Climate for Achievement, *Issue 1*
How research defines school climate

School climate is one of eight state priorities that every school district must address in its Local Control and Accountability Plan. This Climate for Achievement series is designed to help school boards and superintendents explore the priority area of school climate. Future issues will focus on the effect of school climate on student outcomes and school systems, methods and tools for measuring school climate, and the actions school boards can take to improve school climate. This issue summarizes current requirements for school climate in the LCAP, provides an overview of the research that defines school climate, and identifies the various components of school climate.

School Climate in LCAPs

In 2013, Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation enacting the Local Control Funding Formula, redistributing K-12 school funding to address the greater resource needs of three targeted student populations: English-language learners, students from low-income families, and foster youth. The legislation requires districts to develop LCAPs that align district budgets to eight priority areas (See Table 1) identified in the statute, including "School climate, as measured by all of the following, as applicable:

A. Pupil suspension rates.

B. Pupil expulsion rates.

C. Other local measures, including surveys of pupils, parents, and teachers on the sense of safety and school connectedness."[1]

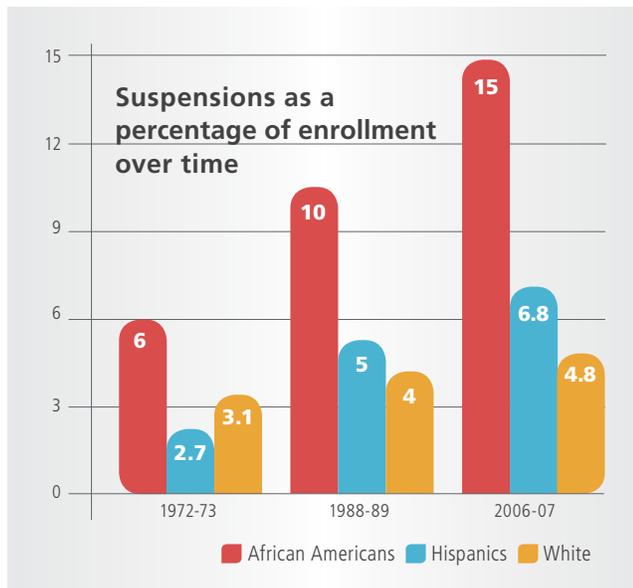**Table 1:** Priority areas defined by the Local Control and Accountability Plan

Priority domains	Priority areas
Conditions of Learning	Basic Services
	Implementation of Common Core
	Course Access
Pupil Outcomes	Student Achievement
	Other Student Outcomes
Engagement	Parent Involvement
	Student Engagement
	School Climate

The local data on district and school student suspension and expulsion rates are important for the board to review and study. CSBA's 2014 Fact Sheet, *The Case for Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions*, highlights two lenses through which boards may want to view this data.[2] First, are the suspensions and expulsions demographically disproportionate? That is, do some subgroups of students receive more suspensions or expulsions than other subgroups? (See Fig. 1) Second, are the suspension and expulsion rates increasing as a percentage of enrollment over time, for any subgroups of students?

The inequitable experience between student subgroups is not limited to issues of discipline. A 2013 report by West Ed found that in addition to the persistence of a racial achievement gap, there is also a racial school climate gap. Students from different racial backgrounds report different perceptions. These differences exist not only between schools, but within schools. In other words, schools serving large numbers of racial subgroups cannot fully explain

this climate gap as resource problem alone.[3] As districts continue to develop their LCAPs, many student advocacy groups are focusing on the issue of equity, and ensuring that all students experience a positive school climate.

Figure 1

Suspensions as a percentage of enrollment over time

	1972-73	1988-89	2006-07
African Americans	6	10	15
Hispanics	2.7	5	6.8
White	3.1	4	4.8

In meeting the "other local measures" requirement in the legislation, school boards and superintendents have an opportunity to develop the definition and indicators of healthy school climate that account for the unique context of their district. Districts will continue to improve the design of their LCAPs over the next several years. This process of change will allow the board and superintendent to provide greater clarity and specificity in answering three questions: 1) How do we define school climate? 2) What will we measure? 3) How will we measure it? There is a significant and growing body of research on school climate to help boards in that effort.

The evolution of school climate research

The study of school climate is not new. Educators have been aware of its importance for nearly a hundred years,[4] but it was not until the 1950s that researchers began to systematically study it.[5] In the last 30 years, the attention given to school climate research has accelerated and expanded, involving organizations including the Center for Disease Control, the Institute for Educational Sciences, and the U.S. Department of Education.[6]

Despite this long history, as recently as 2007, one researcher noted that it was "difficult to provide a concise definition for school climate." Even the National School Climate Center's own website admits that "there is not a national consensus" about which characteristics of climate

are critical to measure.[7] Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that many researchers agree that school climate involves at least three separate dimensions: a physical dimension (clean and safe buildings, etc.), a social dimension (how people interact with and treat each other), and an academic dimension (quality instruction, support for learning, and high expectations for students).[8] In addition, over the years, researchers have used a range of terms for school climate that are different but overlapping in meaning, including "school culture" and "the learning environment."[9] School climate has been defined as:

» "a place where students and teachers like to be"[10]

» "the conditions or quality of the learning environment, which are created and maintained by the values, beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and the physical setting shared by individuals within the school community"[11]

» "supportive learning conditions and opportunities that promote achievement and prepare [students] to succeed in college, career, and adulthood"[12]

» "an environment that reflects a commitment to meeting and developing the academic, social, and emotional needs of every student."[13]

Given this history, it is easy to understand why a survey conducted by the Character Education Partnership, in cooperation with other organizations, revealed that 90% of educators responding to a survey reported that their need for detailed and practical school climate guidelines was either strong or very strong.[14]

Dimensions of school climate

This lack of full agreement on an exact definition notwithstanding, there is an emerging consensus among those leading the school climate research effort about the core elements of school climate. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) has been focusing on improving school climate for more than 15 years. The NSCC suggests that "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."[15] NSCC advocates a framework with the four main dimensions.[16]

1. Safety: Clear rules and norms are effectively communicated and fairly enforced. Adults and students feel safe from physical harm, verbal abuse, and exclusion.

