



# NNER News—Special Edition

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## NNER 2006 Annual Conference

By Gregory Bernhardt



The Miami University and Wright State University settings in Ohio are excited to be co-hosting the 2006 National Network for Educational Renewal Annual Conference just north of Cincinnati, Ohio, October 18—21.

The conference theme this year is “Leadership for Simultaneous Renewal: Changing Roles in Changing Times.” Our conference will facilitate conversations around sustaining partnerships among the tripartite members and their three distinct cultures. Presentations will be organized around five strands:

- Advancing Social Justice in the P-16 Classroom;
- Blending Roles in Changing Times;
- Engaging Arts and Sciences Disciplines

- in Teacher Preparation;
- Creating Democratic, Ethical Leaders and Leadership in P-16 Settings; and,
- Integrating Democracy in P-16 Education.

In addition to presentations from around the NNER we will interact with nationally recognized speakers to include: Nancy Zimpher, president of the University of Cincinnati; Cile Chavez, former superintendent of the Littleton (Colorado) Public Schools; Bob Moses from the Algebra Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Michael Dantley, president elect of the University Council for Educational Administration (Oxford, Ohio); and, speaking at the closing session will be Dr. John I. Goodlad, the founder of the

NNER and president of the Institute for Educational Inquiry.

Please check out the NNER website for more conference details and plan to join us in Ohio for an outstanding opportunity to expand the work of the NNER as we work together to explore and implement the Agenda for Education in a Democracy!

If you have questions, please contact Drs. Bruce Field or Bryan Burgin, the conference planners, at [pdsconf@gwm.sc.edu](mailto:pdsconf@gwm.sc.edu), or Ann Foster at [fosteraw@u.washington.edu](mailto:fosteraw@u.washington.edu), or myself at [gregory.bernhardt@wright.edu](mailto:gregory.bernhardt@wright.edu).

## Conference Reminders and Announcements

The **Tripartite Council meeting** will be held on Wednesday, October 18 from 6:00—8:00 p.m. and will continue the next day (October 19) at 8:30 a.m. *(This extended time was recommended by last year’s tripartite group to allow more time for this important work.)*

The **Governing Council** will meet on Thursday, October 19 from 1:15—4:15 p.m.



The **New Participant’s session** will be held Thursday, October 19 from 1:15—4:30 p.m. This interactive session will include an overview of the NNER mission and information on the conference strands for those new to the conference and/or the NNER work. We encourage everyone interested in this session to attend. It will be an opportunity to network with colleagues as well

as learn more about the NNER. For more information please contact Stephanie Kenney at [skenney@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:skenney@georgiasouthern.edu) or Ann Foster at [fosteraw@u.washington.edu](mailto:fosteraw@u.washington.edu).



**The NNER is Proud to Announce the 2006 Clark and Michelli Award Recipients!**

Rishel Middle School in partnership with the University of Colorado at Denver, members of the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal, will receive the Richard W. Clark Award for Exemplary Partner School Work. The Denver school, in conjunction with its university partner, continues to promote inquiry as an ongoing practice for school renewal. Representatives from the partnership will highlight their collaborative work on Friday at the conference luncheon.

The Wyoming setting will receive the Nicholas Michelli Award for Promoting Social Justice. The presentation will be at the Saturday conference luncheon where representatives from the Wyoming setting will highlight the Shepard Symposium activities initiated in honor of Mathew Shepard as a reminder of our shared responsibilities and hopes for a more just society.



**DR. JOHN I. GOODLAD,  
PRESIDENT OF THE  
INSTITUTE FOR  
EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY  
IN SEATTLE,  
WASHINGTON,  
WILL ADDRESS THE  
NNER MEMBERS  
DURING LUNCH  
ON SATURDAY,  
OCTOBER 21, 2006**

**NNER WELCOMES  
CALIFORNIA STATE  
UNIVERSITY AT CHICO  
AS THE NEWEST  
NNER SETTING!**

The following article serves as an example of the rich content and timely topics that will be addressed in the five strands developed by the conference committee during which P-12, university, and community participants will engage in conversation. We will all exchange ideas for both addressing the challenges we face and building on our strengths as we advance the Agenda for Education in a Democracy (AED).

