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**IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SAFETY REMAIN
MAJOR GOAL FOR U.S. SCHOOLS: *Data Shows Main Street
Academix has a System that Works***

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March 16, 2007 – School reform remains a hot topic, and the nation’s school districts are committed to improving both student test performance and school safety.

It’s a Herculean task. But from a converted rectory in tiny Henniker, New Hampshire, Dr. Bill Preble and his associates at Main Street Academix are manning the front lines, training students and teachers to work together to assess and improve school climate, safety and respect in schools.

“School climate refers to how the school’s environment impacts students personally, emotionally, and academically,” says Preble, a professor at New England College and founder of Main Street Academix, a research firm dedicated to helping schools use data about school climate and safety to enact change and improve education for all students.

Dr. Preble’s research has taken him to literally hundreds of schools throughout the country, including schools in some of the nation’s lowest performing districts. Without exception, he says, school climate has a direct impact on student well-being, school performance and learning. Oftentimes, faculty members and administrators don’t even realize how bad the climate in their school really is for many students, or more importantly, how to go about changing it. Main Street Academix offers a systematic process for doing just that.

It’s called SafeMeasures™, and it’s a process that uses collaborative action research to empower kids and faculty to work together to pinpoint problems related to school climate and safety in their own schools and create solutions to fix them.

"The leadership teams we put together are diverse. They include kids who might traditionally be viewed as leaders, like athletes and honor students, but also other students who are experts on the climate in their schools, but who aren't usually viewed as leaders. These would include students from different racial, social, and academic groups, students that adults might consider to be trouble makers or students who are targets of routine harassment. Our goal is to create a well-rounded leadership team made up of students who are actually 'experts' on what really happens everyday inside their schools," Preble says.

The student leaders and faculty are trained by Main Street Academix to work together to gather data that helps define the school's culture and climate. They use interviews and focus groups, conduct observation studies and surveys. They then analyze the data, identify specific problems, and develop methodologies and techniques to help improve the climate, with guidance from the MSA team.

"When students and teachers have data and can see what really goes on inside their schools every day, they quickly reach consensus on what needs to change. With a little training, they realize that they are the ones best suited to lead the process of improving their schools," Preble says.

Katie Knowles, a vice president with Main Street Academix is intimately familiar with the data schools collect and that she helps to analyze and organize for schools to use. There are trends, Knowles says, that cross boundaries nationwide.

"The issues are really complex. The language kids use today can seem pretty offensive. Some popular phrases are really offensive to certain groups, and many times the kids don't even realize it. There also is a lot of girl on girl harassment – the whole 'mean girls' syndrome and bullying by the popular kids is huge. It's a different world in schools today, and some of the stereotypes no longer apply," Knowles says.

Preble says a key to getting a valid and reliable picture of what goes on inside schools is the empowerment of students and the training that gives them responsibility for naming the problems.

"Student interviews and focus groups are really important. I recently learned from a group of students in Maine that there is a whole new type of harassment going on these days in their school." Preble said. "Kids are taunting certain students, calling them 'EMO'S'. These are

kids who dress in black, wear makeup and are seen as emotionally messed up. The students say, 'Hey EMO....cut, cut, cut,' or "Hey EMO, gonna kill yourself today?" Preble said. "We can only imagine the ways students who are being taunted like this may react, but when kids open up we learn about the kind of interventions needed in school."

Experts say kids rely on adults to step in and deal with problems like this, and yet the harassment or bullying behavior typically doesn't occur when teachers or administrators are around. Students and teachers, therefore, have very different perceptions of what is happening in their school. Adult-developed solutions, based on limited information about problems facing students, often miss the mark and can be quite ineffective.

