Promoting Positivity: Strategies to Build a Supportive School Climate

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School climate is a broad concept representing the academic and non-academic factors that distinguish the felt experience of interactions with a school campus. While a single representative definition of school climate has eluded practitioners, several systematic reviews have identified four composite domains that can support assessment, planning, intervention, and evaluation activities (Lenz et al., 2021; Rocha et al., 2019; Wang & Degol, 2016).

Academic climate is characterized by features that promote student achievement and a culture of learning through developmentally responsive instruction, sufficient allocation of teaching resources, and an affirming culture of learning. At its core, a positive academic climate is grounded in strong leadership, high expectations of learning, support for students and teachers, timely assessment and monitoring practices, personalized learning plans, and the use of technology to promote engagement, collaboration, and success.

School community is defined by the quality of interpersonal relationships grounded in a strong relationship between students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members that promotes inclusion, mutual respect, trust, safety, and connectedness.

A positive school community is characterized by fair and equitable engagement of school stakeholders to share input, innovations, and resources during evaluation, decision-making, and planning processes that inform activities such as positive behavior programs, student well-being initiatives, professional development, and public relations.

School safety is represented by the degree of physical and emotional security experienced by students, teachers, and staff that is conducive to a sense of protection and well-being that allows for optimal learning experiences. School safety is cultivated through physical and digital learning environments that minimize exposure to safety hazards, but also include policies for security and emergency readiness, procedures to address compliance with rules, and an integrated approach to prevention and intervention for social-emotional well-being threats such as bullying, conflict, and mental health challenges.

Institutional environment is evidenced by the organizational, structural, and physical features through which school activities are conducted. These include variables ranging from the hours of operation, campus layout, quality of upkeep and maintenance, and class size to the degree of transparency and communication regarding the availability and allocation of technology, resources, supports, and materials.

Taken together, the composite domains of school climate are expressed in synergistically complex ways that are both uniquely subjective and objectively observable experiences; they operate not only within student-student dyads, but within a matrix of interactions between students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members; they are influenced both actively and as a part of natural developmental processes; they are both input and output and often function as both process and outcome in their contribution to overall school climate.

Despite these complexities, investments in school climate are certainly worthwhile as researchers continue to find promising associations with academic achievement (Daily et al., 2019), graduation rates (Buckman et al., 2021), college-going and persistence (Knight & Duncan, 2020), reductions in physical, emotional, and cyberbullying behaviors (Acosta et al., 2019), positive student and teacher mental health (Dreer, 2022; Wang et al., 2020), teacher job satisfaction and retention (Casely-Hayford et al., 2022; Otrębski, 2022), and civic engagement (Torney-Purta, 2002).

Prevention and Identification Strategies

Supporting a positive school climate requires intentional collaboration among multiple stakeholders and decision-makers to foster a proactive preventative agenda that targets the academic and non-academic development and well-being of the school community.
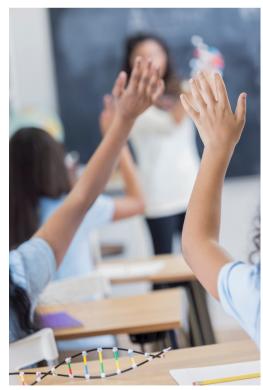
Key among the related activities is the use of a well-designed assessment strategy to develop a data-driven plan to implement age-appropriate prevention programs. The American Institutes for Research (2023) cited school climate assessment as the principal activity to support a positive school climate through the identification of similarities and differences in perceptions between groups of stakeholders.

When selecting an assessment for your campus, consider that the reliability and validity of all scores do not generalize to all stakeholders equally. Thus, it is imperative to consider not only the constructs, costs, length, and logistics of a school climate measure but also the degree that normative data reflects your campus.

Furthermore, an equity-minded approach to school climate need identification will need to account for the representativeness of the sample with the corpus of students, teachers, and staff, as well as, a multi-method analysis that articulates both broad and disaggregated data trends.

Some measures available for consideration include:

- _Panorama Student Survey_ (Grades 6-12; Students, no cost);
- _School Climate Assessment Instrument_ (Grades K-12; Students, Teachers, Staff, Parents/ Guardians, no cost);
- _U.S. Department of Education School Climate Surveys_ (Grades 5-12; Students, Teachers, Staff; no cost);
- _Comprehensive School Climate Inventory_ (Grades 3-12; Students, Staff, Parents/Guardians, Community Members, fee-based).

