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Parental Thoughts about School Climate in Missouri

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In any society, schools are the means by which children are prepared to be successful adults. The life experiences of children at home, in the community, and in school influence how they fare developmentally during the educational process. The importance of the academic preparation of children has never been questioned. Over the last two decades, however, the role of social and emotional development in the educational process has been acknowledged (Fopiano & Haynes, 2001; Education Commission of the States, 2008). The educational milieu is often referred to as school climate.

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) (2008) recently published *The School Climate Challenge*, which suggests that state school accountability systems should include school climate. Missouri has been doing this for some years. The Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP) reviews and accredits school districts in Missouri every five years. Within this process, data on school climate are gathered statewide. MSIP gathers data from school districts via parents, students (grades 3-12),

and school staff in order to evaluate educational processes in Missouri's 524 districts.

One concern reported in a recent summary of state policies related to school climate (McCabe & Haynes, 2006) is a failure on the part of state departments of education to use a definition of school climate that is aligned with current research. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education uses a definition that entails "the degree to which all students feel respected and valued," which is aligned with the research.

What is school climate? Defining school climate is difficult. Most discussions of the term will include ideas of "shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers and administrators, and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school" (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008, p.96). School climate is the quality of school life that either supports or undercuts the learning, achievement and development of the students enrolled.

The *School Climate Challenge* reports that a positive school climate, in which students feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe, is paramount in reducing achievement inequities, enhancing healthy development, and promoting skills, knowledge and

dispositions that provide the foundation for student success. Yet school personnel are not solely responsible for a positive school climate. A positive school climate is created by school personnel and students, as well as parents and the community at large. A school community should support and advance a positive school climate.

What are the effects of school climate? A growing body of research on school climate clearly identifies individual consequences of its impact. School climate

- is directly related to student academic achievement;
- relates to student self-concept and self-esteem;
- is predictive of mothers' reports of school-age children's psychiatric problems and alcohol use;
- has a relationship between absenteeism and rate of student suspension;
- is a critical part of lowering risk taking behaviors and promoting health efforts;
- relates to high correlations between length of school attendance and student health even when SES and other variables are taken into account; and,
- tends to foster attachment: how connected students and school personnel felt to one another and how connected the school is to the community. School connectedness is a powerful predictor of health and academic outcomes, violence prevention, and a protective factor in risky behaviors related to sex, violence, and drug use. (Education Commission of the States, 2008).

We firmly believe that school climate matters.

How do parents perceive school climate?

Our research team reviewed the data collected through MSIP, focusing

specifically on the school climate items. Our analysis takes a perspective based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model of child development. In this model, families are portrayed as enmeshed in complex networks of internal and external relationships, including the family-school relationship.

Yet there are surprisingly few studies of school climate that include family perspectives. From an ecological viewpoint, parents' perceptions of school climate influence the strength of their connections to the school and the people who work there. Positive parent perceptions of the school support their children's connections to school. A negative or absent parent-school relationship diminishes both the family's and the school's abilities to foster student potential. One recent analysis of a nationwide database showed this to be particularly important for African American students (Stewart, 2007).

What about Missouri parents? Based on this perspective, we explored the parent responses to the school climate items from the most recent collection of MSIP data. These data were compiled from 2001 through 2006. In this cycle, 833,737 questionnaires were distributed to parents in all Missouri school districts. Of these, a total of 433,338 (51%) were returned. From analysis of the school climate items on the parent questionnaires, we created a school climate scale with scores ranging from 16 to 80.

