

CREATING SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) explicitly recognizes the strong relationship between positive school climate and student learning and success. In addition to requiring states to include data related to school climate and safety in annual school report cards, the law provides significant opportunity for school leaders to create learning environments that support the success of all students. A strong system of comprehensive social, emotional, and behavioral supports is equally as important as effective teaching in helping students achieve and exceed their academic potential. School psychologists play a critical role in creating safe and supportive learning environments that promote student learning. It is imperative that school psychologists work with principals, parents, administrators, policy makers, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that schools implement comprehensive, evidence-based initiatives to improve school climate.

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES

A school's environment—and the degree to which students feel connected, accepted, and respected—heavily influences students' academic achievement, mental health, and overall school success. Research reveals several essential components of school climate, which foster flexibility for schools and districts to align the unique needs of individual communities with explicit efforts to improve school climate. School psychologists have specific skills and expertise to help develop, implement, and evaluate school and district efforts to create safe and supportive learning environments that include the following elements:

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- **School safety for all students.** Feeling both physically and psychologically safe is a necessary condition for students to learn and achieve. It is critical for schools to engage in crisis response planning and training, develop comprehensive school emergency operations plans, assess the traumatic potential of crisis events, and effectively respond to crises in order to facilitate recovery and return to learning.
- **Positive prevention systems and effective interventions.** Schools that set clear academic and behavioral expectations and subsequently teach, model, and reinforce these expectations create an environment where students can be more successful in school. Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) is one example of a positive prevention system that applies behavioral principles to school-wide settings to increase positive outcomes for students.
- **School connectedness.** Students are more successful when they have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in school. Students who feel connected to school are more likely to attend school and give their best effort. Universal prevention frameworks such as restorative practices, social-emotional learning, and mindfulness are effective approaches for fostering relationships and school connectedness, and for building safe communities.
- **Positive discipline.** Positive discipline practices improve school connectedness and support improved student learning. Prevention-focused positive discipline systems, such as restorative practices, foster healthy relationships among students and staff, improve school climate, prevent and reduce harmful behavior, and support student learning. Furthermore, restorative practices hold students accountable for their actions and support students' efforts in making the necessary changes to avoid such behavior in the future.

- **Cultural competence.** Embracing the diversity of all students is critical to creating a culture conducive for learning. By intentionally teaching students about differences and the importance of respect and acceptance of those differences, schools lower barriers to academic learning.
- **Home–school collaboration.** Creating a school climate that fosters community can be critical in improving the overall climate of the school. Educating parents and other stakeholders about various school initiatives and including them on school leadership teams fosters a sense of shared ownership for school and student success. This helps students see their positive role in their own community.

KEY MESSAGES

Tapping into the expertise of school psychologists and other specialized instructional support personnel can be an incredibly powerful resource in addressing these critical components of a positive school climate. School psychologists work every day to connect students, schools, and communities in ways that helps them all succeed. As school psychologists work with school leaders and key stakeholders (e.g., parents and families, specialized instructional support personnel, educators) to develop plans to improve school climate, it is imperative to understand the critical role school psychologists play in helping foster safe and supportive conditions for learning. School psychologists can work with school leaders in the following ways.

School climate is comprised of many factors, and school psychologists have specific expertise to help schools implement evidence-based practices to improve school climate and ultimately student success.

- Develop and implement positive behavior interventions and supports that apply behavioral principles to school-wide settings and offer support to individual students and groups of students.
- Foster trusting relationships among students and staff, which improves student engagement and overall success.
- Help develop and implement school-wide initiatives such as restorative practices, social–emotional learning, and mindfulness, all of which are effective approaches for fostering relationships and school connectedness, and for building safe communities.
- Offer consultation and professional development to support teacher and staff efforts to infuse culturally competent practices into school-wide and classroom-based school improvement efforts.
- Support improved home–school–community engagement using evidence-based models of consultation and collaboration.
- Improve access to and quality of comprehensive and coordinated learning and mental health supports. School psychologists have unique training that allows them to deliver these services within the context of learning and in support of the mission of schools.
- Develop and integrate school-wide programming to foster school climate, prevent violence, and balance physical and psychological safety.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

- Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach <http://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/ready-to-learn-empowered-to-teach>
- School Psychologists: A More Valuable Resource www.nasponline.org/principal-leadership-nov2010
- *School Psychology Forum*, Special Issue: Improving Student Outcomes: Research on School Climate and Violence Prevention and Intervention [http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/spf/volume-10/volume-10-issue-1-\(spring-2016\)](http://www.nasponline.org/publications/periodicals/spf/volume-10/volume-10-issue-1-(spring-2016))