



Mission Driven Schools Positive School Climates

August 19, 2015

Key findings

- Schools that work recognize that all students can achieve
- Schools that work model and teach dignity and respect
- Schools that work emphasize accountability, build character, and teach students how to make amends—rather than suspend them—when they misbehave.
- Schools that work provide stability in leadership
- Schools that work for students work for parents

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Join us on Twitter at noon on August 19, 2015 for a discussion of this brief and what we can do to improve school climates in Pittsburgh.

Use #pghschoolclimate to follow the discussion.



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Mission Driven Schools and Positive School Climates

When you walk into a school with a positive school climate, you observe many things: students are challenged, thinking hard, and actively participating in their own learning. Adults and students interact in positive and caring ways. Teachers enjoy the flexibility to collaborate, working under leaders who create supportive instructional environments. These schools have something in common that helps bring about higher student achievement, fewer suspensions, and better attendance: **they all have positive school climates.**

Our students can best succeed when they come to school every day feeling safe, welcomed, and respected. They also succeed when taught by teachers who expect them to achieve at high levels and who encourage them to think, reason, and try hard. Keep reading to learn more about how positive school climates are making a difference for our City's students and why mission driven schools with student-centered practices must be made a priority in our District.

What is school climate and why does it matter?

Students thrive in positive school climates, which are defined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) as the quality and character of school life.^a According to the National School Climate Center (NSCC) a positive school climate includes:

- norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe, engaged, and respected;
- students, families, and educators working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision and care of the physical school environment; and
- educators modeling and pursuing attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning

Extensive research proves that school climate affects student outcomes. School climate has been shown to affect middle school students' self-esteem^b and a wide range of emotional and mental health outcomes.^c A positive school climate is related to a lower frequency of students' substance abuse.^d Studies have also found that a positive school climate is correlated with decreased student absenteeism^e and lower rates of suspension.^f

What do we know about school climate in Pittsburgh?

Since 2009 we have been conducting our own research with principals, counselors, social workers, teachers, and students to better understand what school climate factors are linked to positive student outcomes. Year after year, the results indicate statistically significant relationships between school practices and student outcomes. Namely, when schools and their staff have high expectations of students, positive disciplinary practices that address root causes of behavior and help students make amends, and a stable teaching staff that treats students with respect and dignity, their students have higher achievement, higher graduation rates, lower chronic absenteeism, and lower suspension rates.^g

In this brief we examine several additional factors associated with school climate that were gathered by other researchers or shared by the District: principal stability, whether parents would recommend the

school, whether teachers feel their school is a good place to work and learn, and whether students feel cared for and challenged by their teachers.¹

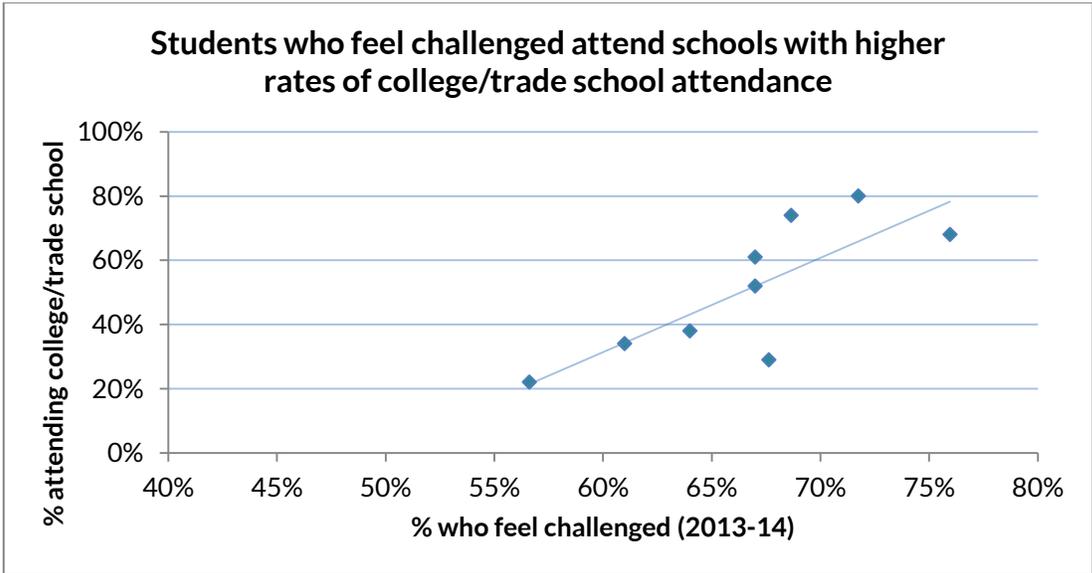
Schools that work recognize that all students can achieve

