School Culture and Climate Assessments

Background

The *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*School Guide*) defines school climate as "a range of campus conditions, including safety, relationships and engagement, and the environment, that may influence student learning and well-being" (p. 53). School climate is important because its effects are far-reaching. Studies reveal that a supportive and prosocial school climate is positively correlated with a number of traits, including student motivation, feelings of connectedness and engagement with school,[1] student self-esteem,[2] decreased absenteeism,[3] and reduced bullying and harassment. School climate has also been shown to have positive impacts on academic performance, going so far as to mitigate the negative impact of a socioeconomic environment.[4] In schools with positive climates, students are more likely to feel connected to adults and their peers. Such a connection fosters a nurturing environment where students are more likely to succeed, feel safe, and report threats. School climate is determined by a number of factors, including staff and student relationships, perceptions of physical and emotional safety by students, the learning environment, and disciplinary policies.

To effectively implement strategies to improve school climate, school planning teams must (1) understand what school climate is determined by, (2) understand how to conduct a culture and climate assessment, and (3) understand how they can use raw data from a culture and climate assessment to make measurable improvements in school climate.

A Look at the Issue Today

The Safe and Supportive Schools Model of School Climate, developed by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), describes school climate as being the result of 10 determinants, organized under three headings: engagement includes relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation; safety includes emotional safety, physical safety, and substance use; and environment includes physical environment, academic environment, wellness, and disciplinary environment. These three factors impact school climate in the following ways.

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[1] Hopson, L. M., Schiller, K. S., & Lawson, H. A. (2014). Exploring linkages between school climate, behavioral norms, social supports, and academic success. *Social Work Research, 38*(4), 197–-209. doi:10.1093/swr/svu017

[2] Hoge, D. R., Smit, E. K., & Hanson, S. L. (1990). School experiences predicting changes in self-esteem of sixth and seventh-grade students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*, 117–127.

[3] Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2010). *School climate research summary. School climate brief, 1*(1), 1–16. Retrieved from https://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/pbis/bullying/downloads/pdf/scbrief_ver1no1_jan2010.pdf

[4] Astor, R. A., Benbenisty, R., & Estrada, J. N. (2009). School violence and theoretically atypical schools: The principal's centrality in orchestrating safe schools. *American Education Research Journal, 46*, 423–461. doi:10.3102/0002831208329598

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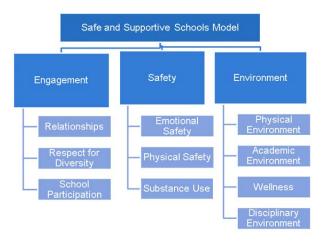@remstacenter   https://rems.ed.gov

Figure 1: Safe and Supportive Schools Model of School Climate. Retrieved from: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/safe-and-healthy-students/school-climate

Engagement and Trauma-Informed Schools. Engagement addresses teacher, student, and whole-school connectedness, as well as parental participation, academic involvement, and the presence of a culture of equity. One of the major determinants affecting whether students are engaged with their school community is emotional safety—a state in which students feel that they are able to express emotions, feel secure in their emotions, and are confident to feel challenged and try new things.[5] Between 13% and 20% of children in the United States experience a serious emotional disturbance—such as bipolar disorder, major depression, generalized anxiety disorder, eating disorders, and conduct disorders—in a given year, according to the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Further, schools are the largest de facto provider of emotional and behavioral health services for children, so awareness and understanding of student emotional and mental issues are imperative.[6] Most students who experience traumatic events experience them as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), a collection of stressful or traumatic events that include abuse, neglect, and the witnessing of substance abuse, among many others. To support these students, schools can be trauma informed, where teachers and staff are prepared to recognize and help those affected. Such schools are culturally sensitive, encourage and support diversity, empower students, and use positive reinforcement principles.[7] They emphasize compassionate teaching practices and provide students with a sense of control.[8] In turn, students become more engaged socially and academically and contribute to a positive school climate.

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[5] National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2017). Emotional safety. Retrieved from https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/safety/emotional-safety

[6] Foy, J. M., & Perrin, J. (2010). Enhancing pediatric mental health care: Strategies for preparing a community. *Pediatrics*, Suppl. 3, S75–S86.

