

# **SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION CLIMATE ASSESSMENT**

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Schools play a critical role in the development of academic abilities of young people. Schools also serve as places that assist students in developing an understanding of society and commitment to political and civic engagement. In this role, schools can help foster the knowledge, skills and dispositions that young people need to develop into politically aware and socially responsible individuals (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004). This process is sometimes referred to as the civic education or civic learning of students, but it is advantageous to frame these concepts broadly in ways that go beyond courses labeled "civics" and even courses that tacitly address civic concerns. In today's educational and political climate, civic learning will continue to remain on the margins unless it is incorporated into districts and states accountability systems. This resource provides practitioners and policymakers with a vehicle for student- and school-wide climate assessment to help meet this need.

School climate contributing to citizenship education includes explicit curricular emphasis on civic-related topics and an array of co-curricular activities existing in most schools. School climate also includes the in-school support for community-based learning experiences. However, it is also vital to include the implicit climate of schooling (at the classroom and school levels) because sometimes teachers and students perceive symbolic and other non-observable elements of the classroom or school's climate without necessarily being able to describe them clearly. (See Section 1 for a definition of school climate.)

A positive school climate is crucial for the development of competent, responsible and capable citizens. Along with the creation of pathways for academic development, positive school and classroom climate has the potential to assist in citizenship development to ensure continuation of a strong and healthy democratic society. The threefold purpose of this School Citizenship Climate Assessment is to focus attention on this often neglected dimension of civic learning; provide members of the school community with a self-assessment tool focused on relevant characteristics of positive school and classroom climate; and enable those members to develop workable strategies to increase and sustain policies and practices for school community members in order to enhance students' knowledge, skills and dispositions relating to competent citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Civic Mission of School campaign defines these competency descriptors as: "Civic content includes both core knowledge and the ability to apply knowledge to different circumstances and settings. Civic skills encompass knowing how to identify, assess, interpret, describe, analyze, and explain matters of concern in civic life; and knowing how to cope in groups and organizational settings, interface with elected officials and community representatives, communicate perspectives and arguments, and plan strategically for civic change. Civic dispositions encompass interpersonal and intrapersonal values, virtues, and behaviors." (Civic Mission of Schools, 2005)

## **ORGANIZATION OF DOCUMENT**

This document is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of our interpretation of school climate, including definition of the term and its key characteristics. Distinguished from another useful term, school culture, we focus on those aspects of both whole-school climate and within-classroom climate that previous research suggests are most relevant to the development of citizenship.

The second section offers a framework for the assessment instrument. The framework is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the elements within each key characteristic. It also clarifies the importance of utilizing the scales as comprehensive tools, rather than presenting a menu where items are organized in a piecemeal fashion. The third section provides a draft version of the assessment instrument. Suggestions for scales and for items are included in those scales.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of school climate, the assessment instrument is intended for use by all members of the school community through a collaborative process. Using these multiple lens will enable students, teachers, administrators and others to gain a richer perspective on the relationship between school climate and students' understanding of their community and government, as well as political or civic engagement.

### **SECTION ONE: OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL CLIMATE**

To clarify the meaning of positive school climate and its relationship to citizenship education it is important to define our use of the term. This is necessary because of the interrelated but differing concepts of school climate and school culture, and their ramifications for this work. We build on the explanation by providing a short list of the key school climate characteristics. The content of this list is developed in section two. Its purpose is to serve as the framework for the presentation of the categories and subcategories of the school climate assessment instrument in section three.

#### **Understanding School Climate**

School climate refers to the impressions, beliefs, and expectations held by members of the school community about their school as a learning environment, their associated behavior, and the symbols and institutions that represent the patterned expressions of the behavior. It includes the explicit mission and policies expected to create positive relationships, attitudes or dispositions and perceptions. The formation of a positive school climate for civic involvement requires the shared recognition and commitment of the school community members—the student learner as a prime focus, the need for intellectual and institutional leadership by the school administration, and the need for a competent and caring teaching staff who share common goals with students, parents, and the community. A positive school climate includes an identifiable, open and nurturing school ethos that attempts to foster a sense of responsibility and efficacy among students and staff. There is mutual respect and collaboration among administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community. Above all, there is an atmosphere of conscious commitment to foster the well-being, academic achievement and civic development of students.

At the outset we must distinguish between the terms school climate and school culture. School culture is the broader term. While we will discuss elements of school culture, such as values,

traditions, and rituals, they are only part of this work. Rather, our primary purpose is to identify those characteristics of school climate that support understanding government and society, as well as political and civic engagement through citizenship education.

