CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

A Report of Primary Findings of the School Climate Study for

Champaign Community Unit School District 4

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

Executive Summary

Overall, with a few notable exceptions, school staff and parents perceive the climate of Champaign schools in very similar and positive terms. Middle and high school student perceptions are generally slightly less positive than those of parents and staff. Their perceptions are typically neutral to negative. Elementary students tend to see the climate more positively than middle and high school students.

Because there are more Whites than African Americans in each sample, the average results for each sample (when race is ignored) tend to look like those of the Whites. However, there are significant differences across race on most perceptions. This is true for staff, parents, middle and high school students. When results are examined separately for Whites and African Americans, significant differences emerge. African Americans see many aspects of the social climate in dramatically more negative terms than do Whites.

The largest and most pervasive racial differences occurred among school staff. This reflects the fact that African American staff tended to see the climate the most negatively of all groups and White staff tended to see it most positively. On 18 of the 19 the climate dimensions measured (95%), African American staff perceived the climate more negatively than their White peers. This was true for each subsample of staff, including teachers, administrators and other staff. Middle school students had the next largest proportion of climate dimensions with differences across race. On 8 of 12 of the climate dimensions measured (75%), African American middle schoolers perceived the climate more negatively than their White peers. Fewer, yet numerous, differences were found for parents (on 10 of 19, 53%, of dimensions) and high school students (on 6 of 12, or 50% of dimensions).

Across all samples, the largest and most consistent differences in perceptions appeared on six climate dimensions: General Fairness, Disciplinary Fairness, Academic Fairness, Cultural Understanding, Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools, and Need for Change. Racial differences were found on each of these dimensions in every sample. African American respondents were, depending on sample, between 2 and 23 times more likely than their White counterparts to believe the schools are unfair, between 2 and 4 times more likely to disagree that teaching styles are personally and culturally relevant, between 3 and 9 times more likely to perceive a need for change in their school to address racial inequities, and between 7 and 11 times more likely to rate as very important various issues found in previous research to foster positive school climate for African American students in desegregated schools, such as hiring African American teachers and administrators in similar proportions to those of African American students in Unit 4 schools.

Parallel differences exist across socio-economic class, with parents and students from lower income families consistently tending to perceive the climate more negatively than those from middle and upper income families. However, statistical analyses demonstrate that racial

differences in perceptions cannot be explained by social class (nor by students' academic or disciplinary status). Racial differences persist even when analyses controlled for income level and students' academic and disciplinary status.

The findings from this study reveal both positive and negative aspects of the perceived social climate of Unit 4 schools.

On the positive side

- The majority of all parents, staff, and students in the district see the school climate in largely positive terms.

- Neither adults nor students perceive widespread overt or malicious interpersonal racism.

- There is a widespread desire to be fair and to "do right" by all children and families in the district; nearly 1000 staff, parents and students indicated an interest in working to end inequities in Unit 4 schools.

On the other hand, numerous findings indicate reason for serious concern.

- African American staff, parents, and students perceive the climate in markedly more negative terms than do Whites --- often in very negative terms. These findings indicate perceived lack of fairness and cultural understanding that are not, typically, the result of malicious or intentional racism on the part of individual people, but rather are institutionalized in the educational practices and policies of the schools.

- There is evidence that large proportions of those with the most power in the district, White staff and parents, do not perceive a need for change.

- There is evidence of considerable resistance to change.

Building on the sources of support for change and recognizing the nature of the resistance to change, the following recommendations are designed to address the climate concerns identified in this study. Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list of actions that could be taken to improve the perceived social climate of Champaign schools. But progress toward these goals is both feasible and likely to have significant impact on the perceived social climate of Unit 4 schools.

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

Recommendations

- Increase cultural competence of teaching staff. Efforts to do so must go beyond the teaching of cultural sensitivity to educating about issues of White privilege. These efforts must also go beyond a focus on interpersonal understanding of racism to educating about issues of institutional racism, history and power.

- Create forums both in the schools and in the community to discuss the climate study results and make recommendations to address issues raised by them. Although this study focused on African Americans, this discussion should take into account the full range of racial and ethnic diversity in the district, especially because the proportion of people of color in the district is growing rapidly.

- Hire more African American regular classroom teachers.

- Develop incentives to reward teachers who teach students of diverse backgrounds well.

- Develop incentives for teachers to learn from colleagues who demonstrate success teaching students of diverse backgrounds well.

- Reduce and eventually eliminate all "ability based" tracking.

- Establish goals and strategies to reduce the overall number of disciplinary and special education referrals.

- Implement in-school programs to educate students about issues of race, culture and ethnicity.

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

Introduction

This report presents the primary findings of the Champaign School Climate Study. There is widespread recognition among educational policy makers, researchers and school personnel that perceived school social climate is important to the health and well being of school children. Research has shown negative school climate perceptions to be associated with students' poor achievement, emotional problems, behavioral difficulties, dropping out, absenteeism and dissatisfaction with school. The purpose of this study was to gather opinions about the perceived social climate of Champaign schools from parents, students, and school staff.

The report is organized into four sections. First, historical background to the study is provided. Next, the study's methods are described. The third section describes the primary results from the study. The final section presents interpretations, commentary, and recommendations for addressing issues raised by the survey's results.

Historical Background

In 1996, members of the Champaign community filed complaints with the United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), on behalf of certain African American students alleging racial disparities in access to school programs and educational outcomes. In August 1996, OCR initiated a pro-active compliance review of minority over-representation in special education and under-representation in upper level courses. OCR also examined other dimensions of within school segregation of students on the basis of race, including student discipline, staff hiring and other issues.

Following the charges filed by the community and OCR's review, the District commissioned a comprehensive education audit to assist the District in determining "...its responsibilities and priorities in ensuring that a quality education be made available equitably to all students."[1] The findings of that audit indicated that while African American students comprised approximately one third of all students in the district at that time, they represented only about three percent of students in the gifted and talented program, over half of special education students, and nearly two thirds of all suspensions. The audit's findings and recommendations were delivered to and accepted by the Board of Education in the summer of 1998.

In September 1998, the District and OCR signed a Resolution Agreement outlining those actions the District should take "...to further its commitment to ensure that African American students are provided equal access to high quality education and rigorous educational standards under the law."[2] In this resolution agreement, the District agreed that "a school climate which promotes learning and success and encourages students to support each other is essential" in

---

1 Education Equity Implementation Plan: "Closing the Achievement Gap", adopted by Champaign Community Unit School District 4 Board of Education, June 12, 2000.

order "to ensure equal access for African American students to its educational programs."[3]   The Agreement mandated:

> a district-wide school climate study to determine the extent to which each school in the District offers a learning environment that supports all students and provides maximum opportunities for success. The climate study will include a survey of District parents designed to identify problems with District programs perceived by parents and to understand reasons why parents are not able or choose not to become involved with District activities. The climate study will be conducted with the assistance of recognized experts in the field and will include recommendations for implementing actions deemed necessary to correct any identified deficiencies.[4]

In the summer of 1999, the Unit 4 School District publicly solicited proposals to design and conduct the survey. The Planning and Implementation Committee[5] reviewed all proposals and recommended that the district contract with Professor Mark Aber, from the University of Illinois to complete the work. Superintendent Cain followed that recommendation.

Study Methods

Survey Content. This study focused on *perceived* school climate. It did not aim to measure an objective climate. Instead, it emphasized the importance of how individuals and groups *perceive* what happens in their schools. Thus, two children in the same classroom may perceive the classroom climate quite differently depending on their backgrounds and experiences. Such individual differences in perceptions of climate are expected in any organization. Neither child's perceptions necessarily reflect a unitary objective climate. However, both are *equally valid* perceptions and *equally valid* reflections of the perceived school climate. The decision to focus on perceived climate had two primary motivations. First, perceived school climate has been found in previous research to be associated with student performance and well being. Second, important group differences in perceptions of climate were anticipated in the Champaign schools.

---

2 Ib. Id.

3 Resolution Agreement --- Case Number 05975014, page 1.

4 Ib. Id., pages 3-4.

5 The Planning and Implementation Committee is composed of Board of Education members, parents, teachers, District administrators and community members and works with the District to oversee the development and implementation of the reforms called for in the various agreements signed by the District.

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

Because this study follows from concerns regarding documented racial inequities in Champaign schools, particular attention was devoted to examining how race and issues related to race impact school climate. A new school climate survey had to be developed and validated to examine the impact of racial issues on social climate in a public school district, as none existed prior to this study. To capture the unique perspectives of the Champaign community concerning school climate, individual and group meetings were held with representative stakeholders.[6] Several themes emerged repeatedly in these meetings. These included the importance of fairness in discipline and academic matters (especially as these matters concern race), the need to address racial inequities, beliefs about why some students perform poorly, and the importance of community and parent participation in schools' decision making processes. Suggestions and insights from these meetings were used to develop survey questions. Other questions were based on the investigators' assessment of relevant issues, and others parallel questions from nationally validated measures of school climate.

Two issues concerning the survey content bear additional comment. First, it is important to note that while the Champaign School Climate Survey has a significant focus on perceptions of how race matters in school, it is not simply a racial climate survey. The majority of items on all versions of the survey examine general climate issues. Approximately half of the items on the high school and middle school versions, one third of the items on the parent and staff versions, and one quarter of the items on the elementary school version of the survey dealt specifically with race. To reduce response bias, on each version of the survey, approximately half of all items were worded negatively and half positively. The specific content of the surveys is described in more detail at the beginning of the results section below. Items used to measure individual climate dimensions can be found in Appendices A through E. Second, it is also important to note that the Champaign community is composed of people from diverse backgrounds. For this reason, some of the questions on the survey ask about "all races." But, because the OCR agreement focuses on the fair treatment of African American students and families, a number of questions specifically ask about African Americans. The omission of questions specifically focused on other racial groups (e.g. Hispanics, Asians, American Indians, Whites, etc.) was not intended to diminish the importance of their experiences in the school. Space limitations simply did not allow separate questions about each of these groups.

