



**N E L S O N  
C O L L E G E**

## **PRINCIPAL SABBATICAL REPORT**

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Term 1 2013**

**Defining school climate and examining its importance in maximising positive student outcomes.**

**How effective are school programmes and initiatives in promoting and reinforcing a school climate based on positive, open and supportive relationships between teachers/ students and students/students?**

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Nelson College Board of Trustees for their support for this Principals Sabbatical and the Ministry of Education and the PPTA for the provision of such Sabbaticals within the PPTA Secondary Principals Collective.

I would also like to thank my Deputy Principal Tim Tucker and the Senior Leadership team of Ron Kelly, John Prestidge and Brian Hore for leading and guiding the College so well in my absence.

During the Term I visited a number of schools in both the North and South Island and I am very grateful for the time and support given to me by those schools in completing this study.

## **Executive Summary**

The schools chosen were high performing schools with ERO reviews indicating strong processes around strategic self-review and continuous improvement.

In preparation for my visit I provided schools with the two research questions:-

1. What events, rituals, policies, processes, and procedures do you have in place to integrate inform and bring your new Year 9 cohort into your school culture?
2. How would you define that culture and do you have any tools to measure how effective your school culture is in producing a positive school climate?

It was clear that few schools if any had survey/research tools which allowed them to measure school climate in a reliable and valid way.

Without a reliable and valid tool it was therefore difficult to objectively establish whether the events, rituals, policies, processes, and procedures they had in place for incoming Year 9s were effective in integrating their Year 9s into a positive school culture supporting a positive school climate.

In response to an identified need I selected a school climate survey tool which was taken from a school improvement research document '9 Characteristics of High Performing Schools' 2003 by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington.

The survey was completed by 780 year 9 students toward the end of their first Term of their High school education.

The results of the survey were collated and the Nelson College results were compared and contrasted with those from other schools.

What was very clear was the significant similarity of responses from Year 9 students irrespective of what school culture they had experienced in their first 8 weeks of secondary education.

The survey results and the importance of school climate have been highlighted during this brief study and I would encourage all schools to look at their school culture and climate and seek to measure it and hence improve student outcomes.

## **Purpose**

Nelson College is New Zealand's first state secondary school founded in 1856.

A school of 1200 boys of which 180 are boarders with a private attached Preparatory school of 120. In 2012 the ERO review of the College earned it a 4-5 year cycle for future reviews. The review identified significant areas of strength in a variety of core areas and few areas of deficiency.

The College had already self-identified the importance of school climate and culture in establishing and maximizing the educational potential of every boy.

What was lacking was an appropriate tool to measure school climate and to then establish strategies to improve that climate and hence improve student outcomes.

A reliable and valid survey/tool should and would provide objective data to better inform the future allocation of human and physical resources to ensuring that a positive school climate was achieved and then sustained.

## Definitions

- School Climate is the quality and the characteristics of school life, which includes the availability of supports for teaching and learning.
- School Culture refers to shared beliefs, customs, and behaviours which support School Climate.

## Literature review

In examining the current research on 'school climate' and 'school culture' it is clear that there is a large body of evidence which is compelling and when examined should lead all schools to seek ways to assess their school climate and then to find ways to improve that climate in order to maximise student outcomes.

In examining the research on school climate there are five contributing areas of focus to be considered:

1. Safety (e.g. physical safety; social-emotional safety)
2. Rules and Norms (eg accepted boundaries and consequences)
3. Relationships (e.g. respect for diversity; school connectedness/engagement; social support; leadership);
4. Teaching and Learning (e.g. social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; support for academic learning; support for professional relationships);
5. Institutional Environment (e.g. physical surrounding)

## Safety

Emotional and physical safety is at the core of a positive school climate, without it every other expressed student outcome is meaningless and every goal set by a school is fundamentally ineffectual.

