School Climate

Introduction

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, 2006¹). 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 we do so that in classrooms the culture and climate reflect the diversity of the community? How can our systems 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 (2012²) 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, 2000³).

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., (2000⁴) reported, the collective will and skills of educators and staff contribute to the overall school culture, creating either a healthy or toxic school climate.

Cromwell (2002⁵) describes a healthy school culture as one in which educators have a belief in the ability of all students to be successful, whereas a toxic school climate ignores the status and history of students. Educators can use their will and skills to lead and transform their school’s culture to not only reduce the disproportionate representation of American Indians and African American students in Special Education, but 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 (CRT), Geneva Gay (2010) 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 (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally Responsive Teaching is designed to raise achievement levels, create equitable learning environments, and increase intrinsic motivation (McKinley, 2010). Therefore, education must be viewed as a process of human development reflective of 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” (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 the personal story of 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 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 bully behavior, support for students to minimize acts of frustration and violence, and inclusivity initiatives.

Benefits of positive school climate:

1. Enhances academic achievement
2. Reduces school drop-outs
3. Increases graduation rates
4. Increases students’ appropriate school behaviors.
5. 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. (National School Climate Center)

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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7 http://www.schoolclimate.org/
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 8

- 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 9. 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.

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9 Reprinted with permission. Copyright 2007. National Association of Elementary School Principals. All rights reserved.
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.

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[^10] (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 on an inappropriate basis (see data contained in this chapter).

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 will be used 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. The five standards also include additional indicators and sub-indicators to further define the essential elements under each 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.

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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.
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 (d) sustain an appropriate structure that and 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 of social control and the use of extrinsic motivation strategies to promote positive social, emotional, ethical and civic learning.”

Healthy development and the prevention of negative behaviors are stressed. Staff responds 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 assists 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.
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.

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 school environment was culturally responsive.
The factors identified by Smith et al (2012) included:

**Cultural Leadership**

- Supportive and efficient organizational structure
- Shared vision including equity components
- Culturally responsive learning community

**Physical Environment**

- Physical and emotional safety
- Culturally responsive learning environment
- Welcoming facilities

**Psychosocial Environment**

- 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
- Inclusion of cultural diversity
- Staff, family, and student connections

**Academic (Teaching and Learning Environment)**

- High expectations and rigor
- Culturally relevant instruction
- Culturally relevant support structures, including culturally relevant professional activities for educators and staff

**Equity and Cultural Competence**

- Teacher Quality
- Special Education Services
- Gifted and Advanced Education and Opportunities
- Bilingual Education
- Data on Discipline and Suspensions
- Equity in Achievement
Using the specific indicators from the five areas of cultural leadership, physical environment, psychosocial environment, academic teaching, and equity and cultural competence, Smith, Ma, & Murray (2012) found that high performing schools scored consistently higher across all domains than mid and low performing schools.

It appeared that schools that performed within the high range attended to all aspects of quality indicators, student support, and staff preparation. Schools rated as lower performing, on the other hand, had significant themes that were found with their results.

**Themes found with lower performing schools:**

1. Deficit beliefs about students
2. Lowered expectations about student attainment
3. Lack of shared responsibility and accountability among staff
4. Less rigorous curriculums.
5. Policies across all five dimensions measured were often inequitable
6. 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) provides an overarching framework to guide local school districts in consideration of their school climate policy. 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 school or district must address the ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic heritage(s) represented within their settings to increase educational equity for diverse students (Nieto, 1999).

**Bioecological Model: Understanding the Complexity of the Whole Child**

Child development is impacted by both heredity and environment. What educators understand is that heredity does not produce “finished traits” but rather interacts with environmental experience in determining developmental outcomes (Brofenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p. 571). As mothers/fathers/caregivers know, their interaction with the child is connecting the child’s inner traits with the outer experiences in a continually growing, interactive process to encourage and build the child’s capacities.

Caregivers provide the initial essential processes of support and nurturance, and the environment is where the process takes place. Not only is environment the immediate setting, but also in the broader sense includes structures of ethnicity, culture, subculture, social class, communication patterns, and other unique factors. These continual processes are found in caregiver/adult-child and child-child activities, language development, new knowledge development, problem solving,
development of social, emotional, and behavioral skills, and the integration of culturally specific behaviors.