Another advantage of using the term "climate" is the possibility to use categories that may be meaningful to educators and students that build upon commonly understood aspects of climate understood in the context of weather. A "sunny" school climate is positive and has high levels of trust, clear visibility of the direction taken, and possibility for steady progress. A "partly sunny" climate has patches of difficulty to be overcome, but generally a sunny outlook. In a "cold but clear" climate there may be agreement on what is needed but a lack of trust and difficulty in moving ahead. A "slippery" climate has unseen hazards.

A variety of factors contribute to the establishment of a school climate. These include external factors (particularly characteristics of the larger community of which the school is part); public policies (of state government, school district, and possibly local government); and the history of the school, its culture, administrative leadership, the preparation and characteristics of the teaching staff, and the students themselves. When we talk specifically about assessment in section three several of these formative influences will be discussed in detail.

### **Key Characteristics of Positive School Climate**

The School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment identifies elements that we believe are the key characteristics related to an education for responsible citizenship. These broad characteristics serve as a basis for 1) development of the citizenship assessment framework and 2) the presentation of actual scales and items related to school climate in relation to students' competency to understand society and their political and civic engagement.

#### ***A positive climate for citizenship education in schools and classrooms is characterized by:***

1. Official recognition and community acceptance of the civic purpose of education that is communicated to all teachers, students and administrators
2. Meaningful learning of civic-related knowledge that builds on and enhances academic and participation skills
3. Cooperation and collaboration in approaching civic-related learning and problem-solving
4. Mutual trust and positive interactions among diverse students, faculty and administrators
5. Students' input in planning and skills in participatory problem-solving that is valued
6. Deliberation and dialogue about issues that are thoughtful and respectful
7. Engagement within the school community and commitment to learn about and interact with the broader community

The Civic Mission of Schools report identifies six promising approaches to fostering students' civic learning and building positive civic climates within school communities. These six promising practices include 1) instruction in government, history, law and democracy; 2) guided discussion of current local, national, and international civic and social issues, particularly those that young people

view as important to their lives; 3) active learning experiences that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through experiences such as service-learning; 4) civic-related extracurricular activities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities; 5) participation in school governance; and 6) participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures. These approaches are most successful when educators adopt instructional methods that integrate civic learning into the curriculum allowing students' to build on past understandings and explore ways to frame and articulate their positions and views on current issues. This School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment instrument allows schools to gauge the presence and quality of civic learning elements valued by the Civic Mission of Schools report.

The expression of these facets of school climate will, of course, differ according to the age of the students. While this work is initially focused toward the middle and upper grades it has an equally important role for the early grades. There is much vitality in the early grades where students' creativity, sense wonder and optimism, and hope for the future fits naturally with the characteristics of a positive school climate for citizenship. In these schools, the School Citizenship Climate Assessment can serve as an intervention to identify the characteristics that may already exist in the school and build on them, or as a conversation starter that helps schools to deepen their understanding for the potential of civic opportunity for all students. Fashioned into an explicit and coherent framework, these characteristics can have a strong connection to issues of policy and practice, especially to the in-service service training provided to teachers and the development of co-curricular and community-based activities that support a positive climate across all school levels.

## **SECTION TWO: SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION CLIMATE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK**

Building on the characteristics listed above we now expand our conceptualization of the relationship between positive school climate as it is related to civic-learning. The framework serves to deepen understanding of the characteristics and their purpose and establishes the basis for the categories and subcategories under which the assessment scales and items are presented in section three—the School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment Instrument. This work has been developed through a process that incorporated identification of the assessment items along with the critical components of the theoretical framework. It has drawn on the education literature of school climate and culture, culture surveys used by others, the Civic Mission of Schools report and other resources.

**Characteristic One:                    Official recognition and community acceptance of the civic purpose of education that is communicated to all teachers, students and administrators**

A positive school climate for citizenship requires a substantial agreement among members of the school community on a philosophy of education committed to the goals and objectives of a common civic purpose. This common understanding provides a reflection of the collective will of the school community through strong instructional content and pedagogy that supports the development of civic learning and promotes understanding of society and commitment to political and civic engagement. The shared

values for civic learning also extend to school district administrators, board members and community leaders who understand and support the democratic principles embraced and enacted by the school. In these schools, policies encourage and reward school-wide civic learning. At the same time policy impediments are identified and reduced so citizenship education is successfully sustained. There is also recognition of ongoing improvement of the school's physical and architectural features as an expression of its civic culture, specifically as concerns: safety, health, and the provision of adequate and attractive civic and other public spaces. Creating the overarching structure for students to achieve this goal requires a school mission that permeates and embraces universal values of citizenship education.

