

THE WHY AND HOW OF A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

A positive school climate includes student academic success, positive social relationships, a safe physical environment, and strong community engagement. With rising mental health challenges, school violence, and academic recovery hurdles, developing and maintaining a positive school climate has never been more imperative. For a successful start to the school year, here are some data, tips, and best practices to consider when pursuing a better school climate in your K–12 district in 2023–24.

THE EVOLVING STATE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

While research shows that K–12 students experience school climate differently depending on demographic characteristics, many U.S. districts continue to grapple with challenges related to student inclusion and motivation.



The percentage of secondary students who feel like they belong at school, compared to 74% of staff members who believe students do



The percentage of secondary school students who are motivated to learn



The percentage of primary school parents who say their students feel welcome at school

5 REASONS A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE IS CRITICAL

During times of crisis, students face a greater risk for negative emotional responses that can interfere with both their learning and their daily lives. But even under normal circumstances, school climate should remain a top priority for K–12 districts. Here's why:



1.

Negative school climates typically result in worse outcomes for students and educators



2.

Research shows a positive school climate can improve academic achievement



3.

Positive school climates also produce greater social-emotional outcomes for students



4.

Educators experience more significant long-term benefits in a positive school environment



5.

Many states include culture and climate assessment in their reporting requirements

WHAT A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE LOOKS LIKE

Experts find many common traits and outcomes among schools with positive climates. Those factors generally fall into four distinct categories.



ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

- Positive perceptions of the instructional climate, attitudes towards learning, and engagement
- Agreement that schools provide enough resources and instruction to support all students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes



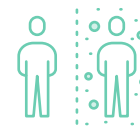
COMMUNITY INCLUSIVENESS

- Responsive, engaging, transparent, and effective district communications with community members and families
- Positive perceptions of school or district leadership and personnel



SCHOOL/BUILDING ENVIRONMENT

- Positive emotional climate, including student feelings of belonging and school pride
- Better safety outcomes, including less violence and theft, safer learning spaces, and safety at school-sponsored events
- Well-maintained physical environment, such as clean bathrooms and common spaces, and appropriate temperature and lighting



SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- Positive relationships and frequent interaction between students and others
- Positive relationships and professional development opportunities for staff members
- Fair enforcement of school rules
- Low incidence of bullying and harassment

5 WAYS TO IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

A positive school climate begins with leaders developing a framework for continuous improvement within their strategic plans. Here are a few tips for engaging in an iterative process:

- 1. Assess your current state**
Develop a core planning team and vision to assess current practices and community members' perceptions through data collection. Allow time and resources for community involvement and partnership development.
- 2. Engage your community**
District and school leaders should prioritize communicating and engaging with students, families, staff, and other educational partners to increase support and encourage diverse viewpoints.
- 3. Collect and review school climate data on a consistent basis**
Recurrent and accurate assessments of school climate can inform strategic decision-making, accountability measures, and future initiatives.
- 4. Select and implement appropriate school climate interventions**
After reviewing current interventions and their effectiveness, district and school leaders should consider new or additional interventions based on student needs and best practices.
- 5. Monitor and evaluate your school climate improvement efforts**
District leaders should monitor and review school climate progress through additional community input, identifying KPIs and reviewing process and outcome data, and make changes where necessary.

CONDUCT A SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY

Assessing school climate involves understanding how students, families, and staff feel about the current state and what areas they think need improvement. Use these key questions in a district-wide climate survey to gather feedback from educational partners and help you fulfill your reporting requirements.

	COMPLETELY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE AND DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	COMPLETELY AGREE	UNSURE/ NO OPINION
SCHOOL AND FACILITIES ENVIRONMENT						
My students feel connected with their school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel safe going to and from school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school/building follows guidelines to protect students' and staff's physical health.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT						
The school provides a well-rounded curriculum.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teachers want students to succeed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Most students at the school enjoy learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school offers quality extracurricular (e.g., sports, clubs) activities for students.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school (or district) provides enough resources for English language learners.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Schools develop students' ability to empathize with others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT						
Students at the school are friends with students from diverse backgrounds.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Adults at the school consistently enforce school rules.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The school/building provides enough professional development opportunities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Students/I have not been verbally harassed by students at schools.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
COMMUNITY INCLUSIVENESS						
The district is transparent with community members about district decision-making.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff members at the school make families feel welcome.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Administrators at the school are in tune with teachers' and students' concerns.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The district retains high-quality teachers.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Improve your district's communication with tips from our infographic,
Engaging Families and Communities in K-12 Education.

GET THE INFOGRAPHIC

Sources: Hanover Research, U.S. Department of Education, Education Week, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, Review of Educational Research, Journal of Educational Psychology.