

Study finds link between school climate and literacy achievement

TEACHERS IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA WERE ASKED HOW THEIR SCHOOLS WERE DOING IN:



SCHOOL CLIMATE



TEACHING AND LEARNING



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



STAFF SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

“Schools and researchers everywhere are realizing that one measurement—for example, scores on a standardized test—is not enough to understand how students are really doing in school. There’s a lot more to look at to know whether kids are truly being prepared for career or college.”

-DR. TEDRA CLARK, McREL MANAGING RESEARCHER

FINDINGS:
SCHOOL CLIMATE
PREDICTED GRADE 5 ACHIEVEMENT IN
LITERACY

FURTHER
ANALYSIS
SHOWED
HOW THIS
HAPPENS

STRONG SCHOOL LEADERSHIP
LEADS TO **BETTER TEACHER**
COLLABORATION WHICH LEADS TO
ACADEMIC OPTIMISM WHICH THEN
LEADS TO **LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT**

75% OF THE VARIANCE
IN LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT AMONG
SCHOOLS CAN BE PREDICTED BY
LOOKING AT TEACHERS’ FEELINGS
ABOUT **SCHOOL CLIMATE**.





Staff survey for Australian teachers leads to study with promising result

THE CHALLENGE

For many years, the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, Australia (formerly the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development), has been using a school staff survey to help keep tabs on how teachers are doing—what they think about their instruction, the support they get from leadership, and the professional learning they receive—but they knew they could be doing more with the data they collect.

So in 2013, they chose McREL to help develop a new School Staff Opinion Survey that would provide a better understanding of how teacher perspectives might be contributing to overall school performance. They wanted to measure in a valid, reliable way what they saw as the five vital areas of school functioning: school climate; school leadership; professional learning; staff safety and well-being; and teaching and learning.

STRATEGIC SOLUTION

First, McREL researchers developed a customized survey on school climate, DEECD's top-priority area. Working with Roger Goddard, a leading education researcher known for his studies on collective efficacy, McREL customized a survey that was piloted in 82 primary and secondary schools across the state. When results showed that the survey was highly reliable, McREL then developed and piloted survey modules for the four remaining areas. When the final survey covering all five areas was completed, McREL suggested further study into the relationship between the survey results and student achievement. Managing Researcher Tedra Clark explains, "To really make the surveys worthwhile to DEECD's stakeholders, we thought it was important for them to know how the results relate to the outcomes that matter most to them."

DEECD agreed, and McREL developed and conducted a predictive validity study that examined the relationship between survey results and student performance at the primary level on Victoria's annual standardized assessment, the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

RESULTS

While the study found that all five areas are highly interrelated and positively connected to student outcomes in both literacy and numeracy, the most statistically significant finding was that *school climate* predicts Grade 5 achievement in literacy. Researchers then "unpacked" this finding, using various statistical models with elements of school climate within the survey. The model that was most predictive of achievement was strong *school leadership*, which leads to better *teacher collaboration*, which then leads to *academic optimism*—a construct that includes 1) collective efficacy, 2) trust in students and parents, 3) academic emphasis, and 4) parent and community involvement—and leads to literacy achievement. In other words, *school leadership predicts student literacy scores through greater teacher collaboration and academic optimism*.

This model, according to Clark, explained over 75% of the variance in literacy achievement at the school level—a finding that is consistent with previous research conducted in the U.S. Clark says this indicates that the model is not only statistically strong but also holds up in different contexts and with different populations.

NEXT STEPS

DEECD has implemented the survey statewide, and Clark says she would like to conduct a similar study at the secondary level. In addition to teacher surveys, she says, getting the perspectives of school leaders, students, and parents would provide a more complete picture of factors affecting student achievement.

This is true for any school system, she adds. "Schools and researchers everywhere are realizing that one measurement—for example, scores on a standardized test—is not enough to understand how students are really doing in school. There's a lot more to look at to know whether kids are truly being prepared for career or college."