

Evaluation of the Development and Implementation of School Climate in WELS

Schools

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

This study examined the connection between research-based best practices and the implementation and development of school climate in WELS schools. A survey of every WELS principal was used to conduct a general study of WELS schools, followed by interviews with three schools that were found to have successful and positive school climates as well as three schools that were found to have weaker school climates. Common themes and practices were identified in each of these schools. The study resulted in several findings that will be helpful for WELS schools to consider and possibly implement as they seek to improve their own school climates.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

For many years, WELS schools have advertised themselves to communities as “Christ-centered atmospheres” with “family feel” and a “high-quality education” as well as other buzzwords that communicate a positive school climate. These are obvious qualities that anyone would want to have in their school. But the question must be asked: is this what WELS schools are like? How are they creating this kind of climate? At the same time, are these the things that schools should be focused on?

Significance of the Proposed Study

A vast amount of research has been done on school climate – what is effective and what is not (Bayko, 2005; Fuerstenau, 2021; Habegger, 2008; Loukas, 2007; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Prokopchuk, 2016; Turan & Bektas, 2013; Zullig, Koopman, Patton, & Ubbes, 2010). Entire classes have been dedicated to teaching school leaders how to drive school climate in a positive direction. While no school is perfect, it is important for the sake of school ministries that school leaders take these matters seriously and work hard with their faculties, families, and students to develop, implement, and maintain strong, positive school climates.

Although studies of public schools demonstrate the connection between good climate and high-quality education, no such study has yet been conducted in Lutheran schools. These public school studies have mostly focused on the academic, environmental, and social aspects of schools. While that will be the same focus of this study, WELS schools have an additional faith component of their climates that will

heavily impact the way stakeholders view them. The impact of this aspect of school climate has not yet been studied.

Research Question

This study will seek to answer the question: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families?

Definition of Terms

WELS – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Climate – Physical, academic, and social environmental qualities of a school

Culture – The attitudes, values, or belief systems that are held by an organization which serves as the foundation on which all school matters are built.

High-quality education – A school experience which focuses on high academic expectations, social and emotional instruction, connection between the school and the family, and (for WELS schools) a focus on Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The research for this study will be heavily based on the opinions of WELS school leaders, teachers, and parents. Due to time, travel, and financial constraints, the researcher will be unable to be at the physical school location and make observations of the school. The research will rely on the honesty and care of survey respondents and interviewees.

It is important to state that this research is not meant to convict WELS schools or the faculties, staffs, or families that make up these schools. It can be assumed that all

WELS schools are doing their best to provide a high-quality educational experience to their students and their families. More importantly, it can be assumed that all WELS schools are teaching Christ crucified to the students in their classrooms. This research is intended to evaluate how WELS schools develop and implement their school climates. All comments regarding this matter should be received in a reflective and constructive manner.

Overview

The following sections contain a review of the research concerning school climate, the methodology that was used to conduct the study, an explanation of how the data was analyzed, and conclusions and recommendations that were made as a result of the study. A combination of a survey and interviews were utilized to collect the data, and the researcher connected the findings that were made in the study to the research that can be found in the literature review section.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Difference between school culture and school climate

Before reading this thesis, the reader must understand the difference between school culture and school climate. In recent research, these two terms have been used somewhat interchangeably (MacNeil, et al., 2009; Van Houte & Van Maele, 2011). Some researchers claim that there is a significant difference and choose one on which to focus. The differences are difficult to find because of the way researchers view both terms. In fact, several researchers have the exact same definition for climate as others do for culture. It can be a confusing realm to venture into. The definitions for both terms in this study will be listed in this section.

The definition for culture in this study comes from Martin (2009) and Wagner (2006). They define culture as the attitudes, values, or belief systems that are held by an organization. It is seen as the more anthropological of the two terms (Van Houte & Van Maele, 2011). While some use them interchangeably, most researchers would agree that culture is what helps define a school climate. Culture is the foundation on which all organizational and school matters are built (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Turan & Bektas, 2013; Van Houte & Van Maele, 2011). Research that is directed toward leadership reveals that culture is the most important thing for a school leader to understand if they want to be a good leader and influence positive change in their school (Brion, 2021; Habegger, 2008; Leithwood, 2021; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Martin, 2009; NASSP & NAESP, 2013; Prokopchuk, 2016; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Culture is not easily or quickly changed; it typically transcends one or two individuals (Turan & Bektas, 2013). In fact, it can even get in the way of change if

the culture is negative or based on tradition (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

“Culture” is the word that most people associate with this topic, so it is the one that is more commonly used.

Climate, on the other hand, refers to the feelings or experiences of the groups that make up a school including school leaders, teachers, students, and parents (Loukas, 2007; Thapa, et al., 2013; Zullig et al., 2010). Loukas’s (2007) definition of climate will be used in this study as he defines climate as the the physical, social, and academic environmental qualities of a school. Van Houte and Van Maele (2011) consider climate to be the more tangible or perceptual of the two – accounting for the environmental quality of an organization. Cohen et al. (2009) refer to climate as the pattern of people’s experiences that make up the quality and character of school life. One study referred to school climate as the heart and soul of a school – the essence of the school that draws teachers and students in and makes them want to be a part of it (MacNeil, et al., 2009). Some researchers state that school climate is the reflection of the school culture – the attitudes, values, and beliefs of an organization (Thapa, et al., 2013; Zullig, et al., 2010). Loukas (2007) divided school climate into three dimensions: physical, social, and academic. Components of his three dimensions consisted of things like appearance, size, organization, safety, quality of relationships, and quality of instruction. These are the things commonly associated with climate. These three dimensions will be the main focus of this study, and will be further described later.

To summarize, one should think of culture as the backdrop of everything that happens at a school – the foundational beliefs, values, and norms that make people behave the way they do. One should think of climate as the physical, social, and

academic environment of the school as well as the feelings and perceptions of the people that make up a school. While many researchers confuse and use the two terms interchangeably, the reader of this thesis should use careful discernment from this point forward when reading the word “climate.”

Climate is the focus of this study because it is the more observable of the two, and can be easier to recognize for stakeholders of the school. Culture is much more difficult to evaluate and change as it consists of the underlying beliefs and values of an organization. While school leaders certainly do have an effect on both, any leader will have an immediate effect on a school’s climate (Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Schools looking to undergo drastic change should seriously consider and study both their climate and culture, but those that are interested in changing or improving their day-to-day or more tangible factors should do an evaluation of climate.

History of school climate research

The idea of school climate can be traced back more than 100 years; however, it was not until the 1950s that actual school climate research began (Cohen, et al., 2009; Zullig, et al., 2010). This research in the 50s stemmed from the study of organizational climate. The business world sought to identify those connections between the environment (climate) of an organization to things like morale, productivity, and turnover. Schools quickly picked up on this same idea as they began to examine schools for the same connections. By the 1980s, researchers were trying to make connections between school climate and student achievement. They began to find positive relationships between student success and the school environment, specifically the social aspect. School climate research saw a shift in the 1990s as researchers began to look

more closely at individual classes and teachers. They studied the effect of students having multiple teachers or visiting more than one classroom each day as opposed to sitting in one classroom with one teacher. They found that the strongest connection between climate and achievement exists at the whole-school level (Zullig, et al., 2010). This became the main focus of school climate research going forward.

As referenced in the previous section, the lack of a mutually agreed upon definition of school climate has proven problematic in the area of school climate research. Much of the difficulty lies in the fact that some researchers view it as mainly subjective – the opinions and feelings of the people in the organization – while others view it as objective – the observable aspects of the environment that an outsider should be able to catch onto relatively quickly (Cohen, et al., 2009; MacNeil, et al., 2009; Van Houte & Van Maele, 2011).

A review of school climate research literature by Zullig, et al. (2010) reveals five distinct domains of school climate. The first domain is order, safety, and discipline. The second is academic outcomes. The third is social relationships. The fourth is school facilities. Finally, the fifth domain is school connectedness. One can see the connection to Loukas' (2007) three domains: physical, social, and academic. While Zullig, et al go into more detail, Loukas' divisions will be the main focus of the research in this study.

Today, school climate research occurs mostly to assist school leaders in making well-informed decisions about their schools (NASSP & NAESP, 2013). Data and observations are collected from multiple schools, both with perceived positive and negative climates, and compiled into studies and reports for school leaders to read and learn what makes successful schools. This is also one of the purposes of this thesis.

Impact of climate on schools

Leadership experts say that the most important thing an organizational leader can do is focus on the climate and culture of their organization (MacNeil, et al., 2009). It is no different in schools. Jamie Prokupchuk (2016) describes the importance of the feeling a person gets when they walk through the halls of a school. They take in a lot of information: what is on the walls, how the staff interacts with the people around them, and how students treat one another. These are just a few of the components that have a significant impact on a person's impression of a school.