**Characteristic Two:**

**Meaningful learning of civic-related knowledge that builds on and enhances academic and participation skills**

Classroom instruction that explicitly focuses on meaningful civic content is a critical element for student citizenship and enhanced learning. This instruction usually takes place in courses such as social studies, history and government that include opportunities for debate, discussion, role play, and mock trials and hearings, but it also extends more broadly throughout the school. Instructional methods and approaches that foster civic-related knowledge engage students in activities that promote a range of academic competencies. A positive classroom climate can enhance academic performance and cultivate development of the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary in a democratic society. Using United States data from the 1999 IEA Citizenship and Education Study, Torney-Purta (2002) concluded that meaningful civic knowledge builds upon students' past understanding that is made authentic by connections to current issues and concerns. Support in understanding material presented in texts or by teachers, opportunities to frame questions, and assistance in articulating one's position can increase motivation for learning and lead to enhancement of civic knowledge and skills. This type of instruction is far more likely to be successful than asking students to memorize government structures or fill in the blanks on worksheets. Successful instruction also requires a shared commitment to articulate the civics theme across the curriculum and across grade levels. Therefore, the school's professional development policies and practices should encourage in-service opportunities that marry strong pedagogical content and engaging instructional methods. And wherever possible, faculty themselves should be engaged in acquiring the skills of curriculum development and assessment development.

**Characteristic Three: Cooperation and collaboration in approaching civic-related learning and problem-solving**

In a positive school climate for citizenship, members of the school community engage in cooperative and collaborative experiences that enhance and support learning and problem-solving connected to citizenship development. School leaders, teachers, staff and students work together through curriculum activities and projects to integrate civic learning in the school. These cooperative activities engage students in learning tasks and problem-solving. At the same time, collaborative experiences can create spaces for students and faculty to collaborate as a team, share in the decision-making process, and create meaningful educational experiences that actively engage students in their learning. School environments designed for these types of interactions serve as the foundation for powerful learning environments that promote cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust (Ghaith, 2003; Kerr, 2004; and Finnan, et al, 2003)—all important characteristics for development of citizenship. Furthermore, parent and community involvement is essential in the process. Positive school climate for citizenship involves parents as active partners in the education of their children.

**Characteristic Four: Mutual trust and positive interactions among diverse students, faculty and administrators**

Positive school climate for citizenship fosters a supportive environment that merits mutual trust and positive interactions among all its members. Group openness, collaboration, cooperation and supportive atmosphere are consistent with schools' mission and goals. While quality collaboration and cooperation can create an environment fostering mutual trust and respect through the positive interactions that occur within them, these qualities can be further enhanced by creating learner-centered environments. Cohen (2001) suggests that improved classroom and school climate can create an "environment where learning optimally takes place." Learner-centered environments allow teachers and students to participate in shared partnerships and provide a basis for mutual understandings. These mutual understandings help create a "bridge to civility" that engages youth in experiences that contribute to the well-being of others, develops social consciousness, responsibility, awareness of the social and political world (Berman, 1998), including cultural awareness and positive interactions among different cultural groups of students.

**Characteristic Five:****Students' input in planning and skills in participatory problem-solving that is valued**

McLaughlin (2004) suggests that organizations, such as schools should provide opportunities for youth to engage as active learners in ways that lead to confidence in the value of participatory problem-solving. Positive school climate respects and values students' abilities to shape their own learning and participate in solving problems that arise in the school. In these schools, students feel a sense of freedom to express their ideas and respect the ideas of others, both in the classroom and through school-wide activities that bring students together to address issues related to school life. Members in schools with positive climate ask students for their input regarding a range of issues including school policies, and this input is taken into account by teachers and administrators. Engaging schools in vision-building activities that connect groups of students to best practices and the design and evaluation of programs are ways to acknowledge the value and the contributions of students. Through these experiences students become active participants in the democratic process and help them meaningfully contribute to school life. McLaughlin also suggests that choice and attention to individual differences are key when addressing issues of diversity.

