

Our Children, Our Schools: Seeking Solutions for Improving the Climate in Urban Public Schools

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Using a quantitative study the researchers examined perceptions regarding school climate of parents with children who attend urban schools, based on several dimensions: quality of the instructional program, support for learning, school climate/environment for learning, parent/school relationships, and resource management. Of the 150 administered surveys by the National Study of School Evaluation NSSE (2004) Parent Opinion Inventory, 116 or 77.3% were returned. Descriptive statistics were used to report findings. Results showed high levels of agreement with parents on most dimensions; however, the lowest level was resource management. In conclusion, although the dimensions regarding school climate were perceived as favorable, student achievement data and conditions that typically characterize urban schools indicate continuous improvements are needed. Recommendations for such improvements include providing additional funding and educational opportunities for children attending urban schools.

Keywords: school climate, urban schools, parental involvement, support for learning, resource management

Introduction

School climate is among the most frequently mentioned concepts relevant to student achievement and has been identified an essential component in the successful implementation of school reform (Bulach & Malone, 1994; Dellar, 1998). Research drawn from a white paper published in 2014 by the Center for Social and Emotional Education, the Education Commission of the States, and the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, indicates the most fundamental dimension of school climate relates to the connection between parents, students and their school. Consequently, the researchers designed this study to examine perceptions regarding school climate of parents with children who attend urban schools, based on the following dimensions: the quality of the instructional program (Herman, Osmundson, Dai, Ringstaff, & Timms, 2011; Popham, 2005; Varias, 2005), support for learning (Cohen, Cardillio, & Pickeral, 2011), school climate/environment for learning (Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE), 2010), parent/school relationships (Jeynes, 2005), and resource management (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997; 1998). The aforementioned dimensions of school climate were derived from the National Study of School Evaluation's (NSSE) (2004) Parent Opinion Inventory, which serves as the theoretical framework of this study.

School Climate / Environment for Learning

Relative to the school climate or environment for learning, it is necessary to establish the context or basis of this study as it relates to the terms "urban schools and urban school districts." Although, research that defines, characterizes, and highlights differences between urban schools and their suburban counterparts is abundant and longstanding. For the purpose of this study, the terms refer to schools or school districts which serve city populations that exemplify concentrated levels of poverty, are set in high crime areas, and often have deficient school success among students at all grade levels. Moreover, Lippman, Burns, and McArthur (1996) suggest these factors are strongly linked to differences between urban and suburban schools. Beyond these general characterizations, there are differences in urban school settings. Urban school districts are stratified or frequently consist of several types of schools, such as private, magnet--considered to be elite public schools, and traditional public or neighborhood schools, which are further divided into categories such as failing or passing and low or high quality (Lipman, 1998). Despite efforts by education policy makers to improve the educational performance of low-income students through mixed income strategies, the problems persist (Lipman, 2008). Therefore, it is of great importance for educators to establish and maintain healthy school climates in urban settings.

A viable, positive school climate promotes youth development and learning necessary for a productive and satisfying life in a democratic society (Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE), 2010). It is especially important for the climate in urban schools to be based on trust, safety, fairness, respect, a welcoming environment, and high expectations due to the challenging family and community circumstances inner-city youth face. Parents' positive perceptions of the school's climate positively correlate with their increased involvement and student achievement. In a special report on urban

school climate, Perkins-Gough (2008) stated parental involvement is important because it can serve to create greater student achievement through cultivating a climate of respect, trust, and an ethos or spirit of caring. Also, parent's feelings about their child's school, whether positive or negative, influence how deeply they get involved in school activities—and research indicates that the right kinds of parent involvement can boost student achievement. In this light, it is not only important to understand how parents perceive the school climate, but also to understand other parent/school relational factors.

Parent/School Relationships

Relative to the NSSE Parent Opinion Inventory dimension concerning parent school relations, research suggests, over time, that variables associated with the family frequently have a greater impact on educational outcomes than those associated with schools (Barth, 2011; Coleman, 1966). For example, Bandura (1986) found that parent efficacy or belief that he or she has the ability to positively influence student outcomes is directly related to involvement. However, in order to be effective, involvement must extend beyond mere parent participation in school related activities. Only those actions which support student learning at home are likely to positively impact academic outcomes. Furthermore, there is little dispute among researchers that certain types of parental involvement are needed in urban schools to facilitate greater student achievement and that parent perceptions of the school influence such involvement. More specifically, activities that involve help with homework and educational activities, volunteering in the classroom, conference participation, and frequent communication with teachers are associated with student success in urban schools (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brisse 1992). Nevertheless, relevant research supports the premise that parent perceptions strongly impact overall involvement.

