



# Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC)

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## How to Use the ASSC SCAI Effectively in Large and Small Scale Administrations: Including Two Exemplary Case Studies of Effective Implementations

This paper has been prepared by the Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC) to explain how best to use the ASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) surveys to achieve optimal improvement outcomes in school climate and student learning. Two case examples that represent effective efforts to implement the SCAI for large-scale assessment and improvement efforts are examined in detail. Why these two projects achieved success is explored and the requisite conditions for the success of any large or small-scale school climate assessment process intended to lead to school improvement is offered.

### The content of this paper includes the following components:

- I. Conditions requisite for using the SCAI and SCAI data to achieve optimal school evaluation and improvement results.
- II. Two exemplary case studies of assessment/improvement efforts in which the necessary steps were followed and the requisite conditions for successful use of the SCAI assessment were met, what they did and why it mattered.
- III. Implications at each stage of the process for leaders of state or other broad-level school improvement projects using the SCAI.

*Note: We at ASSC do not require those who elect to use our surveys or services to adhere to a fixed implementation protocol. We encourage wise and thoughtful use, and trust that schools, districts and agencies that choose to use the SCAI have the best of intentions and qualified personnel to carry out their efforts. We provide resources such as this document so that those engaging in the process will have recommendations for what it takes to go from data collection to tangible improvement. However, those who use our surveys represent broad ranges of scope, purpose, project coherence, and initial school performance levels. What we can say with confidence is that in those instances where efforts included more of the qualities and conditions that we encourage, the better the ultimate results tended to be.*

### I. Requisite Conditions for Successful School Improvement When Using the SCAI

The following eight conditions are necessary for the SCAI survey and improvement process to achieve maximal results. Each condition is examined here briefly and will be exemplified and discussed in the successful case studies described later in this document.

1. **Leader Commitment** – Successful efforts using SCAI survey data, whether large or small, require vision, planning and coordination. The leader and leadership team must be at least somewhat mindful of the capability and intent of the SCAI and the ASSC roadmap concept and they must be committed to using the process to encourage real change.
2. **Intention to Use Data and Survey Process for Improvement** – To result in change, the effort must be designed with change as the goal. Simply gathering survey results data will not likely lead to real improvement. No matter how telling or compelling the results, without an intention for using them to move up the ASSC roadmap (See Appendix E) results will be limited - usually taking the form of data used for tangential purposes or not used at all.

3. **Building Level Leadership/Climate/Vision Team** – For successful results (i.e., things at the school change for the better), both a visionary leader and a leadership team (also could be called the school climate team, or vision team, or site council, etc.) are required. This leadership team must include change-motivated teachers. Inclusion of students and staff is a plus as well. Those closest to the implementation and practical application must be involved. And there is a benefit to having the same team both examine the survey results data and make the plans for improvement.
4. **Focus on Solving Real Problems, not Just Symptoms** – The guiding mindset during the process should be to investigate the real problems at the school rather than just the symptoms. The SCAI will encourage the discovery of real problems. The primary focus of the solutions generated should be fundamental improvements in practice or changes in policy that will address real problems.
5. **Awareness of the Improvement Roadmap and the Concept of “Success Psychology”** – For an individual school to seek improvement, it must have a clear sense of what constitutes “better.” The ASSC roadmap offers a conceptual framework for understanding what “better” practice implies, and what would constitute an “improved” condition. One could ask – “If a school does not know where it is currently, or where it is going, then what is guiding its decisions for how to interpret its data and how to conceptualize improved practices?” The factors in the concept of a “psychology of success” (POS) help the school better classify what kinds of practices could be defined as effective and useful and which would be defined as those that are harmful or limiting, and should therefore be discarded.
6. **System for Processing Data** – Each individual school, or school within a broad-scale effort by a state, agency or district, needs to be given an efficient system for processing the SCAI survey data that has been collected. The system should include a broad assessment and contextualization of the school based on the data, an examination of each item and dimension, a way to prioritize the most important areas of attention, a method for creating goals, action steps and the conception of what an improved set of practices would look like, and accountability.
7. **Accountability for Improvement** – The successful process will require individuals within the effort at each building who are actively engaged in encouraging its success to be conspicuously identifiable by everyone else in the building as project leaders. This should include the SCAI administrator and the members of the climate or vision team. Effective accountability requires that improvement is a top priority at the school and that the school’s other initiatives are integrated into it.
8. **Use of the Effectiveness Roadmap Logic in On-going Decision Making and PD** – The best way to encourage results during the process will be to ask the following questions on an ongoing basis: “What will it take to move us up the pathway” on the effectiveness roadmap and “If we do X will it encourage our movement up the pathway?” Moving up the roadmap implies improvement in all areas; however, the inverse is not true: not all programs, initiatives, policies or practice reforms will lead to movement up the roadmap. Gaining others’ trust and perseverance requires a sense that “our collective efforts” will achieve results, ultimately get us somewhere better and be an efficient use of our time.

