

To: Randy Spaulding, Executive Director, The Washington State Board of Education
From: Stephen Kostyo, Dr. Jeannie Oakes, and Julie Woods, Learning Policy Institute
Re: Using Indicators & Measures of School Climate and Conditions for Learning in a Broader System of Data Collection that Supports Improvement
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Using Indicators & Measures of School Climate and Conditions for Learning in a Broader System of Data Collection that Supports Improvement

Introduction

Washington seeks to “provide students with the opportunity to become responsible and respectful global citizens, to contribute to their economic well-being and that of their families and communities, to explore and understand different perspectives, and to enjoy productive and satisfying lives,” per state law.¹ To support schools’ and districts’ work to achieve that goal, the Washington State Board of Education is exploring options for a more equitable and informative continuous improvement and recognition system. Key considerations include a desire to capture more robust metrics that address inputs, outputs, and outcomes aligned to the state goals for basic education.

Washington state policies and key documents embody a theory of action about how the education system can achieve its goals. Six cross-cutting, research-based key elements of the education system are considered central to achieving the state goals equitably and effectively:

- 1) ample and equitably distributed resources;
- 2) a well-prepared, diverse, and stable education workforce;
- 3) opportunities for powerful and meaningful learning;
- 4) positive, supportive, and enriching learning environments;
- 5) active engagement of students, educators, families and communities; and
- 6) a focus on students’ college, career, and civic readiness.

These are elements about which all stakeholders—from state leaders to school and district staff to families—need information to understand progress toward the state’s education goals and engage in continuous improvement processes.

In addition to relying on data that is already collected, a comprehensive accountability, recognition, and continuous improvement system may require the development and implementation of new measures and strategies. In particular, the state can build its capacity to collect and support districts in using information about students’ opportunities for powerful learning (element 3), the characteristics of learning environments (element 4), and levels of engagement (element 5).

These elements (3, 4, and 5) are typically considered characteristics of the school and classroom climate and/or school and classroom “opportunities to learn.” **Climate** is often thought of as “how a school or classroom feels”; that is, whether it feels safe and supportive for students, staff, and families. **Opportunities to learn** are the more tangible teaching and learning structures and practices that are necessary for students to have meaningful opportunities to achieve the state’s basic education goals. Because these concepts sometimes overlap and sometimes are treated as distinct, we characterize them as “climate” and “conditions for learning” to emphasize the importance of both the intangible and the structural dimensions of learning opportunities, environments, and engagement in students’ success.

Data collection around these elements is already occurring in some districts and, in others, is possible with the modification of or additions to already-existing tools. For example, school and classroom observations or surveys may ask students, educators, and families to report on the school climate and conditions for learning that they experience.² Some useful information about these key elements is provided by data that Washington currently collects through the state’s Healthy Youth Survey and through school climate surveys used by districts and schools in the state (e.g., Panorama, CEE) and could be further leveraged for continuous improvement.³ Additional details about these data are detailed in the memo of potential metrics that LPI provided to the state board.

In what follows, we briefly review the rationale for including research-based indicators and measures of school climate and conditions for learning in data systems designed to inform school improvement. We also briefly provide an overview what can be measured and instruments available for this purpose, offer some cautions about ensuring the reliability and validity of such measures and their use, and identify examples of how other states are tackling this challenge. At the end of this memo, we provide additional resources on measuring school climate and learning conditions.

Why Do School Climate and Conditions for Learning Matter?

The climate of schools and classrooms reflect the prevailing “norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.”⁴ Considerable research demonstrates that a positive school climate, including access to key conditions for learning, is critical for students’ learning and other key schooling outcomes. For example, all students benefit from long-term, secure relationships that support academic, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, and, in particular, such relationships can help mitigate the negative effects on learning of traumatic experiences such as violence, crime, abuse, homelessness, or food insecurity.⁵

Social-emotional learning (SEL) supports a positive school climate. Explicit teaching of social-emotional competencies allows children and adults to “acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”⁶ School climate and SEL are linked because, as

students and school personnel refine their social and emotional competence, school climate improves, just as the existence of a positive school climate creates the atmosphere within which SEL can take place.⁷

