

## Positive School Climate

*Strong interpersonal relationships and ongoing support for students' self-regulation create a positive context for learning.*

By Beth Doll

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*Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).*

The City Center High School could have been a discouraging place to be. Located in the city's poorest neighborhood, students faced numerous challenges, and their parents' long work hours and limited resources made family involvement in school difficult. But the administrators and faculty members had an unwavering commitment to their students and making their school a place where students and staff members felt valued and empowered.

An anonymous student survey suggested that the teachers sometimes overlooked missed homework and limited test preparation because they knew that their students often lacked adequate housing and nutrition. The administrators and faculty members worked to reframe their response to students' underperformance. Instead of forgiving missing work, the teachers helped students figure out ways to meet the school requirements. This shift served to further strengthen the learning climate of the school.

School climate has been called the fourth leg of school success, after curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and teachers. It is usually measured by asking students and staff members to explain what it feels like to be teaching and learning in a particular school and asking families to describe their perceptions and sense of being welcome—or not.

A school's climate contributes to the academic success of its students and predicts the degree to which they actively participate in learning, including how consistently they attend school, how attentive they are in class, how carefully they complete their class assignments, and how committed they are to staying in school and doing well there. Students who feel connected to their school are more likely to graduate and move on to successful postsecondary educational and career opportunities.

### Social Health

A key component of school climate concerns the relationships that exist among students and adults, as well as the relationships among schools,

families, and their communities.

**Between teachers and students.** The relationships between teachers and students are the most important to achievement. They should be warm and caring and meet students' personal and developmental needs. Teachers' actions must show their high expectations for their students and their confidence that their students will be successful. Classroom climates can be irrevocably harmed if teachers behave in derogatory or punitive ways.

**Among students.** Three aspects of peer relationships are present in schools with positive climates:

- Each student has at least three friends who provide safe harbors in difficult times
- Students are able to resolve everyday conflicts in productive and prosocial ways that do not interrupt friendships or disrupt classmates' interactions
- Students feel safe and protected from peer aggression, intimidation, and bullying.

These characteristics may be difficult to observe directly because high-quality peer interactions can include

jostling and rough talk. Adults may be unfamiliar with the tenor, conventions, and boundaries that mark students' interactions with one another, and they may not be able to distinguish between student conflict and student friendships. But most students are adept judges of the social culture, and collectively, they can reliably assess the school's peer climate.

**Among adults at school.** In most respects, teachers need the same things from their colleagues that students require from their classmates: a few good friends at work, trust that minor conflicts over resources or practices will be resolved productively and respectfully, and safety from social aggression and victimization. Strong collegial relationships multiply the supports teachers have to strengthen their instructional strategies: colleagues bounce ideas off of one another, share their successes, step in to help solve challenging problems, and foster conditions for successful teaching.

**Among schools and families.** In schools with strong school climates, teachers' relationships with their students' families are usually familiar and comfortable. Families and schools hold common expectations and values for students' learning and development, which prevents misunderstanding between school and family life. Students should not be required to negotiate disagreements between their parents and teachers. When families visit the school on a daily basis, the community's culture becomes familiar and welcoming.

### Self-Regulation

A second important component of school climate is support for students' autonomy and self-regulation, which

is essential to their psychological well-being and incorporates multiple skills that students need to further their own welfare. Schools that facilitate students' self-regulation convey respect for students' dignity and maximize their capacity for self-direction in adulthood.

**Self-efficacy.** Efficacy expectations saturate the social and psychological climate of high-performing schools. Self-efficacy is a person's belief that he or she will succeed at the tasks he or she attempts; self-efficacy often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students who expect to succeed set ambitious goals, try harder and persist longer to achieve them, ask for help when they need it, and use problem-solving strategies. When most students expect to be successful, every student self-reports higher self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is promoted by teacher talk and peer comments that reinforce successes, curriculum and instruction that accommodates individual abilities and needs, previous experiences with success, and widespread availability of models of success that students identify with.

**Goal setting and decision making.** Effective school climates reflect routines and practices that strengthen students' goals for learning and provide multiple opportunities for students to make decisions about their schooling. Performance improves when work is guided by goals that are ambitious, worthwhile, and highly valued by the community. The impact is magnified when students choose mastery goals of acquiring new skills and knowledge, rather than competitive goals of outperforming other students.