How parents perceive schools greatly influences how involved they become in children's education (Perkins-Gough, 2008). As suggested earlier, parental involvement or participation in the educational experiences and processes of their children, is increasingly identified as a primary means of increasing academic achievement in urban schools and has been found to strongly influence minority children's academic achievement. For example, parental expectations, attendance and participation in school functions, communication with teachers, and help with homework are effective in student academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005, 2007).

Parent perceptions of urban schools may also have a negative impact on the type of involvement they render. Many urban schools are located in inner-cities and have majority, African-American and Latino enrollments. Social class and race can greatly impact academic achievement in such settings, because associated factors may negatively influence parents' orientation (perceptions) toward education and their involvement. It is noteworthy that though poverty is often associated with lack of income, it frequently results in humiliation, perceived lack of power, and feelings of exclusion, factors which may directly impact parent's efficacy and orientation (Amatea, E., & West-Olatunji, C., 2007). More precisely, educational orientation refers to what parents believe to be their role in education and how such beliefs impact their parental involvement strategies (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Quality of the Instructional Program (Relative to Teachers)

The quality of the instructional program depends heavily on the quality of teachers the school is able to attract and retain. Varias (2005) suggested that recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in urban schools, characterized as being “hard-to-staff,” is challenging. Creating safe school environments, building better relationships with the community, and raising teacher expectations are effective methods of addressing teacher retentions (Varias, 2005).

Though urban schools are often associated with problems, such as low achievement and apathy among students, parents and teachers, and high teacher turnover, educators can employ effective solutions through carefully investigating the causes and taking specific actions. For example, the instructional program can be improved through attracting and retaining high quality teachers. Teacher retention might be improved through understanding what motivates teachers to leave and then taking actions to curtail those motivators. Moreover, safety, school-community relations, and teacher expectations are factors associated with instructional program quality because of how they impact teacher retention (Varias, 2005).

Support for Learning

To be supported is for others to appreciate areas that pose challenges for us. There is little doubt amongst researchers concerning the need for teachers to engage in task oriented behaviors, but research also supports the need for relationship oriented behaviors as well. In an article highlighting innovative instructional strategies, Weselby (2014) suggested that task oriented behaviors that support student learning include embracing various instructional strategies and delivering lessons at varying levels of difficulty. Activities such as grouping students by shared interest, achievement, and ability for the assignment are proven to facilitate effective instructional differentiation. Relational behaviors that support student learning include personal interactions, soliciting individual student engagement and their input. For example, asking the students questions about what teachers might do to better support them can have a profound positive impact on students. This is supported by Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2000) finding that respect is authentic; it cannot be imitated, but embodied. When respect is embodied it leads to feelings of student safety, support and engagement and which can be effective in improving school climate. Furthermore, the show of respect is contagious and leads to sustainability; when people are respected they are apt to show respect or appreciation to others; they tend to pay it forward or continue the behavior (Cohen, Cardillio, & Pickeral, 2011).

When teachers share practice, engage in high levels of collaboration and develop warm relationships, it results in faculty effectiveness, the promotion of professional growth, and camaraderie (Hord, 1997; Dufour, 2004). Teachers desire to be intimately involved with professional learning communities as ongoing learners (Marcinek, 2015). In this light, schools may inadvertently contribute to teachers’ perception of disrespect, by not supporting this need. On the other hand, when professional learning communities are structured in a manner that allows teachers to feel comfortable sharing shortcomings with colleagues in a non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere, it can add significantly

to their feelings of support. (Cohen, et al., 2011). Professional learning is essential to improving educational practice and can be the guiding principal in life-long learning and the model students emulate in becoming life-long learners (Marcinek, 2015).

Resource management

Determining how school expenditures relate to student achievement has been difficult to measure for researchers. In response, researchers have applied the term “educational production function” to exhibit how school resources relate to school outcomes or more specifically, “to describe the relation between school inputs and student outcomes” (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996, pg. 362). In this light, education can be viewed as a production process that utilizes limited resources to produce desired educational outcomes (Jagero, 2013). Moreover, research on schools demonstrates that there are various ways to manage resources to improve student achievement. For example, when resources are allocated in ways that create more instruction-free time for teachers, specialized programs for small subsets of students, and inflexible work hours for teachers, it increases teacher collaboration, enhances instructional focus on specific student deficits, and allows more common planning time for specific groups of teachers ((Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997; 1998).

