

Student Voice

Students Can Help Create the Climate They Want to See

In the quest to improve school climate, it is easy to get bogged down in numbers. Seemingly endless data fill the Powerpoint presentations about how students feel in school. While vital to creating a safe, supportive environment for all students, the data will only get state and school leaders so far. It is what we as leaders do with the data that matters.

And within a topic as important and interpersonal as school climate, students are best equipped to further improvements. They are the ones whose actions most directly affect school climate. They see what is wrong and know how to help fix it. Often, the only thing missing is the opportunity to do so.

As the student member of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, I oversee the State Student Advisory Council. This organization comprises high school students from around the commonwealth. Over the past few years, the council has been focusing on school climate and safe, supportive learning environments for all students. Working with the Office of Research and Evaluation within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, council members this past year reached out to their respective principals to obtain school data from the statewide Views on Climate and Learning (VOCAL) Survey, which is voluntarily administered alongside the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. The data are rarely shared between schools and not normally accessible to the public, but the students took great care to use the data ethically and in compliance with confidentiality agreements.

Using the data, the students began to pinpoint problems to address. Some

identified mental health as their focus, others racism and homophobia, and some found student engagement with the curriculum to be their school's biggest downfall. Each student set out to help their school address areas that needed improvement. The students ran focus groups with school staff and fellow students to help gather context before they returned to the department to debrief.

In addressing the issues, the students established best practices. One talked about her school's issue with the guidance department; another mentioned his school's guidance dropbox, which lets students quickly and discreetly seek help. One mentioned his school's issue with transition from middle to high school; another talked about a Step-Back Day program, where high schoolers visit the middle school to answer questions to ease the transition. Both students clearly understood the problems their schools faced and were attuned to what would work best to address them.

To truly ensure everyone is welcomed into a safe, supportive environment each morning, state leaders must work in tandem with the people who create school climate. Students want to roll up their sleeves and help make it better. By bringing students together and getting them invested in improving their schools, state education leaders can begin to fix the problems schools face.

Students can do much on their own. But if they work with their state board of education, they can accomplish much more. So before state board members dive deeply into their climate data, they should get students in the room and allow them to be a part of the solution to the problems the surveys reveal. ■



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