

# School Climate Through Students' Eyes

How School Climate Affects  
Student Learning

Dr. William Preble

April 13, 2010



**Solutions**  
*to the Dropout Crisis*

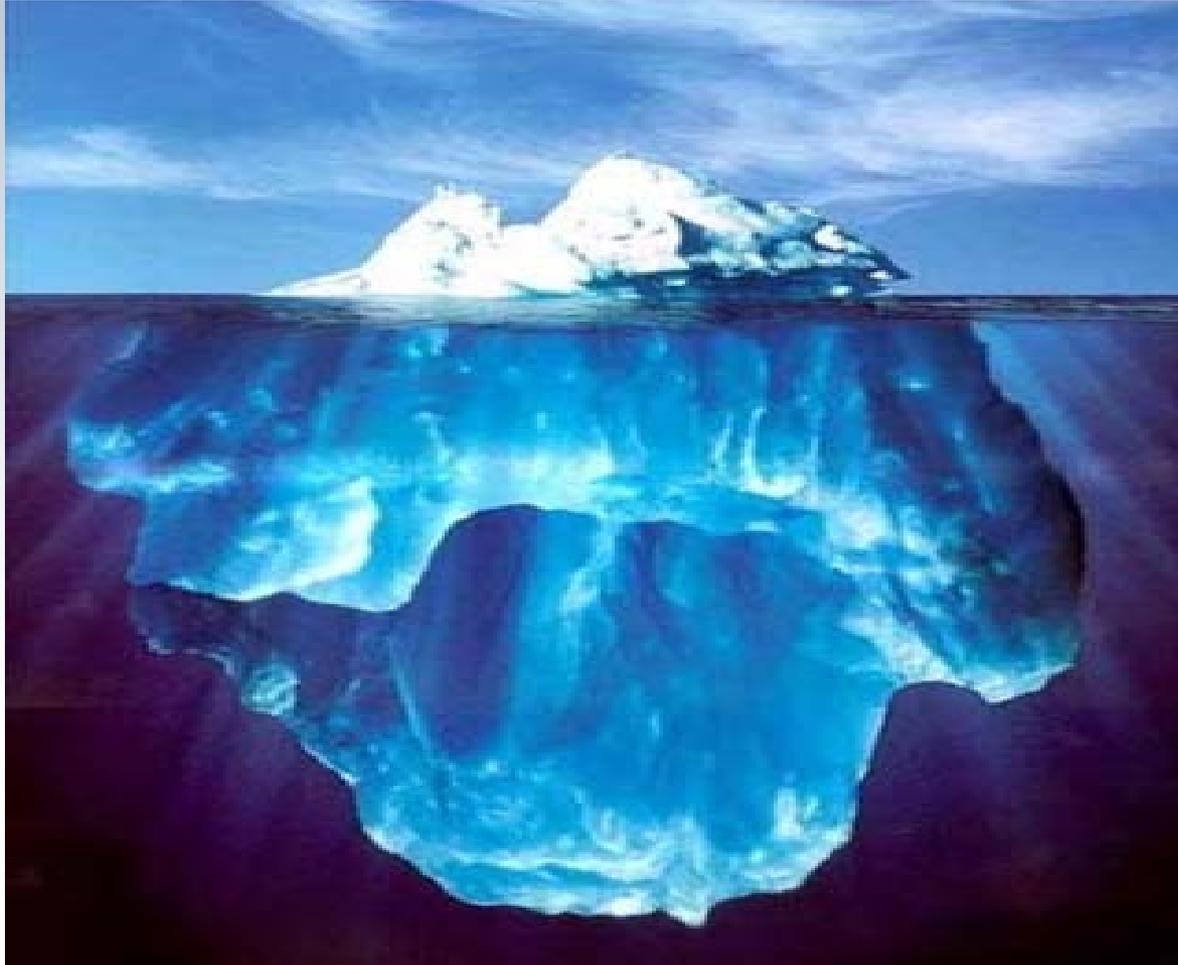
# Welcome

“School Climate is like the air we breathe; you don’t really notice it until it becomes toxic.”