[7] Cavanaugh, B. (2016). Trauma-informed classrooms and schools. *Beyond Behavior, 25*(2), 41–46.

[8] Crosby, S. D. (2015). An ecological perspective on emerging trauma-Informed teaching practices. *Children & Schools, 37*(4), 223–230. doi:10.1093/cs/cdv027

Safety. Physical safety refers to the protection of the entire school community from violence and crime in order to establish a learning environment in which students are focused, engaged, and ready to learn. Bullying, a highly influential contributor to school climate, has many documented effects on the victim and overall school community. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 28% of U.S. students in grades 6–12 have experienced bullying. More striking, 70.6% of young people say that they have seen bullying in their schools, with 70.4% of school staff having witnessed bullying, as well.[9] Harassment is also a major issue in schools, with 85% of high school students reporting suffering harassment due to real or perceived sexual orientation.[10] School districts with strong, comprehensive antibullying and antiharassment policies see a 7%–13% reduction in school violence and an 8%–12% reduction in school bullying.[11]

Environment. A school's environment is defined by its facilities, classrooms, student supports, and disciplinary policies. Schools perceived as safe are generally well cared for and aesthetically pleasing, and positive interactions between staff and students are observable. According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE), administered by ED's Office of Safe and Healthy Students, using positive approaches to student discipline puts the focus on restoring relationships and restoring the understanding of and commitment to order, as opposed to punishment that may alienate students. A positive academic environment challenges students, yet provides a multitude of supports for students who may be struggling. For example, classrooms are free of disruptions, and teachers and students are provided with all the tools they need to teach and learn. According to the NCSSLE, there is considerable evidence that positive teaching and learning environments produce better test scores and graduation rates. School environments that contribute to a positive school climate are also supportive of physical and mental/behavioral health and provide an array of culturally competent services that can be accessed easily by students. Schools adequately staffed with encouraging mental/behavioral health professionals help create a climate in which students feel comfortable confiding in adults, which in turn can help prevent potential emergencies from occurring. Student mental/behavioral health, as with other elements of the school environment, is connected to positive student achievement.

Methods to Measure School Climate

Measuring school climate is important because this allows stakeholders to understand the school community's perceptions of school safety and provides them with localized data that they can then use to make informed decisions addressing school climate. A culture and climate

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[9] Bradshaw, C. P., Sawyer, A. L., & O'Brennan, L. M. (2007). Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff. *School Psychology Review, 36*(3), 361–382.

[10] GLSEN & PFLAG. (n.d.). Claim your rights: Bullying, harassment, and discrimination of LGBT students should be reported! [Fact sheet]. Retrieved from https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Claim%20Your%20Rights%20-%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20GLSEN%20%26%20PFLAG_0.pdf

[11] Sabia, J., & Bass, B. (2017). Do anti-bullying laws work? New evidence on school safety and youth violence. *Journal of Population Economics, 30*(2), 473–502. doi:10.1007/s00148-016-0622-z

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assessment is an important tool for measuring school climate, as it can evaluate student, staff, and family connectedness to the school and both positive and problem behaviors. The assessment should be regularly conducted and is one tool a school district's or school's planning team can use as it progresses through the six-step planning process to create, review, or revise an emergency operations plan (EOP) (see the "Relation to EOP Development and Emergency Preparedness" section below for more information). Additionally, assessment data can be used to identify problem behaviors, prioritize the ones that will be addressed, and find programs to help improve this behavior.

Planning teams can conduct a culture and climate assessment in the following ways.

Create the Assessment Instrument and Methodology. Planning teams should use a culture and climate survey that best meets the needs of their school community. Despite surveys being the source of most quantitative school climate data, planning teams can also collect qualitative data via observations, interviews, and focus groups, among other methods, so that each topic within the three domains of school climate is thoroughly assessed and that data exist in some form on each topic. Schools should clarify who within the school will be responsible for administering any data collection tools as well as to whom the data collection tools will be administered. This person would also coordinate any interviews or focus groups. It is important to ensure that data collection methods protect the privacy of individuals and that surveys, particularly, collect data anonymously so that information collected cannot be linked back to an individual. According to the NCSSLE, schools ideally will want to gather survey data from more than 80% of stakeholders. A plan for data analysis will clarify whether the necessary data are collected to answer important school climate questions.

