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## School Climate

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MDE Promoting Fairness Chapter 3 School Climate
School Climate

A critical question revolves around methods and mechanisms for educators to facilitate the positive adjustment of our American Indian and African American students (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). How do educators, administrators, and caregivers use culturally responsive and relevant teaching to create and sustain high expectations for students? How do educators, administrators, and caregivers come to understand, honor, and incorporate the ways in which family culture shapes student’s academic life? What can educators do so that in classrooms the culture and climate reflect the diversity of the community? How can educators and families unite to prepare each student to become a contributing community member?

In The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach: Transforming Schools at Every Level, Muhammad and Hollie (2012) argue that educators must have a “combination of both will and skill to ensure that students have the best opportunities for success in school and in life” (p. 9). Will is defined as a certain attitude, reasoned choice or action. Educators who have the will to affect positive educational reforms typically self-identify as having the desire, commitment, and the will to make choices. These educators have been found not only to increase student achievement, but to also affect organizational reform (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000).

Creating effective schools that are fair to all students requires more than will; it requires specific skill to enact a vision and mission into reality. Teaching is a science and an art that requires knowledge of subjects taught, organizational skills, and a refined set of professional skills involving communication of information to others. Educators and teaching professionals representing specialized areas can tailor their skills to the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As Goddard, et al., (2000) reported, the collective will and skills of educators and staff contribute to the overall school culture, creating either a healthy or toxic school climate.

Pickerel, Evans, Hughes, and Hutchinson (2009) described components of school climate that represent the quality of life in the setting and the character of the school. Healthy schools attend to issues of student safety; quality of teaching and learning opportunities for students; strength of relationships; and the physical environment. It is important to monitor

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2 Muhammad, A., & Hollie, S. (2012). The will to lead, the skill to teach: Transforming schools at every level. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
services within any of these broad domains so that they consistently promote an atmosphere where students of all cultures can be successful. Educators can use their will and skills to lead and transform their school’s climate, not only to reduce the disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students in special education, but also to work collaboratively with parents, community members, and stakeholders to increase student success through culturally relevant instruction.

The Relationship of Climate to a Culturally Responsive Learning Community

In her book *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2010), Geneva Gay states that “culture counts” and “is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is instruction, curriculum, administration or performance assessment” (p. 8). Culture is embedded in all that we do, say, think, and believe, as well as how we teach and learn. Culturally relevant instruction makes sure that the curriculum, instruction, and environment are infused with the cultures of its community membership.

Culturally relevant teaching empowers students, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by infusing culture within their environment (see Footnote 45). Culturally responsive teaching is designed to raise achievement levels, create equitable learning environments, and increase intrinsic motivation (see Footnote 49). Therefore, education must be viewed as a process of human development reflective of the cultural and linguistic framework of our diverse students.

“As we look to the future, we understand how schools are a vehicle for the transmission of culture. Our challenge is to ensure that education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic” (Assembly of First Nations, 2012, p. 68). The fundamental change in our assumptions and approach is to shift our goal from the concept of bringing in culture into education to making sure that education is integrated with culture as a new whole. For example, no longer would it be bringing in isolated cultural events to celebrate a “day” or month, such as Black History Month, but rather the entire culture, climate, environment, curriculum, instruction is integrated into the daily life and fabric of the school/classroom.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer states that “good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness” as they weave connections between themselves and their students on the “loom of the heart” (1997 p. 11). One such story tells of the personal connectedness between a teacher and her students:

Black kids are outspoken, so I spend lots of closet time with them one-on-one. I do not put kids in the hall. I spend time with them at lunchtime and offer pep talks. I figure out something that they do well and commend them regularly. As a black person, I have an

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advantage. I share problems black people have if they don’t get their behavior together. We talk about relationships at home, family, and friends. What I find is that if you care, then kids will perform for you. They meet me one-half or three quarters of the way. My relationship with them is something they are looking for.

What is School Climate?

The topic of school climate has received much attention throughout the United States because of the importance of the environment and actions of educators and administrators in promoting students’ development, learning and achievement. The National School Climate Center defines school climate as “…the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’, and school personnel’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures”.

Educators and administrators collaborate with caregivers to produce an environment that is inclusive, and which contributes to the success of all its participants. The climate of the school addresses factors such as the promotion of positive interactions among students to reduce bullying behavior, support for students to minimize acts of frustration and violence, and inclusivity initiatives.

Benefits of positive school climate:

- Enhances academic achievement
- Reduces school drop-outs
- Increases graduation rates
- Increases students’ appropriate school behaviors.
- Helps students and school staff members feel safe, valued, respected and cared for.
- As a result of a positive school climate, learning increases and teachers and staff members are more satisfied.

An engaging and inclusive school climate is essential for the positive development of learners. All students should be viewed from the perspective of promise and potential. Open communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships between caregivers, students, and staff promote positive learning.

When students, staff and caregivers accept and appreciate the racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, disability-related, language-related, socio-economic status, and gender differences represented within a school district, all students and staff feel welcome and ready to learn and teach. In schools with a positive climate, students from diverse backgrounds and students with disabilities are treated equitably and teachers and parents collaborate to develop the best educational program for each child.

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In a setting with a positive school climate assessment of student needs is conducted by well-trained, knowledgeable, and sensitive professionals who understand the diversity and family issues of students with whom they work.

According to the National School Climate Council, the definition and components of positive school climate include ⁹

- Values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe;
- Members of the school community who are engaged with each other and who respect each other;
- Students, families and educators who work together to develop and contribute to a shared school vision;
- Educators who model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning; and
- Members of the school community who contribute to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment

The National Association of Elementary School Principals outlined three dimensions that define school climate. ¹⁰ These dimensions include physical, social, and academic areas.

The physical dimension of school climate includes:

- Appearances of the school building and its classrooms, aspects of appearance should address recognition of multiple cultures (students see their cultures reflected in art work, signage, books, and materials discussed in the curriculum);
- School size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom;
- Order and organization of classrooms in the school;
- Availability of resources;
- Safety and comfort.

The social dimension of school climate includes:

- Quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers and staff;
- Equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff;
- The management of competition and social comparisons among students;
- Degree to which students, teachers, staff and caregivers contribute to decision-making at the school, where educators advocate for the needs of students and caregivers advocate for the needs of their student, and students learn to advocate for themselves.
- Extent to which student diversity is reflected in diversity among professional staff and administrators.

