Introduction

Bringing Our Schools Into Balance

Good teachers understand that when students feel stressed, threatened, angry, or unsafe, they are less likely to learn. Every new teacher learns the importance of meeting basic human needs for safety and belonging (Maslow, 1968). Teachers who are familiar with the latest research on the dynamics of the brain know that clarity of academic thinking can be impeded when we are under emotional stress or duress (Jensen, 2008a).

This book aims to make a research-based case for the importance of school climate, not only to support the social and emotional well-being of students, but because we believe the only way to achieve and sustain strong academic results is through the interaction between positive school climate and learning.

Schools are not always the safest, most respectful places, especially for any child who may appear to be remotely "different." For many students, school can be a mean, lonely, irrelevant, even dangerous place. As many as 73 percent of all students report being directly or indirectly exposed to bullies in school (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurts, 2009). Perhaps this is why the recent attention to the problem of bullying is resonating so widely and powerfully through our culture. Most of us have either experienced it personally or we've seen it happening all too frequently to friends or family members.

For the past decade or more, since the school shootings at Columbine, issues of school safety have been front and center in schools and communities across the country. Safety plans, lockdown drills, and evacuation plans have been created and we have seen firsthand how these school safety plans can be effective tools for saving lives. But no school safety plan alone will ensure that a school is completely physically and emotionally safe. A school without guns is a fine goal, but it is not necessarily a safe school nor a learning school.

BEYOND BULLYING, BEYOND COMPLIANCE

The tragedy and injustice of bullying is finally becoming clear to educators, parents, school officials, and state leaders. While new anti-bullying laws, better school policies, and zero-tolerance disciplinary models may be a welcome attempt to ensure that adults begin to more fully address the suffering, humiliation, and social isolation imposed by bullies, in our view, they will not solve these complex problems. We know that all too often such new initiatives in our schools amount to little more than window dressing that fails to address deeper, more systemic problems. Despite all the media attention being paid to bullying, the problem facing schools today is not simply a problem of bad kids (e.g., bullies). Rather, the fundamental issue in schools relates to the overall school climate that encompasses not just bullying and student discipline but the whole relationship of students and adults to school and learning.

The issue of bullying is a symptom of larger social, emotional, and systemic educational problems. When educators aim to make their schools safer, more respectful places, it often follows a focus on achieving higher levels of "student compliance." The underlying belief seems to be, "If those darned kids just did what they were told [by adults] then everything would be okay!"

In the chapters that follow, we will challenge this assumption that safer, more respectful schools are simply places with more rules, harsher penalties for violators, fewer behavior problems, and where kids do just as they are told. Of course, rules are important. But we will show how schools that empower students and partner with them to define, assess, and implement what we refer to as *respectful teaching and school practices* are those that achieve real results for school climate and learning.

School climate is the combined result of the

- Quality of the relationships (both adult and student) within a school
- School's overarching vision, goals, and mission
- Systems of support for students, teachers, and parents that enable the school to achieve its mission
- Roles available to and played by students, teachers, and school leaders
- Opportunities for active, meaningful engagement as learners, leaders, and citizens within the school and community
- Extent to which there is respect, tolerance, fairness, equity, and social justice at every level of the school's culture

The quality of a school's climate goes far beyond "getting the kids to behave" and "comply" with adult demands. In schools that have a positive climate, there is a purposeful vision and systemic mission to link positive school climate and learning. Teachers and students are partners in creating a school culture that values each individual, engages all in learning, and actively supports the success of every member of the community. The school values and promotes civic engagement and service to the larger community. Everyone—adults and students—is an active agent of fairness, social justice, and change. Schools that recognize the limits of compliance and include their students in the process of school improvement are a special brand of schools.

GETTING BEYOND PIECEMEAL PROBLEM SOLVING

There is no doubting the good intentions to improve schools—bullying and harassment prevention programs, school security officers, video cameras in school buses, test preparation programs, diversity training, dropout prevention, lunchroom monitors, curriculum mapping, reading specialists, curriculum consultants . . . There is no shortage of problems in schools (or any place where hundreds or thousands of people are put together day after day, year after year). And for every problem, schools offer a well-intended solution usually involving some new program, policy, or staff position. But like the carnival game of Whac-A-Mole, when a problem is pushed down in one place, a new problem seems to jump up somewhere else.

