



school climate matters

NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE CENTER NEWSLETTER

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in brief

November 16-18, 2014: International Bullying Prevention Association (IBPA) Conference, San Diego, CA – NSCC’s Dr. Jonathan Cohen will present a workshop: A Foundation for Effective Bully Prevention Efforts at the (IBPA) Conference. The topic of the association’s 11th annual conference is “Building Supportive Relationships to Create a Positive School Climate.” For information and to register, visit IBPA’s website: <http://www.ibpaworld.org>.

October 28-29, 2014: Share My Lesson Virtual Conference – *Share My Lesson* is launching its free two-day *Ideas and Innovations* virtual conference of professional learning this October. Register and gain classroom and school-wide practices across a number of topics. Visit www.sharemylesson.com conference for a full schedule and list of presenters.

Knowledge

Education

Ideas

Information

School Climate Consulting Services & National School Climate Center Present: *Equity Issues in Discipline and School Climate Improvement: Policy & Best Practices*

December 12, 2014 @ Harvard Graduate School of Education

The National School Climate Center (NSCC) is a proud co-sponsor of this one-day professional development conference to build awareness and education around the links between equity and school climate improvement.

Attendees will learn about a number of equity-focused policies and practices, including school climate strategies educators can use to reduce discriminatory discipline and new laws or regulations supporting school climate improvement.

Keynote Address: **Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Ed. D.**, Lecturer in Prevention Science & Practice Program, HGSE

Who Should Attend: Principals, Assistant Principals, Deans of Students, School/District Administrators, Classroom Teachers, and Guidance & Adjustment Counselors

Location and Time: Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA on Friday, December 12, 2014 8:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Conference Highlights: **NSCC’s Law and Policy Director, Jessica Savage, Esq.** presents “How is Discriminatory Discipline a Key Civil Rights Issue for Schools?” to provide an overview of the evolving federal civil rights landscape for discipline policies and practices in schools.

NSCC’s Senior Consultant, Randy Ross, M.S., M.A. presents “Equity-Centered School Climate Improvement: Policies and Strategies for Current Concerns” to provide an introduction to school climate and approaches to developing effective school climate policies.

Register Today!

Visit http://www.schoolclimateconsulting.org/SchClimate_Conf_Dec12_2014.pdf to view the full schedule.

Registering as a school team is strongly encouraged.

The registration deadline is **Monday, December 1, 2014**.

message from the president



“If we can’t help protect kids and staff, and make them feel safe at school, then everything else that we do is secondary.”

—U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, September 2014

Dear Friends,

As we move further into the fall and new initiatives are launched, NSCC knows this is a critical time to deepen the relationship between all members of a school community. At NSCC, our mission has remained constant: to increase awareness and provide resources to promote collaborative development of school climate improvement strategies.

Recent weeks have highlighted the focus of this vision. Last month, the U.S. Department of Education announced the allocation of more than \$70 million to 130 grantees in 38 states through a series of competitive grant programs aimed at improving school climate and safety. The commitment to providing the best learning environments for students is unwavering.

This issue details that commitment with reflections from leaders speaking to school climate improvement from diverse perspectives.

On page 3, our Legal Matters Column recaps the Office of Civil Rights Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) of May 2014 and how Federal civil rights laws impact practices within charter schools.

In the Expert Spotlight (pages 4-5), we hear from Arnold F. Fege, President of Public Advocacy for Kids, as he expands the meaning of family engagement and encourages shared decision-making as a school and district policy. Read his piece for a review of nine integral elements needed for effective partnership.

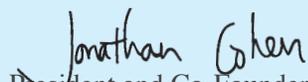
On page 6, we travel to Essex Junction, VT and speak to

Center for Technology, Essex, a high school digging deeper into findings from NSCC’s assessment tool, the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), by forming a Student Focus Forum. Their discussion titled “A Welcoming and Safe Environment at CTE” continues to make strides in supporting the social-emotional needs of its students.

