THE WHOLE SCHOOL CLIMATE FRAMEWORK:
CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS FROM THE INSIDE-OUT

The Whole School Climate Framework, developed by Community Matters, is a cost-effective and attainable approach that provides educational leaders with a clear blueprint for achieving the educational outcomes that have proven so elusive in recent reform efforts.

HOW SAFE ARE OUR SCHOOLS?

Over the last decade, our nation has invested more than $10 billion in school safety and climate improvement measures. The vast majority of those dollars have supported an *"Outside-In Approach"* that is driven by adults and characterized by fences, locks, tougher rules and policies, security personnel and other staff to supervise students and cameras to monitor their behavior.

Today, even with such an enormous investment, and despite national media attention and increased efforts of legislators, policymakers, and educators, schools are not significantly safer. As well-publicized youth suicides have demonstrated, bullying, cyber-bullying, and other forms of youth mistreatment continue to occur. These hurtful and dangerous behaviors are getting younger, meaner, and becoming more acceptable in youth culture, negatively impacting attendance, discipline and achievement.

THE SOLUTION WITHIN

We know that we cannot legislate bullying away and we cannot punish students into becoming better citizens. What's needed is a major shift: a change in attitudes, beliefs, direction, and priorities, and a corresponding reallocation of resources. This shift is best accomplished by using an *"Inside-Out Approach"* – one which recognizes that a positive school climate is the foundation for building safe, high performing, and thriving school communities.

Researchers and educators looking for keys to educational success have increasingly focused on the importance of the social-emotional climate of a school, and have found that a positive climate is achieved through:

- Strong, visionary and shared leadership;
- Discipline policies and practices that are formative rather than punitive;
- Staff members who are hall-friendly asset builders; and,
- Students who are engaged and empowered to be contributors and peacemakers.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CLIMATE?

The climate of a school is the visceral, almost palpable "sense" and the feeling of safety and belonging that people experience on campus. It can be described as warm or cool, safe or unsafe. Though there is no single, formal definition, scholars seem to agree that the climate is the sum total of the attitudes and behaviors elicited by:

- school policies, practices, and physical environment;
- staff interactions with peers and students;
- opportunities for student engagement and leadership; and,
- beliefs and attitudes students bring to the school from their families and the community.

> Climate influences individual behavior and performance.
> More importantly – <u>WE influence the climate</u>.

WHY IS SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPORTANT?

When school climate is positive, school connectedness is strong. Students want to attend a school where they feel welcome, safe and included (e.g. where their developmental needs for safety and belonging are being met). The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) noted in its recent summary[i] of a long-term national study of more than 36,000 adolescents:

- School connectedness was found to be the strongest protector against substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (such as drinking and driving or not wearing seat belts).[ii]

- Research also shows a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes,[iii] including school attendance,[iv] staying in school longer;[v] and higher grades and classroom test scores.[vi]

School climate is also a key to keeping schools physically safe. The *Threat Assessment Guide*, produced by the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education after their analysis of 37 school shootings, emphasized that "climates of safety, respect, and emotional support can help diminish the possibility of targeted violence in schools."[vii] Why? Because when the climate is positive, relationships are strong and connectedness is high, so there is less of the bullying and other mean behavior that can escalate into violence. Consequently, there are fewer suspensions and other disciplinary actions that cost money and take time away from teaching and learning.

> Understanding WHAT DETERMINES the climate
> and
> knowing HOW TO IMPROVE the climate
> are the keys to achieving the educational outcomes we are seeking.

WHAT DETERMINES SCHOOL CLIMATE?

School climate is influenced and determined by five primary factors:

1. *Organizational*: The vision and leadership of educational leaders and their commitment to school climate as the guiding principle for safe and effective schools. The policies of a school and/or district and the processes for determining and enforcing them; the lines of, and access to, communication and authority, and opportunities to participate in decision making.

2. *Staff*: The ways school staff relate to each other and to students; their classroom management and discipline practices; and the priority individual staff members place on being hall friendly asset builders, building and strengthening relationships with students.

3. *Student*: The degree to which students are engaged in leadership opportunities and ways students relate to one another and to adults in authority, how they prioritize education relative to other experiences in their lives, their attitudes toward acquiring and building relationship skills like communication and conflict resolution, and how their behaviors and choices are influenced by the other four factors.

4. *Family*: The values, beliefs, and practices that are instilled and reinforced in children by parents and other relatives, especially regarding how to behave with adults in authority and how to resolve differences with others peers, and also what value is placed on education, tolerance, communication, and nonviolence.

5. *Community*: The values, beliefs, and practices that are evident outside the walls of school and home, particularly the value a community places on its children and youth, how its members treat youth when they encounter them in their neighborhoods; and how they invest time and resources to support youth development.

