

1

School Climate

The Heart and Soul of a School

School climate is like the air we breathe—it tends to go unnoticed until something is seriously wrong.

Jerome Freiburg, *School Climate* (1999, p. 1)

MAKING MEANINGFUL IMPROVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

There are many problems confronting our schools—bullying and harassment, inadequate academic performance, children who feel left out or fall between the cracks, disrespectful behavior, unmotivated students, and frustrated teachers. Despite countless reform initiatives, “research-based” programs, mandates, school assemblies, and outside speakers, these challenges persist in many schools. This book is about not just taking steps to address school issues such as these, but about a sustainable problem-solving process—one that makes real progress on the targeted issue *while* building capacity within schools to address other challenges inherent to school life.

We make the case that piecemeal efforts, one-time assemblies, and off-the-shelf programs rarely get to the heart of the difficulties schools need to

address. Whatever happens in schools happens in a context, a context that the school culture and climate influence and shape, and that can undermine even the best-intentioned ideas.

Without creating a more positive school climate, most efforts to institute change will flounder—maybe never getting off the ground, or lasting only as long as the program funding, or at best, being an isolated bright spot out of step with other parts of the school program.

This book focuses on school climate as the heart and soul of school success for both adults and students. It is this climate that creates the conditions for students, teachers, and administrators to work effectively—feeling safe and supported, able to make a difference through their efforts, and ready to contribute to the good of the school as a whole.

Whether aiming to prevent bullying, increase attendance, lessen disciplinary incidents, or improve academic performance, the umbrella of school climate offers a comprehensive framework for real problem solving and organizational capacity building. This is the orientation that facilitates continuous school improvement.

WHY IS SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPORTANT?

What would you do if your child came home from school upset that her peers called her names, threatened to hurt her, or made fun of her when she made mistakes in class? You would probably ask her what the grown-ups at school were doing to help her, right? What if she said that there was no adult at school that she felt comfortable talking to about these problems, and there was nobody at school she could turn to for help?

Would you expect that, after a while, she would become stressed and anxious about going to school? Do you think that her grades would eventually suffer? Would she be less and less eager to even go to school each day if nothing were to change?

If this were the case, then your daughter would not be alone. Our research (Preble & Knowles, 2011) on elementary school students shows that nearly one out of every five children (20 percent) report feeling physically or emotionally unsafe at school and the same number of students report that there is no adult they can turn to for help at school. In a class of twenty-five students, that means that at least five students feel unsafe and are typically dealing with it on their own.

An important study about bullying in school called the Youth Voice Project (Davis & Nixon, 2011) offers quite similar findings, as 22 percent of students in the elementary grades reported at least two incidences of peer victimization per month. These findings are consistent with those of Olweus (1993) in his seminal studies of bullying in schools.

Davis and Nixon (2011) also examined how students responded when their peers bullied them, and found that the vast majority of students “pretended it doesn’t bother them” (75 percent), “told the person

to stop” (71 percent), “told a friend” (71 percent), or “walked away” (66 percent). Only 42 percent of the students in the Youth Voice study told an adult at school. So, it should be no surprise that when we ask teachers to tell us how safe or respectful their schools are, the vast majority say that their schools are “just fine”—they seem safe and respectful places for students. These adults are likely unaware of the severity of the school climate problems that are happening in their schools.

Given the fact that most students don’t report bullying incidents to adults at school, and that much of what contributes to peer victimization happens out of the direct view of adults, it is really no wonder that there is such a disconnect between what students understand about school climate and what grown-ups (i.e., teachers and administrators) believe is happening right under their noses. This disconnect presents a serious challenge. If adults honestly believe that these problems do not exist at their schools, how likely are they going to be to try to address them? Perhaps even more important, when adults do take up the challenge of addressing school climate issues, how effective can we expect them to be when most do not understand what is really going on?

PREVENTING PITFALLS: DON’T UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

Educators have been under increasing pressure for more than a decade to focus on student academic performance and test scores. Moving to a more balanced view of the importance of the learning environment, then, will take thoughtful advocacy. Reminding adults of the impact of stress and threat on performance, for adults in the workplace as well as students in the classroom, can help remind educators of the important connections between positive climate and performance.

Bullying and peer-to-peer harassment at school are not the only factors that influence school climate. The ways that teachers establish discipline and rules in classrooms affect school climate. The kind of relationships teachers develop with their students affects the climate within a classroom and a school. The teaching methods a teacher uses makes the classroom either an engaging place for learning or a dull setting that students can’t wait to leave.

In the following chapters, we elaborate a process for engaging students as partners with adults to develop a shared understanding of the most serious school climate issues within their school. This common vision allows them to work together to take effective steps to address these concerns. Let’s begin by looking in more depth at the reasons schools are now beginning to take issues of school climate more seriously.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

School climate is not a new idea. In the 1980s, research on *effective schools* demonstrated the importance of providing a safe and orderly school environment (Edmonds, 1979; Walberg, 1984). More recently, the topic of school climate has received increased attention after being linked to school violence in reports by both the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) and the U.S. Secret Service (2002). School climate has been associated with nearly every incident involving school shootings reported over the past fifteen years. It seems quite clear that if teachers and school leaders pay too little attention to school climate problems, serious consequences may occur.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for most students to focus on learning when they have to deal with disrespect, bullying, harassment, public humiliation, hate speech, threats, or violence. A review of forty major studies between 1964 and 1980 found that over half of these studies reported important effects of school climate on student achievement (Anderson, 1982).