The interaction of the individual with their environment means that each individual’s actual genetic potential for growth may be expanded, given strong environmental processes. Throughout the lives of each person, strong and appropriate environmental support is important. The environment has the capacity to provide positive intervention. Unfortunately, if not attended to, the environment also has the capacity to become a barrier to growth. Caregivers, educators, and community resources are all part of the processes that may positively impact the child’s acquisition of developmental competence (e.g., cognitive skills, learning, social and emotional learning).

The bioecological approach is a model that conveys a child’s inner world (cognitive, emotional, and spiritual) and the child’s outer world (physical, social, behavioral). It is a dynamic process. The ecological research of the Center for Child and Family Well-Being expands upon Brofenbrenner’s model to include examination of the child’s well-being or whole child approach and several external factors and related resources. Of particular note is the inclusion of contemporary issues such as political systems and healthcare concerns.

It is important to know that many representations of a bioecological system are not inclusive of diversity, which should be a standard component of all systems. Each culture will have their unique factors that are not currently represented in any one given representation. The goal is to ensure that education is integrated into culture. The concepts of Brofenbrenner’s Ecological model provide the basis for understanding the interrelationships of factors that influence a student and their impact upon a student’s development and learning. The following representations and links to web sites provide further depictions and information about the Brofenbrenner model.

Figure 1 Center for Child and Family Well-Being (link to title)

Figure 2 The Ecological Perspective of development http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/human.development/ecological.htm (hyperlink)
Consider These Questions to Develop a Bioecological Understanding of a Student

Consider the ecological system of one of your diverse students in your setting.

- What components of the child’s system do you need to learn more about?
- What source(s) might provide the most valid information?
- How can this information help build upon the student’s background information?
- How can this information inform your instruction and understanding?
- How is parent/community involvement supported?

The bioecological model shows the ever-expanding systems of the environment supporting a student. When systems work collaboratively to support the child/student, his or her progress evolves more smoothly\(^\text{16}\). As an example, the systems that support an American Indian student include elders, spiritual beliefs of the family, and support of extended caregivers.

A culturally responsive school team reaches out to all of these potential support systems to provide services to the student. Although the bioecological model emphasizes the value of systems working together, any model must also ensure that education is integrated into a culturally and linguistically appropriate system inclusive of our American Indian and African American students\(^\text{17}\).

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\(^{16}\) Bronfenbrenner, U., The ecological perspective of development, Retrieved from [http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/human.development/ecological.htm](http://faculty.weber.edu/tlday/human.development/ecological.htm)

Data on School Success Indicators: Race and Graduation 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 Caucasian 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 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 (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.

**MN Public School Student Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011**

![Graph showing the distribution of student races and ethnicities in Minnesota public schools from 2010 to 2011.](image)

MN student total population data. Data retrieved from Minnesota Department of Education (September, 2012).
Graduation Rates\textsuperscript{21} (scroll over columns for percentages).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Graduation Rates} & \textbf{Percentages} \\
\hline
\textbf{Minnesota} & (2011) & (2012) \\
\hline
All Students & 77\% & 77.6\% \\
American Indian & 42\% & 45.5\% \\
Asian & 72\% & \\
African American (Black) & 49\% & 51.0\% \\
Caucasian (White) & 84\% & 83.9\% \\
Students with Disabilities & 56\%\textsuperscript{22} & 56.3\%\textsuperscript{23} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{High School Graduation Rates (2011) by State and Race/Ethnicity}
\end{table}


\textsuperscript{23}Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). Data for Parents and Educators. Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp
The percentage of diverse students in the United States and Minnesota is increasing. 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, including students receiving free or reduced meals.
High School Dropout Rates

- Total Dropout Percentage: 7.4%
- American Indian: 12.4%
- African American: 8.0%
- Caucasian: 5.1%24

Minnesota (2012)
- Total Dropout Percentage: 5.1%
- American Indian: 18.3%
- African American (Black): 9.3%
- Caucasian (White): 3.6%
- Special Education: 9.8%25

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.

Achievement Data

**Academic Achievement in Reading, Grade 8:** Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders (2011).

![Academic Achievement in Reading, Grade 8 (2011)](image)

Data from National Center for Educational Statistics

**Academic Achievement in Math, Grade 8** Percentage rates at or above proficiency based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Tests taken by 8th graders (2011).