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The academic dimension of school climate includes:

- Amount and quality of instruction
- Levels of teacher and administrative expectations for student achievement; and
- The quality of monitoring and reporting of student progress to students and parents. Assessment and data collection is used to inform educator practice to help educators reflect on what needs to change in their methodology to benefit students.

Although not included in the definition by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, caregiver input needs to be included in each of the dimensions listed above. As suggested by the Harvard Family Research Project (www.hfrp.org), family engagement should occur across the student’s school experience and across multiple settings or institutions (home, school, and community).

**Framework for Improving School Climate**

Throughout the United States the achievement gap between American Indian and African American students and White students remains. Compared to White students, American Indian students and African American students are behind in high school graduation rates. Additionally, both groups of students have larger incidences of dismissals from school, have larger numbers of absences from school, and are more often placed in special education programs, inappropriately (see data in Tables 2, 3, and Figure 6).

As a result of the concern of achievement gaps between students from diverse backgrounds and their White peers, many educational research organizations have developed methods and procedures to assess the school climate in districts, schools, and classrooms. The National School Climate Center has written school climate standards that can be used in an assessment rubric. These standards are presented as an example of the multidimensional nature of a school climate assessment and can be considered by school districts to be Goal Statements.

According to the National School Climate Center, a non-profit organization, a framework for improving school climate can be organized around five research-based standards (see Footnote 54). The five standards also include indicators and sub-indicators to further define the essential elements under each standard.

**Standard 1. The school community has a vision with a plan for promoting, developing, and sustaining a positive school climate.**

Schools gather and share reliable school climate data from stakeholders including students, staff, and parents/guardians and use evidence based methods for continuous improvement.

School policies and procedures develop and implement instructional improvement goals that are frequently assessed for their effectiveness.
Standard 2. The school community develops policies that promote (a) the development of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills and (b) has a comprehensive system to reduce barriers to learning and teaching.

The school district’s vision and mission statements promote continuing development and sustainability of a comprehensive and cohesive system of learning supports.

Policies and procedures promote the use and monitoring of formal and informal opportunities for students, including recreational and extracurricular activities. Codes of conduct and fair enforcement of rules, mentoring, and informal interactions of students are developed and implemented to ensure learning and teaching that foster mutual respect, caring, pro-social, and responsible behavior.

Policies promote curriculum content, continued monitoring and standards for social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning and are fully integrated into the classroom and school in ways that align with students’ prevailing cultures, circumstances, and languages.

Standard 3. The school community’s needs are identified, prioritized, and supported to (a) promote learning; (b) enhance teaching and learning, (c) reduce barriers to learning and teaching, and (d) sustain an appropriate structure that builds capacity for meeting this standard.

School practices encourage students to express their needs and desires with adults and other peers and provide opportunities for students to participate in developing and implementing school policies and procedures.

School staff members help students maximize their feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to others. Staff are trained to reduce the emphasis on social control and the use of extrinsic motivational strategies to promote positive social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning.

Healthy development and the prevention of negative behaviors are stressed. Staff respond as quickly as possible after the occurrence of a problem to provide for those whose serious, pervasive, and chronic negative problems require more intensive assistance and accommodation.

School and classroom interventions and strategies improve instruction and behavior management for all students. School staff assist students and their families through grade changes and other transitions to increase home and school connectedness, negotiate student and family access to special services, and increase community involvement and support through the use of volunteers and community resources.

Students are encouraged to accept leadership roles that help them increase their commitment to school, which aids in their development.

Continuous professional development for staff members is provided to ensure the implementation of all of these standards.

The policies and procedures for providing effective leadership, improving instruction, supporting appropriate behavior and social development, and overall district and school
government are integrated the school’s daily activities. If instruction is engaging, interesting, developmentally appropriate, respects the student’s culture, behavior management concerns are likely to diminish.

**Standard 4. The school community creates and sustains an inclusive environment welcoming of all members, and members feel safe (socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically).**

School leaders and staff members implement school-wide improvement efforts to welcome and support students, families, school staff members, and community members.

School leaders develop, assess, and evaluate the strategies designed to support people feeling welcomed, supported and safe in their schools and use that data to improve their policies, facilities, staff competencies and accountability. Evaluation is focused on increasing the quality of instruction.

**Standard 5. The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices and support activities that promote social and civic responsibilities with a commitment to social justice.**

Students and staff model culturally responsive behavior. Continuous learning is promoted so that knowledge, awareness, skills and the ability to identify, understand, and respect the unique beliefs, values, customs, languages and traditions of all members of the school community occurs.

Curriculum and instructional practices promote curiosity, inquiry into and celebration of diverse beliefs, customs, languages, and traditions of all members of the school community.

Every student is connected to a caring and responsible adult in the school.

Positive peer relationships are encouraged and students have many opportunities to provide service to others in meaningful ways, both in school and in the community.

Smith, Ma, & Murray (2012) evaluated aspects of school climate between high, mid, and low performing public schools. From their research they isolated dimensions that contributed to the success of students within the settings. The dimensions identified were also examined for the potential to promote and support equity in services to students, and cultural competence among educators and staff. Issues of equity and cultural competence were considered to be factors important to sustaining a culturally responsive school environment.

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11 Smith, L., Ma, X., & Murray, N. (2012). *Beneath the surface: Culture and climate in higher and lower performing schools research brief.* Lexington, KY: School Culture Solutions.
The factors identified by Smith, et al. (2012) included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Leadership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive and efficient organizational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared vision including equity components</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally responsive learning community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical and emotional safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally responsive learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming facilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosocial Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respectful and supportive relationships and communications on five levels involving staff to student, administrator to staff, staff to staff, student to student, and school to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of cultural diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff, family, and student connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic (Teaching and Learning Environment)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High expectations and rigor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally relevant instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culturally relevant support structures, including culturally relevant professional activities for educators and staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity and Cultural Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted and Advanced Education and Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data on Discipline and Suspensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity in Achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the specific indicators from the five areas of cultural leadership, physical environment, psychosocial environment, academic teaching, and equity and cultural competence, the researchers found that high performing schools scored consistently higher across all domains than did mid and low performing schools.
Schools that performed within the high range appeared to attend to all aspects of quality indicators, student support, and staff preparation. Not surprisingly, schools rated as lower performing, appeared to have practices, policies, and attitudes in place that represented the antithesis of a healthy school climate.

This included:

- Deficit beliefs about students,
- Lowered expectations about student attainment,
- Lack of shared responsibility and accountability among staff,
- Less rigorous curriculums,
- Policies across all five dimensions were often inequitable, and
- Disproportionality was found in discipline use and overrepresentation in special education programs.

