



**EDUCATORS  
FOR EXCELLENCE  
BOSTON**

2019

## Thriving, not just surviving

Building  
a positive  
school  
culture

To create meaningful recommendations, our team of teachers examined research from across the country, engaged over 500 of our Boston colleagues through focus groups and another 200 through surveys, and consulted with experts and stakeholders. We believe these solutions can have a significant and immediate impact in fostering positive cultures in schools for students, families, and educators.

Thank you to more than 700 of our fellow Boston educators who shared their experiences and views on how to foster a positive culture in all schools. We shaped these recommendations based on the challenges and successes educators have encountered in schools and classrooms.

### Boston Teacher Policy Team

**Caroline Ballou**  
English-as-a-Second-Language  
Teacher at East Boston High School

**Anabell Deutschlander**  
Middle School Science Teacher  
at Neighborhood House Charter School

**Karen González**  
Family and Community Engagement  
Coordinator at the Hurley K-8 School

**Nina Leuzzi**  
Dean of School Culture at Bridge  
Boston Charter School

**Chastity Mathurin**  
Seventh-Grade Special Education  
Teacher at Boston Preparatory Charter  
School

**Michelle Napor**  
Inclusion Teacher at the  
Holmes Innovation School

**Kelli Serbin**  
Fourth-Grade Teacher at Brooke  
Charter School: East Boston

**Monique Symes**  
Seventh- and Eighth-Grade Teacher  
at John W. McCormack Middle School

**Patrick Synan**  
English-as-a-Second-Language Teacher  
at East Boston High School

**Theresa Thalhamer**  
Science Teacher at New Mission  
High School



# Thriving, not just surviving

## Building a positive school culture

Although Massachusetts schools rank among the best in the nation academically, they are plagued by some of the largest opportunity gaps for students from low-income families and students of color.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to closing these gaps, decision-makers often ignore one of the chief causes: school culture. In order to learn and teach, we need schools that have a shared vision, strong relationships, and opportunities to recognize and celebrate everyone's hard work. In fact, research shows all students perform better in schools with healthy environments, and our experience as teachers underscores that daily.<sup>2</sup> Researchers examining 78 school climate studies found a direct link between school climate and student achievement in all but one study.<sup>3</sup> Any educator can tell you why: Students and teachers need safe, welcoming, and engaging schools in order to thrive.

The fact is too many Massachusetts students and educators are struggling today in schools where they feel isolated and under-supported. Ninety-seven percent of surveyed Boston educators shared that school culture directly impacts their retention, and we know that teacher turnover negatively impacts student achievement.<sup>4</sup> So we asked: What could we achieve if every student and educator had a safe and supportive school community? And how can we build that culture?

## In order to build a positive school culture where students can thrive, we as educators recommend:



### 1. Create a Plan

Increase schools' capacity to examine the current obstacles and to develop a positive school culture.



### 2. Give Teachers the Space to Lead

Provide teachers with the structure to create a collaborative culture in which they can learn from one another and build essential skills.



### 3. Engage Families and Communities

Reduce barriers to meaningful family and community engagement and share best practices to involve key school stakeholders.



### 4. Let Every Child Learn

Support teachers to manage classroom discipline through relationship-building.



## Create a Plan

Increase schools' capacity to examine the current obstacles and to develop a positive school culture.

Throughout our teaching careers, attempts to address school culture challenges have felt top-down, disjointed, and inconsistent. Recognizing this pervasive problem, the state created the Safe and Supportive Schools Tool, a framework that allows schools' stakeholders to collaborate on long-term school culture plans that meet students' unique needs,<sup>5</sup> but most of us are not given the time and resources necessary to create and implement a tailored plan for our schools. The state offers a competitive grant providing up to \$20,000, a mentor, and other supports to use the tool, but only 30 out of 289 districts across the state have received a grant, and not all districts were allotted their full funding request. In total, over \$67,000 of requested funding was denied.<sup>6</sup> And while schools are required to convene School Site Councils, improving culture is not listed as one of their main responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Without a clear vision and plan, buy-in from our colleagues and community members, and a collaborative approach, our schools will continue to struggle with fostering a positive culture for students, families, and educators.

### School Site Council

A schoolwide group of teachers, family and community members, and, in high schools, a student who advises on matters such as the budget, student needs, and school-based initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

### ACTION PLAN

**The Massachusetts Legislature** should increase funding for the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant program to support all districts.

