

## State Policies on School Climate and Bully Prevention Efforts: Challenges and Opportunities for Deepening State Policy Support for Safe and Civil Schools

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The National School Climate Center (NSCC) recently completed a 50-state policy scan on state school climate and anti-bullying policies to better understand the current state policy infrastructure supporting the development of positive school climates. This policy brief examines the current status of school climate and anti-bullying policies in each state, and provides policy examples and recommendations for policymakers, districts, schools and school climate advocates to consider. In conducting the policy scan, we defined policies as a state's statutes, administrative code, state education standards and rules/regulations.

The scan revealed that most states (45) currently have policies in place to address school bullying, while only 24 states have a policy on school climate. Details of many of these policies are explored in this brief. In 2006, NSCC conducted a scan of state Department of Education policies on school climate, which investigated state Department policies and programs for their alignment with definitions and current research in the school climate field. It made suggestions for how school climate policies and programs could be better designed and aligned with what the research show effective school climate includes. This scan, in contrast, examines the prevalence of state policies on both school climate and school bullying, and what elements those policies contain.

### How Do We Define School Climate?

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of stu-

dents', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.

#### Four Essential Dimensions of School Climate

##### Safety

- Rules and Norms
- Physical Safety
- Social and Emotional Security

##### Teaching and Learning

- Support for learning
- Social and civic learning

##### Interpersonal Relationships

- Respect for diversity
- Social support – adults
- Social support – students

##### Institutional Environment

- School connectedness/engagement
- Physical surroundings

Cohen, J., McCabe, E.M, Michelli, N.M & Pickeral, T. (2009). School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice. Teachers College Record, Volume 111: Issue 1: pp. 180-213.

A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This

climate includes:

- Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

*(The definitions of school climate and a positive, sustained school climate were consensually developed by the National School Climate Council.)*

## Why Does School Climate Matter?

The National School Climate Council found that “over the last two decades, there has been a growing appreciation that school climate, the quality and character of school life, fosters — or undermines — children’s development, learning and achievement. Research confirms what teachers and parents have claimed for decades: a safe and supportive school environment, in which students have positive social relationships and are respected, engaged in their work and feel competent, matters. A growing number of reports, studies and legislation emphasize the importance of positive school climate in reducing achievement inequities, enhancing healthy development and promoting the skills, knowledge and dispositions that provide the foundation for 21st century school — and life — success.”

## State Policies on School Climate

### Where do we find state policies on school climate?

Nearly half (24) of the states have some form of school climate policy in place within their state education policies, and 8 provide another form of state support for school climate – often in the form of school climate or climate-related guidelines.

State school climate policies are not typically stand-alone policies, rather the policies that address the dimensions of school climate (safety; teaching and learning; interpersonal relationships; and institutional environment) are often scattered within many areas of general school regulation. In most states, policies addressing school climate can be found within their academic school approval, accountability and strategic planning policies, school health and safety policies, or in a combination of areas. These areas of regulation all seem to have a natural alignment with some school climate elements, so school climate policies tend to be scattered throughout laws and regulations in most states, rather than an organized set of cohesive school climate policies.

Many states’ policies address some aspects of school climate in their school quality standards. For example, the Standards for **Alaska’s** Schools include, “The school goals and staff behavior promote equity and respect for diversity among students, teachers, administrators, families, and community members of different socio-economic status and cultural background” and “The school environment is supportive and physically safe.”

**Vermont’s** School Quality Standard 2120.8.12, School Facilities and the Learning Environment, states “Each school shall maintain a safe, orderly, civil and positive learning environment, which is free from hazing, harassment and bullying and based on sound instructional and classroom management practices and clear discipline and attendance policies that are consistently and effectively enforced.”

Four (4) states integrate school climate goals and assessments through their school improvement standards.

**Montana’s** can be found in their school improvement strategic planning provisions, requiring local boards to “encourage cooperative and harmonious relationships among staff, students, parents, trustees, and community” and “develop policies, procedures, and rules that respect the rights of all learners, promote an awareness of and concern for the well-being of others, and address bully-

ing, intimidation, and harassment of students and school personnel” (MT Admin Rules § 10.55.801).

