

## Climate and Culture

*Boards need to pay more attention to attitudes of students and staff*

By Del Stover

Urban school leaders who want real reform in low-performing schools must look beyond such obvious steps as strengthening the curriculum, training staff, tutoring, and implementing new instructional strategies. The key to successful schools also lies in improving the attitudes and beliefs of students, teachers, and administrators.

Put another way: School boards need to pay a lot more attention to the state of the climate and culture in their schools.

That's the contention of researchers who've spent years studying the subtle interpersonal dynamics that take place among students and educators. Many are convinced that a closer look at climate and culture can help urban boards determine why one school is academically successful and—more important—why another is performing poorly and consistently failing to improve.

A school's climate "is probably the best predictor of whether a school will have high achievement"—more so than the socioeconomic status of students or the school's past levels of achievement, claims Clete Bulach, associate professor emeritus of educational leadership at the University

of West Georgia and a longtime researcher in the field.

To some degree, school board members can accept this claim. After all, a school

where students are enthusiastic about learning should do better than one where students are bored or have low expectations. And a school where teachers feel empowered to tackle instructional challenges should fare better than a school where the staff is demoralized and lacks enthusiasm.

Researchers such as Bulach contend that school boards consistently overlook

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Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa meets with students and parents after a fight between 20 Latino and African-American students at Jefferson High School in May.

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NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 107 member school boards and the almost 9 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for more than three decades.

#### About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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## Districts make tough cuts due to drops in enrollment and state funding



A kindergarten student holds up a sign protesting the Kansas City, Mo., board's plan to consolidate several schools in the district.

Declining enrollments and shrinking budgets are forcing a number of urban school districts to make hard and unpopular decisions to “downsize” operations.

One of the hardest-hit school systems is Detroit, which has seen enrollment drop by 35,000 students since 1996. That decline is estimated to cost the district nearly \$250 million a year in lost state funding.

To deal with a \$200 million budget shortfall—and anticipated deficits in the future—school officials developed a deficit-reduction plan that calls for 33 school closures and up to 2,800 layoffs this year.

But other urban school systems—Baltimore; Buffalo, N.Y.; Cleveland; Minneapolis; Oakland, Calif.; St. Louis; and Seattle; to name a few—also are confronting the challenges of lost enrollment and dwindling state aid.

In Cincinnati, the school board agreed to consolidate or close six schools next year and eliminate 543 teaching positions and 137 central office staff positions.

The cuts are a response to a 17-percent drop in enrollment—about 7,800 students—over the past five years. School

officials cut \$41 million—or 9 percent—from the budget.

“We as a district have been working exceedingly hard over the last six months or so on a fiscal responsibility plan that really addresses the declining enrollment and staffing,” says district spokesperson Janet Walsh. “We’re taking difficult steps to bring fiscal responsibility to the district.”

One of the most unpopular decisions as school districts downsize is the closing of schools. This spring, Seattle school officials, facing huge budget problems exacerbated by a small but gradual decline in enrollment, proposed the closure of 10 schools. Strong public opposition prompted school officials to shelve the plan and reexamine their options.

In Des Moines, school officials are defending school closures at the same time the district is midway through a 10-year plan to renovate old schools and build new ones. Declining enrollment is leaving the district with excess classroom space.

Although many factors are forcing downsizing, some school officials note that the proliferation of charter schools is making itself felt.

In Detroit, charter schools enroll an estimated 33,000 city students, each taking at least \$7,180 in state funding from the district. Oakland, Calif., has lost almost 10,000 students in the past five years; at least 2,000 are known to have switched to charter schools.

In Cincinnati, where charter school enrollment has grown by 4,600 over the past five years, the school district is fighting back with a grassroots public awareness campaign that uses teachers, parents, and other public school supporters to share with families the advantages in resources and academic opportunities available in the public schools.

In the meantime, Walsh says, city officials continue to work hard to protect classroom learning from the demographic and financial challenges facing the district.

“It’s a tremendous challenge for the schools in the district to deal with declining budgets,” she says. “We’re committed to providing the best-quality academics for our students, but as resources decline, that becomes increasingly challenging.” ■

## Payzant talks of politics, need for common vision

On his first day on the job as a Boston teacher in 1963, Thomas W. Payzant was sent to a union meeting where everyone was assigned to a voting precinct to help with the union's political efforts.

"I learned very quickly that education is not immune from politics," he says.

Four decades later, with 10 years of service as Boston's superintendent, Payzant shared his views about education and politics with urban school leaders at the closing address of CUBE's Issues Seminar in Boston, June 24-26.

The politics of education have undergone a radical change since the arrival of standards-based reforms, he said, because "once you have standards, you are in direct conflict with and challenging the bell-shaped curve."

Standards have raised awareness about equity issues and the achievement gap, and with the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act, there is more transparen-



Thomas Payzant, superintendent of Boston Public Schools, meets with students during the 2004-05 school year. Payzant, whose district won the first CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence in 2004, shared his views about education and politics at the CUBE Issues Seminar in Boston.

cy about the work of public schools, their successes, and their failures, Payzant said.

