# Chapter 10: Exploring the Eight Dimensions of School Climate and Function: Why they are Interdependent and Implications for Improving Each – John Shindler

In this chapter we examine the eight dimensions of school climate and function. Each dimension makes a vital independent contribution to the overall quality of outcomes and effectiveness at the school. Moreover each is also inter-related. They function interdependently to create a whole school phenomenon. The eight dimensions are:

1. **Appearance *and* Physical Plant**
2. **Faculty Relations**
3. **Student Interactions**
4. **Leadership/Decision Making**
5. **Discipline Environment**
6. **Learning Environment**
7. **Socio-Emotional Culture**
8. **School-Community Relations**
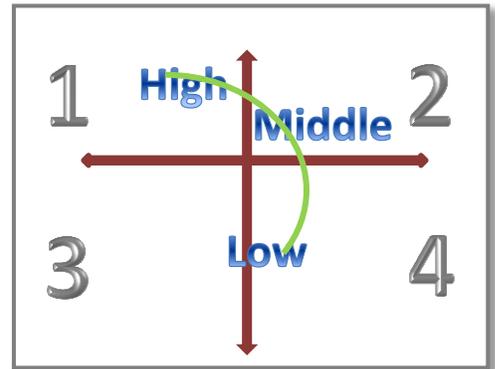
In the effort to move up the school effectiveness roadmap (Figure 10.1), it is sensible to begin by examining the climate at one's school. School climate could be considered the "X factor" that pervades all aspects of the school environment. It is the essence of the school's overall reality. Moreover, when we know our climate level, we know where we are on the roadmap. And when we understand the various strengths and weaknesses related to the climate we will have a solid understanding as to where to focus our intention and attention in the improvement process. Since it is such an inclusive indicator, it can be represented in a single number. But it can also be disaggregated into a thousand inter-related micro-phenomena.

As discussed in chapter 2, the ASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) items are based in a theoretical construct that is related to the degree to which any particular school micro-phenomenon encourages or discourages a psychology of success (i.e., internal vs. external locus of control, a sense of acceptance and belonging, and a growth vs. fixed orientation), and higher levels of function. As a result, the rating of any individual SCAI item will relate generally to a location on the theoretical school effectiveness roadmap (see figure 10.1), just as will be the case for the overall dimension and/or overall aggregate means. One reason that it produces so much validity is that most of the items relate to the practices or X's at the school and fewer relate to the outcomes or O's at the school. The reason is that the survey is intended to primarily measure the level of the causal phenomenon of the climate and secondarily the experiential results of those causes.

Legend: R-X-O

R's = References
The inner thoughts and operations that we use to inform our actions – such as – values, conditioning, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, mental processes.

X's = Actions
What we do each day in the job of being an educator – such as – practices, methods, strategies, policies, habits, all behavior verbal and non-verbal.

O's = Outcomes
That which results from our actions –such as – effects on students, effects on colleagues, and all resultant learning measurable or unmeasurable.

Why are all Eight Dimensions Inter-Related?
For nearly every school for which we have SCAI data, what we find is that the means for each of the eight dimensions tend to be very consistent with one another. For example if the dimension 3 mean related to student interactions were a 3.4, the great likelihood is that the mean for dimension 5 related to classroom management and discipline (as well as the means for all the other dimensions) would be in that same middle 3ish range. Why is this? There are three main reasons that we will discuss here, and each will provide useful insight for our efforts as we endeavor to raise the level of climate and function at our school.

1. **Reason #1: The Same Set of R's Inform All Eight Dimension**: The main reason that phenomenon from each of the eight distinct areas of climate tend to be rated by participants similarly at any particular school is that the same DNA runs through all of what happens at the school. In other words, the X's in each dimension are informed by the same set of collective adult R's. Therefore, X's that are characterized by high level R's will produce high level O's, and the same will be true of R's at any level. For example, if the pervasive R's include that students want to learn and can be trusted, those R's will appear in what the school does (i.e., X's) in all areas, and therefore the corresponding level of O's. And if the students are surveyed, their responses will reflect an experience consistent with the predominantly used X's at a middle to high level. In contrast, if our pervasive R's are defined by mistrust and a resignation that students at the school are unmotivated, consequently our X's will be consistent with those R's and produce correspondingly lower end SCAI ratings by staff and students. Figure 10.2 outlines three overall resultant school levels. Each of these levels is defined by the corresponding way that the R's that inform that level appear across a series of factors. What happens at each low level school will look very similar to one another, as will what happens at the middle and the high level phenomenon schools. As you examine each list, can you see the low, middle and high level R's that pervade each overall school phenomenon?