H. Jerome Freiburg



# School Climate is Like...



# Agenda

- What is School Climate and Why School Climate Matters
- National School Climate Standards
- Overview of the Safe Measures Process
- The Importance of Student Leadership and Empowerment
- National Support for Improving School Climate and Learning



# What is School Climate?

## Definition\*: School Climate

**School climate refers to character and quality of school life.**

**It is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects\*:**

- norms, goals, values,
- interpersonal relationships,
- teaching, learning and
- leadership practices, and
- organizational structures.

\* National School Climate Council



More than just words...these  
things matter

***Safety, Respect, Bullying, Fear, Feeling  
Welcome, Racism, Feeling Like you  
Belong, Relationships with Friends and  
Teachers, The Chance to Make Choices  
and Decisions, Fairness for All, Sexism,  
Boredom, Being Interested, Being  
Engaged, Discipline that Works, Adults  
Who Listen, Having a Chance to Make a  
Difference, Changing the World***



# School Climate Matters

- Reports by the US Secret Service and the Department of Justice cited positive school climate as an important factor in reducing school shootings and school violence.
- ‘Downshifting’ of the brain occurs when students feel bored, threatened, or stressed which affects higher order thinking and learning (Wolfe, P., 2001; Sousa, D., 2006).
- Students who find strong social and emotional support in their schools are much more likely to be successful academically (Cohen, 2006 ).
- Our research shows that nearly 20% of elementary students 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 (Preble, W., 2010).



# School Climate Matters

- There is an important link between school climate and a student's motivation to learn (Comer, J., 1984); (Eccles, A., et al. 1993); Goodenow & Grady, 1993).
- School climate ultimately is about recognizing the human nature of education—as research on the brain and learning has demonstrated, thoughts, feelings, and emotions operate concurrently in our response to learning experiences (Caine, R. & Caine, G., 2009)
- Our brains process and retain less without an emotional connection. We need our hearts to engage our heads.



# NATIONAL SCHOOL CLIMATE STANDARDS

- Standard #1: *Develop a **vision and plan of action** to improve school climate, based on school climate data, and input from all stakeholders.*
- Standard #2: *Develop **specific policies and systems of support** to promote student engagement in learning and reengagement of disengaged students.*
- Standard #3: *Identify and support **teaching practices and learning opportunities** that promote engaged learning and respectful effective teaching.*
- Standard #4: *Develop a safe, **welcoming environment** where all members of the school community feel safe, respected, and supported.*
- Standard #5: *Create meaningful opportunities for students to learn and practice **civic responsibility**, be committed to **social justice**, and develop the skills and values that are essential in a democratic society*



# A Glimpse at the Work We Do

1. We bring **adult leaders** together with **student leaders** and **student experts** to learn and work together to improve their schools.
2. We help schools **measure, evaluate, and work to improve** school climate and learning.



# School Climate is PERCEPTION

- How safe, respectful, and effective is your school?
- **It depends on who you ask.**
- We all have blind spots.
- We all need to work together to understand and improve school climate.



# How the SafeMeasures™ Process Works

- **Stage #1:** Adult Team Development, Planning, and Student Leadership Team Selection
- **Stage #2:** Students Collect School Climate Data
- **Stage #3:** Student Leaders and Adults Set School Climate Improvement Goals
- **Stage #4:** Student Leaders and Adults Develop and Implement Action Projects
- **Stage #5:** Formative Assessment, Leaders work to Ensure Systemic Changes and Sustainability



# We Add **Student Leadership** to the Process

- School climate occurs when adults are not around!
- Students see, hear, and understand school climate issues in ways adults cannot.
- Students aren't the problem, **SYSTEMS** are the problem. (It is what adults do that matters most.)
- Students are school climate **EXPERTS** and can influence their peers in ways adults cannot.
- **DIVERSE Student Leadership Teams** are the **KEY**.



# Involving DIVERSE Students Changes Everything!

1. Adults show respect for students when they empower them as partners to help improve their schools (civic engagement).
2. When we invite ALL types of students (social justice) to serve their school as EXPERTS we show that we respect all students.
3. The ‘collective knowledge’ about a school that is held by a diverse student team provides a ‘valid’ picture of school climate and school effectiveness.



# Involving DIVERSE Students Changes Everything!

4. Survey data are more valid when collected by students who “look like” and “are like” their peers.
5. A School Change Model Involving Diverse Student Teams

Inputs- adults learn what diverse students know about your school.

