



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT™
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

**PROJECT
CORNERSTONE**
A YMCA of Silicon Valley Initiative

Improving Student Achievement by Improving School Climate

Understanding School Climate

A growing body of research shows that improving school climate improves student achievement, even in disadvantaged schools¹. In fact, in the 2008 report “Closing the Achievement Gap,” California Superintendent of Education Jack O’Connell states unequivocally that improving school climate is essential to improving achievement for all students². Educational researchers generally agree that there are four essential elements of school climate³, three of which are directly related to strong, positive interpersonal relationships throughout the school community. (The fourth element is related to a school’s physical environment.) These elements are:

- **Safety.** Safety is perhaps the most fundamental element in creating a positive school climate—students simply can’t learn effectively if they feel unsafe or afraid. Students who do not feel safe at school are more likely to be truant, become distracted from school work, and experience lower levels of achievement⁴. One of the biggest reasons that students feel unsafe at school is fear of bullying; according to the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, bullying is by far the most prevalent form of youth violence at schools⁵. Recently, both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Family Physicians published position papers recognizing the significant effect that bullying has on student health and achievement. The presence of bullying has negative impacts not only for bullies and victims but for all students in the school—bullying and violence in schools lowers the quality of classroom instruction, affecting all students⁶. Schools with a positive climate that supports student achievement take active measure to prevent bullying and build support and respect throughout the student body.
- **Positive Relationships.** The more positive relationships that a student experiences at school with peers, teachers, and other caring adults, the more likely the student is to achieve academic gains. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that school connectedness—the belief that by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals⁷—is a strong predictor of higher achievement, fewer conduct problems, and less violence. Schools that foster strong, positive relationships between students and teachers as well as other caring adults and that promote an atmosphere of tolerance and cooperation create an environment where students feel supported and encouraged to learn.
- **Supportive Teaching and Learning.** The quality and style of teaching and learning are, of course, crucial to student achievement. When teachers actively and consistently support students, students are more engaged in learning and achieve greater academic outcomes⁸. Research also shows that incorporating learning activities that reach beyond the classroom, such as service learning, builds student self-esteem and interpersonal competence as well as increasing academic achievement⁹.

Project Cornerstone’s Model for School Climate Improvement

Project Cornerstone’s School Partnerships program offers a comprehensive range of programs and services that are uniquely designed to engage all members of the school community—faculty and staff, parents and caregivers, and students—in creating a climate that fosters positive social development and academic achievement. All programs are based on the research-proven developmental assets model, and meet the California Department of Education criteria for research-based youth development for the Safe and Drug Free Schools program.

The following table describes how Project Cornerstone’s programs and services directly address the crucial elements of school climate.

| School Climate Element | Project Cornerstone Programs and Services |
|---|--|
| Safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expect Respect bullying prevention and leadership program • Teacher and staff training on bullying prevention and intervention • Yard duty training to create a positive, bully-free environment during recess • ABC and Los Dichos literature-based and parent-led programs that teach positive behavioral expectations and social skills such as tolerance and friendship through culturally and age-appropriate literature and discussions |
| Positive Relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty/staff training on building positive connections with students • Parent and caregiver presentations and six-week workshops on building positive connections with youth throughout the community (including their own children) • ABC and Los Dichos |
| Supportive Teaching and Learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty/staff training and consulting on incorporating asset building into instructional strategies • Consulting to implement asset-building programs such as cross-age tutoring, lunchtime activities, and meaningful student recognition programs |

Project Cornerstone works closely with each school to customize programs and services to meet the needs of each community's unique environment.

Case Study: Project Cornerstone at Trace Elementary School

Trace Elementary School, in the San José Unified School District, has a diverse student population in which 57 percent of students are economically disadvantaged and 38 percent are English-language learners. Under the leadership of principal Mary Martinez, Trace took full advantage of Project Cornerstone's programs and resources to build a positive school climate and improve achievement:

- Faculty and staff attend training on asset-building strategies, and yard-duty personnel and playground volunteers learn to build assets during recess. In addition, a staff team meets twice monthly to discuss ways to further improve school climate.
- The ABC and Spanish-language Los Dichos parent engagement programs are active throughout the school, and 20+ parents participated in the six-week "Take It Personally" workshop.
- After participating in the Expect Respect bullying prevention and leadership workshop, students created action plans that resulted in activities such as Junior Coaches, who are trained in game rules, good sportsmanship, and conflict resolution to help reduce tension at recess.

In 2010, the evaluation firm Applied Survey Research performed a longitudinal study of the effects of Project Cornerstone's programs at Trace. Their findings reveal the following:

- **A significant improvement in student perceptions of school climate.**
- **Consistent upward trends in school-level performance on California Standards Tests (CSTs).**
- **Students who participated in Expect Respect showed greater gains in both the English/Language Arts and Math CSTs than the general student population.**

The results are evident in statewide evaluation data as well: Trace's Academic Performance Index (API) rose 25 points from 2007-08 and their caring school climate index increased by 10 percent. In addition to the significant increase in API, 99 percent of students now agree that Trace teachers care about their students. **Says Marcy Lauck, SJUSD manager of continuous improvement, "Trace has used Project Cornerstone's programs and services as a starting point to involve the entire school community in creating a caring climate where more students are able to succeed socially, emotionally, and academically."**

About Project Cornerstone

Project Cornerstone was founded in 1999 after a survey showed that most youth in Santa Clara County are missing the positive relationships, opportunities, values, and skills—known collectively as "developmental assets"—that provide the foundation for a healthy, successful future. In general, the more developmental assets that young people possess, the more likely they are to avoid risky behaviors and engage in positive, healthy activities. Our School Partnerships program offers a range of services and programs to schools throughout Silicon Valley to build developmental assets in youth and create positive, vibrant learning communities where all students are supported to thrive and achieve.

References

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- ⁵ Addressing barriers to learning. (Vol. 6, #4). Fall, 2001. *The Newsletter of UCLA's Center for Mental Health in Schools*.
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- ⁹ Morgan, W. and Streb, M. (March, 2001). "Building citizenship: How student voice in service learning develops civic values." *Social Science Quarterly*, (82)1, 155-169.