Figure 10.2 ASSC SCAI School Climate Levels

	Level 3/High	Level 2/Middle	Level 1/Low
/System	Intentional	Semi-intentional	Accidental
Ethos	Sound vision translated into effective practice	Good intentions translated into practices that "work."	Practices defined by the relative self-interest of faculty and staff
PCT Level	System/Principle	Program	Sensory
Effect on Students	Liberating Experience changes students for the better	Perpetuating Experience has a mixed effect on students	Domesticating Experience has a net negative effect on students
Staff relations	Collaborative	Congenial	Competitive
Psychological Outcome	Promotes a Psychology of Success	Promotes a Mixed Psychology	Promotes a Psychology of Failure

2. **Reason #2: The Status Quo Will Seek to Maintain Itself.** The location of any school on the roadmap at any particular point in time implies a status quo. That status quo will be characterized by the collective/predominant R's and the typical X's at the school. The common X's employed in one area of the school will encourage those of the other areas to be at the same level. So, when we attempt to elevate a particular phenomenon in one domain of the school, the status quo of the other phenomena from all eight interdependent dimensions will act to hold it down to its current level - much like the force of gravity. Yet, if we are able to affect improvement in a particular area, we would also expect to see all the other areas improve slightly as a result. Those in a school are often surprised when they improve one area such as instruction and they subsequently observe another seemingly unrelated phenomenon such as the number of detentions decrease, or the administrator at the school adopt more 1-Paradigm leadership behaviors and find the students report a shift in the quality of social and emotional culture in the school. And it should be noted that all dimensions are relate to and will affect the overall global O's/outcomes which includes the level of student achievement. One big leadership take-away here should be that if we can make high level X's (guided by high level R's) the norm, the location of the O's at the school in all eight areas will rise to that level eventually.

3. **Reason #3: Students Acclimatize themselves to the Common Level/Types of X's used by the Adults, Which Further Solidifies the Status Quo**. Students will become accustomed to a level of X's – from our school as well as all of their past schools. So part of the status quo and the "normal" at the school will reflect what the students have gotten familiar with. Therefore, improvement will imply supporting a new level of expectations on the part of students. It also means that the faculty and staff need to be aware that they are recalibrating the students' expectations and that that takes persistence, patience and a steadfast commitment to the more functional X's necessary to make it happen. Therefore our school-wide vision clarification process (see chapter 6) will need to include the cultivation of a new "normal" for the students. Too often teachers make the assumption that since their students are used to a lower quality level of X's, that therefore they should continue using X's at that same level because they are the "only things that works with these students and they understand." The error of this kind of thinking needs to be examined and amended as it can severely damage your school's collective ability to effect growth and move up the roadmap.

In the next sections we will examine each of the eight dimensions of school climate and function as defined by the Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC). The examination of each dimension will include the five elements. First, a general definition of the theoretical phenomenon contained within the dimension. Second, the relative correlation of the SCAI dimension sub-scale to what we could call the global desired O/outcome. That global O includes such effects as level of learning, achievement, positive behavior, and an exhibited psychology of success. Third, we offer a few guiding questions for leaders to consider as they try to boil each dimension down to its operational essence. Fourth, we examine the considerations related to the kind of values and R's that project the defining qualities and essence of the school. Finally, we examine the practical consideration and X's of each area. When we look at the common X's at the school, what do they tell us? and what location on the roadmap do they imply?

