

School Climate Policy
Westbrook Connecticut

Policy Statement

All schools must support and promote teaching and learning environments where each and every student achieves academically and socially, has a strong and meaningful voice and is prepared for democratic life and successful transition into the 21st century workplace. A positive school climate is an essential element of achieving these goals. Rigorous implementation of the following set of guiding principles and systemic strategies will promote these desired outcomes.

The Westbrook Board of Education (the “Board”) adopts this Policy that is guided by the fundamental belief that each and every school community member should be treated with dignity, should have the opportunity to learn, work, interact and socialize in physically, emotionally and intellectually safe, respectful and positive school environments, as well as the opportunity to experience high quality relationships. Schools, therefore, have the responsibility to promote conditions designed to create, maintain and nurture positive school climate.

This Policy sets forth the framework for an effective and democratically informed school climate improvement process, which includes a continuous cycle of (i) planning and preparation, (ii) evaluation, (iii) action planning, and (iv) implementation, and serves to actualize the expectations of the five National School Climate Standards,¹ as detailed herein.²

The Board recognizes that there is not one best way to improve school climate. Each school needs to consider its history, strengths, needs, and goals. This Policy will support and promote the development of research-supported action plans that will create and/or sustain physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe learning environments that foster social, emotional, ethical and academic education.

Definitions

An **“Effective School Climate Improvement Process”** is one that engages all stakeholders in the following six essential practices:

(1) Promoting decision-making that is collaborative, democratic, and actively involves all stakeholders (e.g., school personnel, students, families, community members) with varied and meaningful roles and perspectives where all voices are heard;

¹ Appendix A.

² School Climate Improvement is more encompassing than any individual program that might be implemented as a strategy for improving one or more dimensions of school climate.

(2) Utilizing psychometrically sound quantitative (e.g. survey) and qualitative (e.g. interviews, focus groups) data to drive action planning, preventive/intervention practices and implementation strategies that continuously improve all dimensions of school climate, including regularly collecting data to evaluate progress and inform the improvement process;

(3) Tailoring improvement goals to the unique needs of the students and broader school community. These goals shall be integrated into overall school improvement efforts thereby leveraging school strengths to address evidence-based areas of need, while sustaining the improvement process over time;

(4) Fostering adult learning in teams and/or professional learning communities to build capacity building among school personnel and develop common staff skills to educate the whole child;

(5) Basing curriculum, instruction, student supports, and interventions on scientific research and grounding in cognitive, social-emotional, and psychological theories of youth development. Interventions include strength-based programs and practices that together represent a comprehensive continuum of approaches to promote healthy student development and positive learning environments as well as address individual student barriers to learning; and

(6) Strengthening policies and procedures related to:

- a. climate informed teaching and learning environments;
- b. infrastructure to facilitate data collection, analysis, and effective planning;
- c. implementation of school climate improvement plans;
- d. evaluation of the school climate improvement process; and
- e. sustainability of school climate improvement efforts.

“Positive Sustained School Climate” is the foundation for learning and positive youth development and includes:

1. Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe;
2. People who treat one another with dignity, and are engaged and respected;
3. A school community that works collaboratively together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision;
4. Adults who model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning; and
5. A school community that contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

“Safe School Committee” (the “Committee”) means the committee appointed at a specific school building by the Specialist to perform the duties described herein.

“Safe School Climate Coordinator” (the “Coordinator”) means the Superintendent or the certified administrator appointed by the Superintendent to oversee the implementation of the district's Safe School Climate Plan and perform the duties described herein.

“Safe School Climate Plan” means the district plan developed and implemented pursuant to Conn. Gen. Stat. Section 10-222(d), containing provisions pertaining to bullying, filing complaints and conducting investigations, and posted on the district website.³

“Safe School Climate Specialist” (the “Specialist”) means the certified administrator appointed by the Coordinator at a specific school building to oversee the implementation of the district's Safe School Climate Plan within the building, oversee the implementation of the School Climate Improvement Plan within the building, and perform the duties described herein.