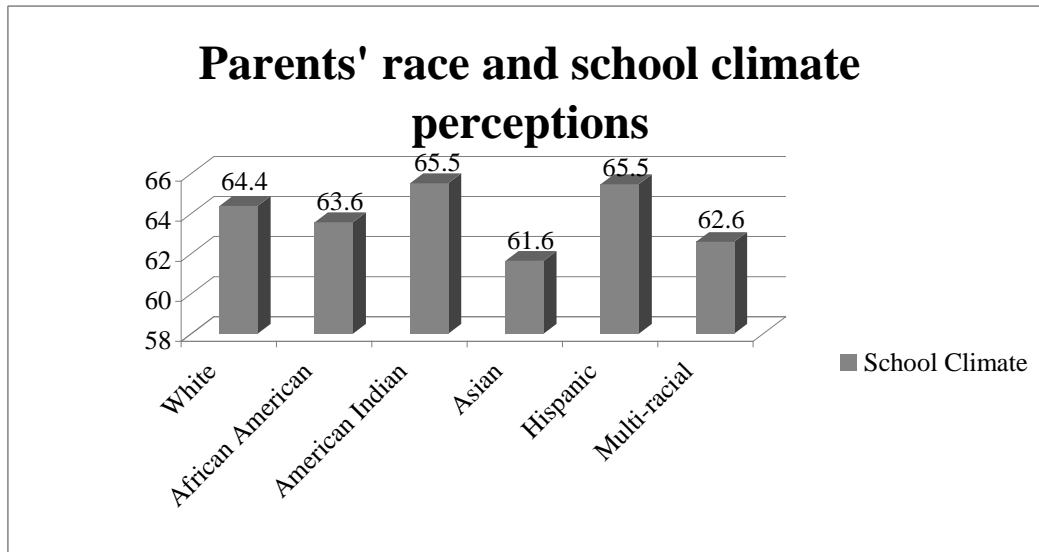
We were especially interested in how different groups of parents perceive school climate. We found that Missouri parents rated schools somewhat differently, depending on their race, education, and income.

For example, Figure 1 shows that while on average all parents responded positively, American Indian, Hispanic and White parents on average have more positive perceptions of the climates in their

children's schools than African American, Asian, and Multi-racial parents. The average score was 64.3. Firm conclusions cannot be drawn, because of the low percentages of

responders in some groups, but we hope to explore this further.

Figure 1

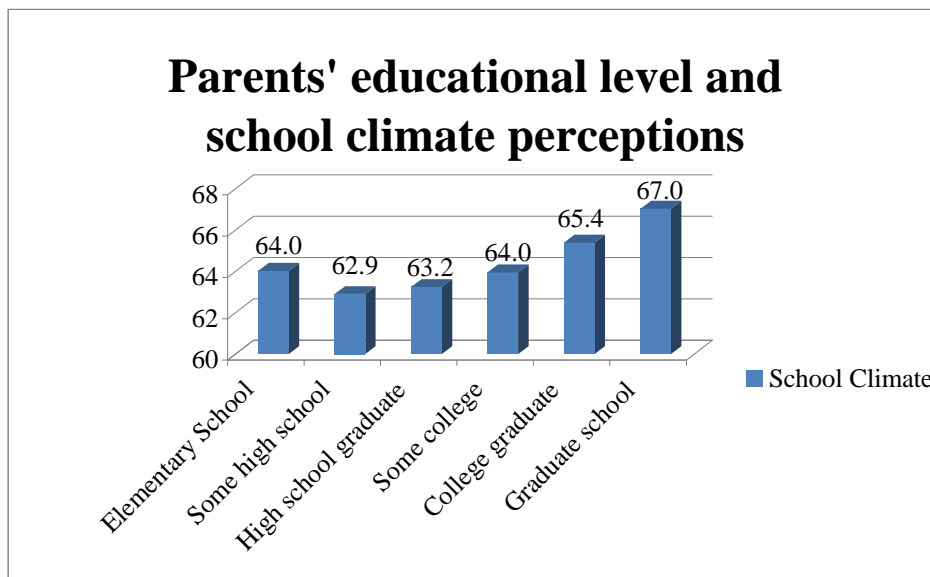


Percentage of total responders: White 83.2%, African American 11.2%, American Indian 1.4%, Asian 0.7%, Hispanic 2.2%, Multi-racial 1.3%,

Figure 2 shows that, with the exception of parents with an elementary school education, on average parents with more

education have more positive perceptions of school climate. The average score was 64.3.

