

Student and Teacher Perceptions of their Middle and High Schools' Sense of Community

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Abstract

This study investigated the sense of community at a Midwestern school district's middle and high schools. Students and teachers completed the School Ethical Climate Index (SECI) to assess the schools' sense of community. Middle school student and teacher perceptions of their school's sense of community were significantly more positive than high school student and teacher perceptions across all SECI subscales. Regardless of school level, teachers rated *teacher to student* interactions and relationships significantly more positive than students. There was a significant positive relationship between student perceptions of their schools' sense of community and their attendance and academic achievement. Recommendations were made to enhance the schools' sense of community by integrating opportunities for students to practice prosocial skills within classroom activities.

Key Words: sense of community, school climate, middle school, high school.

Introduction

Recent world events and violence at schools throughout the nation indicate that schools need to be concerned about developing humane citizens, people who are

concerned about the feelings and welfare of others (Noddings, 1988, 1992; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997). In order to develop humane citizens, schools must establish a sense of community within their physical structures where students and teachers honor one another. A sense of community has been defined as “a feeling of belongingness within a group” (Osterman, 2000, p. 323) and “based on the ethics of acceptance of otherness with respect, justice, and appreciation and on peaceful cooperation within difference” (Furman, 1998, p. 312). A school with a positive sense of community is characterized by caring relationships (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Noddings, 1988, 1992).

Evidence abounds for why there is a need for a positive sense of community within schools. A lack of belongingness has been associated with incidence of mental and physical illness, behavior problems, teen suicide, violence in schools, loneliness, delinquency, withdrawal, aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, depression, drop outs, teen pregnancy, vandalism, diminished motivation, and poor academic performance (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Kagan, 1990; Newmann, 1981; Osterman, 2000). For teachers a sense of belonging is associated with greater job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism (Bryk & Driscoll); for students it is associated with positive social and personal attitudes and increased participation, motivation, and engagement in school, resulting in academic success (Bryk & Driscoll; Deci et al.; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1998). In schools, both students and teachers share rights and responsibilities to promote a caring, supportive school community (Bryk & Driscoll).

Interactions and Relationships

For the purposes of this study, a school's sense of community was assessed by the degree to which five ethical principles were present within the interactions and relationships of students and teachers, specifically *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships. Attention to these three types of interactions and relationships is important in developing a positive sense of community within schools. According to Noddings (1988), in a caring, supportive school, students respond positively to teachers by actively engaging in school, and students encourage and support one another so that collaboration and cooperation, not competition, are the norm. Other researchers have found that in a caring school teachers support and respect students, which results in student engagement and achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994; Wentzel, 1998). Wentzel contends that in order for prosocial development to occur, positive student to student interactions and relationships must exist. Yet, Battistich, Solomon, Kim,

Watson, and Schaps (1995) found that none of the schools in their study had a positive sense of community among its students. Researchers have concluded that in order for students to learn to treat each other ethically, they must practice caring (Battistich et al.; Noddings, 1992).

Ethical Principles

To develop a positive sense of community within a school, five ethical principles must be present within the interactions and relationships of students and teachers. These ethical principles include (a) respect for autonomy or respecting the right of an individual to act independently, (b) nonmaleficence or doing no harm to others, (c) beneficence or benefiting others, (d) justice or treating others fairly, and (e) fidelity or being loyal and trustworthy toward others (Kitchener, 1984, 1985). At the core of these principles lies respect for persons. When teachers respect students' autonomy by allowing them to choose units of study and contribute to classroom management, students' motivation, perceived competence, self-esteem, and self-determination increase (Deci et al., 1991; Ryan & Powelson, 1991). If the school norms support collaboration and cooperation, students experience the school as a community (Osterman, 2000). A common theme of Allen's (1995) qualitative study was that students want to be treated fairly. "For children to understand the basis for ethical behavior they have to be helped to construct their understanding of ethical concepts such as fairness and kindness and how they apply to classroom life" (Watson et al., 1997, p. 574).

Schools must be concerned about establishing a positive sense of community within their physical structures because of the high probability that "students transfer the interpersonal skills and attitudes they learn in school to their relationships with other individuals and groups as members of the larger society" (Osterman, 2000, p. 359). Schools need to assess their sense of community to determine areas where changes could be made to enhance their sense of community and improve the possibility of producing humane citizens. This study compared student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community within a Midwestern school district's middle and high schools. In a search of the research literature, no studies were found that directly compared student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community. Some researchers focused only on student perceptions (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1998), while others focused only on teacher perceptions (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988).

Purposes of the Study

The first purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference between student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community across middle

and high schools. High schools may be less conducive to establishing a positive sense of community than middle schools because of departmentalization (Osterman, 2000). However, middle school students may perceive the teachers at the middle school level as less supportive than their former teachers at the elementary school level. As one middle school student said, “once you get here they consider you a delinquent, and trouble. I really miss how nice and caring the teachers all were in elementary school...it was a friendlier place” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 12). In a recent study of teacher and administrator perceptions of their schools’ sense of community, high school teacher and administrator perceptions of *student to teacher* and *student to student* interactions and relationships were significantly more positive than middle school teacher and administrator perceptions (Schulte et al., 2002).

The second purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference between male and female student perceptions of their schools’ sense of community across middle and high schools. Several researchers who studied male and female differences in sense of belonging at the middle school level found that girls scored significantly higher than boys on their sense of school belonging, with stronger felt support of teachers and emulation of teachers and friends (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994). No studies were found that investigated male and female differences in sense of belonging at the high school level.

