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## Tell Me More: Utilizing Student Focus Groups to Further a Community's School Climate Dialogue

Megan Pell & Debby Boyer  
*Delaware PBS Project*




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### Our Purpose for Today



- **Discuss our experiences related to:**
  1. Identifying school climate concerns
  2. Structuring meaningful focus groups
  3. Providing schools with useful and meaningful focus group data
  4. Facilitating discussions for possible next steps to improve school climate
- **Share recommendations related to:**
  1. Utilizing student focus groups for discussing difficult school climate issues
  2. Following a collaborative process for creating these student focus groups

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### What Is School Climate?

School climate refers to the “*quality and character of school life*” which includes “*norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe*” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 182).



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### Why is school climate important?

School Climate is linked to a wide range of academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes for students:

- Academic achievement
- Student academic, social, and personal attitudes and motives
- Delinquency
- Behavior problems

(Bear & Boyer, 2012)

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### 1. Identifying school climate concerns through a collaborative, multi-step process


After several high profile incidents at a high school...

- Discussions among School Climate Committee Members
- + • Discussions with School Administration

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= Outreach to the DE-PBS Project

- Reviewed the HS's Delaware School Climate Survey (DSCS)
- Coordinated communication across stakeholder groups
- Led and Reported on 3 Student Focus Groups



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### Delaware School Climate Survey

*What It Looks Like...*

This is a psychometrically sound survey constructed by Dr. George Bear at the University of Delaware (Bear & Yang, 2011).

- Supported by Delaware DOE and managed by the Delaware Positive Behavior Support (DE-PBS) project staff
- Completed by students, teachers, and parents (Students in grades 3-12)
- Via either computer or scantron paper form
- The 2010-2011 version, 42 student items across two sections (plus demographic questions)



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**DSCS - Student Report**

Table 1b. Average Item Scores for All Grades Combined

	N	Part I.				Total Scale	Part II.		
		Teacher-Student Relationships	Student Relations and Safety	Fairness of Rules	Clarity of Expectations		Positive Techniques	Punitive * Techniques	Social Emotional Techniques
<b>Total</b>	<b>746</b>	<b>2.27</b>	<b>2.62</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>2.51</b>	<b>2.59</b>	<b>2.41</b>	<b>2.24</b>	<b>2.35</b>
<b>Race</b>									
White	N=330	2.67	2.26	2.70	2.68	2.54	2.20	2.58	2.30
Black	N=192	2.54	2.27	2.52	2.75	2.48	2.30	2.67	2.47
Hispanic	N=88	2.53	2.26	2.58	2.74	2.49	2.17	2.57	2.35
Asian	N=51	2.68	2.42	2.65	2.52	2.57	2.40	2.55	2.52
Other	N=86	2.59	2.19	2.57	2.59	2.43	2.28	2.52	2.39
<b>Gender</b>									
Girl	N=392	2.63	2.22	2.68	2.76	2.52	2.22	2.58	2.36
Boy	N=357	2.59	2.32	2.55	2.60	2.50	2.27	2.60	2.38

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**Specific DSCS items of concern at this school...**

<b>Teacher – Student Relationships</b>	
<b>38%</b>	of students disagreed that teachers care about their students
<b>8%</b>	of teachers disagreed that teachers care about their students
<b>37%</b>	of students disagreed that teachers treat students of all races with respect
<b>12%</b>	of teachers disagreed that teachers treat students of all races with respect
<b>Student – Student Relationships</b>	
<b>74%</b>	of students disagreed that students treat each other with respect
<b>54%</b>	of teachers disagreed that students treat each other with respect
<b>59%</b>	of students disagreed that students get a long
<b>33%</b>	of teachers disagreed that students get a long

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**Specific DSCS items of concern at this school...**

<b>Fairness of Rules &amp; Clarity of Rules</b>	
<b>30%</b>	of students disagreed that the rules are clear
<b>36%</b>	of teachers disagreed that the rules are clear
<b>37%</b>	of the students disagreed that the rules are fair
<b>12%</b>	of teachers disagreed that the rules are fair
<b>Global "Liking" Question</b>	
<b>42%</b>	of students agreed most students like this school.
<b>74%</b>	of teachers agreed most students like the school

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## 2. Structuring meaningful focus groups

"The focus group operates on the assumption that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, the choice of focus groups is not justified simply by being an efficient alternative to conducting...Rather, the method depends on the interaction of the group to stimulate participants to think beyond their own private thoughts and to articulate their opinions." (Kleiber, 2004).



