Focus Area Policy Brief:
Inclusive School Environment

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Introduction

In February 2016, a student survey was administered to all 6th, 8th, and 11th grade students in the Iowa City Community School District (ICCSD). The survey asked students to report on their experiences of school across a number of areas including relationships with teachers, mentor relationships, support resources, negative experiences of school, social belonging, motivations to attend school, perceptions of discipline, inclusive classrooms, and the salience of race and gender for social identity and relationships. An extensive analysis of this survey was conducted and summarized in a report released in April 2016, Assessing Student Experiences Survey Report (Bruch et al. 2016). Drawing on the findings from the Report, three focus areas have been identified for the District: teacher and mentor relationships; inclusive community; and disciplinary environment.

This focus area brief concentrates on inclusive school environment and community. Briefs have also been prepared for teacher and mentor relationship and disciplinary environment. Each brief answers the following questions:

1) Why is this particular aspect of student experience important?
2) What is the extent of the problem in regard to this aspect of student experience in the ICCSD?
3) What are the strategies for intervening that have been shown in the education research literature to be effective?
4) What are the evidence-based recommendations that can inform the ICCSD decision-making process?

Importance of Inclusive School Community

What is school climate and why does it matter to an inclusive school community?

According to The National School Climate Council, school climate is "the cumulative reflection of staff and student experiences representing their respective goals, values, relationships, and the overall institutional environment of the school" (2007). Staff and student experiences of the school climate are shaped by safety of the school, teaching and learning practices, and relationships among individuals in the school and surrounding community, and the structural environment itself (Cohen et al. 2009). While there are many components that comprise each school's individual climate, this brief will primarily focus on issues related to the perception of inclusivity, the negative experiences that inhibit inclusivity and the disproportionate effects that not having an inclusive school climate can have on specific student groups. Sustaining a positive, inclusive school climate is paramount to a school's overall ability to provide a successful environment for students. Research demonstrates that positive school climate is predictive of a multitude of benefits including increasing student academic achievement, reducing violence, promoting student physical and mental health, and teacher retention (Cohen et al. 2009).

What constitutes an inclusive school community?

Inclusivity serves as a focal point to our discussion as research has often shown that it is integral to the creation of a school environment beneficial for all students' academic progress (Cohen et al. 2009). In context with childhood development, research has repeatedly shown associations between a students' perceptions of connectedness and their academic motivations (Frenzel, Pekrun, and Goetz 2007; Hattie 2009), as well as academic achievements and mental health (Waters, Cross, and Runions 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) define school connectedness as "the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals". School connectedness is often conceptualized as the outcome of the school "ecology", or the organizational and interpersonal characteristics of a school that influence a student's ability to feel connected by encouraging autonomy, competence and relatedness (Waters, Cross, and Runions 2009). Consideration of these developments alludes to fact that an inclusive school community is pivotally important to an environment conducive for all students to learn in, given that it is able to be substantially influenced by teachers and student alike.

How does an inclusive school community affect students?

A major obstacle in creating inclusive school climates is the occurrence of negative experiences, such as the prevalence of hurtful comments. Along with affecting student motivation and sense of

belonging, the accumulation of negative interactions at school influences student attention, behavior, and health. Recent studies indicate that racially targeted and stereotype-based comments in schools hinder achievement of students of color, particularly females, while controlling for other variables, such as socioeconomic status (Davis and Welcher 2013).

A literature review conducted by Thapa et al. (2013) on studies related to the improvement of school climate cites numerous works that propose findings indicating that a student's level of connectedness to his or her school environment is connected to health and academic outcomes (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum, 2002; Resnick et al. 1997; Whitlock 2006), violence prevention (Astor, Benbensity and Estrada 2009; Kracher 2002a, 2002b; Skiba et al. 2004), student satisfaction and other conduct problems (Loukas, Suzuki, and Horton 2006). Quality of school climate is directly associated with interpersonal relationships among individuals at the school. For example, the work of Kuperminic et al. (2001) and Payton et al. (2008) have observed that increased levels of inclusivity and positive school climate affect middle school students' ability to effectively navigate the effects of bullying/criticism, as well as overall mental health. Additionally, Frenzel and colleagues (2007) found that emotional reactions amongst students in the same classroom are deeply connected to a shared perception of their teacher.