Outputs- school improvement ideas, programs, information are easily disseminated because students simply talk to their friends when they go back to their lunch tables



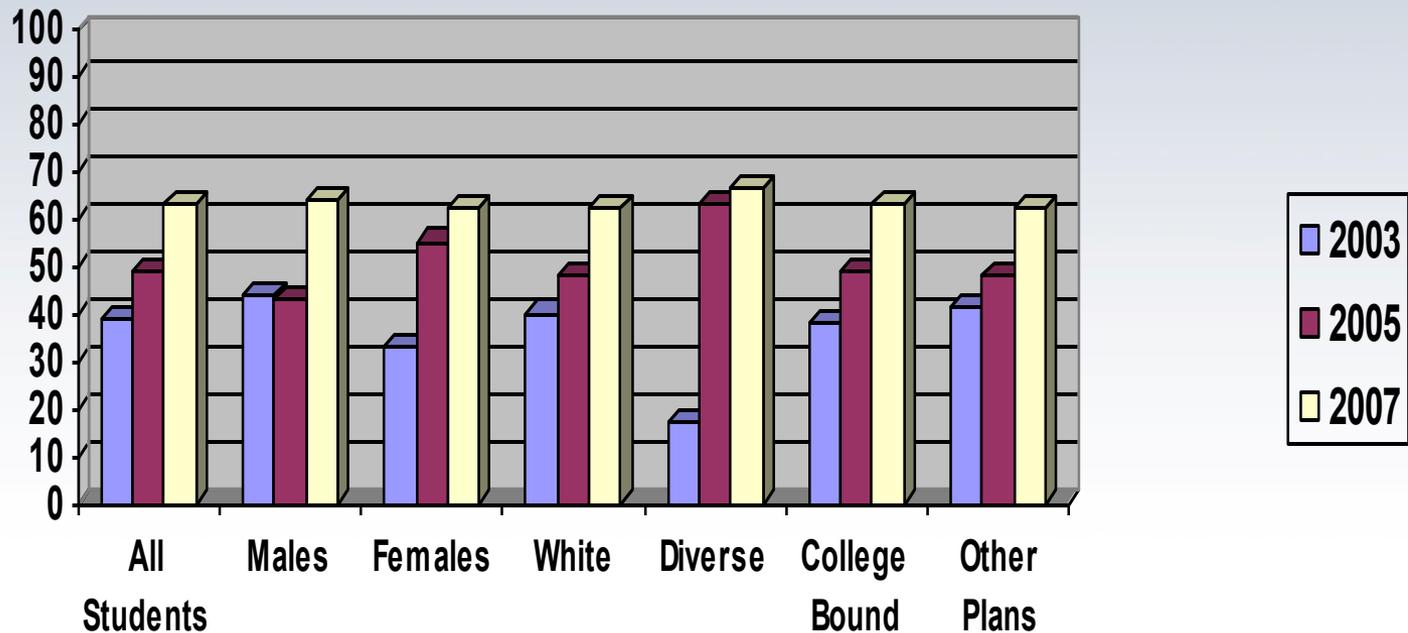
# Our Data = Words and Numbers

- "I would make this school more open to different beliefs and points of views."
- "I think teachers should provide different ways to learn and test."
- "I think the students should have a say in how we should learn and what we want to learn."
- "Watch more closely at boys being provocative towards girls and disrespecting them... especially sexually."
- "Make our heating systems more environmentally friendly by getting rid of the polluting smoke stack we have now."
- "There's way too many drug dealers here. When we got checked, 48 people got suspended. I mean, really? "



