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TEACHING  
IN CONTEXT



The Social Side of  
Education Reform

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and policy proposals at this intersection. Let's lift our gaze above frameworks and solutions focused on assessing and augmenting the qualities of individuals and embrace an equal focus on attending to and growing the value that can be created *among* them. This will not only benefit educators and the teaching profession but also America's students.

## Developing Workplaces Where Teachers Stay, Improve, and Succeed

*Recent Evidence on the Importance  
of School Climate for Teacher Success*

JOHN P. PAPAY AND MATTHEW A. KRAFT

One of the strongest lessons from the past decade of education research is a broad, scholarly consensus that teachers have large effects on students' learning and that some teachers are far more effective than others.<sup>1</sup> This research has been interpreted to mean that improving the American educational system at scale requires a policy focus on attracting and retaining "high-quality" individuals to teach the nation's students. We argue that this singular policy direction is a misinterpretation of the literature and that policy makers—and students—would be better served by a recognition of how teachers are supported or constrained by the organizational contexts (or professional environments) in which they teach.

Clearly, individual teachers play a primary role in shaping the educational experiences of students in schools. However, researchers and policy makers tend to ascribe teachers' career decisions to the students they teach rather than the conditions in which they work. They often treat teachers as if their effectiveness is mostly fixed, portable, and independent of the school context. An emerging body

of research documents the limitations of these perspectives, showing that the contexts in which teachers work profoundly shape their job decisions and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> Teachers who work in supportive contexts stay in the classroom longer, improve at greater rates, and experience more success in the classroom than their peers in less-supportive environments.

In this chapter, we review the growing evidence about the importance of the professional environment in schools and describe recent quantitative studies that document how context influences teachers' career decisions, their effectiveness in the classroom, and their development. Throughout, we also provide examples from a recent large-scale qualitative study on which we collaborated with Susan Moore Johnson and colleagues as part of The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University. This study involved in-depth case studies documenting teachers' experiences working in six high-poverty schools in a large urban school district. These schools were quite varied in their approach to and success with engaging the high-poverty students they taught.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, we draw on interviews with a diverse set of ninety-five teachers and administrators whose stories validate and instantiate the emerging quantitative findings. We end by highlighting some promising interventions for improving elements of the school context and conclude with a discussion of the implications of this emerging body of research for policy and practice.

## DEFINING SCHOOL CONTEXT

Schools are complex organizations. A long history of detailed qualitative research has documented the constellation of organizational features that shape teachers' and students' daily experiences.<sup>4</sup> We use *context* or *climate* to refer broadly to the environment in which the teacher works. These words have many meanings in the field

of education. While we recognize that school climate can have direct influences on students—for example, students are better able to learn if they are in a safe environment—for our discussion we focus on how features of the organizational climate influence the adults in the building, thereby affecting students through their influence on teachers.

While the contexts in which teachers work are influenced in part by district and even state policies (such as standards and accountability), teachers' day-to-day experiences are shaped more directly at the school level as well as in micro contexts that arise within schools (such as grade-level or subject-area teams). Thus, as we define it, context refers broadly to teachers' professional environment, including policy (such as class sizes and salaries), traditional working conditions (such as facilities and textbooks), and more interpersonal features of the work environment (such as relationships with colleagues, collaboration with teams, and principal leadership).

Importantly, context is not a fixed feature of a school, nor is it unilaterally imposed by building-level administrators. Instead, teachers both work in the context and co-construct it with school leaders through their collective actions. Principals and other leaders help shape this climate through the policies they adopt and in the way they marshal collective action to promote (or not) a supportive school environment. In this way, the adults in the building have agency over the contexts in which they work. However, the nature of this process—whereby multiple actors with potentially differing priorities co-construct the school context—can make efforts to change the context difficult to achieve and sustain.

