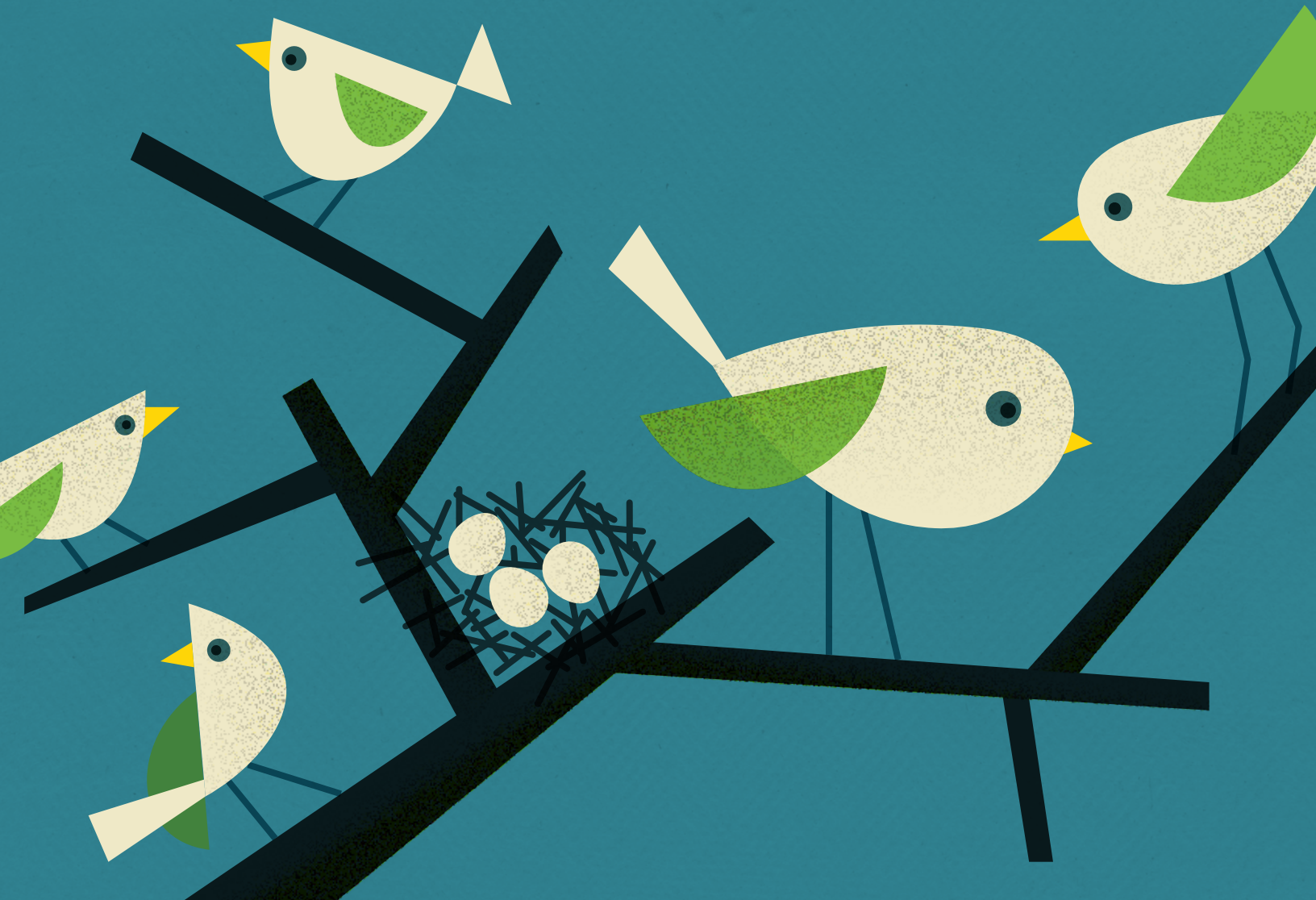





IT TAKES A VILLAGE

IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STUDENT DISCIPLINE IN NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

September 2015



The image features a green background with three stylized birds perched on branches. The birds are rendered in a simple, flat style with a circular eye and a pointed beak. The branches are also stylized, with some overlapping. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

"A safe, secure environment is a threshold issue for any school. It is indispensable if teachers and students are to focus on what is important—teaching and learning."