Note that, in addition to the intangible aspects of climate, tangible structures and practices (sometimes called “opportunities to learn”) also determine whether students have meaningful opportunities to achieve the state’s basic education goals. These include such things as teachers certified to teach the content area they are teaching, up-to-date curriculum frameworks and materials aligned to standards, sufficient instructional time, learning experiences that include higher level problem solving and project-based learning, and access to broadband and devices for online learning. Research has also established that the students benefit from these more tangible learning resources and conditions, and that those students with limited access to such learning resources and conditions out of school benefit most.⁸

As we describe in the LPI report, *Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability*, measuring school climate can shine a light on important school practices that are often overlooked and can send a signal from the state to districts and schools that creating a positive school environment in which students feel safe and connected is a priority. This attention may incentivize the development of positive school cultures through improved teaching strategies and schoolwide initiatives in which students are supported socially, emotionally, and academically. Analysis of disaggregated results may lead to intervention and support opportunities for the least engaged youth or subgroups of students disproportionately impacted. A focus on school climate and conditions for learning can also encourage educators to create a more welcoming environment for effective family engagement.⁹

Washington is not alone in seeking to broaden the information that policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders have available to monitor and improve the education system. As this memo describes below, both the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and state initiatives have recognized the need and are working to develop and use indicators that can inform continuous improvement around school climate and school and classroom conditions for student learning.

ESSA Opened the Door for Indicators of Climate and Learning Conditions

Under NCLB, accountability systems focused almost exclusively on measuring student outcomes on standardized tests and graduation rates. This followed from the theory that if educators were given clear performance goals (standards) and data that monitored students’ and schools’ progress toward meeting those goals, they would be able to alter school and classroom practices in ways that boost student performance. In contrast, including indicators and measures of conditions for learning can open the “black box” of schools and classrooms and shed light on alterable conditions that may inhibit or support learning.

ESSA, which passed Congress in December 2015, gives states the opportunity to create new approaches to school accountability and continuous improvement. Along with measures of

academic achievement (student performance on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics, which may include student growth toward proficiency), graduation rates, and English language proficiency progress, ESSA requires states to include at least one indicator of school quality or student success. These new state approaches, if informed by well-chosen indicators of student opportunity, have the potential to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments for historically underserved students.¹⁰

All indicators must provide valid, reliable, and comparable information within each state's accountability system. States then use school performance on these indicators to identify schools for support and improvement. Districts with such schools can use data from statewide indicators to inform the needs assessments and school improvement plans required under ESSA. States and districts can also select additional indicators to use as part of their broader continuous school improvement efforts across all schools, regardless of identification status.

How are Climate and Learning Conditions Measured?

School climate and conditions for learning can be measured in accountability and continuous improvement systems through student, staff, and parent surveys or expert on-site reviews of practice, such as School Quality Reviews, during which teams observe classrooms and the organization of the school as a whole and receive feedback that can lead to action steps to better serve students.¹¹ This memo focuses on surveys, given Washington's expressed interest in this strategy.

School climate surveys vary widely in the constructs that they measure. Although there are several important aspects of school climate, most surveys limit themselves to five to 10 constructs to keep the survey length manageable. Each construct is measured by several questions, called a "scale."¹² Most ask respondents how strongly they agree or disagree with statements on a five-point scale.¹³

Although climate surveys can cover a wide range of topics, many measure perceptions of school or classroom safety, supports for teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and physical environment. Staff surveys can measure levels of staff collaboration, working conditions, and leadership—key predictors of teacher turnover and thus student success.¹⁴ Surveys may also measure the degree to which a school is supportive of students' social and emotional development by, for example, helping them learn to resolve conflicts with peers. When considering whether a particular survey is useful to measure climate and learning conditions, it is useful to choose one that focuses on the construct(s) of most importance to the state, district, or school, as applicable.

Individual students' social and emotional skills can also be measured for school-level improvement purposes through surveys, teacher observation tools such as rubrics, or performance assessments.¹⁵ Such instruments can measure whether students feel—or their teachers perceive—that they have learned to identify their own emotions and strengths (self-awareness); are able to persevere even when they feel frustrated (self-management); can feel

empathy and learn from people with other opinions or experiences (social awareness); and are able to interact productively in interpersonal relationships, including resolving conflicts (relationship skills). Disaggregation of survey results by subgroup is important because student experiences often vary significantly, even within a single school.¹⁶

However, researchers caution that data from these measures should not be used for high-stakes purposes, such as school identification, because student-level assessments could become distorted under high-stakes conditions, putting pressure on students or adults to report their self-perceptions or perceptions of others less honestly, and are better suited for improvement purposes.¹⁷

Are Valid and Reliable Measures Available?