This common and never-ending strategy of identifying individual problems to solve one at a time, exerting our best efforts as wise and experienced adults, hasn't, as yet, eradicated problems in schools. In fact, our concerted efforts to raise test scores may be exacerbating other problems—narrowing the curriculum, sapping the joy of learning, ignoring developmental needs, lessening time for physical activity, pushing out struggling students, raising stress levels for teachers and students, and instead of valuing the whole child, students can be reduced to mere test results as part of subgroups on the big NCLB scorecard.

This approach to using "expert" (read adult) knowledge to try to solve school problems ignores the basics of what we know about human nature and the change process. Endless experience supports the age-old wisdom, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink—reform imposed from above rarely sticks. Our deepest educational thinkers—such as Michael Fullan, Seymour Sarason, and John Goodlad—marshal a lifetime of research showing the futility of top-down reform. Change does not happen from the outside; change is not something that can be imposed on people. In human institutions such as schools, lasting and meaningful

change must come from within the school, employing the primary resource schools have—the energy, ideas, expertise, and goodwill of every individual in the school community.

Our experience as educators and our research with schools has demonstrated the power of positive school climate to simultaneously improve school safety and academic achievement. In fact, the case we wish to make is that the only way to sustain improvement in academic achievement is to improve school climate and culture for faculty and students in the school. Unless students feel safe at school, feel a sense of belonging, and feel valued in the learning process, it is unlikely we will see students perform anywhere close to their potential. For too long, schools have separated issues related to academic results from those tied to school violence, student relations, and respect. We have found, in our work with schools throughout the nation, that these issues are inextricably linked—improve respect in schools and learning improves. Without respectful and safe schools, the learning environment is compromised.

As schools wrestle with pressing issues of improving academic performance while also trying to stop bullying and other ways students mistreat each other, why does anyone need a book on school climate? Certainly there is an urgent need to respond to egregious and dangerous student behavior to assure every child is physically safe. But if all we do about bullying is develop more stringent policies, exert more adult authority, and increase consequences for misbehavior, it is not only unlikely there will be a substantive decrease in school violence, but we may worsen other problems. By framing problem solving under the unifying umbrella of school climate, schools can address immediate problems while elevating the overall health of the school and developing organizational capacity to continue the ongoing work of school improvement.

Our studies show that adults and students often share similar desires for their school. They can clearly understand the things that are working well and the things that aren't. The way we see it, in many cases, teachers and students are the real experts on the school experience—they know all too well what does and doesn't work in their schools. They have dreams (and all too fleeting moments of experience) of what really does work to promote learning for every child. While understanding research and "best practices" can help, what matters is the ability of local teachers, leaders, parents, community members, and students to articulate and name their problems and the solutions that they then embrace.

This book aims to make a research-based case for the importance of school climate, not only to support the social and emotional well-being of students but—and this is the most essential argument of the book—also because we believe the only way to achieve and sustain strong academic results is through the interaction between positive school climate, student

engagement, respectful caring relationships, empowerment, and learning. We believe that this book will help school leaders make the powerful and important connection between improving school climate and improving the quality of teaching and learning in a school.

THE RATIONALE FOR THIS BOOK: SCHOOL CLIMATE AS A KEY TO SCHOOL SAFETY, STUDENT MOTIVATION, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The idea that we can somehow ignore the social and emotional aspects of schooling is just plain silly. Yet, this is precisely what many schools have done for nearly a decade under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and during similar periods of our history in public education. We are convinced that the time is now ripe for refocusing our attention on school climate, safety, and respect and the important effects that these have on students' personal, intellectual, social, and civic development.

We welcome the fact that educational leaders and teachers are beginning to adopt a more balanced perspective about the things that truly matter in education. There is increasing interest in unifying what we know about human dignity, freedom, happiness, and leadership in complex systems like schools with what we know about the conditions in which human beings thrive and grow.

This is not some recycled "touchy-feely" school reform agenda. Its roots can be found deep within the humanistic traditions of our culture and are tied directly to the compelling new research on human development, the brain, and what we now understand about how people learn.

We think school climate is like the air we breathe or the soil in which we plant a seed to grow. Both the air and the soil provide something that is essential to growth and to life. Learning cannot be achieved in the midst of a hostile, threatening environment. As Jerome Freiberg (1999), an eminent researcher in the field of school climate research, says, "Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul" (p. 1). We are all too familiar with the results of toxic school environments. School shootings such as Columbine (U.S. Secret Service, 2002) and the more recent tragedies at South Hadley and Virginia Tech can all be linked to the impact of bullying and an alienating school environment.

