively and significantly related to greater
implementation fidelity of new curricula and interventions (Beets et al., 2008; Gregory, Henry, & Schoeny, 2007), decreased reports of teacher burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008), and greater levels of teacher job satisfaction and work productivity (Bevans, Bradshaw, Miech, & Leaf, 2007; Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991; Taylor & Tashakkori, 1995). Positive perception of school climate is also associated with teacher-efficacy (Bevans et al., 2007), intention to remain in the teaching profession (Weiss, 1999; see Guarino, Santibáñez, & Daley, 2006, for review), and increased teacher retention (Kelly, 2004; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Although these outcomes are positive ends in themselves, they are more compelling in terms of related “downstream effects” on student outcomes. It follows that more effective and satisfied teachers model positive interpersonal behaviors and report positive relationships with their fellow staff members and students. Indeed, evidence suggests that perceptions of positive school climate influence teacher practices that are likely to enhance positive psychosocial outcomes for their students (e.g., bully prevention programming) (Gregory et al., 2007), especially when working with low-income, minority populations (Brown & Medway, 2007; Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996). The data suggest that teacher and student perceptions of school climate are transactional—influencing each other in a bidirectional, cumulative way over time.

School Safety Outcomes

As described previously, poor perceptions of school climate are associated with risk-taking and violent behaviors among students (Resnick et al., 1997) as well as reduced feelings of safety (Welsh, 2000). Moreover, schools with weak school climates have higher rates of potential threats, but students are less willing to report these threats to school staff (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Syvertsen et al., 2009). School climate also interfaces with school violence and safety indicators at other levels. For example, a convergence of empirical evidence indicates that students experiencing poorer school climates—for instance, those having little social support from peers, problematic relationships with teachers, and lacking appropriate instruction—are more likely to be victimized by peers at school (e.g., DioGuardi & Theodore, 2006; Lee & Croninger, 1996; Welsh, 2003; Welsh, Stokes, & Greene, 2000), engage in self-victimization (e.g., suicide) (Blum, 2001), and be situated within communities characterized by higher rates of disorder and violence (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). Beyond the student level, evidence suggests that school climate factors are predictive of teacher victimization rates at school—accounting for, in some cases, up to 18% of the variance of such rates in secondary schools (Gottfredson et al., 2005). Thus, early evidence suggests a moderate, positive association between students’ and staff members’ safety at school—or at least their lack of victimization—and favorable appraisals of school climate.

Other studies have examined the student connectedness or bonding aspect of school climate and found that it is the strong predictor of school safety outcomes, beyond the presence or condition of physical environment or organizational elements (e.g., Gottfredson et al., 2005; Resnick et al., 1997). Hence, scholars have suggested that student connectedness is one of the essential pillars for promoting safe, supportive, and effective schools (Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2006; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Focusing on students’ connectedness to school should be viewed as a complementary, not contradictory, priority to focusing on safety-related indices. Together, these multiple data sources better represent the safety-status of school environments, and students’ experiences therein, than other external and more distal indicators, such as the socioeconomic status of the surrounding community or historical patterns of school organization (e.g., Galloway, Martin, & Wilcox, 1985; Hellman & Beaton, 1986). Ultimately, this suggests that assessment and intervention efforts are likely to be more effective when they focus on multiple internal school climate variables. Of course, for an individual school to do this
it needs access to efficient and effective methods and valid school climate measures with which to monitor campus conditions and adjust school programs and services to local conditions. We turn our attention now to a review of school climate measures that are readily available and have sufficient psychometric information to warrant their use.