In our own research in thirty-six schools in Sullivan County, Tennessee, we found a nearly 10 percent increase in academic performance in those schools that made a significant improvement in school climate over a three year period (Preble & Newman, 2006). To plan for and monitor school improvement, the district has adopted a process of collecting school climate data each year along with its academic testing data. They obviously feel that school climate matters (Preble & Taylor, 2008).

There is a growing body of research showing how a positive school climate facilitates not only student learning and higher academic achievement but also promotes the healthy social and emotional development of students (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Freiburg, 1999). Jonathan Cohen, director of the Center for Social and Emotional Education, cites a safe, positive climate for learning as one of the most important factors for schools to promote the kind of social, emotional, ethical, and academic education that is essential for participation in democracy. This safe, caring, engaging learning environment can be developed through systemic intervention and is essential “to provide the platform upon which we teach and learn” (Cohen & Elias, 2010).

School climate also contributes to risk prevention and to positive youth development. Stated simply, in schools where students experience a positive school climate, students are generally less at risk for antisocial behavior and drug use, and tend to have more positive life outcomes (Cohen, Fege, & Pickeral, 2009). Looking deeply into the issue of school climate in one’s own school can help educators, parents, and students better understand and appreciate the often *dramatically different* school experiences that different groups of young people have inside the school on any given day.

Clearly, we know that there are subgroups of students in almost any school (highly intelligent students, struggling students, minority students,

gay and lesbian students, etc.), who are socially marginalized and can routinely be targets of disrespect, bullying, or harassment by their peers. While many students might report having highly prosocial and positive school experiences every day in their school, other students may be treated in their school in ways that are simply unacceptable. These experiences steal the self-confidence, dignity, and self-respect of targeted students. Disrespectful, hurtful, and threatening school climate can rob these students of their spirit, their education, their physical and mental health, and sometimes their lives (Wessler & Preble, 2003).

It is clear from this research that the most effective schools—whether measured by academic outcomes, the promotion of democratic and civic skills, or the personal and psychological development of students—are those schools that have a safe, respectful, and personalized school climate. These are schools where students are engaged as learners, personally connected with peers and teachers, and empowered to actively apply their learning. This all occurs in ways that allow students to serve others, improve their schools and communities, and become confident and competent at solving real problems.

We refer to these schools that give focused attention to the social and emotional well-being of every child (and adult), actively value each individual in the school community, and look for ways to include all voices in the success of the school as *respectful schools*. In these schools, there is a commitment to respect throughout the school, both in and outside the classroom, for and among students as well as teachers—respect for each individual, respect for difference, and respect for the learning process.

ESSENTIAL SCHOOL CLIMATE FACTORS

There are a number of essential factors that affect school climate. First, the *relationships* that students have with their peers and adults in their school most certainly affect school climate. These relationships shape each student's perception of the school experience and provide the lens through which each student views all other activities at school. JoAnne Freiburg, an educational consultant with the Connecticut State Department of Education, has been a dedicated leader in her state's efforts to link school climate and respect to its work to improve academic outcomes for Connecticut schools. As Freiburg (2008) explains,

School climate is very simple—it is about relationships: relationships among adults, relationships between adults and children and relationships among peers. It's about the quality of those relationships and in essence whether individuals inside schools treat each other appropriately. It boils down to this. (public presentation, March 27, 2008)

In addition to respectful relationships, we believe that *respectful teaching practices* are at the heart of a respectful school and shape its climate every minute of every school day. The kinds of teaching practices used at each school communicate a great deal to students about the adults' expectations, values, and beliefs. Respectful teaching practices reflect attention to the needs and interests of each child, a belief that while time or methods might need to vary for each student, learning results are achievable for every child. Respectful teaching offers students opportunities to interact with and learn from one another, foster interdependence, promote effective communication, and build rapport and respect. Respectful teaching helps create a positive school climate as it inspires students and makes them feel valued as individuals and appreciated for their ideas and contributions to the class. It makes sense that students engaged by respectful teaching practices will learn more and perform better academically. These students will feel more motivated about education in general and their school in particular, thereby perpetuating a positive school climate.

The *physical environment* of the school also plays an important role in school climate. A school building that is run-down, or with bathroom stalls covered in graffiti and furniture falling apart, all send a message to students about their worth and the value of their educational experience. At the same time, students who deface or disrespect their school property are communicating their own feelings for their school, adults, and their peers. Giving students responsibility to help maintain and restore their school environment is a powerful strategy for improving school climate.

