Positive School Climate: What It Looks Like and How It Happens

Nurturing Positive School Climate for Student Learning and Professional Growth

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Table of Contents

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Executive Summary

Any principal can change their school climate in a positive way by developing an intentional strategy and following through. There is no simple single strategy. What we have seen in these five schools is that the most effective strategy is dependent on the existing characteristics of the school, their recent history, the students served and the staff that work there. Additionally, the principal himself will influence the strategy by building on his existing strengths and weaknesses. School climate is an essential requirement for higher attendance and student achievement.

What we observed in schools is that many strategies implemented by principals had no cost or were of a minimal cost. For example, simple activities like posting student data, examples of student work, and personal affirmations on walls has minimal cost, but were noted by students and staff as a key ingredient to creating the perception that academics and interpersonal relationships are important and everyone and everyone's performance matters.

Elementary Compared to Secondary. While we maintain anonymity for our schools and principals, we share differences according to school type, primarily elementary and PreK-8 schools compared to high schools. For example, teachers in the elementary schools had tight knit relationships and reported helping one another and working collaboratively more so than teachers in high schools. The types of incentives offered to students varied as did the groups with whom the students affiliated. For example, sports teams and academic programs contributed highly to climate in high schools while grade-level classroom dynamics were the focus for elementary school students. Finally, in high schools we were able to compare the experiences of freshman and sophomores with those of juniors and seniors to better understand changes in climate across time and across groups. In elementary schools we limited our focus groups to fifth grade students.

Challenges to School Climate. We want to acknowledge that in today's high-stakes education world, principals are primarily held accountable for student achievement outcomes but not necessarily relationships and overall school climate. In our current school accountability framework, there is a heavy reliability on student data and average test scores that has made it easy to forget about personal and professional relationships. When schools are perceived to be test score factories and teacher and principal contracts contain explicit goals about test scores, it is easy to lose focus on human connections and relationships. The personal contact that is so essential to school climate, as well as instruction, is necessary to provide a space where children feel comfortable taking risks, exposing vulnerability, and building their sense of self.

Suspensions. In Baltimore, a focus on suspension policy has led to an opportunity for schools to rethink how to engage students and staff. This resulted in a direct intervention by the Office of Student Support to provide summer professional development for school leadership teams to analyze suspension data, including locations and timings, to inform the school about where they were "losing" kids and where they could intervene strategically. During the two-day sessions, for example, school teams heard about alternative interventions such as Restorative Practices, Capturing Kids' Hearts, and Holistic Life.

Strategic Use of Resources and Financing. One difference we saw across the schools was the use of resources and financing to support school interventions. Each school had their own take on how best to do this, some more strategic than others, but all having an influence on what could happen at their school. Perspectives ranged from bringing in community partners to provide resources and support to students, developing a school wide budget process to increase the transparency of where dollars are being spent and also provide opportunities for staff to share their thoughts and participate in differentiated professional development.

Overarching Themes

Principal as Leader. While some principals in this study were more intentional in promoting positive school climate than others, staff and students in *all* schools identified the principal as the fundamental agent of change in school climate. The principal was seen as setting the stage for how everyone engaged and worked within the building. Principal accessibility and support with clear and consistent communication were seen as promoting positive climate.

Systemic and Individual Practices. Factors supporting school climate often had a systemic framework that was supported by one-on-one interpersonal engagement between adults and students and among adults. For example, a school might have additional academic supports for students but how successful these are seemed dependent on the anecdotal engagement of staff with students. Likewise, a principal may have an open-door policy but it is his interaction with individual staff members that influence how respected the staff feel and how cohesively they work with and for the principal.

Relationships Matter. Not surprisingly, when talking with both adults and students in a school they often reflected on their relationships with teachers and administrators. Students often used familial terms when referring to adults who supported them academically and personally. Specifically, they describe these adults as giving them multiple chances, being friendly with them but having clear and consistent limits, holding them responsible for their own behavior and learning, and believing that they could succeed. Adults describe the importance of the principal's accessibility and the cohesiveness among the staff as impacting school climate, as well as, professional and academic growth of teachers and students.

Welcoming. The discourse and tone seen in a school's main office and at the doors simultaneously inform and are informed by a school's culture and climate. Principals might even sit quietly and listen to the interactions in their main office to get a better sense of the school's culture. Some schools promoted positive starts to the day by greeting one another and students at the front door of the school.

High Expectations. Students wanted and noticed when teachers and staff had high expectations of them. Teachers as well, whether novice or veteran, wanted to be pushed to grow and hone their craft through observations with coaching and professional development opportunities.

Consistency and Sense of Fairness is Important. We heard from students and adults alike that the perception of some individuals *getting away* with things while others did not caused tension and created a sense that if the rules were not fair, they were dismissed. A school with a wonderful

code of conduct will find it ignored by staff and students if it is not enforced consistently. This was an area where relationships between adults and students potentially soured.

Communication and Messaging. Savvy principals spoke of the importance of developing their *identity*, even going so far as to hire a marketing firm to help them think about what it might be and how to communicate it to their constituents both internally and externally. Such intentional approaches to defining identity helped school members refocus their energy toward creating *schools* where *learning* is the focus rather than *institutions* where *comportment* was the focus. These shifts corresponded with a reduction in serious student infractions.

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Background

The term *school climate* has been around for more than a hundred years to explore the idea of school environmental or contextual factors that might have an impact on student learning and academic success. During the past three decades there has been growing research to support the importance of a positive school climate in promoting academic achievement, school safety, dropout prevention, teacher retention, healthy social interactions, and well-being (Cohen, 2010; Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008).

Although school climate has been studied for a long time, researchers have yet to develop a common definition. Most often cited, however, is a definition developed by the National School Climate Center NSCC: "School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society" (retrieved from the NSCC website November 26, 2013) (see Appendix A for Full Framework).

Prior Research. The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention recommended school climate reform as a scientifically sound strategy that promotes healthy relationships, school connectedness and student engagement. The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) includes school climate as a strategy for dropout prevention, and the U.S. Department of Education recommends school climate reform as an evidence-based strategy to prevent violence. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education is investing in school climate improvement efforts as a fundamentally important school reform strategy (Jennings, 2009).

The way students, teachers, and parents view their school climate is a strong predictor of social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Arum, 2003; Bear, 2005; Pianta, 1999). When the school climate is seen as a positive one, there are fewer behavior problems, increased academic achievement, higher self-esteem, and more commitment to school (Arum, 2003; Bear, 2005; Pianta, 1999). In order to achieve a positive school climate, collaboration among stakeholders, best practice techniques, effective evaluations, and useful resources are needed.

Principal Role. Principals/Administrators are pivotal to defining, promoting, and sustaining a positive school climate. Research has shown that the leadership of a school principal directly impacts the climate of the school and, in turn, the achievement of its students (Norton, 2002). Research also shows that the principal's effect on school climate influences the feelings that teachers have about their work (Littrell, Billingsley & Cross, 1994). Despite this research, the connection between a positive school climate and student achievement is often ignored (Bulach & Malone, 1994). Administration/supervision graduate programs and professional development

do not always emphasize the importance of school climate, nor is it part of administrative certification in most states. Hence, training is lagging behind research about school climate.

Teacher Role. Educators (teachers and staff) play a critical role in promoting a positive school climate. Investing their time and effort in creating an encouraging environment can be a proactive approach that will result in effective and positive outcomes for all (Lee & Piscatelli, 2011; and NSCC, 2013). Some examples of what educators can do to promote positive school climate include:

- Treating all students equally regardless of ethnicity, gender, and disability.
- Actively motivating students to learn by believing they can learn and succeed in school and life.
- Emphasizing high expectations for all students' academic achievement.
- Creating opportunities for students to participate in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Engaging students in conversations about school climate.
- Explicitly teaching, modeling, and enforcing the school rules with consistency.
- Developing supportive relationships with all students so that they feel they are in a connected, safe, and trusting environment.
- Using strategies that increase social, emotional, and civic learning (e.g. conflict resolution, peer mediation, service learning, and cooperative learning).
- Collaborating with staff to address students' behavior and learning.

Student Role. Students play a key role in setting the climate of a school. When students are full partners in the development of policies and practices that directly affect them, they are afforded a real-life opportunity to practice their leadership skills (Freiberg, 1998; The NSCC, 2013).

Students who feel comfortable at school and well connected to other students and adults can:

- Become well-informed about what and how school climate is defined, supported and assessed.
- Become a "student voice" and participate in school climate improvement activities.
- Become involved in or suggest leadership trainings, peer mentoring, school climate planning teams, community service-learning, student councils, etc.
- Take part in any school climate assessments, such as surveys and interviews, with a positive and candid attitude.
- Ask school leadership about starting programs for new students, such as, a peer ambassador program, a buddy program, or hosting a get- together for new students.

In addition, all students can make a conscious effort to:

- Be a positive role model for others.
- Hold high expectations for their own behavior and that of others.
- Demonstrate good sportsmanship.
- Ask for help from an adult when needed.
- Be on time and attend school and classes regularly.

Policy on School Climate

In 2011, the NSCC completed a 50-state policy scan on state school climate and anti-bullying policies to better understand the current state policy infrastructure supporting the development of positive school climates. If states value a positive school climate, and through their policies seek to encourage positive school climate, then assessing school climate would also make sense. Such assessments would provide useful data on the school's areas of strength and areas to improve as they work to ensure they meet or exceed state policies and create a positive school climate for their students and staff. However, NSCC found that state policy is generally vague about how to measure school climate.

Attendance and Suspension- Impact on School Climate

Studies have shown that a positive school climate is correlated with decreased student absentee-ism in middle school and high school (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reid, 1982; Rumberger, 1987; Sommer, 1985) and with lower rates of student suspensions in high school (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982; Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011).

Discipline problems also can contribute to a poor school climate. While schools have a responsibility to protect students from disruptive or dangerous peers, it's important to understand that students who are being disciplined through out-of-school suspensions can suffer academically. Students are far more likely to repeat a grade or drop out altogether as a result of suspensions. In addition, high out-of-school suspensions and expulsions can have a negative impact on school-wide performance (Fabelo et al, 2011). Research shows that some schools are able to keep suspensions down and produce higher student outcomes as a result of community partnerships and strong school leadership (Rausch and Skiba, 2006).

School Policy. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals, schools should develop discipline policies about removing students from class. Out-of-school suspensions and even in-school suspensions can mean that a student falls further behind in work and is even less motivated to start attending school.

National School Climate Center Definition of School Climate

The NSCC has developed *12 Dimensions of School Climate Measured* (see Appendix A) which lists the major domains, dimensions, and indicators of a productive school climate. The five broad domains are divided into twelve dimensions which are used to measure the essential components of school climate. For each dimension the NSCC model identifies specific behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes indicative of positive school climate. We used this framework to organize our data collection as well as the findings and discussion sections of this report. The domains and dimensions are described below.

Safety: *Rules and Norms* capture the clarity and enforcement of the school rules that pertain to verbal and physical harm, mistreatment, and banter. The *Sense of Physical Security* includes

positive feelings concerning safety and comfort among all members of the school. The final safety component is *Sense of Social-Emotional Security* which is defined as a safe feeling among students in an environment that is free of abuse, insults, and engenders equitable treatment for all.

Teaching and Learning: *Support for Learning* captures the quality of teacher instruction and strategies that include teacher expectations for student success and achievement, higher level questioning and wait time for students to respond, guided student practice, encouragement of students' answers and acceptance of students' feelings in a nonjudgmental way. The other component of this dimension is *Social and Civic Learning* which is defined as providing attention to the growth and understanding of social and civic information through attentive listening skills, compassion, reflective personal perception, individual concern, and fair resolutions.

Interpersonal Relationships: *Respect for Diversity* includes perceiving all persons as equal and individuals in all aspects of the school and in all relationships among the entire staff (adult: student; adult: adult; student: student). *Social Support – Adults* allows schools to think about staff relationships with students that convey high expectations and a caring and nurturing environment with individual attention and concern. *Social Support – Students*, the third and final component of Interpersonal Relationships, includes a compassionate and caring rapport among the students that creates a trusting environment where students feel supported by their classmates.

Institutional Environment: *School Connectedness/Engagement* refers to feeling an optimistic identification with the school where all school community members are actively engaged. *Physical Surroundings* is defined as the physical appearance of the building and its environment, where ideally it is attractive, clean, and organized, with sufficient materials and supplies.

Staff Only: *Leadership* is defined as administrators who have established a clear mission that is easily understood and translated into appropriate school professional development with built-in support for the staff. *Professional Relationships* is defined as quality relationships and a shared understanding among all staff that makes the professional learning environment an amiable and effective work place.

Methodology

The purpose of this report is to describe *how* principals, staff, and students in five schools have made deliberate attempts to improve their school climate. Data were collected through observations, focus groups, and interviews during the spring of 2013. Through this report, we answer the following research questions:

- **What factors most influence a school's climate, from the perspective of the students, teachers, and staff?**

- **What strategies or practices can a school adopt?**

- **How does a principal intentionally create a positive school climate?**

School Selection and Data Collection. Seven schools were originally selected with guidance by staff in the Baltimore City Schools Office of Student Support, in collaboration with researchers from BERC. The schools were selected based on perceived positive changes in climate and reduced suspension rates. As we coordinated the interviews and site visits two schools dropped out of the study. One did not responded to requests and a second solicited more information about the number of participants and time commitment and then became nonresponsive. Ultimately we collected data at five schools (three high schools and two elementary schools).

