

# Sounding the Alarm

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Building the Climate & Culture  
Our Students Need

JUNE 2017

“They say it takes a village to raise a child,  
but what do you do if the village is asleep?  
You sound the alarm.”

Venita Conway, Tilden Career Community Academy High School

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**Dear fellow Chicagoans,**

We are deeply proud of our city, just like many of you. It is because we love Chicago that we believe it is so important to acknowledge its very real challenges. You watch the news. You read the paper. You walk on our streets and live in our neighborhoods. You send your kids to school, or you attended our schools as a child, or you go to school every day yourself. So, you understand.

We are proud to be Chicago educators, but we also deeply believe that we have work to do. It is our belief that the city we live in—although vibrant and strong and good at heart—is struggling to do right by each and every one of our citizens, especially our children.

It is our responsibility to create healthy classroom environments for all learners, even as they struggle with a host of challenges, including poverty, violence, and other forms of trauma. Though we know that many of our students are hungry, homeless, or afraid that they or their loved ones will be victims of Chicago's violence or deported, we also know that our students are intelligent, resilient, kind, hopeful, and capable of greatness. Our students bring these incredible strengths and these enormous challenges through the front doors of our school buildings every single day. We must all - administrators, teachers, families, students - strive to give our future leaders what they need and deserve to learn, grow, and succeed.

With this goal in mind, as a team of 18 educators, we came together in January 2017 and embarked on a process of confronting these issues head-on. We crafted the following set of recommendations for improving school climate and culture citywide, with a focus on better serving our students through social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice. Our diverse group has combined our own voices and experiences with academic research, national models of success, input from local experts, and the stories and opinions of over 500 of our colleagues from across Chicago's schools.

When we evaluated everything we learned these past few months, we realized that the problems plaguing the climate and culture inside our schools were directly related to the many challenges our students face outside of our schools. We questioned whether or not we, as educators, were truly equipped to understand and support students through these challenges. Our recommendations are focused on access - access to the information, resources, and systems we need to fully support and effectively educate and nurture every child, regardless of the challenges they face.

We are grateful to all the Chicagoans who shared their stories and perspectives with us as we crafted these recommendations. There is no question that we all love this city and all of its children. We call on our city and education leaders to partner with teachers, families, and supporters in every community to create the necessary systems, structures, and supports to ensure that every child has access to a high-quality education and a happy, healthy, and successful future.

With pride in and hope for our city,

The 2017 Educators for Excellence-Chicago  
Teacher Policy Team on School Climate and Culture



## Definitions & Terms

As a team, we recognize there are many ways to define school climate and culture and that some terms discussed in this paper may lack common definitions or are not widely used outside of the education community. Although additional definitions are included throughout the paper, it is our hope that the list below will help guide your reading and provide a foundation for understanding our recommendations on this complex topic.

### **School Climate & Culture**

School Culture is the shared set of long-standing values, norms, and beliefs that create the foundation for practices, behaviors, and relationships within a school. School Climate is reflective of the culture, embodying the mood, feeling, and morale within classrooms and the overall building.

### **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.<sup>1</sup>

### **Trauma-Informed School**

Schools where the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. In addition, students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The goal is to not only provide tools to cope with extreme situations but to create an underlying culture of respect and support.<sup>2</sup>

### **Restorative Justice**

An effective alternative to punitive responses to wrongdoing. It brings together persons harmed with persons responsible for harm in a safe and respectful space, promoting dialogue, accountability, and a stronger sense of community. School-based restorative justice offers a more sustainable, equitable, and respectful alternative to dealing with misbehavior, from minor infractions to violence. It can also be used as a proactive strategy to create a culture of connectivity and care where all members of the school community can thrive.<sup>3</sup>

### **Restorative Practice**

Restorative practice is a social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making. The use of restorative practices helps to: reduce crime, violence and bullying; improve human behavior; strengthen civil society; provide effective leadership; restore relationships; and repair harm. In many cases, restorative justice is viewed as a subset of restorative practices.<sup>4</sup>

## Policy Selection Process

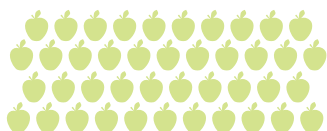


900 Chicago teachers were surveyed on the state of education

revealing

### top 5 issues

presented to



a caucus of 75 Chicago teachers convened to select a leading topic...



## strengthening school climate and culture

then

200 Chicago teachers were pre-surveyed

leading to



26 focus groups of over 300 educators

and

a detailed survey of 460 education colleagues



before beginning research

# Our Process & Methodology

## Identifying & Refining a Policy Focus

Educators for Excellence-Chicago staff and teacher members began surveying Chicago educators at the end of the 2015-2016 school year to identify the education issues they felt were most important. After collecting nearly 900 surveys, 75 Teacher Leaders gathered in November 2016 at a Policy Selection Dinner to discuss the top five issues and settle on a single leading topic. Through a teacher-led discussion and caucus process, attendees determined that strengthening school climate and culture was Chicago educators' top priority in today's environment."

Once the topic had been selected, Educators for Excellence-Chicago returned to schools and circulated a pre-survey among Chicago teachers, asking them to clarify the issues related to school climate and culture that were most pressing. With over 200 responses, this created a strong foundation for the Teacher Policy Team to begin researching the issue in January 2017.

## Researching & Crafting Recommendations

For 10 weeks, from January through March 2017, our Teacher Policy Team met as a group to refine the topic of school climate and culture, where we:

- Met with local education policy experts to discuss the current landscape, opportunities, and barriers to improving school climate and culture;
- Reviewed research and best practices connected to improving school climate and culture, especially related to social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice; and
- Analyzed pre-survey results and designed and executed a second round of focus groups and surveys to gather teacher input on improving school climate and culture.

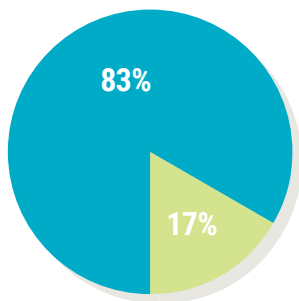
We also discussed our findings with local education policy experts from Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Teachers Union, the University of Chicago Consortium for School Research and UChicago Impact, Chicago Beyond, New Leaders for New Schools, Schools That Can, The Partnership for Resilience, the Consortium for Educational Change, and other city, state, and national experts on school climate and culture.

As a result of the above research, surveys, and conversations, we came to believe that the biggest opportunities to improve school climate and culture citywide would be through addressing three specific areas: student social-emotional health; trauma in our city and how it manifests in our students and our schools; and current disciplinary practices.

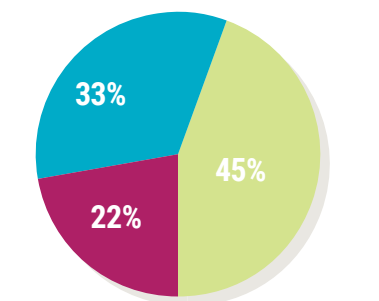
## Gathering Feedback

During this 10-week period, we conducted 26 focus groups engaging more than 300 Chicago teachers, administrators, school staff, and students to provide feedback on our recommendations. We also conducted a detailed survey of more than 460 E4E-Chicago members and non-members. These focus groups and surveys were designed to gather further information on the issues identified as most pressing by educators for improving school climate and culture: social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice. This feedback ensured that our Teacher Policy Team presented policy recommendations that meet key needs and concerns among our colleagues.

