



## Alliance for the Study of School Climate

California State University, Los Angeles  
[www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate](http://www.calstatela.edu/schoolclimate)

### **Change from the Inside: Examining K-12 School Reform Using the AASC School Climate Assessment Instrument**

**By John Shindler**

#### **Introduction**

The Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) provides a School Climate Assessment Indicator (SCAI) assessment protocol and support services to assist schools in their process of reform. The following examination of school reform is intended to clarify the nature and demands of the change process as well as to explain the value of the ASSC SCAI and assessment protocol in that process for K-12 schools.

#### **What is Successful School Reform?**

In a meaningful school reform effort, the outcome is a substantive change that addresses real problems and makes the school fundamentally more effective. Successful reform means things really change. For this to happen, the members of the school must embrace new values and new practices. A critical element to the achievement of any successful reform process is that the members of the school undertake the process with a recognition that *everything in the school is related and must be approached systemically*. There are no isolated events. A school is a system; therefore policies and practices in each aspect of the school operation will affect the success of the efforts in the others. Consequently, de-contextualized piecemeal reform will always have limited potential to improve things. Occasionally it results in superficial impact and improves the symptoms of a problem, but most often piecemeal reform will have little if any lasting impact. We might examine any particular school as if it were a body with many parts. Each of the parts must work together. Continuing this analogy, we could say that the school's level of health can be seen in the quality of its climate. Therefore, any school's successful reform process will require an assessment of its climate and an understanding of how its level of improvement will be evidenced in the quality of that climate.

***The ASSC SCAI was constructed with the assumption that each of its eight scales is interrelated. Data obtained from administering the SCAI will reflect this relationship to the school. The AASC SCAI provides a sound means to assess the overall health of the school, and provides a starting point for systemic change.***

## What is a “problem”?

“Problems” are specific to each school, but appear in familiar forms. Problems can be explained theoretically but need to be owned personally. For meaningful change to be possible, the members of a school must recognize the need for change should stem from the recognition of an existing and priority problem condition. However, the basic existence of problems does not mean that those inside the system see them. Moreover, simply because those within a school agree that an existing practice, condition, or policy is undesirable does not mean they feel motivated to do something about it. For a problem to gain importance it needs to be perceived as keeping members of the school from meeting their needs and/or accomplishing their goals. Rarely would an outsider have success convincing those operating within a system of a problem if those inside the system do not experience the issue as a problem.

***The AASC SCAI functions as a mirror to which a school can view itself. Often problems that were not evident reveal themselves in this assessment process. Moreover, the assessment data will typically assist those who examine it to recognize that each of the problems within the school is fundamentally interrelated.***

## The Nature of Change

Changes only occur when a school is ready. They occur when those who can make a difference understand the problems and then decide to take action. Invariably four factors need to be in place for a change to occur:

- 1) an identifiable problem
- 2) a solution to the problem and the resources to utilize that solution
- 3) participation from those who can make a difference
- 4) an opportunity within the system

*Without any one of these four factors present, change rarely occurs.*

When it comes to change, there are countless pathways to failure and only a narrow pathway to potential success. As a result, it is not surprising that most efforts at change fail. This is true in case after case, even while the causes of success or failure are rather predictable and well-documented. The sequence of events in most failure situations follows a common path, as do the events that lead to success.

**Sequence of events in a typical unsuccessful reform effort:** a solution is introduced (often by an outsider or an administrator)--leadership supports the solution/program and sets out to convince the faculty and staff of its value--teachers adopt the new practice to the degree that they are required--real problems are not examined, and values do not change--the new program eventually fades as attention shifts from it, leaving little effect.

**Sequence of events in a typical successful reform effort:** a problem is identified and recognized by the collective--the need for change is made evident, defined and conspicuous, creating a shared value that change is necessary---a collective vision arises among the willing that generates a clear goal for change--leadership for the change comes from those most affected--action is taken--results support the value of the change--change reflects new values and culture--improved practice becomes the norm.  
***Due to its analytic-scale design (i.e., rubric structure, see Appendix A), the AASC SCAI offers personnel within a school both a clear sense of where they are and where they need to go. By design it implies solutions and a vision for a better school.***