This study addressed the research question: *Regarding climate, what are the perceptions of parents with children who attend urban schools, based on the quality of the instructional program, support for learning, school climate/environment for learning, parent/school relationships, and resource management?*

Methodology

Quantitative methods were utilized in addressing the research question framing the study. The descriptive research approach was employed for the purpose of determining the current status of parent perceptions concerning the climate of their child's school, located in an urban setting.

Participants

One hundred fifty surveys were administered to parents of students attending an urban school located in the United States southeast region. The school had a free and reduced lunch rate of over 98%, which is an indicator of the overall social economic status of parents participating in the survey. Of the 150 surveys administered to parents, 116 were returned, yielding a 77% return rate. The high return may be due to the support of administrators and teachers to offer incentives to students who returned completed surveys.

Instrumentation

The National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) (2004) granted permission to utilize the organization's Parent Opinion Inventory to measure parent perceptions regarding the climate of schools. The Parent Opinion Inventory consists of fifty Likert-type items

exploring five major dimensions: quality of the instructional program, support for learning, school/environment for learning, parent/school relationships, and resource management. Parents were expected to provide their level of agreement involving their perceptions of the climate in their child's school based on six survey responses: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), Doesn't Apply/Don't Know (D/A). This study was designed specifically to ascertain perspectives regarding school climate of parents whose children attend an urban school setting.

Data Collection

Permission was granted by the district superintendent to conduct the study. Parents of students attending public schools in an urban location were randomly selected through a systematic sampling technique. In other words, every *n*th parent in the population was chosen. Systematic sampling is a slight variation from random sampling and has been used by school administrators to study parent satisfaction (Creswell, 2008). A listing of all students enrolled in the school was used to determine the population data. Systematic sampling was used by randomly assigning each student a number; the students whose names corresponding to the first 150 odd numbers were chosen. Students whose parents completed and returned the surveys were offered incentives such as extra reading time in the library.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to report the findings from the data. To address the research question, frequencies and percentages were calculated to report parent perceptions of urban schools regarding climate, based upon the five constructs of the study: quality of the instructional program, support for learning, school/environment for learning, parent/school relationships, and resource management. Frequencies and percentages were used as means of adding clarity to the perception results.

Findings

Based on the conclusions related to the research question, an overwhelming majority of parents agreed the climate in their child's school was positive on all five dimensions. The quality of the instructional program, support for student learning, the environment for learning, parent/school relationships, and resource management were favorably perceived.

More specifically, the overall quality of the instructional program the school offered in the school was considered high among parents ($n=106$, 91.3%). Reading ($n=111$, 95.7%), mathematics ($n=111$, 95.7%), and science ($n=111$, 95.7%), was perceived at a slightly higher level of agreement than in social studies ($n=109$, 94.0%). It is noteworthy that considerable emphasis was placed on reading, writing, mathematics, and science from the state and local boards of education. (See Table 1 in Appendix)

In the area of support for student learning, evaluation and grading ($n=111$, 95.7%), and reporting of student work ($n=112$, 96.5%) was perceived as being slightly more agreeable than the individual help the school offers students outside of the

classroom ($n= 101, 86.9\%$). This may be due to the recent and perpetual emphasis placed on educational accountability at the federal, state, and local levels. (See Table 2 in Appendix)

On the dimension of environment for learning, respondents agreed that all students at the school are treated with respect regardless of race, religion, or gender and school rules are applied equally ($n= 111, 95.7\%$). However, there is a less favorable parent perception regarding adequate security measures in place ($n= 104, 89.5\%$). The school was perceived as having a minor problem with bullies, even though it fostered an overall safe environment in an urban area known for criminal activity. (See Table 3 in Appendix)

Pertaining to parent/school relationships it was strongly agreed that parents felt welcomed when they came into the school ($n= 111, 95.7\%$), that school rules were clearly communicated and that the school provided sufficient opportunities for parent involvement. Compared to other responses regarding parent/school relationships, a high level disagreement and neutrality was exhibited regarding parents' opinions when important decisions were made ($n= 103, 88.7\%$). (See Table 4 in Appendix)

Of the five dimensions studied, resource management received the highest level of disagreement among parents regarding their perceptions of the climate within their child's school. The item regarding the quality of the school influencing parents' decisions to live in the community received the lowest rating of resource management ($n= 98, 84.3\%$). This may not be as reflective of the school as it is of the community. A significant number of the student's parents receive public financial assistance relative to housing in the area. Adequate space for extracurricular activities was also ranked lowly among parent perceptions. The school and community have concentrated poverty. The community is also frequently associated with crime. (See Table 5 in Appendix)

