



SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THE EARLY GRADES

School leaders can build broad engagement through the following promising student engagement strategies in the early grades:

1. Value the experiences and perspectives of students in the early grades.
2. Create and implement appropriate and quality tools for young students to express and report their school experiences.
3. Provide professional development for school and program leaders, staff and teachers to increase their skills to engage early childhood students effectively in school climate improvement.
4. Engage with parents/guardians regarding the school experiences of their young children.

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Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports PK-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote prosocial education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

School Climate and Engaging Students in the Early Grades

The early grades (PK – 3) are the cornerstone and foundation upon which subsequent learning, development and achievement is built. Therefore, it is critical to develop, enhance and sustain a school/program climate that is safe, equitable, engaging and supportive for students and the educators who work with them.

Measuring the perceptions of students with respect to their social environment in the early grades is not just a nice or interesting strategy; it is absolutely necessary. One cannot assume a school

climate, which is positive, safe, equitable and engaging for older students, is automatically effective for students in the early grades.

Dr. James Comer advocates that school climate improvement methods have to be directly geared toward pre-primary school age students because engagement in and excitement for learning in school over a PK – 12 lifetime has its roots in early grade experiences; the foundation of which is learning and socializing in a positive school climate: one that has healthy relationships and is safe.

The National School Climate Center's School Climate Improvement Process outlines five stages of enhancing a school's climate, no matter what the level:

1. Preparation
2. Evaluation
3. Action Planning
4. Implementation
5. Re-Evaluation

Even for young children, it is essential in each of these stages to engage students and their parents/guardians in identifying the current school climate. We need to provide spaces and formats for early childhood students to feel at ease suggesting strategies to improve the school's climate and responsibilities they can take to engage in improvement efforts. Additionally, it is important to understand that students in the early grades offer unique perspectives. Incorporating these perspectives will greatly enhance the school climate improvement process.

For all children, including those in the early grades, there are clear markers that can be easily identified and assessed to determine if they are experiencing safety (physical, emotional, social and intellectual) and fostering the necessary bonds that make them connected and engaged in school.

School climate assessment surveys for younger students can be created and implemented to understand their school experiences, feelings of safety, connection to the school and quality of their relationships. Given kindergarten and early elementary students' literacy skills, corresponding surveys can be developed so that adults can read the question and the young student can express their response by checking a box with a smiley face, neutral face or unhappy face. Tools such as this have been developed and successfully implemented in Southeast Elementary School in Mansfield, Connecticut and subsequently throughout the entire state.

Correspondingly, the results of the school climate assessments can be analyzed and students engaged in creating strategies to enhance the school's climate. While these strategies may look different than those used with students in older grades, they are equally important in being responsive to the experiences and developmental levels of younger students and offer an incredible opportunity to address issues that may not be recognized or identified by older students.

Students who read and write with fluency can implement student engagement strategies relatively easily, as these students can complete surveys, suggest action steps and engage in school climate improvement strategies with or without direct adult involvement. On the other hand, there are challenges inherent in engaging students in the early grades to contribute directly in school climate improvement efforts without adult involvement.

Despite these challenges, engaging students in the early grades in school climate improvement is critical to ensure their voices are heard and they learn over time to contribute to school climate reforms in developmentally appropriate ways. Just because they cannot initially read or write does not negate the fact that they need to

be engaged and included. We simply need to commit to such inclusion and engagement by utilizing tools that are appropriate and effective and likely involve adult input and assistance.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

1. Value the experiences and perspectives of students in the early grades.

Students experience school in a variety of ways and these experiences orient them to immediate and long-term appreciation for education. When schools value student experiences in the early grades, students recognize the contributions they can make to school climate improvement and develop corresponding habits. Even though early grade students are just learning the fundamental skills for reading and writing, their capacity to imagine, extrapolate, interpret and intuit are fairly well developed. During an assessment interview (a valuable alternative to a standard school climate Likert scale model), much information can be culled with a simple cue such as “When you are having a really, really great day at school, what’s going on?” Asking children to report sensually, rather than analytically, will capture their perception of what positive school climate looks like, sounds like, and feels like. In doing this we both honor the feelings of younger children and allow ourselves to re-calibrate our frame of reference to include a much deeper cross section of our school communities.

2. Create and implement appropriate and quality tools (assessments, conversations, observations, etc.) for students and parents/guardians to express their school experiences.

The range of student literacy in the early grades requires the development and implementation of developmentally appropriate school climate assessment tools. While one size does not fit all students and the responsibility of adults varies in implementing school climate assessments, there

are effective tools to allow students to express their experiences, feelings of safety, connection to the school and quality of their relationships.

Additionally, these tools will need to incorporate the breadth of all modes of learning. Especially in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten grades, we need to be deliberate in assessing school climate by utilizing verbal, bodily, kinesthetic, rhythmic, visual and aural methods of expression. By embracing all learning styles and all the various forms of expression, we are more likely to capture a child’s perception of what it means to belong, feel special, be in a safe environment, know there is support and experience a sense of empowerment. Accommodating the developmental needs of early childhood learners (Comer, 2008) is key to preparing a strong foundation for subsequent collaboration with school climate improvement strategies and assessment.

3. Provide professional development for school/program leaders, staff and teachers to increase their skills to engage early childhood students effectively in school climate improvement.

It is important to enhance adults’ knowledge and skills to effectively integrate school climate assessment and improvement in the early grades. Corresponding quality professional development should include why engaging students is important, what strategies are most effective for engaging students, and how most effectively to involve students in the early grades in assessing and improving their school’s climate.

As with all quality professional development, we need to ensure that there is a blended learning approach that allows for the acquisition of new knowledge through presentations, seminars, online learning modules, in-person workshops, mentoring opportunities, sustained coaching, and reflection to strive toward improvement in practice. Building an infrastructure that allows

for continuous quality assurance and monitoring of the coaching model is essential for high-quality program management (Lloyd, 2012).

4. Include parents/guardians and their teachers in sharing the perceptions of their early grade students.

This provides a wonderful opportunity for engaging parents and guardians in school climate improvement efforts. With a small amount of preparation, a school can prepare parents/guardians to ask certain specific questions of their children at home and report back to the school about their findings. They can also provide reflective information verbally and/or in writing as well as providing detailed information about their child's personality, learning style, preferences and many other aspects that contribute toward teaching and catering to the whole child. This creates a meaningful bridge and empowers our parents/guardians with a valuable role of co-learners and collaborators.

Summary

Quality early childhood programs and schooling in the primary grades requires a foundation of a positive climate; without this necessary foundation, children's learning (socially, emotionally, and intellectually) is compromised. It is imperative that from the earliest years of a child's education, focus and attention be squarely placed on fostering the kind of learning environments that are physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually safe, healthy and engaging. To do so requires that school/program climate be assessed, formally and informally and that the five-stage school climate improvement process be followed, just as it would for upper elementary,

middle and high schools. There are inherent challenges in working with children whose linguistic abilities are not fully developed. However, strategies do exist and should be implemented both to assess climate in schools/programs and to foster climate improvement. To do anything less would be to compromise the potential educational benefits of the youngest children.

References

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Lloyd, Chrrishana M., and Emily L. Modlin. "Coaching as a Key Component in Teachers' Professional Development: Improving Classroom Practices in Head Start Settings." *OPRE Report 2012-4.* Administration for Children & Families (2012).

Also, the work of Jerome

Freiberg: <http://www.uh.edu/news-events/stories/2010articles/May2010/5102010CMCDRecognition.php>

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