

## The Case for Improving School Climate

### The Urgency of Student Needs

- Over three-quarters of adolescents report being bullied (The Bullying Prevention Handbook, 1996), and two-thirds of teens report being verbally or physically assaulted because of factors such as race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation (Harris Interactive, 2005).
- Reported bullying increased by 50% between 1983 and 2002 (Olweus, 2002).
- Almost a quarter of 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders report that bullying interferes with their ability to learn (The Bullying Prevention Handbook, 1996); indeed, bullied youth are more likely to use substances and perform poorly in school (Nansel et al., 2001).
- Nearly two-thirds of those who bully in 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grades will have at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (SDE Report, 2007).
- Bullying is considered a symptom of the larger problem of poor school climate, or the overall learning environment. Poor school climate is associated not only with bullying, but also with other student behavioral problems, a high rate of disciplinary suspensions, poor attendance and disengagement, substance abuse and poor achievement (Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs, 2006).
- Common factors among all youth perpetrators of school shootings have been persistent bullying, and a poor school climate whereby (1) youth are ostracized for not fitting a rigid set of norms and (2) youth who report being bullied do not receive help (Freiberg, 2008).
- One of the major components of positive school climate is connectedness to school, facilitated by connection to positive adult role models. Youth without a connection to at least one caring adult face increased risk of substance use, poor school achievement and dropout, criminal activity, and failure to reach productive adulthood (Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota).
- An increasing number of young people are growing up in chaotic, unstable families and neighborhoods, in relative geographic and emotional isolation, with a single parent who may have less capacity to provide consistent support and encouragement, and without the kind of social networks that connect them to education and legitimate employment (National Guard Youth Challenge). Mentors can help fill this gap for youth, yet in Connecticut, the demand for mentors far exceeds the supply. Further, mentoring programs must meet identified quality standards in order to realize these benefits for youth, and not all programs meet these standards.
- Alcohol remains the top drug of choice among adolescents. Over 40% of Connecticut high-school seniors report heavy drinking in the past month. Youth who use alcohol are more likely than adults to drink dangerously large quantities, especially at the college level, where alcohol use has remained consistently high. More than half of the state's college students report drinking heavily in the past two weeks. Serious consequences of underage drinking include car crashes, injuries, rape, violence and in

some cases, death. Underage drinking contributes to poor academic achievement, and alcohol use at a young age is associated with brain damage and increased risk of alcoholism.

- Youth prescription drug abuse is a growing problem, with one in five teens (over 4 million nationally) admitting they've abused prescription painkillers to get high. Prescription medications are close to replacing marijuana as the traditional "gateway" to illicit drug use, and abuse of opioid painkillers presents a risk of progression to heroin use. Many youth obtain prescription drugs free from family and friends, while adults may be unaware of the potential danger lurking in their own medicine cabinets.

### **What is Positive School Climate, and How Does it Benefit Students?**

"In addition to producing students who are culturally literate, intellectually reflective, and committed to lifelong learning, high-quality education should teach young people to interact in socially skilled and respectful ways; to practice positive, safe, and healthy behaviors; to contribute ethically and responsibly to their peer group, family, school and community; and to possess basic competencies, work habits, and values as a foundation for meaningful employment and engaged citizenship." —Greenberg et al. (2003)

The above description of the educational "ideal" is also a good description of positive school climate, which is considered the "foundation for 21st-century learning" (National School Climate Center et al). The importance of school climate is reflected in both federal and state education policy:

- Federal IDEA law permits and encourages the use of special education funds to develop and implement "coordinated early intervening services" (CEIS) which provide both academic *and* behavioral supports for regular-education students. High responsiveness to the needs of individual students and an emphasis on the whole child are hallmarks of positive school climate.
- The Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) Framework, which outlines Connecticut's recommended implementation of the best practice Response to Intervention (RTI), is designed to more accurately identify students in need of special education services as well as improve education for all regular education students. SRBI/RTI practices are key to promoting positive school climate.
- State anti-bullying legislation passed in May 2008 requires schools to use evidence-based prevention strategies and consider the larger framework of safe school climate in order to address bullying.
- The CT Early Childhood Education Cabinet recognizes that "a positive [school] climate is an indispensable precondition for realizing high achievement and social success" and recommends:
  - Adopting a common statewide annual school climate survey, identifying additional outcome indicators of positive school climate (e.g., school attendance, student connection to caring adults, discipline data) and requiring schools to report survey/indicator data to the State Department of Education annually;
  - Identifying "best practices" for improving school climate and highlighting school successes in implementing these practices; and

- o Integrating school-climate best practices into the improvement plans of schools not making AYP under No Child Left Behind (CT's Accountability for Learning Initiative [CALI], which provides schools not making AYP with free services, already uses school climate as an organizing principle).

Consistent with this federal and state emphasis, positive climate is a useful framework for organizing schools' numerous policies and functions that aim to serve the needs of the whole child. Further, under the school climate "umbrella," school activities are often designed to facilitate "social and emotional learning" (SEL). SEL approaches aim to build self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (Blum, 2005). Well-implemented, evidence-based SEL programming—including prevention and early intervention strategies—can reduce behavior problems and risk behaviors such as substance use while also improving academic achievement (Greenberg et al., 2003). Likewise, students in schools with positive climates are emotionally healthier and more likely to be successful academically (Bulach & Malone, 1994; National School Climate Center et al., 2008).