**The Massachusetts Legislature** should amend the School Site Council law to include improving school culture as a major area of responsibility.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Increasing funding for the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant program would help many more schools create a consistent and shared vision for a positive school culture, in everything from creating and implementing school procedures to administering discipline to planning activities that build community. Studies show that a clear vision for a school is closely tied to student outcomes.<sup>8</sup> In our experience, this kind of consistency would build trust between students and staff in an environment in which everyone knows that the rules will be enforced and respected.

Every person in a school community shapes school culture. Changing the law to explicitly name school culture as a priority of School Site Councils would signal its importance and the role that these bodies can play in ensuring their schools are warm and welcoming environments. Allowing this group to drive the development of school culture will better leverage this untapped resource that brings together representatives from all stakeholders in the community.





# Give Teachers the Space to Lead

Provide teachers with the structure to create a collaborative culture in which they can learn from one another and build essential skills.

While teaching is the most rewarding job out there, it is also one of the most emotionally and physically exhausting. Whether a student erupts in anger or says something that makes you burst out laughing, we need a school community where we can go to our colleagues and share the highs and lows of our day, as well as our challenges and the solutions that we have found. But these relationships don't happen by chance. In addition to gaining and strengthening skills, professional development and collaboration time is when teachers build relationships that are the foundation of a positive school culture.

Unfortunately, we feel there is not enough time built in for us to collaborate or learn new skills as a team. Moreover, our professional development system does not allow us to learn from some real classroom experts: our peers. While peer observations build skills and relationships, in our experience, we need designated time for these activities so that we don't have to give up a much-needed prep period or lunch to make it happen.

## ACTION PLAN

**Districts** should guarantee that staff have more designated time during school hours for professional development, including time for collaboration and peer observations.

**Schools** should incorporate peer observation and feedback as a regular part of instructional practice and professional development.

## WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

A 2017 report from the Center for American Progress compiled a number of case studies of schools across the country that changed their typical school schedules to incorporate collaborative planning time or professional learning into educators' workdays, usually while students attend enrichment activities. The Guilmette Elementary School in Lawrence, Massachusetts, for example, added more than 260 hours of instructional time to the school year and built in common planning time by extending the school day and aligning team schedules. These adjustments not only allowed teachers time within the workday to collaborate and plan, but also created time for needed student enrichment activities. While this costs the district \$2,500 to compensate each teacher who took on the extra work, it more than paid off. In the four years after implementing their new schedule, students' English language arts and math proficiency scores steadily improved, resulting in Guilmette consistently outperforming other schools in the district.<sup>10</sup>

Peer observation can improve student learning within a larger culture of collaboration, mutual trust, and respect.<sup>11</sup> We need designated time within the day in order to observe our colleagues and a protocol for giving and receiving feedback. We want the opportunity to learn from each other to better serve our students and strengthen relationships with our peers in the process.

---

“Watching colleagues teach is not only beneficial to learning new practices and gaining insights, but also builds trust and camaraderie. This keeps us in the classroom where we can help our students.”

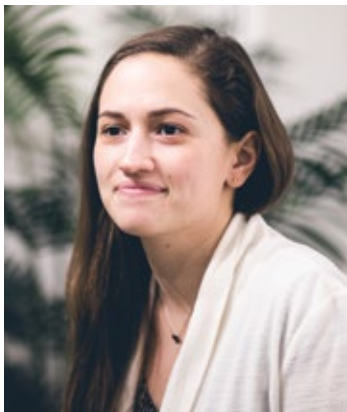
— Anabell Deutschlander, middle school science teacher at Neighborhood House Charter School





### School Site Council

A schoolwide group of teachers, family and community members, and, in high schools, a student who advises on matters such as the budget, student needs, and school-based initiatives.<sup>17</sup>



“Effective family engagement is one of the most important factors in a student’s academic success.”

— Michelle Napor, Holmes inclusion teacher at the Holmes Innovation School

## Engage Families and Communities

Reduce barriers to meaningful family and community engagement and share best practices to involve school stakeholders.

Collaboration with students, families, and community members is the best way to find sustainable solutions to school culture challenges. But our schools struggle to authentically and effectively engage stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> Because most schools do not have a role dedicated to this work, connecting with families becomes another item on everyone’s already long to-do list. This results in methods that are quick or convenient rather than a strategic approach tailored to meet the needs of the school’s unique community.