All of this invites political scrutiny, he said, but there is another side to the equation: "When you think about that piece, at the center of so much of what we're

trying to address, that wouldn't have happened without political forces."

Given his success working under an appointed school board, Payzant often is asked about the pros and cons of various governance models. Payzant, who has been superintendent in four other districts and served as an assistant secretary of education under President Clinton, told urban leaders that he has worked well with both elected and appointed school boards.

Arguments for and against each governance model really must take into context the situation within an urban school system, he says. Much depends on whether politics is interfering with the school board's effectiveness.

What's important, Payzant said, is to have "the particular governance structure that will work for kids, that will help us reach the goal of every child graduating with a high school diploma."

For example, he says, he would never have come to Boston to work under the elected school committees that ran the city schools from the 1970s through the early 1990s.

"It was not about kids," he says. "Committee meetings were about a circus, about political agendas. It was a stepping-stone to move to the city council. I'm generalizing. There were good people, good

### CUBE ANNUAL MEETING TO BE HELD IN LAS VEGAS

**Strong leaders can solve complex problems—that's the message that urban school board members will hear repeated at the 37th Annual CUBE Conference in Las Vegas, Sept. 29 to Oct. 2.**

**At this conference, urban school leaders will have the opportunity to network with expert keynote speakers in the field of urban education and learn cutting-edge strategies and techniques for improving their skills as policy-makers.**

**Among the topics to be explored in seminars and workshops:**

- Improving the condition of your schools to foster a healthy learning environment;
- Urban boards, civility, and responsible discourse;
- Districtwide improvement for high-poverty school districts;

- CUBE School Climate Survey research project results;
- Conversation on Race briefing;
- Urban school districts and the textbook adoption challenge;
- Alternative teacher pay plans and urban school achievement; and
- Annual legislative update.

**During the conference, urban school leaders also will have an opportunity to participate in meetings of CUBE's racial isolation and training and programming task forces, a site visit to Clark County public schools, an evening networking reception, and the CUBE Annual Banquet and presentation of the 2005 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.**

**Information on the CUBE Annual Conference is available on the CUBE website: [www.nsba.org/cube](http://www.nsba.org/cube).**

committee members. But the structure wasn't working."

In contrast, Payzant worked with a successful elected school board during his years in San Diego. Turnover on the board was gradual, ensuring "there was a core group that had committed to the work and mission."

To some extent, Payzant told urban leaders, the success of any governance structure depends on relationships—among board members, with community groups, and with the superintendent.

Learning to work with the superintendent is key to any school board's success, he said. "It comes down to having a very clear understanding [about] the rules of communications and engagement."

## Reform advocates look more closely at districts

**A**fter years of focusing their efforts at the school level, reform advocates are coming to realize that long-lasting improvements require a larger system—such as the school district—to support reforms and ensure they take root.

That was the message Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, shared with urban school leaders at CUBE's Issues Seminar.

Greater interest in district-level reform is a shift from the past, when the focus of reform was on school-based initiatives or legislative fiats that often downplayed or ignored the role of school districts, he said.

The thinking has changed for many reasons, but one is that reform advocates have seen funds invested in training and new instructional approaches at the school level—only to watch reform falter with staff turnover, Simmons said.

"You look at a good program five years later, and that good program has become a bad program, because we have systems that undermine good practices," he said.

For some reform advocates, it's clear that a larger system is required to sustain reform as principals and teachers leave schools. New staff must be trained, and schools held accountable for maintaining programs implemented in the past.

What's more, Simmons says, successful school reform will remain isolated and limited unless some system is in place to push reforms at many schools at the same time.

"I think we now understand at the national and local level is that to meet these goals—to get all children to meet proficient levels of performance—we have to deal with issues of scale," he said. "It's not demonstration projects, but how do we create systems that take reform to [a larger] scale?"

Given the interest in turning over control of school districts to mayors or state officials, school board members need to take heed of the need to take action now, he said.

"You have to prove to your public that your system can do [the job], or it will create and support another," he said.

A new system—a collaboration of public agencies and private organizations—might well be the model for the future, he said.

"I think we're going to evolve to a mixed system, with multiple partnerships that combine resources to take reform to scale," he said. "None of us alone can be successful. None of us has the resources. None of us has the expertise."

## Urban leaders must face market pressures

**B**lindly opposing school choice only plays into the hands of those seeking to privatize American education, says Jeff Henig, professor of political science and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Speaking at the CUBE Issues Seminar, Henig told urban leaders that the average citizen doesn't look at the issue of choice as a stark conflict between a public education system that's equitable and a privatized system that caters to an elite.

Some parents, including minorities and those living in poverty, see school choice as a viable strategy to help their children escape poor-performing schools. Other citizens agree—rightly or wrongly—with arguments that competition will pressure public education to improve.

So arguments that vouchers and charter schools threaten public education will not win the public over, Henig said. Indeed, such attacks could lead the public to view educators as obstacles to reform—and undermine the credibility of valid concerns about privatization and school choice.