Survey Administration. The survey was administered to all school staff and students (grades 3-12) and parents from all Champaign Unit 4 schools in the spring and summer, 2000. Staff surveys were distributed at each school from the principal's office. Staff self-administered their own surveys. They were given written instructions indicating that they need not answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering. Student surveys were administered in classrooms by their teachers during regular school hours. Teachers read the questions aloud and students followed along silently, responding to each question by filling in the appropriate

---

6 For example, meetings were held with African American activists and leaders of community organizations, clergy, district- and school- level administrators, representatives of the teachers' union, the PTA council, the school board, and Champaign students, among others.

response bubble with a pencil. Teachers were instructed to inform students about the purpose of the survey, that their participation was voluntary, that they may refuse to answer any question, and that they may decide not to complete the survey at any time without penalty. Parents of each child in the District were mailed a parent survey with a cover letter describing the background and purpose of the survey and explaining that parent participation was voluntary. The letter also stated that they need not answer any questions they were not comfortable answering. Surveys were returned directly to the University of Illinois in postage-paid, pre-addressed envelopes provided for that purpose. If parents did not respond to the first mailing, a second survey was sent to them.

Confidentiality of Responses. All data collected for this study has been and will continue to be kept completely confidential and stored in a secure location, accessible only to the research team. No respondent data will be reported in a way that allow that individual to be identified.

Survey Sample Response Rates. Survey respondents included approximately 90% of students in attendance on the days the surveys were administered in the designated grades (1916 completed from 3rd-5th graders, 1516 from middle schoolers, and 2195 from high schoolers), approximately 75% of all school building staff (814 completed surveys), and 35% of all families (2012 completed parent surveys), distributed evenly across schools and grade level. With the exception of three schools where staff response rates were particularly low (57%, 44% and 43%) student and staff response rates were high and fairly consistent across schools. Parent responses, while considerably lower, were also consistent across schools.

The only known sources of non-response among students and staff were absences and refusals to complete the survey due to their own, or, in the case of students, their parents' objections. In both cases, comments received via phone, written notes, and e-mail suggested that the non-responses were disproportionately from students and staff who are positive about the general climate of the schools and who hold skeptical or negative views of the community equity complaint and the School District's Resolution Agreement with the Office of Civil Rights. Thus, our best guess is that if these individuals had completed the survey, the general perceptions of the climate by staff would have been more positive, while the differences found between White and African American respondents would have been larger.

More information was available (through parent comments) concerning the sources of non-response among parents. Indications are that there were primarily four reasons parents did not respond.

- They saw the survey as biased and/or a waste of time, these people see little in the way of race problems - or see race problems as being isolated to rare individuals.
- They were highly skeptical that anything positive would come from the survey and, therefore, saw no purpose in completing it (this appeared to be a primary reason among African Americans and other parents of color).

- They did not see it as enough of a priority to take the time to complete it.
- For other reasons, they could not find the time to complete it.

It is difficult to assess how the results might have been different had all parents responded, as it is impossible to know the proportion of parents who did not respond for each these four reasons and each reason is likely to have had a different impact on the results.

In any case, concerns about non-response are mitigated by the sheer number of students (5627), staff (814) and parents (2012) upon which the results are based. The perceptions of such large numbers of students and staff must be given serious consideration.

Results

Social Climate Dimension Scores. Each survey item was designed to measure how participants feel about one of the school climate dimensions defined in Table 1 below. Each dimension was measured by participants' answers to at least two (typically between three and seven) items on the survey.[7] (See appendices A through E for the specific items used to measure each climate dimension within each sample.) Depending on the dimension measured, each item was rated either for participant's level of agreement, perceived importance, or frequency of occurrence. Scores for each climate dimension were computed for each participant by taking the average of the ratings across the multiple items for each dimension. These scores enable us to report the proportion of each sample that, on average (across items) agreed, were neutral or disagreed with each climate dimension.

Overall, with a few notable exceptions, school staff and parents perceive the climate of Champaign schools in very similar and positive terms. Middle and high school student perceptions are generally slightly less positive than those of parents and staff. Their perceptions are typically neutral to negative. Elementary students tend to see the climate more positively than middle and high school students.

Because there are more Whites than African Americans in each sample, the average results for each sample (when race is ignored) tend to look like those of the Whites. However, there are significant differences across race on most perceptions. This is true for staff, parents, middle and high school students. When results are examined separately for Whites and African Americans, significant differences emerge. African Americans see many aspects of the social climate in dramatically more negative terms than do Whites.

---

7 An individual may interpret the meaning of any single question on a survey differently than was intended by the survey creator. Moreover, an individual's response to any given question can be affected by many factors. Therefore, when measuring broader concepts, averaging responses to several specific questions can create a more accurate picture of how people feel about the concept. Use of multiple questions to measure each climate dimension increases the validity and reliability of survey results.

CHAMPAIGN COMMUNITY UNIT SCHOOL DISTRICT 4 - SCHOOL CLIMATE STUDY

Table 1: Climate Dimension Definitions

Dimension Name	Definition	Samples
Influence	Participants' perceived influence on school operations and decision-making.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Trust & Respect	Participants' trust of their teachers, principal, and other staff.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Reasons for Misbehavior	Participants' perceptions of why students have problems at school.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Fairness: General	Participants' perception that all students are treated fairly.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Fairness: Discipline	Participants' perception that discipline is administered fairly.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Fairness: Academic Programs	Participants' perception that access to academic and social programs is fair.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Discipline – Overreaction	Participants' perception that discipline is overly stressed in their school.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Need for Change	Participants' perceptions of the need to change the school system to better address racial inequities.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Cultural Understanding	Participants' perceptions of how well teachers are able to teach to diverse groups of students.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Experiences of Racism	Participants' perceptions of how often they have experienced racism.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Fear of Black Students	Participants' perceptions of whether students and teachers at their school are afraid of Black students.	Staff, Parents, High School, Middle School
Discipline- Interference with Education	Participants' perceptions of how much disciplinary procedures do or do not interfere with the educational	High School, Middle School
School-Parent Contact – Discipline	Participants' perception of why and when parents are contacted when children have disciplinary problems.	Staff, Parents
School-Parent Contact – Comfort	Participants' perception of how comfortable parents feel about their contact with school staff.	Staff, Parents
Conceptualizations of Integrated Schools	Participants' perceptions of the importance of different aspects of racial integration when considering racially integrated schools.	Staff, Parents
Parent Involvement – Outside of School	Participants' perceptions of the importance of the different ways they are involved in their children's education outside of school.	Staff, Parents
Parent Involvement – In School Auxiliary	Parent's perceptions of the importance of the different ways they are involved in volunteering and attending events in their children's schools	Staff, Parents
Parent Involvement – School Governance	Participants' perceptions of the importance of the different ways parents are involved in their children's classrooms and decision-making in their children's schools.	Staff, Parents
Parent Involvement – Frequency	Participants' perception of how often parents do different parent involvement activities	Staff, Parents
Perceptions of Encouragement of Parent Involvement	Participants' perceptions concerning how encouraging their school is of parent involvement	Staff, Parents
Barriers to Parent Involvement	Parent's perceptions of the reasons why they are unable or choose not to become involved in their children's schools.	Staff, Parents
General Climate	Participants' perception of school climate as indicated predominantly by how teachers treat the respondent and students in general	Elementary School

| Experiences of Racism from Other Students | Participants' perceptions of racism directed towards the respondent by other students | Elementary School |

Staff and Parent Results[8]

Influence, Trust and Respect. On average, Champaign school staff and parents perceived the social climate of the schools in relatively positive terms. Most felt valued and appreciated as members of the school community. Approximately 60% of all staff and 47% of all parents believed that their opinions matter and their ideas and suggestions influence the operations and decision-making at their school. Nearly three quarters of both groups felt that they are respected by, and can trust, other school staff. Still, 35% of staff and 45% of parents were neutral or not sure about their influence, and nearly a quarter of both groups (23%) were neutral or not sure about whether they have the trust and respect of school staff.[9] (See pages A11-A12 of the Appendix A and pages B12-B13 of Appendix B for more details.)

School-Parent Contact and Parent Involvement. Similarly, both parents and staff, on average, had generally positive views about the nature of school parent contact and parent involvement in the school. Both groups agreed that parent involvement is sought immediately when serious disciplinary problems exist and before serious disciplinary action is taken, although staff were more likely to agree with this than were parents (76% v. 67% respectively). Nearly half of both groups agreed they were satisfied with the level of comfort and ease they experience in school-parent relations. However, a larger proportion of parents than staff viewed this dimension of the school climate negatively (4% v. 3% respectively). Nearly two out of three parents who responded to the survey believed that their child's school encourages parents to be involved in school in various ways. One out of four parents were neutral or not sure. Staff perceptions of how encouraging the schools are of parent involvement were similar to parents'. (See pages A13-A16 of Appendix A and pages B14-B20 of Appendix B for more details.)

