



A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Creating a positive learning environment



Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Many factors contribute to improving student achievement. One important factor is the learning environment, or as it is sometimes called, the school climate. A school's climate reflects the shared ideas—assumptions, values, beliefs—and practices that define its culture and standards for expected behavior.²⁴

There is mounting evidence that a positive school climate increases student achievement.²⁵ A school climate that contributes to learning focuses on essential components, including safety and strong relationships between teaching and learning.²⁶

A positive school climate means that students, staff, and visitors all feel safe. Threats to their physical and emotional safety (e.g., bullying) can take a great toll on students, leading some to be fearful of attending school²⁷ and ultimately impacting student learning.²⁸ Bullying does not only impact the children in schools. Growing evidence indicates that a significant number of teachers are treated disrespectfully, threatened, and even physically assaulted by students every year, further deteriorating the school climate.²⁹

A school climate that builds a culture of mutual trust and respect, engages participants, and supports a relationship between teaching and learning can improve childhood health and academic performance.³⁰ Ensuring that a school's learning environment is sensitive to its culturally and linguistically diverse student body results in stronger connections between each student and teacher.

The nation became focused on school safety in the wake of extreme acts of random and well-publicized school violence that cannot and should not be forgotten. Such extreme acts attract the most attention; however, the more frequent and pervasive issues involve physical and emotional acts toward students and, increasingly, acts of disrespect and violence toward teachers. The keys to reversing this troubling trend are prevention and early intervention. Disrespectful actions lead to violence. Lawmakers must ensure that any violent behavior, whether against a student, a teacher, or anyone else in the school, is swiftly addressed and does not get swept under the rug. Ignoring such behavior sends the wrong signal to students and staff that violence is tolerated, which in turn undermines the overall learning environment in a school. Research shows that improving the school climate leads to better

academic performance.³¹ Lawmakers must promote safer school climate policies and with them better learning conditions.

Enhance Anti-Bullying Tools

There is no question that bullying is a challenge facing all schools. Research indicates that anywhere from 30 percent³² to over 60 percent³³ of school-aged children report being subjected to some form of bullying or harassment at school. Moreover, by the time they graduate from high school, nearly all students will have been exposed at some point to bullying at school,³⁴ especially in middle schools and urban areas.³⁵

The evidence is clear—bullying negatively affects learning and undermines the ability of students to reach their full potential.³⁶ Victims of bullying are at greater risk of skipping school or spending the school day in fear,³⁷ ultimately impacting their ability to learn.³⁸ As the legislature recognized last year, efforts to address low achievement in school must include anti-bullying policies.

In a national survey, teachers and school staff recognize the increased incidence of bullying at school, and over 50 percent report that it is a serious problem.³⁹ They should know since an increasing number of students seek guidance about bullying from their teachers.⁴⁰ Yet, many staff members feel disengaged and ill-equipped to help due to inadequate training. Nationally, only about half of teachers and educational support personnel have received training in bullying prevention and intervention.⁴¹ In particular, teachers cite cyberbullying, sexting, and harassment based on sexual orientation as those areas in which they need specialized training.⁴²

The legislature recognized this when it passed comprehensive bullying and cyberbullying legislation in 2011. The 2011 legislation also required school districts to implement school climate plans. Both are commendable building blocks toward a more comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying effort that can promote better learning environments.⁴³ Still, there is more that can be done. Lawmakers should work to improve the way laws are implemented to prevent and address bullying.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Conduct school climate surveys. Recently, North Carolina implemented a statewide teacher survey to identify schools where disrespect, aggression, and intimidation negatively impact the learning environment. This survey strategy helps to identify poor learning environments, particularly

those with a diminished culture of respect and trust that can, and often have, led to bullying and violence. Lawmakers should build upon the school climate legislation enacted in 2011 (as recommended in the previous section) to provide a tool to school leaders to effectively prevent aggressive or violent school climates.

- ➔ Monitor implementation of bullying laws. The legislature passed comprehensive bullying and cyberbullying legislation in 2011. This serves as a strong building block toward a more comprehensive school-wide anti-bullying effort that can promote better learning environments throughout schools. Lawmakers should remain focused on ways to implement laws to prevent and address bullying.

Address the Troubling and Growing Trend of Violence against Teachers

National statistics show that a troubling rise in the incidence of violence against teachers has reached unprecedented levels.⁴⁴ During the 2007-08 school year, 7 percent of teachers indicated that they had been threatened with injury or physically attacked by a student from their school.⁴⁵ Other reports have found the percentage to be even higher.⁴⁶ In Connecticut, violence against school staff is occurring with even greater frequency. In 2009-10, there were 836 reported incidents of physical altercations, fighting, or battery directed against certified school staff. In 2010-11, the number grew to 1,021.⁴⁷ In addition, there were 507 reports of physical aggression against other, non-certified staff, including substitute teachers during that same school year.⁴⁸ It is important to note that these data reflect only reported incidents of violence against teachers. Unfortunately, many educators do not report a physical assault against them for fear of retribution. As a result, schools and police are left with unreliable data, and thus are unable to assess and address the true scope of the problem in their community.