Opportunities for students to participate as valued members of a school community and to feel connected to those around them contribute to a positive school climate. Nurturing a sense of *belonging* is also an important component of school climate. *Empowering* students (and teachers) to feel valued for their input into policy making, management, and improvement of the school and the surrounding community raises commitment and motivation. Promoting these positive qualities, rather than simply fighting against negative behaviors, fosters more constructive actions and continued improvement by individuals and for the school as a whole.

WE ALL WANT RESPECTFUL SCHOOLS

School climate is one of those vital but seemingly indefinable qualities that you can actually "feel" within the first few minutes you walk into a school. Each of you has spent a large portion of your life inside schools as a student, and perhaps as a teacher or administrator. You may have had communications and interactions with schools as a parent or guardian

of a child. These personal experiences make you a kind of expert on school climate.

Some of you remember your former schools with fondness and others will have less positive memories. Each of the schools in your past had its own unique school climate; no two schools are exactly alike, and this is important when it comes to measuring school climate. *School climate must be assessed and addressed one school at a time.*

It is likely you remember people in your school treated you fairly or unjustly, were kind or mean, helpful, or hurtful toward you. The school was personal or impersonal for you, engaging or boring. More than likely, *certain* individuals treated you in supportive or destructive ways, *certain* teachers were respectful and engaging, while other teachers were more impersonal, rigid, or dull.

As we reflect more about our school life, we may recall more vividly the experiences we had there. We quickly recollect certain classes and certain teachers and barely remember others. We call to mind those teachers we felt were caring and genuinely interested in us and in the subjects they taught us. We may remember other teachers who were not so committed to us or to what they taught. We remember some classrooms as exciting places for learning. We may remember field trips to special places that were exciting, or ones that bored us to death. We vividly remember some things that some of our best teachers taught us years ago, as if it were yesterday. Or we draw a complete blank about years and years of instruction and recall almost nothing about what some teachers taught us.

We think about places in school that were safe and comfortable for us, and also about places that may have been scary, threatening, or even dangerous. We think about the discipline systems used in the school and their fairness and effectiveness in helping to make the school a safe and respectful place. We think about how the school or our teachers treated our parents and how closely the school interacted with our families.

We may think about student government and the students who had the chance to become leaders; we recollect those as effective, representative systems or as organizations that were closed to “unpopular” students, were elitist, or even racist. We remember the students and teachers with whom we connected on a personal level, and as much as we wish to have forgotten those who made us feel less valued and welcome, bitter memories of these interactions probably prevail.

We may still think about the so-called jocks, the nerds, the artsy kids, the theater geeks, the band and chorus kids, maybe the Goth kids, the retards, the loners, the druggies, the kids who were rumored to have committed suicide, maybe some kids who dropped out . . . but if they dropped out, you probably don’t remember them at all.

When you think back on your school experiences, what do you recall that felt respectful, and what disrespectful experiences stick with you?

WHAT TEACHERS AND STUDENTS MEAN BY RESPECT

The question of what teachers and students mean by respect was actually the starting point for a decade of school climate research we completed at Main Street Academix (MSA) (see www.msanh.com). In 1998, a new superintendent invited us as outside consultants to assist his administrative leadership team as they struggled to improve their schools. This was a district that had a reputation as a “struggling system.” The district had gone through eight superintendents in eleven years, and many high school principals in the same period. Buildings, programs, budgets, and morale were in terrible shape and the taxpayers voted down the school budget every year. The drop-out rate was among the highest in the state. Families who could afford it were fleeing the system and sending their children to private schools.

One of the first things we did was meet with teachers to talk about their school’s strengths and what they felt were the chief barriers to student success. On slips of paper, each teacher listed the three things that seemed the greatest impediments to their success as teachers. While there were many different “barriers” listed, only one was agreed upon by the majority of faculty—over 60 percent of the faculty mentioned “no respect here” as their primary concern.

The next day, we gathered together a highly diverse group of students from the middle and high schools. We had a very similar conversation with these students about the barriers to student success. When students were asked to write down the main obstacles they felt were getting in the way of their success, the majority of students responded, “There’s just no respect around here.”

At first, we were pretty amazed that both groups came up with the same problem; we thought that perhaps what the teachers wanted in their school and what the students wanted might be the same things. It also occurred to us that what the students and their teachers actually meant by the word *respect* might actually be quite different.

BEEPER STUDIES: OUR ORIGINAL RESEARCH ON RESPECTFUL SCHOOLS

The next thing we did was to conduct research on what respect meant to students and teachers in the school. We developed an exciting and innovative research process that we designed based on the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1986) from the University of Chicago. The process we used involved the use of beepers, or electronic pagers, to randomly sample

real-time respectful and disrespectful school experiences occurring at any given moment inside this school.

Here is how the beeper studies worked: First, we selected a highly diverse team of approximately thirty students and a few teachers to serve as observers inside the school. We trained these participants to conduct brief, five-minute observations when signaled by the pagers that they each kept in their pockets. We set all the pagers on vibrate and, at a specific time, we silently signaled the student and teacher researchers. The first signal told them to start paying careful attention to the *respectful* or *disrespectful* words and actions of students and teachers around them. After five minutes, we paged them all again, which indicated it was time for them to write down the examples of respect or disrespect they had observed during the past five minutes. Students and teachers carried the beepers throughout the school day, waiting for the times they would be paged to signal it was time for another observation.

