Measuring School Climate:
Let Me Count the Ways

A healthy school climate contributes to effective teaching and learning. These instruments for assessing climate can help schools make informed and meaningful changes for the better.

H. Jerome Freiberg

School climate is an ever-changing factor in the lives of people who work and learn in schools. Much like the air we breathe, school climate is ignored until it becomes foul.

School climate can be a positive influence on the health of the learning environment or a significant barrier to learning. Thus, feedback about school climate can play an important role in school reform and improvement efforts. Without continual and varied sources of feedback, reforms may lose a sense of direction and suffer from a lack of knowledge about school- and classroom-based efforts and about the perceptions of those who are key partners in the learning environment (students, parents, and community). Measuring the influence of change-directed activities on the climate in which teaching and learning occur should be a key factor in improving and sustaining educational excellence (Freiberg & Stein, in press).

The elements that make up school climate are complex, ranging from the quality of interactions in the teachers’ lounge to the noise levels in hallways and cafeterias, from the physical structure of the building to the physical comfort levels (involving such factors as heating, cooling, and lighting) of the individuals and how safe they feel. Even the size of the school and the opportunities for students and teachers to interact in small groups both formally and informally add to or detract from the health of the learning environment. The support staff—cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians, and office staff—add to the multiple dimensions of climate.

No single factor determines a school’s climate. However, the interaction of various school and classroom climate factors can create a fabric of support that enables all members of the school community to teach and learn at optimum levels. Further, making even small changes in schools and classrooms can lead to significant improvements in climate.

There are many ways to measure school climate (see Freiberg, in press). The following account tells how schools used three measuring instruments—student concerns surveys, entrance and exit interviews, and ambient noise checklists. In these schools, measuring school climate—and then acting on the findings—led to significant, healthy changes.
Student Concerns Surveys
Few climate measures tap students as a source of feedback. Yet most 3rd graders have spent more than 5,000 hours in classrooms (preK through 3rd grade), and most of them could tell you if they like or hate school, whether they are learning, and which teachers are caring. In addition to teachers and administrators, the students represent an important base upon which to measure the health of a school.

One area in which the student perspective is critical is the transition from one school level to the next. Moving from elementary school to middle school or from middle school to high school can be an unnecessarily frightening experience for many students, and their perceptions have a direct effect on school climate.

A series of questions (see fig. 1) was developed for students in West Virginia and has since been replicated for thousands of students in several states and other countries. The questions asked elementary students (5th or 6th graders) and middle school students (8th graders) to identify their greatest concerns in moving from their current school to the next level. Figure 2 shows the survey results from school districts in Houston, Chicago, and Norfolk, Virginia. The results represent the responses of 338 5th and 6th graders and 324 8th graders. Both groups of students expressed similar concerns. The findings are also similar to results from other surveys conducted in rural West Virginia and Texas.

After teachers and administrators received the survey results during summer staff development workshops, they developed action plans on the basis of the data. For example, instead of asking students to present before the entire class (the fourth-ranked concern on the survey) on the first day of school, teachers had students introduce themselves in small groups. As students felt more comfortable, they presented before the entire class or smaller groups. Follow-up discussions indicated that both students and teachers believed the strategy was very effective in alleviating this concern.

Schools developed strategies to address a variety of other top-ranked student concerns (for example, failure, keeping up with assignments, and taking tests)—as well as teacher concerns. Teachers helped students with study and test-taking skills during homeroom and content area classes. They gave assignment/project planner books to each student to support better time-management skills, with the goal of reducing the failure rates through better organization and greater responsibility for completing assignments. In one middle school and high school, students made assignment books. In another school, the honor society students and teachers started after-school tutoring sessions. Students could gain extra credit for attending the sessions. The administrative teams in several schools spent time in each homeroom class talking about schoolwide expectations as well as the support that was available to each student. In one school, the administrators showed their own high school yearbook pictures to students as a way to establish rapport. Several principals taught at least one class a week to keep in touch with the realities of instruction.