Several states, as we describe in more detail below, have chosen to repurpose existing or develop new surveys to assess students' perceptions of their school's climate and learning conditions. Additionally, a number of existing measures have been found to be valid and reliable. The US Department of Education's School Climate Survey (EDSCLS), for example, is a free, open-source school climate survey available for any local or state education agency to use to measure three domains of school climate: engagement, safety, and environment. Over the past few years, the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments at the American Institute of Research (AIR), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education, has compiled a list of over two dozen valid and reliable school climate survey batteries (including those developed by states) to support states, districts and schools as they explore which school climate survey to administer in their community.¹⁸

Selected State Approaches

As this memo describes, there are compelling reasons for a state to require districts and schools to implement measures of school climate and conditions for learning, including through student, parent, and staff surveys. Some states are using school climate surveys as part of their federal accountability systems to identify schools for improvement under ESSA. In addition, a number of states are using school climate survey data to inform improvement in identified schools specifically or as part of their broader approaches to continuous school improvement.

In an LPI review of ESSA state plans, *Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap*, we found that in 2018, eight states were using student surveys to measure school climate in their accountability systems. Six of these states were also using survey data to inform their school improvement efforts. Sixteen additional states described how they planned to use strategies for improving school climate in schools identified for support and improvement or as part of a broader statewide effort. For example, six of these states provided technical assistance that includes evidence-based strategies for improving school climate in schools, and nine states were supporting a diagnostic/self-assessment process at the school level to identify areas of improvement as they relate to school climate.¹⁹ A recent scan of state accountability systems by Education Commission of the States found that, as of

2021, seven states currently use a school climate survey as part of the state’s school quality/student success indicator under ESSA.²⁰

Below, we provide examples of how three states are using climate surveys.

Used for Accountability Purposes: Iowa.

Iowa measures school climate through the Iowa Conditions for Learning survey, which asks students in grades 3-12 about their practices and perceptions of school climate in three domains: safety, engagement, and environment. While all public schools with students in grades 3-12 administer the online survey annually each spring, only surveys from students in grades 6-12 are included in schools’ accountability scores. Anonymous, aggregated survey data for all relevant grades (3-12) are available in the state report card’s in-depth view for each school. Data may be used by schools to “identify strengths and weaknesses” and provide a “foundation on which to build an action plan for improving the learning environment for all students.”²¹

To create its school climate measurement tool, the state was able to build on early efforts in surveying students. Since 1999, the Iowa Department of Public Health’s Division of Behavioral Health, in collaboration with the Iowa Departments of Education, Human Services, and Human Rights, has measured school climate for students in grades 6, 8, and 11 through the Iowa Youth Survey. This long-standing survey has been used by state- and community-level policymakers to understand the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of youth across the state and how best to support them.²²

Used for Accountability Purposes: Maryland.

The Maryland School Survey, developed in collaboration with Mathematica and with input from every district, measures the school climate perceptions of all students in grades 5-11 and all educators. Specifically, the survey measures:

- Safety—physical safety, emotional safety, bullying, and substance abuse;
- Community—respect for diversity and participation and engagement;
- Environment—behavioral and academic supports and physical environment; and
- Relationships—between students and between students and staff.²³

Two sets of survey results are reported for each school, one for students and one for educators, with the student portion counting for 70% and the educator portion counting for 30% of the weighted school climate accountability measure. Overall, the school climate indicator makes up 10% of a school’s accountability points and is publicly reported on Maryland’s Report card website.²⁴

Used for Transparency and School Improvement Purposes: California.

California measures school climate through both school discipline data—incorporated into federal accountability—and through a locally-administered school climate survey, which is included as a local indicator (i.e., not used for federal school identification) in the state’s

accountability system. Districts report on and summarize this data on the state’s school dashboard and use this data to inform their local control accountability plans.

The locally-selected survey is administered at least every other year and must be “a valid measure of student perceptions of school safety and connectedness in at least one grade within the grade span (e.g., K–5, 6–8, 9–12).” Districts provide a narrative summary of the administration and analysis of the climate survey on the district’s California School Dashboard webpage and provide an update on the survey results at a public meeting of the local governing board.²⁵ Districts respond in the narrative to the following prompts:

1. **DATA:** Reflect on the key learnings from the survey results and share what the LEA learned.
2. **MEANING:** What do the disaggregated results (*if applicable*) of the survey and other data collection methods reveal about schools in the LEA, such as areas of strength or growth, challenges, and barriers?
3. **USE:** What revisions, decisions, or actions has, or will, the LEA implement in response to the results for continuous improvement purposes? Why? If you have already implemented actions, did you see the results you were seeking?