RANDI WEINGARTEN, *American Federation of Teachers President*
2009 United Federation of Teachers Speech in New York, NY

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LETTER TO OUR STUDENTS

As your teachers, we want the best for you, but the unfortunate truth is that the education system does not always meet your needs. Currently, too many of you are in an environment that does not prepare you for college, a career, and life: a reality connected to our district's insufficient policies around school climate and student discipline.

A wide body of research links disciplinary removals to higher rates of dropping out of school and increased contact with the juvenile justice system.^{1,2} So, first, we acknowledge that discipline removals come at a serious cost to your academic and lifetime achievements.

It's hard for us, as your teachers, to admit that we contribute to this alarming problem. When you don't understand the material and then act out, we too often respond by removing you from class. When you don't show up for class, we react by suspending you—which leads you to miss even more learning time! We know this does not make sense. We know we are sentencing you to fall further behind and to feel less connected to your school, teachers, and education.

Second, we also recognize that our students of color are disproportionately suspended and expelled when compared to white students. National data show that, when compared to white students, Latino and Black students are significantly more likely to be suspended.³ And, unfortunately, these same disparities exist here in Connecticut (*see footnote*).

We've known this for decades and yet haven't addressed the problem. Our district can no longer exist as a reactionary institution. For you, our students, we must do better. We must create healthy, welcoming, and engaging school climates so that you are empowered to drive your own learning and take positive risks; and we must ensure our discipline system treats the root causes of misbehavior rather than perpetuating underlying problems through punitive reactions.

Over the course of several months, we examined how we currently respond to discipline issues and what it means to be suspended or expelled from our system. We read hundreds of pages of research, surveyed our colleagues, and talked to you, our students. We debated and finally came to consensus around how we could improve school culture and discipline in our diverse schools.

We are your teachers, and we want all of you to succeed. Together, let's build an environment that supports you in doing so.

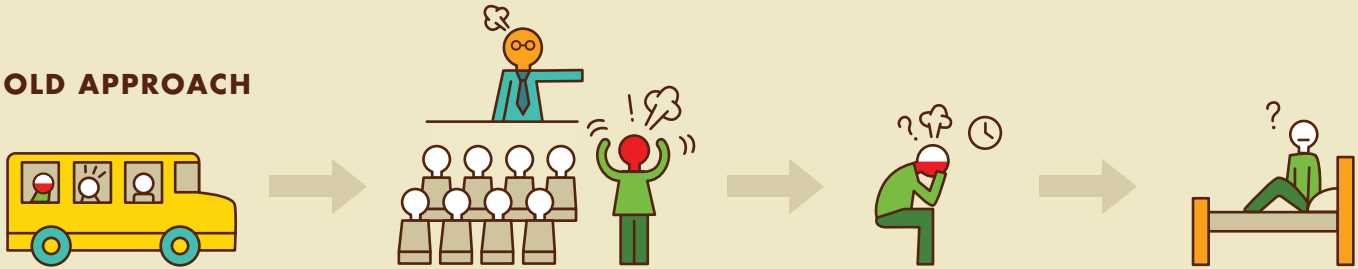
Your teachers,

2015 Educators 4 Excellence-Connecticut Teacher Action Team on School Climate

During the 2012-13 school year, in New Haven, a school district that serves predominantly Black and Latino students, the district handed out nearly 2,000 out-of-school suspensions in a population of approximately 21,183 students. A few miles away in Madison, a predominately white school district, the district handed out only 42 out-of-school suspensions in a population of approximately 3,300 students.⁴ For incidents related to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, students in Madison were suspended an average of 8 days, while students in New Haven were suspended an average of 33 days. For more subjective incidents like school policy violations, students in Madison were suspended an average of 1.5 days, while students in New Haven were suspended for an average of 2.5 days.⁵