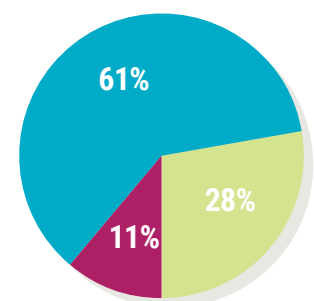
## Teacher Policy Team Diversity



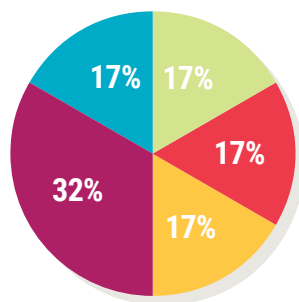
**School**  
 ■ District ■ Charter



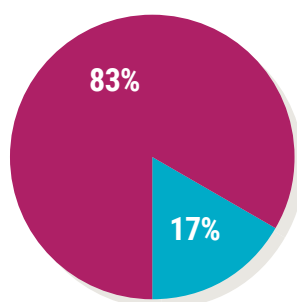
**Experience**  
 ■ < 4 Years ■ 4-9 Years ■ 10+ Years



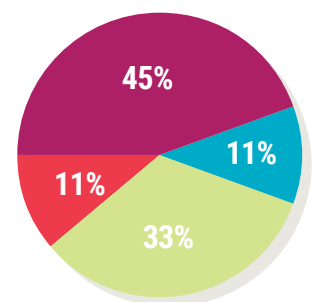
**Grade**  
 ■ ES/MS ■ HS ■ Pre-K



**Geography**  
 ■ West ■ Southwest ■ North ■ Near-North ■ South



**Gender**  
 ■ Male ■ Female



**Racial Diversity**  
 ■ Hispanic ■ Caucasian ■ Unknown ■ African American

# The Current Reality: What Our Students Face

## The Chicago Landscape

As a result of Chicago's current landscape, far too many of our students are exposed daily to factors that we know can diminish or hinder a student's ability to be successful. According to the 2015 census, 22 percent of Chicagoans and more than one-third of Illinoisans are considered low-income or living in poverty. More strikingly, 33 percent of children in Chicago<sup>5</sup>, and 39 percent of Black children and 27 percent of Latino children across the state, live in poverty.<sup>7</sup> In addition, estimates indicate that just over 180,000 Chicago residents are immigrants, with 11 percent of that population falling below the age of 18. And, during the 2015-2016 school year, estimates indicate there were over 18,000 homeless students in Chicago and another 2,000 students who are considered "unaccompanied youth" (youth who are homeless and living on their own, without the support of a family or guardian).<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, records show that in 2016 there were 324 youth under the age of 16 who were victims of a shooting, 36 of which resulted in a homicide.<sup>9</sup> And, beyond those students who were direct victims of violence, there are many, many more who are exposed to violence in their homes or communities. In addition to the 324 youth who were direct victims of gun violence in 2016, we know that murders in Chicago grew by 58 percent between 2015 and

2016.<sup>10</sup> This increasing violence disproportionately impacts low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, likely leaving large groups of our city's children with much greater and more frequent exposure to violence than others.

By the numbers alone, it is clear that Chicago's youth are facing an array of challenges before they enter our classrooms.

These realities also translate directly into Chicago's schools. In Chicago Public Schools (CPS), more than 80 percent of students identify as economically disadvantaged, 17 percent of students are current English Learners, and 13 percent of students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).<sup>11</sup> Yet, in the 2015-2016 school year, among a population of over 390,000 students, there were only 323 social workers, leaving approximately one social worker for every 1,200 CPS students. And, despite this ratio, many teachers are not receiving the necessary training to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms: "although CPS officials say 300 to 400 schools have received some kind of training around social-emotional learning that promotes trauma-informed care, services vary from school to school...district officials said only 25 schools—out of more than 650—received specialized training to better screen and identify youth with symptoms of trauma."<sup>12</sup>



**1 in 5**  
students live  
in poverty

**39%**  
of Black  
students live in  
poverty

**27%**  
of Latino  
students live in  
poverty

**18,000**  
students are  
homeless

**2,000**  
homeless  
students live  
on their own

**324**  
youth were  
victims of gun  
violence in 2016



Additionally, like many urban districts, discipline disparities exist between racial and socioeconomic groups, reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline for many of Chicago's most vulnerable students.<sup>13</sup> In 2016, there were nearly 250 police officers assigned to CPS, stationed either inside the school or outside in a squad car,<sup>14</sup> and research shows that the mere presence of officers in schools can increase the likelihood that students will be referred to law enforcement, putting them on the fast track to interacting with the justice system.<sup>15</sup>

And, as a district, CPS faces recurring financial instability and budget shortfalls. This is compounded by the fact that the state of Illinois' education funding formula is the most regressive in the country, sending only 81 cents to low-income districts for every dollar that goes to high-income ones.<sup>16</sup> For Chicago, this means that while CPS serves 20 percent of Illinois' students, the state sends the district only a 15 percent share of the available funding.<sup>17</sup>

But these statistics about our city and our schools do not tell the whole story. While many Chicagoans face poverty, our city is investing in public and private ventures aimed at revitalizing our most struggling communities.<sup>18</sup> While families across the city struggle with issues related to immigration, Chicago remains a strong and proud sanctuary city, and CPS remains committed to protecting immigrant

students. And, while our communities and schools must grapple with the fallout from neighborhood violence, everyday citizens and parents are stepping in to protect one another and push for change.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, much is happening at the state and district level to equip school communities to meet the challenges they face. While poverty and violence continue to impact our students and our schools, there is increasing priority being placed on creating and measuring a safe, nurturing climate and culture through the new Illinois plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the continued use of the 5Essentials Survey. While discipline disparities exist, the passage of Senate Bill 100 set a precedent at the state level regarding the importance of reducing exclusionary discipline. And, while restorative justice is not yet uniformly implemented or supported district-wide, the early work of district and school personnel to implement restorative justice has resulted in a significant reduction of suspensions, expulsions, and police notifications district-wide.<sup>20</sup>

The challenges our city must overcome are real, but we know that there are so many among us with the will and dedication to do so. As teachers, this paper shares our vision for how our schools and classrooms can be a part of tackling these challenges head-on and helping to craft a different narrative for the students of Chicago.



**81¢**  
are spent on  
low-income districts  
for every  
**\$1.00**  
spent on  
high-income districts

only  
**1 in 25**  
schools have  
trauma training

**1**  
social worker  
per  
**1200**  
students in CPS

**80%**  
of CPS students  
are economically  
disadvantaged

## The Impact of Trauma in Our Schools

A bird's-eye view of the current reality—the aggregated impacts of a starkly segregated city, the high rates of poverty and violence in Chicago communities, and the challenges facing the school system—strongly suggests that many Chicago youth regularly or persistently experience some form of trauma. In this context, trauma is defined as any time a child does not feel safe or protected.<sup>21</sup> This trauma can then result in child traumatic stress, when traumatic events or situations overwhelm a child's or adolescent's ability to cope.<sup>22</sup> And trauma, while often connected to experiencing poverty or violence, is certainly not restricted to those communities. A study conducted to assess the frequency of exposure to trauma during childhood, found that more than half of respondents were exposed to at least one type of childhood trauma, one-fourth experienced at least two types, and slightly over 5 percent reported exposure to four or more types of trauma.<sup>23</sup>

Research confirms what we already know as educators: Child traumatic stress can have dire impacts on a student's ability to succeed and can have long-term effects on brain development. For example, "a child in the 90th percentile for trauma and violence exposure would be expected to have 9.8 fewer points in reading achievement and 7.5 fewer IQ points."<sup>24</sup> Additionally, according to the National Association of School Psychologists, students who are exposed to trauma in their home, school, or community are more likely to demonstrate higher rates of separation anxiety, social anxiety, depression, oppositional and aggressive behavior, and are three times more likely to have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for learning or behavior problems.<sup>25</sup> And, if undiagnosed, the negative impacts trauma can have on a student's mental health and emotional well-being may manifest in behaviors that can be misunderstood as classroom misbehavior, resulting in a response that does not truly recognize or meet the needs of the student.<sup>26</sup>

On top of the direct impacts during childhood and adolescence, "unaddressed trauma can greatly harm people's well-being, life prospects, and public safety."<sup>27</sup> Studies assert that high exposure to trauma during childhood is associated with higher adulthood risks for many types of health, mental, and behavioral issues including alcoholism, drug addiction, obesity, suicide attempts, and STDs.<sup>28</sup> And at a community level, research shows that "untreated trauma feeds the cycle of poverty and violence,"<sup>29</sup> ensuring that those living in our most impacted neighborhoods continue to be exposed to these devastating realities generation after generation.

