School Climate, the Brain and Connection to School

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"What we have found from our research is that kids who felt connected to school . . . smoked less, drank alcohol less, had a later age of sexual debut and attempted suicide less. On top of this, from the educational literature, they do better across every academic measure we have. As our research expanded, [we learned that] this is not just an association—kids who smoke less also felt more connected to school. It is a causal relationship. There is something in that bond, in that connection to school that changes the life trajectory—at least the health and academic behavior. It is very powerful—second only to parents in power. In some contexts it's more powerful than parents."

Robert Blum, professor and chair,
Department of Population and Family Health Sciences,
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

School Climate

Within moments of entering a school building, we develop a "feel" for a school. How a school "feels" is influenced by a myriad of small and seemingly unimportant things. As you look around at the walls, what do you see? Are there displays of student work? Inspiring slogans on the walls? Posters announcing upcoming community and school events? Or, are the walls stark and bare except for a long list of Rules of Conduct—each beginning with the word, "Don't"? How do students and staff respond to you as you walk down the hallway? Are you greeted with a smile? Do students and staff show interest in who you are and ask if you need help getting to your destination? Or, do they walk silently by without acknowledging your presence, trying to avoid eye contact with you.

This "feel" we experience is indicative of the school's climate. School climate has a direct effect on whether or not a student will develop a positive connection to school, which in turn protects against a wide range of risk factors in students' lives. Students who are connected to school are *less* likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors (including drug and alcohol abuse and early sexual activity) and are *more* likely to be more successful academically and graduate from high school. The Wingspread Declaration (http://www.jhsph.edu/bin/s/q/Septemberissue.pdf) demonstrates that connection to school is crucial for a safe school environment and positive relationships build this connection. Connection to school by sixth grade is a protective factor that lasts throughout high school for the connected individual.

We Respond to the Social Environment

Have you ever noticed how your mood can be influenced by others around you? Even though we might enter a room feeling pretty neutral emotionally, if the room is filled with people who are cheerful and laughing, we are more likely to feel upbeat and happy. Similarly, if we enter a room full of people who are sad or tense our mood is likely to shift to match the prevailing mood in the room. We become emotionally responsive to the affect of the people around us. This emotional responsiveness is known as "affective resonance."

Emotional responsiveness is initially developed in the first year of life through attuned, reciprocal relationships developed with adult caretakers. We learn this emotional attunement and reciprocity from thousands of give and take, face-to-face interactions with those around us. This creates the neural patterning for future relational skills that enable us to sense if an environment or person is attuned to our needs, helps develop empathy and teaches us to sense when we may be violating social norms.

The Brain Automatically Assesses Situational Safety

Our brain automatically evaluates the safety of a situation and activates the nervous system to respond with either a sense of open receptivity (reflective state of mind) or "fight, flight, or freeze" (reactive state of mind). In a reflective state of mind we are in a state of relaxed alertness and emotional calmness. The brain is in an optimal state for learning. In a reactive state of mind the brain becomes vigilant for threat, cognitive functions are depressed and learning and memory are impaired. When we are reactive, we revert to primitive behaviors without flexibility or compassion. We act impulsively and lose the ability to balance our emotions, and fail to exert moral reasoning*. (Siegal, Mindsight p.258)

When we feel attunement and trust, we stay in that relationship and respond reciprocally. When we sense non-attunement, our brain is triggered to a state of vigilance and we scan the environment for danger. The brain chemistry of this reaction depresses our abilities to process and remember information unrelated to the issue of safety until the brain is satisfied that the danger is past. The greater the perceived threat, the more intense is the brain's stress response. The more the brain has to focus on getting back to safety, the less capacity there is for learning and remembering academic material.

Partial responsibility for the auto-assessment of social situations rests with mirror neurons. The socially based mirror neuron system enables us to create "maps of intention". That is, in a social setting our mind maps the intentions of others. Based upon prior experience, the brain predicts what is coming next. This has tremendous survival value for us as a socially complex species. We take in other's movements and expressions, anticipate the implications of their motor actions (including facial expressions and body language) and anticipate what will happen next. This enables our brain to prepare for an appropriate response. Every school has a climate and culture that creates in each student a set of expectations based on prior experiences that unconsciously produces either a reactive or reflective state of mind. This is the effect of the "affective resonance" of a school.