Finally, NSCC is thrilled to announce it is co-sponsoring a December 12, 2014 conference titled *“Equity Issues in Discipline and School Climate Improvement: Policy and Best Practices for New England Educators”* in Cambridge, MA to support the links between equity practices and school climate improvement. We look forward to learning with you during this one-day conference. For more information and to register, visit http://www.schoolclimateconsulting.org/SchClimateConf_Dec12_2014.pdf.

As always, we want to hear from you! The fall season can be a demanding time, but please continue to share your stories, feedback, and needs for new resources with us at newsletter@schoolclimate.org.

Thank you and all the best for the remainder of fall!


Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder
National School Climate Center

School Climate Resource Questionnaire: Enter our iPad Raffle!

The National School Climate Center (NSCC) is committed to developing the tools and resources to drive continuous school improvement for schools and districts nationwide. To provide us with the feedback to better support these efforts and challenges, we invite school leaders to spend 8-10 minutes on an anonymous school climate questionnaire developed by NSCC to examine 1) Perceptions of school climate and 2) The range of school climate policy, measurement, improvement, and leadership guidelines needed in the field.

As a thank you for participating, please enter your contact information at the end of the survey for a chance to win an iPad. Your contact information will be used for no other purpose unless you specifically request additional information about findings from this survey. To take the school climate resource questionnaire, please visit: <https://ethn.io/57139>. The survey will remain live until the end of November 2014.

Your feedback is valuable to advancing our research, policy, and practices. Thank you in advance for your time and participation!

School Climate, Civil Rights and Charter Schools: OCR's Dear Colleague Letter on Charter Schools and Its Connection to School Climate



The Issue:

The Federal civil rights laws, regulations, and guidance that apply to other public schools also apply to charter schools. These laws impact numerous practices within charter schools, including recruitment and admissions, educational services and testing, extracurricular activities, and disciplinary measures.

This Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) (of May 14, 2014) serves as a reminder that charter schools are falling short on a number of fronts, but must comply with these laws. In particular, the DCL outlines charter schools' obligations in four areas where major issues have arisen.

School's Obligations:

1. Charter schools must provide equal opportunity in admissions to all students and **"may not discriminate in admissions on the basis of race, color, national origin, or disability."** Because students are in the position of choosing to attend charter schools, schools must be aware of how they publicize to attract students, as well as how they evaluate a student's candidacy for admission. In particular, charter schools must ensure that they provide appropriate information to parents who are language minority and those with disabilities. In addition, schools must ensure that their eligibility criteria for admission are nondiscriminatory on its face and in practice.
2. Charter schools must comply with Section 504 requirements and ensure that every enrolled student with a disability is provided with a **free appropriate public education (FAPE)**, including special education and related aids, services, and evaluation, as needed. In addition, charter schools are

required to provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in nonacademic and extracurricular services and activities.

3. Charter schools must provide **appropriate services to English-language learners** to ensure that they overcome language barriers and are able to participate fully in their school's educational programs.
4. Charter schools must **"avoid and redress discrimination in the administration of school discipline on the basis of race, color, or national origin; disability; and sex."**

Connection to School Climate:

Many charter school leaders pride themselves on paying attention to school climate improvement, recognizing that it is critical to improving academic success for their students. In doing so, however, it is easy to lose sight of the broader equity issues that OCR raises in this DCL. Here are some points that may clarify these connections:

"Nondiscrimination in admissions," including the admission of **English learners**, leads to a more diverse student body. We know this is important (and even the Supreme Court has somewhat agreed) that a diverse environment – especially racially, ethnically, and in terms of language – is better for all students. They are more likely to develop cross-racial/cross-ethnic understanding through conversation and friendship. This will better prepare them for our diverse society as well as the global economy.

Providing appropriate services for special education students (FAPE) enables them to benefit from the small school aspect and quality climate of charter schools, while providing

the other students opportunities to understand differences in learning needs.