A New Approach to Discipline

OLD APPROACH



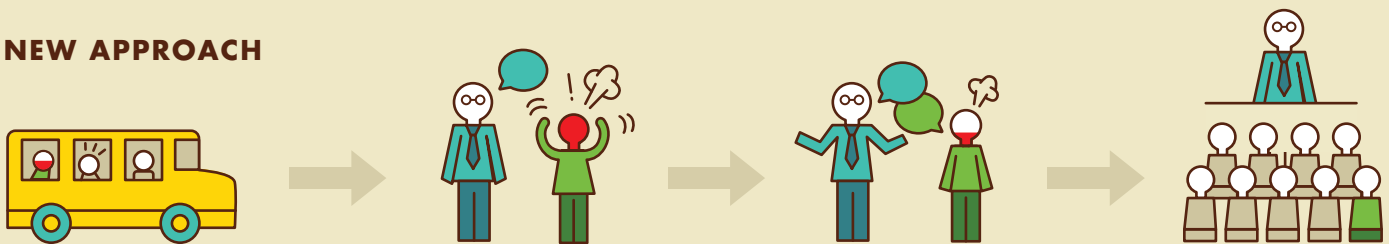
Student shows up to school upset either because of bullying on the bus or challenges at home. His/her negative feelings from the morning carry over into the classroom, and the student refuses to do his/her classwork.

His/her teacher confronts and scolds him/her in front of the class and the student "talks back." The teacher further reprimands the student and the situation escalates into a verbal argument.

The teacher calls security to remove the student from class and he/she spends the rest of the day in in-school suspension with minimal classwork available for him/her.

When a similar situation arises the following week, the student is suspended from school for a few days and sent home without all of his/her make-up work because there is inadequate time for his/her teacher to prepare materials for his/her absence.

NEW APPROACH



Under the same circumstances, a student shows up to school "off." His/her negative feelings carry over into the classroom, and the student refuses to do his/her classwork.

The teacher, who has been trained in responding constructively to students' emotional needs, speaks with the student individually during a quiet moment to better understand the student's emotions and avoid escalating his/her response by discussing his refusal publicly.

Although the student first "talks back" to the teacher's redirection and gently probing questions, the teacher changes the subject to build rapport before returning to the matter at hand.

The student calms down, remains in class, and completes most of his/her work. After the incident and the successful completion of coursework, the teacher and student discuss what happened under calmer circumstances, the student acknowledges what caused his/her challenging emotions, and he/she apologizes to repair the relationship.

INTRODUCTION

School climate has recently received increased attention from educators, civil rights advocates, and policymakers across the nation. At the federal level, the United States Department of Education awarded nearly \$40 million in grants to measure school safety in 2010, ushering in innovations and interventions in the highest need states in our country.⁶ At the state level, in the most recent legislative session, Connecticut legislators banned suspensions for students under eight years old.⁷ Finally, at the local level, our district and union in New Haven have pushed this issue to the forefront by piloting restorative justice practices, expanding the Youth Stat program^a, and emphasizing success for all students in the School Change 2.0 initiative.^{8,9}

As teachers, we are encouraged by the steps being taken by our district, which have led to a reduction in the use of exclusionary discipline practices since the 2008-09 school year.¹⁰ However, there is still significant room for improvement.

Studies confirm what we know by experience: school climate—or a student’s learning environment—has a dramatic impact on student academic performance.¹¹ Research also confirms that students need to be in school to learn;¹² yet exclusionary practices like suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests occur all too often across the district. In a single school year, 2,762 unique disciplinary incidents were reported in New Haven, which resulted in students spending an alarming 15,145 days out of the classroom.¹³

We therefore call on New Haven Public Schools (NHPS) to take proactive measures to develop positive and welcoming school climates, to meet students’ socio-emotional needs, and to help prevent issues of student misbehavior. We also urge the district to continue to promote restorative practices to ensure educators are equipped to react to student misbehavior in a way that repairs relationships, treats the root cause of misbehavior, and discourages recurrence.

With these recommendations, we hope to add to the growing dialogue about school climate and discipline and to be part of the village that works together to ensure that the conversation translates into actual improvements for educators, parents, and students.

^aYouth Stat is a citywide effort to share information about at-risk kids across city departments. Through data sharing, Youth Stat aims to identify at-risk kids, and then intervenes to reengage students in schooling and/or career opportunities and internships.

DISTRICT SYSTEMS

Recently the district and state have taken significant steps to reduce suspensions, expulsions, and other student removals from the classroom for disciplinary reasons. While these reforms are an important first step, we must also ensure that all efforts are coordinated. Research shows that strategies to reduce student removals should be incorporated into a comprehensive plan to create healthy school climates if they are to be successful.¹⁴



CHALLENGE

Though the district has identified school climate as a priority, systems to support and improve school climate are not yet fully integrated into all district practices.