Do students experience school climates differently?

The extent to which students feel as if they belong to a particular school environment often varies within a school rather than across schools. This means the sense of belonging is often influenced by individual and interactional factors that students experience differently within schools (Ma 2003). Social boundaries within schools can mirror social group differences outside of school and can influence the likelihood that numerically underrepresented and/or students from more marginalized backgrounds to feel as if they are included in the school community (Carter 2006). Therefore, the extent to which a student perceives inclusion and connection in their school is largely impacted by their social identities.

Evidence from social psychological research point to the fact that historically under-represented ethnic and racial groups are more likely to experience difficulty in their social belonging, what experts Walton and Cohen call "belonging uncertainty" (2007). As such, perception of racial climate is particularly important, as it relates to school environment and inclusivity. Supporting this assertion is the work of Mattison and Aber (2007), who observed that across groups of both White and Black students there is an association between positive perception of school racial climate and academic achievement, as well as a decline in discipline problems. However, unfortunately researchers have found that African American, poor, and female students are more likely to perceive a negative racial climate in their school (Watkins & Aber 2009; Schneider & Duran 2010).

School Climate in the ICCSD

Student School Climate Experiences Survey Results

Survey Measure	District Average	Race Disparity	Gender Disparity	Socioeconomic Disparity
Positive sense of Social Belonging in school	80%	White=83% **Black=71%** Latino=78%	Female=80% Male=80%	**Low=72%** Med=77% High=85%
Treated Unfairly	67%	**White=70%** Black=68% Latino=53%	Female=67% Male=67%	Low=68% **Med=70%** High=66%
Treated them as if they are not smart	64%	White=64% **Black=69%** Latino=64%	Female=63% **Male=65%**	**Low=70%** Med=68% High=59%
Treated them as if they are dishonest	53%	White=54% **Black=58%** Latino=50%	Female=46% **Male=60%**	**Low=57%** Med=55% High=51%
Acted afraid of them	39%	White=36% **Black=56%** Latino=33%	Female=46% **Male=43%**	**Low=47%** Med=43% High=35%
Acted better than them	82%	**White=84%** Black=56% Latino=33%	**Female=82%** Male=81%	Low=79% **Med=83%** High=82%
Criticized for the way they speak	53%	White=51% **Black=60%** Latino=56%	Female=50% **Male=56%**	**Low=64%** Med=53% High=50%

Note: Race disparity includes the three largest racial/ethnic categories represented in the survey sample (White, Black, and Latino). Race is measured as the student's self-reported racial identification. Socioeconomic status is measured as the highest level of student's parental education. Details on each survey measure are provided at the end of the brief. Light yellow highlighted cells indicate a 5-10% disparity between groups. Dark yellow highlighted cells indicate disparities greater than 10% between groups. Bold indicates the group with the worst value. When survey measure is a positive experience, this is the lowest number, when the survey measure is a negative experience, this is the highest number.

Key Findings

1) <u>Racial Disparities</u>: There are moderate or large racial differences for every one of the student school climate experiences.

2) <u>Socioeconomic Disparities</u>: Low socioeconomic status students have the worst school climate experiences with large and moderate disparities for five of the seven experiences.

3) <u>Gender Disparities</u>: Male students are more likely to report three of the negative school climate experiences: treated them as if they are dishonest, acted afraid of them, and criticized for the way they speak.

