IMPROVING STAFF CLIMATE

Accumulating research demonstrates that characteristics of the working environment have a profound impact on teachers' decisions about where to teach and whether to stay in the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). Dissatisfied teachers who leave the profession in California, particularly in high poverty schools, cite a range of school climate factors as reasons for leaving, including lack of administrative support, meaningful participation, and collegiality; low staff morale; unclean and unsafe environments; and disruptive bureaucratic impediments (Futernick, 2007). Evidence from these attrition studies indicates that school staff members need physically and emotionally safe environments; collegiality based on caring, trust, and mutual high expectations; and a sense that they are meaningfully involved in school decision–making.

Moreover, effective school climates for students must begin with effective school climates for staff. Students cannot be expected to feel supported, connected, and engaged in learning if teachers do not feel the same. In addition to the short– and long–term personal psychosocial effects that burned–out teachers experience, they are less invested in the social and emotional learning of their students (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009). It is essential, then, that organizational and relational supports for the well–being of staff— essential dimensions of school climate—be made available to help teachers cope with the burgeoning demands of their jobs.

In this What Works Brief, we recommend activities for improving school climate for staff across four major research–based strategies:

1. Support new staff members

2. Foster positive, collegial relationships among staff

3. Support staff members' social and emotional competencies

4. Implement reliable systems of student discipline and support

What Works Briefs summarize state–of–the–art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system–wide issues.

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1. SUPPORT NEW STAFF MEMBERS

A priority in creating a healthy, positive staff climate is developing support systems for the newest members of the school's faculty. Results from a recent national longitudinal survey indicate that just over 10 percent of new teachers leave the profession after their first year of teaching, 75 percent of whom report leaving for reasons other than the non–renewal of their contract (Kaiser, 2011). New teacher attrition is particularly high in schools serving economically disadvantaged students (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). Highly informative hiring processes and mentoring are among the resources cited as new teachers' reasons to remain in these challenging schools (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004). Following are recommendations for school leaders as they begin building organizational and relational support structures for new staff members:

ESTABLISH SUPPORTIVE HIRING AND INDUCTION PROCESSES.

» Implement multidimensional interview practices that include: in–person interviews with hiring committees; demonstration lessons; school tours; and meetings with stakeholder groups, including parents and students. These practices help ensure an optimal match between the school (e.g., student demographics, urbanicity) and the skill set of new teachers.

» Provide a transparent hiring schedule (i.e., dates of interviews and lesson presentations, notification dates) and follow–up with candidates on–time.

» Provide pre–service instructional opportunities to (a) help new teachers navigate district and school policies and procedures; and (b) improve knowledge of available district and school–level student supports structures.

PROVIDE SYSTEMATIC MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES.

» Introduce new teachers to mentor teachers as soon as they are hired, rather than waiting for the new academic year to begin. In order to reduce the stress of the fall, encourage new teachers and their mentors to collaborate before the school year begins.

» Provide common preparation and planning periods with colleagues in new teachers' content area.

» Provide regularly scheduled time for within and cross–discipline collaboration.

» Connect new teachers to networks of teachers within the school district or neighboring school districts.

» Provide opportunities for new teachers to observe experienced teachers.

» Provide opportunities for experienced teachers to observe new teachers and give constructive, formative feedback using established rubrics.

2. FOSTER SUPPORTIVE & COLLEGIAL WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Lack of perceived support in collegial relationships is related to symptoms of depression and anxiety (Mahan et al., 2010), exhaustion, and reduced empathy, and negatively related to the sense of personal accomplishment (Halbesleben, 2006). Among the key evidence–based recommendations for improving teacher effectiveness and retention in California is the need to build healthy working environments characterized by supportive teacher relationships (Futernick, 2007). Indeed, in the high–pressure atmosphere of U.S. public schools, supportive collegial relationships help teachers develop and maintain their professional identities, support them through challenging professional and personal experiences, and encourage them to stay in the teaching profession despite high levels of stress.

In order to avoid burdening staff members with activities outside of the school day, strategies for fostering staff collegial relationships can be woven into the daily experience of school life. Following are ideas for building collegial relationships during the school day:

IMPLEMENT FRAMEWORKS THAT FOSTER COLLABORATION AND IDEA GENERATION.

In order for new teachers to feel supported and encouraged, more experienced staff members must feel a level of respon-

sibility to them, which is only possible if they themselves feel valued and connected. A number of frameworks for providing staff with ongoing professional support have gained popularity among both scholars and practitioners (see Darling–Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). These types of professional support structures not only provide a forum for building relationships but also improve perceived self–efficacy, which is protective against burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Following are recommendations for school leaders as they begin the task of building organizational and relational support structures for veteran staff members:

SUPPORT A LEARNING–ORIENTED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY.

» Establish times for teachers to visit one another's classrooms and to observe one another's lessons.

» Provide opportunities to observe at other schools and other classrooms.

» Provide high quality professional development opportunities to meet the needs determined by teachers and other staff.

» Provide structured opportunities for teachers to obtain constructive feedback from peers, such as Professional Learning Communities.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC). PLCs provide systematic opportunities for teachers to engage in collegial dialogue around their shared professional practice (Louis, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). One specific type of PLC, Critical Friends Groups (CFG), encourages professional development through reflective teaching practices and collaborative learning. Staff who participate in CFGs report greater staff collegiality, knowledge of research–based practices, and perceptions of positive school climates (Curry, 2008; Darling–Hammond et al., 2009). Explore more about PLCs, including defining characteristics, benefits, and school anecdotes, and a portal to additional websites at www.centerforcsri.org/plc

IMPLEMENT DATA–FOCUSED TEACHER TEAMS.