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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, they 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

Dismissal from School: Percentage Rates

Minnesota Statute 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”. Nationally, approximately 50% of the student population is male and 50% female; however, males make up 74% of students expelled (2012)\(^\text{28}\). In Minnesota, 72% of students expelled are male (2011)\(^\text{29}\).

Out-of School Suspensions, Exclusions, Expulsions

![Out of School Suspensions U.S. 2012](image)

Data from Office of Civil Rights\(^\text{30}\)


\(^{29}\) Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). *Categorical breakdown of expulsions and exclusions 2010-2011 school year.* Data Reports and Analytics. Discipline Data. Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)

Data from the Minnesota Department of Education

Minnesota Expulsions & Exclusions (2010-2011)

Minnesota Disciplinary Incidents (2010-2011)

53% of Discipline Incidents Involved a Student with a Disability
Data from the Minnesota Department of Education

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Discussion of Discipline Data

Although African American and black students comprise approximately 10% of the 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. When analyzing all discipline incidents, Minnesota students with disabilities have the highest rate, followed by White and African American students. Since most discipline incidents involve male students, it can be safe to assume 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 safe to conclude that American Indian students are also disproportionately involved in discipline incidents.

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

**Discipline Data from Neighboring States**

**Iowa Discipline Data (2010-2011)**

- Caucasian: 81.5%
- Hispanic: 8.5%
- African American: 5.1%
- Asian: 2.0%
- American Indian: 0.5%

Wisconsin Statewide (2010-2011)

### Suspensions from class

- **Caucasian**: 2.74%
- **Hispanic**: 6.55%
- **African American**: 26.41%
- **Asian**: 1.61%
- **American Indian**: 9.62%

### Expulsions

- **Caucasian**: 0.07%
- **Hispanic**: 0.15%
- **African American**: 0.60%
- **Asian**: 0.05%
- **American Indian**: 0.16%
Performance Indicators: Students with Disabilities

U.S. Percentages of Students Receiving Special Education Services in 9th Grade by Race/Ethnicity (2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></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>Caucasian</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>

Minnesota Special Education Percentages by Race/Ethnicity and Disability Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></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>
</tbody>
</table>

Nationally, American Indian and African American male and female students are over-represented in special education services. In Minnesota, American Indian students, comprising about 2.3% of the student population, are over-represented in Developmental Cognitive Delay (DCD), Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and Emotional or Behavioral Disability (E/BD) categories.

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

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Information collected from the Minnesota Department of Education Data Center for Parents and Educators. Data calculation was changed in March 2012 to reflect the latest graduation rate calculation requirements of the U.S. Department of Education. Four-year rate takes number of students who begin 9th grade, plus number of students moving into state, minus number of students moving out. Number of graduating students with regular diploma at the end of 12th grade is divided by number of potential graduates and turned into percentage for four-year rate.\(^{34}\)

As seen in the total Minnesota graduation rates above, American Indian students have the lowest graduation rate of any racial/ethnic student group. American Indian students with disabilities also have the lowest graduation rate compared to other racial/ethnic student groups. African American students and receiving special education services also trail in rate of graduation.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Percent</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, Mild/Moderate</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech or Language Impairment</td>
<td>3%(^{35})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted previously students with disabilities at the national and state level had one of the highest rates of discipline incidents. It appears that most of these students from Minnesota 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.**

\(^{34}\) 2011 MARSS. Data retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)

\(^{35}\) 2011 MARSS. Data retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)
Case Example of Managing a Concern: Digging Deeper

Digging deeper to explain why students from backgrounds different than most educators in a building can make a difference. Italics are intentional to emphasize negative statements or attitudes communicated about students, their family, or their background.

An elementary school in a very-affluent neighborhood of a large, Midwestern city comprised of students who were primarily white and middle- to upper-middle class also drew a certain number of students from a social economically distressed area of the city. Students who attended the school from the distressed area of the city were primarily African American. The district was also involved in desegregation program to improve racial balance in students attending the school. Unfortunately, Those kids from that area of the city were often looked upon with suspicion and fear from some staff, administrators, and caregivers of the more affluent students.

A fifth-grade girl from that area was referred for special education testing under the possible category of emotional-behavioral disturbance due to a situation that arose in the classroom. The student did not follow a classroom rule and was administered discipline in the format of the loss of recess for one week. According to the teacher, the student went berserk upon learning of the consequence for her behavior, leading the teacher to make the referral for assessment.

