NSCC
National School Climate Center

school climate matters

in this issue:

in brief

Our Team is Growing!

Fred Chute, *Junior IT Associate*
Frederick Chute is a Junior IT Associate at NSCC. He recently graduated from John Jay College of Criminal Justice with a BS in the field of Computer Science and Information Security.

Marisa Zalabak, *Education Specialist*
Marisa is an Education Specialist at NSCC. She is an Educational Psychologist, Teaching Artist, Curriculum Developer, and Director of Open Channel Education.

Christian Villenas, *Director of Research*
Christian Villenas is the Director of Research at the National School Climate Center (NSCC). Christian has spent the last 15 years conducting program evaluation, policy, and statistical analysis on projects related to education. His research has focused on social disparities in education, education policy, school climate, disability studies, LGBTQ students, the diffusion of new educational practices in schools, and college access.

A Message from the President

Dear Friends,

I am very pleased to announce that after 21 years leading NSCC, I will be moving into a new role: Senior Scholar and President Emeritus. When George Igel and I co-founded NSCC (then called the Center for Social and Emotional Education) in 1996, I had no idea how we would grow. We knew we wanted to "build" helpful bridges between K-12 education and mental health. We believed it was essential to translate educational and mental health research into practical guidelines that would support children's ability to learn and develop in healthy ways. But we didn't have any idea that now—two decades later—we would be learning and working with schools across America and around the world in service to these core values.

Thanks to so many of you, NSCC has become an extraordinary backbone organization: Supporting school communities to understand their current strengths and needs and working with them to create even safer, more supportive, and engaging climates for learning that—truly—support school and life success for all students.

As the Board and I considered NSCC's expanded standing in the field, we felt it was the ideal time to bring new skills and leadership into NSCC to best guide the organization and achieve our mission in this critical moment of need in the field. In my new role, I will have the opportunity to focus on the work I most love—being a learner, teacher, writer, researcher, and partnership builder for our essential efforts—and contribute in ways that best serve the communities we support.

I am thrilled to announce that Whitney Allgood is joining NSCC as our new Chief Executive Officer. I believe that Whitney will be able to support NSCC's growth and further enhance our capacity to collaborate with schools, districts, State Departments of Education and educational ministries around the world. Whitney has an extraordinary background as a teacher, researcher, educational leader, and policy maker. I am honored to be able to support Whitney, NSCC and the field, and I invite you to read our full release announcing this exciting news. We look forward to the future of NSCC and to working alongside each of you to meet the needs of our schools and communities in the months and years ahead.

Very sincerely,

Jonathan Cohen

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

CREATING A CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

Fostering School Leadership and Creating Positive Climates in Pennsylvania

By Mylisa Nogra, *School Support Coordinator, NSCC*

The Pennsylvania School Climate Leadership Initiative (SCLI) started in May 2015 as a three-year partnership between the National School Climate Center (NSCC), the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Office for Safe Schools, and the Pennsylvania Intermediary Units to increase the capacity of PA educators to lead school climate improvement efforts. The SCLI is designed to help schools complement or expand on their existing efforts so that they may achieve equitable outcomes and increase student achievement. To create a strong infrastructure for school climate improvement, Intermediary Units invited School Regional Coordinators (SCRCs) to participate in NSCC's Leadership Certification Program. Through the Leadership Certification Program, SCRCs receive training and coaching to build their capacity as they support schools within their region to implement strategies to build positive school climate.

The SCLI is based on the NSCC's five-stage school climate improvement process, which is the cyclical model of preparing and evaluating school climate data, strategically planning around the data, implementing the plan of action, re-evaluating progress and continuing the cycle of the improvement process. Primarily focused on data from two survey tools, the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey and NSCC's *Readiness Tool*, the SCLI drew on both self-reported school climate data from students, staff, and families, as well as reflective data from the schools' leadership teams on their readiness to plan and prepare actionable school climate improvement plans.

The goal of year one of the Leadership Cer-

tification Program was to build the capacity of education leaders in creating safe, supportive, engaging, and healthy climates for learning to promote students' academic and life success. In total, there were 26 School Climate Regional Coordinators (SCRCs) who carried out this work to 55 schools in the state. Throughout the first year of implementation, the SCRCs completed their leadership certificate by attending monthly coaching calls, webinars, and three in-person full day trainings. According to Dr. Stacie Molnar-Main, the Strategic Initiatives Manager at the Center for Safe Schools, "an SCRC does not necessarily need to be someone who is trained in counseling and interventions." She adds that school experience is key, as "many of them [SCRCs] had their background in teaching and learning issues, and are engaged in the core work of the schools."

