

IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

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What is School Climate?

The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate as “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe” (p.4). School climate is a product of the interpersonal relationships among students, families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. Positive school climate is fostered through a shared vision of respect and engagement across the educational system. Emphasis is also placed on the collective sense of safety and care for the school’s physical environment. A related concept is school culture, which refers to the “unwritten rules and expectations” among the school staff (Gruenert, 2008).

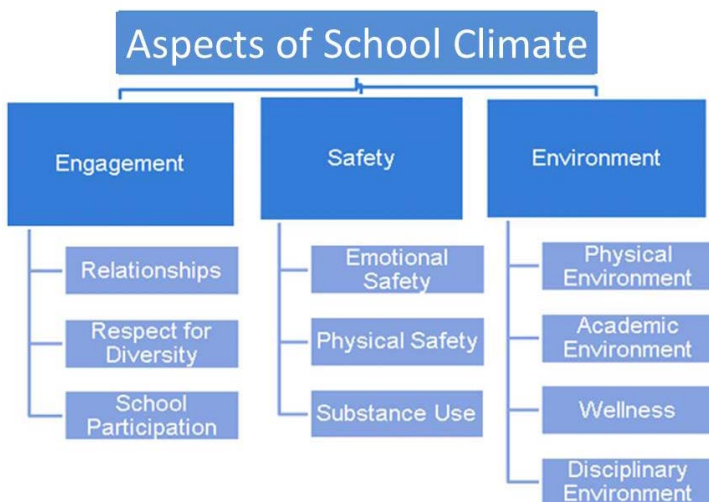
Although there is no universally agreed upon set of core domains or features, the National School Climate Center identifies five elements of school climate: (1) *safety* (e.g., rules and norms, physical security, social-emotional security); (2) *teaching and learning* (e.g., support for learning, social and civic learning); (3) *interpersonal relationships* (e.g., respect for diversity, social support from adults, social support from peers); (4) *institutional environment* (e.g., school connectedness, engagement, physical surroundings); and (5) *staff relationships* (e.g., leadership, professional relationships). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education’s Safe

and Supportive Schools model of school climate (see Figure) includes three inter-related domains or features of *student engagement* (e.g., relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation), *safety* (e.g., social-emotional safety, physical safety, substance use), and the *school environment* (e.g., physical environment, academic environment, wellness, and disciplinary environment) (also see Bradshaw et al., in press).

Why is School Climate Important?

A positive school climate is recognized as an important target for school reform and improving behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa et al., 2012). Specifically, schools with positive climates tend to have less student discipline problems (Thapa et al., 2013) and aggressive and violent behavior (Gregory et al., 2010), and fewer high school suspensions (Lee et al., 2011). Research has also shown associations between school climate and lower levels of alcohol and drug use (LaRusso et al., 2008), bullying (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009), and harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009). In addition to reducing students’ exposure to risk factors, school climate can promote positive youth development. For example, a favorable school climate has been linked with higher student academic motivation and engagement (Eccles et al., 1993), as well as elevated psychological well-being (Ruus et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, schools promoting engaging learning environments tend to have fewer student absences (Gottfredson et al., 2005) and improvements in academic achievement across grade levels (Brand et al., 2003; Stewart, 2008).

A positive school climate also has benefits for teachers and education support professionals (Bradshaw, Waasdorp et al., 2010). Research shows that when educators feel supported by their administration, they report higher levels of commitment and more collegiality (Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Likewise, schools where educators openly communicate with one another, feel supported by their peers and administration, and establish strong student-educator relationships tend to have better student academic and behavioral outcomes (Brown & Medway, 2007). School climate efforts also have the



U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Supportive Schools Model

potential of increasing job satisfaction and teacher retention, which is a major concern given the high rate of turnover in the field of education (Boe et al., 2008; Kaiser, 2011).

How is School Climate Measured?

Given the importance of positive school climate for students and educators, it is essential for schools to monitor school climate on a regular basis. Several tools have been developed to assess student, parent, and educator perspectives on school climate. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has created an online compendium of research-based school climate measures, including surveys to be completed by students, parents, and educators. One such measure included in the collection is the *California Healthy Kids Survey*, which assesses school connectedness, opportunities for meaningful participation, and perceptions of safety across elementary, middle, and high school. The *Comprehensive School Climate Inventory* also measures multiple elements, including an orderly school environment, parent/community involvement, collaboration within the school, and instructional practices. Other assessments, such as the *Communities That Care Youth Survey*, gather data on school, community, family, and peer risk and protective factors related to perceptions of school climate. There have been relatively few observational tools developed to measure school climate, although measures of school engagement and student-educator interactions may tap into aspects of school climate (Pianta et al., 2008).