Staff and parents also had similar views about the relative importance of various kinds of parent involvement. Both groups viewed parent involvement in children's education at home as very important and as more important than either volunteering/attending events at school or involvement in school governance. This includes activities such as monitoring children's homework, reading to children at home and stressing the importance of education. Parent involvement at the school as a volunteer or attending school activities was viewed by staff and parents as important. Only one area of parent participation was viewed, on average, as only somewhat important --- involvement in school governance issues. Interestingly, over twice as many

---

8 Of the 814 staff respondents, 70% are teachers, 3% administrators and 24% are other building staff, including teachers' aids, clerical, office, janitorial, etc. Results were examined separately for teachers and non-teachers. Because no appreciable differences were found in the results for these two groups, results for all staff are grouped together in this report. See Appendices A and B for a further details on the demographic characteristics of the staff and parent samples.

9 Given the labeling of the response categories, for dimensions based on items rated in terms of agreement it is not possible to distinguish those people who answered "neutral" from those who answered "not sure." For this reason, caution should be used when interpreting the meaning of mid-range responses.

parents (25%) as staff (11%) saw parent participation in school governance as unimportant. (See pages A17-A19 of Appendix A and page B20 of Appendix B for more details.)

One area where staff and parents had somewhat different views concerns perceptions of barriers to parent involvement. Parents and staff tended to see different factors as the most significant barriers to parent involvement.[10] The largest groups of parents saw issues of scheduling, time availability, lack of teacher encouragement, and lack of information from school as the most significant barriers. While many teachers recognized constraints on parents' time, they underestimated problems associated with the other top parent concerns and overestimated the extent to which transportation and inadequate knowledge of how to help children with homework serve as barriers. In Table 2, below, is a partial list of factors that parents viewed as barriers to parent involvement ranked by the proportion of parents that see them as "usually" or routinely a barrier for their involvement.

Table 2: Perceived Barriers to Parent Involvement		
Item	Percent of <u>Parents</u> who view item as usually a barrier	Percent of <u>Teachers</u> who view item as usually a barrier
Activities at my child's school are held during my working hours.	16%	7%
I do not have enough time to get involved.	14%	21%
Teachers do not encourage me to participate in classroom activities.	10%	5%
My child's teachers do not make useful suggestions about how to improve my child's school work.	8%	1%
I do not know how to help my child with homework.	5%	9%
Transportation is a problem.	3%	7%

Fairness. Most staff and parents also felt that students of all kinds are treated fairly in the schools, regardless of race, social class, or how well they achieve in school. Only six percent of all staff disagreed that all students are treated fairly at their school,

---

10 Only 3/4ths of all responding staff completed this subscale. Comments suggest that many of those who did not complete it did not feel comfortable estimating what conditions were or were not barriers to parent involvement.

and only seven percent of all parents did. While parent perceptions did not change when perceptions of fairness were more narrowly focused on fairness of discipline or academic programs, slightly higher numbers of staff (9%) believed that discipline is not administered fairly at their school, and even more staff (12%) believed that access to specialized academic programs is not fair. Still, the overwhelming majority of staff and parents saw these areas of student treatment as fair. (See pages A34-A36 of Appendix and pages B34-B36 of the Appendix B for more details.)

Cultural Understanding. Most staff (53%) also believed, on average, that teachers take students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds into account when teaching. Only 8% of staff actively disagreed, while the remaining 38% were either neutral or not sure. Parents' views were less positive, yet only 9% actively disagreed. Less than half of the parents (43%) who responded believed, on average, that teachers take students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds into account when teaching, while the largest group of parents (47%) were neutral or not sure. (See page A37 of Appendix A and page B37 of Appendix B for more details.)

Need for Change. Consistent with the findings regarding perceptions of fairness

Perceptions of Fairness
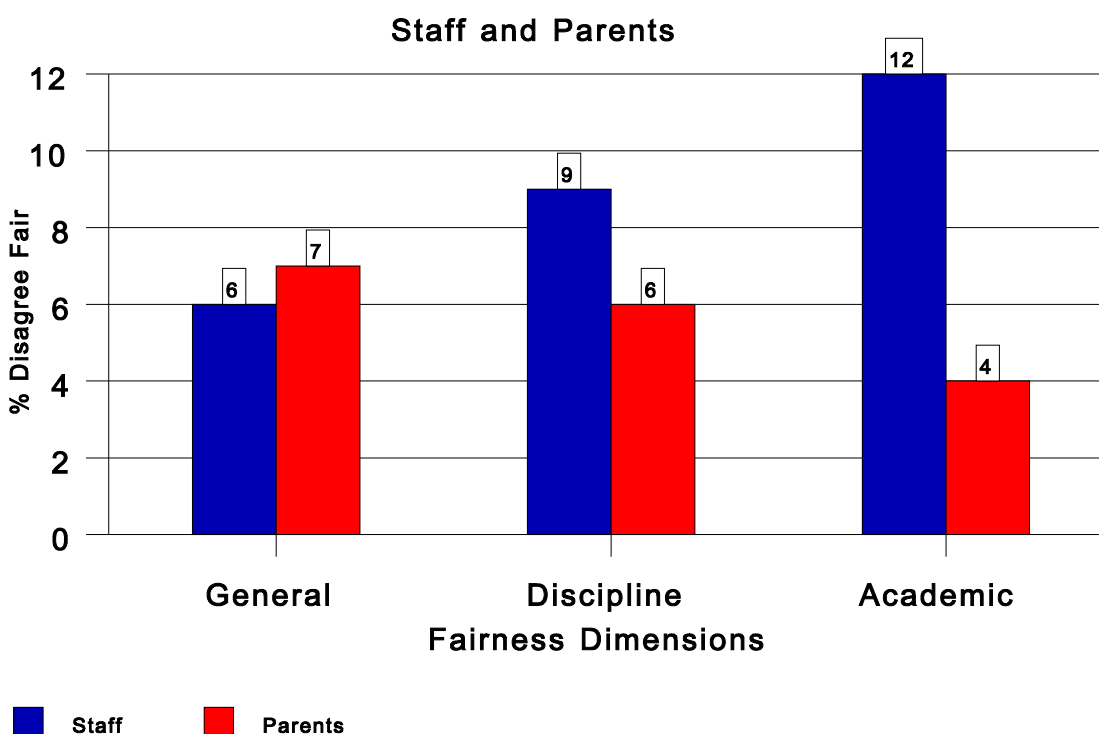
Staff and Parents

and cultural understanding, on average, staff and parents tended to see little need to change the school system to better address the needs of non-White students, including addressing racial inequities and the potential racism of some teachers. Among staff, 46% disagreed that such needs exist, while 40% were either neutral or not sure and only 14% agreed. Parents were slightly less likely to see a need for change in these areas. Among parents, 51% disagreed that such needs exist, while 37% were neutral or not sure and

only 12% agreed. (See page A38 of Appendix A and page B38 of Appendix B for more details.)

Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools. Given Unit 4's goal that its schools be racially desegregated, the survey examined staff and parents' perceptions of the importance of various issues found in previous research to foster positive school climate for African American students in desegregated schools. These issues included African American representation in academic programs and among school staff, and the teaching of cultural sensitivity and African American history.

Overall, the results in this area reflected moderate support for these issues. When the issues are viewed as a group, 78% of staff and 58% of parents believed they are important, at least to some degree. However, when each item of the dimension was viewed individually, significant variability in the amount of support for each separate issue was apparent. Staff and parents viewed the teaching of cultural sensitivity and African American History as the most important issues, while they viewed proportional African American representation in special education classes as the least important. While 94% of staff reported that teaching cultural sensitivity is at least somewhat important (36% viewed it as very important), less than half of the staff (49%) viewed proportional representation of African American students in special education classes as at least somewhat important (only 6% view it as very important). Support from staff for proportional representation of African Americans in upper level classes and among teaching and administrative staff fell between these extremes. Sixty-five percent of staff viewed proportional representation of African Americans in upper level classes as at least

Perceptions of Desegregated Schools
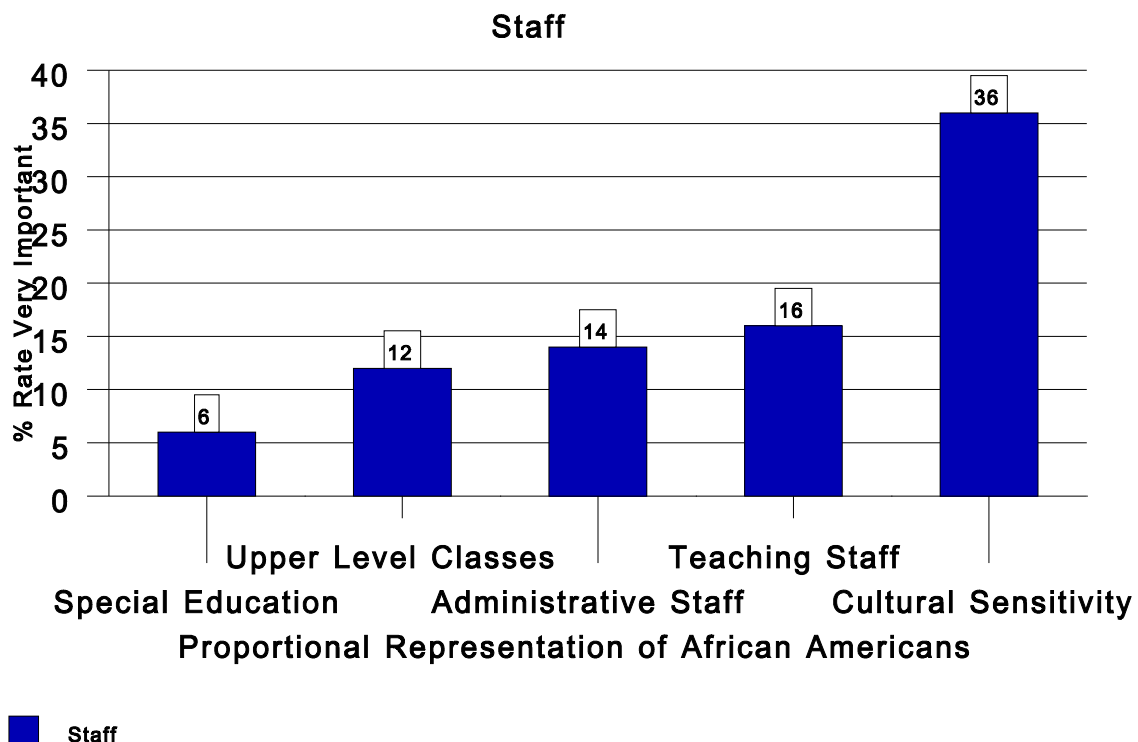
Staff

somewhat important. Seventy-three percent of staff viewed proportional representation

of African Americans among teachers as at least somewhat important. Finally, 68% of staff viewed proportional representation of African Americans among administrators as at least somewhat important. Still, only between 12% and 16% of staff view these latter three issues as very important. Results from the parents paralleled those from staff. Parents and staff ranked the importance of the various issues in the same order, although on average, parents viewed all of the issues as less important than staff. (See page A39 of Appendix A and page B39 of Appendix B for more details.)

