National Center for School Safety

Cultivating a Supportive School Climate:

A "How To" Guide

INSTITUTE FOR FIREARM INJURY PREVENTION
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Contributors

Sarah Stilwell, PhD
Research Investigator
National Center for School Safety

Briana Scott, PhD
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
National Center for School Safety

Esther Lee, MPH
PhD Candidate
National Center for School Safety

Heather Murphy, MA, LPC, NCC, CCTP-II
School Safety Specialist
National Center for School Safety

Erin Wyatt
Marketing and Communications Specialist
National Center for School Safety

Carolyn Seiger, MA
Instructional Designer
National Center for School Safety

Brent Miller, MA, PMP
Training Manager
National Center for School Safety

About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention and is affiliated with the School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. The NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Bureau of Justice Assistance Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. The NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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INTRODUCTION

School climate refers to the overall atmosphere of school life, which significantly affects the experiences of everyone in the school community. A positive and supportive school climate plays a crucial role in promoting healthy youth development and is also a strong predictor of school safety.

- A positive school climate can improve mental health outcomes,[1] self-concept,[2] and self-esteem[3] for middle school students.
- Middle and high school students experience lower absenteeism rates when they are in a supportive school climate.[4]
- High school students who experience a positive school climate exhibit fewer psychiatric problems, engage in lower levels of drug use,[5] and face lower rates of suspension.[6]
- School climate is a key predictor of students' motivation to learn,[7] and a positive school climate can mitigate inequities in academic success due to socioeconomic factors.[8]

This guide provides a step-by-step approach to assessing school climate needs, developing strategies, and identifying relevant resources for improving school climate. This resource can be utilized by any educator, administrator, or practitioner seeking to improve their school climate, through individual classroom initiatives, to broader school district policies.

STEP 1: CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

One of the first steps to improving school climate is conducting a Needs Assessment. This process helps identify existing positive elements and areas needing enhancement within the school community. It also aids in making informed decisions, prioritizing resource allocation, engaging the school community and garnering their support, measuring success, and encouraging comprehensive solutions. Based on this assessment, improvements might include implementing necessary programs, services, or resources (please refer to the Promoting Physical and Psychological Safety section for more information).

Needs assessment results will likely fall into one or more of these four areas, which will be elaborated on in the next section:

Relationships

The connections between members of the school community.

Teaching and Learning

Strategies enacted in the classroom to support academic and professional development.

Safety

Ensuring the safety of students, staff, and school personnel from potential harm or injury to promote physical and emotional well-being.

Institutional Environment

The organizational and cultural elements influencing the educational experience.

STEP 2: CHOOSING STRATEGIES

After completing a needs assessment, begin selecting strategies that align with your school climate objectives. The following strategies are categorized according to the primary area they influence. As you review the descriptions of each strategy, contemplate which ones are most suitable for your specific needs and circumstances; depending on the findings of the needs assessment, you may need to employ a variety of strategies.

Strengthening Relationships

Strengthening relationships among members of the school community is vital for fostering trust and support. The following strategies and resources can be used to improve school-based relationships:

Organizing Focus Groups

Focus groups bring students together to participate in a guided discussion on specific topics, issues, or initiatives. Focus groups can improve school climate by providing a platform for members of the school community to express concerns, offer suggestions, and collaboratively develop strategies to address issues. They foster a sense of inclusivity, ownership, and trust within the school community, resulting in a more positive and supportive environment for teaching and learning. This document on focus group best practices provides guidance on when to use focus groups and how to ensure the representation of all perspectives. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers insights on best practices in conducting focus groups and collecting data from them.

Conducting focus groups in a *virtual* setting can efficiently engage students or other hard-to-reach populations, enabling the collection of their perspectives. This research brief offers further recommendations for best practices in conducting virtual focus groups.

Forming Youth Advisory Councils (YACs)

Youth Advisory Councils are formal groups where youth and adults work together to make decisions regarding the school community. These councils play a vital role in addressing issues pertinent to school climate, such as creating safe environments for LGBTQ+ students or those with disabilities and bolstering mental health support systems. By fostering a sense of competence among youth and empowering them to take charge of

their community, YACs contribute significantly to enhancing school climate.