Scholarly understanding of the importance of school context has grown in recent years as large-scale teacher surveys have provided researchers with new data to quantify these organizational features. The availability of Race to the Top funds and an emphasis on measuring school culture led many states and school districts to

adopt or develop their own surveys to measure working conditions in schools. For example, these surveys include the New Teacher Center's Teaching, Empowering, Learning and Leading (TELL) survey, TNTP's Insight Survey, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's (CCSR) 5 Essential Supports Survey, and a range of state and local district surveys designed to measure school working conditions (such as New York City's School Survey and Tennessee's Teacher Educator Survey or Boston Public Schools' School Climate Survey). While such surveys have been valuable for policy, they have also provided a treasure trove of information for researchers seeking to understand the effect of school context on teachers.

#### SCHOOL CONTEXT AND TEACHER TURNOVER

School climate survey data have shed new light on important questions about teachers' career decisions and their effectiveness. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s researchers consistently found that teacher turnover was higher in schools that served larger populations of low-income and minority students.<sup>7</sup> This finding, which has been interpreted frequently as illustrating that teachers' prefer to teach higher performing, whiter, and wealthier students, has led to policy prescriptions such as paying teachers "combat pay" to work in hard-to-staff schools.

However, more recent analysis, replicated in a wide range of districts, reveals that the high rates of teacher turnover observed in such schools are largely explained by the poor working conditions in these schools rather than the students they serve. Understanding the determinants of teacher turnover, and why turnover rates differ across schools and school districts, is important for policy makers. Large urban school districts experience relatively high rates of teacher turnover, and turnover is costly both for schools and students.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the substantial financial costs of replacing large numbers of

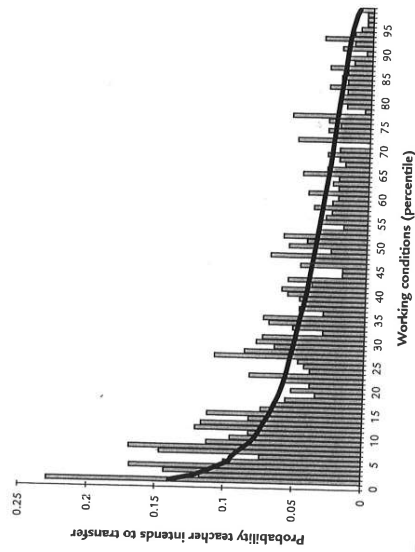
teachers, turnover has long-term, negative consequences for teachers and students, especially those who live in low-income communities.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent study in Massachusetts, we documented the relationship between teacher working conditions and turnover using a statewide teacher survey.<sup>8</sup> As expected, we found that teachers reported less supportive working conditions in schools that served high proportions of low-income and minority students. This echoes detailed ethnographic research and interview studies documenting the challenging environments in which urban teachers often teach.<sup>9</sup> We also found much higher levels of reported teacher turnover in these schools.

However, we found that the working conditions in the schools were much stronger predictors of teachers' career plans than were the demographic characteristics of students in these schools. In fact, accounting for differences in the quality of teachers' working environments greatly diminishes the relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover. By contrast, the relationships between working conditions and turnover were essentially unchanged after controlling for student characteristics, suggesting that un supportive conditions lead to turnover in a wide range of school settings. We document this pattern in figure 1.1, which demonstrates how in Massachusetts teachers are over three times more likely to report intentions to transfer away from a school with poor working conditions (bottom percentiles, on the left) than from one with strong working conditions (top percentiles, on the right) even after controlling for a range of student, teacher, and school characteristics. This finding has been replicated in a wide range of districts and states, including California, North Carolina, New York City, and Chicago.<sup>10</sup>

Schools with un supportive working environments struggle to retain teachers, which leads to what Richard Ingersoll terms the "revolving door." Turnover then contributes to organizational instability and potentially reinforces a cycle of poor working conditions

FIGURE 1.1 The probability that Massachusetts teachers intend to transfer from their school by percentile of working conditions with predicted relationship overlaid.



and teacher turnover in these schools.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, what appear to matter most to teachers about the contexts in which they work are not the traditional working conditions policy makers often think of, such as modern facilities and well equipped classrooms. Instead, aspects that are difficult to observe and measure, such as the quality of relationships and collaboration among staff, the responsiveness of school administrators, and the academic and behavioral expectations for students, appear to be most influential.<sup>12</sup> Several studies have documented how the quality of leadership in a school and the degree to which teachers feel supported by administrators are central to teachers' career decisions.<sup>13</sup> Quantitative studies, however, are limited in the degree to which they can isolate the relative importance of specific school context features given the measurement

challenges associated with self-reported survey data and the interrelated nature of these features. Qualitative studies help illustrate the specific ways in which these features shape teachers' experiences and career decisions.