Affective Resonance and Connection to School

We hear about school climate and school culture, but affective resonance? Human neurology is set up to respond to the emotional atmosphere of the social environment, its "affective resonance." What does this have to do with school climate? Everything! School climate is a reflection of the affective resonance of a school. It is how an individual feels walking in the door of your school. Each individual has his or her own experience of a school's climate. Is this school a safe place for me? Am I treated with respect and acceptance here? Will I be treated fairly? Do I have close relationships here? These are big issues for each student and are key factors in developing feelings of connection to school. Students' emotional experience at school each day produces for them an emotional response to walking in the door of school and a personal response to the affective resonance they perceive. Affective resonance has the power to increase or decrease students' feelings of connection to school depending on whether it creates a receptive or reactive state of mind in the student.

American Culture Affects School Culture

It's also important to note that school culture ("the way we do things here") is often influenced by the larger culture of the community and the country. When we examine the models that are shaping the attitudes and behaviors of our students, we don't have to look far to identify aspects of American culture that, if allowed to become part of our school culture, can seriously and negatively affect school climate. Some of these cognitive constructs include:

- "Us and them" thinking, demonizing the "other" side. You are my friend or my enemy, and there is no middle ground. Moderation is portrayed as weakness. Perceiving a group as

"other" is a step toward creating hatred for them. Next comes justifying violence toward the "other".

- Revenge as legitimatizing violence. If you are my enemy then I can attack you.
- Unity at the cost of diversity. Seeing sameness (white, heterosexual, Christian majority) as unifying and representing a social "norm," and anything different as a threat or danger. This is currently being demonstrated through the media on the issues of immigration, homosexual marriage and the proposed Islamic center near ground zero in New York City.
- Stereotypes and bias. Models are pervasive in television, movies, magazines and video games.
- Sarcasm and abusive language. Television characters are often seen being mean to each other with a laugh track as background.
- Inappropriate models for dating relationships and family roles. Sexualized adolescent behavior and dress are pervasive in media. Often children are portrayed as more mature and smarter than their parents. Mother often has to look out for dad because he is a buffoon. Children in television and movies routinely use derisive sarcasm toward their parents and peers without any consequences.
- Persistent denial and blame as a way to avoid taking responsibility and accountability for one's actions. The cognitive process modeled here seems to be, "If I deny it vehemently enough for long enough it will go away" and/or "He made me do it." The thinking is that someone else's action "justifies" the unacceptable behavior and therefore absolves the actor of any responsibility.

The pervasiveness of these negative messages in all forms of media is distressing. The latest media usage data from the Kaiser Family Foundation says that eight to eighteen year olds are engaged with media including television, video games, movies, computer, music/audio and print for more than seven hours a day. This study does not include time texting on cell phones. This number climbs to more than ten hours a day if you count multi-tasking on different platforms, like doing homework while watching TV or listening to music. That's a lot of exposure to ideas, that when repeated over time through several different mediums, change students' attitudes and behaviors dramatically. Exposure to these messages often happens in a environment that is socially reinforcing and enjoyable, like watching TV with an older sibling, eating a favorite snack and laughing at the inappropriate models and language on the TV. These positive environmental influences add to the impact of media norms. The models seen in the media are rarely, if ever, questioned for validity or appropriateness by the young people watching them.

How to Counter Negative Media Models

Cultural attitudes and behaviors derived from American culture will dominate our school culture as social norms unless we consistently model the behaviors and attitudes we want from our students, proactively, on a daily basis. Countering these negative cultural models will require planning and persistent action by adults at school in the following ways.

- We can begin by engaging the natural curiosity that students have about their brain and how it works. Teaching students how the brain learns and the importance of effort and learning from mistakes will improve individual self-efficacy.
- We can model a "zero indifference" attitude for language that is derogatory, racist, sexist, homophobic, or stereotyping by questioning students in a non-hostile manner about the effects of such language on others, even when there seems to be no hostile intention.
- We can help students learn to think critically about generalizations and stereotypes presented by the media by teaching them how to deconstruct the messages presented to

them. Building media literacy with students will give them a greater understanding of how information influences attitudes and how attitudes drive behavior.

