

## **Systemic or school-wide, coordinated efforts designed to create a climate for learning**

What is this? A positive school climate is one that evidences norms, values and patterns of behavior that support people feeling safe, cared for, “connected” and engaged in learning and teaching together. As detailed below, there are a number of key systemic processes that further – or inhibit – schools developing a climate for learning.

Why is it important? The norms, values and patterns of behavior in schools promote and/or undermine students feeling safe, engaged, respected and able or not. Positive, sustained school climate is strongly associated with and predictive of effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts as well as caring, connected, responsible school communities.

### Common barriers:

- ✓ School leaders are focused on raising reading and math scores
- ✓ School leaders do not know what steps to consider taking to create authentic learning communities that can develop a shared vision and work together to actualize this vision
- ✓ Distrust and a culture of “blame”
- ✓ Academic, risk prevention and health promotion efforts are not coordinated
- ✓ Professional development is short term and fragmented
- ✓ Teachers do not have ongoing opportunities to learn from one another
- ✓ The school has not established effective systems to identify “at risk” students
- ✓ Schools that are too large
- ✓ Educators do not appreciate that it is essential that every student feel “connected” to at least one caring and responsible adult at school
- ✓ Educators do not take responsibly for enforcing rules consistently and fairly
- ✓ Educators do not have input into the schools disciplinary policy
- ✓ Parents and families are disconnected to school
- ✓ Inadequate mental health services and/or mental health professionals who wait for “problems” rather than being actively involved with primary prevention.
- ✓ Educators, parents and school-based mental health professionals are not effective patterns working and learning together to (1) recognize students who may be “at risk”; (2) addressing student needs; and, (3) thinking and working together to promote healthy students and healthy schools.

### Key learning’s that staff need to understand and be able to do:

#### Learning objectives

- To collaboratively develop a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
- To create a decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.
- To create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

- To learn about how to use school climate assessment as a strategy to build community, develop SEE action plans and implement them with fidelity
- To learn about and develop systems to support educator-parent and mental health professional partnerships.
- Learning about strategies to review and further develop positive social norms that support caring and responsible behavior.
- Learning about systems and frameworks that support our identifying barriers to learning and addressing them.
- To support teachers using effective classroom management and teaching methods that foster a positive learning environment.
- Developing strategies to insure that risk prevention, health promotion as well as teaching and learning is coordinated in your school.
- Promoting helpful school-home partnerships.
- To understand and be able to foster school-wide upstander behavior and inclinations.
- Providing professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, social and emotional needs of their students.
- Develop leadership skills used for the development and functioning of SEE teams in school and district environments.

Tasks that need to be considered to actualize this process:

*Reflecting and raising awareness about:*

- ✓ To reflect on what kind of system your school is? How do you think about the school as a system?

*Critically evaluating resources and making recommendations about:*

- ✓ Considering what are the essential personal characteristic as well as organizational support systems that further effective school climate improvement coordinator efforts. (Note, the person in this role may have any number of titles (e.g. assistant principal, mental health professional, 'safe and drug free' school counselor).
- ✓ Systems designed to insure the coordination of risk prevention, health promotion and educational efforts that foster a shared vision and vocabulary, assessments, and planning.
- ✓ School-family-community support and "partnership" systems.
- ✓ Professional development (PD) efforts that aim to support educators understanding how to recognize and helpfully address "at risk" students. This includes PD that supports (1) educators, parents and mental health professionals being meaningful partnerships; and, (2) educators (and

parents) understanding that student behavior is a “signal” and that “mis behavior” reflects problems.

- ✓ Systems designed to identify barriers to learning.
- ✓ Professional development efforts that aim to support educators being active and positive role models for students.
- ✓ Social emotional learning, character education and risk prevention/health promotion curriculum that have been shown to be effective.
- ✓ How diversity, in-group and out-group behavior are recognized, talked about and responded to in the academic (e.g. social studies; language arts) and non-academic aspects of school life.
- ✓ How rules/regulations are communicated and enforced.
- ✓ School norms, values and rules designed to promote even more positive social relationships (e.g. code of conducts; annual or semi annual reviews of the schools code of conduct; “prizes” which reflect what is recognized and honored).
- ✓ *Note:* measuring school climate is a systemic strategy that is detailed below in section IV-*Evaluation.*

*Strategies that foster a decision making process that fosters student, family, and community engagement, academic achievement and staff empowerment.* (Note: these research-based strategies have been taken from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth.* Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009 (available on: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth))