The advantages of this feedback process are enormous. Schools invest huge amounts of effort and money in teachers, textbooks, equipment, and furnishings. Feedback tells how students are responding to this learning

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environment and its curricular content and whether they are integrating it into their lives. The feedback process also allows students to be citizens rather than tourists in their school (see Freiberg, 1996), as they realize that they have an opportunity to participate in shaping the education process. The cost is very small in relation to the valuable information obtained (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

**Entrance and Exit Interviews**

Entrance and exit interviews are other effective ways to measure school climate from the student’s perspective. A number of school districts have videotaped focus groups of randomly selected students who were entering or graduating from high school. Some high schools also videotaped students who had dropped out. The graduating students responded to four questions:

1. What do you like about your school?
2. What was your most memorable experience in high school?
3. What area would you like to have improved in your school?
4. What is one message you would like to give your teachers?

The students entering from middle school responded to the following questions:

1. What do you like about your current school?
2. What is one concern you have about going to high school?
3. What is something you will do to improve your success in high school?
4. What is one message you would like to give your teachers?

Viewing the videotapes at inservice sessions before the next school year began, teachers were amazed at the “thank yous,” the stories about a teacher or a group of teachers who had made a difference in students’ lives, and the tearful responses of some students. Some students made concrete suggestions about course schedules, homework, and social events in the schools.

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**Figure 1**

**What Students Worry About**

On an answer sheet, fill in the circle that represents the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not worried about this</th>
<th>Hardly worried about this</th>
<th>Worried about this</th>
<th>Very worried about this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Being different from others  
2. Drugs  
3. Failure  
4. Giving a presentation in front of others  
5. Being picked on  
6. Being made fun of  
7. Being sent to the principal  
8. Getting lost  
9. Hard class work  
10. Getting along with other students  
11. Homework assignments  
12. Unkind people  
13. Lockers  
14. Getting on the wrong bus  
15. Lunchroom  
16. Getting to class on time  
17. Keeping up with assignments  
18. Making friends  
19. Not having an adult who listens  
20. Moving from classroom to classroom  
21. Length of class periods  
22. Not knowing what is expected  
23. New rules and routines  
24. Textbooks  
25. New teachers  
26. Size of the building  
27. Taking tests  
28. Club activities  
29. Opportunities for after-school activity  
30. Physical education program
The middle school students liked the smallness of their schools and were concerned about the size of the high schools and getting lost. They wanted their teachers to “be friendly rather than mean.” One student said, “I had problems in middle school, but I want a chance to start over.” In response to the interviews, the teachers of freshman classes developed a series of strategies that focused on students getting to know one another and the faculty in the first days and weeks of school.

The Cafeteria Noise Checklist
The climate of a school can be set by what happens in the common areas, the playground, the hallways—and the infamous cafeteria. Every teacher and student has a story about the cafeteria. As one middle school teacher told me during a meeting on school climate, “Our cafeteria is from hell.” In one elementary school, the teachers said that behavior had improved in the classroom, but every morning after breakfast five fights erupted outside the cafeteria. The teachers wanted better discipline strategies to stop the fights. This was a cafeteria I had to visit.

The cafeteria was like many I have seen over the years. It had folding tables and chairs and seated about 300 students, a majority of whom were eligible for free or reduced breakfast. Students ages 4 through 12 arrived for breakfast continually from 7:00 until 7:30 A.M. They received their breakfast cards from an aide, proceeded to the serving area, and then jostled to find a seat near their friends. What struck me immediately was the excruciatingly high noise levels. The machines in the cafeteria were all running, an aide was using the public address system to tell Billy or Sarah to “find a seat and sit down,” and the cafeteria workers seemed to be playing the 1812 Overture with the stainless steel pots and pans. Students were emptying their trays by banging them inside a metal trash can. Adults were shouting across the room, asking specific students to be quiet. The students talked over this din. Few adults acted as if they were glad the students were there. The tone of the aides and other cafeteria workers was less than positive. I observed no smiles, no “good mornings,” no friendly faces. When I said “good morning” to an older child, he looked at me as if I had called him a bad name. After 30 minutes in the cafeteria, I was ready to fight.