Reasons for Misbehavior. This scale measures respondents' perceptions of reasons why students have problems at school. It focuses on the role of parents valuing and stressing the importance of education, the role of social class compared to race, and the role of teacher understanding of students' ethnic backgrounds. Most staff and parents did not express strong views about these issues. The most common response to items on this scale from both staff (52%) and parents (50%) was neutral or not sure. However, over one third of staff (35%) and over one quarter of parents (27%) believed that student problems stem from a failure of parents to adequately value and stress the importance of education. These respondents also tended to believe that most problems labeled as 'racial problems' in the district are more due to poverty than to race, and they tended to disagree that a better understanding of students' ethnic backgrounds by teachers and principals would reduce disciplinary problems at school. (See page A40 of Appendix A and page B44 of Appendix B for more details.)

Fear of Black Students. The vast majority of staff (73%) and parents (63%) did not believe that teachers or students are afraid of Black students at their school. However, 15% of staff and 9% of parents believed that students at their school are afraid of Black students.   (See page A41 of Appendix A and page B41 of Appendix B for more details.)

Experiences of Racism. Overt acts of racism were not reported to be a pervasive problem by any group of respondents. The vast majority of staff (86%) and parents (93%) reported never having experienced racism or being treated badly because of their race at school.   Only 4% of staff and 2% of parents reported such experiences more often than a few times. (See page A42 of Appendix A and page B42 of Appendix B for more details.)

Discipline Overreaction. Neither staff nor parent respondents believed that discipline is over-stressed in their school. Only a small minority of both groups (less than 2% of staff and 6% of parents) tended to believe that there are either too many rules, or that teachers are too strict and overreact to student misbehavior. (See page A43 of Appendix A and page B43 of Appendix B for more details.)

Student Results

On balance, middle and high school students' perceptions of the school climate were more neutral to negative than were those of staff or parents. Typically, those dimensions of the climate that staff and parents saw positively, middle- and high-school students perceived in neutral terms. Those dimensions that adults were neutral about,

students perceived negatively. Descriptions of how middle- and high-school student perceptions differed from those of staff and parents follow immediately. Results for elementary students are then presented.

Influence, Trust and Respect. Perhaps not surprisingly, students were less likely to perceive that they have influence in the school than adults. Students were also less likely than adults to perceive interpersonal trust and respect (primarily from school personnel) in the school. While staff and parents, on average, tended to believe that their opinions influence school operations and decision making, middle and high school students tended to feel neutral about their influence.   Over half of high school students were neutral or not sure about influence, while only about 20% believed that their ideas and suggestions are used to improve the school. About twice as many middle school students perceived that they have influence; still fewer than half, only roughly 40%, of middle schoolers believed that their ideas and suggestions are used to improve the school. Similarly, while 75% of both staff and parents perceive interpersonal trust and respect in the school, only 55% of middle schoolers and 45% of high school students do. (See pages C8-C9 Appendix C and pages D8-D9 of Appendix D for more details.)

Fairness. Middle and high school students tended to be significantly less positive about the fairness of the schools. On average, they reported being neutral or not sure about how fair the schools are. Slightly larger proportions of students (15% of middle and 20% of high schoolers) than staff or parents felt that the schools are unfair. This was especially true in middle school students' perceptions of how fairly discipline is administered.   Twenty-nine percent of middle school students perceived that the schools are unfair. (See pages C10-C11 Appendix C and pages D10-D11 of Appendix D for more details.)

Understanding. This scale has some content overlap with the cultural understanding scale from the staff and parent surveys. However, in addition to measuring perceptions of whether teachers take students learning styles and cultural backgrounds into account when teaching, it also includes perceptions of whether the principal and teachers understand students' points of view. Substantially fewer high school students (16%) than adults (53% of staff and 44% of parents) perceived that teachers take students learning styles and cultural backgrounds into account when teaching. Students who doubted teachers' in this way also tended to believe that the principal and teachers do not understand students' points of view. (See page C13 Appendix C and page D13 of Appendix D for more details.)

Need for Change. Students saw only slightly more need for change than did staff or parents. On average, like the adults, students were neutral or not sure about the need for change to address issues of race in the schools. (See page C14 of Appendix C and page D14 of Appendix D for more details.)

Reasons for Misbehavior. Slightly fewer students than adults (22% of middle and 27% of high schoolers compared to 35% of staff and 27% of parents) believed that student problems stem from a failure of parents to value and stress the importance of education. (See page C15 of Appendix C and page D15 of Appendix D for more details.)

Experiences of Racism. Like the adult samples, the vast majority of middle (72%) and high school students (74%) reported never having experienced racism or being treated badly because of their race at school. However, significantly more students (16% of middle and 11% of high schoolers) than adults (4% of staff and 2% of parents) reported having experienced racism monthly or more frequently. (See page C17 of Appendix C and page D17 of Appendix D for more details.)

Discipline Overreaction. Significantly higher proportions of students (33% of middle and 15% of high schoolers) than adults (less than 2% of staff and 6% of parents) perceived that the teachers overreact with discipline, are too strict and have too many rules. (See page C18 of Appendix C and page D18 of Appendix D for more details.)

Fear of Black Students. Students saw more fear of Black students among both teachers and students than adults did. Like the adults, the largest groups of middle and high school students disagreed that teachers and students fear Black students at their school. However, roughly one fifth of both high schoolers (17%) and middle schoolers (16%) believed that their teachers fear Black students. (See page C16 of Appendix C and page D16 of Appendix D for more details.)

Elementary Student Results. Unlike responses to the middle- and high-school versions of the survey which captured eleven distinct dimensions of the social climate, responses to questions on the elementary version revealed only two dimensions of the social climate. This fact indicates a less highly developed cognitive representation of the perceived climate among elementary students compared to middle- and high-schoolers.

The first general climate dimension measured students' perceptions of how teachers treated the respondent and students in general. (See page E7 of Appendix E for the items which measured this dimension.) Results indicated that 75% of students had a positive view of their and other students' treatment by their teacher. Only 6% of all students had a negative view on this dimension. There were no differences on this dimension across race or grade of respondent.

The second dimension measured students' perceptions that they had been treated badly or unfairly by other students because of race. (See page E8 of Appendix E for the items which measured this dimension.)   Fifty-nine percent of all students disagreed that they had been treated badly by other students, while 22% agreed. Slight differences emerged on this dimension when examined separately by race (24% of African American compared to 17% of White students agreed).

Differences in Perceptions of Climate by Race.

African Americans saw the social climate in dramatically more negative terms than Whites. Differences in perceptions between African Americans and Whites are the rule in Champaign Schools. For all but the elementary student sample, and on a high proportion of all climate dimensions, there were very substantial differences across race.[11] On most measures, White school staff and parents had the most favorable view of the climate, followed by White students. African American staff and students had the most negative view, followed closely by African American parents.

The largest and most pervasive racial differences occurred among school staff. This reflects the fact that African American staff tended to see the climate the most negatively of all groups and White staff tended to see it most positively. On 18 of the 19 the climate dimensions measured (95%), African American staff perceived the climate more negatively than their White peers. This was true for each subsample of staff, including teachers, administrators and other staff. Middle school students had the next largest proportion of climate dimensions with differences across race. On 8 of 12 of the climate dimensions measured (75%), African American middle schoolers perceived the climate more negatively than their White peers. Fewer, yet numerous, differences were found for parents (on 10 of 19, 53%, of dimensions) and high school students (on 6 of 12, or 50% of dimensions).

Across all samples, the largest and most consistent differences in perceptions appeared on six climate dimensions: General Fairness, Disciplinary Fairness, Academic Fairness, Cultural Understanding, Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools, and Need for Change.[12] Racial differences were found on each of these dimensions in every sample. African American respondents were, depending on sample, between 2 and 23 times more likely than their White counterparts to believe the schools are unfair, between 2 and 4 times more likely to disagree that teaching styles are personally and culturally relevant, between 3 and 9 times more likely to perceive a need for change in their school, and between 7 and 11 times more likely to rate as very important various issues found in previous research to foster positive school climate for African American students in desegregated schools.

---

11 Parallel differences exist across socio-economic class, with parents and students from lower income families consistently tending to perceive the climate more negatively than those from middle and upper income families. However, statistical analyses demonstrate that racial differences in perceptions cannot be explained by social class (nor by students' academic or disciplinary status). Racial differences persist even when analyses controlled for income level and students' academic and disciplinary status.

