Department of Accountability and Research
2019-20 Classified Staff Climate Survey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- There was a record number of respondents \( N = 928 \) this year
  - The second-highest response rate—at 48%—since its inception
- No substantial differences were noted from changing the format to online-only
  - Assessing for differences due to the format change, no major fluctuations in participation rates, even when analyzing within job types, were noted between last year and this year
- The overall climate (i.e., percentage of positive responses to the survey items) was down this year by about 1.2% compared to last year
  - The percent of positive responses (68.9%) was within the historical range
  - *Work Conditions* subscale had the largest decrease in agreement (-3.4%)
    - The majority of items within the subscale corresponding to the decreased agreement rates were in regard to the Classified Staff performance evaluation process
- Jobs with the most marked decreases in agreement rates from last year were: Information Technology, Transportation, Campus Monitor, and Construction
- Last year, subgroups of positions were identified regarding overall longitudinal trends
  - **Negative** group: negative trend in climate scores over 8 years
    - Construction, Early Childhood Education, and Warehouse workers
    - This group saw a *continued decrease* in agreement in the current year
  - **Recent Negative** group: positive change in climate responses, but in the past 2 to 3 years, there was a negative shift in the trend
    - Building Custodians and Maintenance Operations workers
    - This group saw an increase in agreement in the current year
  - **Flat** group: no change in climate scores over 8 years
    - Administrative / Secretarial Support, Nutrition Services, and Paraeducators / Educational Assistants
    - This group saw a slight increase in agreement rates this year
  - **Positive** group: positive change in climate scores over 8 years
    - Budget / Finance, Campus Monitor, District Security, Information Technology, Pickens Technical College, and Transportation
    - Overall, this group saw a decrease in agreement rates this year
- Agreement rates were also assessed according to length of employment
  - Climate survey agreement rates were stable when assessing total time at APS
  - Climate survey agreement rates decreased following employees' 3rd year of employment within their current job
Introduction

Most research studies suggest that school climate is positively correlated with academic achievement – that is, aspects of school climate related to safety, teaching and learning, relationship-building capacity, and school environment have been shown to foster greater student achievement when properly cultivated (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). School climate can even be a protective factor for students with less than ideal family environments, moderating the relationship between possible negative burdens the students have and their academics (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, & Eklund, 2014), and although it may be perceived differently from one student to the next, climate has been argued to be “a measure of community that is thus reflected in the collective experience of students and their interactions with peers and school adults … [and] ought to be researched at the school level” (i.e., in a multi-level model research design) (Wang et al., 2014).

Research has also shown that increasing staff climate can have multiple impacts on both staff and students’ outcomes.

- Better climate has been linked to increased staff, faculty, and student performance (Freiberg, 1998)
- “Research shows that school climate can affect many areas and people within schools. Consequently, research suggests that positive interpersonal relationships and optimal learning opportunities in all demographic environments can increase school achievement levels and reduce maladaptive behaviors” (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; as cited in Tubbs & Garner, 2008, p. 18)
- Students who attend safe schools are more likely to be academically engaged and are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors such as drug use or violence. Students are less likely to drop out of safe schools (Bekuis, 1995; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Greenberg, Skidmore, & Rhodes, 2004; Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2005)
- “The organization's climate is reflected in its structures, policies, and practices; the demographics of its membership; the attitudes and values of its members and leaders; and the quality of personal interaction” (Tubbs & Garner, 2008, p. 19)
- “Evaluation is necessarily only one step in an ongoing process of learning and school improvement” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 205)

In short, survey measurement and analysis is the beginning of a change process. The safety, challenge, support, and social emotional learning aspects of the survey reported within this paper should be used to provide a meaningful start of a performance management strategy in APS schools.
**Administration of the Survey**

This year marked the 13th administration of the Classified Staff Climate Survey. The survey was sent to employees via email from an online survey tool (i.e., Survey Monkey), and reminders were sent weekly for three weeks leading up to winter break. A final reminder was sent to staff following the break. Although survey links were sent to individual emails, data were kept anonymous through a setting within the Survey Monkey tool. This was the first year in which paper copies were not made available to staff, and although the participation rate was 3% lower than last year, it was still higher than any previous year. Thus, the shift to providing the survey only online did not seem to significantly impact the participation rate.