"Maintaining strong, democratically responsible school systems, in my judgment, should not lead to knee-jerk reac-

## KEYS TO EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

The school district is the obvious system to take on the task of reforming public schools, according to Warren Simmons, executive director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. But success will depend on districts being effective in the following ways:

- Providing schools, students, and teachers with needed supports and timely interventions. Resources must be allocated according to need, and high expectations must be maintained.
- Ensuring that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions. To do that, the district must distribute resources equitably and maintain constant standards for achievement.
- Making decisions and holding people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of performance and practices.

tions to school choice in all of its manifestations," he said. "Pragmatic and selective choice may be consistent with public education and may strengthen public institutions."

For example, choice programs within public school systems have proven popular with parents in many communities, Henig said. State laws that allow a slow and deliberate expansion of charter schools, with proper regulation and accountability, also are no threat.

So supporters of public education need to pick their battles, he said. The goal should be to argue a stance that clearly will improve student academic success, such as insisting that a charter school law include provisions for testing students or releasing academic performance.

School board members really have no viable options available to them. The nation is moving toward more school choice, whether school officials like it or not. Although voucher programs remain limited, 3,400 charter schools serve 1 million students, and as many as 2 million children are home-schooled.

Add in public school choice, he said, and 15 percent of America's school-age children are already taking advantage of some choice option.

Powerful forces will continue to support this trend, Henig said. The argument for freeing schools from government regulations and increasing competition hits a

positive chord with many citizens. And a new industry, with growing political clout, is growing around the privatization and choice movements.

That doesn't mean, however, that public education is facing extinction. The research makes clear that vouchers and charter schools are no panacea, and public schools hold their own in educating students.

What's more, polls show that the public remains committed to the institution of public education—and to schools where children of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds learn to become good citizens.

So, although school choice and privatization are not going to go away, the public will listen to reasoned arguments by public educators about how to explore these educational options in a thoughtful manner. If, that is, educators make thoughtful arguments.

"This selective and pragmatic openness to choice can help defenders of the ideals of public education reclaim the high ground," he said, "and avoid the political trap of defending a failed status quo."

## Investment in preschool pays off for society

For every dollar spent on preschool programs, society gets its money back and more—in terms of children who grow up to attend college, get better-paying jobs, pay more taxes, and stay off welfare and out of jail.

That was the message of Donna Desrochers, vice president and director of education studies for the Committee for Economic Development, a nonpartisan organization of 250 business and education leaders.

Various studies have tried to determine the economic benefits of preschool programs, she said. Some studies have suggested a return as low as \$2 for every dollar invested in preschool, while others that look at the savings of reduced crime rates and the long-term benefits to the children themselves put the return as high as \$17 per dollar invested.

Putting the economics aside, it is very clear that children—particularly disadvantaged children—gain greatly from preschool, Desrochers said. Some of the strongest evidence of that comes from a study of the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Mich., where researchers have followed

the lives of students since 1962.

This study, Desrochers said, found that children who attended Perry School were more likely to graduate from high school than a control group of children who did not receive preschool care and more than twice as likely to attend college and earn a higher salary once employed.

The Perry children also were less likely to be held back a grade, less likely to be identified for special education services, and less likely to be arrested as a juvenile.

The benefits of preschool have not been overlooked by policymakers, Desrochers told urban leaders. Only 7 percent of 4-year-olds attended preschool in 1965; today the figure is nearly 69 percent. And there is political pressure to expand preschool services even more.

Part of the debate today is whether to expand services universally and fund preschool for all, she said. Enrollment data suggests that could have advantages: Children from middle-income families are no more likely, in fact, to attend preschool than disadvantaged children.

"School readiness is not just a problem for the poor," she said. "The aggregate benefits may be greater for universal programs."

## Mobility undermines investment in schools

The high rate of student mobility in urban school systems is undermining the impact of additional funding being invested to boost student achievement.

So observed John A. Powell, executive director of the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. Powell, who does not capitalize his name, spoke at length on a variety of topics in an informal session with the CUBE Steering Committee and task force leaders before the start of the Issues Seminar.

More money translates into higher test scores when it is strategically invested—mostly in more qualified teachers, he said.

### COMER: FOCUS ON THE WHOLE CHILD IS KEY TO SUCCESS

Three months have passed since the nation first saw news footage of the out-of-control 5-year-old girl who was removed from a St. Petersburg, Fla., elementary school in handcuffs.

But noted education researcher James Comer says he can't help thinking the situation could have been handled differently if teachers and administrators had been better prepared to work with the troubled child.

Such preparation is all the more necessary in urban schools, Comer told urban school leaders at the Issues Seminar. Too many children from disadvantaged homes enter school unprepared developmentally to handle the school environment, and the harm to children can be significant if school personnel mishandle a child "in crisis."

"When we're not able to get along with children with poor control of their emotions, when we don't know how to work things out we see them as bad and as dumb, and we crush them," he said. "We control them rather than teach them how to manage themselves."

Comer, who serves as associate dean at Yale University's School of Medicine, told board members that an



James Comer

investment in more staff training would make a difference.

"Every time a child is helped by those around him or her to deal with a crisis, the child grows," he said. "The child gains confidence in handling his or her environment. So helping administrators and teachers learn how to help children is investing in that. It will go a long way to address many problems."