Overall, the principles set forth by the National School Climate Association, factors suggested by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and research and assessments of schools conducted by Smith, Ma, and Murray (2012) provide an overarching framework to guide local school districts in consideration of their school climate policies. It is possible to develop rubrics to conduct self-studies and identify avenues for change to strengthen services offered by schools, improve equity, and reduce overrepresentation. Each individual educator must address the ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic heritage(s) represented within their settings to increase educational equity for diverse students (Nieto, 1999).\(^\text{12}\)

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**Data on School Success Indicators**

**Graduation, achievement, and drop-out data.** Many districts and schools use data to improve academic learning and outcomes for students. Data about the performance of specific groups within the school setting can provide information about factors related to fairness and inclusivity, which are important school climate factors.

In assessing the status of American Indian and African American students in Minnesota, comparison data was obtained from several perspectives, both within Minnesota as a whole and between Minnesota and other states. Data was obtained from national sources and the surrounding states of Wisconsin, Iowa, South Dakota and North Dakota to illustrate the extent to which African American, American Indian, and White students are successful in our public schools. This data review is useful to establish a baseline of performance and to identify places to direct improvement efforts.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “between 1990 and 2010, the percentage of public school students who were White decreased from 67% to 54%...” while the data from the same period indicates an increase in the number of students of color \(^{13}\) (inclusive of African American students and immigrants). This report also states that Minnesota and 22 other states, primarily in the Midwest and West, will have a 6-20% increase in their school-age population by the year 2022. The growth of non-white students in Minnesota is expected to continue.\(^ {14}\)

\(^{13}\) National Center for Education Statistics (ww.nces.ed.gov/)

\(^{14}\) National Center for Education Statistics (ww.nces.ed.gov/)
Table 1 provides information on the graduation rate in Minnesota for 2011 and 2012 by race. Figures 4–5 provide data on Minnesota’s (a) student population by race/ethnicity and (b) high school graduation rates by race/ethnicity, across Minnesota and four neighboring states. Figure 6 shows high school drop-out rates for the U.S. and for Minnesota. Following these, Figures 7 and 8 show achievement data, in reading and math for grade 8, nationally and in Minnesota.

Table 1.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minnesota Graduation Rates</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>83.8%</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15 Retrieved from http://rc.education.state.mn.us/ (Graduation Rates)
Figure 4 (Above) Minnesota public school student population composition by race/ethnicity 2010-2011 School Year. Data retrieved from Minnesota Department of Education (September, 2012).  

Figure 5 (Below). High school graduation rates for 2011 by state and race/ethnicity (Place cursor over columns for State percentages).

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16 Retrieved from http://rc.education.state.mn.us/ (Demographics)

The percentage of diverse students in the United States and Minnesota is increasing. As is shown in Figures 5 and 6, data on graduation rates consistently reveal lower graduation rates for African American and American Indian students compared to their White peers. African American students have lower graduation rates than students with disabilities. This seems to be true in Minnesota as well as in most of our neighboring States, except North Dakota. In Minnesota, American Indian and African American students have the lowest graduation rates of any racial/ethnic group.

An additional concern for American Indian and African American students in Minnesota is the high drop-out rate for both groups across the nation and in Minnesota, where the drop-out rate for American Indian students surpasses the national rate and is more than twice as high as that for African American students.
Table 2.

High School Dropout Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S. (ages 16-24)</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Dropout Percentage</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Total Dropout Percentage</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is alarming that both nationally and in Minnesota, American Indian students have the largest dropout rate of any racial/ethnic group. The next highest dropout rate includes students with disabilities (in Minnesota) followed by African American students.

Figure 7. Academic achievement in reading, grade 8 (2011). Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders (2011). Data from National Center for Educational Statistics\(^\text{18}\)

Figure 8. Academic achievement in math, grade 8 (2011). Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders. Data from National Center for Educational Statistics\textsuperscript{19}

Nationally and in Minnesota, African American students have the lowest reading achievement scores (grade 8) in reading. In math achievement (grade 8), African American students have the lowest scores, nationally, and one of the lowest scores in Minnesota. American Indian students also score well below their White peers in reading and math. In Minnesota, American Indian students have the lowest math achievement scores of any racial/ethnic student group. This data confirms that there is a very large achievement gap between white students and African American and American Indian students in Minnesota.

School discipline data. Minnesota Statue 121A.40 subdivision 2 defines dismissal from school as “the denial of the current educational program to any pupil, including exclusion, expulsion, and suspension. It does not include removal from class.”\textsuperscript{20} Nationally, approximately 50% of the student population is male and 50% female; however, males make up 74% of students expelled (2012). As shown in Figure 7, in Minnesota, 72% of students expelled are male.


\textsuperscript{20} Retrieved from https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=121A.55
Figure 9. Out-of-school suspensions, exclusions, expulsions in U.S. public schools (2012)\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure9.png}
\end{figure}

The use of expulsions, office disciplinary referrals, and other disciplinary incidents for American Indian and African American students is an area of concern. As demonstrated in this next series of figures, data from the Minnesota Department of Education indicate that American Indian students and African American students are suspended from school or involved in disciplinary procedures at much higher rates than their White peers.

Figure 10. Minnesota expulsions and exclusions (2010-2011).\(^{22}\)

Figure 11. Minnesota disciplinary incidents (2010-2011).\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/StuRight/StuDisc/Expul/

Although African American and Black students comprise approximately 10% of the total student population in Minnesota, next to White students, they have the highest rate of out-of-school suspensions for both males and females. Students receiving special education services follow. Since most discipline incidents involve male students, it can be said that African American males and those receiving special education services are disproportionately involved in discipline incidents.

American Indian students comprise approximately 2.3% of Minnesota’s student population; yet 6% are involved in discipline incidents. Therefore, it can be said that American Indian students are also disproportionately involved in discipline incidents.

Information from our neighboring states of Iowa and Wisconsin reveals similar data.

Figure 12. Iowa discipline data (2010-2011).\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{iowa_discipline_data.png}
\caption{Iowa discipline data (2010-2011).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{24} Retrieved from https://www.educateiowa.gov/article/2014/08/14/2011-annual-condition-education-report-available
Figure 13. Wisconsin class suspensions (2010-2011).  

Figure 14. Wisconsin school expulsions (2010-2011).  

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26 Retrieved from https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/sdpr/spr.action
**Students receiving special education services.** The following section includes data on the numbers and status of American Indian and African American students receiving special education services.

