Investing in Adolescents

High School Climate and Organizational Context Shape Student Development and Educational Attainment

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Introduction

Evidence in psychology and economics has converged on an understanding of what matters for students' learning and what influences their life trajectories. While earlier work focused on the role of large scale assessment test scores, more recent research emphasizes the importance of socioemotional skills, experiences, and mindsets—such as conflict resolution, conscientiousness, goal-setting, study skills, belonging, and adaptive self-beliefs—for thriving in adolescence and into adulthood.[1] This updated scientific knowledge about socioemotional factors has mobilized action in educational policy. Most notably, the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* formally expanded the definition of school performance such that measures of supporting socioemotional development can now be used for accountability purposes. On the practice side, many educators have adopted programs and curricula that measure, promote, and assess socioemotional factors.[2] And many states and school districts have designed guidance to support socioemotional development (SED) in educational settings. For example, Illinois has formally adopted SED standards and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has dedicated staff and resources to support the implementation of these standards.[3]

Yet many of these policy and practice shifts have moved forward without definitive evidence on critical questions about fostering SED in school contexts. While there is considerable evidence that socioemotional skills, mindsets, and beliefs matter and are malleable, there is much less evidence about whether and how schools meaningfully support their development.[4] In our recent research,[5] we addressed this gap by examining the role of high schools—and their climates—in shaping students' trajectories. We identified three key insights from this research:

1. Effective high schools contribute productively to *multiple* dimensions of student growth from eighth to ninth grade—socioemotional development, test scores from large-scale assessments, and observed behaviors in school[6]—and positively influence students' short- and long-run trajectories (e.g., college-going and interaction with the legal system on school grounds);

2. High schools' contributions to students' socioemotional development and behaviors matter most for students' short- and long-run trajectories; and

3. Effective high schools have supportive, collaborative, and instructionally ambitious climates.

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1   Almlund, Duckworth, Heckman, & Kautz (2011); Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & Ter Weel. (2008); Farrington et al. (2012); Farrington, Porter, & Klugman (2019); Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly (2007); Dweck & Master (2008); Heckman & Rubinstein (2001); Immordino-Yang, Hammond, & Krone (2019); Pelligrino & Hilton (2012).

2   Grant et al. (2017); Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle (2017).

3   Review Illinois standards and an explanation for why the Illinois State Board of Education chose to adopt them at **https://www.isbe.net/sel**

4   Credé, Tynan, & Harms (2017); Rimfeld, Kovas, Dale, & Plomin (2016); Revelle (2007); Duckworth & Yeager (2015); Immordino-Yang et al. (2019).

5   Jackson, Porter, Easton, Blanchard, & Kiguel (2020); Jackson, Kiguel, Porter, & Easton (forthcoming); Porter, Jackson, Kiguel, & Easton (2023).

6   For ease of discussion, in the following, we refer to socioemotional development, achievement, and academic behaviors as distinct dimensions of student growth; however, there is compelling research (e.g., Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Heckman & Kautz, 2012) that socioemotional (and cognitive) factors contribute to each of these dimensions.

Interpretive Summary

The three recent studies summarized in this report provide strong evidence of **1)** the importance and value of factors beyond test scores—and, in particular, socioemotional development (SED)—for adolescents as they transition into high school, and **2)** the role of high school climate and organizational context in shaping students' SED and longer-run trajectories.

When schools foster SED, students are more likely to thrive in high school and beyond.

Relative to schools that fostered only test score growth, schools that promoted growth on *all* of the dimensions we studied (SED—both social well-being and academic effort and work—test scores, and behaviors*)* had a far greater impact on student success at the end of ninth grade. Attending these effective schools had positive impacts on students' long-run trajectories, including increasing the likelihood of high school graduation and college enrollment. These same schools reduced the likelihood of school-based arrest, as well, thereby reducing students' racialized interactions with law enforcement. Our research adds to the encouraging evidence base that shows the value of socioemotional development. Collectively, this evidence strongly suggests the need to take a more holistic view of adolescents—consistent with recommendations from research oriented in whole child, culturally-sustaining, and trauma-informed frameworks.

Many 'school quality' measures miss the important ways in which high schools foster student thriving.

Our findings, which point to the importance of SED measures in understanding high school impacts, show that effective high schools cultivate an environment in which: students and teachers interact positively and productively, students develop connections to their peers and feel a stronger sense of belonging in their schools, and students' orientation toward hard work, effort, and engagement is nurtured and supported.

Based on this research, school quality measures that are based primarily on test scores will underestimate or misidentify many impactful schools. The gap between what happens at effective schools and what is captured in school quality measures may already be apparent to the educators most familiar with their schools; this research underscores the size of that disconnect.

School climate is strongly and positively tied to school effectiveness.

This research found that school culture, policies, and norms predicted high schools' impacts on multiple dimensions of student growth. More research is needed to unpack the nature of this relationship; however, one possibility is that a strong school climate raises the capacity of educators to develop an environment that is tailored to the needs of their students. A hint that this may be the case is that effective schools seemed to reliably meet the needs of their particular students year after year, perhaps suggestive that leaders and teachers in effective schools had the capacity (e.g., support, strategies, professional development) needed to be adaptive and responsive as circumstances, students, and/or staffing changed over time.

Effective schools are rigorous and relationship-oriented.

Three aspects of school climate—Supportive Environment, Ambitious Instruction, and Collaborative Teachers—were the strongest predictors of school effectiveness. These results are consistent with other evidence pointing to the importance of relationships in educational settings, which feature prominently in these climate measures. One important implication of this work (and other work with similar findings) is that it may be more productive to understand rigor and relationships as functioning in concert rather than independently. Consider, for example, a school community in which educators collaborate with one another to develop

rigorous instructional strategies, teachers and students build relationships that enable the creation of classwork and experiences that feel relevant to students, and students feel empowered to deeply engage with challenging work given the support of their teacher and peers.

And last, student and teacher voices are reliable, valuable, and valid guides for school improvement. What students and teachers have to say about their school experiences matters greatly. We found in this research that schools' impacts on students' self-reports of SED were more strongly related to students' longer-run thriving than schools' impacts on test scores.

Extrapolating from our findings, we encourage schools and supporting organizations to **1)** accelerate the pace at which more culturally-responsive survey measures are adopted that can more accurately capture experiences and learning of a broad range of students, and **2)** pursue other means of capturing rich student and teacher voice beyond surveys, such as focus groups, discussions and reflections, and informal and formal interviews. In seeking student voice, in particular, it will be important to situate students as agents of change, empower them to share their perspectives, and demonstrate in observable ways how these perspectives are influential and valued.