I met with the faculty that afternoon and explained the relationship between noise levels and stress. Often, student behavior is a healthy response to an unhealthy situation. I did not have empirical evidence from this school, but I have observed that many students become aggressive as a result of elevated stress levels from noise. Also, the general lack of caring contact with adults had to be contributing to the fights and other discipline problems. I asked the faculty, “Would you want to have breakfast in your cafeteria?” They responded with laughter and a resounding no. “Then why,” I asked, “would you want your students to eat under these conditions?”

The faculty and administration used what I call a Cafeteria Ambient Noise Checklist (see fig. 3) to identify sources of noise in the cafeteria, including the public address system, the kitchen machinery, and the adults talking to students across the room. They then made changes, some small and some more dramatic. The aides received training in relating positively to children. A teacher greeted the students at the front of the serving line. The cafeteria workers stopped banging pots and pans. A sponge stick to clean the plates replaced banging them in the metal trash cans. Students were assigned regular tables each day and were allowed to talk with any student on either side or directly across from them. This eliminated the cross-table shouting matches. The public address system was placed in mothballs. Adults went to children and spoke directly to them.

The results were dramatic. The cafeteria became a pleasant place to eat, with a noise level comparable to that of a restaurant rather than a raceway. The cafeteria workers were amazed at the

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**FIGURE 2**

Top-Ranked Concerns of Students Surveyed in Chicago, Houston, and Norfolk*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students Entering Middle School</th>
<th>Students Entering High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N = 338</td>
<td>N = 324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried/Very worried</td>
<td>Worried/Very worried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Being sent to the principal</td>
<td>1. Failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.77%</td>
<td>51.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Failure</td>
<td>2. Keeping up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.19%</td>
<td>with assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Drugs</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.53%</td>
<td>2. Taking tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.53%</td>
<td>in front of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Giving a presentation</td>
<td>43.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in front of others</td>
<td>4. Hard class work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.06%</td>
<td>42.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Rankings were determined by the percentages of students who responded with worried or very worried to the items on the Student Concerns Survey.
peacefulness of their work environment. The chief cook said that after 25 years at the school, this was the most pleasant time she had experienced. And, not surprisingly, within two weeks the daily fights had stopped.

An ambient noise checklist also proved effective in a high school in Chicago. When I first visited the school, I noticed the hallways were very noisy, even without any students present. All members of the security staff at the school had walkie-talkies or “squawk boxes.” In the classrooms, I could hear voices from the squawk boxes talking about the latest problem. These devices were clearly distractions, noisy contributors to a climate of anxiety. I shared this observation with the principal. On a return visit, I found quiet hallways and no external distractions from the squawk boxes. The security people had headsets that allowed them to talk and listen without disrupting the learning environment.

The three measures of school climate described here represent just a few of the many instruments available. Taken individually, they may not seem like major factors in the larger context of national standards and school reform. However, they illustrate the importance of including at least some measures of school climate in any educational reform effort. And they show that significant, positive change can come from making even small adjustments in schools and classrooms. Measuring school climate can help us understand what was and what is, so that we can move forward to what could be.

**References**


Author’s note: This article is based on a forthcoming book titled *School Climate: Measuring, Improving and Sustaining Healthy Learning Environments* (Freiberg, in press). The book contains 15 school and classroom climate measures, including the 3 described in this article.

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**FIGURE 3**

*Cafeteria Ambient Noise Checklist*

If you hear...
- Announcements/public address system
- Adults talking to students across the room
- Banging of trays/clattering of silverware
- Machine noise
- Banging of pots and pans in the kitchen

Then...
- Do not use public address system.
- Provide lessons in table manners.
- Organize lunch time (assign tables, limit time, appoint cafeteria managers).
- Create rules with the students.
- Play calm, relaxing music.
- Model the behavior you expect from students.
- Eat lunch with the students once or twice a week.
- Expand the overall lunch times for the school and shorten the actual lunch time of the students. This will allow lines to move faster and students to find seating more easily.
- Make the teacher the cafeteria manager for his or her class for a week, or for however long it takes to establish a good climate. The teacher then trains six students as cafeteria managers.
- Appoint the principal or another authorized person to be always on duty in the cafeteria.
- Allow classes who behave well for a week to go on a picnic.