Figure 2

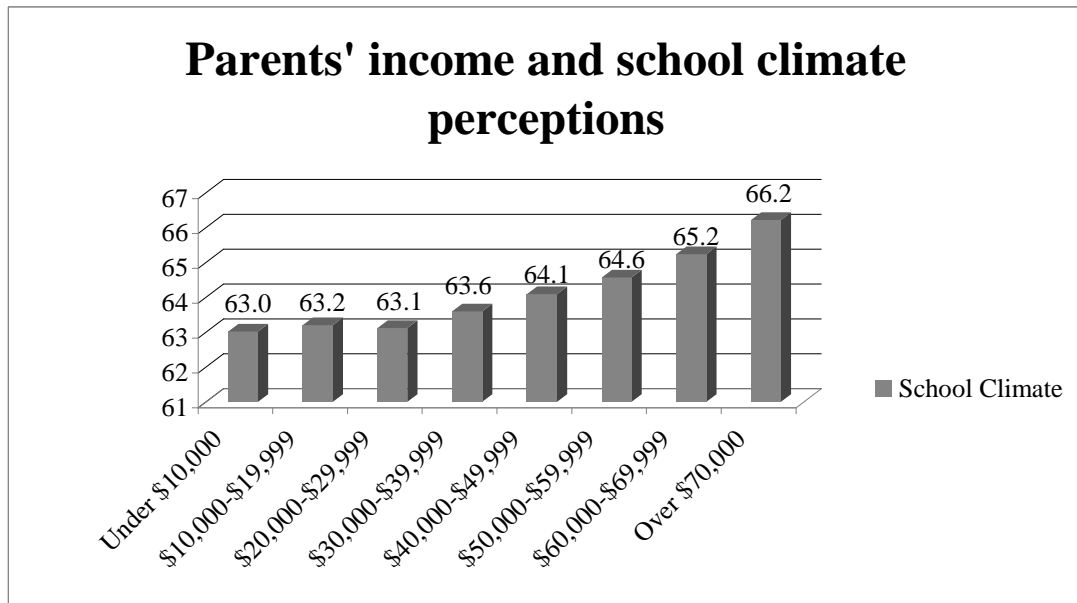


Percentage of total responders: Elementary School 1.4%, Some high school 8%, High school graduate 27.6%, Some college 30.5%, College graduate 22.6%, Graduate school 10%.

Finally, according to Figure 3, there is a clear relationship between parents' reported income levels and perceptions of school climate, with more wealthy parents having

more positive perceptions. The average score was 64.4.

Figure 3



Percentage of total responders: Under \$10,000 8%; \$10,000-\$19,999 10.8%; \$20,000-\$29,999 12.3%; \$30,000-\$39,999 12.8%; \$40,000-\$49,999 11.9%; \$50,000-\$59,999 10.8%; \$60,000-\$69,999 8.9%; Over \$70,000 24.5%

What does this mean?

Obviously, these findings represent only those parents who returned the MSIP questionnaires. Those who responded are not a good representation of the overall parent population. For example, while about 18 percent of Missouri students are African American, only 11 percent of the responding parents were African American. Hispanic and Asian parents are also under-represented. Therefore, we must be cautious in drawing conclusions from these preliminary findings.

However, these findings for Missouri are consistent with other studies that have shown gaps among parents based on race, education, and income. Lareau (2003) indicated that parents with higher incomes and education levels are more involved in their children's schools and, therefore, collaborate more with school personnel to *create* the school climate they want. When they say they are more satisfied with the

school climate, it is because they may have used deliberate strategies to intervene when they are dissatisfied with a school. Lower income parents, and especially ethnic minority parents, are rarely reported to feel so empowered.

Conclusion

Our review of the responses suggests that parents overall perceive a positive school climate in their children's schools. There are some disparities in perceptions between parents of differing income levels, education, and race. We did not do analyses that included regional or urban/suburban contexts. Future work with these data will include more detailed reviews. We suggest that Missouri schools' efforts with school climate might be best served by further research into why these disparities exist, using strategies such as focus groups or follow-up interviews with parents who responded to the questionnaires. This MSIP review had a 51 percent response rate.

Efforts should be made to obtain data from additional Missouri parents with the intent of securing a more realistic view of parental thoughts on school climate.

Parents were the focal point in this report. However, we want to reiterate that promoting positive school climate statewide encompasses local and state policies (assessment and improvement) that detail the voices of students, parents, and school personnel covering all dimensions of school life: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the community.

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