Two states – **Ohio** and **Wisconsin** – have developed specialized school climate standards/guidelines. While a great step that shows the value these states place on school climate, both are voluntary standards that districts are encouraged, but not required, to implement.

**Wisconsin’s** Standards of the Heart guidelines “...help children become caring, contributing, productive, and responsible citizens. Schools that foster standards of the heart have high expectations for students’ behavior. They provide a variety of curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities that build strong personal and interpersonal skills. The result is a school climate where all students feel safe and valued.”

The **Ohio** School Climate Guidelines describe how schools can create environments where every student feels welcomed, respected and motivated to learn. The nine guidelines are summarized here:

1. Schools, parents and communities together bolster academic achievement.
2. Integrate students’ social and emotional needs into the district’s school improvement framework.
3. Evaluate the learning environment and ensure its ongoing improvement.
4. Maintain caring, engaging and well-managed classrooms.
5. Deal with threats to safety for a better focus on learning.
6. Teach social and emotional skills to foster student success.
7. Involve parents and families to maximize student learning.
8. Connect students with schools by empowering them in responsible roles.
9. Provide high-quality food service and emphasize physical activity.

The **Ohio** School Climate Guidelines include benchmarks and suggested activities to achieve each of the nine guidelines. (See [www.ode.state.oh.us](http://www.ode.state.oh.us), keyword search: school climate for more information.)

The policy scan also found state support for school climate – not always associated with corresponding policies – in the school health and safety areas. The most common is through implementation of the Coordinated School Health Program (CSHP). Eleven (11) states have implemented the program. With eight core elements, most states use “climate” or “healthy school environment” as one element. For example:

- Maine’s CSHP is “designed to connect health (physical, social and emotional) with educational (cognitive and intellectual) programs.” One of the eight elements in Maine is “school climate.” It then lists seven school climate guidelines, with a rationale and indicators for each.
- New Mexico’s CSHP, called Healthier Schools New Mexico, takes a different approach. School climate components are found within several elements, including “Family, School and Community Partnership” and “Social and Emotional Well-Being.”

### **The Role of Students in State School Climate Policies**

Most state policies on school climate focus on what schools, school administrators and teachers should do in order to foster a positive school climate. Few, however, acknowledge the role of students. The Ohio climate guidelines above include connecting students with schools by empowering them in responsible roles.

**West Virginia’s** State Board of Education explicitly acknowledged the critical role students play by including in its Student Code of Conduct, “All students enrolled in West Virginia public schools shall behave in a manner that promotes a school environment that is nurturing, orderly, safe and conducive to learning and personal-social development...Students will help create an atmosphere free from bullying, intimidation and harassment” (WV

Board of Education Rule §126-99-3).

**New Hampshire's** rules for school approval require in its Culture and Climate section that policies adopted by local boards of education reflect, "Shared ownership and responsibility for the success of the school among students, their families, and the community" and "Student leadership through involvement in decision-making" (NH Ed 306.6 (a)).

**School Climate Assessment Instruments**

In addition to state-specific school climate assessment instruments, states may wish to examine the following publications and center that has evaluated various school climate measures:

- Cohen, J., McCabe, E.M, Michelli, N.M & Pickeral, T. (2009). School Climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice. Teachers College Record, Volume 111: Issue 1: pp. 180-213. (<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=15220>)
- Gangi, T. (2010). School climate and faculty relationships: Choosing an effective assessment measure. (<http://gradworks.umi.com/33/88/3388261.html>)
- Haggerty, K, Elgin, J. & Woollye, A. (2011). Social-emotional learning assessment measures for middle school youth. Raikes Foundation. <http://raikes-foundation.org/Secondary.aspx?file=Resources>
- Safe and Supportive Schools TA Center: School Climate measures: <http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133>

## How Do States Measure School Climate?

If states value a positive school climate, and through their policies seek to encourage positive school climate, it makes sense that measuring or assessing school climate would also be important. Such measurement would provide useful data on the school's areas of strength and areas to improve as they work to ensure they both meet or ex-

ceed state policies and create a positive school climate for their students and staff. However, state policy is generally vague and/or not prescriptive on how to measure school climate.