Table 3.

*Total Percentages of U.S. Students Receiving Special Education Services in 9th Grade by Race/Ethnicity and Gender (2009)* \(^{27}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Students</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.

*Minnesota Percentages of Students Receiving Special Education Services by Race/Ethnicity and Disability Category.* \(^{28}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>American Indian</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>2.29%</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
<td>6.88%</td>
<td>9.98%</td>
<td>74.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPL</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
<td>5.80%</td>
<td>7.60%</td>
<td>7.70%</td>
<td>76.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCD</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>4.40%</td>
<td>7.10%</td>
<td>16.50%</td>
<td>68.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLD</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>5.20%</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
<td>62.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBD</td>
<td>6.30%</td>
<td>1.40%</td>
<td>5.10%</td>
<td>23.20%</td>
<td>63.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHD</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
<td>1.90%</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
<td>76.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASD</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
<td>4.90%</td>
<td>4.70%</td>
<td>8.60%</td>
<td>80.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DD</td>
<td>4.10%</td>
<td>4.30%</td>
<td>9.70%</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
<td>69.30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{28}\) Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp
Nationally, American Indian and African American male and female students are overrepresented in special education services. In Minnesota, American Indian students, comprising about 2.3% of the student population, are overrepresented in developmental cognitive delay (DCD), specific learning disabilities (SLD) and emotional or behavioral disorder (E/BD) categories.

African American students, who comprise about 10% of the population, are overrepresented in DCD, SLD and OHD disability categories. They are significantly overrepresented in the E/BD category. White students seem to be overrepresented in the ASD category.

Table 5.

*Minnesota Expulsions and Exclusions of Students with Disabilities by Disability Category (2010-2011)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Students Excluded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/Behavioral Disorder</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Health Disability</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Cognitive Disability</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech or Language Impairment</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted previously students with disabilities at the national and state level have one of the highest rates of discipline incidents. In Minnesota, the majority of these students received special education services from SLD, E/BD and/or OHD programs. The SLD disability category had the highest expulsion and exclusion rate in Minnesota.

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<sup>29</sup> Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSue/StuRight/StuDisc/Expul/](http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSue/StuRight/StuDisc/Expul/)
Table 6.

*Minnesota Postsecondary Outcomes of Special Education Students by Race/Ethnicity (2011-2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Competitive Employment</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
<th>Not Engaged</th>
<th>Other Employment</th>
<th>Other Postsecondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>32.73%</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td><strong>45.45%</strong></td>
<td>5.45%</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>34.38%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>21.88%</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>29.63%</td>
<td>24.87%</td>
<td><strong>31.22%</strong></td>
<td>8.47%</td>
<td>5.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>34.18%</td>
<td>31.14%</td>
<td>18.64%</td>
<td>9.61%</td>
<td>6.43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In analyzing graduation data from Table 6 it appears that American Indian students who have graduated from high school have lower rates of becoming employed and have the lowest rate of attending an institution of higher learning. American Indian students have the highest rate of any other racial/ethnic group for not being engaged after graduation. American Indian students have one of the lower rates of graduation from high school. In Minnesota they have the lowest graduating rate of any racial ethnic group at only 45%. A factor contributing to the low graduation rate of American Indian students is the high rate of dropping out of school. National data as well as Minnesota data shows that American Indian youth have the highest dropout rate of any racial/ethnic group. Nationally, they are at 12.4%, while in Minnesota the dropout rate is 18.3%.  

After graduation, African American students have the lowest rate of competitive employment after high school and have the second highest rate of not being engaged. African American students also have low rates of attending an institution of higher learning.

For both American Indian and African American students, several factors contribute to their high drop out rate or failure to graduate from high school.

These factors include
- Location of the school (rural vs. urban)
- Mobility challenges for these students and their families (frequent moves, different curriculums)
- Family relationships and stressors (see Digging Deeper)
- Stressors associated with poverty
- Cultural competence of school staff involving staff perceptions of families where lack of support for cultural diversity is found.
- District/school staff’s competence providing positive behavior supports
- Instructional strategies, intervention resources, and special education assessment procedures
- Caregiver involvement and connections
- School and community involvement relationships

31 Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp
Challenges to Creating a Healthy School Climate

Approximately 30% of US schools are located in rural areas and 18% of students attend them. Both urban and rural school districts face challenges of student engagement in learning and academic success. Both urban and rural schools include diversity in their student populations but in different ways.

The teaching force remains representative of majority groups. Teacher recruitment and retention of a diverse staff is a concern in both types of schools. Student behavioral concerns, including drug and alcohol abuse, are found in both types of schools. Poverty is found in both rural and urban settings. For diverse students in rural settings stressors may come from lack of culturally specific services such as dining, grooming, or mental health care.

Indicators of positive school climate in both types of schools include

- A warm and caring relationship between teacher and student.
- The establishment of high expectations from teachers about students.
- Students and teachers feel safe in the school with a sense of belonging.
- Consistency and fairness related to consequences (discipline).
- Students have choice built into the learning environment to build self-efficacy.
- Learning is relevant to students’ lives and inclusive of their culture.

Effects of poverty on school success. According to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau, poverty is defined as a family of two adults and two children (under 18 years of age) earning less than $23,021. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2010-2011, 20% of public school students attended a high-poverty school and 24% attended a low-poverty school. High poverty schools are those where more than 75% of the students are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches, and mid-high poverty schools are those where 51-75% of students are eligible. Low poverty schools are defined as those where 25% or fewer are eligible for free or reduced priced lunches and mid-low poverty schools are defined as 26-50% of the students are eligible.

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The Children’s Defense Fund reported that in 2013 in Minnesota, 15.4% of the children were considered poor and 6.4% of the children were living in extreme poverty. These children are more likely to have chronic absenteeism. Many of these children have to work or care for other family members, making it difficult for them to attend school. Many may drop out of school before graduating.

Many, but not all, children experiencing poverty perform below average on math and reading achievement tests. Children of color have the highest rates of poverty in Minnesota. In 2009, Black children were six times more likely to be poor than White children and 40% of American Indian children in Minnesota are poor (see Tables 7 and 8).

Table 7.

*Minnesota Children in Poverty by Race and Ethnicity (2009)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>14%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.

*Minnesota Percentages of Students Living in Poverty by Location (2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many African American families live in larger to medium cities. In Minnesota a significant number of African American families live below the poverty level. Many American Indian families live in rural or semi-rural areas, where the second most high percentage rates of poverty exist.