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## Conducting diverse focus groups

- 17 students total
- 3 groups by engagement:
  - highly engaged, less engaged, mixed engagement in extracurricular and academic activities
- 9<sup>th</sup> grade – 12<sup>th</sup> grade representations across groups
- 7 African-American, 8 Caucasian, 2 other
- 11 female students, 6 male



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## Timing of Focus Groups

- Focus groups took place in March 2012
  - Report and presentation (2 month process)
  - Report and presentation was discussed with the School Climate Committee and school administration May 2012
- Focus groups took place during advisory
  - Passes were provided ahead of time (for signed permission form)
  - On-site check-in



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### The Focus Group Sessions

- Focus groups lasted an average of 66 minutes
  - Group 1 (high engagement): 1:02
  - Group 2 (low engagement): 1:00
  - Group 3 (mixed engagement): 1:16
- 1:1 discussions held with 2 students\*
  - Student 1 (high engagement): Late arrival to focus group
  - Student 2 (check engagement): Lack of participation in whole group discussion

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### Format of Discussion

- 1:1 Demographic Survey (at chair)
- Round Robin Responses to "What do you like about [your school]?"
- Open-Ended Discussion of semi-structured questions related to *student-student relationships, teacher-student relationships, and rules and expectations*:
  - Problems/Concerns
  - Ideas for Improvement

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### 3. Providing schools with useful and meaningful focus group data

- We provided an oral presentation with a written report
  - 5 page (self-imposed limit)
  - Included:
    - Background
    - Process
    - Likes and Challenges (Results of Student Responses)
    - Potential Avenues of Change
- Evening presentation with multiple presenters and stakeholders

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**How this “useful and meaningful” information was derived by the focus groups:**

- We used 3-person team per focus group
  - Facilitator
  - Recorder/Greeter
  - Notetaker/Logistics Support
- Immediate debriefing
- We recorded all sessions and transcribed when possible
- Joint listening sessions when transcription was unavailable
- We triangulated notes generated during focus group (student survey, facilitator and team debriefing and spontaneous notes)

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**So...the Students’ Feedback (or “Data”)**

- What Students Like
- Challenges
- Potential Avenues of Change



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**So...the Students’ Feedback (or “Data”)**

**What Students Liked:**

- Extracurricular activities*
- Electives and associated departments*
- Academic opportunities*
- Opportunity to learn in general*
- Improved sense of safety*



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**So...the Students' Feedback (or "Data")**

**What Students Liked (continued):**

- Friends at school*
- Support of adults in school*
- "Very personal experience" of being a student*
- Outside décor of school's front entrance*



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**So...the Students' Feedback (or "Data")**

**What Students Considered as Challenges for the School:**

1. Groups often do not know, understand, or like each other
2. Students receive differential treatment from adults depending on academic work



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**1. Groups often do not know, understand, or like each other**

Groups were identified based on several characteristics

- Academic program
- Neighborhood
- Extracurricular activities

There are limited opportunities for groups to work together

- Advisory period is seen as more of a hindrance
- Differences create misunderstandings


Groups ignore and/or intimidate each other

- Hallway concerns
- Rumors spreading, especially through technology

Students see it as an individual responsibility to avoid conflict and protect themselves

- Avoid problem areas
- Concern about inconsistent response by adults to discipline issues

*"We don't know them and they don't know us."*



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**2. Students receive differential treatment from adults**

Students perceive teachers to be less engaged and less effective in CP classes (sense of "giving up")

- Students believe administration is not aware of these issues in the classroom


Students believe that rules are not always enforced fairly

- CP students can get away with more because they are not held to same standard
- Personal relationships with adults allow students to get away with things
- Positive Behavior Support program is not used consistently

Students who benefit from preferential treatment still view it as unfair

The PBS program is not used consistently.

*"One of my teachers will, like before a football game, ask who is going to the football game, and if you raise your hand, he'll give you two RAP cards."*



*"And my teacher decided to raise [my grade] to 90 just because she, I guess, she liked me more than the other student...and the other student left with a B."*

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**Potential Avenues for Change**

**Develop more diverse relationships among students**

**Student Ideas:**

- Increase positive connections (interactions) between students
- Create a student-run newspaper
- Utilize inspirational speakers
- Increase communication within the school and about the school with the community

**Additional Project Recommendations:**

- Revisit use of Advisory for facilitating acceptance
- Improve the PBS program
- Develop school-wide community service activities
- Investigate available transportation and how it impacts student involvement




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**Potential Avenues for Change (Continued)**


**Increase communication within the school and about the school with the community**

**Student Ideas:**

- Engage the elementary and middle school students from NHS feeder schools to get them excited about attending
- Provide updates about alumni and current student accomplishments (diverse types of accomplishments)
- Provide teacher professional development on a range of interpersonal skills