Our vision for Pittsburgh is that 100% of students—white, black and brown—graduate ready for college or career. We acknowledge that many factors outside of a school’s control affect student achievement. However, schools that live and breathe by the proven fact that **effort creates ability** have higher-achieving students who are more likely to be prepared for life beyond high school. Research over many decades has proven that when adults in schools have high expectations for students and act on the belief that all students can learn and succeed, students will achieve at higher levels.^h



High expectations are linked to achievement in Pittsburgh Public Schools:

High school students who feel challenged generally attend schools with higher graduation rates, higher percentages of seniors eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise, higher percentages of Algebra proficiency by 11th grade, and higher percentages of graduates attending college or trade school directly after graduating.

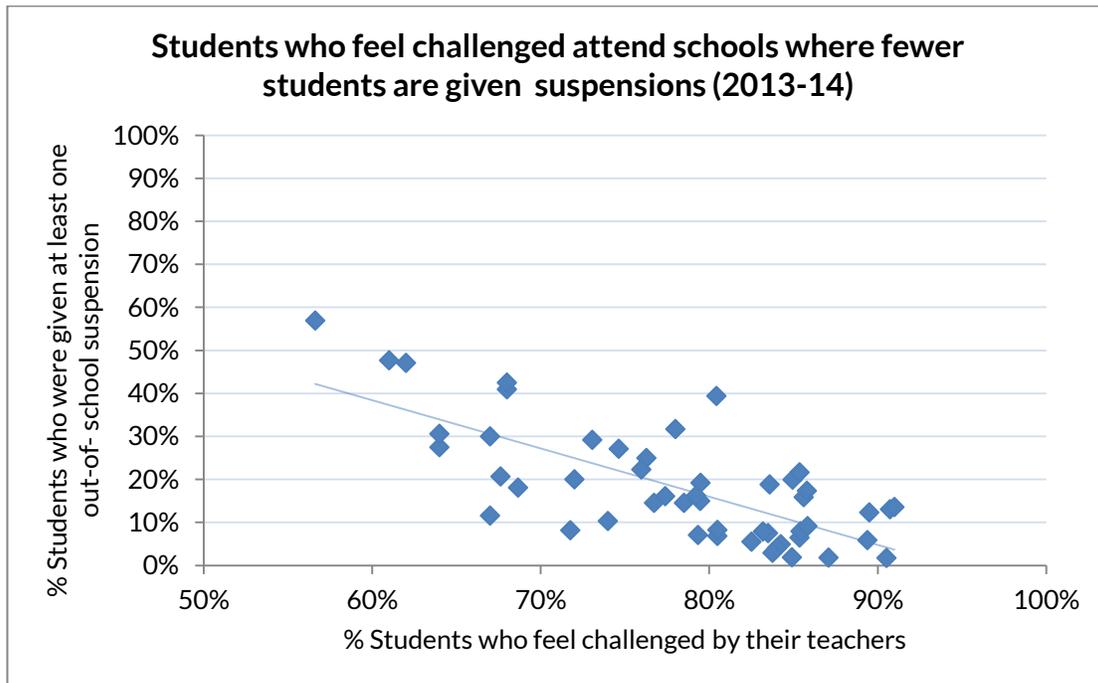


High expectations are linked to student engagement in Pittsburgh Public Schools:

Students who feel challenged and cared for by their teachersⁱ and whose principals report more teachers who have high expectations of all students^j are significantly less likely to receive an out-of-school suspension or to be chronically absent (missing 10% or more of school days, excused or unexcused).