Collect and Analyze Data. Schools should segregate data based on subpopulation (e.g., race, gender, grade, level of ability, and sexual orientation) and stakeholder type (e.g., teachers, students, and administrators) to be able to compare populations and identify patterns that occur within particular topical areas.

Prepare and Distribute Final Reports. Final data reports should be easily understood by all stakeholder groups and provide a starting point from which improvements in school climate can be made. Goals, objectives, and courses of action that support safe schools and preparedness can then be created for before, during, and after an incident (see the "Relation to EOP Development and Emergency Preparedness" section below) to reduce the number of challenging behaviors that detract from the school climate and reduce the degree to which effective teaching and learning can take place. Once final reports are prepared, they should be distributed to members of the school community. The school community, including students, should be allowed to provide feedback and submit any questions or concerns to administrators regarding the state of the school's climate.

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Methods to Create a School Climate Improvement Plan

A comprehensive understanding of school climate and of culture and climate assessments is an integral part of emergency preparedness, and can help schools prevent, mitigate the effects of, protect against, respond to, and recover from emergency events. School climate cannot be improved if schools do not have a thorough understanding of where their school climate stands prior to the implementation of a school climate improvement program. Even schools with existing programs must continually measure and analyze school climate data to ensure that their improvement programs are effective over time and, if not, to make changes. School climate data are powerful, allowing schools to grasp what issues stakeholders are struggling with and, in the process, gain insight into what elements of school climate can be improved, with the overarching goal of preventing targeted violence within the school community and ensuring that students are learning in the safest, most productive instructional environment.

A myriad of school climate improvement programs exists, and planning teams should consider those that are evidence based, are replicable in their school, and align with their school climate improvement needs. Teams should also ensure that they have the capacity to implement the program, whether that means having enough of the appropriate staff required or the budget necessary. School climate can be improved using a data-driven, multi-tiered framework that provides a continuum of behavioral supports and interventions to improve student behavior and achievement. A comprehensive school climate improvement program will have interventions that address each tier in this framework:

1. **Universal.** Schoolwide or universal interventions and supports that focus on developing prosocial behaviors and social–emotional competence and on preventing problem behavior.
2. **Second Tier.** These interventions target groups of students who are at heightened levels of exhibiting problem behavior (e.g., bullying). These groups of students can be identified more easily and their needs or behavior can be addressed more effectively when a schoolwide foundation, which is the first tier of intervention and support, is in place.
3. **Third Tier.** A third tier of interventions targets individual students who are at even more elevated levels of academic and social–emotional behavioral need and risk.

Relation to EOP Development and Emergency Preparedness

The *School Guide* outlines a six-step planning process for developing a high-quality school EOP. Schools can incorporate culture and climate assessments and their data into this federally recommended framework in the following ways.

In Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team, schools should include on the planning team the staff with a role in conducting culture and climate assessments, such as school counselors, school psychologists, and mental/behavioral health staff. Not only will these

staff provide insight into the culture and climate assessment results and findings, but they will also be able to integrate such data throughout the school EOP.

In Step 2: Understand the Situation, school planning teams will use the information from the culture and climate assessment as they identify possible threats and hazards to address in the school EOP. Culture and climate assessment data will not only illuminate the potential threats and hazards that the school may face, but will also aid planning teams in evaluating and comparing the risks and vulnerabilities associated with each threat or hazard. In turn, school planning teams will be able to prioritize threats and hazards to address directly in the school EOP and enhance the school's overall emergency preparedness, including the components of safety, security, and emergency management.

In Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives, the planning team develops goals and objectives for each of the threats and hazards identified and prioritized in Step 2. These may include threats that relate to school climate and, therefore, the goals and objectives may address incorporating school climate improvement activities. Planning teams should determine goals and objectives to achieve the best outcome for (1) before, (2) during, and (3) after an incident or emergency occurs, as illustrated in the *before* example below.

