

What We Think

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF URBAN SCHOOL CLIMATE

A PROJECT OF THE URBAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT TASK FORCE

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Communications Guidelines for the CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate

“What We Think” April 2008

These guidelines were prepared to help school leaders talk with school staff, students, communities, and the media about the survey report, “What We Think.” This survey is one of the largest ever to be undertaken to ascertain how parents feel about their children’s urban school environments.

Whether your school district participated in the survey or not, the survey results could be used by your community’s reporters who may want to localize the findings about your parents’ perceptions of school climate. This could be an excellent opportunity to share any initiatives that you may be carrying out to improve the climate in your schools as well as engage your community around the areas that need improvement.

About the Survey

Participants: Approximately 10,270 parents from 112 urban schools in 17 states and one U.S. territory.

Study publisher: The National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE)

Principal investigator: The survey instrument was developed and research carried out by Dr. Brian Perkins, professor and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Southern Connecticut State University and president of the New Haven, Conn., Board of Education. Dr. Perkins is a member of the NSBA board of directors serving as the Chair, National Black Caucus of School Board Members.

Survey facts:

- All school districts that are members of the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) were invited to participate in this school climate study. As a result, 20 school districts signed on as survey participants and surveys were distributed in the following districts:
 - ◆ Aurora School District, Aurora, Colo.
 - ◆ Baltimore County Public Schools, Towson, Md.
 - ◆ Cartwright School District #83, Phoenix, Ariz.
 - ◆ East Baton Rouge Parish School District, Baton Rouge, La.
 - ◆ Fort Bend Independent School District, Sugar Land, Texas
 - ◆ Houston Independent School District, Houston, Texas
 - ◆ Isaac School District, Phoenix, Ariz.
 - ◆ Jackson Public Schools, Jackson, Miss.
 - ◆ Montgomery Public Schools, Montgomery, Ala.
 - ◆ New Haven Public Schools, New Haven, Conn.
 - ◆ Reading School District, Reading, Pa.
 - ◆ Richmond Public Schools, Richmond, Va.
 - ◆ Saint Paul Public Schools, Saint Paul, Minn.
 - ◆ San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco, Calif.
 - ◆ Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools, Savannah, Ga.
 - ◆ Seattle Public Schools, Seattle, Wash.
 - ◆ Trenton Public Schools, Trenton, N.J.
 - ◆ Tulsa Public Schools, Tulsa, Okla.
 - ◆ U.S. Virgin Islands Public Schools, United States Virgin Islands
 - ◆ Yonkers Public Schools, Yonkers, N.Y.

- Results for the participating individual school districts were computed and sent directly to their superintendents. The report, “What We Think,” does not contain individual school district results. Those results will be left up to the individual school districts to share with their communities. However, survey results from individual districts are subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

- Parents’ responses were analyzed by gender and ethnicity. Almost one-third (29.7%) of respondents were male. Parents indicated their perceptions in seven areas:
 - ◆ Safety;
 - ◆ Parental involvement;
 - ◆ Parental expectations for success;
 - ◆ Trust, respect, and ethos of caring;
 - ◆ Bullying;
 - ◆ Community welfare; and
 - ◆ Importance of race.

Public Rollout of the Survey Report

Wednesday, April 23, 2008

Media advisory distributed to the national, education, and association press announcing the news conference. A link to the PDF of the executive summary and full report, “What We Think” e-mailed to reporters. All information regarding the report is embargoed until April 30.

Friday, April 25, 2008

PDFs of the executive summary and full report, “What We Think” and accompanying Communications Guidelines e-mailed to key individuals including all CUBE members; communication directors and research directors of the CUBE districts that participated in the survey; NSBA board of directors; and NSBA state executives and state communication directors.

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Official release of “What We Think” through an online news conference hosted by National School Boards Association. Participants will be:

- Brian Perkins, Principal Investigator
- Warlene Gray, National Chief Executive Officer, Parent Teacher Association
- Steve Corona, Chair, CUBE

Overall Key Message Points on “What We Think”

- While not representative of all urban districts (since the results represent only those districts that self-selected to administer the survey), this report nonetheless can be ***an important starting point for discussion*** among school board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, students, parents, and the community at large about school climate.
- Some ***areas school districts may want to explore*** are highlighted by the survey. They are:
 - ◆ Why significant numbers of parents believe children carry guns or knives to school;
 - ◆ Why parents who rely on the newspaper for information about the school are more negative about issues of safety, respect, and expectations;
 - ◆ Why parents who rely on television for information about the school are more negative about issues of safety, respect, and expectations;
 - ◆ Why parents who speak Spanish as the home language were significantly high in indicating that they did not feel welcome at their child’s school during visits.

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- The issues that the survey has uncovered ***are not just school-based issues***. They often reflect the issues that communities and families are wrestling with. Every member of the community is a role model for children. And thus the responsibility for improving school climate extends beyond the schoolhouse doors into the community.
 - A safe and welcoming learning ***climate is a prerequisite to high student achievement***. This is an opportunity to elaborate on your own district's steps to understand and assess your school climate as well as policies that can lead to improvements.

