

SUBJECT:

# Best Practices:

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ENHANCING

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT



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## Introduction

This monograph on Best Practices in Enhancing School Environment has been developed under contract with the Department of Defense. While its focus is to help military connected schools to better address the needs of their military students, what we present has relevance for all of our children in all of our schools.

First, a few words on how the extraordinary programs you are going to read about were selected. We began by undertaking a review of the literature, identifying those programs aimed at improving school engagement and connectedness with the goal of identifying those programs that have been empirically shown to have an impact. From that literature we then used a nomination technique to identify the “best of the best”—the one school that exemplifies the principles that make effective programs work. The schools that you will read about and view on the DVD provided in the back cover have been selected not because they are extraordinary but rather because they are ordinary. These schools have put into place with limited resources, programs and interventions that any school can do. Some of the schools we have selected are in urban inner city settings and others are in rural communities. Some target children at the elementary school level and others at junior high and high school. Some are military linked and some are not. What we highlight is what these schools do to make their programs work.

It is our hope that you will come away from the monograph and DVD saying that we too, in our school, can do these things that will help all our children feel more connected and ready to learn.



WHEN STUDENTS BELIEVE THAT ADULTS IN THE SCHOOL CARE ABOUT THEM, HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR EDUCATION AND WILL PROVIDE THE SUPPORT ESSENTIAL TO THEIR SUCCESS, THEY THRIVE.

**School Environment—Why It Matters** School environment refers to the social, academic and emotional contexts of a school—the “personality” of the learning context—and how it is perceived by students, staff and community. This climate is influenced by a broad range of factors, from disciplinary policies to instructional quality to student and teacher morale.

A positive school environment creates an optimal setting for teaching and learning. Research shows that school can be a stabilizing force for young people, both emotionally and academically, particularly when they are experiencing transition or crisis. As a nation on the move, parents uproot their families for a variety of reasons. Military children are particularly transient and suffer from the loss of lunchtime friends, favorite teachers and participation in extracurricular activities. But they are not alone. From the children of business executives to the migrant laborer’s children — no longer do most of our children graduate from the school where they started. To the extent that schools can be flexible and supportive in meeting the needs of these children, they provide an essential lifeline to their healthy development.

Just as military children may be concerned about a deployed mother or a father recovering from injuries, other children may be distressed by personal circumstances. A national survey revealed that, in comparison with their more affluent peers, low-income students felt a more pronounced lack of community and a weaker connection with their schools. The point is that life stressors, no matter what the cause, if ignored, impede learning.

School environment and school connectedness can be the determining factors in a young person’s educational experience. When students believe that adults in the school care about them, have high expectations for their education and will provide the support essential to their success, they thrive. When teachers and staff are deeply engaged in creating a safe, nurturing, challenging school environment, their job satisfaction increases.

A positive school environment is a product of collective effort. This monograph looks at strategies to improve school environment and examines four of its major components: 1) caring relationships, 2) academic environment, 3) structure and safety, and 4) participatory learning. It also suggests ways in which military children and other highly mobile young people can be successfully integrated into the flow of a new school. Then it takes a look at how to measure a school’s environment. The goal of this monograph and its accompanying DVD is to show how teachers and administrators create engaging environments in classrooms across America.

What you will see in the pages that follow, as well as in the DVD, is not rocket science—but it just may be more difficult to accomplish. Far too often we say that we don't have the time or resources to do the things that engage young people. But if young people do not know that we care, they will never care what we know.

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**“Just asking, ‘I know your dad is deployed, your mom is deployed, I know you are with your grandma now—how is that going?’ That means so much to the kids.”**

TRANSITION COUNSELOR

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**“I’m lucky. My principal puts me out front in the morning to kind of be the gatekeeper, so not only do I see the children coming in, I can see the ones who are in tears, just had a fight with mom or having a bad day because the dog died or something. I also see the new parents coming in and that’s my chance to get to meet them.”**

SCHOOL COUNSELOR

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**“One teacher in particular I see every day, and she is just cool. We respect our different positions, but ... I can talk to her about school, friends, anything I want and it is not weird.”**

STUDENT

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**“Academics are critical, obviously, and a great education is crucial, but fostering the other sides of the child—the social side and the communication side—builds life skills. It is the place of the family to take care of that to a large extent, but having that reinforced at school is a huge advantage.”**

PARENT

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**“We try to model in our relationships with one another, adult to adult, what we hope to see child to child. Our children set their own standards of behavior in the classroom, and we as a staff have set norms for our interactions with one another. That has made us better colleagues. We want the environment to be positive and healthy for the children—and it’s only going to be that way if it’s positive and healthy for the adults.”**

PRINCIPAL



OFTEN WE SAY THAT WE DON'T HAVE THE TIME OR RESOURCES TO DO THE THINGS THAT ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE. BUT IF YOUNG PEOPLE DO NOT KNOW THAT WE CARE, THEY WILL NEVER CARE WHAT WE KNOW.



## The Impact of School Environment: Evidence and Outcomes

Researchers have found that school environment affects more than academic performance—it influences students' emotions and health behaviors as well. First, let's look at the academic evidence.

Students who feel socially connected to others, in schools that hold them to high academic standards, are more engaged in their education. A positive school environment enhances motivation, increases educational aspirations and improves attendance and retention. An unhealthy school environment—one in which rules are unclear or arbitrary, bullying is accepted if not condoned, and teacher attitudes are indifferent, hostile or unnecessarily punitive—is a likely setting for high absenteeism, misbehavior and interpersonal aggression. A large study found that in schools that were more communal, there were lower dropout rates and less class cutting and absenteeism. School climate is a key ingredient in academic success.

Furthermore, research indicates a strong link between school connectedness and student self-esteem. “Children who experience a sense of relatedness have a stronger supply of inner resources,” notes Professor of Education Karen Osterman. “They perceive themselves to be more competent and autonomous and have higher levels of intrinsic motivation. They have a stronger sense of identity but are also willing to conform to and adopt established norms and values. These inner resources in turn predict engagement and performance.”