SOLUTION

The district should foster healthy school climates and a proactive and supportive approach to school discipline.

Distinct School Climate Vision

The district has developed an overarching vision within the School Change and School Change 2.0 Initiatives.^b However, the district should define and set a distinct vision specifically for school climate in New Haven.

A clear, actionable vision statement would be a powerful tool for the district to shape values and practice at the school level. By establishing clear priorities, an effective vision statement would enable schools to design and implement aligned initiatives aimed at reducing student removals and improving school culture.

A vision for healthy school climate should be developed by the district in collaboration with teachers and parents. We believe the district's vision should:

- Be restorative, not punitive, by focusing on preventing the recurrence of misbehavior rather than punishing misbehavior.
- Be student-focused and respect the rights of individual students.
- Respect learning time and emphasize keeping students in class whenever possible.
- Encourage the development of respectful, trusting, and caring relationships between students and adults.

Accountability System that Incorporates School Climate and Discipline

If we truly wish to create a proactive and supportive approach to school discipline, the district must hold schools accountable to making improvements in this area.

The district currently uses its annual School Learning Environment Survey to help inform the school tiering process in the district's accountability system. We applaud the district's efforts to call attention to school discipline and climate, but think the district should go further. Currently, school climate and discipline are optional components of principal and school evaluations. To show that creating a positive school climate is a priority for the district and to encourage school-based change, school climate and discipline performance indicators should be a required component of a school's annual evaluation. We propose that schools be responsible for both qualitative results from staff, student, and parent School Learning Environment Surveys, as well as quantitative student disciplinary data including reductions in suspensions and expulsions.

Accountability should also include positive recognition. The district should use school discipline data and School Learning Environment survey data to identify bright spots: schools demonstrating either high overall performance or significant improvement in school climate and discipline. Bright spot schools should be recognized for their success and given a platform to share their achievements and best practices.

By focusing our school evaluation system not solely on the academic success of students, but also on the environment that fosters that success, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to holistic education.

^b The School Change Initiative and School Change 2.0 Initiative are a collaborative school reform project, spearheaded by the New Haven superintendent, Board of Education, mayor, and local teachers' union.

DEFINITION OF SCHOOL CLIMATE PER CONNECTICUT PUBLIC ACT 11-232

The quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of relationships within the school community between and among students and adults.¹⁵

Additional In-School Supports

Accountability is only an effective strategy for change if it is matched with high-quality support. The district should also invest in building the capacity of teachers and other school-level staff to develop positive school climates.

With the passage of Connecticut Public Act 11-232, the district was required to staff a safe school climate specialist in each school.¹⁶

However, not all schools in New Haven have a dedicated safe school climate specialist or similar position; and, for schools that do, this position is not consistently used to support the development of a strong climate at the building and classroom levels.

We believe this position has the potential to build school-level capacity for developing positive school climates.

To achieve this, the district must ensure that every school has a safe school climate specialist or similar position, and make sure teachers are aware of who serves in this capacity in their schools. One strategy would be to empower teacher leaders to serve in this role, in a structure similar to the district's Super Tutor and Teacher Facilitator programs.^c

As outlined in Public Act 11-232, safe school climate specialists are focused predominantly on reacting to and documenting incidents of bullying in schools. We believe there is an incredible opportunity to truly transform school climate if this role is expanded. Given this, we also recommend the district expand the scope of support provided by safe school climate specialists.

“The current systems in place do not support and encourage educators and parents to work together efficiently and effectively. Students should not slip through the cracks, but be caught by the safety net that is provided by faculty, staff, administrators, and parents.”

Keeler Otero, Middle School Science Teacher, Christopher Columbus Family Academy

^c Super Tutors and Teacher Facilitators are relatively new positions in which teachers, if accepted to the program, are paid a stipend for taking on additional responsibilities at their schools. Specifically, Super Tutors conduct after school tutoring for students in need, and Teacher Facilitators run professional development sessions for their colleagues. Super Tutor and Teacher Facilitator stipends are currently covered with a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Research consistently shows that teachers are the most critical school-based factor in a student's academic growth.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, teachers are also a vital part of fostering a positive school climate.¹⁸ However, as teachers, we do not receive sufficient training and support focused on school climate and discipline. Eighty-two percent of educators we surveyed reported that they do not receive adequate training to effectively address student discipline and school culture issues in their classrooms. To better support teachers, the district should redesign its professional development system to make discipline and climate a priority.