When assessing school climate, educators should consider the following key factors:

- ✓ **Chose a reliable and valid assessment.** School climate has multiple features (e.g., safety, interpersonal relationships, physical environment); thus, survey instruments should reflect the multi-dimensional nature of the school's culture. Schools should aim for a survey that addresses the emotional, physical, and behavioral aspects of school climate.
- ✓ **Assess annually.** School climate should be assessed on an annual basis; thus, surveys should be easy to administer.
- ✓ **Survey across perspectives.** In order to get a comprehensive view of the school, multiple perspectives need to be assessed. Students, families, teachers, administrators, and education support professionals should be involved in the school climate assessment.
- ✓ **Communicate findings.** An often overlooked, but critical step in the assessment process is sharing the results with the school community. School-wide

presentations, community discussions, PTA meeting presentations, and classroom discussions will help gain buy-in for school climate initiatives and future planning.

- ✓ **Take action.** A core reason for collecting data on school climate is to use it to guide decision-making related to the selection of evidence-based approaches for improving school climate and, more broadly, for informing school improvement efforts which match the school's unique needs.
- ✓ **Repeat.** Re-assess the school climate annually, celebrate improvements, and plan for the next phase of school climate enhancements.

How Can Schools Improve Climate?

Once a school has measured the school climate and identified areas for improvement (e.g., increased supervision in hallways, professional development on cultural diversity), educators need to consider ways to change the school norms, values, and expectations. Integrated and multi-tiered models are often the most effective approaches (Greenberg et al., 2001; O'Connell et al., 2009). Although there is no one-size-fits-all program, there are common features of evidence-based practices related to school climate enhancement.

- ✓ **Multi-tiered framework.** Although the use of a single, targeted program may change specific problem behaviors in the school (e.g., bullying), there is growing interest in the use of multi-component approaches which provide a continuum of programs and support services in order to both target behavior problems and address the broader social ecology of the school.
- ✓ **Communication across partners.** Research indicates that prevention programs are not only more effective, but are more likely to be sustained over time if the entire school community (students, staff, administrators) contributes to developing the program (Greenberg et al., 2003; Rigby, 2007).
- ✓ **Assess school climate from multiple perspectives.** Parents, students, and staff often differ in their perceptions of the school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Waasdorp et al., 2011). While some may debate which perspective is more accurate, it is important to understand multiple viewpoints on school climate, including areas of convergence and divergence.
- ✓ **Data-based decision making.** In order to effectively address the emotional and behavioral needs of a school, several different types of data need to be utilized. These data include, but are not limited to: student, parent and staff surveys, discipline data (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspensions), school-wide observational data, as well as school demographics

(e.g., enrollment, student mobility). This information can inform decisions about implementation of universal, selective, and targeted prevention programs.

Evidence-based Approaches to School Climate Improvement

✓ Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

(PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2006) is a three-tiered prevention strategy that focuses on the prevention of student behavior problems and promotes a positive, collaborative school environment. School staff work together to create a school-wide program that clearly articulates positive behavioral expectations, recognizes when students and educators meet those expectations, and encourages data-based decision-making by staff and administrators. Schools implementing PBIS have documented significant decreases in discipline problems (e.g., bullying, aggressive behaviors, suspensions, office discipline referrals), enhanced school climate, reduced need for counseling and special education services, and improved academic outcomes and prosocial behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2010; 2012; Horner et al., 2009).

✓ Olweus Bullying Prevention Program

(Olweus et al., 2007) is a school-wide evidence-based program designed to reduce and prevent bullying and improve school climate. The tiered program is implemented across all school contexts and includes school-wide components, classroom activities (e.g., class rules against bullying, class meetings), and targeted interventions for individuals identified as bullies or victims. It also includes activities aimed at increasing community involvement by parents, mental health workers, and others. Previous studies of the Olweus program have demonstrated significant reductions in students' reports of bullying and general antisocial behaviors (e.g., fighting, vandalism, theft, and truancy), as well as improvements in schools' social climate (Limber et al., 2004; Olweus, 2005).

✓ Social and Emotional Learning

(SEL; CASEL, 2013) is a framework for developing social and emotional competencies in children based on the understanding that learning is maximized in the context of supportive relationships and engaging educational settings. SEL programs are implemented school-wide (i.e., preschool through high school) and can improve the sense of the school as a caring, supportive environment. For example, the Caring School Community Program and Responsive Classroom are both SEL programs that have been shown to improve student and staff perceptions of the school climate and increase positive behavior and academic performance (CASEL, 2013).

Resources

National School Climate Center: schoolclimate.org

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments' School Climate Survey Compendium: safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement

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