Dr. Molnar-Main also underscores the importance of school climate work as it helps students pay attention to career training, is positively correlated to greater school safety, and helps foster educational equity. She says that an important outcome of school climate work is assessing how to "best reach different subgroups of students to provide rigorous opportunities for achievement."

The findings from the *Readiness Tool* show that school leadership teams are on track to building capacity and supporting school improvement efforts. The *Readiness Tool* was taken by school leadership teams in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, and the highest increases in scores were seen in the domains of Vision and Support, Leadership, and Building on Success.

These domains emphasize goal-setting, building on strategic plans, and forming an authentic and representative leadership team. The *Readiness Tool* was administered to principals, administrative staff, instructional staff, non-instructional staff, and those with other/unknown roles. Findings showed that the average domain score increase was largest among those with other/ unknown roles, and the smallest score increase was seen among principals and instructional staff.

For the upcoming 2017-2018 school year, schools had to apply to participate in the SCLI. In order to be chosen, the school leadership team had to develop a memorandum of understanding with the School Climate Regional Coordinators, in which they declared that they understood that they were accountable for an actionable plan around the school climate data. If approved, the school would participate in the SCLI and receive an additional $5000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to support their planning.

The upcoming school year will have a tighter focus on stakeholder engagement and selecting effective interventions for school climate improvement. Whereas the first year of the Leadership Training Certification Program focused on developing foundational knowledge on school climate leadership, the second year is focused on both content and process with a heavier emphasis on implementation science and evidence-based practices. NSCC is committed to developing schools' capacities to embark on the school climate improvement progress and we are excited to continue the second year of our partnership in Pennsylvania.

Latest Findings on Social Inclusion from NSCC and Special Olympics

By Ashley Duffee, *Senior Research Associate, NSCC*

NSCC has approached the end of a three-year research collaboration with Special Olympics, in which we have explored the relationship between Unified Champion School programming, social inclusion, and overall school climate. We have found that in addition to the critical role of social inclusion in promoting a healthy school climate for students with disabilities, students without disabilities—specifically those that are underserved and vulnerable—benefit from these efforts as well.

Social inclusion encompasses meeting all people's basic needs, enabling and encouraging all people to be contributing members of society, and making everyone feel valued and respected. This study, however, focuses on inclusion of students with disabilities. These students are often segregated from their peers in both academic and social settings and often experience various forms of peer rejection, including social exclusion and bully victimization.

The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools program is an education and sports-based model that addresses the academic and social inclusion of students with disabilities in a way that is qualitatively different from tradi-

tional Special Olympics programming. While Special Olympics provides year-round athletic competition for individuals with disabilities, Unified Champion programming unites students with and without disabilities through inclusive sports, youth leadership and advocacy, and whole school engagement initiatives.

To explore the connection between inclusive programming and school climate, NSCC and Special Olympics developed the Social Inclusion Scale and the Characteristics of a Socially Inclusive School Assessment (CSIS). The Social Inclusion Scale aims to assess the extent to which students, staff, and parents perceive their school as inclusive of students with disabilities in all areas of school life, while the CSIS measures school leadership teams' awareness of socially inclusive practices within their school. We administered these two assessments, along with the *Comprehensive School Climate Inventory 4.0* (CSCI), to schools with and without Unified Strategy programming.

Compared to schools without inclusive programming, Unified Champion Schools:

- have students, staff, and families that perceive more positive whole-school climate and greater social inclusion;
- report greater perceptions of social

inclusion, not only from students with disabilities, but also from general education students;
- have leadership teams that report more opportunities for collaboration between special education and general education staff, as well as more opportunities for training on inclusive practices

While our findings are only correlational and we cannot conclude that differences found were definitively due to the presence of Unified programming, the patterns of differences between Unified Champion Schools and comparison schools provide a consistent pattern of evidence that Unified programming is associated with greater awareness of inclusive school climate practices and a heighted sense of social inclusion. that is not limited to students with disabilities, but also extends to other underserved groups.

Our partnership with Special Olympics helps schools understand how socially inclusive practices and policies benefit all students. We hope to expand our work to further our understanding of social inclusion as an essential element of a positive school climate.

Youth Participation and Empowerment Is the Key: Partnering with Middle Schools in Illinois

By Tim Tasker, *Educational Project Manager, NSCC*

For the past 3 years, NSCC has partnered with a group of five middle schools from across the state of Illinois in creating and refining an approach to bullying prevention through school climate improvement. Our current work with these five schools grew out of a collaborative grant project that was completed in partnership with an Illinois-based organization called *Prevent School Violence Illinois*. The bullying prevention approach we developed was grounded in NSCC's framework for effective school climate improvement, including components such as: school climate leadership teams; readiness, process, and outcome metrics; data-driven decision making; professional development for school staff; youth participation and empowerment; and broad stakeholder engagement.