¹ Responses came from the Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey (completed annually by teachers), the Pittsburgh Public Schools Parent Survey (mailed to parents annually), and the Tripod Student Survey (administered to students twice a year).

When principals report more teachers with high expectations, they also report more teachers proactively working to make the school **safe, positive, and academically rigorous**. These principals also report greater school wide effectiveness at developing students’ social and emotional learning skills.^k These actions nurture a positive school climate that helps keep students engaged and less likely to participate in negative behaviors.



Schools that work model and teach dignity and respect

All students should be treated with—and taught to treat others with—dignity and respect in school. Effective teachers value the diversity of their students and work hard to make their classrooms safe and inclusive spaces where all students can learn and succeed.^l Where students perceive a better-structured school with positive student-teacher relationships, behavioral problems are less likely to occur.^m Relationships start early; if a student-teacher relationship is negative in kindergarten, it is more likely that the student will have academic and behavioral problems in later grades.ⁿ

Modeling dignity and respect is linked to student achievement in Pittsburgh Public Schools: Principals at less vulnerable schools—which have higher achievement, growth, and lower achievement gaps, report more staff members proactively working to create a positive school culture or actively addressing students when they make discriminatory comments toward one another.^o

Schools with more black and brown students must prioritize modeling dignity and respect: High school students attending schools with higher percentages of black and brown students reported fewer of their teachers treating them with respect or caring about their lives outside of school. Principals at these schools also reported similar challenges.^p

Schools that work emphasize accountability, build character, and teach students how to make amends—rather than suspend them—when they misbehave.

Until recently, schools in our District practiced zero tolerance policies that automatically suspended students for minor infractions such as dress code violations, disrespect, and cell phone use. Exclusionary discipline such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions has negative consequences for students: just one suspension in 9th grade doubles the chance of a student dropping out, from 16% to 32%.^q

Suspensions have a disproportionate effect on black and brown students. According to the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, black and brown students are three times as likely to be suspended as white students across the country.^r This pattern exists in Pittsburgh Public Schools, where 10% of all African American students were suspended in October and November 2014, compared to only 3% of White students. Black students received 76% of the suspensions even though they represent just 53% of the District's students.^s

There are alternatives to exclusionary discipline. These alternatives prioritize keeping students in the classroom by helping them understand and address the root causes of their misbehavior. One promising alternative that has recently been embraced by the District is **restorative practices**. Restorative practices refer to a set of school wide values and actions that emphasize the importance of positive relationships as central to building community and provide opportunities to restore relationships when harm has occurred.^t

More schools reporting using restorative practices in Pittsburgh Public Schools:

Although 39 out of 50 schools continue to practice zero tolerance policies, a third of principals report positive changes based on the Student Bill of Rights championed by Teen Bloc students last year. These changes include reducing the number of minor infractions resulting automatic suspension, using restorative practices such as mediation with students and parents, and more staff having high expectations and modeling positive relationships with students.^u

Restorative practices are linked with lower suspension rates in Pittsburgh Public Schools:

The average suspension rate was lower or the same in schools reported to have more effective restorative practices than in schools reported to have less effective restorative practices or that do not use restorative practices.^v

Schools that work provide stability in leadership

We know that effective leadership takes time to grow at a school. Principals must collaborate with teachers to establish a shared vision of instruction and performance. They must monitor and assess teaching and learning, ensuring that teachers receive meaningful feedback, resources, and flexibility with their time in order to grow their practice.^w

Principal stability is linked with positive student outcomes in Pittsburgh. We looked at the number of principals each high school has had in the past 4 years (range: one to three). Every school with students in the top quartile of college or trade school attendance, eligibility for the Pittsburgh Promise, and enrollment in advanced courses (Advanced Placement and Center for Advanced Studies) had only one principal in the past four years.