**“Something happens so bad you can't stop thinking about it. It's like you try to do something else like school work, but it keeps coming back and you think about the trauma instead of what you are supposed to be doing.”**

Chicago Student

Yet a bird's eye view doesn't give the full picture. At the ground level, we see students each day bursting with curiosity, intelligence, and ingenuity. They are our city's next generation of scientists and engineers, teachers, journalists, and elected leaders. They will build upon what they inherit from our generation, which is why we must act to ensure that our smart and talented students have access to the supports they need in order to be successful. While we cannot shield them from the many challenges our students will face, we can give them the tools to process the trauma and stressors in their lives, find trusting and supportive relationships in our schools, constructively manage their own behavior, and ultimately rise above the obstacles in their paths to reach the incredible potential we know lies in each and every one of them.

“Given the circumstances that many of our students have to cope with, they are incredibly resilient. I admire so many of my students for continuing to work toward their dreams, in spite of all of the challenges stacked against them.”

Dayna Heller, Roger C. Sullivan High School



# Why School Climate & Culture?

But how can we tap into our students' strengths and support them to overcome the hurdles that they face? Studies suggest that the most effective means to combating the adverse impacts of trauma may be through interventions that are inherently linked to improving school climate and culture. In fact, "the ever-growing body of research on school climate continuously attests to its importance in a variety of overlapping ways, including social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; positive youth development, mental health, and healthy relationships; higher graduation rates; school connectedness and engagement; academic achievement; social, emotional, and civic learning; teacher retention; and effective school reform."<sup>30</sup> This is why improving the climate and culture of our schools citywide would mitigate the challenges that many of our students are facing.

For example, interventions that specifically address student behavior through social-emotional programs, positive behavioral interventions, school-wide integration of social and academic learning, a focus on positive school-wide climate, and better family and community involvement programs all demonstrated increases in student achievement and decreases in absenteeism and suspensions.<sup>31</sup> Overall, research shows that "helping students cope with the potentially traumatic effects of community violence promotes school engagement and [academic] success."<sup>32</sup> By improving the climate and culture of our schools through a focus on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice, we are helping our students leverage their strengths and putting them on a more direct, navigable path to achieving their fullest potential.

In addition, analysis shows that there is a significant return on investment to consider when it comes to focusing on school climate and culture. For example, "a cost-benefit analysis of the school culture and positive school behavior programs found that these programs are some of the most economically beneficial, providing a benefit of over \$31,000 per student while the costs are low (\$221 per pupil)."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, an analysis of the impacts of social-emotional learning interventions showed an average benefit-cost ratio of about 11 to 1. In other words, on average, for every dollar invested in SEL programming, there is a return of eleven

dollars.<sup>34</sup> Both of these examples clearly demonstrate that investing in school climate and culture is not only impactful for students, it is also incredibly cost-effective.

Perhaps most importantly, the experiences and perspectives of current Chicago educators support the research. Over 90 percent of surveyed educators believe that school climate and culture impacts both student achievement and student well-being. And nearly 93 percent of surveyed teachers think that improving and supporting a positive school climate and culture should be a priority for the district.

Unfortunately, while Chicago educators clearly view school climate and culture as an immediate priority, we do not currently have access to the resources and development we need to ensure that students and families are supported equitably across the district. For example, despite the fact that 65 percent of surveyed educators said that supporting students with trauma is a challenging issue at their school, only 22 percent of educators felt that their school had the resources they need to address the issues of students with trauma and less than 15 percent have received training to work with that specific population. Likewise, only 20 percent of educators feel they have received "at least effective" training on restorative justice, and 81 percent of educators are hungry for training on social-emotional learning. These numbers clearly demonstrate that Chicago teachers want and need additional training that they are simply not getting.

We know the strengths that our students bring to the table; both research and educator experience dictate that focusing on school climate and culture would better prepare us to leverage those strengths, supporting our students to work through the obstacles before them and focus on the curiosity, resilience, and creativity they possess. But, as educators, we are limited in our capacity to help them do this when we don't have access to the resources, systems, and training we need to effectively prioritize this work. In order to truly address the current reality faced by the majority of Chicago students, schools and teachers must be adequately and appropriately equipped to create a positive school climate and culture.

## 90% IMMEDIATE PRIORITY 93%

90 percent of surveyed educators believe that school climate and culture impacts both student achievement and student well-being

93 percent of surveyed educators think that supporting a positive school climate and culture should be a priority for the district



**only 1 in 5**  
educators feel they have received "at least effective" training on restorative justice

# 81% SEL

81 percent of educators are hungry for training on social-emotional learning



## SEL Return On Investment

**INVESTING \$1 YIELDS \$11 AND CHANGE**

An analysis of the impacts of social-emotional learning interventions showed an average benefit-cost ratio of about 11 to 1

## First Responders

Across the country, districts and states are working to improve school climate and culture in a way that prioritizes practices like social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice. The idea that recognizing and supporting the social-emotional needs of students, especially those students experiencing trauma, is more and more becoming embedded in what it means to improve the climate and culture of an entire school. Here are a few examples of states, districts, and organizations that are approaching whole-school change in this way:



### Trauma-Sensitive Schools in Massachusetts

Through a partnership between Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School, the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative created a "Flexible Framework" for building trauma-sensitive schools. This framework has been implemented in schools across Massachusetts and is supported by state legislation. This law, and the framework it presents, relies on whole-school change. Trauma-sensitive schools fundamentally shift the climate and culture of a school community to recognize, support, and respond to student needs in a holistic way.<sup>35</sup> In one Massachusetts district, schools implementing this Flexible Framework recorded decreases in suspensions of up to 40 percent<sup>36</sup> and a 75 percent decrease in the number of students being sent to the principal's office for discipline-related concerns.<sup>37</sup>



### The Partnerships for Resilience in Illinois

Originally the "Southland Education and Health Initiative," this partnership is a cross-sector effort bringing together healthcare, education, and community organizations in the southern suburbs of Cook County, Illinois. As part of their work, the partnership is piloting "Resilience Teams" in Calumet Park schools. These teams will build additional community partnerships, provide whole-staff training, and bring in additional resources, all with the aim of creating a more trauma-informed and supportive school climate and culture.<sup>38</sup>



### Compassionate Schools in Washington State

The Office of the State Superintendent for Public Instruction in Washington launched the Compassionate Schools Initiative. This initiative, supported by a detailed handbook released to schools across the state, supports schools to foster compassionate infrastructure, classrooms, and attitudes by creating and supporting a healthy climate and culture within the school where all students can learn.<sup>39</sup> Initial studies of schools involved in this initiative show significant reductions in aggressive student behavior. For example, "[d]uring the months of January to April 2011, Willow Elementary had 83 referrals for aggressive behavior (defined as pushing, hitting, and fighting). During that same time period in 2012, after complex trauma training, the school had 13 referrals."<sup>40</sup>

# Connecting to the 5Essentials Survey



As Chicago educators, we recognize the 5Essentials Survey as the primary tool that schools use to measure and improve climate and culture in our city and state. We also know that the five essential indicators measured through this survey are not only indicative of a school's climate and culture but also predictive of a school's performance. Schools that are strong in 3-5 of the indicators measured in the 5Essentials Survey are "10 times more likely to improve student learning substantially" as compared to schools weak in 3-5 of the indicators.<sup>41</sup>

However, while we acknowledge that this survey provides actionable information tied to both improving school climate and culture and academic outcomes, we also believe that additional practices must be pursued given the current realities that so many of our students are experiencing. Although not explicitly captured in the 5Essentials Survey at present, we recommend that the district and our schools focus on supporting the social-emotional health of our students, addressing the trauma impacting our neighborhoods, and reforming our school discipline practices. If we do this effectively, we believe we will improve school climate and culture citywide, while also seeing improvements in how schools are scoring on the 5Essentials Survey.