## **Why Reforms Typically Fail**

Building-level reform is more likely than large-scale reform to be successful at bringing about meaningful improvement. This is mainly due to the benefits of the smaller scale. However, most building-level efforts toward reform result in little long-term change. Why? First, no matter how collegial the leadership is at the school, most change is initiated from the top down. Typically, the administration identifies the problem and locates a solution, often obtained from an outside source. The result is that there is very little ownership of the solution or recognition that the solution has value. Few of us embrace solutions in whose generation we did not participate. Second, most solutions do not solve the real, foundational problems. They usually deal with symptoms. Therefore, no matter how well the isolated intervention is implemented, the fundamental problems will keep the system resistant to any meaningful change. Third, most reforms lack a vision. Vision requires that those involved are on the same page, with a clear sense of the disease as well as some expertise in the cure. A policy, for example, is not a vision. Fourth, there is often not enough time, energy, resource or leadership necessary to bring about the desired outcome. Vision requires commitment, and commitment requires time and energy.

***The AASC assessment protocol encourages the starting point of the change process to be the mirror of self-examination that the SCAI provides rather than beginning with a solution such as a new program implementation. The climate assessment process is critical to defining the priority needs and creating a vision for how to address those needs. Moreover, the AASC protocol encourages those who are part of the assessment process to be part of the vision-setting process. In most successful reforms, change starts from inside--inside the walls of the school and within the hearts and minds of those who will participate in the effort.***

## **School Climate as the Cornerstone of Successful Reform**

When the school climate improves, there is a corresponding improvement in each area of the school's overall performance. When attention to the climate of the school is neglected, it will limit the ability for a school to improve its performance either in any single area or as an institution as a whole.

***What is school climate?*** School climate has been defined in many ways. At AASC it is defined as "everything that happens at a school manifested in the experience of "the way things are here." The climate is a by-product of all practice, values, cultures and policies. It is the indicator of the health of the school. As mentioned previously, climate reflects the reality that at any school everything is interrelated and affects the school as a whole. Because it is so fundamental to understanding the operations at a school, an examination of climate will be critical to the success of any reform effort.

## **The Only True Change is Change from the Inside**

The most effective efforts at reform will be those that originate and emanate from those inside the institution. Real change is personal, whether for an individual or a group. It involves self examination and an internalized decision that "I/We need to do better." Those doing the work of change must own the changes. This begins with seeing the need for them. Without ownership there is neither understanding nor motivation. Therefore, each part of the change must be grounded in the collective vision. Needs assessment data collection, data analysis, goal setting, planning, leadership and power must all be integrated. This may sound like an abstract principle, but in practice it will be

experienced as very real. For instance, what is your response to a set of goals that you did not have a hand in creating? What is your response to data analysis conclusions that were done by someone else? How do you feel when you know that those who are working toward change are not those with the real power in the school? When there is dis-integrity in the change process, holes are created, and out of those holes leak motivation, understanding, commitment, and trust.

***The AASC Assessment Protocol encourages a series of steps for any change effort large or small. These steps are outlined below. The SCAI encourages these steps by promoting a transparent process. Moreover, items in the instrument can be used throughout the process to promote vision and clarity.***

## **A Step-by-Step Process for Lasting Change--Change from the Inside**

### **Step 1: Determining the Needs--Needs Assessment**

The starting point in an effective change process is an assessment of need. To know where we are going we must know where we currently are. Data-driven decision making requires meaningful data. The process of needs assessment operates to inform, clarify and prove the nature and extent of the problems at the school. Assessment data must be valid and reliable. To achieve validity, a wide range of factors must be assessed. It is possible to do a narrow assessment and conclude that what requires change is a narrow set of problems. It is important to examine whether we are asking the right questions in our needs assessment. Common needs assessment tools are surveys, interviews, focus groups, school records, observations, and community concerns.

***The AASC SCAI works to focus on a wide range of outcomes and aspects of school life (see eight factors). Often after administering the SCAI, schools realize that their most fundamental problems were outside of their awareness. The AASC instrument helps bring a broad-based “mirror” that identifies and quantifies the level of effectiveness in a wide range of areas within the school. The SCAI helps to address both the “real” as well as the “right” problems.***

### **Step 2: Collecting Sound and Meaningful Data**

Data collection within the needs assessment/self-study process has many useful functions. It educates those that take part in it. It makes problems more concrete and real. And it helps build ownership of the problems that are identified. When this process is done by outsiders, or if the school is unclear as to the constructs of the assessments, then they run the risk of obtaining data with little meaning. Sound data could be defined as that which answers the right questions in the most concrete and usable form.

