

CUBE completes new school climate survey

Teachers, administrators say schools in good shape, but improvements needed

One-quarter of teachers aren't sure they can stop a child from bullying another. One in five believes that race is a predictor of future success in school. More than a third of administrators say that teachers are unfair to their students.

These are just a few of the findings of *Where We Teach: The CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate*, a study of adult perspectives concerning the urban learning environment. The report was released by the Council of Urban Boards of Education in March during a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

The survey's findings are generally positive, notes CUBE Steering Committee Chair Brian Perkins, who also is the survey's principal investigator. Most teachers and administrators surveyed say their schools are safe, students can do well on standardized tests, and students and teachers have a caring and trusting relationship.

But not all adult responses are so positive, and that's where urban school leaders will want to focus most of their attention,



First-graders laugh while a college student reads a book at Santa Fe Accelerated Elementary School in Kansas City, Mo. When students feel safe, respected, and expected to excel—in other words, when they learn in a good school climate—academic performance improves.

Perkins says. “We need to look at this kind of information and figure out what conditions are most favorable to high academic performance.”

After all, Perkins says, achievement is the bottom line. School climate is more

than having a “nice” place to attend school; it's about creating and maintaining the conditions that facilitate the learning process. A recent unpublished study by a

See Survey on page 8

INSIDE

3 Trends & Analysis examines timely issues

7 Competition forces schools to expand marketing efforts

10 Opinions mixed on success of single-gender schools

Urban Advocate

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About CUBE

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 113 member school boards and the more than 8 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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CUBE Issues Forum

Mayoral takeover attempts, the educational needs of undocumented immigrants, and the U.S. Supreme Court's upcoming decision on race-based admissions policies gave urban school leaders a lot to think about when they gathered in Washington, D.C., for the Jan. 27 CUBE Issues Forum. Here are a few highlights of the day:

D.C. mayoral takeover: All about making money?

Business interests—hoping to expand the charter school industry and develop prime real estate owned by the school district—are playing a role in the attempted mayoral takeover of the Washington, D.C., school



Rev. Carolyn Graham

system, claims the Rev. Carolyn Graham, vice chair of the D.C. school board.

In a session on mayoral takeovers nationwide, Graham offered a provocative assessment of D.C. Mayor's Adrian Fenty's takeover attempt. "No mayor has ever been elected in this city with the [political] war chest that this young mayor was able to amass," she said. "Debts have to be repaid."

CUBE MEMBERSHIP HITS ALL-TIME HIGH

For the first time in its 40-year history, the CUBE membership roll has hit 113 urban school districts, CUBE Steering Committee Chair Brian Perkins announced.

Many factors have contributed to CUBE's continued growth, but Perkins made note of CUBE's advocacy efforts for urban school boards. "We're championing ideas," he said. "We're working hard to get the issues before the policymakers in such a way that they enact responsible legislation and provide adequate funding for our schools."

DREAM Act opens doors for undocumented immigrant youth

A tragic waste of brilliant young minds—and federal legislation that could put an end to misguided federal immigration policy—was the topic of a session examining efforts to win passage of the DREAM Act in Congress.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act addresses the challenges of teenagers and young adults who, as children, were brought into the country illegally by their parents and attend K-12 schools—but can't continue their education in college or use a college degree to find a good job because of their immigration status, says Josh Bernstein, director of federal policy for the National Immigration Law Center.

These children, if allowed an opportunity to go to college and gain citizenship, could strengthen the nation, he said. "What's fair and just for young people who haven't done anything wrong other than grow up and finish high school?" he asked.

Strategies for school diversity rest with Supreme Court

When the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments in December about whether schools can use race in

student-assignment plans, it was apparent from the justices' questions that—while they see racial diversity in schools as a legitimate governmental interest—they're not comfortable with how boards should try to achieve it.

That was the assessment of NSBA General Counsel Francisco Negrón, who told urban leaders that the justices appear to be looking hard at how policies can be "narrowly tailored" to satisfy constitutional issues. Before the court are appeals of race-based admissions policies in the Louisville, Ky., and Seattle school systems.

"We know the issue of narrow tailoring is going to change in the next few months," he said. "We just don't know how it's going to change." ■



Francisco Negrón

Trends & Analysis

Middle schools? K-8 schools? 6-8 schools? Practicality decides

These days, urban school districts seem to be of different minds when it comes to the best approach to educate middle-grade students. In some cities, middle schools are being closed in favor of K-8 schools; in others, officials are consolidating grades 6-9 on one campus.

Why is there no consistency? In some cases, experts say, local educators believe that one configuration will produce better academic results; in others, simple practicality—such as classroom availability—is fueling decisions.

In recent years, a K-8 configuration has gained favor with educators across the nation, and Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City, and Philadelphia are just a few districts that hopped on that bandwagon.

K-8 proponents argue that young adolescents benefit from the smaller, more personal learning environment found in elementary schools. Some research backs their claims, but others contend that evidence for K-8's success is questionable.

