

INTRODUCTION

The challenges of the last year, both the pandemic and the reckoning with our racist systems, have taken an enormous social and emotional toll on our students and have reinforced how important it is for our schools to prioritize the needs of the whole child. Moreover, we have seen how pivotal a role culturally affirming school environments play in shaping the lives of young people. Students of color, who make up the majority of the children in California's public schools, deserve to feel welcomed and understood in their classrooms. That is not always the case.

We, a group of California teachers and 2020-21 Teach Plus California Policy Fellows, strive to ensure that the educational spaces we occupy—classrooms and offices, schools and districts—actively work toward creating a positive, culturally affirming school climate. We believe that our students deserve to feel confident that the policies and systems in place are supporting programs to enhance and maintain safe and affirming environments for all. We hope that by sharing our recommendations and vision directly with policymakers, we can do just that.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Why School Climate Matters

A growing body of research shows that school climate strongly influences students' motivation to learn and improves academic achievement. When those within school communities feel safe, valued, cared for, respected, and engaged, learning increases. In addition to helping them achieve academically, schools that provide students with support to meet these basic needs allow them to grow socially and emotionally, helping to avoid problems ranging from emotional distress to drug use to violence. Teachers' social interactions with students directly affect students' behavioral and emotional engagement in the classroom and provide an "optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning," especially for middle school and high school students.¹ Students' sense of belonging is positively associated with higher achievement and fewer discipline problems. Additionally, a recent report reviewed 78 school climate studies going back to the year 2000 and found that "a more positive school climate is related to improved academic achievement, beyond the expected level of achievement based on student and school socioeconomic status backgrounds," and can mitigate the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement.²

School Climate Surveys in California's System of Accountability and Improvement

Using a survey to collect school climate perception data from students, school staff, and families is the first step in creating a positive school climate. Survey results provide schools with information about how each group of stakeholders perceives conditions for learning. Such information can then be used to design prevention and intervention programs specific to the needs of the school community. The California

Department of Education has developed the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS), a suite of school climate surveys, including the California Healthy Kids Survey, to help local school districts collect school climate data.

In 2013, with the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), California began to evolve its accountability system, assessing performance on multiple measures and moving towards a system of support that advances continuous improvement. In an effort to move beyond only focusing on academic assessments, California identified eight state priorities for schools to prioritize, including school climate data. Those priorities are assessed using state and local indicators. The California School Dashboard reports the performance of local educational agencies (LEAs), schools, and student groups on the state and local measures to assist in identifying strengths, challenges, and areas in need of improvement. While all of the indicators are intended to inform local planning processes, the measures based on data collected consistently across the state are the ones that are used to identify LEAs and schools to receive additional support. At this point, that does not include school climate surveys because there is no consistent data across the state.



The initial design of the LCFF recognized the critical role that positive school climate plays in advancing student performance and equity, by naming it as one of these eight priorities. LEAs are required to report how they administered a local climate survey—at least every other year, thus providing a valid measure of perceptions of school safety and connectedness—to their local governing boards at a regularly scheduled meeting, and report to stakeholders and the public through the California School Dashboard. Even though California has curated tools and surveys for LEAs to use, they are not required to use any particular instrument. There is not consistent school climate survey data across the state. As such, school climate surveys are only included in the Dashboard as a local indicator that they have either met or not met by conducting the surveys.

The California School Dashboard does not reflect the findings of the surveys or any reflection of the disparate experiences between groups of students. Furthermore, schools are identified for additional support by their county office of education using state indicators, not local. By not including the school climate surveys as a state

indicator, the state cannot ensure that schools and districts that are struggling to provide the positive, safe, and culturally affirming school climate that students need will get the help they need to improve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Elevate school climate surveys as an indicator in the state accountability system and ensure consistent, comparable data statewide.

In any system of improvement it is essential to measure what matters. But measurement alone is not enough. The state can help ensure that local education leaders prioritize this data and use it effectively to meet the needs of their students and community. While all LEAs are required to conduct school climate surveys, it is only a local indicator and not included in a meaningful way in the California School Dashboard. For the state to signal that school climate is a priority on equal footing with other indicators, like academic achievement, it needs to be included in the Dashboard as a statewide indicator. By elevating school climate as a measure of school and LEA performance in our accountability system, we will be able to better identify schools and LEAs who need help to improve their school climate, particularly for our most marginalized students.