While all of that is certainly important, perhaps the most significant components of school climate are instructional practice and student achievement. MacNeil et al. (2009) say that unhealthy schools put low value on teacher professional development and motivation as well as student achievement. On the other hand, those schools that are seen as healthy, successful, and thriving put great emphasis on those exact factors that play into school climate. Their study was unique in that it looked for a specific link between school climate and student achievement while others mainly focused on teacher morale, enrollment levels, etc. MacNeil and his colleagues noticed an important shift in educational research from linking school climate with management to focusing more on students. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (2013) found the same thing in their study – leaders who focus heavily on climate and do the right things see better performing schools in general. This, in turn leads to the aforementioned morale, enrollment, etc. becoming a more positive aspect of a school's climate as well.

Findings like the ones in these studies are proof that this is an important topic for school leaders to consider, and that it is one in which they should be well-trained. It is even more important for WELS school leaders to focus on these things as they look to use their schools to share Jesus with a highly skeptical and critical society while simultaneously offering a superior academic education.

Best school climate practices

Finally, the question must be asked: How does a school develop, implement, and maintain a positive school climate? Countless experts agree that training of principals and other school leaders is a vital step that cannot be overlooked (Bayko, 2005; NASSP & NAESP, 2013). Schools cannot expect to be successful if their principals are inexperienced and untrained. This; however, is just the first step of many.

There are several different “divisions” of school climate that exist in educational research. Loukas’ (2007) physical, social, and academic divisions of climate will be used for this research. These three encompass so much of school climate, and they are simple to understand and easy to evaluate for any stakeholder in the school. For schools looking to improve or affirm their school climate practices, these three divisions will allow for ease of understanding and clear direction.

The following sections will dive deeper into each of the three divisions to define them. While Loukas (2007) came up with these three divisions, an easy connection can be made between these and almost any researcher’s divisions of school climate.

Physical Climate

Loukas’ (2007) physical dimension of school climate includes: the appearance of the school building, the school size, student to teacher ratio, order and organization of the

school and its classrooms, availability and resources, and safety and comfort. This further description of a the physical dimension of school climate will prove very helpful to schools looking to improve their climate.

Thapa et al. (2013) have a lot to say about physical school climate. They cite Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to support the idea of safety being an important component of school climate. Feeling safe is one of the most basic needs that students have in school, but Thapa et al. (2013) found that there is significant research that shows that many students do not feel safe in their school setting either physically or emotionally. In order for schools to be successful, they must accomplish feelings of safety in their students. Habegger (2008) takes this a step further by saying that leaders create a positive culture by creating a sense of belonging, especially for their students.

Other components of the physical dimension are fairly obvious in how they will affect school climate. Schools with a positive climate will have cleanliness and order as a priority. They will maintain their facilities. They will ensure that there is adequate space for students and teachers to work successfully, and ensure that students and teachers have access to the resources they need to do their work (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Social Climate

Loukas (2007) describes the social dimension of school climate as being created by the following: the quality of relationships among students, teachers, and staff; the equitable and fair treatment of students; the degree of competition and social comparison between students; and the degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school.

Prokupchuk (2016) argues that school climate and culture are created by the students, teachers, and staff as much as (if not more than) it is created by school leaders. The extent to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decisions that affect the school will have a significant impact on the social climate of the school. The relationships between those that work for the school and those whom the school serves should emulate respect across the board as well as some degree of collegiality when appropriate. Leithwood (2021) says that one of the most significant impacts a school leader can have on a school is to build productive partnerships among parents, schools, and the larger community.

Other factors that will affect the social aspect of a school climate as described by Loukas (2007) might include the way discipline is carried out (Bayko, 2005), communication between school and home (Fuerstenau, 2021), as well as the way interpersonal relationships are fostered and encouraged between students and between teachers. Many researchers, including Martin (2009) and Savage (2007) cite collegial relationships between teachers as being a key to positive school climate. It can have a positive effect on school climate when teachers get to know one another on a personal level and spend time together outside of the school building.

Academic Climate

Finally, Loukas (2007) defines the academic dimension of school climate as: the quality of instruction, teacher expectations for student achievement, as well as monitoring student progress and reporting those results to students and parents.

One could argue that the academic climate may be the most important of the three divisions as described by Loukas (2007). After all, the ultimate purpose of a school is to

teach. Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom (2011) are strong advocates for school leaders affecting positive change in classroom environments as far as instruction is concerned, stating that all schools should strive for “a culture of excellent instruction” (p. 54). This is a major focus of school climate research, as experts implore leaders to make this a priority through professional development, observation, and evaluation of teachers (Fuerstenau, 2021; Leithwood, 2021; Martin, 2009; Prokopchuk, 2016).

The desire for professional development among teachers will create a growth mindset throughout the school facility. School leaders and teachers alike should strive to grow and improve their craft so that they can discover better ways to instruct their students. It can be easy when thinking of “climate” to immediately go to the physical and social dimensions. Those two are the more tangible, easily observable of the three. However, the academic dimension deserves at least as much – if not more – attention than the other two. Schools must ensure that they are accomplishing their main purpose – delivering a high-quality academic experience to all of their students – at a high level.

Development and Implementation

So, what do we gather from all of this? How should school leaders choose to evaluate their school culture and provide focus and direction? There is certainly no one-size-fits-all answer to be had for “how to develop a strong, positive school climate.” However, there are some principles that we can glean from the many studies that have been done on the topic.

First, the leader of the school must be effective. Effective leadership means different things for different leaders. One thing is certain: school climate cannot happen through one person. It takes the collective effort of all stakeholders of the school to make

it a reality, so those should be the people involved in developing the desired climate of the school (Leithwood, 2021; Martin, 2009; Prokopchuk, 2016; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Before school climate can be developed, relationships must be developed between the school leader and all stakeholders. The school leader should act as a team builder and delegator (Bayko, 2005).

Next, stakeholders must understand the culture from which the climate will be developed. This can be understood through things like the school's mission statement, traditions, values, and assumptions (Prokopchuk, 2016). The school team needs to agree on the school's identity. If that needs to be changed, there is a great amount of work that needs to be done before climate can be developed. If there is a strong cultural foundation, on the other hand, the school team should come up with the components on which they want to focus. They should identify the strengths and weaknesses of their current climate and prioritize those things that they want to change (Bayko, 2005). The numerous aforementioned studies would be useful in this process, giving the school climate team direction in the areas they should prioritize in their improvement process.

A valuable piece of the process for school teams in developing a school climate is to discover the feelings and opinions of other stakeholders in the school. This can be done through something as simple as a survey (Bayko, 2005; Martin, 2009; Prokopchuk, 2016; Wagner, 2006). Not only will this provide the team with helpful and important information, it will give all other stakeholders a sense of belonging and ownership of the school climate (Leithwood, 2021). The information gleaned from this survey can be compared to the plans that the school team made and revised as needed. At the end of this first step, the team should have a clear agreed-upon picture of what they want the school

climate to be as well as a plan for implementation. An example of a survey will be used in the research for this study. This survey is a combination of two different research-based and field-tested surveys created by Wagner (2006) and the New Jersey Department of Education (2012). These two survey tools were combined, the questions were categorized based on Loukas' (2007) divisions of school climate, and similar questions were re-written to combine ideas.

Once goals and targets have been established for school climate, the time comes to implement the desired climate and maintain it. Bayko (2005) classifies the implementation process as "school improvement" – defining it as "a systematic, sustained effort aimed at a change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively" (p. 23). No matter what the goals and targets for the school's climate are, it is vital that the school team see this effort as structured, long-term, and aimed at accomplishing educational goals.

Finally, the sustained and systematic implementation must be followed by concentrated maintenance. This is still a team effort, but the school leader plays the most significant role. It requires great patience and focus. Courage, creativity, tough-mindedness, and persistence are just a few of the qualities that leaders will need to have to incorporate this change and improvement (Bayko, 2005). Brion (2021) noted school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic that put a significant focus on people rather than policies and procedures having great success in improving or maintaining their strong, positive school climates. Multiple experts put emphasis on creating a sense of belonging for workers, students, and families (Habegger, 2008; Leithwood, 2021; Martin, 2009;

Wagner, 2006). Communication from the school leader is incredibly important. Yet another area of focus is professional development – raising the academic bar at the school, which, in turn, raises the rest of the school climate (Fuerstenau, 2021; Leithwood, 2021; NASSP & NAESP, 2013; Prokopchuk, 2016; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Zullig, et al., 2010; Cohen, et al., 2009).

This is obviously a huge task that will require a lot of time, focus, energy, patience, and communication. School teams and leaders cannot expect changes to take place overnight. School climate improvement is well worth the expenditures. Physically, socially, and academically, it raises the bar of the school. This, in turn, enables WELS schools to better share the gospel of Jesus with children and their families.

Summary

Although there is a difference between the terms “climate” and “culture”, most people use them interchangeably. This study was conducted by examining school climate – which can be considered the environment of the school. There has been extensive research done on the topic of school climate – even in WELS schools. But all of them have only sought to find a connection between school climate and some other facet of school ministry. This study will seek to evaluate WELS schools on their use of best practices regarding school climate. The framework of this study is based on Loukas’s (2007) three divisions of climate: physical, social, and academic. A fourth division of climate – spiritual climate – was added to make a direct application to WELS schools. Survey and interview questions as well as data analysis were conducted with these divisions as the foundation.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

It is vitally important that WELS schools work to stay relevant in a constantly changing world of education. A major factor of that work is centered around school climate. One could say that climate is the most important way WELS schools differentiate themselves from others. This study evaluates how WELS schools are utilizing best school climate practices that are based on research.

