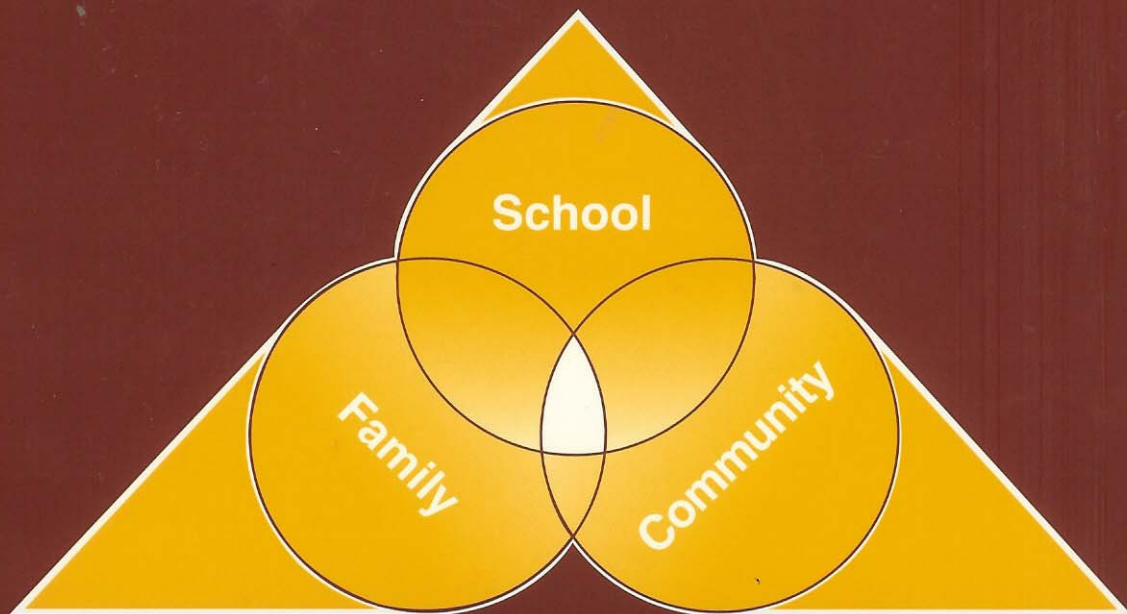


SAFEGUARDING OUR YOUTH

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PROGRAMS



Co-editors:
Dan Rea
James J. Bergin

Chapter 5

Creating The Climate For Positive School Change

Steven Edwards, Ph.D.

The issue of school safety has risen to the top of the educational agenda with the tragic events of recent years. No longer are school administrators viewed solely as instructional leaders. The roles have changed, and the responsibilities and focus have been redirected with safety in schools at the forefront of our national education agenda.

In the days after Columbine, school administrators across the country were bombarded with an array of products and services designed to enhance school safety. Metal detectors, camera systems, safety audits, and training programs flooded administrators' mailboxes. Although the contribution of such products and services should be considered in developing a school safety plan, the specific needs of the school and district must be considered with an understanding that one size does not fit all.

One could argue the rationale for one or more of these products or services on the market. Yet another factor that stands alone is the impact of school climate as part of the safety equation. The single most important factor in determining a school's level of risk is an assessment of the school's climate. A healthy school climate contributes to effective teaching and learning (Freiberg, 1998).

Premises Regarding School Climate

When examining school climate certain premises should be considered. Regardless of the present school climate, there is always room for improvement. "A school that claims it has a perfect school climate is myopic, for improved school climate is something that professional educators are working toward-always" (Hansen & Childs, 1998, p. 14). Often, schools operate from a position that if it's not broken, don't fix it. Unfortunately, maintaining the status quo is in reality a move backwards. Conditions in schools are constantly changing and evolving, therefore climate conditions will continually need to be examined and modified even under the best of circumstances.

It is important to understand the relationship between school climate and social context. Schools reflect the background, attitudes, belief and conditions of the community at large. When addressing school climate issues, the school and community demographics will play a critical role. Consideration of current trends in the school and community, the power base, and the needs and priorities of the children must be factored into the equation. Regardless of the degree and scope of the climate issues, improvements will require reform.