Bullying prevention through school climate improvement involves expanding schools' resource access through the creation of a network improvement community

Another key feature of this approach to bullying prevention through school climate improvement involves expanding schools' resource access through the creation of a network improvement community. Network improvement communities (NIC), a term coined by Bryk and colleagues (2015), are similar to professional learning communities, except that they typically extend beyond an individual school and center around a common aim (e.g., reducing bullying) as opposed to a common interest or role (e.g., departmental learning community). The power of such an NIC was on full display at our project's cluster meeting on October 27 in Hillside, Illinois. Clusters consist of full-day meetings, organized by project personnel, that bring together all five school teams in order to update on progress, participate in professional development, receive technical assistance, and share ideas and strategies through various collaborative activities.

This particular Cluster Meeting was attended by multiple representatives of all five school leadership teams. Together, the five teams engaged in a series of professional development sessions that were focused on:

1) understanding data from NSCC's school climate leadership team readiness tool,

2) using student discipline data to further bullying prevention and climate improvement efforts, and

3) recognizing implicit bias and its association with bullying behaviors and student discipline.

Participating in these professional development sessions together allowed the five school teams to learn from each other by sharing ideas, challenges, successes, and strategies.

The recent Cluster Meeting agenda also included considerable time for the five groups to synthesize and apply their learnings at the individual team level. NSCC personnel supported each team to revisit their school-specific action plans that day in order to update or add new strategies based on what they were learning. For instance, several teams outlined plans for conducting a review of their student discipline data, others added new professional development sessions to their school calendar, and some even planned a program audit that would help ensure coordination of various bullying-relevant programs within their own schools.

Anonymous evaluations completed at the end of the day demonstrate the tremendous successes of these kinds of meetings. Attendees provided an overall assessment for the Cluster of 4.8 (Excellent) on a 5-point scale. Further, they expressed considerable appreciation for: "getting more ideas from other schools and discussing with our teams how we can implement them at our school," "the presentations and the small group work with the NSCC members," and "great ideas and take-aways to implement in our program."

Outside of these Cluster Meetings, NSCC continues to support this particular group of schools through other networking tools and services. Since the beginning of the project, school team members have been connected through a listserv to facilitate communication about our work. In addition, we developed a Classroom Climate Resource Guide, which is a Wiki-based networking site where all staff from participating schools can post and share resources, as well as pose questions and request support. More recently, NSCC has worked to incorporate these kinds of social and networking functions—and more—into our latest redesign of the NSCC Resource Center. We are excited that innovations like these will facilitate networks of school communities serving as resources to one another in implementing effective school climate improvement and bullying prevention efforts!

Using ESSA to Improve School Climate and Social Emotional Development

By Catherine Holahan

This provides an opportunity for state, district, and school leaders to impact student outcomes by ensuring that new aligned systems are designed to support positive school climates and learning environments that foster inter- and intra-personal (social and emotional) development.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed in December 2015, laid the groundwork for two significant shifts in education reform in that it (1) shifted significant authority and responsibility for designing key education systems from the federal level to states and districts; and (2) prioritized college and career ready outcomes for all students—allowing for a broader focus than the strictly academic nature of its predecessor, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)—and required that all systems be aligned toward those outcomes.

With the passage of this law, every state and district will revisit their efforts to achieve equity and excellence, creating myriad opportunities to assert new priorities and embrace new approaches. This provides an opportunity for state, district, and school leaders to impact student outcomes by ensuring that new aligned systems are designed to support positive school climates and learning environments that foster inter- and intra-personal (social and emotional) development.

In thinking about how to leverage ESSA, several questions come to mind: What kind of change are we talking about? What policies and practices are needed to improve school climate and foster students' social and emotional development? Is there funding available to support these efforts in my state, district, or school? How can measurement of this be incorporated into and leveraged in our systems and processes?

The answers to these questions will vary, depending on your goals and at which level of the system you are. However, there are a number of opportunities for state, district, and school leaders to develop policies that improve school climate and foster social and emotional learning and that are informed by relevant data about needs and progress (such as, for example, school climate surveys, disciplinary data, student engagement data, etc.). It is important to think of ESSA as an opportunity to set directions and then make continuous improvement over time.