The third purpose of the study was to determine if, across middle and high schools, students’ perceptions of their schools’ sense of community were related to attendance, academic achievement, and involvement in extracurricular activities. Several studies found a positive relationship between students’ sense of belonging and their academic achievement and involvement in school (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Deci et al., 1991; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994; Wentzel, 1998). None of the studies cited above investigated differences across middle and high school levels.

The fourth purpose of the study was to determine if, across middle and high schools, there was a difference between student and teacher perceptions of the importance of their schools’ sense of community in keeping their school safe. No studies were found that specifically related a school’s sense of community to school safety. However, several researchers have noted that a climate of mutual trust and respect among students and teachers is an important element in keeping schools safe (Gallagher & Satter, 1998; A Guide to Safe Schools, 1999; MacDonald, 1997; Wanat, 1996; Welsh, 2000).

Method

Design and Subjects

The study used a survey procedure to collect information from students and teachers in a Midwestern school district located in a small city with a population of approximately 8,000, located near a large metropolitan area. The socioeconomic level of the residents within the school district is upper middle class. The School Ethical Climate Index (SECI) was distributed to all the students and teachers at the middle school and high school in the school district.

Of the 1,013 returned student surveys, 935 (92%) contained the necessary information to be used in the study (i.e., valid responses, not the first semester in the school district, missing no more than six SECI items). Of the student respondents, 427 attended the middle school, which represents 84% of the middle school student population, and 508 attended the high school, which represents 74% of the high school student population. At both the middle and high schools, 51% of the student respondents were males, and 49% were females. The mean age of the middle school student respondents was 12.57 ($SD=.94$), while the mean age for the high school student respondents was 16.17 ($SD=1.28$). Of the middle school student respondents, 32% were in sixth grade, 33% were in seventh grade, and 35% were in eighth grade. Of the high school student respondents, 24% were in ninth grade, 27% were in tenth grade, 27% were in eleventh grade, and 22% were in twelfth grade.

Of the 78 returned teacher surveys, 77 (99%) contained the necessary information to be used in the study (i.e., not the first semester at the school, missing no more than six SECI items). Thirty-six of the teacher respondents taught at the middle school, which represents 100% of the middle school teacher population, and 41 taught at the high school, which represents 87% of the high school teacher population. The gender breakdown for the middle school teacher respondents was 31% male and 69% female, while the gender breakdown for the high school teacher respondents was 49% male and 51% female. Of the middle school teacher respondents, 40% were ages 30 or less, 17% were between the ages of 31 and 40, 20% were between the ages of 41 and 50, 17% were between the ages of 51 and 60, and 6% were more than 60 years of age. Of the high school teacher respondents, 18% were ages 30 or less, 18% were between the ages of 31 and 40, 33% were between the ages of 41 and 50, and 33% were between the ages of 51 and 60 (percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding). At the middle school level, 17% of the teacher respondents taught or worked at the sixth grade level, 25% at the seventh grade level, 22% at the eighth grade level, and 36% at multiple grade levels. The majority (95%) of the high school teacher respondents taught or worked at multiple

grade levels. The number of years that the middle school teacher respondents were employed at their current school included 1 year or less (14%), more than 1 year, but less than or equal to 3 years (17%), more than 3 years, but less than or equal to 6 years (22%), more than 6 years, but less than or equal to 10 years (17%), and more than 10 years (31%) (percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding). The number of years that the high school teacher respondents were employed at their current school included 1 year or less (12%), more than 1 year, but less than or equal to 3 years (20%), more than 3 years, but less than or equal to 6 years (7%), more than 6 years, but less than or equal to 10 years (10%), and more than 10 years (51%; percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding).

Data Collection Procedures

The superintendent of the school district and the principals of the middle and high schools granted their approval to conduct the study in January 2002. During February 2002, the SECI survey was distributed to all the students and teachers at the middle school and high school in the district. The survey information included (a) a cover letter containing a brief explanation, instructions, and the assurance that all responses would be completely anonymous; (b) the SECI and importance items; and (c) demographic questions.

Students. To gain parental approval to conduct the study, in February 2002 the following information was sent to each student's home with the student's midterm progress report: (a) a letter from the university researcher explaining the study; (b) the option out provision letter from the middle and high school principals that informed parents if they did not wish to have their child participate in the study, they should sign and return the letter to the school office; and (c) the university's Institutional Review Board guidelines on the rights of research participants. Teachers at the middle and high schools distributed the SECI surveys to the students during the Teacher Advisement period during one week in February 2002. A student from each class collected the completed surveys and returned them to the school's main office. From there, personnel in the school's office forwarded the surveys to the district's central office.

Teachers. The SECI survey was distributed through school mail to all the teachers at the middle and high schools. The teachers completed the surveys and returned them to the school's office. From there, personnel in the school's office forwarded the surveys to the district's central office.

Instruments

The 49-item SECI (Schulte et al., 2002) was utilized to measure student and teacher perceptions of the middle and high schools' sense of community (see Table

1). The SECI uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Rarely or Never True) to 5 (Usually or Always True). The SECI measures a school's sense of community by assessing student and teacher interactions and relationships (i.e., *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships) through the application of five ethical principles: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. Schulte et al. (2002) provided evidence of the SECI's reliability and validity in their validation study. For the student and teacher respondents in this study, the reliability estimates for the *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* subscales using Cronbach's alpha are as follows: .82, .86, and .96, respectively.