Positive school environments not only engage students academically but they are also strongly associated with a range of positive health and behavioral outcomes. Specifically, research indicates that students who feel connected to school are less likely to:

- Exhibit disruptive or violent behavior
- Carry or use a weapon
- Experiment with illegal substances
- Smoke cigarettes
- Drink to the point of getting drunk
- Experience emotional distress
- Consider or attempt suicide
- Engage in early-age sexual intercourse

These connected students enjoy the learning process, exhibit greater trust and respect for teachers, show concern for others and are more likely to employ the techniques of conflict resolution.

From an extensive review of school climate materials, four components emerge as being critical for successful schools: caring, safety and structure, academic rigor and support, and participation. We will now examine each.

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**"I do feel like I belong there. My school is diverse, has different kinds of people. No two people are the same, and that makes everyone feel at home. It makes everyone feel like they have a place and a reason for being there."** MILITARY STUDENT

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**"If my dad got deployed, the best thing the teacher could do is just say they are going to be there for me if I ever need anybody to talk to. If you don't have friends yet, you are just alone and it feels really weird. So if they just tell you they are going to be there for you, it helps more than people know."** MILITARY STUDENT

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**"The students' basic needs must be met before they are going to be ready for the academic portion. That involves addressing their emotional need of feeling connected to the school, being a part of what goes on, so they can be ready for the academic preparation that we want them to have."**

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PRINCIPAL



### THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

*In one study of math and reading scores, researchers examined the impact of social support. Students with high levels of social support increased their reading scores by one and a half years and math scores by one and two-thirds years in one school year. By contrast, students with low levels of support gained, in one school year, only a half year in reading and less than one year in math. (Lee V, Smith J, Perry TE, Smylie MA, 1999. *Social Support, Academic Press, and Student Achievement: A View from the Middle Grades in Chicago*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, University of Chicago.)*

# Caring Environment

A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT IS BUILT

UPON CARING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ALL PARTICIPANTS—

STUDENTS, TEACHERS, STAFF, ADMINISTRATORS, PARENTS

AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS.





**Caring Environment: A Precondition for Learning** A positive school environment is built upon caring relationships among all participants—students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents and community members. A warm morning greeting from the custodian can help determine a child’s mood for the day, just as a teacher’s cheerful send-off at day’s end can help motivate the child to do homework. Learning requires a personal touch, and teaching fundamentally depends on interpersonal communication.

*Student-Teacher Relationships.* No factor is more important for positive school outcomes than the children’s perception of the teacher’s attitude toward them. When students believe that their teachers care about them, see them as competent, respect their views and desire their success, they tend to work toward fulfilling those high expectations.

Unfortunately, many schools have not fostered such positive student-teacher relationships. A Coalition of Urban Boards of Education study revealed that nearly two-thirds of the students surveyed were either not sure they trusted their teachers—or worse, were certain they did not trust their teachers. More than one student in six felt their teachers did not respect them. More than a third believed their teachers did not care whether or not they were successful. Such discouraging results are a recipe for individual and social disaster. We must improve this dynamic.

*Student-Student Relationships.* School is the primary social structure for children. Friendships and social relationships with peers are a central part of students’ lives. A positive school environment encourages communication and interaction and does not tolerate harassment, bullying or violence of any kind.

Social norms are often established and spread by members of the popular crowd, who tend to have a disproportionate influence on school climate. When popular students get good grades, the general sense of school attachment is strong, and more students emulate these leaders. If, however, the popular cliques favor fun over future, sports over studies or popularity over inclusiveness, they will undermine a positive learning environment. Because student leaders have a powerful impact on school culture, adult educators must pay close attention to the messages and attitudes conveyed from student to student. We need to recruit those influential young people as allies.

School attachment is particularly difficult for transfer students, who are concerned about making new friends and being included in extracurricular school activities. In addition, when friendship networks are disconnected, stratified or segregated by race, student relationships and school attachment both suffer.



SCHOOL IS THE PRIMARY SOCIAL STRUCTURE FOR CHILDREN. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS ARE A CENTRAL PART OF STUDENTS’ LIVES. A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ENCOURAGES COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION AND DOES NOT TOLERATE HARASSMENT, BULLYING OR VIOLENCE OF ANY KIND.



IN ANY ORGANIZATION  
THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE  
FOR GOOD LEADERSHIP, AND  
SCHOOLS ARE NO  
EXCEPTION. PRINCIPALS AND  
ADMINISTRATORS CREATE  
THE VISION, ESTABLISH THE  
AGENDA, COMMUNICATE THE  
GOALS AND LEAD BY  
EXAMPLE.

*Teacher-Staff-Administrator Relationships.* Positive relationships—based on trust, respect and support—among school adults are essential to professional fulfillment and school success. An atmosphere of collegiality influences teachers' efficacy, satisfies emotional needs, and leads to personal and professional learning. Teachers and staff need to enjoy their work and be willing to contribute to the school's positive learning environment. Furthermore, teachers cannot create a democratic classroom in an autocratic school. They cannot teach interpersonal respect when they are treated disrespectfully by administrators, and they cannot set high standards for students if administrators set low standards for them.

In a study of Chicago schools, nearly all the teachers in schools with the highest achievement reported strong relationships with the principal, and three-quarters reported strong relational trust with fellow teachers. By contrast, fewer than half of the teachers in schools with the lowest achievement reported a strong relationship with the principal, and only a third reported strong relationships with peers.

In any organization there is no substitute for good leadership, and schools are no exception. Principals and administrators create the vision, establish the agenda, communicate the goals and lead by example. The best leaders are well organized, task oriented and well informed. Effective principals are good listeners and are open to suggestions from every stakeholder in the school. They encourage progress toward goals. They foster healthy interpersonal relationships, provide constructive criticism and bestow generous and genuine praise.

*School-Parent-Community Relationships.* Parents and community members should feel that their school has a welcoming environment. It should be accessible and open to parent participation, recognize parents' expertise and provide opportunities for their contributions. Effective communication and collaboration with parents and the community will promote better outcomes for students. Research demonstrates that parental support and value of education is a consistent predictor of children's academic achievement. These outcomes are enhanced when the entire community values education and demonstrates support for its schools.