What Will the National and Local Media Likely Focus On?

There is much good news in the survey report about how parents feel about their schools. Your school district, whether or not it participated in the survey, will likely have an excellent opportunity to discuss school climate issues when the media focuses its attention on this national study. Local reporters often take a national education story and try to localize it by finding out what's happening in your school district in that particular subject.

School board members and superintendents should seize this leadership opportunity by working closely with the district's communications director to craft clear and consistent messages about the district's school climate initiatives.

Overall, the parents' responses were positive, but because the media tends to focus on reporting the negative aspects of stories rather than highlighting the positive, your district should be ready to balance the story with these positive points. You may also want to include information about policies, programs, and other initiatives in your district designed to improve school climate.

The report delves into each of eight areas. Under each area, there are some likely headlines that reporters may glean from the report.

- **Bullying continues to be an issue at school.** Little more than half of the parents surveyed felt that teachers had the ability to stop bullying, with close to 30 percent not sure if this was possible. More than 25 percent of parents have spoken to an administrator about bullying. Parents with students in the middle grades (6-8) were the largest group (nearly 11 percent) to report that their child was bullied during the school day at least once per month.
- **Parents believe their child's school to be a safe place.** The majority of parents surveyed viewed their child's school as a safe place. However, only 42 percent of parents surveyed disagreed that students fight a lot at school. Forty percent of parents were not sure when asked about students carrying guns or knives to school.
- **The majority of parents are actively involved in their child's school.** Three-quarters of parents agreed that they visited their child's school to support activities. Seventy-two percent of the fathers who responded indicated that they visited their child's school often.

- **Parents’ believe that their children can achieve and are proud of their accomplishments.** The vast majority of parents agreed that their children were capable of performing very well on standardized exams. Additionally, the majority of parents agreed that their children would pursue opportunities in higher education at the community college or university level. Ninety-seven percent of parents were proud of their children.
- **Teachers and administrators have gained parents’ trust and make them feel respected.** The majority of parents (84%) felt that they could trust the teachers at their child’s school. The majority (87%) also felt respected by the teachers. Parents agreed that they felt respected by administrators at their child’s school (83%).
- **Parent views vary about the degree of safety in their neighborhoods.** The majority of parents (49%) indicated that there had not been violent crimes within their immediate neighborhoods in the past six months, while a quarter of them indicated that there had been.
- **Racial differences are not viewed to have an impact on a child’s success at school.** Race is not a factor in the success of children in their child’s school, according to the majority of parents (70%).

Working with Your Media and Community

Here are some tips for school districts that participated in the CUBE Urban School Climate Survey, “What We Think.”

- ***Share the news.*** If you haven’t done so already, this is the right time to make sure the results of your individual school climate survey have been shared with key internal and external groups. Internal groups include teachers, central office and building administrators, school-based support teams, and other employees. External groups include students, parents, elected officials, media, chamber of commerce officials, faith-based groups, and civic organizations. Be prepared to discuss the results and why they are important. The sample news release and op-ed at the end of these guidelines can get you started in crafting your own.
- ***Celebrate your successes.*** This is an excellent opportunity to celebrate the good news you have gleaned from your district’s survey. Emphasize those areas in which your district is excelling. Highlight the programs that are working in your district. Share the credit with students, teachers, building administrators, building staff, parents, PTAs, and others.
- ***Prepare to address areas needing improvement.*** The results of your school district’s climate survey likely revealed some areas that need addressing. There’s no need to be defensive. Your district has taken a proactive approach to finding what areas need addressing through the climate survey. Continue that proactive stance by bringing the critical players together to shape a plan of action to address those areas.

- ***Set aside some special time with your local reporters*** to meet with key school board members and the superintendent to review and digest your district's survey results. School safety and school climate are topics that can become sensationalized in the media. Make sure your reporters understand the district's priorities in addressing areas that might be of concern.
- ***When talking to reporters, tell the truth.*** You probably won't have the answers to all the questions you are posed. It's fine to say that you don't know and will share the answer, once you find out. When faced with a sticky issue, tell the truth and in the same breath tell them what you are doing to fix the problem. Reporters will find the truth by talking to students, staff members, school resource officers, and others to get to the bottom of the story. You don't want to be placed in a position of covering up anything. Once you lose your credibility, you may have lost a chance of bringing everyone together to solve the problem.

Other Communications Tips Worth Considering

- Develop one standard PowerPoint presentation for use by the superintendent, board members, central office staff, building principals, and others to share your district's results to key audiences.
- Hold a town hall or community forum on school safety and school climate.
- Involve a cross section of community representatives, not just as participants, but also as a steering committee to plan the discussion. Consider collaborating with the mayor's office, city council, or chamber of commerce in sponsoring and promoting the town hall.
- Hold a series of small forums or study circles to facilitate a deliberative dialogue among community members.
- Conduct focus groups with staff and community on the topic of school safety and juvenile violence.
- Form a blue ribbon task force to survey the community, study options, and present a plan of action.