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**Effects of student mobility on school success.** It is important for students to experience a sense of belonging or community within the context of school. Promoting a sense of belonging and community requires effort on the part of educators. In addition, teachers need to reach out to these caregivers to establish communication and develop a positive working relationship.

High levels of student mobility are associated with

- greater risk for school dropout,
- lower math and reading achievement levels,
- need for greater amounts of remedial education and interventions,
- higher risk for school behavior problems, and
- increased social and psychological challenges.

Repeated moves interrupt the learning process for the student and weaken their peer and school support systems. Students who move frequently feel less safe than peers in stable situations and are not as content in school. Students who move more frequently, especially beyond their third grade year, often experience detrimental effects.  

Mobility may be a significant problem among particular subgroups, including families living below the poverty level, those experiencing homelessness, one-parent families, or families with no fully employed adult. Families living in large urban areas experience greater mobility challenges, particularly families of color. A study conducted by the National Survey of Children’s Health in 2007, found that “...children in poor families made up 43% of the frequent-mover group, although they comprised 18% of the total sample.”

Students who enter school mid-year need extra attention to help them adjust to the school’s routine, and learn missed academic skills. Students who enter a new setting need support in learning new codes of behavior and in developing new social relationships. They will need time and guidance in learning to trust teachers and other school staff members so they feel safe and respected.

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Summary of Data Involving American Indian Students

American Indian youth are overrepresented in special education programs. In Minnesota, where they represent approximately 2% of the student population, they are overrepresented in developmental cognitive disabilities (4%), specific learning disabilities (4%), developmental disabilities (4.1%) and emotional/behavioral disorders (6.3%).

National figures show that American Indian – Alaska native students have the highest percentage rate in special education compared to other racial/ethnic groups; males at 27% and females at 19%. This is significant because American Indian students represent only 1% of the U.S. student population.

Postsecondary information about American Indian youth who have graduated high school reveal they have one of the lowest rates of obtaining competitive employment at 32.7%; the lowest rate in enrolling in higher education programs at 9%; and the highest rate of not being engaged in any program at 45%.

Gilbert, in the Journal of American Indian Education, outlined several risk factors that may be associated with the low school achievement of American Indian youth, (2000). Many of the risk factors are issues that are beyond the control of the student, such as bias in testing, lack of educator training on diversity issues, or use of curriculums that do not involve the culture of the student. Many of the risk factors identified by Gilbert also apply to African American students and are relevant to any discussion of school climate. These risk factors include:

- Stress associated with socioeconomic issues
- Learning style preferences or differences that are not identified by educators
- Curriculums which are not sensitive to culture
- Lack of teacher and administrator training on diversity
- Lack of adequate funding for diversity initiatives
- Loss of student motivation when not connected to school
- Loss of caregiver motivation through conflict with educators
- Lack of understanding by teachers (and school staff members) of cultural differences
- Low student self-concept
- Testing bias

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40 Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp
41 Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Data.jsp
The establishment of a positive school climate and use of periodic measures to assess the maintenance of a positive school climate is suggested as a mechanism to reverse the negative statistics associated with educational outcomes for American Indian students. The expectation should be that each American Indian student can stay in school, graduate, and choose to continue learning after graduation.

Caregivers, students, and educators need to feel a sense of connectedness and trust in the educational process to guide students to a path of success. School staff may need to better understand the unique values, customs and traditions of each tribe represented in their district. Each tribe has its own customs, values, and traditions that may be very different from other tribes.

School staff should understand the Sovereign Nation concept and increase their knowledge of the history, language, stories, songs, and chants of each tribal unit. The Sovereign Nation concept holds that American Indians in Minnesota are a nation and have the right to self-determination.

American Indian youth are first taught that their identity comes from the tribe, not from the term American Indian or Native American. Staff development and education on this issue is needed to accomplish understanding the importance of this sense of identity for American Indian students.

Policies and procedures within a school system should be reviewed to determine support for American Indian students. Each policy should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents, administrators and students, if appropriate. These components include:

- Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
- Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing tribal stories and history in course content)
- Using research-based instructional strategies on recognizing student learning styles
- Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
- Teaching the culture, history, stories, and language of the Tribe to the entire class, when appropriate
- Implementing data-based assessment systems
- Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to improve motivation for learning specific academic material
- Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class
- Using hands-on, visual, and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills
Students and their caregivers are more likely to be receptive to teachers and school staff when a supportive relationship is established with each student and caregiver. Establishing a safe environment in the school and classroom has been attributed to higher gains in educational progress.

Most tribes value harmony and balance, nonverbal communication and listening skills, rather than rapid and angry speech patterns. Activities and demonstrations, including sharing, cooperation, kindness and generosity are usually more appreciated than the accumulation of possessions and status using competition.

American Indian youth are taught the value of noninterference in their daily lives. These students often do not interfere in the struggles with other students unless a tribal member is involved. Therefore the development and implementation of a schoolwide disciplinary system should include a caring social aspect. In most American Indian families, the tribe and family are valued more than the individual.

One of the more difficult concepts that educators who are not culturally competent must learn is the concept of present time. Most tribes value the here and now and not the future or consequences that may occur later. This can be a challenge when discipline systems use positive or negative consequences for a student, which occur at a later time than the event for which the student receives a consequence.

Caregivers from American Indian families can be strong assets to their children’s school and teachers. Establishing a social relationship with caregivers, especially the mother, when present, enables the teacher to better understand the students. A caregiver orientation meeting at the beginning of the school year is one method to establish a trusting relationship.

Caregivers can provide cultural, language, academic, social and recreational information about the student, which may help the teacher better plan an academic program. By inviting caregivers, tribal elders, and other tribal members to the classroom to speak to classes or assist with academics, art lessons and field trips, teachers, students and caregivers are unified.

Caregivers and community members can be involved in choosing new textbooks, curriculum planning, and new teacher orientation workshops. When a caring relationship is established, it is easier for the teacher to help parents learn how to help their children at home with academic tasks and to help their children learn appropriate school behavior.

The school can also function as a community facility by opening the building for tribal events and celebrations. Implementing after school activities for all members of the Tribe, including the development of a student-mentoring program involving tribal elders, can be very successful. When school staff members attend American Indian – Alaska native cultural events, trust develops and relationships grow stronger.