Schools that work for students work for parents

Parents across the district responded to a survey about their satisfaction with their child's school. While survey response rates were generally low and uneven across schools, we found significant relationships

among the data we analyzed. Overall, when parents say they would recommend their child's school to another parent, the following positive indicators of school climate are in place:

- More teachers feel the school is a good place to work and learn
- Student stability rate is higher
- Chronic absences are lower
- Fewer students are suspended
- More students proficient in English and Language Arts and Math
- Smaller racial achievement gaps

Recommendations to Schools and the District

In order to create positive school climates where adults consistently support every student's social, emotional, and academic success,

Schools should:

Demonstrate High Expectations for Students

- Increase academic rigor by holding students to high standards and encouraging effort
- Teachers and other school staff should model the school's behavior expectations and teach students how to replace inappropriate behaviors with appropriate ones
- Implement a plan for developing students' social and emotional learning skills (i.e., managing emotions, conflict mediation, etc.)

Emphasize Accountability, Building Character, Making Amends, and Keeping Students in School

- Remove students from school only when there is a real and immediate safety threat to the school community
- Eliminate zero tolerance policies and replace them with restorative practices
- Provide training, support, and time for schools to implement restorative practices that reduce the number of disciplinary actions taking students out of class
- Provide support for parents and students to understand and use restorative practices

The District should:

Create stable environments for principals to lead, teachers to teach, and students to succeed

- Support visionary leaders who develop strong instructional cultures that help all teachers improve and increase students' academic success
- Empower principals to hire their own team and hold them accountable for outcomes

Conclusion

School climate is critical to student success. Both national research and data from our own school district show that when adults in schools have high expectations for their students and build positive, respectful relationships with them, students are more likely to succeed academically. Students who attend these schools have better attendance and miss fewer days of class due to suspensions, and parents are more likely to recommend these schools. Moreover, students attending schools with stable leadership are better prepared for college and career. By intentionally working to build positive schools climates where students feel safe, welcomed, respected, and challenged to achieve at a high level, Pittsburgh can give

students what they deserve: a high quality education that—regardless of their race or background—supports their success.

^a "School Climate Standards." *Pennsylvania Department of Education* 1 (2010). <http://www.pa-strengthening-families.org/providers/311/School%20Climate%20Standards.pdf>.

^b Hoge, D.R., Smit, E.K., & Hanson, S.L. (1990). School experiences predicting changes in self-esteem of sixth and seventh-grade students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82, 117-127.

^c Kuperminic, G.P., Leadbeater, B.J., Emmons, C., & Blatt, S.J. (1997). Perceived school climate and difficulties in the social adjustment of middle school students. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1, 76-88.

^d LaRusson, M., Romer, D., & Selman, R. (2008). Teachers as builders of respectful school climates: Implications for adolescent drug use norms and depressive symptoms in high school. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 37, 386-398.

^e Rumberger, R. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Education Research*, 57, 1-29.

^f Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). High suspension schools and dropout rates for black and white students. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 34, 167-192.

^g A+ Schools School Works Results (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

^h University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning. Retrieved from http://ifl.pitt.edu/index.php/who_we_are/principles_of_learning

ⁱ Based on student responses from the Tripod Student Survey administered to K-12 students in 2013-14.

^j A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^k A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^l University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning. Retrieved from http://ifl.pitt.edu/index.php/who_we_are/what_we_know

^m Gregory, A., & Cornell, D. (2009). "Tolerating" adolescent needs: Moving beyond zero tolerance policies in high school. *Theory Into Practice*, 48, 106-113.

ⁿ Hamre, B.K., & Pianta, R.C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children's school outcomes through eighth-grade. *Child Development*, 72, 625-638.

^o A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^p A+ Schools. Students Have Spoken: Will You Listen? School Works Results (2014).

^q Balfanz, R., Byrnes, V., & Fox, J. (2012) Sent Home and Put Off-Track: the Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade. Everyone graduates center, School of Education, Johns Hopkins University

^r Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (March 2014). Retrieved from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>.

^s A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^t Amstutz, L. & Mullet, J. The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools. (2005)

^u A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^v A+ Schools. Schools that Work: What we Learned from Principals (March 2015).

^w University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning. Retrieved from http://ifl.pitt.edu/index.php/who_we_are/what_we_know