Data collected at each of the five schools included the following:

    a. Principal Interviews (one informal at start of project and a final formal interview),
    b. Focus group with Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) members
    c. Focus group with teachers (separately from ILT)
    d. Focus groups with students (two per school: for high schools we met with Juniors and Seniors separately from Freshman and Sophomores; for elementary schools we met with two groups of fifth grade students)
    e. Interviews with two veteran staff members (some with more than 20 years in the school) to describe perceptions of any change.
    f. Informal school observations during school tour and visits
    g. Neighborhood observations (two at the start of the day and two at dismissal to provide a local context and feel of the school)
    h. Online resources were consulted to provide researchers with a clear sense of the history and context of each school (this is not included in this report for reasons of anonymity).

Participant Selection. Focus group participants were identified through a convenience sampling method. Principals were asked to invite all teachers, staff, and students to participate. Principals were asked to select 6 to 8 teachers who might be able to talk about school climate from different viewpoints including grade-level, subject area, and years of experience, and principals were asked to select 12 to 16 students that represented various groups and who might see school climate differently. In two schools, a convenience sampling method was used to include additional students who were over the age of 18 to participate in focus groups that had low turn-out or whose original members did not have signed parent consent forms.

At each school purposeful sampling included all members of the Instructional Leadership team

and those who were available attended. The principal identified a second group, veteran staff members who had been at the school long enough to talk about how climate had changed, the average tenure across the ten veterans was 17.5 years (ranging from 4 to 36). The type and number of participants are included in the table below.

Table 1. Participants by school and type.

| School | Interview Participants | | Focus Group Participants | | | | Total |
	Principal	Veteran	ILT	Teacher	Student Group 1	Student Group 2	
School 1	1	2	8	7	8	4	30
School 2	1	2	7	5	8	7	30
School 3	1	2	0	8	8	4	23
School 4	1	2	5	8	3	5	24
School 5	1	2	5	5	6	5	24
TOTAL	**5**	**10**	**25**	**33**	**33**	**25**	**131**

Confidentiality. All data collected in the field are reported anonymously for this report. While direct quotes are included, no school or individual will be identified. For confidentiality all principals are referred to with masculine pronouns. The specific protocols related to confidentiality are detailed in the Appendix.

Protocols. Interview and focus group protocols are included in Appendix B as well as the neighborhood observation tool. Interviews and focus groups, lasting about one hour each, had identified note takers, and were recorded and transcribed. Participants received gift cards if the school principal believed it was appropriate.

Analysis. Two 4-hour debriefing meetings were conducted with the research team after the completion of the focus groups, interviews, and school tour. Both meetings were facilitated by the principal investigator with half of the team meeting one day and the other half a second day. In each meeting the group identified general key themes and observations or accounts that described the relationships, physical environment, safety, and teaching and learning at each school (one school at a time). The notes from the two meetings were aggregated and used to confirm or challenge key findings. The transcripts were analyzed through an iterative process where these key findings were used to guide the preliminary coding.   The findings and their relevant quotes were then correlated with and organized according to the 5 NSCC domains. A secondary coding was done based on the 12 dimensions of the NSCC model to identify any other areas of school climate that had been missed during the debriefing sessions and initial coding. Detailed case studies reports were developed for each school to clearly establish common and unique characteristics across schools. Finally, in order to maintain the anonymity of the school participants, we aggregated the findings from all five schools to identify common and varied practices (which are the focus of this report).

A third debriefing meeting was conducted after completion of the neighborhood context observations. Similarly, in this meeting the group identified the physical aspects of the

neighborhood (e.g., condition and type of buildings) as well as any observed behaviors and interactions of the students and others around the perimeter of each the school, taken one at a time (See Appendix B for the specific questions we addressed). Key findings were confirmed or challenged based on the aggregate of the four observations at each school. Specifically, we determined which physical and social aspects were observed by different observers on different days and which observations were consistently noted during opening, dismissal, or both.

Limitations. Establishing trust is always a challenge in collecting qualitative data. Being new in the school made it challenging to engage school staff to participate and to share freely in what they may have perceived to be a threatening exercise. Other limitations included the relatively short amount of time we spent in the schools and the concurrence and timing of the visits (i.e., all occurred near the end of the academic year). The climate of the school undoubtedly fluctuates throughout the year and school member's perceptions may have been influenced by fatigue given how near the end of the year we met them. Further, given the case study nature of this study it is difficult to generalize findings.

Findings

In the subsequent sections, we present aggregate and anecdotal findings from the five schools to respond to the questions listed in the methodology. The findings are organized according the National School Climate Center's (NSCC) five domains for measuring school climate (see Appendix A). The dimensions within these domains are summarized here and described in more detail under the corresponding findings sections below:

- Safety: Rules and Norms, Sense of Physical Security, and Sense of Social-Emotional Security

- Teaching and Learning: Support for Learning, and Social and Civic Learning

- Interpersonal Relationships: Respect for Diversity, Social Support – Adults, Social Support - Students

- Institutional Environment: School Connectedness/Engagement, Physical Surroundings

- Staff Only: Leadership and Professional Relationships

The findings paint a picture that starts with the overall feel of a school in terms of safety and routine, and concludes with principals' leadership and vision to impact school climate in a meaningful way. The relationships among members of the school set the stage for teaching and learning, the environment, and feelings of connectedness to the school. Finally, we will describe the principal's leadership practices and professional relationships as a means to leverage a strategic plan towards school change.

Safety

The NSCC area of safety includes three dimensions: *Rules and Norms, Sense of Physical Safety, and Sense of Social-Emotional Safety.*

Safety Overall. When we asked students and staff about safety they normally responded in more general terms saying "Yes, I feel safe in the building" and they would follow up by saying they are "comfortable staying at the school after hours". Since they generally reported feeling safe in their school they focused their other comments on discrete factors that might compromise their overall feeling of safety. In this section, we aggregated all school responses to questions about safety and included other related comments.

Inside School Versus Outside. As mentioned, students and adults at all of the schools reported feeling generally safe inside the school. However, in one school staff reported feeling unsafe outside of the building and not wanting to leave after dark. In accord with this perspective, students were noted to directly enter the school in the morning and abruptly leave at dismissal with little or no lingering outside the school building. This school is still categorized as a

persistently dangerous school because of the percent of students being suspended for assaults on staff and weapon possession. Despite this designation the school is showing positive gains in enrollment and the principal reported that that staff attendance rate was in the 90's, and that only one teacher has left since the turnaround (due to personal matters). A member of the leadership team remarked that ". . . the climate has definitely changed in terms of the type of student that we have. Also, before it was a neighborhood school, so now it's a citywide school. . . .- it's open to the whole city, so you don't have the neighborhood rivalries that we had before. I think socially, culturally, it's kind of moved a little more away from the neighborhood gang kind of affiliation, to some degree, but it hasn't really trickled as much into our building as it did before."

Neighborhood Context. While safety within a school is in a principal's purview, outside of the school there can be concerns and issues that directly address safety and will have an impact on a school's climate. Below we describe the different external contexts of our schools.

At one school, home maintenance varied in the neighborhood, and a few abandoned homes were visible. The streets were in need of cleaning with garbage and trash seen all around. Closer to a nearby highway there were small bars and convenience stores. A police car was observed parked in front of the school and seen patrolling during arrival and dismissal. Many students walked to school with some dropping off younger siblings on the way. Some students were dropped off and picked up by car; parents would pull over on the streets surrounding the school. About 30 to 40 students were dropped off by school bus and a few boys biked home from school. Most students were clearly wearing uniforms while others were not. School officials were seen greeting student at the front door in the morning and staffing the back door during dismissal. There was very little loitering outside the building during arrival. Athletes went to an open field beyond the school grounds at dismissal. There was a tattered looking woman wandering around the school area with unkempt and stained clothing, possibly a prostitute.

Another school is immediately surrounded by both residential and commercial property. The residential areas around the school included older and more weathered row homes. Some streets appeared divided where one side of the street had homes that were maintained while those on the other side were run down. There were also a few abandoned homes behind the school football fields. At dismissal, people were seen left behind at the bus stop because the buses were too full. There was often security or police officers at the crossing, many walkers were seen rushing across the roads, jaywalking and not looking for cars. Near the bus stop there were liquor stores, churches and take-out restaurants. Most students arrived by public transit. These students would walk together in small groups talking and laughing with one another while students who arrived by foot kept more to themselves. All students went directly in the school during arrival and directly out of the school during dismissal. Many students arrived to school in street clothes but were wearing uniforms during dismissal. There were very few parents seen around the school other than those taking their kids to the elementary school. No teachers or other adults were noted outside of the school during arrival and dismissal.

At a different school the surroundings were mostly homes with the exception of one edge which was bordered by a large intersection. In the neighborhood there were large single family homes with mostly well-kept yards. There were several churches in converted homes and a home daycare center. Most students walked to and from school accompanied by parent figures or older siblings. There were several crossing guards helping the students get to school. Many students

were dropped off by car, in which case the parents would park on the street and walk the students into the building. One parent dropped off her student via taxi. There appeared to be many young mothers and a few fathers as well as some grandparents escorting the students to school. The parents or adults were generally alone with their student and were dressed in a range of clothes from work or business to pajamas or sweats. Most students were in uniforms. Teachers held the door open in the morning greeting and letting people in, waving and welcoming parents, students, other teachers and visitors. The door was locked at all times. Right before dismissal parents and younger children congregated waiting to greet their children at the door, then they slowly transitioned to the playground where the parents socialized and the students played. There were many positive interactions between adults and students such as playful chasing and running games, smiling, hugs, and kisses. Students who were not picked up by adults walked home in groups. No student was seen walking alone.

Another school is in a residential area that surrounds the school with many single family homes, some of which had driveways, well-manicured lawns, and luxury cars. Homes were nicely kept. Facilities behind the school were used by staff who ate outside, smoked, and socialized. During arrival and dismissal family members appeared to be racially and ethnically diverse. Many students arrived by car. Parents would park their cars on the streets around the school and walk their kids inside; this was also the case at dismissal. The streets were overly congested during these times causing parents to be more cautious while walking their students to school and frustrated while trying to maneuver around. There was very little loitering after drop-off or pick-up. People seemed familiar with each other and were hostile toward our observers (whom they seemed to know did not belong there). A man with crutches who seemed to be a member of the community wore two different shoes and was taking pictures of cars that were not parked correctly. About 20 to 30 students arrived by school bus. Some students walked to school. No student walked alone, most were with adults, and some appeared to be with older siblings. Women accompanying students mostly wore house clothes while men wore business attire. Three crossing guards assisted pedestrians. The students generally showed high energy and ran up to the school. At dismissal about 15 students headed over to the local recreation center for after school programs.

The fifth school is in a business and commercial area with some residential housing across the street. At the time of the observations the school was surrounded by construction. There were many plain brick apartment complexes nearby with their own courtyards. Not far from the school was a torn down mall where kids would walk on their way to school. The school stadium stood out in the neighborhood because of how new it is compared to the surrounding buildings. Many students were seen walking toward the school but it appeared that many were walking from the bus stops near the school. There was a large group of students waiting for the MTA bus in the afternoon. Some students were dropped off on the streets surrounding the school and one student drove herself. Students walked in groups toward the school but did not interact much in the morning. Once they got to the school they interacted with police/security officers with a great deal of familiarity. Many students were seen arriving after class was already in session. Upon dismissal, there was more interaction among the groups as they left school, where girls were seen walking in groups more often than boys. Administrators manned the doors as the students left in the afternoon. Many students headed to the stadium to practice after school and others went there just to hang out. Other students walked back to the various bus stops.

These interactions describe the neighborhood context students leave as they enter schools and the context they return to at the end of the day. Next, we describe other safety factors in the schools.

Communication and Follow Through. School staff and administrators used various strategies to promote clear rules and norms for enforcement. Four schools used Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or other reward programs to clearly communicate rules and promote positive behaviors. Most schools had adults walking through the halls specifically making sure that students were headed where they were scheduled to be. Most schools used denying access to school events as a consequence for misbehavior. Students in a school where such consequences were consistently reinforced expressed that they had "no doubt" that they would not be able to go on special trips or attend school social events. In another school the swipe card system was used as a mechanism for enforcing such consequences by blocking students who had lost privileges from attending school events. In a third school a student said of the principal: "It's just so funny. But it's like he has a good relationship with all the students, but when something's wrong the students know, 'Okay, he's being serious, this is not a game, let's listen'."

Challenges to Consistency of Enforcement. There were also several barriers to clear and consistent enforcement of rules identified by teachers and students. Teachers in two schools perceived an inconsistency in how consequences were given and to whom. Teachers in one of these schools felt that if consequences for poor behavior occurred more consistently, for students and teachers, the teachers would be more united and consistent in their expectations of one another and the students. "And so I think that there's a large proportion of us still very much holding the kids up here, but there are some adults in the building who might be undermining that slightly, with like not holding kids to the same expectations, not having the same sort of general rules."

In a third school, one teacher commented that "They [students] don't believe we can do anything to them-- [we are talking about] just standard discipline. We say things, and they know they will not be followed through, they know there will be no consequence; they know that we are essentially helpless to do anything. . . . You can't possibly run a school and demand and have expectations of children if you cannot enforce them. And that really undermines our whole goal and our whole mission here. Because they're kids and they get away with what they can, and they know exactly what they can get away with, and they're suffering." In a separate focus group students at this school noted that administrators do not do much when students come late to school and that because of this more students are coming late.   "Usually people are late. Yeah, they [administrators] don't say nothing to me either unless I'm with a lot of people, they don't really say nothing." Adults in this school also struggled with "norms for adult intervention" in that there was disagreement about who was responsible for responding to particular incidents and/or involving particular students. This struggle was made worse by technical difficulties that prevented teachers from being able to call for assistance when fights or other incidents occurred. "Safety, I still feel like you can't really get someone when you need them. My intercom system has always been not really reliable even today. So I end up having to use my cellphone to call down here if I ever need like an emergency. And then that's really the only kind of communication that I can have with the main office down here. I've called down on by cellphone--if there's a fight in the hallway you call down--if nobody's around, it takes time for people to get here."