Our staff at Main Street Academix and several preservice teachers at New England College purposefully selected six or eight times during each school day to silently signal the subjects. We chose times when they were in hallways passing between classes, normal class times, lunchtimes, and times before and after school.

The participants wrote down the words they heard students and teachers use, the behaviors they saw, and the responses of those who witnessed the incidents. They then labeled these situations as being either “respectful,” “disrespectful,” or “neither.” With thirty subjects paged six to eight times a day for five days, we were able to gather over one thousand random snapshots of respectful and disrespectful interactions from each school.

As we read through the descriptions of the behaviors and words our researchers recorded during their observations, a complex and intriguing picture of respect and disrespect emerged in this school (Preble, 2003). We carefully reviewed each observation and organized the data thematically along a continuum from most disrespectful to most respectful behaviors. What was most interesting, and most troubling, was while we had plenty of examples on the disrespect side of the continuum, there were not nearly as many observations that fell on the respect side. The problem, we could plainly see, was exactly what the teachers and students identified—there really was a lot of observable disrespect happening throughout the school, but relatively few clearly described examples of respect evident in over a thousand real-time snapshots. Moreover, the behaviors that were labeled as respectful fell mostly on the lowest end of the Respect Continuum, under a heading we called *compliance*—students being “obedient” and doing what they were told—but there were not nearly so many other examples of respect recorded.

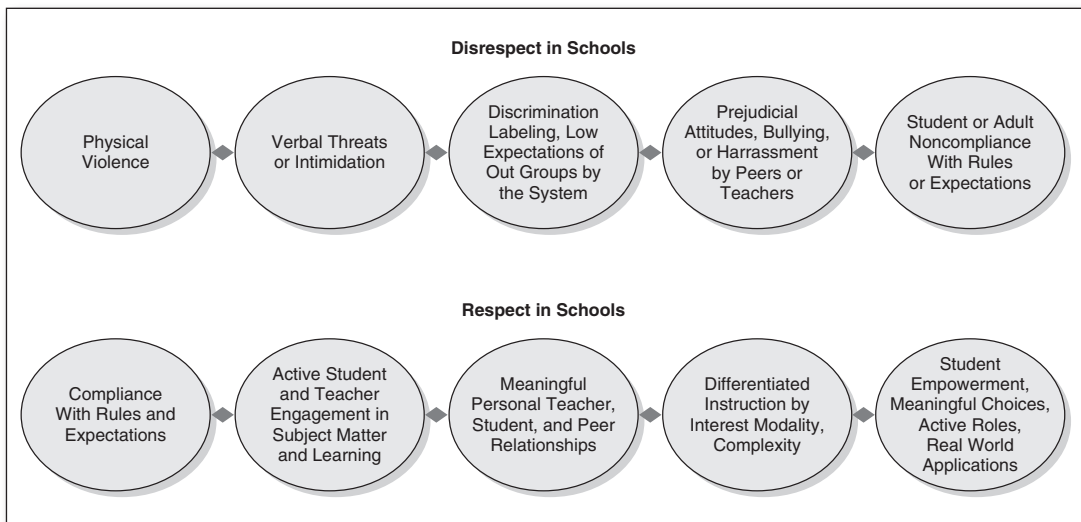
PREVENTING PITFALLS: BE AWARE OF THE TENDENCY FOR ADULTS TO DEFINE RESPECT AS COMPLIANCE

Everybody agrees that respect is important but not everyone agrees upon what respect means. Be prepared to encounter those adults who feel strongly that respect is all about student obedience and compliance. Engage in dialogue with students about what respect means to them and how this would be evident to them in school.

As we looked closer at the pile of responses labeled as being respectful, we saw that more of these had to do with what teachers were doing than with what students were doing. Our Respect Continuum that evolved from the data from the beeper study offered what became a powerful lens through which we could examine *respectful teaching and learning* practices (see Figure 1.1).

We were excited about what we had learned about respect and disrespect in schools through these beeper studies. Our challenge immediately became evident. How could we use these results to help the school develop a shared understanding of respect and disrespect at this school? How could we use these examples of respect to encourage more teachers to use respectful teaching and learning strategies as a way to improve their school?

Figure 1.1 From Violence to Empowerment: A Respect Continuum



Source: Copyright © W. K. Preble, EdD, 2008

THE RESPECT CONTINUUM: A PRACTICAL THEORY OF RESPECT

The superintendent called a meeting of his administrative team following analysis of the beeper study data and we reviewed our findings at the high school. The principals saw hundreds of examples of disrespect as well as a number of powerful forms of respect that the students and teachers had observed and recorded. Here is a brief summary of what we found in this initial beeper study research (Preble, 2003).

The Disrespect Side of the Continuum

There were very few, but some relatively serious, incidents of *violence* noted in the observers' responses. These incidences involved punching; shoving of a student, who was slightly hurt, into a locker; and one student slapping another student in the face in a hallway.