## II. Necessary Steps in a Successful Process, With Two Case Examples of Successful Efforts

ASSC recommends that the steps outlined below be followed to encourage the most successful results from any assessment effort. The order of the steps is less critical than the fact that each is honored.

- A. Pre-Planning
- B. Survey Administration
- C. Examination by leadership team
- D. Data Put into Context and School-wide Analysis
- E. Envision Goals and better practices
- F. Support teachers and staff on changes
- G. Post-Assessment after each year and recycle the process (steps C-G)

For each of the steps above, we will examine the efforts at two exemplars: PISD and Seneca, and study what each entity did at each step. For each step, we will examine how the necessary conditions were met along the journey for each project, and point out where they are often missing in less successful efforts.

In addition, this paper will offer recommendations for State-level use or other broad-based efforts and identify the key conditions and some of the practical issues that are important to consider at each stage of a broad-based process.

### **Successful Case Examples:**

The two cases below represent assessment and improvement efforts that effectively embodied the necessary conditions for success outlined above. In each case, all eight conditions were adequately present. As a result, both of these broad-scale assessment and implementation efforts attained very positive results.

**Exemplar A: PISD** - Pflugerville Independent School District (PISD) is located near Austin, TX and is comprised of a broad demographic and ethnic mix of students. The district includes 29 schools total - 19 elementary and 10 secondary. In 2012 the district chose to begin administering the SCAI. The overall effort was led by a visionary Assistant Superintendent, Lori Einfalt, and was embraced by the individual building administrators and site leadership teams.

**Exemplar B: Seneca** - In 2014, the Seneca Family of Schools Agency was one of 25 awardees out of 618 applicants for the Investment in Innovations (i3) federal grant. The initiative serves schools in the Oakland and San Francisco, CA regions. The initiative is being led by visionary leader Jenny Ventura, who wrote the grant and is also coordinating the assessment efforts at each school. The initiative is focused on providing Special Education services to the schools being served and the SCAI is the primary one of three instruments that are being used in the project.

### **A: Pre-Planning Stage:**

Before administration, those undertaking the SCAI survey process must prepare themselves for a successful effort. This includes identifying which groups they are intending to survey – teachers, students, and/or parents. Then for each group, examining which SCAI items in that version of the survey may need to be omitted and/or added and which SCAI items should be used as demographic data classifiers (e.g., grade, gender, ethnicity, years of experience teaching, etc.). A decision also needs to be made regarding optional versions in Spanish or another language for students and parents who would be best served with SCAI versions in their first language.

ASSC provides an online system for the SCAI instruments. All participant groups can take the survey online using this system. ASSC can also provide a license for any state, district or agency to put the SCAI items onto its own system. In the exemplars below, PISD used the ASSC QuestionPro system and Seneca elected to house the SCAI on its own system.

In addition, a team for processing the data should be tapped or assembled. Using an existing site-leadership team is recommended. The earlier this team can engage in the process the better.

## ***PISD***

PISD elected to use all items in the SCAI instruments. It elected to survey teachers and students in all of their elementary and secondary schools, and made surveys available to parents as well. PISD also worked with ASSC to create Spanish language versions of the student and parent surveys that were suited to their region in Texas.

