


# where we learn

## communications guidelines

THE CUBE SURVEY OF  
URBAN SCHOOL CLIMATE

A PROJECT OF THE URBAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT TASK FORCE  
COUNCIL OF URBAN BOARDS OF EDUCATION • NATIONAL SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

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# Communications Guidelines for the CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate

## “where we learn” March 2006

**T**hese guidelines were prepared to help school board members, superintendents, and school district communications directors talk with school staff, students, communities, and media about the survey report, “Where We Learn.” This survey is one of the largest ever to be undertaken to ascertain how students feel about their urban school environments.

Whether a 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 students’ perceptions of school climate. This could be an excellent opportunity to share any initiatives that you may be undertaking to improve the climate in your schools as well as engage your community around the areas that need improvement.

### about the survey

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**Participants:** Approximately 32,000 students from 15 urban school districts in 13 states

**Study publisher:** The National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education

**Principal investigator:** The survey instrument was developed and research carried out by Dr. Brian Perkins, president of the New Haven, Conn., Board of Education, and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Southern Connecticut State University. Dr. Perkins also serves as the CUBE chairperson and is a member of the NSBA board of directors.

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## Survey facts:

- All school districts who 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, 15 school districts signed on as survey participants and surveys were distributed in 108 schools: 40 elementary, 26 middle, 14 K-8 schools, and 28 high schools. The districts are:
  - ◆ Baltimore County Public Schools, Baltimore, Md.
  - ◆ Cartwright School District No. 83, Phoenix, Ariz.
  - ◆ Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, Ill.
  - ◆ Fort Bend School District, Sugar Land, Texas
  - ◆ Grand Rapids Public Schools, Grand Rapids, Mich.
  - ◆ Isaac School District No. 5, Phoenix, Ariz.
  - ◆ Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Neb.
  - ◆ Mobile County Public Schools, Mobile, Ala.
  - ◆ New Haven Public Schools, New Haven, Conn.
  - ◆ Orleans Parish Public Schools, New Orleans, La.
  - ◆ Portsmouth Public Schools, Portsmouth, Va.
  - ◆ Saint Paul Public Schools, Saint Paul, Minn.
  - ◆ San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco, Calif.
  - ◆ Tulsa Public Schools, Tulsa, Okla.
  - ◆ Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas
- Results for the participating individual school districts were computed and sent directly to their superintendents. The report, "Where We Learn," 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).
- Student responses were analyzed as a whole and were also examined by gender, ethnicity, and grade level. Students indicated their perceptions in five areas:
  - ◆ School safety;
  - ◆ Bullying;
  - ◆ Trust, respect, and ethos of caring;
  - ◆ Racial self-concept; and
  - ◆ General climate.

## public rollout of the survey report

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**Friday, March 17, 2006**

PDFs of the executive summary and full report, "Where We Learn" and accompanying Communications Guidelines will be 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

**Thursday, March 23, 2006**

Media advisory distributed to the national, education, and association press announcing the news conference

**Tuesday, March 28, 2006**

PDF of the executive summary and full report, “Where We Learn” will be e-mailed to the reporters who received the media advisory. Key constituent groups such as the NEA and AASA will receive a PDF of the executive summary. All information regarding the report is embargoed until March 30.

**Wednesday, March 29, 2006**

Reminder of news conference sent to reporters

**Thursday, March 30, 2006**

Official release of “Where We Learn” at news conference at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C. Participants will be:

- ◆ NSBA Executive Director Anne Bryant
- ◆ CUBE Chairman and Principal Investigator Brian Perkins
- ◆ School board member Warren Hayman, Baltimore County, Md., Public Schools
- ◆ Superintendent Joe Hairston, Baltimore County, Md., Public Schools

**Monday, April 10, 2006**

10 a.m. (CT) — News briefing for reporters covering NSBA’s Annual Conference in Chicago

11:30 a.m. (CT) — Live online discussion on NSBA’s daily blog BoardBuzz (<http://boardbuzz.nsba.org/>)

### **Reality Check: Statistics on School Crime and Safety**

According to *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2005*, the National Center for Education Statistics’ latest annual report:

- 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.