But for urban schools, the advantages of better teachers is undermined when students aren't in those classes long enough to be taught.

It's an intractable problem. In some urban areas, only 15 percent of students stay in the same school for three years in a row, Powell said. As a result, "you're testing kids that someone else educated."

High mobility rates also hamper the learning of all children, because teachers must spend classroom time reviewing old material to help newcomers catch up with the rest of the class, he said.

During this discussion, some participants talked about how their school systems were working to ease the damage done by high student mobility. Some school systems, for example, provide free transportation within the district for students who change schools in mid-school year. This allows students to stay at their old schools rather than switch.

In East Baton Rouge Parish (La.) School System, a common curriculum and schedule of weekly lessons across the district means that, when students switch schools, they will find their new classes studying the same lessons using the same textbook. This strategy greatly reduces the disruption of student transfers within the district.

## Professor: Teacher hiring practices fall short

Nearly half of teachers working in schools today are "burnouts, dropouts, and failures," says Martin Haberman, professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

This blunt assessment was shared with urban school leaders at the CUBE Issues Seminar.

Haberman expressed dissatisfaction with the recruitment and hiring practices in many school districts. The nation's schools spend \$2.6 billion annually selecting teachers, he says, yet 45 percent of new teachers walk away from the profession in a few years, move to more affluent and less-demanding schools, or turn into "burned out" employees who will serve students poorly.

This reality helps explain why so many urban schools have a tough time raising student achievement, he said.

"You can adopt any policy you want," Haberman said. "You can pay for any

## CELEBRATING IMPROVEMENT



Senior class girls celebrate during "Move Up Day" ceremonies in June at the Philadelphia High School for Girls. During the CUBE Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, a session will focus on districtwide improvement for high-poverty school districts such as Philadelphia.

reading program you want. You can pay for any math program you want. You can buy anything you want. It can be undermined and sabotaged" by these teachers.

After 46 years of teacher observations, Haberman said, he's not convinced these teachers can ever be put to good use by a school district. School boards can encourage professional development, mentoring, observing the best practices of good teachers, and earning more college credit, but "none of that is going to have any impact at all."

To understand why so many newly hired teachers fall short of the mark, Haberman pointed to flaws in the screening and hiring process used by many school systems. For example, human resources officials ask some of the most foolish questions when interviewing job applicants. Example: Why do you want to be a teacher?

The answer is obvious: "Because I love children," he said. But what does that really tell you about whether the applicant can succeed in an urban classroom? And, he added, if that's why a teacher wants to work in a classroom, they're setting themselves up for disillusionment. Kids aren't always lovable.

School boards need to insist that the screening and interview process be made a bit tougher—and more thorough in uncovering applicants' true beliefs. For

example, a better question to ask job applicants is: "Why are some kids successful in school?"

If an applicant attributes success to a child's natural abilities, then you're looking at a teacher who is more likely to believe there is little he or she can do to boost student achievement, Haberman said. If an applicant attributes academic success to a student's efforts, however, you've found a teacher who believes in the importance of encouraging and motivating students.

Any screening process should involve looking for teachers who view education as a mission—and a matter of life and death for the kids, he said. The best prospects are applicants who do not accept failure easily. They do not look negatively at children who pose problems in the classroom but they expect problems as part of the learning process.

What Haberman did not offer urban school leaders was a solution to the nation's shortage of highly qualified teachers—nor did he suggest how urban schools could compete for talent with more affluent suburban districts.

But he did suggest that school boards favor older, more mature applicants. "If you hire people under age 25, one in 10 will be successful—if there are 10 who say they want to work with children in poverty." His advice, he says, is to hire people who are "more mature, over 30." ■

## CLIMATE

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this simple truth when seeking to improve poor-performing schools. They invest heavily in staff development, tutoring programs, or new instructional initiatives—yet make little or no effort to ensure that conditions within a school are receptive to these reform efforts.

“You can implement a good improvement plan and knowledgeable, data-driven decision making, but if the [staff] doesn’t believe that things can be improved, it’s not going to implement things with the same depth or energy or commitment,” says Kent D. Peterson, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and coauthor of *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership*.

What’s true for staff is no less true for students, says Brian Perkins, chair of the CUBE Steering Committee. As a researcher studying school climate, he says urban leaders must be cognizant of the distractions from learning that stem from negative student perceptions about school safety, teachers, and the learning process.

That’s why CUBE is working on a school climate survey of 50,000 students in urban schools nationwide. According to Perkins, the study’s author and a member of the New Haven, Conn., school board, the findings should provide policymakers with their clearest picture yet of the experiences, attitudes, and nonacademic development of students in urban schools.

“We don’t have a full picture of what’s going on in the nation’s urban schools,” Perkins says. “We have a range of [tests] we use to assess students to determine where the schools are in an academic space, but we don’t assess their psychological well-being—their social health—in a comprehensive way.”

### Academic impact

How important is it to assess these less-tangible aspects of the school experience? How much do a school’s climate and culture affect academic performance?