Intervention Strategies

For the purposes of this brief, evidence-based interventions that improve the school climate are separated into three groups: 1) school leadership training; 2) student-targeted social psychological interventions and programs that modify a student's sense of belonging or their self-concept; and 3) school-based programs that promote student attachment and engagement. The strategies described below represent interventions from each category that has substantial evidence to support its efficacy in improving student experiences of school. It should be noted that some programs mentioned are designed to modify a particular academic or behavioral outcome (i.e. academic achievement gaps) *through* the improvement of how a student experiences his/her school.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership Training

School leadership is a crucial component for achieving any type of education-related success. Inclusive school environments are no different, the role of school administrators is critical. School leaders play a key role in promoting and supporting a school environment that is welcoming, supportive, and equitable for all students; and recruiting and supporting culturally responsive teachers (Riehl 2000). However, research has found that many principals are unprepared to lead reform efforts that address diversity and disparities issues (Young, Madsen, and Young 2010). In a recent review of the literature on culturally responsive school leadership, Khalif, Gooden, and Davis (2016) identified four key behaviors or best practices:

- Critical self-awareness - an awareness of one's values, beliefs, and dispositions regarding the issues of diversity, equity, and disparities.
- Culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation – articulating a vision that supports the development and sustaining of culturally responsive teaching. (More on the role of teachers and culturally responsive education is in the Inclusive Classrooms section of this brief.)
- Culturally responsive and inclusive school environments – promoting and fostering a culturally-affirming, welcoming and supportive school context.
- Engaging students and parents in community contexts – engaging students, families, and communities and promoting school-community partnerships that create space for collective conversations and strategies to support all students.

These best practices have been examined in numerous studies of effective school leaders that identify and describe specific practice-based strategies for implementing them. The most common avenue for providing school leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to successfully implement these best practices has been through principal preparation programs and in-service professional trainings.

Social-Psychological Interventions

Social-psychological interventions that encourage student self-affirmation and sense of social belonging have shown to dramatically improve academic achievement, and reduce the achievement gap among underrepresented groups (Yeager and Walton, 2011). These interventions are effective because they begin with the acknowledgement that schools are social spaces. How students think of themselves and their school influence motivation and performance.

Most of these interventions operate by modifying a student's interpretation of themselves or of the school climate as a whole through brief writing exercises or workshops. Over time, the initial psychological state affirmed in the intervention becomes self-confirming or recursive, meaning that there are lasting benefits to altering the trajectory of how students conceive of their academic surroundings and their place in the environment (Cohen et al. 2009).

Such interventions offer a potential solution to improving student perception of school climate and their own self-concept while boosting achievement. The research mentioned is meant to serve as a general introduction to the efficacy of student social-psychological interventions. It should be noted that despite the interconnected processes, there is a distinction between modifying individual perceptions and mitigating negative characteristics of the entire school climate.

One way in which social-psychological interventions can work is through subtle attitudinal changes, wherein an activity or writing exercise creates self-generated messages. For example, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that providing a narrative to college students that social adversity is not static or due to individual or social deficits creates a sense of belonging. Students in the treatment group constructed self-generate messages that social adversity is a shared trait, and led students to understand that adversity on campus is not "an indictment of their belonging". This intervention significantly boosted academic performance and health outcomes for college students over a three year period, particularly for African American students, and effectively minimized the achievement gap (Walton and Cohen 2011). This "social belonging" intervention strategy has also recently been implemented in middle schools. In one recent experimental study in middle schools, the typical drop in perceptions of social belonging that occur when students transition to new schools did not occur for African American students who received the "treatment" of the social belonging intervention whereas African Americans in the control condition and did not receive the social belonging

intervention did (Cook et al. 2012).

Another method of targeting student belonging is through their self-conceptualization of intelligence, an effective strategy in this instance is the "growth mindset" approach. "Growth mindset" teaches students that intelligence is malleable and can grow over time through persistence and effort (Yeager et al. 2016). Offering such narratives to students can significantly improve GPA for lower-achieving students, but also provide students with a self-confirming message that they belong in school and are capable of doing the academic work. The growth mindset message is especially effective for the high school transition, and has been effectively scaled-up (Blackwell, Trzesniewski and Dweck 2007; Yeager et al. 2016).