Survey questions were originally developed in 2007. The questions were developed with input from the Classified Employees Council, staff focus groups, district leadership, and the former Division of Accountability and Research. The questions were designed to obtain attitudes on clarity of APS’s vision, communication, morale, program support, trust, and work conditions.

In addition, the survey window changed from the spring semester to the fall in 2017-18, with the survey opening in November. This year, the survey window maintained consistency with the previous two years. A minor change regarding a question asking how long the employees have been working in APS was made: it was changed from a variably-scaled response (i.e., 1st year, 2-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-10 years, 10-20 years, 20+ years) to a pure ratio-scaled response (e.g., 1, 2, 3, …, k years). In doing so, more precise analyses were able to be conducted this year.

**Important Note:**

One additional item was added to the survey this year that allowed us to evaluate the quality of an individual’s responses. It has been shown that respondent interest, survey length, social contact, and environmental distractions impact the quality of survey research (Meade & Craig, 2012). In effect, a portion of survey participants typically responds to items without regard to the item content. For example, a participant might respond with "Disagree" to all of the items on this survey without reading each item. Responding without regard to the content is referred to as careless responding. In line with Meade and Craig’s (2012) recommended best practices in survey research, we incorporated this additional item (i.e., *For your response on this item, please select “Neutral”*) to gauge careless responses in 2019-20. Participants who did not respond by selecting “Neutral” on this item were removed from analyses.

**Staff Characteristics**

For the current school year, the number of responses was at an all-time high—with 928 employees having taken the survey (48% participation rate). As stated earlier, the participation rate was slightly lower than last year (down 3%); nevertheless, it was
Table 1. *Historical Classified Response Rates from 2013-14 to 2019-20 School Years.*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N Responses</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>919</td>
<td>928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Employees</td>
<td>1817*</td>
<td>1830*</td>
<td>1928*</td>
<td>1818*</td>
<td>1973*</td>
<td>1803</td>
<td>1935</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Response Rate</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Careless Responses</td>
<td>n 150</td>
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<td>Effective Response Rate</td>
<td>% 16%</td>
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*Note.* Number of employees for these years was calculated post-hoc from the number of responses and the response rate per each year.

Still the second-highest rate recorded for the Classified Survey. Table 1 presents the response rates from the past seven survey cycles.

Within Table 1, the number and percentage of careless responses is also provided. Of the 928 Classified Staff employees, 150 did not select *Neutral* on an item which asked: *For your response on this item, please select “Neutral”—if employees marked anything other than “Neutral”, then they were considered a careless respondent, with subsequent removal of their responses from the data analysis.

In Figure 1, the number of responses, the number of Classified Staff, and the response rate over the past 7 years is illustrated. These numbers are relatively flat for classified staff, with a slight declining number of staff over the past 7 years (by about 13 per year) and a steady response rate.

![Figure 1. Historical Classified Staff response trends.](image-url)
Of the 850 responses to the item which asked of the employees position (70 chose to not specify their position), over half were Paraeducators ($n = 323, 35\%$) and Administrative or Secretarial Support ($n = 174; 19\%$). On the following page, Table 2 provides the full breakdown of respondents. With the removal of the paper copies, changes in responses from the 2018-19 school year to the current year (2019-20) were also assessed. The overall percentage differences, comparing the 2 years, ranged from -2\% to +2\%, with Nutrition Services having the most marked decrease and Maintenance Operations having the most marked increase in response rates. The majority of positions had a year-to-year change of less than 1\%, indicating that the switch to conducting the survey as an online-only measure did not seem to substantially affect response rates by position.

![Figure 2. Number of respondents by position.](image)

This year, Classified Staff were also asked to report how many years that they have been working in their current job as well as how many years they have been working at APS; Figure 3 illustrates responses from both of these questions. In the figure, the percentage of employees who responded is charted on the y-axis and the total number of years that they have been working at APS is logged on the x-axis. The number of years that Classified Staff respondents reported working in their current job is distinguished in the colors of the bars, with gray-tones illustrating between 1 to 4 years, and bluer tones illustrating more than 4 years. The average number of total years at APS was a little over 8 years, and the average number of years at their current job was about 3.5 years.
Survey Results