CHALLENGE

Teachers are not fully equipped with the tools they need to effectively prevent and respond to student misbehavior.

SOLUTION

The district should redesign its professional development and support system to make healthy school climate and restorative discipline a priority.

Professional Development

The district should not focus solely on developing teachers in academic areas. Developing teachers' skills in responding to student misbehavior and creating positive classroom climates is equally important, because, as research confirms, a positive learning environment is connected to positive academic growth for students.¹⁹

Given this, we recommend that the district provide teachers with high-quality professional development in the following areas: building relationships with students, creating a positive learning environment, and responding with restorative practices.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS: Strong teacher-student relationships are essential to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of students. Furthermore, research has shown that teachers who have built strong relationships with their students are able to limit the impact of their own biases. Because of their strong relationships with students, these teachers are also less likely to make unfair judgments about their students' misbehavior.²⁰ Specifically, we need training on building strong peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student relationships. According to the American Psychological Association, improving student relationships with their teachers and peers can have positive and long-lasting impacts on students' academic and social development.²¹

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: Learning environments, or the culture in which teaching and learning occur, matter. One study of New York City middle school students found that variations in classroom environment account for up to one-third of the gap in test scores and discipline outcomes between students of

color and their white peers.²² To create a positive learning environment, students must feel safe and engaged in their classrooms.²³

For students, a key driver of feeling safe and engaged, particularly in urban schools, is their teacher's cultural competency, or the set of skills which enable educators to work more effectively with students from different cultures than their own.²⁴ To ensure all New Haven students learn in an environment that will nourish their development, the district should not only provide us with trainings on classroom procedures and rules, but also on culturally responsive instruction to encourage us to recognize and reflect on our biases and how these biases affect our students' ability to access learning.

RESTORATIVE RESPONSE: Because we spend every day in the classroom with students, teachers have a direct impact on disciplinary removals. As many education scholars have found, improving school discipline and climate requires more than changing student behavior; we also have to focus on teacher behavior.²⁵ During the 2012-13 school year, only half of the district's discipline incidents qualified as "serious" incidents as defined by the state: 40 percent of the incidents were school policy violations such as disrespect, obscene language, or disruptive behavior. As teachers, we know many of these incidents could be avoided but too often we do not know what specific strategies, other than removal from the classroom, we can use. To avoid unnecessary removals, we need training to respond to misbehavior effectively, especially how to de-escalate situations and to repair relationships using restorative practices.

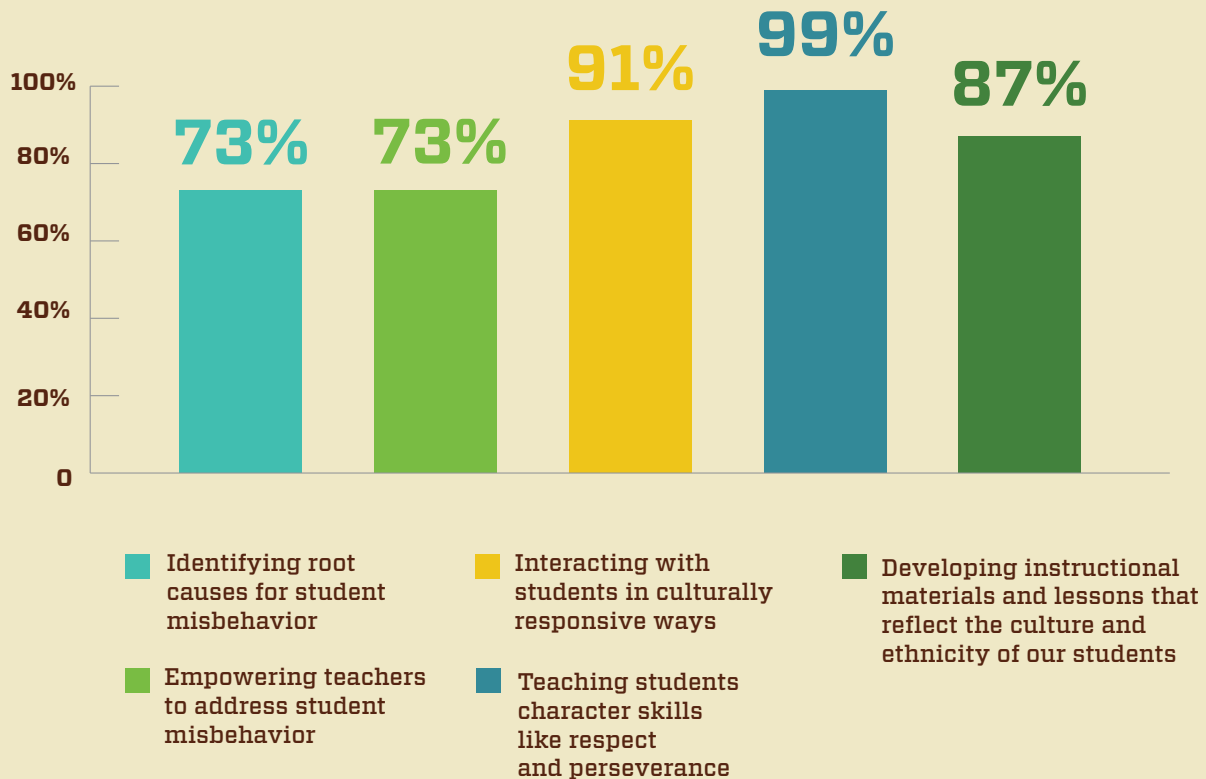
"We need to cultivate a culture of kindness and respect in all human interaction within a school community."