Whatever the truth, at least 56 different configurations exist for the middle

grades, ranging from traditional 6-8 middle schools to schools serving grades 6-12, 8-9, and 5-6, says Jack Berckemeyer, assistant executive director of the National Middle Schools Association.

In many cases, a school's organization depends more on classroom availability or busing routes than pedagogy, he says. Some K-8 schools exist to solve disciplinary problems seen in a troubled middle school, while other configurations are the result of the restructuring of poor-performing schools running afoul of NCLB.

"I don't think [most middle-grade configurations] have anything to do with what's developmentally appropriate," he says. "Most are middle schools in philosophy." ■



Students celebrate their win in a math competition at Edwards Middle School. The school's 6-8 grade configuration is just one of 52 variations that exist around the nation.

Seattle schools work to improve public image

After a few tough months last fall, the Seattle Public Schools has managed to rebuild its battered public image—at least enough to win passage of an \$887 million bond referendum to fund new construction and bolster the district's operating budget.

Things looked grim at the end of 2006, after a tumultuous debate over school closings soured public opinion about the school system. Talk arose of turning over the schools to the mayor, and fears grew that the bond referendum scheduled for Feb. 8 was doomed.

The sense of being under siege is an all-too-familiar experience for urban boards, but the success of Seattle officials in turning attitudes around is a useful lesson: School board members don't have to



Security personnel wrestle with an audience member during a contentious Seattle school board meeting on school closings last fall.

"circle the wagons" and stay on the defensive in the midst of controversy.

An early decision that helped undercut board bashing was to scuttle deliberations on school closings until emotions cooled. That gave school officials time to regroup and find a new approach to reopening the unpopular debate, says Teresa Wippel, a district spokesperson.

The board also elected a new president, Cheryl Crow, a former city council member who put her political acumen and strong community connections to work by reaching out to parents, politicians, and business leaders. Crow also took a firm stance on civil discourse by the public and board at meetings.

Credit for passage of the bond referendum must go to parents and community leaders who rallied behind it, Wippel says. They pushed the message that, however upset school board critics may be, the city's schoolchildren should not be caught in the political crossfire.

Over the coming months, school officials will pound home further reasons why the public should feel more optimistic about their district: Finances are greatly improved over years past, and test scores are on the rise.

"We hit a low point," she says. "I'm not saying we're out of the woods, especially once we start talking about school closings again. But I think people are feeling more positive right now." ■

Street violence raises ante on school safety

A surge in youth violence and gang activity in several cities has some school safety experts concerned whether urban schools face a greater threat from the neighborhoods that surround them.

Violent crime is down inside the nation's public schools. In 2004-05, only four out of 1,000 students were victimized by a serious violent crime—sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault—compared to six per 1,000 in the previous year, according to the latest annual figures released by the federal government.

Not every city is seeing an escalation in youth violence on the streets. But where it's happening, it's a threat to the districts' safety records. In Boston, for example, there's been a 42-percent increase in the number of weapons confiscated in and around the city's schools in the past five years. With a rise in youth shootings off campus, students reportedly have started hiding weapons in bushes and dumpsters on their way to school, then retrieving them after classes end.

Although incidents are down a bit in Boston this school year, "we're a reflection of the neighborhoods," John Sisco, chief of the city's school police, told the *Boston Globe*. "The vast majority of serious incidents start in the neighborhoods and spill over into the schools."

Of particular concern for officials is an upswing in gang activity nationwide. According to the federal report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2006*, reports of gangs at schools are up 3 percent. Nashville, for example, has seen a spate of violence on the streets among Hispanic gangs—an alarming trend given that gang members are enrolled in almost every middle and high school in the city. Gang vio-



A student is transported to an ambulance after he and another boy were shot in front of Grant High School in the Van Nuys section of Los Angeles.

lence also has soared in Los Angeles, where two teenagers were shot in January outside a high school.

So far, school officials largely have managed to keep neighborhood violence out of their buildings. The school crime rate remains at half of what it was in 1992—the result of a growing reliance on surveillance cameras, metal detectors, security checkpoints, a strong police presence, and anti-bullying and anti-gang intervention programs.

But Ron Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, says neighborhood violence demands vigilance: It's all too easy for brewing trouble to go unreported and undetected—until it blows up in your face.

"My take is that you may have a lot of things like intimidation, name calling, and disruptive activity going on [in and outside of school] that you don't know about. It might not be happening in your schools, but there's a need to be vigilant." ■

San Diego embraces Baldrige model of management

Is this the latest trend? Two urban school systems have decided to adopt the management model called the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence.



Carl Cohn

The San Diego Unified School District recently announced it was adopting the Baldrige model, which emphasizes continuous improvement through self-assessment, data-driven decision-making, customer service, and a focus on results.

Last August, the Tulsa, Okla., school system announced it was embracing the same model—with the ambitious goal of competing for the distinguished Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, created by Congress in 1987 to recognize organizations for outstanding leadership, strategic planning, and results.