- We can discuss with students how advertising works to target and control our beliefs about masculinity, femininity, sex roles, our bodies, race, relationships, etc. This can help students develop a sense of control over their choices.
- We can engage with students in projects creating media to promote pro-social change in our school and community, thus fostering connectedness to both.

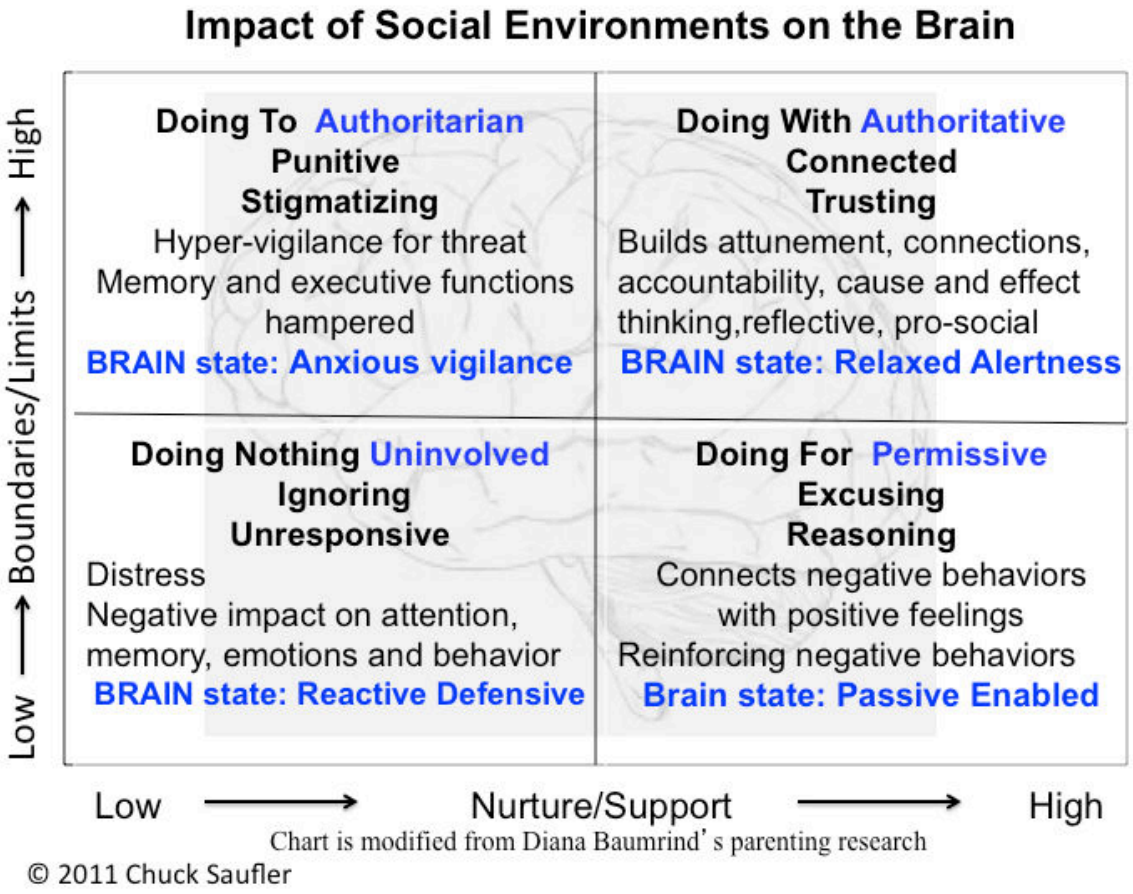
This process should include addressing peer norms through student surveys and focus groups. All of these processes will help students to think critically about their attitudes and beliefs, and to examine the origins and validity of those norms. This can be the beginning of a process that engages students in planning and empowers them as social activists to change the peer norms at school. A restorative approach, which I explain in more detail below, supports this work; builds understanding, trust and respect; and improves student connection to peers, adults and school. It is up to us to intentionally create a positive school climate and culture every day, in order to foster a safe, welcoming and relational school that promotes academic achievement, personal growth and connection to school.