Michael Kuszpa

Middle School Science Teacher, L.W. Beecher Museum Magnet School

POLLS

According to our survey of over 100 New Haven Public Schools teachers, the most immediate supports needed include:



New Haven educators were asked what the district should do to develop positive school climates and a school discipline system that treats the root cause of student misbehavior.

93%

Agree that teachers should be provided trainings on culturally responsive ways to interact with students.

99%

Agree that the district should prioritize teaching students character skills like respect and perseverance.

93%

Agree that the district should prioritize using instructional materials that reflect the culture and ethnicity of its students.

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

In collaboration with the city, New Haven Public Schools Superintendent Garth Harries is championing work to meet student needs with the Youth Stat program, which provides intensive support to re-invest the most disengaged, at-risk students. We believe this work is important, and also believe our district must reach all students, and must reach them earlier.

When students' needs are unmet there is increased misbehavior, more removals from class, greater isolation, and increased gaps in academic learning. To break this cycle, the district should invest in student empowerment programs, socio-emotional skill development, and celebrations of student success on discipline and climate.



CHALLENGE

Unmet student needs create a cycle of student misbehavior and discipline removals, which leave students feeling unwelcome, isolated, and academically behind.

SOLUTION

The district should invest in student empowerment programs, additional student supports, and opportunities to celebrate success on school discipline and climate.



EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-RUN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

STUDENT-RUN MEDIATION: A program in which student leaders act as mediators to help other students resolve disputes in a confidential process. Student-run mediation helps students in conflict resolve their disputes and create their own solutions using shared problem-solving. Student-run mediation empowers students to lead conflict resolution at their schools, providing students a sense of ownership on climate and discipline in their schools.³²

OLDER BUDDIES OR PEER MENTORS: A program in which older students befriend and mentor younger students in a structured environment to provide a positive behavioral role model for students in need. There is a growing body of evidence to support positive peer mentoring effects for both the mentee and mentor. For mentees, research has found mentoring to provide increased connection to school and peers, improvements in social skills, and fewer behavioral incidents. For mentors, research has found mentoring to provide improvements in empathy among students and improved moral reasoning.³³

DEFINITION OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Socio-emotional learning is the education program that focuses on developing the skills, behaviors, and attitudes students need to effectively manage their cognitive and social behavior.²⁶

Student Empowerment

To break the cycle of unmet student needs and disciplinary removals from class, we must ensure students are engaged as part of the solution. A strong school climate is not created solely by teachers and administrators; it includes empowered students who help drive change in their schools. Providing students an opportunity to accept increased responsibility for community building will elevate students as true partners in our effort to create positive school climates. At the district level, this may include the district's pilot of restorative practices, which kicked off in the 2015-16 school year. At the school level, this may include student-run conflict resolution or mediator programs, and older buddy or peer mentors, in addition to other student leadership opportunities.

