

# Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data



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# Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data

School climate profoundly influences students' social, emotional, and academic functioning and therefore represents an important indicator of student and school success (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) requires states to include an indicator of "school quality and student success" in their statewide accountability systems (ESSA; P. L. 114-95). This indicator may include measures of student engagement, student attendance, educator engagement, school climate and safety, or other factors that are intimately related to academic success and well-being. Additionally, ESSA requires states to provide school climate data in annual school report cards and encourages state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) to prioritize positive learning conditions for all students.

School psychologists have critical knowledge of the evidence-based methods to support a positive school climate, as well as a background in using appropriate data collection methods and analysis. School psychologists are encouraged to work with their state and local administrators to ensure valid, reliable, and meaningful measurement of school climate for the purposes of both school improvement and accountability. In addition, school psychologists play a critical role in creating safe and supportive learning environments that promote student learning and well-being. It is imperative that school psychologists work with administrators, families, educators, policy makers, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that schools implement comprehensive,

evidence-based initiatives to regularly measure and improve school climate.

This document is designed to assist SEAs and LEAs in the following ways:

1. Define school climate, its components, and influential factors related to its assessment.
2. Illustrate the importance of a positive school climate on student outcomes.
3. Describe how to measure school climate for purposes of school improvement and accountability.
4. Identify basic considerations associated with assessing and using school climate data.
5. Provide additional resources to help with measuring and using school climate data.

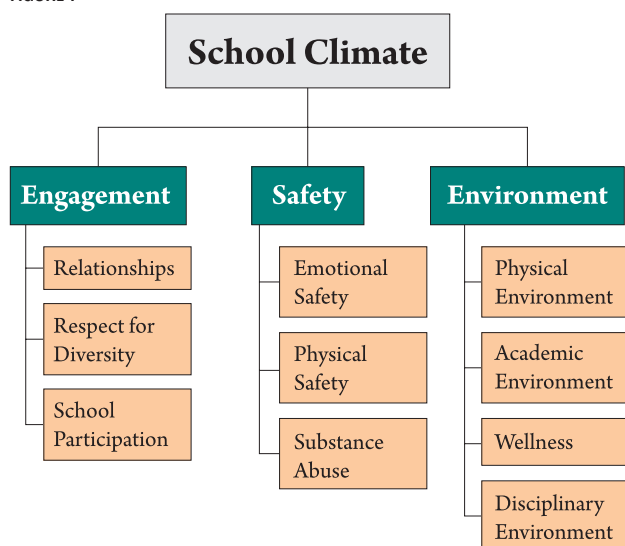
## DEFINING SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate generally refers to the physical, social, and emotional environment at school. More specifically, the National School Climate Council (2007) suggests that school climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teacher and learning practices, and organizational structures. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) defines school climate as the extent to which a school community creates and maintains a safe school campus; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community.

School climate represents a multidimensional construct inclusive of multiple factors that characterize the school environment. In an extensive review, the National School Climate Center identified five interrelated domains of school climate (Thapa et al., 2013):

- Safety (physical safety, social–emotional safety, rules and norms)
- Relationships (school connectedness and engagement, social support, leadership, respect for diversity, students’ race/ethnicity and their perceptions of school climate)
- Teaching and learning (social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning; service learning; support for academic learning; support for professional relationships; teachers’ and students’ perceptions of school climate)
- Institutional environment (physical surroundings, resources, and supplies)
- School improvement process (implementation of evidence-based programs)

FIGURE 1



The U.S. Department of Education Safe and Supportive Schools’ depiction of school climate also includes multiple components that are hierarchically organized (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education School Climate Model (Figure 1) has three broad school climate domains that include safety (physical safety, social–emotional safety, substance use), student engagement (school participation, relationships, respect for diversity), and the school environment (physical environment, academic environment, disciplinary environment, wellness).

Although different models of school climate exist, most focus on school safety, healthy interpersonal relationships, and fostering a positive learning environment.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL CLIMATE

A positive school climate is critically important for the social, emotional, and academic success of students. An ever-expanding body of research indicates that a positive school climate is associated with prosocial behavior, motivation for achieving in school, healthy self-esteem, and the development of effective conflict resolution skills in students. Additionally, a healthy school climate is associated with increased teacher retention and reduced burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Conversely, an unhealthy school climate is associated with school absenteeism, truancy, bullying and aggressive behavior, students being suspended or expelled, and ultimately dropout risk (Bradshaw, Wassdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2014).