Over the past 5 years, the overall percentage of items with a “Positive” response (i.e., “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”) has fluctuated between 67% and 70% of the items on the Classified Staff Climate Survey. The rate for the current year (68.9%) was down from last year (70.1%) but still within the historical range. Individual subscale agreement varied regarding the change from last year, with Work Conditions decreasing the most (down 3.4%) and Program Support having a slight increase (up 0.2%) (See Figure 4). The items in Work Conditions that showed the largest decreases in agreement were:

- I feel safe in the workplace. (↓ 6.4%)
- My performance evaluations are fair. (↓ 4.8%)
- My principal/supervisor has a clear understanding of my skills and abilities. (↓ 3.8%)
- The process for performance evaluations is clear. (↓ 3.7%)

In order to show a more succinct representation of changes in Classified Staff Climate, Figure 5 provides three data points for each of the subscales. The first is the average “Positive” response percentage for the previous 5 years—this can be used to illustrate a robust estimate of historical ratings for the subscales. The second is the
“Positive” response percentage for the previous school year (i.e., 2018-19), and the third is the percentage for the current year. In general, the results of the current year suggest slight decreases comparing this year to last year, but overall agreement within historical bounds for the subscales, with the exception of Program Support, which has historically been rated higher.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 4. Percentage of positive responses on Classified Staff Climate Survey subscales over the past 5 years.*

![Graph](image)

*Figure 5. Percentage of positive responses on Classified Staff Climate Survey subscales, including an average for the previous 5 years, results from last year, and for the current year.*
Overall “Positive” response percentages were further investigated by differentiating among the Classified Staff positions (see Figure 6). There was a difference of about 36% in “Positive” response percentage, comparing the highest (Budget/Finance – 89.6%) and the lowest (Campus Monitor – 53.2%) positions. Of the 13 positions, overall positive agreement increased for four of them (Budget/Finance, 1.6%; District Security, 2.7%; Maintenance Operations, 8.2%; and Building Custodian, 10.3%). The four positions with the largest decreases in agreement were: Information Technology (-13.9%), Transportation (-8.5%), Campus Monitor (-8.3%), and Construction (-8.2%). It appeared that different positions have varied perspectives regarding Staff Climate. Thus, further analyses sought to identify insight into these differences.

In the 2018-19 Classified Staff Climate Survey Report, four distinct trends were revealed: (1) Negative Overall Change, (2) Recent Negative Overall Change, (3) Flat Overall Change, and (4) Positive Overall Change—see Figure 7. Last year, Construction, Early Childhood Education, and Warehouse workers comprised the Negative Overall Change (Negative; \( n = 75 \) for 2018-19). For the current year, these positions had a lower agreement rate than last year. No individual positions in this group had a higher agreement rate for the current year.
Building Custodians and Maintenance Operations workers were in the Recent Negative Overall Change group (Recent Negative; n = 86 for 2018-19). For the current year, this grouping of positions had a higher agreement rate than last year, with both positions reporting increased agreement on Trust subscale items.

Respondents who had Flat Overall Change (Flat; n = 568 for 2018-19) were Administrative / Secretarial Support, Nutrition Services, and Paraeducators / Educational Assistant staff members. For the current year, there was a slight increase, compared to last year, for this grouping of positions, with Administrative / Secretarial Support (HR-Only) and Paraeducators / Educational Assistant showing increased agreement and Administrative / Secretarial Support and Nutrition Services showing decreased agreement rates.

Finally, the positions with Positive Overall Change last year (Positive; n = 140) were Budget / Finance, Campus Monitor, District Security, Information Technology, Pickens Technical College, and Transportation. Overall, these groups had decreased agreement ratings on the Trust subscale for the current year (compared to last year), with three positions showing increased rates (Budget / Finance, District Security, and Pickens Technical College) and three positions showing decreased rates (Campus Monitor, Information Technology, and Transportation).

![Figure 7. Positive responses to the Trust subscale across seven school years, grouped by longitudinal climate attitude change within each position.](chart.png)
Because we asked Classified Staff how long they have been working in their current job and how long they have been at APS, we were also able to analyze responses based on tenure this year. Across all subscales, a general trend of increasing agreement rates was observed when analyzing employees’ total years at APS. However, when analyzing years in employees’ current jobs, a decreasing rate of agreement was observed across all subscales. In order to provide a more succinct chart, Figure 8 only displays employee climate agreement across all scales.