The intent of the effort was to see schools move their school climate and student achievement levels up the ASSC school effectiveness roadmap. This goal was stated to the personnel at all the schools. ASSC consultants conducted a one day training on the roadmap and the critical factors necessary to move up in all eight ASSC dimensions – physical environment, teacher relations, student interactions, leadership, discipline and management, teaching and assessment, attitude and culture, and parent and community. Leadership teams from each school attended.

## ***Seneca***

Seneca chose to survey teachers, students and parents as well. They used all SCAI items, and worked with ASSC to create items for a ninth dimension related to Special Education Integration (since this was the primary focus of their grant). They chose to administer the survey in house since they possess a high level of technological capability and support staff. Leadership teams were systematically created at each site and engaged in a series of trainings.

## ***Implications for State and Broad-based Assessment and Implementation***

A successful broad-based assessment effort that is intended to lead to improved schools begins in the pre-planning. What we have seen from recent broad based efforts that have focused on school climate is that a strong intent across each stage of the process is necessary for success. Leaders of the effort must be prepared for some participants in the system being resistant to meaningful change. Any survey that evaluates a range of practices –from worse to better - will produce resistance. Each level of the organizational chain will need to be committed enough to using an instrument like the SCAI that challenges mediocrity to sell it to the level below and weather complaints from those who would rather not improve. It is a near certainty that change resistant ineffective teachers will complain to their administrator and ineffective administrators whose leadership is scored low will resist as well. So, too often the remedy to discomfort is to find an alternate survey that does not reveal the bad practices at the school, but instead shifts the focus to blaming the students. The result is that those in the school publicly justify the school's unsatisfactory climate ratings by pointing to whom their students are and avoid any need to examine their own practices. The SCAI includes the experience of the students, but it puts a lot of attention on the practices of the teachers, staff and leaders at the school. For improvement to occur, it is heavily the attitudes, expectations and practices of the latter that need to change.

An additional aspect of the early planning is to encourage a process that is both meaningful and seeks integrity between the results of the data and eventual improvement planning. This will require a working definition of "better" or "improvement" that guides the efforts. ASSC recommends the growth roadmap. With no such definition we are asking schools to improve in an entirely relativistic manner: any solution can be justified as supporting improvement. A presentation to school leadership teams in which a definition of what "better" looks like in conceptual and concrete terms is vital to include from the beginning of the process.

## **B: Survey Administration**

There are ways to facilitate the survey administration process that will obtain sound data. Specifically, we recommend having participants take the surveys at school. For teachers and staff that is best done in a faculty meeting. For students, it is best done having all class sections from one required subject area complete the survey. For parents, having computers and paper versions of the survey available when they visit can produce a better response rate than an email link alone. But we recommend both.

### ***PISD and Seneca***

In each effort, all teachers and staff were surveyed in each of their schools during faculty meetings. The vast majority of students from each school was also surveyed. Both efforts had students identify their grade level, gender, and ethnicity. Both efforts had teachers identify which grade level they most often taught. Each surveyed in the spring at a point in time where there were not too many other surveys being conducted and/or testing occurring. Both exemplars obtained solid samples for all groups.

### ***Implications for State and Broad-based Assessment and Implementation***

Each building should have a point person who understands the data collection process and is able to ensure that a reliable sample of data is collected.

## **C. Examining Data by Leadership Team, D. Putting Data into Context, E. Envisioning Goals and Better Practices.**

The primary consideration at these stages of the process is that a team is in place and that the team has the time and sense of responsibility to do its job. We recommend that the team has also been trained in how to understand the data and the questions to ask as they look to interpret it. The team members need to feel confident that they have been given the power to do what they think is right, and that their recommendations will be seriously considered and honored in most instances as the process continues.

Data must be shown on a timely basis to the whole staff so that they are able to be included in the process of the leadership team, by way of suggestions, reflections, analysis and interpretation. The process needs to be transparent and conspicuous, the responsible players need to be engaged and a sense of collective ownership must be cultivated.

Eventually goals and plans need to be generated. These should reflect the implications from the data and should deal with the real problems the data illuminate. The tendency to respond directly to the symptoms should be resisted. Solutions should be encouraged to come primarily from within the school and only secondarily from external authorities. And stakeholders should buy into the overall solutions.

