Ensuring a Positive School Climate and Culture

"A positive school climate is the product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting —from pre-K/elementary school to higher education." – National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

Use this guide to call attention to school climate and culture, and press leaders to take action to ensure that all students and adults have positive experiences in school.

What do we know?

- **School climate is important for EVERYONE.** Students who attend schools with a positive school climate have been found to have increased self-esteem and self-concept, decreased absenteeism, reduced behavioral issues and disciplinary actions, and increased school completion. Also, teachers need a positive climate so that they can guide, encourage, and support students' learning.

- **Students experience school in varied ways.** Students of different races and ethnicities have been found to have differing perceptions of their school climate. For example, in multiple studies examining students in California, Asian and White students generally reported higher levels of safety, support, and connectedness than African American, Latino, and Native students within the same schools as well as between schools across the state.

- **Addressing school climate is key to eliminating the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline.** Research shows that suspensions and expulsions have negative impacts on student outcomes, and the victims of these practices are disproportionately students of color. Improving school climate is key to alleviating these problems.

- **School, district, and state leaders** have critical responsibilities in ensuring that all students attend schools that are physically and emotionally safe, encourage strong interpersonal relationships within the school building, and support all students to achieve at high levels.

Advocacy guide roadmap

This guide focuses on what advocates can do to push states, districts, and schools to promote, enhance, and sustain positive school climate and culture. It suggests:

- **Key questions to ask** leaders about what schools are doing to foster strong relationships, set high expectations, and utilize fair disciplinary practices, and how states and districts are supporting this work

- **Examples** of states and districts that are rising to the challenge, implementing evidence-based strategies to promote a positive school climate

- How advocates can use **ESSA** to press state, district, and school leaders to focus on school climate

- **Additional resources** for advocates to learn more

> **KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ANY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTION**
> 1. What interventions have school leaders tried in the past and what were the results?
> 2. Why do district or school leaders think the proposed intervention will work?
> 3. How will district or school leaders plan for and implement the intervention?
> 4. How will district or school leaders know if this approach is working?
> 5. What will district or school leaders do if it doesn't work, and when?

▶ QUESTIONS TO ASK DISTRICT AND STATE LEADERS ABOUT
school climate and culture

1. **What data does the state collect and make available to district and school leaders to help them understand school climate?**

Look for:

- At minimum, the state provides the following at least once a year:
  - Discipline data by student group and offense type
  - Chronic absenteeism rates by student group
  - Evidence-based student and parent climate survey results by student group; teacher survey results by teacher race/ethnicity
  - Teacher absenteeism
  - Teacher turnover by race/ethnicity
- Data allow for comparisons between districts, between schools, and within schools, as well as over time

Watch out for:

- The state does not provide disaggregated school climate data
- Data aren't comparable to other districts/schools
- Use of a school climate survey that is not evidence-based, or that doesn't allow disaggregation of results

2. **How do state and district policies promote the importance of a positive school climate, including high expectations and strong relationships?**

Look for:

- The state to have research-based standards for quality school climate and ways to measure whether schools meet those standards. The state makes school climate data available to families and the public.
- The state to provide funding for alternatives to exclusionary discipline and for hiring support staff like counselors
- The district to have a plan — with timelines — for ongoing family and community engagement in school improvement.
- The district routinely examines its policies (e.g., codes of conduct, staffing processes) to ensure they don't undermine school climate
- The district to have staff dedicated to building and maintaining relationships with community organizations and other agencies to ensure students receive the supports they need in and out of school (e.g., mental health services)

Watch out for:

- Surface-level engagement with community members
- No acknowledgment of impact of district policies on school climate
- States and districts allowing the use of corporal punishment in schools[1]

3. **What will the district do to support school leaders and staff to improve school climate?**

Look for:

- The state and/or district to provide training and support in collecting school climate data to ensure quality and comparability.

- The district to actively seek teacher and principal input on professional development and respond to that input.

- The district to provide ongoing training, coaching, and support on building a positive school climate and implementing alternatives to exclusionary discipline (e.g. implicit bias, cultural competency, empathy, and restorative justice training)

- The district to seek and respond to feedback on the quality of professional development

Watch out for:

- No training/support in data collection

- "One-off" professional development on school climate-related issues

- No ongoing evaluation of interventions or trainings

4. **How will the state/district ensure schools are clean, physically safe spaces that promote an academically supportive and respectful learning environment?**

Look for:

- The state and/or district to have standards of quality for building cleanliness and maintenance

- The state to prioritize districts and schools with the highest need for school construction funding

- The district to handle maintenance requests quickly and efficiently (e.g. within 24 hours of single call from school)

- The district to work with other agencies/organizations to ensure students' physical safety inside the school building and on the way to/from school

Watch out for:

- The state or district does not consider need in construction and renovation fund allocations.