To learn more:

- Explore the CDC's website for a comprehensive overview.
- Utilize the Youth Advisory Board Toolkit for guidance on establishing YACs, including valuable tips.
- The Creating and Sustaining a Thriving Youth Advisory Council guidebook provides further insights into developing and maintaining YACs effectively.

Teaching Social Skills

Social skills encompass a range of abilities and behaviors that enable individuals to effectively interact and communicate in social situations. These skills may include verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy, active listening, cooperation, conflict resolution, and interpreting social cues. Schools can enhance relationships and improve the overall school climate by teaching social skills to all students and providing extra lessons to small groups needing additional support.

To learn more:

- The University of San Diego lists important social skills and how to teach them.
- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) offers a video that guides school practitioners in implementing schoolwide social-emotional learning (SEL).

Implementing Restorative Practices

Restorative practices prioritize resolution and reconciliation over punishment to mend relationships and address underlying issues. By fostering dialogue and empathy, they promote understanding and facilitate problem-solving, ultimately bolstering school climate through enhanced communication and peaceful conflict resolution. Many schools implement daily restorative circles, which involve structured dialogues in a circle format, to foster a sense of community. Educators use these circles to address disruptions and mend relationships following classroom, school, or community incidents. For guidance on implementing restorative practices, consult the National Center for School Safety's Introduction to Restorative Practices guide.

Using Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a framework based on behavioral psychology principles. Its purpose is to encourage and reward positive behaviors schoolwide while supporting students who display unwanted or unexpected behaviors. The PBIS approach can create a positive school climate and strengthen relationships by promoting positive and appropriate student social behaviors. Visit the PBIS Implementation Blueprint for guidance on implementing PBIS in your school.

Establishing Mentorship Programs

School mentorship programs are initiatives designed to match students with mentors who can offer support throughout their academic journey and personal development. Mentors are typically teachers, school staff, or community members with expertise in specific fields. Students benefit from mentorship programs by receiving personalized guidance and encouragement from positive role models, leading to improved academic performance, social-emotional development, and a sense of belonging within the school community. While there is no one-model approach to developing strong mentorship programs, consider several recommendations for creating a successful one, such as those utilized by Big Brothers Big Sisters. This national mentorship program offers one-on-one mentorship, especially for at-risk youth across diverse settings, including after-school programs.

To learn more:

- Explore an article from the Office of Justice Programs outlining practices to enhance mentorship programs for delinquency prevention.
- Visit the National Mentoring Resource Center's webpage.

Promoting Physical and Psychological Safety

Ensuring the safety of all school community members is crucial in promoting a positive school environment. This involves safeguarding students, staff, and other personnel from potential harm, danger, or injury to maintain their physical and emotional well-being. In this section, we will explore different strategies and resources that can be used to improve school safety collectively, thereby contributing to a more positive school climate for everyone in the school community.

Enacting Mental Health Supports

Enhancing school climate involves recognizing and addressing mental health crises to prevent potential safety risks. It is essential for school personnel to undergo training to identify and support students experiencing mental health concerns or crises. Additionally, empowering youth to identify and address concerns within their peer groups contributes to fostering a responsive school climate.

To learn more:

- Programs like Youth Mental Health First Aid and Notice. Talk. Act. at School provide training on identifying students in need and making appropriate referrals.
- Teen Mental Health First Aid offers training to youths, equipping them with skills to recognize mental health issues, cope, and seek help from a trusted adult.
- Say Something, an initiative by Sandy Hook Promise, helps identify signs of individuals who may pose a threat to themselves or others and offers support within school communities.
- The Trusted Adult Workbook from Sandy Hook Promise offers educators activities, tips, and guidance on becoming trusted adults within schools.