No one can accuse San Diego of simply jumping on the bandwagon: Superintendent Carl Cohn is a long-time fan of the Baldrige approach, which he brought to the Long Beach (Calif.) Unified School District years ago as its superintendent. He credits the management philosophy with helping that district improve its academic results and operational efficiency.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

The Memphis City Schools announced sweeping changes in its school attendance boundaries—reassigning students in 96 schools and changing the grade configurations in others.

The new attendance boundaries are part of a five-year plan to erase all vestiges of desegregation-era busing patterns and focus on neighborhood schools.

Schools in New York City should be paid at least \$1.93 billion more a year, says

the state Court of Appeals in the latest ruling of a 13-year lawsuit disputing New York State's education funding formula. The city school system, which serves 1.1 million students, has a \$14.5 billion operating budget.

The Milwaukee Public Schools have cracked down on students carrying cell phones. The ban is not new—personal electronic devices have been against the rules for years. But school officials say it was widely ignored until Superintendent William

Andreopoulos ordered the crackdown.

Celebrating its fifth anniversary is the Ohio 8 Coalition, a labor/management alliance of superintendents and teacher union presidents of Ohio's eight largest urban school districts.

Dedicated to improving the educational opportunities in their cities, the coalition recently completed a case study that looks at the first five years of the coalition, its accomplishments, and lessons learned. A copy is available at www.ohio8.com. ■

Parents see Chinese as language to learn in global economy

Ni hao. Ni jiao shenme mingzi? This greeting in Chinese (Hello. What's your name?) is being heard in an increasing number of urban schools that have added lessons in Mandarin Chinese to the curriculum.

In 2000, only about 5,000 students studied Chinese, according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Today, that number is between 30,000 and 50,000.

Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle are just some of the major urban school districts that teach Chinese as an alternative to such standard foreign language offerings as French, German, and Spanish. Chinese has been offered at Baltimore Polytechnic High School since 1988, and enrollment is at an all-time high of 100 students.

This fall, Milwaukee will offer Chinese lessons in three schools, says Robin Rivas, a curriculum specialist for the school district. The city's School of Languages already has a partial immersion program,



Young students work on their colors in Chinese during class at the Foreign Language Immersion School in Detroit. Chinese is an increasingly common curriculum offering in the nation's urban schools.

and a new Milwaukee Academy of Chinese Languages will offer some daily instruction to students as young as age 4.

Parent demand is pushing the school district to make Chinese instruction more readily available, she says. "That's what drives the program—the interest in the community."

That interest is fueled by China's growing influence on the global economy and its role as a major trading partner with the

United States, says Marty Abbott, ACTFL's director of education. Parents realize that an understanding of Chinese will give their children a boost as adults in the workforce.

"It kind of parallels the increases we saw in Japanese in the 1980s and in Russian in the 1960s after Sputnik," Abbott says. "But, in my opinion, today's interest is even greater. People are incredibly curious about China." ■

School closings promise controversy and, perhaps, better learning

Times are tough in the Detroit Public Schools, and after years of struggling with declining enrollment and repeated budget crises, school officials have yet another tough time ahead: They've got to close schools—a lot of schools.

The school board has announced plans to close 52 schools—47 this summer and five more next year—out of 232 buildings in the district. That's in addition to 36 buildings closed in the past two years.

Not surprisingly, strong opposition surrounds the plan. The mayor has criticized the school leadership, and the teachers union vowed to seek the ouster of school board President Jimmy Womack.

But the reality is that the school system has seen enrollment plummet by tens of thousands of students in the past decade, and its classroom capacity stands about 60,000 students greater than is needed.

Desite the controversy, Womack told the *Urban Advocate* that the closings are not just a financial necessity. They also



Kindergarten teacher Joyce Aban leads her class in song at Detroit's Wilkins Elementary School. To allocate more money to classrooms like this, the school board wants to close dozens of underutilized schools.

promise to breathe new life into the district's academic program.

"If you have fewer classrooms to police, you can free up more dollars for the classroom," he said. "If you have less schools to maintain, you free up more dollars for the classroom. We might at some point be able to reduce class sizes."

Womack said the closings also are designed to support the city's most academically successful school programs and restructure those that are falling short.

"Some schools are doing phenomenally well," he said. "So we're moving them to a larger facility, so they hopefully can provide the same level of leadership and situation that these schools had before—and accommodate more students."

Students also may find themselves in better facilities. For example, a school with limited athletic facilities and no art program might be closed and students transferred to a school with a swimming pool and more extensive arts program.

"Both schools might be designed for 1,000, but each only has 500 students," Womack says. "So we create a convergence of educational opportunities."

At least, that's the hope. But, although the closings will save the school system \$19 million a year, many are unhappy.

"I don't understand why our school has to be one of them [that closes]," one parent told the *Detroit Free Press*. Said a teacher: "We're encouraging parents, teachers, and students to protest by any means necessary." ■

THE DROPOUT PROBLEM

Although test scores dominate the urban education policy debate these days, no one is forgetting that improved student academic achievement is an illusion if lower-performing students simply drop out of school. Yet that's happening way too often: Depending upon the research and cities studied, estimates on the urban dropout rate run as high as 50 percent—a tragic waste of human life.