**Mississippi** has developed its own formal climate assessment. The Mississippi Safe and Orderly School Instruments include a checklist, interview questionnaire and school map. The checklist's first assessment category "Positive Climate/Prevention" includes :

- procedures to implement programs such as conflict resolution, aggression management, communication skills, bullying prevention, tolerance training, and prosocial skill development
- plans to create a climate of ownership and school pride
- policies and procedures to enhance multicultural understanding and consistently implements these procedures.

The **California** Department of Education has also developed a school climate assessment. The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CAL-SCHLS), include the California School Climate Survey. Since 2004, all local education agencies in California are required to administer the CSCS at least once every two years as part of compliance with No Child Left Behind.

As a result of federal funding in recent years through Safe and Supportive Schools grant (S3), more states are looking into school climate measurement. The **Tennessee** Department of Education is one state that secured an S3 grant. It requires the state to measure school climate relative to engagement, safety, and environment at the school level and help intervene in those schools with the greatest needs. Beginning during the 2011-2012 school year, Tennessee looks to adopt of an instrument to measure school climate (conditions for learning), which will include input from students, school personnel, and parents.

More commonly, states assess and monitor school climate

and/or culture (or similar concepts) through their leadership standards. Thirteen (13) states' leadership standards contain climate indicators. **Michigan's** standards for teachers regarding learning environment state "The teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation."

## What School Climate Technical Assistance do States Provide?

Twenty-seven (27) states offer some form of technical assistance to districts and/or schools on school climate generally. However, 9 states' technical assistance is related only to the school safety aspects of climate. Only three (3) states (Arkansas, Connecticut and New Hampshire) require technical assistance be provided to educators and administrators. Much of the states' technical assistance takes the form of access to resources on the state department's website and occasional webinars or training opportunities.

**Georgia's** education laws mandate the creation of the School Climate Management Program (O.C.G.A. § 20-2-155), a state-wide program to help local schools and systems requesting assistance in developing school climate improvement and management processes. The law states, "These processes will be designed for, but will not be limited to, promoting positive gains in student achievement scores, student and teacher morale, community support, and student and teacher attendance, while decreasing student suspensions, expulsions, dropouts, and other negative aspects of the total school environment. The state board upon request of a local school system is authorized to provide the necessary on-site technical assistance to local schools and systems and to offer other assistance through regional and state-wide conferences and workshops, printed material, and such other assistance as may be deemed appropriate under this Code section..."

### Technical Assistance: School Climate Improvement

In addition to state-specific school climate technical assistance now provided, states may wish to examine the resources noted below:

Formative assessment tools:

- *A school climate standards self assessment tool:* This tool is based on the National School Climate Standards ([www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php)) and can be ordered (at no cost) from the National School Climate Center: [info@schoolclimate.org](mailto:info@schoolclimate.org)
- *School Climate Improvement Formative Assessment Rubrics:* <http://src.schoolclimate.org/>
- *School Climate Resource Center:* <http://src.schoolclimate.org/>
- *Safe and Supportive Schools TA Center:* <http://safe-supportiveschools.edu>

**New Hampshire's** rules for Minimum Standards for Public School Approval include the section "Climate and Culture." It requires the school administration to provide professional development opportunities directed at understanding the policies and reporting requirements that support a safe and healthy school environment" (NH Ed 306.6 (c)).

**Arkansas** requires administrators seeking to renew their license to participate in a continuing education and professional development program that includes school climate (ACA § 6-15-1005(h)(3)).

The National School Climate Center suggests all school reform efforts need to include four overlapping implementation processes:

1. Conducting "readiness" and formative assessments that helpfully reveal "where are we now as a school?" and "what are helpful next steps to focus on?";
2. "Igniting" the school community in ways that foster

intrinsic motivation or a process whereby students, parents and guardians, school personnel and community members become meaningfully engaged in learning and working together;

3. Understanding and addressing the tasks and challenges that shape the school improvement process; and,
4. Developing and carrying out plans that promote (i) capacity building and a sustainable and successful school improvement process. The current scan did not reveal to what extent the twenty-seven states that do offer some form of technical assistance are focused on these four overlapping processes.

### State Policies on School Bullying

One of the four essential dimensions of school climate is safety, including physical as well as social and emotional safety. A common issue in American schools is bullying, which can threaten students' physical, social and emotional safety. Anti-bullying policies are often independent of and more prevalent than other school climate policies. Our policy scan revealed that 45 states currently have anti-bullying legislation in place, and North Dakota has a pending regulation.

