

# **Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE): An Underused Framework for Measuring School Climate**

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## **ABSTRACT**

School environment refers to the social, academic, and emotional contexts of the school—the “personality” of the learning context—and how it is perceived by all major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, and parents). This climate is influenced by a broad range of factors, including the social environment, the school district and community environment, and the school and classroom environment. A positive school environment creates an optimal setting for teaching and learning. Assessing the school environment can provide opportunities to discover and address issues that can impede learning and healthy student development. The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) is a psychometrically sound instrument that can be used to measure student, teacher, and parent satisfaction in addition to school climate.

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The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) named a task force to investigate the current literature and measures of school climate. After an extensive review of the literature, the task force found that most existing definitions of climate were unclear, that many climate studies were based on one stakeholder group (usually teachers), that climate and satisfaction measures were frequently confused, and that measures with good psychometric properties were scarce and rarely used by practitioners.

## **The Model**

The task force formulated a general model depicting the contextual, input, mediating, and outcome variables of school environments. The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) model is shown in Figure 1 (Keefe & Howard, 1997). Assumptions accepted in the formulation of the model were as follows:

- Climate and satisfaction are distinct but related concepts.
- Climate does not define effectiveness; it only predicts it.
- Student outcomes (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) and efficiency data (cost) are the most appropriate measures of school effectiveness.