The school psychologist, puzzled as to why the student reacted the way she did, decided to investigate the situation further before proceeding with any form of assessment. Through his research, the school psychologist learned the student was being raised by a single mother who worked the 2:00 p.m.-midnight shift, meaning the girl was responsible for looking after herself and her younger brother after school, including doing the cooking, cleaning, and homework monitoring for both students. Additionally, the girl and her brother were instructed by their mother to go right from the school bus to their apartment, to lock the door, and not to go out for any reason due to the high-level of crime and gun violence in the neighborhood.

Thus, by taking away the girl’s recess, the school took away the only unfettered, worry-free time the girl had to play outside during the day. With this new information, it was decided to apply another form of consequence to deal with the rule infraction and to reinstate the girl’s recess time. By digging deeper and being flexible in their approach to dealing with student discipline, staff became more sensitive to the needs and situations of individual students and stopped judging students based on impressions and biases about who they were and from where they came.
## Minnesota Post-Secondary Outcomes of Special Education Students by Race/Ethnicity

2011-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Competitive Employment</th>
<th>Higher Ed.</th>
<th>Not Engaged</th>
<th>Other Employment</th>
<th>Other Postsecondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amer. 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 the data above, 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 Alaska Native students have the highest rate of any other racial/ethnic group for not being engaged after graduation.**

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, additional factors may account for the elevated figures related to lack of involvement in post-secondary options.

These factors include

1. Location of the school (rural vs. urban)
2. Mobility challenges for these students and their families (frequent moves, different curriculums)
3. Family relationships and stressors (see Digging Deeper)
4. Stressors associated with poverty
5. Cultural competence of school staff (perceptions of support versus non-support)
6. District/school staff’s competence providing positive behavior supports
7. Instructional strategies, intervention resources, and special education assessment procedures
8. Caregiver involvement and connections
9. School and community involvement relationships

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36 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12 Minnesota Post Secondary Survey. Retrieved from [http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp](http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp)
Urban/Rural Schools and Diverse Student Populations

Approximately 30% of US schools are located in rural areas and 18% of students attend them\(^37\). 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**

1. A warm and caring relationship between teacher and student,
2. The establishment of high expectations from teachers about students
3. Students and teachers feeling safe in the school with a sense of belonging
4. Consistency and fairness with consequences (discipline)
5. Students having choice built into the learning environment to build self-efficacy
6. Learning 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\(^38\). 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\(^39\).

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\(^40\). 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 in experiencing poverty perform below average on math and reading achievement tests. Children of color have the highest rates of poverty in Minnesota. In 2009,

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\(^38\) US Census Bureau, 2011. Retrieved from Factors in Dropping Out: Poverty. Save Our Schools. savourschoolsmarch@gmail.com


Black children were six times more likely to be poor than White children and 40% of American Indian children in Minnesota are poor\textsuperscript{41} (see chart below).

**Minnesota Children in Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</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>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

**Effects of Student Mobility on School Success**

High levels of student mobility are associated with:

1. Greater risk for school drop-out
2. Lower math and reading achievement levels,
3. Need for greater amounts of remedial education and interventions
4. Higher risk for school behavior problems
5. 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 third grade, experience detrimental effects\textsuperscript{43}.

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.

Students need 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.

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Murphy, David; Bandy, Tawana; Moore, Kristin, A. (January 2012). *Frequent residential mobility and young children’s well-being.* Trends Child Research Brief, Publication #2012-02. Washington, DC.
Summary of Data Involving American Indian Students

Nationally, the population of American Indians in our country is about 1%\(^{45}\). In Minnesota the American Indian – Alaska Native population is approximately 2.3%\(^{46}\). In our neighboring states 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%\(^{47}\). 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%\(^{48}\) while in Minnesota the dropout rate is 18.3%\(^{49}\).

On academic proficiency tests in reading and math, American Indian students have one of the lower percentages among racial groups on performance results, both nationally\(^{50}\) and in Minnesota. U.S. data discloses that American Indian students have one of the higher rates of out-of-school suspensions\(^{51}\) but in Minnesota and its surrounding states, they have lower percentage rates of expulsions at 2%\(^{52}\) and one of the lowest rates of any disciplinary incidents at 6%\(^{53}\).