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## overall key message points on “where we learn”

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- 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, teachers, students, parents, and the community at large about school climate.
- The *report contains much good news* about how children perceive their school climate. For example, almost two-thirds of all students felt that their teachers cared whether they were successful and more than two-thirds of all students said they enjoy learning at their school. And their outlook on the future is bright: Nearly 80 percent of all students surveyed said they plan to continue their education after high school. Further, students are overwhelmingly satisfied with who they are: Only 7 percent wished they were of a different race.
- Some *areas school districts may want to explore* are highlighted by the survey. They are:
  - ◆ The degree to which students witness others being bullied;
  - ◆ Why students in the upper grades do not have much confidence that teachers can stop bullying;
  - ◆ Why older students have less trust in their teachers; and
  - ◆ Why some races are more likely to believe that other races do better in school than they do.
- 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.
- While schools are still one of the safest places for children to be, *student safety is a school district’s top priority*. There are many programs, such as peer mediation, conflict resolution, and character education, that school districts are using to improve school climate and student safety. This is an opportunity to elaborate on your own district’s programs.

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## what will the national and local media likely focus on?

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There is much good news in the survey report about how students feel about their schools. Your school district, whether or not your students 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. Your 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.

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 some positive points about policies, programs, and other initiatives in your district designed to improve school climate.

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

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- **School safety headlines**

- ◆ Nearly 63 percent of urban students report feeling safe at school.

**However ...**

- ◆ Nearly one-quarter of urban students report feeling uncertain of their safety.
- ◆ Sixty percent of urban middle school students report that many fights occur at their school.
- ◆ Twenty percent of urban students believe that other students carry knives or guns to school.

- **Bullying headlines**

- ◆ More than 75 percent of students said they were not bullied during the school day.

**However ...**

- ◆ Half of all students witness children being bullied at least monthly.
- ◆ Only 37 percent of students believe that their teachers can stop bullying.
- ◆ Nearly half of high schoolers don't believe that teachers can stop bullying.
- ◆ African-American students have the least faith in teachers: 46 percent do not believe that teachers can stop bullying.

- **Trust, Respect and Ethos of Caring headlines**

- ◆ A majority of students (61 percent) at every grade level agreed that teachers respect the students at their urban school.
- ◆ Almost two-thirds of all students felt that teachers cared whether they were successful or not.
- ◆ More than two-thirds (68 percent) of urban students said they enjoy learning at their school.
- ◆ Nearly 80 percent of urban students said they plan to continue their education after high school.
- ◆ Nearly 62 percent of urban students said they are hopeful about the future of the United States and nearly 84 percent said their parents are proud of them.

**However ...**

- ◆ Nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of urban school students said that they did not trust their teachers.
- ◆ Only 34 percent of African-American students felt that teachers were fair compared to 47 percent of Hispanic students and 41 percent of white students.

- **Racial Self-Concept headlines**

- ◆ Only 7 percent of students wished they were of a different race.

**However ...**

- ◆ Thirty-five percent of urban students believe that some races are smarter than others.
- ◆ African-American students were twice as likely to believe that students who aren't of their race generally do better in school.

- **General Climate headlines**

- ◆ Forty-four percent of younger students in grades 4-6 report a family adult member visiting often at school.

**However ...**

- ◆ Half of urban students report that no adult family member came to school often.

## working with your media and community

Here are some tips for school districts that participated in the CUBE Urban School Climate Survey.

- **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 have lost any 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](http://www.schoolcounselor.org)
- The Character Education Partnership, 918 16th St., NW, Suite 501, Washington, DC 20006; (202) 296-7743; [www.character.org](http://www.character.org)
- National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 657-0270; [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)
- National School Safety Center, 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Suite 290, Westlake, Village, CA 91362; (805) 373-9977; [www.schoolsafety.us](http://www.schoolsafety.us)
- National Crime Prevention Council, 1700 K Street, NW, 2nd Floor, Washington, D.C. 20006-3817; (202) 466-6272; [www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)

## **Additional Resources on Community Engagement**

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

The Communications Guidelines were written and produced by NSBA's Communications Office. Contact Barbara Hunter, director of communications, at [bhunter@nsba.org](mailto:bhunter@nsba.org) or (703) 838-6153 with comments or questions.

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

Interested in administering the CUBE Urban School Climate Survey in your district?  
Contact Dr. Brian Perkins at [perkinsb1@southernct.edu](mailto:perkinsb1@southernct.edu) or (203) 392-5341.



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## sample news release for districts to use

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For Immediate Release

### **School Climate Survey Points to Positive Indicators and Areas Needing Attention**

Washington, D.C. – March 30, 2006 — A majority of urban students say they feel safe at school, that teachers respect the students, and that they enjoy learning at their school, according to a survey of urban school climate conducted by the National School Boards Association’s Council of Urban Boards of Education.

However, the survey also found that almost one-quarter of urban students report feeling uncertain about their safety. Sixty percent of urban middle school students say that many fights take place at their school and half of all students see other students being bullied at least monthly.