Physical safety was facilitated by consistent implementation of consequences, support and communication during crisis, the presence of adults in the buildings, and monitoring the hallways. While the development of positive adult to student relationships and approaches to discipline curtailed many disciplinary problems (described in the Interpersonal Relationships Domain), teachers and staff still had more serious incidents that needed stronger approaches and supports. Relationship building seemed to set the norms and rules for pro-social engagement whereas other structures were needed to address more serious incidents. Teachers and staff needed the authority and support to follow through with consequences, including suspension, when appropriate and when considering the safety of others in the building.

Fighting. At one school, teachers thought that the number of stairwells in the building made it less safe by making it difficult to find students who might be misbehaving. They also reported feeling isolated in their classrooms because the intercom system does not work. In this way, they have difficulty contacting the office. "We don't have intercom systems like we used to have back in the day. So if a fight broke out there was no way to reach anybody. So a lot of times kids would fight, get up and walk away before anybody even knew that the fight had occurred."

In another school, the students and teachers reported feeling safe in the building. They noted that there are "fewer fights here than at other schools". Students felt safe: "I feel very safe because there are a lot of teachers and staff and the teachers are nice and I learned a lot of stuff." "I felt very protected." The principal was said to follow the children into the community to make sure they are safe. He also reportedly picks them up if they need help getting to school.

Weapons. We heard in one school that they often find weapons on students when they are looking for other things. An adult shared an example of a student who explained that his mother forces him to carry a knife to school for protection when walking through the neighborhood. Students felt that there had been a reduction in violence and now feel fairly safe at school. There are police in the school and students are required to swipe their identification cards upon entering the building. Upon entering two of the schools, security members looked into and used a wand to check student bags for weapons and other items not permitted at school.

Reputation-Reality Discrepancy. The sense of safety felt by students, teachers, and staff in one school was noted as a significant shift from the past. They reported that the number of major incidents had declined (especially the number of fires that were started in the building) because there were consequences. Freshman and sophomores reported anticipating the school would be unsafe and bad but after a few months they saw it as a great environment to learn. One student who was told the school was going to be terrible said; "But when I got here, it was different. But then I think if they come here for a little while and really see the environment, they'll change their views about it. It's an environment that it's so full of joy and fun that you wouldn't even believe it's like a real school because even though we have the typical fights and arguments that any other school might have, it's an enlightened feel that you may not be able to find if you go to another school. They don't yell at you to get out of the hallway. The way they say it to you, you'll want to go back to class because it's not in a manner that you'll be like, okay, you'll want to get smart back with them. If they putting it to you in a way that you're like, "Okay, what he said be respectful to me. I'll be respectful back to them." Some teachers came to the school knowing very little about it, while others came assuming the worst. Teachers coming from the

Teach for American program reported being told horrible things about the school as part of their orientation and given a "good luck" send off.

Verbal Abuse, Teasing, and Exclusion. As a preventive measure, one principal moved the fifth grade classrooms from the wing with the third and fourth graders to a more isolated part of the kindergarten through second grade wing of the school. This allowed the fifth graders to have their own space (closer to the main office), and being near the younger students gave them a place to be themselves and be responsible for modeling good behavior for the younger students. At this same school students identified a single bully. While they were frustrated by the bully's impact on the classroom, they did not report personal incidents of teasing. In a few schools students identified specific members of the staff who would yell at the students, but these were seen as exceptions. The students would identify various people who do support them in the school (see Interpersonal Relationships).

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning under the NSCC model is comprised of two dimensions; *support for learning* and *social and civic learning*.

Teaching and Learning is often the focus of school research, and it plays an important role in school climate. Likewise, school climate is a key ingredient to strong teaching and learning and hence influences student outcomes. While we did not systematically observe classroom practices and interactions we noted some practices we observed while touring the schools. These informal observations as well as the characteristics of teaching and learning describe by students and adults are included here.

Student Driven Learning. Members of the leadership team at one school noted a shift in their approach to learning from teacher driven to student and community driven curriculum. They remarked that "So it's more student-driven. But it's motivating as well because it's preparing our students for leadership, that they can do it. . . . they need to start finding things out on their own. And they have been doing that because they have the technology and the resources now to get it." Technology is another central focus at the school. They have prioritized technology in their budget and have equipped the school with iPads and Smart Boards in every classroom. The technology was seen in use by students and teachers for planning, administering and recording assessments, and student engagement was seen both in front of the class and at their desks. They attributed their recent increase in student achievement scores and student ownership for learning to these changes.

Principal as Instructional Leader. One principal demonstrates his leadership of academic learning by knowing the reading level of every child in the building and asking them about their reading levels when he meets them in the hallway. He was also aware that students had different needs. For example, when talking about providing interventions for the most challenging 15% he said ". . .those kids really rely on relationships. And you need teachers with a lot of dexterity . . ." Referring to one student in particular he notes; "It's been a multi-year process with him to get

him to where he is now. And, you know, a lot of times people . . . They're willing to write those kids off and just continue to suspend them. . . . . that kid--he needs a lot of love. He needs a lot of support. He . . . needs to learn strategies, have opportunities to practice the strategies. And . . . he needs time and space in order to apply those. . . ."

A Focus on Instruction. The principal at one school emphasized the need to maintain a focus on instruction. As one step toward facilitating learning he developed a rotating block schedule. With this schedule students do not see every teacher every day nor do they meet at the same time for a given class. The purpose of switching to this schedule was to minimize the impact of a particular disruption on a particular class. For example, if a student is always late to school instead of missing the same class every first period, the impact of being late will be spread across classes. Likewise, if a student has trouble concentrating after lunch, previously (s)he would have the same class after lunch everyday which would negatively impact his/her performance. The seniors noted that the change to block schedule was drastic but they really like it because "it's better when it's alternating because . . . say I had this teacher this day and I have homework, but I forgot, but I won't have them the next day so I have an extra night to get my homework done". Other academic supports reported by students included an after school class that helped them make-up work and provided extra help if needed, a program geared toward college readiness for juniors and seniors (with 2.7 GPA or higher), and a group that provided assistance with applications to college and college exam prep. Such after school programming for assisting students were seen in the other high schools as well. All high schools had partnerships with local universities for purposes of offering college level courses, supporting academic programs in the high school, and providing services that were mutually beneficial for the high school and college (e.g., using social work interns).

Expectations and Accountability. Adults at one school noted that they no longer apologize or make excuses for why students can't learn, and that there are now expectations and accountability for student performance. "I think that the biggest change that I've seen is that we've gone from a culture of apology to a culture of accountability. And the last six principals I've had, and I've had some good principals, but it was never the child's fault, it was never the child's responsibility that--I mean if a child sat and cursed you out it was, 'Well, they listen to that music, it's okay. That's where they get it.' And it was always an apology for it, and the shift now has gone from an apology to accountability. It's you as a student now are accountable for your education." There were many programs geared toward academic growth and success. Students had a variety of other opportunities to serve as teaching assistants, take college courses, and receive SAT prep.   On an individual level one student, when asked what s/he would remember most about his/her school, said "After I graduate, I want to go to a four-year college, and I want to major in early childhood education and I want to minor in journalism. The expectations from the teachers are very, very, very high for me because, even though I don't have faith in myself, they still have faith in me to get accepted to any college that I want to. So I think that's a real high expectation. And then I will remember the bonds I made with the staff the most. Because I feel like the school is nothing without the bonds you have and the type of relationships you make with the different people you interact with every day. So yeah, that's what I'll remember the most."

<u>Sustaining High Expectations</u>. While students described some teachers as supporting them, they describe others as not helping them learn, not challenging them, or giving them assignments without explanation. Similarly, teachers recognized that expectations varied and especially newer teachers seemed to have lower expectations of the students.   A few teachers described it this way; ". . .we lowered down the standards so much now" "I think the teacher expectations vary too much in our school. I feel like sometimes we don't have a specific goal or a plan mapped out that all of the staff members to know what we should expect from the students. Because if you have new teachers coming in, and when they come in they see kids running wild, they see kids cursing in the hallways and cursing in the classroom, then that new teacher's going to believe that that's the climate and structure that we should have or that we accept here as a school." "So you have teachers, who were my teachers that are still here, and their expectations are different than those that are coming in. So then the new teachers they'll say that they feel supported, but then the teachers that have been here longer say that they don't feel supported. And that's just because of a difference in expectations of what they believe the students are capable of doing". Two contributing factors were; a need to significantly increase the enrollment over a short period of time and the retirement of ten "seasoned" teachers in the last two years. Students particularly noted the difficulty when teachers left during the school year and lesson plans were changed.

<u>Challenge to Instruction</u>. An obstacle cited at two schools was the use of "packets". Packets of missed materials which let students "miss" school, but make up the work. They describe a process where by students could ask for and complete a packet at any point in the term and still pass the course without attending. Principals and teachers felt this undermined the classroom and could better be addressed through the school's evening programs (describe above) where students who have fallen behind can make up credits.

<u>Social and Civic Learning Programs</u>. There were a variety of programs where students were able to engage in authentic activities that promoted social and civic learning.

- Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) (4 schools)
- Peer Mediation Training (all schools)
- Peaceable Education Program
- Social and civic projects
- Production
- Peer-court for disciplinary infractions
- Community internships
- School jobs

Through these programs students played the roles of facilitator, mediator, journalist, producer, community activist, lawyer, and judge. In each program they were able to enact real-life scenarios and take responsibility for themselves, their peers, and their community. While touring two schools we met students who were excited to share what they were doing with their programs (such as video and studio productions and social justice community programs) and they spoke about them with pride and ownership. At one school, a teacher is facilitating community and social justice activities with a group of students. In a large conference-style room students were talking about projects and ways in which they can inform the community. One student shared a project they have been working on to stop the construction of

an incinerator near the school. The students said they organized to inform and meet with neighborhood members to build awareness about the project and solicit help in fighting the building project. They have also worked with an organization to set up air pollution monitors in the area to show it is already a high pollution area and that the incinerator would reduce the air quality even further. The student spoke professionally and with great pride about the work her team had completed.

<u>Supporting the Whole Child</u>. At one school, student education is inclusive of strong academic and social skill development and included an intervention hallway set-up such that academic interventions are on one side and social/behavioral interventions directly parallel them on the other side. Good behavior was supported and rewarded through PBIS, fieldtrips, and other unique opportunities that the students might not have ordinarily had. Social workers hosted workshops on puberty (for both kids and parents). Similarly, one of the high schools had a health suite were students could meet one-on-one with social work interns to work through personal and academic struggles. In both schools, the physical space was clearly delineated and gave the programs prominence. Programs like the peer mediation training for students and "Paths to Pax" from Johns Hopkins helped students develop their emotional competencies by helping them learn about feelings, proper expression, complimenting others, finding similarities with others, and finding good aspects of others. In addition to these systemic supports for the whole child students noted acts by specific teachers. For example, one student spoke of a teacher who supported her academics and well-being saying, "She gave--when I was going through a struggle or anything, she gave me money, she fed--even when didn't ask for it, she fed me for no reason. She took me to California, Virginia, Alabama all types of places for science fairs. That's why I love science so much because she made a big impression on science when I first got here. So that's one person I definitely have seen who cares, and even if she don't know a student--if a student come up to her and say, 'I'm hungry' she'll give them money".

In summary, teaching and learning incorporates academic content as well as opportunities for children to learn how to work together, self-regulate their behavior, and adopt and practice real life roles in the safety of their school community. These lead to a greater sense of pride, ownership, and excitement related to maturing and learning. Furthermore, these activities were associated with more positive engagement and connectedness with the school.

Interpersonal Relationships

The National School Climate Center's *interpersonal relationships* domain for measuring school climate include three dimensions*; respect for diversity*, *social supports* for students *from adults,* and *social supports* for students *from students*. The first refers to all types of relationships in the building while the others address adult-to-student and student- to-student relationships respectively.

In general, schools need to develop a *respect for diversity* that supports all interpersonal relationships; student to student, adult to student, and adult to adult. Through our conversations

with students and adults we did not identify any systemic issues of intolerance. While there was mention of intolerance at several of the schools, these examples were seen as anomalies compared to the norm. Some students did feel that there was inequity in who received attention and praise. For example, in one school the students felt adults knew the "troublemakers'" names better than the other students' and that sports accomplishments were acknowledged more than academic success. Administration, teachers, and students all agreed that sports were the highest priority at this school. One student said: "Another thing I would change is not only caring about the sports, because that is not the only group. They give the good stuff to the football. Yeah, and they praise when the sports team win at stuff but that--when like--me personally I've been in the news and all that for winning science fairs, but you will never hear on the school announcement, "[Student name] won the science fair." You hear, "We won 31 to 22, woo."   In another school, students pointed to the opposite saying that the principal was more familiar with the "smart kids".

Relationships: Adult to Student

According to the NSCC model, adult support for students is indicated through caring relationships, "high expectations for students' success, willingness to listen to students and to get to know them as individuals, and personal concern for students' problems". Students in all five schools spoke glowingly about these types of relationships and the ways adults in their school looked out for their personal as well as academic needs. They often expressed the closeness of these relationships through use of familial terms and parallels. Some of the most positive relationships were those established with hall monitors. What differed across the schools was the ratio of engaged to disengaged teachers and whether intentional structures and practices were put in place to promote positive relationships between adults and students.