Similarly, due to time constraints and lack of support, schools often neglect potentially powerful engagement tools, like School Site Councils, which are required through statute. In our experience, because principals often don’t have the time to actively recruit council members, their membership does not often reflect the diversity of the larger community. This means that key voices are often left out of school decision-making, which can harm culture.<sup>13</sup> We must ensure that families from low-income households, non-English speakers, and guardians of children with special needs are encouraged and supported to engage with our schools.<sup>14</sup> Any solution to culture challenges that doesn’t include input from all stakeholders leads to vulnerable students not getting what they need to be successful.

And while we know there are many schools and classrooms that have successfully involved the community, there is no comprehensive statewide data on family engagement to identify areas of need or best practices and share them across the state. Some districts survey parents about the culture of their child’s school, but responses are limited. Only 20 percent of families in Boston who received a survey in 2018 responded.<sup>15</sup>

### ACTION PLAN

**School districts** should establish a role in every school dedicated to family and community engagement.

**The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)** should collect and share parent engagement data disaggregated by school, school type, student demographics, and engagement strategies.

### WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

A role dedicated to engaging families and the community would diagnose and address the issues unique to each school and take on the work to overcome them. This has made a difference in New York City, which has parent coordinators in most of their schools. In addition to engaging families, parent coordinators fill in wherever their schools need them, as event planners, translators, or liaisons.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the school-based role could also reinvigorate School Site Councils through more deliberate recruitment, including the voices of parents who are often underrepresented.

A comprehensive and user-friendly database of family engagement statistics will show us which schools excel at engaging families and allow us to gather best practices from schools across the state. To support the family and community engagement work at the school level, using the data described above, DESE should develop a vision for what effective parent and community engagement looks like and elevate methods that districts have developed to meaningfully engage families consistently. All results should be made publicly available and easily accessible on DESE’s Data and Accountability website, as well as on individual schools’ sites.



# Let Every Child Learn

Support teachers to manage classroom discipline through relationship-building.

Schools should be safe and welcoming places to learn, but every year in Massachusetts thousands of students are removed from school, often for minor infractions.<sup>18</sup> This disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities, damaging relationships essential to a thriving school culture.<sup>19, 20</sup>

We know that the solution to meet our students' needs and manage behavior is restorative, not punitive, discipline. In a recent study conducted in Pittsburgh, the implementation of restorative practices led to a reduction in suspensions and the punitive disparities between white students and students of color. These findings also demonstrated the link between improved relationships and improved school culture overall, as educators involved reported better school climate.<sup>21</sup> Yet, many of us have spent our entire time in the classroom using a different approach. We want to learn more about restorative practices in order to build authentic relationships with our students. This would allow our schools to rely less on exclusionary discipline and promote more inclusive and supportive ways to address behavior and build community.

The 2014 school discipline guidance released by the U.S. Department of Education was created to help districts, schools, and teachers reduce discipline disparities and address school climate through restorative practices, which focus on preventing future misbehavior rather than punishing it.<sup>22</sup>

## ACTION PLAN

**The Massachusetts Legislature** should uphold the principles outlined in the 2014 federal school discipline guidance by instituting it as state guidance.

**The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)** and local districts should expand trainings and supports for the implementation of non-punitive discipline, such as restorative justice.

## WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Codifying the principles outlined in the 2014 federal school discipline guidance in a state resolution would reaffirm Massachusetts' commitment to creating positive school climates. In 2018, our fellow E4E members in Chicago wrote and successfully advocated for two resolutions by state lawmakers urging Illinois to make school climate and culture a statewide priority. Passing similar state resolutions in Massachusetts would be an important first step to partner with the state to transition to non-punitive discipline practices.

In order to implement restorative justice, training should be provided to all educators and administrators. The state and districts should incentivize teachers to attend these trainings by offering a stipend or credit toward Professional Development Points. Additionally, districts should invest in coaches to support schools with their implementation and share learnings between schools. In order for this to be most effective, this approach should be a part of every school's shared vision for a positive school culture.