Feeling safe in school powerfully promotes student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

For a student to feel 'safe' a school needs to establish a culture which is proactive and identifies the cultural norms which allows 'safety' to prosper. If schools are without supportive norms and relationships, students are more likely to experience violence, peer-victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions, often accompanied by high levels of absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010.)

Bullying in all of its forms, both simple and complex is, if measured appropriately using a school climate survey, a clear indicator of whether a school culture truly supports a 'safe' school climate.

When students bully and/or are victimized repeatedly, it dramatically increases the likelihood that they will develop significant psychosocial problems over time (Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000).

Bullying also seems to adversely affect the witnesses as well as illustrated by a recent study of more than 2,000 students (ages 12 to 16) which found that those who witnessed bullying reported more feelings of depression, anxiety, hostility and inferiority than either the bullies or victims themselves (Rivers, Poterat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009).

## **Rules and Norms**

Current research identifies and emphasises the importance of school rules and perceived fairness in regard to dealing with students' behaviour.

One of the most important explicit or implicit norms in schools relates to "witness-related" behaviours ie being a passive bystander who, knowingly or not, colludes with and supports a bully-victim culture.

Schools must proactively create a culture which converts the passive 'bystander' to bullying behaviour to an 'upstander' who is able to intervene and prevent the bullying.

Rules play a vital part in providing those clear boundaries and parameters and also in establishing explicit and fair consequences for breaching those accepted rules.

## **Relationships**

The process of teaching and learning is fundamentally relational. The patterns of norms, goals, values and interactions that shape relationships in schools provide an essential area of school climate. One of the most important aspects of relationships in school is how connected people feel to one another. From a psychological point of view, relationships refer not only to relations with others but relations with ourselves – how we feel about and take care of ourselves.

Research has also shown that in schools where students perceive a better structured and school discipline and more positive student-teacher relationships, there are lower associations with the "probability and frequency of subsequent behavioural problems" (Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak, 2010; )

In summary, safe, caring, participatory and responsive school climates tend to foster a greater attachment to school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional and academic learning for middle schools and high school students (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002).

## **Teaching and Learning**

Teaching and learning represents one of the most important dimensions of school climate. School leaders and teachers should strive to clearly define the sets of norms, goals, and values that shape the learning and teaching environment. Research supports the notion that a positive school climate promotes students' abilities to learn.

## **Social, Emotional, & Civic Education**

Education has dimensions which are social, emotional, civic, and ethical as well as intellectual, intentionally or not. The purposes of education are not merely to 'train and certificate' but to provide opportunities for adolescents to self-discover and to develop holistically as human beings.

Evidence-based socio-moral emotional learning programs have resulted in impressive gains in achievement test scores and in increasing the academic emphasis of elementary and middle school students Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, (2009).

## **Service Learning**

Building relationships beyond the narrow age specific nature of a school experience is a vital component in providing a full and holistic education. The participation in such

programmes outside of the school community brings significant benefits in developing a positive school climate.

Implementing learning activities beyond the classroom is an effective way to incorporate civic education into a school and these activities, in turn, promote student learning. Encouraging active and collaborative learning through authentic projects is most effective in an environment with a civic mission that encourages trusting relationships between all members of the school community (Carnegie Corporation of New York & Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Education, 2003).

## **Institutional Environment**

Institutional environment, can be broadly categorized in two aspects;

- i) school connectedness/engagement.
- ii) physical surroundings of a school.

School connectedness can be defined as “the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.”