*For many years now I have found that almost everything I do professionally is somehow related to the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. In fact, I try not to engage in activities that are unrelated to the Agenda. The brief paper included in this newsletter focuses on one of the most important aspects of our work—being sure about what we mean when we use abstract terms like democracy or social justice and thinking about how these ideas affect schools. The recent work I have been doing with Jon Cohen has, for me, been a way to do that. We would love your feedback—this is a work in progress. We will be presenting at the annual meeting Friday morning on a related project, so send a note or grab us then. Thanks—Nicholas Michelli*

## EVALUATING SCHOOL CLIMATE: PROMOTING THE SKILLS, DISPOSITIONS AND A CLIMATE FOR DEMOCRACY

By Jonathan Cohen and Nicholas M. Michelli

One of the most elusive concepts in our times is that of a socially just democracy. When member settings of the National Network for Educational Renewal undertake the task of preparing students to be active participants in such a democracy, it is essential that we be clear about what we mean and achieve a shared vision within our settings. When we think about democracy it is important that we go beyond “government” and think about how one is expected to live in a democracy. With this in mind, we propose this definition as a starting point:

In its essence, socially just democratic living is associated living characterized by conscious consideration of the effects of one’s actions on others, consideration of the views of others, argument that is based on reason, civic participation, and living a life defined by nonrepression and nondiscrimination of others. (Michelli, et.al., forthcoming)

We have been exploring the role of social, emotional and cognitive competencies and ethical dispositions that have the potential to provide the foundation for democratic participation in schools, communities and our nation (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Michelli, 2005; Michelli & Keiser, 2005). Table one lists the specific social, emotional, ethical and cognitive skills and dispositions that we believe provide the foundation for participation in a democratic community. Else-

where, we have discussed the range of ways that educators can promote these indispensable skills and dispositions through the academic and non-academic aspects of K-12 school life and create a climate for learning (e.g. Cohen, 2001 and 2006; Michelli, et. al., forthcoming). Evaluating and shaping school climate is another way that we can – potentially – powerfully promote democratic processes at individual and school wide levels.

### - Table 1 -

#### Essential skills:

- Learning to listen to ourselves and others;
- Critical and reflective thinking abilities (e.g. being able to think about various points of view and goals);
- Flexible problem solving/decision making abilities including the ability to resolve conflicts in creative and non-violent ways;
- Communicative abilities (e.g. being able to participate in discussion; learning to argue thoughtfully and directly for one’s position and use evidence in support of it);
- Collaborative capacities (e.g. working together for a common goal; learning to compromise).

#### Essential dispositions:

- Responsibility;
- An appreciation that we are social creatures and need others to survive and

thrive;

- Appreciation of and involvement with social justice (e.g. a nation is as strong as its weakest members; when certain groups are discriminated against it is not only unfair to them but, in the long run undermines society);
- Service to others or an appreciation that it is an honor and a pleasure to serve and help others. [From: Cohen, J. (2006). Social, Emotional, Ethical, and Academic Education: Creating a Climate for Learning, Participation in Democracy, and Well-Being. *Harvard Educational Review*, Summer. Vol. 76, No. 2, pg 201-237.]

Educators have appreciated the importance of school climate for almost one hundred years (Perry, 1908). Although there are a range of definitions for school climate (e.g. “the feeling tone of the school” or “how we feel and think about school”) all essentially agree that it refers to our subjective experience in school (for recent summaries, see Cohen, 2006; Freiberg, 1999). Over the last fifty years, the empirical study of school climate has grown exponentially. Table Two lists the dimensions that most educational researchers believe color and shape school climate.