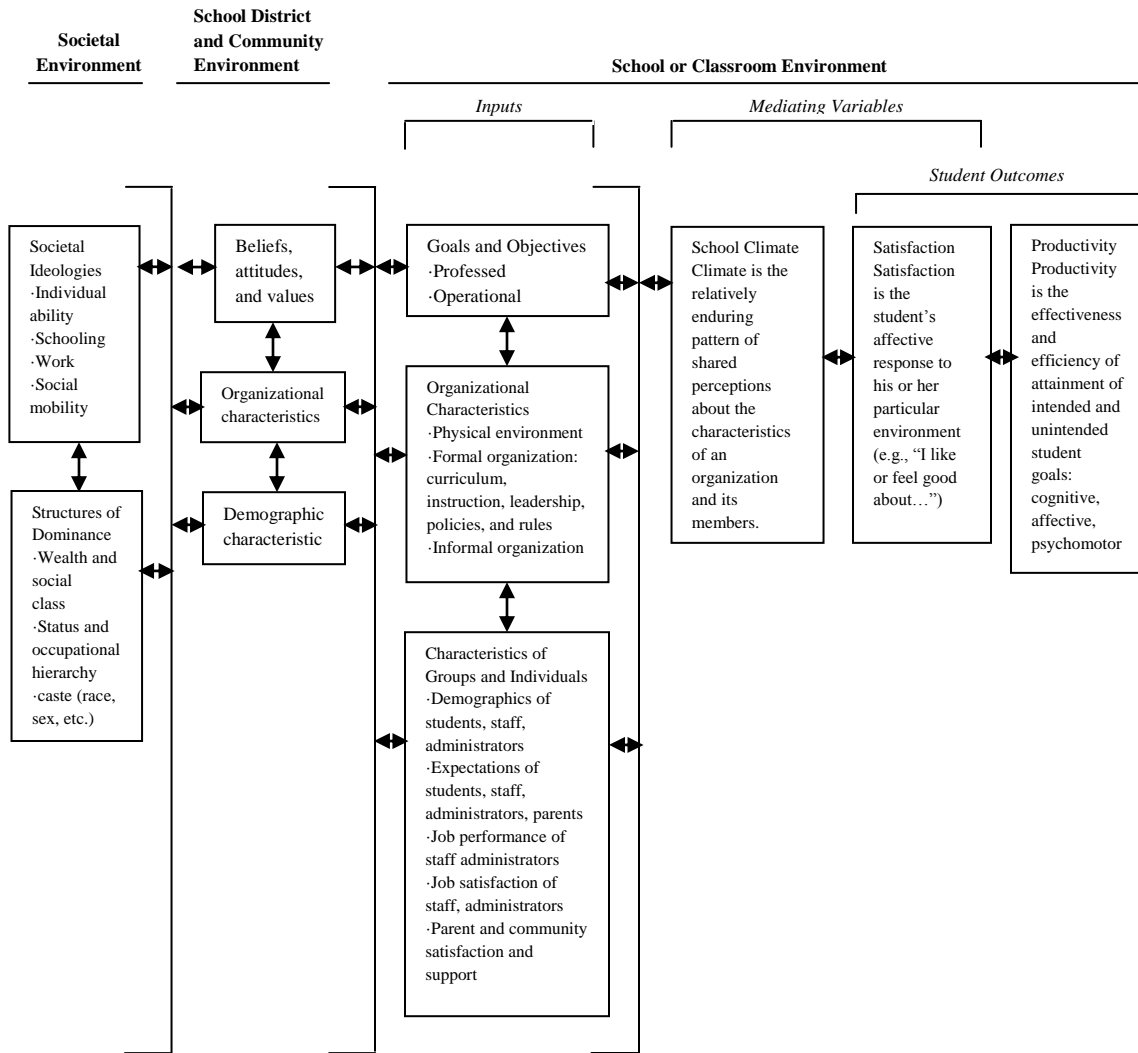


Figure 1. An interactive model of the school environment.

The model of the school environment developed by the NASSP task force goes beyond a simple consideration of school climate to encompass a full range of inputs and outputs to the process of school improvement. As Figure 1 shows, perceptions of climate held by stakeholder groups (students, teachers, parents) are mediating variables— influencing factors—not outcome measures. Teacher and parent satisfaction are input variables. Student satisfaction is both a mediating variable and an outcome measure; it both influences school success and corroborates it.

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## The Instruments

The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) battery consists of four survey instruments: the NASSP School Climate Survey, which is designed to elicit responses from all major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, parents), and three separate NASSP Satisfaction Surveys, one for each of the three major stakeholder groups. Each survey has eight to ten subscales touching on all important aspects of the school environment.

The NASSP survey instruments were validated in national pilot and normative studies of 1500 teachers, 14,600 students, and 4400 parents. For each of the four instruments, internal consistency coefficients have been calculated for each subscale based on data collected in pilot and normative studies. The average internal consistency reliability of the School Climate Survey subscales is 0.81, with a range from 0.67 to 0.92. The average reliability of the Student Satisfaction Survey subscale average is 0.81, with a range from 0.76 to 0.83. The Teacher Satisfaction Survey subscale average is 0.88, with a range from 0.80 to 0.93. The Parent Satisfaction Survey average is 0.85, with a range from 0.72 to 0.92 (Halderson, 1990). Computer scoring programs provide separate climate and satisfaction profiles for each school.

The NASSP School Climate Survey collects and measures data about perceptions on the following subscales:

- *Teacher-student relationships*: The quality of the interpersonal and professional relationships between teachers and students.
- *Security and maintenance*: The quality of maintenance and the degree of security people feel at the school
- *Administration*: The degree to which school administrators are effective in communicating with different role groups and in setting high performance expectations for teachers and students.
- *Student academic orientation*: Student attention to task and concern for achievement at school.
- *Student behavioral values*: Student self-discipline and tolerance for others.
- *Guidance*: The quality of academic and career guidance and personal counseling services available to students.
- *Student-peer relationships*: Students' care and respect for one another and their mutual cooperation.
- *Parent and community school relationships*: The amount and quality of involvement in the school of parents and other community members.
- *Instructional management*: The efficiency and effectiveness for teacher classroom organization and use of classroom time.
- *Student activities*: Opportunities for and actual participation of students in school-sponsored activities. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

*School Climate Scale Dimensions*

SCALE NAME	SCALE DESCRIPTION	SAMPLE ITEM
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS	Quality of the interpersonal and professional relationships between teachers and students	Teachers in this school like their students. (+)
SECURITY AND MAINTENANCE	Quality of maintenance and the degree of security people feel at the school	Students usually feel safe in the school building. (+)
ADMINISTRATION	Degree to which school administrators are effective in communicating with different role groups and in setting high performance expectations for teachers and students.	The administrators in this school listen to student ideas. (+)
STUDENT ACADEMIC ORIENTATION	Student attention to task and concern for achievement at school.	Students work hard to complete their school assignments. (+)
STUDENT BEHAVIORAL VALUES	Student self-discipline and tolerance for others.	If one student makes fun of someone, other students do not join in. (+)
GUIDANCE	Quality of academic and career guidance and personal counseling services available to students	Teachers or counselors encourage students to think about their future. (+)
STUDENT-PEER RELATIONSHIPS	Students' care and respect for one another and their mutual cooperation.	Students care about each other. (+)
PARENT AND COMMUNITY-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS	Amount and quality of involvement of parents and community members in the school.	Parents and members of the community attend school meetings and other activities. (+)
INSTUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT	Efficiency and effectiveness of teacher classroom organization and use of classroom time.	There is a clear set of rules for students to follow in this school. (+)
STUDENT ACTIVITIES	Opportunities for and actual participation of students in school-sponsored activities.	Students can take part in sports and other school activities even if their families cannot afford it. (+)