## Strategies to Promote a Caring, Respectful School Environment

### Create more opportunities for student-student and student-teacher interaction through:

- Small learning communities, as lower student-teacher ratios promote interaction
- Block scheduling, with longer classes that foster greater interaction
- Looping, in which a teacher is with the same class for more than one year
- Class meetings, where students share their thoughts daily or weekly
- Staff members who are assigned as mentors or advisors to individual students or groups
- Cooperative learning projects, which studies show eliminate cliques and widen friendship networks, even across racial divides

**Build students' social and emotional competencies—self-awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills and decision-making capacities.** These skills are predictive of a child's ability to learn and solve problems nonviolently, and studies indicate that the vast majority of children can improve these competencies. To learn more, see the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning at [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org).

**Support positive peer relationships through:**

- Teachers' modeling positive and supportive interactions
- Developing class rules that value kindness and discourage exclusion

**Promote relationships among teachers by establishing:**

- Common planning time
- Interdisciplinary work teams
- Collaborative work opportunities

**GRAND STREET CAMPUS: LEADERSHIP PROGRAM**

Based in more than 230 New York City public schools, the innovative Leadership Program (LP) aims to empower students in leadership, self-concept, conflict management, cooperation and social responsibility. By recruiting engaging educators who understand the importance of focusing on caring relationships, the Leadership Program impacts violence, character development, school attendance, retention and academic achievement. Its menu of choices for schools includes a comprehensive schoolwide program, day and after-school programs, professional development and leadership mentoring.

The Grand Street Campus, once one of New York's most dangerous high schools, chose to implement the Comprehensive Schoolwide Program, with the following LP features:

- Trainers work full time with all members of the school community to effect positive change.
- Facilitators are present in selected classrooms.
- Students participate in after-school activities and community-outreach projects.

- Hard-to-reach students share lunch-time roundtable discussions.
- Support and mentor groups reinforce messages.
- Staff development and parent workshops build skills.

Along with dividing the school into smaller units, the Leadership Program is credited with a significant reduction in violence. Mentors show genuine concern for the students and are viewed with respect. Student interests are reflected in programs, such as an after-school hip hop club for boys.



#### COSSITT AVENUE SCHOOL: TEACHING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

For nearly a decade, Cossitt Avenue School in LaGrange, IL has relied on the benefits of social emotional learning (SEL) to support academics and develop a positive climate. Cossitt's SEL program teaches critical life skills—recognizing and managing emotions and behaviors, showing concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions and handling challenging situations. It focuses on creating a safe and orderly environment where students can thrive.

*Academics.* SEL objectives are integrated into academic objectives. “Homeside assignments” engage parents and students in joint projects, and the heightened respect for differences creates a more positive educational environment for students with learning disabilities.

*Meetings.* Cossitt students gather daily for student-led class meetings, practicing listening and communication skills and showing respect for others.

*Buddies.* Younger students are paired with older students in a buddy system, building a stronger relationship network within the school community.

*Rules.* Students generate norms for discipline, behavior and partnerships in cooperative learning.

Cossitt's SEL program is based on a framework outlined by Caring School Community/Child Development Project and Responsive Classroom.

**“My language arts teacher knows when something is wrong. She will pull me out of class and ask, and she makes me feel like I don’t have anything to hide and I won’t ever need to hide. She will always be there.”**

MILITARY STUDENT

**“Every morning I come in and invariably see students honoring other people and being aware of other people’s stories, opinions and perspectives, being attuned to looking at things from different angles. They seem to be very thoughtful in the way they approach issues from a collaborative and multi-level point of view. I am very impressed by that, especially when I see it in second and third graders.”**

SUPERINTENDENT

“My teaching has changed dramatically. There were lots of skills that I expected my third graders to have—but I didn’t realize I needed to be teaching those skills. I spent a lot of time policing, and it was taking away from my teaching time. Now I try to be more proactive, teaching the skills in the beginning, spending time talking about how we are going to work as partners, how we are going to do recess, how we are going to solve conflicts. When they first told me that third graders could resolve conflicts among themselves without my help, I didn’t really believe them. But it has been amazing to see how, if we teach children these skills, they can use them and transfer them beyond school into the neighborhood.”

TEACHER

“If there is a problem at recess, one of the things we do is find a way to make it fair for everyone. We include everyone who wants to play. Even if some people are in a bad mood, they can still play.”

STUDENT

“SEL brings sophistication to the children in terms of why they do what they do, and gives them tools by which to manage their everyday lives. Children have to understand how their feelings interact with their desires and talents and abilities to make things happen in a positive way. SEL does that, and I see much more thoughtful and appropriately introspective children as a result.”

SUPERINTENDENT



# Safe and Structured Environment

MANY FACTORS COMBINE TO PROMOTE A FEELING OF SAFETY,  
RANGING FROM THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT  
TO DISCIPLINE POLICIES TO PERCEPTIONS OF FAIRNESS.



**Safe and Structured Environment** In a safe, structured environment, students can focus their attention on learning. Many factors combine to promote a feeling of safety, ranging from the physical environment to discipline policies to perceptions of fairness.

*The Physical Environment.* A school's physical structure and appearance send important messages. When the physical plant is well maintained and the surrounding grounds are well kept, they convey respect for the school community and the educational mission. In low-resource communities, students and parents often help in maintaining the facility to keep it looking good. Likewise, the physical organization of a school can create obstructions to engagement or foster opportunities for a positive learning climate. When teachers have easy access to materials and classrooms are arranged for optimum student learning, the focus remains on the core goals. When the necessary materials for learning are not present, the message is also clear: *In our community, kids don't matter.*

*The Importance of Safety.* When students do not feel safe in school, they are more likely to become truant, carry weapons, get distracted and experience lower achievement. A sense of safety for the entire school community has both physical and emotional aspects.