In recent years, forty-four states have adopted tough new anti-bullying laws in response to the increased recognition of this problem in schools. We know from conversations with Kevin Jennings, assistant deputy secretary for Safe and Drug-Free Schools for the U.S. Department of Education, that the Title IV program formerly dedicated to "safe and drug-free schools" has been reframed to focus on evaluating and improving school climate. Under the new safe schools model, all schools will soon be asked

to evaluate school climate from both student and adult perspectives, in addition to academic achievement, and assess how well they are meeting the social, emotional, and educational needs of their students and the needs of their communities. There will be a new kind of accountability to make our schools places where all students feel safe and respected by their teachers and peers.

Our research on respectful schools has shown us that it is the daily acts of kindness and appreciation shown to others that begin to frame school experiences for both students and adults. It is the relationships between teachers and learners, high expectations coupled with adult support, the availability of choices and options, and opportunities for each person's ideas to be heard and valued that have powerful effects on creating respectful schools.

It is difficult to go one day, it seems, without hearing the latest news report about bullying, school violence, school discipline problems, the untenable drop-out rate, and the need to re-engage disinterested learners in our nation's schools. All of these issues relate to school climate and the need to make our schools more personalized, more interesting, engaging, exciting, and meaningful places for our youth.

It is increasingly clear that our schools need to change. Every day, young people come home from schools that have all too often been devoid of engagement, excitement, meaningful choices, and higher-order thinking. At a time when the sheer volume of knowledge; the pace of technological innovation; and highly complex, global, social, economic, cultural, and political problems are growing exponentially, we should by no means be narrowing the curriculum so that we can ensure students pass a simplistic set of standardized tests. Instead, our children need to be expanding their reach, their understanding, and their ability to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The skills needed for the modern world go far beyond the basic knowledge and skills that most state testing demands. In a rapidly changing global economy, our graduates need the skills of problem solving, communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration (Wagner, 2008). When we focus solely on academic achievement outcomes, we can often lose sight of what is most important—our students and what they need to assure their success. This curricular narrowing not only fails to meet the needs of the twenty-first century, but it also makes our schools less and less engaging for students. Too many students are being left behind as pressures of testing sap much of the energy from the classroom and push many students out of the ever more confining system.

At a time when every child needs a strong and broad education to be prepared for democratic community life, and when students need ever more diverse skills for the dynamic world of the twenty-first century, the narrow focus on test scores and academics is often more limiting than

liberating. At best, students may be gaining basic factual knowledge and basic skills. Too often, students are simply becoming better test takers, or even worse, being turned off on learning and school by a curriculum that feels far removed from the needs of the twenty-first century.

GUIDEPOSTS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS: ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, *AND* STUDENTS

Balancing Leadership Roles and Voices

The central purpose of this book is to help school leaders improve school climate and learning through the engagement of student leaders and teachers. Using positive peer pressure from a diverse team of student leaders, along with collaborative action research, schools can develop the capacity for sustained improvement in school climate and, as a result, improvements in learning.

This book is designed to help school leaders reestablish the equilibrium that seems to have been lost in our schools. We make the case that schools must balance the push for high academic achievement with understanding that academic rigor will not be accomplished without providing a safe and respectful learning environment—a positive school climate—for all students in our schools.

The foundational structure we use for school climate improvement we call SafeMeasures™, a collaborative action research process developed by William Preble and his colleagues at Main Street Academix that has been successfully used in hundreds of schools across the United States over the last decade to improve school climate, expand leadership roles, and improve teaching and learning. We use the label of SafeMeasures throughout the book as one example of a well-structured collaborative action research process that can be applied to build organizational capacity in any setting. SafeMeasures focuses on both of the following:

1. A leadership model that includes students and teachers working together to collect and analyze school data

2. An action planning and implementation process that results in changes at the school and classroom level to impact climate and learning

The stages of SafeMeasures detailed in the following chapters are the following:

Stage One: Everyone is a leader: Empowering students and teachers. This chapter shows how to establish a design team to lead the process that includes students and teachers.

Stage Two: Including all voices: School climate data collection. This chapter demonstrates strategies for collecting qualitative and quantitative school climate data in a school.

Stage Three: Thinking together: Data analysis and goal setting. This chapter explains how data are used to "change people's minds" about their school's strengths and needs, and how to use data to develop school climate and learning improvement goals.

Stage Four: Making change happen: Action planning and project development. This chapter shows educators how to use the Respect Continuum and a list of research-based action projects to develop a powerful school improvement culture that will dramatically change school climate and student engagement in learning.