### **PISD**

During the remainder of the spring, building leadership teams were asked at each school site to examine their data once it came in. Each team was asked to come up with “smart goals” for each priority problem area that was identified in the survey data. Smart goals were defined by the item results to which they referred, the real problem they were addressing, the concrete changes that would be implied by the goal, and who would be accountable for making it happen. Buildings were encouraged to share their processes. One of the more successful middle schools shared its process for defining the list of “things at the school you should see, and the things that you should not see.” This encouraged schools in the district to value subtracting ineffective practices as much as encouraging better or improved practices. Assistant Superintendent Einfalt made it clear that “moving up the pathway” at each school was a district priority and that improvement was expected. She was supportive and positive, but the sense of accountability at

each school site was strong. Smart goals and plans were required to be submitted and reviewed by the district office.

This process was repeated for each year of data, from 2012 -2014. Year to year data were used to assess progress. Goals and plans were revised each year to respond to what the data were saying.

The school effectiveness roadmap was used at the schools to help guide their thinking. It was used by Assistant Superintendent Einfalt to encourage the schools to use their goal setting and action planning to intentionally move up the pathway at each school.

A new superintended was hired after the second year. The climate assessment process subsequently dropped in priority.

### **Seneca**

After data were collected in the spring of 2014, leadership teams were assembled for a three day training in August 2014, before the school year. Part of the training, facilitated by an ASSC consultant, was having building teams examine their initial spring data. The school effectiveness and improvement growth roadmap created by ASSC was presented to all the participants. Each team engaged in the process of classifying school policy and teaching practices into those that promoted a psychology of success (internal locus of control, acceptance and belonging, and growth-orientation) and those that undermined it and promoted a psychology of failure. Teams examined their school's data by dimension, using guiding questions and suggestions for how to identify and ultimately respond to the real problems illuminated by each dimension area.

When the school leadership teams went back to their schools, they were given a few meetings to produce goals, priorities and action plans for the year. In this first step of the process, site teams were asked to create a list of their top priorities and the data that was used to determine each. See example of this template below.

	What are the top 3-5 priority areas for your school?	What data points in SCAI, (or other surveys) serve as indicators?
<b>1</b>		
<b>2</b>		

Teams brought their initial lists to a meeting at which they were able to share them with the project leadership and teams from other schools. Schools were able to reflect and revise their lists. The teams were then instructed to develop goals and sub-goals for each with time frames and indicators. An example of the write-up for one of the priorities (of the several created) from one of the schools in the project is included below.

<b>Priority 1: Develop a shared understanding of and commitment to the school's vision amongst staff.</b>		
Goal 1: June 2015, ----- Strengthen relationships between staff members and give staff opportunities for collaborative decision-making and leadership. As measured by: SCAI -Staff SCAI score of 3.0 on "Trust and Respect for Leadership" (baseline = 2.61) -Staff SCAI score of 3.25 on "Sense of Vision and Mission" (baseline = 2.70)		
<b>Short-Term Objectives:</b>	<b>By When</b>	<b>Measure</b>
1.1 Create teacher committees for each of the 4 AIP goals in which a larger group of staff members can exercise leadership.	10/1/15	Committees created and presented to staff. Attendance logs from initial Thursday meetings and subsequent monthly meetings.
1.2 Engage staff in using ODR data to modify discipline policies and general campus procedures. If decisions are made by a smaller group of leaders, present them to staff with clear rationale and create space for feedback.	10/17/16	Notes from data dive on 10/16 indicate that staff revisited HPIPs and mission statement.

A similar in-service was conducted the next year (but was led by Seneca consultants who used ASSC resources and protocol). The concepts of the roadmap and POS were reinforced at each event and resonated with leadership teams throughout the process.