- *Physical safety* comes from a sense of community, which decreases a feeling of personal risk. Environments that experience conflict are often those that accept aggressive behavior. Bullying, for example, is an all too common phenomenon and must not be tolerated. In a nationwide school-climate study involving 30,000 students, about three-fourths said they themselves were not bullied at school—but half said they saw other students being bullied at least once a month. Children who feel threatened in school can't learn. If schools ignore even the most subtle forms of aggression, they convey the message that school is not an arena of safety. A safe community is built through clear expectations for personal conduct; respect for others; conflict resolution techniques; and fair, enforceable and equally applied consequences for violations.
- *Academic safety* is defined as an atmosphere in which both students and teachers feel free to take intellectual risks. Students can raise their hands and present an idea without fear of ridicule. Teachers feel they can bring new ideas to the classroom and concerns to the administration without reprisal. Every person in the school community feels free to innovate with the knowledge that fresh ideas will be welcomed and valued, even if they are not all equally successful.



A SCHOOL'S PHYSICAL  
STRUCTURE AND  
APPEARANCE SEND  
IMPORTANT MESSAGES.  
WHEN THE PHYSICAL PLANT  
IS WELL MAINTAINED AND  
THE SURROUNDING GROUNDS  
ARE WELL KEPT, THEY  
CONVEY RESPECT FOR THE  
SCHOOL COMMUNITY AND  
THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION.



WHEN DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS ARE ADDRESSED ACCORDING TO A THOUGHTFULLY ESTABLISHED, WELL-COMMUNICATED CODE OF CONDUCT, A SENSE OF ORDER AND A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE ARE MORE LIKELY TO PREVAIL.

- *Emotional safety* occurs in an environment where bullying is not allowed; neither is teasing. It is an environment where one does not feel threatened because of the color of her skin or the color of his sneakers. It is a school where neither one's language of origin or linguistic disabilities are a source of ridicule.
- *Safe schools are fair.* Most individuals have an innate sense of fairness and bristle when rules are unequally applied. Students must feel that treatment is fair and nondiscriminatory. A school declares its high behavioral expectations through consistent classroom management and clear, fair discipline. When discipline problems are addressed according to a thoughtfully established, well-communicated code of conduct, a sense of order and a positive school climate are more likely to prevail. In a Council of Urban Boards of Education study, concerns about fairness increased among older students. Ethnicity was also a factor in the responses, as fewer African-American students, compared with Hispanic and white students, felt their teachers were fair. Predictability, consistency and structure in students' daily lives promotes a sense of emotional safety, particularly for those whose lives outside of school are in turmoil.

### Strategies to Improve Structure and Safety

- Invest in school maintenance, and involve students, parents and the community in these efforts.
- With input from students, parents and staff, create a disciplinary system with clear expectations and consequences.
- Clearly and briefly state the school rules—such as “respect for others” and “respect for property”—and post them around the school, with guidelines for their application.
- Teach conflict resolution skills.
- Promote academic security by encouraging and rewarding participation from all students, eliciting questions and promoting critical thinking and open debate.
- Emphasize constructive feedback and do not allow ridicule.
- Work toward policies that are—and are perceived as being—fairly conceived and fairly applied to everyone.

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**“We often think about this as building a great big safety net for our kids so no matter what happens, no matter when you take a tumble or fall, there will be somebody in this school who is going to catch you.”**

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PRINCIPAL

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A process called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is proving helpful in creating safer, more academically rigorous schools. The systems approach enhances educational capacity through a framework that enables each school to design, implement and evaluate student-specific, schoolwide discipline plans. At MacArthur Middle School students are held to high academic and behavioral expectations, and teachers use a variety of creative approaches to teach and discipline. The school uses PBIS as follows:

- *Code of Conduct.* MacArthur students follow the Eagle Code of Conduct—Be Responsible, Respect Yourself, Respect Others—which establishes behavioral expectations for the classroom, hallway, cafeteria and bus. Procedures also address the consequences of rule-violating behaviors.
- *Social Skill Building.* Teachers look at school data, observe needs and develop social skill lessons that set forth expectations for personal interaction.
- *Rewards.* Students are given rewards for positive behavior, such as “Eagle tickets” that are used like cash for attending quarterly events—dances, skating parties, a carnival and a silent auction. Students can also “purchase” rewards or participate in weekly drawings for items from a prize cart.
- *Evaluation.* A PBIS team surveys faculty each year and uses the results to establish priorities. Activities are planned accordingly.
- *Mentors.* A mentorship program pairs school adults with students who have academic or behavioral problems. A disruptive student may be sent to the mentor instead of the principal.

“The anchor for kids is often the school—and should be the school. It is one place that is predictable, constant, a place where children should be able to count on the fact that there is a routine, an expected way of behaving, and that the people in their school lives are consistent. It is a stabilizing place. We can establish a support network so they feel they are in a place that cares about them and gives them the safety and security, if needed, to face the rest of the day—which can be a lot more traumatic.” CHIEF,

DOD MILITARY CHILD IN TRANSITION AND DEPLOYMENT, 2006

“Our lunchtime referrals have dramatically decreased, and I think it’s because the children have better conflict resolution skills. We are better as adults in viewing minor disciplinary infractions as learning opportunities rather than as punishment opportunities. So when children misbehave, we’ll have a conversation—‘What did you think was going to happen when you did this? Did you plan ahead? What would you do differently the next time?’ We help them learn what is expected and how they can improve their interactions with others.” PRINCIPAL



# Academic Environment

SCHOOL LEADERS NEED TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT

THAT IS FOCUSED ON EXCELLENCE

IN TEACHING AND LEARNING —

AND COMMUNICATE THIS EMPHASIS

TO STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS.





**Academic Environment** A sense of belonging is important to student success, but it alone is insufficient to produce desired outcomes. School leaders need to create an environment that is focused on excellence in teaching and learning—and communicate this emphasis to students, teachers and parents.

*Academic Press.* The term “academic press” refers to a positive—but determined—effort to meet high expectations. It defines an attitude and does not refer to pressure. Instead, academic press focuses attention on academic work, provides constructive feedback, refuses to accept half-hearted efforts, holds students accountable and provides assistance when needed. It means never giving up on a student and holding firm to the notion that all students are capable of mastering essential skills. Then it provides the support required to get them to that level of mastery.

Student achievement improves when academic press is accompanied by communality and social support. For example, a large study of Chicago Public Schools found that the relationship between social support and performance on standardized math and reading achievement tests was strongest in schools that employed greater academic press.