The cost to the nation is also high. Just cutting in half the number of high school dropouts in a single year would, over a lifetime, earn the nation \$45 billion via extra tax revenues and reduced costs in public health, crime and justice, and welfare programs, says one study.

HELP STUDENTS STAY IN SCHOOL

Here's what dropouts say would help them stay in school:

More real-world learning (internships, etc.) to make classroom more relevant	81%
Better teachers who keep classes interesting	81%
Smaller class sizes with more individualized attention	75%
Better communications with parents	71%
More tutoring, summer school, and extra time with teachers	70%
More classroom discipline	62%
Help for students with problems outside of class	62%
Someone to talk to about personal problems	41%



WARNING SIGNS

After all these years, you'd think school officials would have programs to identify and intervene with students who exhibit the warning signs of dropping out of school. Yet, all too often, such efforts fail to spot at-risk students until too late. Here's what to look for in your students:

- Repeating a grade at any age
- Excessive family mobility
- Excessive absenteeism
- Friends/family that drop out
- Poor behavior

The likelihood of graduating also is determined by the number of courses failed in high school.

Source: The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, www.gatesfoundation.org.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

According to *The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children*, a new study by a team of economists, the nation would more than recoup the cost of interventions designed to reduce the dropout rate. For example, if the nation spent \$82,000 for every student who



became a high school graduate because of those interventions, the economic return would be:

INVESTMENT:

Intervention programs -\$82,000

RETURN:

Increased tax revenue \$139,100
Savings in health care \$40,500
Savings in law-enforcement and prison costs \$26,600
Savings in welfare \$3,000

TOTAL BENEFIT: \$127,200

Source: The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for All of America's Children, www.cbcse.org.

Rep. Miller talks to CUBE members about NCLB

Addressing many longstanding complaints about the No Child Left Behind Act will be on Congress' mind as it begins work on the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

That was the message offered by Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), chair of the House Education and Labor Committee, when he met with urban school leaders during a CUBE luncheon on Capitol Hill in January.

"I've been traveling the country for five years, and I started hearing what was possible and what was not," he said.

One proposal that won't make the grade is President Bush's idea for "opportunity scholarships"—essentially \$4,000 vouchers for students in chronically low-performing schools, Miller said. That proposal "didn't sail, hasn't sailed, and will not sail." ■

Low-income parents no less savvy in school selection

As school-choice laws and charter schools offer parents and students more educational options, a new study suggests that urban school leaders shouldn't assume poorer parents are less discerning in their decisions about the education of their children.

The reality is that low and moderate-income parents use the same techniques and tools in seeking information about school choices as do wealthier parents, according to *Opening Doors: How Low-Income Parents Search for the Right School*, a study by the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

"These families visit schools, talk with administrators and teachers, talk with family and friends, other parents and students, review printed material as they gather information," says the study's author, Paul Teske.

These findings suggest school boards cannot assume that only affluent parents will look at other options—and that poorer parents will simply accept the status quo. Instead, board members who read the report may recognize the growing need to develop popular academic programs—and then get that information to parents who have options outside the public schools.

The report is available at www.crpe.org. ■

Schools boost marketing efforts in face of growing competition

By Joetta Sack-Min

Thomson Elementary School is an anomaly in the District of Columbia. In the wake of declining enrollment and the closing of traditional public schools in the city, this pre-K-6 school in the city's downtown saw its enrollment climb 20 percent this school year.

School officials credit that jump in large part to an aggressive marketing campaign to recruit students, who nowadays have an extensive selection of educational choices ranging from public and private to charter and parochial schools.

Principal Gladys Camp and parents formed a committee last year that sent out fliers in three languages to local neighborhoods, put messages touting Thomson on local websites and list serves, and hosted open houses at the school. The parents, Camp said, "were very outspoken and supportive."

Public schools and districts have been marketing and "branding" themselves for years, particularly since charter schools and choice policies have spurred competition for students. Now, those districts and schools are seeing signs of success—increased enrollments, staff retention and recruitment, and positive stories in the local press.

And many urban districts that had not tried marketing are now doing so.

Success stories

In Pittsburgh, for instance, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt and his chief of staff Lisa Fischetti, a former marketing consultant, recently unveiled a campaign that includes a new logo and phone surveys of parents and students to guide district reforms. The 29,500-student district has lost about 10,000 students over the past decade because of urban flight and increased competition from charters and other schools.

Miami-Dade schools also are rolling out a new campaign that takes a more dramatic approach: billboards along highways, posters in schools, and radio and television advertisements in three languages. Superintendent Rudy Crew has hired a new marketing director and is meeting with government and business officials to solicit advice and funding for the campaign.

While billboards and radio ads might seem extreme, Miami's strategy is not that unusual. The 2,400-student Bloomfield, Conn., Bloomfield Public Schools district has had great success with billboards and radio advertisements, according to Superintendent David Title. It started when a teacher in Bloomfield, a predomi-



nantly minority suburb of Hartford, won Connecticut's 2002 teacher of the year award, and Title decided to put up a billboard by the interstate.