It is important to think of ESSA as an opportunity to set directions and then make continuous improvement over time.

1. **Vision.** ESSA allows for an expanded definition of student success that goes beyond academics to also include the full range of knowledge and skills that students need for success in college, career, and life. ESSA provides the opportunity to revisit existing norms and to set a new vision, particularly with the engagement of stakeholders, that includes social and emotional development as necessary for student success.

2. **School Improvement.** ESSA sets out a process for the identification of schools in need of improvement and the development of plans and support needed for those schools. The two schools identified are those in need of: (1) comprehensive support and improvement (CSI) (low-est-performing 5% of Title I schools, schools with graduation rate of less than 67%, and TSI schools that did not exit); and (2) targeted support and improvement (TSI) (schools with subgroups that are consistently underperforming and/or performing as low as the lowest 5% of Title I schools). This process involves conducting needs assessments of the identified schools (required for all CSI schools, and optional for TSI schools). States, districts, and schools should seize this opportunity to select the best, research-based needs assessments that provide important insights on school climate and to design plans that include evidence-based interventions that improve school climate and foster student social and emotional learning.

3. **Title IV.** Student Support and Academic Enrichment (SSAE) grants. These grants provide funding to districts for activities to support "safe and healthy students," including those to improve school climate. States can distribute this funding by formula, competition, or a combination of the two, and may also reserve up to 5% of the funds to support state-level activities toward this same goal. Districts receiving $30,000 or more must conduct needs assessments, which includes assessing the school conditions for student learning in order to create a healthy and safe learning environment. District leaders have an opportunity to seek this funding for activities related to school climate and, in doing so, to conduct needs assessments to understand the greatest needs in their district's schools.

4. **Title II.** Educator Effectiveness. Title II provides funding to support professional learning for educators and school leaders. States and districts can dedicate a portion of this funding to support teachers and school leaders in understanding and establishing positive school climates and implementing approaches that foster students' social and emotional development.

5. **Accountability.** ESSA requires states to design statewide accountability systems to differentiate among schools and to identify schools in need of improvement. The system must include one or more measures of "school quality and/or student success" (SQSS) such as those related to "student engagement" and "school climate and safety" (among others). These measures must be valid, reliable, the same across all schools, and capable of meaningfully differentiating between schools. This creates an opportunity for states to select indicators of school quality that provide information about school climate.

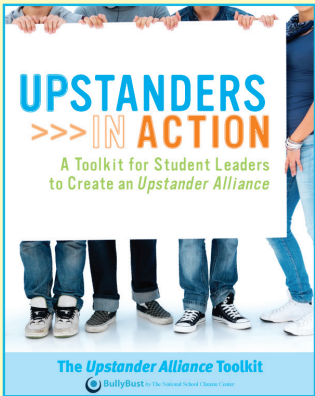6. **Data Reporting.** ESSA requires state systems of data reporting, which can include a broader set of data beyond that used for school accountability purposes. Therefore, states (and districts) have the opportunity to require the collection and reporting of data that provides information about school climate, even if not used for purposes of school accountability.

7. **District ESSA Plans.** Once state ESSA plans are approved by the U.S. Department of Education, districts will complete their district-level consolidated plans for how they will use federal funding. This is an opportunity for states to ask (in designing the application) and for districts to consider (in completing the application) how they might use their different streams of federal funding under ESSA—Title I, Title II (educator effectiveness), and Title IV (SSAE grants)—to support activities that will help improve school climate and foster social and emotional development, such as, for example, through building educator and school leader capacity, revised disciplinary policies and practices, and training on evidence-based approaches.

Each of these areas provides opportunities for state, district, and/or school leaders to support the establishment of positive school climates for students to be engaged and successful. Depending on your vantage point as a state, district or school leader, you may find more leverage in some opportunities than others. The type of measures that you incorporate (i.e., school climate surveys, discipline data, chronic absenteeism, student surveys, etc.) and the type of change that you are trying to drive (i.e., increased educator capacity, improved discipline policies, improved student engagement, etc.) will also depend on the unique context of your state, district, or school.

Cathy Holahan is a Senior Legal and Policy Advisor for EducationCounsel LLC. She provides legal, policy, and strategic planning support to organizations on education policy matters with a focus on disability-related issues, special education, school climate and discipline, and the advancement of innovative strategies to improve student outcomes, particularly in high-poverty, low-performing schools. She holds a Juris Doctor from the University of Connecticut School of Law, a Master of Social Work in Policy and Planning from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Vermont.

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NSCC:
Creating a Climate for Learning!

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www.schoolclimate.org

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