Dimension One: Appearance *and* Physical Plant

Examines the relationship between the physical characteristics and environment of a school and the climate that it promotes. This dimension includes the degree to which intentional efforts have been made related to the consideration of the perceptions of outsiders and expectations and treatment of custodial staff.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.6

Some Key Questions:
- Is student ownership evident?
- Is care for the space/place by school community members evident?
- Is there intention evident in how things look?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
What does the schools appearance say to those in and out of the school community? Does it speak of care and pride? Or of neglect and institutionalism? Do things work? (When there are a significant appliances or features of the school that are under repair indefinitely, it can send the message that the inhabitants are less worthy than in a school where things are "nice" and work even if it is entirely a perception). Does one see an intentional sense of an aesthetic purpose or use of school colors? Is the value of student ownership and sense of a home in evidence as one walks through the school? Is there a sense of the identity of the school exhibited in the physical plant?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Is there a pro-active policy for ensuring repairs get made? Is there a formal or informal policy about what is displayed on the walls? Is current student work encouraged? Are display cases maintained? Is graffiti dealt with immediately? Is there someone with the responsibility for thinking about how the physical aspects of the school could be improved?

Dimension Two: Faculty and Staff Relations

Examines the relationship between how faculty members relate to one another its effects on the climate of the school. This dimension includes the degree to which collaboration, respect, capacity to interact, and a sense of collective purpose exist among the faculty. It also includes the explicit and explicit expectations among faculty as to how decisions are made and duties are delegated and performed.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.7

Some Key Questions:
- Do teachers have the time and desire to collaborate (i.e., time to connect skill/process-based references)?
- Do teachers/staff have opportunities to bond (i.e., connect personal R's and become a "we.")
- Are efforts made to encourage teacher leadership?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Do we hear a "We" in our narratives? Is there a sense that what we do each day is a team effort? Do we feel a collective ownership of our vision? Do we feel trust in one another and what the collective is about? Do we assume a 1-Paradigm way of being in our interactions and

discussions about teaching and learning? Do faculty and staff members expect to be given power over the products that affect them at the school?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Do faculty members have assigned time to collaborate, plan and innovate? Does the school embrace both symbolically as well as practically the idea of being a professional learning community that embodies a growth orientation? Is an effort made by someone to encourage and plan celebrations, gatherings, time to share school and non-school related experiences? Is true emotional sharing encouraged? Whether it be personal, critical, supportive, of whatever, do faculty and staff members care enough about serving students and being excellent that they feel some obligation to hold one another accountable for their R's and X's? (but note that comparison of O's is not helpful and will not encourage movement up). Do faculty members feel comfortable in taking on roles in which they have a heightened level of responsibility, especially where they will be the primary beneficiary of the outcomes?

Dimension Three: Student Interactions
Examines the relationships among student expectations, peer interactions, and their place in the school and the climate that exists. This dimension includes the degree to which students interactions are governed by intention vs. accidental qualities.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.8

Some Key Questions:
  • Do students feel safe from abuse – both verbal and physical?
  • Is there an intention by staff to meet the students' basic needs?
  • Do the structures in place (or absence of them) knowingly or unknowingly promote the advantage of the advantaged?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Do students trust that the adults have a plan that intends their safety and personal growth? Or is the implicit assumption that students interactions are outside of the control of the adults? Do students feel like they are in a 1-Paradigm school and all that implies? Or do they feel like every situation and classroom implies a separate set of assumptions and expectations? Do we adults believe that we are good role models for students? Do we agree on absolutes including forms of student interaction that simply cannot occur within the school walls and trust that we and others will act if those kinds of interactions were observed?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
What do we as the adults do - in our classrooms, open spaces, gym, fields, assemblies, and offices – to promote the dispositions, skills and understandings in the students for how to interact in an effective, healthy and respectful manner? Do we teach and assess cooperation in our classes? How do we create structures that encourage safety, and habits of human consideration? Are the students that are in the temporary position of being the "advantaged" aware of their responsibility to be servants and role models rather than the entitled? Does student voice start in the classrooms, and it is reflected in an empowered student governance structure?

Dimension Four: Leadership and Decisions

Examines the relationships among decision-making mechanisms, how administrative authority is manifested and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which the collective possesses a shared sense of values and an operational vision. It also explores the ways in which the quality of leadership affects school life.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.7