School Climate Defined

The climate of a school reflects the attitudes, behavior, and values of the many stakeholders who interact within the school community. Substantive climate change occurs when each individual looks within and contributes to the change process (Edwards, 2001).

A child's behavior is determined by the conditions in the child's primary environment. Massey (2000) suggests three major spheres of influence in a child's behavior-family, community, and school. The degree to which positive experiences are fostered in each of these environments dramatically influences attitudes and behaviors.

In a study by The Search Institute (1997), findings indicate that only 25% of students believe that a caring climate was present in their school. The sample was based on children from urban, suburban, and rural settings. The need to examine school climate and its relationship to school safety and student performance is critical. Technology may indeed provide a level of protection, yet countless incidents have occurred in schools where technology was meant to address safety concerns. School safety is not the only issue impacted by school climate. Student performance is impacted positively or negatively depending on the climate of the school. Children do not excel or achieve in environments where they do not want to be or where they do not feel wanted. For substantive change in student safety and performance to take place, the climate of a school must-be examined.

The School

Presently, East Hartford High School in East Hartford, Connecticut is an urban school with an enrollment of over 2,300 students. The school represents children who originate from over 70 different countries and who speak over 40 different languages. Of the school's 2,300 students, 72% are children of color and 28% Caucasian.

In the early 1990's, the climate at East Hartford High School reflected the negative influences of gangs, drugs, school violence, a high dropout rate, low-test scores, low staff morale, and low student achievement. The school was in a crisis situation. In the fall of 1992, a new high school administration was instituted. The first task of the new administration was to establish a baseline to determine the perception of the schools climate at that time. Faculty, staff, students and parents were asked to list the three greatest assets of East Hartford High School and the three greatest challenges the school faced. Results were tabulated. Based on the findings an action plan was developed to continue to build on strengths and to address challenges for an overall improvement in school climate, staff morale, student performance, and the community's perception of the school.

Efforts begun in the early 1990's have resulted in a reduction in incidents of violence by over 60%, suspensions reduced by over 50%, no expulsions in seven years, a dropout rate of under 2.5%, raised standardized test scores, increased graduation rates, and increased the number of students going to college by 20%. The positive changes that have occurred required a change in philosophy and the establishment of a shared vision.

Philosophy and Vision

For decades in American education, experts have called for reform. The concept of

educational reform has been and continues to be popular among educators at all levels. For reform to take place change needs to occur. A change in philosophy and the establishment of a shared vision are two key elements in the change process.

For substantive climate changes to occur, a school must examine its philosophy and vision. At East Hartford High School a philosophy was adopted that no child would be lost. Every child that drops out of school is a failure of the American education system. Currently in the United States, 75% of incarcerated individuals are high school dropouts. With the current prison population in the United States exceeding 2,000,000 persons the magnitude of the problem can be realized. The wealth of a community lies in its ability to educate all its children.

East Hartford High School's philosophy is grounded in two principles. One, that all decisions are based on what is in the best interest of children, and secondly that nothing is impossible. Educators are only limited by the range of their imagination.

Philosophy drives vision. When individuals in a school have a shared philosophy, it serves as the foundation to establish a shared vision. Vision focuses on outcomes, an ideal situation that individuals hope to achieve. McEvoy and Welker (2000) suggest that a positive climate is significantly impacted by a shared vision among teacher and staff. Once a vision is established, all activities and planning must revolve around the vision. A shared vision creates a clear agenda for action (Dufour & Eaker, 1999). Positive climate changes occur when all stakeholders have a collective sense of purpose.

Barriers and Common Mistakes To Implementing Climate Changes

As indicated earlier, individuals and organizations often resist change. It is important

to highlight common barriers and mistakes that may impede the change process.

Staff training and professional development are critical to successful climate change. Without systematic and ongoing staff development the effectiveness of initiatives to implement climate changes will diminish (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Regardless of the issues, staff will need assistance in the change process. When examining staff, it is important to look at the impact of staff beyond faculty. All stakeholders must collectively consider the impact of school climate on student achievement (Jobe & Parrish, 1995). Without question teachers play an important role, yet there are many other individuals who impact school climate. Support staff such as custodians, security officers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, tutors, bus drivers, and parents are just a few examples. A common mistake in addressing school climate is not including all stakeholders.