There is substantial evidence to suggest that interventions targeting student self-affirmation (i.e. self-worth) or values-affirmation (i.e. positive sense of self) is effective in reducing achievement gaps and standardized test performance for stereotyped or underrepresented groups and potentially buffering them from negative school climates. Often these affirmation exercises do not directly influence non-threatened groups, such as White or Asian students, but do bolster achievement and self-concept for under-represented and stereotyped groups such as Black and Latino students (Borman, Grigg and Hanselman 2016; Shnabel et al. 2013). Evidence from a district-wide scale up of self-affirmation exercises shows them to be effective at reducing achievement gaps; however the effect sizes are smaller for district-wide implementation (Borman, Grigg and Hanselman 2016). Additionally, school composition can influence the efficacy of self-affirmation exercises, schools with more threatening environments for Black and Latino students (i.e. small proportion of the school population, large racial achievement gaps) are most impacted by the interventions (Hanselman et al. 2014; Protzko and Aronson 2016). Further, new evidence suggests that psychological interventions can have lasting impacts by altering the social environment, meaning students who did not participate in the intervention still benefit (Powers et al. 2016).

Promoting Attachment to School

Another method of improving the school climate is to offer school-based activities and programs that promote attachment and connection. Organized activities such as sports teams, academic and interest-based clubs, and school-wide events and activities that involve cooperation between students and with teachers and staff can promote prosocial behavior, engagement and connection (Mahoney et al. 2005). These activities are thought to increase student attachment and feeling of connection and belonging (Anderson-Butcher 2010), however, there is little rigorous evaluation of such impacts. Despite lack of systematic evaluation of particular programs, research does demonstrate that involvement in such activities does increase student engagement and instill a positive, connected school climate (CDC 2009; Vandell, Reisner and Pierce 2007). When designing school-based organized activities, it is important to remain aware that historically marginalized groups, such as Black and Latino students, are least likely to participate (Brown and Evans 2002). While organized activities have the capacity to promote a positive school climate, it is suggested to carefully consider the accessibility and interest of such activities for a diverse student population.

Recommendations

Drawing on the key findings from the Assessing Student Experiences Survey Report and the research evidence regarding the effective programs listed above, the following are general recommendations to guide the district in selecting and implementing programs and policies that can improve the overall school climate and students' sense of belonging.

- School leaders play a crucially important role in creating a supportive and inclusive school climate. Given that all schools in the District have disparities in several aspects of their school climates, the District may consider conducting an in-service training for school leaders to ensure that all building-level leaders have the tools and strategies they need to foster inclusive and equitable experiences for all students in their schools.

- Given the extent of racial and socioeconomic disparities in several aspects of school climate with students in the most marginalized groups reporting the highest levels of people acting afraid of them and treating them as if they are not smart, and the lowest levels of social belonging, the District may consider a social-psychological intervention that can improve marginalized students' academic resiliency and affirm their self-concept. This may be particularly appropriate in the schools that have higher levels of racial and socioeconomic

disparities in achievement and experience. In addition, many of the above mentioned social psychological interventions have strong research evidence of effectiveness and are relatively easy to implement.

- The District may consider strengthening the options and accessibility of school-based organized activities, including school-wide social functions. Given the disparities across social groups in their experience and perceptions of school climate, developing school-based organized activities that target relationship-building and contact across groups, both with students and teachers, can improve the overall school climate and student attachment to the school.

Inclusive Education in the ICCSD

Inclusive Education Experiences Survey Results

Survey Measure	District Average	Race Disparity	Gender Disparity	Socioeconomic Disparity
Feel valued in the classroom	70%	White=72% **Black=64%** Latino=68%	Female=70% Male=70%	**Low=62%** Med=65% High=77%
Material representation	63%	White=70% **Black=51%** Latino=56%	Female=65% **Male=62%**	**Low=49%** Med=64% High=69%
Content representation	60%	White=65% Black=56% **Latino=54%**	Female=60% Male=60%	**Low=52%** Med=59% High=63%
Class opportunities to talk about race	55%	White=56% **Black=50%** Latino=56%	**Female=54%** Male=55%	Low=53% Med=54% High=57%
Class opportunities to talk about gender	58%	White=59% **Black=54%** Latino=59%	**Female=57%** Male=58%	Low=57% **Med=54%** High=62%
Unable to share views in class due to own race	10%	White=5% **Black=24%** Latino=13%	Female=7% **Male=12%**	**Low=17%** Med=10% High=6%
Unable to share views in class due to own gender	8%	White=6% **Black=15%** Latino=8%	Female=6% **Male=10%**	**Low=11%** Med=9% High=6%
Heard hurtful comments about race from students	66%	White=64% **Black=70%** Latino=65%	**Female=70%** Male=61%	Low=68% Med=66% High=66%
Heard hurtful comments about race from teachers	24%	White=21% **Black=33%** Latino=28%	**Female=25%** Male=23%	**Low=32%** Med=26% High=21%

