

# Resiliency-Building “Hidden” Predictors of Academic Success

by Nan Henderson, M.S.W.

A growing chorus of prominent researchers and experts on effective education are documenting three “hidden” predictors of academic success. The evidence of the power of these three predictors is emerging as a result of an increase in research to discover why, in this era of “No Child Left Behind” many children are, in fact, left behind. Not surprisingly, these three predictors are intimately connected with fostering resiliency; fostering resiliency is, after all, another way of describing healthy, successful human development. And such development includes becoming a successful learner.

## School Climate, Social and Emotional Learning, and Arts Education

In the last decade, and increasingly in the past five years, study after study is showing the impact of school climate, social and emotional learning (SEL), and arts education on student achievement. These three powerful connectors to academic success can be termed “hidden” only because they are so often overlooked. Potent and proliferating research, however, is showing the crucial impact of a positive school climate. In a very broad sense social-emotional learning and arts education can be viewed as contributors to an overall positive school climate, though each of these have their own growing data base documenting their connection to academic success as well.

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Key components of positive school climate vary slightly study by study. Generally, however, they can be summarized as:

- Feelings of safety among staff and students;
- Supportive relationships within school;
- Engagement and empowerment of students as valued members and resources in the school community;
- Clear rules and boundaries that are understood by all students and staff;
- High expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behavior (Elfstrom, et al., 2006); and
- “Trust, respect, and ethos of caring” (Perkins, 2006).

It is interesting to compare these descriptors of positive school climate to the six primary environmental resiliency builders identified in The Resiliency Wheel (see Part One, chapter two) a decade ago. These six protective factors of caring and support, high expectations for success, opportunities for meaningful participation, pro-social bonding, clear and consistent boundaries, and life skills training, based on a synthesis of the body of research on fostering resiliency, formed the basis of a model of effective school reform (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, 2003). In the ensuing decade, the importance of addressing these six factors, under the rubric of improving school climate, providing social-emotional learning, and/or building student resiliency has been extensively validated.

A compelling case for addressing the inclusion of these general school climate/resiliency-building factors is now being made by those who are reviewing the growing weight of scientific evidence about the power of school climate to foster academic success for all. An article in the December, 2005, *American School Board Journal*, is indicative of the clarion call to schools to address school climate:

Urban school leaders who want to reform low-performing schools usually embark on a series of ...strategies...[that often] overlook an important piece of the puzzle:...Good climate. [It is] the key to success of urban schools, according to researchers who’ve spent years studying the subtle and interpersonal dynamics that take place [in schools]. “A school’s climate is probably the best predictor of whether a school will have high achievement—more so than the socioeconomic status of students or the school’s past levels of achievement,” says Clete Bulach, associate professor emeritus of educational leadership at the University of West Georgia and a long-time researcher in the field. (Stover, 2005, p. 1)



## The Most Comprehensive School Climate Research

Perhaps the most comprehensive and powerful research to date on the importance of school climate was just published (October, 2006). Researcher Brian Perkins studied the impact of school climate in 108 urban schools from 15 school districts across the country. Thirteen states were represented in this study, and the students, ages six to 20, included “self-identified 110 ethnicities or national origins; 32 % identified as African American, 26% as white, 29.6% as Hispanic, 6.8 % as Asian, 2.5% as Native American, and 2.2 % as another ethnicity.” Perkins’ research, “the CUBE Survey,” was sponsored by the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA). The results revealed improved school climate contributes to:

- Higher student achievement;
- Higher morale among students and teachers;
- More reflective practice among teachers;
- Fewer student dropouts;
- Reduced violence;
- Better community relations; and
- Increased institutional pride (Bryant & Kelley, 2006, p.ii).

This research was a project of the Urban Students Achievement Task Force, which is sponsored by CUBE and NSBA. In his Foreword to the CUBE Survey research report, *Where We Learn: The CUBE Survey of Urban School Climate*, Yale University School of Medicine Associate Dean James Comer, writes:

Students cannot learn well and are not likely to behave well in difficult school environments. . . . Good student development and academic learning are inextricably linked. Indeed, research-based evidence continues to demonstrate this critical connection. . . . Unfortunately, however, the recent increased pressure to improve student test scores has led many to feel that they do not have time to address anything but academic instruction. . . . But because relationships are so important to learning, strengthening instruction in a difficult school climate generally does not improve academic outcomes. (2006, p. 1)