Schools prompt goal setting and decision making by ceding some authority over learning to students. Most



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## How Your School Psychologist Can Help

Your school psychologist can be a valuable resource in creating a positive school climate. He or she can:

- Select appropriate survey instruments to assess school climate issues, evaluate the data, and recommend appropriate approaches to addressing problems
- Support teachers' problem solving and team collaboration
- Help teachers and parents implement strategies to support students' self-regulatory skills
- Consult on positive discipline and behavior
- Help identify cultural and logistical barriers to family engagement.

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For a summary of school climate characteristics, visit [www.principals.org/pl1210cruise-climate](http://www.principals.org/pl1210cruise-climate)

A list of additional resources is available at [www.principals.org/pl1210cruise-resources](http://www.principals.org/pl1210cruise-resources)

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middle school students can make and monitor goals that they can accomplish within one month, and most high school students can manage goals that are several months away. Goals set in collaboration with families are even more powerful because they convey a sense of unity and purpose from both school and home.

**Self-control.** Schools with effective climates have routines in place that prompt students to behave consistently with their goals and expectations of success. Behaviors that promote success are nondisruptive and nonaggressive and include such subtle behaviors as paying attention, listening, and participating in discussions. Families can reinforce similar principles of self-control in the home. Students are more inclined to assume responsibility for regulating their behavior when schools have seamless and effective practices for managing disruptive and aggressive behaviors without interrupting learning.

### Strategies to Enhance School Climate

Strategies to enhance school climate include those that strengthen relationships and those that foster self-regulation and autonomy.

**Build relationships.** Take time to build relationships with students and families and make time for students and other school personnel to build relationships with one another:

- Incorporate opportunities for fun into daily routines. The best relationship-building strategies derive from a basic principle: people become closer when doing fun things together. Fun can be incorporated into instruction through humor, learning games, and

enjoyable activities that foster laughter and enthusiasm.

- Set aside a few precious moments every day for adults and students to share the triumphs and disappointments of their daily lives.
- Engage students in informing their families about the work in the classroom through newsletters, video reports, family interviews, teacher-family conferences, and community activities.
- Respond to families' cultural and language needs.

**Minimize and manage conflicts.** A positive school climate is one in which conflicts occur infrequently and students treat one another with respect:

- Minimize conflicts by modifying adult supervision practices and promoting productive work and enjoyable interactions among students
- Guide students through problem-solving steps or scripts that prompt respectful conversations about solutions that satisfy the goals of other students and teachers as well as their own
- Reinforce strong and respectful interactions with families before conflicts occur, and engage them as partners in resolving and managing conflicts if they do occur.

**Prevent bullying and victimization.** A positive school climate is one where bullying is taken seriously and addressed effectively:

- Structure school routines and environments to minimize opportunities for victimization
- Ensure that students know that adults will intervene to protect them when necessary

## Principal Perspective: Positive School Climate

As the principal of a suburban high school with almost 2,200 students, I spend a considerable amount of time thinking about how I might better instill a sense of belonging in our school community.

Fostering relationships between adults and young people is key to unlocking the door to improved school climate. Young people today are desperate for adult relationships. They might not say it out loud, but students want to connect with their teachers and coaches—and even their principals. Tapping into that desire for connection offers tremendous possibility.

Positive relationships between students and educators encourage students to take risks, raise their hands, offer an answer, and wrestle out loud with a challenging problem. When adults and young people in school trust one another, then confidence builds and a desire to impress—or at least, not to disappoint—develops. Relationships become the means to the academic ends of achievement and success.

As a principal, I have a tremendous responsibility to discuss the importance of relationships with staff members, students, and parents. At the same time, I make every effort to spend time engaging in genuine

conversations with young people and working to connect with my students. I laugh with them and I allow them to laugh at me. After all, students derive tremendous pleasure from seeing their principal make a fool of him- or herself. Thus, climbing into the dunk tank or letting students duct tape me to a wall for charity represent ways of connecting with my students. Those simple acts show my staff members that I practice what I preach. Whether cheering with students at a heart-pounding athletic competition or mourning with them at a heart-wrenching funeral, I hope to show the power of a connected community.

As principals, if we can know students and “push” our staff members do the same, then we can benefit on three fronts: we create a stronger communities of belonging; we create a places where academic risk taking, and thus, achievement is more likely to occur; and we develop a sense of personal fulfillment that only our profession can deliver.

Chris Garran  
Principal  
Walter Johnson High School, Bethesda, MD  
Montgomery County Public Schools

- Implement schoolwide bullying prevention programs.

**Support adults.** Teachers and families frequently need the same kinds of support to foster positive adult climates in the school:

- Provide opportunities for adults to enjoy spending time with one another
- Develop clear and dependable guidance and strategies for staff members and families to help maintain a safe environment.