"No one had ever thought of that before," he said. "We got such a good reaction to it that the next year we decided to put up another billboard, and tried to drive traffic to our website."

Now, the district has negotiated discounts for billboard advertisements, and most recently, it bought a sponsorship on the local National Public Radio affiliate. "It's really brand awareness and imaging, just like regular companies do," Title said.

Many districts, particularly urban districts, are not doing enough to promote their strengths, said Arnold Fege, director of advocacy and public engagement for the Public Education Network. "To a lot of superintendents and principals, marketing is a dirty word—it's something Budweiser does," he said. "There are a lot of schools that are very good, but nobody knows about them."

Fege suggests that urban districts hire a communications director who is well-versed in community relations, and larger districts should consider hiring an ombudsman to work as a community liaison. Schools should treat parents and community members as "stockholders" and find ways to engage them in marketing strong programs and features of the school, such as preschool or a language-immersion program. Strong leadership, particularly from the superintendent's office, is key.

Choosing public schools

In states with expansive school-choice programs, a particular challenge for urban officials is the perception that surrounding affluent suburbs have better schools. For the Minneapolis Public Schools, one solu-

tion is to market the multitude of educational options that a big-city district offers. To that end, officials set up the Minneapolis Schools' Choice Center, an online search engine that gives parents a starting point in their search for educational options for their children.

The Arizona School Boards Association, along with several groups representing public educators, is leading a statewide drive to promote the state's public schools. The "Arizona Schools Make a Difference" campaign is soliciting donations from businesses to help pay for radio and television advertisements and billboards, said ASBA spokeswoman Eleanor Andersen. The campaign also has a website—www.azschoolsmakeadifference.org—where visitors can submit stories of interesting events and awards received. ASBA sends out those stories regularly through e-mail and newsletters.

The Arizona School Public Relations Association also offers to mentor any district in the state that wants to boost its marketing and communication efforts.

While some districts have spent thousands on strategies designed by outside consultants, most can do the work themselves, but even the all-volunteer staffs incur some costs. Of course, districts must be prepared for some criticism from parents and community members who say they would rather see the money spent directly on education services.

In Bloomfield, Title negotiated heavily discounted rates for the billboards, about \$1,700 for 10 weeks, and the local teachers' union and an administrators' association helped with the costs. But the rewards, he said, have been well worth the expense; for instance, the \$2,000 spent on the three-month National Public Radio sponsorship helped reach senior citizens. Moreover, newspapers and television stations have featured the school's campaign—the *Hartford Courant*, the state's largest newspaper, even wrote an editorial praising its innovative spirit—and those stories have bred more positive publicity.

"My job is to communicate all the good things happening in our school system to not only parents but the community at large," Title said. "When you look at the money we spend on communications, this is a drop in the bucket, and it's really cost effective." ■

Joetta Sack-Min (jsack@nsba.org) is associate editor of *School Board News* and contributing editor of *Urban Advocate*.

SURVEY

Continued from page 1

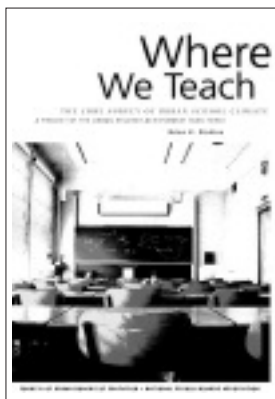
doctoral student at Southern Connecticut State University, where Perkins is head of the educational leadership department, found that a positive school climate can affect test scores by as much as 14 percent.

“School boards need to recognize the impact of school climate on academic achievement,” he says. “I want school districts to start collecting this kind of data and using it, because it is imperative that we address these issues that affect our schools’ success in teaching.”

Different perceptions

Part of the largest research project ever conducted by CUBE, *Where We Teach* surveyed nearly 5,000 teachers and administrators from 13 urban school districts in 10 states. Adults indicated their perceptions in a number of areas: bullying, expectations of success, influence of race, professional climate, professional development, safety, and, finally, levels of trust, respect, and ethos of caring in the school.

The study comes one year after CUBE released *Where We Learn*, a landmark national survey of urban students and their attitudes about school climate. That



study also found generally positive climates in urban districts but also identified student populations whose school experiences are far different from the majority—such as the 15 percent of boys who reported being bullied at least once a month.

In *Where We Teach*, the survey findings should be equally valuable in spotting issues that deserve more attention, Perkins says. Although most teachers agree their schools are safe, for example, 11.7 percent disagree. That suggests some teachers—or teachers at some schools—experience a more troubled working environment than their peers.

Any difference in perspective—even a small difference—offers an opportunity to

improve schools, he says. “When you look at 75 percent of administrators saying they can stop someone from being bullied, that’s positive,” Perkins says. “But what are the conditions for those 12 percent of administrators who say they don’t think teachers can do anything. What’s going on?”

A comparison between *Where We Teach* and last year’s survey also is valuable, suggests Anne L. Bryant, NSBA’s executive director. “What distinguishes this report from *Where We Learn* is not only the perspective of teachers and administrators but the differences between the student and adult view of their surroundings,” she says.

