QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF CLIMATE WITHIN SMALL, STAND ALONE, SECONDARY MAGNET SCHOOLS

BY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide a qualitative assessment of climate within small, stand alone, secondary magnet schools since small public magnet schools are perceived as being community-like. Therefore, education policymakers should ascertain if small magnet schools have fewer problems than those associated with large schools and have positive climates.

Four small, stand alone, secondary magnet schools, in Connecticut, Delaware, and New Jersey, were studied. Themes of schools included Visual and Performing Arts as well as Engineering, Math, Science, and Technology. Two schools were county based, one multi-city/regionally based, and one statewide. Three schools had competitive application procedures; the fourth a lottery admissions system. Variables addressed include: 1) overall school climate; 2) relationships among students, teachers and administrators; 3) student academic achievement; 4) teacher performance; 5) student absenteeism/drop-out rates; and 6) pride.

Literature on small school climate and addressed variables is reviewed. A discussion of design-methods and procedures – including the interviewing of 4 principals and 8 teachers and the convening of three focus groups of teachers - at four small stand alone magnet high school programs – is included.

Environment in schools studied is positive. Violence and substance abuse are rare, relationships between students and staff members are positive, most students are academically succeeding within a college-preparatory environment, teachers are committed, and absenteeism/drop-out rates are insignificant. Threats to student achievement and staff member morale, however, are discussed. For instance, Federal
statutes, such as NCLB, and district emphasis on basic skill competency leave behind the motivated and/or gifted student, as well as their teachers, in these small high schools.

Administrator recommendations include: 1) exploring options for co and extracurricular activities; 2) developing interdisciplinary programs; 3) researching grant monies; 4) disclosing school mission prior to admission; and 5) investigating options for further professional development and school based leadership. Research recommendations include: 1) replicating this study in other small schools; 2) distinguishing small magnet high schools with different application procedures; 3) studying small magnets with broadened curriculum; 4) reviewing emotional and social needs of small magnet students; 5) analyzing parent influence in these schools; and 6) assessing value of professional development.