12 It is worth noting that there were not racial differences on all dimensions, and that those found were of very different magnitudes, some differences were extremely large, while others were less so. This suggests that the race differences can not simply be accounted for by a general response bias of either African Americans (negative) or Whites (positive).

Fairness. African Americans were far more likely than Whites to perceive that the schools are unfair to children. Twenty-five percent of African American staff compared to only 2% of Whites disagreed that students of all kinds are treated fairly in the schools, regardless of race, social class, or how well they achieve in school. Similar findings were obtained for staff perceptions of the fairness of discipline and academic programs. Thirty-four percent of African Americans compared to only 4% of Whites disagreed that discipline is administered fairly in the schools, while 46% of African Americans compared to only 6% of Whites disagreed that talented/gifted and special education programs are administered fairly. Additionally, on each fairness dimension, larger proportions of African Americans compared to Whites were neutral or not sure about fairness. Thus, on average, roughly 83% of African American staff failed to report that they believe the schools are fair to students while only 25% of Whites felt this way. Similar, but somewhat less pronounced differences exist for the parent, middle and high school student samples.
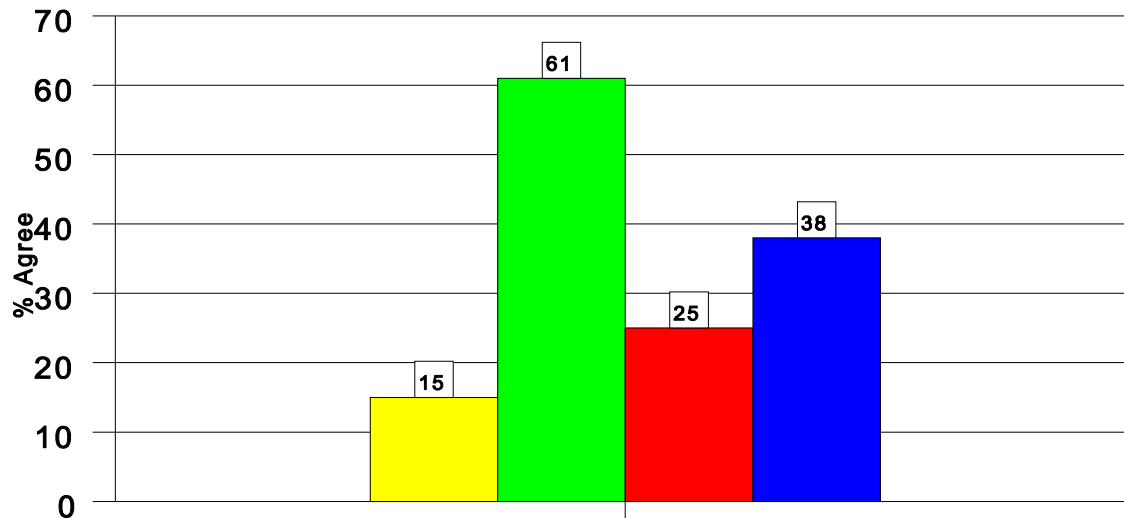
Perceptions of Fairness

Staff by Race
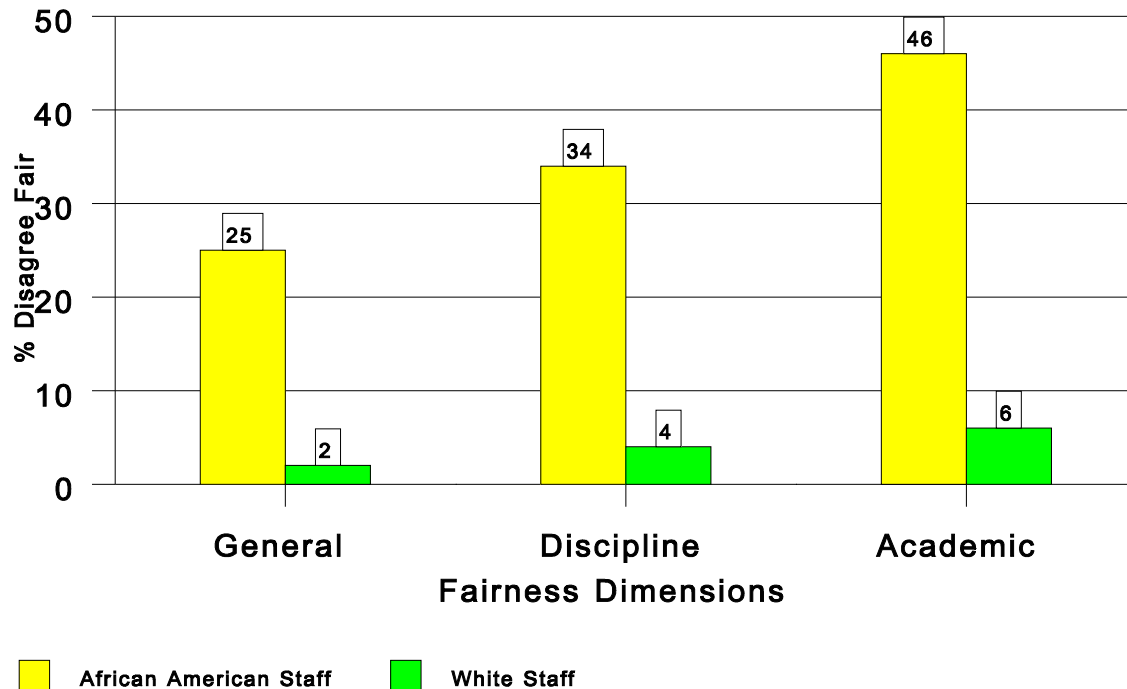
Cultural Understanding. While White staff tended to believe that teachers at their school take students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds into account when teaching, African American staff, generally, did not (only 15% of African American staff believed this to be true while 61% of White staff did). The same is true for parents, only 25% of African American parents believed this to be true while 38% of White parents did. There were no appreciable race differences on this dimension in the middle- or high-school samples.

Perceptions of Cultural Understanding

Staff and Parents by Race


Teachers Show Cultural Understanding

- African American Staff
- White Staff
- African American Parents
- White Parents

Need for Change. Consistent with their perceptions of Fairness and Cultural Understanding, 53% of African American staff and 49% of African American parents believed that their schools need to change to better address racial inequities. Only 6% of White staff and 7% parents felt the same. Parallel differences, although not quite as large, exist for both middle and high schoolers.

## Perceptions of Need for Change

Staff and Parents by Race
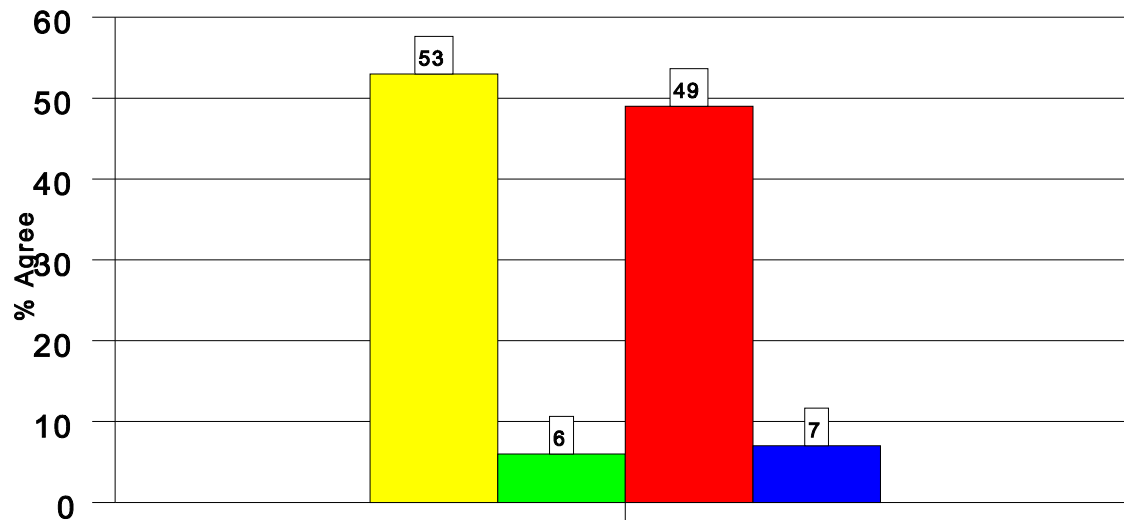
Need for Change to Better Address Racial Inequities

- African American Staff
- White Staff
- African American Parents
- White Parents

Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools.   On average, African American staff (61%) and parents (48%) felt it is very important that Champaign schools both adopt curricula that embrace African American perspectives and achieve proportional representation of African Americans in various school roles (e.g., teacher, administrator) and programs (e.g., upper level or special education courses).   Very few White staff (9%) or White parents (5%) perceived these qualities of desegregated schools as very important.