Caregivers can be included as members of district and school committees that have a direct impact on their child’s education. As volunteers in the classroom, caregivers can help the teacher by working with small groups of students, reading stories to small groups as well as presenting their knowledge about tribal customs, language, art and music to entire classrooms or to small groups of students.
The use of trained tribal members as cultural liaisons can be extremely helpful to staff as well as families who need assistance in understanding the various processes and procedures used by individual districts and schools. Trained cultural liaisons have the knowledge of tribal customs, traditions, and language and also understand district and school procedures. Cultural liaisons can facilitate communication between caregivers and educators.

**Summary of Data Involving African American Students**

Nationally, and in Minnesota, the data presented in this chapter shows that African American students are overrepresented in special education programs. In Minnesota, where 10% of the student population is African American, they comprise 23% of our students receiving services under the category of emotional/behavioral disability. African American students are also overrepresented in programs for specific learning disabilities, developmental cognitive disabilities, other health disabilities, and developmental disabilities.

African American students receiving special education services have a lower high school graduation rate. Those students enrolled in specific learning disability and emotional/behavioral disability programs have very high rates of exclusion from school and next to White students (who are in the majority), have the next highest rate of discipline incidents. Since many African American students comprise a disproportionate number of students in SLD and E/BD programs, we can assume that many of the behavioral incidents and school consequences involve these students.

Postsecondary outcome data for special education students discloses that African American youth have the lowest percentage in obtaining competitive employment after high school. They also have lower percentage rates in enrolling in higher education programs and higher rates of not being engaged after high school.

Positive expectations of students should be promoted. Adopting the position that every student is a capable learner and can achieve, both academically and behaviorally to their highest potential, must be intrinsic to every educator and administrator. The presence of poverty, family stressors, and differences among cultural, ethnic or racial backgrounds should not be excuses for a student’s underachievement or reason to fail to hold high expectations for success.

Every staff member in the school building is responsible for every student. This implies the use of more creative methods to individualize instruction and provide additional support for academics, social skills, and self-regulation. Caregiver engagement strategies and programs are essential to support students achieving to their potential. Caregivers must become an integral partner in the school and the district, by being members of all significant curriculum committees, and participating on policy decision committees.

Everyone in the school must feel welcome, safe, respected, and self-confident. Trained cultural liaison staff can have a direct positive impact on students, parents, teachers and administrators. Providing culturally responsive education and pedagogy will help all involved establish trusting relationships that will help students from diverse backgrounds in the learning process.
Having the right mindset means *No Excuses*. Whatever the circumstances, caregivers, educators, and advocates for children are going to find a solution. Through collaboration and collective efficacy everyone shares in contributing to success of students.

**No Excuses in Action**

(Students from a Trailer Park and Reading Scores)

An elementary school in a small, rural, isolated district in a southern state consistently posted the lowest scores on the reading portion of the state-mandated testing year-after-year. A new principal, dismayed by what he observed in this regard, sought to find out what may be contributing to the situation. Through his investigation, he learned the majority of students with low reading scores came from a trailer park that overlooked the school. By digging deeper, the principal discovered the trailer park did not have electricity. Given that the majority of the school year fell during times of the year when sunlight was relatively low, coupled with the fact school did not let out until approximately 4:00, the students who lived in the trailer park were not completing their homework, including independent reading time, because they had no light by which to work.

One solution to address this matter, instituted by the principal, was a no-homework policy that stipulated no work was to be sent home to be completed. Instead, the school was to remain open well into the evening and homework help was made available to all students to allow them to complete work that need to be accomplished outside of school time, as well as to provide opportunities for students to engage in independent reading under plenty of light. Within a year of the implementation of this policy, reading scores started to go up. Within three years, the school’s reading scores were among the highest in the state. By taking a no-excuses approach and rallying the staff to take ownership of each child and by believing they could turn around the situation, academic improvement occurred for a group of children many considered beyond help.

The development of a positive school climate also recognizes the well-being of all teachers and school staff members. Educators, administrators and staff members also need support and encouragement. Teachers should be proud of their teaching skills and remain open to new ideas on instructional and behavioral strategies. School climate is a perception and an attitude about schools and learning. Students, parents, teachers and administrators can work together to enable all students to learn in a warm, caring environment.
In her book *Raising Black Students’ Achievement through Culturally Responsive Teaching*, Johnnie McKinley recounts the practices that led the Seattle School District to narrow the achievement gap between their Black and White students (2010). Similarly, Nieto (2000) described issues related to transforming teacher education.

Components to focus on to reduce achievement gaps

- Constructive teacher attitudes and beliefs that nurture student motivation
- Positive interpersonal relationships that draw on the student-teacher social interactions
- Social activist approaches that address racism, social injustices, and disparate expectations, conditions, and opportunities to learn
- Establishment of a cultural context for learning based on students’ backgrounds
- Effective and culturally responsive instructions and assessment.

**School Climate Survey Samples**

Assessment with appropriate evaluation procedures and development of sound inferences about student needs form the basis of effective programmatic changes. Schools can conduct comprehensive surveys and checklists to determine student, staff, and community perceptions of various aspects of school climate (e.g., building and teacher quality, policies, supports, family engagement), including cultural awareness and knowledge of the staff.

Some examples of existing school climate surveys, which usually require permission to use, are the American School Climate Survey for Students and for Teachers, the ASSC Climate Survey (2004), the School Safety Survey (2002) from PBIS Assessments.org, and the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (2007).

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Some examples of existing school climate surveys, which usually require permission to use, are the American School Climate Survey for Students and for Teachers,\textsuperscript{47} the ASSC Climate Survey (2004),\textsuperscript{48} the School Safety Survey (2002) from PBIS Assessments.org, and the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (2007).\textsuperscript{49}

Information that is useful to collect for assessing school climate includes aggregated and disaggregated data by population on:

- attendance rates
- discipline referrals
- suspensions/expulsions
- tardiness
- students receiving services as gifted
- graduation rates
- college acceptance
- test scores
- staff attendance patterns
- staff turnover

Data on staff attendance patterns and turnover provides further insight into trends and patterns that affect overall school climate, or that might be a product of the school climate. Once teams have initial data, developing systems and policies and utilizing resources to address concerns becomes the next step. Assessment tools can be used to collect data at regular intervals to measure intervention effectiveness and to inform additional school climate modifications.

\textbf{The School Building and Staff}

Efforts to reduce disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students requires a systemic approach. Such an approach involves continuous professional development focused on culturally responsive pedagogy, recognition and support of diverse learning styles, assessment of cultural ways of knowing, and involvement of community in education programs. Resources are assessed, staff attitudes are addressed, and building functional relationships with caregivers is established as a specific strategy used by educators and administrators. The school becomes a community in which all who impact the child, both within and outside the school, work to facilitate the child’s positive adjustment.


