

INSIGHT

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Is your school climate a positive one?

By Doug McCarthy

Many of you have likely had an experience similar to one I had recently. I offered to help a friend with a home project, and when I arrived I could tell that he and his wife had been arguing. I didn't hear them fighting; my friend didn't tell me they had been fighting; and he and his wife were polite and courteous to me. But even though there were no obvious signs, I knew they had been quarreling. There was an undefined "something-in-the-air" that made me feel uncomfortable. I just wanted to leave.

I have experienced the same "something-in-the-air" feeling when entering some workplaces – an unsettled climate that makes one wonder what is going on behind the scenes. What issues have not been resolved? What grievances have not been heard? What arbitrary decisions have been made without input from those who are affected?

On the other hand, I can sense an optimistic climate in other situations where the "feeling" is one of people who get along, who are committed to a common purpose, who resolve issues in a safe environment.

Interestingly, these same contrary climates can be felt in different schools, to varying degrees. Research shows that there is a direct link between student success and the environment in the school. When reflecting on our own school days some adults will

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remember that "something-in the-air" feeling that made them feel safe and motivated to be successful at school – or not.

One of the most important outcomes of a positive school climate, and arguably one that could receive more focus in the many documents that have been produced on the topic, is that student achievement is affected by school climate.

Ministry documents have defined the school climate as: "the learning environment and relationships found within the school and school community." What is significant is the climate is not created just by the relationship teachers have with students but by all relationships: adult and student, student and student, adult and adult. A positive climate is an environment in which people feel engaged and respected, and where students, teachers, principals and parents contribute to a shared school vision.

While initiating methods to measure school climate is important, sometimes you can just tell what's going on by visiting a school and asking the question: "Is there 'something-in-the air' that would make me want to be a part of this community – or not?"

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