In fact, it is difficult to explain or predict the academic-performance "half" of a given student without considering his/her social/emotional "half" within the context of school climate. A good example of this "chicken and egg" phenomenon is the literature on student antisocial/violent behavior and academic achievement. Research indicates that antisocial behavior and academic failure reinforce one another, and that both problems become markedly worse within poor school climates (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

One of The Partnership's major climate/SEL initiatives, the Student Assistance Program, has been implemented across the state. A Partnership cost-effectiveness study (2004) demonstrated that schools were able to reduce or eliminate behaviors of concern in 30-40% of student cases, particularly in the area of academic achievement. These schools also reported thousands in cost savings due to reduced need for special education services. Nationally, Student Assistance programs have demonstrated a variety of positive outcomes including improved school attendance and achievement.

Mentoring, another important component of both SEL and positive school climate, is linked with academic achievement (Mentoring Resource Center, 2005). A 2007 evaluation of Connecticut mentoring programs in an urban setting indicated that among mentored youth, 66% had better grades, 45% had better attitudes toward school, and 88% felt they had more options for their future. Nationally, youth in a mentoring relationship are 52% less likely to skip school, 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs, and 27% less likely to begin using alcohol (Public/Private Ventures). Mentoring, defined broadly, also enables student "connectedness," and increased student connectedness to school promotes educational motivation, academic performance, and successful graduation (Blum, 2005). In addition, connectedness is key to promoting youth resiliency, or the ability to "bounce back" from stress and adversity (Blum, McNeely & Rinehart, 2002). The need for mentoring and other connectedness-promoting strategies is reinforced by the fact that nationally, almost a third of youth report not feeling connected to their schools (Blum, McNeely & Rinehart, 2002). Further, accreditation standards for high schools require that staff facilitate for each student a caring, consistent relationship with an adult.

## What Do Schools Need in Order to Promote Positive Climate?

Positive school climate does not happen by accident; instead, it requires commitment of staff; intentional policies, programs and practices; and ongoing maintenance. Based on research findings and identified dimensions of school climate, several school functions emerge as essential to building positive climate, including:

- Helping at-risk students use school and community-based supports to build upon their unique strengths
- Adopting school-wide practices that build character and prevent inappropriate student behavior
- Using diverse and increasingly intensive approaches to support students who struggle academically
- Tracking and analyzing school data (test scores, rule infractions, risk behaviors, climate survey, etc.) to identify needs and trends
- Promoting meaningful youth leadership and actively seeking and supporting parent involvement
- Adopting programs and policies to prevent specific risk behaviors (e.g., substance use) and address student mental health and other concerns; and
- Formally connecting each student to at least one caring adult—either a school staff member or community member (i.e., mentor).

The top obstacles to schools' SEL and climate-improvement efforts are lack of coordination among—and insufficient monitoring of—initiatives and programs. Further, despite the existence of evidence-based programs and practices, many schools do not use them as intended, or do not use them at all (Greenberg et al, 2003). This situation is reflected by a recent Partnership survey (2008) of a small sample of Connecticut schools—the survey indicated that many schools feel overwhelmed by the level of support needed by students, the volume of SEL topics and programs available, and the competing demand of academic accountability. The survey suggested that although schools understand the need for a comprehensive climate improvement strategy and in fact have many key practices (including the key practice of adult-to-youth mentoring) in place at some level, they lack clear quality standards and an evaluation process for these practices. The survey also suggested that school staff would welcome assistance with choosing quality, affordable programs, planning day-to-day implementation (e.g., how to set up appropriate staff teams responsible for facets of school climate) and evaluating programs.

A similar picture of Connecticut schools emerges regarding bullying prevention, based on a study conducted by the University of Hartford and the State Department of Education (LaRocco, Nestler-Rusack & Freiberg, 2007). The study revealed that as of October 2007, only about half of surveyed school districts had put in place all elements of bullying prevention required by state law in place at that time. Subsequent 2008 anti-bullying state law requires even more of schools; it is likely that many districts are currently falling short of the mandate. Further, most surveyed districts reported using a “hodgepodge” of bullying prevention

materials, programs and strategies that tended not to include federally approved model programs. Accordingly, nearly two-thirds of districts reported a need for professional development, and many also expressed interest in curricular materials (LaRocco, Nestler-Rusack & Freiberg, 2007).

### **Recommended Advocacy Activities and Technical Assistance Services to be Provided by The Governor’s Prevention Partnership and its Partners**

- Conduct statewide study (follow-up to LaRocco, Nestler-Rusack & Freiberg, 2007) of schools’ climate-improvement efforts; identify best practices, highlight “model” schools and assess needs for training and technical assistance.
- Develop clear, research-based Connecticut quality standards for (1) assessment of school climate, (2) implementation of climate-improvement strategies (see National School Climate Center white paper) and (3) compliance with 2008 bullying legislation.
- Develop training and technical assistance protocol (including evaluation services) to help schools meet climate-related quality standards and achieve compliance with bullying legislation.
- Conduct statewide baseline study of school- and community-based mentoring programs to determine (1) the current number of mentored youth, (2) the current investment in mentoring, (3) the additional amount of investment required to serve the needs of Connecticut youth, and (4) the benefits of mentoring for youth, including cost savings.
- Build on the success of the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership in promoting quality standards for mentoring programs, including promotion of a research-based standard assessment tool, MentorPro. Develop formal accreditation process for mentoring programs to ensure that they meet quality standards. Promote regional collaboration among mentoring programs, so that expertise is shared and resources are used as efficiently as possible. Support evaluation of mentoring programs.