There is a growing body of research that suggests that school connectedness is a powerful predictor of and/or is associated with adolescent health and academic outcomes (Whitlock, 2006.) Studies also show that school connectedness is associated with violence prevention, and student satisfaction. Moreover, school climate research indicates that school connectedness is a protective factor against risky sexual, violence and drug use behaviors (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterie, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004;

## **Summary**

A positive school climate:

- (i) not only contributes to immediate student achievement, but its effect seems to persist for years (Hoy, Hannum & Tschannen-Moran, 1998).
- (ii) has a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al, 1993)
- (iii) mitigates the negative impact of the socioeconomic context on academic success (Eccles et al, 1993)
- (iv) is linked to lower levels of drug use as well as less selfreports of psychiatric problems among high school students (LaRusso et al., 2008).
- (v) produces lower associations with the “probability and frequency of subsequent behaviour problems” (Wang, Selman, Dishion & Stormshak, 2010; Gregory & Cornell, 2009).
- (vi) contributes to less aggression and violence (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih & Huang, 2010; less harassment (Kosciw & Elizabeth, 2006; Blaya, 2006)
- (vii) is associated with and/or predictive of positive child and youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention. (Jennings 2009)

- (viii) promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust. These particular aspects have been shown to directly improve the learning environment (Ghaith, 2003; Kerr, Ireland, Lopes, Craig & Cleaver, 2004).
- (ix) is correlated with decreased student absenteeism (Rumberger, 1987; Sommer, 1985) and with lower rates of student suspension in high school (Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011).

## Methodology

The research process used in administering the school climate survey was as follows:-

- All surveys were done in a pastoral care time. (eg a morning or afternoon form class or homeroom period).
- All surveys were done in or around week 8 of Term one 2013.
- All surveys were completed 'pen & paper'
- Total numbers surveyed Nelson College – 205 boys
- Total numbers surveyed from other schools – 574 students

The results of the survey were collated in two groups.

Group one was the 205 Year 9 student results for Nelson College. Group two was the 574 Year 9 student results for the other schools.

## Findings

### Sample Results

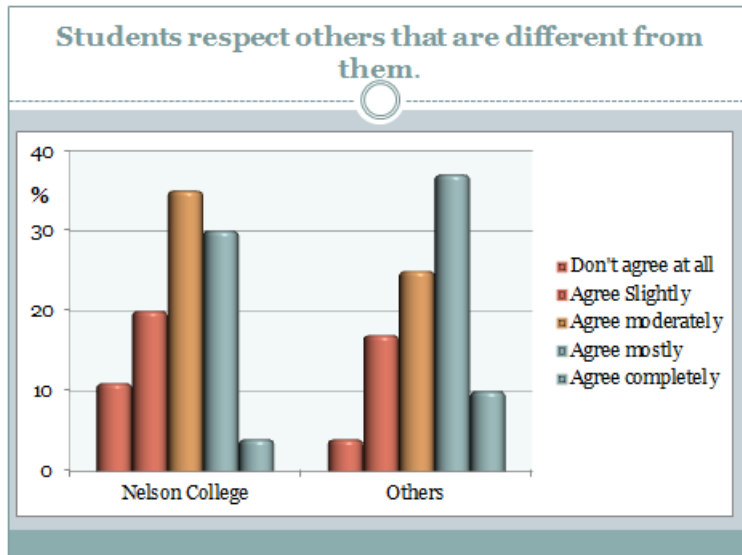
<b>Total – Other schools - 574</b>	Don't Know	Don't agree at all	Agree Slightly	Agree moderately	Agree mostly	Agree completely
My School has goals that students understand	44	0	28	110	272	120
The main purpose of my school is to help students learn	4	4	8	68	234	256
Teachers make it clear what I am supposed to learn	2	4	38	158	262	110

<b>Total –Nelson College - 205</b>	Don't Know	Don't agree at all	Agree Slightly	Agree moderately	Agree mostly	Agree completely
My School has goals that students understand	18	0	20	45	97	25
The main purpose of my school is to help students learn	0	5	8	25	67	100
Teachers make it clear what I am supposed to learn	3	3	15	40	115	29