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Taken together, the campaigns selected for implementation also bear varying degrees and paces of impact. For example, some preventative programs may be short-term and efficacious; by contrast, others may feature multi-year campaigns with small but systemic cumulative effects.

Therefore, it is prudent to develop a campus prevention programming agenda that not only responds to school climate data but can also be monitored for global and differentiated responses among stakeholders.

While many areas of academic and non-academic development are worthwhile foci for prevention efforts, common topics include:

⇒ **Alcohol and drug use** prevention programming that provides normative education, teaches social resistance skills, provide normative education, and reinforces competence;

⇒ **Anti-bullying** programs that develop the knowledge and skills to recognize, respond, and report wide-ranging forms of bullying such as verbal, physical, social, and cyberbullying;

⇒ **Civic engagement and social responsibility** efforts aimed to promote volunteerism, participation in public elections, and advocacy;

⇒ **Cybersecurity awareness raising** related to issues such as the use of good netiquette, identity protection, interacting with others online, and sharing sensitive information;

⇒ **Personal wellness and mental health promotion** initiatives that include healthy living, nutrition, personal resilience, mental health literacy, and social-emotional coping skills;

⇒ **Positive relationships and social skills** that teach active listening, effective communication, character education, non-violent conflict resolution, and self-advocacy;

⇒ **Safety and security** of self and others in school and non-school-based spaces.

Intervention Strategies

School-based interventions have a prominent position within the cadre of approaches to improve, support, and maintain a positive school climate. While many of the topics and methods of intervention delivery are similar to those of prevention efforts, there are key differences in the purpose and intended outcomes.

Among these key differences is a focus on (a) directing efforts to children who have developed a problem rather than those who are at risk, (b) deliberate rather than incidental risk reduction, and (c) targeted rather than universal implementation.

There is substantial evidence that well-designed intervention programs can affect the domains of school climate with some prominent options available in urban and rural campuses described below. However, the selection of which intervention may be best suited for your campus would rest on thoughtful deliberation of available data, feedback, and available resources.

#1 School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

The implementation of PBIS has increased in recent decades as campus stakeholders attempt to support academic and non-academic success through teaching, modeling, and rewarding positive behaviors as an alternative to practices such as admonishment, inconsistent punishment, and exclusionary practices.

Rather than rely on a standardized curriculum, PBIS is grounded in a foundational framework of measurable goals and outcomes, databased decision-making, identification and implementation of evidence-based practices, and a systems-level application (Center on PBIS, 2023). These composite interventions are supported across 3 tiers (Universal, Targeted, Intensive and Individualized) as indicated by student needs and school capacity (Harlacher et al., 2018).

Despite the unique expression of PBIS across campuses, there is promising evidence for the fidelity of implementation and desired associations with academic achievement, prosocial behavior, discipline referrals, and suspensions (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

#2 Mental Health Support Services

School-based mental health support services (MHSS) increase student access to individual or team-based care delivered by licensed and non-licensed providers for commonly occurring clinical issues. MHSS approaches are based on the assumption that mental health and academic achievement have reciprocal influences on one another and consider evidence-based and manualized interventions as a pathway to promote to support development and well-being across the lifespan (Raffaele Mendez, 2017).

Students participate in individual and small group services using any combination of in-person and telehealth mediums. Programs such as Think First (Larson, 2005), Brief Coping Cat (Kendall et al., 2013), Stop and Think (Caselman, 2005), the Adolescent Coping with Depression Course (Clark et al., 1990), and Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (Jaycox et al., 2018) are available for treating aggression, anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, and posttraumatic stress, respectively.

While considerable evidence exists for the application of such programs, the observed effects tend to be largest for targeted interventions and moderated by a combination of program type, length of intervention, and age group (Feiss et al., 2019; Sanchez et al., 2018).

#3 Conflict Resolution and Peer-Mediation Programs

Teaching students to resolve disagreements provides a supportive platform to increase felt safety and reduce incidents of violence while concurrently fostering the communication, problem-solving, and interpersonal effectiveness skills that will be adaptive across the lifespan. Conflict resolution skills are taught to individual students by teachers, administrators, and school counselors who focus on applications such as early intervention, real-time remedies, and follow-up training.

Common elements include the use of constructive communication, steps in negotiation, and debriefing activities. Staff and students can also serve as a mediator between 2 or more students when students require additional support to resolve a disagreement.

While standalone programs and curricula Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers (Johnson & Johnson, 2005) and Overcoming Obstacles are available for access, school personnel often develop and implement interventions based on units within a universal social-emotional learning curriculum or to meet established standards. Evidence has indicated program effects ranging from small to moderate based on various implementation characteristics (McElwain et al., 2017; Turk, 2018).