Although a direct comparison of findings must be cautious given each study’s focus, Perkins says a look at both studies together proves revealing. In *Where We Teach*, for example, 85.5 percent of white administrators say students trust their teachers, but 32 percent of black students in last year’s study said students do not.

“It should not be surprising that there are differences in perception,” Perkins says. “The issue is the gap. How large is the gap in the perception [between adults and students]? There should be concern in that, especially when it relates to issues like safety. If there’s a big perception gap, then there’s something that should be

SURVEY FINDINGS RAISE QUESTIONS

For the most part, survey responses were generally positive about the learning environment in urban schools. But, to no one’s surprise, some findings raise questions worth further study.

Bullying: Slightly more than one-third (35.8 percent) of administrators disagree that some children are bullied at their school once per month. That contrasts sharply with last year’s *Where We Learn* survey, in which half of students say they see others being bullied at least once a month. Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of teachers agree that they can help discourage bullying, but 11.9 percent do not believe they can deter bullying.

Expectations: Slightly more than 85 percent of administrators believe their students can be successful in community college or university, compared to only 58.1 percent of teachers. The difference in perceptions was seen again when asked if students were capable of high achievement on standardized tests. Almost all administrators (94.6 percent) agreed that such achievement was possible, compared to 77.2 percent of teachers.

Fairness: More than 20 percent of teachers and 37.5 percent of administrators agree with the statement that “teachers are not fair to some students at this school.” Another 18.7 percent of teachers are “not sure” about the fairness of their colleagues.

Parental Involvement: More than four in five (81.1 per-

cent) of administrators agree that parents support the school and its activities, compared to only 57.3 percent of teachers who feel the same.

Professional Climate: Among administrators, 86.3 percent feel that teachers exercise good professional judgment. But only 76.3 percent of teachers believe administrators show the same level of judgment.

Professional Development: A higher percentage of administrators (93.8 percent) feel they actively seek opportunities to help teachers learn new instructional methods, while only 78.4 percent of teachers agree that there are sufficient opportunities for training.

Race: One in five teachers agree that the race of a student will affect their success in school, while just over half disagree. Black teachers are more likely than white or Hispanic teachers to believe race will play a role in student success. Three out of four teachers (75.3 percent) agree that racial barriers to educational and economic opportunities still exist.

Safety: Asked if their school was safe, almost 12 percent of teachers said no. Only 12 percent of administrators say that students fight a lot at their school, but almost three times as many teachers (35.1 percent) agree students fight at their school.

Trust: A majority of teachers and administrators agree that students in their school trust teachers. Opinions, however, vary by race: 84 percent of Hispanic teachers agree, but only 66.9 percent of black teachers agree.

done differently.”

A ‘baseline’ for discussion

As the study focuses on national results, it is most useful as a “baseline” for discussions—but boards must look closely at their own schools to determine where improvements are possible, Perkins says. Local responses already have been delivered to participating school districts in the CUBE study, but other school systems will need to conduct their own surveys.

“It’s important that we move forward with finding ways to collect this information,” Perkins says. “Why don’t you think students are motivated to learn? That gets you to understanding the school context ... that test scores don’t tell the entire story.”

Some districts already have put their data to good use. In Phoenix, Ariz., principals in Cartwright School District 83 were asked to report their schools’ survey results to the board and outline how they will use the data to improve climate, Perkins says. In Sugar Land, Texas, the Fort Bend Independent School District brought administrators together to review the data and suggest strategies to deal with problem areas.

In Tulsa, Okla., principals have been encouraged to take the survey results to their school improvement teams and respond to any obvious needs in the next year’s strategic plan, says Bettye Rector, the district’s director of institutional research.

The CUBE survey also has inspired Tulsa officials to rethink their own annual student survey and add “some of those harder questions,” Rector says. “We were satisfied with the results of our survey, but when we really looked at the survey done by CUBE, we thought we needed to revise it (and) get more information.”

That kind of thinking is exactly what Perkins hopes to see more boards support. “A lot of districts don’t collect this kind of information,” he says. “They should ask, ‘What if this national data were our school district’s data. What would we do?’”

“If you see things [in the CUBE survey] that are of concern, that means you should go assess the climate in your district. You’re likely to find something that could be improved. So the first thing is to collect the data.”

Context matters

At first, such data may raise more questions than answers, he warns. Consider the findings that more than one-third of teachers (35.6 percent) say students will have diffi-

RECOMMENDATIONS

Where We Teach offers a number of recommendations and key principles to help school boards improve school climate. Here are a few highlights:

- **Bullying:** School districts must be more proactive in eliminating violence and disruptive behavior. That includes responding to cyberbullying and cyberthreats delivered through the Internet or other communication devices.

- **Expectations:** A climate that supports the philosophy that all children can learn at high levels should be established and cultivated into the norms of the school system.

- **Parental Involvement:** District policymakers should create positive relationships with parents and community members, and they should engage families as partners in the education process.

- **Professional Climate:** School personnel must create a culture of continuous learning that ensures student learning and other school goals. Each school should aim for a community in which staff members collaborate to develop and implement the school’s learning goals.