The 4-item Importance Scale was used to assess the importance of a school's sense of community in keeping a school safe (see Table 2). The students and teachers in this study were asked to rate the importance of each item in keeping their school safe using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not Important) to 5 (Very Important). The reliability estimate for the Importance Scale using Cronbach's alpha is .85.

Table 1. School Ethical Climate Index Items

Student to Teacher Subscale

1. Students' work shows effort.
2. Students follow teachers' directions.
3. Students complete assignments on time.
4. Students are respectful to teachers.
5. Students actively participate in class discussions.
6. Students pay attention during class.
7. Students accept responsibility for getting help when they need it.
8. Students let their teachers know when commitments cannot be met.
9. Teachers can trust students to behave appropriately in unsupervised situations.

Student to Student Subscale

1. Students feel free to discuss their ideas with their classmates.
2. Students are considerate of their classmates' feelings.
3. Students make new students feel welcome at this school.
4. Students make fun of classmates who are different from themselves. (RK)
5. Students go out of their way to help their classmates.
6. Students encourage their classmates when appropriate.
7. Without cheating, students share ideas, class notes, and other materials with their classmates.
8. When working in a group with their classmates, students do their fair share of the work.
9. Students treat their classmates with respect.
10. Students defend classmates who are being picked on by others.
11. Students respect classmates' personal belongings.
12. Students are treated differently because of the way they dress. (RK)
13. Honor roll students are accepted by their classmates.
14. Students feel it is O.K. to walk away from a fight.

Teacher to Student Subscale

1. Teachers are available to students outside of class time.
2. Teachers praise students for excellent work.
3. Teachers help students improve their study habits.
4. Teachers present more than one point of view.
5. Teachers treat all students with respect.
6. Teachers encourage students to ask questions if they are appropriate.
7. Teachers give students the opportunity to practice what they learn.
8. Teachers are well prepared for their classes.
9. Teachers are positive role models for students.
10. Students and teachers cooperate with each other.
11. Teachers respect the cultures of all students.
12. Teachers' tests cover what was taught.
13. Teachers are available to all students on an equal basis.
14. Teachers help students with special needs.
15. Teachers provide students with praise when appropriate.
16. Teachers return assignments in a reasonable amount of time.
17. Students who have questions about grades feel free to talk to their teachers.
18. Students feel comfortable seeking help from teachers outside of class time.
19. When school-related problems arise, students feel free to talk with teachers.
20. Students can trust teachers with personal information.
21. Teachers promote cooperation among students.
22. Course exams, projects, and papers are graded fairly.
23. Teachers follow through on reasonable requests made by students.
24. Teachers allow students to choose topics for course projects or papers.
25. Teachers are attentive to students during meetings.
26. Teachers allow students to express their opinions even if they are different from the teachers'.

Note. RK indicates that the item is reverse-keyed.
Parts of this table appear in the Schulte et al. (2002) article.

Table 2. Importance Scale Items

For the following four items, how important do you feel each item is in keeping your school safe?

1. A positive ethical climate.
2. Positive *student to teacher* interactions and relationships.
3. Positive *student to student* interactions and relationships.
4. Positive *teacher to student* interactions and relationships.

Note. Parts of this table appear in the Schulte et al. (2002) article.

Data Analyses

The mean substitution process was used to compute subject mean scores for each of the SECI subscales so that data could be used from subjects who did not respond to every SECI item. The mean substitution process generates a subscale

mean for each subject by computing the mean of the items with data. For example, on the 26-item *teacher to student* subscale if a subject responded to 24 of the 26 items, the mean on the *teacher to student* subscale would be computed from the responses on the 24 items. Respondents were excluded from the analyses if they failed to respond to more than six of the SECI items. The data were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS for Windows 10.0. Because multiple statistical tests were conducted, the alpha level was set at .01 to control for Type I errors.

Study purpose 1. To test for statistically significant differences across middle and high schools between student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community, three univariate 2 x 2 Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted. The two independent variables were position (student or teacher) and school level (middle or high school). The dependent variables were the mean scores on each of the three SECI subscales: *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*.

Study purpose 2. To test for statistically significant differences across middle and high schools between male and female student perceptions of their schools' sense of community, three univariate 2 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted. The two independent variables were gender (male or female) and school level (middle or high school). The dependent variables were the mean scores on each of the three SECI subscales: *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*.

Study purpose 3. To test for statistically significant relationships across middle and high schools between students' perceptions of their schools' sense of community and their attendance, three univariate 2 x 4 ANOVAs were conducted. The two independent variables were school level (middle or high school) and student reported attendance with four levels: absent between 0 to 2 days per school year, absent between 3 to 5 days per school year, absent between 6 to 9 days per school year, or absent 10 or more days per school year. The dependent variables were the mean scores on each of the three SECI subscales: *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*.

To test for statistically significant relationships across middle and high schools between students' perceptions of their schools' sense of community and their academic achievement, three univariate 2 x 4 ANOVAs were conducted. The two independent variables were school level (middle or high school) and student reported academic achievement with four levels: A student, B student, C student, or D student. The dependent variables were the mean scores on each of the three SECI subscales: *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*.

