

A school's atmosphere affects student achievement, study finds

Last year, a friend of mine who was shopping for a kindergarten called me in tears about the tour she'd just taken of one of Minneapolis's most popular elementary schools. The principal showing her around seemed to be saying all the right things, my friend reported, but there was no toilet paper in the bathrooms — plural.

She mentioned this to the administrator, who she said blinked a couple of times, muttered something that sounded like, "Huh," and kept walking down the hall. Kids, meanwhile, raced in and out of the lavatories.

Do you think my friend got past that? No, she did not. And no amount of normally-parent-pleasing talk about Reader's Workshop in every grade or Responsive Classroom as the touchstone for the building's culture got her over her horror that the principal did not pick up a phone or corral an aide or do something to ensure that TP was on the way.

My response to her, as someone who spends her days knee-deep in policy white papers and has had kids in three markedly different schools: Trust your gut. Her boy was going to be captive in this building for years, and things like his ability to keep himself clean and navigate the social hierarchy would loom large.

I mention this because with all of the reform-minded attention we focus on student testing, teachers and their unions, and preparatory



programs and whether we should be spending on all-day-K or pre-K, we spend remarkably little time talking about what it is like to spend time in a school. And even though most of us have an idea about the atmosphere inside a building within minutes of stepping inside, if it's grim, we have few options except to vote

with our feet.

At last, some research on students' surroundings

Hallelujah, then, that we finally have some formal research linking student achievement to a school's atmosphere. A study being published in the March issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, a quarterly publication of the Washington-based American Sociological Association, found that students are affected by rundown surroundings and stressed teachers.

Researchers at the University of Maryland interviewed more than 10,700 parents and teachers of kids who were first-graders in spring 2000. What they found, essentially, was that the effects of teachers reporting to work in a gloomy facility or one where the adults were overworked or disrespected one another had a measurable trickle-down effect.

And partly because they are often clustered in the most stressed programs and partly for more subtle reasons, racial minorities and impoverished kids struggle more in distressed schools.

Stress transfers to students

You can read a nice [summary published last week by Education Week](#), or you can read on for a few highlights. I've removed the academic citations; if you want the whole, unfiltered thing you can find [the entire paper](#) online.

- "If frustrated, overworked, or disrespected teachers offer little patience or kindness in their interactions with students, stress may transfer to students. For example, teachers who are not viewed as supportive to middle-school students create more disruptive behavior among them. ...
- "Teachers' anxiety and frustration with their schools' climate spills over to interactions with children in the same way that mothers under financial duress treat children harshly, creating distress in offspring. Stress contagion in this way occurs through "passive exposure" of a group to one individual's stress. This is particularly likely for individuals who share a "linked fate," such as members of a household or classroom. ...
- "Children spend a substantial amount of time in school, a key social institution in their lives analogous to the workplace in adults' lives and one from which they cannot opt out. Although links between workplace strains and adults' mental health have received a great deal of attention from sociologists, the stressors that children face in school have been relatively neglected in sociological research. [We] find that for several components of the learning environment, worse conditions are associated with more emotional and behavioral problems in children. Moreover, the ways these conditions affect black versus white children is complex. ...
- "Specifically, having a teacher who does not feel respected by her

colleagues is connected to all four measures of children's mental health. Low morale may spill over in the form of a dejected teacher who becomes less invested in or unable to create a positive environment for children. For instance, teachers who lack supportive relationships may not have the freedom to seek advice from colleagues, becoming less invested in classroom activities."

Here's one more thing I told my friend: Political rhetoric aside, there really are bad teachers — even in vaunted programs — and lots of fabulous ones. But much more common, in my experience, are just-fine teachers who are overstressed for one reason or another and whose classrooms, by extension, are grim places in which a single academic year is an eternity.