#4 Peer Mentoring and Support Programs

Peer mentoring programs offer a dynamic and relational way to support student success by matching an older student with a younger one who shares a similar developmental pathway. These interventions have the potential to stimulate mutual growth and learning for mentors and mentees by capitalizing on the youth's inherent interest in peer relationships and innate tendency to look up to slightly older peers (Garringer & MacRae, 2008).

Effective peer mentoring programs need to consider several elements such as (a) goals and intended impact, (b) participant recruitment, screening, and selection, (c) mentor training, (d) strategies for matching, (e) parent education and orientation, (f) mentor and mentee supports and monitoring, and (g) approaches to resolving the relationship.

Several models such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the Cross-Age Mentoring Program (CAMP) Cross-Campus Model (Karcher 2012), and Just for Kids! (Smith, 2011) are available for reference, as well as, toolkits provided by groups such as the National Success Mentors Initiative and National Mentoring and Resource Center.

Well-designed peer mentoring and support programs have been associated with promising evidence for academic, psychosocial, and health outcomes, particularly when delivered off-campus and with adult supervision and support (Burton et al., 2022; Raposa et al., 2019).

#5 Restorative Practices

Restorative practices provide an alternative to zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and punitive discipline through the facilitated repair and strengthening of relationships among individual students when harm has occurred. These aims can be reached through several strategies including (a) informal proactive discussions that allow for respectful, empathic, accountability-oriented, and collaborative conversations; (b) reactive strategies that address individual and classroom-wide incidents of harm; and (c) formal discussions that focused on support and accountability to increase empathy, acceptance, and belonging.

Specific restorative practice interventions include restorative conferences, restorative conversations, conversation circles, classroom conferences, and classroom lessons (Winslade et al., 2014).

Numerous program models and training guides are available through groups such as the International Institute for Restorative Practice and Restorative Practices Partnership which can be referenced by school administrators, teachers, and staff.

Preliminary evidence reviews of restorative practices have indicated trends between intervention with decreased disciplinary referrals and improved student-teacher relationships (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

However, given the correlational nature of evidence to date, school personnel must consider the unique intersection of campus characteristics, training and support resources, implementation capacity, and emerging research findings when developing their approach to cultivating school safety and security.

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Key Implications for Practice

Fostering a positive school climate is a complex task requiring an intentional approach that includes stakeholders across the ecology of student academic and non-academic development. Scoping reviews of best practices and evidence-based approaches offer numerous considerations including:

The importance of articulating, adopting, and communicating a shared vision of a positive school climate and related campus priorities, goals, and activities;

Establishing and nurturing a culture of quality improvement that emphasizes transparency, developmental supports, multiple sources of feedback and data and avoids interpersonal pitfalls such as toxic positivity, stereotyping, and scapegoating;

Implementation across the campus' multi-tiered system of supports using evidence-based approaches to prevention and intervention that are delivered with consistent vernacular and a sense of shared ownership;

Intentional and consistent inclusion of internal stakeholders such as students, teachers, and school/district staff, as well as, external stakeholders who are outside of the day-to-day operations, but whose interests can support success; and

District support for school climate-promoting initiatives through the allocation of funding, resources, personnel, and training to promote implementation fidelity, monitoring, and accountability practices.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

This guiding legislation empowered school districts to establish accountability standards and related interventions and supports to promote student success. The ESSA requires annual reporting of school climate and safety data and creates opportunities to create learning environments that support the academic and non-academic success of all students.

National School Climate Standards

The National School Climate Standards represent a set of criteria intended to support school climate assessment, intervention, and accountability. Rather than provide specific guidance, the Standards provide a framework for identifying, planning, and implementing local practices that are based on campus characteristics, priorities, and resources.

National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary School's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. The Center offers information and technical assistance focused on improving school climate and conditions for learning for all students.

School Climate Survey Compendium

This compendium includes links to several surveys that can be administered to pre-K through postsecondary campus stakeholders to identify and monitor school climate. All of the listed surveys have score reliability and validity data available for inspection; however, the constructs representing the internal structure of the measures may vary.

School Literature Survey Compendium

This compendium includes access to peer-reviewed publications that address issues, trends, policies, best practices, and research related to planning, implementation, and monitoring of school climate. The hosting site provides links to organizations and resources that support youth, parents, educators, and community involvement in positive school climate promotion.

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