**High expectations, coupled with strong support, produce desirable outcomes.**

*Creative Instruction.* Effective teachers, of course, are key to academic success, as they are able to engage all students in the classroom. They tend to be flexible and use a variety of instructional methods to build skills and encourage critical thinking. They design classwork that is relevant to students’ lives and captures their interests. Using techniques that go beyond pure recall, these teachers employ active, experiential and cooperative learning methods as well as discussion and debate.

Research indicates that 80 percent of questions asked in elementary and secondary classrooms demand only quick recall of facts or other short answers. Asking questions that spur critical thinking encourages broader participation, as there are fewer right/wrong answers. Quality of instruction has been shown to improve students’ sense of belonging to a school as well as boosting academic achievement. One critic of the educational system has noted: “We still teach our kids to think as if at the end of their education there is a job in the factory. The factory is closed, and the future is for those who know how to solve problems.”

Teachers often unwittingly favor high achievers. A 10-year study of teachers across the country indicated that teachers used their best skills more often with successful students. They called on high achievers repeatedly, believing that eliciting correct answers benefited the entire class. They called on low achievers less frequently, feeling they were sparing the students embarrassment. As a result, the low achievers simply tuned out.



EFFECTIVE TEACHERS, OF COURSE, ARE KEY TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS, AS THEY ARE ABLE TO ENGAGE ALL STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM. THEY TEND TO BE FLEXIBLE AND USE A VARIETY OF INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS TO BUILD SKILLS AND ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING.

## Academic Quality

The Department of Defense Education Activity (DODEA) has identified six elements for quality teaching:

- Teaching practices reflect high expectations for student achievement
- Students have multiple opportunities to meet and exceed educational standards
- Varied questioning strategies are used to support student learning
- Varied teaching strategies are used to support inquiry, higher order thinking and problem solving
- Varied and flexible groupings are used to assist students in achieving and exceeding educational goals
- Technology is meaningfully integrated through instruction to support student achievement

## Strategies to Encourage Academic Excellence

**Demonstrate through words and actions that academics are the focus of the school.**

- *Free teachers from trivial, nonacademic tasks*—such as hall monitoring and pass writing—to reinforce the message that teaching is the most important aspect of their jobs.
- *Remove obstacles to teaching*, such as administrative disruptions and lack of classroom materials.
- *Reward innovation*, whatever the outcome, by recognizing teachers through informal notes and positive comments as well as formal awards, certificates and evaluations.
- *Provide teachers with in-service training* and professional development opportunities, which will be interpreted as a vote of confidence in their potential.
- *Reward students for academic achievement*, but also reward improvement and best efforts. One art teacher, for example, noticed dramatic improvement in student work after displaying all students' work on a hallway wall.

**Develop high expectations and support for learning.**

- *Eliminate tracking*, which communicates low expectations.
- *Hold students accountable* for work completion.
- *Provide “second-try” opportunities*, based on feedback, for students to improve their assignments.
- *Provide support for attaining academic goals*, such as tutoring, study-skill sessions and summer or Saturday catch-up opportunities.
- *Engage students in their future*; students who had frequent conversations about their futures had on average higher educational expectations for themselves and higher rates of postsecondary education participation.



STUDENTS WHO HAD FREQUENT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THEIR FUTURES HAD ON AVERAGE HIGHER EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THEMSELVES AND HIGHER RATES OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PARTICIPATION.

## THE CROSSROADS SCHOOL, BALTIMORE, MD: EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

The Crossroads School is an award-winning Title 1 public charter school serving 150 middle school students who live in some of East Baltimore's most challenged communities. The core mission of the school is to raise student achievement by combining rigorous college-preparatory academic standards with hands-on, project-based learning experiences.

The school provides students with an extended academic day as well as summer programs for intervention and enrichment opportunities. As an Expeditionary Learning school, Crossroads students learn through in-depth investigations that integrate multiple disciplines, fieldwork and collaboration with outside experts. For example, students have created a scale model of the solar system in conjunction with

the Space Telescope Science Institute and have written and published a book about Frederick Douglass and Isaac Myers. For the past four years, Crossroads has been one of Baltimore's highest performing middle schools on the Maryland School Assessment and has been the only 6-8 middle school to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

### Improve and diversify teaching methods.

- *Encourage a variety of teaching techniques* and provide training to support their effective application.
- *Sensitize teachers to use effective teaching strategies* with all students, not just high achievers, and strengthen their ability to select best methods through professional programs and workshops.
- *Choose materials based on students' interests and developmental needs.*
- *Offer interdisciplinary and applied projects as well as service learning* to connect academics to real life.

**"Like a business, our customer is the student. As we consider the content they need to learn, we need to talk to them and understand their interests so we can wrap their interests and experience around the content. We should not just plan a lesson but design an experience so they want to come to school and are interested in work that is challenging."**

SUPERINTENDENT, MILITARY CONNECTED DISTRICT

**"Whether you have 20 or 30 students in a classroom, they are 20 or 30 individuals. There is no cookie-cutter way to educate a child. Some kids are tactile learners, some have to read it or write it or whatever. I would expect a teacher to be doing as much as possible to see what motivates my child and what is the best way for my child to learn—and then to incorporate that into lessons."**

MILITARY PARENT

# Participatory Environment

LEADERSHIP AT ITS BEST

IS NOT CONFINED TO TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

BUT ALSO INVOLVES PARENTS AND STUDENTS

IN DECISION MAKING AND PLANNING.





**Participatory Environment** A more positive school environment is created when all stakeholders feel they are contributing to the school's success. This process begins with leadership and a shared agenda, both clearly defined and clearly communicated. Leadership at its best is not confined to teachers and administrators but also involves parents and students in decision making and planning.

*Opportunities to Contribute.* Students, teachers and parents feel a stronger connection to a school that welcomes their contributions. Opportunities for involvement abound—from democratic processes in decision making to the inclusion of various stakeholders in school committees to class and town hall meetings that encourage sharing of views.