Our study revealed numerous examples of teachers, explicitly or implicitly, tying their career decisions to the professional environment in the school. For example, at a large, comprehensive high school, several teachers we interviewed said they were planning to transfer to another district school, one that served a relatively similar population of students, because of their current school's lack of a systematic response to student behavior. As one teacher explained, "Most of the teachers deal with things independently," causing them to spend "so much time handling discipline issues." Another agreed, saying, "I'm ready to teach. I'm ready to not worry about discipline." One spoke for herself and two colleagues, all of whom were discussing plans to transfer: "I know personally that the three of us don't feel supported by the [principal]. I feel like we're not making a difference because the behavior is so bad [that] the teaching is not happening." These teachers were not seeking to leave the students; on the contrary, they expressed that they were attached to their current school largely because of the students. Rather, they were planning to leave because of a lack of institutional support for their work.

### SCHOOL CONTEXT AND TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

The same unsupportive working environments that may motivate teachers to leave a school also constrain their ability to be effective with students. Although often treated as a fully portable characteristic of an individual teacher, teacher effectiveness is supported or constrained by the environment in which teachers work. For example, the teachers described above clearly noted that they felt less effective

in the classroom than they would have had the school developed a more orderly environment for learning. One can view the impacts of many educational interventions (such as curricula, school structure, or student behavior policies) as operating, at least in part, through improved teacher effectiveness given that these efforts develop the conditions for success in the classroom.

Survey data provide additional opportunities to examine the relationship between context and teacher (or school) effectiveness. Using rich survey data on school climates from CCSR's 5 Essential School Survey, Bryk and colleagues show that Chicago schools with stronger and more supportive work contexts experienced substantial improvements in student achievement.<sup>14</sup> Our work confirms this result. We examined the relationship between school context and student achievement in Massachusetts and found that schools with more supportive environments experienced larger gains in student test scores than schools with poor working conditions.<sup>15</sup> These patterns held even when we accounted for differences in many observable students and teacher characteristics and compared schools to only those within the same district. Ladd showed quite similar results in her study of working conditions in North Carolina.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Kraft, Marinell, and Yee examined public middle schools in New York City over the course of five years and found that schools which experienced improvements in organizational culture—particularly in school safety and academic expectations—experienced corresponding improvements in student achievement.<sup>17</sup> The authors' analyses of changes in organizational contexts over time eliminate many of the primary threats to validity faced by previous cross-sectional analyses. In other words, it is not simply that higher performing schools report better organizational contexts; instead, when the reported context improves, student performance does too. Together these studies suggest that when schools

strengthen the organizational contexts in which teachers work, teachers are more likely to remain in these schools and students appear to learn at greater rates.

One specific example comes in efforts to increase student attendance. Students learn more when they attend school more consistently. If schools can promote student attendance, they can improve the effectiveness of teachers in supporting their students' learning. When we interviewed teachers at a district-sponsored charter high school that enrolled predominantly low-income minority students, we heard about the value of the school's robust approach to student support. The school's staff included two full-time counselors and a dean of discipline dedicated to ensuring that students had access to appropriate social-emotional supports. These efforts helped create a safe environment where students wanted to be and felt supported in their learning.

For one teacher we interviewed, this environment stood in stark contrast to the school where she had taught previously, a school that served a very similar student population. She explained:

While I was teaching at [my old school], it was very challenging because I was working with a lot of kids that were court-involved, and one day I would have thirty-two students in my classroom and the next day that number [was] down to twenty. And as I tried to get to know the kids better, I'd find that a lot of them are in and out of jail, or in and out of DUJs, or there were many issues that were interfering with their learning. And some of them lost interest in learning anything that I had to present because, well, the next day they had to appear in front of a judge and chances are they were going to be away for a while.