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In summary, regarding Conant's (1961) prophetic warning, echoed more recently by Ravitch (1998) and a host of others, describing how inadequacies of urban education such as insufficient funding and outdated facilities, leads to low academic achievement and ultimately negative perceptions of school culture and climate, one would readily suspect that the school would have a negative climate. Contrarily, despite the inadequate resources and deficient conditions which existed within the urban school under study, it was concluded an overwhelming majority of parents agreed the climate in their child's was positive on the studied dimensions: the quality of the instructional program, support for student learning, the environment for learning, parent school relationships, and resource management. Although the results were favorable, an analysis of the research indicates that when schools engage in continuous improvement efforts it results in increased student achievement. Recommendations, in light of continuous improvement, include providing additional funding resources and learning opportunities to children in urban settings for optimal educational attainment.

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Appendix

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Item Responses of Parents Regarding Quality of Instructional Program (N=116)

Item	SA		A		N		D		SD		D/A	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. The education offered to students at our school is of high quality.	33	28.4	73	62.9	7	6.0	1	0.9	1	0.9	1	0.9
2. Our school is doing a good job teaching language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening).	26	22.4	85	73.3	3	2.6	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9
3. Our school is doing a good job teaching mathematics.	24	20.7	87	75.0	3	2.6	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9
4. Our school is doing a good job teaching science.	17	14.7	94	81.0	2	1.7	2	1.7	0	0.0	1	0.9
5. Our school is doing a good job teaching social studies.	19	16.4	90	77.6	5	4.3	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9
6. Our school is doing a good job teaching fine arts (music, visual arts, dance, and drama).	17	14.7	80	69.0	2	1.7	9	7.8	1	0.9	7	6.0
7. Our school is doing a good job teaching physical education.	23	19.8	87	75.0	3	2.6	2	1.7	0	0.0	1	0.9
8. Our school is doing a good job teaching health education.	14	12.4	84	72.6	5	4.4	5	4.3	1	0.9	7	6.2
9. Our school is doing a good job teaching driver's education.	6	5.3	63	54.0	3	2.7	8	7.1	2	1.8	3	29.2
10. Our school is doing a good job teaching foreign languages.	8	7.0	66	57.4	5	4.3	7	6.1	1	0.9	2	25.2
11. Our school is doing a good job teaching career/vocational courses.	15	12.5	92	79.5	4	3.6	2	1.8	0	0.0	3	2.7
12. Students see a relationship between what they are studying and their everyday lives.	21	18.1	90	77.6	2	1.7	1	0.9	0	0.0	2	1.7
13. Teachers use a variety of teaching strategies and learning activities to help students learn.	21	18.1	90	77.6	2	1.7	1	0.9	0	0.0	2	1.7
14. Teachers challenge my	29	25.0	83	71.0	2	1.7	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9

student to do his/her best work.	0	6										
15. Teachers provide a reasonable and appropriate amount of homework to help students succeed in their studies.	22	19.	84	72.	6	5.2	3	2.6	1	0.9	0	0.0
		1		2								
16. Teachers hold high expectations for student learning.	22	19.	88	75.	2	1.7	3	2.6	1	0.9	0	0.0
		1		7								

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Item Responses of Parents Regarding Support for Student Learning (N=116)

Item	SA		A		N		D		SD		D/A	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
17. Teachers give students extra help in class when needed.	2	20.	81	69.	7	6.0	2	1.7	1	0.9	1	0.9
	4	7		8								
18. Teachers are willing to give students individual help outside of class time.	1	16.	82	70.	1	9.6	2	1.7	1	0.9	1	0.9
	9	5		4		1						
19. Our school offers learning opportunities that support the full range of students' abilities.	1	14.	91	78.	6	5.2	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9
	7	7		4								
20. Our school recognizes the achievements of students for all types of accomplishments.	1	16.	89	76.	5	4.3	2	1.7	0	0.0	1	0.9
	9	5		5								
21. The grading and evaluation of my child's school work is fair.	1	14.	94	80.	4	3.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.9
	7	8		9								
22. Reports on my child's progress are clear and easy to understand.	2	17.	92	79.	1	0.9	1	0.9	0	0.0	2	1.7
	0	2		3								
23. In our school, students have access to a variety of resources.	1	13.	82	70.	7	6.0	2	1.7	0	0.0	9	7.8
	6	8		7								
24. Effective procedures are in place to support my communication with teachers.	1	11.	92	79.	6	5.2	2	1.7	0	0.0	3	2.6
	3	2		3								
25. In our school, students have an access a variety of resources to help them succeed in their learning, such as technology, media centers, and libraries.	2	17.	87	74.	5	4.3	1	0.9	0	0.0	3	2.6
	0	4		8								
26. Our school facilities are adequate to support student's learning needs.	1	12.	94	80.	5	4.3	2	1.7	0	0.0	1	0.9
	4	2		9								
27. Our school provides	1	15.	91	78.	5	4.3	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.9