***Implications for State and Broad-based Assessment and Implementation***

The implications at this stage of the process for broad-based efforts are as important as for any stage. If the goal of the overall effort is a better school, or better climate, or a better level of function, what that means must be defined. The structure of the SCAI implies what better practice looks like. So site teams must be instructed to infer what the SCAI data are telling them. Too often those examining the data look only at the numbers. Item and dimension means are telling, but they do not give the full picture. The item content and the overall SCAI construction that implies a range of practices (from low to high quality) need to be understood and considered. When the basis of the items is appreciated, then any goal set will be informed by that appreciation. Too often teams look at a low number and then select a solution that is not well aligned to the real problem because they do not understand what the SCAI item and/or dimension rating is telling them. A good example is when schools get a low number on dimension 5, related to discipline. Then, with good intentions, but with mistaken reasoning, the schools make plans for new practices that are not empowering and/or involve extrinsic rewards - which will ultimately lead to lower scores the next year. If school teams do not have the roadmap and POS concepts in mind and ask themselves whether any choice will "lead up the pathway," they tend to adopt practices that come from the same level of understanding as those that got them where they are currently.

The actions of the leaders within the two exemplary cases offers a positive model for those in leadership positions at each level of a state process as well. Leadership needs to encourage (and even require) that: 1) school sites align their action planning with their data; 2) include in their plans how they intend to do less of the ineffective pedagogy; and 3) have coherent rationales for why any new practices planned will lead to solving their real problems (and reasonably expect to result in better scores in the future). Facilitators at each level need to have the authority to encourage certain solutions and respectfully discourage others.

## **F. Support Teachers and Staff on the Changes**

As leadership teams identify the real problems at their schools based on their SCAI data, those solutions should be aligned to either specific problem focus practices or general areas of need. Changes in thinking and/or pedagogical skill level that result in overall improved practice will typically achieve better results than electing to add a program into the current patterns of practice and levels of function. As these initiatives unfold it is critical that the administration maintains the broader vision – how do all change initiatives integrate and relate to real problems? And practical support – what training, policy change, collective processing time and context do the teachers and staff need?

### ***PISD***

PISD had a series of professional development initiatives in place concurrent with the school climate assessment process. Lori Einfalt was fairly confident that there was good alignment between all efforts. That is, if schools did a good job implementing their district programs, there should be a positive effect on each school's climate. She was also supportive of the more micro efforts at each school that were generated by the "smart goals" from the SCAI assessment process and the changes in practice that resulted.

### ***Seneca***

Written into the i3 grant were a series of professional development pieces for each school. Schools were to implement PBIS/RTI and later assess its fidelity. And there was an extensive series of trainings on Special Education and School Personnel Cooperation. There could be some question of alignment of this PD with the concept of moving up the roadmap. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the leadership teams did use POS and the roadmap frameworks in their thinking as they planned and implemented their PD.

## ***Implications for State and Broad-based Assessment and Implementation***

Identifying the extent to which changes implied by data from SCAI or other assessments are incorporated in subsequent improvement initiatives that are actually carried out at the building level is an enormous challenge in any large scale effort. As a result, it rarely occurs. What can be helpful is to have regular "tuning" events where broad project themes and goals can be reinforced and building-level leaders are able to come together and share their successes and experiences. What can be very useful for the coordinators of the effort is to use guiding questions to help focus the discussion. But it matters a great deal how one frames the question. Asking the question "what are you going to do to solve your problems" may seem like a good question. But, unfortunately, that question allows an unlimited number of answers and does not help the school align data results with appropriate responses. This is why some definition of "better" or "improved" is useful. If we ask questions such as "How are your change initiatives going to move you up the pathway?" or "How do you intend to create more student empowerment?" we will get more focused and aligned solution thinking. Finding programs that are actually aligned with the goals at the school can be helpful. Allowing schools to visit one another and share concrete practices can be useful as well.

## **G. Post-Assessment after each year and recycle the process**

It is recommended that any improvement effort approach the change process as on-going and an opportunity to result in transformative results. The SCAI is intended to provide a window into the fundamental level of health and function of the school and the school's current level on the growth roadmap. Maybe the most valuable outcome of the process will be for those at any school to take on a



growth-orientation and become increasingly more skilled at seeing down the pathway and using current reality as information and material for their growth.

So it is recommended that schools use their SCAI scores as their indicators of that growth process, and compare items, dimensions, and overall means from year to year. Comparing year-to-year ratings helps the school see if both its practices and the perceptions at the school are improving as planned, and whether the action planning is achieving the results that were intended.