Some Key Questions:
- Is there a vision that is understood and shared?
- Are decisions made by those who are most knowledgeable and best situated?
- Are the principles that guide the school evident and conspicuous?
- Are there efficient democratic mechanisms in place to make decisions and process data?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
What level Paradigm embodies the R's starting from how the leaders talk and act? (There is no greater symbol of the school than the leader as a figure). Is the school about empowerment or control from the top down? Does each school leader see herself/himself as representing something bigger than her/him? Is leadership a pervasive quality at the school or is it just in the hands of the administration – i.e., Is shared leadership a priority?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
This paragraph essentially relates to the purpose and content of this book and many others. So the practical considerations that apply are vast. But here are a few essential questions. Are the R's clarified and cultivated at the school? Or are they left to chance? Is a conspicuous and continuous effort made to align the X's at the school with the desired R's and the intended location on the roadmap? (Or are they defined by "whatever works" for each adult?) Are O's used primarily for self-assessment of the degree of progress toward our destination? (Or are they used to shame and compare?). Are there inclusive and functional shared leadership bodies? Is there a functioning mechanism for operating as a professional learning community?

Dimension Five: Discipline Environment

Examines the relationship between the classroom management and discipline approaches used within the school and the climate that is created as a result. This dimension includes the degree to which management strategies promote higher levels of self-responsibility and self-motivation. It also examines teacher-student interactions as a source of management and motivation.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.9

Some Key Questions:
- Is there are a consistent policy and set of R's/principles that guide action?
- Do practices promote increased "POS/ psychology of success" over time?
- Do practices promote more self-direction and self-discipline over time?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Do adults at the school see classroom management as a part of the overall learning and growth development process at the school, (or it is seen as a means to getting students ready to learn)? Is an empowering, transformative 1-Style classroom a collectively accepted R, (or are there adults that cling to the belief that they need to use X's that assume either mistrust, manipulation, and coercion (4-Style), or apathy and neglect (3-Style)?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Do the adults at the school accept the idea that consistency benefits students, and that consistency across classrooms requires students to do less unnecessary guessing about what is expected and valued? Does the school have processes and policies (including performance evaluation) in place to encourage teachers and staff members to self-reflect on their current classroom management and discipline related X's and eventually cease those that can be characterized as leading downward on the roadmap (see Figure 10.x below), and adopt and refine those practices that are characterized as supporting movement upward? Do the adults in the building have opportunities to share expertise and discuss the subtleties of creating the 1-Style self-directed classroom community?
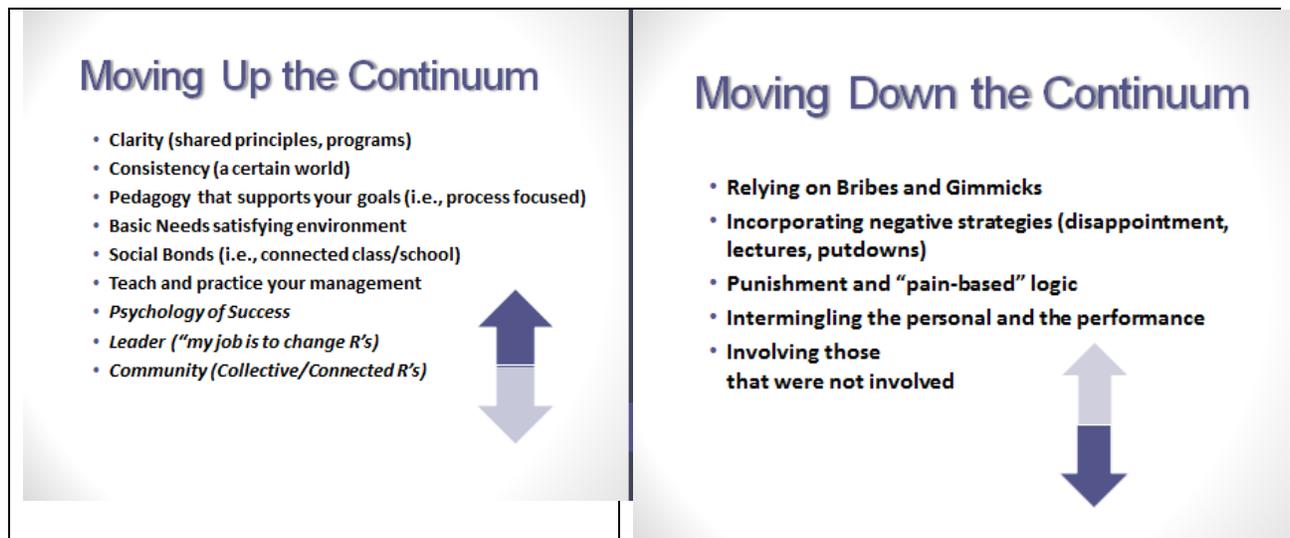
Do teachers have the opportunity to share, discuss and refine their expertise in the skills of creating clear and empowering expectations? Does the school commit to the use of techniques for promoting the growth of student skills and dispositions relate to collaboration, process quality assessment and self- and peer assessment? Figure 10.x below depicts some of the strategies commonly used to support expectation clarification and classifies them as encouraging movement up, down, or having little effect.

