Safe, Supportive Conditions for Learning: Making Connections for Student Success

Key Concepts

Connection 1: Safe, supportive conditions for learning are essential to school success.

Students who do not feel safe and supported at school cannot learn to their fullest potential. Creating positive conditions for learning is essential to student achievement and must be integral to education reform efforts and legislation. Such conditions start with safe learning environments that promote student well-being, prevent negative behaviors, and engage students in the classroom and broader school community. We can enable teachers’ ability to teach and students’ ability to learn when we ensure that all students: (a) come to school knowing they are safe, welcomed, and respected; (b) have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in the building; (c) understand clear academic and behavioral expectations; and (d) see their role as positive members of the school community. Positive conditions for learning are shaped by the attitudes, expectations, policies, and practices of school personnel and must be intentionally established, measured, and maintained.

School psychologists have specialized training in learning, instruction, school and family systems, behavior, and mental health. They are a vital part of the school leadership team working to bring out the best in students and schools.

Connection 2: School-wide programs that prevent negative behaviors increase school safety and are central to positive conditions for learning.

Negative, antisocial or violent behaviors such as bullying, gang involvement, substance abuse, and truancy undermine physical and psychological safety for students and staff and can impede achievement. Zero tolerance policies have proven ineffective at improving school climate and actually can increase bad behaviors and dropout rates (APA, 2008). In contrast, effective, evidence-based strategies to improving school safety employ positive discipline, target the negative behavior and its underlying causes, and teach and reinforce positive skills and decision-making. Integrating school safety measures with efforts to improve school climate and academic achievement results in more sustainable and comprehensive school improvement.

School psychologists are trained to address the many factors that shape student behavior at the individual, classroom, and school-wide levels, and to implement evidenced-based interventions that improve student behavior, the school environment, and academic achievement.

Effective use of learning supports helps school leaders, teachers, and parents to target the most critical issues, minimize or prevent problems, and effectively promote student success. Specialized instructional support personnel, like school psychologists, are essential to this process and a valuable resource, particularly in tight budget times.
Connection 3: Comprehensive and coordinated learning supports directly contribute to student social–emotional wellness, positive behavior, and academic achievement.

Learning supports should be comprehensive, integrated, and directly connected to the school context. This means they are relevant to the mission of teaching and learning, connect to the processes and dynamics of schooling, and strive toward improved school success. Well-coordinated supports are provided in an integrated, mult-tiered system of supports that connects school-wide prevention and skills building with increasingly intensive interventions for higher risk groups and individual students. Effective supports include school-based mental health services, emphasize prevention and early intervention, actively engage families, and incorporate strength-based approaches that link behavior, social–emotional wellness, and academics. Evidence-based examples include social–emotional learning, positive behavior interventions and supports, and response to intervention.

School psychologists help gather school-wide and student progress data, implement interventions to improve school climate and student performance, and evaluate response to interventions.

Connection 4: Engaging students and families in the school community creates essential connections that improve student behavior and achievement.

Students must feel connected and valued as members of the school community and challenged academically in order to be fully engaged in learning. Disengagement from school increases the risk of academic failure and school dropout. Effective prevention programs address disengagement through life skills development, parent training and education, academic support, and behavioral interventions (Hammond et al., 2007). Improving school connectedness and engagement is associated with significant increases in reading, writing, and mathematics (Spier et al., 2007). Additionally, parent engagement is essential to the success of individual students and the health of the overall school community. Specialized instructional support personnel (school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, school nurses, and other specially trained professionals) work with parents and teachers to make important cultural and community connections that benefit students.

School psychologists actively collaborate and consult with teachers and parents to help address the school-wide and individual issues that impact school engagement.

Connection 5: School-based specialized instructional support personnel provide essential supports that improve school culture, teaching, and learning.

Specialized instructional support personnel provide a broad range of services specific to supporting teaching and learning. The expertise and services they provide are central to creating effective conditions for learning. They connect student health, mental health, behavior, language, and learning needs to school and community interventions. School psychologists, in particular, are highly skilled at collecting and interpreting data that provide school leaders with meaningful information that helps identify the most critical issues and how to effectively address them. Effective use of data is critical to improving conditions for learning, guiding progress monitoring and accountability measures that inform better instruction, and providing a comprehensive picture of student and school achievement.

Interventions that promote students’ bonding to school contribute to positive outcomes in terms of academic performance and social competence, while reducing tobacco, alcohol, and drug use; criminal involvement; gang membership; and school dropout (Catalano et al., 2004).

Data from nearly 500 studies indicate that the impact of promotion and prevention interventions is at least two to three times higher when programs are carefully implemented by qualified personnel who have expert knowledge of the relevant issues being addressed (Durlak & Dupre, 2008).

For more information, visit http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy. References are found in briefing handouts.