### ***Case Examples***

Each project used year-to-year comparison data as an integral part of its SCAI assessment process. The leaders of each process, Einfalt and Ventura, were eager to see how ratings had changed, as were those at the building level. In each case, the planning at the start of each year included the new data and the lessons learned from the year-to-year changes. For the project leaders, the data also provided insights into the efficacy of the professional development and the initiatives that were being implemented in each case, as well as the relative success level of each individual building.

### ***PISD***

In the year to year comparison from 2012 to 2013, PISD schools made an average improvement of .18 points on the SCAI. This equates to about 40 points on a 200-1000 scale and about a 5%tile improvement. Appendices A and B represent the year to year SCAI climate comparison data from PISD. At the same time the district saw some steady gains in its achievement scores. These gains can be seen in Appendix C.

### ***Seneca***

First year SCAI comparison data showed improved climate ratings in all schools in the project. Each school was provided a complete analysis of its ratings after one year of program implementation. Reports included item and dimension level means and year-to-year comparisons.

### ***Implications for State and Broad-based Assessment and Implementation***

The efforts at PISD and Seneca are good models for a state level or large scale use of the SCAI. Data need to be examined each year and initiatives need to be reconsidered periodically and systematically as they did. Lessons from the S3 school climate improvement process within several states include the need to encourage a greater sense of data use and a re-evaluation of goals and initiatives. Periodically engaging in the process of evaluating the data and re-asking questions related to: "Are our action plans getting us where we are trying to go?" is critical. If not, improvement efforts can be undertaken without the sufficient vision and or alignment that is necessary for attaining best results. Putting three years into implementing new practices and programs that do not ultimately improve the climate and function of the school is an outcome nobody wants. Seeing evidence of either a positive or negative improvement trajectory early in the process and refocusing the vision periodically is essential.

### ***Conclusion***

These two case examples illustrate the intentions and applications necessary to obtain high quality outcomes when using the SCAI for the purpose of school climate assessment and improvement. Each case example met the eight conditions for success outlined in this paper. In each case, there were leaders at the overall project and individual building levels who had a clear intention of using SCAI to identify strengths and weaknesses in their schools and make needed changes. The leaders had a solid sense of both the big picture - what an improved condition would look and feel like, and the operational specifics -

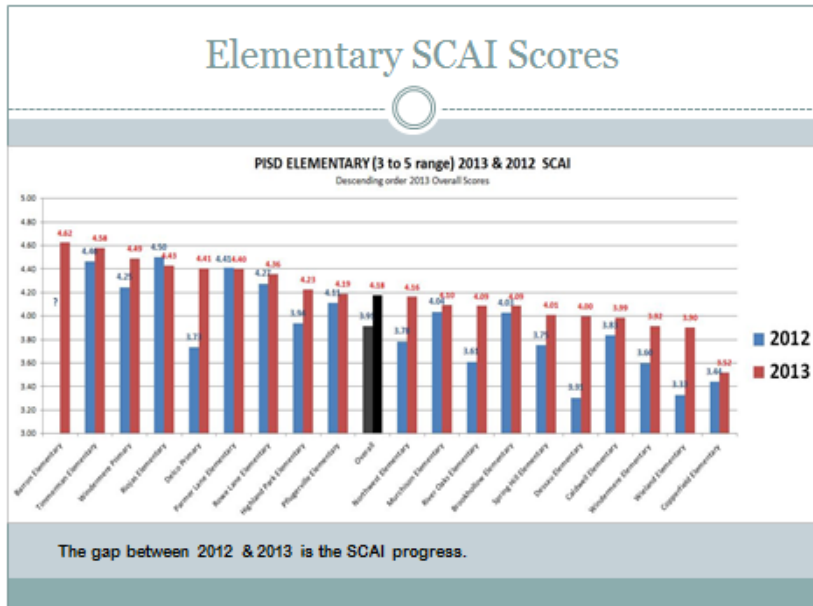
the expectations, attitudes, policies, practices and daily adult actions that it would take to make the goals an actuality, and how each would need to be aligned.

In each case there was a systematic use of the survey data, including a required uniform procedure for processing the data that encouraged the values of quality and thoroughness. At the same time, each effort encouraged building-level ownership of its change vision and action plan. This included having each team really get to know its SCAI data and use them to justify solutions, based on the real problems at their schools that could be gleaned from that exploration.