**Promote autonomy.** Autonomy-building practices also contribute in important ways to the school’s climate:

- Support students’ self-regulation by using classroom

meetings to solve problems and plan modifications to classroom practices

- Help students break big goals into smaller tasks, tackling each step one at a time to move steadily toward achieving their goals
- Ensure the routine application of social problem-solving steps within classrooms and small groups: identify and describe the problem, propose alternative solutions, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each solution, choose a solution and try it out, and reconvene to discuss whether the solution is working or how



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- Include students in schoolwide goal setting and decision making whenever feasible.

### What Principals Can Do

Principals' actions are instrumental in strengthening the learning climate of their schools. Their essential responsibility is to balance the strong and supportive relationships that are fostered among students and staff members with the need to demand excellence from all members of the school. Four actions are especially important:

**Foster relationships.** Protect some time every day for teachers and students to talk together. Find ways to bring teachers and families together for fun activities that everyone enjoys. Even stolen moments can cement these relationships and strengthen

teachers', students', and families' commitments to one another.

**Reframe difficulties.** Engage teachers and students and families in devising strategies to solve problems and meet high expectations. Involving students and families contributes to students' growing autonomy and sense of purpose.

**Celebrate successes.** Celebrate loudly, often, and with delight. Too often, the good things done by students and teachers are overlooked, but recognizing what you are doing right is the very first step toward repeating it.

**Choose staff members carefully.** Careful teacher selection ensures that the school is populated by gifted educators who balance their deep caring for students and respect for families with a demand for excellence and autonomy. **PL**

## Academic Engagement

Students attending schools with strong climates participate actively in learning and have high grades and achievement scores, few disruptive behaviors, easy transitions to new schools or new grades, and high rates of school completion.

### Attendance

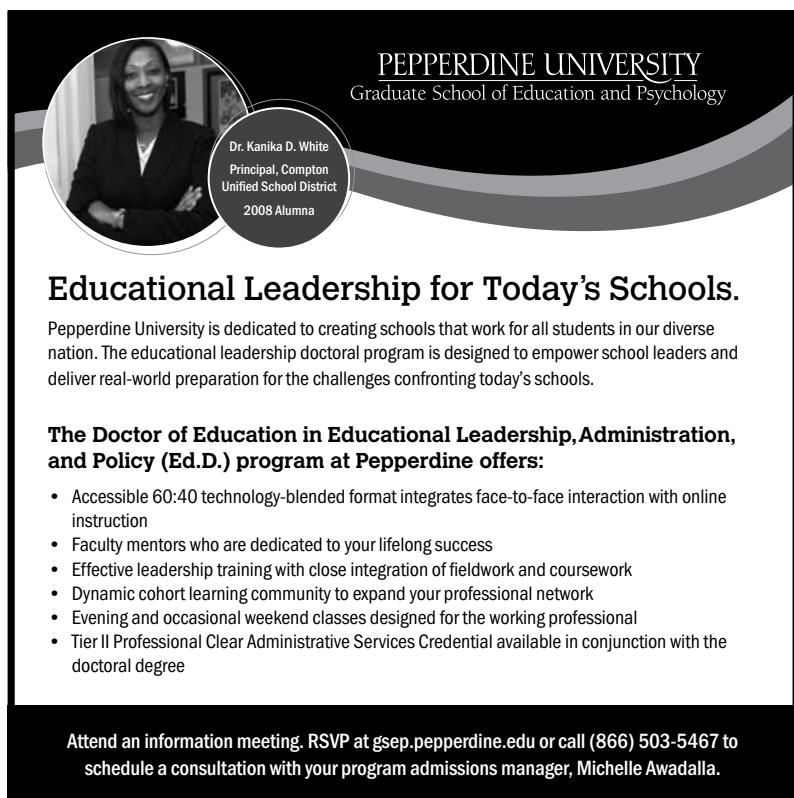
At its most basic level, *academic engagement* means that students are present in the classroom and are following the teachers' instructions. Schools with strong school climates have high attendance rates and low rates of disruptive behaviors.

### Attention to Schoolwork

At its second level, students are paying attention to their work. They are thinking about the material, listening when the teacher or other students are talking, and applying their new learning to assignments and practice activities. Students tend to complete more of their work and complete it more accurately in schools with strong climates.

### Enthusiasm for Learning

At its third level, students are not only compliant with the classroom learning and behavioral expectations but are enthusiastic about learning and motivated to be contributing members of the classroom. This excitement reflects a sense of belonging to and ownership of the school.



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