By providing increased resources, systems, and supports to help schools and teachers implement social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice, schools will make significant advancements in indicators measured by the 5Essentials Survey, ultimately improving outcomes for students. For example, we believe that the recommendations offered in this paper, if implemented, will directly help schools improve on both the Collaborative Teachers and Supportive Environment indicators. The information in the following chart outlines a few of the possible connections between indicators and measures in the 5Essentials Survey and the positive impacts generated by social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.

	5Essentials Measure	Alignment to Recommendations
Collaborative Teachers	<p><b>Collective Responsibility</b> Discipline is maintained across an entire school, not just in individual classrooms.</p>	<p><b>Restorative Justice</b> The most effective method for implementing restorative justice practices are at a whole-school level. By providing the resources, supports, and training necessary for schools to implement restorative justice appropriately, schools would also ensure that discipline is maintained universally across an entire school community, not just in individual classrooms.</p>
	<p><b>Collective Responsibility</b> Teachers feel responsible for helping students develop self-control.</p>	<p><b>Social-Emotional Learning</b> Through prioritizing social-emotional learning at a school-level, all teachers would be empowered to promote the development of social-emotional competencies, including self-management and responsible decision-making.<sup>42</sup></p>
Supportive Environment	<p><b>Safety</b> Students report how safe they feel outside around the school, traveling between home and school, in the bathrooms and hallways of the school, and in classes.</p>	<p><b>Trauma-Informed Schools</b> By identifying and addressing student trauma, students will likely develop an increased sense of safety, especially within the school building and in their relationships with teachers.</p>
	<p><b>School-Wide Future Orientation</b> Teachers work hard to make sure all students are learning.</p>	<p><b>Social-Emotional Learning</b> If school communities are prioritizing social-emotional well-being, teachers will be armed with tools to identify student social-emotional needs, which may break down additional barriers to student learning and success.</p>
	<p><b>Student-Teacher Trust</b> Students report they feel safe and comfortable with teachers at the school.</p>	<p><b>Trauma-Informed Schools</b> By identifying and addressing student trauma, students will likely develop an increased sense of safety, especially within the school building and in their relationships with teachers.</p>
	<p><b>Student-Teacher Trust</b> Students report teachers treat them with respect.</p>	<p><b>Restorative Justice</b> The implementation of restorative justice, especially at a school-wide level, can help promote feelings that teachers are treating all students with respect.<sup>43</sup></p>

# Our Vision: A.C.C.E.S.S.

## A Vision for School Climate & Culture

We believe that Chicago Public Schools should be a district where school climate and culture is a priority—and resources are allocated to reflect that priority.

We envision a district in which policies related to school climate and culture are created, supported, and implemented by those with the experience, knowledge, and resources to do so with fidelity. For teachers, this means access to the resources and training they need to foster a positive school climate and culture, including social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice strategies. For students, this means listening to what they need to feel safe and supported in school and ensuring that this goal guides all of this work.

Our School Climate and Culture Teacher Policy Team aims to encourage proactive school climate and culture strategies throughout our district and to build school communities grounded in trust – where strong relationships exist between students, parents, school leaders, and district officials that help propel students toward academic and life success.

## Supporting the Students We Serve

In order to achieve our vision for School Climate and Culture in Chicago, we must provide our school-based leaders, teachers, students, parents, and communities with access to the information, resources, and supports they need to truly educate and nurture the whole child.

We need to address the realities faced by our students and believe we can do so by leveraging the interconnectedness of social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice toward improving school climate and culture. Acknowledging that all schools should be able to tailor their climate and culture to fit the unique student populations they serve, we recommend that the district and school-based leaders focus on breaking down any barriers that exist and prioritizing **A.C.C.E.S.S.:**

- **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; and
- **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.





## Introducing Jordyn

This paper is written by us, a group of educators, but we are not the only people with a story to tell about school climate and culture. This issue is as much about the students in our classrooms as it is about teachers. So, instead of only telling this story through our eyes, we will illustrate this complex issue through the life of a hypothetical student. In the pages to follow, you will meet Jordyn. Jordyn is not based on a single person; Jordyn is a compilation of students we've met and stories we've heard from fellow educators. The issues Jordyn faces transcend gender, race, neighborhood, and socioeconomic background, and we believe that telling you Jordyn's story will demonstrate why improving the climate and culture of our schools is absolutely urgent and essential for every student. Jordyn's story is all of our stories. And Jordyn's future depends on all of us.

## Supporting Senate Bill 100

Illinois passed Senate Bill 100 (SB100) in August 2015 in recognition of the growing national and local movements focused on breaking down the school-to-prison pipeline and reducing exclusionary discipline practices.<sup>44</sup>

Previously, Illinois was among the vast majority of states that drew hard-lined discipline policies in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado in 1999, swinging the pendulum of discipline policy firmly into the zero-tolerance corner. However, within a decade there was a growing body of research demonstrating disparities in how suspensions and expulsions were impacting students of color, in addition to data indicating adverse impacts on student achievement.<sup>45</sup>

In 2015, Illinois swung the pendulum back in the other direction. SB100 was considered a much-needed reform of the state's discipline policies, prohibiting out-of-school suspensions longer than three days, removing zero-tolerance policies, and pushing for an increase in restorative practices.<sup>46</sup>

However, with such a dramatic swing, the state has yet to catch up to the intention of the law by providing the supports and training necessary for districts to implement the new policies as intended. With a lack of infrastructure, guidance, and trainings around restorative practices, many schools are struggling to catch up to the requirements of the law. While this paper focuses primarily on Chicago, it is important to acknowledge the critical work the state has done to establish a high bar for districts when it comes to reducing exclusionary discipline practices and the persistent gap that remains between the spirit of the legislation and the supports being provided for effective implementation of restorative practices.

We also believe that while it is imperative for the state to fill this gap, the recommendations in this paper offer meaningful and immediate steps that districts, schools, and teachers can take in the interim.



GRADE 3

## Reflections from Jordyn's Teacher

Jordyn is bright, creative, and energetic. Like most kids, there are moments when the pure joy of learning is so clearly painted on Jordyn's face. But working with Jordyn can also be a struggle - most days, it takes more time and attention than I have to give in order to get Jordyn to sit still, focus, or follow instructions. I'm frustrated by these behaviors and I can tell something bigger is going on. I checked Jordyn's file, and without access to pre-k, Jordyn started kindergarten behind and has struggled to catch up. I know that Jordyn needs special attention, but my school doesn't have the resources. I want to better understand the challenges Jordyn is facing, I want to know how to help, and I want my school to be able to meet Jordyn's needs. I know that if we don't get this right, school will only get harder for Jordyn.

# Assess & Compile



## Cause for Alarm

There are currently many tools that the district and schools have at their disposal to assess various aspects of climate and culture. Unfortunately, there is inconsistent awareness of these tools and a lack of clear direction in how they can be used to assess student needs and make appropriate adjustments in policies and practices. As a result, assessment is often not being applied or analyzed in a way that allows the district or schools to strategically set priorities, distribute resources, or train staff. This is illustrated by the fact that when surveyed, only 53 percent of Chicago educators said their school had the resources needed to create and support a positive school climate and culture.

If the district cannot assess and identify the schools with the greatest needs, and what those needs are, they cannot strategically or efficiently invest in resources. And if our schools cannot accurately assess the populations they serve, the challenges their students face, and the gaps between their current practices and their desired outcomes, then they cannot realistically be expected to set policies or practices that will indeed meet the needs of their students. According to a Chicago educator, "seeing children as a homogenous group, instead of taking the time to assess their individual needs, can lead to an inability to properly care for and educate a child and can even create unintended consequences that exacerbate a traumatic situation, rather than mediate it."