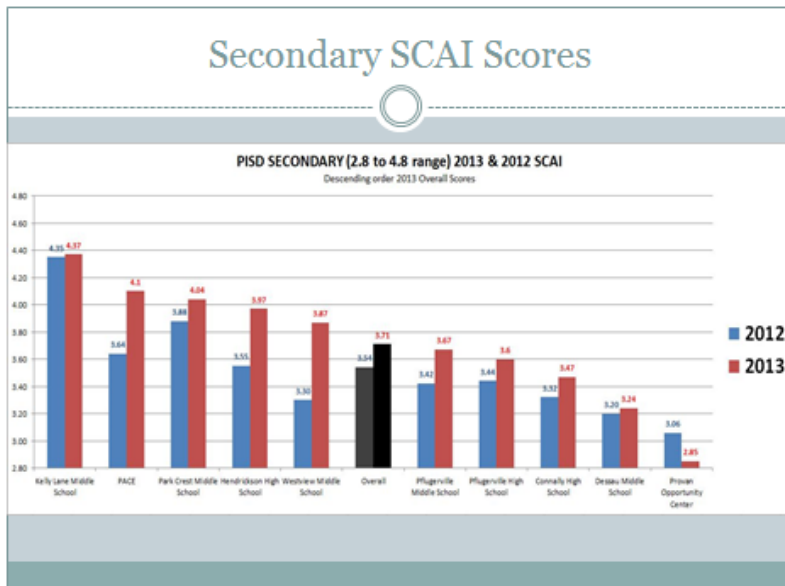
Each effort was undertaken with a spirit of sincerity and of putting the students first at each school. The leaders projected a great deal of faith in those in each building and assumed that they valued and desired excellence. I did not witness much, if any, cynicism in the process, even though it involved much hard work for leadership teams and the teachers at each school.

## Appendices

### Appendix A – PISD Elementary Year to Year Improvement – SCAI scores



### Appendix B – PISD Secondary Year to Year Improvement – SCAI scores



### Appendix C – PISD Elementary Year to Year Improvement – State Achievement Scores

Year	Level 2: Proficiency ≥ College Readiness (All Subjects)	Level 3: Advanced – Exceeds Proficiency (All Subjects)	Level 2: Proficiency or Advanced (Science)
2012	37%	14%	32%
2013	39%	15%	38%
2014	44%	17%	48%

Also, teacher retention in PISD went up from 85% in 2011-12 to 91% in 2012-13

**Appendix D: Sample SCAI data set – Climate scores shown in a scatter plot correlation with CA state student achievement scores (representing a 0.7 correlation)**

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

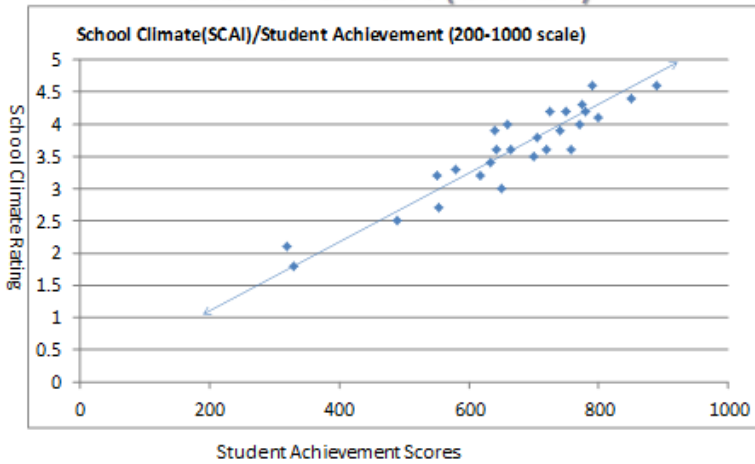


Diagram represents a sample of schools from Los Angeles County randomly sampled between 2005 and 2010. These data are consistent with the growing ASSC data set of over 300 schools from several states.

**Appendix E: Complete School Improvement Theoretical Roadmap with Pathway pattern reflected**