### -Table 2 -

#### Ten Essential Dimensions of School Climate (and some of the elements included within each):

- 1) **Environmental** (cleanliness; ade-

quate space and materials; inviting aesthetic quality)

2) **Structural** (size of school; curricular and extra-curricular offerings)

3) **Safety:**

a. **Physical** (crisis plan; clearly communicated rules; clear and consistent violation response; people in the school feel physically safe; attitudes about violence)

b. **Social-Emotional** (attitudes about individual differences; students' and adults' attitudes about and responses to bullying; conflict resolution taught in school; belief in school rules)

4) **Teaching and Learning** (high expectations for student achievement; all learning styles honored; help provided when needed; learning linked to "real life"; engaging materials; use of praise/reward; opportunities for participation; varied teaching methods; instructional leadership; creativity valued; social-emotional as well as academic learning valued/taught; varied "intelligences" appreciated; connections across disciplines)

5) **Relationships** (positive adult-adult relationships between/among teachers, administrators, and staff; positive adult-student relationships; positive student-student relationships; shared decision-making; common academic planning opportunities; diversity valued; student participation in learning and discipline)

6) **Sense of School Community** (students/adults feel and demonstrate sense of community in the school)

7) **Morale** (students are engaged learners; staff are enthusiastic about their work; students connected to one or more adults; students/staff feel good about school)

8) **Peer Norms** (students/staff: feel learning is important; are invested in caring; appreciate importance of being able to say "no"; expect collaboration/cooperation)

9) **School-Home-Community Partnerships** (mutual support and ongoing communication; school-community involvement; parent participation in school decision-making; shared parent-teacher norms vis-à-vis learning and behavior; student family assistance programs)

10) **Learning Community** (standards and measures used to support learning and continuous improvement; professional development systematic and ongoing; data-driven decision making linked to learning; school systems evaluated)

School climate is garnering the attention of district and State leaders because a

growing body of research reveals that it is correlated with and predictive of school success: student achievement, effective risk prevention efforts, student's healthy development and school connectedness (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, McCabe, Pickeral and Michelli, in preparation; Greenberg, et. al. 2003; Torney-Purta, 2002). By definition, school climate recognizes the social, emotional and ethical as well as cognitive dimensions of school life. Although there are scores of school climate measures, curiously, there are only two scientifically sound school climate tools that are comprehensive in the following two ways: they recognize K-12 student, parent and school personnel experience; and they assess virtually all of the dimensions that scholars believe color and shape school climate. These measures are the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (Center for Social and Emotional Education, 2005; Sandy, Cohen and Fisher, submitted for publication) and the High Performance Learning Community Assessments (Felner, et. al., 2001).

Evaluation – be it for a student or a school – is naturally only one step in a process of understanding, planning, intervention and re-evaluation. But, when evaluation reveals unexpected patterns that are understood and used for individual and/or school improvement, it can become a powerful springboard for social, emotional, ethical and academic learning and systemic change. At the Center for Social and Emotional Education, we are doing just this with a growing number of schools committed to democratic education and social, emotional, ethical and academic school improvement. Here, we will briefly describe a five stage process for whole school improvement and focus on one of these stages to illustrate how evaluating school climate can help us to promote the skills, dispositions and a climate for democracy. (See [www.csee.net/climate](http://www.csee.net/climate) and/or Cohen, Shapiro & Fisher, 2006 for details.)

All school improvement models build on the familiar problem solving cycle. Our social, emotional, ethical and academic school climate improvement model is also grounded in a problem solving model as well as research from K-12 education, character education, social emotional learning, risk prevention, health/mental health promotion and democratic education. It is grounded in the coordination of two critical processes: (1) purposively



promoting students' – and adults' – social, emotional and cognitive competencies and ethical dispositions over time; and, (2) creating a safe, caring, participatory and responsive school. During the following five phases of school climate improvement, we suggest that it is essentially to consider how we can further the two processes noted above: (i) planning; (ii) data gathering and evaluation; (iii) understanding the data to develop an action plan; (iv) pedagogic and systemic interventions; and (v) re-evaluation and planning for the next phase of school improving.

