Recent efforts to reform schools in the United States have focused almost exclusively on improving accountability systems and student standardized test scores (Sunderman, 2010). Yet, the quality of a school’s environmental climate, or social and organizational structure of the school setting, may also play a critical role in improving students’ academic outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Policymakers have taken note of the link between climate and achievement. For example, the U.S. DOE (2007) has invested in the Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant program to support state-wide efforts to measure and improve school climate. Yet, additional research identifying the dimensions of school climate critical for student achievement, across different types of schools and samples, is needed. Such work will inform intervention designed to improve school climate, and help target programming and resources at schools with climates most likely to benefit.

Given this need, the proposed symposium draws on three diverse datasets to explore components of school climate hypothesized to support students’ academic achievement in middle childhood and early adolescence. Paper 1 uses a nationally representative sample of children in grades K – 8 to identify dimensions of school climate and context that predict students’ math and reading achievement trajectories. Using growth curve modeling with a comprehensive list of control variables, the authors find that school-level parent involvement and teacher professional climate contribute to gains in students’ reading achievement. School grade configuration (K – 5/6 – 8 vs. K – 8), however, is not predictive of achievement. Findings suggest that specific school climate dimensions, rather than a structural school transition, are critical factors explaining gains in achievement. Paper 2 then aims to determine whether school climate matters in the context of intervention. The authors test whether impacts of a universal social/behavioral intervention on achievement vary by three dimensions of school climate – leadership, accountability, and safety/respect. Using data from a school-randomized trial, the authors find evidence that intervention impacts on reading and math scores are generally larger in schools that had lower levels of leadership, accountability, and safety/respect prior to the intervention. Similar to this study, but utilizing a large national sample, Paper 3 examines whether school climate moderates impacts of seven Social and Character Development (SACD) programs on elementary school students’ engagement and academic competence. The authors find that while SACD schools had lower engagement overall, impacts of SACD programs on school engagement were largest in schools that initially had more negative climates. To conclude, Dr. Catherine Bradshaw, a national expert on school climate and social/behavioral intervention, will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the three papers. She will then identify implications of this work for policy and practice.

Findings from these diverse studies demonstrate that school climate is critical for understanding students’ achievement in elementary and middle school settings. Policymakers and practitioners should target key components of climate when implementing programs to enhance achievement. Additionally, targeting resources at the schools with the least supportive climates may be an effective way to improve the academic achievement of students at highest risk for failure.