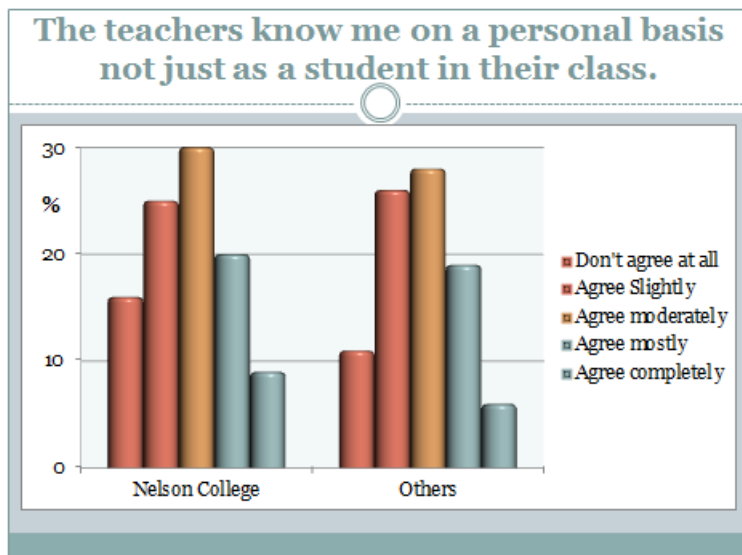
The raw results were converted to percentages and the responses to key school climate questions.

The following school climate questions were chosen as of being of particular importance and interest to the future development of Nelson College and comparisons are detailed below:-

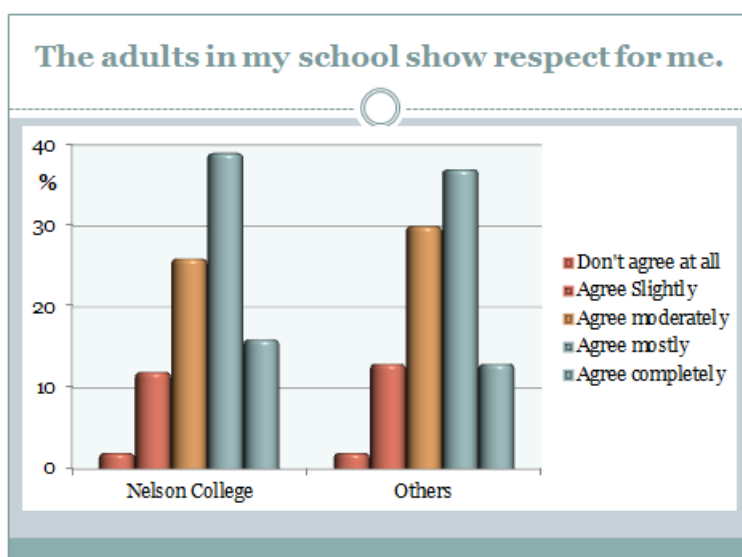
- a) Students respect others that are different from them.



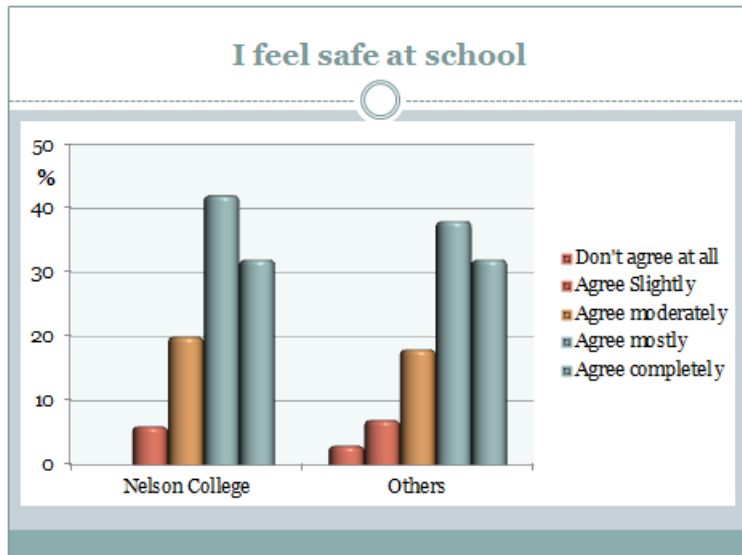
b) The teachers know me on a personal basis not just as a student in their class.



