



FACT SHEET #7: School Climate

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BACKGROUND

- “School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures.” (National School Climate Center, 2007, p. 5).
- A positive school climate is characterized by multiple features including an attractive and inviting physical landscape; collaborative relationships among school staff members, students, and families; high expectations for all; an atmosphere of respectful and positive interactions; and opportunities for meaningful participation both academically and socially.
- In schools with a positive school climate, students tend to be more engaged academically, and experience less bullying, crime, general discipline problems, school avoidance, and other social and emotional problems. Teachers also express greater job satisfaction and commitment to the profession

KEY ISSUES

- Establishing a positive school climate is a crucial aspect of school safety plans.
- Many elements of school climate are typically targeted in evidence-based prevention programs, including those for preventing bullying and school violence.
- Although differences in school climate exist *between schools*, large differences typically exist *between classrooms* in the same school and especially at the level of *individual student perception of climate*. Thus, a multiple tiered ecological approach to improving school climate is likely to be more effective than one that targets only school-wide, classroom, *or* individual factors.
- Regular ongoing assessment of school climate and intervention fidelity is essential for identifying areas of need and for evaluating progress toward establishing a more positive climate.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research shows that the following characteristics are common among schools that are effective in building and maintaining a positive school climate, as well as in preventing school violence:

- *Positive relationship-building*. Intentional efforts are made to build and maintain caring and supportive relationships among students, teachers and other school staff members, and families.
- *Sense of belonging*. In addition to positive relationships, both students and staff experience school as meaningful, productive, and relevant. Active student participation in decision making is emphasized, as well as activities, such as service learning, that promote a sense of community and belonging.
- *Positive behavior supports*. Emphasis is placed on the use of positive rather than punitive techniques.
- *High expectations*. Teachers, students, and parents expect success in both academic and behavioral endeavors and provide the necessary supports to achieve these expectations.
- *Social and emotional skills*. Deliberate efforts are made to develop social and emotional competencies among all students.
- *Parent and community involvement*. Family and community members are viewed as valuable resources and their active involvement in the school’s mission is strongly encouraged.
- *Fairness and clarity of rules*. Students perceive rules as being clear, fair, and not overly harsh.
- *School safety*. Students, teachers, and families perceive the school as safe.
- Additional school-level variables related to positive school climate include strong administrative leadership, availability of educational resources, high teacher morale, small school size and student-teacher ratio, less student and faculty turnover, higher socioeconomic status, and a low percentage of students with behavior problems. School climate is frequently more positive in elementary than middle or high schools, in rural than urban schools, and in private than public schools. Males and African-Americans tend to have less favorable perceptions of school climate than do females and Caucasians.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Include school climate as part of a comprehensive school-wide plan for preventing school violence, bullying, harassment, discrimination, and other problem behaviors, and for promoting academic, social and emotional learning. This would be included in the school's mission statement, policies, procedures and practices.
- Delineate the key elements (processes and outcomes) of school climate and include them in a needs assessment.
- Assess perceptions of school climate by students, teachers, and families. Be sure that the measures are valid and reliable and that they include the key elements of school climate. In combination with other forms of assessment and data, such as office disciplinary referrals, results of school climate surveys should be used in the needs assessment and to guide decision making.
- Provide on-going staff development that targets elements of school climate, especially those elements identified in research as areas of need. These include staff development and training in the areas of teacher-student relations, student-student relations, positive techniques, fairness and clarity of rules, and school safety.
- Implement a school-wide evidence-based curriculum for establishing school norms of caring and support in the prevention of school violence and/or bullying and in the promotion of social and emotional learning. The curriculum should include instruction in social, emotional, and behavioral skills shown to be linked to school violence and bullying prevention, such as empathy, caring, respect, social problem solving, conflict resolution, impulse control, anger management, and peer resistance.
- In combination with a school-wide evidence-based curriculum recommended above, infuse lessons, teacher practices, and school-wide activities that target elements of school climate throughout the school's curriculum and everyday life of the school (e.g., student government, class meetings, sports, assemblies).
- Include students and families in the planning and implementation of school climate initiatives. Families and students should be actively and frequently invited to participate in school climate interventions.
- Provide more intensive small-group and individual interventions to those students identified as being at-risk of aggression or bullying. These interventions must involve active collaboration with the families.

CAUTIONS

- Do not assume that low office disciplinary referrals and suspensions necessarily indicate a positive school climate. Schools should strive to have low disciplinary referrals as a result of an excellent learning environment, positive student engagement, and positive perceptions of school climate by all stakeholders.
- Do not assume that frequent use of rewards necessarily indicates a positive school climate.
- Avoid viewing the school as requiring 100% consensus on climate among students, teachers, and parents. Differences in perceptions between, and especially within, groups are common.
- Do not neglect influences on school climate that lie outside of the school, particularly families. It is important that parents have positive relationships and effective communication with school personnel.
- Avoid short term and fragmented initiatives, especially those that focus on single elements of school climate (e.g., school safety, rules and expectations). Likewise, avoid initiatives that are not supported by teachers, administrators, families, and students.

RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review*, 76, 201-237.
- National School Climate Center, Center (2007). *The school climate challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy*. Available at www.nsc.csee.net
- www.nsc.csee.net – National School Climate Center
- www.csee.net – Center for Social and Emotional Education

The Consortium to Prevent School Violence (CPSV) is non-profit group of researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who are focused on advocacy that promotes effective implementation of positive school violence prevention practices, and fostering technical assistance, information dissemination, and professional development based on high-quality scientific research. CPSV promotes open access where stakeholders in schools and surrounding communities are an integral part of the Consortium's work.