To test for statistically significant relationships across middle and high schools between students' perceptions of their schools' sense of community and their involvement in extracurricular activities, three univariate 2 x 2 ANOVAs were conducted. The two independent variables were school level (middle or high school)

and student reported involvement in extracurricular activities (yes or no). The dependent variables were the mean scores on each of the three SECI subscales: *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*.

Study purpose 4. To test for statistically significant differences across middle and high schools between student and teacher perceptions of the importance of their schools' sense of community in keeping their school safe, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was conducted. The two independent variables were position (student or teacher) and school level (middle or high school). The dependent variable was the mean score on the Importance Scale.

Results

Study Purpose 1

The first purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference between student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community across middle and high schools. The means and standard deviations for the SECI subscales that measure the three categories of relationships broken down by position and school level are presented in Table 3. The results of the 2 x 2 ANOVAs for the *student to teacher* and *student to student* subscales indicated that there were statistically significant school level main effects for the subscales, $F(1,1008)=9.066, p=.003$; $F(1,1008)=15.021, p<.0005$, respectively. For both the *student to teacher* and *student to student* subscales student and teacher perceptions at the middle school level ($M=3.65, SD=.61$; $M=3.50, SD=.64$, respectively) were significantly more positive than student and teacher perceptions at the high school level ($M=3.37, SD=.58$; $M=3.14, SD=.57$). These differences represent effect sizes of .47 and .60, respectively. For both the *student to teacher* and *student to student* subscales there were statistically nonsignificant position main effects, $F(1,1008)=5.710, p=.017$; $F(1,1008)=2.202, p=.138$, respectively, and position by school level interactions, $F(1,1008)=1.297, p=.255$; $F(1,1008)=1.827, p=.177$, respectively.

The results of the 2 x 2 ANOVA for the *teacher to student* subscale indicated that there were statistically significant position and school level main effects for the subscale: $F(1,1008)=55.030, p<.0005$; $F(1,1008)=22.642, p<.0005$, respectively. For the position main effect, teacher perceptions ($M=4.27, SD=.45$) of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships were significantly more positive than student perceptions ($M=3.67, SD=.72$), regardless of school level (see Table 3). This difference represents an effect size of 1.03. For the school level main effect, middle school student and teacher perceptions ($M=3.96, SD=.69$) of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships were significantly more positive than high school student and teacher perceptions ($M=3.51, SD=.69$; see Table 3), which represents an effect

size of .65. The position by school level interaction was statistically nonsignificant, $F(1,1008)=1.088, p=.297$.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for SECI Subscales by Position and School Level

Student to Teacher

<i>Position</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Student	Middle	3.65	.62	427
	High	3.35	.59	508
	Total	3.49	.62	935
Teacher	Middle	3.74	.46	36
	High	3.60	.53	41
	Total	3.67	.50	77
Total	Middle	3.65	.61	463
	High	3.37	.58	549
	Total	3.50	.61	1012

Student to Student

<i>Position</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Student	Middle	3.49	.65	427
	High	3.12	.57	508
	Total	3.29	.64	935
Teacher	Middle	3.50	.43	36
	High	3.32	.43	41
	Total	3.41	.44	77
Total	Middle	3.50	.64	463
	High	3.14	.57	549
	Total	3.30	.63	1012

Teacher to Student

<i>Position</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Student	Middle	3.92	.70	427
	High	3.46	.68	508
	Total	3.67	.72	935
Teacher	Middle	4.43	.39	36
	High	4.13	.45	41
	Total	4.27	.45	77

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	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Total	Middle	3.96	.69	463
	High	3.51	.69	549
	Total	3.72	.72	1012

Study Purpose 2

The second purpose of the study was to determine if there was a difference between male and female student perceptions of their schools' sense of community across middle and high schools. The means and standard deviations for the SECI subscales that measure *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships broken down by student gender and school level are presented in Table 4. The results of the 2 x 2 ANOVAs for all three SECI subscales indicated that the school level main effects were statistically significant, $F(1,926)=54.618$, $p<.0005$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,926)=85.677$, $p<.0005$ (*student to student*); $F(1,926)=103.376$, $p<.0005$ (*teacher to student*). For all three SECI subscales, regardless of gender, student perceptions at the middle school level were significantly more positive than student perceptions at the high school level (see Table 4). For all three SECI subscales, there were statistically nonsignificant gender main effects, $F(1,926)=1.900$, $p=.168$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,926)=1.145$, $p=.285$ (*student to student*); $F(1,926)=5.048$, $p=.025$ (*teacher to student*) and gender by school level interactions, $F(1,926)=1.908$, $p=.168$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,926)=0.443$, $p=.506$ (*student to student*); $F(1,926)=0.577$, $p=.448$ (*teacher to student*).