We know that schools and states have spent millions of dollars on security strategies and procedures such as safety lockdowns, metal detectors, photo IDs, locked doors, and so forth. While even one incident of school violence can change a school and community forever, there is much more to improving school climate than simply focusing on school violence.

There were a number of *threats* that students recorded. One student threatened violence toward another student, another threatened to hurt one of his peers after school. Several other students reported hearing statements that were interpreted as vague or veiled threats, but again, this was not a prevalent problem in this school.

A few students wrote about perceived issues of fairness in the form of *systemic inequities*, such as how the principal or certain teachers gave certain groups special privileges within the school, and how that angered some students. Some observers wrote about "popular students" not being punished as severely as less successful, less popular students. One observer even noted that the special education classes were all held in rooms that were more like closets than classrooms, and the fact that these rooms had no windows and poor lighting was viewed as a sign of disrespect for these students.

There was a wide range of other disrespectful occasions recorded involving students saying mean things to others. We categorized these as *verbal bullying or harassment*. Some student observers noted rather severe, even illegal, racial or sexual harassment, and a great deal of homophobic wording was recorded. Several student observers noted overhearing verbal put-downs of students with emotional, mental, or physical disabilities. Observers noted that many of these disrespectful comments were combined with taunting, name-calling, and peer rejection. Other verbal harassment was less severe, although still probably very hurtful to the targeted students—lots of comments about being a loser, a retard, fat, stupid, a fag, and so on.

There were even a few teacher comments in this set of disrespect observations that seemed to reflect teachers' biased attitudes toward certain students, and that also suggested teachers may have had low expectations of these students. One student wrote, "I was heading to my fifth period class when the beeper went off. Two teachers were standing in the hallway talking. One said, 'I've got those SPED kids fifth period; they don't do anything. It's going to be a long afternoon.'" Not surprisingly, the student observer labeled this incident as disrespect.

There were also many reports of students (and teachers) *breaking school rules*, or not following teacher requests or directions in class or in the hallways. Classroom misbehavior included the typical and common incidents of students' chewing gum, talking while a teacher spoke, using cell phones, getting up from one's seat, and other distractions. Although these behaviors aren't threatening, they often are seen, especially by teachers, as creating a climate of disrespect.

Finding examples of disrespect was not difficult. As we mentioned, the vast majority of observations fell on the disrespect side of the continuum. While relatively few of these were physically threatening, there was a general perception, from both students and teachers, that the school was far from being a respectful place.

The Respect Side of the Continuum

As we looked at the student and teacher observations labeled as respect, an intriguing picture emerged that evolved into what is actually a rubric for respectful schools.

The majority of examples of what students called respect had to do with students simply doing what teachers told them to do in classes or hallways. We labeled this *compliance*. Anyone who has ever taught knows that without compliance, an educator cannot function or teach effectively. This process of classroom management is crucial to teacher success and the success of students.

What was also quite interesting was that a number of the comments students made about disrespect also fell into this classroom management category. For example, a student wrote, "This teacher is always yelling at us to be quiet, and then she loses it and tells a kid to shut up. That's disrespect too." So, while compliance with a teacher's directives is necessary for teachers to do their job, the ways that teachers get their students to comply can be done either respectfully or disrespectfully. Yelling "shut up" isn't a respectful (or effective) approach to classroom management. The variety of observations in this category reflected that classrooms can be organized and orderly without being repressive.

The next set of comments related to respect from the beeper study focused on something we labeled *engagement*. Students said things like, "This teacher is respectful because she gives us stuff to do that we enjoy." Another commented, "I think it's respectful that he doesn't treat us like a

bunch of sponges, just soaking up what he tells us or writes on the board.” “In this class we do projects and activities that are fun.” Clearly, students felt that respectful teachers did things with their students that helped them be engaged in what was happening in the class. The work in these classrooms seemed relevant to students, often involved more active learning, and had some kind of emotional resonance for students’ lives. Note the shift in focus here from what students do (behaving or misbehaving) to a focus on what *the teacher* does to respectfully promote student engagement and learning.

The next set of respect observations were about *relationships*. There were many comments that noted positive, friendly, supportive, personal peer relationships happening when the beepers signaled. Also noteworthy were the comments in which students observed that they or their peers were engaged in positive relationships with their own teachers when they received the page. Students wrote: “This teacher knows all of our names . . . that’s respectful.” “He shows students that he cares about us doing well in his class.” “I think it’s respectful that this teacher takes time to talk to us about herself and the things she does outside of school and she asks us what we enjoy too . . . that’s respectful.” Relationships make schools more human and humane. When we see each other as “regular” people with interests and personalities that go beyond just the academic realm, students and teachers have more positive relations and work more effectively together.

An extension of the relationships theme came with a few observations that were much more specific. In these cases, students observed that they felt that it was respectful when some of their teachers “taught in different ways to different students, depending on what the students need.” Or, “this teacher finds out what we are interested in and lets us do what interests us.” We labeled this set of responses *personalized instruction*. “She lets us choose projects that we are interested in,” said one student. “I am allowed to write my papers on the computer and that is respectful because I have trouble writing a big paper by hand without lots of mistakes.” “I have finished all my work early, and she is letting me work on a new topic. I think that is more interesting than waiting around and it’s respectful.” When teachers modify assignments, provide choices, or allow for their students’ learning differences, students identify it as respectful teaching.