## Endnotes

- 1 The Massachusetts Equity Partnership. (September 2018). #1 for Some: Opportunity & Achievement in Massachusetts. Retrieved March 20, 2019 from <https://number1forsome.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/09/Number-1-for-Some-9.25-18.pdf>
- 2 MacNeil, A., Prater, D., Busch, S. (January 2009). The Effects of School Culture and Climate on Student Achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12, 73-84. Retrieved April 4, 2019 from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ830019>
- 3 Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R., Benbenisty, R. (November 1, 2016). A Research Synthesis of the Associations Between Socioeconomic Background, Inequality, School Climate, and Academic Achievement. *Review of Educational Research*. Vol. 87(2), p. 425-469.
- 4 Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., Wycoff, J. (January 2012). How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement. National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research. Retrieved April 5, 2019 from <https://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/Ronfeldt-et-al.pdf>
- 5 Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 69, Section 1P. Retrieved March 22, 2019 from <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter69/Section1P>.
- 6 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Grant Allocations and Awards: FY 2019. Retrieved on March 22, 2019 from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/grants/2019/awards/335.html>.
- 7 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. School Council's Legal Responsibilities. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/advisory/schoolcouncils/part2d.html>.
- 8 Ingersoll, R. M.; Sirinides, P.; and Dougherty, P. (2017). School Leadership, Teachers' Roles in School Decision Making, and Student Achievement. CPRE Working Papers. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from [https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre\\_working-papers/15](https://repository.upenn.edu/cpre_working-papers/15).
- 9 Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 71, Section 59C. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section59C>.
- 10 Benner, M., Partelow, L. (February 23, 2017). Reimagining the School Day. Center for American Progress. Retrieved on March 21, 2019 from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2017/02/23/426723/reimagining-the-school-day/>.
- 11 Kaplan, C., Chan, R., Fabram, D., Novoryta, A. Time for Teachers: Leveraging Expanded Time to Strengthen Instruction and Empower Teachers. The Joyce Foundation. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/timeforteachers.pdf>.
- 12 National Education Association. (2008). Policy Brief: Parents, Children, and Community Involvement. Retrieved on March 21, 2019 from [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11\\_ParentInvolvement08.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf).
- 13 Mexican American Legal Defense Fund & the National Education Association. (June 2010). Minority Parent and Community Engagement: Best Practices and Policy Recommendations for Closing the Gaps in Student Achievement. Retrieved on March 21, 2019 from [http://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Minority-Parent-and-Community-Engagement\\_maldef-report\\_final.pdf](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Minority-Parent-and-Community-Engagement_maldef-report_final.pdf).
- 14 Murray, K. W., Finigan-Carr, N., Jones, V., Copeland-Linder, N., Haynie, D. L., & Cheng, T. L. (2014). Barriers and Facilitators to School-Based Parent Involvement for Parents of Urban Public Middle School Students. *SAGE open*, 4(4). Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4844490/>
- 15 Boston Compact. (February 7, 2019). Boston Compact Public Engagement Session.
- 16 Harris, E. (September 7, 2016). The Title: Parent Coordinator. The Job: Whatever Needs to Be Done. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/nyregion/parent-coordinator-new-york-city-public-schools.html>.
- 17 Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 71, Section 59C. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section59C>.
- 18 Skiba, R., Chung, C-G., Trachok, M., Baker, T., Sheya, A., Hughes, R. (August 1, 2014). Parsing Disciplinary Disproportionality: Contributions of Infraction, Student, and School Characteristics to Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(4). Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831214541670>.
- 19 United States Government Accountability Office. (March 2018). A Report to Congress: K-12 Education Discipline Disparities Between Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-258>.
- 20 Skiba, R., Chung, C-G., Trachok, M., Baker, T., Sheya, A., Hughes, R.
- 21 Augustine, C., Enberg, J., Grimm, G., Lee, E., Wang, E., Christianson, K., et al., 2018. Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?: An Evaluation on the Impact of Restorative Practices in a Mid-Sized Urban School District. Rand Corporation, p. 1-110.
- 22 United States Department of Education. (January 8, 2014). U.S. Departments of Education and Justice Release School Discipline Guidance Package to Enhance School Climate and Improve School Discipline Policies/Practices. Retrieved on April 5, 2019 from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-departments-education-and-justice-release-school-discipline-guidance-package>.



We want our students and educators to thrive, not just survive. Our schools need to be safe, inclusive, and nurturing, in addition to meeting our students' social-emotional and academic needs. Our schools need to give educators the structure to learn from each other and build relationships with our students and peers. This cannot happen without resources, opportunities to collaborate, and support from our political leaders, communities, and families. Everyone has a responsibility to invest in our children and take action so our schools can live up to the promises of equity and opportunity for all students.









For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table — the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators for Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers. E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers' Principles and Beliefs.

E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action and advocate for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at [e4e.org](http://e4e.org).

 /Educators4Excellence

 @Ed4Excellence

 [E4E.org](http://E4E.org)