> Active Aggressor Goal Example 1 (before): Prevent the incidence of targeted acts of violence on the school campus.
> - Objective 1.1: Implement and maintain a school climate improvement program.

In Step 4: Plan Development, the planning team develops courses of action for accomplishing each of the objectives developed in Step 3. An important component of this step is to use scenario-based planning to imagine the different ways that a threat or hazard may unfold, and the steps the school and community partners should take to address that threat or hazard. These procedures, paired with their goals and objectives, can result in the creation of an annex for each threat and hazard addressed in Step 3. Here, planning teams will incorporate the school climate improvement plan by determining who will be responsible for implementing school climate improvement activities; what the components of the activities will consist of; and when, where, and why they will be implemented. If a school culture and climate assessment revealed that many students felt uncomfortable about the severity of school disciplinary policies, a course of action for the aforementioned active aggressor goal and objective examples may look like:

- Courses of Action: A month before each school year begins, the Principal, Vice Principal, and school resource officers will review and revise school disciplinary policies to ensure that they are fair and appropriate.

In Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval, the school EOP is written, reviewed, approved, and shared. Those threats relating to school climate, which were identified in Step 2 and then addressed in Steps 3 and 4, will be included as annexes, such as an Active Aggressor Annex, in the Threat- and Hazard-Specific Annexes section of the school EOP.

Finally, in Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance, the plan is shared with stakeholders, who are trained on the plan and their responsibilities. School EOPs should be maintained on an ongoing basis, and so relevant annexes should be reviewed after culture and climate assessments generate new information or after a change in personnel or policy in school climate improvement efforts. Exercises, such as drills, tabletop exercises, functional exercises, or full-scale exercises, should also be conducted to test key personnel and stakeholders and to help refine areas in the EOP that need improvement.

Key Resources

Several federal resources are available to support conducting culture and climate assessments. These include:

- **School Climate and Discipline: Support School Staff, ED.** This Web page lists resources that can help educators and other school staff create a positive school climate. Resources offer guidance, strategies, rubrics, and technical assistance, and information on grants is provided. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/support.html
- **EOP Interactive Tools, REMS TA Center.** The REMS TA Center offers interactive tools that support individuals and planning teams at schools, school districts, and state education agencies in assessing their knowledge of the recommended six-step planning process, creating a high-quality school EOP, and evaluating existing EOPs. https://rems.ed.gov/EOPinteractivetools.aspx
- **ED School Climate Surveys (EDSCLS), NCSSLE.** This Web-based administration platform offers a suite of school climate surveys for middle and high school students, teachers and staff, and parents/guardians. Data are processed within the platform, can be stored locally by education agencies, and are generated into user-friendly reports in real time. EDSCLS measures three domains of school climate—engagement, safety, and environment—and covers such topics as physical safety and mental health. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls

- School Climate Survey Compendia, NCSSLE. This Web page contains sample culture and climate assessments from federal and nonfederal agencies. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium

- School Climate Improvement Resource Package, NCSSLE. This Web page contains a collection of resources for stakeholders interested in addressing and improving school climate. Components include a Quick Guide that provides an overview of methods to improve school climate, a reference manual that provides lists of goals, strategies, outputs, and resources on improving school climate; an Action Guide for school leaders that provides steps on how to support a healthy school climate; a resource list for stakeholders to assist in interpreting school climate data; and online modules that provide an opportunity to practice skills related to managing school climate. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about

- National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. This searchable online registry contains substance abuse and mental health interventions. Schools may use this to research evidence-based interventions to incorporate into school climate improvement programs. http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/landing.aspx

- Conducting Assessments to Help Your Education Agency Understand the Situation and Enhance Emergency Planning, REMS TA Center. This topic-specific Web page contains resources from the REMS TA Center, ED, and other federal agencies related to conducting assessments to inform school emergency planning. One type of assessment covered on this Web page is the culture and climate assessment. https://rems.ed.gov/Resource_Plan_Basic_Assessment.aspx