“School Climate” means the quality and character of the school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults. School climate is also based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices and organizational structures.⁴

“School Climate Improvement Plan” (the “Improvement Plan”) means the building-specific plan developed by the Committee using the Survey data and developed in accordance with the process described herein. An Improvement Plan must include the requirements of the Safe School Climate Plan, but has the larger purpose of improving school climate on a more global level and actualizing “The 13 Dimensions of Climate” (Appendix C) and “The National School Climate Standards” (Appendix A).

“School Climate Survey” (the “Survey”) shall mean a well-established reliable and valid survey, approved by the Connecticut State Department of Education, with additional external confirmation of its strength through third party evaluators and research studies, that is vigorously field tested, measures the core district populations (including students, parents/guardians, all school personnel - administrators, educators, certified and noncertified staff) and, when available, the wider community, and is easy and quick to administer. It shall also be administered in the predominant languages used by the population being surveyed.⁵

³ Appendix B.

⁴ 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. On: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/policy-briefs.php>.

⁵ Faster, D. & Lopez, D. (2013). School climate and assessment. In Dary, T. & Pickeral, T. (ed) (2013). School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability. A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1, New York, NY: National School Climate Center.

“School employee” means (1) a teacher, substitute teacher, school administrator, school Superintendent, guidance counselor, psychologist, social worker, nurse, physician, school paraprofessional or coach employed by the Board; or (2) any other individual who, in the performance of his or her duties, has regular contact with students and who provides services to or on behalf of students enrolled in a public elementary, middle or high school, pursuant to a contract with the Board.

“Social Justice” means a community that *enables* its members to be fulfilled as fully engaged contributors to their community. It provides the foundation for a healthy and thriving school community that takes care of all of its members, especially those with the least advantage. A socially just community insures that there is complete and genuine fairness and equality. To that end, each and every school community member (students, faculty/staff, parents/guardians, family members, community members, etc.) no matter his or her age, role, power base, privilege, advantage, etc.:

1. Has value, worth and is treated with dignity;
2. Is assured protection of his/her liberties, rights and opportunities;
3. Is honored and celebrated for his/her unique background, culture, language, gifts and/or challenges;
4. Has fair and equal access to all curricular, extra-curricular educational and social programs;
5. Is provided the opportunity to have a meaningful voice in decision making and policy creation; and
6. Feels physically, emotionally and intellectually safe to exercise his/her voice, participate freely and contribute to the wellbeing and benefit of the entire school community.⁶

Declarations

I. Applicable Standards:

A. For School Employees:

1. All certified educators in the State of Connecticut are accountable for compliance with the regulations enacted by the Connecticut State Department of Education and the Bureau of Education Standards and Certification, including, but not limited to the Connecticut Code of Professional Responsibility For Teachers, Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies, (Section 10-145d0400a) and the Connecticut Code of Professional Responsibility For Administrators, Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies (Section 10-145d0400b) (collectively “Codes”), as they may be amended from time to time.
2. All school employees are accountable for compliance with the policies and procedures of the Board applicable to personnel, including, but not limited to non-discrimination, conduct and professional rights and responsibilities.

⁶ This definition is a compilation of dozens of definitions of Social Justice provided by philosophers, religious leaders, social, civic and community organizers, lawyers, ethicists, journalists, authors and educators.

B. For Students:

1. All students are accountable for compliance with applicable codes of student conduct, policies and procedures for student participation and behavior.

C. For Board Members:

1. Board Members are accountable for compliance with the Board's Code of Ethics and applicable Board By-laws governing Board member conduct.

D. For Persons Contracted to Provide Services to the Board:

1. Persons contracted to provide services to the Board (such as bus drivers, consultants, evaluators or the like) are accountable for compliance with such codes of ethics as may apply professionally, the terms of any such contract, as well as the policies and procedures of the Board generally applicable to persons on school property.

E. For Other Participants in the School Community:

1. Parents/guardians, family members, visitors and other persons on school property or otherwise participating in programs or services of the Westbrook Public Schools are accountable for conducting themselves in accordance with applicable policies and procedures pertaining to such participation.