Discriminatory discipline, leading to suspensions and even feeding the school-to-prison-pipeline, is a serious issue for all schools, including charter schools. Improving school climate is essential for reducing suspensions, thereby keeping students in class and on track for learning. In fact, **School Climate Improvement and Equity are two of the three Guiding Principles identified by the US DOE and the Department of Justice as essential for reducing discriminatory discipline in all schools.**

stopbullying.gov

Please visit <http://www.stopbullying.gov/videos/2014/02/civil-rights.html> to watch a video that highlights bullying, harassment, & civil rights: **An Overview of School Districts' Federal Obligation to Respond to Harassment:**

Since late 2010, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has issued nearly a dozen "Dear Colleague Letters" (DCLs) addressing "discriminatory conduct" in K-12 schools. Visit www.schoolclimate.org/programs/ocr-overview.php for further explanation, or email:

Jessica Savage
jsavage@schoolclimate.org
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Don't Forget: Families and Parents Are Essential for Positive School Climate

By **Arnold F. Fege**, *President, Public Advocacy for Kids, Washington, DC*



Family and parental engagement in education is often the subject of rhetoric, curiosity and lip-service. But, it is as foreign to many academics, reformers and big philanthropy as that of the Chicago Cubs ever winning a World Series. While family engagement is not necessarily in retreat, it is also not considered an integral part of educational change and improvement. I think I understand (while I don't agree) why most education panels, conferences and policy meetings hardly include parents in discussions about important issues of equity, choice, teacher professionalism, college and career readiness, etc. I have heard all of the excuses such as parents work, they can't afford to get to meetings, they are ignorant about the issues, etc.

OK, so none of those are excuses for omitting parents from important debates about their students—but in the past, there has at least been some recognition, if only superficial, that parents play a role as their child's first educator. What I don't understand is what appears to be the extension of that superficiality as defined by a recent opinion piece in *The New York Times*. Under the headline “**Parental Involvement Is Overrated**”, two sociology professors, Keith Robinson and Angel L. Harris, wrote, “**Most forms of parental involvement . . . do not improve student achievement. In some cases, they actually hinder it.**” The authors based that claim on research they conducted and described in their book, *The Broken Compass: Parental Involvement with*

Children's Education, noting that “most measurable (emphasis added) forms of parental involvement seem to yield few academic dividends for kids, or even to backfire—regardless of a parent's race, class, or level of education.”

My quarrel is not with the need for critical research about what kinds of parental involvement makes a difference, but rather with the narrow definition of parent involvement and use of test scores as the ONLY gauge or measure for effective engagement. By reducing parents to doing separate tasks, it completely misses the larger role that families and parents play in partnership in solving complex education issues. Often parents are seen as a problem, rather than as equal partner in the system as a whole, working collaboratively in assuring student success.

However, a recent spate of new research studies have revealed current education policies—particularly high-stakes assessments and zero-tolerance discipline policies—as being dangerously misaligned with parenting and the multiple roles it plays in child achievement and school governance. Too little attention and resources are being focused on these potentially more positive policy directions.

Strengthening Family Engagement in High Poverty Schools: A Pathway to Equity

Many districts are beginning to build parental engagement into the key elements of their instructional program and learning community. There are many examples of school districts

trying to disregard parents, only to discover their best laid plans mired in controversy because decision-making was not shared. Working together, there are nine elements integral to assure every child has a quality education. These elements include:

- Family engagement as a state and local priority
- Collective action and shared vision: A leadership task
- School and district capacity building
- Local parent information and resource centers
- Prepared school staff
- Ongoing personal communication
- Connecting home and school
- Community coordination and support
- Research for program improvement

Family Engagement as a State and District Priority

Unless engagement becomes a state and district priority, it will not be highly regarded as priority. Ensuring parents and the community are equal means conversations and collective learning takes place to strengthen public support.