The State Board of Education requires that LEAs adopt a valid and reliable survey, such as the California Healthy Kids Survey, which is currently used by about two-thirds of districts.²⁶ However, the state has not yet provided a set of recommended or approved survey instruments that can ensure valid and reliable indicators of school climate. The State Board of Education formed a School Climate and Conditions Workgroup consisting of researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to inform the development of the state’s policies around measuring school climate and conditions.²⁷

Next Steps

Washington is exploring options for a statewide approach to assessing school climate, in which the state will take up important questions including whether to mandate a single statewide survey and/or give districts choice in the use of survey and/or questions, who and how often to survey, and how survey results should be used (e.g. for federal accountability, locally for school improvement, for reporting purposes). As the state takes up these critical questions, Washington and its school districts can help schools improve their climate by:

- Building on the use of surveys already being used in many Washington districts and schools. For example, schools in Washington participate in the Healthy Youth Survey, which could be utilized to add additional questions based on the state’s goals.²⁸ In addition, many districts in Washington use Panorama Education surveys to gather information on student perceptions of teaching and learning, culture and climate, and student experiences in the classroom and school.²⁹

- Providing schools with implementation resources and technical assistance as they seek to interpret school climate surveys and develop responses to what they find. For example, Washington can create and share a compilation of valid and reliable survey instruments available to districts and schools. In addition, Washington can offer training in the analysis of the data they collect and the implementation of high-quality programs, professional development, and school organizational changes that support students' development based upon that analysis. State-level support may include technical assistance for program development, widely available professional development, and the provision of state and federal funding to support schools' efforts.³⁰
- Identifying ways to acknowledge success and share best practices of schools that have improved school climate. For example, Washington could organize state and local conferences or build peer learning networks among districts and schools to share strategies about how to collect and utilize school climate data.
- Fostering new or enhancing existing partnerships between local education agencies and community-based organizations. Such partnerships between districts and youth-serving organizations in the community should aim to create or build on existing interventions regarding youth development, parent engagement, and/or mental and behavioral health.³¹

Resources for Implementing Measures of School Climate

- [Encouraging Social and Emotional Learning in the Context of New Accountability](#) (Learning Policy Institute) – This report examines the ways that social and emotional learning and school climate can be included in state accountability and improvement systems under ESSA. The report also outlines measures and tools that can generate data to help educators foster social, emotional, and academic learning.
- [Building a Positive School Climate](#) (Learning Policy Institute) – This brief describes how states can incorporate a school climate indicator for school identification or improvement in their statewide accountability system. It also provides descriptions of how states are using indicators of school climate and provides policy considerations for implementation.
- [School Climate Surveys in State ESSA Plans](#) (FutureEd) – This report also describes how states are incorporating school climate indicators into their state ESSA plans. In addition, it describes the challenges of using surveys, how those surveys can drive school improvement, and provides recommendations to support the use of climate data by policymakers.
- [Monitoring Educational Equity](#) (National Academies Press) – This book puts forward a system of indicators and measures aimed to help policymakers better access and respond to inequity. The indicators and measures are compiled into a framework with recommendations to help policymakers collect and use these data to identify and close opportunity gaps.
- [Toward Better Ways of Measuring School Climate](#) (Phi Delta Kappan) – This article discusses the limitations and current problems with the current set of school climate surveys being used by states. In light of the current limitations, the article walks through the benefits of using a combination of surveys and structured school observations.

Endnotes

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- ¹³ Because this scale is somewhat subjective, some newer surveys have begun framing items as a “forced choice,” in which students need to pick the statement that is the best match to what they believe, or as a “situational judgment,” which provides the student with options on how he or she might respond to a scenario. Oswald, F. L., Schmitt, N., Kim, B. H., Ramsay, L. J., & Gillespie, M. A. (2004). Developing a biodata measure and situational judgment inventory as predictors of college student performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(2), 187–207; Stark, S., et al. (2014). From ABLE to TAPAS: A new generation of personality tests to support military selection and classification decisions. *Military Psychology*, 26(3), 153–164
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