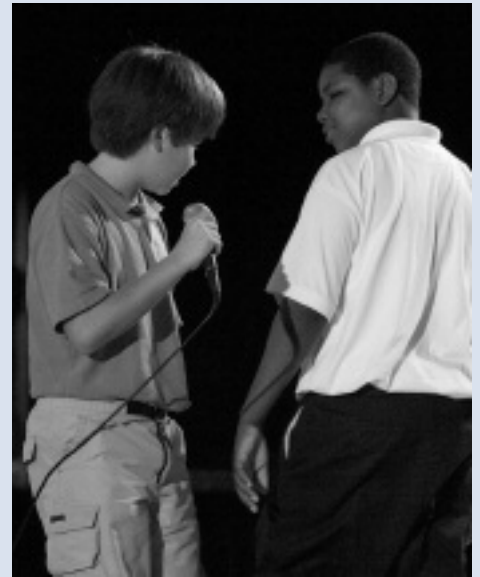
- **Professional Development:** School personnel need substantive, ongoing training to help them appreciate issues of diversity and expose students to a rich array of viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences. School districts should recognize the importance of positive school climate in raising student achievement by conducting an assessment of school climate and establishing goals for improvement.

- **Race:** Districts should institute in-

culty with core academic subjects regardless of the strength of instruction. Does that mean teachers have low expectations for students? Or are they finding 12th-graders in their classroom who cannot read?

“There are huge implications here,” Perkins says. “But what’s important is to realize that these perceptions don’t occur in a vacuum. They’re not absent a context.”

Indeed, the need to examine school climate is so great that CUBE reached out to other organizations—the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Association of Elementary School



Two sixth-graders demonstrate anti-bullying techniques for classmates at P.S. DuPont Elementary School in Wilmington, Del.

service programs to train all school personnel to recognize and prevent racial, ethnic, and sexual harassment against employees and students.

- **Respect:** School districts should incorporate policies and practices that encourage and strengthen student attitudes.

- **Safety:** Students who incessantly disrupt the learning of other students should receive appropriate services or be referred to alternative education. Programs that provide assistance and training in child development, effective parenting skills, and strategies for dealing with disruptive students should be available for parents and guardians.

Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals—to collaborate on the recommendations included in the report.

These organizations “are critical partners in the release of this report,” Bryant says. “Together, we hope that these organizations, working with their memberships, will help us to enact real change to improve school climates where it is needed.” ■

Del Stover (dstover@nsba.org) is a senior editor of American School Board Journal and editor of Urban Advocate.

Proponents extol single-gender schools despite mixed research

Research & Reality is an occasional section examining education research and its practical application in urban school policy and administration.

By Naomi Dillon

Lambasted by some as a step back in time and touted by others as the key to bridging the academic gender gap, school districts across the country are tentatively but increasingly wading into and experimenting with the concept of single-sex education.

The practice of educating boys and girls separately is an old one that gradually subsided in the public school system in the 19th and 20th century. For all intents and purposes, single-sex education was formally denounced with the passage of Title IX, the 1972 federal law that prohibits gender-based discrimination.

Beginning in the early 1990s, however, a renewed interest arose about this



Students work on a project at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Atlanta, where more than 400 sixth- and seventh-grade students are divided by gender.

traditional form of educating students. In limited pockets of the country, academicians and school district personnel found single-gender schools to be a viable answer to stemming high dropout rates and disproportionate disciplinary problems among boys—and, conversely, low self-esteem and disinterest in certain subjects like math and science among girls.

Efforts to spread this format on a national level failed, and it wasn't until the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 that proponents of single-sex

education received a federal green light—sort of. NCLB included language allowing schools to use funds to create single-sex schools and classes, but it did not provide any direction regarding their operation until late last year.

Despite the slow pace, school districts—bolstered by a slew of studies that appear to support the efficacy of single-sex education—have forged on. According to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 253 schools currently offer all-boy or all-girl classrooms, of which 51 schools are completely gender segregated.

Among proponents of single-sex schools, such as St. John's University law professor Rosemary C. Salomone, the research is clear. In her book *Same, Different, Equal: Rethinking Single-Sex Schooling*, Salomone writes that “research has found that single-sex schools and classes promote less-gender-polarized attitudes toward certain subjects—math and science in the case of girls and language arts and foreign languages in the case of boys.”

Leonard Sax, a family doctor and psychologist who heads the Maryland-based NASSPE, also has been one the most vocal proponents of single-sex education. His book, *Why Gender Matters*, is a compendium of recent research that illustrates the significant biological differences that exist between the sexes.

Ignoring those differences, Sax maintains, puts students at risk of academic failure, apathy, or worse. “Various regions of the brains of boys and girls develop in

OPPOSING VIEW

Gender segregation has become one of the most hotly debated topics in education, as urban public schools look at separating the sexes as a new way to engage and reach students, particularly male students, who may be falling behind.

As can be expected, single-sex education has its critics. From the American Civil Liberties Union to the National Organization of Women, a number of groups and high-profile individuals have said this latest trend is unsubstantiated and unwise.