The following sections detail the design of the study including the research question, a survey that was created to answer that question, an established framework for interviews that were conducted, a description of the sample population, the data collection analysis procedures that were used, and some limitations of the study.

Research Question

To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families?

Research Design and Procedures

This study was created to be a non-experimental simple descriptive study that evaluated the connection between best school climate practices and the climate practices that are observed in WELS schools. The researcher created a Google Forms survey (Appendix A) by utilizing questions from two surveys created by Wagner (2006) and the New Jersey Department of Education (2012). These two surveys were built with the purpose of research-based school climate evaluation. Both have been evaluated for validity and have been conducted in several schools across the country as an evaluation of school climate. Several of the questions in these studies were repeated, so some

questions were re-written or combined to avoid redundancy for survey participants.

Simple demographic information was also included in the survey to differentiate between individual responses and for further analysis – such as a connection between the quality of school climate and the length of time a principal had been serving at his/her school.

Using the help of the WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools, an email (Appendix D) was sent to their list of acting principals – a list of 299 individuals. This email included a brief description of the researcher and the purpose of the study as well as an invitation to participate in the study and a deadline for participation. Two follow-up emails were sent, one a week before the deadline and one the day before the deadline, asking each time for more participation.

After the deadline passed, the researcher put all the results of the survey into a spreadsheet for analysis of the data. All of the data was sorted into three categories based on the school's location – suburban, rural, and urban. Each location category was analyzed on its own to see if there was any connection between the quality of school climate and a school's setting. Within each setting, the data was divided into the three divisions of school climate – physical, social, and academic as spelled out by Loukas (2007). This was done to evaluate any common themes among survey scores within each setting or among overall “high-scoring” schools or “low-scoring” schools.

Following the initial data analysis, the highest and lowest-scoring schools from each setting category were selected for further examination through interviews. The principal at each of the six schools was emailed to ask if they would be willing to participate in an interview to enhance the study (Appendix E). Some school leaders declined, so the next top-scoring or lowest-scoring school was contacted. After interview

consent forms (Appendix B) were signed and returned, interviews (Appendix C) were conducted via Google Meet and recorded using an audio-recorder app so that the researcher could return to the interview for analysis later on. In the interview, each principal was also asked for the name of a teacher and/or a parent that might also be willing to participate in an interview. This was done to get an additional perspective so that the principal wasn't the only one providing the insight to the school's climate.

Following the interview stage, the researcher went back and listened to each interview again, taking notes for each question that was asked to each person that was interviewed. Notes were compared and analyzed for common themes between schools. Themes were identified, coded, and reported in the final section of this thesis.

Population and Sample

According to WELS CLS school statistics (2022), there are currently 422 schools that exist in the WELS. 109 of those are standalone Early Childhood Ministries and were not included in this study. Although there are several similarities between an Early Childhood ministry and a K-8 or high school climate, the focus of this study was only intended for schools, and the term "Early Childhood Ministries" could also include day cares. Because the 109 ECMs were not included, there are 313 schools that were possible participants in this study.

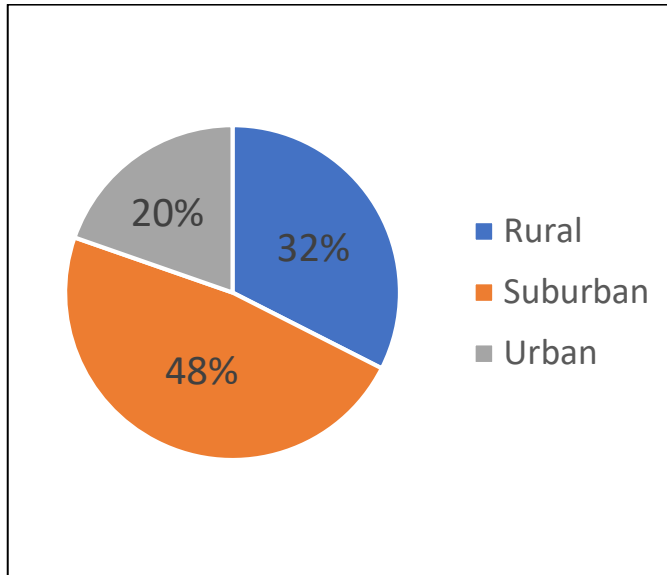
The WELS CLS list of principals included 299 individuals. The initial email to request participation in the survey (Appendix D) was sent to all 299 of these individuals with the help of the CLS.

After allowing just over two weeks of participation, 117 responses were recorded. This is a response rate of 39%. Of the 117 responses, 38 (32%) were from rural schools,

56 (48%) were from suburban schools, and 23 (20%) were from urban schools. Figure 1 shows the percentage of participation from each setting category.

Figure 1

Percent of survey responses by category



Note. Survey participants were asked to identify what setting they are located in. Nearly half of the schools that participated are from suburban settings.

Table 1 shows the simple statistical analysis of the enrollment numbers for the schools that participated in the survey. The lowest enrollment was 12 students, while the greatest enrollment was 1150 students. The average enrollment for the 117 schools was about 136 students.

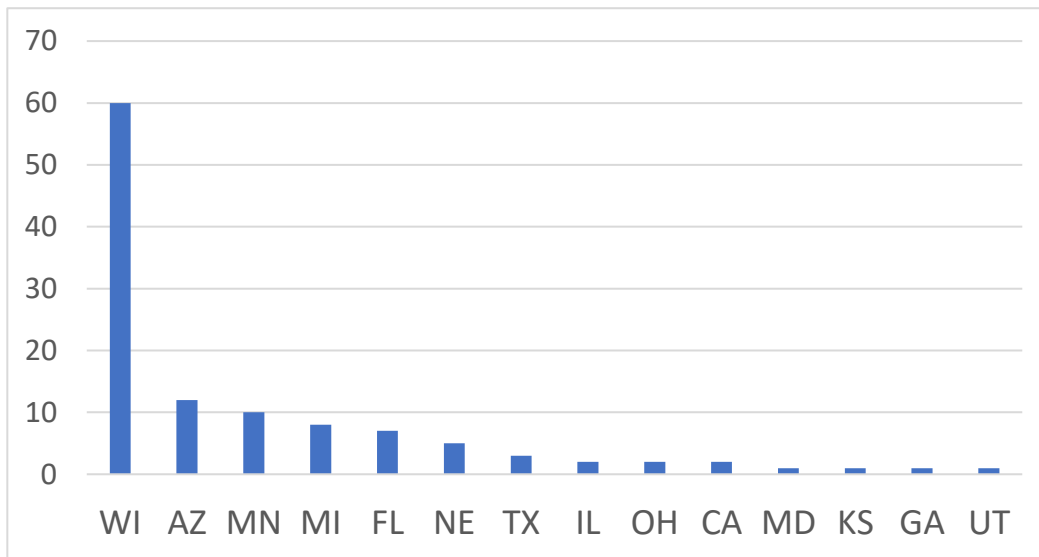
Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Enrollment Data

Statistic	Value
Mean	135.91453
Median	104
Mode	100
Range	1138
Minimum	12
Maximum	1150
Count	117

Note. The average enrollment for a school that participated in the survey was about 136. The lowest enrollment was 12 and the highest enrollment was 1150 students.

Of the 117 schools that participated, 60 of them can be found in Wisconsin. The next highest state representation from participating schools was Arizona with 12. Utah, Georgia, Kansas, and Maryland all contributed one participating school to the study.

Figure 2
Number of Participating Schools per State



Note. 60 of the 117 schools that participated in the survey were from Wisconsin. There were 14 states represented in the survey.

For the interviews, the highest-scoring and lowest-scoring school from each category was selected. This means that a total of six schools were selected for interviews.

The interviews were conducted with six principals, three parents, and four staff/faculty members from the six schools that were selected. Every school was represented by at least two individuals in the interview process.

Instrumentation

The Google Forms survey was created using questions from two well-established school climate surveys created by Wagner (2006) and the New Jersey Department of Education (2012). Both of these surveys have had validity studies done and have been utilized by schools across America to evaluate school climate. Questions were combined or re-written to avoid redundancy and organized by the three divisions of climate. The survey was made up of mostly Likert scale questions. Scores were derived from responses in the following way: a response of “Strongly Agree” was assigned a score of four, “Agree” was given a three, “Disagree” was a two, and “Strongly Disagree” was a one. Some questions were worded in such a way that a response of “Strongly Disagree” was the more positive response. For those questions, the point values were reversed. Demographic questions were also asked to enable the researcher to divide the schools into their setting categories (rural, suburban, and urban), gain contact information for interview purposes, and look for connections between enrollment and length of time the school leader has served at that school with school climate. Overall, the survey was estimated to take around 10 minutes to complete.

