

## School Climate & Academic Performance Across California High Schools

The dimensions of school climate (e.g., positive relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation, school safety perceptions) are closely related to students' academic performance. First, students who perceive that they attend schools with positive climates are more engaged in their learning—they participate more actively and are more self-regulated in their learning strategies (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Also, in both U.S. and international samples and across elementary, middle, and high school levels, students' positive school climate perceptions have been linked to important academic outcomes, including standardized test scores and grade-point-averages (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011; Jia et al., 2009; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998).

Although these individual student outcomes are paramount, educators are increasingly interested in school-level indices that aggregate individual student data to more broadly reflect school-level performance. In California, the school-level academic measure of interest is the Academic Performance Index (API), which is used in state accountability efforts. For this factsheet, we use California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey System (Cal-SCHLS) data to examine the relationship between API and the School Climate Index (SCI), a school-level measure of school climate in California's high schools.

### SAMPLE AND MEASURES

Data for this analysis were collected from 789 public high schools in California during the 2008/09 and 2009/10 school years. Data included student responses to the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) as well as

school-level truancy incident data. In addition, data from the 2010 Base Academic Performance Index (API) file released by CDE was used to obtain school-level academic performance information.

» **SCHOOL CLIMATE INDEX (SCI).** The SCI provides a state normed, school-level description of several non-academic factors that are known to influence learning success in schools. Scores on the SCI are based on student CHKS data and school-level truancy incident data. It is calculated by computing the weighted average of three domains: (1) *Supports and Engagement* (45%); (2) *Violence, Victimization, and Substance Use at School* (45%); and (3) *Truancy Incidents* (10%). SCI scores can range from 100 to 500, with higher scores representing more positive school climates. During the 2008/10 period, the average SCI score for all comprehensive high schools in California was 300. This analysis used data from all the 789 high schools that administered the CHKS over the two year period 2008/10.

The SCI was developed by WestEd for the California Department of Education (CDE) as part of the federally-funded Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Project. All schools participating in the S3 Project received their SCI in a *School Climate Report Card*, all of which are publicly posted at [CaliforniaS3.wested.org](http://CaliforniaS3.wested.org). Other schools can request a similar report card as a custom service by contacting their CHKS Regional Center.

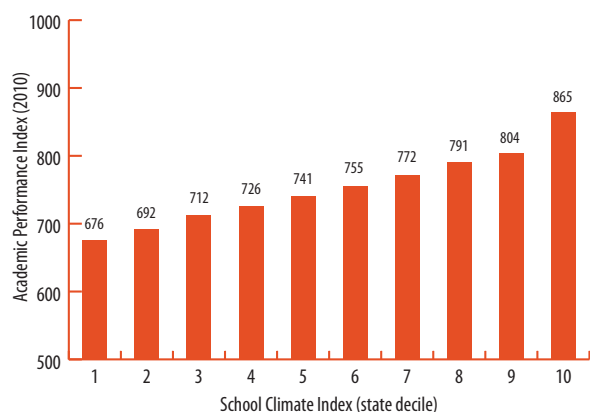
» **ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE INDEX (API).** The API, the cornerstone of the state's accountability system, is calculated by converting a student's performance on statewide assessments (i.e., Standardized Testing and reporting

(STAR) and California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)) across multiple content areas into points on the API scale. These points are then averaged across all students and all tests to create an API. API scores range from 200 to 1000.

## ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND SCHOOL CLIMATE IN CALIFORNIA

Figure 1 displays how Academic Performance Index varies across schools with different School Climate Index scores. In general, the higher the SCI, the higher the school's API score. High schools in the lowest decile on SCI exhibit the lowest API scores—averaging 676. API then increases for each succeeding SCI decile, with high schools in the highest SCI decile exhibiting an average API of 865.

Figure 1. School Academic Performance Index by School Climate Index (state decile)



### SUMMARY

School climate, as measured by the School Climate Index, is strongly related to state Academic Performance Index (API) scores. As illustrated in Figure 1, as SCI scores increase—as high schools became safer, more supportive, and more engaging—so do API scores. More specifically, the analysis indicates that academic performance is higher among students in California high schools that (1) cultivate more positive student perceptions of adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation (e.g., contribute to the school), school safety, and school

connectedness; and (2) have students who report fewer experiences of harassment, bullying, physical violence, and substance use at school and have lower truancy rates, as measured by the SCI.

The analyses are based on non-experimental, correlational data. No causal inferences should be made. But the associations of school-level SCI and API scores are strong and consistent, and the results do suggest that student perceptions of school climate are strongly related to school-level academic outcomes. These results support previous research suggesting that attending to nonacademic components of the school learning environment holds great promise for helping to improve critical academic outcomes.

### REFERENCES

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