Finally, our last pile of responses was unfortunately very small, but very exciting. It revealed a kind of respect that we truly believe is the key to building respectful school *empowerment*. One girl wrote,

When the beeper went off, I had just handed in my poetry final in my English class. I thought about what was respectful and disrespectful and I thought, “this final is respectful!” Instead of making us memorize a bunch of poems or answer questions on a test, this teacher asked us to choose a genre that we really enjoyed and learned a lot about and to write our own original poem to show our understanding of that genre, then we just attached a reflection to the poem.

The next day when we beeped this girl again, she was in the same class. She wrote, “Today my teacher came into class with all of our finals (poems) bound in a leather book! She must have gone to Kinko’s or someplace and she published our work in a beautiful leather book of poetry! Now, *that* is respectful!” And on the last day of our study, we happened to beep this girl again when she was involved with her English class:

We just came back from the middle school. Our class took our book of poetry down there and had a poetry reading to the little kids in the library. When we were leaving, the middle school librarian asked us if she could borrow our book so some of the little kids could read it. She put one of those little check-out slips in the back of our book, so the middle school kids could take it home and read our poems to their families!

Now that is empowering!

How Schools Use the Respect Continuum

After completing the beeper studies, we took what we had learned about school climate and respect and developed a student and teacher school climate survey, along with a process for implementing the surveys that involved students as researchers and leaders. We discuss this process, that we call SafeMeasures™, in much greater depth in the next several chapters.

Inviting students to be school climate researchers and to assist in implementing a schoolwide school climate survey is an empowering role. When students explain the purpose of a survey and administer it to their peers, this provides a much more effective way to collect honest and accurate survey data than when adults try to administer surveys like this on their own.

After collecting student and teacher school climate data, we shared the qualitative and quantitative data with teachers, students, and school leaders. Participants used the Respect Continuum to develop goals for improving their schools. We provided follow-up professional development for teachers to help them begin to use *respectful teaching strategies* more effectively. (For another version of the Respect Continuum, see Appendix A.)

INITIAL SUCCESS IN ONE DISTRICT

We continued to work with these schools for a number of years. The teachers began to appreciate the respect from their new superintendent, who provided them with professional development and helped them get a new contract, something that they hadn’t had for years. Many of the teachers

became more excited about engagement with the work to improve respect in their schools. We also established a cohort of teachers from the schools to work together to earn a master's degree that was paid for by the district. These graduate students conducted action research in their classrooms and implemented new teaching techniques while they collected data on their effectiveness. In the end, the district even got a new, state-of-the-art middle school approved and built after more than a decade of failed votes in the community. In one year, toward the end of this superintendent's tenure, 85 percent of students from the high school went on to higher education, a level unheard of before in this district.

During our research in this district, one student told us what she would do to make her school work better for all students: "Tell all the good teachers to stop leaving after a year or two to go to the richer towns." This girl felt abandoned by the system and by her teachers who chose to move on to wealthier school systems. As a result of this superintendent's leadership, a large group of caring teachers, principals, and the community stepped up to support these schools. Many good teachers chose to stay, and many of the students and families who had left the school previously decided to come back. The girl's wish was fulfilled.

This superintendent has said repeatedly that his success in turning around this struggling district began the day he announced his goal as a leader: "We may not end up being the top academic school system in the state, but we will be the kindest, most supportive, most caring and respectful district anywhere, and that will make us all more successful."

LOOKING BEYOND STOPPING MISBEHAVIOR

Striving to eliminate disrespectful behaviors is certainly a worthwhile goal for any school, but stopping disrespect is not enough. Reducing bullying and stopping fights, threats, and violence is important. But these goals of "cracking down on disrespectful student behavior" and "changing" students will not in and of themselves create a truly respectful school climate. To build a climate of respect, engagement, inspired teaching, and student empowerment, we also must encourage changes in what adults do every day in the classroom and the hallways. When we recognize the need to become respectful teachers, and learn how to more effectively support each of our students so that he or she becomes an engaged learner, we will be on our way toward building more respectful, effective schools.

Since this initial work, we have used the Respect Continuum as a guidepost for school improvement throughout the country. While we are frequently called in to help address discipline, bullying, or school safety issues, the SafeMeasures process quickly shows teachers and school leaders the need to focus more attention on *building respect*, rather than simply fighting to stamp out discipline problems or disrespect. This seems like

a simple step, but moving from one side of the Respect Continuum to the other as the basis for taking corrective action makes all the difference and results in using completely different school change strategies.

PREVENTING PITFALLS: ASK TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS FEARFUL OF "CHANGE" TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING AND EMPOWER STUDENTS

Prepare to address the inevitable "push back" from some educators whenever advocating for more respectful teaching practices. This can be achieved through deepening teacher-student relationships, such as initiating an advisory program or using more engaging, empowering practices such as service learning or project-based learning. It is important to have data to show such changes are necessary, as well as a clear vision for how these changes might look in your particular setting.

