Safe and Supportive Schools
Engagement | Safety | Environment

School Climate Teams:
Strategic Planning for Integrating Promotion, Prevention & Intervention into School Climate (Part 1)

WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On May 11 and 12, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center (Center) hosted a Webinar, titled *School Climate Teams: Strategic Planning for Integrating Promotion, Prevention and Intervention into School Climate (Part 1).* During the session, the presenter, Kevin Dwyer, MA, NCSP, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenter could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (sssta@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

Q1. Can you provide a specific example of how conditions for learning are effectively integrated into academics?

Kevin Dwyer: If you are teaching a social skills program in school, for example, promoting alternative thinking strategies. Then what we do is have the coaches that are working with that social skills program work together with the coaches in reading and language arts. When those coaches work together, then they are stimulating teachers to utilize this in their reading and language arts assignment activities. Therefore, we have that opportunity to enable generalization from a nonacademic social skills program to an academic reading and language arts program and even help to define the scope and sequence kinds of spots where this would best fit.

Q2. Why is a school climate so important in title one schools in urban and suburban and rural areas?

Kevin Dwyer: It is important in all schools, but for many of our kids their communities are tough and the kids and their families are under the stress of poverty. We know a great deal about the impact of poverty, you can see it's a burden that we have placed on our kids for which we need to enable some compensation. Schools need to be a safe and engaging place where that can occur. Schools need to be the place where they can be shown care, where they can make connections, improve their skills, and be assured they will progress through the academics in which they are involved. It is so important for this population of youngsters, as is true for all of our kids. For

example, I would say right now, today, in our world, our kids' social skill development is being bombarded by things that are counterproductive to effective social skills and we need to think about how we can support positive social skills to counterbalance that influence.

Q3. One reason so many of us to do more with available data is simply a matter of time. How have you seen systems deal with this issue? How have they found a space in their day to do more with the data that exists?

Kevin Dwyer: Time is one of the most valued resources that we sometimes overlook. We put more and more responsibilities on school staff without thinking about how they are utilized. Think about a nine week time period for which report cards come out . . . things like that. If you plug into utilizing that--as in setting aside time to look through your data sets at those times to begin with (I would suggest two or three people do that) and what we have done is to have a small group of people look at the data sets for example on discipline referrals. To look at data sets on the number of kids that are being referred to student support teams, for example, and begin to then analyze those data and keep it as a priority. I know this is hard to say, but if you have an administrator involved you have a higher chance of success than if you turn the task over to one individual, a counselor or somebody. The value of the information is in terms that it serves as our internal report card that we should take the time to use on a regular basis. Otherwise, why are we gathering the data in the first place if we are not going to analyze it?

Q4. Can you talk for a minute about the importance of cross training and school climate for roles such as teachers, academic coaches and other staff?

Kevin Dwyer: That is part of the Holy Grail as far as I am concerned in terms of training. Training should be done across professions as much as possible and co-trainers should very frequently include representatives from those being trained. If you have a person coaching five schools on a certain skill. If they are developing skills within the teaching staff of each school, they should have a teacher from each school serve as a co-trainer with them to reinforce those skills in their interactions with the kids. So it is really those kinds of co-leading that are important. We have been doing this in some sites, such as having security people, school psychologist, counselors, social workers, and others getting training together and by doing that they learn so much from each other about how to reinforce the skills to improve the school climate.

Q5. Can you discuss how schools are addressing the top of the pyramid (i.e., intensive interventions) in days of extreme funding?

Kevin Dwyer: In systems, and the urban systems in particular, I've been involved in, they have fairly good relationships with the community agencies. In any urban district with high poverty levels, Medicaid money is utilized to support these services and I suspect that about, I am making a guess, 60% of the cost and those intensive services is covered by Medicaid or other similar dollars, CHIP dollars or other dollars like that. It's not an impossible task, and in situations where you don't have a large population that can benefit from Medicaid then it's going to have to come through some other resources and the most intensive interventions particularly the marriage of

mental health and education and the urban districts.   For example, Cleveland has a mental health clinical agency attached to every school. So there are eight different agencies, each with an attachment to the schools. In the schools we are working with in New York, it's not in all the schools of course, but in many schools they use the public health dollars to provide that and money from United Givers. So there are resources available to support this kind of effort. Money is getting tighter right now. Another service model is to provide tutoring and different agencies in the community have been relatively successful providing afterschool programs to do so. There is some federal money also coming in for these kinds of programs through recent federal programs and the Department of Education, which is assisting in the academic component of that.

