

It Takes a Whole School to Support a Whole Child

By Gene R. Carter, Executive Director, ASCD



A recent HBO documentary depicts the 2005 school year at a struggling Baltimore high school. The school's statistics are alarming: 50 percent of its 9th graders drop out by the end of the year, 66 percent of its teachers are uncertified, and its test scores are well below state averages. But perhaps even more troubling is the documentary's depiction of the school's overall climate: chaotic classrooms and hallways, disrespectful and apathetic students, rampant truancy, and dismal turnout at events like back-to-school night.

In this column, I frequently emphasize the importance of nurturing the whole child so that all children are healthy, safe, engaged in learning, supported by caring adults, and academically challenged. This doesn't just happen. It takes a "whole school" to nurture the "whole child."

A whole school is one that collaborates with its community to deliberately build and sustain a positive school climate. The Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE), an ASCD whole child partner, has outlined essential dimensions of school climate that range from a school's physical environment to its expectations for learning, but the Center sums up school climate as the "quality and character of school life."

Research shows that when school systems work to improve school climate, academic achievement and teacher retention increase, while violence decreases. Moreover, experts contend that positive school climates prepare students to be active and engaged citizens.

CSEE's National School Climate Center and the Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Citizenship recently released "The School Climate Challenge," a white paper that underscores the importance of school climate and how that importance is inconsistently reflected in educational policy and practice.

So how does a school create a positive climate that's capable of nurturing the whole child? A logical first step is to take the pulse of the school's current climate. "The School Climate Challenge" emphasizes the importance of using scientifically sound school climate evaluation tools that account for the experiences of students, parents, and school personnel.

But measurement alone will not fix school climate. "Too often schools administer a school climate evaluation, look at the results once, and fail to use the data as a springboard for collaborative learning and improvement," says Jonathan Cohen, president of CSEE. "School climate data give us information related to social, emotional, and ethical learning that can build community and help schools create an action plan."

Incorporating school climate measures into a broader and richer accountability system is one way to ensure schools use the data to make improvements. Valid and reliable indicators of school climate and student achievement—beyond those used to evaluate school and district performance under No Child Left Behind—would provide a more complete and accurate picture of how schools are doing. Some states, like Ohio, are developing school climate assessment as an additional and complementary form of accountability.

ASCD's Whole Child Initiative emphasizes that schools should leverage community resources to provide students

with the education, health, and social services they need. Similarly, a school administrator—even one armed with the best data and intentions—can't single-handedly improve a school's climate.

Recent data show community involvement can improve. The Public Education Network conducted a national poll that captures the public's views on community commitment to helping improve education. The public thinks business leaders and community organizations can do more to support public schools. "The School Climate Challenge" suggests school leaders use their school climate evaluation results as a way to promote community participation in improvement efforts.

HBO's grim documentary of the Baltimore high school showed how futile it can be to narrowly focus on raising test scores in the context of a dysfunctional climate that undervalues learning and relationships. But there is hope. The climate can improve if the school listens to its students, uses reliable data to build an action plan, and marshals community resources to implement the plan. All children deserve whole schools that promote achievement and prepare them to be engaged members of a democratic community. Three years from now, wouldn't it be great to watch HBO's follow-up documentary about the turnaround success of this Baltimore high school?

Access "The School Climate Challenge" at www.csee.net.

Access Public Education Network's 2008 National Civic Index Poll results at www.publiceducation.org/pubs_civicindex.asp.

Learn about the whole child at www.wholechildeducation.org.