Interview questions (Appendix C) were created based on the literature review chapter of this thesis. The first four questions were based on Loukas’s (2007) three

divisions of climate as well as the addition of spiritual climate for the direct application to WELS schools. The remaining questions were created as a result of research-based best practices also found in the literature review and to assist the researcher in making recommendations to WELS schools. Interviews typically lasted 20-30 minutes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Responses from the survey were populated into a spreadsheet for analysis. First, data was sorted into the three setting categories – rural, suburban, and urban. Data was organized by total score on the survey from least to greatest in each category.

Beyond finding the top and lowest-scoring school from each category, several different tests were conducted to see if there was a difference between each setting category. Three t-Tests were used to compare rural to suburban, urban to suburban, and rural to urban. The results of these tests will be discussed in the Results chapter.

Correlations between demographic factors and overall scores were also researched. Using a spreadsheet function, tests were conducted to measure the impact of size of faculty, principal experience at a school, and enrollment on the total climate score. These results will also be shared in the Results chapter.

Following the interviews, notes were coded for common themes like curb appeal, teacher relationships, or quality of instructions. These codes were also marked with a positive sign or a negative sign for additional analysis. Notes that were coded the same were grouped together. The most mentioned comments, or those that were directly connected to the research in the Literature Review were reported in the Results section.

Limitations

This study entirely relied on data reported by the subjects. There were some differences of opinion regarding specific factors of school climate that existed between principals and teachers or principals and parents. This study is also not reflective of all WELS schools. As shown in Figure 2, over half of the schools that participated are from Wisconsin, while no other state was represented by more than 12 schools. While it is true that most WELS schools are in Wisconsin, there are several other states that contain many WELS schools.

Summary

Two field-tested school climate surveys were combined to create a Google Forms survey that was emailed out to every WELS principal. Following the completion of the survey by 117 participants out of 299 possible, quantitative data was analyzed by researching correlation between several different factors of school climate. The top and lowest-scoring school from each setting category (rural, suburban, and urban) were contacted and asked for an interview. Individuals from six schools were interviewed about their school's climate. Notes were gathered from the interviews and coded to identify common themes.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

A survey was written and interviews were conducted with WELS school leaders, teachers, and parents to answer the question: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families? The following sections will detail and analyze the results of the survey and the interviews.

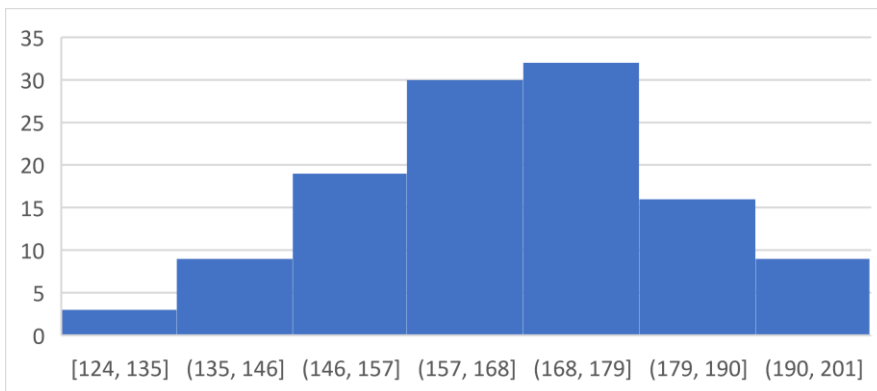
Data Analysis

Survey

Following the survey deadline date, data was arranged in a spreadsheet for analysis. Schools were divided by setting category and sorted from lowest total score to highest total score within each category. The highest and lowest scoring school from each category were noted as these schools would be contacted for interviews.

The first analysis that was conducted was to see the distribution of scores. There were 204 possible points on the survey. Out of 117 responses, the lowest score was 124 or 61%. The highest score was 201 or 99%. The average score was 167 or 82%.

Figure 3
Distribution of Total Survey Scores

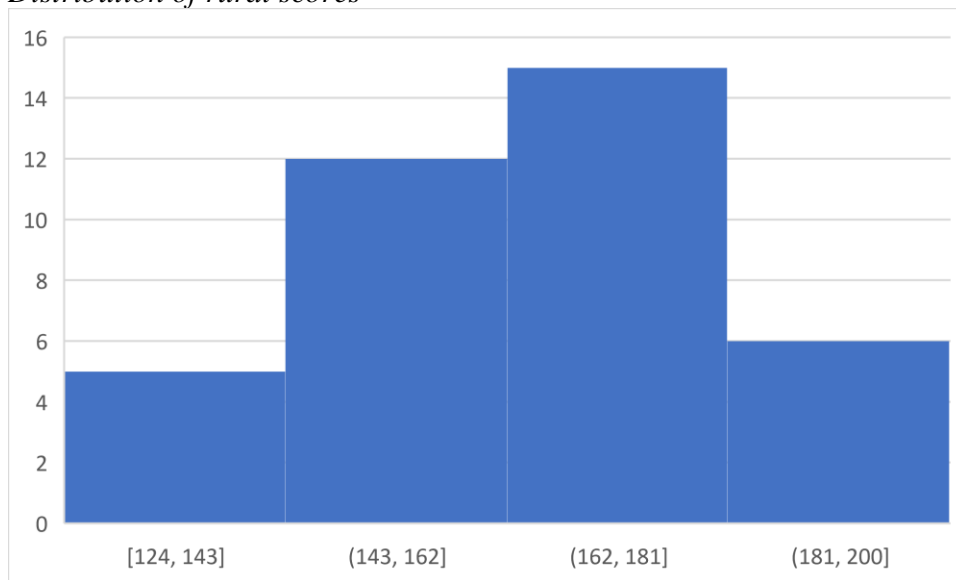


Note. There were 204 possible points on the survey. The lowest total score was 124. The highest score was 201.

The following figures show the distribution of scores for each of the three categories. One can immediately notice the bell-curve nature of the overall distribution as well as the rural distribution. The suburban and urban scores are skewed slightly to the left of the bell curve. It is worth noting that the interval ranges for the suburban and urban graphs are quite different than the rural graph. Because of this, not much meaning should be assumed from the differences in these graphs.

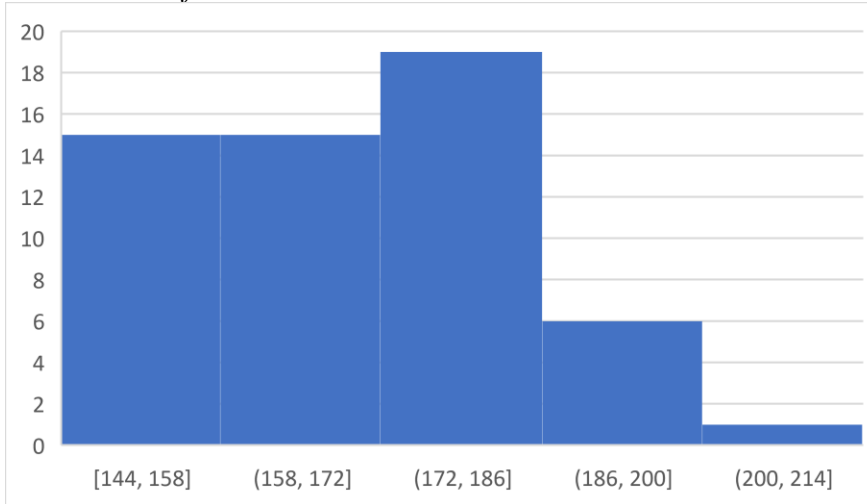
Figure 4

Distribution of rural scores



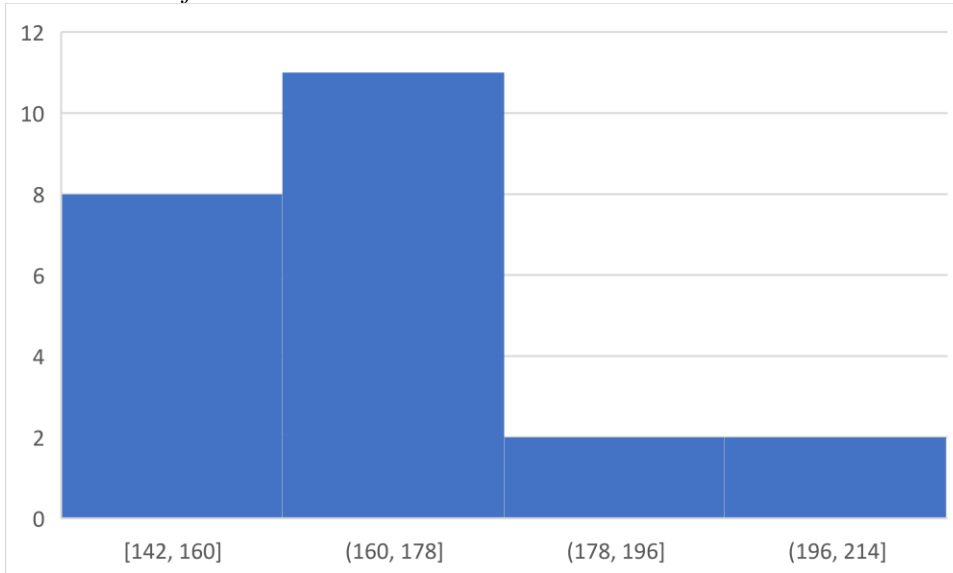
Note. Rural was the only category with any school that scored below 70%. There were three schools in this category that scored as such. The average score for the rural category was 164.