Some striking examples of the differences in adult and student perceptions can be found early in the student and teacher survey data that typically kicks off the SafeMeasures process. The chart shown here compares data from one Middle School:

STUDENT AND FACULTY COMPARISONS
 SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY ITEMS

	Students	Faculty
I feel physically safe at my school.	70%	95%
Girls are treated with respect by boys at this school.	53%	79%
I think students mostly treat each other with respect at this school.	51%	90%
When teachers act to help students who are harassed, it really works.	46%	79%
When principals and other administrators act to help kids who are harassed, it really works.	57%	79%
Students' work is often displayed publicly and celebrated by our teachers.	63%	100%
In the past year or two, students have become more likely to step forward and help when another student is being disrespected or harassed.	47%	79%
The stricter rules against harassment are helping to stop students from harassing others at my school.	46%	74%
Teachers are doing a better job of stopping bullying and harassment at my school lately.	46%	90%
Principals and administrators are doing a better job of stopping bullying and harassment at my school lately.	55%	95%

“What I like about the SafeMeasures program is that it is data driven. It allows me to look at hard numbers about what kids and staff are saying. When there is a disconnect between the two audiences, that’s a great place to start looking at real problems and real solutions,” says Rich Abrahamson, superintendent of the Maranacook Area Schools in Readfield, Maine, a district that has been working with MSA over the last few years.

Work in one the Sullivan County School District in Tennessee began with a court order after the U.S. Justice Department came down hard following lawsuits by students citing racial harassment. Although an out of court settlement was reached for the students, the district was required to provide an educational environment free from harassment. MSA was brought in by the school district third party evaluator to assess the situation and to monitor improvement in school climate over a four year period.

“We began working with the 36 schools in Sullivan County Tennessee in 2002 in conjunction with an organization called The Center for Prevention of Hate Violence. At that time it was a court-ordered procedure and the teachers and administrators were not exactly excited about our presence or the work they were required to do under the consent decree, said Preble.

But leaders have changed their tune. Exit interviews this year about their four year school climate improvement effort led one school principal to comment, “Like most people here, I was unsure of how I would like an outsider coming in telling me what is wrong at my school and how to fix it. I didn’t think we had any problems, but we really did.”

Janie Barnes, who serves as the Compliance Coordinator as part of the Justice Department’s Consent Decree, says that, “In Sullivan County, we can see a big difference. The school district is proud of the changes that have taken place and wants to tell its story to other schools.”

“In the early stages, when they were being forced to comply with an assessment of their problems, no one in the district wanted the researchers to talk to the minority students. It was as if they were afraid of the truth. But today the district wants the story told about how bad it was then, and how good it is now,” Barnes says.

After four years of working on school climate, data shows that the students in Sullivan County are more comfortable involving adults in their problems or in stepping in themselves when problems at school occur. Based on survey data, students report that they feel safer. There is less harassment in the schools, and teachers are doing a better job of intervening when harassment does occur, Barnes says.

Angela Buckles, the principal of East High School in Sullivan County says she initially was very surprised by how different student views were from teacher views, but adds that over the four years of the SafeMeasures process, "Everyone in our school is more aware of harassment and bullying. Students feel more comfortable to report it and stand up against it. Data gathered has been helpful in developing ways to deal with issues often not seen by teachers or administration. Student views were so different than teacher views. Being given data that showed these differences was eye-opening and allowed the staff and administration a totally different perspective," she says.

Perhaps most telling are the test scores for the schools in Sullivan County, which have improved markedly in the last five years, especially in those schools that have shown the greatest improvement in school climate.

"When students feel safe at school, they are free to learn. If they are worried about getting beaten up in the hall or harassed in the lunchroom, they are obviously not going to be as open to learning," Preble says.

The growing brutality of school violence in recent years, including the rash of violence in 2006, has led to an increased demand for change coming from both inside and outside the nation's schools. The government remains committed to improving some of the nation's worst performing schools, and Main Street Academix has seen a surge in interest from districts clamoring for help.

"We're seeing interest from school districts in assessing their climate, and when problems are identified, they want to fix them," Preble says, adding that districts are also very interested in the role that a positive school climate can play in drop out prevention and improving teaching and learning.

The process of changing a school's climate doesn't happen over night. Typically the SafeMeasures process can take two years, so Main Street

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Academix works with districts on multi-year agreements, which allows time for the climate change to occur.

Dr. Preble says there are five key elements of successful and respectful schools: safety for all students, high expectations for all, respectful personal relationships, meaningful and engaging teaching and learning, and the empowerment of students and teachers as leaders. Main Street Academix is providing schools with the kinds of tools, training and support that they need to become safe and respectful schools.

For more information on Main Street Academix, visit www.msanh.org, or call 603 428 8706.