Q6. **Can you say more about the use of planning centers as an alternative to detentions? How are they structured and how do they differ from business as usual?**

Sandy Keenan: Kevin Dwyer and I have been part of the team in Cleveland that has been implementing planning centers as an alternative to in-school suspension programs and the planning center model is basically a center which is a space in a school building where a student can go to for emotional support, It's a place where they can pull off to resolve the conflict that they are having. They can get assistance with their schoolwork and work on any problem-solving skills with which they may be having difficulty in order to learn; and there is an adult there who is trained in managing behavior and providing emotional support and the staff helps students and families potentially access mental health support -- whether through community agency services or by making referrals to go to the student support team. These planning center staff identify problems the students are having and intervene early. Then they can work with students and teach them coping skills and problem solving skills and really manage some of that difficulty that the students may be having. What we have found is that by addressing these academic, emotional, and behavioral needs they are actually preventing crisis from occurring. They are able to de-escalate situations and prevent the escalation of inappropriate behavior to disrupt the classroom or the school. When it is combined with other programs like Kevin addressed in this session, we see results such as improved grades, improved achievement, improved attendance, fewer disciplinary referrals and it really does help create a more positive trusting learning environment that has a high academic behavioral expectations for all students. So certainly we would be happy to provide some more information about the planning center models with which we are working and the Cleveland contacts if participants have additional questions.

Q7. **With the goal of enhanced family engagement, can you provide an example of social emotional learning that would be tied to that enhanced family engagement?**

Kevin Dwyer: Many of our good social emotional learning programs provide materials for families to use and I know that has been successful. I have actually heard people say to me, "I have used this at home and it has helped me in terms of bedtime routine." And, "I have used this to help my son not become so angry when frustrated. He seems calmer." There is a connection and my feeling is, as we move into class meetings, we are going to get another vehicle as well as with the implementation of advisories where we want the advisers to be calling home twice every nine weeks. Those kinds of things are going to enable us to have more family involvement in our schools and I think the families will see this as an indication that we really care about their

children. We see them as our children and want their support. We don't have measures on this yet, but I do anticipate that that will happen.

Q8. **Do the school climate measurement instruments that are most commonly used assess the distinctive needs and issues of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth (LGBTQ)? Can you point us to instruments that include this population of at-risk students?**

Kevin Dwyer: We have set as an action item in Cleveland under cultural issues a LGBTQ plan and there are questions on some of the instruments that address these groups. We also address these groups in our bullying prevention training. I would also look at the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).

Q9. **When we discuss climate control, why do we not start with the base of the problems- the parents?**

Kevin Dwyer: There are examples of successful schools serving very stressed communities and families. I am unsure how defining the problem as parents (most of whom went to our schools) helps us determine what to do. We can make progress with families when we hear and help address their issues. Wraparound service models have changed disengaged families into involved families. Family liaisons, whom are trained and supervised to effectively reach out to and engage parents, have helped. Our mental health agencies have helped. If we provide the best educational environment that is safe and caring and produces academic and social skills we have achieved our goals. If our schools are the schools to which we would want to send our own children, we will succeed. I agree that we need to provide more support to families so they can be more effective partners in these efforts. Wishing for it or blaming failure on it does not make measured progress happen.

Q10. **What funding sources are your schools using for School Based Climate Teams?**

Kevin Dwyer: The funding is from a variety of sources. Some is from the school system in its own budget, budgeting for extra time, paying teachers so they can get the training they need after school. There is also funding coming from foundations and in some situations, (as in New York) there is funding coming from the United Givers fund. The funding is pooled and some funding is coming in from the US Department of Education in what is called School Improvement Grants (SIG). The funding streams are multiple, for example, in our intensive interventions we are using Medicaid money. So you have a lot of different sources for the plan.

