

snapshot

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EXAMINING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: SEQUOIA HIGH SCHOOL'S SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

Background

Research has shown that adolescents' school experiences and perceptions of the school climate can influence their attendance, motivation to learn, and health risk-taking behaviors. At the request of the Sequoia Union High School District, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (Gardner Center) collaborated with Sequoia High School (SHS) in the 2011-12 academic year to develop and analyze the results of a survey instrument that tapped all SHS students' viewpoints of the school environment (e.g., sense of safety). We also partnered with the Redwood City School District (RCSD) to examine the degree to which students' perceptions of the school climate shift as they transition from RCSD middle schools to Sequoia High School. For this study, we used the Gardner Center's Youth Data Archive (YDA) to analyze key background characteristics of survey respondents, and track how RCSD students' assessments of the school setting in the 8th grade change as they matriculate to the 9th grade in Sequoia High School.¹

Key findings

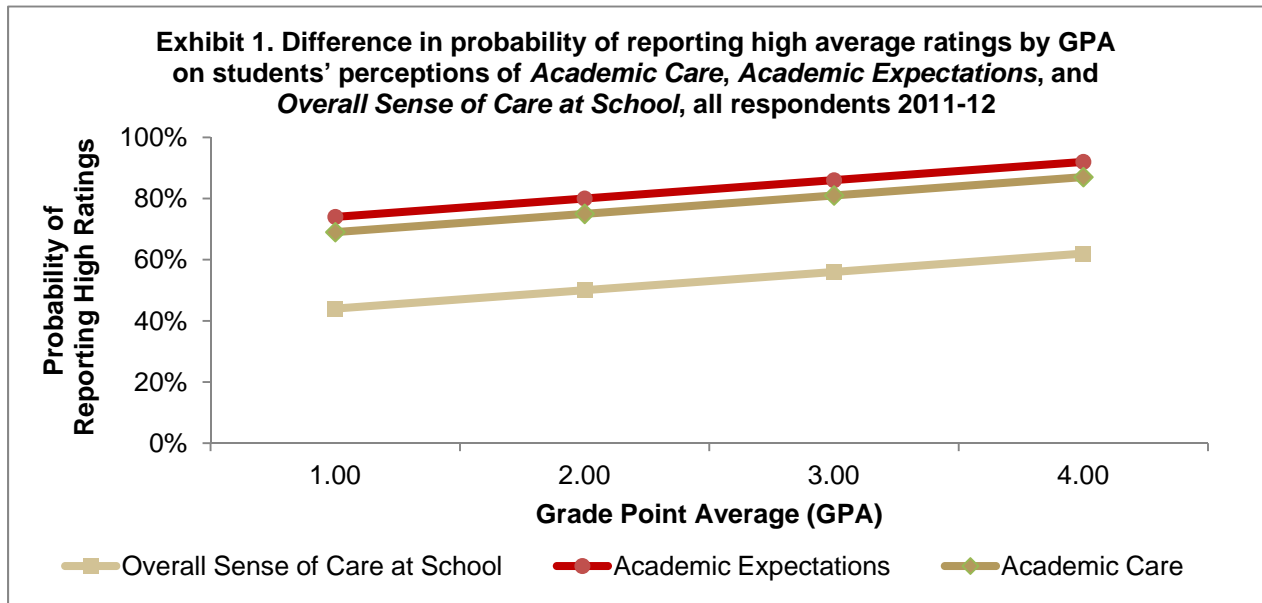
Examining survey responses in five school climate areas from a representative sample of 1,606 SHS students in grades 9-12, we find that students' demographic, academic, and disciplinary backgrounds are related to how they perceive different dimensions of the school environment at Sequoia High School.² We found that:

1. As students' grade point averages increase, so too does the likelihood that they will report high average ratings on their perceptions of *Academic Care*, *Academic Expectations*, and *Overall Sense of Care at School* (Exhibit 1).
2. Female students were more likely than males to report positive ratings on their perceptions of *Academic Expectations* and *Overall Sense of Care at School*, all else equal.

¹ The YDA is an integrated data system that enables researchers to examine questions about youth across agencies that do not typically share data.

² These school climate areas include: *Academic Expectations of School Adults* refers to students' perceptions that adults on campus recognize their strengths and convey to them high expectation beliefs; *Respect for Racial/Ethnic Diversity* refers to students' perceptions that the school environment is respectful of racial/ethnic diversity; *Academic Care* refers to students' beliefs that their teachers are responsive to their academic needs; *Autonomy Support* refers to students' perceptions that there are opportunities for them to contribute and participate in meaningful ways; and *Overall Sense of Care at School* refers to students' beliefs that there is a culture of care and mutual respect among students and staff.

3. Compared to 12th graders and those without disciplinary infractions, students enrolled in the 11th grade and those with at least one suspension were less likely to report that they experienced a climate of care at school or perceived opportunities to exercise their autonomy and personal decision making.



Further, we discovered that the transition from 8th grade in RCSD to Sequoia High School had a positive influence on 8th grade students who reported low average perceptions of overall care at their middle school. Eighth grade students who reported high average perceptions of overall care in middle school continued to report similar high average perceptions in the 9th grade. In this cohort, we found that non-White, non-Latino, and students with at least one 9th grade suspension were less likely to report high average responses on the *Overall Sense of Care* scale at Sequoia High School, relative to their peers.

Implications

This study provides information that teachers, school administrators, and central office leaders in the Redwood City and Sequoia Union High School districts can use to engage in dialogue about school climate issues. Present findings demonstrate variations among students' perceptions of the campus environment, where males, 11th graders, and students with at least one suspension reported fewer positive experiences compared to their counterparts. Implementing school and district practices and policies that help increase the engagement of these (and all) students may be warranted. Studies in education have identified several effective interventions, including practices that: afford more relationship-building between adults and students (e.g., student-teacher mentorship pairs); promote student autonomy (e.g., enabling student choice in the classroom); and help communicate high expectations of performance to all students regardless of their demographic, disciplinary, or achievement backgrounds. As additional survey data from Sequoia High School are made available for future analyses, we will be able to examine students' changing attitudes over time, which in turn can help guide the work of school officials in the community in more detailed ways.