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for SECI Subscales by Student Gender and School Level

Student to Teacher

<i>Gender</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Male	Middle	3.65	.60	215
	High	3.30	.63	258
	Total	3.46	.64	473
Female	Middle	3.65	.65	209
	High	3.41	.53	248
	Total	3.52	.60	457
Total	Middle	3.65	.62	424
	High	3.35	.59	506
	Total	3.49	.62	930

Student to Student

<i>Gender</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Male	Middle	3.49	.65	215
	High	3.09	.61	258
	Total	3.27	.66	473
Female	Middle	3.50	.66	209
	High	3.16	.54	248
	Total	3.32	.62	457
Total	Middle	3.50	.65	424
	High	3.12	.57	506
	Total	3.29	.64	930

Teacher to Student

<i>Gender</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Male	Middle	3.89	.72	215
	High	3.39	.73	258
	Total	3.62	.77	473
Female	Middle	3.95	.67	209
	High	3.53	.61	248
	Total	3.72	.67	457
Total	Middle	3.92	.70	424
	High	3.46	.68	506
	Total	3.67	.72	930

Study Purpose 3

The third purpose of the study was to determine if across middle and high schools students' perceptions of their schools' sense of community were related to attendance, academic achievement, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

Attendance. The means and standard deviations for the SECI subscales that measure *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships broken down by attendance and school level are presented in Table 5. The results of the 2 x 4 ANOVAs for all three SECI subscales indicated that the school level main effects, $F(1,918)=36.036, p<.0005$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,918)=48.413, p<.0005$ (*student to student*); $F(1,918)=82.372, p<.0005$ (*teacher to student*) and the attendance main effects, $F(3,918)=5.187, p=.001$ (*student to teacher*); $F(3,918)=6.816, p<.0005$ (*student to student*); $F(3,918)=9.120, p<.0005$ (*teacher to student*) were statistically significant. On all three SECI subscales, the school level main effect indicated that regardless of attendance level,

student perceptions at the middle school level were significantly more positive than student perceptions at the high school level (see Table 5).

To follow-up the significant attendance main effects for each of the three SECI subscales, Tukey pairwise comparison tests were conducted across the attendance levels using a .05 familywise alpha level. For each of the SECI subscales, the perceptions of those students who were absent 9 or less days per school year were significantly more positive than the perceptions of those students who were absent 10 or more days per school year, regardless of school level (see Table 5). These differences represent effect sizes ranging from .37 to .59. The attendance by school level interactions were statistically nonsignificant, $F(3,918)=0.104$, $p=.958$ (*student to teacher*); $F(3,918)=0.276$, $p=.843$ (*student to student*); $F(3,918)=1.479$, $p=.219$ (*teacher to student*) for the subscales.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for SECI Subscales By Attendance and School Level

Student to Teacher

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Attendance – Absent</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	0 to 2 days	3.70	.56	158
	3 to 5 days	3.64	.61	172
	6 to 9 days	3.66	.72	66
	10 or more days	3.40	.66	29
	Total	3.65	.62	425
High	0 to 2 days	3.43	.54	189
	3 to 5 days	3.32	.60	209
	6 to 9 days	3.35	.63	72
	10 or more days	3.08	.58	31
	Total	3.35	.59	501
Total	0 to 2 days	3.55	.57	347
	3 to 5 days	3.47	.63	381
	6 to 9 days	3.50	.69	138
	10 or more days	3.24	.63	60
	Total	3.49	.62	926

Student to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Attendance – Absent</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	0 to 2 days	3.56	.62	158
	3 to 5 days	3.50	.65	172
	6 to 9 days	3.50	.70	66

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Attendance – Absent</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
	10 or more days	3.11	.66	29
	Total	3.50	.65	425
High	0 to 2 days	3.16	.54	189
	3 to 5 days	3.13	.59	209
	6 to 9 days	3.08	.56	72
	10 or more days	2.84	.61	31
	Total	3.12	.57	501
Total	0 to 2 days	3.34	.61	347
	3 to 5 days	3.30	.64	381
	6 to 9 days	3.28	.67	138
	10 or more days	2.97	.64	60
	Total	3.29	.64	926

Teacher to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Attendance – Absent</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	0 to 2 days	3.93	.68	158
	3 to 5 days	3.97	.66	172
	6 to 9 days	3.92	.71	66
	10 or more days	3.60	.83	29
	Total	3.92	.69	425
High	0 to 2 days	3.56	.64	189
	3 to 5 days	3.49	.64	209
	6 to 9 days	3.28	.66	72
	10 or more days	2.98	.88	31
	Total	3.46	.68	501
Total	0 to 2 days	3.73	.69	347
	3 to 5 days	3.71	.69	381
	6 to 9 days	3.59	.75	138
	10 or more days	3.28	.90	60
	Total	3.67	.72	926

Academic achievement. The means and standard deviations for the SECI subscales that measure *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships broken down by academic achievement and school level are presented in Table 6. The results of the 2 x 4 ANOVAs for the *student*

to teacher and *teacher to student* subscales indicated that there were statistically significant school level, $F(1,846)=12.723, p<.0005$; $F(1,846)=44.605, p<.0005$, respectively, and academic achievement main effects, $F(3,846)=5.877, p=.001$; $F(3,846)=6.663, p<.0005$, respectively for the subscales. For both the *student to teacher* and the *teacher to student* subscales, regardless of academic achievement level, student perceptions at the middle school level were significantly more positive than student perceptions at the high school level (see Table 6).

To follow-up the significant academic achievement main effects for the *student to teacher* and *teacher to student* subscales, Tukey pairwise comparison tests were conducted across the academic achievement levels using a .05 familywise alpha level. On the *student to teacher* subscale, regardless of school level, the perceptions of A and B students were significantly more positive than the perceptions of C students (see Table 6). These differences represent effect sizes of .42 and .34, respectively. On the *teacher to student* subscale, regardless of school level, the perceptions of A students were significantly more positive than the perceptions of C students (see Table 6). This difference represents an effect size of .39. The academic achievement by school level interactions were statistically nonsignificant, $F(3,846)=1.567, p=.196$ (*student to teacher*); $F(3,846)=1.866, p=.134$ (*teacher to student*) for the subscales.

