Redesigning the Annual NYC School Survey: Improving Measures of School Climate through a Strong Research-Practice Partnership
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Introduction

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February 2018
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In New York City and nationally, efforts to improve schools are becoming less narrowly focused on the performance of individual students and teachers. Instead, policymakers and school leaders are beginning to ask how schools can be strengthened as organizations. This perspective recognizes that schools are more than just collections of individuals; rather, they are complex organizations, with their own web of relationships, routines, structures, and environments (Cook & Yanow, 1996).

This shift is in part a reaction to emerging research, which has begun to show that certain organizational characteristics—such as student-centered learning environment, instructional leadership, and safety—are important for improving student outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010; Kraft et al., 2016). Federal legislation has also helped generate momentum behind efforts to gather information about these organizational characteristics of schools. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in late 2015, included a new requirement that states collect and report data on at least one alternative measure of school quality, in addition to the standard achievement data. This change encouraged some districts to initiate or expand efforts to collect information about schools’ organizational strengths and weaknesses by surveying teachers, students, and parents.

Much of this work has roots in research conducted over the last decade by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR). CCSR identified a set of five essential, inter-related factors needed for school improvement, which drew on teacher and student surveys about school climate in Chicago Public schools over many years. In the widely read book, Organizing Schools for Improvement (Bryk et al., 2010), CCSR researchers reported that schools that were strong across key areas of school climate were substantially more likely to show gains in reading and math test scores than schools that were not.

Drawing on the Consortium’s work, state and school district leaders across the United States have created their own surveys designed to measure malleable
schoolwide characteristics that, if improved, could lead to better academic outcomes. Results from these surveys have been used to provide schools with formative feedback about various characteristics of their learning environments. In some cases, the results also have been used in more summative assessments of school quality (i.e., as part of school accountability strategies).

The New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) launched its School Survey effort in 2006. Each year since then, the district has distributed the NYC School Survey to all students in grades 6-12, as well as all teachers and parents—reaching about a million people across more than 1,800 schools each year, making it the largest education census in the United States.

Beginning in 2010, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools has worked with the NYC DOE to analyze and suggest improvements to the Survey.1 For several years, the district made only modest changes to the instrument. But in 2014, new leadership at the NYC DOE sought to undertake a comprehensive redesign of the Survey, which would focus on measuring key aspects of school climate and capacity that research had shown to be important for improving student outcomes. The redesign was a core part of the DOE’s larger effort to develop a framework for school improvement and support across the City, which eventually crystallized into the “Framework for Great Schools.”

The process of redesigning the NYC School Survey has been highly collaborative. This collection documents the work that has taken place to date. It illustrates how collaborations between researchers and practitioners can help inform school districts’ efforts and create useful measurement tools for the field. In more concrete terms, the collection offers guidance to other districts about the process of creating a school climate survey and about specific measures they might consider using. Finally, the collection provides practical information about the NYC School Survey, which may be useful to local organizations that use the results.
“Redesigning The Annual NYC School Survey” consists of several parts:

- **Part I: A Brief History of Measure School Climate in New York City:** How the NYC Department of Education and the Research Alliance for NYC Schools Collaborated to Redesign the NYC School Survey

- **Part II: The NYC School Survey in the Field: Survey Administration and Response Rates**

- **Part III: Technical Properties of the NYC School Survey:** Measurement Quality

- **Part IV: Exploring Two Approaches to Analyzing Survey Results:** School-Level Scoring and Individualized Scoring Within Schools

We also created a short brief that highlights key lessons and insights from this work to date:

- **Redesigning NYC’s School Surveys: Lessons from a Research-Practice Partnership**

Finally, we are sharing copies of the Survey itself, as well as technical documentation that some readers may find useful:

- **NYC School Survey, 2015-2016**

- **Appendices**
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank our colleagues at the Research Alliance for New York City Schools and the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) who provided feedback on this collection. We would particularly like to thank Executive Director James Kemple and Research Director Cheri Fancsali, both of whom provided thoughtful feedback at multiple stages of this compendium. Communications Director Chelsea Farley, Communications Coordinator Kayla Stewart, and her predecessor, Shifra Goldenberg, also made significant contributions to the development and design of this report. Their efforts helped make this work clearer and more accessible and attractive.

We would also like to thank Anna Remenschneider, Andrew Lee, Lauren Sypek, Eric Ashton, and Sarah Martin from the NYC DOE, whose thoughtful and timely feedback was invaluable to the development of this report.

We are indebted to the NYC DOE partners who invited us into their process of redesigning and refining the annual NYC School Survey to assess school climate measures that support effective teaching and learning. Our work truly would not have been possible without them. In particular, we thank Josh Wallack, Josh Winters, Ailish Brady, Laura Patterson, Linda Edouard, Maya Mitchell, Eric Ashton, Alice Brown, Michelle Paladino, Elise Corwin, and Michelle Costa.

We appreciate all of the help and support we’ve received from academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders across NYC who are interested in improving the NYC Survey. For example, professors Michel Knight and Eddie Fergus helped us refine and revise our measure of cultural awareness. Many parents, teachers, and students participated in focus groups, which provided valuable feedback about the Survey. Several people played a key role in helping organize these focus groups; they were Dery Rodriguez at FACE, Tina Collins at the United Federation of Teachers, and Cynthia Wong and Staci Taustine from CORO Youth Leadership Academy.
(YLA). Special thanks to the CORO youth leaders who engaged with us on Saturday mornings to learn and think about school surveys.

Research Alliance publications are made possible by the support of a generous group of funders who underwrite our core operations, including flexible research capacity, communications, and public engagement efforts.

These funders include Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and the William T. Grant Foundation.

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Endnote

1 Our early work culminated in a report assessing the reliability and validity of the Survey’s measures and making a number of recommendations about how the Survey could be improved (Nathanson, et. al., 2013).
The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the city’s public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.