She noted that at her current school “we have the same group of kids,” but with “the support that is in place . . . we give the kids

a certain environment that they want to come back to, even though they may have a court date coming up . . . It's a positive environment for them to be, so they keep coming."

It is reasonable to infer that had this teacher continued to teach at her previous school, she would have been less effective in the classroom—not because she had changed or the students were different, but because the context provided an environment that supported effective classroom instruction. This is just one of many ways context can play a direct role in promoting student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

### SCHOOL CONTEXT AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

In supportive schools, teachers not only tend to stay and be more effective in their classrooms, but they also improve at much greater rates over time. In a recent study, we tracked teachers in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for up to ten years and examined how their individual effectiveness (as measured by contributions to student achievement) changed over time.<sup>18</sup> As shown in figure 1.2, we found that, over ten years, teachers working in schools with strong professional environments improved 38 percent more than teachers in schools with weak professional environments. Here we used six measures drawn from teacher surveys to characterize the environment: consistent order and discipline, opportunities for peer collaboration, supportive principal leadership, effective professional development, a school culture characterized by trust, and a fair teacher evaluation process providing meaningful feedback. More recently, Ronfeldt and colleagues used a similar research design to show that teachers in Miami-Dade County Public Schools improved at substantially faster rates in schools where effective collaboration took place through instructional teams.<sup>19</sup>

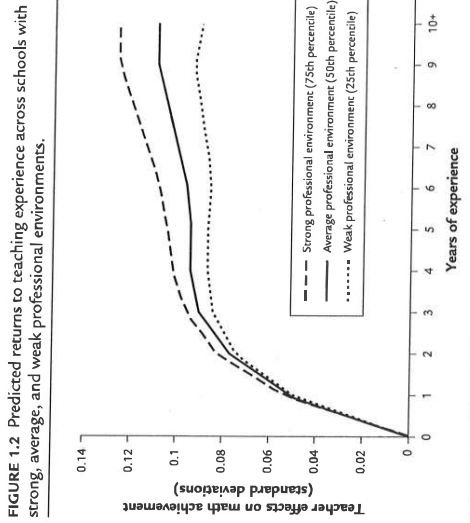


FIGURE 1.2 Predicted returns to teaching experience across schools with strong, average, and weak professional environments.

In the schools we studied, teachers reported that instructional teams supported their professional growth when teams were well structured and aligned with their own priorities.<sup>20</sup> Teachers met regularly in instruction-focused teams in all of the schools we studied. However, the degree to which organizational efforts to promote professional growth through teams depended on how well this time was used. For example, in one elementary school teachers met in grade-level teams designed to explore and support new instructional approaches. Teachers in these teams regularly tried out new approaches and used video and peer observations to provide feedback and refine practice. As one teacher noted, "We all kind of give each other feedback . . . we'll talk about what strategies we used, what we could do to improve it." This ongoing and targeted feedback led teachers to

report that their instruction improved and they became more effective teachers.

### SOME PROMISING INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

These findings, and a growing body of evidence, make clear that the school context matters a great deal for teachers and, as a result, their students. Furthermore, school contexts are not set in stone; working conditions in schools can improve over time, and teachers are responsive to these changes.<sup>21</sup> However, simply saying that contexts matter and can change does not give policy makers and practitioners clear guidance about how to strengthen organizational practices in schools. Although the collective and interpersonal nature of school contexts makes quick policy fixes unlikely to succeed, research suggests several concrete ways in which educators and policy makers can take on this challenge.

We discuss four evidence-based practices that hold promise for improving school contexts and thereby boosting teacher effectiveness: leveraging colleagues to promote instructional improvement; developing effective behavioral supports; setting high expectations for learners; and engaging parents actively in students' education. The evidence suggests that if implemented well, all of these practices can promote teacher development and success. Importantly, the effectiveness of these supports rests on the school leader. There may also be synergistic effects of adopting policies that attempt to address these approaches together given that these efforts are all interrelated.