American Indian youth are over-represented in special education programs. In Minnesota where they represent approximately 2% of the student population, they are over-represented in Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (4%), Specific Learning Disabilities (4%), Developmental Disabilities (4.1%) and Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (6.3%)\(^{54}\).

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%\(^{55}\). This is significant because American Indian students represent only 1% of the U.S. student population.


\(^{46}\) Minnesota Department of Education. (September, 2012). "Schools, Districts and Teachers at a Glance." Retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Summary.jsp


\(^{49}\) Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). "Data for Parents and Educators." Retrieved from http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp


\(^{52}\) Minnesota Department of Education. (2012). "Dangerous weapons and disciplinary incidents 2010-2011 school year." Retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/Reports.jsp


Post-Secondary 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%\(^{56}\).

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\(^{57}\)). 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.

- Stress associated with socioeconomic issues
- Learning style preferences or differences that are not identified by educators
- Curriculums 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

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 outcomes of education for American Indian students. The expectation should be that each American Indian student can successfully 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.


\(^{57}\) Gilbert, W. Sakiestewa. (Spring 2000). Bridging the gap between high school and college. Journal of American Indian Education
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 school-wide 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 that 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.

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.

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.
Example of Recognizing Cultural Components

Setting the Stage, an example of recognizing cultural components

(By learning about individual differences that may be culturally-based some students bring with them to the school setting, school personnel can become more aware of, sensitive to, and responsive to the needs of all students.)

A third-grade girl in a small-town, rural Midwestern school district was referred for special education assessment under the possible category of emotional-behavioral disturbance due to her seeming inability to enter the school building in the morning and to get settled into her classroom and working within a reasonable amount of time, according to the teacher.

The girl was reported to take about 15-20 minutes from the time she entered to the school to put her belongings away and to get to her desk to work on various items before instruction began. She was observed to make social contact with a number of students and adults in the building. These contacts apparently slowed her ability to get down to the business of schooling. Described as a kind and loving student with a lot of potential, the teacher believed the girl was purposefully disobeying her and that she was unable to take redirection around transitions.

During the initial meeting to discuss the assessment process, the school psychologist wondered aloud as to whether what was actually being observed was a phenomenon described in the literature on American Indian – Alaska Native heritage as setting the stage or nesting.

Some students come from collective cultures, where value is placed on social contact and on relationships over tasks. Students following this value system may find themselves in conflict with the norms of many U.S. schools that tend to be steeped in a cultural way of being that de-emphasizes social connections and that focuses on timeliness and independent work.

Perhaps the student in-question needed to make contact with various people before she could attend to the academic expectations laid out for her. It was decided to postpone the assessment process and to implement an intervention that allowed the student to set the stage in a manner that transitioned her more quickly to the classroom and to the work at-hand. Within two weeks, the intervention proved successful and the special education assessment was scrapped altogether.
Summary of Data Involving African American Students

The Center of Education Statistics states that the percentage of white students in 2010 was 54% compared to 15% of black students in the United States\(^{58}\). In Minnesota, during the 2010-2011 school year, the percentage of white students was 74.3% compared to 10% of black students\(^{59}\).

Nationally academic proficiency tests in reading show that African American students obtain the lowest scores of any racial/ethnic group of students. In Minnesota, African American students have the lowest scores in reading and one of the lowest scores on math proficiency tests. A summary of the discipline data reveals that nationally, African American students, particularly males, have the highest rates of out-of-school suspension. Even though African American students comprise 10% of Minnesota’s student population, they are involved in 41% of all school discipline incidents. Neighboring states also show similar discipline results.

Nationally and in Minnesota, the data presented in this chapter that African American students receiving special education services are over-represented in special education programs. In Minnesota, where 10% of the student population is African American, they comprise 23% of our students receiving Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities services. African American students are also over-represented 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 Disabilities and Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities 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.

Post-Secondary Outcome data of 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. Adapting the position that every student is a capable learner and can achieve, both academically and behaviorally to their highest potential, must be an intrinsic belief of every educator and administrator. The presence of poverty, family stressors, and differences among cultural, ethnic or racial backgrounds are not an excuse for a student’s underachievement or failing to hold high expectations for success. As well, educators understand the ways that their actions impact students.

