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Delaware School Climate Survey—Student: Its factor structure, concurrent validity, and reliability

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ABSTRACT

The Delaware School Climate Survey—Student (DSCS—S) was developed to provide schools with a brief and psychometrically sound student survey for assessing school climate, particularly the dimensions of social support and structure. Confirmatory factor analyses, conducted on a sample of 11,780 students in 85 schools, showed that a bifactor model consisting of five specific factors and one general factor (School Climate) best represented the data. Those five factors are represented in five subscales of the DSCS—S: Teacher–Student Relations, Student–Student Relations, Fairness of Rules, Liking of School, and School Safety. The factor structure was shown to be stable across grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), racial-ethnic groups (i.e., Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic), and gender. As evidence of the survey's concurrent validity, scores for each of the five subscales and the total scale correlated moderately, across groups and at the school level, with academic achievement and suspensions and expulsions.

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1. Introduction

During the past several decades, a rapidly growing number of schools have implemented schoolwide programs for preventing behavior problems and promoting mental health. These include universal-level prevention and promotion programs for social and emotional learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki,

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Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Zins & Elias, 2006) and character education (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2006), School-Wide Positive Behavior Support programs (SWPBS; Sailor, Dunlap, Sugai, & Horner, 2009), and universal programs that focus on preventing more specific behavior problems, such as bullying (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010) and school violence (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Jimerson & Furlong, 2006). What many of these programs have in common is the aim of promoting a positive school climate. Although a wide range of definitions of school climate exist, most refer to positive social relationships. For example, Haynes, Emmons, and Ben-Avie (1997) define school climate as “the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development” (p. 322). Recognizing the importance of interpersonal relationships but placing additional emphasis on safety, Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, and Pickeral (2009) recently defined school climate as the “quality and character of school life,” that includes “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe” (p. 182).

School climate has been linked to a wide range of academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes (Anderson, 1982; Haynes et al., 1997), including academic achievement (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Griffith, 1999); student academic, social, and personal attitudes and motives (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995); attendance and school avoidance (Brand et al., 2003; Welsh, 2000); student delinquency (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Welsh, 2000); attitudes and use of illegal substances (Brand et al., 2003), bullying (Nansel et al., 2001); victimization (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Welsh, 2000); depression and self-esteem (Brand et al., 2003; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007); and general behavior problems (Battistich & Horn, 1997; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Welsh, 2000). Although a positive school climate is a goal of most schoolwide programs for preventing behavior problems, school climate is seldom evaluated in studies of program effectiveness. The most common method of evaluating the effectiveness of programs for preventing behavior problems in schools has been the use of teacher reports of student behavior (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). Likewise, in studies of SWPBS, office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) have been the most common outcome measured (Horner & Sugai, 2007). Both teacher ratings and ODRs have their shortcomings. A major shortcoming of teacher reports is reporter bias. That is, in rating student behavior, teachers in intervention schools often are well aware that the interventions implemented are expected to improve student behavior and that their negative ratings are likely to cast a negative light on their school’s effectiveness and, in some cases, their own effectiveness. This bias may largely explain why intervention effect sizes tend to be larger when teacher reports, rather than student reports, are used in studies of program effectiveness (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). ODRs also have multiple shortcomings (Morrison, Redding, Fisher, & Peterson, 2006). Perhaps chief among them is that decreases in ODRs may occur without improvements in student behavior. Instead of improvement in behavior, reduced ODRs may simply reflect normal fluctuations in ODRs from year to year and changes in referral policies and practices (Wright & Dusek, 1998). To be sure, both teacher ratings and ODRs also have their advantages, especially when used as part of a multimethod system of assessing program needs and effectiveness (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, 2010). However, in addition to the disadvantages noted above, they do not assess, nor are they intended to assess, school climate and student perceptions of their schools.

The primary purpose of the present study was to develop a brief and psychometrically sound instrument for assessing student perceptions of school climate, the Delaware School Climate Survey—Student version (DSCS—S). Initiated and supported by Delaware’s SWPBS project, the DSCS—S was intended to complement existing methods and measures that many schools use to indicate a school’s effectiveness, such as state-wide achievement tests, suspension/expulsion rates, teacher ratings of student behavior, and ODRs. Of particular focus was the development of a valid and reliable self-report survey that schools could use to assess student perceptions of those aspects of school climate related to the aims of two program initiatives in Delaware: SWPBS, which is now implemented in approximately 60% of schools in Delaware, and bullying prevention programs, which are mandated by state law and thus implemented to one degree or another in all schools. Those program initiatives focus on improving relations among students and between teachers and students, establishing clear and fair expectations and rules, reducing student conduct problems, and increasing school safety.

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