The results of the 2×4 ANOVA for the *student to student* subscale indicated that there was a statistically significant academic achievement by school level interaction, $F(3,846)=4.339, p=.005$, and school level main effect, $F(1,846)=33.282, p<.0005$, but the academic achievement main effect was statistically nonsignificant, $F(3,846)=3.706, p=.011$. To follow-up the significant academic achievement by school level interaction, simple main effects tests were conducted. The simple main effects tests for school level at each of the academic achievement levels were all statistically significant, $F(1,846)=67.410, p<.0005$ (A); $F(1,846)=10.150, p=.001$ (B); $F(1,846)=8.984, p=.003$ (C); $F(1,846)=8.133, p=.004$ (D). A, B, C, and D students at the middle school level had significantly more positive perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships than A, B, C, and D students at the high school level (see Table 6). These differences represent effect sizes ranging from .35 to 1.37. The simple main effects tests for academic achievement at each school level indicated that student perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships differed significantly across academic achievement levels at the middle school level, $F(3,846)=5.671, p=.001$, but not at the high school level, $F(3,846)=1.693, p=.167$. To follow-up the significant simple main effect at the middle school level, Tukey pairwise comparison tests were conducted across the academic achievement levels. The results indicated that at the middle school level, A students perceived *student to student* interactions and relationships as significantly more positive than B and C students (see Table 6). These differences represent effect sizes of .40 and .41, respectively.

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations for SECI Subscales by Academic Achievement and School Level***Student to Teacher***

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Academic Achievement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	A Student	3.77	.61	180
	B Student	3.62	.61	147
	C Student	3.45	.66	57
	D Student	3.56	.61	14
	Total	3.66	.63	398
High	A Student	3.37	.55	200
	B Student	3.42	.63	173
	C Student	3.18	.59	77
	D Student	3.26	.50	6
	Total	3.36	.59	456
Total	A Student	3.56	.62	380
	B Student	3.51	.62	320
	C Student	3.30	.63	134
	D Student	3.47	.58	20
	Total	3.50	.63	854

Student to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Academic Achievement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	A Student	3.63	.61	180
	B Student	3.39	.63	147
	C Student	3.36	.70	57
	D Student	3.56	.63	14
	Total	3.50	.64	398
High	A Student	3.13	.56	200
	B Student	3.17	.58	173
	C Student	3.05	.58	77
	D Student	2.72	.59	6
	Total	3.13	.57	456
Total	A Student	3.37	.64	380
	B Student	3.27	.61	320
	C Student	3.18	.65	134
	D Student	3.31	.72	20
	Total	3.30	.63	854

Teacher to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Academic Achievement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	A Student	4.04	.64	180
	B Student	3.86	.72	147
	C Student	3.85	.74	57
	D Student	3.80	.89	14
	Total	3.94	.70	398
High	A Student	3.55	.58	200
	B Student	3.49	.68	173
	C Student	3.24	.74	77
	D Student	2.83	1.17	6
	Total	3.47	.67	456
Total	A Student	3.78	.65	380
	B Student	3.66	.72	320
	C Student	3.50	.80	134
	D Student	3.51	1.05	20
	Total	3.69	.72	854

Involvement in extracurricular activities. The means and standard deviations for the SECI subscales that measure *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships broken down by involvement in extracurricular activities and school level are presented in Table 7. The results of the 2 x 2 ANOVAs for all three SECI subscales indicated that the school level main effects were statistically significant, $F(1,881)=49.853, p<.0005$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,881)=86.418, p<.0005$ (*student to student*); $F(1,881)=96.118, p<.0005$ (*teacher to student*). For all three SECI subscales, regardless of involvement in extracurricular activities, student perceptions at the middle school level were significantly more positive than student perceptions at the high school level (see Table 7). There were statistically nonsignificant involvement in extracurricular activities main effects, $F(1,881)=3.032, p=.082$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,881)=3.819, p=.051$ (*student to student*); $F(1,881)=2.519, p=.113$ (*teacher to student*), and involvement in extracurricular activities by school level interactions, $F(1,881)=1.294, p=.256$ (*student to teacher*); $F(1,881)=6.271, p=.012$ (*student to student*); $F(1,881)=6.127, p=.013$ (*teacher to student*) for the subscales.

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations for SECI Subscales by Involvement in Extracurricular Activities and School Level

Student to Teacher

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	Yes	3.66	.62	290
	No	3.64	.62	107
	Total	3.66	.62	397
High	Yes	3.38	.57	388
	No	3.25	.59	100
	Total	3.36	.58	488
Total	Yes	3.50	.61	678
	No	3.45	.64	207
	Total	3.49	.61	885

Student to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	Yes	3.50	.64	290
	No	3.52	.68	107
	Total	3.50	.65	397
High	Yes	3.17	.54	388
	No	2.95	.65	100
	Total	3.12	.57	488
Total	Yes	3.31	.61	678
	No	3.25	.72	207
	Total	3.30	.64	885

Teacher to Student

<i>School Level</i>	<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Middle	Yes	3.91	.67	290
	No	3.96	.75	107
	Total	3.93	.69	397
High	Yes	3.51	.63	388
	No	3.29	.84	100
	Total	3.47	.68	488
Total	Yes	3.69	.68	678
	No	3.64	.86	207
	Total	3.67	.72	885