Perkins concludes,

School climate is the learning environment created through the interaction of human relationships, physical setting, and psychological

atmosphere. Researchers and educators agree that school climate affects student achievement. Yet many school improvement initiatives primarily address school structure and virtually ignore school climate. (2006, p. 1)

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His report offers six recommendations for schools, based on the findings that “The affective dimension of the school day—that is, how students feel about their experiences at school—is just as important as the academic dimension” (p.7). These are:

1. Districts should include a school climate assessment in their annual evaluation processes.
2. Schools should identify one or more key areas on the basis of these assessment findings. . . . and implement strategies to improve these conditions and students’ perceptions of them.
3. Parents should be encouraged to participate in the discussion, development, and implementation of strategies to improve school climate.
4. Students should engage with their peers, teachers, and administrators to address school climate issues, and [should themselves] contribute to a healthy school climate.
5. School officials should engage members of the community about the ways they can participate in and support the creation and development of healthy school climate.
6. Boards of education should establish clear policies to create a positive school climate and clarify expectations for teachers and administrators around their responsibilities to carry out these policies.

Two other related studies confirm the importance of positive school climate characteristics for preventing “all youth risk behaviors” and for promoting life success. Commissioned by Congress, the largest survey ever conducted of adolescents in this country confirmed that the number one condition in schools (and families) that protect kids from “all risk behaviors” is “feeling connected.” At school, that means students feel teachers treat students fairly, that students feel “close to people at school,” and students feel they are “a part of the school” (Resnick, 1997, et al.). In addition, the Gallup organization has been researching

what leads to human success for several decades, surveying hundreds of thousands of people around the world, and conducting millions of interviews with “the best of the worlds’ professions.” Based on the organization’s conclusion that

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the key to life success is identifying and building on one’s strengths, Gallup has initiated building “Strengths-Based Schools” through its “Summit on Strengths-Based Schools” and related publications. One key finding: Both students and teachers feel better about being at school and are more positively motivated when the school focuses on identifying and building student and educator strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Gordon, 2006).

### **Social and Emotional Learning as a Route to Improving Climate**

That social and emotional learning connects to a positive school climate also comes as no surprise. School climate improvement recommendations include increasing an “ethos of caring and respect” between all members of a school community, including supportive relationships, and creating environments of safety and trust, including setting and maintaining clear rules and boundaries. Social and emotional learning is defined as “the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave... responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors” (Zins, et al., 2004, p. 3). It is one thing to suggest school climate improvements; social and emotional learning interventions provide the strategies that can actually achieve the goal of creating a positive school climate.

A 2006 article in the American Association of School Administrators publication, *The School Administrator*, connects social and emotional learning, school climate, and academic success. Author Jose Torres concludes,

[That] a strong relationship exists between social-emotional development and academic achievement cannot be denied. Caring relationships between adults and children in schools foster a desire to learn and a connection to school. When students’ barriers to learning are removed, students do better, learn more,

and are more engaged... Social and emotional learning programs improve students’ behaviors and academic learning. They do not focus on behavior at the expense of academics. The reverse is true. If we ignore students’ social-emotional learning, we shortchange students’ academic performance. (2006, p. 1)

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Torres bases his conclusions on a new comprehensive research-based discussion of the power of social-emotional learning, *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research say?* This comprehensive book, edited by Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walbert, documents decades of research on the positive impact of social-emotional learning in schools. The “essential characteristics of effective social-emotional learning programs,” documented in the book, include:

- Careful planning, based on theory and research;
- Teaching SEL skills that are relevant to “daily life” (such as recognizing and managing emotions, respecting others, positive goal-setting, making responsible decisions, and “handling interpersonal relationships effectively”);
- Addressing affective and social dimensions of learning by actively building positive attachment to school, strengthening relationships in school, providing opportunities for meaningful participation in school, using “diverse, engaging teaching methods,” nurturing safety and belonging in school, and emphasizing respect for diversity;
- Linking to academic outcomes through integrating with professional development on academic success, and coordinating with student support efforts (health, nutrition, service learning, physical education, counseling, nursing, etc.);
- Addressing key implementation factors, such as policies, staff development, supervision, adequate resources, and evaluation issues;
- Involving family and community partnerships; and
- Including continuous improvement, outcome evaluation, and dissemination components (Zins, et al., 2004, p. 10).