2. Relationships: There is respect for individual differences at all levels of the school. Adults listen to and get

to know individual students. Student peer relationships are healthy and positive.

3. Teaching and learning: Teachers use effective research-based practices of instruction and support for student learning. Curriculum goes beyond the academic sphere, engaging students in opportunities for social and civic learning, conflict resolution, ethical decision-making, and more.

4. Institutional Environment: The physical environment is clean and orderly. There are adequate resources for learning and an expectation for participation in school life for students, parents, and staff.

A fifth dimension, professional leadership and relationships, is unique to school staff alone. School leaders create a positive work environment with a clear vision and support for staff and particularly for staff development. School staff relations are marked by collegiality and cohesiveness.[17]

District Spotlight: Students defining climate

Hacienda La Puente Unified School District has engaged their students directly in building a positive climate. In October 2014, the San Gabriel Valley Tribune reported that approximately 400 students from Wedgeworth Elementary School performed a 'flash mob' demonstration at the Puente Hills Mall in Industry, California, that was focused on anti-bullying.[18]

Instead of a framework based on concepts like the NSCC's above, Community Matters uses people as its organizing principle. Their model identifies five groups that contribute to school climate: leadership, staff, students, parents and community.[19] Other frameworks are similar to NSCC's model, but combine them in different ways, and some are more complex than others. Table 2 summarizes the components of three different models. The NSCC includes engagement and equity/ respect for diversity in 'relationships' whereas the Quality School Framework calls it out specifically. Culture is just one aspect the QSF, so it addresses teaching and learning elsewhere in its framework.

Boards can convene and lead conversations about school climate. The framework a district chooses may not be as important as adopting one that the board, superintendent and staff mutually support. The framework is important because it becomes the basis for establishing a common language for improving school climate. That is the first step to improving school climate for school boards. They must help define — in district values, policies and other governing documents — the elements of climate, so that

the professional staff has clarity about what must be measured and addressed. Only then can they acquire or develop tools to collect data that will measure the degree to which the district is achieving the climate it seeks.

Questions for board members

» As a board member, when I walk through our schools, how do I perceive the school climate?

» When I talk to students and parents, how do they describe their school experience?

» How does our district define school climate?

» What do our policies say about school climate?

» Do district leaders and school principals talk about school climate?

Table 2: Comparing climate frameworks

	NSCC	NCSSLE	CA DOE QSF
Safety / Discipline	✔	✔	✔
Relationships	✔		✔
Teaching & Learning	✔		
Institutional Environment	✔	✔	✔
Engagement		✔	✔
Professional leadership & relationships	✔		✔
Equity / Respect for Diversity			✔
Developmental Support			✔
High expectations			✔
Physical Health			✔

NSCC: National School Climate Center[20]

NCSSLE: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments[21]

CA DOE QSF: CA Department of Education Quality School Framework: Culture[22]

Endnotes

1   California Education Code 52060

2   California School Boards Association. (2014). Fact Sheet: The Case for Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions. West Sacramento, CA.

3   Voight, A. (2013). The racial school climate gap. San Francisco: Region IX Equity Assistance Center at WestEd.

4   Cohen, J. (2014). School climate policy and practice trends: A paradox. Teachers College Record. www.tcrecord.org

5   Education Commission of the States. (2007). The school climate challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy.

6   Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Higgins- D'Alessandro, A., & Guffey, S. (2012). School Climate Research Summary: August 2012. School Climate Brief, No. 3. National School Climate Center, New York, NY.

7   Loukas, A. (2007). What is School Climate? Leadership Compass, Vol 5 (No. 1).

8   http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/ accessed on 1/29/2015

9   The Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2009). School climate guide for district policymakers and educational leaders. New York, NY: Pickeral, T. Evans, L., Hughes, W., and Huthchison, D.

10   Hinde, E. R. (2004). School culture and change: An examination of the effects of school culture on the process of change. Essays in Education. Winter: Vol. 12.

11   Health and Human Development Program (2011). Workbook for Improving School Climate. Los Alamitos: WestEd.

12   http://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/cc/index.asp accessed on 1/29/2015

13   Alliance for Excellent Education. (2013.) Climate change: Creating and integrated framework for improving school climate. Washington, D.C.

14   Cohen, J. (2014). See endnote 4.

15   http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/ accessed on 1/30/2015

16   Thapa, A. et al., (2012). See endnote 6

17   http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/documents/dimensions_chart_pagebars.pdf accessed on 1/30/2015

18   http://photos.sgvtribune.com/2014/10/09/photos-wedgeworth-school-performs-anti-bullying-flash-mob-at-puentehills-ma/#4 viewed on 2/6/2015

19   http://community-matters.org/our-approach/whole-school-climate-framework

20   http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate accessed on 1/30/2015

21   http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate accessed on 1/30/2015

22   http://www.cde.ca.gov/qs/cc/ accessed on 1/30/2015