

Blueprint for Improving School Climate: And Why School Climate is the X Factor - Summary

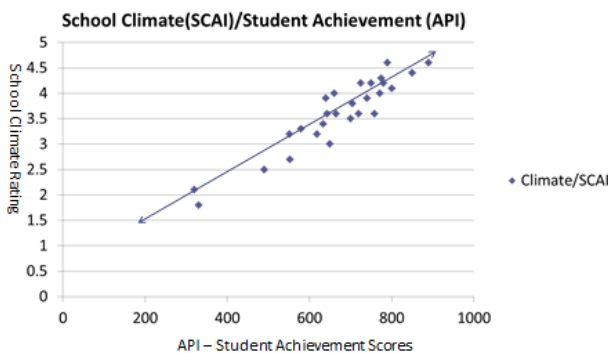
A) rationale/need, B) process for the improvement, and C) what better schools do.

By John Shindler

A: Rationale: Why be concerned with improving school climate?

1. There is almost a perfect correlation (0.7) between school climate measures (ASSC SCAI) and student achievement scores (i.e., API in CA) as well as several other outcomes including mental health factors, bullying levels, future economic success, crime, disciplinary and violence rates. This correlation is even more compelling due to the fact that the ASSC SCAI measures primarily “what people choose to do” in a school. The correlation between SCAI and API can be seen in a very concrete way in the scatter plot diagram below.

School Climate Score (SCAI) by Student Achievement (CA API)



So in other words, it could be said that, for example, in a school “we do” 500 API/2.5 climate or “we do” 800 API/4.0 climate.

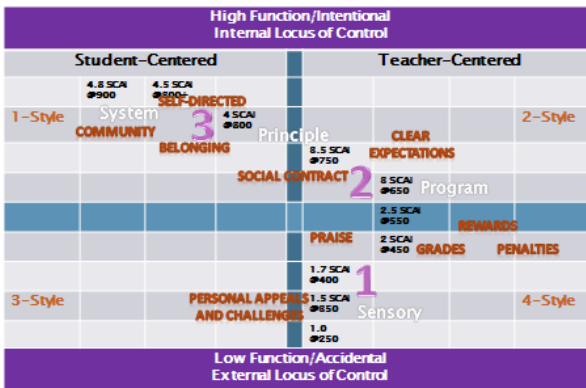
2. The recognition that there is a predictable result from a certain set of practices can be in itself a very powerful realization as well as motivation for change. And can clarify the task of improvement to a significant degree. In fact, the process of self-assessment (taking the SCAI climate assessment instrument as a school and processing it within a climate committee or as a faculty) can be the beginning of substantive growth when there are adequate levels of receptivity and an intention and interest in improvement.
3. School Climate could be considered the causal X factor. It is the cause, and the effect is just about everything that happens both wanted and unwanted within the school – the problems, and the accomplishments. So affect the climate and we will affect outcomes at the school generally. This relationship can be demonstrated very clearly from the large and growing body of research on the topic of school climate. And its null hypothesis can also be demonstrated – i.e., try to solve isolated symptoms of unwanted conditions without addressing climate and it will take a huge amount of effort that will almost always dissipate and be ultimately ineffectual.

B: Process: Things that ALL necessarily need to occur for schools to fundamentally improve their climates

1. Assessment. A high quality school climate assessment process provides both a diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses and a prescription for change. And it provides the ability to compare school to school and each school year to year. We recommend the SCAI as its structure and content provide a unique capability to get at the essential phenomenon in each school and provide users with the richest possible data upon which to act.
2. Understanding of the roadmap to success. The processes that lead to higher levels of function are shown to follow a regular and predictable pattern. All efforts toward improvement will not necessarily manifest in resulting higher levels of function and performance. When those engaged in the process are able to 1) recognize where they are on this theoretical roadmap (see diagram below) and 2) devise improvement

strategies that are consistent with growth along the roadmap, positive results are more likely. The capacity of the members of any school to experience growth will be relative to several factors within that school.

SCAI Classroom Management Ratings, and Corresponding Predicted API Score
Correlations by Specific Teaching Practice (projected S3 schools)



- Committed effort toward solving the “real problems” (rather than symptoms) at the school. Once the school has assessed its current state, it is in the position to clearly envision priority changes that will lead to growth. When the change process is defined by the fundamental and real problems at the school, results are possible. When efforts to change focus on solving only symptoms of those real problems, little long-term change is likely.
- Shared process values. A critical component of any school’s process of moving together toward higher levels of function is to create, communicate and evaluate themselves relative to the operational process values and core principles that they feel are the most important and will lead to the kind of school that they want to see. Values defined by outcomes or vague abstractions will be inherently less effective.
- Support. Helpful to members of a school community in the effort to grow in their individual and collective levels of function will be selected professional development, time to collaborate and share ideas, opportunities to observe high functioning classrooms (in the school or out), ongoing assessment data, and leadership committed to supporting its members and creating a culture of growth and success psychology.

C: What higher performing schools do:

Success psychology (defined by 3 inter-related variables, a) internal vs. external locus of control, b) sense of acceptance and belonging, and c) growth vs. fixed ability orientation). All teaching practices could be divided between those that promote mostly a success psychology and those that promote mostly a failure psychology. In underperforming schools the ratio is commonly under 1-1 and as low as 1-10 or worse. In many high performing schools the ratio is usually never below 4-1 and can be 30-1 or higher.

Practices (which are rather straight forward and simple to explain and implement) that are relatively common in higher performing school but that are almost never present in an underperforming schools – these include: well-orchestrated and systematic inquiry, formal process assessment, systematic use of expectation clarifying strategies, effective cooperative learning, a formal peer-mediation process, etc.

Classroom management. The kinds of classroom management choices that a teacher makes are the single most predictive element in the level of the school’s climate. Usually just listening to how the average teacher at the school talks to his/her students will typically predict both the API and the climate level at the school. See *Transformative Classroom Management* as the model for practices that raise the climate to the optimal.

Relationships within the school. Higher functioning schools are defined by a sense of belonging and community.

Relationships with the community and parent. See research in this area.