

School Climate Perceptions of Staff in Schools with Different Racial/Ethnic Compositions*

Both socio-economic status (SES) and a positive learning environment have been identified as major contributing factors to the racial/ethnic achievement gap. Analyses of the 2004-06 *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS) showed that student reports of both academic performance and the developmental supports available at school varied consistently across schools along racial/ethnic lines.¹ Perceptions of both academic performance and school environmental supports were lowest in schools with large proportions of African American and Hispanic students, as well as in low-income schools, and highest in predominantly Asian and White schools. Although controlling for SES and other school demographic characteristics reduced these racial/ethnic student group differences, it did not eliminate them. These findings suggest that school-climate factors related to student well-being, as measured by the *California School Climate Survey* (CSCS) for staff, may also play a role in the very well-documented achievement gap between Asian, White, Latino, and African American schools.

This factsheet summarizes the key findings of a similar analysis of more recent data from the *California School Climate Survey* (CSCS) based on data provided by 93,659 school staff during the two-year period 2008-2010, from 670 districts and 4,788 schools (3,010 elementary, 823 middle, 675 high, and 313 other schools) throughout the state. The CSCS gathers staff perceptions of school environments as measured by 84 questions covering a variety of school climate areas. Staff perceptions of the school

climate indicators varied significantly depending upon the predominant racial/ethnic composition of schools in ways consistent with the findings from the CHKS analysis.²

Method

We examined how the racial and ethnic composition of schools, as measured by the *predominant* race/ethnicity of students enrolled, is related to staff reports of school climate. Schools were classified into five categories based on their racial/ethnic composition:³

- Predominantly Latino, where 83% of students are Latino/Hispanic (representing 33% of schools)
- Plurality Latino, where 47% of students are Latino/Hispanic (representing 26% of schools)
- Plurality African American, where 69% of students are African American (representing 2% of schools)
- Plurality Asian, where 48% of students are Asian (representing 7% of schools)
- Plurality White, where 63% of students are White (representing 32% of schools)

For clarity of reporting, these categories will be referred to as Predominantly Latino, Plurality Latino, African American, Asian, and White for the remainder of this factsheet. In interpreting the results, it should be noted that

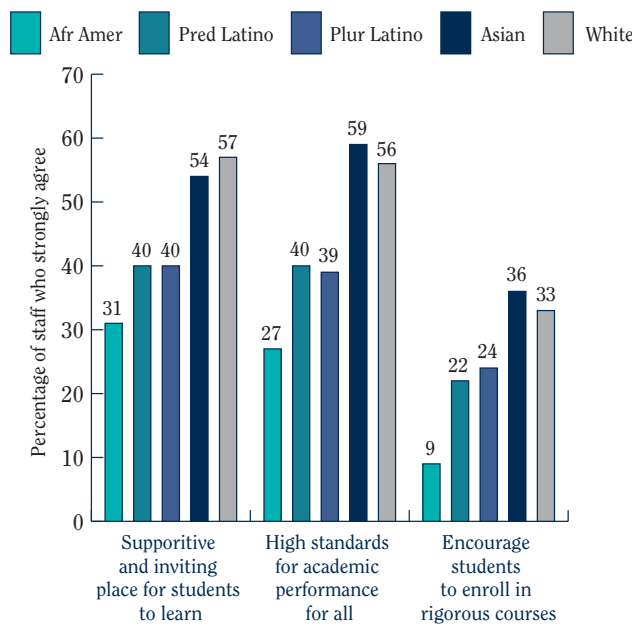
*This document was produced by WestEd for the California Department of Education's Closing the Achievement Gap project.

schools classified as plurality Asian and African American represent small percentages of the schools in the state, 7% and 2%, respectively. More than 90% of schools in the state were in the Predominantly Latino (33%), Plurality Latino (26%), or White (32%) groups.

Findings

Staff perceptions of the school climate indicators varied significantly, depending upon the predominant racial/ethnic composition of schools. Detailed tables presenting these data and analyses can be found in *California School Climate Survey, Statewide Results, 2008-10: School Variation by predominant race/ethnicity of student enrollment* (<http://chks.wested.org/reports>). The figures included in this factsheet provide a sampling of some of the findings that support the trends reported below, organized around three of the school climate areas assessed: the learning environment, developmental supports provided at the school, and cultural sensitivity, respect, and equity.