These numbers aren't particularly surprising, given both the publicity that school bullying has had in recent years, particularly when connected to acts of violence in American schools, and the anticipated passage of the Anti-Bullying and Harassment Act of 2011 (HR 975) at the federal level. If adopted, the Act will require each state to have an Anti-Bullying and Harassment policy in place. It would also require states to report incidents of bullying and harassment, to report the perceptions of students regarding their school environment, and to provide assistance to districts in their efforts to prevent and respond to incidents of bullying and harassment. It does not, however, contain any funding to assist states in this effort.

State Anti-Bullying Policy Components	States (#)
Bully prevention policy	45
Regulation defines bullying	39
Regulation defines being the target of bullying	1
Regulation addresses cyber-bullying	31
Regulation defines cyber-bullying	19
Regulation addresses harassment	37
Regulation addresses being teased	2
Regulation addresses social, emotional and/or intellectual safety	25
Bully prevention is part of the accountability system	23
Regulation is focused on prevention	34
Regulation is focused on intervention and punishment	41
There is a funding stream supporting the regulation	6
There is Technical Assistance	37
There is professional development	22

Of the 45 states with existing anti-bullying policies, 37 states already make technical assistance available to districts or schools. However, only 25 states' policies require the state or school districts to provide technical assistance at the school level.

While the numbers look impressive, a concern is that

11 state anti-bullying policies focus solely on intervention, after a bullying act/incident has occurred. The more comprehensive bullying policies also address prevention – designed to reduce or prevent the occurrence of bullying incidents.

Many states require that each local school district adopt a policy on school bullying. For example, **South Carolina** requires each local school district to adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying at school. The school district must involve parents and guardians, school employees, volunteers, students, administrators, and community representatives in the process of creating the policy (SC Code § 59-63-140). Among the components that must be in the policy:

- a statement prohibiting harassment, intimidation, or bullying of a student;
- a definition of harassment, intimidation, or bullying no less inclusive than the state’s definition;
- a description of appropriate student behavior;
- consequences and appropriate remedial actions for persons committing acts of harassment, intimidation, or bullying, and for persons engaging in reprisal or retaliation;
- a statement that prohibits reprisal or retaliation against a person who reports an act of harassment, intimidation, or bullying;
- consequences and appropriate remedial action for persons found to have falsely accused another

To assist local districts in developing their policies, the statute required the South Carolina State Board of Education to develop model bully prevention policies and to develop teacher preparation program standards on the identification and prevention of bullying.

The statute also required information regarding a local school district policy against harassment, intimidation, or bullying must be incorporated into a school’s employee training program.

The **Maryland** State Board of Education also developed and adopted a model policy to address bullying, harassment, or intimidation: Section 7-424.1 of the Education Article of the Annotated Code of Maryland. Maryland’s model bullying policy is one example of a state that makes explicit the link between bullying and school climate. “This policy recognizes that the prohibition of bullying in schools and reprisal and retaliation against individuals who report acts of bullying, as well as subsequent and standard consequences and remedial actions, cannot be effective as prevention and intervention methods unless they are included as a part of a whole-school prevention/intervention program. The whole-school program would include the following elements: prevention, intervention/remediation, and consequences.”

The prevention phase includes annual professional development for administrators and all staff; school-wide evidence-based anti-bullying programs implemented as a part of a system of positive behavioral supports and school improvement efforts; and school climate improvement efforts in order to promote student involvement in the anti-bullying efforts, peer support, mutual respect, and a culture which encourages students to report incidents of bullying to adults, among others.

Examination of the comprehensiveness of a state’s anti-bullying policies and the link – or lack thereof – to other school climate policies could serve as a good starting point for states seeking improved school climates and decreased incidences of school bullying.

## **What Anti-Bullying Technical Assistance is Required in State Policy?**

Twenty-five of the states with anti-bullying policies include some requirements for technical assistance. Generally, the type of technical assistance falls into two broad categories: assistance the state is to provide to districts and/or schools, and assistance the school districts are

required to provide to schools/staff.