Perceptions of Desegregated Schools

Staff and Parents by Race

Proportional Representation and Curriculum Change

- 🟨 African American Staff
- 🟥 African American Parents
- 🟩 White Staff
- 🟦 White Parents
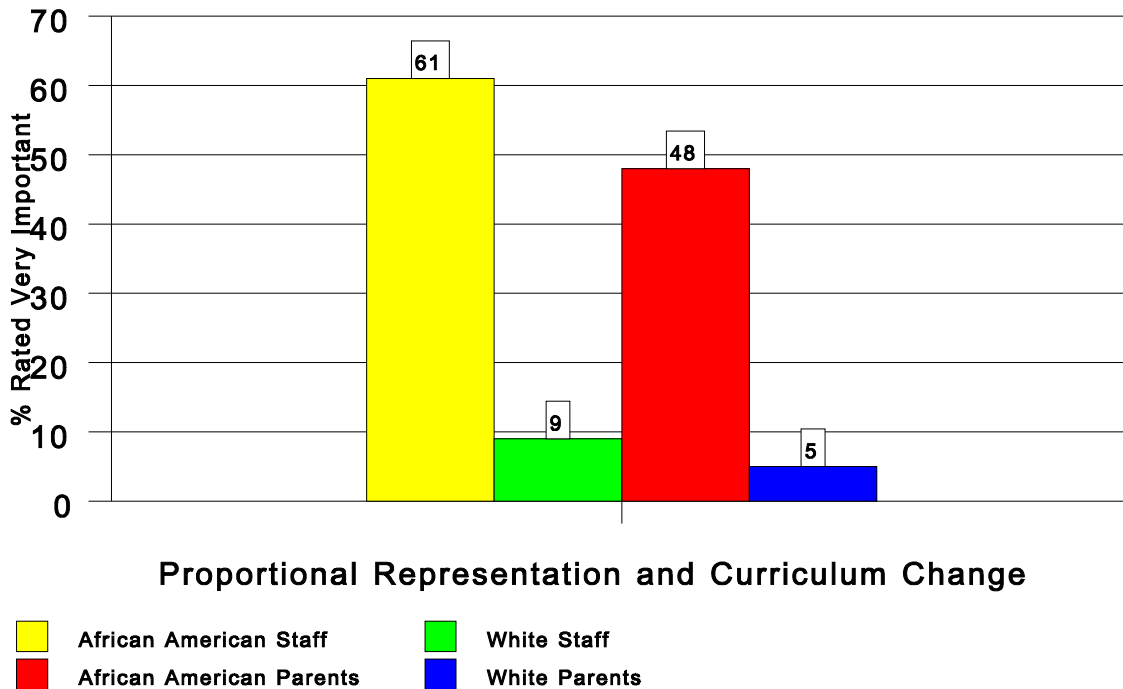
Experiences of Racism. While differences between African Americans and

Whites in their perceptions of whether they have experienced racism were not particularly large (between 3% and 7% across samples), it should be noted that when disaggregated from Whites, high proportions of both middle- (21%) and high-school (16%) African American students reported experiencing racism at their school monthly or more often.

<u>Discussion</u>

The findings from this study revealed both positive and negative aspects of the perceived social climate of Unit 4 schools. On the positive side, first, the majority of all parents, staff and students in the district saw the school climate in largely positive terms. Second, neither adults nor students perceived widespread overt or malicious interpersonal racism. Third, there was a widespread desire to be fair and to "do right" by all children and families in the district.

On the other hand, numerous findings indicated reason for serious concern. First, African American staff, parents and students perceived the climate in markedly more negative terms than did Whites --- often in very negative terms. These findings indicated perceived lack of fairness and cultural understanding that are not, typically, the result of malicious or intentional racism on the part of individual people, but rather are institutionalized in the educational practices and policies of the schools. Second, there was evidence that large proportions of those with the most power in the district, White staff and parents, did not perceive a need for change. Third, there was evidence of considerable resistance to change.

In addition to the numerical results from the survey, comments were volunteered by 40% of parents and 54% of staff respondents.[13] These comments do not represent all parents' or staffs' views. But they provide a useful interpretive context and help to illustrate interpretations of the numerical findings. The study findings along with comments by many respondents begin to shed light on why differences in perceptions of school climate exist. They can also show what might be done to make the experiences people have in the Champaign School district more positive for everyone.

The diverse perspectives measured in this study result from diverse experiences. For example, the experiences of staff and parents led them to view school climate more favorably than students. Given differences in their roles in the schools, it is not surprising that children and adults have divergent experiences, and therefore, divergent perspectives on climate. Similarly, African Americans' experiences led them to view the climate less favorably than Whites did. To understand differences in White and African American perspectives on school climate, it will be useful to understand differences in their experiences.

Many of the experiences that influence one's perspective on school climate take place in the schools. Other experiences occur at home, in the neighborhood and in the broader society. Although school staff cannot control all the experiences that influence school climate, they should understand those experiences in order to attempt to improve their own school's climate.

Should the differences in perspectives revealed by this study be taken seriously? One important implication of this study's findings pertains to whose perspectives deserve attention. Some parents and staff believed that concerns about racial equity and school

---

13 Many comments were provided in writing on the surveys while others were gathered through the interviews and group meetings held in the survey construction phase of the study.

climate in Unit 4 are held by only a few vocal and misguided activists. One parent expressed this view this way:

> I feel that everything that has happened to the Unit 4 schools in the past 2-3 years has been a gross overreaction to a few people's perception that there is rampant racism in public schools....

Another noted:

> I am saddened by the amount of time, energy and money diverted from the educational process by this controversy. It is distressing that a few attention-seeking individuals can detract from the true mission of our schools.

Comments from many others were consistent with these perspectives. They suggested that it is not uncommon for staff and parents to believe that only a few individuals perceive race-related problems in Champaign schools. Results from this study contradicted this perception. They indicated that large numbers of people[14], particularly (although certainly not exclusively) African American parents, staff and students perceived significant problems in school climate.

Results from this study also suggested possible reasons why such concerns might be misattributed to only a few people. If climate perceptions are not broken down by race, perceptions were generally neutral to positive. Looking at the overall average, it appears that a relatively small percentage of people perceived significant problems in school climate. When the results are broken down by race, however, it becomes obvious that large numbers of people had serious concerns. Because the majority of staff and parents tend to interact professionally and socially with others who see the world in similar ways, they are less like to hear concerns voiced by peers who see things differently.

Comments from those who had climate concerns suggest that they are often reluctant to raise them, thereby decreasing their visibility. Reluctance to raise concerns stemmed from many sources, including the desire to avoid criticism, alienation or retribution. Perhaps most importantly, comments suggested that many staff and parents actively resisted discussing or taking seriously concerns about climate and equity. For these reasons, the pervasiveness of concerns about climate and equity indicated by the results of this study may not have been previously visible to large numbers of Champaign school staff and parents.

It is important that the board of education, the district administration, and the staff of each school treat the concerns of fellow staff, parents and students seriously and with respect. To do so, will require that a number of difficult and sensitive topics be discussed. The results from this study might provide a starting point for discussion about a broad range of these issues. That hope, held by many respondents, was reflected in the comment of one African American parent: "If this survey will change the way things are

---

14 The number varies from one climate dimension to another but typically ranges from several hundred to thousands of individuals.

in our school, it was worth filling out. I hope and pray that school systems can help with the understanding of the problems raised in this survey."

Fear of talking about race, unfairness and racism. One form that resistance to addressing concerns about climate and equity takes is fear --- fear of discussing race and how race might matter in schooling. Many parent and staff comments mentioned concerns that talking about race will create problems that otherwise would not exist. An example of this perspective was offered by a staff member who wrote: "Talking about racism just tends to enlarge the problems evolving around it." Some hold this belief because they think talking about racism creates the misperception that it exists, where it really does not. The following staff comment reflected this view:

> This survey was unhealthy and the one you are giving the students is worse! We ... [should not] make children and teachers answer questions that put the idea of unfairness in their heads – this is sad and whoever thinks this is for the good of Unit 4 needs to think again!

This same person believed that talking about racism leads to blaming. In response to the questions on the survey this person noted: "We need to educate by working together for the good of each student rather than trying to find fault ...."   Many others felt similarly. One parent suggested "I think [blacks] are looking for someone to blame ...." Many other staff commented that survey questions focused on perceptions of race and racism felt like accusations. One staff member noted "I felt this [survey] was extremely anti-White. NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT RACISM."[15] Another offered "This survey and the very existence of this survey is insulting to our professional staff."

Perhaps the most extreme version of this type of resistance was expressed by people who considered it inappropriate (even racist) simply to ask questions about race. One staff member asked about one item on the survey, "If racism is such an important issue in our schools, why do you want to know my race? Is it really necessary?" There appears to be a belief that the best way to deal with issues of race is to ignore the fact that people are of different races. This issue is connected to perceptions of fairness and is discussed in more detail below.

Fair and equal treatment. The results of this study clearly indicated that across samples of students, parents, and staff, African Americans perceived Unit 4 schools to be less fair than did Whites. Comments from parents and staff suggested that these differences may be rooted in different perceptions of what it means to be fair. Two topics generated particularly impassioned comments --- the disproportionate numbers of African American students in disciplinary actions and the disproportionate number in various academic programs.

The results of this study clearly indicate that most White staff and parents and a minority of African Americans did not believe that racial disparities in discipline and academic programs reflect unfairness. Comments suggested that they believed fair

---

15 Use of underlining and capitalization for emphasis in this and all subsequently quoted comments was provided by the author of the comment.

treatment requires that all students be treated equally. They also believed that the rules are administered the same for everyone and the criteria for placement in academic programs are consistent. As one parent noted, "If a rule is broken, you pay the consequence. End of story."

>From this perspective, racial disparities reflect differences in student behavior and performance across race. In the words of a parent: "The kids acting up are the ones getting suspended." A staff member with a similar perspective wrote: "Students are disciplined because of their ACTIONS – NOT color." The same thinking was applied to academic performance. A parent commented: "Encourage black students to strive harder and believe they are gifted but don't just 'give' it to them." Another offered, "if the kids aren't trying or don't want to do better at school they can't (or shouldn't) be put in gifted programs just to make the numbers and people happy."