Effect of common management practices related to their ability to 1) create clarity and 2) positive association of expectations

Practice	Effect
Purposeful Action Positive Recognition Clarifying Statements/Mantras Clarifying Questions/Expectation Cues Debriefing Written Expectations	⬆
Personal Recognition/Praise Warnings Requests	⬄
Negative recognitions Irrational or Negative Actions Threats and Put Downs	⬇

Dimension Six: Instruction and Assessment

Examines the relationships among the instructional strategies and the assessment methods used in the school and the learning and psychological climate that is created as a result. Instruction is explored as it relates to its level of engagement, student empowerment and authenticity. Higher quality instruction and assessment methods are contrasted to less effective methods by the degree to which they promote a psychology of success rather than a psychology of failure, deep learning rather than surface learning, and critical thinking skills rather than just information processing.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.7

Some Key Questions:
- Is assessment used to promote growth rather than just comparison?
- Is learning engaging and student-centered?
- Do students learn to function effectively in collectives?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Is assessment seen as an expression (i.e., X) of the school's values (i.e., R) related to what is important and what it defined as "quality" and "success?" And is there an intention to find a way to assess the most essential learnings? Are the qualities of "highly effective learner" defined and the skills necessary to develop one operationalized? Is there a value for wanting to coordinate learning experiences? Is there an agreed upon sense of what an observer "should see" and also "should not see" if they peeked into a class at the school? Is there an intention for regular education and special education faculty and staff to collaborate for the highest good of all students in the class?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Do teachers have an intentional system for determining and considering students' learning styles and any necessary modifications for learning disabilities? Do teachers look for every opportunity to process content within an inquiry model or at least a hands-on manner? Is

purposeful cooperative learning a regular practice? Do teachers create high quality in-depth rubrics for both process and product outcomes in their classes and have students regularly self-reflect on their progress? Is an effort made by teachers to differentiate instruction and assessment where it would benefit students? Are students given an opportunity to make choices and take ownership for some aspects of what they are doing and producing? Are student led-conferences or something similar incorporated? Does learning encourage leadership and an orientation toward socially conscious engagement in the world? Do instructional and assessment related X's at the school promote more POS and less POF? (see appendix X)

NOTE: We find that schools typically are making a more intentional effort in this area – for good reason. As a result, fewer educators are surprised or challenged by the items on this scale. But what does come as more of a surprise is that a school's success in this dimension is greatly dependent on what it does on the other dimensions. Rule #1: Everything is connected. Many times the greatest limitation to efforts to move up the roadmap in the area of teaching and assessment at a school come from a comfort with a 2-Paradigm/2-Style teaching and management. Until teachers take on the R's of a 1-Style classroom as the goal, there will be a subtle resistance to more student-centered X's, and/or an overall mixed result when they are combined with 2-Style and 4-Style teaching and classroom management X's.

Dimension Seven: Social and Emotional Culture
Examines the pervasive attitudes and social-emotional cultures (i.e., R's) that operate within the school and their relationship to the resulting climate. This dimension explores the degree to which social and/or communal bonds are present within the school, the attitudes and narratives that the members of the school possess, and the level of pride and ownership they feel. It includes the degree to which efforts in this area are made intentionally or left to chance.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.8