Examining Current School Climate Measurement

Until very recently, Anderson's (1982) illustration of the construct of school climate with the fable of the blind men and the elephant, wherein each blind man defines the beast according to the part he can touch, remained appropriate. However, the period between 2009 and 2011 have proved rather fruitful for the growth of the school climate construct. A consensus has emerged regarding a common definition for school climate (see NSCC, 2009), as well as a solution to the problem of operationalizing school climate variables for the purpose of measurement. Before the three-pillar (engagement, safety, environment) federal school climate model (Jennings, 2010) was advanced, no single agreed upon conceptualization existed. Heretofore, research was based on a theoretical divide between those who posited that organizational climate within schools is a characteristic of the organization—an organizational trait—represented as an internal collective psychological appraisal of other external properties of a school (e.g., Van Horn, 2003) and those who argued that school climate is instead a trait of the individual perceiver because it reflects the cognitive representation of the environment by the individual (James, 1982, p. 219). Because survey development should be guided by theory, these differing conceptions led to the emergence of a gulf in approaches to identifying individual elements (e.g., relationships, safety, and administrative support) selected to represent school climate as a dependent or independent variable in contemporary scholarship (cf, Beets et al., 2008; Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Burns, & Bolton, 2008). As a result, direct comparisons among many studies attempting to demonstrate school climate’s effects on staff and student outcomes are challenging. The ongoing dilemma for interested researchers and practitioners has revolved around what specifically to assess, as the variables measured define and constrain possibilities for understanding and intervention. In an attempt to address this problem and reconcile it with recent developments in school climate theoretical construct development, the remainder of this chapter focuses on available methods for measuring school climate, with a special focus on strengths and limitations of each method.

Direct and Indirect Methods for Assessing School Climate

Lehr and Christenson (2002) suggest that two types of data, indirect and direct, may be collected for the gauging of a school’s climate. Indirect measures can include raw data such as rates of suspensions, behavioral referrals, staff turnover, and teacher-to-student ratios, as well as objectively measurable properties of the environment, such as the number and quality of textbooks. While these indirect measures add an important dimension to the comprehensive assessment of school health, they do not tap into the psychological experience of the individual with the organization, which is the essence of school climate (James, 1982). It could be the case that a school ranks high on indirect measures (e.g., low rates of suspension, low rates of behavior referrals, and low staff turnover), but has low ratings in terms of community members’ perceptions of support. Conversely, a school with few objectively measurable resources may have superior ratings on school climate psychological latent constructs (e.g., “resilient schools”). By tapping into individuals’ psychological experiences with the school’s environment, direct measures help eliminate the possibility of error by inference from indirect measures. Survey instruments, such as questionnaires, are an important and efficient direct measure of students’, staff members’, and parents’ psychological experience of school climate.
Selecting a School Climate Survey Instrument

School climate instrument selection should link to the school’s unique needs, and the improvement team’s stated purpose and goals. The team will need to determine if it wishes to conduct a comprehensive assessment or a brief surveillance-style “check-up.” Whatever the chosen instrument, school climate assessments should be time-efficient, suited for use across settings (i.e., primary, middle, and secondary) and stakeholder groups (i.e. staff, parents, and students), sufficiently researched and validated, and capable of identifying an array of organizational strengths and challenges.

Psychometric Properties of School Climate Measures

As previously discussed, school climate is typically measured by subjective appraisal of tangible and intangible elements of the school environment. Therefore, school climate is considered a latent construct—an underlying psychological experience—that is measured through self-report. When measuring latent constructs through self-report survey instruments, rigorous psychometric analyses of validity and reliability should guide scale development (Warner, 2008, p. 869). Many school climate and safety surveys, however, were developed as responses to national mandates to obtain population statistics, rather than in the interest of gaining insight into these latent psychological phenomena (cf. California School Climate Survey, Austin & Duerr, 2008; Sharkey, Dowdy, Twyford, & Furlong, this volume). As a result, psychometric analyses of available scales have often been conducted post-hoc, if at all. School climate measurement is thus limited by a lack of a single, unified, sophisticated instrument by which to assess and guide intervention.

While the field is awash with instruments purporting to measure school climate, no comprehensive, methodical reviews of school climate instruments currently exist in the peer-reviewed literature. Dissertations on the subject are growing in number, however. Gangi (2010), for example, began by identifying 102 staff surveys purporting to measure school climate, reviewing the only three surveys that met the following two inclusion criteria: (a) availability of current norms and (b) inclusion of factors shown to adequately predict student and staff outcomes. The three identified instruments (Comprehensive School Climate Inventory [CSCI; NSCC, 2009]; the (Tennessee) School Climate Inventory-Revised [SCI-R; Butler & Rakow, 1995]; and the Western Alliance for the Assessment of School Climate: School Climate Analytic Inventory [SCAI; Shindler, Taylor, Cadenas, & Jones, 2003]) were then ranked based on reliability data (i.e., internal consistency, interrater, alternate-form, and test-retest), validity data (i.e., content, construct, concurrent, convergent, divergent/discriminative, criterion, and/or predictive), and sample size/representativeness of norms. Based on these criteria, the SCAI was most favored, followed closely by the CSCI, and the SCI-R. Exemplary instrument items have been reprinted in Table 24.1 where permission has been granted by scales’ authors.