## Our Recommendations

The district should 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.



**District:** Compile and share a set of tools to assess school climate and culture needs at the school level, specifically related to social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.



**District:** For each assessment tool provided, set a level at which schools can be identified as high-need, requiring additional supports or resources based on the specific needs of their student populations.



**School:** Utilize the assessment tools and resources to assess the needs of the student population in relation to school climate and culture, set school-wide goals and priorities that are reflective of those needs, and share results with the district to receive additional supports and resources.



## Rationale

As teachers, we are eager for the district and schools to make this kind of assessment a priority. As one Chicago educator shared, “I recommend that we start by taking an honest assessment of the issues in our schools and then making recommendations, based on best practices, that will work for our students.” Teachers understand that every student is unique, which is why starting by assessing a school’s population—before making any changes or adjustments to resources, policies, or practices—is the right place to begin. While some resources and trainings exist, it is imperative that we first accurately identify students’ needs within a school by compiling and using accurate assessments to ensure that resources and trainings are allocated according to need.

Experts agree. According to the National School Climate Center, before any adjustments or improvements can be made toward improving climate and culture, schools must invest in assessment and evaluation.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network recommends that the very first phase of creating trauma-informed schools is to routinely screen for exposure to and symptoms of trauma in the student population.<sup>48</sup> Both research and teacher opinion are clear, without assessment as a first step, any other changes to policy or practice will be far less effective or efficient.

# Assess & Compile

## What This Could Look Like

The district does not need to reinvent the wheel on assessing student need. There are currently multiple tools and existing data sources that schools can use to assess and analyze the climate and culture of their school community, including assessments and data specifically related to social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice. These include:

- **The 5Essentials Survey:** The Illinois 5Essentials Survey provides detailed data on school climate and culture by inquiring into five leading areas for school improvement. The five indicators that positively affect school success are: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environments, and Ambitious Instruction.<sup>49</sup>
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study:** The ACE study is an ongoing collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente. The ACE score, which totals the number of adverse childhood experiences (or traumatic experiences) reported by participants, is used to assess cumulative childhood stress or trauma.<sup>50</sup>
- **Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS):** CPS' MTSS provides a framework for delivering high-quality, differentiated instruction and targeted support for all students' academic, social-emotional, and health/wellness needs. This framework includes both instruction and interventions with targeted supports for those students who require additional, explicit, and more focused instruction to meet the academic and SEL standards.<sup>51</sup>
- **Suspension & Discipline Records:** To promote safe, respectful and productive learning environments that contribute to student success, CPS reports school-level data on behavior incidents, suspensions, and expulsions. This data can help schools develop effective practices to support students' social and emotional needs.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than identify new tools, the district should focus on compiling assessments in one place and creating resources that allow schools to apply the assessments appropriately, analyze and synthesize data accurately, and respond effectively. The district could compile a toolkit with a range of assessments and instructions for when and how schools can apply each tool. Accompanying the toolkit, the district could also set "trigger scores," which would aid both the district and schools in identifying areas of high need and suggest targeted resources or supports in a given area.

Lastly, we believe that the district could use the data and information gathered from schools to determine how effective and actionable the assessments are, as well as to begin understanding the frequency of certain high-needs populations across the district. As such, we suggest tracking how often these resources are accessed by schools and how many schools are self-identifying as high need in various areas.

## A.C.C.E.S.S. in Action

"As a school community, we know that many of our students face gun violence in their neighborhoods and daily lives," shares **Cory Cain of Urban Prep Charter Academy-West**. "While we understand that violence and trauma are most often circumstances that are outside of our locus of control as a school, we also know that how we understand and respond to our students is fully within our control. Once we took time to learn and assess what our students cope with and what tools they did or didn't have to manage the trauma in their lives, we were able to help to bring them additional skills. Doing this helped our students become more self-sufficient and feel safe enough in our school to proactively support each other and ask for help when they need it."



How does this help students like Jordyn?

If Jordyn's school was actively assessing its student population and analyzing data related to social-emotional needs, child traumatic stress, and discipline practices, Jordyn's teacher would have a more complete picture of the specific challenges Jordyn is facing. Knowing this, both the school and the teacher could effectively target supports and resources to meet Jordyn's and Jordyn's classmates' needs. Doing so would bring out the bright, energetic, and creative student that Jordyn's teacher sees so clearly despite the daily struggles.

GRADE 6

## Reflections from Jordyn's Social Worker

I started working with Jordyn due to concerns about angry outbursts, chronic absence, and disruptive behavior. In our short time together, it's become clear to me that Jordyn is resilient, passionate, and well intentioned, but also that Jordyn has been struggling a long time, not just academically, but also emotionally. I'm learning about Jordyn's home life and I believe there are some traumatic experiences that need to be addressed. But I already have nearly 60 students on my caseload and only visit Jordyn's school once a week. With all that I am already required to do, there simply isn't enough time to observe Jordyn's classes, talk to teachers, or be present when things go really wrong. It doesn't quite feel like Jordyn's non-academic needs are enough of a priority; the school hasn't made plans to support students like Jordyn and the district hasn't yet allocated the resources.

# Coordinate



## Cause for Alarm

Once there is a clear understanding of students' needs, infrastructure, policies, and systems at the district and school level must be coordinated in a way that reflects school climate and culture as a clear priority.

At present, many of the district's guiding documents and policies still need to be updated to incorporate school climate and culture in a way that allows schools to prioritize and implement initiatives related to social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice. While the district's 2016-2019 vision calls attention to both trauma and social-emotional learning, noting that "many of our students come to school with challenges brought about by poverty, language barriers, a disability, a lack of family support or neighborhood violence" and also asserts that "all children, regardless of background, can learn well with the right academic and social-emotional support, and schools must be organized to provide it,"<sup>53</sup> these priorities are not consistently translated to other guiding documents and policies at the district level.

In addition, many schools currently lack the resources, personnel, or supports that they need to serve their student populations. For example, social workers are allocated to schools based only on the special education needs of the students in the building, not taking into account student needs related to social-emotional issues or childhood traumatic stress. As one educator put it, "At best we get directed to a form. And things are so beyond a form. Our kids are in crisis." While this is reflective of one teacher's experience, if we expect schools and educators to be able to effectively respond to the needs of their students, the district must set policies and distribute resources more strategically.

And finally, the district cannot be the only entity to align infrastructure, systems, and resources to support school climate and culture. Schools must also provide clarity and raise the priority level within their own buildings and among their staff.



## Our Recommendations

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



**District:** Update guiding documents and centralized district policies to reflect social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice as priorities and align on common definitions and best practices.



**District:** Distribute existing resources, personnel, and supports to schools based on the unique needs of the student population, as determined by needs-assessment results.



**School:** Utilize existing school-based structures and plans to set a vision and goals that prioritize school climate and culture, specifically incorporating social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.



## Rationale

The importance of coordinating policies and systems cannot be understated. Ensuring that there is a baseline definition of terms and that all schools are assessing and addressing issues with a common, foundational understanding is key to setting schools up for success. Research on social-emotional learning states that “leaders need a coherent vision and communication effort to create common expectations for what SEL does and does not entail”<sup>54</sup> in order to truly make the implementation of such programs a success.

In addition to coordinating policies and systems, prioritizing school climate and culture is also dependent on coordinating and allocating resources appropriately. According to one Chicago educator: “We need resources. We need personnel. We need ongoing trainings. We have the ability and the compassion. We just need the resources.” At present, even when schools and teachers are committed to improving climate and culture - and even if they understand the needs of the students they are trying to serve - they often still lack the structures, resources, and systems to act.