Figure 5
Distribution of suburban scores



Note. Suburban contained the highest scoring school with a score of 201. The average score for the suburban category was 169.

Figure 6
Distribution of urban scores



Note. The average score in the urban category was also 169. The lowest was 142 and the highest was 200.

Using a spreadsheet function, the correlation between three demographic factors and total scores was researched. A correlation that is close to either 1 or -1 is considered to be high, and Table 3 shows that the correlation between each of the three demographic

factors and total score was essentially non-existent except for one. Principal experience in rural schools had a correlation of .34. While this could be a coincidence, perhaps it can be said that principal experience in rural schools is an important factor in school climate – that the longer a principal is present at a school, the more positive the climate will be.

Table 2

Correlation between total survey scores and demographic factors

Setting Category	Correlation Coefficients		
	Enrollment	# of Teachers	Principal Experience
Rural	0.038332565	0.071132432	0.341134299
Suburban	0.096462131	0.081262447	0.162078551
Urban	0.085754145	0.073447344	-0.068566287

Note. The correlation between total scores and the listed demographic factors was found to be very low.

Finally, three paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the total scores of the schools in each of the three setting categories. The first was a test between the rural and suburban categories. Using an alpha level of 0.05, the difference between rural ($M = 164.08$) and suburban ($M = 168.95$) was found to be statistically insignificant, $t(92) = -1.43, p = 0.15$.

The next test was between the rural and urban categories. Using an alpha level of 0.05, the difference between rural ($M = 164.08$) and urban ($M = 169.35$) also did not reach the level of statistical significance, $t(59) = -1.19, p = 0.24$.

The last test compared the scores of suburban schools to the scores of urban schools. Using the same alpha level of 0.05, the difference between suburban ($M =$

168.95) and urban ($M = 169.35$) was found to be statistically insignificant, $t(59) = -1.19$, $p = 0.24$.

Following the analysis of survey data, six schools were selected for interviews. These were the top and lowest scoring schools from each of the three setting categories. Table 3 shows the total scores for each of the schools that were selected. There were 204 total points possible in the survey. The highest scoring school that was selected for an interview was the top suburban school with a score of 201. The lowest scoring school that was selected for an interview was the low rural school with a score of 128. The percentage next to each score is used to quickly judge each school's score using a grading scale method as if this was a test that was being graded. The two urban schools are actually the 2nd highest and 2nd lowest scoring urban scores. The top and lowest scoring urban schools declined an interview. The low rural school is also the 2nd lowest scoring rural school. The lowest-scoring rural school also declined an interview.

Table 3
Scores of Schools that were Interviewed

School	Total Score	Percentage
Low Rural	128	63%
Top Rural	198	97%
Low Suburban	144	71%
Top Suburban	201	99%
Low Urban	154	75%
Top Urban	197	97%

Note. The scores listed in the table are the scores and percentages (out of 204 possible points) from the top and lowest-scoring schools in each setting category. Percentages are provided to help the reader understand the score as if it were a grade on a quiz or test.

The average score for each statement on the survey was also found. The highest scoring statement of the survey was: "Our students have access to the basic resources

they need in our classrooms.” The lowest scoring response was to the statement: “Some students at this school just cannot be motivated to do the work.” While this may not speak to every school, these are points worth investigating. The most positive response to the statement about resources was surprising as the researcher was under the impression that many WELS schools feel like they don’t have the resources that other schools have. This turned out to not be the case. The average score on this statement for all of the schools that participated was 3.85 out of 4. For reference, the next closest average score for a statement was 3.59. The most negative response is an indication that many WELS schools are struggling with student motivation. The average score for this statement was 2.61 out of 4.

In summary, it appears as though WELS schools are doing a mostly excellent job in implementing and developing school climate – providing a high-quality educational experience to students and their families based on best practices. Or, at least, it is perceived to be going very well from the point of view of school leaders in the synod.

Interviews

Interview questions were asked to further help the researcher understand the answer to the research question: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families?

Each interview was recorded to allow me to be present during the conversation. Following the completion of all the interviews, the researcher went back and listened to each one to take notes. Notes on each interview were divided by the four divisions of climate discussed (remember that spiritual climate was added to the interview). Once all

interviews were listened to and notes were taken, the notes were coded. For example, notes that had to do with the physical appearance of the facility from the outside were coded “curb appeal.” Notes that had to do with teacher relationships were coded as such with a positive or a negative sign. Once comments and notes from each interview were coded, the top scoring schools were grouped together to look for common themes among the codes. The same was done for the low-scoring schools. Standout practices that were noteworthy based on their connection to the research from the Literature Review were also recorded.

In this section, the data from the interviews will be divided into categories based on the questions that were asked and identify common themes or standout practices in schools that have a successful climate as well as those themes or practices in schools that have weaker climates.

Physical Climate

The first question that was asked always revolved around physical climate. Lukas’s (2007) definition was used when explaining physical climate to the interviewees so that there was a mutual understanding of what we were discussing.

For each of the three top schools, well-kept, modern facilities were mentioned in regard to their physical climate. This seems to be a major factor that immediately pops into the heads of school leaders when they think about their facilities based on the initial comments from each of the principals (Peterson & Deal, 2002). This factors heavily into other important aspects of physical climate such as safety. All three schools mentioned their safety practices for entering and exiting the building as well as the efficient design of their buildings to allow for safe emergency drill and evacuation procedures. This was a

major point of Thapa et al. (2013) as they cited Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to point to student safety as essential to find success in student achievement.

In connection to Habegger (2008), one of the top-scoring schools mentioned that when students walk through their front door, they feel like they are a part of something bigger than themselves. This was a powerful statement in reference to that school's physical climate. The design and maintenance of the building are such that students feel comfortable walking through those front doors, and even enjoy that part of the school process!

Each top-scoring school mentioned that they have a regular crew that keeps their school facilities clean and well-kept. Two of the three schools also mentioned the artwork and imagery that they have hung on their walls that helps to create an inviting atmosphere (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

An interesting point was made by one of these three top-scoring schools. The interviewees mentioned that they don't necessarily have a "large" campus. Most would consider it very small. However, they don't let the lack of space discourage them. They use it to their advantage, working intentionally to create an atmosphere of "closeness" amongst faculty and students. They do this by doing activities together with different ages, which is a simple task as they can quickly move to other classrooms. All of the teachers get to know each student very well because of the close proximity they have.

For the three low-scoring schools, several factors were mentioned as things that weigh down the physical climate of their respective schools. The first and most significant factor of physical climate to these school representatives was curb appeal. Two of the schools mentioned the lack of a visible outdoor playground. This seemed

important to those that mentioned it as something people from the street could look and see that the school is there as well as enjoy the view of happy children playing outside. This wasn't necessarily mentioned by the top-scoring schools, but it is certainly something that stands out to those schools that don't have it. Peterson and Deal (2002) make a point for the importance of the look of a school and its architecture and its effect on school climate.

All three of the schools mentioned facility design as negative factors to their physical climate. One school has two campuses, making it difficult to unify people and create an atmosphere of "closeness" that was mentioned in the previous paragraph. One school is landlocked in a very urban area and is limited in options on how to make themselves more visible as more than just a church. One school was piecemealed together through several additions over many decades and there is no logical "flow" to the building. This school mentioned student safety being an issue because of fire doors in inconvenient locations and no quick and easy access to external doors for some classrooms. When asked how their physical climates might be improved, two of the schools mentioned a more inviting entrance area with signage that made it clearer as to where to find rooms or certain parts of the building.

In summary, one of the most important aspects of physical climate is school safety. The facilities must be designed in a way that keeps students safe as instructed by state or local codes. Many WELS school buildings may have been built several decades ago and precede some codes that currently exist. This is a difficult financial burden that many schools may not be able to afford but is certainly an issue worth exploring in every possible way. Modern, clean, and efficiently designed buildings also appear to be an

important piece of a positive physical climate. Missing these things has quite the negative impact for the low-scoring schools in this section. An inviting atmosphere with signage, friendly or even spiritual artwork, and bright, open spaces is also a way that several successful schools have made positive first (and lasting) impressions.

Social Climate

The next question in the interview was about social climate. Lukas's (2007) definition was also used here to define social climate for the interviewees.

There were some common themes in the social climates of the top schools. First and foremost, each school mentioned a "tight knit" faculty and staff that is unified and works together well (Martin, 2009; Savage, 2007). They commented on the mutual respect and support that everyone who works in their building has for one another. This obviously goes a long way in setting the tone for the social climate of the school! One school specifically mentioned that the "tightness" of their faculty is not something they try to force. They don't mandate staff holiday parties or get-togethers. They simply let relationships happen naturally. This interviewee said that sometimes one group will hang out one weekend and some will be excluded. Sometimes no one will get together for quite a while, and they're all ok with that. They have an understanding that they don't all need to be best friends, but that they do need to have a mutual Christian love and respect for one another as people and as teachers and workers in the school.

