



National School Climate Center

Educating Minds and Hearts...Because the Three Rs are Not Enough

National School Climate Center

School Climate Brief

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The School Climate Improvement *Process*: Essential Elements¹

National School Climate Council



The physical, social, emotional, and intellectual climate of schools and classrooms is a significant factor in the achievement, behavior, well-being, and future success of students and their teachers.²

Student learning and development are a function of both individual and systemic factors. Individual factors include students' motivation as well as their intellectual and social abilities. Systemic factors include teacher quality, administrative leadership, community engagement, and learning environments. The increasing numbers of children living in poverty and rapidly changing ethnic demographics are critical contextual factors that must be addressed in creating positive school climates for all.

The National School Climate Council defines school climate as the quality and character of school life. School climate is a multidimensional concept that reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, safety, and organizational structures of a school community.³ In a school with positive school climate, students, families, and educators work together to contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture prosocial behavior. Everyone contributes to the operations of the school and care of the physical environment. Students, families, and school personnel feel respected, valued, and engaged in the life of the school.

There is a wealth of research evidence that demonstrates that school climate significantly influences key student behavioral and educational outcomes including attendance, engagement, academic achievement, socio-emotional well-being, prosocial behavior, and civic engagement.⁴ These outcomes enable students to become productive, contributing members of our democratic society.

The School Climate Improvement Process Defined

School climate improvement is an intentional, strategic, collaborative, transparent, and coordinated effort to strengthen school learning environments. Democratically informed decision-making constitutes an essential foundation for the school climate improvement process. Based on our members' collective experience partnering with schools, the Council defines an effective school climate improvement process as one that engages all stakeholders in the following six essential practices:

1. The decision-making process is collaborative, democratic, and involves all stakeholders (e.g., school personnel, students, families, community members) with varied roles and perspectives (e.g., teacher, nurse, social worker, administrator, bus drivers, secretaries, maintenance staff as well as nontraditional student leaders and disempowered parents).
2. Psychometrically sound quantitative (e.g. survey) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) data are used to drive action planning, intervention practices, and program implementation to continuously improve dimensions of school climate. Data are collected regularly to evaluate progress and continue to inform the improvement process.
3. Improvement goals are tailored to the unique needs of the students and broader school community. These goals are integrated into overall school reform/renewal efforts thereby leveraging school strengths while facilitating the sustainability of the improvement process over time.
4. Capacity building among school personnel promotes adult learning in teams and/or professional learning communities to promote collective efficacy and staff skills in providing whole child education.
5. Curriculum, instruction, student supports, and interventions are based on scientific research and grounded in cognitive, social-emotional, and ecological theories of youth development. Interventions include strength- and risk-based practices and programs that together represent a comprehensive continuum of approaches to promote healthy student development and positive learning environments as well as address individual student barriers to learning.
6. The improvement process strengthens (a) policies and procedures related to learning environments, and (b) operational infrastructure to facilitate data collection, effective planning, implementation, evaluation, and sustainability.

As a result, the school climate improvement process supports:

- Students feeling safer and better equipped to engage in learning and school activities that develop and enhance their knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions in order to further academic achievement, social and emotional health, civic engagement, and workplace success;



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- Collective efficacy, skills, and capacity of teachers and school personnel to ensure student success within and outside the classroom;
- A positive sense of belonging for all students and adults regardless of their individual differences, including but not limited to race, disability, language, sexual orientation, and gender;
- Parent engagement and support of student learning and development; and
- Community-school partnerships that yield positive outcomes for students, families, the school, and the broader community.

Glossary of Terms

Barriers to Learning—external and internal factors that interfere with academic and social success at school. They stem from a variety of widely recognized societal, neighborhood, familial, school, and personal conditions.

Capacity Building—the process of creating a school environment with appropriate policy and human resource development that will support school reform/renewal in an ongoing manner to accomplish key goals and objectives.

Civic Engagement—individual and group responsibility and related actions to address issues of broad community concern.

Collective Efficacy—refers to perceptions of ability to perform a specific behavior, aggregated across individuals, and within specific settings such as schools or communities. Collective efficacy has been demonstrated by research to be related to student achievement and the success of school reform/renewal.

Data-driven Decision Making—a process by which district leaders, school leaders, teachers and parents review cause and effect data to determine strengths and prioritize areas in need of improvement to inform instruction, curriculum, school climate and policy decisions to positively impact student achievement.

Professional Learning Community—a community in which professionals share common values and beliefs and are actively engaged in learning from and with each other in order to be collectively responsible for improving student outcomes using

data and research-based information.

Prosocial Behavior—benefits other individuals or the community as a whole and typically relates to the extent that individuals demonstrate social, emotional and civic competencies such as self-management, social awareness, empathy, good communication skills, perspective-taking, ethical reasoning and decision-making, cooperation, and sharing, for example.

Scientific-Based (or Evidence-Based) Research—refers to evidence established by research and evaluation that uses “. . . rigorous, systematic, and objective methodologies to obtain reliable and valid knowledge.” Further information about the American Education Research Association’s (AERA) definition and principles of scientific research can be found online at: http://www.aera.net/Portals/38/docs/About_AERA/KeyPrograms/DefinitionofScientificBasedResearch.pdf

Teacher Quality—the extent to which of teachers can accomplish the goals of education, including academic achievement as well as prosocial and civic behavior as measured by qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Theories of Youth Development—posit causal relationships or key mechanisms of change that are targets of intervention in the development of youth cognitive, social, and emotional skills and subsequent outcomes. For example, social, ecological theory underscores the multiple systems or contexts within which students function and the interactions or interplay across settings including school, family, and neighborhood social environments.



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²Freiberg, H. J. (Ed.). (1999). *School climate, measuring, improving and sustaining healthy learning environments*. London, England: Farmer Press, Taylor and Francis Inc.

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³National School Climate Council. (2007). *The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the Gap Between School Climate Research and School Climate Policy, Practice Guidelines and Teacher Education Policy*. Available online at www.schoolclimate.org/climate/papers-briefs.php

⁴Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Higgins-D'Alessandro, A., & Guffey, S. (2012). School climate research summary – August 2012. *School Climate Brief*, No. 3. New York: National School Climate Center. Available online at www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v3.pdf

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