**Characteristic Six:****Deliberation and dialogue about issues that are thoughtful and respectful**

Torney-Purta (2002) found that "civic knowledge, skill and disposition are fruitful in a rich classroom climate based on mutual engagement where trying one's knowledge in interpersonal situations makes the experience more meaningful by discussing it with others." Schools with positive climate support opportunities for deliberation and dialogue that cultivate the ability to listen to others views, acknowledge those views, and build on them when expressing one's own ideas. In these schools, teachers encourage students to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions. They ensure that there is enough time to talk about a topic and create a safe and welcoming environment where many students are comfortable expressing their opinions (Hess, 2004). Positive school climate for citizenship also supports teacher collaboration and ongoing professional development, precisely on how and where to foster deliberation and discussion—in the classroom and in co-curricular activities such as forensics. Talbert (2002) suggests that strong collaborative communities improve teacher practice through dialogue and collaboration around engaging classroom practice. The development of citizenship education through thoughtful and respectful

deliberation and dialogue is supported by policies and practices that are student-centered, recognize and encourage civic-related professional development, and create genuine opportunities for collaboration, cooperation and communication across the school.

**Characteristic Seven: Engagement within the school and commitment to learn about and interact with the broader community**

Citizenship education has an important relationship to active participation within the broader community. Beginning through involvement in student councils and other types of in-school civic participation, citizenship education continues by through building relationships between the school and the community. Democratic concepts such as inequality, injustice, and an obligation to the broader community are elements that link real community issues to co-curricular activities in the school. A positive school climate also promotes a shared commitment to an “open-door” policy that encourages more collaborative interaction between the school and its community partners in higher education, the economy, civil society and government. Ongoing involvement in high-quality service-learning experiences, for example, can help students identify community problems, create solutions to address those problems, and reflect on the process through multiple points of view. Beneficial to the community, students and schools these experiences provide opportunities for achievement and recognition, participation in meaningful peer interactions, and help students work toward collective goals with each other and adult members of their community.

In conclusion, the school citizenship education climate framework is intended to provide the rationale for the intersection of citizenship education and positive school climate for all members of the school community. Based on research and other data, the work provides a deeper understanding of the critical components of each characteristic and serves as a framework the School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment instrument presented in the next section.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** The scales and items chosen for this assessment have undergone considerable testing usually by those who originally developed them to ensure their validity. We caution against the use of the instrument as a buffet-style menu—where one item is selected from one scale, another item is selected from another scale, and yet another item is selected from still another scale—to ensure appropriate and accurate assessment of citizenship development. Rather, when scales are presented, use them in their entirety. Average scores across items in a scale provide a more complete picture of the aspect of school climate than would be gained by examining responses to individual items.

## SECTION THREE: SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP CLIMATE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

### Assessment Instrument

The School Citizenship Education Climate Assessment Instrument is available below for download and distribution. We encourage those using this instrument to administer it to members of many different groups in the school community, including administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members. A modified instrument will soon be available for asking students about these issues.

Including different voices in the assessment process will allow for a more balanced assessment of school citizenship climate than would be gained by including only “experts” or certain groups in the community. Administers should allow respondents to answer these questions *anonymously* so that they may feel free to accurately and truthfully assess their school. Like other assessments previously developed by individual school districts and organizations, the purpose of this instrument is to encourage discussion among surveyed groups on how best to develop and improve the school’s climate of citizenship.

### Scoring the School Citizenship Climate Inventory

To assess how individuals rated their school’s climate, compute scores separately for each scale within the seven sections. (See Appendix for an outline of the scales). The first response category (e.g., “almost never” or “strongly disagree”) is scored as 1, the next as 2, the third as 3, and the final as 4. This can be accomplished by assigning a number to each response, adding the scores across all items in the scale and dividing by the number of items, leaving out any missing responses. To compute the average scale scores for a school, add the scale scores of each individual respondent in the school and divide by the total number of respondents. Some may also want to compute average school scores for certain groups within the school: for example, for teachers only.

All items have been adapted so that they have four response categories. Consequently, the highest possible score for an item or for a scale is 4. The lowest score possible is 1.

### Interpreting Results from the School Citizenship Climate Inventory

Results from this assessment will reveal a great deal about various aspects of a school citizenship climate. We hope that this assessment will be used not only to gain an initial understanding of a school’s climate, but to identify areas for improvement as well. To use the climate analogy presented earlier:

- Perhaps the results reveal a school climate, in which diverse members of the school view the school climate as positive (or “sunny”) across a variety of indicators. The school is already set to encourage civic development, but this assessment could be used periodically to ensure that the climate of the school remains open and encouraging.