Given the many factors that affect academic achievement, it’s difficult to quantify, but decades of studies make it clear a correlation exists. Take, for example, a case study cited in Peterson’s book, coauthored with University of Southern California professor Terrence E. Deal.

The study, based on research in 1995, compared two schools serving minority student populations of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. One school had a 60-percent dropout rate and student grades

that were largely in the D and F range. At the other school, students scored in the top quartile in math and were first in the district in language arts.

Why the contrast? According to the study, Peterson and Deal note, the only discernable difference was that the poor-

performing school had terrible teacher morale. The higher-performing school had a learning environment of passion and commitment and a “positive, focused culture.”

In the most basic sense, say researchers, the act of learning is a very human

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE SURVEY RESULTS

Urban school leaders should look upon the upcoming results of the CUBE school climate survey as a positive public relations opportunity.

So advised Glenn Cook, NSBA’s staff liaison to the CUBE Communications Task Force and a former school public relations officer, in an Issues Seminar workshop preparing urban leaders for the survey’s release later this year.

Some board members might worry that the survey results will highlight weaknesses in their districts—or in urban schools in general. But Cook says the survey also underscores that urban policymakers are proactive in meeting student needs.

“If something is bad news, it’s often a reflection of what’s going on in society, not necessarily what’s happening in a school’s classrooms,” he says. “How openly you address that will go a long way to solving the problems that arise.”

In talking to the media—and the community—the focus should be on the positive, Cook says. Highlight the successes shown in the data. If problems are revealed, talk about possible solutions and the school district’s response.

But stick to the facts, Cook says. Don’t guess. Don’t give opinions without knowing the facts. Don’t lose credibility by trying to paper over problems. Stay on message: Here’s what the data shows, and here’s how the school board intends to respond.

Cook reminded board members that the media—and the community—will turn to teachers, civic leaders, and other key groups for help in interpreting the survey results. So he advised sharing the findings, what they mean, and the school board’s response with these individuals and organizations at the earliest opportunity.

The survey results that are most likely to draw interest and controversy will be students’ responses to state-

ments that examine student attitudes about race, says CUBE Chair Brian Perkins, who, as the study’s author, also spoke at the workshop.

In New Orleans, a handful of parents took issue this spring with this part of the survey, he says. The resulting media coverage offers a case study in how to respond to questions about the results.

When he received an inquiry from the New Orleans media, Perkins says, he did not return the telephone call immediately. Instead, he did his homework. He called district officials to get the facts, discovered that concerns had been raised by only a few parents, and was offered some advice on how to work with the reporter.

Only when he was prepared did Perkins call back. During the interview, he says, he was careful not to speculate in response to the reporter’s questions. For example, when asked to respond to parents’ complaints that race wasn’t a fit subject to discuss at school, he avoided any comment that could be construed as critical.

Instead, he says, he focused on facts, such as research that indicates that students already have opinions about race and are dealing with racial issues at school.

The message is simple, he says. “We are trying to find out what our children’s experience is in school. Are our children being bullied? Are our children bringing guns and weapons to school? How do they feel about teachers? Do they feel cared about? That’s the kind of thing we want to know. It helps us better serve our children.”

If possible, urban boards will take a look at the preliminary results and pick one or two issues to tackle, Perkins says. Then you can go to the media and say, “We’ve got good news. We did this survey. We want to tell our story about kids and what we’re doing. This is our plan.”



Police direct students away from campus at the end of classes at Los Angeles' Jefferson High School in late May. The school was plagued throughout 2004-05 with fighting between Latino and African-American students. Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa met with teachers, then participated in a "Days of Dialogue" session with students and crisis counselors in an effort to improve the climate at the school.

endeavor—one that is undermined if students are distracted by bullies, teachers fail to challenge students, or struggling students are ignored and forgotten.

Research conducted by Perkins offers an example of this subtle interplay and its effects. In one district, he discovered that some students had given up on school. After watching drive-by shootings, drug overdoses, domestic violence, and deaths due to AIDS and cancer, these students didn't expect to live past age 25.

"That has great implications for achievement motivation," he says. "You have 14 or 17 year olds who would say, 'Why bother? Why do I need to learn algebra?'"

Still, Perkins reminds board members, academic performance is not the only measure of a school's success. Also important is whether students feel safe, believe adults care about them, and develop values of respect and citizenship.

All of this emphasizes the importance of taking a hard look at the data collected in the CUBE survey, he says. "It is providing a snapshot of what's going on in the districts. It allows school boards to identify and address those issues" that impact student learning.

Of course, data is useful only if school

boards are serious about responding to the problems identified. Based on his observations over the years, Bulach is somewhat skeptical about the long-term commitment of school officials to stay on top of the measures they might implement.

"What I see is spitting in the wind," he says. "Everyone goes through the motions. 'Yeah,' they say, 'we evaluate our school climate. We do a school improvement plan.' But does it ever improve? Many times it does not."

### Climate vs. culture

Some educators use the terms "climate" and "culture" interchangeably, but researchers in the field say there is an important difference between the two. How students and staff members feel about their school is climate. Why they feel the way they do is determined by culture—by the values and behavior of those in the school.

