Climate, Culture, and Community

The University of Virginia's Youth-Nex Center and Curry School of Education and Human Development have launched the <u>Remaking Middle School Initiative</u>, an effort to elevate the middle grades and realize their promise for all students. To achieve these goals, the Initiative commissioned a set of four working papers that synthesize a robust body of research on early adolescence, informing supports and resources that can help the field make the most of this developmental phase. This brief highlights key ideas from the <u>second paper in the series</u>, which focuses on what schools can do to create a positive school climate for young adolescents.

School climate and culture both exert a powerful influence on how young adolescents experience school, affecting their social, emotional, and academic development. Climate, in particular, is defined by students' and staff's experiences of life in a school. These experiences are shaped principally by their relationships with one another, as well as the organizational structures, learning and leadership practices of the school. Meanwhile, culture refers to the way teachers and other staff members work together based on the implicit set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share.

In efforts to redesign middle school, efforts focus on school climate since it is viewed as more malleable than culture.

Assessing the Impact of School Climate and Culture on the Middle Grades

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments adopted a comprehensive model for understanding and evaluating school climate according to three domains: **engagement**, **safety**, and **environment**. The model has been adapted here to assess the extent to which school climate and culture can specifically support the success of early adolescents.

Engagement

In terms of school climate, engagement represents both strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools as well as strong connections between schools and the broader community. Engaging young adolescents in middle school is especially important because feelings of belonging, competence, and autonomy are core developmental needs--and engagement in any given setting can depend on whether these foundational needs are met.

Additionally, efforts to strengthen family involvement in young adolescents' schooling can help to increase student achievement. Such efforts can take the form of linking schoolwork to current events, creating forums to discuss learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future.

The Importance of Out-of-School Learning Opportunities

Research has shown that high-quality, out-of-school learning opportunities can position students to make significant gains in math and reading. By expanding access to before-and-after school academic, specialty, and multipurpose programs, students can also access supports and resources as they grapple with developmental issues of autonomy and connection.

Safety

Safety from catastrophic violence, such as school shootings, is a prominent public concern that often leads to investments in restrictive security measures. While school safety should be a priority, national violence statistics show that schools are very safe places. Rather than focusing on statistically rare threats to school safety, a more appropriate emphasis is on school safety with respect to investments that promote social emotional learning, psychological well-being, substance use prevention, and community engagement.

Restrictive school security measures have the potential to harm students' sense of emotional safety in school learning environments.

Early adolescence is a period marked by increased rates of bullying and an increased focus on peer relationships among young adolescents, both of which can threaten students' physical and emotional safety. Middle schools can work to address these threats to safety by investing their finite resources in bullying prevention, social emotional learning, and mental health services.

Environment

The physical and social structures of the school can have a profound effect on achievement, behavior and development, and overall well-being for young adolescents.

▶ **Structural.** By introducing K-8 grade configurations, or introducing later start times to support early adolescents' need for 8.5 hours of sleep, middle schools can off-set traditional declines in student engagement and achievement.

▶ **Physical.** School buildings' attention to basic needs for clean and sanitary classrooms, safe drinking water, comfortable temperatures, and food security not only can affect student learning and well-being. They also can have lasting impacts as young adolescents navigate their emerging sense of identity.

▶ **Social.** Middle schools can implement clear, proactive, and positively-stated rules and consequences, all of which are at the core of supportive school discipline practices that address young adolescents' psychological needs.

Attending to these three aspects of a school's climate can serve early adolescents' unique physical, emotional, and psychological needs during this critical developmental period.

Creating A Positive School Climate in Practice

Schools and middle grades educators can create positive school climates that address the educational needs of young adolescents by:

▶ **Providing equitable access to resources and supports, increasing forums for community and family involvement, as well as expanding out-of-school learning opportunities.**

▶ **Advocating for investments in school facilities and additional resources that can promote positive development.**

▶ **Implementing bullying and substance use prevention programs that pave the way for positive intergroup relationships, promote diversity (especially with regard to race and ethnicity), and increase safety.**

▶ **Establishing clear, positively-stated rules that provide a foundation for supportive and equitable school discipline.**

A full list of specific implications for practice are included in the corresponding working paper.