Q11. **What top district and school staff positions support your initiatives?**

Kevin Dwyer: In two districts it has been supported by the Chief Executive (School Board and city mayor). The real day-to-day support comes from a central office executive committee under the direction of a chief academic officer or superintendent. The executive committee in Cleveland, for example, controls the multiple action items put in place such as the universal social skills curriculum

Q12. What type of data systems have you had experience within schools?

Kevin Dwyer: In Cleveland we are developing a series of measures that first of all they already use — they use a school climate survey which is part of the annual report card for each school. We developed a way to follow each individual student receiving interventions through our Student Support Team. We are also evaluating social skills training and implementation. I am not sure at this moment how that data system is being recorded, but I know that we know how many lessons each teacher has instructed and those kind of things, so we can make comparisons on the conditions of learning survey information between schools demonstrating fidelity and those not.

Sandy Keenan: There is a lot of data that schools are collecting in many different ways for state and federal reporting. It is more about deciding which data you are going to use and how you were going to use it and ways to collect and analyze it that are most beneficial.

Q13. Could you comment on how to bring into the school climate team families from diverse backgrounds who have much to contribute, but generally do not feel welcome or accommodated (as with translators)?

Kevin Dwyer: There are other people who are working in Cleveland that have more experience than I do on that. One of the things we are sure not to do is plop people into a team of highly educated people from the community without giving them support ahead of time. We would not have a single parent involved in a team, we need more than one representative. We may have a broader advisory team with a very significant number of family members on that team. It is important to meet with the families prior to putting them into a team to answer their questions, give them support and ways to present their ideas — give them ideas to help them understand their voice is the voice that needs to be heard. Professionals also need to know how to engage families. That does take a little preparation time and doing otherwise is unfair to the family representatives.

Q14. How did you go about convincing the leadership of the school district that there was a need to integrate social and emotional learning into academics, particularly in a low performing school?

Kevin Dwyer: That is not easy. I think the thing we have to do is help people at all levels to understand that if you teach social and emotional learning, you will have more instructional time available for academics. I think for example, a chief academic officer can get the understanding if we reach out to them with the right kind of data. If you improve the readiness to learn for kids, if you improve their respect and responsibility and their social skills, you're going to have less disruption in class and more instructional time. The instructional time as it increases should have the impact of improving academic scores. We have seen some academic growth in the settings in which we are working. That is a nice result to have. If you go back to social skills, you will be able to see that it does have an academic impact. Integrating these skills into and/or aligning with academics is something that most people in the academic world believe in.

Q15. **Will you provide some examples of good studies which link academics and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?**

Sandy Keenan: I would guide you back to our website. One of our first Webinars was one we did in February on school climate and measurement. At the end of that Webinar, there are about eight slides of citations and references that will give you everything you need linking academics and SEL.

Q16. **How do you show growth and what are you considering measures? It's very clear in academics but not so clear in climate other than the already mentioned.**

Kevin Dwyer: Climate measures are available on the Safe and Supportive Schools Web site. We use attendance, (including teacher attendance) tardiness, discipline referrals, grades, suspensions, crisis calls and special education referral rates as measures. For example, we see a significant drop in crisis incidences in primary grades where social skills have been taught for the longest period (2 semesters). Academic progress is moving in a positive direction.

Q17. **Are there specific adaptations for high schools?**

Kevin Dwyer: High schools are the most difficult to penetrate with social skills. However, there are many interventions that can be used in high schools including advisories that connect students with an identified staff person. Intensive interventions can be better implemented when you have effective Student Support Teams. Student trust results in more mental health interventions for students with emotional barriers to learning. We have seen that training staff in early warning signs helps expedite earlier referrals to services. Planning Centers are also having a positive impact on discipline. A description of Planning Centers (culture change from in-school suspension) is available on the Safe and Supportive Schools Web site. We also think that staff de-escalation training and properly supervised peer mediation can help. Refocusing staff to provide academic supports and counseling opportunities has also been implemented in high school.