As teachers and students look at their school climate data, it becomes apparent that if they can develop better relations among students and teachers, make learning experiences more engaging, increase personalization, and empower students, many of the incidents of disrespect will simply disappear.

It would be naive, however, to think that a more positive climate will eliminate all issues of disrespect and assure no one ever threatens school safety. Schools still need systems of discipline, clarity of expectations, and strategies to address the most egregious behavior. But by decreasing the less extreme disrespectful behaviors, enlisting students more in contributing to the school's functioning, and reducing the frustrations of teachers being asked to continually put out small fires, everyone has a greater capacity to address the less frequent, truly dangerous threats to school safety.

We want to help schools achieve results, rather than to just say they are trying to address challenges. Research on the shortcomings of school reform shows all too well what doesn't work—top-down imposition of one-size-fits-all strategies rarely works. Many schools have tried to create more rules and escalate enforcement, yet disrespect in schools continues (and often increases).

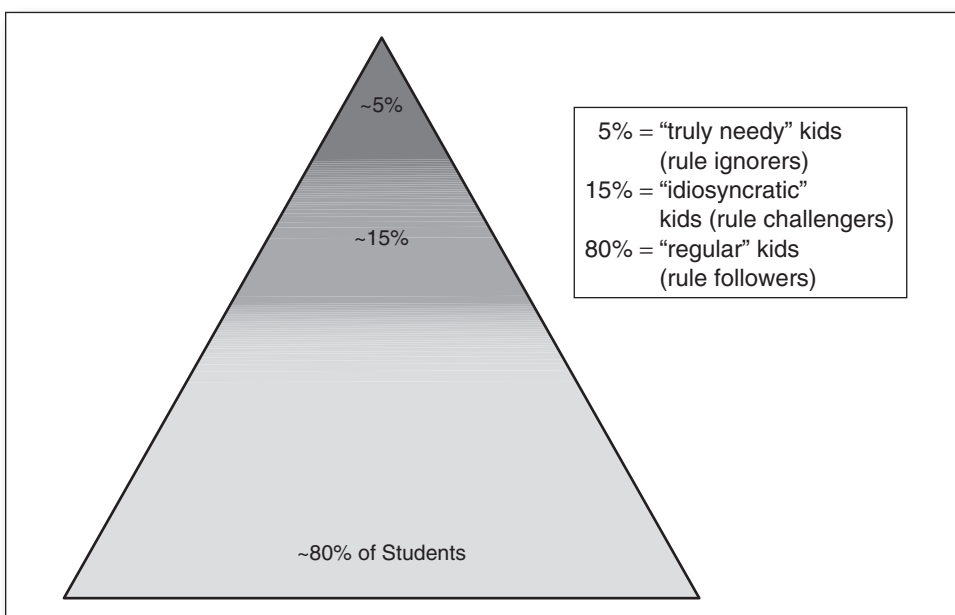
No one solution will work for all students. Insightful work by Rob Horner and George Sugui (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], n.d.), who developed the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, advises we look at students as falling into three distinct categories. In most schools, 80 percent of students are usually responsive to any well-designed program instituted in a school—these are the "regular" kids who largely enjoy school, follow rules (most of the time), and

have the foundational skills and dispositions to succeed in school. Another 15 percent of students in most schools will respond a bit differently. These students may be a bit more idiosyncratic, come from more challenging home environments, have unique learning styles, or may be going through some personal difficulties. What works for the 80 percent may not work for these students. Yet, there are actions schools can take that can work for these students; they may look different or be modified from what is being implemented for the majority. The last 5 percent is the truly needy or most at-risk group. These students may have deep-set personal difficulties, extreme circumstances outside school, or psychological profiles beyond what schools are set up to address. These students may need professional help, special contracts, or alternative programs more suited to their needs (see Figure 1.2). Making school policy based on this small minority can be oppressive for the majority and prove counterproductive. Likewise, making plans based only on the more numerous 80 percent is likely to miss a good 20 percent of the student population (OSEP, n.d.).

As we use the Respect Continuum with schools, we seek to consider related systems and strategies that are adaptable to the needs of each group of students—to not only prevent (or respond to) the worst behaviors but also to enable and encourage the best behaviors. This perspective realigns educators' roles to balance their responsibility for discipline with the fundamental goal to promote learning—*simultaneously improving both through the same process*.

School reform has all too often been an adult exercise in “changing the kids.” The power of the SafeMeasures process is that it helps schools

Figure 1.2 PBIS Triangle



develop the leadership potential and civic engagement of their students as partners in school reform. Students in Grades 3–12 learn to conduct research on school climate, advocate for fairness and respect for all, and expand opportunities for engaged learning and respectful teaching practices in their schools. The democratic roles that these students and their peers play embody the best of what American education should be doing—preparing its students as future citizens to stand up for what is right, to learn how to take effective action, and to provide valuable service to their communities. Incorporating adult and student leadership roles as opportunities for meaningful civic engagement is a major part of what the SafeMeasures process and this book are about.