Some Key Questions:
- Are there traditions and rituals that help the students feel connected?
- Do students feel supported and listened to by adults?
- Do students feel a sense of voice and power in the school?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Do the educators in the school express an R of school pride that extends to their students and community? Are there rituals and traditions that are maintained that symbolize the R's of continuity, identity, and a value for joy at school? Can the adults say in honesty that it is "the students' school" and they are there to serve? Is the emotional life and basic needs of the student considered when decisions are made?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Do the adults at the school like the students and project an openness to talk to them and listen to their concerns and needs? Are traditions maintained that student look forward to and bond classes and grade levels and when possible the larger school community? Are there at least some opportunities for students to engage in leadership roles, and many opportunities to have a voice in the school? Are there student activities such as clubs, groups, intramurals, etc.? Is an effort made by adults to attend and promote school activities? Is there a committee or group that is responsible for planning for ways to encourage a positive school climate? If one was to ask a student if they could see evidence that the adults were making a deliberate effort to promote each student's POS (i.e internal locus of control, sense of acceptance and belonging, and growth orientation), they would say yes? Do the adults in the school make some level of effort to

use their words (especially about the students as well as one another) carefully and purposefully when they were in private spaces? Systematic mechanisms such as peer mediation are in place to encourage student ownership of problems and conflict.

Dimension Eight: Community Relations
Examines the relationship between the way that the school is perceived externally and relates and projects itself outward to the parents and community. This dimension includes the degree to which the school is welcoming, provides quality communication and resource tools and takes advantage of the resources in the local community including parents, and acts intentionally as a center of community life.
Correlation to Theoretical Overall O/Outcome = 0.6

Some Key Questions:
- Is the school welcoming to parents and community members?
- Do students have opportunities to serve and connect to their community?
- Does the school's vision extend to all aspects of the school experience?

Values and R Alignment level Considerations
Is there a shared R that the school is an integral member (if not a hub) of its community? Does the school have an intention of using its local and global communities as part of the educational process for students? Do we want the light of day shed on what we do? Do we think that parents and other adults not currently employed by the school may potentially have something of value to share? Are the highest level R's reflected in the school athletics and other public events?

Practical and X Alignment level Considerations
Does the school have a systematic way of sharing information with parents and the local community? Do school representatives take part in local events to stay connected and informed? Does the school promote its fine arts and athletics in an effort to support student participants? Are service learning activities incorporated on a regular basis? Does the school have a systematic way to include community volunteers in classrooms and other aspects of the school? Does the school have a process by which volunteers can be educated in the "X's we do" and "X's we don't do" lists to encourage consistency and quality among all adults in the building? Do the teachers at the school take the opportunity to spend time in and get to know the community and its residents? Does the school provide meaningful and plentiful information about its practices and policies and student progress?

Conclusion
In this chapter we examined each of the eight areas of school climate and function. Within any school improvement effort, each area will require adequate attention if the school intends to experience movement up the pathway. And as discussed, the eight areas are inter-related and interdependent. Informed by the collective R's held by the adults in the school, they will tend to move together and exist at similar locations on the theoretical roadmap. Low level R's will produce low level X's in each area. High level R's will produce high level X's in each area. The climate and function represented in the SCAI scores will be a reflection on the level of those R's and X's.

An encouraging aspect of recognizing the interdependence of each area is that it encourages us to better trust that success in one area will boost success across the other seven. When we

improve the R's, X's and O's in one area, the result is more faith in more trusting and empowering R's and X in general. Given that movement up the roadmap defines both the journey as well as the destination, we should recognize that the feeling of trusting higher quality R's and X's itself *is* movement up (and will ultimately evidence as higher level O/outcomes over time).

In the next two chapters we outline a step by step process for moving your school up the pathway to higher levels of climate and function. In chapter 11, we examine the school that is currently operating in the lower quadrants, and in chapter 12 we examine the school that is currently operating in the middle region and is seeking to move into the 1-Paradigm from a likely 2-Paradigm current location. Locating our school's climate and addressing climate as a foundational point of emphasis will be essential for success in both cases.

Exercise 1: As a group on individually, complete the ASSC School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI)

Exercise 2: As a group or individually, complete the form below, by rating where you would assess your school to be on each dimension using the 3 levels of function provided?

Handout D - Evaluating Current Practice Levels:
Rate the practices at your school across each category

Dimension	Level 1 Accidental/POF Sensory	Level 2 Semi-Intentional Program	Level 3 Intentional/POS Principle/System
Physical Environment			
Teacher Relations			
Student Interactions			
Leadership and Decision			
Management/Discipline			
Learning and Assessment			
Attitude and Culture			
Community			

References
Reflections
Examples from practice