Collective action and a shared vision: A leadership task

Organizing parents is an important function for school accountability and action. Parents should organize around a shared vision such as increasing college readiness or providing a quality education for all children. The school and parent visions should be aligned and a learning culture developed where educators and parents learn together. Parents should see the benefit of advocating for all children, as well as their own. Family engagement should not be a program, but a component interwoven throughout the school—its instructional program, planning and management, and other aspects of school life. As families gain knowledge about what constitutes a high-achieving school, they will also feel ownership

over advocating for change.

School and district capacity building

This next phase should focus on responding to the needs of low-income parents. This cannot be done in one year as successful partnerships evolve and are based on time devoted to sustain partnerships. The current factory model school was not designed for partnership; it was designed for efficiency and without value for the input or participation of the citizen/consumer. In many cases, educators, parents, and the community have limited expertise and skills in knowing how to partner with each other. They do not possess understanding of the cultural, gender, and ethnic differences that often do not relate to traditional middle class parent involvement. Schools need to help families build their knowledge and then help them to act using these new skills.

Local parent information and resource centers

School districts can take steps to bolster parent and educator collaboration for student learning. Besides just informing parents of school policies and activities, more intensive efforts can move parents and educators to joint action. Exemplary centers have assessed local needs regarding parent involvement, trained parent liaisons, conducted home-school visits, developed parent-school compacts, and trained parents and educators to work as teams.

Prepared school staff

Focus on staff professional development is imperative. Few colleges of education or school districts devote any substantial time to helping educators prepare to work with parents beyond early childhood and special education. Strong parent-teacher relationships are linked to various positive outcomes for students. Skills and practices can be folded into systems of training. The diverse students and families of the 21st century challenge the competencies of educators and call for new engagement efforts in a variety of community

contexts.

Ongoing personal communication

Continued two-way contact allow for the free exchange of ideas. Early home contacts by phone or in person send a message that all parents and their children are important. Annual parent-teacher conferences are more productive when teachers urge parents to bring questions and follow-up plans are made to engage families in understanding data and the classroom work. This requires more than the usual two parent-teacher meetings per year and reinforces the need for continuous communications to understand the data. Finally, school meetings with parents should allow ample time for questions and comments to promote personal communication.

Connecting home and school

Well-crafted and continuous home learning activities can be a potent part of enhancing positive relationships. Studies examining academic progress from third to fifth grade in 71 Title I schools showed early and continuing phone contact with families on a regular basis was more important than a number of other school reforms in schools with strong improvement. Teacher visitations to homes, similar to the nurse visitation projects, have also demonstrated enormous results in connecting the home and school.

Community coordination and support

Parent engagement, acting alone, is inadequate to improve the most difficult public schools. Schools and families need the support of and coordination with their community. Community members must also be involved in and responsible for providing resources and funding. To hold all groups accountable, community-based organizations should be part of the capacity-building in partnership with parents.

Research and evaluation for program improvement

Developing and supporting a research-based family engagement framework is essential to

determine when programs are working and how to improve them. Besides counts of parents or educators served, information is needed on knowledge and skills gained by them. Before and after data on participation in programs and comparison with matched non-participating groups make a much stronger case than one-time information on participants alone.

Next Steps

If we have learned anything from the rocky past of parental involvement, it is that effective education reform policy cannot ignore the essential partnership of the family in academics.

And, lastly, experience over the years has demonstrated that, without a federal framework, low-income parents frequently do not receive the kind of attention or school priority necessary to make the seamless link and connection between the family and the teacher. Jeffrey Henig and S. Paul Reville conclude that “in polite education circles, drawing attention to community and other non-school factors is met with impatience, resigned shrugs, or a weary rolling of the eyes. ... (but) the vision of future education reform is in connecting the home and the school in a culture of learning that not only enhances the skills of students and parents, but also positive relationships between the parent and teacher. It is that simple: American schools won’t achieve unless they attend to the non-school factors.”