Stage Five: Moving forward together: Sustainability and continuous improvement. This chapter explains how student leadership and engagement can drive the school improvement process in any school, especially when school climate projects align with academic learning goals.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is framed around this five-stage process, including leadership team development, data collection and analysis, goal setting, action planning, and sustained school change. The first two chapters lay out the case for school climate and the role of teachers and students as partners in the change process. Chapters 3–6 and 8 detail each stage of the SafeMeasures process, offering not only practical approaches for facilitation but also concrete examples of SafeMeasures in action. In each chapter, we share what we hope are inspiring stories and effective practices of school climate improvement to provide a template for readers to impact climate in their own setting.

These core chapters are organized to be both informative and practical. Each chapter

- Explains the rationale for the particular stage of the process, along with step-by-step procedures to allow readers to implement the process in their own setting
- Is elucidated with a story of "making it real" to show how this stage looks in action, in real school settings
- Concludes with a summary to offer a succinct "how-to" overview of the stage

- Provides book study questions at the end to guide the reader's own reflection and application of these ideas and to encourage shared reflection within a professional learning community

Because the vast majority of a student's time in school is spent in the classroom, we dedicate Chapter 7 to the critical pillar of engaged teaching and learning. School climate must involve more than just respect in the hallways and lunchroom. The focus of schools ultimately needs to be on the learning environment, and how this embodies the values of social and emotional safety, valuing of every individual, and a culture of respect can profoundly influence the climate of the school. Chapter 7 offers an array of best practices we have seen work in schools that engage students in the learning process and reflect an ethic of respectful teaching and learning.

Chapter 9 concludes the book with consideration of how a focus on school climate can provide a central, organizing framework for all other school improvement initiatives not only in individual schools but also on a more systemic level.

WHY READ THIS BOOK?

There is no shortage of literature talking about how to improve American education. Some offer practical solutions aimed at particular problems but fail to address the structural and cultural conditions that can undermine implementation of these ideas. Other books suggest revamping schools or the educational system and might offer a future direction but do little to address the immediate challenges confronting educators daily.

This book aims to reframe the dialogue from

- Piecemeal programs aimed at individual issues to a more holistic approach that creates the underlying conditions in the school climate and culture to subsequently help schools address the array of challenges and goals they face
- A limiting and futile focus on simply eliminating unacceptable behaviors to more liberating and expansive attention on how to teach, support, encourage, and honor positive behaviors
- Reacting to problems as they are identified to building organizational capacity for replicable processes that bring stakeholders together to effect and lead solutions for the challenges schools confront
- Reliance on "experts" from outside the school telling schools how to change to the experts inside the school leading the change
- A history of failed reforms and new initiatives to a sustainable model for continual school improvement

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS AS PARTNERS IN TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CLIMATE

As our research in schools throughout the United States has shown, when we move beyond a focus on stopping negative behavior and compliance with adult rules and dictates, and toward creating positive school climate, exciting new possibilities emerge. This occurs through focusing attention on the social and emotional well-being of every child (and adult), actively valuing each individual, and looking for ways to include all voices in the success of the school. Powerful effects ensue—producing fewer discipline problems, improving student motivation, and increasing student academic performance (Freiberg, 1999; Preble & Newman, 2006).

We make the case that students, even more so than adults, are often the real experts on school climate. Much of what constitutes or contributes to school climate happens, as one student told us, "When grown-ups aren't around." We show how schools can incorporate student and adult perspectives, and provide new leadership roles for teams of diverse students to serve as partners in school reform. Positive school climate, at its heart, is based on the value and dignity of every individual—SafeMeasures is designed to help schools focus more clearly on the unique perspectives and school experiences of all members of the school community.

We share success stories from schools across the country that are able to hold high academic expectations for all children while also creating the conditions and supports that enable each child to reach these expectations. This book showcases schools effectively balancing the *desired ends with the appropriate means* to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students.

The central purpose of the book is to help school leaders improve school climate and learning through the collaborative action research process we call SafeMeasures—engaging student leaders and teachers in a process of collaborative, schoolwide inquiry and improvement. We have seen firsthand how the process of collecting school climate data, comparing teacher and student perceptions of school climate, and developing action plans and projects to improve school climate can bring a school together. We have also seen the simultaneous impact that improving school climate has on improving student learning.

This book is designed to share this process with educators and student leaders, and to help school leaders reestablish the equilibrium between these social, emotional, and academic dimensions of schooling.