Figure 1. Perceptions of positive learning environment by racial/ethnic composition of school



Asian and White schools. For the most part, staff in Asian and White schools reported the most positive school climates, with relatively small differences between them, generally in the direction of White schools having the most positive environments.

- Staff in Asian and White schools were more likely than staff in other schools to report that their schools provide positive, supportive, and safe learning environments for students; and that the students that they serve come to school ready to learn.
- Although there were few differences between the reports of staff in Asian and White schools, staff in White schools reported higher levels of staff collegiality.
- But staff in Asian schools were more likely than staff in White schools to report that their school fosters an appreciation of student diversity, emphasizes showing respect for all students' cultural beliefs and practices, and considers closing the racial/ethnic achievement gap a high priority.
- Staff in Asian schools were also more likely than staff in White schools to report that students are motivated to learn and well-behaved.

Figure 2. Perceptions of school safety and facilities by racial/ethnic composition of school

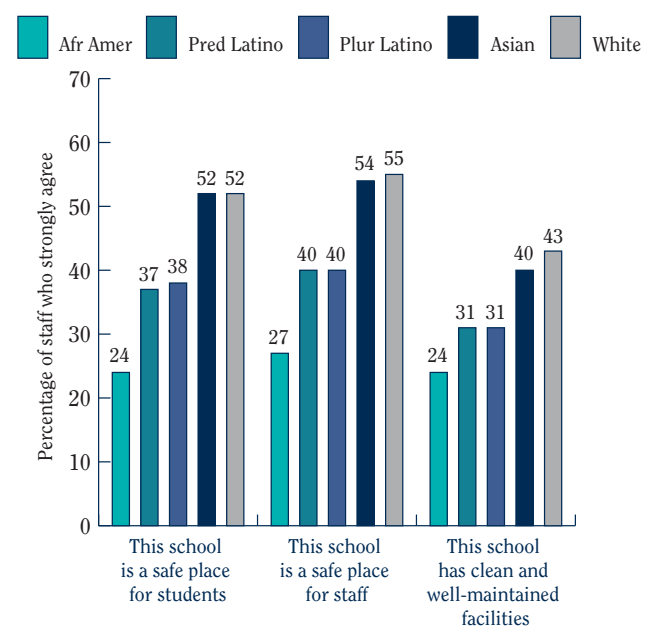
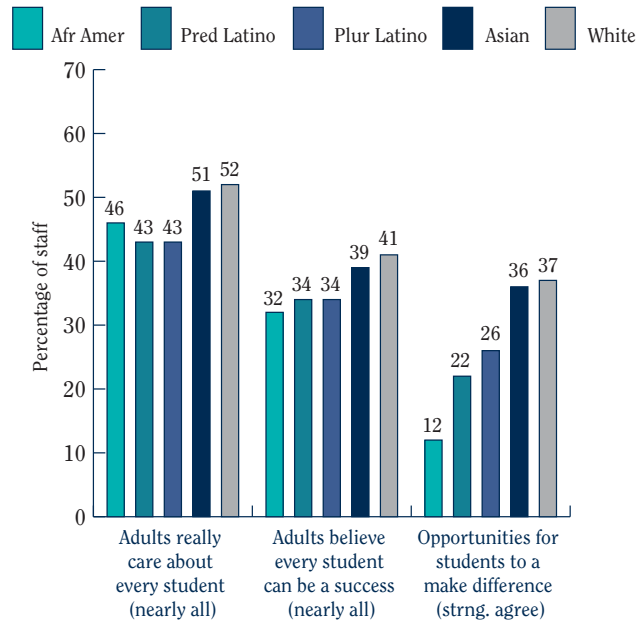


Figure 3. Perceptions of developmental supports by racial/ethnic composition of school



African American Schools. With only a few notable exceptions, staff in African American schools reported the poorest school climate indicators, and the differences between these schools and the others were pronounced.