II. Alignment with Conn. Gen. Statutes Section 10-222(d):

A. This Policy is aligned with C.G.S. 10-222(d), "An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws."

B. In order to be in compliance with applicable law, all individual schools in the District of Westbrook must adhere to the following requirements:

1. In order to develop and maintain an "Effective School Climate Improvement Process,"⁷ schools must develop and implement "Improvement Plans," administer and utilize the findings of "School Climate Surveys," and engage in a continuing systemic process of learning and evaluating identified goals and objectives. The vision of the Westbrook Board of Education is to support a vibrant and thriving school community by removing any barriers to teaching and learning, and reengaging those who may have become disengaged.
2. In order to implement an Effective School Climate Improvement Process, qualified and effective leadership is required. Such leadership shall be developed through (a) the implementation and satisfaction of appropriate professional development, (b) the Superintendent or the appointment of a Coordinator by the Superintendent, (c) the appointment of Specialists at each school building by the Coordinator, and (d) the establishment of a Committee at each school building.⁸

⁷ <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/process.php>.

⁸ In the National dialogue, this Safe School Climate Committee is often referred to as a Safe School Climate Team, see http://schoolclimate.org/climate/stages_tasks_challenges.php.

III. Safe School Climate Coordinator Roles and Responsibilities:

- A. The Superintendent shall assume the role of, or appoint from among existing school district administrators, a district Coordinator.
- B. The duties of the Coordinator shall include those enumerated under C.G.S. Section 10-222(d) and the Westbrook Board of Education's Regulation Section 5131.911. at a minimum, and shall also include the following:
 - i. Overseeing the implementation of the district's Safe School Climate Plan;
 - ii. Preventing, identifying and responding to any kind of mean-spirited behavior including, but not limited to reports of alleged bullying and harassment in the schools of the district, in collaboration with the Specialists, as well as the Board and the Superintendent as appropriate;
 - iii. Providing data and information regarding school climate improvement to the Connecticut State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Superintendent as may be required by law;
 - iv. Meeting with the Specialists at least twice during the school year to: (i) identify strategies to improve school climate that promotes high quality relationships among all school community members, and, as a result, is designed to eliminate intentional and unintentional mean-spirited behaviors including, but not limited to bullying and harassment, (ii) make recommendations concerning amendments to the district's Safe School Climate Plan, as well as to make recommendations concerning amendments to each individual school's "School Climate Improvement Plan," and (iii) oversee completion of each individual school's "School Climate Survey;" and
 - v. Providing leadership for the following activities:
 - 1. Advancement of evidence-based policy and best practices to improve school climate, foster high quality relationships, and promote physical, emotional, and intellectual school safety; and
 - 2. Development and dissemination of resources and training materials for Specialists, Committees, school staff and community members about issues of school climate and school climate improvement efforts and activities.

IV. Safe School Climate Specialist Roles and Responsibilities:

- A. At the beginning of each school year, the Principal of each school, or the Principal's designee as approved by the Coordinator, shall serve as the Specialist for the individual school to which he or she is assigned.
- B. The Specialist's duties shall include those enumerated under C.G.S. Section 10-222(d) and the Westbrook Board of Education's Regulation Section 5131.911. In addition to these duties, the Specialist shall:
 - a. Investigate, or supervise the investigation of, reported acts of mean-spirited behaviors including, but not limited to reports of alleged bullying and harassment in the school in accordance with this Policy;
 - b. Collect and maintain records of such reports in the school;
 - c. Act as the primary school official responsible for preventing, identifying and responding to such reports in the school and leading efforts to improve school climate;
 - d. Chair or co-chair the Committee and establish the meeting calendar for the

- Committee meetings; and
- e. Serve as the primary supervisor of the school's School Climate Improvement Plan for the implementation and the monitoring of the School Climate Improvement Plan.