![Graph](image)

*Figure 8. Overall Agreement Rates by the Staff Total Number of Years & Number of Years in Current Job.*

A final set of analyses was used to determine Classified Staff climate perceptions depending on their tenure, both (1) within their *current* job and (2) within their total years of employment at APS. Figure 9 provides scale results for total years of employment, which was grouped into similar classifications seen elsewhere (e.g., CDE’s TLCC Survey report), and Figure 10 provides similar results, using current job years of employment for the grouping variable. Comparing both Figures, it appears that, for each of the subscales, general employee satisfaction remains relatively stable across years
of employment at APS (Figure 9); however, employees who stay within a single job tend to report lower scores on each of the subscales following their 3rd year at any particular job. Although arguments can be made for workplace stability, and increased experience that coincides with employees remaining in their current job, the current results suggest that employee satisfaction (in terms of the constructs measured by the Classified Staff Climate survey subscales) suffers in the absence of changing jobs.

Figure 9. Subscale agreement rates by total years of employment (grouped).

Figure 10. Subscale agreement by years of employment (grouped) at current job.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Although there was a record number of responses this year ($N = 928$), the participation rate was lower than last year (48% vs 51% in 2018-19). Nevertheless, the participation rate for 2019-20 remained higher than any other year prior to 2018-19. For the current year, we also decided to provide online-only access to the Classified Staff survey—compared to previous years in which we also offered the survey in print. This decision was made in response to a declining trend of responses away from the paper version, with last year’s print-version responses only comprising 5% of the total responses (which in turn was down from 12% in 2017-18). That said, no major fluctuations in participation rates per job type were assessed, comparing this year and last year’s responses. Thus, the shift to an online-only assessment for Classified Staff did not seem to affect participation.

For the current year, we also opted to assess for careless responses, which are classified as responding to items without regard to the item content. To assess for this, an item was included, which asked participants to simply select “Neutral” as their response for that particular item. In total, 150 of the 928 Classified Staff selected an option other than “Neutral” on this item, equating to 16% of all responses. In line with best practices (Meade & Craig, 2012), their data was subsequently removed from the analyses in this report. Thus, the effective response rate (i.e., number of careless respondents subtracted from the number of survey participants and then divided by the total number of eligible employees) was 38%. It should be noted that although this method decreases the number of data points in the analysis, it provides more robust estimates.

The current overall agreement rate of 68.9% was within the historical range of 67 to 70%, suggesting stable rates of agreement over the past 5 years. In terms of individual subscales, Work Conditions had the most marked decrease from last year—down 3.4%. The items with the largest decreases in agreement were provided. Aside from feeling safe in the workplace, the other three items listed were in regard to classified staff members in relation to their supervisor and their performance evaluations. It may be worthwhile to investigate the performance evaluation process to see if anything can be improved upon.

Classified Staff climate was also assessed according to job location/position, and four positions were noted to have considerable decreases in agreement compared to last year: Information Technology (-13.9%), Transportation (-8.5%), Campus Monitor (-8.3%), and Construction (-8.2%). Department supervisors may consider further investigating these locations to find out what may have negatively affected their climate survey outcomes so drastically in the past year.

Last year, longitudinal change was assessed within each job type, and positions were classified as having: Negative, Recent Negative, Flat, or Positive change (in relation to the Trust subscale). For the current year, the classifications were kept
constant with last year’s results in order to assess for improvement within those job type classifications. Within the Negative group (Construction, Early Childhood Education, and Warehouse Workers), the current year’s results saw continued decreases in agreement rates on the Climate Survey. For the group classified as Recent Negative last year (Building Custodians and Maintenance Operations), higher agreement rates were observed this year. This was also true for job types classified as Flat Overall Change—although not as drastic a change as the former group. Finally, job types classified as Positive Overall Change last year saw mixed changes this year. Overall, there was lower agreement rates within this group, with Campus Monitor, Information Technology, and Transportation showing lower rates of agreement and Budget / Finance, District Security, and Pickens showing higher rates.

Finally, agreement rates were assessed according to length of employment, both within their current job and total time at APS. For total time at APS, agreement rates for all subscales were stable across 26 years of employment; however, subscale agreement decreased following employees’ 3rd year within their current job, suggesting that classified staff are happier with shifting roles within APS.
References