Additional Resources on School Safety and School Climate

- American School Counselors Association, 1101 King Street, Suite 625, Alexandria, VA 22314; (703) 683-2722; www.schoolcounselor.org
- The Character Education Partnership, 918 16th St., NW, Suite 501, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 296-7743; www.character.org
- National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 657-0270; www.nasponline.org
- National School Safety Center, 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Suite 290, Westlake, Village, CA 91362; (805) 373-9977; www.schoolsafety.us
- National Crime Prevention Council, 1700 K Street, NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, D.C. 20006-3817; (202) 466-6272; www.ncpc.org
- The Center for the Study of School Climate; (888) 264-3106; www.schoolclimatesurvey.com

Additional Resources on Community Engagement

- Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University, Box 1985, Providence, RI 02912; (401) 863-7990; www.annenberginstitute.org
- The Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road Dayton, OH 45459-2799; (937) 434-7300; www.kettering.org
- National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; (703) 838-6737; www.nsba.org
- National School Public Relations Association, 15948 Derwood Road, Rockville, MD 20855; (301) 519-0496; www.nspra.org
- Public Education Network, 601 Thirteenth Street, N.W., Suite 710 South, Washington, DC 20005-3808; (202) 628-7460; www.publiceducation.org

Reality Check: Statistics on School Crime and Safety

According to *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2005*, by the National Center for Education Statistics:

- Middle schools were more likely than elementary and high schools to report racial tensions, bullying, verbal abuse of teachers, and disorder in classrooms.
- Seven percent of students ages 12-18 reported that they had been bullied at school during the last six months.
- As students get older, bullying seems to decrease. For example, 14 percent of 6th graders, 7 percent of 9th graders, and 2 percent of 12th graders reported that they had been bullied at school.
- Fighting is on the decline in high school: 16 percent of high schools reported being in a physical fight on school property in 1993 compared to 13 percent in 2003.
- Carrying weapons is on the decline as well. Between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of students in grades 9-12 who reported carrying a weapon at school declined from 12 to 6 percent.

For more information on this report or others from the National Center for Education Statistics, visit <http://nces.ed.gov> or call 1-877-433-7827.

Interested in administering the CUBE Urban School Climate Survey in your district?
Contact Dr. Brian Perkins at briankperkins@doctor.com or (888) 264-3106.

Thanks to the National School Public Relations Association for resources used in preparing these guidelines.

SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO USE

For Immediate Release

Parents Believe Schools To Be Safe, Trust Teachers, Hold High Expectations For Their Children According to National Survey of Urban School Districts

Washington, D.C. – April 30, 2008 – A majority of parents believe that their child’s school is a safe place, according to a national survey of urban school climate conducted by the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education.

Parents feel respected by the teachers and administrators at their children’s school. Additionally, the vast majority of parents felt that they can trust the teachers at their child’s school. Parents also agree that their children are capable of performing very well on standardized exams. Moreover, an overwhelming majority (97 percent) of parents surveyed said that they are proud of their children.

The survey report, “What We Think,” outlines findings from 112 urban schools in 17 states and one U.S. territory, including [ADD YOUR DISTRICT HERE IF PARTICIPATED].

“The results of this report are extremely encouraging, with such a strong and positive response from parents, because their engagement in the schools is critical to student achievement and success,” said Anne L. Bryant, NSBA executive director. “This report serves as an important starting point for discussion among school board members, superintendents, teachers, students, parents, and the community about the climate in our schools and the resulting impact on our students.”

In [YOUR DISTRICT], approximately {XXXXXX} parents responded to the survey. [ADD LOCAL RESULTS AND LOCAL QUOTE].

The survey’s findings are grouped under seven areas: safety; parental involvement; parental expectations for success; trust, respect, and ethos of caring; bullying; and community welfare.

Among the major findings is that while only a little over half of parents felt that teachers had the ability to stop bullying, close to 30 percent was not sure if that was possible. Also, parents with students in the middle grades (6-8) were the largest group (nearly 11 percent) to report that their child was bullied during the school day at least once per month.

“The results from this survey are intended to be used to start conversations in our urban communities about how we can improve our school climate,” said Brian Perkins, the study’s principal investigator and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy

Studies at Southern Connecticut State University. “Because our urban schools enroll almost 25 percent of this nation’s public schoolchildren, this dialogue is imperative to the future of our country.”

[ADD ANY OF YOUR DISTRICT’S INITIATIVES OR PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE]

“What We Think” is the third school climate survey conducted by the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education. It comes on the heels of two previous surveys, “Where We Teach,” which examined the perceptions of urban school teachers and administrators and “Where We Learn,” which looked at the perceptions of urban school students. The executive summary of the report, “What We Think,” can be found at www.nsba.org.