- Many schools may have favorable results in many areas but difficulty in others. Perhaps, for example, the school encourages collaboration among diverse students and teachers within the school, but that collaboration only rarely extends into the community. Or, perhaps students are encouraged to engage in dialogue in extracurricular activities and the community, but their in-class activities in citizenship education center around answering the questions at the end of textbook chapters and filling in worksheets. Administrators might view this assessment as an opportunity to take concrete steps to improve the few difficulties that “cloud” the otherwise “sunny” outlook for their school.
- The assessment could also show some major differences in the way that different groups view what actually happens in the school. Teachers and administrators, for example, may think that they are giving their students an ample chance to openly discuss issues, whether social or political (in the classroom and extracurricular activities) or school-based (in student councils). Students, however, may feel that such opportunities are limited. The good news in this case is all parties agree about what *should* happen in the school, even if they disagree on how well that vision is actually carried out. While the school’s climate may be “cold” at the moment, the future direction to be taken is also “clear.” That is, more needs to be done to ensure that ideals about classroom climate are translated into actually opportunities for all parties involved.
- In a few cases, the scores may reveal that the school currently does little to foster an ideal school climate, remaining disconnected from the community and doing little to encourage student voice and collaboration. Keeping in mind this “severe forecast,” though, schools can make a concentrated effort to actively improve the school’s mission and practices in order to form a more civically-conscious school climate. This assessment should continue to be used to keep track of improvements in the school climate as opportunities for positive change are identified and implemented.

In summary, regardless of the initial status of school citizenship climate at the time of assessment, much can be done to foster a more positive climate if areas of difficulty become apparent. The results from this instrument should be used not only for the initial measure of school citizenship climate, but also to encourage and keep track of progress in creating a climate which will encourage the academic, civic, and social development of students.

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## **APPENDIX: Background on Items Included in the School Citizenship Climate Assessment**

The scales and items included in the School Citizenship Climate Assessment are organized into seven sections, each corresponding to one of the characteristics of a positive school climate outlined above. In addition to the scales and items collected and used below, we also drew ideas on designing and organizing the assessment from work conducted by the Character Education Partnership (2003) and the Center for Social and Emotional Education in New York (2005).

The following is a summary of the scales and items collected. Each summary includes the original source of the items.

### ***Section 1: Recognition of the Civic Purpose of Education***

- Questions 1.1-1.4: From Terry Pickeral, National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States.
- Questions 1.5-1.8: Adapted from the Idaho Civics "Report Card"/Annual Accreditation Report.

### ***Section 2: Meaningful Learning of Civic-Related Knowledge***

- Questions 2.1-2.4: United States version of the IEA Civic Education Study (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001): Interactive Class Activities scale (developed by CEDARS: see <http://wam.umd.edu/~iea.>)
- Questions 2.5-2.8: United States version of the IEA Civic Education Study: Traditional Class Activities scale (developed by CEDARS).
- Questions 2.9-2.10: United States version of the IEA Civic Education Study: Media-Based Class Activities scale (developed by CEDARS).

- Questions 2.11-2.12: United States version of the IEA Civic Education Study: Individual Items.  
*Note: Questions 2.11 and 2.12 do not belong to a scale; therefore, their responses need not be averaged together with one another. While we feel that scales generally provide a more complete and accurate measurement of school climate than individual items, we felt that these items were important enough to include on their own even though they did not form a scale.*

### ***Section 3: Cooperation and Collaboration***

- Questions 3.1-3.3: From the IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001): Learning about the Value of Cooperation scale (developed by CEDARS).
- Questions 3.4-3.8: From the Tools for Civic Education and Service-Learning (Minkler & Hill, 2005): Student/Teacher Collaboration Items
- Questions 3.9-3.11: From the WASSC School Climate Survey, Community Relations scale.
- Questions 3.12-3.16: From the SEANet Quality Review Tool/Sustainability Index: Collaborations and Partnerships scale.

### ***Section 4: Trust, Respect, and Positive Interactions***

- Questions 4.1-4.4: From the Inventory for School Climate (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003), Support for Cultural Pluralism scale.
- Questions 4.5-4.9: From the Inventory for School Climate, Positive Peer Interactions scale
- Questions 4.10-4.15: From the Inventory for School Climate, Teacher Support scale.

### ***Section 5: Students' Input and Participation Skills***

- Questions 5.1-5.5: From the Inventory for School Climate, Student Input Subscale
- Questions 5.6-5.9: From the IEA Civic Education Study, Confidence in the Value of Student Participation scale.

### ***Section 6: Thoughtful and Respectful Dialogue about Issues***

- Questions 6.1-6.6: From the IEA Civic Education Study, Student Perception of Open Classroom Climate scale.

### ***Section 7: Engagement In and Learning about the Community***

- Questions 7.1-7.6: From the IEA Civic Education Study, Participation in Co-curricular Activities Items.
- Questions 7.7-7.10: From the SEANet Quality Review Tool/Sustainability Index: Policy and Leadership Scale
- Questions 7.11-7.13: From the Tools for Civic Education and Service-Learning: Student Input Items