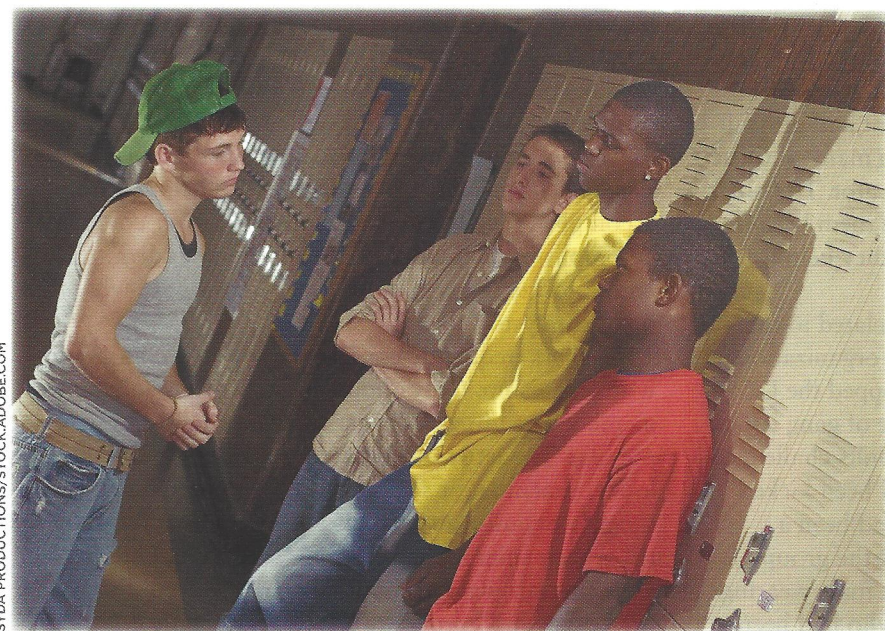


# Adjusting Your (Student) Thermostats to Improve School Climate

*Programs to improve a school's climate can provide optimum return on investment by tapping into an unused human resource.*

By Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D.



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Just as indoor air quality, temperature, and lighting affect the physical environment of our schools, students themselves affect the quality and character of school life—the school climate. As they work to improve school climate, educators often overlook that powerful resource.

A small percentage of students have an inordinate ability to influence their peers. In essence, they are the school climate *thermostats*. By identifying and developing the influence of those social catalysts—by adjusting those thermostats—educators can significantly improve the school climate with little or no effect on the budget.

Why should district leaders, including school business administrators, give a hoot about student thermostats? They should care because the real bottom line in schools is academic achievement, which is correlated with school climate.

## **If Culture Is King, Climate Is Queen**

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella said, “The C in CEO stands for culture. The CEO is the curator of an organization’s culture.” Culture is to an organization what character is to a person; it encompasses values, customs, and norms. Climate is more like personality—the way individuals express themselves and interact with people.

Research shows that school climate directly affects academic achievement. The School Conditions and Climate Work Group for the California Department of Education undertook an exploration of school conditions and climate measures and concluded the following:

- Safe, supportive environments, centered on strong relationships, are critical for learning and development.
- School conditions and climate are linked to academic achievement and social and emotional development, particularly for students who experience adversity. Positive school conditions and climate are also correlated with teacher retention.
- Other factors linked to school climate include relationships, engagement, facilities and resources, access to supports for social and emotional learning and physical health, parent involvement, teacher collaboration and professional development, working conditions, and leadership.

The seeds of learning grow best when watered and fertilized in positive psychosocial soil. Thus, climate affects a school’s return on investment. Recognizing this link, California laws now require schools to establish a positive behavior plan, tied to funding.

A shortcoming of positive behavior research is that it focuses on the entire student body instead of



identifying the small percentage of social influencers who possess an inordinate ability to affect others. History is not made by the masses, but rather by those who influence groups.

## Leveraging Your Thermostats

One of the most powerful resources to improve a school's climate is the less than 10% of students who are gifted in leadership. In a typical class of 25 students (Figure 1), 2 will purvey strong influence among peers (red triangles) and 2 will have above-average influence (green triangles). Each of those "thermostats" has an ability to get others to follow them, potentially disrupting or supporting a teacher's agenda.

They are not always the stellar students. Sometimes they're the troublemakers, frequent flyers to the principal's office. In my work with schools, I've noticed that about 75% of teachers express an aversion toward those students because they can be noncompliant and difficult to handle. This tug-of-war tension sets up many of those students to be labeled enemies of the educator. The other 25% of classroom teachers appear to like them because after they turn those students into allies, they help teachers run their class.

During the first few years of my work related to thermostats, I worked with a nonprofit youth organization in Salinas, California. At the time, Salinas topped the U.S. cities list for adolescent homicides because of gang issues.

During a training session, one of the adults challenged me to identify a middle schooler who had been kicked out of the program because the student had been a negative influence. Within two minutes of the group of students entering the room, I pointed to a male wearing a purple shirt. Sure enough, he was one who had been expelled. How did I know? I could tell from his swagger and how the others responded to him. The adults considered him a negative influence, but I could tell he was a strong leader.

In 1972, the Marland report, a congressionally mandated report on gifted and talented education in the United States, listed leadership as a domain of giftedness. Today, the U.S. Department of Education continues to recognize leadership as a unique talent. Unfortunately, the definition of giftedness is by and large related to academics.

Because people who specialize in organizational leadership don't work with youth and those who do are trained in pedagogy, most young leaders—your social influencers—fall through the cracks and their leadership is never cultivated.

## IDU—Do You?

Tapping the potential of those student leaders to influence school climate involves a three-pronged approach: identify, develop, and unleash.