Teachers who are given more autonomy and control over their work have higher morale. Students who are given responsibilities and opportunities to lead and contribute build competencies and self-confidence. The delegation of responsibility signals to students and teachers that their opinions are valuable, and it transmits the expectation that they are capable problem solvers. Such attitudes add to a positive school climate.

*Activities that engage students.* Students can often contribute and develop leadership skills through participation in service learning and after-school activities. These activities enable students to be more self-directed, allow them to explore areas of interest and provide opportunities to experience success.

- *Service learning* engages students in active civic participation through organized experiences that meet real-world needs. The programs develop awareness of social justice issues and the value of collaboration. The best service learning programs integrate social, emotional, ethical and academic learning while promoting civic engagement. Effective programs enable students to process the experiences.
- *After-school activities* are valuable for a number of reasons, but they are particularly helpful in integrating new students into the school community. For this reason, it is important that activities welcome newcomers who arrive throughout the school year. These activities foster a sense of community, increase school connectedness, provide an outlet for specific interests and build new skills.



STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS FEEL A STRONGER CONNECTION TO A SCHOOL THAT WELCOMES THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT ABOUND—FROM DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN DECISION MAKING TO THE INCLUSION OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS IN SCHOOL COMMITTEES TO CLASS AND TOWN HALL MEETINGS THAT ENCOURAGE SHARING OF VIEWS.



## Strategies that Foster Participation

### **Involve teachers, students, parents and community members in decision making.**

- Designate places for students/teachers/community members on school committees.
- Involve students in establishing school rules and consequences for infractions.
- Encourage students to lead regular class or school meetings with open discussion of issues.
- Give students a choice in which school projects they prefer to complete.
- Within guidelines, give teachers flexibility to apply a variety of instructional methods in their classrooms.

### **Create opportunities for contribution and responsibility.**

- Assign each student a job, thereby freeing teacher time while nurturing responsibility.
- Provide service learning opportunities.
- Create peer-tutoring and peer-mentoring programs.
- Establish inclusive after-school programs and ensure access for students who transfer or those whose families cannot afford associated fees.

#### **HUDSON HIGH SCHOOL, HUDSON, MA: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Civic engagement is a valuable component of a democratic society and a complementary element within an effective educational program. It provides essential services to community residents and psychological, social and intellectual benefits to participants. Civic engagement programs vary, but most emphasize the social nature of civic participation and incorporate life skills or a civics curriculum. Hudson High School developed a civic engagement program that featured the following:

- A core civics class for all ninth graders
- Service learning experiences that were integrated into many high school courses
- An innovative schoolwide governance structure that includes a cluster structure, town meetings and a Community Council, all including students in leadership roles

**"I've turned over some of the responsibility to the students. That is beneficial to both of us. They grow in skills and the ability to make good choices, and it frees me up so I can focus on other things. I don't have to make every little decision about every little thing."** TEACHER

“We realized we were expecting to see changes in the children when we needed first to see changes in ourselves. If we wanted the children to feel they had voice and autonomy in the school, we needed to give it to them. We had to stop being control freaks. Let the children decide what they were going to do with their buddies, how they were going to work on a particular academic project. As we started to give that up and turn it over to the children, we started seeing the changes we were hoping to see.”

PRINCIPAL

“Another technique for getting students involved is at the teacher level. Say to the teachers, ‘This year, take on the responsibility of being a mentor to two students. If you are going to sponsor a robotics club, find two of the most unlikely students and find a way to make them part of your club. Or find two students to be part of your dance club.’ We know that won’t get every student involved, but it will get 60 more students involved—and form 60 more positive relationships—than last year. We’ve done that, and it has worked wonderfully.”

SCHOOL COUNSELOR, MILITARY

CONNECTED DISTRICT

“I think when you give children that sense of power, that sense of control over their environment, they will live up to your very high expectations.”