The latest naysayer comes from the Education Sector, a Washington-based non-profit that analyzes school matters. In June, the organization released *The Truth About Boys and Girls*, which combed through more than a decade's

worth of test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to determine if there really was a growing academic disparity between boys and girls.

“It's clear that some gender differences in education are real, and there are some groups of disadvantaged boys in desperate need of help,” writes Sara Mead, a senior policy analyst with the organization and the study's lead author. “But it's also clear that boys' overall educational achievement and attainment are not in decline—in fact, they have never been better. What accounts for the recent hysteria? It's partly an issue of simple novelty.”

To read the full study, go to: www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/ESO_BoysAndGirls.pdf.

different ways," Sax says. "That wasn't discovered until 1999 but that's been proven."

Despite definitive distinctions in the way male and female brains receive and digest information, how educators deal with these variations is where the dissension begins. Curiously, many of the school districts most willing to try single-sex education are those located in urban or impoverished areas. Most, like Detroit Public Schools, are underachieving academically and juggling a host of other socioeconomic challenges.

Detroit, which boasts one of the worst graduation rates in the country, has been dealing with a massive student exodus for much of this decade. Officials expect to lose 9,000 students this year, bringing the total student enrollment to 119,000—about 40 percent less than it was in the late 1990s.

The district's board president, Jimmy Womack, said offering parents the ability to enroll students in single-gender schools is one attempt to halt the decline. "We have private academies in and around metro Detroit offering all-girl and all-boy schools," he said. "Having that option would give us an opportunity to change the landscape in urban education."

Detroit began offering single-sex classes in the fall of 2006 at one of its elementary schools. It was the district's second attempt at this format; an all-boys academy in the mid-1990s was shut down when a parent alleged discrimination and filed suit.

It's still too early to determine whether Detroit's program has been successful, but Sax says school districts that pay attention to gender and learning are the ones most likely to yield good results. Schools that train their teachers in gender-specific modalities, get community buy-in, and possess leadership that embraces and supports the concept are much more likely to succeed.

"If you simply put girls in one school and boys in another, and your teachers have no professional development, the results can be disastrous," Sax said.

For information on research supporting single-sex schools, visit the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, www.singlesexschools.org, and the National Coalition of Girls' Schools, www.ncgs.org/index.php. ■

Naomi Dillon (ndillon@nsba.org) is senior editor of the American School Board Journal and contributing editor of Urban Advocate.

Mayoral takeovers: Get used to the talk. This "silver bullet" is gaining favor again

Every few years, it seems, there's a new round of interest in mayors taking control of their city school systems. Now this controversial governance approach is making a comeback in some communities.

Recent months have seen debates over mayoral control in Albuquerque, N.M.; Los Angeles; Seattle; and Washington, D.C.

As *Urban Advocate* went to press, one of the most serious takeover efforts under way was in Washington, D.C., where the City Council this winter conducted hearings on Mayor Adrian Fenty's proposal to take control of the city's 58,000-student school system. A final decision is expected this spring.

Fenty's proposal was criticized at the CUBE Issues Forum in January by the Rev. Carolyn Graham, vice president of the D.C. school board. A change in leadership makes no sense, she said, given the board's efforts at reform, including a new master plan to guide education in the city, a major facilities improvement plan, and new tests and standards for students.

"The work has been done—and aggressively done," she said.

Urban school leaders have heard many arguments in favor of mayoral control. But the one that has proven most compelling with policymakers was underscored in the summer issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, which suggested that a mayor can serve as a useful change agent when institutional obstacles or political bickering block reform.

In Boston, the *Review* noted, Mayor Thomas Menino ended years of political turmoil that followed desegregation by bringing in Thomas Payzant, a former U.S. assistant secretary of education, and backing the appointed school board's reform efforts. In Chicago, Mayor Richard M. Daley brought in his budget director, Paul Vallas, to replace the district's weak leadership, improve the school system's decaying infrastructure, and raise the efficiency of district operations.

Despite these arguments, mayoral



Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, center, leads New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, left, on a tour of Fremont High School in South Los Angeles last fall. Both mayors are high-profile figures in the debate over mayoral takeovers of urban school systems.

takeovers remain controversial. For one, a takeover diminishes citizens' democratic control by denying them the right to pick the district's governance team. It's also argued that a school board is elected to focus solely on education policy, while a mayor is distracted by many competing responsibilities.

Perhaps most important, however, is that little evidence exists to show mayors are any more successful than school boards in improving student performance.

Often unmentioned in takeover debates is the reality that the challenges facing urban education have little to do with its governance structure. As long as urban schools must deal with the consequences of widespread poverty, racial segregation, and lack of resources, its challenges remain immense.

Even those who see some potential in mayoral control recognize that the approach is no panacea. In the *Review*, Michael D. Usdan, senior fellow of the Institute for Educational Leadership, writes: "Although the evidence so far suggests that mayoral involvement in education has been a positive experience for cities and their school districts, it is certainly possible that less enlightened mayors may exacerbate problems through their involvement or seek to politicize public schools in self-serving ways." ■