Study Purpose 4

The fourth purpose of the study was to determine if across middle and high schools there was a difference between student and teacher perceptions of the importance of their schools' sense of community in keeping their school safe. The means and standard deviations for the Importance Scale broken down by position and school level are presented in Table 8. The results of the 2 x 2 ANOVA indicated that the position and school level main effects were both statistically significant, $F(1,994)=70.892, p<.0005$; $F(1,994)=6.845, p=.009$, respectively. The significant position main effect indicated that teachers ($M=4.78, SD=.36$), regardless of school level, perceived the ethical climate to be significantly more important in keeping their school safe than students ($M=3.98, SD=.84$). This difference represents an effect size of 1.33. The significant school level main effect indicated that middle school students and teachers ($M=4.19, SD=.74$) perceived the ethical climate to be significantly more important in keeping their school safe than high school students and teachers ($M=3.91, SD=.90$). This difference represents an effect size of .34. The position by school level interaction was statistically nonsignificant, $F(1,994)=0.144, p=.705$.

Table 8. Means and Standard Deviations for the Importance Scale by Position and School Level

<i>Position</i>	<i>School Level</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Student	Middle	4.13	.74	419
	High	3.85	.90	502
	Total	3.98	.84	921
Teacher	Middle	4.90	.21	36
	High	4.68	.43	41
	Total	4.78	.36	77
Total	Middle	4.19	.74	455
	High	3.91	.90	543
	Total	4.04	.84	998

Discussion

Student and Teacher Perceptions of their Schools' Sense of Community

Across school levels, student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community ranged from 3.35 (sometimes true) to 3.74 (sometimes to often true) for the SECI *student to teacher* subscale, 3.12 (sometimes true) to 3.50 (sometimes to often true) for the SECI *student to student* subscale, and 3.46 (sometimes to often

true) to 4.43 (often to always true) for the SECI *teacher to student* subscale. At both the middle and high school levels students and teachers rated *teacher to student* interactions and relationships more positively than *student to teacher* and *student to student* interactions and relationships. Of the three types of interactions and relationships assessed by the SECI, *student to student* interactions and relationships were rated lowest by both students and teachers at the middle ($M=3.50, SD=.64$) and high ($M=3.14, SD=.57$) school levels. This finding is similar to the findings of Battistich et al. (1995) who found that none of the 24 elementary schools in their study had a positive sense of community among its students. On a 5-point Likert scale the overall mean rating of the sense of community among students for the 24 schools in the Battistich et al. study was 2.95. Battistich et al. developed an intervention project to help improve the sense of community among the students of the schools in their study. A major premise of the intervention program is that in order for students to learn to treat each other ethically (e.g., with fairness, respect, compassion, and kindness), they must practice these social skills (Battistich, Watson, D. Solomon, Schaps, & J. Solomon, 1991). An examination of the SECI items with low mean ratings by both students and teachers at the middle and high school levels in the current study could provide insight into areas where changes could be made to enhance the schools' sense of community. For example, only two of the SECI *student to student* items received mean ratings above 4.00 by students or teachers at both the middle and high school levels.

Differences between student and teacher perceptions. Across school levels, student and teacher perceptions did not differ significantly on the SECI *student to teacher* and *student to student* subscales. However, there was a significant difference between student and teacher perceptions on the SECI *teacher to student* subscale. At both the middle and high school levels, teachers ($M=4.27, SD=.45$) perceived *teacher to student* interactions and relationships more positively than students ($M=3.67, SD=.72$). This finding is similar to the findings of studies completed on undergraduate and graduate college programs (Schulte, 2001/2002; Schulte, Thompson, Hayes, Noble, & Jacobs, 2001). Persons (the teachers) in positions of power within an organization may view themselves more positively than persons (the students) in less powerful positions (Kipnis, 1976). To enhance the sense of community between students and teachers, the researchers pinpointed the differences between student and teacher perceptions on the SECI *teacher to student* subscale by examining the differences in the student and teacher mean scores on the 26 items of the subscale. For all 26 *teacher to student* items, teachers' mean scores were greater than students' mean scores. The mean score difference exceeded an effect size of .40 on all but one of the items (Teachers respect the cultures of all students.).

Differences between middle and high school student and teacher perceptions.

Middle school student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of community were more positive than high school student and teacher perceptions. For all but 1 (Teachers allow students to choose topics for course projects or papers.) of the 49 SECI items, middle school student and teacher mean scores were greater than high school student and teacher mean scores. This finding differs from a previous finding by Schulte et al. (2002) where high school teachers and administrators rated *student to teacher* and *student to student* interactions and relationships significantly more positive than middle school teachers and administrators.

In the school district investigated in this study, several programs that may enhance a school's sense of community are being used at the middle school such as teaming; conflict resolution, character education, anti-bullying, and tolerance and diversity programs; and an extended teacher advisement period. The high school utilizes an orientation program for ninth graders and an extended teacher advisement period. Block scheduling was implemented at the high school one semester before this study was conducted. Perhaps the potential positive effects of the change to block scheduling were not reflected in the student and teacher perception scores because of the relatively short period of time since the implementation of block scheduling.

To make changes to enhance the sense of community of the high school, researchers pinpointed the differences between middle and high school student and teacher perception scores on the SECI items. On the *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* subscales, the items that had effect sizes greater than .40 between the middle and high school student and teacher mean scores included:

Student to Teacher

- Students are respectful to teachers.
- Students actively participate in class discussions.