***The AASC SCAI and protocol promote a deep understanding of the realities within the school. The process of assessment therefore becomes as useful to the eventual change effort as the needs assessment data itself. Those involved in the process of understanding and obtaining the data become expert in asking the right questions. If those within the school are not those asking the questions, or do not know what questions to ask or what they are looking for, the assessment process can take on a superficial quality, and the resulting data can lack “soundness.”***

### **Step 3: Identifying what “We” will Agree are Our Problems**

For change to be successful, the school must arrive at a shared set of values. This can take the form of a deep appreciation of the problems or a clear sense of what needs to change, or both. Without shared values, any change process will derail over time, at best becoming a formality that is given lip service but ignored in practice, and at worst will lead to a train wreck of the whole process and produce divisiveness and a resistance to future change.

***The AASC instrument can be used to help the faculty self-assess. When there is a broad self-survey, the results can help the faculty see where they are and where they are not. Throughout the process the faculty and staff can be reminded that as a collective, “we” judged ourselves to be low in Area X. Ultimately, this may not mean that the collective shares a value to change in Area X, but it can initiate conversations that would not likely have transpired with another instrument. A finding that one’s school achieved a low climate score from a yes/no survey will seldom lead to the in-depth item-by-item analysis that is possible with the AASC SCAI.***

### **Step 4: Building a Collective Vision**

For the change process to produce results the collective should share a sense of vision as it moves forward in the process. The collective does not always have to agree, but they do need to be “on the same page.” To make this possible it is helpful in the process of vision creation to adopt a common set of theoretical constructs with which to discuss the problems. For example, a school may decide that instructional quality or classroom discipline is at the root of their problems. They may agree on the problem, but *why* it is a problem may reflect dramatically different perceptions. The vision creation process is where the faculty and staff try to arrive at a common conception of what “best practices” and/or a “better school” look like. Vision requires that the collective possess a clear sense of the problem, shared goals, and a common conception of the roadmap to those goals. This stage in the process is likely to be contentious, but working out the details, the definitions, and the goals are essential to success. Typically, members of the collective tend to like solutions when they align with their own thinking and meet their own needs, and dislike them when they do not agree and/or the solutions do not improve their lives. Continuous communication and keeping all the stakeholders at the table at this stage is critical. And if worst comes to worst, some members of the collective may have to agree that while they may not like the vision, they will commit to giving it a chance. In some cases, this commitment may simply mean refraining from actively resisting the changes. While appealing, sparing the collective from this process will just lead to diminished buy-in later.

At the stage of process, it will be tempting for the vision/steering/leadership entity to move forward boldly once a consensus on key issues has been reached. This is usually the result of an illusory sense of confidence. The problem is, as the process moves into the planning phase while momentum toward producing new policy and practice builds, the number of participants who care and/or understand where the reform process is heading gets smaller, and ownership and commitment are weakened. The vision will likely need to be articulated by a single person or body, but must remain “owned” by the collective throughout. This is accomplished by making the process and goals of the change effort as transparent as possible, using a constant process of listening, articulation, and clarification.

***The AASC SCAI facilitate this vision process in a number of ways. First, the SCAI and the data that it generates will help the collective recognize that all problems in the school are related and therefore solutions need to reflect systemic changes. Second, changing practice entails adopting new attitudes. The SCAI implies “best practice” as both practice and principles. These principles help many teachers and administrators recognize that to achieve school improvement, they are required to rethink one or more of their attitudes. Third, the SCAI can be a valuable tool in the process of connecting the dots between the big picture and the specifics necessary for change. Each sub-scale acts as a rubric for quality in that particular area. Finally, the high quality level of the SCAI implies a concept of a quality school and a pathway for getting there. These levels connote both “things that you will want to start doing” as well as “thing that you will want to reduce or eliminate” at your school. AASC does not encourage or discourage schools from taking on ideas wholesale from the instrument or our school improvement material. We only encourage that faculty and staff at each school see clearly what it will take to get where they want to go, and take on a team-oriented mindset to get there.***

### **Step 5: Operationalizing and Planning**

In an effective reform process, the vision setting stage of the process should overlap into the planning and implementation stages. At some point the vision does need to become operationalized and concrete, so that it can be interpreted and put into action most efficiently. This planning stage can take many forms, but should be done with the broadest level of participation and be led by those who will be most responsible for its implementation. It will be helpful at this point to operationalize what must change, and set it out into a timeline of series of stages. It will be necessary for those participating to educate themselves or be educated in the operational details of the new forms of practices and/or structures. Planning for change is seen traditionally as being done at a single point in time, but in practice it works better if it takes the form of an ongoing process driven by very concrete and specific goals and the collectively shared vision. In other words, it is conceivable that planning could become a perpetual stage. But maintaining trust and faithfulness to the vision will always be necessary. It can work for participants to decide to modify the pathway, but it will be essential that anything that alters the larger vision is processed by the representatives of the collective.