Responding to the need to reconcile the growing consensus over the elements that define school climate (Jennings, 2010) with a psychometrically sound scale that measures those same constructs, Zullig, Koopman, Patton, and Ubbes (2010) combined items from five separate student-response measures in order to perform cross-battery exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Results revealed an eight-factor model (Positive Student-Teacher Relationships, School Connectedness, Academic Support, Order and Discipline, School Physical Environment, School Social Environment, Perceived Exclusion/Privilege, and Academic Satisfaction), with the largest proportion of variance explained by positive student-teacher relationships and, distantly, school connectedness. Their results suggest a great degree of consistency between the theoretically derived federal model (Jennings, 2010) and the statistically derived multidimensional solution, with engagement, safety, and environment components being represented. To date, similar psychometric rigor has not been applied to staff or parent measures of school climate.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 24.1</th>
<th>Staff School Climate Measures: Subscales and Selected Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehensive School Climate Inventory-Staff Form (CSCI)</strong> (NSCC, 2009)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php">http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscales: Safety-Rules and Norms; Sense of Physical Security; Sense of Emotional Security; Support for Learning; Social &amp; Civic Learning; Respect for Diversity; Social Support-Adults; Social Support-Students; School Connectedness/Engagement; Physical Surroundings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults who work in this school treat students with respect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in this school talk with students about strategies for understanding and controlling their emotions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most staff in this school typically work well with one another.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most staff in this school are generous about helping others with instructional issues.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers encourage students to think independently.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The administration at this school provides teachers with opportunities to work together collaboratively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief California School Climate Inventory (B-CSCS)</strong> (You et al., 2011)</td>
<td><a href="http://web.me.com/michaelfurlong/HKIED/Welcome_files/MJF-CSCS-Nov7.pdf">http://web.me.com/michaelfurlong/HKIED/Welcome_files/MJF-CSCS-Nov7.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscales: Organizational Supports; Relational Supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. School is a supportive and inviting place for students to learn.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School sets high standards for academic performance for all students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. School promotes academic success for all students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adults really care about all students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Adults acknowledge and pay attention to students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adults want all students to do their best.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>California School Climate Survey (CSCS)</strong> (Austin &amp; Duerr, 2008)</td>
<td><a href="http://cscs.wested.org/">http://cscs.wested.org/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscales: Staff Characteristics; School Norms &amp; Standards; Staff-Student Relations &amp; High Expectations; Student Opportunities for Participation; Student Behaviors that Facilitate Learning; Teaching/Working Conditions; Equity, Diversity, and Cultural Relevance; School Safety, Harassment, and Crisis Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. This school encourages opportunities for students to decide things like class activities or rules.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. This school fosters an appreciation of student diversity and respect for each other.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. This school is a safe place for students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. This school is a safe place for staff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Adults at this school support and treat each other with respect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adults at this school feel a responsibility to improve this school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Climate Analytic Inventory (SCAI)</strong> (Shindler et al., 2003)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/#scai">http://www.calstatela.edu/centers/schoolclimate/assessment/#scai</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscales: Physical Appearance; Faculty Relations; Student Interactions; Leadership/Decisions; Discipline Environment; Learning/Assessment; Attitude and Culture; Community Relations;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Level 3: Faculty members are typically constructive when speaking of each other and/or administrators. Level 2: Faculty members wait for safe opportunities to share complaints about other teachers and/or administrators. Level 1: Faculty members commonly use unflattering names for other faculty and/or administration in private.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Level 3: Faculty members have the time and interest to commune with one another, and feel very little isolation. Level 2: Faculty members congregate in some cordial groups, yet commonly feel a sense that teaching is an isolating profession. Level 1: Faculty members typically see no need to relate outside the walls of their classes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Level 3: Various cultures and sub-groups blend, interrelate, and feel like valid members of the community. Level 2: Various sub-groups avoid each other and have varying degrees of sense of validity. Level 1: Various sub-groups are hostile to one another.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Level 3: Most of the staff have a high level of trust and respect in leadership. Level 2: Some staff have respect for leadership. Level 1: Most staff feel at odds with the leadership.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The School Climate Analytic Inventory is an analytic trait-type scale. Response options are leveled as follows: Level 3 (high on the measured trait); Level 2 (mid-level of the trait); and Level 1 (low on the trait).
Brief School Climate Measures