<u>The Main Office: Setting the Tone</u>. A school's main office is a microcosm of a school. The following description of some main offices from other schools is from an as yet unpublished BERC report. It highlights how interactions in a school's main office and hallways simultaneously inform and are informed by a school's culture and climate. In essence it sets or reflects the tone of relationships in the school. Everything from communication via telephone, email and face-to-face interactions shape experiences parents and students have in school. These interactions also inform parents' and students' positive and negative perceptions and attitudes about a school. These potential domains of experience for parents and students—telephone, email, and face-to-face interactions—extend along a continuum of thriving, personally engaged school contexts to distant, unengaged school contexts.

For example in schools with thriving, positive climates a ringing telephone was answered promptly and respectfully. Callers were not put on hold for lengthy amounts of time. Guests entering a school were promptly and warmly greeted by school staff and offered assistance with a seemingly genuine tone of voice. Students arriving late for school or returning after an absence were greeted by name and told their presence in school was missed. Further, in one optimal school climate context, school staff politely asked students about their absence, asked students if they understood how much time they had missed, what subject(s) they had missed, and school staff collaboratively strategized through a series of questions and answers what steps were necessary to address tardiness or absence. Hallway interactions reflect similar levels of rich, socio-emotional contact with students and parents. School staff greet each parent by name.

Individual students are greeted by name and interactions between school staff and students reflect intimate knowledge of each student's interests, strengths and aspirations, and school staff explicitly relate this information in an encouraging manner to the importance of a student's attendance, performance and daily choices and actions.

In contrast, in schools with less than optimal school climate, the culture of telephone, email, and face-to-face communication can be quite different. Attempts to telephone the school are more likely to be met by an automated message-only recording, a seemingly consistent busy signal, or being put on hold for extensively long periods of time. Requests for information that should be readily available, such as the school principal's email address, are met with great scrutiny as though a request was made for the principal's social security or personal telephone number. Visitors are less likely to be greeted promptly, politely, or as though their presence is a disruption to the school employee. School visitors are also more likely to encounter unusually long delays while front office staff talk on the telephone, on obviously personal calls, as other staff, who appear available enough to peer from ante-offices, offer no assistance. Face-to-face interactions are more likely to be obstructionist and impolite. Students arriving late for school are not known by name, with the front office staff having to request each student's name. There is no discussion of the child's presence in school being missed, of the amount or type of instructional time lost due to tardiness or absence, and no attempt to identify barriers and changes necessary to ensure the student is in school all day, every day.

Although school districts typically do not frame students, parents, and the public as customers, similar to a customer's interactions with an agency, service, restaurant, retail or other business establishment, experiences in telephone, email, and face-to-face interactions inform people's perceptions and attitudes for better or worse (Rone, unpublished).

Intentional Adult-Student Relationships. One school was very intentional and systemic about improving relationships within the school. One ILT member summarized relationships stating ". . .[relationships are] the cornerstone of what we do here. . . .So I think relationships among students and--I've only been here for a few years?--but among students and student to teacher and teacher to teacher, because it's so small, have always been very intimate and very tight-knit". The students, staff, and administration engage and connect with one another like a family. While this change in culture was associated with the principal's arrival it was far from coincidental as he has provided ongoing training to help staff develop positive relationships with students (and each other). One leadership team member described it this way; "The goal of it is to improve relationships which should decrease the level of time and effort on discipline and which should increase learning". They follow this framework when engaging with one another and with their students. One veteran remarked that the program has helped them shift from one where they yell at students to comply with the rules to one where they engage each student in dialogue and try to understand where he/she is coming from.

Students used familial terms when describing various people in the building. For example, they referred to a staff member as being like their mother and another as an uncle, one teacher was like their aunt and another was like their brother. "[He's] like somebody's brother kind of--he'll act like us sometimes, but he'll get serious. But if you're like a terrible kid, don't want to learn, probably no ambition and disrespectful towards certain teachers, they're still going to try to

honestly help you". They attributed this positive change in their relationships with teachers and staff to the principal.

Using a Mentoring Model. Similarly, another principal took an intentional approach to building and supporting relationships between adults and students through a cohort project that pairs each student with an adult mentor. The mentor may be a teacher, administrator, or other staff member in the building. Juniors and seniors at the school noted a major change in climate with new principal's arrival. They now feel like a family in the school. One student said: "The one thing that I will remember from [this school] is that I will always have a family base here; I will always be accepted here; I will always be welcomed into the building as an alumni--and, yeah, that's what I'll remember the most, that I'll always have a family here". They reported that teachers have high expectations of them, believe they could do better, and help them after school. A student said "I notice a lot--because I speak for the school, on behalf of the school, what I like to bring up a lot is that we are more like a family. We have these posters that they put up on the wall that are color coded saying whether you are on track to graduate, almost on track to graduate or on track to _____. So when you look on those posters, they putting all your business out there, how many classes you ever failed, your attendance records, everything. So you don't want to be the only person up there who's red in your cohort". They felt particularly supported by the hall monitors and reported going to them when they needed help. Likewise, freshman and sophomores similarly reported that some teachers care about them, encourage them to reach for higher goals, connect with their life story, and help them with whatever they needed. Recently teachers and staff came together to help out a student who was homeless, which resonated with many of the students. The homeless student described the teachers this way: "the fact they went above and beyond, and they went to find out what was wrong in my life and said I would never be in that situation again, that's how they care".

Conversation versus Relationships. One caveat in thinking about relationships was seen at a school where a principal took a less formal approach to relationship building. Seniors recognized that since his arrival teachers and administrators have tried to learn every student's name and develop relationships with as many students as possible. The principal described an effort to have conversations with students. However, some students and staff described their relationship with the principal as somewhat distant. Seniors were less likely to go to administration when they need something, saying "I can't really go to an administrator. I can go to a teacher, but as far as like an administrator, no. I just feel like it would be a waste of telling them, like they just wouldn't care. I have a bigger bond with my teacher than an administrator." Freshmen and sophomores felt disconnected; "He wants everybody to be his friend and you're not here for friends, you're here to get a check and we're here to get an education." They felt the principal only knew the names of the kids who get into trouble. "He doesn't try to get to know people, don't know people's names." "Only people he knows name is those that cause trouble." They noted that he came from a different type of school and that while he was "adjusting well" they had not yet formed a close relationship with him. "He's good as a principal but I don't think he's ready for [this school] to be the principal of [this school]." "I don't think he's ready for [this school] or Baltimore City or high school. I think he's ready for a middle or elementary school principal".

<u>Modeling Positive Relationships</u>. During one school tour we observed an adult modeling the type of positive exchange that the principal hoped would enhance student-to-teacher relationships while maintaining order in the school. The teacher stopped to talk with a handful of individual students walking around the halls and he got them to go back to class. He was very light hearted yet persistent with the students. In each case, he asked and established why the student was out of class (rather than making assumptions). He discussed with the student where he/she was supposed to be (but it was evident he knew where the student was supposed to be when he challenged the accuracy of one student's response) and then the adult followed through with making sure each student knew that he/she should go back to class. He talked to one resistant student encouraging him to make the right decision saying "I know you can make a good decision".

Yet, we learned that teachers in this school struggled with trying to focus on relationships instead of consequences because they felt there was less continuity in consequences from the administration: "Well that's the frustration that I have, too, like it gets put on relationship, more than the, 'There needs to be a consequence for this action that goes beyond your relationship with the kids'." Hence, balancing individual student needs and circumstances with the implementation of consequences was a challenge.

<u>High Expectations</u>. Student in all schools noted teachers that had high expectations of them:
- "Expectation to do well and don't give up, just go to college and make it through".
- "They don't want me to give up; they want me to keep going. Like they want me to be something beyond--when I got my acceptance letter, the teachers were so happy. We want you to take this acceptance letter, and we want you to go. And whatever you need help with we're there to help whatever it is.".
- "Okay, so the teachers expect me to do great and another--yeah they expect me to do the best I can do and expect me to succeed in every single area of my life. And they're definitely expecting me to go, because just yesterday my friend, I was with her and she told Ms. [Teacher], 'I don't think I'm going to college' and she was like crying and everything. And Ms. [Teacher] just broke it down like, 'No, you're going, that's not even a choice. And this is what we're going to do to make sure that you go.' So they're definitely expecting me to go and do my best so that I can be successful."
- "And a lot of teachers does push me, because when I do something wrong, or if I disrupt class or talk, whatever, then I will get in trouble. And I'll say, 'Why you always come at me,' or whatever. My teacher would say, 'Because I expect more of you,' and stuff like that. I think they just expect me to try my hardest and stuff."
- "They really want us to succeed".

<u>Demand for Higher Expectations.</u> In two schools a few students expressed a desire for higher expectations:
- "This used to be prestigious program but they just don't challenge us like they should"
- "Teachers have higher expectations of the younger kids now…they are teaching them the same skills earlier" (NOTE: This may have been partly due to the implementation of the Common Core)

<u>Student Perceptions of Adults</u>. One consistent finding across the five schools was that students talked about two types of adults: the kind that was committed and fully engaged in helping

students with academic and personal struggles and the kind that was disengaged and leaving as soon as possible. Often, teachers also reported this perception.

When discussing the committed teachers, students spoke with great emphasis and excitement. They reported feeling that these teachers, whom they often called by familial names, cared about them on a personal level and provided the structure and support to help them succeed academically. They described these teachers in a variety of ways. The students would give a little giggle or smirk when they would describe times when adults at the school would set clear limits and "call them out" when they were making poor choices.

The teachers identified a divide amongst those that try to make a difference and those that are simply collecting a paycheck. The students also noticed this divide. "So I will agree with everybody when they said there are certain adults in this building that lower expectation, and not just with students but just with other adults, and having a sense of integrity about their work". In some cases teachers were reported to be absorbed in personal matters, talking on their cell phones, and modeling inappropriate behaviors such as swearing, yelling, and threatening.

<u>Students Seeking Adult Support</u>. Students said they could go to some of their teachers, coaches, and hall monitors when they had problems. They said that some of their teachers really cared about them and would do anything to support them. In particular they reported having good relationships with sports coaches whom they saw as family and with the hall monitors to whom they could go to for guidance and for help. (Note: they said they were called hall monitors but then said "but that is not what they really do."). Other teachers were seen as not caring and were compared to caring teachers in this way "… she always cares about your grades. Like if she even sees your grades slipping or something she will let you know. Some teachers don't let you know, they will just have you fail. Or they don't tell you that you're missing this or missing... They're just here because of the job and they just give you a paper- They're not opening my eyes, they don't care-- They're not organized-- And those teachers those are the ones that get mad because they know they can't do what they want, and they think that you think you're better than them because the administrator's on your side rather than their side. And those teachers try to make your life like H-E-L-L, Literally. And I ain't saying no names, but." Teachers reported having good relationships with some of their students, however many teachers commented on the pervasiveness of profanity expressed by the students and felt it signified disrespect for teachers.

<u>Adult-to-Student Clarity and Consistency</u>. At one school, students described being well-cared for and loved by the principal and their teachers. There was agreement that the principal had high and explicit expectations of the students and that there were clear consequences for misbehavior. When talking about the principal they said "The principal's nice because he gives a lot of chances when you get in trouble". While they felt some teachers were prejudiced or treated them poorly most reported feeling they were treated like family with "tough love", they "know you did wrong but still love you", and "they treat us like we are their own kids. "Teachers want us to be better and more respectful", "I felt good. A lot of teachers who care about you and wanted you to learn and do things."   Teachers noted a positive shift in student behavior when they started using PBIS and instituted "School" bucks. One teacher described it as a great collective system with a common language: "So then it was PBIS. And so when we started this thing, it was the kids buying into the [School name] box in the store and really wanting you to catch them being on task because before that, we had--like I said, we had the red-zone kids. But our regular

kids were feeling like, 'Well, look, why should I be good when he's getting more attention going to the office for being bad?' So it was a reward system even for the--you know? And then it worked for some of the red zones. They became a little pinkish-yellow. And it was a language that we all shared, you know. Everybody's saying, 'responsible, respectful, ready' and the kids fed into it. The parents fed into it. So that kind of worked." Another teacher saw it as a great program to calm behavior instead of punish it:". . . we developed this climate of, 'Let's reward their behavior,' instead of, 'Let's punish or focus so much on the negative'."

As a result, students felt that they had very positive relationships with their teachers and the staff. They described their teachers as caring, friendly, and having high expectations. They reported feeling like a family where teachers and the principal would joke and have fun with students but yet demanded respect and set clear limits. "I'm going to remember … school the most because I think this is probably the best years, because I have made so many new friends, I've got so many new teachers that I was introduced to. Teachers that actually care, like they're a second family, this is how they are. They want us to have this type of relationship, they're just like another big family, like this is just a big house that everybody just lives in, and they really accept us."

Students and Other Administrators. Students at one school reported their strong relationships with and support from the assistant principal and the social worker. They got along especially well with the social worker and like interacting with her as part of the peer mediation program. One student said: "Ms [Social Worker], she's nice, she's peer mediator, she helps us when like bullying occurs, she will, somebody tells Ms [Social Worker] for like help where they get the person that bullied the person and then they just like talk together and just agree to a remedy."

In many ways staff and principal thinking about relationships were inextricably linked with teaching and learning, which taken together were at the core of positive school climate. One principal summed this idea up saying "The best way to improve school climate--I mean, . . .at the heart you need really good. . . teachers. They need to understand kids. They need to develop relationships with kids. I mean, I think that's ultimately the most important thing."