Furthermore, teachers see the importance of coordinating systems, policies, and resources at the school level. As one Chicago educator explains, “It is important to establish and share a school-wide vision, beliefs, and goals. There must be statements and priorities that inspire both the students and staff.” And from another Chicago educator, “We need to make sure that communication is open and that everyone understands their role in supporting student growth, academically and emotionally.” These perspectives clearly point to the need for schools to incorporate school climate and culture into their vision and goals. Doing so would ensure that staff are aligned around climate and culture as a priority and therefore can feel secure in adjusting their own behaviors and practices in support of a shared vision.

# Coordinate

## What This Could Look Like

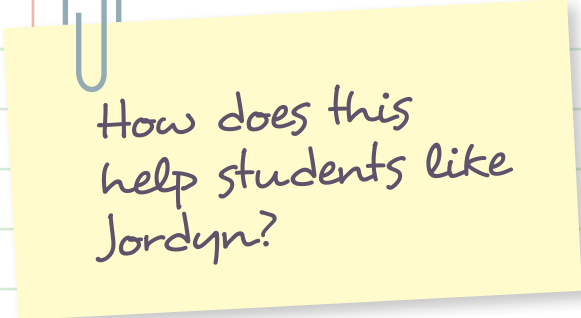
There are many existing opportunities to update, align, and codify school climate and culture as a priority at the district and school levels. To begin, CPS could ensure that there are clear definitions incorporated into the CPS Handbook and Student Code of Conduct for terms such as child traumatic stress, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice. The district could also update both the School Climate Standards and the CPS Framework for Teaching to incorporate additional elements of trauma-informed teaching. Finally, the district could examine the possibility of reallocating a portion of mandated instructional minutes toward social-emotional learning, all of which would reinforce the importance of such practices.

Likewise, schools could specifically incorporate school climate and culture goals into the Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) planning process, thereby aligning school-wide priorities and activities around specific elements of climate and culture improvement.

Another opportunity for coordinating resources and personnel at the school level relates to upcoming changes in how schools utilize the role of school counselors moving forward. As schools begin working under the new 2015-2019 contract established between the district and the Chicago's Teachers Union in 2016, school counselors should be freed from the responsibilities of acting as case manager for special education students and could instead be leveraged to serve as leaders of climate and culture and social-emotional learning at the school level.

## A.C.C.E.S.S. in Action

"At Jamieson School, our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) coordinates the annual strategic planning process of the school by writing or revising our Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP)," shares **Susan Paik of Jamieson Elementary School**. "Taking into account feedback and input from the whole school community, our ILT decided to address climate and culture as one of the areas of focus for our most recent CIWP. This prioritization was guided by gathering and reviewing available data, which then helped us plan out and align on strategies for improving climate and culture. Having clear action steps and strategies within our CIWP allows our entire staff to work together to make whole-school, positive change."



How does this help students like Jordyn?

By better aligning personnel and resources at the district-level, it is likely that Jordyn's social worker would be able to spend more time in the school, increasing his or her capacity to support Jordyn in learning strategies to address the impact of traumatic stress and improve social-emotional skills. And, at the school level, if there were increased alignment across the entire staff about prioritizing school climate and culture - and improved understanding about social-emotional learning, child traumatic stress, and restorative justice - Jordyn's social worker would likely feel less isolated in the recognition of Jordyn's struggles and more supported in the pursuit of what Jordyn needs to be successful in school.



## Coordinating ESSA with School Climate & Culture

In April 2017, Illinois submitted their plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to the U.S. Department of Education. Through this plan, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) set an important vision for the state, declaring that Illinois will be “a state of whole, healthy children nested in whole, healthy systems supporting communities wherein all citizens are socially and economically secure.”<sup>55</sup>

The plan goes on to say that, “the notion of ‘the whole child’ in the ESSA State Plan for Illinois can be understood as a child within an ecology of multiple and interconnected parts (e.g., the child is an individual composed of interacting parts, such as cognitive, social and emotional, and physical, among others, and that this individual lives within overlapping environments including, but not limited to, home, school, and community).”<sup>56</sup>

With the impending implementation of ESSA statewide, we believe that this vision and much of the content of the plan, indicate a commitment at the state level to prioritize school climate and culture and the social-emotional health and well-being of all Illinois students. The state’s new accountability and school-rating systems, for example, create opportunities for ISBE to more directly support improvements in school climate and culture. Many of the non-academic indicators included in the accountability and school-rating systems, such as the inclusion of the 5Essentials Survey, are aligned to and reflective of elements that contribute to a healthy school climate and culture.

While the inclusion of these indicators is notable all on its own, it will be equally important for the state to coordinate systems and resources for districts and schools that help make the results of these measures actionable. Districts and schools

must be prepared to analyze, reflect on, and improve upon the information communicated through the non-academic indicators. We believe that many of the recommendations that we discuss in this paper could be supported through actions and activities at the state level. We encourage ISBE to take an active role in ensuring that districts and schools are fostering strong school climates and cultures across the state.



Image accessed from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/images/wsc-model-1g.png> on January 14, 2017. For additional information on the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model, please access <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/wsc/index.htm>.



GRADE 8

## Reflections from Jordyn's Family

Jordyn's teacher told us today that Jordyn might not be ready for high school next year. How did this happen? We know that there are problems at school. Jordyn is still acting out, is increasingly less invested in schoolwork, and does not have a strong relationship with many of the teachers. We have tried to attend parent conferences and other events, but due to our work schedules, we have not been able to, and there are not a lot of alternatives for us to be involved and informed. If only we knew how to talk to someone about what Jordyn needs - but it never feels like we know who to talk to or where to go for information. We feel lost and we are afraid Jordyn does, too.

# Execute



## Cause for Alarm

At present, the district and schools lack the frameworks, structures, and communications systems necessary to fully prioritize school climate and culture.

While we know that the district has created a multitude of resources related to school climate and culture and invested in initiatives that specifically target bright spots and areas of high need, much of this work remains disconnected from or unknown to many of Chicago's schools and classrooms. As one educator stated, "There is a definite need to make resources more accessible. We know that information and resources exist but unfortunately it all ends up in a binder on a shelf. We need to keep these strategies alive by putting them in front of educators and providing support and follow up."

In addition to the existing information that is not currently being shared effectively, there is also a need for new frameworks and structures to be built that make connections between the many different interventions that can impact school climate and culture. At present, information and resources are siloed, often addressing social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice separately, which makes their interconnectedness difficult to leverage.

Similarly, many schools lack the structures or systems to communicate and collaborate across buildings, and educators often lack the time and leadership to do the same even within their own schools. Families and the broader community face similar challenges. Without any formal structure or communication system in place, families frequently do not have an opportunity or avenue for them to actively engage in supporting their school's climate and culture. All of these factors combine to create a system where work is often isolated and a district where schools, teachers, families, and communities aren't able to leverage the benefits of collaboration.



## Our Recommendations

The district and schools should 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.

★ **District:** Build a framework that can be applied and differentiated at the school level, incorporating a multi-tiered cycle for schools to assess and address social-emotional needs, trauma, and restorative practices within the school community.

★ **District:** Create a digital hub or communication system to provide ongoing information and updates to administrators and educators regarding best practices, models of success, and new evidence-based resources related to school climate and culture.

★ **District:** Organize school climate and culture problem-solving forums within or across networks that encourage collaboration between different school communities and stakeholder groups, including families.

🏠 **School:** Develop clear leadership roles for teachers, students, and families that create capacity at the school level to prioritize school climate and culture through establishing and supporting climate and culture leadership teams.

## Rationale

According to research, the following communication strategies can be integral to enhancing the effectiveness of school climate and culture efforts: engaging the full school community, creating networks to share best practices and openly discuss challenges, and creating and sharing tools and information that will help educators, administrators, and parents promote a positive school climate.<sup>57</sup> If communication could be improved, through refreshing how the district communicates with schools, how schools communicate with each other, and how schools communicate with families and the broader community, the ability to create networks, share knowledge, and collaboratively problem-solve would provide huge gains for improving climate and culture.