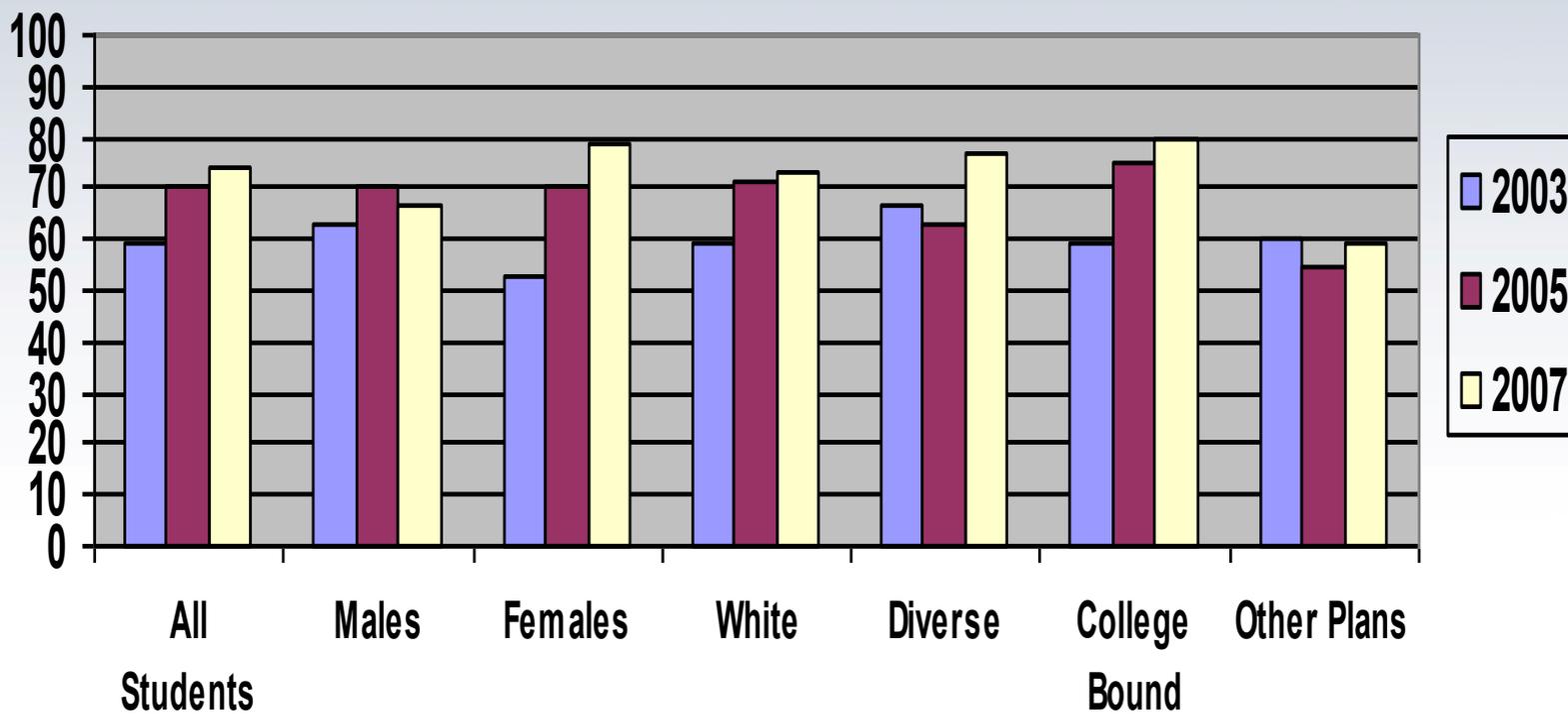
# Numbers Show Success Stories

Students are willing to step forward and help when they see others getting picked on or harassed.