In summary, students who felt well supported described relationships where adults treated them like family. In these cases they felt connected, loved, encouraged, and supported. Students said these adults had continued high expectations of them even after they had made bad choices, giving them multiple opportunities to improve, proactively calling them out when they were making bad choices, helping them with social dilemmas, and giving them attention and praise for a variety of attributes (not just academic or behavioral). It is important to note that many of the positive relationships they had were with non-instructional staff which indicated the importance and role of every adult in the building toward positive interpersonal relationships. The way in which adults engage students during adverse times was a major factor. When adults focused on diffusing and calming the students rather than punishing them during adverse incidents it resulted in more discussion and less yelling. In this way, more positive relationships were formed and more time was spent on learning rather than discipline.

Relationships: Student-to-Student

Students often highlight relationships when asked about what they would remember most when they graduate. In some schools younger students remarked how older students served as guides for them. Generally, juniors and seniors were more connected than freshman and sophomores in the high schools. Likewise, fifth grade students seemed connected with one another. Through the student focus groups we were able to get a general sense for relationships but a deeper and more detailed analysis would require additional research approaches. Nonetheless, we were able to identify some systemic correlates where high school students in athletics and in structured academic programs had strong relationships with their peers in these groups.

<u>Growth and Development of Student Relationships</u>. Student-to-student relationships at one school were strongest among seniors. Freshmen were less connected with one another and had less respect for one another during their focus group. They had a greater tendency to talk over and interrupt one another, call each other names, and laugh and make fun of the contributions made by other students. This may be due to their developmental maturity and their relative newness at the school. In one school the seniors talked about how it was their job to guide and direct the freshman and likewise the freshman reported feeling supported by the seniors. These exchanges seemed to be facilitated by membership on sports teams especially.

<u>Respect for Each Other</u>. In one focus group students all participated and respected one another's contributions. A leadership team member described the students: "They are a very tight group of kids and they know everything that goes on. And if I don't know something that's going on, I can go to one of the teachers say, "Hey, what's going on?" And I can get the history on the kid and then move from there. So I do feel very comfortable here". Teachers hoped that the school could have other group activities for students to engage with one another beyond sports and service work.

<u>Student-to-Student Challenges</u>. Some students mentioned "a lot of drama" among their peers but in a humorous, fun manner. Overall, they expressed fairly positive relationships with one another. However, both groups referred to one bully who ruined the class and the teacher's approach to the class. Here the students looked to the teachers to prevent the bully from disrupting the class, showing the interconnectedness of teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships.

Opportunities for developing adult to student and student to student relationships included participation in co-curricular, as well as, academic activities which created a greater sense of connectedness with the school and are therefore discussed in the next section on Institutional Environment.

Institutional Environment

Institutional environment encompasses attitudinal factors such as feeling connected and engaged with the school as well as the physical aspects of the school such as cleanliness and availability of resources.

Many of the dimensions we have discussed up to this point contribute to students' feelings of connectedness and engagement. In the following sections we will draw out those factors we observed or heard and their reported impact on school climate.

Connecting to School Programs. Similar to our findings about students' peer relationships we found students who had been at a school longer reported a greater sense of connectedness with their school. Students seem to develop friendships over time as they develop specific interests and join groups. School community programs in which students work and engage with programming outside of the school were associated with great connectivity and pride in one's school. Some of these programs included academic competitions, community based learning, and partnerships with other community institutions). The sense of belonging at one school seemed to be strengthened by membership in their profession-focused programs which are designated during the sophomore year. While they identified with these programs they also had friends in other academic programs. Juniors and seniors expressed pride in their school: "No leaps, strides; it's becoming a more known school for academics. And I think that we should be proud that along with our academics we get a building that looks--is presentable. Our school looks like--it's not to say showing off, but we look like we have just as much amount of money or just as much nice stuff as like [other local high schools]. We have . . . partnerships with [local Colleges] all the stuff that our school is now integrated within, throughout the community, that I'm proud to say that I'm going to be a graduate from [School Name]." The freshman year seems to be a particularly good opportunity for the school to work intentionally toward helping students feel connected with the school.

Similarly, students at another school showed enthusiasm for the engineering club who worked with a local university and traveled cross-country with the club advisor. Students felt this was a major academic success and should have been celebrated more. While seniors were proud of their school and to be graduating from the school, they felt in recent years the school has "lowered it standards".

Rebranding a School. In an effort to build the school's identity two principals hired a marketing firm to help rebrand the school, they were trying to overcome previous negative connotations of the school and develop a new school culture.

Teachers at one of these schools felt they were still developing the school's new identity because of the turnaround changes. "I just think also that there's no real large group identity within the students. I think we made it through two years without a single assembly. We don't really do a good job of bringing classes together to let them understand that they're--that all the students are supposed to be part of something larger. Like there's very little of that here, there's no large

group identity for 9th grade, 10th grade--you know what I'm saying?". Again, here we see that freshman and sophomores were less connected to the school. The school community worked toward developing strong one-on-one interactions and has an opportunity to focus on whole-school identity.

Perspectives on Urban Schools**.** Physical surroundings were one of the least talked about aspects of the school with regard to school climate and some teachers/principals noted that you can have a beautiful school and still have failing students. Beautiful new facilities are great, but not enough. Creating a safe, welcoming environment that highlights student interest and growth is also needed. One of the schools was newly rebuilt, two appeared to be in relatively good repair, the fourth was half renovated and half in disrepair, and the fifth was slated to be rebuilt or extensively updated. The two most frequently mentioned aspects of the physical environment were windows and air conditioning.

New Facilities. At the newly built school most of the halls in the building were bare, giving it a relatively sterile feel. The new front office seemed to be a source of pride. The principal described the school this way: "I often say, affectionately, that it was a school with an identity crisis. They had gone through quite a few changes--some that were thrust upon it. And so the student, staff, and faculty necessarily wasn't adjusted to some of the changes that were occurring. . . . So when ___ moved back, it had lost its--the visibility of its [key programs]--just come back to a new school where, you know, beautiful murals and the history and that sort had been kind of packed up and it was dusty and in closets. . . . And I think that the identity crisis that I explained at the beginning of this interview is one of the reasons why ___ had gone into battle mode."

Use of Hallways. One fairly well-maintained school appeared clean and inviting. There were new windows and a new turf. Hallways were painted with murals and students' attendance records and scores were posted by name for all to see (note: the principal gained permission from parents before doing this). Staff members monitored the hallways and checked in with students walking around when they should have been in class. The hallways are also colored-coded by profession-focused programs and students wear coordinating uniforms. Areas used by all students are painted a third color. This helps staff know where students should be and helps create small communities within this large school. There was a life-like court room where students conduct trials of their peers, two student-run stores where students can buy food as part of the PBIS program and spirit clothing and paraphernalia, and two production rooms where students produce radio and television programing. Another school, as mentioned earlier had a hallway designated for student interventions with academic supports on one side of the hall and social supports on the other side of the hall. The hall was decorated in a fun way and the support centers had fun and inviting names. The hallways were filled with samples of student work with rubrics detailing each student's performance. In a third school, they had an affirmation board in the main hallway. The purpose of the board was to help the school community focus on its positive aspects, it served as a public posting of notes that students, faculty, and staff wrote about one another to show their appreciation for or pride in someone else. The hallway was also decorated with pictures and included a teen leadership quote wall.

School Layout. Another fairly well-maintained school had an open-space layout. Teachers struggled with the open-space but said it also contributed to their learning from and helping one

another. The only complaint teachers had was that the building was not very clean. However, they explained that this was because funding was used for other purposes and they valued the way the money was being spent: "The only thing that I would complain about is what I complained about when I first came in, and that's the cleanliness. And his idea, which is true--I mean, it's like am I going to put money towards another teacher, another instructor, another program or another--or more janitorial support? And—""Teachers have access to more training, I think I mean they go away to conferences and they feel good about that. They have technology, they have courses so I think that makes people feel good. OK we're growing, not only do we do things for kids but we do things for ourselves. We're learning some things. I think that's a feel good that has increased because we have spent money for things to help teachers. Everything I've asked for in terms of equipment, books, workshops- he'll say OK and he gets them. That feels good to be able to get things that you need." There was also a reading station in the hallway, a newly renovated computer lab, and large community recreation center.

<u>Challenges of Renovations</u>. The main level of the partially renovated building had widened hallways on the main floor while other floors remained in relative disrepair (with no heating or air conditioning). The main entrance, which was previously bricked in, was reopened so that students no longer needed to come through the back door (although the back door can still be used). The entrance faces the new main office and is flanked by the student store and flat screens with information for students and an "affirmation" board (described above). There was also a beautiful health suite of rooms where the social worker interns could meet individually with students. In addition, the school had a community service room/resource center, writing center, guidance office, and a renovated information resource center with comfortable seating for reading. The bathrooms were seen as needing repair. Students commented on how the lack of air conditioning affected their ability to concentrate; "Heat makes you tired. Then you just get grumpy." "People really get grumpy when it's hot. It don't make me feel right. It makes me sleepy. When it gets hot, I get really sleepy." "When it gets hot, I get bad. I get frustrated.--agitated. It like stop everything you doing."

In the school slated for renovation/rebuilding students and teachers complained most about the lack of air conditioning, dirty bathrooms, old windows they can barely see out anymore, and the lack of drinking water, since they cannot drink from the water fountains or faucets in the building. They consumed or saved all the water we brought during our visits. Reportedly the playground often floods.

All in all, while physical aspects of the schools differed, these differences were not correlated with a school's overall level of positive school climate. Students and staff wanted and enjoyed newer spaces and windows but there was a lot of work that had to be done to promote connectedness and learning.

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Staff Only

The National School Climate Center's Staff Only domain refers to two components: *Leadership and Professional Relationships.*

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Principal Leaders. At the time of the interviews three of the five principals had been at their current school for two years, one for three years, and one was completing his sixth year. Three of the principals had lived in the Baltimore area for at least three years prior to their current position and worked in schools similar to the one they are in now. Two were hired from other areas of the country where they worked in dissimilar schools. Two were trained through the "New Principals for New Schools" program in Baltimore.

Staffing. Two of the principals shared intentional practices in hiring teachers. One selects teachers based on their "relational capacity" expressing that he "cannot teach someone to be nice". The other took a proactive approach in looking for teachers 3 years out. Once he identifies someone who is a good match and has a "team mentality" he contacts him/her and "lures them with stability."

Challenges. The principals faced a variety of challenges in their schools including:

- Declining enrollment (3 schools),
- School identity crisis (3 schools),
- Building disrepair or recent renovations (3 schools),
- Negative school publicity or reputation (2 schools),
- Waning family engagement (3 schools),
- Loss of 10 or more teachers (4 schools),
- Competing advice and expectations from institutions supporting turnaround schools, and
- Concerns about sustaining programs when School Improvement Grants run out.

Clear Vision. The key goals principals worked toward included building relationships, the value of diplomas, the quality and amount of learning, student-focused differentiation, reforming identity and branding the school. Specific visions included:

- "The school was like a prison when I arrived. We (me and the faculty) have worked to make it more like a school by focusing on academics rather than on fights and rules". He also talks about a need to **"restore humanity"** "make it a school not a prison". The leadership team, teachers, and students all reported a significant positive change in the school with this principal's arrival. "I think we can close with saying what [Mr. Principal] would say, 'A place where your child will want to come to school'." (ILT) He personally works towards this end and delegates this and other leadership responsibility to his senior staff.

- "This school is in a state of identity crisis with a new white-washed building, a large group of new teacher hires, and greatly changed student body"

- "So when [School name] moved back [to its new building], it had lost its--the visibility of its [key program]--just come back to a new school where, you know, beautiful murals and the history and that sort had been kind of packed up and it was dusty and in closets. And lastly, my first year here I came to the end-of-the-year celebration of the year preceding my appointment, and we were retiring about 300 years of experience because we were also losing several anchor teachers who had been here 30-plus years." His vision for the school, at the end of the second year, was to "…bring back the history and engage parents as partners, all with the focus on increased academics--academics, academics, academics, academics--rigor, learning every day--everyone's learning every day--learning, learning, learning, learning".

- "The school was literally in a state of rubble when I arrived". "It's all about relationships I hired people on their relational capacity". Teachers, staff, and students expressed amazement with regard to the changes the principal has made and all felt he related to them. A member of the leadership team described him as ". . . more open to ideas and flexible if you want to try something, for instance … starting internships and doing [work-based?] learning, that's all kind of esoteric and they're very flexible with me on what we're doing with that". Another member said; "I think he hires people with relationships in mind, really looks for people who want to make positive relationships with students. He's found those people. He continues to find those people as he hires new people, and he makes that a real priority in our PD certainly, as a staff". Students said: "Because he's just so--he listens, he's so supportive, and our other principals they were nice, but . . . one of the best principals that we've had in the school. He cares, he asks us questions, he's so concerned." "Also I think that it was, the relationships, he changed all the relationships--I mean I know that I was okay with most of the teachers here before, but when he came, he brought all new teachers basically, there was only like five of the same teachers here. And the teachers are just so much better, like they care, they really do care. Like everybody wants a relationship with everybody and it's like--like some students when they go home and their parents don't care--the only reason why some students are still coming to school is because the teachers are supporting them. And they're like, 'You have to do this, you have to do that' because they don't have the same thing at home." "It's just so funny. But it's like he has a good relationship with all the students, but when something's wrong the students know, "Okay, he's being serious, this is not a game, let's listen."