All five of these determinants have a different "leverage value" or capacity to influence the climate – some are more direct and immediate, while others require more time in order to have the maximum effect.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL CHANGE

The first key to successful whole school climate change is understanding how change occurs, and then initiating, managing, and monitoring the process. Meaningful change often begins with the courage to question the current conditions – how things are being done. This stimulates an inquiry and assessment of personal and organizational attitudes and beliefs. That exploration generates ideas that lead to new and improved policies and practices. The revised policies and practices promote changes in behavior and environment that in turn reinforce the changes in attitudes and beliefs. This successful change process includes the implementation of programs and services that are clearly aligned with the new policies, practices, attitudes and beliefs.
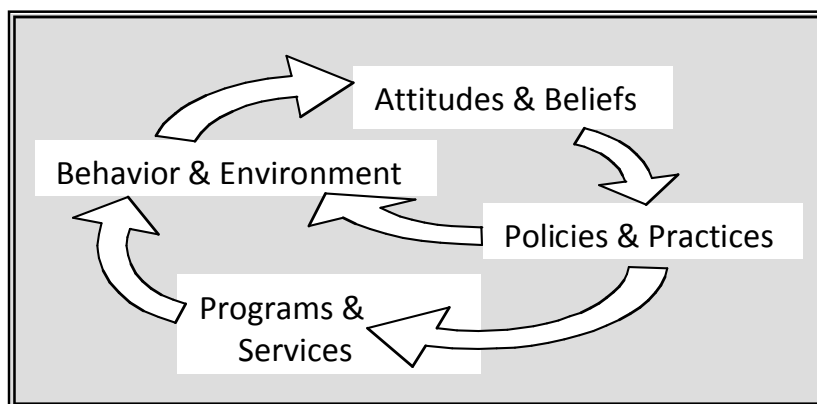
The second key is developing specific actions that support the five determinants and integrating them into a coherent plan.

PLANNING FOR WHOLE SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE

A school's climate can be significantly improved when school and community stakeholders work together to develop and carry out a well-designed plan. The process involves these four steps:

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STEPS IN A WHOLE SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE PLAN
1. Assess and Determine Data Collection Methods
2. Develop the Plan
3. Implement and Monitor the Plan
4. Evaluate the Results

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1. Assess and Determine Data Collection Methods. This step involves:
   - Forming a team or advisory group of key stakeholders that will oversee and guide the process
   - Identifying data sources and collection methods for initial assessment and ongoing monitoring
   - Conducting an assessment to identify strengths, gaps and needs

2. Develop the Plan. This step involves:
   - Field research to identify strategies, curricula, and other resources
   - Educating stakeholders, including staff members at all levels
   - Building consensus and commitment
   - Developing timelines and sequencing activities
   - Developing a budget
   - Determining ownership and responsibilities

3. Implement and Monitor the Plan. This step involves:
   - Providing training and materials that equip stakeholders with new skills and information necessary for changing policies and practices
   - Modifying or initiating new programs and services
   - Communicating with stakeholder groups and coordinating activities
   - Gathering data and feedback to assess progress
   - Adjusting and adapting the plan

4. Evaluate the Results. This step involves:
   - Collecting quantitative and qualitative data
   - Compiling and analyzing data against baseline and projections
   - Presenting results to stakeholders
   - Recognizing the efforts of those involved
   - Determining next steps, leading to another iteration of this cycle

THE SOLUTION IS WITHIN OUR REACH
The Whole School Climate framework is a "call to action" that can inspire and mobilize staff, students, families and the whole community to work together to accomplish a common vision: creating safe and thriving schools that promote student achievement, healthy social emotional development and civic responsibility.

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[i] Centers for Disease Control. Strong Connections at School Can Lead to Healthier Choices. 2010. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/Features/ConnectToSchool/

[ii] Resnick MD, Bearman PS, Blum RW, et al. Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *JAMA* 1997;278(10):823–832

[iii] McNeely C. Connections to school as an indicator of positive development. Paper presented at the Indicators of Positive Development Conference, Washington, DC; 2003. Klem AM, Connell JP. Relationships matter: linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. Journal of School Health 2004;74(7):262–273. Rosenfeld LB, Richman JM, Bowen GL. Low social support among at-risk adolescents. Social Work in Education 1998;20:245–260. Battin-Pearson S, Newcomb MD, Abbot RD, Hill KG, Catalano RF, Hawkins JD. Predictors of early high school dropout: a test of five theories. Journal of Educational Psychology 2000;92(3):568–582. Barber BK, Olsen JA. Socialization in context: connection, regulation, and autonomy in the family, school and neighborhood, and with peers. Journal of Adolescent Research 1997;12(2):287–315.

[iv] Ibid, Rosenfeld, et al.

[v] Ibid. Battin-Pearson, et al.

[vi] Ibid. Klem, et al. Barber, B.K., et al.

[vii] Fein, R., et al. Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-free Schools Program and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2004) 5-6.