In addition to being psychometrically sound, school climate measures must also be of practical benefit to school improvement teams working under significant resource constraints. To this end, the team must identify methods that are both practical and purposeful and that balance the tension between brevity and breadth. While they typically do not address all validated school climate elements, brief screening instruments provide practical benefits including the reduction of cost, time to administer and score, and staff time requirements for interpretation and data management (Caldarella, Young, Richardson, Young, & Young, 2008; Glover & Albers, 2007). The 15-item Brief California School Climate Survey (B-CSCS; You et al., 2011) is one such instrument for which psychometric data are available. In addition to validity and reliability data, the B-CSCS has evidence of factor invariance, which suggests that a single staff form measures perceptions of school climate consistently across multiple rater groups, including teachers and administrators (You et al., 2011).

The authors of the B-CSCS (You et al., 2011) suggest that the two factors measured (Relational Supports [positive, supportive relationships between and among staff and students; belief in, and encouragement of, student success; and personal investment in the school’s performance] and Organizational Supports [schoolwide academic and behavioral standards, expectations for student performance, and support for staff and parent needs]) are essential elements consistent with the engagement and environment components of the federal school climate model. Results from the B-CSCS or other brief measures could be used by school reform teams to target and subsequently monitor specific climate intervention programs, but are not meant as replacements for comprehensive assessment strategies.

Single Form Versus Multiple Form

A single standardized, psychometrically sound survey measuring the same theoretically-driven latent school-climate constructs invariably across multiple respondent groups (e.g., teachers, students, parents) represents the panacea of school climate measurement. At this time, however, many school climate surveys employ different versions for different respondent groups. Items on each version may be group-specific (e.g., “The principal acknowledges and incorporates my feedback”) or group-general (e.g., “I feel that my feedback is important at this school”). School climate assessment teams are faced with another tension, then selecting between measures that have single report forms for multiple informants (i.e., a single form for teachers, administrators, and parents), or different forms for each group.

The California School Climate Survey (CSCS), which is used in the national evaluation of the U.S. Federal Safe Schools/Healthy Student initiative (Sharkey et al., this volume), is an example of a measure with a single staff report form with preliminary psychometric evidence (Austin & Duerr, 2008; O’Malley, 2011). All staff members, including teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and other staff groups complete their endorsements of the same items. Areas for inquiry and potential intervention are illuminated when discrepancies are found between groups. Selected items from the CSCS are shown in Table 24.1.

Overview of School Climate Assessment

Having outlined trends in school climate measurement, the remainder of this chapter provides a framework for school climate assessment in schools. Until empirical studies on best practices for school climate-specific intervention are made available in the peer-reviewed literature, research from the school safety planning literature is tapped for general guidance.
As a first step, Pickeral, Evans, Hughes, and Hutchison (2009) recommend establishing school and district teams of administrators and practitioners charged with regularly surveying the school community and responding appropriately through policies and practices that are aligned with the goal of prioritizing healthy, positive learning environments. Since school climate assessment is best thought of as an iterative process, school climate teams are likely to be most effective when they meet multiple times through the year to plan for assessment, review assessment data, plan and implement interventions, and reassess at regular intervals throughout the school year.

In order to obtain the most accurate representation of a school’s climate, the school climate team should plan to survey all members of the school community, including teachers, administrators, other staff members, students, and parents, early in the academic year. This recommendation is based on converging scholarship confirming that groups of different members of the school community perceive school climate differently, and that their school climate ratings may be biased by factors such as lack of experience (Van Horn, 2003). For example, Mitchell et al. (2010) demonstrated that not only do teachers and students consider different elements of the school and classroom when assessing climate, but that their ratings can diverge considerably. You and colleagues (2011) demonstrated similar divergence in perceptions of school climate between administrators and teachers, particularly at the secondary school level, with administrators having more positive school climate perceptions than teachers.