Although Connecticut law requires principals to file a copy of a teacher's assault report with the local police,⁴⁹ it is common for that report not to be forwarded to the local police authority, in direct violation of state law. That statute does not have any enforcement mechanism, and thus it is often ignored by administrators, leaving teachers without any real recourse. Moreover, state law specifically prohibits school administrators from interfering with the right of a teacher or any school employee to file a complaint with the police in cases of threats of physical violence and in cases of physical assaults by a student against such teacher or employee.⁵⁰ Yet, despite this protection, many teachers remain afraid to file a report with their principal, let alone directly with the local police. As a result, state laws should

be strengthened to provide a remedy in cases where a principal defies his or her statutory assault-reporting responsibility. This will lead to accrual of more accurate data and the prevention of future assaults since immediate intervention following an assault can reduce the likelihood of further violent incidents.⁵¹

Finally, there are long-term consequences of this violence against school staff for students who are ultimately affected by a hostile learning environment. Teachers who feel unsafe in their schools often decide to leave the profession, and studies show that teacher attrition has a negative effect on students' engagement and achievement.⁵² An assault against a teacher can result in lost wages for the victim, workers' compensation claims, litigation costs, and lost instructional time.⁵³ Lawmakers must act to address the growing trend of violence against teachers.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Strengthen penalties for principals who—although required by law to report assaults on teachers to the police—fail to do so.
- ➔ Provide teachers with the same legal protections given to nurses, social workers, and bus drivers who are assaulted in the line of duty.



Build Stronger Relationships between Teaching and Learning

In a time of fiscal constraint, it is imperative that Connecticut invest in educational improvement strategies with a proven record of success. Those that have proven most successful have one common theme: They involve teachers and other school personnel in the most critical decisions affecting student learning.

For decades, external reform groups and self-interested for-profit companies and individuals have tried to impose change from outside. The result is all too predictable—faddish, out-of-touch reforms fail to make a real or lasting difference. As research has shown, effective continual school improvement is about involving those who are asked to implement the change—teachers, administrators, parents, and community members who support public schools.⁵⁴ In short, the hallmark of any successful reform strategy is that it is done *with* teachers and administrators, not *to* them.⁵⁵ After all, they are the experts in teaching and learning. Fortunately, Connecticut has already begun implementing successful reform strategies that do just this.

CALI

In 2007, the General Assembly established the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) to address the achievement gap. CALI is active in 18 urban and urban-ring school districts, representing nearly a third of all Connecticut students.⁵⁶ CALI is a data-driven model of continuous improvement that independent auditors have determined to be highly effective.⁵⁷

Key components of the mission and vision of CALI include strong leadership at all levels, with a sense of urgency for change; targeting of human and fiscal resources, in the form of grant funding, consultative support, and training opportunities; professional learning and development opportunities integrated into the classroom; student-centered improvement plans based on external, district-wide, and school-level assessments; and integration of data teams to better target curriculum and high-quality instruction at the district, school, and instructional team levels.

The results of CALI are clear. A statewide system of support has developed, capable of efficiently targeting resources and timely support where they are needed most. At the same time, the model has enabled school reform and improvement to be generated from the ground up, a process much more sustainable and replicable than failed top-down reforms. Most importantly, mounting evidence shows that CALI has increased student engagement, improved achievement, and enhanced learning.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Expand the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI) which has successfully boosted student achievement by strengthening teachers' skills in world-class, research-based, data-driven instruction and quality interventions.
- ➔ Increase research into culturally and linguistically diverse student populations and embed the best practices in programs such as CALI.

CommPACT Schools

The CommPACT Schools model was established legislatively in 2007. It is a first-of-its-kind whole-school reform program that is making a difference in many urban schools in Connecticut. The CommPACT Schools model—which embodies a shared commitment by key school partners, including community members, parents, administrators, children, and teachers—partners with the UConn Neag School of Education to link research-based solutions directly to schools and classrooms. When these partners are engaged in the teaching and learning process, the resulting shared purpose has been shown to improve student learning.⁵⁸ All CommPACT Schools have demonstrated gains in student achievement in at least one area since beginning their engagement in the CommPACT process.⁵⁹ It also is important to note the accomplishments below.

- An upward trend in standardized test scores is identified with dramatic growth in several schools, particularly Barnum School in Bridgeport and Westside Middle School in Waterbury, both of which outscore other schools in their districts.
- Impressive improvement at Westside Middle School in Waterbury and Bassick High School in Bridgeport has elevated them to “Safe-Harbor” status.
- Notable increases in parental and community involvement include higher attendance at school meetings and events, improved rates of volunteering, more engagement in school activities, and greater participation on steering committees.
- Improved school learning climates due to implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have resulted in reduced suspensions and improved student learning.

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CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Invest in “innovation school” transformation models, such as the CommPACT school model, that are implemented within the public school system and are scalable in other neighborhood schools, particularly those identified as in need of improvement.

Collaboration

Our schools must continually improve to adapt to the ever-changing needs of today’s complex economy and world. The stakes have never been higher. That is why when the educators at one school find a formula for success, it should be shared with educators in other schools across the state. In fact, Connecticut magnet and charter schools were initially envisioned to foster and share best practices to promote innovation in school reform. Unfortunately, this collaboration of ideas has yet to achieve its true potential. Connecticut should look to its own collaborative model implemented by the State Education Resource Center as a blueprint for developing a clearinghouse of best practices to promote school reform and student growth and development.

CALL TO ACTION

- ➔ Establish strategies, a clearinghouse, or a resource center to showcase and disseminate best practices developed by any of Connecticut’s public schools, whether they are charter, CommPACT, vocational-agriculture, vocational-technical, or magnet schools.