» Provide teachers easy access to all available data sources at the school level (e.g., California Healthy Kids Survey) and student level (e.g., formative assessment scores,

course grades, state standardized testing scores) to assist in their instructional decision–making.

» Train teachers on the types of data available to them as well as how to use the data to inform decisions in the classroom.

» Provide time for teachers to meet together for the purpose of reviewing student data, discussing student needs, and determining ways to appropriately modify instruction.

BUILDING ASSETS–REDUCING RISKS (BARR). BARR provides one research–based framework that can be relied upon for identifying at–risk youth using teacher teams. www.search–institute.org/BARR

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION.

Teachers are more likely to stay in the teaching profession when they feel that they are both supported by, and autonomous of, administration (Johnson, 2006). Indeed, teachers want to feel a sense of purpose, evidenced by the fact that they tend to stay in schools where they have a role in making substantive and important decisions (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009). An analysis of teacher retention data in California revealed that having opportunities for decision–making was the most important factor for teachers choosing to stay in the profession (Futernick, 2007). Following are recommendations for school leaders as they work to include staff in meaningful school climate–related decisions:

» Give teachers and other staff members decision–making power, including choice in the courses they are asked to teach, the committees in which they are involved, and the direction for school reorganization and reform.

» Provide opportunities for teachers to inform the selection of curricula and other instructional materials.

» Provide opportunities for staff to thoughtfully review Cal–SCHLS student, staff, and parent data and obtain their input into how to address identified needs.

» Encourage and provide support (e.g., release time, stipend support) for staff to participate in extracurricular opportunities that contribute to school climate efforts, such as volunteering to advise student clubs or activities.

3. SUPPORT STAFF MEMBERS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Teaching often requires the ability to cope with high levels of stress to remain intellectually and emotionally present for colleagues and students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Fostering healthy adult and adult–student relationships at school requires that teachers develop and maintain their own social and emotional competencies. Those include self–awareness, social awareness, prosocial values and actions, and emotional regulation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). When adults cultivate these competencies within themselves, they not only model healthy communication and collaboration skills for the youth they serve, but they also may be more willing and able to nurture relationships that communicate both warmth and high expectations for their students.

Although these social–emotional competencies are essential to the creation of a healthy classroom climate, they require ongoing personal and professional development opportunities to expand and maintain.

CULTIVATING AWARENESS AND RESILIENCE IN EDUCATION (CARE). CARE aims to support teachers in the development and maintenance of these critical emotional competencies (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011). www.garrisoninstitute.org

4. IMPLEMENT RELIABLE SYSTEMS OF STUDENT DISCIPLINE AND SUPPORT

Teachers frequently spend a disproportionate amount of instructional time with a small number of students who present significant social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs. These experiences are a significant factor in teachers' poor perceptions of school climate (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010). School leaders can help reduce the burden on staff by building and reinforcing high–quality student support frameworks that staff members can rely upon for help with their most challenging students.

» *CONSISTENT DISCIPLINE PRACTICES.* Behavioral norms and expectations that are unbiased, transparent, and uniformly enforced contribute to a positive, healthy school climate that enables staff and students to feel physically and emotionally safe. Staff are able to relax when they know that persons responsible for school discipline will:

- Enforce rules fairly, consistently, and without bias.
- Provide immediate follow–up to staff members who have referred a student for discipline. Explain the disciplinary action taken and its rationale.

» One organizing framework for helping school personnel organize and deliver evidence–based behavior management practices is Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Despite the variety of implementation challenges faced by secondary schools, PBIS is viewed as promising practice among practitioners (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009). www.pbis.org

» *STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS (SAPS).* Staff can come to rely upon Student Assistance Programs for referring students with more significant learning or social/emotional needs. SAPs are established to perform a number of important duties, including:

- Providing a process wherein teachers can refer students that appear to be at–risk.
- Providing a process wherein administration can refer students who appear to have behavioral and/or emotional difficulties stemming from challenging life situations.
- Connecting students to appropriate resources, both at school and within the community. SAPs usually include teachers, administrators, and student assistance staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, speech therapists).
- For more information on SAPs, visit The California SAP Resource Center (www.casapresources.org) and The UCLA Center for Mental Health in the Schools (smhp.psych.ucla.edu).

» *VOLUNTEER RESOURCES.* Recruit and retain resources that staff can rely upon for assistance, including parent/community member/student volunteers.

NEW TEACHER CENTER

The New Teacher Center (NTC) is a non−profit organization dedicated to supporting effective new teachers. NTC works with federal and local education agencies to develop and implement induction programs aligned with district learning goals. NTC induction programs include one−to−one mentoring and professional development, all taking place within school environments that support new teachers. newteachercenter.org

NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL CENTER

The National High School Center is part of a national network of Content and Regional Comprehensive Centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to help build the capacity of states across the nation to improve secondary education. betterhighschools.org

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING TALENT: CREATING CONDITIONS IN HIGH−POVERTY SCHOOLS THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Published by The Education Trust, this succinct report describes methods for attracting and retaining high-quality, effective teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools. edtrust.org/dc/publication/building-and-sustaining-talent-creating-conditions-in-high-poverty-schools-that-suppo

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