- "This was a good school" but faced single digit pass rates on State assessments. The principal is described as incredibly caring, an excellent listener and communicator, exceptionally dedicated, following through in supporting all (teachers, students, and parents), having clear convictions and a strong leadership style. He believes vision and

execution come together. When describing his own leadership style he says he focuses on listening, sharing ideas until people come together, and he does not believe in mandating anything; "I think it's a lot of listening and, you know, talking to people and bouncing around some ideas until you come to, --until you have a group that's kind of coalescing around--you know, you have a critical mass around support of a different initiative or a different way of pushing things. And then, you know, I think you move forward from there". His top priorities were reading, using growth-focused criterion-based assessment data to drive intervention, professional learning communities, and technology. Teachers believed he truly supported the students, "Every administrator at every school will tell you they are there for the kids but this is the only one that truly is". . . "Mr. Principal has brought the school much more in contact with community with his many outreach programs".

- ". . . the school has always been moderately successful. It's always been considered a successful school". The principal describes the school as being back in time, needing physical and pedagogical rebuilding. "My perception of the school when I came in was that it was a school that was like trapped in the 1950s. . . . . It wasn't doing anything instructionally that I was taught as a teacher or as a principal that was good instruction." "I thought that the school needed to be more focused on academics. I thought the school needed to be student-centered." He worked to shift the focus from teacher-driven to student-driven, focus on reading and academics, and updating teaching skills to be "more pedagogically sound" and "more current with teaching research".

Accessible and Supportive of Staff and Staff Development. Teachers and staff most emphasized a principal's accessibility and support, as well as relationships, when discussing the strengths and areas of improvement for school climate. The schools where teachers and staff expressed the most positive feelings of empowerment and satisfaction also described principals with truly inclusive open-door practices and invested in quality professional learning experiences. These lead to a perception of a positive environment in which to work.

For example, in the three schools where teachers and staff expressed the most positive access and communication with their principal we found similar but slightly different approaches. First, the principal in these three schools reportedly met individually with every member of his staff either before or during his first year at the school. The purpose of these meetings was to get to know individual staff members and to ask their advice about the vision of the schools. They asked questions such as "Tell me about yourself.", "What do you love most about this school?", "What would you change to this school?", "What advice would you give to new principals?", "What are three things this school does well" "What are three things this school needs to improve on" here. While meeting with staff individually appeared to be a positive practice toward building professional communication and relationships, it needed to be followed by continued dialog between the principal and his staff. This was evident in a fourth school where despite this initial gesture on the part of the principal, staff reported feeling they were not heard and they felt powerless.

Open Communication. In the three schools where staff felt continued support and open communication, the essential difference was principal practices that varied according to the size of the school and the individual leadership style of the principal. One principal proactively facilitates communication with students and teachers by frequenting the various areas of the building where they congregate. During our visit he was always walking around the building, often tending to a student at the same time. He engaged with students by asking them how they were doing and asking about their current reading level. He also uses this time to hold students and teachers accountable for communicating with him. Staff also noted his presence in the community. They commented that he attends the students' baseball games and is often in the neighborhood making sure students get to and from school safely.

Communication Challenges. Accessibility and communication did not mean that principals always agreed with the staff or that they always got what they wanted. Staff reported appreciating or wanting the principal to be available, to hear what they had to say, to consider their ideas, and to have clear and open communication. In two of the schools staff felt they had much less access to the principal.

One principal was described as "hiding in his office." This was even noted by students. While in our interview he talked about walking around the school with data sheets about the students, students did not concur. This was a case where the principal felt he was accessible to the students but the students perceived that "he only knows the bad kids." The teachers also had an indifferent feeling toward the principal.

In another school, the principal actively limited access and required all staff to go through the Leadership Team. Staff felt they were not heard and were concerned that the principal was not listening to them, but rather wanting to control them.   ILT members and teachers recognized that the leadership team members had greater, albeit limited, access to the principal than other teachers. The leadership team reported that they wanted to help teachers but were limited in what they could do.   The ILT felt stuck in the middle unable to support either the principal or the staff. However, the staff at this school were tight and had developed their own network of support.

Professional Development. In addition to accessibility, staff at all schools expressed a desire and need for quality ongoing professional development. Likewise, several of the principals mentioned contemplating the best way to provide meaningful and effective professional development. The principals took various approaches from in-house sessions led by leadership team members to external local and distant group trainings to individualized professional opportunities and experiences.

Overall, two types of professional development stood out as the most advantageous. The first was whole-school professional development which had the unintended benefit of bonding school members (especially if they traveled to the training). The other type emphasized individualized opportunities to engage with broader professional communities through conferences and professional organization meetings where teachers came together from various schools and talked about their practices. In contrast, in-house, second-hand professional development and development aimed solely at newer teachers were seen as problematic. Some examples are provided below:

- The summer before his first year, one principal required his entire staff (including teachers, administrative staff, and custodians) to attend a 3-day external training about building relationships with one another and their students. A follow-up training was completed the subsequent year to facilitate continued practice and introduce new teachers to the practices. All in all, the instructional leadership team felt that relationships have been built and students and staff feel supported by one another. Now, they are eager to start paying greater attention to improving teaching and learning. "I know I've talked to several people who have kind of thought that we've kind of gotten a lot of the climate stuff down. We've got the relationship stuff down-- --where we've worked on that, and now it's time to really get to the next level instructionally. And we're not doing that."

- One principal had a school wide focus on educating students, parents, and teachers. Teachers in this school glowed about their professional growth. Despite a firm foundation and veteran staff, teachers said "A lot has changed since this principal arrived. We feel rated as a whole, as professionals now. He gives you autonomy in the classroom and does not micro manage", "He is usually spot on with his observations and suggestions but doesn't put that on you." The principal "gives reinforced support, if you tell him what you struggle with he will help", "He pushes you personally…. anyone… teachers, parent staff". Overall, the teacher reported feeling that the principal vested in and encouraged the professional growth and development of every staff member. "Enjoy the learning that the teachers are able to experience – and are encouraged by principal to pursue these things. Teachers had the opportunity to attend conferences, meet with colleagues from other schools, and choose professional development training sessions based on their interests and subject areas. One veteran staff member reported when we go "we have a sense that we are growing for us and our kids. Teachers also reported that their principal is "respectful of your personal life that teachers value" and "he know what you are doing explicitly states that he appreciates it". An ILT member said ". . . but then I think the biggest thing was sort of pushing us--when he [the principal] found our strengths, like pushing a national board cohort, pushing a mentor teacher cohort, and then technology--like finding people who excel at a certain thing and putting them in groups to strengthen that skill. So we could work together and build that way".

- At another school, teachers felt they had a strong mission to improve student learning and the support of the principal. A member of the ILT said "…he [the principal] has re-empowered us to do our jobs. And that was something that was really lacking three years ago. So I think that we're given every opportunity and every tool that we can ever ask for, and we're not micromanaged, we're given a broad task, and you're allowed to just run with it. And it's an awesome feeling after all these years."

- One principal initiated in-house professional development where the leadership team members attend external training and in turn they trained teachers during faculty meetings. The aim of this approach was to give teachers more meaningful professional development. However, teachers felt under prepared and under supported.

- Veteran teachers, in one school, reported too much focus was on newer teachers. Part of this focus is a practical need because approximately 40% of the teachers in the building were trained through either Teach for America (TFA) or Baltimore City Teaching Residency (BCTR). None of the 40% had a background in education, nor were they trained in the subject area they were teaching at the time of the visit. As a result, veteran teachers felt they weren't being pushed to improve their craft. "I think sometimes some of the folks that have been teaching, whether it be in this particular building or somewhere else for a while, are not so much forgotten but kind of--the assumption is that you're okay so there isn't as much as [this is put on that?] individual support for quote-unquote the "veteran" teachers, if you will".

Professional development was desired by both novice and veteran teachers to further develop their practice. Some required basic training because of their lack of background in education and in the subject they were teaching, and others just wanted to be challenged. Teachers wanted to be empowered through autonomy with support. They did not want to be "micro-managed" but wanted to receive first-hand professional development and meaningful feedback from observations.

Unintended Consequence. The focus groups provided an opportunity for teachers to talk meaningfully about school-wide issues and challenges. Teachers seemed excited to talk with one another in this way and in some cases reported feeling that this opportunity did not exist because principals generally lead and set the agenda for faculty meetings (the one common time teachers all meet together).

Professional Relationships. A significant peer-to-peer factor relating to *professional relationships* was having an "*us* versus *I* mentality." This mentality was facilitated or inhibited by congruence of values and expectations, staff longevity, opportunities for teachers to work and socialize with one another, and physical proximity (discussed in the section on institutional development above). Furthermore, professional relationship practices differed across school size and type (elementary or high school).   While the NSCC distinguishes between *professional* and *interpersonal relationships,* all aspects of staff-to-staff relationships are subsumed under the professional relationships dimension.

Faculty Bonding. There was an extremely tight bond among the faculty in the two elementary schools. In both schools, the teachers expressed complete confidence that they could get help from any other teacher in the building if they asked.

One school's teachers reported close relationships with one another and that the principal worked flexibly with them to meet their students' needs. For example, during our visit a child in kindergarten was having trouble behaving in class so he was moved to a first grade class where he was removed from the triggers of his classroom and where he could observe how first graders behave. Teachers also reported that when misbehavior becomes overwhelming in their classroom others teachers will come support him or her. In this way, they work together to diffuse tension and support both teacher and student.

In another school a strong bond was both expressed and observed among the teachers and between the leadership team and teachers. The teachers had grown into a tight knit group, especially as some have taught at the school for decades. This camaraderie was evident in their support for one another and their unity. They all agreed when saying "Oh, well, you can go to anyone and ask anybody for help, whether it pertains to like anything you need for the children in your classroom, anything you need personally. To me it's like--it's like a friend.". . . everybody works together, everybody's very encouraging to each other, offer ideas, steal ideas. I mean, it's all the teachers definitely work very well together." Initial entry proved to be a challenge with such a tight group. For example, teachers reported that when they first arrived they lacked clear direction and that it was hard to break into the existing social structure. This particular challenge was two-fold, they reported not having a clear orientation or explicit faculty handbook and they had not yet built the social capital to learn these things from others. However, when they got to know their fellow colleagues they felt fully supported and gained a better understanding of the implicit direction of the school.

Building Relationships. Principals often took intentional approaches to relationship building. They focused on the school vision and rallying staff to work together toward meeting these goals. Below are some examples from one school.

One principal invited the school staff to watch the Karate Kid movie. This was a social event aimed at helping build community and reflecting on how staff would go about supporting their students. He continues to host events and trainings to define the "[Schools'] experience". He helps set the tone for the school by sending weekly update emails. On a side note, while most of these were positive the principal also sent out whole-school emails when issues arose. Some teachers reported feeling that everyone is being reprimanded rather than the individual(s) involved. The principal maintains an open door and teachers and staff reported that they can talk with him.

The ILT describe him as protecting them from district pressures: "And I think a huge part of it is, from a leadership standpoint, you've been in the principals where the principals kind of throw the staff under the bus or kind of not be that buffer between the staff and the district. And I think what [Mr. Principal] has been able to do is really stand in the gap and be that person kind of like buffer. So the pressures of the district aren't really necessarily hit the school, per say, because he acts as a buffer. And I think one of the clear messages he sent last year was that he will protect the staff, and he's sure that we have everything that we need to do our jobs."

Shared Values. Teachers formed cliques within the school connecting themselves with like-minded teachers. They reported working in an isolated manner out of necessity. "I know I always fight about the integrity issue. You feel like there are certain people in cliques, and if you go to them, nothing's going to happen until you cc . . . the principal. So I know that's one of the main issues I have". They desired greater connectivity but described some teachers as functioning under an "I" mentality rather than a "we" mentality. They felt that all teachers should model behaviors that could improve teacher-to-student relationships. There was a sense that those who were not committed to the mission should leave the school. Most of the teachers in the focus group were either trained through Teach for America or Baltimore Residency Program. In another school the ILT attributed their large gain in student achievement scores to having a more cooperative approach: "We banded together, because we were already close but it

[our single digit achievement scores] made us even closer. One of the things about this staff is that there's no big I and little U's. We can all go to each other and get support and collaboration between the two."

Staffing Relationship Challenges. An adult at one school reported that there were character clashes among the adults in the building ". . there's been a lot of character clashes amongst adults here that I've been trying _____. But giving them leadership and spending time in fostering--it's amazing how much you got to--how much people appreciate--even adults appreciate learning. I think all of them. They all--they all cause clashes. And a lot of change. A principal who is going to turn up the corners and look under the rug". Such clashes were further noted as individuals spoke of struggles in understanding roles and responsibilities among and between leaders and staff. This tension seemed to be amplified by breakdowns in communication where staff felt their voices were not heard. Teachers seemed to depend on other teachers near their classroom in times of crisis hence physical proximity played a role in working together. However, there was a feeling of disconnect among teachers with regard to shared teaching and learning. Some teachers felt that their lack of coordination jeopardized the quality of their department's curriculum because of lack of vertical planning.

At another school, administrative staff reported getting along and feeling supported. Likewise, teachers felt that their ideas were heard and supported. One teacher remarked: "I have never taught with a faculty as supportive as here. They are kind, warm, and welcoming. The kids see that and respond. It is amazing how supportive the staff is. We feel like a family". ILT: But I feel more comfortable here because I think the kids generally know that you care. And when they know you care, they don't want you to be in danger, like if you were a parent of theirs. So they take on that family kind of feel, like we're a part of the family. And we all make mistakes as well, then they'll turn too, but it's like a family knitted, well, a knitted family type relationship. So I don't know what else I could say but I see a lot. ILT: But we really are a tight and supportive group, at least from my point of view. And that makes an incredible [strength?].