Brain Research Supports a Restorative Approach

There exists a large body of evidence in the brain research field showing that attention, motivation and learning are driven and guided by emotion. These concepts apply not only to academics but also to students learning new patterns of behavior. Response To Intervention (RTI) has raised awareness for schools of the necessity to include tier one interventions that address academic learning as well as social and emotional development, sometimes referred to as “relational literacy.” Adopting a restorative approach strongly supports teaching and practicing the skills of relational literacy. A fundamental principle of the restorative approach is that relationships are central to learning and development. In a restorative school, all adults model this principle in their interactions with students **and** each other. The restorative approach focuses on **how** we act in relationships, address problems, manage discipline and resolve conflict. When we rely on genuine curiosity, empathy and caring, we help students learn and improve relational skills, while also improving their connection with us and to school.

The fundamental hypothesis in taking a restorative approach to school climate and culture is that students are happier, more cooperative, achieve more academically, and are more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than do things *to* them or *for* them. This hypothesis is supported by brain research on stress, motivation, learning, and memory explained in the following section. One of the most common questions asked by principals is, ”How do we get buy-in from the staff? They are so focused on academic outcomes that they feel they don’t have time to deal with climate or behavioral issues”. One approach to getting buy-in from staff is to address the brain research showing the effects of different school environments.

The following chart illustrates the impact of school climate on the brain by cross-referencing school environments with low to high boundaries and limits with low to high nurturance and support.



Low Structure and Low Support

As shown in the chart above, providing low structure and low support in an uninvolved school climate produces an environment unsupportive of developing caring relationships. Negative emotions like fear produce trigger a reactive and defensive state in the brain. In a school where this is the cultural norm students can become depressed and hyper-vigilant regarding their own safety, which reduces their ability to develop close relationships, focus on academics, and remember material learned in class. Forming a positive connection to school is very difficult in this environment.

Low Structure and High Support

The low structure and high support *permissive* school climate is characterized by adults who, upon seeing a student break a rule, respond by telling the student what they did wrong, why it was wrong, how it affected other people, what to do the next time instead, and then giving a warning that next time there will be a consequence. The adult does all the work concerning the student's misbehavior while the student waits for the adult to finish and then goes on his/her way. Because students are passive observers in these situations, they do not engage in cognitive reflection on their behavior or its effects on others. This type of adult-student interaction relieves the students of any responsibility for their own behavior and keeps them from developing and practicing alternative positive behaviors. This creates a passive and enabled brain state. Misbehavior is relatively easy in this environment because there is no accountability. Negative behaviors produce good feelings for students, which reinforce the behavior as positive and something to repeat in the future.

High Structure and Low Support

The high structure and low support *authoritarian* climate is characterized by adults who use an authoritarian style. Adults blame and stigmatize "rule breakers," making it difficult for them to make pro-social changes. This type of school climate often produces a distress response from students. In this climate, executive and memory functions are dampened, leading to negative effects on learning and behavior. The human brain in this environment tends toward a state of anxious vigilance. Students must use part of their brain to constantly scan for threats in the environment, which contributes to fewer social connections and lower academic achievement.

High Structure and High Support

The high structure and high support *authoritative* climate engages students co-operatively and collaboratively. The human brain in this environment is in a calm and attentive state and is capable of reflective thought. When misbehavior is handled with a positive toned restorative discussion with students, empathy for others and taking responsibility for one's own behavior become positive actions to be repeated. Trust is built with adults and the connection to school as a positive institution is improved. This environment creates optimal learning conditions in the brain.

Connection to School is Important

The Wingspread Declaration and supporting research has clearly demonstrated the importance of connection and bonding to school. A restorative approach sets and maintains a positive social environment even in times of stress or conflict. Students seeking connection will find it easier to establish connections in a school with a positive affective resonance. Adults who are consistently proactive in modeling a positive emotional tone and responding quickly and effectively to situations of peer aggression ensure students of a safe environment. School climate affects everyone.

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