Another common mistake is acting on perception, not reality. Left to its own devices perception becomes reality. When examining school climate, it is important to base decisions on data. Being data driven allows schools to address issues from a scientific viewpoint. Data collected over time is an important element in planning for climate changes. Both quantitative and qualitative data should be collected and used in the planning process. The use of data allows an organization to substantiate or dispel perceptions.

Data will provide valuable information to drive decision-making; sharing data with staff, students and parents will assist in prioritizing. As a result of data collection, there is a tendency to examine multiple issues. A common mistake is to attempt to address

each issue equally. Priority should be based on urgency and feasibility; the urgency of the issue and the feasibility of correcting the problem. Lack of prioritization can create

a situation where individuals are unable to stay focused and unable to see progress. When this occurs, people are more likely to shut down and the initiative stalls. In conjunction with prioritization, it is important to plan for early successes. Faculty, staff and students will need to see the results of their efforts. Too often goals are established that are long term. Building in short-term successes will help maintain momentum for initiatives to move forward.

Funding is an issue in all aspects of public education. When examining climate changes, it is vital to consider current expenditure and to evaluate how funds may be reallocated to address climate issue. Whenever possible, applications for grant funding can supplement programs or help establish new programs. Currently, the federal government has made considerable dollars available for after-school programs, a key area often cited when addressing school climate.

A review of policies and procedures will allow a school to determine if certain policies and procedures impede climate initiatives. Policies, procedures, and regulations govern schools in ways that make them impersonal (Hansen & Childs, 1998). Policies and procedures are structural components. The structure of a school is the "how we do business" and can negatively impact the climate. If it can be changed today it is structural; if a change requires changes in attitudes, beliefs, and values it is a climate change (Dufour, 2001).

Often one of the biggest barriers is just getting started. Data will assist in laying the foundation to begin. As indicated earlier the examination of data (both quantitative and qualitative) is a valuable tool to obtain a clear understanding of issues.

Relationships

Asa Hilliard (1997) stated, "It's not about sophisticated pedagogy, it's all about relationships." Relationships are at the core of what we do with children. Adults must recognize the importance of relationships and the role it plays in improving the overall climate of the school (Glasser, 1998). Research suggests that low performance schools demonstrated significant improvements in academic performance and social norms when relationship issues were addressed (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

To foster positive relationships with youth, adults must be visible in the school, at after school and evening programs, and in the community. At East Hartford High School adults practice active visibility, engaging children often and in a variety of settings. Active visibility is visibility that creates engagement as opposed to passive visibility, which refers to just being seen. Active visibility demonstrates a sense of interest and caring on the part of adults. At East Hartford High School, the administration plans their daily schedule around the bell schedule to ensure visibility at passing times, at lunch, and before and after school.

Visibility in the hallways at passing time, in the classrooms during instruction, at athletic events, and other co-curricular programs allows staff to bond with youth in different ways. A highly visible administration and staff assist in creating a positive school climate and creates the opportunity for the development of positive relationships among children and adults.

Building relationships contributes to personalization within a school. When students develop positive relationships with adults, it leads to students taking ownership for the institution. When this occurs with greater numbers of students, the concept of critical

mass comes into play. In this case critical mass refers to a significant number of members of the organization (school) ascribing to a shared vision. As with any initiative, leadership is important. At East Hartford High School, the principal makes a point of meeting with a minimum of five students per day. Over a school year this equates to a significant number of children. Faculty and staff are encouraged to meet with students regularly in informal settings to foster the establishment of positive student-staff relationships. The consistency and redundancy of the message is critical to develop lasting bonds with youth who are at risk of dropping out. To further drive this message, East Hartford High School implemented a successful mentor program that makes use of positive adult role models from inside and outside the school community.