In summary, professional relationships were facilitated by open communications with the principal, social and professional group events, teacher longevity (which lead to deep interpersonal bonds), opportunities for collaboration, and physical proximity. Interestingly, the tight bond among teachers was also a barrier to professional relationships, at least initially when new teachers found it hard to break into the group. However, once they were "in" they felt overwhelmingly supported. Another barrier was the incongruence between individual values, expectations, and standards related to teaching and professionalism. This led to teachers forming cliques and working in isolation from one another. Teachers noted that there were unintended consequences to working in isolation and having weak professional relationships. Specifically, the lack of vertical planning was seen as reducing the quality of academic programs, lack of collaboration and a shared vision led to uneven expectations of students, and students were impacted by the types of relationships adults had with one another.

Discussion

This section will include a discussion of overall findings, identification of the larger themes in the study and then some practical examples observed in the schools that any principal or school could use or adopt for their circumstances and needs.

While it is clear that an intentional strategy can be adopted to improve a school's climate, it is also clear that there is no *silver bullet* or single strategy. What we have seen in these five schools is that the strategy is dependent on the existing characteristics of the school, their recent history, the students served and the staff who work there. Additionally, it will be influenced by the principal himself, and build on his existing strengths and weaknesses. While there is no simple answer or product purchase to change a school's climate, there are some clear steps to consider when attempting to improve climate.

Most interesting in what we observed in the schools was that many strategies had no cost or were of a minimal cost. There was no need to purchase a program or additional staff, but rather many interventions came from an intentional re-thinking of the school's role and individual's role in the school. For example, posting student data on walls has minimal cost, but was commented on by staff and students alike as creating the perception that academics matter and everyone's success was being watched. Another example cited by students was the impact of principals and teachers knowing their names. Repeatedly, the students noticed.

Elementary Compared to Secondary

While we maintain anonymity for our schools and principals, we share differences according to school type, primarily elementary and PreK-8 schools compared to high schools. For example, teachers in the elementary schools had tight knit relationships and reported helping one another and working collaboratively more so than teachers in high schools. The types of incentives offered to students varied as did the groups with whom the students affiliated. For example, sports teams and academic programs contributed highly to climate in high schools while grade-level classroom dynamics were the focus for elementary school students. Finally, in high schools we were able to compare the experiences of freshman and sophomores with those of juniors and seniors to better understand changes in climate across time and across groups. We limited our focus groups to fifth grade students in the elementary schools.

Challenges to School Climate

In our current school accountability framework, there is a heavy influence on data and test scores that has made it easy to forget about relationships. When schools are perceived to be test score factories, and teacher and principal contracts state explicit goals about test scores, it is easy to lose focus on relationships. The personal contact that is so essential to school climate, as well as instruction, is necessary to provide a space where children feel comfortable taking risks, exposing vulnerability, and building their sense of self.

Suspensions. In Baltimore a focus on suspension policy has led to an opportunity for schools to rethink how to engage students and staff. This has lead to a direct intervention by the Office of

Student Support to provide summer professional development for school leadership teams to analyze suspension data according to location and timing to inform the school of where they were "losing" kids and where they could intervene strategically. During the two-day session, school teams also heard about interventions such as peer mediation, or Peer Court.

Strategic Use of Resources and Financing

One difference we saw across the schools was the use of resources and financing to support school interventions. Each school had their own take on how best to do this, some more strategic than others, but all having an influence on what could happen at their school. One principal addressed some students' needs by developing strategic partnerships to bring much needed social workers into the school to work directly with students while allowing his teachers to focus on instruction. One principal was using SIG funds to provide additional services in the school, yet while aware they will be expiring soon, there has been no planning as to how to replace funds. Two principals believe having the best staff is essential to having the school climate they want, and as a result they have developed proactive teacher recruitment plans to provide continued support. Finally, one principal strategically decided to move as much money as possible into the classroom. He minimized the cost of administration and things like cleaning services to increase the amount of technology in the classroom. As in one school, it was beneficial when teachers understood these types of financial decisions because they saw how the budget aligned with school values and priorities.

Overarching Themes

Principal as Leader. While some principals in this study were more intentional in promoting positive school climate than others, staff and students in *all* schools identified the principal as the fundamental agent of change in school climate. The principal was seen as setting the stage for how everyone engaged and worked within the building. Principal accessibility and support with clear and consistent communication were seen as promoting positive climate.

Systemic and Individual Practices. Factors supporting school climate often had a systemic framework that was supported by one-on-one interpersonal engagement between adults and students and among adults. For example, a school might have additional academic supports for students but how successful these are seemed dependent on the anecdotal engagement of staff with students. Likewise, a principal may have an open-door policy but it is his interaction with individual staff members that influence how respected the staff feel and how cohesively they work with and for the principal.

Relationships Matter. Not surprisingly when talking with both the adults and students in a school they often reflected on the relationships they had with teachers and administrators. The discourse and tone seen in a school's main office simultaneously inform and are informed by a school's culture and climate. Principals might even sit quietly and listen to the interactions in their main office to get a better sense of the school's culture. When adults addressed students' in discourse about problematic behavior they noticed a reduction in the time spend on discipline and greater time and opportunity to focus on academics.

High Expectations. Students wanted and noticed when teachers and staff had high expectations of them. Teachers as well, whether novice or veteran, wanted to be pushed to grow and hone their craft through observations with coaching and professional development opportunities.

Consistency and Sense of Fairness is Important. We heard from students and adults alike that the perception of some individuals *getting away* with things while others did not caused tension and created a sense that if the rules were not fair, they were dismissed. A school with a wonderful code of conduct will find it ignored by staff and students if it's not enforced consistently. This was also an area from adults and students where relationships soured.

Communication and Messaging. Savvy principals spoke of the importance of developing their *identity*, even going so far as to hire a marketing firm to help them think about what it might be and how to communicate it to their constituents both internally and externally.

Use Resources Effectively and Innovatively. Principals identified strategic partnerships that would provide resources and services for their school with a limited cost. Others conducted school wide budget decisions with all staff to cut things like cleaning services and administration to move dollars into classrooms. With the staff buy-in at the beginning, while teachers commented in a decline in school cleanliness they knew the reason for the decision and supported it.

Promising Practices Observed and Reported in Case Studies

These examples were drawn from specific schools and do not necessarily represent the practices in all five schools. They serve as examples that might be implemented in a variety of ways by principals and staff looking to improve school climate. We do not presume that these are all inclusive as we were only in each school for a short time; however, they represent those that were reported to be highly influential.

Relationships

  Adult to Student - *Know me, talk with me, guide me and trust I can learn and grow*

- Students reacted positively when a principal *knows student names and where s/he was supposed to be, reading levels*, or *personal anecdotes of all students and teachers.*
- Students and staff reported the importance of a principal who *listens to, supports, and cares about teachers and students.* They understood they may not get their way, but appreciated being heard.
- Students responded positively to teachers who listen to my home problems and challenge me to be *my best in life and school*.
- Students reported some relationships in the schools as *family-like* interactions and relationships with multiple adults in the building, *We know we can go to the hall monitors when we need help*.

- Students enjoyed being paired with a teacher, administrator, or staff mentor on enrollment to a school for a consistent relationship with an adult.

Adult to Adult

- Teachers felt empowered when they were encouraged to learn and improve instruction in their classroom, *I have a learned a lot by listening and watching the other teachers,* and *I feel free to ask anyone for help/advice*.
- Teachers responded positively when they could report, *I know that if another teacher hears that I am having trouble with a student he/she will assist me.*
- Overall teachers report a desire to be better teachers, to grow in their work, but to do so in a supportive encouraging climate.

Student to Student

- Juniors and seniors had tighter bonds with one another than freshman and sophomores.
- Student relationships were facilitated by membership on athletic teams, academic programs, and co-curricular and community-based learning projects.
- Athletic teams brought about big sibling – little sibling relationships across grade levels.
- When in socially challenging events, students may be referred to peer-mediation.

High Expectations

For students
- Provide *high and explicit expectations* with clear plans of action for all students, for example, hang student work in hallways and public areas with improvement focused rubrics attached.
- Provide more opportunities for celebration and attention to academic strengths and success. Students noted pride in teacher and staff expectations of them to make good choices academically and personally.
- Develop a culture of hard work to succeed. Students report teachers have *high expectations of us [students] even if you mess up*, and there are *No apologies or excuses for why students can't learn.*
- Strategically develop scheduling to highlight academics as a focus for the school, such as adopting a school wide reading hour where teachers, administrators, and staff lead leveled reading sessions. Other choices could be opting into a block schedule.
- Reward student success, for example, give free prom tickets to students who pass the High School Assessment, send students on fieldtrips, announce and share successes (academic and otherwise) with the whole school.

For teachers

- Teachers like that their principal has *high professional expectations,* and are *demanding and supportive of individual professional growth*.
- Teachers also want accountability: *We [teachers] need to act professionally and be held accountable*.
- Support off-site PD that leads to team and community building for staff.
- Provide strong support for professional development and opportunities to improve teaching practice...*he supports us going to conference and participating in professional organizations*
- Meet your teachers where they are. Teachers report that the best professional development is individualized . . . *like the ways we differentiate for our students, veteran teachers need different opportunities than newer teachers.*

Consistency and Sense of Fairness

- Students positively report that their principal is *friendly with clear expectations and firm consequences. If you misbehave you will not be permitted to attend special field trips.*
- Provide teachers and staff ongoing training in *proactive engagement. We don't yell anymore, we ask students about what is going on with them and try to help them make better choices*.
- Develop and communicate clear procedures for school challenges. Teachers wanted to be reassured that if a fight or event occurred in their classroom or cafeteria, support is on the way, and that all staff understand their role. This reassurance gives teachers a sense of calmness when challenges erupt to help diffuse the situation rather than escalate it. *Clear identification of who is supposed to be where and when. We have continuous radio communication and hall monitoring.*
- Provide professional development to engage in positive proactive communication and situation management with staff. When the principal and teachers proactively engage with students found in the halls during class time, it minimizes time out of the classroom and encourages students to make the *right choice*.

Communication and Messaging

- Principals invested in turning around a negative identity, *we are no longer a school with lots of fighting.*
- Be available and Listen. Everyone must feel they can talk with the principal (teachers, parents, students, staff) and *s/he.* An open-door policy can create this

opportunity, and all will soon realize that *you may not always get what you want but you are heard and respected*.

- Your decorations and hallways identify who you are and what's important, *It is like family when the put all your business up on the walls*, or student teachers and staff voluntarily post positive affirmations about one another in a designated public area.

Use Resources Effectively and Innovatively

- Develop partnerships.
  - o For-profit organizations like Wells Fargo
  - o Universities like the University of Maryland has social work interns and practitioners interested in providing help, Johns Hopkins University has counselor interns interested in providing opportunities for their students.
  - o Enoch Pratt Library can provide author nights or other
- Rethink budgeting to optimize your desired outcomes.

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Appendix A

The 12 Dimensions of School Climate Measured

Dimensions	Major Indicators
Safety	
1 Rules and Norms	Clearly communicated rules about physical violence; clearly communicated rules about verbal abuse, harassment, and teasing; clear and consistent enforcement and norms for adult intervention.
2 Sense of Physical Security	Sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school.
3 Sense of Social-Emotional Security	Sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion.
Teaching and Learning	
4 Support for Learning	Use of supportive teaching practices, such as: encouragement and constructive feedback; varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills; support for risk-taking and independent thinking; atmosphere conducive to dialog and questioning; academic challenge; and individual attention.
5 Social and Civic Learning	Support for the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.
Interpersonal Relationships	
6 Respect for Diversity	Mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.
7 Social Support—Adults	Pattern of supportive and caring adult relationships for students, including high expectations for students' success, willingness to listen to students and to get to know them as individuals, and personal concern for students' problems.
8 Social Support—Students	Pattern of supportive peer relationships for students, including: friendships for socializing, for problems, for academic help, and for new students.
Institutional Environment	
9 School Connectedness/Engagement	Positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.
10 Physical Surroundings	Cleanliness, order, and appeal of facilities and adequate resources and materials.
Staff Only	
11 Leadership	Administration that creates and communicates a clear vision, and is accessible to and supportive of school staff and staff development.
12 Professional Relationships	Positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively working and learning together.

Appendix B: Protocols

Developing a Positive School Climate
Principal/Veteran Interview Protocol

School/Type:	Principal:
Date/Time:	Interviewer:

Introduction & Purpose
Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we start, I would like to give you a little background information about why I am here and answer any questions you may have.

Several schools in the district have experienced changes in school climate over the past couple of years. To better understand these changes Baltimore City Schools has asked us, researchers from the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, to independently conduct case studies in six City schools. The purpose of the studies is to understand how various strategies, programs, and contexts directly or indirectly influence climate. The information gained through these studies will be shared in a summer symposium and used by the district to improve school climate more broadly for the purposes of fostering teacher retention, improved attendance, and higher student achievement.

We are going to have a conversation about how you believe climate has or has not changed in your school over the past few years and the factors you believe may have influenced climate in your school.

School Climate
For the purpose of the study, *school climate* will be defined as "those elements in a school related to: safety; teaching and learning; relationships; and physical environment" (Office of Student Support and Safety).
Confidentiality
Only the research team will hear your comments today. In our report, we will summarize the information we gain in all of our interviews, and may quote some directly, but we will not provide information that identifies you.

Recording
If you don't mind, I would like to record this interview simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the recording. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Can you to tell me a bit about your background in schools? How did you come to be a principal at this school? When? Why?
>   *Probe as necessary:*
>   - Were you brought in as a replacement for a principal who left the school?
>   - Where were you before you were principal at this school? *[If previously principal:]* Were you in similar school?
>   - Why were you placed or did you apply to be principal at this school?