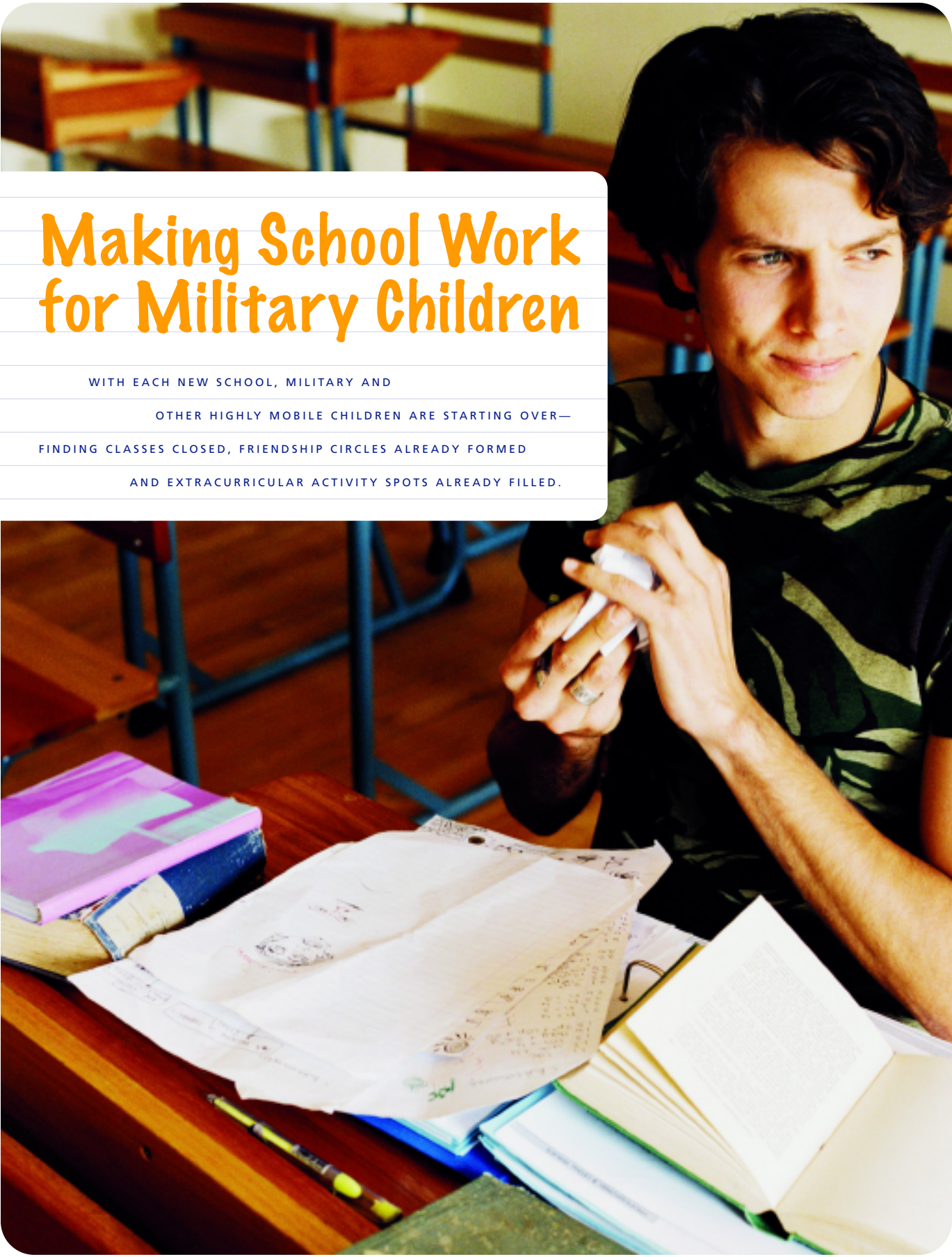
PRINCIPAL

“Evaluation studies have shown us that when you teach a young person a new skill, teach them how to use that skill to be of help or service to somebody else, and give them an opportunity to process that experience with a trained facilitator, kids absolutely blossom. The kids report that they feel confident, competent and needed, and that’s the kind of sparkle, the kind of quality, we seek to instill in all of our kids.”

RESEARCHER



SERVICE LEARNING  
ENGAGES STUDENTS IN  
ACTIVE CIVIC PARTICIPATION  
THROUGH ORGANIZED  
EXPERIENCES THAT MEET  
REAL-WORLD NEEDS.



# Making School Work for Military Children

WITH EACH NEW SCHOOL, MILITARY AND

OTHER HIGHLY MOBILE CHILDREN ARE STARTING OVER—

FINDING CLASSES CLOSED, FRIENDSHIP CIRCLES ALREADY FORMED

AND EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY SPOTS ALREADY FILLED.

**Making School Work for Military and Other Highly Mobile Children** More than a million children of military families attend U.S. public schools. But with each new school, they are starting over—and finding classes closed, friendship circles already formed and extracurricular activity spots already filled. This disheartening pattern adds to their worries about parent deployment and can result in emotional withdrawal, academic underachievement and misbehavior.

Given positive school relationships and flexible academic support, however, most military children thrive. They are generally goal-oriented and college bound. Their perspectives, focused on the impact of world events and shaped by living in multiple communities in the U.S. and abroad, can be an invaluable resource in the classroom. Many schools have successfully integrated military children into the flow of school life by using the following strategies:

### **Strategies to Improve Transitions for Military and Other Highly Mobile Children**

- Develop an academic plan that can be taken from school to school to meet all requirements for high school graduation.
- Enroll military students in the best classes they can handle—not the leftovers, and acknowledge previous achievements, such as membership in the National Honor Society.
- Recognize that most military kids are computer savvy and can catch up, if necessary, online.
- Reserve extracurricular spots for transfer students so that a wrestler, basketball player or robot maker can contribute and make friends with similar interests.
- Use technology creatively to support military children: allow video tryouts for sports teams and school plays, for example, or broadcast graduation ceremonies by satellite to parents overseas.
- Collaborate with nearby military installations to use such resources as sophisticated weather equipment for classroom projects.
- Honor the purpose and commitment of military personnel.
- Allow students time to be with a deploying or returning parent.
- Provide appropriate referrals and support for students whose parents are injured or suffering from other serious challenges.



A MILITARY CHILD'S PERSPECTIVES, FOCUSED ON THE IMPACT OF WORLD EVENTS AND SHAPED BY LIVING IN MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S. AND ABROAD, CAN BE AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE IN THE CLASSROOM.





THE DISHEARTENING PATTERN OF RELOCATION ADDS TO A MILITARY CHILD'S WORRIES ABOUT PARENT DEPLOYMENT AND CAN RESULT IN EMOTIONAL WITHDRAWAL, ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND MISBEHAVIOR.

"I wish teachers would understand the challenge of starting over — because that's what we do. We start over everywhere we go."

MILITARY STUDENT

"The toughest move I ever had was when I was in fifth grade. I switched schools in December and I was failing all my classes — and I'm an honor roll student. I don't fail classes. My teachers thought I was being disrespectful — but I was just miserable."

MILITARY STUDENT

"Parents are a crucial part of a kid's life, so when a child doesn't have their parent — who might be their support system — there's a piece of them missing. They want to compensate for that — or if they can't, then there's a barrier or a wall or something that could make it hard for them to open up or learn."

MILITARY STUDENT

"That's when you really need someone to talk to — like, hey, my father is gone, and I'm having a hard time doing this homework assignment. I'm going to get it done, but I just need to talk to someone about this to get it off my chest before I can concentrate on anything."

MILITARY STUDENT

"They didn't know what to do with us. The guidance counselor couldn't figure out what classes to put them in, working out their schedule. My son ended up taking things he had already had — and had passed."

MILITARY PARENT

"If we can incorporate the military right into the curriculum, help students feel a sense of pride in what their parents do and have everyone understand that, not just the military kids, it's a wonderful thing. It doesn't matter if you agree or disagree with policy or politics, these children's parents have pledged to uphold and support our Constitution, and they are making sacrifices for the good of all."

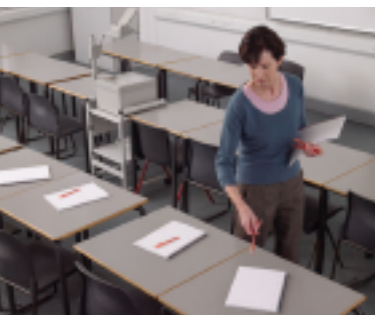
MILITARY INSTALLATION STAFF MEMBER



# Measuring School Environment

THE PROCESS ITSELF HAS THE POTENTIAL  
TO PROMOTE A MORE POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT,  
PARTICULARLY WHEN STUDENTS  
ARE EMPOWERED AS RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION.