Student to Student

- Students feel free to discuss their ideas with their classmates.
- Students make new students feel welcome at this school.
- Without cheating, students share ideas, class notes, and other materials with their classmates.
- When working in a group with their classmates, students do their fair share of the work.
- Students respect classmates' personal belongings.
- Students feel it is O.K. to walk away from a fight.

Teacher to Student

- Teachers help students improve their study habits.
- Teachers present more than one point of view.
- Teachers treat all students with respect.
- Teachers encourage students to ask questions if they are appropriate.
- Teachers give students the opportunity to practice what they learn.
- Teachers are well prepared for their classes.
- Teachers are positive role models for students.
- Teachers respect the cultures of all students.
- Teachers' tests cover what was taught.
- Teachers help students with special needs.
- Teachers provide students with praise when appropriate.
- Teachers return assignments in a reasonable amount of time.
- Teachers promote cooperation among students.
- Course exams, projects, and papers are graded fairly.
- Teachers are attentive to students during meetings.
- Teachers allow students to express their opinions even if they are different from the teachers'.

Differences in Student Perceptions Based on Gender, Attendance, Academic Achievement, and Involvement in Extracurricular Activities

Student perceptions of their schools' sense of community were significantly more positive at the middle school level than at the high school level, regardless of gender, attendance, academic achievement, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

Gender. For all three SECI subscales, *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*, at both the middle and high school levels, male and female student perceptions of their schools' sense of community did not differ significantly. Other research conducted at the middle school level found that girls scored significantly higher than boys on their sense of school belonging with stronger felt support of teachers and emulation of teachers and friends (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994). Based on this study's nonsignificant gender finding, intervention programs designed to enhance the schools' sense of community should target both girls and boys at the middle and high schools.

Attendance. For all three SECI subscales, *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*, student perceptions of their schools' sense of community were related to their attendance level. At both the middle and high school levels, student perceptions of their schools' sense of community were more positive

when they were absent less than 10 days per school year. Based on this finding, school officials should target low attending students at both the middle and high schools for intervention purposes. If students feel a sense of belonging within their school, their attendance may improve. This speculation could be tested in future research.

Academic achievement. At both the middle and high school levels, student perceptions of *student to teacher* and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships were related to their academic achievement. The perceptions of A and/or B students were significantly more positive than C students. These results are similar to other research that found a positive relationship between students' sense of belonging and their academic achievement (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Deci et al., 1991; Goodenow, 1993; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Ryan et al., 1994; Wentzel, 1998). Based on the results of this study, intervention programs designed to enhance *student to teacher* and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships should target low achieving students at both the middle and high schools.

Student perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships were related to their academic achievement at the middle school level, but not at the high school level. At the middle school level, A students perceived *student to student* interactions and relationships as significantly more positive than B and C students. The high school findings in this study suggest that students' sense of community with their peers is related to factors other than their academic achievement. At the middle school level, intervention programs designed to enhance *student to student* interactions and relationships should target low achieving students. Due to the relatively low high school *student to student* ratings for each of the academic achievement levels, intervention programs designed to enhance *student to student* interactions and relationships should target all high school students, regardless of academic achievement level.

Involvement in extracurricular activities. For all three SECI subscales, *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student*, at both the middle and high school levels, student perceptions of their schools' sense of community did not differ significantly between those students involved in extracurricular activities and those not involved in extracurricular activities. Based on this nonsignificant finding, intervention programs designed to enhance the schools' sense of community should target all students, regardless of their involvement in extracurricular activities.

Implications of student findings. When designing intervention programs to enhance student perceptions of their schools' sense of community, school officials should target students with low attendance and low academic achievement. School officials should determine the possible causes of the differences between middle and high school student and teacher perceptions of their schools' sense of commu-

nity. To enhance student perceptions of the high school's ethical climate, the high school may want to consider some of the programs recommended by Felner et al. (2001), such as creating small schools within large schools.

Perceptions of the Importance of Schools' Sense of Community

Across school levels, student and teacher perceptions of the importance of their schools' sense of community in keeping their school safe ranged from 3.85 (somewhat important to important) to 4.90 (important to very important). Middle school students and teachers ($M=4.19, SD=.74$) perceived the ethical climate to be significantly more important in keeping their school safe than high school students and teachers ($M=3.91, SD=.90$). Regardless of school level, teachers ($M=4.78, SD=.36$) perceived the ethical climate to be significantly more important in keeping their school safe than students ($M=3.98, SD=.84$).

Before intervention programs designed to enhance schools' sense of community can be effective, students must understand the importance of a school's sense of community in maintaining a safe school environment. Perhaps, if students understand the connection between positive *student to teacher*, *student to student*, and *teacher to student* interactions and relationships and keeping their school safe, they may be more willing to change the way they interact with others.

Conclusion

Schools should establish a positive sense of community within their physical structures because of its importance in keeping a school safe and the high probability that "students transfer the interpersonal skills and attitudes they learn in school" to the outside world (Osterman, 2000, p.359). Students must learn to treat each other with fairness, respect, compassion, and kindness so that the world situation might improve. The kinds of *student to student* interactions and relationships in schools today might be transferred to tomorrow's work places. Opportunities for students to practice prosocial skills should be integrated within the classroom activities in each subject area, rather than having a separate course that focuses on prosocial skills. It is the responsibility of every student and teacher in a school to establish a positive sense of community within that school.

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