To establish relationships on a broader scale the school has taken bonding a step further through the development and implementation of interdisciplinary teaching teams. In 1993, all students in grades nine and ten were placed on interdisciplinary-teaching teams. Approximately one hundred students spend two years with the same four teachers. Teachers represented the four core disciplines of English, mathematics, science and social studies. Edwards (1995) indicated that one of the positive outcomes of teams is the ability to break a big school down into smaller learning communities, allowing for connections to be made that enhance and foster long-term relationships between students and teachers. Research suggests that increasing the amount of adult-child contact time contributes to improvements in school climate (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Programs That Promote Positive Climate

The establishment of programs that meet the needs of all children is of primary importance. Engaging the non-engaged student is the challenge of any good educator. Interdisciplinary teaming and mentoring have already been discussed. Expansion of after-school and summer programs can have a dual effect on climate, impacting youth at school and in the greater community. The United States Department of Justice 1999 National Report indicates that juvenile crime and victimizations peaks between the hours of three to six in the afternoon. After-school and summer programs allow students positive adult supervised activities that promote academic and social development in a controlled setting. At East Hartford High School, programs such as Doc's Dollars, PRIDE, and an expansive activities program with over fifty Clubs have contributed to positive after-school alternatives for children. Programs that afford youth the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process are more likely to be successful. When youth take part in the planning process they are more committed to the outcome.

The Doc's Dollars (a dollar bill with the principal's picture on it) gives students an opportunity to participate in after-school activities. Doc's Dollars are distributed by staff and can be awarded for any positive action, academic and/or behavioral. Students can use Doc's Dollars to participate in a myriad of after school activities, including but not limited to dances, movies, talent shows, tournaments and many more activities. Programs run from 2:40-5:00 pm, Monday through Thursday. The PRIDE program is an evening activity which opens the gymnasium from 6:00-8:30 pm. Students play basketball, volleyball, and badminton. In addition dancing, bingo, nail painting, and many other activities are available. Each PRIDE Night is sponsored by a local business providing children with refreshments.

During the summer months, enrichment courses are offered in technology, the

arts, and fitness. Furthermore, approximately 80 identified eighth graders-who will be entering the high school in the fall-participate in a summer transition program. During the three-week session, staff members work with students in academic skill development, social skills, and organizational skills.

Options are an important component in the development of programs that enhance school climate. At East Hartford High School, programs are established that create alternatives in both social and academic areas. Creating alternative academic and social programs for youth enhance school climate. Walker, Homer, Sugai, Bullis, Sprague, Bricker, & Kaufman (1996) suggest that a continuance of alternative programs needs to be available to children. Keeping this in mind, the school implemented two comprehensive-alternative programs, Success and LIFE. The Success program addresses the behavioral and academic needs of highly at-risk youth in grades nine and ten. Students in the Success program are non-special education children who need additional support to meet academic and behavioral standards. Approximately one hundred children participate in the program during the school year. The LIFE program (Lifelong Initiative

For Education) is held at an off-campus location. The program meets the needs of students who are older and need a limited number of credits to complete their high school requirements. This shortened day alternative program focuses on three elements: academic, vocational, and counseling skills. LIFE creates opportunities for a select portion of the school population who, without this support system in place, would be high school dropouts.

Other programs that support a positive school climate include the Student Assistance Center (SAC). The center, established in 1993 provides peer mediation, conflict resolution services, drug and alcohol counseling and a variety of other support programs. Each year East Hartford High School holds a START Retreat, which focuses on multicultural issues within the school. Eighty students attend a three-day retreat in August prior to the beginning of school. The Bridges program is an exchange program with suburban school districts that fosters relationships between school districts. Relationships are established that build communication and understanding across communities.

Collaboration with a number of community organizations has contributed to positive climate changes. A sample of groups include senior citizens, law enforcement, partnerships with probation, local colleges and universities, parental groups, partnership with the faith community, area businesses and hospitals. A blending of community partnerships creates countless opportunities for the development of youth programs and builds positive relationships.

Conclusions

With increased attention to student and staff accountability in education, there is a tendency to minimize the role school climate plays in student performance and success. It is the position of this author that a positive relationship exist between school climate and student achievement. This article has touched on a number of key elements of successful climate change and highlights specific examples that have worked at East Hartford High School.

Programs highlighted in this article that have been developed and implemented at East Hartford High School include interdisciplinary teaching teams, Doc's Dollars,

PRIDE, START, and the SAC and LIFE Program. Each of these programs along with others have contributed to significant climate changes. Programmatic changes have assisted in the reduction of suspensions, lower dropout rates and no expulsions in seven years while at the same time enhancing academic performance. Programs alone can only take initiatives so far. Key elements of success include the establishment of a vision and philosophy that drives the programming and development of relationships, which engage youth at the most basic level of need. The combination of a shared philosophy with an articulated vision and supportive programming creates the opportunity for positive climate changes..

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