Arnold F. Fege has over 30 years of experience in public education, child advocacy, public interest policymaking, leadership in non-profit organizations, and grass roots organizing. He was a former aide to Senator Robert F. Kennedy, filed stories for two years as an AP reporter in Vietnam, was active in the civil rights movement, was a public school teacher and administrator, a governmental relations specialist for several grassroots and volunteer organizations, and has written widely about the rights of poor and disadvantaged children and parents.

Evaluating Safety and Acceptance at Center for Technology



In our continued effort to share school improvement best practices, we bring you the story below from Center for Technology, Essex as an example of students and adults working in partnership to analyze school climate findings

Center for Technology, Essex (CTE), located in Essex Junction, VT and one of three member school districts of **Chittenden Central Supervisory Union (CCSU)**, provides comprehensive technical programs and career exploration for its students with a mission to advance student creativity, leadership and achievement.

In October 2012, in partnership with two other CCSU districts, Center for Technology, Essex first participated in the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI). Over 400 responses from students, staff and parents revealed positive results across several areas of Safety, Teaching & Learning, School Connectedness and Leadership. Social-Emotional Security (SES), the dimension focused on verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion, was found to be the one challenging outlier for all population groups. The CTE administration needed background about the experiences driving this feedback. CSCI Coordinator and CTE Assistant Director, Carolyn Dickinson, in collaboration with CTE Director, Assistant Director, Director of Guidance, and Teacher & Student Council Advisor, developed a student-centered method to address the school climate survey data and

gain more understanding of SES perceptions.

On January 30th, 2013 12 students and 3 staff members gathered for a full-day Student Focus Forum. The purpose was two-fold: **1) Convey the importance of student involvement and influence in driving school climate improvement, 2) Define and expand on CSCI SES findings to guide action planning and practice.**

Students were first oriented to the school climate data and then paired with a fellow classmate. In paired groups, students engaged in four rounds of appreciative interviews and focused on the topic of **"A Welcoming and Safe Environment at CTE"** to think and talk about times and places in life they've felt safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion. From these experiences, the groups would identify common themes and behaviors to develop action steps of how they can work together to emulate the same safe and respectful environment at CTE.

They started with these three focus areas:

Focus 1: Safety and Acceptance

Recall a time when you witnessed, created, or experienced a strong feeling of safety in your life and describe what made this a safe

situation and any positive benefits you gained from that experience.

Think about an experience when you didn't feel safe but an adult intervened. Describe the actions taken by the adult to move things in a more positive direction and describe how this experience changed how you or others interacted with each other.

Focus 2: Realizations about Safety and Acceptance

Come together to share highlights of Focus 1 stories. Each student, as he or she is listening, creates a summary of 1) Behaviors that helped people feel safe 2) Ways safety influenced how people felt

From this, each student thinks of three wishes they would grant to make CTE a more safe and inviting environment.

Focus 3: Brainstorming Change and Sharing Idea

In an ideal situation, the wishes of each student are in action at CTE. What rules exist and how are they communicated? How do students and adults respond when others are feeling unsafe or mistreated? Each group takes 30 minutes to create a 2-3 minute presentation showing the group vision for making CTE a place of safety and support from the moment you enter until the moment you leave for the day.

"I realized that I had matured and was acting more like an adult."

—Student from Focus Forum

Smallest Steps and Boldest Actions

The Student Focus Forum named a number of creative ideas ranging from the smallest steps: teachers greeting students at the door or posting positive student messages in the hallways to the bolder and more exciting ambitions: reduce social conflicts by coordinating a meet and greet day to have students from different groups learning about their common experiences.

resource corner

school-family partnerships

One major finding: *Students want to know more about each other and the adults in the building but don't always know the way to do so. This desire is noted by the wish list put together by students hoping for more one-on-one opportunities with students and teachers.*

The work is ongoing at CTE. Next steps include facilitating a collaborative meeting between the Student Council and School Climate Focus Team. To encourage continued engagement, a Parent Focus Forum opportunity is also in the works.

TO LEARN MORE about how your school can benefit from the CSCI, visit: www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php.