#### Leveraging Colleagues to Promote Instructional Improvement

One feature of the professional environment in schools that consistently seems to matter is the nature of collaborative relationships among colleagues.<sup>22</sup> There are many types of models of teacher col-

laboration (teacher teams, professional learning communities, peer observation models, etc.) that have demonstrated benefits for teachers' instructional practice when implemented well. We describe two examples that hold promise to improve classroom instruction: well-designed teacher teams that collaborate to coordinate instruction across students and solve common problems and efforts to have peer teachers provide instructional feedback to each other and learn from each other's practice.

In our case studies of high-poverty urban schools, nearly all of the teachers we interviewed talked about their regular participation in teacher teams.<sup>23</sup> This reflects a national trend toward increased collaboration and teamwork in schools, an effort to break down the "egg crate" model of teachers operating autonomously within their own classrooms.<sup>24</sup> However, while ubiquitous in the district we studied, teams functioned very differently across the schools we examined, with important implications for their influence on teacher effectiveness. At three of the schools, teacher teams were central to coordinating instruction across students and classrooms and served as critical professional learning opportunities for participants. At three others, teams were simply administrative hurdles that took time away from other, more productive, instructional activities—a model Hargreaves calls "contrived collegiality" because it has no real benefit for teachers or students.<sup>25</sup>

We found that for teams to be an effective approach to promote individual and organizational learning, teachers needed both guidance and support in creating effective team structures and flexibility in tackling the problems of practice the team was focused on. Here, principals were central to the success of these teams; they "were active in setting worthy purposes, encouraging learning through collaboration, and ensuring that teachers could safely express opposing views or explore new approaches."<sup>26</sup> Within such structures, teachers found their collaborative work meaningful and productive.



A second example of the role of collaboration in promoting instructional improvement comes from the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI) in Tennessee, an intervention designed to develop data-driven instructional partnerships that leverage professional expertise within the schools. This program uses indicator-level teacher evaluation data to pair teachers who have low scores in certain areas of instructional practice with peer teachers in the same school who have demonstrated a history of success in those same areas. For example, a teacher who struggles in managing student behavior and instructional planning might be paired with a colleague who excels in those areas. The teachers are encouraged to work together throughout the year to refine these practices. The effort is explicitly framed as a collaborative partnership (not coaching or mentoring). Partnered teachers are encouraged to examine each other's evaluation results, observe each other teaching in the classroom, discuss improvement strategies, and follow up with each other's commitments throughout the school year.

This intervention has proven quite effective at increasing teacher effectiveness, as measured by their students' test scores. In 2013–14, a small randomized experiment compared the outcomes of treatment schools that received the IPI to control schools that did not.<sup>27</sup> At the end of the school year, the average student in an IPI treatment school scored 0.06 standard deviations higher on math and reading/language arts tests than she would have in a control school, regardless of whether her teacher participated in a partnership. The gains are larger among the lower performing teachers; for these teachers, the IPI improved students' scores by 0.12 standard deviations. This is a large effect, roughly equivalent to the difference between being assigned to a median teacher instead of a bottom-quartile teacher.

Both of these examples document how one key feature of the organizational context—the nature of collaboration among colleagues—can promote teacher effectiveness and teacher improvement. When

colleagues work together and learn from each other in well-structured collaborative activities, they can coordinate across students and classrooms, improve their instructional skills, and serve students more effectively.

#### Developing Effective Behavioral Supports

Teachers' work environments are shaped not only by the adults in the building and the facilities, but also by the needs that their students bring with them when they walk through the school doors.<sup>28</sup> As part of our study of high-poverty urban schools, we found that schools had quite different reactions to the uncertainty that minority youth from low-income families brought with them into school. When schools worked to provide teachers with support and guidance for engaging with these students' needs, teachers were better able to enjoy success in their classrooms.