Staff mental health is not only important for its own sake, but is also a significant factor that can influence the overall climate of a school. Mental health challenges among staff may compromise their capacity to foster nurturing and positive learning spaces. Recognizing the interconnectedness of staff well-being and school environment, the CDC advocates for introducing programs within schools geared towards bolstering the mental health of educators. For more information, please visit the CDC's webpage on supporting staff well-being.

Employing Suicide Prevention Programs

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2023),[9] suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death among high school youth aged 14-18. Suicide prevention programs can not only help individual students, but they can also improve the well-being of the entire school community. Suicide Prevention Programs such as safeTALK,

Signs of Suicide (SOS), and QPR train school personnel to be responsive to youth mental health, identify students who may be experiencing a mental health crisis, and connect youth to life-saving resources.

Despite many districts encountering constraints in offering direct mental health services and facing limited access to community providers, sharing national crisis resources remains pivotal. 988 and the Crisis Text Line are two options for connecting youth with life-saving support.

Prevention-based policies and procedures that address student mental health and well-being are integral to school climate. School districts can access free prevention-based resources for policies and procedures through the following resources:

- Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools
- Model School District Policy on Suicide Prevention

Running Tip Lines and Anonymous Reporting Systems

School tip lines, which include confidential and anonymous reporting systems, offer a safe way for individuals to report potential threats to student or school safety. These resources can be accessed through websites, phone or text numbers, or apps. Tip lines and reporting systems are crucial in enhancing school climate by enabling schools to detect and resolve issues before they become serious. The School Tip Line Toolkit provides information on setting up and maintaining these systems.

Explore examples of reporting systems:

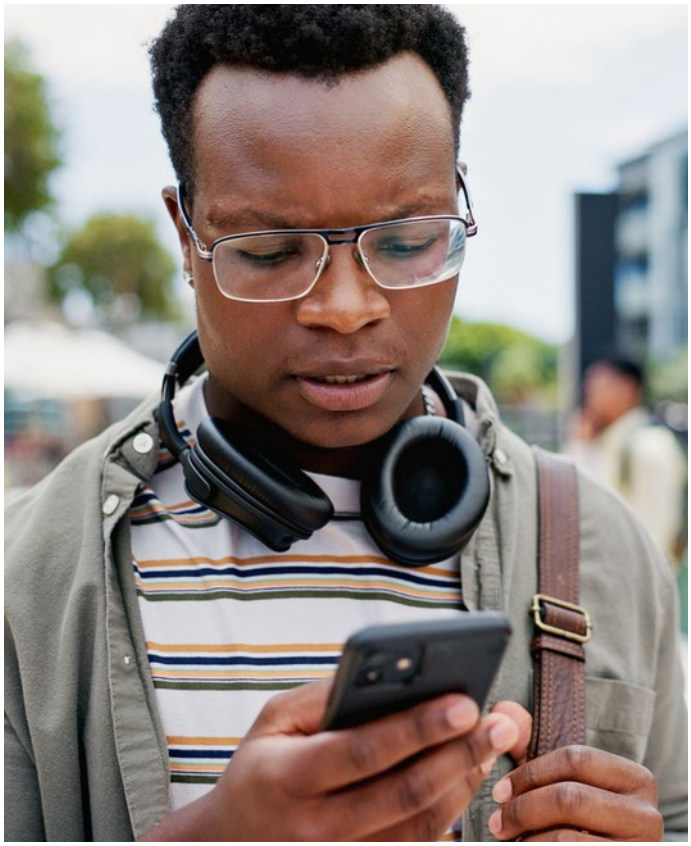
- Safe2Tell: A multimodal anonymous reporting system in schools across Colorado.
- Say Something Anonymous Reporting System: Allows students to anonymously report issues 24/7/365 via app, hotline, or website when they witness a classmate at risk of self-harm or harming others. For additional insights into SS-ARS, watch the video provided by the Sandy Hook Promise National Crisis Center.

Using School Violence Prevention Programming

School violence prevention programs are comprehensive initiatives typically offered as packaged curricula. These programs work to educate students about the root causes of violence and provide them with the skills and resources needed to prevent it. By addressing issues such as bullying, discrimination, substance abuse, and mental health challenges, these programs seek to transform students' attitudes and perceptions toward violence.