Assessment using comprehensive school climate measures at multiple time points is optimal for data collection purposes. However, recognizing the limitations of schools’ tangible and intangible resources, it may be necessary to consider using brief surveillance-type screening measures. If a brief measure of climate yields results indicating areas of need, school climate teams would need to plan deeper probing, which may include a comprehensive assessment, stakeholder group discussions, and review of indirect data. In order to monitor the progress of selected interventions and guide future programming, additional brief probes could be given throughout the year either on an as-needed basis or at predetermined intervals, to all or selected members of

**Figure 24.1** Suggestions for school climate assessment and intervention

---

- **Step 1:** Provide time for class and school norms to develop; select an instrument and assessment strategy based on resources and needs.
- **Step 2:** Distribute initial comprehensive school climate instruments to all members of the school community, including staff, students, and parents.
- **Step 3:** Determine any areas of need identified by initial assessment; provide follow-up assessment and select evidence-based interventions.
- **Step 4:** Provide additional brief measures throughout the year (as needed or at certain intervals; to all or selected groups) for ongoing needs assessment and progress monitoring.
- **Step 5:** Reassess at the end of the year to determine ongoing needs and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. Use this data to guide future programming.
the community. Toward the end of each academic year, the team would reassess school climate to reflect on growth, determine ongoing needs, and guide future intervention planning. Figure 24.1 illustrates a suggested school climate intervention iterative process.

Conclusions and Implications

The working definition of school climate presented herein is that of a latent construct representing the collective, subjective appraisal of individuals’ experiences with local school environments. This chapter examined the relations between this broad construct and school safety indicators by (a) discussing definitional issues, (b) reviewing the correlates of school climate, (c) outlining current assessment and measurement trends for the construct, and (c) offering preliminary guidance for selecting assessment tools. Overall, the chapter highlighted the importance of succinctly operationalizing specific school climate elements, recognizing their influence on student and staff outcomes, assessing these elements via direct and indirect measures, and using systematic, empirically-validated, multiple-informant, multigated measurement approaches that provide a broad and balanced assessment of a school’s climate strengths and challenges.

Most importantly, practitioners and scholars should continue efforts examining the link between school climate and school safety indicators, as this work is in its infancy. For example, although it is clear that a positive school climate is unlikely to exist in an unsafe school, it does not necessarily follow that all safe schools have positive school climates. This is probably because safer schools (i.e., those lacking significant amounts of actual or threatened violence) do not necessarily promote positive interpersonal relationships that enable their members, including staff and students, to thrive. There is a clear need for deeper exploration of specific school climate elements, such as organizational supports and teaching practices, which enhance desired outcomes.

Table 24.2 Implications for School Climate Assessment for Safe Schools Planning and Practices

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Regular monitoring of school climate is recommended to guide interventions that promote positive relationships within schools and help prevent negative outcomes, including deleterious academic and psychosocial outcomes for youth, staff dissatisfaction and turnover, and school violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>School safety indices are one component of a comprehensive assessment of school climate. Other central components include relationships, leadership and organizational support, and tangible elements of the environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Indirect interpretations about school climate can be made through the collection of data such as suspension rates, behavioral referral rates, and staff turnover rates, although direct assessment is warranted in any comprehensive analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Direct assessment of school climate should be conducted using scales that have sufficient psychometric data to support their use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Comprehensive measures of school climate should assess those constructs (i.e., relationships, safety, organizational supports, tangible components of the environment) that have been consistently, positively related to student and staff outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Brief school climate screening instruments provide practical benefits in surveillance-style progress monitoring, although they are not recommended as a replacement for a comprehensive assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>All members of the school environment should be asked to complete school climate measures, including teachers and other staff members, administrators, students, parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Assessment of school climate is an iterative process that requires the support of individuals from different stakeholder groups (i.e., teachers, administrators, parents, students).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Interventions for school climate require ongoing team dialogue, intervention planning, and monitoring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
like school connectedness or belonging. Ultimately, it is by diverting the focus of research from decreasing negative outcomes to increasing positive ones that schools can more fully realize their dual role in the lives of youth. School climate is an essential construct for school safety teams seeking to foster safe, secure, and peaceful environments in which students and staff participate as meaningfully connected members of their communities.

References


Jennings, K. (2010, June). *Keynote address*. Thirteenth annual meeting of the National Coordinating Committee on School Health and Safety, Washington, DC.


School Climate and School Safety