- Lead the school community in a process to develop a shared vision of high standards for learning and behavior.
- Solicit teacher and staff input and involvement in all efforts to improve the school climate and students’ sense of connectedness to school.
- Engage students, parents, school staff, and community members in teams to develop school policies and plan school-wide activities. These teams can also assist in writing proposals for grants and solicit support and supplies from local businesses.
- Give teachers and principals appropriate decision-making authority over how school resources are used, including people, time, facilities, and funds.
- Work with students, faculty, staff, and parents to identify simple changes or modifications that would make the school’s physical environment more
- Assign students developmentally appropriate levels of responsibility for classroom decision-making and management.
- Empower students to communicate openly with school staff and parents by providing a mechanism for students to give in-depth evaluations of their teachers, and hold student-led parent-teacher conferences to actively involve students in the discussions.<sup>34</sup>
- Engage community partners to provide a range of services at the school that students and their families need (e.g., dental services, health screenings, child care, substance abuse treatment).

*Strategies that help to provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.* (Note: these research-based strategies have been taken from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009 (available on: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth))

- Provide opportunities for parents to increase their own skills and competence in areas that will help them be more involved in their children's school life. Opportunities could include educational courses such as General Education Development (GED), English as a second language, and effective communication and leadership skills.
- Implement training workshops that provide parents with skills to better manage their children's behavior. Skills can include identifying desirable and undesirable behaviors, communication strategies, conflict resolution, listening skills, setting expectations for behaviors, and appropriate praise. Parents also can learn about how to teach their children self-restraint and problem solving.
- Provide parent workshops that teach academic support skills, such as how to talk with teachers about ways parents can help their children develop academic skills.
- Seek alternative ways to provide hard-to-reach parents with skills training, such as by using a telephone-based parent education program.
- Communicate the school's behavioral and academic expectations to families, and encourage them to reinforce those expectations at home. Expectations can be communicated through newsletters, parent–teacher–student conferences, and school Web sites.
- Encourage parents to create a supportive learning environment in the home. This includes providing homework guidance, ensuring adequate educational supplies such as computers or books, and assisting their children with time management.
- Create a mechanism to strengthen family involvement in student achievement. This could include creating a full-time staff position to coordinate school-wide activities and parent involvement or assigning school staff members to be liaisons to specific students and their families. The school–family liaison can work with the family to identify ways to be involved in the classroom and school; organize meetings with the family and relevant staff to discuss student progress and other issues; ensure that the student and family feel welcome in the school; help set academic and behavioral goals; and connect the student and family with community resources.
- Establish regular meetings with parents to discuss their children's behavior, grades, and accomplishments. These could include home visits, which are especially beneficial during key transition times (i.e., elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to college/career).
- Have the first communication from the teacher to the parent be about a positive experience the student has had, not a negative one.
- Offer multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in meaningful school and classroom

activities that can fit diverse schedules, skills, and abilities. Examples include assisting in the classroom, attending after-school events, collaborating on homework activities, participating in a school health team or parent organization, and assisting with linking community resources to the school.

- Reduce barriers to parent involvement by providing services such as babysitting, transportation, and alternate meeting locations.
- Create opportunities and mechanisms for parents to share important aspects of their culture, needs, and expectations for their children.
- Translate materials into languages spoken most commonly in students' homes. Provide bilingual interpreters to assist non-English-speaking families at school events.

*Strategies that foster the effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.* (Note: these research-based strategies have been taken from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009 (available on: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth))

- Communicate clear expectations for learning and behavior. Ensure that expectations are developmentally appropriate and that all students are held to the same expectations.
- Ensure that lessons are linked to standards and are sequential to ensure that students' learning builds upon prior lessons.
- Clearly describe lesson goals and how the information relates to students and the real world.
- Assess students continuously and use the results to guide the direction of the class and teaching methods used.
- Use interactive and experiential activities, such as group discussions, problem solving, and role-playing, to engage students in learning and help them personalize the information.
- Be flexible with instructional strategies to allow for teachable moments and personalization of the academic lessons.
- Use a variety of teaching methods such as discussion questions, extra readings, and group projects to foster critical and reflective thinking, problem-solving skills, and the capacity to work effectively with others.
- Apply a variety of classroom management strategies and teaching methods that are conducive to the diverse needs and learning styles of students. Examples of strategies include assessing student knowledge before teaching, teaching to explicit learning objectives, involving students in small cooperative learning groups, and organizing and structuring the classroom in ways that prevent discipline problems from occurring.