MAKING IT REAL: A REAL-LIFE RESPECTFUL SCHOOL

Starting from scratch in 1999, Compass School was designed to be a school where every child finds success. The founders were free to build educational programs and practices closely aligned with the positive side of the Respect Continuum. It was the belief of the founding board that if students and teachers were treated with respect throughout the school program, problems would be minimized and the best in students would shine.

Students don't become angels when they walk through the Compass doors, nor is Compass free from any struggles or challenges. But what is clear, from the minute one steps into the school, is that this is a climate of respect. Even service technicians who come in the building will stop and ask, "What kind of school is this?" They invariably say something like, "I wish this kind of school was there for me when I was a kid."

What works at Compass is the consistency of the messages to students throughout the whole school program that each student is valued, there are high expectations of every child, and the school will do its utmost to assure each student can succeed in school and in life beyond school.

The expectations are that students do their best, act responsibly, follow through on commitments, and are each a contributing member of the school community. These apply whether in classes, where teachers try to personalize learning; in all-school meetings, where every Thursday ends with public "commendations" from one student or teacher to another; Project Week where every student completes an independent academic project of their own design; cleaning the building after lunch with a student advisory; student judiciary that handles most of the rare disciplinary issues following a model of restorative justice; or in any of the other diverse learning experiences required of each student. Some students take more time than others to live up to these ideals, but after hearing this message in a wealth of different settings and circumstances, every student at Compass seems to "get it" and realizes that meeting expectations, working toward a high standard of quality, and being successful is not only achievable, but actually is rewarding and gratifying.

ONE COMPASS STUDENT'S STORY

Mark came to our school having failed every class in middle school. He knew he was already labeled a "problem" child. His older sister didn't help matters much because teachers in his previous school saw her too as being rather "challenging." Mark had a shaved head, ear piercings, a few tattoos, and a troubled past. When he came to Compass, he said he wanted to have a fresh start.

Like all students at Compass, Mark was expected to set personal learning goals. The first goal he set was to be seen as a leader. (To be honest, some at the school figured simply being a high school graduate would have been enough of a stretch for Mark.) Like his peers, Mark was given choices in classes about topics to study and ways to demonstrate his learning; he often chose to use art to express his ideas, but his real talent, to our surprise, was his witty writing voice when he was able to tell stories about his life.

The small school was short on soccer players, so Mark dragged himself out on the field and proved to be the speediest runner on the team. After just a few games, he was soon admired by all for chasing down opposing forwards.

The spring play was similarly short on actors, and since the school lacked the cliques and social pressures of who or what was cool (or not), Mark figured he could audition for *Alice in Wonderland* and he brought the house down as a disheveled and distraught Humpty Dumpty.

Mark ran for student judiciary, so he could help resolve discipline issues in the school; clearly not looking like a teacher's pet, he won this position easily. He became the public spokesperson for "Jude," speaking at the weekly all-school meetings about judiciary rulings and policies. Mark emphasized that while he may not always be a role model, even he understood the importance of school rules for the good of the community.

For his senior project, Mark chose to intern with a famous glassblower, to pursue his interest in art and the possibility of a future career. And in his graduation portfolio, Mark summarized his growth at Compass, saying, "I remember now how each of the previous graduates expressed that Compass was the open door for them to find themselves. It seems by the end of our time here, we discover who we are and who we aspire to be." Mark showed us all what he was capable of becoming. What Mark achieved and managed to accomplish at Compass was exceptional by any school's standards.

CONCLUSION

With all the evidence available showing the positive effects of school climate, we are apt to think that more educational leaders and communities would be focusing on improving school climate as one of their chief

priorities. But we know that addressing school climate issues and the social and emotional development of students remain secondary goals of most schools, as they continue to struggle in isolation with raising test scores and making annual yearly progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Despite concerted efforts in many schools, we are beginning to see test scores plateau, or even fall, as the solitary focus on academic performance cannot sustain the gains we hope to see.

There are many individuals and organizations stepping forward to advocate for redesigning schools using principles of respect, engagement, and personalization as their rallying cries. In the chapters that follow, we share success stories from schools across the country that hold high academic expectations for all children while also creating the conditions and supports that enable each child to reach these expectations. This book showcases schools that are effectively balancing the *desired ends with the appropriate means* to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students. These models and examples and detailed descriptions of the SafeMeasures process will, we hope, provide schools and communities with the tools and resources needed to successfully balance student academic progress with improvements in school climate and respect.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS

1. When in a school, look around for examples of respect and disrespect—which are more common? How severe are the incidents of disrespect? How often does respect go beyond simple student compliance?
2. Think back on all of the teachers you've had in your life as a student, and then describe in a few paragraphs the qualities of your most respectful and effective teachers. What could school leaders do to bring out more of these qualities in all of the teachers or most teachers?
3. In your school experiences, how were or are students involved in any decision making related to school policy or practices?
4. In thinking about schools, where might student perspectives be helpful in figuring out how to respond to different challenges and opportunities?
5. Imagine a school characterized by some of the factors of positive school climate. How would this enhance learning and behavior and overall teacher efficacy?