

Research review confirms positive school climates can narrow achievement gaps

November 1 2016

Positive school climates contribute to academic achievement and can improve outcomes for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, according to a new study published today in *Review of Educational Research*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

In a comprehensive analysis of research published since 2000, U.S. and Israeli researchers found substantial evidence that schools with positive climates can narrow achievement gaps among students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and between students with stronger and weaker academic abilities.

Broadly speaking, positive school climates are marked by a supportive, caring approach from teachers; a sense of safety from violence and bullying; student connectedness in school; and parental involvement.

"Our analysis of more than 15 years' worth of research shows that schools do matter and can do much to improve academic outcomes," said study co-author Ron Avi Astor, a professor of social work and education at the University of Southern California. "Our findings suggest that by promoting a positive climate, schools can allow greater equality in educational opportunities, decrease socioeconomic inequalities, and enable more social mobility."

The analysis also found no correlation between socioeconomic status and perceptions of school climate. This suggests that schools serving students

of lower socioeconomic status do not necessarily have poor climates and that positive climates can be nurtured in these schools.

"Positive school climate has the potential to break the negative influences that stem from poor [socioeconomic backgrounds](#) and to mitigate risk factors that threaten academic achievement," said co-author Ruth Berkowitz, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Haifa, Israel. "Evidence-based interventions that support and improve school climate are critically important to efforts around the world to increase educational opportunity for disadvantaged students and schools."

For their study, Berkowitz, Astor, and study co-authors Hadass Moore of the University of Southern California and Rami Benbenishty of Bar-Ilan University analyzed 78 studies published between 2000 and 2015 that focused on the relationship between school or classroom climate, [academic achievement](#), and [socioeconomic status](#).

Need for Common Definition and Measurement

In their analysis, the authors also found great variation in the school climate definitions and measurements used by researchers, reflecting the absence of clear and uniform standards.

"This becomes very important with the new Every Student Succeeds Act, which focuses heavily on the climate and social and emotional tone of schools," said Astor. "The U.S. Department of Education has a definition and instrument that is only somewhat aligned with the research and the scholars producing it."

"There is a tangible, immediate need to construct a common definition and reliable climate measurements that can be translated into practice and policy guidelines," Astor said. "In the absence of a clear and uniform

definition and measurement of school climate, the ability of researchers and stakeholders to evaluate school climate growth over time is restricted."

Call for More Rigorous Research

In addition, the study authors made several recommendations to improve future research that would provide more definitive results and allow researchers to offer clear recommendations for policymakers and education practitioners. They strongly recommended the use of more rigorous research designs such as longitudinal, experimental, and semi-experimental.

They also recommended investigating an entire school community's perceptions of school climate—including those of teachers, administrators, and parents—not just of students or teachers. In addition to allowing for more accurate evaluations of school climate, a multi-perspective approach would allow school communities to design their own climate improvement programs, tailor-made to their requirements and social and organizational characteristics, rather than importing external models that have proved effective elsewhere.

The authors also suggested examining the contribution of school climate to the arts, physical education, social and emotional learning, civics, vocational subjects, and other areas outside the core subjects of mathematics, language arts, and science.

Provided by American Educational Research Association

Citation: Research review confirms positive school climates can narrow achievement gaps (2016, November 1) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-11-positive-school-climates-narrow-gaps.html>

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