

Clarence Bee Article – January 2018
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School Climate Index

In 2013 the Board of Regents directed the State Education Department to re-establish the NYS Safe Schools Task Force after the school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. The purpose of the Task Force was to make recommendations on ways to improve school safety in New York State. After studying the issue for almost a year, the Task Force made thirty-six recommendations to improve school safety. Two themes emerged in the recommendations. First, that schools need to promote and measure school climate rather than exclusively measuring school violence, and second that a focus on social emotional learning in schools helps students learn the essential skills of understanding and managing emotions, and establishing and maintaining positive relationships. A review of the relevant research suggests that the quality of school climate is the single most predictive factor in any school's capacity to promote student achievement.

In 2017, the Board of Regents put together a draft plan for school accountability to be considered by the federal government as a function of the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. The Regent's accountability plan continues testing students in grades 3-8 and high school on an annual basis, but it also adds another element, the school climate index, which will provide a measure of school culture and climate to go along with student achievement results.

There are three parts to the school climate index. The first and most critical part is a set of evidence-based, valid and reliable surveys that are taken by students, parents, and school personnel. Information from the surveys is collated and analyzed within topics such as emotional and physical safety, bullying, mental health, discipline, and instructional environment. The second part of the index is based on incidents of school discipline, as measured within the categories of the Violent and Disruptive Incident Reporting System (VADIR) and the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA). These reports are submitted annually to the State Education Department. The final part of the school climate index is a calculation of chronic absenteeism, defined as the percentage of students who miss ten percent or more of instructional days.

Clarence has volunteered to be a pilot district for the school climate index. The District will ask parents, students, and school personnel to participate in surveys later in the spring. We will use our strategic planning team to analyze results and make suggestions for how to improve overall culture and climate.