For example, an unresolved problem with bullies can have a detrimental effect on a school's climate, experts say. Children are scared. But why does the bullying exist? Are children not being taught to respect one another? Are teachers unresponsive to complaints, thus emboldening bullies and discouraging vic-

tims from speaking up?

Asking such questions—digging deeper into attitudes and behavior (the culture)—may be the only way to achieve real change, Perkins says. He recalls one school where, after conducting a climate survey, he found that 70 percent of students reported a lack of respect for teachers, and 90 percent of teachers reported that they didn't feel respected.

The findings convinced the principal and staff to do some soul searching—and seek changes in the culture that had prompted such disrespect. They conducted focus groups with students, boosted teacher training, brought in speakers to talk to students, and established a conflict mediation program to help students and teachers deal with problems in a less-confrontational way.

Over the next few years, these efforts to change the school's culture led to improvements in the climate. Indeed, the impact went far beyond original expectations. While surveys showed an improvement in student attitudes about teachers, suspensions declined, fewer students were sent to the principal's office, daily attendance rose, and more students in class meant more time spent learning.

That's not surprising to Bulach, who says there's often a spillover effect when officials begin addressing negative attitudes and beliefs. "If you change behaviors related to respect for others, you'll change behaviors related to compassion, courtesy, kindness, consideration, forgiveness."

For that reason, he suggests school officials take a focused response when they respond to the findings of a climate survey. Don't try to tackle too much, he says. Choose your battles carefully.

"The biggest problem I see with schools and their attempts to improve [school climate] is they are not focused," Bulach says. "Their school improvement plan has too many things in it. My belief is that if you want to improve culture and climate, you focus on one aspect and you hammer it."

### Leadership is everything

In the final analysis, researchers say, any serious look at school climate and culture should lead policymakers to a very simple—and challenging—conclusion: Almost everything depends upon the leadership of the school.

Forget about fancy programs or interventions. Attitudes and behaviors in a school are not going to change unless the principal understands how to work with

the existing culture—and knows how to help it evolve into a healthier one.

This reality puts school boards in a tough spot, says Larry Sackney, who has studied school climate as a professor of educational administration at the University of Saskatchewan. A serious effort to improve school climate—and thus to reform schools at all—means getting serious about hiring good principals who know how to change the school culture.

“You need a principal who has the ability to develop a team—and get it moving,” he says. “Leadership plays a very important role in setting the tone in a school.”

School boards also need to accept that some principals fall short of the mark.

While mentoring and training can help, it might not be enough—and these principals will need to go. “Leadership is a funny thing,” Sackney says. “For the principal who’s in trouble, it’s not easy to turn it around.”

A similar hard line is needed with a school’s worst teachers, Sackney says. School boards need to encourage and back principals who want to remove burned out and demoralized teachers.

“If you live in a climate where people are constantly bitching, it drags and wears people down,” he says. “It’s got a detrimental effect. If you can’t see things turning around, if there’s constant negativity, ... you may have to do some staff shuffling.”

Finally, school board members who

want to improve school climate should look in the mirror, Sackney says. Board members and superintendents who bicker at meetings, badmouth each other, or put politics above instruction set a corrosive tone that eventually permeates the entire school district.

“It starts with the boards themselves and works its way through the system,” he says. “If the staff doesn’t have respect for the school board ... it really demoralizes and drags everyone down. The board has to set the climate—and that sets the tone for the rest of the system.”

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## CUBE’s school climate survey to be released this year

CUBE’s survey of more than 50,000 urban students will reveal that schools are doing a pretty good job, but its author says districts will still have work to do to improve the climate on their campuses.

The survey, which the CUBE Steering Committee agreed to sponsor last year, through the Urban Student Achievement Task Force, is designed to provide the most comprehensive set of data available on the perceptions and experiences of students in urban school systems.

The 17 districts that volunteered to participate in the survey will receive reports on their students’ responses before the national results are released, says author Brian Perkins, who also chairs the CUBE Steering Committee. It is up to local officials to decide whether to release the information for their districts at that time—or wait until national results are released.

Speaking at the summer Issues Seminar in Boston, Perkins told urban leaders that the results are generally favorable. But he also warned that the devil will be in the details.

If 85 percent of students feel safe at school, for example, but 15 percent do not, districts need to decide whether that is OK. If you oversee a district of 100,000 students, 15 percent equates to 15,000 children who feel threatened to some degree.

“That’s a problem,” says Perkins, who is a member of the New Haven, Conn., school board and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership at Southern Connecticut State University. “Those are not numbers that are small enough to ignore. While I think we can pat ourselves on the back for doing a good job, it’s not enough to say there’s nothing to worry about.”

Perkins suggests that such information—even if it isn’t entirely favorable—will prove invaluable to school boards serious about serving students’ needs. Data on local schools will point out problems that might otherwise go overlooked.

Even for school systems that did not participate in the survey, the national data will offer clues about potential areas of concern for urban schools everywhere. The national data also will serve as a useful benchmark to measure against local conditions.