2. I'd like to start by asking you to reflect on your first year at this school. How would you describe the school at that time (what year was this)?
>   Listen for:
>   - Safety
>   - Teaching and learning
>   - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
>   - Physical environment
>
>   Probe as necessary:
>   - What was your vision for the school?
>   - What were your top 3 priorities for the school?

3. How would you describe the climate of this school over the time you have been here?
>   *Probe as necessary:*
>   - Same? Improving? Declining?
>   - Strengths? Areas needing improvement?
>   - How do you know/assess this? [Listen for: climate survey and/or other measures?]
>   - [If change] What factors have directly or indirectly contributed to this change?
>   - Have new goals or challenges developed during your time here?
>   - Teacher and student turnover
>   - How would you describe the climate of this school today?

4. In the last four years, have any climate specific programs or efforts been implemented to intentionally improve climate in this school?
>   - If so, how did these efforts come about?
>   - Who lead and contributed to the efforts?
>   - How were these strategies selected?
>   - Did the teachers and staff receive staff development, support and follow-up?
>   - What things worked? What things did not? How could you tell (evidence)?
>   - How were faculty/students involved or affected? Did they support the program?
>   - Are there other school programs or practices that have indirectly or unintentionally impacted climate? If so, what aspects of these programs or practices have resulted in improving or declining school climate?

5. Do you rely on other staff to assist you with your leadership responsibilities (e.g., department heads, teacher leaders, etc.)? If yes, who are they and what types of leadership roles do they play?
*Who are the two people in building that have been here the longest? How long have they been here? (This is to identify the "veterans" that we will interview)

6. At the school level, what kind of support do you receive to implement the changes in your school? From the School Improvement Team? Other school staff? Network staff? Do you think you have the support you need to achieve your goals? Why or why not?

7. In your experience, what do you think is the best way to improve school climate?
> *Listen for:*
> - Resources required
> - Training
> - Personnel
> - Family/Community support

8. [If workshop participant last year] **I understand that you participated in City Schools' climate workshop last summer. Would you be willing to share the School Work Plan you developed at that meeting and the deliverable that you completed for communicating with your school? Are there any other documents that you would like to share with us or send us after the interview that might help us better understand your school?**

9. Is there anything I have not asked you about that you would like to comment on? Thank you again for your time. We appreciate your participation in this study.

Developing a Positive School Climate
Teacher/School Improvement Team Focus Group Protocol

School/Type:	**Teachers**:
Date/Time:	**Interviewer:**

Introduction & Purpose

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. Before we start, I would like to give you a little background information about why I am here and answer any questions you may have.

Several schools in the district have experienced changes in school climate over the past couple of years. To better understand these changes Baltimore City Schools has asked us, researchers from the Baltimore Education Research Consortium, to independently conduct case studies in six city schools. The purpose of the studies is to understand how various strategies, programs, and contexts directly or indirectly influence climate. The information gained through these studies will be shared in a summer symposium and used by the district to improve school climate more broadly for the purposes of fostering teacher retention, improved attendance, and higher student achievement.

We are going to have a conversation about how you believe climate has or has not changed in your school over the past few years and the factors you believe may have influenced climate in your school.

School Climate

For the purpose of the study, *school climate* will be defined as "those elements in a school related to: safety; teaching and learning; relationships; and physical environment" (Office of Student Support and Safety).

Recording & Confidentiality

If you don't mind, we would like to record this focus group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the tape. We will summarize all the information we gain, and may quote some of it directly, but nobody will ever be able to identify you. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. To start, would each of you share your name, the role(s) you play at the school, and how long you have been at this school? How did you come to be a teacher at this school?

> ***Things to listen for:***
> - Where were you before this school? In similar school?
> - Why were you placed or why did you apply to teach at this school?
> - Have you served (or do you currently serve) any another capacity in this school?

2. I'd like to start by asking you to reflect on your first year at this school. How would you describe the school at that time (what year was this)? [Be careful that this does not take too much time]

> **Listen for:**
> - Safety
> - Teaching and learning
> - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
> - Physical environment

> **Probe as necessary:**
> - When you got here was it what you expected? How so? Not?
> - What did other people tell you about this school before you came?

3. What is it like working in this school? Do you think you have the support you need, at the school, to achieve your goals?

> **Probe as necessary:**
> - Do you feel supported by your colleagues? The principal?
> - Do you feel respected and appreciated?
> - What are your top 3 priorities for the school and/or your students?
> - What expectations do you have of your students?

4. How would you describe the climate of this school over the time you have been here?

> ***Probe as necessary:***
> - Same? Improving? Declining?
> - Strengths? Areas needing improvement?
> - How do you know/assess this? [Listen for: climate survey and/or other measures?]
> - [If change] What factors have directly or indirectly contributed to this change?
> - Have new goals or challenges developed during your time here?

5. In the last four years, have any climate specific programs or efforts been implemented to intentionally improve climate in this school?

> - If so, how did these efforts come about?
> - Who lead and contributed to the efforts?
> - How were these strategies selected?
> - What things worked? What things did not? How could you tell (evidence)?
> - How were faculty/students involved or affected? Did they support the program?
> - Did you receive any staff development, support and follow-up about the program?
> - Are there other school programs or practices that have indirectly or unintentionally impacted climate? If so, what aspects of these programs or practices have resulted in improving or declining school climate?

6. In your experience, what do you think is the best way to improve school climate in your school?

7. Is there anything I have not asked you about that you would like to comment on?

Developing a Positive School Climate
High School Student Focus Group Protocol

School/Type:	Students (number, grade level, gender):
Date/Time:	Focus group leaders:

Introduction & Purpose
Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. Before we start, I would like to give you a little background information about why we are here and answer any questions you may have. Several schools in the Baltimore City Schools district have experienced changes in school climate over the past couple of years. To better understand these changes we would like to find out how students think and feel about their school. We will be talking with students at five other schools in the city. The information gained through these studies will be used to improve school climate throughout the district for the purposes of helping students feel safe, increasing attendance, and improving student learning and achievement.

[Explain that you are students and what roles you will play (i.e., discussion leader & notetaker)]

School Climate
For the purpose of the study, *school climate* will be defined as "those elements in a school related to: safety; teaching and learning; relationships; and physical environment" (Office of Student Support and Safety). [Direct students to poster defining the dimensions of school climate].

Since each of your thoughts is important, we need to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinions and no one person takes too much time. I will take responsibility for time keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions. Use your best strategies to express your opinions without making others feel uncomfortable.

Confidentiality
Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that we won't reveal what was said here by individual name. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside this group. It is extremely important that we all understand the nature of this confidentiality since it will help us to get a clear and honest picture of your school as possible.

Recording
If you don't mind, we would like to record this focus group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the tape. We will summarize all the information we gain, and may quote some of it directly, but nobody will ever be able to identify you. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **To start, we would like you to share your name, grade-level, how many years you have been at this school, and any clubs/sports/activities you participate in at the school.**
    - Note: Demographic information (e.g., gender)

2. **I'd like to start by asking you to tell me what you thought about this school during your first year here.**
    Probe as necessary:
    - When you got here was it what you expected? How so? Not?
    - What did other people tell you about this school before you came?

    Listen for:
    - Safety
    - Teaching and learning
    - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
    - Physical environment

3. **What is it like going to school here? Describe what a typical day is like for you (from when you first arrive to when you leave).**
    Probe as necessary:
    - What is it like when you first get to school?
    - Do people know your name?
    - Does anyone notice if someone is absent?
    - **What do you look forward to most each day? What do you not like? WHY?**
    - Who do you go to when you need help?
    - Do you think the adults care about the students here? If so, or not, what makes you feel this way?

    Listen for:
    - Safety
    - Teaching and learning
    - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
    - Physical environment

4. **Have you noticed any changes in the school climate [refer to poster] since you first came? Do you think or feel differently about the school now than when you first came?**
    Probe as necessary:
    - Same? Better? Worse?
    - **[If change] What things changed? Why do you think this change occurred?**
    - Have these changes affected how you feel about your school? How so? Why not?
    - **What do your friends from other schools say about your school now? Are they right?**

5. **Talk about life beyond high school. What do you plan to do when you finish? What expectations do your teachers have of you? What will you remember most about your high school experiences?**
6. **If you could change one thing to make this a *better* school what would it be? Why? What difference would this make in your school?**
7. **Is there anything I have not asked you about that you would like to comment on?**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. We appreciate your help.
Developing a Positive School Climate

Elementary Student Focus Group Protocol

School/Type:	Students (number, grade level, gender):
Date/Time:	Focus Group leaders:

Introduction & Purpose
Thank you for meeting with us today. Before we start, I would like to tell about why we are here and answer any questions you may have.

[Explain that you are students and what roles you will play (i.e., discussion leader & notetaker)].

We are meeting with students to find out what it is like being a student in your school. By sharing your thoughts you will be helping us figure out how to help kids feel safe in schools and have fun learning.

School Climate
During our discussion we will be talking about your relationships with the adults and other students in the school, what it is like learning in your school, what your school building looks like, and how safe you feel at school. [Direct students to poster defining the dimensions of school climate].

Since each of your thoughts is important, we need to make sure that everyone gets a chance to express their opinions and no one person takes too much time. I will take responsibility for time keeping and making sure that we address all of the questions. Use your best strategies to express your opinions without making others feel uncomfortable.

Confidentiality
Whatever you say here will remain confidential. That means that when we write our report we will not use your name or identify you. It also means that all of you agree not to share the comments made here with others outside this group. It is extremely important that we all understand the nature of this confidentiality since it will help us to get a clear and honest picture of your school as possible.

Recording
If you don't mind, we would like to record this focus group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear the tape. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Would that be OK?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **To start, we would like you to share your name, how many years you have been at this school, and any activities you do in the school (i.e., clubs, music groups, sports, etc).**
   - Note: Demographic information (e.g., gender)

2. **I'd like to start by asking you to tell me what you thought about this school during your first year here.**
   Listen for:
   - Safety
   - Teaching and learning
   - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
   - Physical environment

   Probe as necessary:
   - When you got here was it what you expected? How so? Not?
   - What did other people tell you about this school before you came?

3. **What is it like going to school here? Describe what a typical day is like for you (from when you first arrive to when you leave).**
   Probe as necessary:
   - What is it like when you first get to school?
   - Do people know your name?
   - Does anyone notice if someone is absent?
   - **What do you look forward to most each day? What do you not like? WHY?**
   - Who do you go to when you need some help?
   - Do you think the adults care about the students here? If so, or not, what makes you feel this way?

   Listen for:
   - Safety
   - Teaching and learning
   - Interpersonal relationships (adult-adult, student-student, adult-student)
   - Physical environment

4. **Have you noticed any changes in the school [refer to poster] since you first came? Do you think or feel differently about the school now than when you first came?**
   Probe as necessary:
   - Same? Better? Worse?
   - **[If change] What things changed? Why do you think this change occurred?**
   - **Have these changes affected how you feel about your school? How so? Why not?**
   - What do your friends from other schools say about your school now? Are they right?

5. **What expectations do your teachers have of you?**
6. **If you could change one thing to make this the *best* school what would it be? Why? What difference would this make in your school?**
7. **Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?**

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. We appreciate your help.

School Climate Study
Neighborhood Context Observation Tool

A school's zoned catchment area is considered to span a 1.5 radius from the school. Observe the area around immediately adjacent to the perimeter of a school, fanning out for about 1.5 miles. Focusing primarily on the area closest to perimeter of the school, write responses to the questions below.   Describe what you see and don't see, noting any "surprises" (Are school personnel monitoring the school exterior while donning purple, feathered hats as they welcome children to school? Is the school surrounded by boarded up homes? Do you see large numbers of parents/caregivers in their 20s and 30s using walking canes? Do you see large numbers of children crossing the street without any crossing guards?).

This tool has two sets of questions. The first set of questions focus on the built environment around the school.

1) **What does the neighborhood look like?** (Is the neighborhood mostly residential or commercial? What is in the area immediately surrounding the school?)

2) **If there are residences nearby, what do they look like?** (apartments? housing projects? row homes? vacant homes? Describe.)

3) **What businesses, services, organizations and institutions do you see in the neighborhood surrounding the school?**   Look for and note citizens' associations, businesses, financial institutions, cultural organizations, faith-based organizations/institutions, schools (public, private, religious), medical clinics/hospitals, social service/governmental agencies, public safety (police, fire departments), libraries, vacant land, green space/parks, community gardens, abandoned (boarded up) homes.

4) **In the space below, draw a map of the area immediately surrounding the school.**

The next few questions focus on the people you observe in the space and their interactions.

5) **Observe the opening and closing of the school day. How do children appear to arrive at/depart from school?** (walking—alone? Walking with older/younger children? Walking with adults? Walking school bus with adults and children?; yellow school bus; MTA public transportation—bus or subway; before or after car provider van; riding in a privately operated car; motorcycle; taxi)

6) **What are school personnel doing (if anything) outside the school/at the exit during arrival and dismissal? (socio-emotional relationship)**

7) **Who do you see**? (Age, sex, race/ethnicity, disability, roles) Based upon your observations, do most people appear to be family members/caregivers? Do you see mostly younger and older children walking together? Do you see adults/parents/caregivers walking with children?)

8) **What are people doing?/How do you see people interacting with others?** Are people (children? Adults and children?) walking together? Are children playing with each other? Are people (who?) yelling at each other? Any aggressive behavior? Unexpected behaviors or observations?