Note: Race disparity includes the three largest racial/ethnic categories represented in the survey sample (White, Black, and Latino). Race is measured as the student's self-reported racial identification. Socioeconomic status is measured as the highest level of student's parental education. Details on each survey measure are provided at the end of the brief. Light yellow highlighted cells indicate a 5-10% disparity between groups. Dark yellow highlighted cells indicate disparities greater than 10% between groups. Bold indicates the group with the worst value. When survey measure is a positive experience, this is the lowest number, when the survey measure is a negative experience, this is the highest number.

Key Findings

1) There are moderate or large racial disparities in every one of the inclusive education experiences with Black students having the least inclusive experiences.
2) There are large socioeconomic disparities in the majority of inclusive education experiences with low socioeconomic status students having the least inclusive experiences.

Intervention Strategies

There are ample models to promote an inclusive school environment available to schools. This section of the brief will provide a focused overview of best practices and recommendations that can improve experiences of inclusivity and equity in schools and classrooms.

Multicultural Education and Cultural Competence

There are many definitions of multicultural education. However, definitions typically include not only having a curriculum that is diverse in perspectives and issues, but also teaching practices and pedagogy related to equity issues, inter-group relations, and effective supporting achievement for all students. Recent research has found that practicing culturally responsive instruction improves student achievement and positively influences overall school culture (Aronson and Laughter 2016). These positive effects of culturally responsive instruction practices derive from the fact that for students to learn, they need to feel safe, appreciated, and respected.

There is a strong consensus among educators that multicultural education is a core component of teaching and learning in K-12 education today. What is less agreed upon is what are effective practices that achieve the goals of multicultural education (Banks 2006).

One piece of multicultural education is cultural competence which is defined as:

> Put most simply, it is the ability to successfully teach students who come from different cultures other than your own. It entails mastering certain personal and interpersonal awarenesses and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (Diller and Moule 2005).

In a recent Delphi study (a research technique that is used to generate consensus among experts), five core practices were agreed upon as best practices (Sprott 2014):

- Educators will demonstrate self-awareness.
- Educators will exhibit cross-cultural skills.
- Educators will recognize the full potential of each student and provide he challenges necessary for them to achieve that potential.
- Educators will demonstrate cross-cultural knowledge.
- Educators will illustrate valuing diversity.

While there is relative consensus on these core practices, there is limited research evidence of the effectiveness of these practices, or of other approaches to multicultural education. Below are a few of the evidence-based approaches that have been found to be effective.

One evidence-based strategy for addressing issues related to racial prejudice are role playing and anti-racist teaching (Dessel 2010). These techniques are found to reduce student's negative beliefs about other racial groups and improve their cross-cultural understanding (McGregor 1993).

Cooperative learning strategies have also been found to be effective at improving relationships between students and teachers of different racial backgrounds, and improve the educational outcomes of students (Slavin and Cooper 1999). One particular version of this is the Jigsaw Classroom which is a cooperative learning technique that aims to reduce racial conflict among school children, promote better learning, improve student motivation, and increase enjoyment of the learning experience (Aronson 2010).

Another strategy that several districts have adopted to address issues related to school climate and relationships among students and teachers is character development. Character development programs can be either comprehensive programs that aim to affect the entire school community, or modular programs that are designed to be used in specific classrooms or events. The U.S. Department of Education defines character and character education as follows:

> Character in this context refers to the moral and ethical qualities of persons as well as the demonstration of those qualities in their emotional responses, reasoning, and behavior. Character is associated with such virtues as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Character education programs are activities and experiences organized by a provider for the purpose of fostering positive character development (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

One of the only programs that has met the highest standard of evidence of effectiveness as established by the What Works Clearinghouse, is the Caring School Community (CSC) program. This program is

a schoolwide intervention that is designed to strengthen students' connectedness to school, promote core values, and increase prosocial behavior. Caring School Community programs have been found to increase students' sense of school community, academic motivation, and academic achievement (Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson 2004).