For many staff and parents, efforts to be fair lead them to strive to be "color-blind," or to ignore race. This idea was expressed by one staff member as follows: "The staff and administration at ... [this] school treat all children alike. A child is a child--not a Black child, not a White child, not an Asian child, etc! All children are treated fairly and equally." A parent echoed this perspective arguing "Why must the skin color of a child be made such an issue? Can't each child receive the help they need and be treated the same regardless of color?" Many parents and teachers are actively working to instill the value of color-blindness in their children. One parent wrote: "My child does not see people of color in a different way. He was raised that everyone is equal."

The majority of African Americans on the other hand and a substantial number of Whites believed that racial disparities did reflect unfairness. They suggested that current definitions of giftedness in use by the district are too narrow, and that educational practices and policies involving discipline and special education are culturally inappropriate. They claimed to know that their children are in fact gifted and talented. They claimed to understand that their children's cultural backgrounds and daily experiences are not fully appreciated by all teachers, and that the cultural mismatch between teachers and their children hurts the children's performance in school. To the extent that the color-blind perspective led people not to acknowledge African American experiences and perceptions, many people, particularly African Americans saw this perspective as inherently demeaning and unfair.

To profess to be color-blind is often equivalent to choosing to ignore race altogether. It leads people to be unwilling to talk about how race matters in schools and schooling. It also serves to devalue fundamental aspects of people's identities, histories, cultures and everyday experiences that are connected to race.[16] Professor Sleeter of California State University, Monterey Bay, and co-editor of Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference has written that,

        In a color-blind approach, there is a whole lot about a student that you are

---

16 For additional discussion of these issues see Gloria Ladsen-Billings (1994). The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

not seeing. For example, if you take a kid who is of Mexican descent and you say, "I don't see a Mexican kid I just see a kid," you are preventing yourself from knowing something about that student's culture and community --- and an important part of the student. Do you know much about where the kid's family came from? ... about Mexican holidays and Mexican festivals that the kid may be participating in? ... about church traditions or family celebrations that the kid is part of? ... about Mexican literature and stories the kid is learning at home?

If a teacher is insisting on being color blind, then the teacher is putting herself in a position of saying, 'I don't know about the kid's background, I don't believe that's really important, and I'm not going to learn about it.' "

A substantial and growing body of research demonstrates that African American and other children of color's capacity to learn in school is greatly enhanced when teachers have a deep appreciation of their students' racial, cultural, religious, and family backgrounds and experiences. Learning is inhibited when teachers do not have such understanding. Thus, an unintentional consequence of efforts to be fair by being color-blind is interference with this understanding and damage to students' ability to learn.

The results of this study reveal a curious pattern of findings related to how Unit 4 staff and parents think about race and culture. Despite wide support for the notion of color-blind policies and practices, study results indicated that the majority of Unit 4 teachers (58%) believed that they and their colleagues demonstrate cultural understanding when teaching children of different backgrounds. In fact, only 4% of White staff disagreed.[17] Surprisingly, these results suggested that a good number of Unit 4 staff believed that they could be color-blind and at the same time show cultural understanding.

These results expose a limited perspective on cultural understanding and sensitivity on the part of some staff. Comments suggest that many people simply did not have sufficient background to be able to appreciate the nature of the issues at stake. For example, one staff person feared that efforts to be culturally appropriate would result in African American students not getting the services they need, and thus poor outcomes. This person commented:

Regarding standardized testing-say a black kid doesn't qualify for language services because the way he speaks is due to his culture. Then when he/she can't get a job or get into a top college because he/she uses black dialect, tell me, did taking his cultural background into consideration help or hurt this child? The business world expects standard English. Decide if you want black kids to succeed or not.

It is worth noting that this person expressed no malicious intent. Instead, the comment reflected a belief that "taking ... [a student's] cultural background into consideration" would result in a disservice to African American students. This reasoning led to skepticism about the wisdom of attending to cultural background in education. Unfortunately, there was no appreciation for the possibility that the language and cultural capital that African American students' bring to school could serve as bridges to learning

---

17 Thirty-five percent of White staff are neutral or not sure about this issue.

other language forms and need not impede learning or other longer term outcomes like employment.[18]

Most African American staff had a different view of whether most Unit 4 teachers show cultural understanding in their educational practices. Only 15% of African American staff agreed this was true. Comments suggested that African Americans' disagreement was grounded in ideas about cultural understanding that were different from those of White staff. These results point to the need for Unit 4 staff to engage in dialogue about what constitutes cultural understanding. African American staff's experiences give them an inside and privileged perspective on this issue that White staff cannot have. White and other non-African American staff may benefit from learning more about their African American peers' perspectives. Deeper appreciation of perspectives unlike one's own would be a likely benefit of such dialogue for African American staff as well.

Many staff were open to learning more, and would likely be open to engaging this dialogue. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that the vast majority (94%) of all staff believed that the teaching of cultural sensitivity in Unit 4 schools was at least somewhat important (and 36% viewed it as very important). It is also positive that some staff recognized the limits of their cultural understanding:

> With school's of choice, our students are from all neighborhoods. I know my "cultural" neighborhood well. We all try to be aware of our students lives-but I do not know all about Hispanic neighborhoods where Spanish is spoken at home. I do not know all about single parent families or Jewish households-or African American. I try. We all try. We can not understand it all-but we do our best.

Most staff who believe in "equal treatment" are often willing to ignore it when dealing with children who differ on personal characteristics other than race. Many teachers and parents who endorse the color-blind perspective, for example, believe it good practice to tailor their approaches to teaching and disciplinary practices to the personality and needs of the individual, and to the circumstances in which the child is situated. In effect, they do not believe that it is always appropriate to treat all children equally. With the right experiences, these people may be open to learning the ways in which attending to race and culture can improve the educational experiences of many of their students.

Need for Change. Because they did not see racial disparities in discipline and academic programs as unfair, most staff and parents did not see a significant need for the district to change to better address issues of race. In addition to perceiving little reason to change, many feared that efforts to reduce racial disparities would not only be unfair, but would also make things worse for all students. This thinking produces added resistance to change.

---

18 For an extended discussion of how teachers may provide their students facility in the use of "standard edited English" while also valuing and making use in the classroom of the language and culture children bring from home, see Lisa Delpit's (1995) book, Other peoples children. NewYork: The New Press.

Many feared that efforts to end racial disparities would produce quotas or lower standards. In the area of discipline, these concerns took two forms, both of which centered on unequal treatment and both of which were viewed as "reverse discrimination." A parent who captured the first concern wrote "If you're not watching 'reverse' racism will begin to occur. White, or nonblack students, will receive punishments too harsh and out of line just to have an equal percentage of suspensions. That is ridiculous." The second concern, like the first, focused on unequal treatment, but the reverse discrimination occurs by showing undue tolerance to misbehavior by African Americans. These fears seem to be grounded to some extent in perceptions of what is already taking place in the schools. "My daughter's school treats black staff and students with far more tolerance than their white counterparts. They allow vastly more inappropriate behavior by the black population due to extreme fear of reprisal. All people, regardless of race, should have to follow/abide by same rules!" Another parent echoed this sentiment arguing "... there is a base level of expected behavior from all students and teachers. Continuing to lower that level puts all students at a disadvantage." A third parent said it this way: "If kids are constantly disruptive in class (no matter what race) they should be taken out and put in another class so that teacher can do her job of teaching not just disciplining - the other kids lose their learning time."

Similar perceptions existed in the area of academic programs. Many comments raised concerns that efforts to eliminate racial disparities would compromise the quality of existing programs. One parent expressed this fear as follows: "... tracking rather than mixing will build strength to achieve potential. Don't let statistics dumb down our schools." Another suggested that "standards of gifted programs should not be lowered in order to make racials (sic) more even."

Finally, efforts to end disparities led others to worry that the needs of African American students would be ignored. The following comments illustrated this idea.

As a teacher for Unit #4, I have concerns that the black children in our city are now being overlooked for needed assistance, because of the actions of OCR and other community members. I find this very discouraging as an educator. The tone has been set that black children should not be recommended for special education classes even if they are struggling with academics. Many of these children suffer from poverty, poor parenting, and coming to school less prepared than their classmates. It seems that OCR is intimidating teachers and administrators who care about helping the disadvantaged. We should not have to offer or deny assistance solely because of the color of the child's skin. Why do we set the standards if we are not going to use them as guidelines for everyone?

And,

The need is for minority students who want to take the advanced classes and are willing to prepare themselves for it. To mandate a certain % of minority students to take a class is stupid! By the same token, if a student needs help, they should get help! Are you suggesting that if a black student needs help, but the quota has already been met, then we can't take anymore? Get real!

It is important to note that the word quota did not appear on the survey. Nor did the idea of lowering standards. Thus, it is instructive that so many people reacted to questions about reducing racial disparities with concerns about quotas and lowering standards. It seems that they assumed that this was the only way the district could possibly reduce racial disparities. Of course, this need not be the case. There was little appreciation expressed in these comments for the fact that the normative standards and practices in Unit 4 are based on the experiences of White middle class children. Any effort to broaden or modify those standards tends to be interpreted as evidence of some failing or deficiency in those such modifications might benefit. This dynamic was reflected in the calls of many parents not to "lower standards." Although this dynamic was not driven by conscious racism, it is infused in the policies and practices of the school in a way that constitutes a form of institutional racism.

Alternative explanations for racial disparities. Many who saw little unfairness or need for change attributed racial disparities in discipline and academic programs to differences in student behavior. The results of this study indicated that 40% of White staff believed that the primary reasons that African American children have difficulties in school are problems of economic class and lack of parental support for education. Another 52% were neutral or not sure. Only 8% of staff actively disagreed with such interpretations. Many staff and parent comments were stated to defend the schools against blame for the poor performance of African American students. These comments suggested instead that the problems are rooted outside the school and therefore are not the schools' responsibility to address.