BEFORE AN EVALUATION PROCESS BEGINS, SCHOOLS SHOULD CONSIDER THE INTENSE EFFORT REQUIRED TO GATHER AND ANALYZE THE INFORMATION—AND PLAN IN ADVANCE HOW THEY INTEND TO USE THE RESULTS.

**Measuring School Environment** Evaluating the school environment can present powerful opportunities to discover and address issues that undermine learning and healthy development. Applied skillfully and used wisely, evaluation becomes a valuable tool for reflection and planning.

The process itself has the potential to promote a more positive school environment, particularly when students are empowered as resources for information.

Before an evaluation process begins, schools should consider the intense effort required to gather and analyze the information—and plan in advance how they intend to use the results. Application will depend on the issues that arise, of course, but an evaluation that involves the school community and then goes nowhere dishonors their contributions and diminishes confidence. Evaluation that applies information to problem solving and planning can have a positive impact.

There are many ways to measure climate, but they fall broadly into two categories, indirect and direct.

**Indirect measures** include:

- Analyzing student records for attendance, office referrals and suspensions
- Observing the physical environment, with attention to noise levels, cleanliness, hallway and classroom appearance
- Observing classrooms and interpersonal interactions
- Using the School Climate Observation Checklist adapted from “Skills for Successful School Leaders,” AASA, 1985, second edition 1990

**Direct measures** include surveys or interviews that solicit information from various stakeholders—teachers, students, staff, parents and community members. Schools can develop their own survey forms or use these existing forms:

- Charles F. Kettering (CFK) Ltd. School Climate Profile: One of the most frequently used measures of school climate, it assesses the strengths and weaknesses of a middle school climate from the students’ perspective.
- The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE): This survey measures secondary school student, teacher/staff, and parent satisfaction in addition to school climate. School climate is measured by asking individuals what they believe most people feel about the school’s environment.
- The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI): This assessment tool measures how students, teachers, and parents feel about what is working effectively in the school and what the barriers are to student learning and a positive environment. The survey can be taken on paper or online, and has different versions for elementary, middle, and high school students.

- The Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire (OCDQ): This survey measures teachers' perspectives of school climate, focusing on principal and teacher behaviors. There are elementary, middle school, and high school versions.

Information regarding the above instruments of measurement is available at these websites:

<http://www.emc.cmich.edu/charactered/instruments.htm>

<http://www.csee.net/climate/csciassessment/>

[http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/whoy/instruments\\_6.htm](http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/whoy/instruments_6.htm)

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**"Districtwide, we surveyed children in grades 4 through 8 about how they felt about their learning environment, the relationship with teachers and with each other. One of our objectives was to improve our school's learning climate. We are building an environment where kids feel safe, feel comfortable, feel they have ownership. That's a huge piece of what we focus on—students' autonomy, making sure their voices are heard, that they have some control over what is happening to them. We hope we are building a sense of belonging where they feel it wouldn't be the same school if they weren't here."**

PRINCIPAL

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**"Throughout the year, we have check-in meetings where we go back and say, 'How are we doing? Are we meeting our norms? Are we including everyone and treating everyone respectfully?' The children know that these norms are important, whether it's September or February. Our classes set goals, and we check in on those monthly. We do what we call 'Reach Days,' when we see how we are doing toward reaching our goals. The children reflect on their personal goals as well as their classroom goals and how they are meeting them."**

PRINCIPAL



STUDY AFTER STUDY  
INDICATES THAT A POSITIVE  
SCHOOL CLIMATE IS  
ESSENTIAL FOR OPTIMAL  
TEACHING AND LEARNING.

## Conclusion

*Environment matters.* As human beings, we naturally react to the physical impact of our surroundings. We adapt our clothing to move comfortably through hot or cold air. We spend considerable sums on furniture that makes us feel relaxed and secure. We respond to pleasing décor. And we react just as readily to our emotional atmosphere. Study after study indicates that a positive school environment is essential for optimal teaching and learning.

In this monograph, we have provided an overview of four important components of school environment—caring relationships, the academic environment, structure and safety, and participatory learning—and how they can be developed and implemented to benefit all students, including military children. We have illustrated each concept with specific program examples and the voices of members of school communities. To help bring the programs to life, we have enclosed a DVD that introduces these vibrant individuals and their schools in a more visual format. We hope the package stimulates you to develop an engaging school environment that will enable all students to feel positively connected to their school and realize their maximal potential.

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**“What makes children successful has everything to do with finding out who they are, where they come from, what their needs are, and accommodating those needs. Good teachers are diagnosing all the time. They are always gathering data. They listen carefully to children’s conversations and classroom discussions. When they don’t get enough clues, they ask specific questions. A classroom is an engineered environment where we are constantly figuring out what every single child needs and how we can modify what we do to make sure that learning is occurring in the best possible way for all of them.”**

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CHIEF, DOD MILITARY

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CHILD IN TRANSITION AND DEPLOYMENT, 2006

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#### PROGRAM WEBSITES

Leadership Program: [www.theleadershipprogram.com](http://www.theleadershipprogram.com)

Cossitt Avenue School:  
<http://www.dist102.k12.il.us/facilities/cossitt/mission.htm>

Caring School Community: [www.devstu.org/csc](http://www.devstu.org/csc)

Responsive Classroom: [www.responsiveclassroom.org](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org)

MacArthur Middle School:  
<http://www.aacps.org/aacps/MAMS/home%20page%202006.htm>

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)

Crossroads School: [www.thecrossroadsschool.org](http://www.thecrossroadsschool.org)

Expeditionary Learning: [www.elob.org](http://www.elob.org)

Hudson High School:  
[http://www.hudson.k12.ma.us/schools\\_district/hhs/index.html](http://www.hudson.k12.ma.us/schools_district/hhs/index.html)

#### BEST PRACTICES: BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ENHANCING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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