The book notes that many of the above characteristics are inherent in school-wide “risk behavior prevention” programs, violence (bully) reduction programs, and character education programs and directs readers to the 2002 US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration publication, *SAMHSA Model Programs: Model Prevention Supporting Academic Achievement*. The editors conclude that “The research findings [on the powerful positive impact of social and emotional learning] are “so solid that they emboldened us to introduce a new term, ‘social, emotional, and academic learning or SEAL’” (Zins, et al. 2004, p. 19).

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### Arts Education, Academic Achievement, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Similar powerful data is emerging about the contribution of arts education (visual arts, music, drama, and dance) to academic success. The data includes evidence that part of the positive impact of the arts is an improvement in school characteristics that comprise a positive school climate.

The Arts Education Partnership (AEP) is a coalition of more than 100 education, arts, philanthropic, and government organizations, funded by a cooperative grant from the US Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts. AEP published a report in 2002, *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, a review of 62 “outstanding arts education studies.” The *Critical Links* report concludes that learning in the arts positively impacts six important aspects of schooling:

1. Improvement of basic reading and writing skills and comprehension, through “forms of arts instruction [that] help children ‘break the phonetic code’ by associating letters, words, and phrases with sounds, sentences, and meanings”; and through engaging in dramatic enactments of stories (which is linked to increased comprehension, more effective writing, and the ability to read new material);
2. Improvement in mathematics, through music instruction (especially training in keyboard skills);
3. Improvement in fundamental cognitive skills and

capacities, through individual art projects and “multi-arts experiences” that “engage and strengthen... fundamental cognitive capacities;”

4. Improvement in the motivation to learn, through the impact of engagement in the arts on self-confidence, self-efficacy, school attendance, educational aspirations, and “ownership of learning;”
5. Improvement in social behavior, which occurs through student experiences in drama, dance, and multi-arts activities that result in “growth in self-control, conflict resolution, collaboration, empathy, and social tolerance;” and
6. Improvement in “school environment,” through the arts’ contribution to teacher innovation, a “positive professional culture, community engagement, increased student attention and retention, effective instructional practice, and school identity.”

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James Catterall, a UCLA professor of education and a researcher on the *Critical Links* study, noted that the impact of the arts is especially potent “for economically disadvantaged children.” However, he added,

The beneficial effects of the arts... are reported for *all* children learning in the visual and performing arts.... *Critical Links* identifies no fewer than 84 separately distinguishable, valid effects of the arts when we differentiate among groups of children who benefit.... Notions that the arts are frivolous add-ons to a serious curriculum couldn’t be further from the truth. (2002, p. 6)

The idea of the benefits of creating educational and work environments that actually make people (students, educators) happy has recently entered the cultural dialogue about how schools can more effectively foster “what really matters in life.” In *Happiness and Education* (2003), educational philosopher and reformer, Nel Noddings, Lee L. Jacks Professor of Child Education, Emerita, at Stanford University, comments that whenever parents are asked what they hope for the future of their children, the answer is they want their children to “be happy.” Noddings goes on, “Happiness and education are, properly, intimately connected. Happiness should be an aim of education and a good education should contribute significantly to personal

and collective happiness”(p.1). She rightly points out that beyond all the discussion in education about “aims talk” of standards and achievement should be a primary concern for human flourishing.

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Happiness, as Noddings defines it, is not mere material gain or momentary pleasure. She notes that psychological research on “authentic happiness” concludes that beyond the poverty level, an increase in financial wealth does little to increase true happiness. Instead, Noddings discusses the authentic happiness that comes from caring relationships, feeling “connected,” service to others, developing character, personal growth, experiencing delight, and finding work that one loves.

The best homes and schools are happy places. The adults in these happy places recognize that one aim of education (and of life itself) is happiness. They also recognize that happiness serves as both means and end. Happy children, growing in their understanding of what happiness is, will seize their educational opportunities with delight, and they will contribute to the happiness of others. Clearly, if children are to be happy in schools, their teachers should also be happy. Too often we forget this obvious connection. Finally, basically happy people... will contribute to a happier world. (p.261)

Research is documenting the power of positive school climate, social and emotional learning, and involvement in the arts to improve academic achievement. Though difficult to measure, it makes sense that people in schools (or other environments) filled with these—positive, caring, respectful climate, social-emotional support and training, the beauty and exhilaration of the arts—are *happier*. Any human endeavor is easier, more motivating, and enjoyable when we are happy. Discussing and researching what creates authentic happiness, flourishing, and deep life satisfaction in schools is another emerging and important perspective on academic achievement, resiliency, and life success.

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