The required state assistance is most often a requirement that the state (typically the State Board of Education or State Department of Education) develops model policies, and/or make resources available to districts on bullying prevention. A host of states join South Carolina and Maryland in requiring the state to develop model policies, including Wyoming, West Virginia, Rhode Island, Alabama and Mississippi.

At least sixteen (16) states require the district or the local board of education to provide training to school staff on the anti-bullying policy, at a minimum. **Nevada's** policy requires school districts to teach administrators, principals, teachers, and other school personnel the appropriate methods to facilitate positive relations among pupils without the use of harassment and intimidation. School employees must also be taught methods to teach skills to pupils that enable pupils to replace inappropriate behavior with positive behavior (NRS § 388.133(b)). **Florida's** policy states that each district is responsible for providing teachers and administrators with instruction on identifying, preventing, and responding to bullying and harassment (FS § 1006.147(5)(1)).

A number of states offer other support to districts – most states have, at a minimum, information and materials posted to the state's website for district and school personnel to utilize. Other types of state support include:

- The **Illinois** State Board of Education has a School Bullying Prevention Task Force (SBPTF) that highlights training and technical assistance opportunities for schools to effectively address bullying. (<http://www.isbe.net/SBPTF/default.htm>).
- The **Oregon** Department of Education holds an annual violence prevention institute that is partially dedicated to harassment, intimidation, and bullying.
- **Texas** makes available to districts a videoconference on bully prevention strategies.

## Where Do We Go From Here? Recommendations for Policymakers, Districts and Schools, and School Climate Advocates to Advance State Policies on School Climate

### For State Policymakers

- Evaluate your state's current policies on school climate: Are the four dimensions of school climate represented? Do your state's policies send the message that school climate is important?
- Consider adopting comprehensive school climate standards or guidelines that make the connection between bullying prevention/intervention programs, safety, student engagement, community engagement and a positive school climate.
- Consider incentives the state might offer to districts and/or schools that demonstrate exemplary school climate processes and progress towards improved school climate. Incentives could include financial incentives, additional technical assistance targeted to that district/school, or a recognition/award program.
- Once school climate policies are established in the state, examine levels of technical assistance provided to districts and schools to determine if additional assistance is warranted. Work with in-state institutions of higher education to elevate the role of school climate in teacher and administrator preparation programs.

### For School Districts and Schools

- Implement a quality school climate self-assessment and work with principals to ensure all schools have safe, equitable, inclusive, challenging and democratically-informed school climates. Corresponding data and analysis will focus on improving practice to increase student development.

- Create opportunities for students to participate in leadership and decision-making roles at the school and district level. Engage students in conversations not just about bullying, but about school climate as well.
- Implement professional development for principals, teachers, support staff, students, parents and community partners to successfully create and sustain quality school climates for student development (including: district-level workshops, building-level training, community forums, etc.).

### For School Climate Advocates

- Recognize that each state is unique in its approach to policy creation and in its willingness to mandate what might be viewed as additional regulations onto schools and districts. As a result, a one-size-fits-all approach will not work.
- Develop materials that help state policymakers and others understand what a positive school climate looks like and how state and district policies can better support school climate efforts.
- Celebrate success! Recognize districts, schools and states that are making progress toward improving school climate.

## How the National School Climate Center Can Help

The National School Climate Center's (NSCC) goal is to promote positive and sustained school climate: a safe, supportive environment that nurtures social and emotional, ethical, and academic skills. NSCC offers an ever-expanding website with school climate practice and policy information, as well as a variety of professional development programs and services to support K-12 schools, after school settings, educators, parent advocate groups and states to support sustained school climate improvement efforts. NSCC offers workshops, summer institutes, and a comprehensive school climate assessment, the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), a

nationally-recognized school climate survey that provides an in-depth profile of your school community's particular strengths and needs. NSCC has education experts available to present keynote addresses, panel discussions, or long-term consultations with school leaders and other clients. For more information, write to [info@schoolclimate.org](mailto:info@schoolclimate.org) and/or visit NSCC's website at [www.schoolclimate.org](http://www.schoolclimate.org).

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*National 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. New York: Center for Social and Emotional Education; & Denver, CO: National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States. Available: [www.schoolclimate.org/climate/policy.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/policy.php)*  
*Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2002). Standards of the Heart. Available: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sspw/pdf/soth02.pdf>.*