textbooks and supplies that are current and in good condition.	8	7	3									
28. Up-to-date computers and other technologies are used in our school to help students learn.	2	19.	85	73.	5	4.3	1	0.9	2	1.7	1	0.9
	2	1	0									

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Item Responses of Parents Regarding School Climate/Environment for Learning (N=116)

Item	SA		A		N		D		SD		D/A	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
29. Teachers at the school treat my child fairly.	2	17.	87	75.	5	4.4	3	2.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
	1	7	2									
30. Class sizes at our school are appropriate for effective learning.	1	15.	90	77.	4	3.5	4	3.5	0	0.0	0	0.0
	8	8	2									
31. All students and staff at our school are treated with respect, regardless of race, religion, or gender.	2	20.	88	75.	3	2.6	2	1.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
	3	2	4									
32. Adequate security measures are in place in our school.	1	15.	86	73.	6	5.3	4	3.5	0	0.0	2	1.8
	8	8	7									
33. Cheating is strongly discouraged at our school.	2	20.	90	77.	2	1.8	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
	3	2	2									
34. School rules apply equally to all students.	2	21.	86	74.	4	3.6	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
	5	4	1									
35. Substance abuse (e.g. drugs/alcohol) is not a problem at our school.	3	26.	80	68.	4	3.6	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
	1	8	8									
36. Our school provides a safe and orderly environment for learning.	2	17.	89	77.	3	2.7	3	2.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
	1	7	0									
37. Safety measures are in place to protect children traveling to and from school.	2	17.	89	77.	5	4.4	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
	1	7	0									
38. There are no problems with bullies at our school.	1	13.	83	71.	1	9.8	4	3.6	0	0.0	2	1.8
	6	4	4	1								
39. For the most part, I am satisfied with our school.	2	18.	87	75.	4	3.5	2	1.8	0	0.0	1	0.9
	2	6	2									

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Item Responses of Parents Regarding Parent/ School Relationships (N=116)

Item	SA		A		N		D		SD		D/A	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
40. Parent opinions are	2	17.	83	71.	7	6.1	4	3.5	0	0.0	2	1.7

considered when important school decisions are made.	0	4		3								
41. I am satisfied with the quality of our school's student activities.	2	17.	87	74.	2	1.7	4	3.5	2	1.7	1	0.9
	0	4		8								
42. School rules are clearly communicated to parents.	2	23.	83	71.	3	2.6	2	1.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
	8	7		9								
43. Our school provides sufficient opportunities for parent involvement.	2	21.	82	70.	6	5.2	3	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
	5	7		4								
44. Our school uses technology to provide parents with important information about our school.	2	19.	80	68.	7	6.1	5	4.3	0	0.0	2	1.7
	2	1		7								
45. Parents feel welcome at our school.	2	25.	82	70.	2	1.7	3	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
	9	2		4								

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Item Responses of Parents Regarding Resource Management (N=116)

Item	SA		A		N		D		SD		D/A	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
46. Our school makes effective use of financial resources available.	1	13.	84	72.	9	7.8	2	1.7	1	0.9	5	4.3
	5	0		2								
47. The quality of the school influenced my decision to live in this community.	1	13.	83	71.	1	8.8	2	1.8	2	1.8	4	3.5
	5	2		1	0							
48. Our school and grounds are clean and well maintained.	2	18.	88	75.	2	1.8	4	3.5	1	0.9	0	0.0
	1	4		4								
49. Adequate time, space, and facilities are provided for student activities (i.e., extracurricular, sports).	1	11.	89	76.	8	7.0	3	2.6	2	1.7	1	0.9
	3	3		5								
50. Our school has a positive impact on the community's property values.	1	14.	85	73.	1	8.7	2	1.7	1	0.9	1	0.9
	7	8		0	0							