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.
Making Adjustments: A Case Study Example

Students from a Trailer Park and Reading Scores

*No Excuses* – Whatever the circumstances, we are going to find a solution; *Collective efficacy* – we, as educational professionals, *own* the kiddos we work with and we can and will make a difference in their lives, academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

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 amongst 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. Based upon multiple researchers, the following five key factors provided the focus for the Seattle Schools in reducing the achievement gaps (Banks, et al., 2000; Ladson Billings, 2000; Nieto, 2000).

Components to focus on to reduce Achievement Gaps

1. Constructive teacher attitudes and beliefs that nurture student motivation
2. Positive interpersonal relationships that draw on the student-teacher social interactions
3. Social activist approaches that address racism, social injustices, and disparate expectations, conditions, and opportunities to learn
4. Establishment of a cultural context for learning based on students’ backgrounds
5. 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](#) (2006), [The ASSC Climate Survey](#) (2004), the School Safety Survey (2002) from PBIS Assessments.org and [The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory](#) (2007).

**Useful Data to Collect to Assess School Climate:**

| (1) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on attendance rates |   |
| (2) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on discipline referrals |   |
| (3) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on suspensions/expulsions |   |
| (4) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on tardiness |   |
| (5) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on students receiving services as gifted |   |
| (6) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on graduation rates |   |
| (7) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on college acceptance |   |
| (8) Aggregated and disaggregated data by population on test scores |   |
| (9) Data on staff attendance patterns |   |
| (10) Data on 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.
Efforts to reduce disproportionate representation of American Indian and African American students require a systemic approach. A systemic 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 special 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 Providence-St. Mel school. 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 a finding of the study; it was in good repair, safe, and provided access to current technology and resources to support learning.

Results of baseline assessment may yield feedback on the condition of the 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. Education is integrated into culture to be truly authentic.

While the physical condition and appearance of and within the 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 checklist to address disproportionality is *Culturally Responsive Practices in Schools*. As a Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (WDPI) public document, the purpose is 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) 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/.

One effective and free tool for faculty and staff to assess their implicit bias is found through Project Implicit Project Implicit Association Tool on Social Attitudes. The free website assessment tool can be used to get a glimpse of personal biases that persons 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

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?, African American Students in Urban Schools, and God is Red, respectively. Other topic materials include stories on Freedom Riders and discussion of impact of slavery.

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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 in Columbus, Ohio provides numerous resources around the sociopolitical situation of race, looking at implicit bias and discriminatory practices.

**Systems and Policies**

In addition to the physical building and staff/school community cultural competence, school and district 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 school-wide 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, 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 (Gay, 2010; Nieto, 1999; Concha Delgado-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, 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?
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.

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 versus 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 important role 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 which 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 versus Lopez. The decision borne out of Goss versus Lopez was 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”66.

Research to underscore this point is being collected at an increasing rate. Data within this manual and the report, Closing the Achievement Gap, cites that “formally assessing and addressing school climate as 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.167). To that end, a study entitled, exploring the School Climate—Student Achievement Connection: And Making Sense of Why the First Precedes the Second, measured eight dimensions of climate. Thereby determining that climate of a school is more than interpersonal relationships, although supportive interpersonal relationships are a critical component.

The 8 Dimensions of school climate cited by Shindler, Jones, Williams, Taylor & Cadenas68) are as follows:

(1) appearance and physical plant
(2) faculty relations
(3) student interactions
(4) leadership/decision making
(5) discipline environment
(6) learning environment
(7) attitude and culture
(8) 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 to expect the nothing but the best

67 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
68 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
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 reflecting 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, and experience discomfort with challenging issues and speak the truth about topics they may be unfamiliar with (Singleton and Linton, 200669).

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, 200070). Although difficult, 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 study71, three sub-components 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

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71 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](http://www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate)
supports the correlation between high levels of intrinsic motivation and school achievement (Shindler, p 5).

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 (Assembly of First Nations72). 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” (Assembly of First Nations73).

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.

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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.

Other examples of schools with excellent records of highly successful African American youth here. Additionally, the University of Chicago explores school success for specific groups, and provides many resources. Likewise, more information is located at the Annenberg Institute.

Other Resources


Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project: The State has developed a school climate assessment tool used by most districts to gather information about climate. The tool has promise for utility by other states: http://wordpress.oet.udel.edu/pbs/program-development-and-evaluation/