Recommendations

Drawing on the key findings from the Assessing Student Experiences Survey Report and the research evidence regarding the effective programs listed above, the following are general recommendations to guide the district in improving the inclusivity of curriculum and classroom practices.

- There are quite extensive racial and socio-economic disparities across the majority of school climate experiences. This is strong evidence that the District needs to proactively intervene to improve the overall school climate for students. Improving the school climate experiences of students in the District will help to achieve the mission of the District to "ensure all students become responsible, independent learners capable of making informed decisions in a democratic society as well as in the dynamic global community."

  Given the widespread extent of disparities in student experiences of school climate, it is recommended that the District consider adopting one of the more holistic, school-wide strategies for improving school climate.

- In terms of inclusive education experiences, there are pervasive racial and socioeconomic status disparities across almost every measure – from feeling unable to share their views and hearing hurtful comments about race, to not having material or content representation. These types of disparities point to the importance of having a strong District commitment to multicultural education and having staff and teachers well-prepared to address the challenges of teaching an increasingly diverse student population.

Details on Survey Measures

Demographic Measures

Race and Gender are self-reported indicators of the student's racial and gender identification.

Student's socioeconomic status is measured by parents' highest level of education, which has been shown to be the most reliable indicator of socioeconomic status when asked of adolescents. Parents with a high school diploma or less are coded as "Low SES", those with a college degree as "Medium SES", and those with post-college degree as "High SES".

School Climate

Survey measures regarding school climate are discussed in the full Survey Report within the "Negative Experiences at School" (p.31-33) and "Social Belonging" (p. 35-37) sections. Full Survey Report is available here: http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/iccsd_student_experience_onlineversion.pdf

Survey questions regarding negative experiences were responded to in accordance with a 5-point frequency scale ranging from "Never" to Always".

Students were asked to report their experience regarding the frequency at which the following situations occur:

"How often have people at your school criticized the way you speak?"

"How often have people at your school acted as if they think you are not smart?"

"How often have people at your school acted as if they are afraid of you?"

"How often have people at your school acted as if they think you are dishonest?"

"How often have people at your school acted as if they are better than you are?"

"How often have you been treated unfairly at your school?"

"How often have you heard hurtful comments about race from students?"

"How often have you heard hurtful comments about race from teachers?"

Positive sense of social belonging is a combined measure of survey items asking students their agreement with two statements, "I feel like an outsider in my school" and "I feel like I belong in my school." The first item was reverse-coded so that agreement indicates a positive statement.

Inclusive Classrooms

Survey measures regarding inclusive education are discussed in the full Survey Report within the "Social Belonging" (p.35-37) and "Inclusive Classrooms" (p.49-51) sections. Full Survey Report is available here: http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/iccsd_student_experience_onlineversion.pdf

Feel valued in the classroom is a combined measure of survey items asking students their agreement with two statements, "I see myself as a valuable member of the classroom" and "I feel that my contributions are valued in the classroom."

Material Representation is a combined measure of survey items asking students about their agreement with two statements: "People who look like me are included in class materials" and "People who have the same background as me are included in class materials".

Content Representation is a combined measure of survey items asking students about their agreement with two statements: "I learn about achievements of people who look like me" and "I learn about achievements of people who have the same background as me".

Race Discussion is a survey item measured by asking students about their agreement with the following statement: "There are opportunities in class to talk about race".

Gender Discussion is a survey item measured by asking students about their agreement with the

following statement: "There are opportunities in class to talk about gender".

Unable to Share Views: Race is a survey item measured by asking students about their agreement with the following statement: "I feel unable to share my views in class because of my race".

Unable to Share Views: Gender is a survey item measured by asking students about their agreement with the following statement:" I feel unable to share my views in class because of my gender".

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