A case study of a successful effort was documented in Chicago’s Providence-St. Mel School.\textsuperscript{50} This program demonstrated that directed efforts can lead to positive outcomes for students. Success was determined by high college acceptance and completion rates for African American students. Those involved studied everything from the artifacts in the building, staff behaviors and language, non-instructional periods, to classroom instruction.

The people involved with the school proved to be influential in African American student success. Teachers, the principal, and family members all contributed to the positive environment through engagement with the learning process. Most notably, this school had high expectations for every student, and provided support through relationships, time and material resources, and created a positive atmosphere. The school building itself was reviewed and found to be in good repair, safe, and that resources included access to current technology and resources to support learning.

Baseline assessment may yield feedback on the condition of a building, visual appeal or cues, perceived safety, and access. It may seem obvious that if the building requires intensive updating or repair, school climate may be impacted negatively. Recognizing the limitations of school funding, extensive repairs may not be possible; however, cleanliness and grounds maintenance might be more manageable with existing resources and community buy-in. Access to the building before and after school for culturally meaningful extracurricular activities or tutoring can improve school climate. Culture should be integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning for education to be truly authentic.

While the physical condition and appearance of and within the school building is important, school staff and volunteers affect school climate in a number of ways. Cultural competence in the form of educator and administrator attitudes about students, teaching strategies selected, and learning strategies taught factor into how students perceive their potential success and inclusion in the school community. Understanding and knowledge of one’s own identity is important to stimulate a willingness to learn about and subsequently accept other people’s cultures.

A comprehensive tool for addressing disproportionality is the Checklist for Culturally Responsive Practices in Schools.\textsuperscript{51} As a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) document, its use is intended to reduce overrepresentation of racially, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students in special education. It provides an example of factors educators and administrators can review to assess the impact of cultural factors on a student’s progress through school.

All faculty and staff should complete self-awareness and awareness of others activities, such as reflections on their cultural heritage or assessments of implicit biases. BoySEN (2010)\textsuperscript{52}


defined implicit bias as the unintentional actions and language used that signal a bias around specific cultures or ideas. These implicit biases often result in microaggressions toward other cultures. Microaggressions are statements, behaviors, or attitudes that demean or discriminate against another, frequently from implicit and unconscious biases (Sue et. al, 2007).  

An example of a microaggression would be attempting to welcome someone from another culture by offering a stereotypical food or activity when the person welcomed may or may not like the food or identify with the assumed cultural group. Additional examples of microaggressions specific to any aspect of identity can be found at [http://www.microaggressions.com/](http://www.microaggressions.com/).

One effective and free tool for faculty and staff to assess their implicit bias is found through Harvard’s Project Implicit at [Chapter3SchoolClimate.docx](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/). The free assessment tool can be used to get a glimpse of personal biases that people are unaware they possess. Requiring that school staff and volunteers take several assessments each school year and then write a reflection of their results for group discussions can be helpful. Another example of an assessment tool on attitudes and beliefs is the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) [http://mdbgroup.com/idi-background.html](http://mdbgroup.com/idi-background.html).

Professional development focusing on the cultures of the school is another important step to improve universal school climate. This can be done in a number of ways. Reading groups or book clubs can facilitate greater understanding of a culture, depending on the books chosen for the project. Some books about African American students or American Indian culture are *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*  

*54 African American Students in Urban Schools*,  

*55 and God is Red*,  

respectively. Other topic materials include stories on Freedom Riders and discussion of the impact of slavery.

Cultural liaisons or community leaders can visit the school and provide training on customs, traditions, beliefs, and attitudes of particular groups. Training on sociopolitical or historical contexts for African American or American Indian groups, specifically, is also helpful. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at Ohio State University provides numerous resources around the sociopolitical situation of race, looking at implicit bias and discriminatory practices. [http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/](http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/)

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Systems and Policies

In addition to the physical building and staff/school community cultural competence, systems and policies must be examined and perhaps modified to reflect inclusive practices. Within a congruent framework or system, policies define expectations and consequences. Such policies can relate to feelings and practices around diversity in the school, bullying, discipline, academic standards, and many other aspects of education. It is important for building level leadership teams, representing all groups or professionals and support staff, to review all school policies and determine if they are meeting the needs of the school and of every student.

As of 2013, 22% of Minnesota schools have been involved in systematic training and implementation of schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Education. PBIS programs outline preventive and reactive interventions for the entire school to promote academic and social success for every student. Much like multi-tiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention (RtI), PBIS works with a pyramid idea, signaling universal practices for success as the base of the pyramid.

One main idea behind PBIS is that all faculty and staff adhere to the same practices and expectations for students. However, it should be noted that these frameworks have yet to embed culturally responsive practices. Therefore it is essential that critical elements of culturally responsive teaching, classrooms, and social, emotional, and behavioral supports are included within this broader framework (Gaitan, 2006).

Curriculum factors are another systemic issue or policy that must be examined for representativeness and inclusion of school cultures. Questions can be asked about textbooks, about representation of various cultural groups, and meaningfulness to students. Likewise, learning assessments, such as assignments and tests should be reviewed and adjusted to be developmentally appropriate while continuing to challenge the student to grow and learn.

Teaching strategies and grading practices can be reviewed for fairness and inclusivity of multiple learning styles. Learning opportunities can be examined for equity. Further, one must ask, how are caregivers or guardians involved in the student’s learning? How does the school accommodate work schedules, different family structures, and general needs of families?

School Climate: An Administrator’s Perspective

The National School Climate Center defined school climate as the quality and character of school life. The quality and character of the school is judged on patterns of the experiences of all stakeholders (parents, staff, students, and community representatives). In addition, school climate involves the systems that are in place within the school such as the organizational structure of the school, goals, norms, values, and interpersonal relationships. Given this definition, school climate speaks less to pep assemblies and t-shirt sales, and more to the ethos, or personality of the school.

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School climate cannot be determined based on a school’s location, consumer base, or presuppositions held by students and staff alike. Just as educators and administrators are required to use assessment data to drive instruction, educators and administrators must take the temperature of the school climate to reflect on student, staff, and parent experiences and whether those experiences are positive, not just for some, but for all.

Perhaps more than ever, an administrator’s understanding of the ingredients to a healthy school climate is imperative. School administrators can no longer afford to consider climate as a superfluous activity or a conversation to hold on a staff development day. Rather, school climate must be fostered on a continual basis, as it is the foundation of the school itself.