An essential first step is ensuring that the information on the Dashboard includes consistent data statewide. Specifically, the data included should indicate school climate from multiple stakeholders' perspectives—students, staff, parents—as well as varying areas of focus, including teaching and learning, safety, sense of belonging, cultural/racial equity, and social-emotional development. Fortunately, the California Department of Education has been developing and refining survey tools as part of the CalSCHLS suite of surveys for more than twenty years and the majority of districts in California already use CalSCHLS data to some degree. Additionally, the data should be able to be disaggregated to look at different demographics, including race, gender, socio-economic status, etc. This will allow both LEAs and state policymakers to better understand what factors affect and influence school climate.

2. Recognize and celebrate schools and districts which have demonstrated improvement in school climate, particularly for those working to eliminate racial injustice in schools.

We believe another way for the state to signal the importance of a positive, safe, supportive, and culturally affirming school climate is to celebrate exemplary LEAs and schools. An effective accountability system both identifies those that need support, and holds up examples from which others can learn. California can recognize schools that show significant improvement in school climate, particularly for those working to eliminate racial injustice in schools. This could also help to provide templates for other LEAs and schools who are struggling to meet their students' needs. Though there are many ways to identify and celebrate these schools, we recommend considering the creation of an award for schools that show improvement in school climate as part of the California School Recognition Program (CSRP).

3. Provide meaningful support and professional development for educators to ensure they are equipped to support changes that will help improve school climate.

Once there is clear and comprehensive access to the data from school climate surveys, ongoing professional development is critical in supporting LEAs in making instructional and cultural shifts to improve school climate. In addition to providing funding or grants for outsourced professional development, the state should specifically invest in teacher-led professional development, leveraging the expertise of educators on the ground. This will provide opportunities for compensation for work that a lot of teachers are already doing: supporting their colleagues and sharing best practices. Research shows us that there is a wide range of resources and skills that directly support the improvement of school climate. There should be clear guidance provided from the state to LEAs regarding specific practices developed through professional development, including transformative social-emotional learning (SEL), restorative practices, trauma-informed teaching, implicit-bias training, equitable grading, and ethnic studies. By providing clear guidelines on what types of professional development can support school climate, the state can have a stronger hand in ensuring positive outcomes

In order to further support accountability and implementation of these practices, the state should provide funding for School Climate Committees for LEAs or districts. These committees should include representatives from each school site, including all stakeholders: teachers, administrators, students, and parents. This committee would be responsible for reviewing survey data, identifying areas of need, determining professional development needs, creating action/implementation plans, and monitoring improvement. This will allow LEAs to have agency over not only their survey data, but by creating a plan that can directly respond to the needs of their community.

CONCLUSION

As Teach Plus Policy Fellows, we recognize the need for reform in the way our state administers and utilizes school climate surveys, especially considering the social, emotional, and cultural impacts of the global pandemic. We are pleased by the emphasis the state has begun to place on school climate surveys. Survey results can provide both LEAs and the state with information about how teachers, students, and families perceive conditions for learning. This information should then be used to design prevention and intervention programs specific to the needs of the school community through the disaggregated data provided on the Dashboard and professional development and support for teachers. As teachers, we know how critical a positive, safe, culturally affirmative climate is for every stakeholder, and we look forward to seeing more investment from the state for this work.

TEACH PLUS CALIFORNIA POLICY FELLOWS

Anisa Amani
Alyssa Avila
Debi Bober
Thomas Courtney
Jesus Galindo
Rina Gonzalez
Christina Johnson
Jenna Hewitt King*

Michele Lamons-Raiford
Salvador Limon
Jason Morgan
Nadia Razi
Amber Riehman
Meghann Seril
Tina Starks

*Lead Author

TEACH PLUS CALIFORNIA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Sarah Lillis

ENDNOTES

¹ Thapa, Amrit, Jonathan Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Ann Higgins–D’Alessandro (2013). A Review of School Climate Research. Vol. 83 Review of Educational Research, pp.363–366, September, 2013. Available online at: <http://rer.sagepub.com/content/83/3/357.full.pdf+html>.

² Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2017). A Research Synthesis of the Associations Between Socioeconomic Background, Inequality, School Climate, and Academic Achievement. Review of Educational Research, 87(2), 425–469. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669821>.