***The AASC SCAI and protocol will be helpful in operationalizing what needs to be changed, as well as identifying the kinds of structures in the school that need to be in place to encourage a sound and efficacious change process (see leadership scale). AASC consultants are available to support the efforts of the members of the school at this stage. Staff development can be useful at this stage, as in many cases teachers may be unfamiliar with some concepts or practices that would help them reach their goals. With or without the support of consultants, the planning process will be more effective if it takes the form of new levels of capacity to produce the desired practices rather than a static stage that comes and goes. Planning, like vision creation, should be ongoing. An ongoing planning system and a process for new idea generation will be a useful goal.***

## **Step 6: Illusion-Free Implementation**

Like the vision and planning stages, implementation should be viewed more as the emergence of a new capacity within the collective than a finite set of activities. But effective implementation will have a few important ingredients. First, clarify the roles of those who have the power and the responsibility. Moreover, power and responsibility should be put in the hands of those closest to the implementation, as much as possible. Second, roles, titles and duties can be useful in promoting accountability, but accountability will be greatest when there is ownership and a way for success to be reported and recognized. Third, developing a logical structure to organize and coordinate efforts will be necessary. Grade levels, departments, professional learning communities, small learning communities, implementation clusters, and/or committees are some of the possible organizational structures. Fourth, stages and benchmarks can be helpful tools to keep members on the same page and working in a coordinated fashion. Fifth, time must be provided for those doing the implementation. The presence or absence of time to discuss, reflect, share results and study can make all the difference between superficial and fundamental change over time. Sixth, keep the process transparent and the vision active. Leaders must make a continuous effort to listen to what is going on and articulate it to those who need to know. Finally, when the members of the school become confident in their capacity to grow and change and feel empowered to do what they think will help them serve the goals and vision of the collective, it will be natural that new goals will replace old ones, and new problems will be identified that take on a higher priority. When the school's capacity for change reaches this level, changing the course of an implementation should not be seen as necessarily straying from the vision, but potential evidence of a higher level of understanding of what needs to happen.

## **Step 7: Assessment and Accountability**

Like the three stages described earlier, the assessment and accountability stage should be ongoing, and should begin as soon as there is something to assess. It may be that the measures used to determine the needs and the initial state of affairs could be useful later in the process to demonstrate effect. If we ask the right questions at the beginning of the process, we should learn that things have changed when we ask them again later, indicating success. If we did not ask the right questions at the start, we will still want to find measures that confirm or disconfirm the effectiveness of our efforts. Evidence of change is motivating. It tells us that our efforts have been worth it, and provides a source of positive recognition.

***The SCAI can be used as a periodic assessment tool. It can act as a rubric and a guide in that it helps raise the sights of the school to high level qualities and the practices that define that level. Therefore, it can be used formally or informally at any point in the process to gauge progress.***

## **Step 8: Nurturing the Institution and Sustaining the Results**

A school that is getting better is not only succeeding at getting better results with students but is becoming a more functional and effective institution in general. For a school to become more effective it needs a more effective culture. The capacities that are generated in a meaningful change process will help empower a school to be more vision-based, integrated, and responsible, and help create structures that will promote function and tap more of the potential of its members. Put simply, the school becomes a self-improving, self-educating entity.

***The AASC SCAI implies a success psychology within its constructs. When a school begins to adopt a success psychology, it learns to unlock student potential as well as the potential of its members individually and collectively. The AASC instrument helps the school recognize that all areas of the school performance are related, so that getting better in any area will help the collective, and neglecting any area of performance will keep the school from growing. Therefore, a level of awareness develops related to how “everyone is in it together,” and the actions and intentions of each member count.***

Appendix A  
**School Climate Assessment System Comparison**

School Climate bears a significant relationship between student achievement, teacher retention and satisfaction, school violence and the ability for schools to sustain reform. While efforts made by schools to assess the quality of their climate appear to be worth the investment in general, systems for assessing and improving school climate and their efficacy vary substantially. The following comparison demonstrates the difference between traditional systems of climate assessment and those developed by the Western Alliance for School Climate.