In addition, according to the American Institutes for Research, one of the best ways districts can support schools to create a healthy school climate and culture is to create “a matrix that enables districts to choose which of many SEL and school climate programs and practices to implement.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, building new systems and tools that connect strategies and practices such as social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and restorative justice will set up schools to effectively execute on the needs of their school communities.

Educators are clamoring for these new tools and leadership structures. Rather than calling it a “matrix,” they expressed a desire for a “framework” or “toolbox,” which they feel will allow them to link practices together in a way that is responsive to the specific needs of the school community. They also expressed excitement about using new structures at the school level to prioritize climate and culture. One educator reflected on the positive impact a climate and culture leadership team has had at her school, saying: “It has been my school’s saving grace.”

# Execute

## What This Could Look Like

In addition to the many resources currently housed at CPS related to school climate and culture, there are multiple initiatives that could be helpful in identifying best practice across the district. For example, the 199 schools that have thus far earned the Supportive Schools Certification and the schools currently participating in the federally funded Healing Trauma Together initiative could all be used to identify, record, and share best practices as they relate to social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, the district could support problem-solving forums that bring together educators, administrators, families, and the broader school community. Since the district is divided into 13 geographic regions, called networks,<sup>60</sup> and each network of 30-50 schools is assigned a Social-Emotional Learning Specialist to directly support strategic investments in social-emotional learning at the school level,<sup>61</sup> these forums could happen by leveraging those network-based positions. Specialists can work within their networks or across networks to organize opportunities for schools to increase communication and collaboration with a diverse set of stakeholders, from both inside and outside the school building, on issues related to school climate and culture.

As the district continues to amass information, resources, and best practice, we suggest communicating with schools and educators in a way that allows the district to measure effectiveness, whether it is through tracking visits to a digital hub or clicks on digital newsletter content. Likewise, schools that utilize the framework should be able to rate each resource, and unhelpful resources should be updated or removed. For schools working to support new climate and culture leadership teams, existing assessments such as the 5Essentials Survey or a staff satisfaction survey can gauge the effectiveness of the team.



How does this help students like Jordyn?

The execution of strategies such as the problem-solving forums could increase the direct avenues for families like Jordyn's to engage with the school, build relationships, and have their voices be authentically heard and recognized. In addition, with the creation of a multi-tiered framework and a more effective communication system for research and best practice, Jordyn's school would have access to better information on how to involve the whole staff in meeting Jordyn's needs and engaging with Jordyn's family. Finally, having explicit leadership at the school-level focused on the needs of students like Jordyn could help ensure that there is more school-wide alignment and specialized attention for high-needs students.

## A.C.C.E.S.S. in Action

“Years ago, we had very little family communication or engagement; families would only come to school on report card pickup nights or if their child was in some sort of trouble.” says **Patrick Danaher, James Ward Elementary School**. “But in the past two years, our principal has made great strides in creating more spaces and opportunities to engage families. For example, she created a ‘Parents Room’ in our building, which is open during school hours for families to come socialize, connect, use the computer, or have a cup of coffee. The efforts that our school community has made, led by our principal, have turned James Ward into an open and welcoming school for families to come and share their thoughts and ideas.”

## Family Engagement

Families play a large, if not the largest, role in shaping the children who enter classrooms daily. When schools and families partner together, studies show that it can improve a student’s academic achievement and social skills, and contributes to a decline in problem behaviors.<sup>62</sup> Despite these proven benefits, only 20 percent of surveyed educators in Chicago felt their school had high levels of family engagement. This disconnect results in frustration for both educators and families.

According to best practice, schools that excel in engaging families do the following: focus on building trust, have collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and community members; recognize, respect, and address families’ needs, as well as class and cultural differences; and embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared.<sup>63</sup>

Fortunately, there are many organizations in Chicago that support schools and families to work together and many examples of success. It is imperative to share the best practices being implemented throughout the district and continue to invest in community programs, in order to spread the creative solutions that help bridge the gaps between schools and families.

Through our own experiences and our conversations with educators across the city, we believe that improving school climate and culture will be most successful if we authentically and thoughtfully work with families. The following is a list of suggested ways for schools to engage families within our **A.C.C.E.S.S.** framework:

- **Assess & Compile:** Use 5Essentials survey data or create a survey for families/school staff to determine areas of strength and growth regarding family engagement.
- **Coordinate:** Based on assessment data, build partnerships between community organizations and school staff.
- **Execute:** Create a clear plan for communication and engagement with families, including strategic family-focused programming that is specifically based on needs and partnerships.
- **Support & Sustain:** Prioritize maintaining and building community partnerships, training staff, communicating frequently, and providing access to a family engagement toolkit with resources and best practices.



GRADE 11

Reflections from  
Jordyn

I keep thinking of a reason to go to school every day, but it's getting harder and harder. What's the point of taking the test if I'm not going to college? Plus, I find myself feeling angry and annoyed pretty much all of the time and the social worker is only there to talk to on Tuesdays. I know it is not their fault, but why do I have to wait to talk about my issues until they have time for me? My parents are tired of hearing from the school about my temper and my grades; they already know I have issues. I am not sure what to do. Sometimes I think it would be easier for everyone if I just dropped out.

# Support & Sustain



## Cause for Alarm

Ultimately, the success of improving school climate and culture depends on the ability of individual schools, administrators, and educators to translate assessment data, policies, resources, and frameworks into the practices and behaviors that will positively impact the school community. Doing this requires coordinated training, support, and development. Unfortunately, less than 40 percent of surveyed Chicago educators feel they have received adequate training from the school and/or district to effectively address student discipline and school culture issues in their classrooms.

But simply increasing the availability of training will not get at the heart of the problem that is identified by most educators. For most, the issue comes down to a desire for the whole staff to receive training together, allowing teams to align around common beliefs and practices. According to a CPS Security Officer, "When just one person, or even only one department, gets training there really isn't a positive impact. We [security staff] all went to a training on how to re-enter a student after they had been kicked out of class. But the teachers were getting frustrated - they couldn't understand why we were bringing back a kid they just kicked out. It caused a lot of tension among the staff and inconsistency for the students. For an initiative like this to work well, the whole school needs to be doing the same thing - that includes administrators, security, clerks, lunch staff, and teachers."

Whole-staff training should be followed by regular reassessments of what ongoing support looks like and should look like at the district and school levels. As one educator explained, "We have all these partnerships and trainings, but you get the materials once and then you are left alone to figure out what you can do with it." In order for these new skills and practices to be effective, training cannot be something that happens on a single professional development day and then is never revisited.



## Our Recommendations

The district and schools should support educators and staff in obtaining and sustaining the resources, training, and ongoing development necessary for their entire school community to prioritize school climate and culture.



**District:** Set aside funding and dedicated time for whole-staff professional development opportunities that are related to school climate and culture, specifically focused on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.



**School:** Provide whole-staff training and continued development around specific skills or practices, as identified by needs-assessment data, that lead to a positive and healthy school climate and culture.



**School:** Identify opportunities for individual staff members to receive more in-depth training in order to provide ongoing support for the school community.



## Rationale

In order to see real results, Chicago educators support the idea of whole-staff training, suggesting that schools need to be “following programs with fidelity - the entire school should be involved in and aligned to the program expectations.” Or, as another educator explained, “we all need to get on the same page to consistently support our students.” When an entire staff is trained, rather than

a small group of individual educators, the entire school culture shifts, creating an improved, shared culture that actively prioritizes social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice.