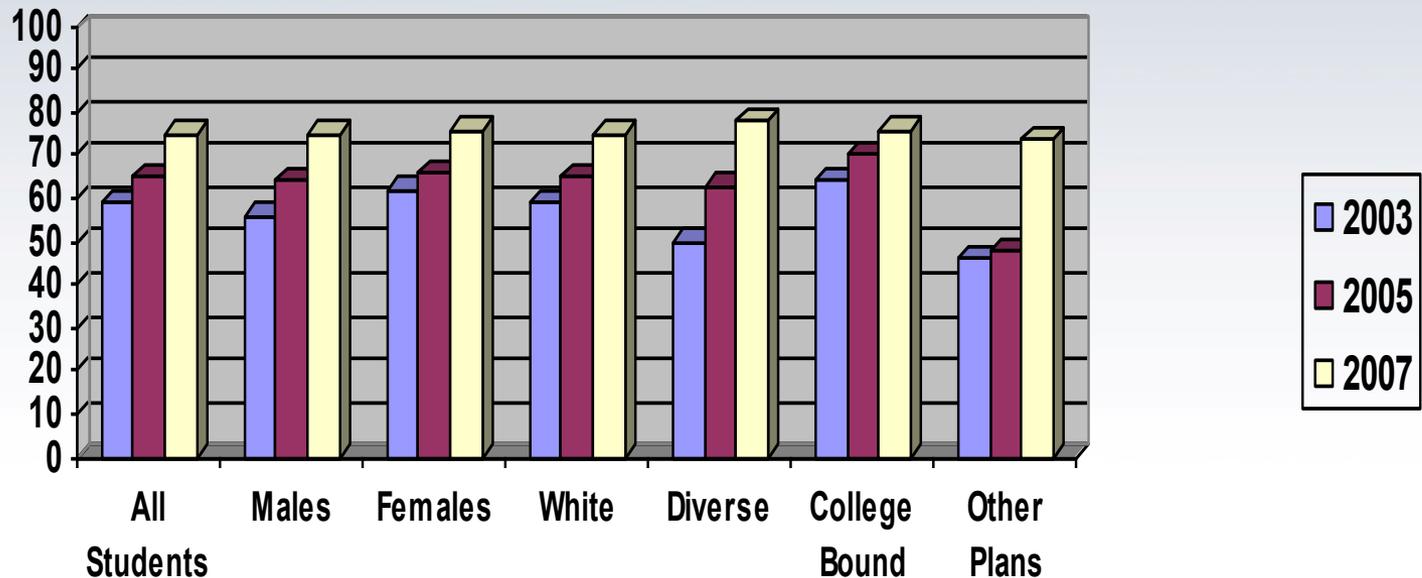
# Students Feel Safer at School (especially girls)

I feel physically safe being who I am at my school



# More students feel teachers know and respect them.

I feel that my teacher(s) really know and respect me as a person or individual.



# Now That Is a Respectful School!

Climate Survey Items	% Positive Average High School Data	% Positive Compass School
I feel physically safe being who I am at my school (free from threats, harassment, violence).	70	97
Most students treat me with fairness and respect.	71	94
Students are willing to step forward and help when they see others getting picked on or harassed.	35	79
Students' work is often displayed publicly and celebrated by our teachers.	43	93
Students help to make decisions about school rules and discipline.	12	94
At my school, students sometimes work together on big, interesting, important projects that make us feel proud and help us get to know each other better.	48	96



# Student Engagement Drives Change Process

- Program evaluators from Clemson University report that Student Leaders are driving the APEX Process.
- Student involvement enhances the likelihood that school climate changes will be sustained.
- Teachers are more receptive to change when students are their partners.



# Best Practices & Sample Projects

- Backpack Project
- Instructional Technology Support for Teachers
- Student Judiciary
- Project Days
- Community Service Learning
- Posters on ‘Choices we made today.’
- Teachers ‘Adopt’ Unmotivated Students-Journal Change
- “Increase the Peace” Bracelets
- Morning Announcement Fun



# USDOE & School Climate Improvement

“A truly safe school”, according to Kevin Jennings, newly appointed Deputy Assistance Secretary of Education and Director of Safe and Drug Free Schools, “is a school in which all students feel like they belong, that they are valued, and that they are physically and emotionally safe.”



# USDOE & School Climate Improvement

- Jennings and his colleagues in the US DOE are creating a new National School Climate Initiative to replace the old Safe and Drug Free Schools model that emphasized, school violence prevention, controlling weapons in schools, and stamping out substance abuse, with one whose primary goals will be to help schools:
  - ensure physical and emotional safety for all students,
  - build stronger more personalized relationships in schools,
  - expand and deepen student engagement in learning and school life
  - create physical environments that reflect our country's commitment to student learning and success



# National Support for Improving School Climate and Learning

- Title IV, Safe & Drug Free Schools is being phased out
- THIS YEAR IS A TRANSITION YEAR
- There will be a new National School Climate Improvement Initiative beginning in 2011.
- Schools that have already collected School Climate data (established a baseline for evaluating improvement) will be eligible to apply for new money to implement school climate improvement programs.
- Schools that understand and use the National School Climate Standards will be more likely to demonstrate a coherent, systemic, data-driven approach to school climate improvement.



# For More Information

- Bill Preble,  
[wpreble@msanh.com](mailto:wpreble@msanh.com)  
603-428-8706
- Thank you for participating and for working to ensure that your school is a safe, respectful, and engaging place for all of your students