In addition, these programs give students positive options for violent behavior, fostering a culture of respect, empathy, and conflict resolution within the school community. They promote positive social interactions, teach strategies for handling emotions, and help resolve conflicts peacefully, creating a safer and more supportive school climate.

It is important to note that school violence prevention programs are typically implemented universally, reaching all students from



kindergarten to twelfth grade. This universal approach ensures every student receives the necessary education and support to contribute to a violence-free school environment. Additionally, these programs often involve collaboration among educators, mental health professionals, law enforcement agencies, community organizations, and parents to effectively address the multifaceted nature of violence and its prevention.

By empowering students with knowledge, skills, and resources, school violence prevention programs reduce violence and cultivate a positive school climate where students feel safe, valued, and supported in their academic and personal growth.

The Start With Hello (SWH) program by Sandy Hook Promise exemplifies this strategy. Specifically designed for K-12 students, it is a violence prevention initiative tailored to their age group. Its core goal is cultivating a culture of inclusivity and connection by reducing social isolation and nurturing empathy among young people. The elementary curriculum of Start With Hello features a digital, interactive storybook with engaging games and activities. The middle and high school curriculum equips educators to empower youth in reaching out to peers experiencing social isolation. SWH's implementation guide provides educators and school leaders with concrete steps to implementing the program in their school contexts.

Other curricula to support the development of social-emotional competencies in youth include Positive Action, Second Step, Too Good for Violence, and Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS). These programs are designed to teach youth skills that are beneficial both in school and outside of the classroom. These programs work to improve outcomes in areas such as making healthy choices, preventing bullying, and emotion regulation in youth.

Supporting Student Development Through Teaching and Learning Approaches

This section provides recommendations on a variety of teaching and learning strategies designed to promote academic and personal growth for both teachers and students. By employing diverse teaching and learning methods, schools can enhance academic achievement and positively contribute to the overall school climate.

Offering a Range of Educational Opportunities

Approaches such as service learning, community service, and project-based learning provide students with opportunities to apply classroom lessons in real-life situations through genuine projects. Project-based learning, in particular, encompasses a broad range of topics and is guided by student interests. Together, students formulate a driving question that motivates their learning and situates the experience in an authentic, real-world problem to solve. These initiatives encourage collaborative learning with a civic purpose and instill a lifelong commitment to learning.

To learn more:

- Edutopia's Project-Based Learning Professional Development Guide details how project-based learning accommodates diverse learning styles, empowers students to leverage their strengths, and enhances critical thinking and communication skills. Additionally, it offers insights into how project-based learning works.
- Youth.gov's Service-Learning page details how to support and implement service learning in K-12 schools.
- Prodigy's blog post on service learning discusses potential project ideas and how to implement them.

Defining Norms and Values

Edutopia defines norms as "commitments developed by the participants for behaviors they all agree to for a shared outcome." It is crucial for educators to collaborate with students in establishing classroom norms and values. Educators can ensure students feel safe, supported, and valued by defining these norms and

fostering a cooperative learning environment. Norms and values may cover:

- What a safe and productive learning environment looks like
- How they want to treat other classroom community members
- How they want to communicate
- How to resolve conflicts
- What behaviors to avoid

To learn more:

- Refer to the Norm Co-Creation practice guide for recommendations on conducting a norm-creation activity.
- Utilize the resource "10 Strategies to Build on Student Collaboration in the Classroom" from the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at George Washington University. This guide recommends establishing rules and expectations for classroom collaboration and assigning roles, which is especially helpful for schools prioritizing collaborative learning environments.

Offering Educator Professional Development

Educators receiving training in positive youth development can foster a positive and supportive environment by actively involving and engaging young people as collaborative partners. One illustration of this is the positive youth development section on Youth.gov. This page offers various training sessions and resources, including links to insights and training materials on positive youth development.