**Traditional forms of school climate assessment are typically characterized by:**

- A process controlled largely by outsiders
- An opaque definition of school climate
- Prescriptions for change that stem from assumptions made by outsiders
- An objective survey type inventory (as seen below)

**Objective-Type Survey Item Example:**

Teachers at my school help us children with our school problems.		
Agree	Not Sure	Disagree

**The Alliance for School Climate Assessment System is characterized by:**

- A process driven by the school’s own steering/vision team
- A transparent definition of school climate
- Prescriptions for change generated by the participants who work in the school.
- An analytic-scale based instrument (example item shown below)

**Analytic Trait Scale Instrument Item Example:**

<b>High</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Low</b>
Teacher-student interactions could be typically described as supportive and respectful.	Teacher-student interactions could be typically described as fair but teacher-dominated.	Teacher-student interactions are mostly teacher-dominated and reactive.

### Comparison Research:

In a study of the efficacy of the AASC system in an urban setting (Shindler, Taylor, Jones & Cadenas, 2003), significant advantages for a participant-driven, analytic-scale system were observed. The analytic-scale (i.e., rubric) instrument demonstrated greater soundness (i.e., validity, reliability, efficiency and benefit) than traditional inventories. The analytic instrument also proved more practical because it provided users with an educational tool for understanding climate, a venue for constructing a meaningful definition for “quality school climate” aligned with the school’s goals, and language that helped participants move from the diagnosis of problems to prescriptions for the cures. Traditional surveys are not designed to provide these benefits. The use of an analytic instrument in the hands of committed faculty and staff creates both ownership and transparency to the assessment process. These findings confirmed previous research that suggests meaningful reform is not possible without both of these conditions being present. Moreover, the AASC system demonstrated the capacity to provide continuity to school personnel as they attempted to move from assessment to planning to action without losing momentum or vision.

### Appendix B

#### AASC School Climate Dimensions/Analytic Instrument Sub-Scales

<b>Sub-Scale</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Physical Appearance</b>	Examines the relationship between the physical characteristics and environment of a school and the climate that it promotes. This dimension includes the degree to which intentional efforts have been made related to the consideration of the perceptions of outsiders and expectations and treatment of custodial staff.
<b>Faculty Relations</b>	Examines the relationship between how faculty members relate to one another and the effect on the climate of the school. This dimension includes the degree to which collaboration, respect, capacity to interact, and a sense of collective purpose exist among the faculty. It also includes the implicit and explicit expectations among faculty as to how decisions are made and duties are delegated and performed.
<b>Student Interactions</b>	Examines the relationships among student expectations, peer interactions, and their place in the school and the climate that exists. This dimension includes the degree to which students interactions are governed by intention vs. accidental qualities.
<b>Leadership and Decision-Making</b>	Examines the relationships among decision-making mechanisms, how administrative authority is manifested and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which the collective possess a shared sense of values and an operational vision. It also explores the ways in which the quality of leadership affects school life.
<b>Discipline and Management Environment</b>	Examines the relationship between the management and discipline approaches used within the school and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which management strategies promote higher levels of responsibility and motivation. It also examines teacher-student interactions as a source of management and motivation.
<b>Learning, Instruction and Assessment</b>	Examines the relationships among the instructional strategies and the assessment methods used in the school and the climate that is created. Instruction is explored as it relates to its level of engagement, student empowerment and authenticity. Higher quality instruction and assessment methods are contrasted to less effective methods by the degree to which they promote a psychology of success rather than a psychology of failure.
<b>Attitude and Culture</b>	Examines the pervasive attitudes and cultures that operate within the school and their relationship to the climate. This dimension explores the degree to which social and/or communal bonds are present within the school, the attitudes that the members of the school possess, and the level of pride and ownership they feel. It includes the degree to which efforts in this area are made intentionally or left to chance.
<b>Community Relations</b>	Examines the relationship between the way that the school is perceived externally and its climate. This dimension includes the degree to which the school is welcoming, takes advantage of the resources in the local community--including parents--and acts intentionally as a center of community life.