

Why School Climate Should Be Every Principal's Top Priority

By Ross Wiener on July 12, 2018 11:00 AM | [No comments](#)

Every once in a while, a research finding comes along that has paradigm-shifting significance. The University of Chicago recently produced one: **principals' greatest influence on student achievement is through changes in school climate.**

This is true across the achievement continuum; that is, principals in both lower- and higher-performing schools contribute to student gains mainly through improvements in school climate. This challenges conventional wisdom on the many roles principals are implored to prioritize, and compels changes in policy and practice so principals can channel their time and energy to benefit students the most.

According to study co-author and director of UChicago's Consortium for School Research Elaine Allensworth:

A lot of times people think school climate is something you work on and take care of so you can get to the real work of teaching and learning, but what we find is learning is inherently social and emotional. If students don't feel safe and engaged, they aren't learning.

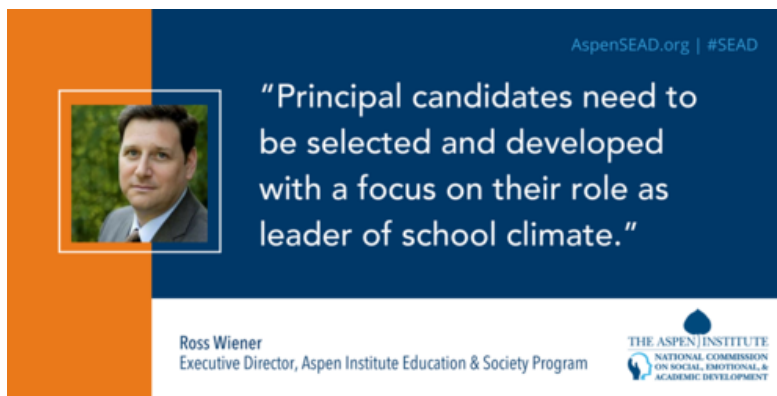
This echoes the scientific consensus statements on **How We Learn** produced by the **National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's** Council of Distinguished Scientists (and, indeed, it reinforces the very name of this blog: Learning Is Social and Emotional!). These findings validate the National Commission's focus on safe, inclusive learning environments as critical to improving academic achievement and genuine readiness for college, careers, and life.

The education sector can't treat this as one more report that comes across the transom. We need to identify and act on its implications. Here are a few that strike me:

Principals and their leadership teams need valid, useful, and timely measures of school climate to focus improvement efforts. In

Chicago, they've been using the **5 Essentials survey for years**, based on prior UChicago research on healthy school climates. In this study, UChicago researchers found that principals who improve student achievement organize teacher teams to continuously examine students' behavior, attendance, grades, and student work—in addition to test scores—to get a holistic and real-time view of the culture of the school.

Principal candidates need to be selected and developed with a focus on their role as leader of school climate. Chicago has become the **fastest-improving big district in the country** through its **concerted effort to seed the principal pipeline** through proactive recruitment of promising teacher-leaders to become assistant principals and a residency program for aspiring principal candidates, among other strategies. Every school system needs to strategically recruit and develop teacher leaders who have shown promise in the climate-strengthening skills and dispositions of effective principals (in contrast to a **2013 Bain & Co. study** finding most school systems lack a systematic approach to identifying, attracting, or developing school leaders).



Principals' roles and responsibilities need to be updated to emphasize responsibility for healthy school climate and teacher leadership as the critical vehicle for achieving it. Principals have a lot of responsibility and only so many hours in the day, and they need clear, consistent signals as well as support for shifting their focus to improving school climate as their primary responsibility. This also requires principal supervisors to have the skills and orientation to coach principals in school-climate leadership. Mixed messages or reinforcement of recent emphasis on principals as instructional leaders or human capital managers will stifle progress.

Allensworth reinforced this last point in her remarks on the study's implications. She commented that principals are often inordinately concerned with improving test scores, channeling that concern into a focus on the tests themselves through test-prep or encouraging teaching to the test, despite a lack of strong evidence for these practices. She continued:

We just keep finding over and over again, the more students feel safe and supported in school ... the stronger the learning gains and the

bigger the improvement in learning gains. It's easy to get caught up in all the other things you could be doing as a principal and lose sight of the importance of students feeling safe and supported.

These are wise words from an esteemed researcher and someone who has contributed to sustained improvements in Chicago Public Schools. The challenge to all of us who are invested in improving education outcomes is to listen, learn, and act on what we now know about how students learn.

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