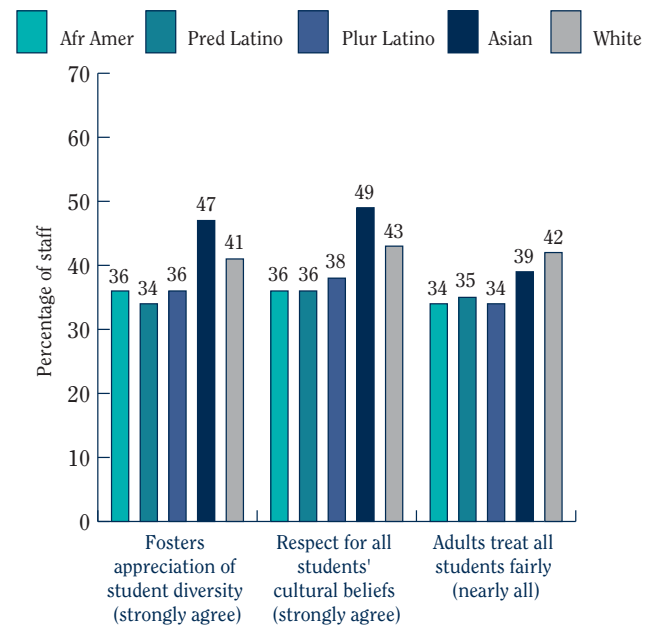
- Staff in African American schools were less likely than staff in other types of schools to report that the school provides a positive learning and working environment, that it is safe and supportive for students, that relations among staff are collegial, and that students come to school ready to learn,
- Staff in African American schools were also less likely than staff in other school categories to report that the school fosters an appreciation of student diversity, emphasizes showing respect for all students’ cultural beliefs and practices, treats all students fairly, and treats all students with respect.
- However, staff at African American schools had the highest percentages among the school categories for the examination of their own cultural biases and for considering closing the achievement gap to be a high priority.
- They also had the highest reported need for more pro-

fessional development in instruction, addressing the needs of diverse populations, and providing support services to students.⁴

Latino Schools. Both Predominantly- and Plurality Latino schools fell in the middle, between African American and White/Asian schools. In general, staff reported very small differences between the two categories of Latino schools.

- However, Plurality Latino schools had substantially higher percentages than Predominantly Latino schools for staff reporting problems with student truancy, racial/ethnic conflict, and violence.
- Conversely, staff at Predominantly Latino schools reported lower percentages than Plurality Latino schools for students coming to school motivated and ready to learn; and for staff who examine their own cultural biases.

Figure 4. Perceptions of cultural sensitivity, respect, and equity by racial/ethnic composition of school



Summary

In short, staff in Asian and White schools consistently reported significantly more positive results on school climate indicators than staff in African American schools. Latino schools fell in the middle, with very small differences between Predominantly Latino and Plurality Latino schools, but still with pronounced differences from Asian and White schools. Although only about 2% of the schools in the state serve predominantly African American enrollments, the results suggests that school climate conditions conducive for student learning are far from optimal in these schools. Overall, these results from school staff add further support to the conclusion reached based on CHKS student data that students in schools that primarily serve African American and Latino students experience poorer school climate conditions related to student academic performance and well-being than students in predominantly Asian and Whites schools. This may play a role in perpetuating the racial/ethnic achievement gap. Enhancing learning supports that foster a more positive learning and working environment for students and staff in African American and Predominantly Latino and Plurality Latino schools should be part of a comprehensive approach to closing the achievement gap.

Suggested citation: Austin, G., De Long-Cotty, B., and Hanson, T. (2012). *School climate perceptions of staff in schools with different racial/ethnic compositions*. CSCS Factsheet #2. Los Alamitos: WestEd Health and Human Development Program for the California Department of Education. Available from http://chks.wested.org/using_results/publications

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Endnotes

1 Austin, G., Hanson, T., Bono, G., and Zheng, C. (2007). *The achievement gap, school well-being, and learning supports*. CHKS Factsheet #8. Los Alamitos, CA. WestEd Health and Human Development Program for the California Department of Education. Available from http://chks.wested.org/using_results/publications

2 Detailed tables presenting all the results of this analysis can be found in *California School Climate Survey, Statewide Results, 2008-10: School Variation by predominant race/ethnicity of student enrollment*. Available from <http://chks.wested.org/reports>.

3 Using the proportion of African American, Asian, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White students in each school, latent profile analyses (LPA) were conducted to construct a racial/ethnic composition typology of schools. Similar to cluster analysis, LPA is an approach for detecting unobserved groupings of variables and categorizing observations into latent classes.

4 It is important to consider that this last set of findings about the perceived need for professional development can be interpreted in both a positive and negative light, as these staff both need and want additional PD in order to address the school climate issues in their schools.