Research and best practice from across the nation in social-emotional learning,<sup>64</sup> trauma-informed schools,<sup>65</sup> and restorative justice<sup>66</sup> also suggest that whole-staff training and development is by far the most effective way to implement these strategies. For example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education asserts that schools effectively implementing social-emotional learning are able to do so because “they take a whole-school approach, involving every student and every adult in every part of the building,” and “they offer all-staff trainings and the use of school-wide strategies.”<sup>67</sup>

In addition to wanting initial development that is “constant and consistent across all staff,” educators want to know they will be supported on an ongoing basis. One educator describes her ideal vision of training and support, in this case for restorative justice, as follows: “I would love to have a full week of restorative justice training and then monthly PDs to ensure that we are continuing to follow through with restorative justice practices. It could additionally be useful to have a group of educators who are well trained in restorative justice to support ongoing learning and check in on our classes to make sure we are implementing it.” This proposed format is also backed by research; according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “Initial training is an important strategy associated with high levels of implementation, but research has also demonstrated that ongoing support beyond an initial training (e.g., coaching, follow-up training) enhances both the quality of teaching and student performance.”<sup>68</sup>

Combining whole-staff training, individual expertise, and ongoing support is what we believe will provide both the foundation and long-term development necessary to catalyze, sustain, and truly impact school climate and culture.

# Support & Sustain

## What This Could Look Like

Supporting and sustaining this work can happen at both the district and school level. To begin, we suggest that the district explore all possible funding streams that could be used to provide increased professional development at a whole-staff level around practices aligned to improving school climate and culture, specifically social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice. The district should ensure that it reviews all funding opportunities at the federal, state, and local levels that could be leveraged to ensure additional financial support for this type of development, such as Title II and other ESSA-related funds.

In schools, this could be tackled through the professional development plans that principals submit at the beginning of each school year. These plans allow principals to predetermine how they will use whole-staff development time and also to identify the various opportunities for ongoing development throughout the year. Should they choose, principals could reserve one or more whole-staff professional development opportunities to focus on school climate and culture-related trainings and outline ongoing support opportunities through Professional Learning Communities or other job-embedded opportunities.

As the district and schools begin investing more fully in training and development, we suggest that the district make efforts to record the professional development being implemented, as reported by principals, to help create an accurate picture of which schools are prioritizing climate and culture through increased professional development. By recording this information, the district could begin analyzing the impact of such trainings by looking for any changes in school climate and culture data, as measured by assessments and metrics such as the 5Essentials Survey, discipline data, or MTSS reporting. And, for those schools that prioritize professional development but do not see positive impacts reflected in their data, that could serve as a trigger for the district to allocate additional supports or resources to help those schools improve.



How does this help students like Jordyn?

Whole-staff training and ongoing development focused on how to support students like Jordyn could have an enormous impact on student success and well-being. If the whole staff had been trained in skills and interventions focused on social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice, Jordyn would be getting consistent messages and coordinated support from the entire school community. This kind of alignment could not only keep Jordyn in school and provide access to academic and behavioral interventions that would put Jordyn on the right track, but could also ensure that students like Jordyn are identified and supported much earlier on, preventing them from ever reaching such an urgent level of need.



## A.C.C.E.S.S. in Action

“At our school, the use of restorative justice aided us in supporting a student who was using inflammatory and hurtful language toward others, as the result of a personal struggle,” explains **Bryan Meeker from Lindblom Math & Science Academy**. “Instead of suspending the student, our dean and teachers, having received some restorative justice training, opened a dialogue with the student. This allowed our staff to work with the student, helping him to both make amends with the school community and grow as an individual, rather than punishing him by removing him from his school and friends. As a faculty, we have seen the limited and only temporary gains made through traditional disciplinary practices. Knowing this, we have since made a conscious effort as a school community, in both our practices and our dialogue, to invoke long-term and lasting reconciliation for struggling students.”

## Including Implicit Bias Training

In order to support educators and other school staff to effectively implement practices that will help improve school climate and culture, implicit bias should be incorporated as part of any whole-staff training and development.

Implicit bias is defined as: “The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily, without awareness or intentional control. Can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, implicit bias is problematic because one can possess and be influenced by implicit biases internally while still maintaining an external and authentic commitment to egalitarianism. And, when educators and other school staff act on implicit bias, it can result in unconscious assumptions about academic potential or behavior, often along racial lines.<sup>70</sup>

If we are going to truly prepare educators and school staff to support a positive school climate and culture, we believe that training must also include the tools that we need to recognize our own implicit biases, understand how implicit bias influences the systems and policies in our district and schools, and set universal expectations so that we can hold one another accountable for our decisions and actions.

# Supporting Teacher Emotional Wellness & Mental Health

As we conducted focus groups and collected surveys, we heard one other issue loud and clear that is inextricably tied to improving school climate and culture: supporting teacher emotional wellness and mental health. Since we did not include this topic as part of our initial research and analysis, we did not feel that we had the information necessary to make specific recommendations. However, as educators, this issue deeply resonates with us and we felt we would be remiss not to include it here.

We want to address the issue now, even in small measure, in hopes that it will continue to be included in the conversation, investigated further, and ultimately prioritized as a necessary part of creating a healthy and positive school climate and culture.

## What's going on:

As a result of the poverty, violence, and trauma impacting many of Chicago's students, Chicago educators described experiencing high levels of Secondary Traumatic Stress, which "is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma expressions of another."<sup>71</sup> Secondary Traumatic Stress is also sometimes referred to as vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or burnout.<sup>72</sup>

Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress can include: symptoms mimicking PTSD; re-experiencing personal trauma; changes in memory and perceptions; alterations in their sense of self-efficacy; hopelessness; fear; sleeplessness or chronic exhaustion; or anger and cynicism.<sup>73</sup>

## Why it matters:

Forty-six percent of teachers report high daily stress, and when teachers are highly stressed, students show lower levels of both social adjustment and academic performance.<sup>74</sup>

High levels of daily stress in teachers also results in increased absenteeism for teachers and higher rates of teacher turnover,<sup>75</sup> two issues that already disproportionately impact urban schools.

Teacher turnover is also costly, with studies suggesting that turnover costs school districts upwards of \$2.2 billion a year.<sup>76</sup>

## What we can do about it:

Interventions on the organizational and/or individual level can help reduce teacher stress by changing the culture and approach to teaching. Specifically, programs for mentoring, workplace wellness, social-emotional learning, and mindfulness are all proven to improve teacher well-being and student outcomes.<sup>77</sup>

The most effective interventions combine education, skills training, and monitoring. Educators need to be informed about the existence and impact of Secondary Traumatic Stress and armed with preventive strategies that may include participation in self-care groups in the workplace; use of a self-care accountability buddy system; and proper rest, nutrition, exercise, or other stress reduction activities.<sup>78</sup>

**“When they give emergency instructions on an airplane, they tell you to put your own oxygen mask on first, and then your child’s. As teachers, we must prioritize self-care, so we always have the capacity to take care of our students.”**

DeJernet Farder, Morton School of Excellence

# Conclusion

What do you think happened to Jordyn? As you read Jordyn's story, you may have imagined what the students in this story look like, what neighborhoods they live in, what schools they attend. But ask yourself, should any of that matter? We believe all students should have access to the resources and supports they need to lead happy, healthy, and successful lives.

If these recommendations are implemented - if our district and schools truly serve all our students through practices like social-emotional learning, trauma-informed schools, and restorative justice - stories like Jordyn's will change for the better in every community, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or neighborhood. If 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, then stories like Jordyn's could be replaced with stories of achievement and opportunity.

As educators, we are passionate about the success of the students we serve. In order for students to thrive, the environment that they learn in has to be supportive, safe, and responsive to their needs. Improving school climate and culture would drastically change the environment in which students learn and teachers work. We know that this issue is a priority for the district and in many of our schools, but we believe we must more directly connect the work already being done to all our teachers, classrooms, and students. Making that change requires that we increase access. It requires that we assess, compile, coordinate, execute, support, and sustain efforts around the common goal of serving all our students.

We owe this much to the many students who have a story like Jordyn's. A different future for those students is in sight. As a city, we must reach for it.

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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





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