

SCHOOL CLIMATE CHANGE

*How do I build a positive environment
for learning?*

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- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment. (2014, para. 3–4)

It's important to call attention to the final bullet point: that each person contributes to the operations of the school. Whether we contribute kind, supportive words or give negative responses and are dismissive to new ideas, we are contributing to the school climate. It's also important to note that *school climate* and *school culture* are different. We define *school culture* as how safe students and teachers feel in their school, whereas a *school climate* involves a more proactive approach to the entire school infrastructure and everything that comes with that. School climate includes how welcoming staff in the building are, how engaged students are in their own learning, and the instructional strategies teachers use to engage students. It also includes the events that take place during the school year and how welcome parents feel when they not only attend schoolwide events but also come for one-on-one meetings with a teacher or school leader.

School climate is a pervasive thing. Most educators have experienced the positive and negative aspects of it. It's possible to get a good feel for it within the first five minutes of entering a school. Students send powerful messages through their facial expressions and body language. It's often possible to tell whether they are busy, noisy, silent, engaged, or bored with just a glance. Look at the state of the playground, parking lot, and school buildings. Are they clean or unkempt? Walk past students and staff, and notice how they watch, look at, greet, or stare at you. Are you welcomed, shunned,

Take a chance. Change it up in the classroom or school. Try the flipped model, which is becoming more and more popular. The idea behind the flipped classroom is that teachers will send out a link or short video so students can watch or read the background material on their own time. Classroom time is then reserved for a more in-depth conversation about that material. This model also allows students to interact with the material numerous times (at their own pace) to gain a deeper understanding.

Using this same flipped mind-set, school leaders are beginning to flip their faculty meetings and forms of parent communication. Whether it is a video, a link to an article, or a new mandate coming down the pike, flipping the information so teachers have it ahead of time allows for more productive discussions and professional development. This model also helps keep parents informed of large events and provides them with a different perspective into their children's education. During a time of high accountability and increased budget cuts, school leaders need to make sure they are doing everything they can to communicate effectively with parents.

See the Encore section for specific ideas about how to encourage and promote engagement among students, staff, and parents, including how to set up advisory groups.

Vignette: Chatting in the Corridor

We understand that knowing our students better helps them feel they are a more integral part of the class, and it also helps us—as teachers—connect with their worlds. We can

student and from student to teacher. A positive feedback interaction creates a positive classroom climate.

Empowerment and autonomy are encouraged when teachers, students, and parents have a say in what happens in schools. They develop when students feel as though they can choose aspects of what they learn or as though they can take their learning in multiple directions, depending on the topic. They develop when teachers have the freedom to work together either cooperatively or independently, depending on the situation. They are not forced or shoehorned into the classroom to meet a preestablished “script.”

School leaders don't always feel empowered, nor do they always feel as though they have autonomy, especially in these days of increased accountability. Therefore, to foster a positive school climate, it's important for leaders to feel as though they can strike a balance between their mandates and their creativity. If we want students to own their schools, then we need to give them ownership. Likewise, if we want staff to feel as if the school is theirs, then we need to make it theirs.

School leaders can do this one of two ways (i.e., it can be a charade that imparts a token amount of ownership, or it can be done realistically with true ownership), and each sends a message about how much ownership is willing to be shared or tolerated. Administrators may feel unsure or apprehensive about handing over power or control, but students and staff usually excel at autonomy, and the additional benefits that come from empowerment far exceed any initial apprehension. A sense of ownership heightens a sense of belonging, a sense of self, and a sense of community—all of



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We hope this publication provides teachers and school leaders with some practical information to use in their classrooms and schools. We understand how busy educators are, especially with an increase in mandates and accountability. We were both teachers, and we remember how teaching can feel a bit like being a plate spinner. As soon as you believe you have all of the plates spinning in unison, one of them begins to falter and demands extra support.

School climate is similar. Some days, we can be proactive and everything seems to fall into place; on other days, despite our best efforts, issues arise that take all of our time. Making a habit of being proactive helps us respond better when the situation calls for us to be reactive. It's all part of the cycle of learning and teaching.

In this section, we offer some additional suggestions for teachers and leaders. We are confident that they will help ensure a positive and inclusive school climate. Thank you for reading.

Engagement

Student

- Diverse Curriculum:** Use a curriculum that encourages social-emotional learning and presents an academic challenge.
- Student Recognition:** Know students' names and make them feel valued.