Two of the three schools also mentioned their ongoing connection to alumni. One school commented that they have alumni parents that will move back to the town of that school solely to be able to send their kids to that school. Another alluded to the fact that several of their alumni stay in touch with one another long after they leave the school.

There is evidence of powerful relational connections being made in these school settings (Prokupchuk, 2016).

Again, two of the three schools discussed the diversity of their programs – having students and families from several different backgrounds that are universally accepted and encouraged in their respective schools. Each of these schools mentioned having (for the most part) extremely well-behaved students. Each school leader commended their teachers for the calm and friendly atmosphere that is present in each of their schools. This was a testament to the classroom management of each teacher – creating an environment of high expectations and mutual respect (Bayko, 2005).

For the low-scoring schools, several factors were admitted that have a negative effect on social climate. For one school, it was stability. Several teachers had taken calls in and out of the school over the last few years. Wahlstrom et al. (2010) discuss the dramatic negative effect that turnover has on a school's climate. With a relatively young and very new faculty, it is difficult for this school to maintain some traditions that school families and long-time staff expect while injecting new ideas and life into the school. Peterson and Deal (2002) address this topic. They state that it is important to hold onto many traditions because they shape several aspects of the school. At the same time, having a vision that looks forward to positive change and improvement is also important. This imbalance leads to tension among staff, which was the main factor for another school. Tension could result from several things in any school setting. For these schools, the faculties and staffs seemed to lack the mutual Christian love and respect for one another that was mentioned by the top-scoring schools.

One school in particular mentioned that diversity is a significant challenge for them – accepting several new students that may have been expelled or removed from other schools for behavioral issues and cultural backgrounds that often times don't seem to mesh with each other. Another one of the three schools mentioned COVID having a significant impact on relationships in their school as it caused division through differences of opinion. This led to a lack of communication amongst the faculty and, in turn, to the parents.

In summary, the top-scoring schools showed that a social climate thrives when teachers show Christian love and respect for one another. This sets the tone for students and their families in the school. Another point worth highlighting is the benefit of called worker stability and the challenge it presents when there is frequent turnover of teachers or administrators. For the top scoring schools, diversity is a blessing. For the low-scoring schools, it is a challenge. An intentional alumni program revealed itself to be an incredibly helpful thing for the social climate of some of these schools. Management of students in a respectful and calm way was also cited as creating a welcoming and friendly atmosphere for all of those in the school building.

Academic Climate

The same process was used for introducing academic climate to each of the interviewees using Loukas's (2007) definition.

Each of the top-scoring schools mentioned having a full- or part-time staff member who was specifically focused on remedial teaching or special education. Each of them saw that as having a significant impact on the academic success of their students and their school.

Regarding curriculum, two of the three schools commented on the connection that they have with other grade schools that are part of an area Lutheran high school association. This is a trend that several high school associations have been moving toward – uniting the curriculum of grade schools in the area that feed into the high school. One school mentioned their goal of being one grade level ahead of the public school in math – a lofty goal as they are competing with one of the top public school systems in the country, but one in which they have found success.

One of the top-scoring school leaders talked about how his faculty does not stray away from the things that work and have worked in education for a long time. They don't get caught up in the trends unless they are proven by research to be effective. One of the teachers that was interviewed credited her fellow teachers saying that the academic climate success of their school isn't necessarily dependent on the curriculum, but the fact that the teachers at that school know the students very well and teach them the way they need to be taught.

Each of the schools also commented on the fact that their students are very well-prepared for the next level, wherever they might choose to go. They all claimed to have positive relationships with high schools that are close because of this fact.

For the low-scoring schools in this section, there wasn't a lot to be said – just an apparent understanding from each interviewee that this was an area of climate that could use some improvement. One school mentioned the need for more student choice when it came to doing homework. From this person's perspective, it seemed that a lot of worksheets were given out as homework. Another school leader said that he would like to see more instruction of life skills rather than just content in their curriculum. There were

still positives in this regard for the low-scoring schools. Each of them mentioned, like the top-scoring schools, that their students were often very well-prepared for the next level.

An encouraging sign for WELS schools!

In summary, solid curriculum and instructional leadership is an important aspect of academic climate in WELS schools. This point makes it clear that the role of principal is vital, and that training of the people in that position is paramount in school climate success. This is a point that will be addressed later. Following that point, each of the three top-scoring schools mentioned their use of special education resources – a growing need in many schools today. The comment about teachers knowing their students is one that certainly sticks out. According to survey results and interview comments, WELS schools, whatever their climate is, are doing an excellent job preparing their students for life after their time in a WELS school.

Spiritual Climate

Spiritual climate was obviously not one of the divisions of climate that was listed by Loukas (2007), but one that was added to have a very specific focus on WELS schools. Through the interviews, there were no “negatives” that really came out, but there were areas of needed improvement that were identified.

The top-scoring schools made it very obvious that spiritual climate is something that is very intentional at their schools. Every school mentioned their weekly chapel, their devotions, and Christ Light instruction, but the top-scoring schools took it to another level and identified spiritual climate in the way that student behavior is managed, the way issues are handled with parents, and the encouragements of families and opportunities presented by the school to become more active in their own spiritual lives. Each of the

top-scoring schools also has a pastor on staff whose job description mainly centered on the school. This is a major factor to positive school climate in these cases. Some of these interviewees also went back to the conversation on physical climate and mentioned some of the things they have on the walls or visible elsewhere that make it very evident what their school is all about.

For the low-scoring schools, the common thread was identifying that they could do a better job of encouraging families to become more active in their spiritual lives. None of these three schools have a dedicated school pastor. However, each of these schools did claim to have some things in the works to improve this area of their school's climate.

In summary, each of the top-scoring schools has a pastor on staff whose job description is specifically directed toward the school. None of the low-scoring schools has this position on staff. Positive use of law and gospel in management situations was also a point made by each of the top-scoring schools. Just about every WELS school does things to contribute to the spiritual climate through weekly chapels, faculty devotions, student groups, and other initiatives that set them apart from other schools. A comment was made by each school to address the work of the school to encourage families to attend worship and connect them to the church. Top-scoring schools said this was a strength of their programs while low-scoring schools mentioned this was something that was attempted but could be more intentional.

Other Findings

Other general questions were asked about the climate of each school regarding mission statements, collaboration, and advice from successful schools for other schools looking to improve their climate.

Peterson and Deal (2002) emphasize the fact that mission and values are an important piece of school climate and culture, referring to it as the bedrock of school culture. In each school setting, it was apparent that the individuals interviewed knew what the mission of the school was. It was very obvious in the three top-scoring schools that the mission was very often a point of focus and included frequently in communication and discussion. In the lower-scoring schools, it was obvious that the mission was known among some, but not all, and may not have been a focus point in the school's communication or decision-making processes.

As for the collaborative effort of creating a school climate, just about every school interviewed indicated that the creation of their climate was a collaborative effort. Some identified in the lower-scoring schools that there may have been a group of people that has more control over the climate than others, but that the whole group would always have ultimate control. In the top-scoring schools, it was apparent that there was a very open environment that was willing to listen to ideas and encourage one another across the board among faculty, staff, parents, and students.

A major factor in the lack of school climate success for these low-scoring schools could be attributed to principal effectiveness. At two of these schools, the principals are also nearly full-time teachers. They are not provided the time they need to make needed improvements in the climate of their schools (Krause, 2018.) The WELS is also just now

roughly a decade into the implementation of various principal training programs. Most WELS principals are serving in that capacity with no prior training – two of the three low-scoring school principals are an example of that. Their knowledge and abilities in the principal position come mainly from previous observation and on-the-job experience. Seashore Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) call for principal and school leader training as a very important aspect of school climate and student achievement.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families? Previous sections included a review of the literature that showed what best practices are based on research, a description of the design and methodology of the study, as well as the results of the general survey and more detailed interviews. This section will summarize the findings of the study, draw conclusions, and make recommendations to WELS schools based on the findings.

Summary of the Results

While it would be extremely difficult to do a thorough and consistent evaluation of each school, the results of the survey showed that, in general, WELS schools are implementing high-quality school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families. If one were to follow a grading scale that assigns an “F” to grades lower than 70%, only three schools would have “failed” based on their survey results. Through the interviews, it was found that even the lowest-scoring schools that took the survey have much to be proud of when it comes to the climate of their schools. One thing that was clear: WELS schools are all working hard at fulfilling the mission they and the congregation have set before themselves. The spiritual climate at each of these schools is something to be admired as children and their families are instructed in the truths of God’s Word.

Conclusions

The survey and interviews were conducted using Loukas's (2007) divisions of climate: physical, social, and academic. One more climate "division" was added on to make the study specific to WELS schools in the form of spiritual climate.