**Demographic and cultural factors that influence school climate.** Culture reflects the values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people based on race, geography, social and economic factors, experiences, or other unifying denominators (e.g., disability, gender). Students’ cultural identities have an impact on how they perceive, interact with, and benefit from the learning environment (La Salle, Meyers, Varjas, & Roach, 2015). For example, compared to their female and nonminority peers, male and minority students have reported having more negative perceptions of school climate in that they perceive school as being less orderly and disciplined (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). Moreover, students with disabilities also tend to report lower perceptions of school climate than do their nondisabled peers (La Salle, George, Polk, & Evanovich, 2018).

Culture is broader than race or ethnicity, and all students experience the climate of the school differently. Considering this, a range of group-specific and individual considerations must be considered to create a school climate that is responsive to the needs of all students. Efforts to measure and improve school climate therefore requires both acknowledging the role of culture on school climate and identifying the ways that specific groups of students perceive the school climate. Similarly, examining cultural considerations related to community and family factors (e.g., community characteristics, language, family structure and beliefs) help identify targeted school improvement prevention and intervention strategies to support students’ needs. Such considerations have implications for how supports are selected, implemented, and monitored.

## MEASURING SCHOOL CLIMATE

Identifying resources to create and maintain a positive school climate is an essential component of a school improvement plan and is predicated upon the accurate measurement of school climate. Collecting information from multiple stakeholders should be a priority for measuring school climate as it allows SEAs and LEAs to identify areas of congruence as well as areas for growth. Key factors to consider when measuring school climate include:

- **Identify your team.** Develop a multidisciplinary team (e.g., administrators, school psychologists and other specialized instructional support personnel, teachers, families, students, school resource officers, and community members) to support school climate work. In particular, this team should include individuals such as school psychologists who have a background in assessment, evidence-based practice, and data-based decision making. Tasks of the team can include building school buy-in, sharing information regarding the process and purpose of data collection, setting up easily accessible and efficient data collection processes, interpreting and disseminating findings to all participants, and using the data to guide targeted, data-based decision-making and school improvement initiatives.
- **Identify the intended goal of data collection.** As a team, determine a rationale for collecting school climate data and how data will be utilized (e.g., school improvement plans, changing schoolwide policy and practice, statewide accountability).
- **Select valid and reliable measurement(s) needed to address your goal.** Identify appropriate school climate measurement(s) that address safety, interpersonal relationships, and physical environment and other relevant factors. Consider the following when selecting the appropriate measurement(s):
- **Comprehensive surveys provide an assessment of school climate across several domains** (e.g., Do students feel safe? Are there high standards for achievement? Do students feel connected to school?). Comprehensive surveys allow schools to identify and focus on specific aspects of the school environment that may differentially affect groups of students. However, they may take more time to administer and provide less feasibility for repeated assessments of school climate within the same year.
- **Brief school climate measures provide an overall snapshot of climate and can provide useful data with multiple administrations over time.** Such measures may be administered more frequently, for example, if schools are using a specific intervention to target a pervasive or significant issue (e.g., most of the school feels unsafe or if most students report low perceptions of climate). See below for a list of measures that have been created.
- **Identify how to use school climate data alongside other indicators of school success.** The integration of school climate data with additional sources of information can enhance a school's capacity to assess overall school functioning. Typically, these sources of data can include office disciplinary reports, suspension and expulsion data, school-wide behavioral screenings, attendance records, school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) data, teacher turnover, and student graduation rates.
- **Include multiple groups.** Consider selecting assessments that allow for participation among a range of key individuals who influence and are affected by school climate such as:
  - Students
  - Parents/families
  - Classroom teachers
  - School psychologists, counselors, social workers
  - School staff
  - Administrators
  - School safety team members
  - Community members (as appropriate)
- **Create a schedule for data collection.** Depending on the measure and its length, schools should determine the frequency of data collection. At a minimum, LEAs should collect school climate data annually to reassess the unique needs of the school each academic year. School climate data should also be used to celebrate and share successes with the school community!
- **Create a plan to analyze and use the data.** Take action once school climate data have been collected and analyzed. Data obtained from surveys will vary across schools and perhaps across respondents, grades, etc. Analyzing the data alongside other complementary data (e.g., discipline, attendance) can improve a school's capacity to identify and implement targeted and contextualized interventions to meet the needs of students.
- **Create a plan for sharing data.** Communicating school climate data is an integral yet sometimes overlooked step in effectively utilizing school climate data. As SEAs continue to prioritize school climate data as part of assessing school success, LEAs will need to provide such data in an easily accessible way to students, families, staff,



and the community. Beyond purposes of accountability, however, such data can inform local educational programming. LEAs can consider presenting school climate data at school board meetings, PTA meetings, school-wide student assemblies or presentations, professional development meetings, community discussions, and classroom lessons/discussions. Individuals are more likely to be honest about their feelings and actively participate in surveys when they feel that their voices are being heard and when they can see how their responses are being used for important decision making.

