

EDUCATION WEEK



How a Chicago School Is Using Data to Improve School Climate

By Urban Education Contributor on April 6, 2017 6:00 AM | [No comments](#)

This week we are hearing from the [UChicago Consortium on School Research](#). Today's post is the practitioner experience with and perspective on the research introduced in Monday's post: [Adopting School Climate Surveys Under ESSA: A Model From Chicago](#).

This post is by Isaac Castelaz ([@ICastelaz](#)), principal of National Teachers Academy, a Chicago Public School managed by the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL).

My first year as a principal was difficult and challenging. As a result, it was a hard year for the entire school. We all knew it. I saw it in the faces of my children. I could sense it in conversations with staff. And in some form or another, I saw it every day as I walked the school. Still, I was shocked when I saw the results of the 5Essentials survey. The 5Essentials framework outlines the five areas research says are critical for school improvement, including the area of "Effective Leaders" (see [this resource](#) and [this resource](#) for more information on the 5Essentials framework).

Dark red. Every essential was in the lowest category. The words hit me like a blow to the stomach: "Not Organized for Improvement."

It wasn't that I didn't know I had failed as a leader. I did. Every data point proved it. But these data were different. They were the story behind the sagging MAP data, the decline in attendance, the spike in suspension.

"The survey data, once I really unpacked it, not only put lyrics to the sad song, but as any really great melancholy tune ought to, it helped me find hope: a roadmap to improvement."

- Isaac Castelaz, Chicago school principal

After reflecting for a few days, my perspective on the 5Essentials results changed. I was no longer hurt. No longer angered. Just the opposite. The survey data, once I really unpacked it, not only put lyrics to the sad song, but as any really great melancholy tune ought to, it helped me find hope: a roadmap to improvement.

It started with me. For my school to improve, I had to change. I had to build relationships, not just be liked. Earn trust, not simply obeyed. Lead, not just manage. And so the summer before my second year, that is exactly what I did. Those two months were long. I mean really long. Eighty-hour weeks leading up to opening our week of professional development. Engaging staff in creating a vision for the year. Listening. Eating lunches together. Hiring new staff. Designing systems.

Throughout the year, the 5Essentials framework helped me prioritize my team and focus on what matters. In that year, laying a strong foundation for improvement depended on trusting relationships and restored confidence. During meetings, I started with our mantra for the year and consistently connected the content from the meeting back to our big goals for the year. I visited with staff before and after school to hear how the day went, or if they had anything on their minds. We monitored processes and systems consistently: Everything from attendance to whether lunch started and ended on time. By establishing an organized culture, my staff felt less distracted and more comfortable focusing on teaching. In turn, the climate of the school was transformed. Staff felt valued, enhancing commitment and the quality of instruction. And students learned.

We had a better year. Every data point said so. And when the results were released, the 5Essentials said so too.

Since my first couple years as principal, my team and I have become increasingly strategic in how we use the survey. Rather than using it as a barometer for the school year, we now identify specific measures upon which to improve. This school year, our instructional priority is Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching Domain 3D: Using Assessment in Instruction. If we are effective, we expect that students will respond more favorably to the questions which comprise the "academic personalism" measure under the "Supportive Environment" essential. We've also adopted a restorative discipline model which, if successful, should lead to more positive student responses to questions in the "student-teacher trust" measure under "Supportive Environment".

This is a long way from my first experience with the 5Essentials. As I have grown as a leader, the survey has been my companion. No matter what, I can always rely on it to tell me exactly what I need to hear.