



## POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Excerpted from *Skills and Dispositions that Support Youth Success in School, Part 2: Strategies for Building Motivation, Engagement and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills*

According to the National School Climate Council, school climate (also referred to as school culture) includes the norms, values, and expectations that permeate a school building. Positive school climates are ones in which people feel socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically safe. Students, educators, families, and community partners must work together to contribute to a climate focused on positive relationships and consistent high expectations for students. Positive climates reflect the belief that all students can learn, all parents want their children to succeed, and that parents are partners with administrators, teachers, and students in education and decision making.

A critical component of a positive school climate lies in the expectations that teachers and administrators hold for their students. Low expectations often become self-fulfilling prophecies, especially for young people of color. Educators may unwittingly carry and project the messages of institutionalized and structural racism. Implicit bias and anti-racism work can help to mitigate the effects of historically embedded attitudes for children and youth of color.

Improving school climate begins with changing how staff and administrators feel about youth, their families, and their communities. Changing what staff members expect of students can dramatically alter what students expect of themselves, and how they connect to school.<sup>1</sup> School connectedness is a stronger predictor of reduced at-risk behavior than any other school environment variable.<sup>2</sup> When they take an active role in school, connect to adults, and gain recognition for their successes and potential, young people are more likely to attend and stay in school and to succeed. At the school level, improved culture is associated with improved outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

*“A growing body of empirical research shows that a sustained, positive school climate reduces dropouts and fosters youth development and academic achievement, as well as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to be responsible and productive members of society.”*

*National School Climate Council  
(2009)*

### HOW TO BEGIN WORKING ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

The process of developing a positive school climate begins with an honest assessment of the current climate. There are multiple tools for this initial evaluation. It is critical that all of the voices in a school community are taken into account. Many school districts conduct their own climate surveys or partner with outside entities to administer surveys to different groups (staff, families, students) within a school community. Once an initial assessment is complete, the next step is to develop a common vision and plan of action by identifying areas for growth and strategies for addressing them. Climate surveys are typically conducted on an annual basis, which allows schools to track change over time, and to see whether actions taken are having the desired effects.

<sup>1</sup> Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D’Alessandro (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Blum & Rinehart (1997)

<sup>3</sup> Tableman (2004)



#### CHARACTERISTICS OF POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

- Common goals are clear to all
- Policies align with the development & sustainability of social, emotional, civic and intellectual skills, and engagement
- Comprehensive systems address barriers to teaching and learning
- Systems reengage disengaged students
- The value and contributions of all stakeholders - students, school and afterschool or youth development program staff – are recognized
- Decision-making is shared among stakeholders

#### CONSIDERATIONS

A school's climate is largely the result of the adults' ideas, behaviors, and policies in the school. Transforming a school's climate is no easy task. Often there is a belief that climate cannot change without significant staff or student turnover. In addition, there is often concern that without strong administrative leadership, a shift in school climate is not possible. Leadership from school administrators is important. However, moving an organization to pursue a positive climate requires shared leadership among all the stakeholders in a school community including staff, students, families, and others.<sup>4</sup> Staff members are an especially important component, and should lead the way to ensure continuity of efforts.<sup>5</sup>

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **Safe, Supportive and Civil Schools** - <http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/safeCivilSchools.php>  
Safe, supportive and civil schools are characterized by norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe; engaged and respected; and collaboratively involved with student-family-educator partnerships to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blum, R. W. & Rinehart, P. M. (1997). *Reducing the risk: Connections that make a difference in the lives of youth* [Monograph]. Minneapolis: Minnesota University, Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health. Retrieved from <http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth/faqs/addhealth/Reducing-the-risk.pdf>
- Fullan, M. (October 2009). Leadership development: The larger context. *Educational Leadership*, 67(2), 45-49.
- National School Climate Center. (2009). National School Climate Standards. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/index.php>
- School Climate Resource Center. (2007). Principles and assumptions. Retrieved from <http://scrc.schoolclimate.org/principles.html>
- Tableman, B. (2004). School climate and learning. *Best Practice Briefs*, 31. Retrieved from <http://outreach.msu.edu/bpbriefs/issues/brief31.pdf>
- Thapa A., Cohen J., Guffey, S. & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of educational research*, 83(3), 357-385. doi:10.3102/0034654313483907

<sup>4</sup> Fullan (2009)

<sup>5</sup> School Climate Resource Center (2007); Fullan (2009)