- Extensive paperwork for maintenance requests

- No plan for student safety on the way to/from school

school climate in schools identified for support and improvement

Oftentimes, students of color experience school climate and teachers of color experience working conditions differently than their White peers. Ask about the particular experiences of each major racial and ethnic group, not just the overall average.

1. **How will the school leadership team establish and communicate high expectations for all students and adults?**

Look for:

School leadership team can show how they:

- Engage families, students, and all faculty in a shared understanding of academic and behavioral expectations and high-quality instruction, and hold staff responsible for implementing any changes.

- Frequently communicate high expectations for all students (e.g., "All students are college material"). Leaders demonstrate how those beliefs manifest in the school building. For example:

  - Collaborative planning is solutions-oriented and based in disaggregated data

  - Student work is displayed throughout school

  - All students are enrolled in college- and career-ready prep curriculum

- Establish a clear code of conduct for students and adults with input from students, families, and school personnel

- **Especially in Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools**, ensure that teachers routinely examine disaggregated data to look for themes/patterns among student groups. These data form the basis for discussions of what's working (or not) for particular groups within a school and what needs to be done

Watch out for:

- Rhetoric of high expectations without evidence of how they manifest in the school building

- Inconsistent or insufficient use of disaggregated data during collaborative planning

2. **What will the school leadership team do to foster trust and collaboration among staff to improve student learning?**

Look for:

The school leadership team to demonstrate how they:

- State expectations explicitly and ensure that teachers have resources, training, and ongoing support to meet them

- Provide frequent, constructive feedback, and actively make themselves available to teachers and staff

- Actively solicit staff feedback on school-wide procedures and create opportunities for teachers to assume leadership roles

- Structure master schedules to include collaborative planning and ensure it is rooted in data on student progress and interests

- Provide orientation for new teachers and ongoing support from a mentor teacher

Watch out for:

- Insufficient support or time for teachers to meet expectations

- Few or no opportunities for teacher leadership

- Lack of diversity among teacher leaders

- Few or no opportunities for teacher collaboration or peer observations

3. **What will the school leadership team do to build trust and improve relationships between adults and students in the school?**

Look for:

The school leadership team demonstrate how they ensure:

- Student perspectives are included in decision-making. For example, leaders review and act on results of school climate surveys

- Staff receive training on bias so that adults are aware of the explicit and implicit messages they send to students

- Teachers establish and practice clear expectations and classroom procedures, and provide frequent feedback to students

- Staff encourage students to be caring and respectful to one another and teachers model such interactions in the classroom

- **Especially in TSI schools**, curriculum and teachers' lesson plans draw on the diverse interests and experiences of students

Watch out for:

- Answers that blame students/community

- No clear schoolwide behavioral and/or academic expectations.

- The school's processes and procedures are primarily reactive (i.e., after negative behaviors) and punitive

4. **What will the school leadership team do to foster relationships between the school, families, and community, as well as communicate that parents are necessary partners in school improvement?**

Look for:

School leadership team to show how they:

- Establish an infrastructure to support family engagement, such as a decision-making parent advisory council, and ensure that it is representative of the student population

- Reach out to families and the community early and often — not just when there is an issue

- Seek input from families on how the school can support students, and follow up with what's being done as a result

- Ensure that logistics of parent/teacher conferences and other school events enable all parents to participate (schedule to accommodate varied work hours, offer translation, and provide food and childcare)

- **Especially in TSI schools**, pay particular attention to how school leaders intentionally engage with families of historically underserved students (e.g., by providing opportunities for small-group conversations with school leaders)

Watch out for:

- No infrastructure to create and/or maintain connections with parents and families

- No clear process for families to offer ongoing feedback

- No meaningful opportunities to involve parents in school improvement efforts

- Parent involvement that does not reflect the entire school population

5. **How will the school leadership team ensure that students of color, low-income students and students with disabilities are not disciplined more harshly or more often than other students?**

Look for:

The school leadership team to show that they:

- Regularly review disaggregated school climate and discipline data (incl. discipline referrals or incident reports, in-and out-of-school suspension, corporal punishment, police involvement, and arrests) to identify disproportionality

- Establish ambitious, but attainable numeric goals for reducing disproportionate discipline with staff, student, and family input

- Implement evidence-based alternatives to exclusionary discipline and corporal punishment (e.g., restorative practices and positive behavioral supports) and provide ongoing training and feedback to teachers on implementing these approaches

- Provide all teachers with training on culturally competent classroom management informed by understanding of implicit bias

- Hire support personnel (e.g. counselors and social workers) and ensure that all school staff — including school resource officers — are trained in de-escalation practices

Watch out for:

- Discipline and broader school culture strategies not informed by data

- School leaders who provide no (or insufficient) ongoing training or resources to support the use of alternative disciplinary practices

- Responses that blame students and don't acknowledge adults' role in overuse of and disproportionality in exclusionary discipline measures

States, districts, and schools that are rising to the challenge

- Since 2013, the **Illinois State Board of Education** has administered the 5Essentials survey in all schools around the state. Based in research conducted in Chicago, the 5Essentials measures five components found critical to school success: effective leaders, collaborative teachers, involved families, supportive environments, and ambitious instruction. Survey results are analyzed and provided to local administrators to better target resources and interventions.

- After successfully piloting restorative practices in a few middles schools, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) school board passed a resolution in 2010 to implement restorative practices throughout the district to reduce the use of punitive disciplinary policies in partnership with the U.S. Office of Civil Rights. OUSD serves more than 45,000 students, 70 percent of whom are students from low-income families and nearly 90 percent students of color. Between 2011 and 2014, the district reduced the percentage of Black students suspended for "disruption/willful defiance" by 40 percent. OUSD also found that schools that implemented restorative practices showed greater improvement in reading than those that did not.

- From 1993 to 1998, nearly half the ninth-grade students at St. Louis Park High School in Minneapolis had been failing at least one course. When a school leader challenged a school counselor to come up with a solution, she developed what is now known as the BARR method, for Building Assets, Reducing Risks. BARR emphasizes collaborative meetings that focus on three things: data, the whole child, and a personalized plan for each student. It combines these meetings with purposeful family engagement, grouping students into cohorts taking core classes together, and short lessons taught by core subject teachers that build students' social-emotional skills. At St. Louis Park, the BARR approach cut the failure rate for ninth-graders from 50 percent to 25 percent.

Since then, the method and its positive results have been replicated in schools across the country, with the strongest impacts for students of color, male students, and students from low-income families.

How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act to urge district and school leaders to focus on school climate?

- **Increased transparency:** ESSA requires states to report data on discipline rates (including suspensions and expulsions) and chronic absenteeism by student group on school and district report cards. Advocates can use these data to draw attention to and push for action on school climate issues.

- **Improvement planning:** Under ESSA, schools identified for improvement have to submit an improvement plan with evidence-based interventions. Given that learning conditions are a critical to student success, advocates can press for inclusion of strategies to address school climate.

- **Funding:** States have to set aside 7 percent of Title I funds to support evidence-based interventions in CSI and TSI schools. In addition, states and districts can use Title II funds to support culturally appropriate and effective instruction. ESSA Title IV, Sec. 4108 provides funding to districts for "activities to support safe and healthy students." Advocates can lobby for using these funds to support evidence-based interventions to reduce exclusionary/disproportionate discipline or improve climate more broadly.

Additional resources

The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice Center is a comprehensive and practical resource guide that demonstrates how schools, districts, and communities are curbing exclusionary discipline.

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments offers School Climate Improvement Action Guides designed to provide practitioners, community members, families, and students with action steps, pitfalls to avoid, and questions to ask about improving school climate.

The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) maintains a collection of additional validated school climate survey tools.

ENDNOTES

1. About 40% of states have policies that expressly allow the use of corporal punishment or have no law that prohibits it. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) defines corporal punishment as "the intentional infliction of pain or discomfort and/or the use of physical force upon a student with the intention of causing the student to experience bodily pain so as to correct or punish the student's behavior." Corporal punishment is harmful, ineffective, teaches students that physical violence is an acceptable means of solving problems, and is often disproportionately applied to students with disabilities and students of color. NASP position statement on corporal punishment available at: (http://www.nasponline.org/assets/documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Position%20Statements/CorporalPunishm ent.pdf).