The survey, however, is only a starting place for school boards, Perkins says. If student attitudes raise issues of concern, school administrators must follow up with focus groups, additional surveys, and personal observations to get to the root of the problem.

For example, if students say that teachers don’t care about them, is the problem that teachers are demoralized? Is the principal spending too much time in the office instead of working with teachers? Are new

teachers, struggling to keep order in their classrooms, failing to connect on a personal level with children?

Perkins says school board members will find interesting results when student responses are disaggregated by race and gender. A similar study of 12,000 students in South Africa found significant differences in student perceptions, for example, between girls and boys.

But it isn’t always so simple to draw conclusions from data, he warns. In South Africa, for example, a small percentage of students agreed with the statement: “I wish I was of a different race.” But interviews revealed that these responses had nothing to do with students’ perceptions about the value of their race. Their reasoning was more pragmatic.

“I know I can’t change the fact I’m black, but I feel if I was of a different race, I’d have a better opportunity to go to a good school,” students told Perkins.

John Shindler, director of the Western Alliance for the Study of School Climate, hasn’t seen the CUBE survey results. But, in an interview, he noted that survey results seldom show a school doing well in some areas of school climate and poorly in others. A school is good, bad, or mediocre in its school climate.

“If a school gets 6s and 7s, or 3s and 4s, or 9s and 10s, the scores are across the board,” he says. “At the heart of what makes a good climate, you can’t separate climate from instruction. You can’t separate climate from leadership. You can’t separate climate from the purposeful things you do to build a relationship with students. If a school is doing great on one thing, it tends to all fall in line.” ■

# Districts provide incentives to recruit teachers

Although easy solutions remain elusive, urban school leaders continue to seek ways to place their best teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

One of the more aggressive efforts to put teachers where they're needed can be found in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) Schools. This year, for example, teachers were not allowed to transfer to 35 schools that met district benchmarks for staff experience and qualifications.

The no-transfer list is designed to prevent the district's most desirable schools from attracting a disproportionate share of the district's most experienced teachers. Teachers can still seek transfers among the county's other 100 or so schools.

Some poor-performing schools also were allowed this spring to accept teacher transfers earlier than other schools in the district, giving these schools an advantage in attracting new talent, says Warren Barkley, the district's director of instructional employment.

Other incentives to attract top talent to selected schools included lower teacher-student ratios, more support staff for teachers, signing bonuses, and bonuses for teachers who meet specified goals for student achievement.

In January, then-Superintendent James Pughsley proposed an even more ambitious effort that included possible bonuses of up to \$10,000, help with repaying student loans, and loans to teachers for houses near

low-income schools. Many of these ideas have been on hold while the district determined its funding situation for the year.

The Baltimore County Public Schools also has been focusing on staffing at its lowest-performing schools. This school year, teachers who meet the definition of "highly qualified" under the No Child Left Behind Act could not transfer from a struggling school unless there was a replacement of similar experience and training.

At the same time, teachers in "critical shortage areas," such as math and science, who agreed to work in targeted schools were eligible to receive signing bonuses of \$2,500 to \$4,000, plus \$1,000 for moving expenses.

In Seattle, school officials are hoping that new salary increases will stop the gradual exodus of experienced teachers to better-paying surrounding districts, says district spokesperson Peter Daniels. New seniority rules also are designed to slow teacher turnover in poor-performing schools and create a more stable cadre of experienced teachers.

A more subtle strategy involves "moving some of the more successful principals out of fairly affluent and stable neighborhoods to more challenging schools," he says.

Focusing on leadership is a good idea—one that Larry Moore, president of the Fresno Teachers Association, would like to see in his school system. Underperforming schools, he says, need good principals to attract good teachers.

"We need the best administration in the most difficult, challenging situations," Moore recently told the *Fresno Bee*. "Teachers will follow strong leaders. Put an experienced, strong-leader principal in a school, and the best teachers will follow."

## REPORTS

### Study: Charters no better on achievement

Charter schools appear to have failed as a school reform strategy, suggests a policy brief by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University.

Intended as an innovative, more flexible alternative to the public schools, the schools have shown themselves no better than public schools in raising student achievement, says Gerald Bracey, author of *Charter Schools' Performance and Accountability: A Disconnect*.

According to Bracey, research that credits charter schools with raising achievement has frequently used faulty methods. For charter school advocates, the assumption appears to be that "deregulation is a sufficient condition for declaring success."

The report also notes that charter schools also are not being held accountable and are shut down when they fail to live up to their promise to increase student achievement.

### Study questions discipline practices

A national study by a University of Missouri-Columbia researcher reports that large, high-poverty middle and high schools are the most likely to take disciplinary action against students. The topic recently was explored by CUBE's Racial Isolation Task Force.

Suspensions and expulsions also are more likely to follow incidents of fighting and insubordination rather than weapon-related problems. Fewer than 5 percent of disciplinary actions deal with the use of weapons.

"Policymakers and administrators need to take these findings seriously and consider how to develop fair policies and practices to prevent students' problem behaviors and to create safe school environments," says Motoko Akiba, assistant

## SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR STAFFING

Many of the strategies being used by CUBE member districts can be found in recommendations included in a new report by the Learning First Alliance, an organization composed of 12 national education organizations, including NSBA.