## USING SCHOOL CLIMATE DATA

The National School Climate Center (NSCC; 2010) recommends that schools use data across various school populations (e.g., district, school building, classroom, student, and community) as part of a problem-solving process that includes the following five stages:

- **Preparation**, which includes forming a team, establishing ground rules, fostering support from stakeholders, promoting a culture of trust, determining needed resources, identifying ways to provide support, and then how to reflect on school climate data.
- **Evaluation**, which involves using measurement tools to systemically evaluate strengths and weaknesses of schools, as well as specific needs and how to share data with relevant stakeholders and reflect.
- **Action planning**, which involves understanding the collected data and digging deeper into what they mean and how such data can help inform school programming. Essentially, this step of using school climate data involves identifying specific ways that school climate can be maintained or enhanced for the benefit of all members of school communities.
- **Implementation**, which involves selecting and applying evidence-based practices that promote the areas of school climate that are lacking. Such practices should be implemented with fidelity and integrity, promote self-awareness and growth in all members of the school community, allow for the continued assessment of school climate, and encourage reflection on the utility of school climate data.
- **Re-evaluation**, which involves revising the measurement, preparation, evaluation, action planning, and implementing stages. Ultimately, this process is informed by data and is consistent with continuing efforts to ensure a positive school climate.

**Application of school climate data.** Using school climate data, school leaders could modify or replace existing practices based on contextually relevant data to improve the overall environment of a school. For example, if the process identifies bullying as a pervasive problem, school leaders can decide to adopt a research-supported bullying prevention and intervention program. Moreover, as a second example related to using school climate data, if students report low ratings of school connectedness or engagement, school leaders may consider implementing strategies to promote student–student and student–teacher relationships, such as school pride initiatives, mentoring programs, or extracurricular activities (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002).

School climate data can also illustrate the degree of alignment between what a school aspires to achieve and their progress toward accomplishing their goals. For example, school climate data may provide valuable insight when trying to meet the academic and social–emotional needs of all students, as well as illustrate tangible outcomes along the way (e.g., students report improvements in teacher–student relationships, students report feeling safer at school). Lastly, when using school climate data, schools should view data collection as an ongoing process that allows for tracking and future decision making as school climates change and fluctuate over time.

## A SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Given the importance of measuring school climate, the following key points are recommended.

- Choose a reliable and valid multidimensional school climate measure that assesses emotional, physical, and behavioral aspects of school climate.
- Assess school climate on an annual basis. A possible consideration would be within the first and last 45 days of school to monitor perceptions across time.
- Survey multiple stakeholders within the school environment including students, teachers, staff, families, and other members of school communities.
- Compare school climate data to other student data including achievement data, discipline data, and absentee data.
- Communicate school climate findings with stakeholders through school board meetings, school-wide assemblies, community discussions, PTA meetings, and classroom discussions using easily relatable formats and methods.

- Integrate a school climate committee or task force within existing school improvement initiatives (e.g., school safety committee, MTSS committee).
- Use school climate data to inform multitiered approaches to supporting student needs.
- Celebrate improvements and make plans for the next phase of re-assessing the school's climate.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE MEASURES

- Authoritative School Climate Survey (Cornell, 2014): <https://curry.virginia.edu/authoritative-school-climate-survey-and-school-climate-bullying-survey>
- California School Climate Survey (Furlong et al., 2005): <https://www.wested.org/project/california-school-climate-survey-cscs/>
- Delaware School Climate Survey (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011): <http://wh1.oet.udel.edu/pbs/school-climate/de-school-climate-survey/>
- ED School Climate Surveys (EDSCLS, 2019): <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/edscls/administration>
- Georgia School Climate Survey (Georgia Department of Education, La Salle, & Meyers, 2014): <http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/GSHS-II/Pages/Georgia-Student-Health-Survey-II.aspx>

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- Maryland Safe and Supportive Schools Climate Survey (Bradshaw et al., 2014): <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/survey/maryland-s3-climate-survey>
- School Climate Measure (Zullig et al., 2015): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25642931>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- NASP ESSA School Climate for School Psychologists: <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/current-law-and-policy-priorities/policy-priorities/the-every-student-succeeds-act/essa-implementation-resources/essa-school-climate-for-school-psychologists>
- National School Climate Center: <https://www.schoolclimate.org/>
- National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments: <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium>

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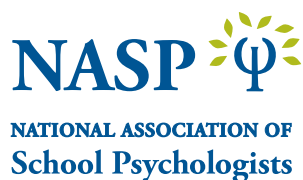
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