Cybrary Man's Educational Web Sites

A one-stop resource page for educators, parents, and students featuring useful tools, guides, and tips for parent-teacher conferences. For educators, there is a multitude of articles for guidance on communicating and connecting with parents. Additionally, there are ideas and resources on best practices of including students in conferences and allowing a sense of ownership for students' own work and behavior.

<http://cybraryman.com/ptconferences.html>

Edutopia: 19 Proven Tips for Getting Parents Involved at School

Increasing parent engagement in schools is "one of the biggest predictors of student success." Edutopia and GreatSchools gathers 19 tips from educators and parents on how to get families involved both in the classroom and at home.

<http://www.edutopia.org/groups/classroom-management/783266>

Parent Toolkit App, NBC News-Education Nation

From customization to creating a list to review later, this freshly released app will help parents benchmark their children's learning and development. The app offers resources by grade level and is designed to help navigate growth and development from Pre-K-12th grade in the classroom and beyond. Brand new sections on Social & Emotional Development will be available in late October on the website, so stay tuned! Text TOOLKIT to 33733 to get the app on your mobile device or learn more here:

<http://www.parenttoolkit.com/index.cfm?objectid=B66C4990-11CF-11E4-97A30050569A5318>

Parent Engagement in Schools, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), this resource provides guides for finding ways to connect and sustain parent engagement in schools, stating that parent involvement "in their children's school life is a protective factor," linking to better "student behavior, higher academic achievement, and enhanced social skills." CDC delivers PDFs of a strategy guide for engaging parents, fact sheets in promoting parent engagement, and staff development programming for engaging parents. Read more about a great planning resource that can be used year-round:

http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent_engagement.htm

EdSource: Now is the time to seize the parent engagement moment

This article pertains to California schools and families, but is relevant to any school, anywhere. Colleen You, president of the California State PTA, highlights strategies

derived from PTA research and experience, from removing education jargon when speaking to parents to incorporating parent engagement into their overall priority improvement goals.

http://edsources.org/2014/now-is-the-time-to-seize-the-parent-engagement-moment/58102#.U3pUo_IdW5l.

Edublogs: Engaging Parents in School

An infographic representing researcher Dr. Joyce Epstein's work on the six types of involvement for successful partnerships: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. This framework not only highlights ways to involve parents, but also the community, supporting children and schools as a "whole village" effort.

<http://engagingparentsinschool.edublogs.org/2014/07/23/useful-parent-involvement-infographic/>

NPR Ed: Rethinking a Fall Classic: The Parent-Teacher Conference

There is often not enough time during parent-teacher conferences to go beyond academic grades, and as students get older, fewer parents are likely to show up. In New York City, schools are trying to change this. By increasing the number of conferences from two to four per year and starting earlier in the year, parents will be informed on a regular schedule on what's expected of their children. "It's less about progress and more about getting to know the parents," says East Bronx Academy for the Future teacher, Nick Lawrence. Read more of how to enhance the experience of parent-teacher meetings:

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/09/18/349234419/rethinking-a-fall-classic-the-parent-teacher-conference>

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NEWSLETTER DESIGN BY: THERESA E. NAMECK

NSCC is an organization that helps schools integrate crucial social and emotional learning with academic instruction to enhance student performance, prevent drop outs, reduce violence, and develop healthy and positively engaged adults.

For more than a decade, NSCC has worked together with the entire academic community—teacher, staff, school-based mental health professional, students, and parents—to improve total school climate.

We continue to help translate research into practice by establishing meaningful and relevant guidelines, programs and services that support a model for whole school improvement with a focus on school climate.

NSCC's vision is that all children will develop the essential social, emotional, and intellectual skills to become healthy and productive citizens.

NSCC's mission is to measure and improve the climate for learning in schools to help children realize their fullest potential as individuals and as engaged members of society.

NSCC achieves this through:

- *Advocacy and policy*
- *Measurement and research*
- *Educational services*