School Climate and Mental Health

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Researchers and educators increasingly have recognized the importance of school climate in learning and youth development (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2010). School climate is an important factor in the successful implementation of school reform programs (Gregory et al., 2007). School climate impacts staff's ability to make change, emotional exhaustion, retention, relationships and trust, feelings of accomplishment, and sense of efficacy (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Miller et al., 1999; Singh & Billingsley, 1998; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). And for students school climate impacts their learning, academic achievement, motivation, safety, absenteeism, group cohesion, stress, mutual trust, and feelings of connectedness and attachment to school (Fleming et al., 2005; Ma & Klinger, 2000; Brand et al., 2003; Freiberg, 1999; Griffith, 1995; Comer, 1984; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Eccles et al., 1993; Ghaith, 2003; Kerr et al., 2004; Devine & Cohen, 2007). In addition, research has shown that students' psychological and behavioral health is associated with school climate (Brand et al., 2003; Way et al., 2007; Eccles & Roeser, 1999; Roeser el al., 1998, 2000).

The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate as "the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures"(p. 2). There is growing evidence that school climate not only impacts student learning, academic achievement, and school success, but also impacts youth social, emotional and psychological development (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2009; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2007; Cohen et al., 2009). Investigating school climate can provide data to support a comprehensive approach to addressing barriers to learning, teaching, and performance. For students these barriers can include educational and psychosocial problems, external stressors, and psychological disorders (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

The study of school climate in the middle school setting is especially important. Middle school provides a critical context in the development of adolescents. During their school experience, students learn about themselves and relationships, and how to navigate the difficulties of adolescence. There is evidence that the interpersonal, instructional, and organizational climate of middle school strongly influences students' psychological and behavioral adjustment across multiple domains (Eccles & Roeser, 1999; Roeser et al., 1998, 2000; Kuperminic et al., 1997; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Roeser et al. (1998) found that school climate can account for some of the difficulties that arise for adolescents often challenging their adaptive capacities. Given that depressive symptoms, low self-esteem and behavioral difficulties often arise during the middle school years, there is a modest set of empirical findings that show how school climate shapes

these emotional and behavioral consequences (Bachman & O'Malley, 1986; Brand et al., 2003; Hoge et al., 1990; Kuperminic et al., 1997; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Way & Robinson, 2003).

School climate has been shown to affect a wide range of emotional and mental health outcomes in students (Hoge et al., 1990; Kuperminic et al., 2001; Kuperminic et al., 1997; Payton et al., 2008; Shochet et al., 2006; Way et al., 2007). Way et al. (2007) found that students' perceptions of school climate dimensions such as teacher support, peer support, student autonomy, and consistency in school rules declined over a three-year period, and that these declines were associated with decline over time in students' psychological and behavioral adjustments. Brand et al. (2003) found that students' perceptions of different dimensions of school climate, including teacher support, structure, commitment to achievement, positive peer interactions, and instructional innovation, were significantly associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depressive symptoms. Lastly, when children with strong social supports are under stress, even high levels of stress, they exhibit fewer symptoms of anxiety than do children with less support (Weigel & Wertlieb, 1986).

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