

Sounding the Alarm

Building the Climate & Culture Our Students Need

JUNE 2017

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“The trauma in our schools is real, but our students are not broken. They are bright, courageous children who need additional support to help them heal. There are countless teachers ready to do this work, but we need more preparation to meet this challenge.”

Artemis Kolovos,
Lyman A. Budlong Public School

Chicago’s current landscape — a starkly segregated city, high rates of poverty and violence, and an underfunded and struggling school system — exposes far too many of our students daily to challenges that hinder their ability to succeed emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. As teachers, we know that the obstacles our students face at home do not stay outside of our classrooms; they come in the door with them and, if not acknowledged and addressed, can harm their ability to succeed and negatively impact the climate and culture of our schools. At the same time, we also know that our students are bursting with curiosity, intelligence, and ingenuity and that it is our job as teachers to ensure that each and every one of them is able to rise to their fullest potential.

Strengthening the climate and culture of our schools is key to addressing students’ challenges and capitalizing on their strengths. We must start by addressing the social-emotional health of our students, the trauma impacting many of our neighborhoods, and the discipline practices in our schools. Acknowledging that all schools should be able to tailor their climate and culture to fit the unique populations they serve, we recommend that the district and school-based leaders focus on breaking down any barriers to doing so and prioritizing A.C.C.E.S.S.

Our Recommendations

Assess & Compile

Assess and compile resources that will allow schools to evaluate their current policies and practices and how they interact with the specific populations they serve, in order to make adjustments based on the needs of individual school communities.

Coordinate

Coordinate existing infrastructure, policies, and systems to more directly establish school climate and culture as a priority at the district and school level.

Execute

Execute on the prioritization of school climate and culture by creating new frameworks and structures that support a school’s ability to address the needs of its student population and connect with families and the broader community.

Support & Sustain

Support schools in obtaining and sustaining the resources, training, and ongoing development necessary for their entire school community to prioritize school climate and culture.

As educators, we are dedicated to the success of the students we serve. In order for students to thrive, their learning environment must be supportive, safe, and responsive to their needs. Improving school climate and culture would drastically change the community in which students learn and teachers work. If our district and schools implement these recommendations — if they truly serve all our students through practices like social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice — we can begin to address the challenges so many of our students face and provide the supports and services necessary for them to reach their full potential.