In 1954, Chief Justice Warren made the following statement when providing his opinion of the historic case, Brown v. the Board of Education:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be available to all on equal terms (347 US 483, 1954).

Years later in 1975, the Supreme Court again provided wisdom when weighing in on Goss v. Lopez. This decision ruled that school-age people are entitled to an education and this entitlement comes with the protection of the law. This access to education was deliberately called “property right for learners” and therefore, protected under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution (419 US 565, 1975). Given the “property right” status of school attendance, the consideration of school climate is vital.

Theoretically, a toxic school climate can unintentionally exclude specific groups of people. An unhealthy school climate may limit student access to education and reduce student achievement. This exclusive school atmosphere and environment may increase the number of referrals and subsequent placement of students in special education programs. As a result, an unhealthy school climate may perpetuate the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and increase the rates of suspension and exclusion. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan stated “Education is the civil rights [issue] of our generation. The undeniable truth is that the everyday education experience for too many students of color violates the principle of equity at the heart of the American promise.”

Research to underscore this point is being collected at an increasing rate. Data within this manual and a report from the Alliance for the Study of School Climate cites that “formally assessing and addressing school climate is an essential component in any school’s effort towards successful, reform, achievement, and making a difference for underprivileged student groups (Shindler, Jones, Williams, Taylor, & Cadenas, p.1). Shindler, et al determined that the climate of a school is more than interpersonal relationships, although supportive interpersonal relationships are a critical component.

These eight dimensions include

- appearance and physical plant
- faculty relations
- student interactions
- leadership/decision making
- discipline environment
- learning environment
- attitude and culture
- school-community relations

Intentional behavior to create and maintain a positive school climate manifests itself into the collective vision matching behavior, collaborative rather than competitive staff relations, and learning experiences that elicit student growth.

If a school’s ultimate goal is student achievement, meaning all students work to reach their individual potential, those who work within the system will be best served with a no excuses for failure approach to meet the needs of students or no excuses for not expecting the best from students. Approaches that raise expectations for student outcomes, particularly groups of students who have experienced disproportionate representation, increases the school’s propensity to become a community of accountability for all participants.

Choosing to improve school conditions means staff reflect on their own biases, stereotypes, and educational practices. Furthermore, educators and school staff must be willing to engage in courageous conversations with their professional peers, caregivers, and the community at large.

In all aspects of our profession, educators must be willing to stay engaged with their students and families, experience discomfort with challenging issues, and speak the truth about topics with which they may be unfamiliar (Singleton and Linton, 2006).

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59 Shindler, J., Jones, A., Williams, A.D., Taylor C., & Cadenas, H. Exploring the School Climate – Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second. Alliance for the Study of School Climate, California State University, Los Angeles www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate

With an approach of “no excuses” for inability to make change, school communities end blame of caregivers, close conversations that center on the futility of a lesson or perceptions about inability to learn, and retire negative assumptions about student motivation for success (Carter, 2000). Although difficult, by working together we can stop insinuations that one’s task cannot be completed based on the inaction of another educator, or because of setting or circumstance. Educators, staff, administrators and caregivers do what is essential and needed to benefit students, rather than what is easy, which is often the case when expectations are lowered.

As administrators, we must be responsive to both student and teacher needs and lend support whenever possible. Inactivity on the part of an administrator can destroy school culture, no matter how healthy the climate. Support for staff may manifest itself in a teacher advisory group created to process challenging situations.

In revisiting Shindler’s study, three subcomponents are defined that contribute to a high functioning school climate, or success psychology. The study cites that when students are able to view learning situations as opportunities to learn and grow, rather than a measure of their overall ability, students enjoy higher levels of academic achievement. Given these learning opportunities, adults within the educational system must be cognizant to avoid further victimization of learners by expecting less than one hundred percent.

A second indicator of success psychology is a student’s feelings of acceptance in a group. The overall feelings of acceptance lead to the probability that one will engage in activities as a part of the school community, therefore increasing self-esteem. Positive self-esteem also has been proven to increase student academic achievement. Promoting a connection for every student with at least one adult in the building is an important accomplishment to promote a welcoming school climate.

Finally, it is agreed that accountability and responsibility are key elements in what the research describes as personal empowerment. This empowerment leads to internal, rather than external motivation, contributing to a student’s appropriate demonstration of power. Again, research supports the correlation between high levels of intrinsic motivation and school achievement (Shindler, et al., p 5).

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character that is the goal of true education” (King, 1947). A healthy school climate will yield opportunities for growth, acceptance within a community, and student empowerment. Working to create a culture of unconditional, positive regard for all stakeholders brings us closer to delivering a free, appropriate public education for all students.

Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) has been designed to raise achievement levels, create equitable learning environments, and increase intrinsic motivation. Therefore, education must be viewed as a process of human development reflective to the cultural and linguistic framework of our diverse students. “Schools are a vehicle for the transmission of culture. Our challenge is to ensure that education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic” (see Footnote 51).

The fundamental change in our assumptions about the value and relevance of cultural understanding is the shift from the concept of bringing culture into education to making sure that education is integrated with culture as a new whole. Culture is not an add-on; it is part of the identity of the students schools serve. For example, no longer would it be offering an isolated cultural event to celebrate a “day” or month, such as Black History Month, but rather that the entire culture, climate, environment, curriculum, instruction is reflective of the culture of diverse groups throughout the school year.

School climate resources. School climate is affected by the type and availability of resources in the school. Resources refer to teaching tools such as textbooks that provide diverse perspectives, supplemental readings that connect with the student’s background or experience, and ready access to modern technologies such as handheld computers, laptop computers, and desktop computers.

Resources can also refer to the human capital within the school. For example, cultural liaisons can be invaluable in helping schools meet the needs of students in the schools. Cultural liaisons may be community leaders, religious officials, or experts in a specific culture. Screening and selecting liaisons must be deliberate and intentional so that relationships are formed with people who will support a positive school climate.

Family engagement and volunteerism positively impacts school climate, too. Further, providing supports to families who are in need promotes academic achievement and upholds the school community overall. As mentioned previously, access to the school building for before and after school activities such as tutoring is important. It builds a sense of community, and can be positive if the culture of the school is considered when creating or improving resources.

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Additionally, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research builds the capacity for school reform by conducting research that identifies what matters for student success and school improvement. http://cesr.uchicago.edu/ Likewise, more information is located at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. http://annenberginstitute.org/research-policy
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