Q18. **Do you see any detriment to the student support and intervention team and the school climate team being one and the same? Could you give an example of two items that would be on the agenda of the first meeting?**

Kevin Dwyer: The team is not the same but connecting core members serve on both teams. In other words, we want to have some of the same people on both teams, but the school climate team will have many more representatives on it. At least those three should be part of the school's climate/leadership team. The student support team that meets regularly (weekly) deals with individual students will have the people necessary to effectively address the student's problems. The core membership that should always be there. I don't want to leave the impression that it would be the makeup of the school climate team. It is core, what three people you need to enable the communication back and forth that is so seriously missing. When you're setting up a school climate team that involves all the stakeholders, how do you craft your meeting in a way that allows the maximum opportunity for each member to attend on a regular basis is critical.

We start with very frequent meetings. They are set for a specific amount of time and it is imperative that you hold the meetings to the time allotted, remember that a lot of work has to be done in-between meetings. If you do the work at the meeting itself, you will end up with meetings that last two or three hours. When you set an agenda early, you can have a one-hour meeting and get a lot of work done. It's really more the design of the meeting that is important. You may need workgroups, for example, finding the most compatible social emotional learning program or those kinds of things that will require looking at programs and seeing how they best fit into your school.

Q19. When setting up a climate team that involves ALL of the areas you listed in slide #36, how do you craft your meetings in a way that allows the maximum opportunity for each member to attend on a regular basis. Could you give an example of two items that should be on the agenda of the very first meeting?

Kevin Dwyer: We would want to talk about why are we here, what is our overall plan? We would set up housekeeping rules. What do we want to accomplish? I will let you know that in New York and in Cleveland, both of these processes started with a tragedy, 9/11 was the tragedy in New York. Lots of kids were left with mental health problems that were causing behavior problems in the classroom. In Cleveland it occurred with a school shooting. The start in both cases was a trauma, but you don't have to wait for a trauma. What we want to do is say why are we doing what we are doing? Everybody should be on the same page. If you improve the school climate, you're most likely to improve academic success. That is where you start. You begin to look at what we're going to do You may say we have 40 behavioral incidences a day in our school, you may want to start with that. How are we going to address this? We can address it by being punitive or preventative.

Q20. Several techniques are available, the trauma needs to be addressed and understood in order to develop effective teaching strategies, would you agree?

Kevin Dwyer: I'm not sure I fully understand the question. Regarding trauma, in some of our schools the student population may have a significant number of members who are experiencing peristent trauma in their lives. When we provide a safe and caring school we help them feel hopeful. When we teach them social skills about feelings they are more able to adapt and we are able to see where they are in terms of readiness for instructional engagement.

Q21. This sounds very similar to the way Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) works. Can you comment?

Kevin Dwyer: PBIS is one way to address positive behavior. Social skill training enables positive behavioral strategies to work. Remember it is the skills we need to be in place for respect and responsibility, without the skills we will not see progress.

Q22. **How does the community variables and parent or family variables, how do they impact the school's ability to provide positive school climate, but how are those potentially integrated?**

Kevin Dwyer: There are a couple of things that are going on. First of all, whatever the community is, the families are sending the best kids they have to our schools and it is our job to help those kids be successful and give them the kind of support that they may not have in their community because of the stress of poverty. Poverty is an overwhelming stressor. One of the things we do in our programs is we have an outreach to families through a family liaison whom we have worked with and trained. Those family liaisons can communicate with the family and draw them in. The other thing is, we have handouts in relation to our social skills program that go to the families. We actually have workshops for families willing to come into the schools on the social skills programs we are using. That is all part of this. Reaching out to families and making sure that decision-making teams in your school and your climate team have family representation. Family representation has to have the support it needs in order to be a strong voice.

Q23. **Please mention some of the key components of that training and what you found to be most successful?**

Kevin Dwyer: Our de-escalation training is done in partnership with one of our community agencies. They have trained the people in the schools. It helps people look at, for example, when a student is having an outburst, you don't get into their face. You give them some space and you show a caring concern for them; you utilize the language that helps support their calming down. Your second step would be to connect with them on what alternatives they could've tried in that situation when it may come up again. It is based on the conflict cycle and finding out where they are in the conflict situation. Is this a response to environmental stress, or to an emotional situation? Is there a trigger you can identify to help that youngster understand what to look for? It is literally helping people listen to youngsters and to get at what is behind the behavior they are engaged in. We have been very successful with this effort and staff like this training.