V. Safe School Climate Committee Roles and Responsibilities:

- A. In collaboration with the Coordinator, the Specialist at each school building shall form a representative Committee consisting of a demographically representative group of students enrolled in the school (if developmentally appropriate); parents of students enrolled in the school; school personnel, including, but not limited to teachers, administrators, student support personnel; other medical and mental health experts where available; and community members.
- B. Such Committee shall be formed no later than 30 days from the effective date of this Policy.⁹
- C. Committee composition/membership shall be reviewed annually by the Coordinator and the Specialist.
- D. The duties of the Committee shall include those enumerated under C.G.S. Section 10-222(d) and the Westbrook Board of Education's Regulation Section 5131.911. In addition to these duties, the Committee shall, at a minimum, perform the following duties:
 - i. Supervising the scheduling and administration of "School Climate Surveys" to students, staff, parents, and community members;
 - ii. Setting goals and tracking survey completion;
 - iii. Reaching out to staff and parents before administering the Survey;
 - iv. Providing Survey data to the Coordinator;
 - v. Reviewing and analyzing the school-based school climate assessment data;
 - vi. Using the data and other appropriate data and information to identify strengths and challenges with respect to improving school climate;
 - vii. Using the data to create and/or update the school-based School Climate Improvement Plan;
 - viii. Overseeing the implementation of the school-based School Climate Improvement Plan;
 - ix. Implementing the School Climate Improvement Plan and monitoring the progress of school climate improvement, in collaboration with the Coordinator;
 - x. Overseeing the implementation of annual school climate assessments at the school;
 - xi. Reviewing and making recommendations to the Coordinator regarding the safe school climate plan based on issues and

⁹ As of July 1, 2012, pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-222(d), every school should have identified a "Safe School Climate Committee." Satisfaction of this Policy's requirement of establishing a Safe School Climate Committee may have been satisfied previously by complying with these C.G.S. Section 10-222(d) requirements.

- experiences specific to the school;
- xii. Overseeing the education of students, school employees and parents/guardians of students on issues relating to improving school climate;
 - xiii. Holding meetings at least four times each year, at which minutes shall be kept and made available to the public; and
 - xiv. Performing any other duties as determined by the Specialist and/or the Coordinator that are related to improving school climate in the school, or required by law.

VI. School Climate Surveys:

- A. Each school, supported with oversight by the Coordinator and under the guidance of the Committee, shall administer, on an annual basis, at the same time of year each year, the School Climate Survey in order to assess a school's strengths and challenges.
- B. Preparation for Survey Administration: All survey participants should be made aware of the purpose and value of the survey as determined by the Committee prior to administration, so that the school will receive authentic data to help drive decisions that will benefit the entire school community.¹⁰

VII. School Climate Improvement Plans:

- A. In collaboration with the Coordinator, each Specialist shall develop and/or update an Improvement Plan based on the findings of the School Climate Survey.¹¹
 - 1. The Specialist and the Committee shall develop and/or update the Improvement Plan, using the School Climate Improvement Plan template¹² (Appendix C), taking into consideration the needs of all key stakeholders, with sensitivity to equity and diversity.
 - 2. The Improvement Plan shall support the actualization of the following five Standards.¹³

¹⁰ When using school climate data as a "flashlight" and not a "hammer," stakeholders will be more fully engaged, and the findings will be more useful for long-term improvement. To promote such a spirit of trust, school leaders should also consider key preparation and planning issues before administration, such as: how representative their Committee is, and to what extent stakeholders work and learn in a culture of blame or distrust as opposed to a more collaborative problem solving culture. For instance, are parents/guardians, students and personnel present to lend their unique perspectives? Differing viewpoints can create powerful discussions and build a transparent culture where members feel valued, trusted, included and actively engaged in the school community.

¹¹ Pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-222(d), all districts are required to have submitted and posted on their District website a Safe School Climate Plan, which contains provisions pertaining to bullying, filing complaints and conducting investigations.

¹² The District Safe School Climate Plan is placed within the School Climate Improvement Plan.

¹³ See Appendix A for exact wording of the Standards.

Standard 1: Develop a **shared vision** and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.

Standard 2: Develop **policies** that promote social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual learning as well as systems that address barriers to learning.

Standard 3: Implement **practices** that promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students and student engagement as well as addressing barriers to learning.