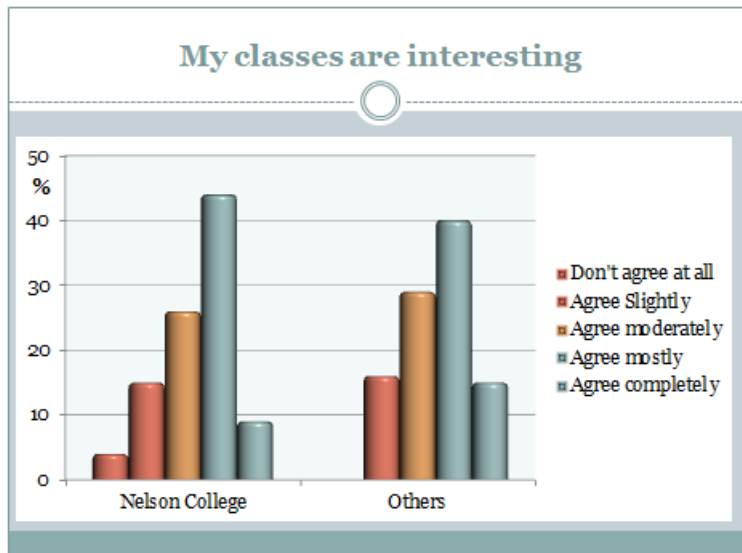
c) The adults in my school show respect for me.



d) I feel safe at school.



e) My classes are interesting



The results provide us with base data which allows the College to examine its culture and how this can be developed and used to improve school climate and through that student outcomes.

### The Future –

School climate assessment can and should be used at a variety of points during a students' transition through their High School experience. Such points could include:-

- At their assessment testing as Year 8s prior to entry.
- Early in their first year at High School.
- At intervals throughout their High School years.

A student survey should be used in conjunction with a teaching staff and parent survey of school climate and culture to inform and lead the discussion on a schools future strategic direction.



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## APPENDIX ONE

This survey relates to various qualities of your school.

Please respond honestly to each statement below — your responses will remain confidential.

This survey should take you about 10 minutes to complete.

It uses a 5-point scale, with **1** meaning you “don’t agree at all” with the statement, and **5** meaning you “agree completely.”

Mark one number for each statement.

How much do you agree with this statement?	Don't Know	Don't agree at all	Agree slightly	Agree moderately	Agree mostly	Agree completely
My school has goals that students understand.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The main purpose of my school is to help students learn.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers make it clear what I am supposed to learn.	X	1	2	3	4	5
I know why it is important for me to learn what is being taught.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My classes challenge me to think and solve problems.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers expect all students to work hard	X	1	2	3	4	5
My classes are interesting.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers give me challenging work.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers make learning interesting by teaching in different ways.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Students feel free to express their ideas and opinions.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers help me when I don't understand something.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers give students extra help if it is needed.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers encourage me.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Students are given many chances to show what they have learnt.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Tests are related to the material and ideas we are supposed to learn.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Achievement grades are given in a fair manner.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Discipline problems are handled fairly.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers are constantly trying to be better teachers.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The adults in my school work well together.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers know me on a personal basis, not just as a student in their class.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The adults in my school show respect for me.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Students respect those who are different from them.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The teachers and other adults in my school show respect for each other.	X	1	2	3	4	5
I feel safe when I am at school.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Students have many chances to participate in school activities (eg sports and clubs)	X	1	2	3	4	5
The school environment makes it easy to learn.	X	1	2	3	4	5
The adults who work at my school care about all students not just a few.	X	1	2	3	4	5
My teachers will contact my family if I am having problems with learning.	X	1	2	3	4	5
Many parents and adults from the community help with school activities.	X	1	2	3	4	5