The NASSP survey instruments have been developed as measures within a CASE battery based on the task-force model (see Figure 1). The instruments can be used singly or in any combination, but the task force encourages their use within the context of the entire model. The principal aim of the measures and procedures of the CASE model is to foster school improvement (Keefe & Kelley, 1990). The CASE data may also be useful in preparing school reports required by state or regional accrediting agencies. Outcomes-based evaluation for school accreditation is gaining support and acceptance from several accrediting bodies. The CASE battery permits the organization and monitoring of outcomes-based data (Schröter, 2010).

### **School Environment: What Does It Mean?**

School environment refers to the social, academic, and emotional contexts of the school—the “personality” of the learning context—and how it is perceived by all major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, and parents) (Blum, 2007). This climate is influenced by a broad range of factors, including the social environment (social ideologies and structures of dominance), school district and community environment (beliefs, attitudes, and values; organizational characteristics; and characteristics of groups and individuals), and school and classroom environment (school climate, satisfaction, and productivity). (See Figure 1.)

A positive school environment creates an optimal setting for teaching and learning. Research indicates that school can be a stabilizing force for youngsters, both emotionally and academically (Cohen, 2006; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). A national survey indicated that, in comparison with their more affluent peers, low-income students felt a more pronounced lack of community and less connection with their schools (McNeeley, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). The point is that life stressors, regardless of the cause, if ignored, can impede learning. There is some evidence that poverty classifies as a life stressor that can alter brain function (Conrad, 2011; Jensen, 2010; Templeton, 2012).

School environment and school connectedness can be the determining factors in a student’s educational experience (Blum, 2005). When students believe that adults in the school care about them, have high expectations for their achievement, and provide the support essential to their success, they thrive (Jackson & Lunenburg, 2010; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004; Pashiardis, 2011; Sadler, 2012). When teachers and staff are deeply engaged in creating a safe, nurturing, challenging school environment, their job satisfaction increases (Bluestein, 2001; Evans, 1997). A positive school environment is a product of collective effort (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2012).

### **Measuring School Environment**

Evaluating the school environment can provide opportunities to discover and address issues that can impede learning and healthy student development. Applied

skillfully, evaluation can be a valuable tool for reflection and planning (Cook, Scriven, Coryn, & Evergreen, 2010; Mertens, 2012; Schröter, 2010). The process itself has the potential to promote a more positive school environment, particularly when all major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, parents) are empowered as resources for information (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schröter, 2011; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012).

There are many different ways to measure school climate, but broadly they fall into two categories: indirect and direct (Lunenburg, 1983). Indirect measures include: examining student records for attendance, discipline referrals, and suspensions and expulsions; observing the physical environment, with attention to cleanliness, hallway and classroom appearance, supplies and equipment, and noise levels; observing classrooms and interpersonal communications. Direct measures include surveys or interviews that solicit information from major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, parents, and community members).

Schools can develop their own instruments or use well known existing instruments, including: the Charles F. Kettering (CFK) Ltd. School Climate Profile (Howard, Howell, & Brainard, 1987), Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) (National School Climate Center (2011), Profile of a School (POS) (Likert & Likert, 1977), Organizational Climate Descriptive Questionnaire (OCDQ) (Hoy & Clover, 1986; Kottkamp, Mulhern, & Hoy, 1987); Organizational Health Inventory (OHI) (Hoy & Tarter, 1997a, 1997b), and the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) (Halderson, 1990).

### **Conclusion**

School environment refers to the social, academic, and emotional contexts of the school—the “personality” of the learning context—and how it is perceived by all major stakeholder groups (students, teachers, and parents). This climate is influenced by a broad range of factors, including the social environment, the school district and community environment, and the school and classroom environment. A positive school environment creates an optimal setting for teaching and learning. Assessing the school environment can provide opportunities to discover and address issues that can impede learning and healthy student development. The Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE) is a psychometrically sound instrument that can be used to measure student, teacher/staff, and parent satisfaction in addition to school climate.

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