



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Positive School Climate, Student Wellness, and Improved Academic Outcomes: Bringing Out the Best in Students and Schools

Key Concepts

1. Positive school climate and student wellness are essential to school success.

Bringing out the best in students and schools requires more than rigorous curriculum and quality instruction. These are central factors in school success, but even the best teachers will face barriers to teaching if the school climate is not supportive and students are not ready and able to learn. Positive and personalized learning environments, a cohesive school community, and student wellness are integral to connectedness, safety, behavior, attendance, socialization, and learning—All of which directly impact achievement. Meeting the needs of the whole child by supporting his or her social, emotional, and behavioral, as well as academic, needs enables teachers to teach and students to learn. These protective factors also are critical to the prevention of school violence and crisis response and are embedded in effective programs such as NASP's PREP_aRE: School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum.

Whole-school interventions using positive behavioral supports have been shown to decrease behavior problems while improving academic performance, as measured by standardized tests in reading and mathematics (Luiselli et al., 2005).

School psychologists have specialized training in learning, instruction, educational and family systems, child development, and mental health. They work closely with administrators, teachers, and other specialized instructional support personnel, and are a vital part of the school team working to bring out the best in students and schools.

2. Positive school climates are grounded in a sense of connectedness, inclusion, and optimism, and the expectation that *every* student can succeed.

School climate is defined by student, staff, and family perceptions of their connectedness to, value within, and the benefits of belonging to the school community. Positive school climates reflect a caring and personalized school environment that is associated with improved student behavior, well-being, and academic achievement. Negative school climate is associated with risk factors such as absenteeism, poorer school performance, behavior and discipline problems, increased violence, and dropping out.

Changing a school's climate and connectedness for the better is associated with increases in student performance in reading, writing, and mathematics (Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007; Spier, Cai, Osher, & Kendziora, 2007).

School climate is experienced in the way students connect to and engage in learning and extracurricular activities, how they interact with each other and school staff, and the tenor and strength of family-school partnerships. It is formulated by approaches to problem solving and decision making; the degree of staff leadership and shared professional purpose and empowerment; and a collective sense of caring, respect, safety, and optimism. School climate is determined almost entirely by the attitudes, expectations, policies, and practices of school personnel and must be intentionally established, measured, and maintained.

Increasing students' engagement and sense of community in the school produces reductions in problem behaviors, increased associations with prosocial peers, and better academic performance (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004).

School psychologists provide important services that link school-wide and individual student strengths to improved academic achievement.

3. Schools must set as a priority implementing the practical, time-tested, and research-based programs and strategies that support positive school climates.

Effective strategies both minimize risk factors and negative behaviors and strengthen protective factors and skills development for positive behaviors. Positive behavioral supports (PBS) is a school-wide program that has shown consistent positive effects on student behavior and discipline, school climate, and academic achievement. Similarly, school-wide programs that prevent bullying and harassment provide a critical foundation for all school safety efforts; decrease negative outcomes such as absenteeism, depression, and suicidal behavior; and are central to positive school climates. School engagement programs such as “Check and Connect” are long proven to decrease delinquency and drop out rates.

A 2005 survey revealed that 53% of teachers see bullying and harassment of students as a serious problem at their schools and that 65% of teens were verbally or physically harassed or assaulted because of their appearance, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, disability, or religion (Harris Interactive, Inc., 2005).

School psychologists help school leaders and staff to identify and implement evidence-based programs that meet the specific needs of the school community.

4. Family–school partnerships form an essential bond that improves student connectedness, resilience, and achievement.

Parent engagement is a priority in almost every area of education and is a major responsibility for school staff. The family–school partnership is essential to the health of the overall school community and to the success of individual students, and the presence of parents in schools helps make important cultural and community connections. In general, children and youth *need* parent engagement in school and their education in order to achieve. Parents are key players in helping to support and reinforce their child’s academic achievement and social–emotional development.

Numerous research studies have indicated that parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes (Jeynes, 2005).

School psychologists advocate for increased home–school collaboration and identify strategies to encourage family participation.

5. Schools can promote students’ physical and mental wellness with a positive, strengths-based approach that emphasizes optimism and resilience while also meeting specific student needs.

By fostering positive relationships among students and adults, and by offering programs and services that meet the needs of the whole child, schools can promote healthy learning and development. Effective student supports that promote wellness include mental health services, emphasize prevention and early intervention, actively engage families, and incorporate strength-based approaches such as positive behavioral supports, social–emotional learning, and response to intervention. Schools are ideal environments to enrich students’ protective factors by incorporating research-based, skill-building strategies into the curriculum. Examples include NASP’s *Gratitude Works* program and the *Fishful Thinking* program (developed by the University of Pennsylvania and Pepperidge Farm), which give teachers and parents simple tools and strategies to promote resilience, optimism, and competence by helping children and youth see the possibilities in themselves and others. Access to student supports directly assists teachers, administrators, and families, and improves school outcomes.

Resilience results from positive social relationships, positive attitudes and emotions, the ability to control one’s own behavior, and feelings of competence (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004).

School psychologists help foster positive attitudes, positive behaviors, and resilience in children by providing research-based activities and interventions.