- Engage students in appropriate leadership positions in the classroom and provide avenues for their voices and opinions to be heard. For example, include students in the decision-making process for setting classroom rules and consequences for breaking the rules.
- Establish a reward system for both academic and extracurricular achievements, such as written praise or coupons to purchase items in the school store. In addition, encourage the intrinsic rewards of learning by displaying student work and accomplishments to parents, other students and teachers, and members of the community.
- Provide diverse opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved, learn, and be recognized. These opportunities could include service learning, extracurricular activities, and creative projects. For example, integrate academic programs with community service (e.g., developing writing skills by working on a community newspaper, reinforcing math skills by tutoring younger students).
- Encourage open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints. Creating opportunities for students to challenge and debate can teach respect for diverse opinions and perspectives.
- Reduce class size to ensure more time for individualized assistance.

*Strategies that provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.* (Note: these research-based strategies have been taken from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009 (available on: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth))

- Employ teachers who have been trained in child development, and demonstrate effective implementation of student-centered pedagogy, a variety of classroom management techniques, and teaching methods (e.g., cooperative learning).
- Offer professional development on ways to organize and structure the classroom to promote a positive environment. Developmentally appropriate discipline strategies emphasize positive behaviors and values and assist students in developing self-control.
- Educate school staff on strategies to effectively involve parents in their children's school life. Important skills include how to establish regular communication, communicate effectively with parents from diverse cultures, conduct effective parent-teacher-student conferences, involve parents in homework assignments, and organize classroom events that engage parents.
- Provide training on all curricula the school plans to use, as well as effective teaching methods (e.g., cooperative learning, active learning), to maximize the curricula's effectiveness. Ensure that teachers have the necessary materials, time, resources, and support to effectively use the skills learned in train.

- Enable teachers to learn from each other by building learning teams to observe experienced teachers applying effective classroom management techniques and facilitating group work in a way that values students' thoughts and opinions.
- Develop a coaching or mentoring program for teachers. Pairing teachers in this manner allows them to solve problems at school, share teaching techniques and classroom management strategies, and create a supportive work environment.

*Strategies that create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.* (Note: these research-based strategies have been taken from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2009 (available on: [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth))

- Consider structuring the school so that teachers stay with the same students for 3 years in elementary and middle school and 2 or more years in high school.<sup>34</sup> This can provide better continuity in learning and might allow the development of stronger teacher–student relationships.
- Allow students and their parents to use the school building and property outside of school hours for recreational or health promotion programs. This can increase their feeling of being part of the school community.
- Apply reasonable and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon by students and staff and are fairly enforced.
- Hold school-wide activities that give students opportunities to learn about different cultures, people with disabilities, and topics such as arts or sports. This will increase students' respect for diversity and form connections among students. Increasing understanding of similarities and differences can engender respect.
- Provide opportunities for students of all achievement levels to interact with one another and develop friendships, promote teamwork, and lessen hierarchical divisions between older and younger students.
- Create opportunities for students to work in partnership with adults in helping roles. For example, service learning opportunities enable students to connect with adults in the community (e.g., field trips, community volunteer events, internships). Involve students in activities that traditionally involved only adults (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, curriculum selection committees, school health teams).
- Have principals, teachers, and other school staff commit to and model respectful behavior toward each other.
- Challenge staff to greet each student by name.

- Encourage school staff to make a concerted effort to reach out to students who may be experiencing academic or social issues and get to know them, opening up the possibility for stronger relationships with those students.
- Ensure that school staff members have an expert (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist) they can consult with about student issues they feel are beyond their expertise, and to whom they can refer students who need assistance they are not qualified to provide.
- Use a variety of methods to communicate and promote expectations, values, and group norms that support positive health and academic behaviors. Communications can be addressed to students, school staff, families, and members of the community through a variety of channels such as school assemblies, newsletters, or a school Web site.

Indicators that a school is successfully focusing on this goal and related methods: There are several indicators of success in this area. First, that a respected member of the school staff has been authorized to coordinate these school wide efforts with adequate time and support to carry out meaningful work in this area. Second, the school has developed a representative leadership team that works in a collaborative and transparent manner. Third, school climate assessment findings reveal that – over time – people in school are feeling safer, more connected to school and engaged in the process of learning and teaching.

How to measure it – Recommendations: School climate survey findings. Whether there is a school climate coordinator (who may have any number of titles).