

Why School Climate Matters for Teachers and Students

Teachers in strong climates get better faster, stay longer, and propel their students to greater heights.

Over the past decade, education reformers have focused much of their attention on raising teacher quality. This makes sense, given the well-evidenced, large impacts teachers have on student outcomes and the wide variation in teacher effectiveness, even within the same school.¹ Yet this focus on individual teachers has caused policymakers to lose sight of the importance of the organizational contexts in which teachers work and students learn.

The quality of a school's teaching staff is greater than the sum of its parts. School environments can enable teachers to perform to their fullest potential or undercut their efforts to do so.

When we think of work environments, we often envision physical features: school facilities, instructional resources, and the surrounding neighborhood. State and district policies that shape curriculum standards, class size, and compensation also come to mind. These things matter, but so do school climate factors that are less easily observed or measured. Teachers' day-to-day experiences are influenced most directly by the culture and interpersonal environment of their schools.

School climates consist of a constellation of organizational features that shape teachers' and students' experiences. Strong school climates are characterized by supportive leadership, teacher collaboration, high expectations for students, and a collective commitment to support student learning. Teaching is a social career, and the relationships that teachers have with those who support their work in the classroom—administrators and colleagues—heavily influence teachers' satisfaction and success.

Strong professional environments foster a virtuous cycle in which teachers develop

skills faster, stay at a school longer, and improve student learning year over year. State education agencies and boards of education that are working to improve instruction across school systems would do well to recognize the interconnected nature of teachers' work and the environments in which they perform their craft.

Teacher Development

Work environments can support—or hinder—effective instruction and teachers' professional growth. Researchers and policymakers often talk about teacher ability as if it were fixed and fully portable across school contexts, but teachers' performance depends on how well matched their skills are with their students' needs and the work environment. Teachers' skills are multidimensional and do not always translate across student populations and school settings. Even the most talented and dedicated teachers will struggle to overcome a school culture that lacks a safe, supportive learning environment.

Strong work environments enable teachers to perform to their potential. Teachers are most effective in environments characterized by trust, respect, and a collective commitment to upholding school values and expectations. Organizational practices such as protecting learning time and restorative behavior policies can improve teacher effectiveness by creating conditions for success in the classroom.²

Teachers also improve faster and continue to become more effective throughout their careers in schools with supportive professional environments.³ Almost all teachers improve in their first few years on the job as they gain experience in the classroom and learn from

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their mistakes. However, some teachers plateau after their early career, while others continue to refine their craft.⁴

School environments can help promote rapid improvement and extend professional growth through formal and informal opportunities for on-the-job learning. Meaningful peer collaboration helps develop teachers' skills, facilitates open feedback, and strengthens collegial relationships.⁵ Teachers get better when there is a school norm of continuous improvement that fosters innovation, collaboration, and the trust necessary to allow teachers to experiment with new instructional techniques.

Teacher Retention

Developing and retaining an effective teaching staff is among the most important avenues through which administrators can drive school improvement. Teachers disproportionately leave large, urban school districts that serve students of color for suburban, high-income districts that primarily serve white students.⁶ Researchers and policymakers tend to ascribe teachers' career decisions to the students they teach rather than the conditions in which they work. Evidence suggests, however, that poor working conditions in many large, low-income urban schools are the driving factor in differential turnover rates.⁷

Positive work environments promote teachers' sense of self-efficacy, which contributes to increased satisfaction and retention.⁸ Social characteristics of the school environment—such as principal leadership, collegial relationships, and school culture—have the largest effects on teachers' satisfaction.⁹ When administrators collaborate with teachers, grant them autonomy, and create teacher leadership positions, teachers are more likely to feel successful and stay on the job.¹⁰

Schools and students bear the cost of high teacher turnover. When teachers leave, less-effective novice teachers often replace them.¹¹ Turnover creates organizational instability, which in turn disrupts teachers' efforts to collaborate or coordinate instruction. Some organizational churn is normal and even healthy, but chronically high levels of turnover hinder student learning.¹² Reducing turnover and retaining effective teachers will strengthen

the school environment and improve education quality for all students.

Student Achievement

Better work environments foster teachers' and students' joint success.¹³ School safety, order, and academic expectations affect teachers' work and their students' learning.¹⁴ A safe environment enables students and teachers to focus on learning, and an orderly environment minimizes disruptions in class.¹⁵ In Chicago, for example, the best-performing schools are more than twice as likely to have safe, orderly climates as low-performing schools.¹⁶

High expectations for students, combined with the relevant supports, also enable student success. When consistent throughout a school and coupled with academic and social-emotional supports, setting a high bar promotes student development.¹⁷ Teachers play an important role in creating a collective culture where students believe they are capable of meeting high standards. In this way, a strong professional environment for teachers facilitates a strong learning environment for students, and vice versa. Cultivating environments where students feel like they belong and are valued members of the community further promotes both academic achievement and social-emotional development.

Directions for Policy

Efforts to strengthen school environments should begin with identifying school-specific structural or cultural weaknesses. Several state education agencies now administer annual climate surveys to teachers and students statewide to inform and track schools' improvement efforts and allow for district-level comparisons across the state (see also article, page 23).

School climate surveys are effective diagnostic tools that assess a range of features important for school organizational contexts. With the right level of specificity, climate survey data can help leaders and teachers understand, more tangibly, the nuances of their work environment and construct targeted plans to strengthen it. Depending on the setting, initiatives might include fostering productive collaboration between teachers,¹⁸ implementing social-emotional behavioral supports,¹⁹ setting high

expectations for learners,²⁰ and engaging parents more directly in the education process.

Principals are key change agents in efforts to improve school climate.²¹ Effective principals develop a collective commitment among their staff and a collaborative work environment. School leaders accomplish this by setting and consistently upholding school norms, providing opportunities for teacher leadership, and conducting rigorous screening processes for vacant teaching positions that seek to identify both strong teachers and those who are a good fit with the culture of the school. However, principals' ability to select the best candidates for the job is often constrained by state laws and district policies. State policymakers have an important role to play in creating a legislative landscape that allows school leadership to have greater autonomy over hiring.

Creating positive school environments is the collective work of principals, teachers, and communities. Schools improve when principals facilitate an open-door culture committed to teacher development and provide teachers with specific, actionable feedback.²² Similarly, creating social and behavioral supports for students allows teachers to focus more on teaching and less on counseling and behavioral management.

When schools raise expectations for students and provide the necessary organizational support to achieve those standards, high standards become both empowering and attainable. State policy should provide school leaders with the budgetary flexibility necessary to staff their schools with an effective mix of student support positions.

Every school can improve its conditions for working and learning. For state education agencies and district leaders looking for further direction, we highly recommend *Teaching in Context: The Social Side of Education Reform*, edited by Esther Quintero and Susan Moore Johnson's *Where Teachers Thrive, Organizing Schools for Success*. These books provide detailed case studies and evidence-based recommendations for strengthening schools as organizations.

State boards of education have the power to create policy and advocate for the flexibility and resources necessary to support strong school climates. There are no easy solutions, but dedicated and sustained efforts can make

the difference between schools where teachers stay and thrive versus those where they struggle and leave. ■

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