Furthermore, providing staff training that aligns with supporting diverse student populations and advocating for inclusive school policies can play a significant role in nurturing a school climate that values the diverse lived experiences of all students. This fact sheet on creating and sustaining discipline policies that support students' well-being provides an overview that can help school and district leaders make informed policy decisions. It also includes strategies for implementing equitable school policies.

Developing a Welcoming Institutional Environment

Enhancing the aesthetic and ambiance of the school environment can substantially improve the school climate. Creating a welcoming environment involves providing appropriate and inclusive classroom furniture, displaying student accomplishments and artwork, and establishing spaces throughout the school that encourage collaborative activities. The following section provides strategies to improve the institutional environment, strengthen relationships between students and staff, optimize the school layout, and provide resources that promote connection and support.

Creating a Clean and Comfortable Learning Environment

The school's physical environment contributes to students' development by facilitating collaboration and enhancing focus on learning. A clean and comfortable learning environment can significantly improve school climate by:

- Promoting physical well-being by reducing the spread of germs and illnesses
- Minimizing distractions to allow students to focus more effectively on their learning. Strong concentration leads to greater engagement in studies and academic success
- Creating a pleasant atmosphere that encourages positive interactions among students and between students and teachers. When individuals feel relaxed and comfortable, they are more likely to engage in collaborative learning activities and develop supportive relationships
- Demonstrating that the school cares about the well-being of its students and staff. A clean and comfortable environment can boost morale and satisfaction among students and educators, leading to a more positive perception of the school climate
- Encouraging students and staff to take pride in their school environment. When individuals take

pride in their surroundings, they are more likely to take responsibility for its upkeep and contribute to maintaining a positive atmosphere

For more information, this CDC resource provides tips for creating a healthy and supportive school environment.

Celebrating Student Interests

When schools represent student interests, students are more likely to feel connected, thereby strengthening school climate. Schools can achieve this by incorporating student interests such as art, music, and food into events.

To learn more:

- Explore Edutopia's article on celebrating student interests, which offers suggestions for incorporating student interests into school events.
- Delve into The Kennedy Center's article discussing how the arts can be utilized to build connections within the school community.
- Learn from Safe Haven International on detailing how a school district enhances climate, culture, and safety through the use of murals and artwork.

Building a Sense of Belonging

Empowering students with a voice fosters ownership and responsibility, reduces behavioral issues, and improves school climate. For example, starting each school day with a morning meeting can help build community in the classroom by giving students space to connect before turning their attention to learning. This Edutopia article offers additional strategies for educators to build classroom community, such as encouraging students to share acts of kindness or write friendly notes to peers.

These strategies are just a few methods to improve school climate. For more suggestions, visit this list of school climate improvement strategies from the Colorado Department of Education.

STEP 3: IMPLEMENTING YOUR CHOSEN INITIATIVE

Before implementing your initiative, it is important to consider key factors to ensure you are headed in the right direction. These include aligning your initiative with the data from your needs assessment, gaining support from your community, and familiarizing yourself with your district's policies. This section guides you through these implementation considerations.

Connecting Initiatives with Data

Aligning your school safety initiatives with the findings from your needs assessment or other school climate data is crucial. By demonstrating how your initiative addresses specific needs identified through data, you can effectively communicate its importance to community members and secure their support. This data-driven approach not only provides a solid foundation for your initiative but also highlights its relevance and potential influence, making it easier to gain buy-in from stakeholders. The NCSS's A Quick Guide to School Safety Data Visualization offers considerations for how to interpret and visualize data to share with the community.

Getting Buy-In From Your Community

Gaining the support of others is essential when implementing strategies to enhance the school climate. While initiating your school climate journey in your classroom is a great starting point, expanding your efforts to reach more students will require additional support from the broader school community. Achieving lasting and effective changes in school climate is a long-term goal that takes multiple invested parties, time, and resources. Attempting to transform school climate single-handedly can prove tiring and may require support to expand initiatives and foster collective ownership of the objectives.

Identify other advocates in your school community who can increase buy-in and generate momentum. These champions may include teachers, school counselors, local community organizations, and families eager to support your endeavors.