Socio-Emotional Skill Development

Students need explicit teaching and re-teaching of socio-emotional skills so they can be productive members of a community. In New Haven, we dedicate explicit time and resources to the teaching and reinforcement of academic skills, but we do not commit similar resources to the teaching and reinforcement of socio-emotional skills.

Our lack of prioritization of socio-emotional education in our schools has serious consequences for our students and school climates.

Socio-emotional learning can be a critical lever for improving student behavioral outcomes and overall school performance.²⁷ Schools that explicitly teach social and emotional learning skills report fewer disciplinary incidents, including fewer students exhibiting aggressive behavior.²⁸ In one district we studied, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, only five years after its socio-emotional learning initiative launched, the district saw dramatic and positive behavioral outcomes for students, including a significant reduction in the number of suspend-able behavior incidents.²⁹

Too often, the district's socio-emotional learning programs—including Comer and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)⁴—are stand-alone initiatives that are not fully integrated in the school's priorities. We recommend the district develop a socio-emotional learning program that is embedded in the district's curriculum and emphasized in the district's overarching educational goals.

In our research, we found that school climate cannot be simply another initiative in an already overloaded system of reforms. To ensure impact, we found school climate must be embedded in all school and district activities.³⁰ For example, at one district we studied in Austin, Texas, the district provided guidance for schools to create a unified approach to socio-emotional learning. With district support, once a month, principals led teachers to share socio-emotional learning best practices, develop schoolwide socio-emotional initiatives, and identify academic areas in which socio-emotional learning could be integrated into existing lessons. After only two years of implementation, teachers and administrators saw a palpable change in school climate: students became more engaged in class, discipline referrals declined, and interactions between students and adults improved.³¹

Recognition of Success

Our school climates need to emphasize the positive. The district should develop a citywide school climate incentive program to recognize and celebrate students who have either contributed to the development of a positive school climate or have made significant progress behaviorally. Recognition should include a scaled set of awards to recognize differentiated levels of success for students. On the more inclusive end, the district could work to publish students' names in the newspaper as positive contributors to school climate similar to the honor roll or perfect attendance lists currently published. On the more selective end, the district could create an annual student citizenship award, to recognize students who dramatically shape their school's positive climate.

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Research confirms what we already know: when parents and teachers work together, students succeed.³⁴ However, while the district has prioritized parent participation with programs like Parent University and the Citywide Parent Leadership Team^e, parent engagement has not always trickled down into schools to improve school-and-home relationships.

^e Parent University is a free Parent Support Network for all New Haven Public School parents. A critical component of New Haven's School Change Initiative, Parent University aims to give parents the tools they need to help their children succeed in school and in life. The Citywide Parent Leadership Team consists of parents from each school to provide input to the district. It is an open group and encourages participation from parents interested in becoming more involved with both individual schools and the school district.



CHALLENGE

Insufficient collaboration and communication systems discourage positive school-and-home partnerships.

SOLUTION

The district should develop systems to better facilitate communication between parents and teachers, and to promote deep parent engagement and welcoming school environments.

Two-way Communication

To deepen engagement, schools should first develop two-way communication pathways between schools and parents. Two-way communication would allow teachers to share information with parents on students' behavior in school, and also allow parents to proactively share information with teachers about stressors or life changes for students.

For this to happen, the district must support schools to develop flexible communication avenues with parents.

The district should provide more than one parent-teacher conference time and offer conference meetings at flexible times. Our most recent district calendar includes additional time for teachers to hold parent-teacher conferences.³⁵

The district should capitalize on this existing structure and build in both daytime and evening conference times to make it more convenient for parents to attend.

The district should also create a unified database of family contact information and publish teacher contact information so that points of contact are easily accessible to parents and teachers. To ensure full and accurate access to family contact information, contact information ought to be regularly updated across schools and linked to

siblings across the district. In our efforts to promote regular communication between home and school, protecting the privacy and security of student and teacher data is crucial. In this undertaking, the district should take every effort to ensure all contact information is kept confidential and secure.

Parent Engagement

True parental engagement involves more than seeking parental support to manage student misbehavior; schools should also involve parents in school planning discussions about discipline and climate.