The report, *A Shared Responsibility*, suggests policy and contract changes to allow challenged schools to hire teachers earlier and base staffing decisions on student learning needs rather than standardized formulas.

The Alliance report also suggests that school districts cannot hope to solve the staffing of "challenged"

schools on their own.

"No one organization or group, not even state and federal legislators, can solve this problem on its own," the report states. "A wide range of stakeholders must collaborate to address the myriad causes of the staffing gap in disadvantaged schools."

Producing more teachers won't solve the problem, either, the report notes. The goal must be to make the so-called hard-to-staff schools "the kind of places where our best educators want to work."

The report is available at [www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org).

professor of educational leadership and policy analysis.

Akiba's study examined data from the National Center for Educational Statistics. Her work found that, on average, schools took severe disciplinary actions 14 times a year.

More ethnically diverse secondary and middle, and urban schools took severe disciplinary actions more frequently as a result of problem behaviors, her work finds. Even among schools with the same level of student disorder, large, high-poverty schools were likely to discipline students severely.

## Interest in college greatest among African-Americans

Nearly 90 percent of African-American youths plan to go to college—a rate higher than among young white or Hispanic school-age students, reports a new poll.

While 89 percent of African-American youths who participated in the study said they plan to attend college, 79 percent of whites and 77 percent of Hispanics expressed the same interest, according to the poll conducted on behalf of Junior Achievement Worldwide and the Diversity Pipeline Alliance.

The survey also found that a larger percentage of African-American youths (63 percent) said “having enough money” is the greatest obstacle to attending college. Money was a concern for 55 percent of white and 59 percent of Hispanic youths.

The poll findings are available at [www.ja.org](http://www.ja.org).

## NEWS

## Chicago: More autonomy for high-achieving schools

This fall, 85 of Chicago's most successful schools will be given a degree of autonomy from the school system's central office.

These schools will be able to implement a restructured day calendar; tailor their own professional development schedule; opt out of districtwide reading, math, and science initiatives; and spend funds and transfer funding from one program to another without approval of higher officials.

“We looked hard at all of the factors

that go into creating a successful school that truly serves the needs of our students,” schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan says. “These schools have obviously got it figured out. The best thing we can do is get out of their way.”

To earn their unique status, the schools had to meet a level of success in student performance, management, school climate, and special education. All schools will be reviewed annually.

## Los Angeles: Tougher graduation standards

The Los Angeles school board has toughened the district's high school graduation standards by requiring all students to complete a college preparatory curriculum.

To earn a diploma, students must now complete a so-called “A-G” curriculum that includes a series of 15 courses in English, math, science, foreign language, and social studies. The courses will be available in 2006-07 and mandatory for all students entering ninth grade in 2012.

The curriculum will ensure that all students complete the coursework required for admission to the University of California and California State University system. Currently, many minority students in L.A. do not complete the coursework that will allow them to attend a state college.

Approval of the curriculum “will increase overall student achievement and narrow the achievement gap,” school board President José Huizar said when he proposed the policy. “Research consistently shows that students actually do better with high expectations and challenging coursework.”

## New Orleans: State finance takeover

A divided New Orleans school board agreed to allow the Louisiana Department of Education to take over the district's finances.

The 4-3 vote gives a private management firm selected by the state control over payments, contracts, and the hiring and firing of nonacademic personnel. The school board will retain control over academic issues and would still have to approve the budget.

Board President Torin Sanders, who voted against the takeover, called it an

exercise in “disfranchising” his constituents, the Associated Press reports.

State Superintendent of Education Cecil Picard proposed the takeover in response to financial mismanagement, a deficit of about \$30 million, and the indictment of dozens of employees for theft.

## Philadelphia: Mandated African-American history

Starting this fall, ninth-graders in Philadelphia will be required to take a course in African and African-American history.

Embracing an idea that was first proposed 40 years ago, the city's School Reform Commission mandated the year-long course—one of four required social studies courses, along with American history, social studies, and world history.

“You cannot understand American history without understanding the African-American experience; I don't care what anybody says,” Paul G. Vallas, the district's chief executive, told the *New York Times*. “It benefits African-American children who need a more comprehensive understanding of their own culture, and it benefits non-African-Americans to understand the totality of the American experience.”

While officials at the 200,000-student school district acknowledge it would be better to have courses that adequately reflect all cultures, they say African and black history has been neglected too long. The district's student population is two-thirds black.

The course will study the origins of humanity, classical African civilizations, and early African leadership before moving on to black history connected with colonial America, the Constitution, the Civil War, civil rights movement, and black nationalism, says Chief Academic Officer Gregory Thornton.

The course replaces one of five high school electives.

The commission's decision has garnered praise from many in the African-American community, who say that their story in American history has been overlooked in textbooks and social studies curricula.

“The reality is that African-Americans have played a tremendous role in American history and world history,” says state Rep. Thaddeus Kirkland, chair of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus. “The diversity of Philadelphia ... requires this type of curriculum.” ■