Standard 4: Create an environment where all members are **welcomed, supported, and feel safe** in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.

Standard 5: Develop meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that **promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.**

3. Each Improvement Plan shall be submitted to the Coordinator for approval and implementation no later than mid-September of each school year. The Coordinator may provide feedback to the Committee with respect to amendments to the Improvement Plan.

VIII. Codes of conduct for both students and adults shall be amended to reinforce positive school climates by detailing, and consistently recognizing and supporting positive behavior, applying appropriate graduated and restorative responses for inappropriate conduct, in order to address the root causes of the individual's specific conduct, while promoting physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe and supportive teaching and learning environments for all students and adults in the school community. Restorative practice builds community, celebrates accomplishments, transforms conflict, rebuilds and strengthens relationships.¹⁴ Such responses shall be educative and restorative and be chosen in response to the context of each situation to support relationship-building and improvement, and with particular attention to issues of equity. These responses may include, but are not limited to one or more of the following:

- a. Reflective activities;
- b. School counseling support;
- c. Anger management;
- d. Health counseling or intervention;
- e. Mental health counseling;
- f. Skill building such as social and emotional, cognitive, and intellectual skills;

¹⁴ Alameda County School Health Services (California) The seven principles of restorative practice are: (1) voluntary participation, (2) respect for everyone involved, (3) inclusion of all the people impacted, (4) a focus on the harms, needs, and causes that have arisen, (5) consensus-based decision-making focused on how to repair the harm and prevent future harm, (6) opportunity for dialogue that aligns with the above principles, and (7) expanding the capacity of the community to create a just and fair response.

- g. Resolution circles and restorative conferencing;
- h. Community service;
- i. Conflict resolution or mediation; and
- j. Other actions detailed in accordance with Board policies and procedures such as those regarding:
 - i. Participation in extracurricular activities;
 - ii. Student discipline (including detention, in or out of school suspension, and expulsion); and
 - iii. Adult/employee professional responsibility, conduct, separation/disciplinary actions.

IX. Professional Development

- a. Mandated school climate trainings shall be provided by individuals and/or organizations deemed qualified service providers by the Superintendent and/or the Coordinator.
- b. All school employees, as defined in this policy, shall participate in any mandated school climate trainings and update sessions.
- c. The District shall provide necessary on-site coaching and/or technical assistance in the implementation phase of school climate improvement.

X. Funding

The District shall budget sufficient funding to satisfy the requirements of this Policy. Such funding shall be distributed accordingly, with Superintendent approval, for assessments and professional development, as well as for community outreach, training, coaching, and technical assistance.

XI. Accountability¹⁵

- a. The Board shall establish, foster, support and maintain a ``no fault" framework and promote a culture of trust. Such a framework and culture is evident by a shared intent to:
 - A. Take collective responsibility for what has been accomplished and/or not accomplished;
 - B. Learn from what has been done well and not so well;
 - C. Work together to improve the quality and character of school life;
 - D. Create a highly effective professional learning community (PLC) whose responsibility it is to:
 - 1. Establish norms, values and goals that encourage and support collaborative and courageous leadership;
 - 2. Model and provide high quality academic, social, emotional and ethical learning; and
 - 3. Engage in ongoing reflection and evaluation.
- b. The Board shall hold itself, its individual members, and the Superintendent to

¹⁵ Because the school improvement process is considered a continuing systemic process of learning and evaluating goals and objectives as they impact a diverse group of learners, the School Climate Survey shall be administered, at minimum, annually, at the same time of year each year.

the standards of this Policy and promote its intent and goals.

- c. The Superintendent shall hold himself/herself, the staff, the students and other members of the school community to the standards of this Policy.
- XII. Compliance with Other Applicable Laws: This Policy does not modify or eliminate a school's obligation to comply with state and federal constitutional protections and civil rights laws applicable to schools.
- XIII. Liberal Interpretation: The design of this Policy being to facilitate the operation of the school district in a positive manner and to advance justice, the Policy provisions will be interpreted liberally in any case where it shall be manifest that a strict adherence to them will work surprise or a manifest injustice.