This deeper level of engagement must start with educators. To facilitate stronger parent involvement, we should better utilize our existing parent engagement structures like School Planning and Management Teams^f (SPMT) as avenues to engage parents as decision-makers. While implementation of SPMTs has been inconsistent across the district, we believe these structures have the potential to dramatically improve the partnership between parents and schools, especially on issues of school discipline and climate.

^f School Planning Management Teams develop a comprehensive school plan, set academic, social and community relations goals, and coordinate all school activities, including staff development programs.

TYPES OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

According to education scholar Joyce Epstein, the six types of parent involvement are:

- 1. PARENTING:** Helping parents establish home environments to support learning.
- 2. COMMUNICATING:** Developing effective two-way, frequent, systematic communication between home and school about school programs and student's progress and challenges.
- 3. VOLUNTEERING:** Recruiting, training, and organizing parents to equip them with the skills they need to support the school's programs and priorities.
- 4. LEARNING AT HOME:** Ensuring parents have the information needed to create continued aligned environments at home.
- 5. DECISION-MAKING:** Empowering parents to participate in school governance and advocacy activities.
- 6. COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY:** Empowering parents to collaborate with business and local community organizations to support student learning and school success.³⁶

Specifically we recommend the district require schools to use SPMTs to empower parents to:

- Help develop and implement school-level plans for school climate and discipline.
- Collaboratively set goals for improved school climate and discipline outcomes.
- Review school-level discipline data and School Learning Environment survey data to ensure school accountability toward goals to reduce disciplinary removals and increase positive school climate.

CONCLUSION

As teachers, we entered the profession and go to work every day with a single goal in mind: ensuring the long-term success and happiness of the students we serve. We know that, to accomplish this, our schools must meet both the academic and behavioral needs of our students. Our district must take proactive measures to create a healthy, welcoming, and engaging school climate, and identify alternative school discipline structures to treat the root causes for student misbehavior. With our recommendations—district systems, support for teachers, support for students, and support for parents—we recognize that we all have a role to play in improving school climate and discipline in New Haven. As members of our village, we, the E4E-Connecticut Teacher Action Team on School Climate and Discipline, eagerly begin this work, in partnership with our school communities, to ensure the best for our students.



TEACHER ACTION TEAM PROCESS & METHODOLOGY

IDENTIFYING E4E'S POLICY FOCUS: To identify this policy issue, Educators 4 Excellence-Connecticut held more than 120 focus groups, school visits, and individual conversations with New Haven educators and stakeholders. We also surveyed over 100 New Haven Public School educators. Through this process, school climate and discipline emerged as one of the most critical issues, with 70 percent of teacher survey respondents ranking the issue as one of the two most important and impactful issues for change.

REVIEWING RESEARCH: The Teacher Action Team on School Climate met for six weeks to review research on school climate and discipline. In our process, we considered current problems, root causes, barriers, and potential solutions. As we explored solutions, we studied programs and ideas from across the nation, as well as promising policies and practices right here in New Haven. We used this knowledge, along with our collective experiences as New Haven teachers, to draft recommendations outlined in this paper.

CONDUCTING LOCAL RESEARCH: Action Team members conducted interviews with our teacher colleagues, district leaders, and NHPS parents to gather critical information about school climate and discipline policies and practices. When developing our policy recommendations, Teacher Action Team members held focus groups, surveyed colleagues, and participated in a panel discussion with parent leaders in the district.

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THE 2015 EDUCATORS 4 EXCELLENCE-CONNECTICUT NEW HAVEN TEACHER ACTION TEAM ON SCHOOL CLIMATE AND DISCIPLINE

Caroline Apgar

Middle School English Language Arts Teacher and Restorative Practices Representative at Mauro-Sheridan Science, Technology, and Communications Interdistrict Magnet School

Donna Bartling

Middle School Mathematics Teacher at L.W. Beecher Museum School

Eva Landau

Elementary School Teacher and Student Support Facilitator at Mauro-Sheridan Science, Technology, and Communications Interdistrict Magnet School

Keeler Otero

Middle School Science Teacher at Christopher Columbus Family Academy

Matt Erickson

Mentor Science Teacher for New Haven Public Schools

Saad Qureshi

High School Science Teacher at Metropolitan Business Academy

Sandra Luu

Talented and Gifted Teacher for New Haven Public Schools

Zach Kafoglis

Elementary Bilingual Education Teacher at Fair Haven School

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