What is School Climate?

The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate as “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe” (p.4). School climate is a product of the interpersonal relationships among students, families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. Positive school climate is fostered through a shared vision of respect and engagement across the educational system. Emphasis is also placed on the collective sense of safety and care for the school’s physical environment. A related concept is school culture, which refers to the “unwritten rules and expectations” among the school staff (Gruenert, 2008).

Although there is no universally agreed upon set of core domains or features, the National School Climate Center identifies five elements of school climate: (1) safety (e.g., rules and norms, physical security, social-emotional security); (2) teaching and learning (e.g., support for learning, social and civic learning); (3) interpersonal relationships (e.g., respect, support from adults, social support from peers); (4) institutional environment (e.g., school connectedness, engagement, physical surroundings); and (5) staff relationships (leadership, professional relationships). Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education’s Safe and Supportive Schools model of school climate (see Figure) includes the inter-related domains or features of student engagement (e.g., relationships, respect for diversity, and school participation), safety (e.g., social-emotional safety, physical safety, substance use), and the school environment (e.g., physical environment, academic environment, wellness, and disciplinary environment) (see also Bradshaw et al., 2013).

Why is School Climate Important?

A positive school climate is recognized as an important target for school reform and improving behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa et al., 2012). Specifically, schools with positive climates tend to have less student discipline problems (Cohen & Geier, 2010) and aggressive and violent behavior (Gregory et al., 2010), and fewer high school suspensions (Lee et al., 2011). Research has also shown associations between school climate and lower levels of alcohol and drug use (LaRusso et al., 2008), bullying (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2009), and harassment (Attar-Schwartz, 2009). In addition to reducing students’ exposure to risk factors, school climate can promote positive youth development. For example, a favorable school climate has been linked with higher student academic motivation and engagement (Eccles et al., 1993), as well as elevated psychological well-being (Ruus & Veisson, 2007; Shochet et al., 2006). Not surprisingly, schools promoting engaging learning environments tend to have fewer student absences (Gottfredson et al., 2005) and improvements in academic achievement across grade levels (Brand et al., 2003; Stewart, 2008).

A positive school climate also has benefits for teachers and educational staff (Bradshaw, Waasdorp et al., 2010). Research shows that when educators feel supported by their administration, they report higher levels of commitment and more collegiality (Singh & Billingsley, 1998). Likewise, schools where educators openly communicate with one another, feel supported by their peers and administration, and establish strong student-educator relationships tend to have better student academic and behavioral outcomes (Brown & Medway, 2007). School climate efforts also have the potential of...
How is School Climate Measured?

Given the importance of positive school climate for students and educators, it is essential for schools to monitor school climate on a regular basis. Several tools have been developed to assess student, parent, and educator perspectives on school climate. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) has created an online comprehensive school climate measurement, including surveys to be completed by students, parents, and educators. One such measure included in the collection is the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), which assesses school connectedness, opportunities for meaningful participation, and perceptions of safety across elementary, middle, and high school.

The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) also measures multiple elements, including an orderly school environment, parent/community involvement, collaboration within the school, and instructional practices. Other assessments, such as the Communities That Care Youth Survey, gather data on school, community, family, and peer risk and protective factors related to perceptions of school climate. These assessments, along with observational tools developed to measure school climate, although measures of school engagement and student-educator interactions may tap into perceptions of safety across elementary, middle, and high school.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are often overlooked, but are essential for schools to implement. These programs have been shown to improve student and staff perceptions of the school climate and increase positive behavior and academic performance (CASEL, 2013). Resources

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: safesupportiveschools.ed.gov

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: School Climate Survey Compendium: safesupportiveslearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement

References

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