**Additional Project Recommendations:**

- Address perception of favoritism and inconsistent enforcement of rules
- Consider engage faculty in problem-solving activities to gain consensus on




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**Potential Avenues for Change** (Continued)


**Improve the Positive Behavior Support program: Consider Shared Spaces, Classroom Management, School-wide Expectations and Recognition**

**Student Ideas:**

- Get students involved in program to improve the school grounds - students are more motivated to keep clean if the school is clean and not cluttered
- Have students identify and participate in other school or community projects in both "home communities"
- More opportunities for students to show they can be trusted

**Additional Project Recommendations:**

- Reinvigorate student involvement in PBS program
  - ✓ Have students from the "less engaged" groups participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating school climate improvement projects
  - ✓ Utilize student ideas for recognition systems
- Increase supervision in trouble areas




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**4. Facilitating discussions for possible next steps to improve school climate**

- Written report
- Oral presentation to stakeholders with visuals
- \* Check-in with the school immediately after the presentation and report, give guidance as needed
- \* Conduct a follow-up discussion with the school 1 year after the presentation and report

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**\* For this school, we gave staff guidance... on when to acknowledge students:**

- Painless PBS List: easy guide to using RAP Cards
  - Students who go above and beyond in class by taking on group leader role
  - No tardies for 2 consecutive weeks
  - No absences for 1 month
  - Turning in homework consistently
  - Displaying Random Acts of Kindness
  - Providing supplies for classmate (pencil, paper etc)

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### DE-PBS Follow-Up with this School

One year later, their SW PBS team has...

- Expanded Staff Training of Acknowledgement Systems
- Strengthened Staff Recognition Activities
- Introduced *Growth Mindset Conversations* (Dweck, 2008)
- Created PLC presentations regarding *Behavioral Patterns of Interaction* (Minke, 2012)

Next year, they will start...

- Student-led parent conferences



**The Focus... DELIBERATE, SCHOOL-WIDE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING ACTIVITIES**

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### Teaching Staff Video




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### Keep in Mind: *Change Can be Slow*

2011	Teacher – Student Relationships	2013
<b>38%</b>	of students disagreed that teachers care about their students	28% (-10)
<b>8%</b>	of teachers disagreed that teachers care about their students	6% (-2)
<b>37%</b>	of students disagreed that teachers treat students of all races with respect	23% (-14)
<b>12%</b>	of teachers disagreed that teachers treat students of all races with respect	12% (0)
2011	Student – Student Relationships	2013
<b>74%</b>	of students disagreed that students treat each other with respect	57% (-17)
<b>54%</b>	of teachers disagreed that students treat each other with respect	39% (-15)
<b>59%</b>	of students disagreed that students get a long	45% (-14)
<b>33%</b>	of teachers disagreed that students get a long	16% (-17)

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### Keep in Mind: *Change Can be Slow*

2011	<b>Fairness of Rules &amp; Clarity of Rules</b>	2013
<b>30%</b>	of students disagreed that the rules are clear	30% (0)
<b>36%</b>	of teachers disagreed that the rules are clear	17% (-19)
<b>37%</b>	of the students disagreed that the rules are fair	30% (-7)
<b>12%</b>	of teachers disagreed that the rules are fair	10% (-2)
2011	<b>Global "Liking" Question</b>	2013
<b>42%</b>	of students <b>agreed</b> most students like this school.	*
<b>74%</b>	of teachers <b>agreed</b> most students like the school	*

\*Item is not in the new version of the survey

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### Before we end, here are some additional recommendations...

1. Maintain relationships with schools to build trust.
2. Utilize *student focus groups* for discussing difficult school climate issues
  - Hard to argue with the students
  - Adults are less caught up in finger point
3. Prioritize concerns and select a limited number
4. Follow a *collaborative process* for creating these student focus groups



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### Some additional logistical recommendations...

- Choose participants who are demographically representative *and* who can provide diverse perspectives
- Make sure there is consensus on the participant selection procedure
- Provide sample language for permission slips \*
- Work with administration to ensure permission slips are available in a timely manner\*
- Use numbered materials and numbering protocols to track materials and ideas
- Practice your facilitation skills, including those to handle unexpected focus group events



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College of Education & Human Development  
Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project  
Creating safe and challenging environments to provide the educational and academic development of all children.

*Thank you  
for your time and interest today!*

<http://www.delawarepbs.org/>

Megan Pell  
[mpell@udel.edu](mailto:mpell@udel.edu)  
(302) 831-4896

Debby Boyer  
[dboyer@udel.edu](mailto:dboyer@udel.edu)  
(302) 831-3503



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