Throughout this process there are countless opportunities – and a demand – for the community to learn and plan together. We all know – from our lives in schools, not to mention intimate relationships – how easy this is to suggest that people need to collaborate—but how challenging this can be to do! Collaboration – and the democratic process – is tough work.

In our work with scores of schools, we have seen leaders establish a shared vision for what the community wants. When school leaders, for example, ask members of the school community "what do you want children to know and to be when they graduate?" the answers are extraordinary similar across America. Parents and educators want students to learn to be life long learners, to be a good friend and mate, to be able to discover their "healthy passions," to be able to work and to be a responsible member of the community. On the other hand, there is always divergence of opinion and conflict about "what is most important?" "What are we doing already and how successful have these efforts been?" and, "what is most important to focus on now?"

During every one of the five phases of social, emotional, ethical and academic school climate improvement school leaders and members of the community have an opportunity to think about and practice the skills and dispositions summarized in Table One. In fact, at the beginning of this process we often suggest to school leaders that they consider how they want to talk

about these skills and dispositions and the process of social, emotional ethical and academic school improvement. Just as more and more couples are thinking about what it means to marry and are encouraged to think about the skills they need to manage differences and conflict in healthy (rather than toxic) ways, school leaders can do the same at the beginning of a school climate improvement process.

Here is a more detailed example from the third phase of the process: Understanding evaluation findings and action planning. School climate evaluations result in a large amount of information. Sometimes, school climate findings are fairly consistent between groups (students, parents, and school personnel) but more often, discrepant views emerge. In a recent twelve-school study, we discovered that parents and educators believed that social bullying was a “mild” to “moderately severe” problem. But, in every single school the students reported social bullying to be a “severe” problem. We have worked with these educational and parent leaders to support making students their teachers. Clearly, the kids knew something that the adults did not! We also sought to make students “action researchers” and to discover more about what kinds of bully-victim-bystander behavior was occurring and why this was. There is never just a bully and victim. There are virtually always witnesses who assume the role of passive bystander or as an “upstander.” Discovering that school climate assessment reveals this (or almost any kind of problem and/or discrepant view of what is and is not working) provides school leaders with an opportunity to democratically say to the community “we need to dig deeper and understand what this means. And, we need to think about how we want to prioritize our goals and work together to actualize them.” We suggest that this sets in motion democratic processes. It also raises the great question of “what do we need to be able to do, to actualize these goals?” Being an upstander, for example, is not so easy. But, we can and need to promote the skills and dispositions that support children – and adults – being able and inclined to do so. In doing so, we are also raising larger questions. What kind of community do we want school to be? What are the skills and dispositions that we all need to pay attention to and prac-

tice to make our school a truly caring and responsible place to learn and be?

When the school uses climate assessment to discover what parents believe is and is not working in schools, we are also creating a platform that makes it easy to foster vital home-school partnerships. It is well known how challenging it often is to foster these partnerships as well as how important they are in supporting student development and learning. To the extent that schools leaders really want to know what parents think about school climate, we automatically create a platform that has the potential to promote democratic practice and that allows educators to say, “We have heard what you think? We are beginning to understand what you think is most important. Now we need you to help us.” To the extent that people feel that the authority (i.e. the principal) cares about and knows what they think, they will tend to be more inclined to participate in school climate improvement efforts.

#### - Conclusion -

It is critically important that we make our work towards a socially just democracy “operational” so that we have a shared vision for what that means. While assessment has always been a part of teaching and learning—it is not typically used as a springboard for assessing the degree to which a school is collaborative and focuses both on academic learning and the qualities we need for future participants in and developers of our democracy. School climate assessment has the potential not only to support understanding about what our schools’ strengths and challenges are, but also to promote student voice, foster community building, and, in the process promote the skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for democracy.

**Jonathan Cohen**, President, Center for Social and Emotional Education; Adjunct Professor in Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University; Adjunct Professor in Education, City University of New York [jonathancohen@csee.net](mailto:jonathancohen@csee.net)

**Nicholas M. Michelli**, Presidential Professor in Urban Education, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York [nmichelli@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:nmichelli@gc.cuny.edu)

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