Conclusion #1: Successful physical climates are a result of prioritizing safety, resources for students and teachers, and modern and clean facilities. As far as physical climate goes, schools with a positive and successful climate share several key components. The first is student safety. This aligns with Thapa et al. (2013) who cited Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, saying that student safety needs to be the number one priority in finding student success. This was not just found in the design of the facilities and their ability to handle an emergency, but it was the "feel" of each school's climate that was evident through the interview and the conversations that were had. Each of these schools has a climate where students feel that they are loved and accepted – feelings of safety. They also aligned with Habegger (2008), who talked about the need for a feeling of belonging. This aspect of physical climate may be overlooked by some and replaced by the look and feel of a building. Successful schools, however, make this a priority. Each of the highest scoring schools also made it evident that students and teachers have what they need to be successful in terms of space and resources. Finally, probably the most obvious factor of physical climate, facility maintenance and cleanliness, was clearly a priority at each of these schools (Peterson & Deal, 2002). These schools have modern facilities that are kept clean and orderly by a maintenance staff that understands the mission of the school.

Conclusion #2: Successful social climates are a result of prioritizing collaboration, behavior management, and productive, loving, and respectful relationships. In regards to social climate, Prokopchuk (2016) would commend each of the schools that was interviewed – high or low scoring – for the collaboration that has happened to create the climates that they currently have. Each of the schools answered the question about climate collaboration by stating that it was truly a collaborative effort between administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and that no one person or group of people had total control over the climate.

Bayko (2005) may not have considered the use of law and gospel when he talked about the importance in the way that behavior management is carried out and how it affects climate, but the three top-scoring schools all mentioned the positive use of law and gospel in many different management situations in their schools. This important application of law and gospel applies to the social and spiritual climate of the schools as students and their parents are taught to see the truths of these teachings in their own lives.

The effective use of law and gospel can go a long way in creating productive and loving Christian relationships. When thinking about social climate in a school setting, it is natural to consider the relationships between teachers. Martin (2009) and Savage (2007) both highlighted the significance that teacher relationships have in the climate of a school. It was evident in the three top-scoring schools that these relationships had been nurtured, not forced, to be productive and create buy-in from each individual so that the mission could be successfully carried out. In each of the three lowest-scoring schools, it was evident that this is a challenge and was having a negative impact on the overall climate of the school.

Conclusion #3: Successful academic climates are a result of prioritizing a mindset of continuous improvement of student achievement. The success of schools' academic climates is clear as a result of one factor: a mindset that is fixed on student achievement. This was evident in each of the interviews conducted with individuals from one of the three top-scoring schools. Teachers and leaders are dissatisfied with “the status quo” when it comes to instruction and curriculum. They want to ensure that teachers are performing at a high level and that their curriculum meets the needs of their students. For the three low-scoring schools, it was evident that this was not the case. Teachers may have been satisfied to continue on with old habits or not be critical when evaluating the curriculum. This is such a crucial aspect of climate because it is the main purpose of a school – to ensure academic success of their students. Each of the three top-scoring schools also had a staff member specifically dedicated to remedial or special education instruction. This valuable resource allows schools to teach a variety of students at different academic levels.

Conclusion #4: Mission is important for a positive school climate, and WELS schools do this very well. As mentioned earlier, spiritual climate is a strength for most WELS schools. There is clear acceptance and willingness to carry out the mission at each WELS school that was part of this research. There is certainly room for improvement, but this is an encouraging thing for the synod. Schools are achieving the purpose for which they have been established. Finally, Prokupchuk (2016) and Peterson and Deal (2002) also stated that successful schools have people that understand the school's purpose and how they can fit into that purpose. For WELS schools, this is the mission of the school. Many of these schools that were interviewed stated how they knew and understood the

mission, but the lower-scoring schools were unsure whether or not their people would know it as well. It was clear that the top-scoring schools made it a priority for their people to know and understand the mission so that they could do just as the authors suggest. A united body who is working together and encouraging one another toward a common purpose will be a successful school.

Conclusion #5: WELS schools are utilizing best school climate practices. All of this is intended to answer the focus question for this study: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families? As a result of this study, I feel confident in stating that there are many WELS schools that are certainly utilizing best school climate practices. I even feel comfortable stating that all of our WELS schools are using at least some best school climate practices based on the results of the survey. It is evident through those results that principals believe their schools are mostly doing the right things. Many of the synod's schools are finding great success because of the dedication to school climate that leaders, staff members, teachers, parents, and students have shown. There are also schools that have struggled through trying to find or create their climate and are hoping to improve it. Through my interviews, it was apparent that many school leaders, teachers, and parents at least know what successful and positive climates look like. This is an encouraging point as it does provide some direction for schools, and school leaders know what they should be working on to improve their schools' climates. It should be very obvious by this point that climate improvement is not something that happens overnight. It takes great time and dedication from everyone involved with the school – starting with the school leaders, faculties, and staffs.

Recommendations

While not all of these recommendations will be feasible for various reasons in every school setting, it is valuable for each school to consider such things. Some of these recommendations should be strongly considered as they apply to all school teams, regardless of location or financial situation. If any of these are currently impossible or infeasible, these may serve as excellent additions to a goals and objectives document or vision planning document.

Recommendation #1: Advance the training of principals in WELS schools.

As it was mentioned earlier, many WELS principals are serving in a position they were never officially trained for. Various training programs now exist in the WELS for training principals, but at this time the programs designed specifically to address this issue are only roughly a decade old. A vast majority of principals have only learned how to do their jobs from on-the-job experience, which leaves several gaps of vital knowledge for successful school climates. Men and women need to be encouraged to participate in these programs at a young age so that they have a solid foundation of knowledge regarding school leadership. They should also be encouraged to pursue advanced degrees in educational leadership. Positive school climate certainly is driven by the collective group of school members, but it must be mainly driven by school leaders.

School leadership has direct ties to student achievement and school success (Bayko, 2005; Fuerstenau, 2021; Habegger, 2008; Krause, 2018; Leithwood, 2021; Martin, 2009; NASSP & NAESP, 2013; Prokopchuk, 2016; Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Grissom et al. (2021) did a study on two decades of research on school leadership and found that it would be “difficult to envision an investment with a

higher ceiling on its potential return than a successful effort to improve principal leadership” (p. 43). If the WELS wants their schools to be successful, principal training should continue to be a focus at a synod, district, and school level.

For those schools with principals who have not been trained, strong considerations should be directed toward finding and funding opportunities for their principals to be trained. Master’s degree programs, leadership training cohorts, or apprenticeship or other training programs exist to do these very things while principals are on the job.

Recommendation #2: Allow time for school leaders to focus on school climate. This has been a focus for many years in WELS schools – allowing school leaders administrative time. Many WELS principals also teach during the day. Some even teach full time while also fulfilling the duties of a principal. Schools cannot possibly hope to see the success and positivity of some of the schools that were interviewed for this study without a school leader/administrator who has time to work on and prioritize the things mentioned above. Krause (2018) did a study on administrative release time for principals and found that many WELS principals need to be supported with more time to perform the duties necessary to implement and maintain a positive climate. All three of the top-scoring schools had leaders that did not have teaching responsibilities beyond a class or two.

Recommendation #3: WELS schools participate in WELSSA accreditation process. The WELS has a program titled the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod School Accreditation process. This process is designed to evaluate schools and give them direction for the very things that were discussed in this study. There are many benefits to

it, the highest of which is a qualified third party that comes in and informs school leaders, teachers, parents, students, and the congregation what needs to be done to make the school a place that offers a high-quality educational experience. The cyclical nature of the process also ensures that this is a regular topic of study and focus as there is an accreditation visit that happens once every six years. Five of the six schools that participated in this study are accredited.

Recommendation #4: WELS schools work together to share ideas regarding school climate. This was a regular comment from individuals from the three top-scoring schools. When asked to give advice to schools looking to improve their climate, each of them talked about working with other schools or individuals who are finding success. “Beg, borrow, share, and steal” was a sentiment that was shared more than once. Many WELS schools are blessed to be nearby to other WELS schools. This can be a blessing when ideas are shared as those schools view one another as partners in advancing God’s Kingdom. One of the three top-scoring schools even made this a significant point in their interview. Around 20 years ago, members from their congregation and school leadership team journeyed to another part of the country together to observe a school setting that they had heard to be extremely positive and successful. Some of the things they gleaned from that trip two decades ago are still in practice today at that school. This is just one example of what could happen if schools are willing to work together in this way.

Recommendation #5: Dedicate a pastor to the work of the school. This may be one of the most challenging of the recommendations for many WELS schools, but it is hard to deny the positive effect that this has on a school. Each of the three top-scoring schools had a pastor that was specifically focused on the work of the school – connecting

with families, ensuring proper doctrinal instruction and use of law and gospel, and being a spiritual resource for anyone in the school. This common theme in the top-scoring schools cannot be overlooked.