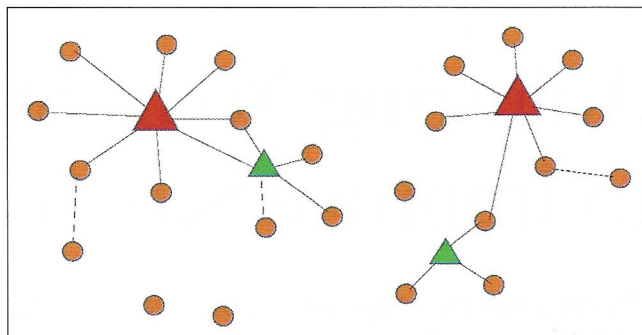


Figure 1. Social influence schematic of students.

## Identify

Nearly all leadership development assessments focus on effectiveness because they're designed for adult leaders in organizational roles of influence. But effectiveness differs from emergence.

What is unique about those who emerge as leaders? We define *leadership* as "the process of helping people accomplish together what they would not or could not accomplish as individuals." *Leaders* are "individuals who catalyze this social process." *Leading* is "what they do as catalysts."

Teachers frequently confuse popularity and academics with leadership. Only about half of student government members are gifted in leadership; the others are merely popular. The latter are elected by their peers based on looks, charisma, or social presence. but when you ask them to organize a school assembly or event, you can see the wheels spinning in their eyes, like a computer seeking a missing software program.

"Leadership" programs in schools include only a small percentage of those students who truly possess leadership acumen. Here are brief descriptions of the four skills that help differentiate the thermostats from team members.

**Persuasiveness.** Napoleon said, "Leaders are vendors of hope." They are always selling ideas, visions, and perceptions. You can be good at selling and not leading; however, you can't be good at leading without selling. A student who convinces peers to attend a party, ditch a class, or laugh at an inappropriate joke could be a budding CEO or organizational leader. Leaders are less prone to peer pressure but adept at pressuring their peers.

**Propelling.** Leaders have an internal locus of control (70% of people have an external locus of control), meaning they don't base their decisions on situational conditions but on what they believe they can do to influence the results. Students who are leader oriented display a propensity to initiate actions, such as starting clubs or coordinating events—even recess activities. They demonstrate a competitive, achievement-oriented motivation

to accomplish things, typically with or through others rather than alone.

**Planning.** Planning involves strategic thinking, seeing the big picture, and developing step-by-step plans. The planner isn't necessarily the engineer or computer programmer, but rather the person who taps both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. A student with this ability can see the end result and then break it down into incremental steps, assigning tasks and roles to others.

**Power.** Power activates the other three skills; a student who is comfortable seeking and being in power tends to demonstrate influence over the rest. Psychologists refer to this as *social potency*. It might be demonstrated in class clowning, debating perceived unfairness, or even confronting a bully. The willingness to pursue social power and manage it is a complex social skill. It is often admired by peers and perceived as disrespectful and disruptive by teachers.

(The Nelson Young Leader Inventory, a 30-question assessment based on these four skills, can help adults estimate the likelihood of leadership gifting in students and offer a preliminary tool to identify the thermostats in a school. The assessment can be found at [www.Lead-YoungTraining.com](http://www.Lead-YoungTraining.com).)

## Develop

A shortcoming of most "student leadership" programs is a lack of training in skills development. The programs I've reviewed are more about team building than building a team—two significantly different learning objectives.

Most student government programs consist of promoting recurring events by hanging posters, making announcements, and giving campus tours to new students. Rarely do we teach skills on how to lead effectively. We wouldn't think of doing that in math, English, science, or athletics.

Leadership is a soft skill, meaning you can't learn it from a book, video, or guest speaker. Project-based methods provide opportunities for real-time, Socratic coaching, whereby an adult offers subtle cues as opposed to telling the student what to do. This approach helps students learn how to think like leaders, not just to mimic leader-like behaviors when adults are present.

## Unleash

On-the-job experience, after training, provides real-life learning that rounds out an effective thermostat leadership development program. Don't give students token roles; let them take reasonable risks. Give them the opportunity to fail, to birth innovative ideas, to come up with new ways of accomplishing old things, and to sit on school boards.

Granted, they will make some messes, but better they do it now than when they're in charge of thousands

of people and millions of dollars. By unleashing these strengths, you create allies among the social catalysts who will police peers when adults are not around, fending off bullies and enhancing a safer, more positive environment for the herd.

## The Soft Side of ROI

Paul Batalden of Dartmouth University said, "Every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets."

As a professor of organizational behavior, I concur. Academic achievement isn't the only performance issue related to school climate and the costs of education.

According to Ken Futernick's 2007 WestEd report titled "A Possible Dream: Retaining California Teachers so All Students Learn," 22% of new teachers in California quit within their first four years, referring to working climate as one of the main reasons.

Turnover and brain drain cost every organization. As a former Iowa farm boy, I know that the fruit is directly related to the root. The roots of an organization include culture and climate. That's a big aha for many master's of business administration students who think that superior marketing, financial planning, and supply chain solutions are sufficient to turn a profit.

There's one more big benefit of identifying and developing young leaders in the largest social environment of their lives. Although adults commonly complain about the quantity and quality of effective and ethical leaders, little has been done over the millennia to improve how we grow our leaders. Schools are in the unique position of recognizing leaders while they're moldable, not moldy.

A *Harvard Business Review* blog published survey results of 17,000 managers, revealing that the average age of first formal leadership training is 42. At that age, people are long past being pliable in their character, not to mention elevated in their cognition.

Although not a silver bullet, I'm convinced that the most overlooked and underused resource for catalyzing school climate improvement is failing to identify and develop the thermostats in our midst. A Trojan horse solution for elevating school climate and increasing academic achievement is to identify and develop these influencers. We're around them all the time. Why not tap their potential to take our schools to the next level?

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