

School Climate

Building Safe, Supportive and Engaging Classrooms & Schools

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This reference guide is designed for classroom teachers, principals, chief education officers, parents and school board members who are committed to creating a safe, supportive, engaging and helpfully challenging school climate for students in years F-12. When school personnel, students, parents/guardians and community leaders work together to create a positive school and classroom climate, the result is school – and life – success!

What is School Climate?

School climate refers to the current quality and character of school life. It is based on people's experiences of school and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organisational structures. School climate is sometimes linked with the term, "school culture", described by Seymour Sarason, Roland Barth and Christopher Wagner as the way schools "do things", informed by its shared history, customary practices, formal and informal traditions, celebrations, teamwork and a psychological sense of community. "Supportive learning environments" and "conditions for learning" are also related terms.

Positive School Climate Components

- Norms, values and expectations that make students and adults feel socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe. The environment is free of harassment, intimidation and bullying.
- All members of the school community (students, staff, parents, etc.) are engaged and respected.
- All subgroups of students and staff feel productive and valued.
- Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasises the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.
- Visitors to the school feel genuinely welcomed.

School Climate Improvement Goals

Every school is unique. As a result, each school needs to consider its own history, community, strengths and needs in order to delineate school climate improvement goals. The key word is "improvement". With concerted effort, making a climate more positive will take time, up to two or three years if major improvement is needed. Even small changes can seem difficult in the face of an enduring school culture. What is required of educators is dedication to the spirit of continuous improvement which will ultimately create an irresistible momentum for positive change.

Why Focus on School Climate Now?

Educators have long recognised that environments in which students feel safe, supported, engaged and helpfully challenged are optimal for learning and healthy development.

However, many schools today focus so much on student aptitude in subjects such as English, maths and science, that the issue of school climate is neglected. In order to create a school climate that promotes the education of the whole child, educators need to adopt practical strategies that foster the social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual dimensions of learning. (www.wholechildeducation.org).

It is not a cliché to say that it takes the whole village to raise healthy children. Measuring and working to improve school climate – necessarily – entails all school community members learning and working together.

School Climate Standards

In 2009, the American National School Climate Council developed five school climate standards that are applicable world-wide. These standards state that the school community should:

1. Have a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. Set policies that specifically promote: (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching, including re-engaging students who have become disengaged.
3. Identify, prioritise and support practices that: (a) promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students, (b) enhance engagement in teaching, learning and school-wide activities; (c) address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity-building mechanisms for meeting this standard.
4. Create a school/classroom environment where all members are welcomed, supported and feel safe: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
5. Develop meaningful/engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

For details about indicators, sub-indicators and how these standards were developed, visit: www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php

School Climate Improvement Goals

School climate improvement is a continuous process. Each of the following stages of the improvement process is characterised by a series of evidence-based tasks and challenges. (For details about how leadership teams and school communities can address and master these tasks, visit the School Climate Improvement Road Map at: www.schoolclimate.org/climate/roadmap.php)