Recommendation #6: Pray that God would continue to bless the work of faithful school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. It is important to remember that in all of this, it is not dependent on the people doing the work, but on the one for whom they work. This is a good thing, too! Satan is hard at work in WELS schools, trying to win over the faithful workers for his side. But God is faithful! He has blessed the work of WELS schools for a long time and will continue to do so. We should take comfort and confidence from that very fact.

WELS Schools have an inherent advantage to other school settings as they share a common faith and mission. Everyone working in a WELS school should ultimately be working toward the same goal – to bring students and their families closer to Jesus. While there are other important missions that WELS schools accomplish, this underlying aspect of school culture cannot be overlooked when developing and implementing school climate. Principals and school teams alike need to remember this fact first and foremost.

It is my prayer that this study may be a blessing to many WELS schools as they seek affirmation or direction in the way they develop and implement their climates. This is certainly a challenging task to take on. Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. My hope in conducting this study and writing this paper is that school leaders might get some clarity in the things they should be looking for in their own climate or some direction regarding the things they should focus on to improve it. It is a blessing and a privilege to be a worker in this group of schools united across the country with the

purpose of instructing children with high academic expectations but also the truths of God's Word. I pray that in some small way, I may also be a blessing to it!

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Appendices

Appendix A: School Climate Survey Questions

Participants will be asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with these statements using Likert scales:

Physical Climate

1. We are providing a safe, healthy, and effective learning environment for our students
2. The school environment is clean and in good condition.
3. Our students have access to the basic resources they need in our classrooms
4. The class enrollments at the school are a good size.
5. Students at this school are well-behaved.
6. The student behavior code is a result of collaboration and consensus among staff.
7. This school encourages students to get involved in extracurricular activities.
8. School administrators promote the success of all students
9. School administrators follow through on commitments
10. Teachers and staff tell stories of celebrations that support the school's values.
11. Our school supports and appreciates the sharing of new ideas by members of our school.
12. Members of our school community seek alternatives to problems/issues rather than repeating what we have always done.
13. Members of our school community seek to define the problem/issue rather than blame others.
14. Our school reflects a true "sense" of community.
15. I have a clear understanding of our school's mission
16. We do a great job of reinforcing and promoting our mission, both internally and externally
17. We are all working toward the same goals
18. My feedback is encouraged and valued
19. Students have pride in the school.
20. We have a strong relationship with our community

Social Climate

1. Adults who work in this school treat students with respect.
2. Adults who work in this school typically work well with one another.
3. Teachers and staff visit/talk/meet outside of the school to enjoy each other's company.
4. Teachers at this school build strong relationships with students
5. Students respect their teachers.
6. School administrators involve teachers in decision making and problem solving.
7. School administrators and staff communicate with each other effectively.
8. Parents respect their children's teachers.

9. Parents are actively involved with the school.
10. Parents are made to feel welcome in this school.
11. Parent engagement is a priority here
12. Parents know what is going on in this school.
13. Students at this school do not tease or insult one another.

Academic Climate

1. Everyone here is putting students first
2. The school community has high expectations of all students.
3. Parents care about how their child performs in school.
4. Parents are aware of what is expected of their child at this school.
5. Students at this school are encouraged to think critically.
6. Some students at this school just cannot be motivated to do the work.
7. Discipline takes up too much time at this school that could be spent teaching.
8. Students at this school don't care about learning.
9. School administrators encourage risk-taking and innovation
10. School administrators are aware of what goes on in the classrooms.
11. School administrators give useful feedback on teaching.
12. Teacher development is important to the school
13. School administrators recognize teachers for a job well-done.
14. School teachers and administrators recognize students for a job well-done.
15. Teachers get the support they need from administrators
16. Instructional strategy is a collaborative endeavor at this school
17. The school staff is empowered to make instructional decisions rather than waiting for supervisors to tell them what to do.
18. Everyone has a clear understanding of the ways they can serve as an advocate and champion for the school

Other (*short answer responses*)

1. School name
2. School setting (urban, suburban, or rural)
3. Approximate number of students in your school
4. Number of teachers on your faculty/staff
5. Name of participant
6. Email address of participant
7. Phone number of participant
8. Years of experience at current school

Appendix B: Interview Consent Form

Evaluation of the Development and Implementation of School Climate by WELS
Schools

Consent to take part in research

- I, _____, voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in theses.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in private Google Drive files until completion and approval of the research in which I am participating.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for up to two years following my participation.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalization I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Aaron Markgraf – Researcher – Email: amarkgraf@stpls.com; Phone: (920)248-2223

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions

These questions will be asked initially of principals/school leaders of the schools that have been chosen based on the data analysis as listed in the Design section. At each school, the principal will also be asked to provide the name and contact information for a faculty/staff member and a parent that might be willing to participate in this study and be asked these same questions.

For individuals from the three highest scoring schools:

1. What do you feel is the strongest aspect of your school's physical climate? What caused that to be such a strong component of your school's climate?
2. What do you feel is the strongest aspect of your school's social climate? What caused that to be such a strong component of your school's climate?
3. What do you feel is the strongest aspect of your school's academic climate? What caused that to be such a strong component of your school's climate?
4. What do you feel is the strongest aspect of your school's spiritual/faith climate? What caused that to be such a strong component of your school's climate?
5. Do you know what the school's mission [statement] is? How do you feel that is being fulfilled in the academic lives of your students and their families? How do you feel it is being fulfilled in the faith lives of your students and their families?
6. Do all stakeholders in your school have an impact on the school's climate, or is it mainly developed and implemented by school leaders?
7. Any comments regarding specific responses from the survey? (Interviewer may ask about specific responses as well)
8. Any advice for schools looking to improve their school climate?
9. Are there any documents you would be willing to share that contribute to or document the strengths of your school's climate?
10. Please reflect on this survey/interview experience for me... Has it made you think more carefully or rethink anything about your school's climate?

For individuals from the three lowest scoring schools:

1. What do you feel is the aspect of your school's physical climate that could benefit the most from a concentrated improvement effort?
2. What do you feel is the aspect of your school's social climate that could benefit the most from a concentrated improvement effort?
3. What do you feel is the aspect of your school's academic climate that could benefit the most from a concentrated improvement effort?
4. What do you feel is the aspect of your school's spiritual/faith climate that could benefit the most from a concentrated improvement effort?
5. Do you know what the school's mission [statement] is? How do you feel that is being fulfilled in the academic lives of your students and their families? How do you feel it is being fulfilled in the faith lives of your students and their families?
6. What do you feel is holding your school back from having a strong, positive climate?

7. Do you feel that all the stakeholders in your school have an impact on the school culture, or is it mainly developed and implemented by school leaders?
8. Any comments regarding specific responses from the survey? (Interviewer may ask about specific responses as well)
9. Do you feel that your school would benefit from a concentrated school climate improvement effort?
10. Please reflect on this survey/interview experience for me... Has it made you think more carefully or rethink anything about your school's climate?

Appendix D: Request for Participation

Email to WELS principals

Dear WELS principals,

My name is Aaron Markgraf. I am currently serving as the principal at St. Paul's in Norfolk, Nebraska. I am finishing the work for my master's program through MLC and have reached the point of completing a study for my thesis: "An Evaluation of the Development and Implementation of School Climate in WELS Schools."

This study will seek to identify those things which WELS schools that have a positive climate do very well, and what is missing from those WELS schools that have a perceived negative climate. I hope and pray that the results of this study are beneficial for WELS schools across the synod as they seek to improve or maintain school climate for the benefit of the students and the families that they serve. My research question is this: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families?

The first step in this study is a survey that I am asking each WELS principal to take. It should take around 10 minutes to complete. The results of this survey will help me to identify those schools that have a strong school climate as well as those that have a perceived negative climate. Six schools will then be chosen for interviews to be conducted, provided they accept the invitation for interviews to be done. By participating in the survey, you are providing your consent for your responses to be included in the results of the survey. The results of this survey will remain confidential, and any personal/contact info will only be used to contact you if you are a school that is selected for the interview process. If, at any point, you would like your responses to be removed from the study, that will be done immediately upon your request!

Please click here to access the survey. (linked)

I greatly appreciate your help in this effort! The deadline for completion of this survey is *TBD (dependent on date it is sent)*.

Blessings to you all,

Aaron Markgraf

Appendix E: Request for Interview

Dear _____,

In the last few weeks, you participated in my survey on school climate in WELS schools. First of all, thank you for that! I am pleased to inform you that your school has been selected based on your survey responses for closer examination in my study to answer the question: To what extent do WELS schools use best school climate practices to offer a high-quality educational experience to students and their families?

I would love to interview you about your school's climate. A video chat via Zoom/FaceTime is preferred, but it could also be done over the phone.

Please respond to this email with your willingness to participate (or not participate) in an interview! Following your response, I will schedule a time to meet with you.

If you are willing to participate, I also ask that you come up with two names - a teacher at your school and a parent - who would be comfortable with an interview on the same topic. You don't need to ask their permission for the interview, but you may want to ask them permission before sharing their name and contact info with me.

I'm hoping for an honest discussion that helps me understand the school climate practices at your school. As a reminder, all of the results of the survey and interviews will remain confidential in my study. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you!