Many believe that parents, economics, and/or society are to blame. The view that racial disparities in schooling are primarily due to parental failings took a number of forms. One set of attributions centered on lack of parent involvement in schools and lack of parent valuing of education. The following parent's comments illustrated this set of views.

> Having been involved with the schools, I see almost no [African American] parents who are involved. I feel if the parents do their part in child-rearing the children will be equal. The schools can only do so much to change the inequities without the parents' help. If there are more [African Americans] in special education and less in gifted, it's because the parents do not try to enrich their children's lives (by reading to them, etc) from the time they're born ... If that's a cultural thing, then their culture is adversely affecting their children, if they want them out of special ed and in gifted. That's how its done- either play by the rules or stop whining. If lack of parental education is to blame, there's free adult ed for them. If they want their kids to not get in trouble at school, teach them values at home, back the teachers, watch the children. Know where they are.

Sometimes parent blame seemed to be generalized to all aspects of parenting as suggested in this staff comment:

> This is a joke! And a waste of paper and my <u>time.</u> Children do poorly in school because of many issues. Their parents aren't well educated and don't value

education. The children are poor and live in chaotic homes. They are neglected at best and often terribly abused—by their parents—NOT THEIR TEACHERS. We are often the only good thing they have going for them. Until people start parenting their children, nothing will get any better. WHY DOESN'T THIS SCHOOL DISTRICT HAVE THE GUTS TO SAY THIS?

In other comments the view that parents were to blame was generalized to the entire African American community. The comments of one staff member reflected this view:

As usual, this district looks only at outcomes and draws conclusions about race. We are race obsessed. The Black community refuses to face its responsibilities. So the primarily White teaching staff is constantly accused of racism. The only racists in the district are Mellon Building officials who allow shallow thinking disguised as "research" to replace the truth. The truth might get us sued – so we avoid it at all costs. Meanwhile, the business of our district – designing the curriculum, teaching it, and assessing it is something we never have time to do.

Many comments illustrated the view that racial disparities are primarily due to economic differences. One staff member wrote "... do not make this an education problem, this is a SOCIAL and ECONOMIC problem. That is why NOTHING is ever solved when we try to revamp education because THERE IS NOT where the problem lies." Another noted that one survey question "... hit the nail on the head! Most issues that come up with a struggling student are more an issue of economy than race."

Some comments connected parenting and economics, as illustrated in the following comment:

I don't feel [race] has anything to do with academic performance or behavior. I do believe that all these problems stem from a lack of good parenting. Unfortunately, lack of parenting is something associated with social status (i.e. income). Parents have just as much responsibility as the schools in ensuring their kids get a good education. Just spending more time talking, reading and listening to the child goes along way in their academic behavior and their social skills.

A number of comments suggested that the problems of race and racism were too big and too long standing to be addressed by schools. This view resulted in the attitude that it is not the schools' responsibility to work on these problems. A parent comment illustrated this idea:

Why do we ask a single school district to address and solve societal problems which our nation as a whole cannot? Our educational system is not set up to change parental education responsibilities, concern, involvement, values, and goals. Until that is possible, there will always be [inequities] in what children attain!

A staff member with a similar view noted in frustration:

We feel we are being blamed for complex social problems that are not of our making. My colleagues and I are doing our utmost (in less than optimal conditions) to provide the best education we can to <u>all</u> of our children. If you want the help of teachers, get off our backs and let us TEACH!

It is worth noting here that statistical analyses indicated that racial differences in climate perceptions found in this study could not be accounted for by socio-economic status nor by students' academic or disciplinary status. These findings parallel those of previous research which shows that an educational performance gap exists for African American students at all socio-economic levels. As is true for performance, climate perceptions vary with socio-economic class. However, both race and class contribute independently to academic performance and climate perceptions.

Not surprisingly, African American respondents in this study were considerably less likely than Whites to agree that racial disparities in Unit 4 schools were primarily a function of socio-economic class. Our findings indicate one reason this may be true. Based on student self-reports of suspensions, our analyses demonstrated that being relatively poor increased the likelihood that a White student received a suspension in the past year. But, this finding did not hold for African Americans. They had the same high chances of suspension regardless of social class. These facts suggest that differences in perceptions of the importance of class in racial disparities might be due to African Americans and Whites both drawing on their experience of their own racial group.

Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools. Consistent with their views of fairness, need for change and explanations for racial disparities, results indicated most White staff and parents did not view as very important the hiring of teachers and administrators to reflect the number of African American students in Unit 4 schools. Again, fear of quotas was invoked. In the typical comment, the importance of having African Americans in these roles was tempered by desire for the "best" or "most qualified" teacher. One parent commented "I would rather know that my child has the best qualified teacher versus a teacher hired to fill a quota." A staff member echoed "The importance of having a staff that is proportional in racial background to the student body is no where near as important as hiring the best staff available...." Another staff offered:

Schools should <u>never</u> look at hiring a particular race thinking it will better address student needs. Should look at quality of teaching skills vs. color of skin. I find that some African-American teachers do not want to join in with white teachers, i.e., will always sit together, but have been asked to join others, but will not.

These comments raise the question of what constitutes a high quality teacher. In these comments there is no obvious appreciation for the fact that a teacher's race, and the life experience that come with being of a particular racial and cultural background, may constitute an extremely valuable resource for teaching, particularly for teaching African American students. If such teaching were valued, racial and cultural background would be considered relevant to deciding who is "best" for the job or who is most "qualified."

Concluding remarks. Taken together, the results of this study make clear the multiple sources of resistance to addressing racial equity and social climate concerns held

by many staff, parents and students in Unit 4 schools.   This resistance was manifested as fear of discussing race, fear of being blamed and labeled racist, fear of reverse discrimination, concerns about quotas and lowered standards, and concerns of compromised quality of teachers. Efforts to address racial equity and climate concerns must account for these various forms of resistance.

This study also identified significant sources of support for addressing these issues. This support included hundreds of White staff, parents and students whose climate perceptions were more similar to the average African American respondent in the study than they were the average White respondent. It also included nearly 1000 staff, parents and students who indicated interest in helping to end inequities in Unit 4 schools.

Research shows negative school climate perceptions are associated with a variety of student problems in school. Moreover, ignoring racial differences in perceptions of climate will further marginalize those with the most negative experiences and perceptions. Proactive steps must be taken to address racial differences in perceptions.

To successfully address negative climate perceptions will require reduction or elimination of existing racial disparities. Compelling research by Professor Claude Steele of Stanford University demonstrates part of what is at stake with respect to the links between racial disparities and climate concerns that exist in the Unit 4 schools. Steele has documented what he calls "stereotype threat." Stereotype threat refers to the threat that an individual feels when she becomes aware that she might be judged according to a stereotype about a group to which she belongs, rather than according to who she is as an individual. Men, who are stereotyped as emotionally unexpressive, might experience the threat when called on to express themselves emotionally. Women, who are stereotyped as not mathematically inclined, experience the threat when taking math and science tests. Stereotype threat has been shown to interfere with people's performance of tasks that are implicated by the threat. This threat has been documented to have effects on African American's academic performance.

Steele's work suggests that the likelihood of experiencing stereotype threat depends on how the person interprets the likelihood that the stereotype will be applied to them in a given situation. When an African American student in Champaign observes a gross over-representation of African American students in detention and special education, and a gross under-representation in the gifted and talented program, she is very likely to interpret those numbers as having negative implications for herself. She is likely to say to herself "this is an environment where people like me do not do well, and where people like me will not be expected to do well." This interpretation will produce a threat to her own identity as a well-behaved and successful student. When she is in performance situations where others might make plausible negative interpretations of her behavior based on the stereotype, her performance is likely to suffer. Thus, in the context of Unit 4, racial disparities are likely to have a negative impact on the behavioral and academic performance of African American students.

Building on the sources of support for change and recognizing the nature of the resistance to change, the following recommendations are designed to address the climate concerns identified in this study. Certainly, this is not an exhaustive list of actions that

could be taken to improve the perceived social climate of Champaign schools. But progress toward these goals is both feasible and likely to have significant impact on the perceived social climate of Unit 4 schools.

Recommendations.

- Increase the cultural competence of teaching staff. Efforts to do so must go beyond the teaching of cultural sensitivity to educating about issues of White privilege. These efforts must also go beyond a focus on interpersonal understanding of racism to educating about issues of institutional racism, history and power. These efforts must also extend beyond short term workshops and in-service trainings to become incorporated as more regular and ongoing features of each school.

- Create forums in the schools to discuss the climate study results and make recommendations to address issues raised by them. Confronting issues of race and racism will raise anxieties and make some people uncomfortable. Critical dialogue and respectful exchange is needed. This exchange must avoid blaming and self-righteous finger pointing. Although this study focused on African Americans, this discussion should take into account the full range of racial and ethnic diversity in the district, especially because the proportion of people of color in the district is growing rapidly. School forums should critically evaluate what steps are already being taken at the building level to deal with equity and climate issues.

- Hire more African American regular classroom teachers. In addition, when hiring non-African American teachers, develop selection criteria that value the teacher's cultural competence.

- Develop incentives to reward teachers who teach students of diverse backgrounds well.

- Develop incentives for teachers to learn from colleagues who demonstrate success teaching students of diverse backgrounds well. These incentives should encourage inter-racial collaboration which will enable people to get to know one another by working closely together.

- Reduce and eventually eliminate all "ability based" tracking.

- Establish goals and strategies to reduce the overall number of disciplinary and special education referrals.

- Implement in-school educational programs for students focused on issues of race, culture and ethnicity.