Once you have gained support from your school community, forming a coalition may be an option to ensure continued capacity for your efforts.

Aligning Your Initiative with Policies

Aligning school safety initiatives with district policies ensures coherence and consistency across all levels of operation. For instance, if one of your school climate initiatives involves implementing restorative practices, it is crucial to consider how they integrate with your district's discipline policies.

Review your district's policies and practices regarding school climate, discipline, and student well-being. Identify areas where your initiatives align with existing policies and where there may be discrepancies or areas for improvement.

Next, assess how your initiatives complement and support the overarching goals outlined in your district policies. Look for opportunities to reinforce positive behaviors, promote inclusivity, and create a supportive learning environment that aligns with your district's vision for school safety and student success.

Additionally, consider how your initiatives can be integrated into existing structures and processes within your school and district. This may involve collaborating with administrators, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders to ensure that your initiatives are effectively implemented and sustained over time.

STEP 4: SUSTAINING SCHOOL CLIMATE IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Ensuring the sustainability of school climate initiatives is paramount for long-term success. While initiating such programs is crucial, it is equally important to strategize how to maintain and nurture them over time. This section delves into key strategies for implementing these initiatives across the entire school, including the development of action plans and the ongoing evaluation of your efforts. By focusing on sustainability, schools can ensure that their climate initiatives have a lasting and meaningful effect on the educational environment.

Securing Funding

Insufficient and unsustainable funding often presents a significant obstacle to implementing school-wide initiatives. To address this challenge, utilize resources like the schoolsafety.gov grants finder tool to explore funding opportunities related to school safety. Consider applying for grants specifically geared towards school safety, such as the STOP School Violence Program, to kickstart your school climate efforts.

To ensure long-term sustainability, explore incorporating your initiatives or programs into your annual school budget. This may involve establishing partnerships with local community organizations or collaborating with local schools and statewide initiatives to secure ongoing financial support.

Schoolwide Implementation

Implementing school climate initiatives across the entire school is important to ensure the programs are sustainable. Engage your students, including the Youth Advisory Council, in the implementation process. Student-led projects, such as creating schoolwide public service announcements, are an effective way to gain support and sustain your efforts through ongoing student involvement.

Using Action Plans

Consider using an action plan to guide your program planning from initial vision to long-term sustainability. A school safety action plan is a comprehensive document outlining strategies, protocols, and procedures to enhance safety and security within a school environment. It typically includes measures to prevent and respond to various safety threats such as emergencies, violence, natural disasters, and other hazards. Key components of a school safety action plan may include:

- Identifying potential safety risks and vulnerabilities within the school premises and surrounding areas.
- Implementing measures to proactively address safety concerns and mitigate potential risks.
- Establishing emergency response procedures such as for evacuation, lockdown, shelter-in-place, and medical emergencies.
- Outlining communication channels and procedures for disseminating information during emergencies to students, staff, caregivers, and relevant authorities.
- Providing regular training sessions and conducting drills to ensure that students and staff are prepared to respond effectively to emergencies.
- Establishing partnerships with local law enforcement, emergency services, mental health professionals, and community organizations to support school safety efforts.
- Implementing mechanisms for ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of safety measures and making adjustments as needed to enhance school safety.

Continuously Evaluating Your Initiative

Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of safety strategies are essential to maintaining a proactive and effective approach to school safety. By regularly assessing the effectiveness of implemented measures and remaining vigilant to evolving threats and changing circumstances, schools can identify areas for improvement and promptly implement necessary adjustments. This ongoing process ensures that safety protocols remain relevant and responsive to emerging challenges, ultimately enhancing the overall security and well-being of students, staff, and the school community. To learn more about evaluating school safety initiatives, take the Public Health Approach to Evaluating School Safety Initiatives self-paced course.

CONCLUSION

For more resources on improving school climate, visit the National Center for School Safety's school climate topic page. Additional resources are available to support student wellness and comprehensive school safety. Thank you for your dedication to enhancing your school environment and creating a space where every student feels secure and supported

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