Across the schools we studied, teachers spoke about how specific supports facilitated their ability to succeed with their students. Teachers in several schools described the value of creating strong environments for learning by providing support services to attend to students' social and emotional needs. They acknowledged that students brought many needs to the classroom, only some of which they were equipped to handle. Thus, teachers valued and thought their students benefited from these outside-of-class supports.

In the schools we studied, two quite different examples stand out. In one school, the principal had established a formal Student Support Team comprised of teachers and administrators who met weekly to discuss student issues. For each case, the team developed a set of recommendations that it asked teachers and, in some cases, parents to follow. In another school, administrative positions filled a very similar role. Rather than relying on a more collaborative team to handle these responsibilities, the school had a three-member Student Support Department, headed by a dean of discipline. These

counselors worked not only on discipline issues but on broader social-emotional supports for students who were struggling. Despite the differences in how these student supports were delivered, teachers at both schools regularly described the services as critical resources for facilitating effective instruction.

#### Setting High Expectations for Learners

Evidence of the importance of teacher expectations for student achievement dates back to Rosenthal and Jacobson's study of the Pygmalion effect.<sup>29</sup> Many experimental studies have since replicated their seminal finding that teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities affect student learning.<sup>30</sup> More recently, studies examining variation in charter school effects have found that a culture of high expectations is likely a key ingredient in the success of high performing charter schools.<sup>31</sup> Studies also suggest that schools can work to collectively raise expectations for students. As Kraft, Marinell, and Yee show, schools where teachers raise their academic expectations for students experience corresponding increases in student achievement.<sup>32</sup>

However, simply articulating high expectations for students or decorating the hallways with college banners is unlikely to result in meaningful changes if these efforts are inauthentic, uncoordinated, or uncoupled from intensive student supports. Teachers need to not only hold high standards for student learning but to believe that all students can achieve those standards with appropriate support. High expectations matter, particularly when they come from someone students feel knows them and cares about them. In this way, developing strong relationships with students helps make a teacher's high expectations more credible. At the same time, these expectations must be upheld by all teachers rather than just a few. A student who is uplifted by a teacher's belief in her ability to do excellent work might easily lose self-confidence if she perceives that the teacher of her next class holds her to a lower standard than her

classmates. Thus, students benefit most when there is a school-wide culture of high expectations.

A key complement to creating this culture of high expectations involves providing the necessary supports, both academic and social-emotional, to enable students to meet these rigorous standards. Many of the teachers we spoke with in low-income urban public schools felt they were able to hold students to high expectations because they could also count on the organizational supports at their school to provide students with the type of services and coordinated support they could not provide on their own. These services were both academic (additional instructional time or resources for specific students) and socio-emotional (services designed to attend to students' needs beyond core academic instruction). As one elementary school teacher explained, teachers and the school could not ignore students' personal experiences outside the school, which in some instances included living in abusive homes, foster homes, or homeless shelters: "They say you shouldn't take that into consideration, [that] we need to have high expectations, and yes we do. But still that needs to be addressed." Teachers' high expectations for students at the school were authentic because they were able to help students work toward meeting these standards with the assistance of student support teams and counseling services. Teachers were not required simply to go it alone.

#### Engaging Parents Actively in Students' Education

The important role that parents play in shaping students' experiences in school and supporting their success cannot be overstated. Parents affect the school context indirectly through their influence on students as well as directly via their interactions with teachers and engagement with the school. The teachers at the schools we studied consistently described how traditional attempts to engage parents only through open houses, back-to-school nights, and online grade

books were often insufficient. In one teacher's words, these "push rather than pull" efforts did little to draw parents into the school or convey that they have invaluable insights into their child's experience that would help teachers be more effective. Instead, schools can facilitate stronger parental engagement and support through two primary avenues: by making active outreach to parents a schoolwide priority and dedicating resources to these efforts and by establishing clear expectations and effective support for teacher-parent communication.