The survey report, “Where We Learn,” includes findings from 15 urban school districts in 13 states, including [ADD YOUR DISTRICT HERE IF PARTICIPATED].

“This is an important study since research shows that improved school climate contributes to higher student achievement, higher morale, fewer student dropouts, and better community relations,” 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 at large about school climate.”

In [YOUR DISTRICT], more than [X,XXX] students responded to the survey. [ADD LOCAL RESULTS AND LOCAL QUOTE].

The survey’s findings are grouped under five categories: school safety; bullying; trust, respect, and ethics of caring; racial self-concept, and general climate.

Nationally, in the area of school safety, nearly 63 percent of urban students report feeling safe at school. However, nearly 20 percent of students believe that other students carry weapons to school. When it comes to bullying, more than 75 percent of students say they were not bullied during the school day, but 50 percent said they saw other students being bullied at least once a month.

Overall, a majority of students at every grade level say that teachers respect students at their school and almost two-thirds believe their teachers care if they are successful. Nearly 80 percent of urban students say they plan to continue their education after high school graduation.

However, almost 25 percent of students do not think students in their schools trust their teachers and only about a third of African-American students say their teachers are fair.

“The concerns we uncovered in this survey are not just school-based issues,” said Brian Perkins, the study’s principal investigator and chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Southern Connecticut State University. “Rather, they reflect the issues that communities as a whole are struggling with. The responsibility for improving school climate rests on all our shoulders.”

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

The executive summary of the report, “Where We Learn,” can be found at [www.nsba.org](http://www.nsba.org).

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## sample op-ed for districts to send to print media

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### Positive School Climate Leads to Academic Success

Today, children all over [YOUR DISTRICT] spent most of their day in school. They arrived and departed on a school bus, attended classes in a variety of subjects, ate lunch in a cafeteria, and interacted with their peers and teachers throughout the day.

Our children's perceptions of their school, their safety, and the level of trust they place in their teachers have a direct impact on how well these children learn. Is it a school that is warm and welcoming or do bullies roam the hallways? Does the staff respect the students or do the students feel disrespected by teachers? Do students feel safe in the classroom or are they always looking over their shoulder for a student with a weapon?

The answers to these questions and the students' overall perception of what it feels like to be at school define a school's climate. School climate is the learning environment – the physical setting, interaction among students and between students and teachers, and the emotional atmosphere.

[YOUR DISTRICT] recently participated in a major national survey to gauge students' overall perceptions of their school's climate. Students judged their schools in five areas: safety, bullying, trust, racial self-concept, and general climate. Approximately 32,000 students from 15 urban school districts took part in the survey, which was conducted by the National School Boards Association's Council of Urban Boards of Education.


The results, published in a report entitled "Where We Learn," will help us better understand how school climate influences student achievement. The data will also help us make more informed decisions about new programs and initiatives.

The results clearly offer an outline for us to improve our schools' climate. Research shows that improved climate contributes to higher academic achievement, higher morale, fewer dropouts, improved safety, and better relationships with the community.

The findings are generally positive – students feel good about themselves, their schools, and their teachers. But, at the same time some of the findings suggest areas of concern. A majority of students said they feel safe at school, for example. But almost one-quarter said they feel uncertain about their safety.

The problem of bullying has received a great deal of attention in recent years. The good news is that more than 75 percent of students said they were not bullied during the school day. But, the not so good news is that half of the students said they saw other students being bullied at least once a month. The students' perception of how the bullies can be stopped changes over time. In elementary school, more than half of the students say teachers can stop them, but in high school, half of the students say teachers are unable to stop the bullies.

Trust is another critical component of school climate. A majority of students at every grade level agree that teachers respect the students at their school and almost two-thirds said that teachers care whether they are successful. The downside is that almost 25 percent of students said they did not trust their teachers and only 34 percent of African-American students say their teachers are fair.



This report is a conversation starter for school board members, administrators, and the community. Many of the issues raised are not just school-based. They reflect the issues that our community and our families are wrestling with. The responsibility for improving school climate is shared by all of us who care about [YOUR DISTRICT].

Clearly, we need to explore several areas of concern. It is disturbing that our students see others being bullied and that the older students lack confidence that teachers can stop it. And, we need to address the concerns of those students who report feeling uncertain about their safety.

School climate is just as important as the results of any standardized test in determining how well our students and schools are performing. The community must be involved in the development of a healthy school climate and parents, especially, must be our partners in developing strategies to improve climate.

With a safe environment of trust and respect, we know our students will be better able to reach their maximum potential.