Evidence suggests that schoolwide efforts to engage parents as active partners in students' education can benefit both teachers and students.<sup>33</sup> For example, Grand Rapids (Michigan) Public Schools have reduced chronic absenteeism by half through coordinated efforts to increase communication with parents when absences occur, to educate parents about the consequences of chronic absenteeism for student learning, and to enlist parents and community organizations in support of the district's attendance goals.<sup>34</sup> In several of the schools we studied, teachers described a range of nontraditional efforts their schools initiated to connect with parents. One school had a dedicated family outreach coordinator who offered Parent Nights, with classes designed to familiarize parents with the curriculum and make them more confident in their ability to support their children's academic and social-emotional learning needs. Administrators at another school worked to accommodate parents' demanding schedules by holding open houses and parent meetings at off-site locations, given that many students' neighborhoods were far from the school. Teachers saw these efforts as important supports that helped engage parents more actively in their child's learning and open lines of communication between parents and teachers.

School leadership teams also have a key role to play in establishing schoolwide norms and supports for teachers' efforts to connect with parents. Teachers face a range of barriers when attempting to communicate with parents, including the frequently out-of-date

parent contact information, language barriers, and the lack of non-instructional time to make contact during the school day. Without formal expectations combined with sufficient time and the necessary communication infrastructure, teachers' may take a passive approach to communication as they shift their attention to other tasks. Efforts to establish communication norms and reduce barriers to communication can increase parent-teacher communication substantially and raise students' performance in school. Several randomized trials document how frequent communication with parents, often facilitated by automated or very brief personalized text messages, enhanced student engagement in school, improved attendance, and raised achievement.<sup>35</sup> When schools and teachers work to engage parents, they are also promoting a schooling environment where parents support both teachers and students to succeed.

## CONCLUSION

Analyses of large-scale teacher surveys confirm what educators and qualitative researchers have long known: school contexts matter. We hope the new evidence summarized here will push public debate and policy about education reform to recognize and be responsive to this reality of working in schools. Of course, saying that context matters does not mean that the skills and aptitudes of individual teachers do not. Clearly, US schools need to work hard to recruit the most skilled and able candidates possible. However, our reading of the research suggests that policy makers cannot continue to focus so narrowly on the individual. Instead, effective teacher policy will require attending to the organizational context of the schools in which teachers work and the interpersonal relationships that form the basis for this context.

We have identified several key supports that show promise in sustaining supportive work environments. Importantly, these features

do not exist in isolation; there are likely important complementarities and synergies that exist when schools attend to several of these dimensions at once. Furthermore, school principals play a key role in establishing productive professional environments in schools.<sup>36</sup> They are the ones who establish these organizational supports and build schoolwide cultures. Hiring principals who have the ability to identify organizational weaknesses, establish schoolwide systems to support teachers and students, and galvanize the collective buy-in and involvement of all teachers is a central lever for improving the teaching and learning environment.

The proliferation of school climate surveys in recent years has not only facilitated this research documenting the importance of school context but also afforded new opportunities to inform school improvement efforts. These surveys provide rich data on schools' organizational strengths and areas for improvement. For example, school context reports could provide building principals with important feedback on their organizational leadership, and such reports could help school and district leaders identify and target efforts toward strengthening specific organizational weaknesses in their schools. In short, these data are rich, and the opportunities to use them are great. Of course, as with any measure, incorporating school context surveys into accountability systems may undermine their value and lead to biased results if teachers, students, and parents feel pressure to rate their school favorably.

We conclude where we began, arguing that policy makers should focus as much attention on developing supportive work environments as they give to staffing their schools with effective teachers. There are two central reasons why we believe this focus on the organizational climate in which a teacher works is important. First, the school context influences how effective a teacher is with her students, her career decisions, and her development throughout her career. Teachers are more effective, more likely to stay, and improve at

greater rates in supportive working environments. But, more broadly, this organizational perspective will bear fruit because education itself is necessarily an interpersonal and organizational endeavor. Students move across classrooms and teachers as they move from subject to subject and grade to grade throughout their schooling. Attending to the school context, rather than simply the classroom, will help policy makers frame the challenge of ensuring student success more accurately, focusing attention on improving students' learning trajectories across their schooling experiences and not simply their learning in an isolated classroom. The types of coordination and continuity supported by strong work environments will help promote sustained student learning throughout their schooling.