

# School Climate Essentials:

## A CALL TO ACTION

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### Overview

A positive and equitable school climate is foundational to school and student success. Based on the latest findings from learning science, many schools are embracing the need to support students' **physiological, social, and emotional growth** in addition to their cognitive development as a part of school climate improvement efforts. **School climate refers to** the qualities of a school environment experienced by students and staff, encompassing relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures ([National School Climate Center](#)). To ensure that all members of a school community can learn and thrive, schools need to establish a positive climate that facilitates the conditions for learning and teaching.

**The climate and culture of a school determine the experiences of all individuals in a school community.**

A school's **climate reflects its culture**, defined as the shared norms, values, beliefs, and rituals that are informally developed over time and impact how school community members think, feel, and act in schools (Peterson & Deal, 1998). In schools with a positive climate and culture, there is a sense of community and students feel known, safe, and able to learn in a caring and supportive environment (Redding & Corbett, 2018). These schools implement a whole-person approach that supports well-being by drawing on the **assets, needs, and aspirations of students and the adults who take care of them.**

**Conditions for learning include social, emotional, and physical well-being.**

Research demonstrates that such a supportive, positive environment increases motivation and achievement outcomes. A positive

school climate also promotes strong interpersonal relationships between and among students and teachers, bolsters communication, and supports students' sense of belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

**School culture norms affect all aspects of students' experiences at school.** For example, positive, consistent teacher-student relationships can be a protective factor, as students perform best when they feel highly supported. The presence of consistent, supportive adults can be particularly impactful in the lives of students of color who may face racism, discrimination, and prejudice in their daily social interactions. The presence of supportive adults can build resilience among students exposed to such systemic factors. Conversely, deficit thinking can influence teacher expectations for and interactions with Black and

Latinx students, frequently resulting in reduced school engagement and achievement as well as higher suspension rates among these students (Gregory et al., 2011; Woolley & Bowen, 2007).

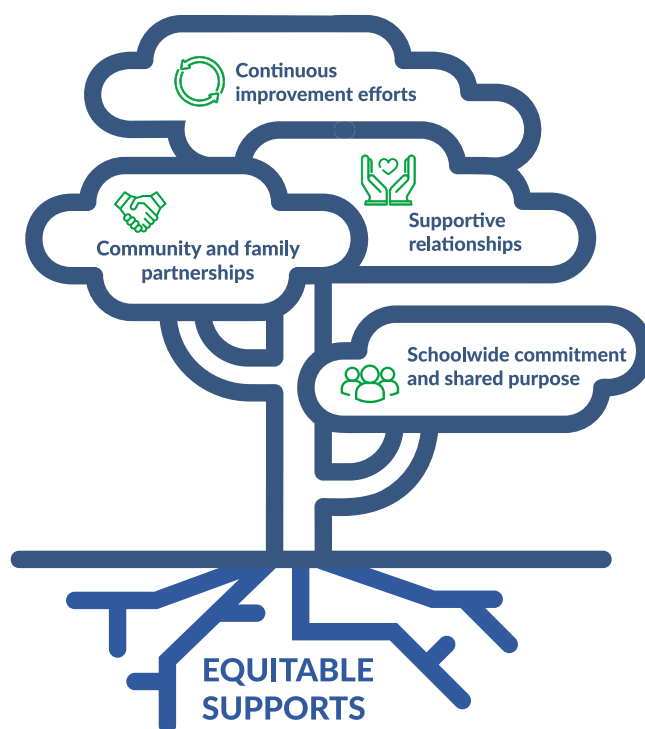
Disparities in academic outcomes exist within schools and across school districts. Analysis of data on such indicators as engagement, safety, and learning supports suggest that these gaps persist due to disparate access to key school resources (Hanson et al., 2012; Murray, 2018). Such findings underscore the urgency of establishing conditions for equitable learning and development by ensuring that policies, procedures, resources, and instructional strategies across districts, schools, and classrooms support the well-being and growth of every student (García Coll et al., 1996).

### What can schools do to support a positive school climate?

The most successful schools put policies and structures in place that ensure ongoing attention to and integration of school climate goals. Ideally, these goals support and facilitate all areas of student learning and development (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Goals might include professional learning for teachers, implementation of identity-affirming supports for students, initiatives to build community members' sense of safety at school, and a shift to more positive approaches to school discipline. Each warrants focus and investment on a par with its essential role in promoting positive student academic and social-emotional outcomes.

To ensure a safe, supportive, and equitable learning environment, schools must apply multiple integrated strategies as a part of their school climate improvement efforts – by developing equitable supports, supportive relationships, schoolwide commitments, community and family partnerships, and continuous improvement efforts (see Figure 1). The following practical guidance can help administrators and other leaders enact these essentials.

**FIGURE 1: SCHOOL CLIMATE ESSENTIALS**



#### EQUITABLE SUPPORTS

Equity is at the root of each school climate essential. An equitable school climate supports high expectations and safe and healthy environments as well as positive and caring relationships between and among all students, staff, and families. Schools can ensure full access to these supports when policies and practices respond to the needs of all community members, create safer school environments for diverse groups, understand the strengths and needs of diverse groups and cultures, encourage cultural awareness, and support the reflective practice of learning as well as unlearning past assumptions or practices.

One concrete strategy for promoting equity is incorporating educator, student, and family voice in an initial strengths- and needs-sensing phase. Schools should ensure this phase is strengths based rather than only focused on needs and gaps so that educators can achieve a deeper understanding of student and family experiences (Walrond, 2021). A strengths-based approach also values the capacity, knowledge, and potential in the school community. This phase encourages

distributive leadership by providing community members with the opportunity to provide direct feedback to leadership, which also promotes transparency and trust, values that are integral to each of the school climate essentials.

### COMMUNITY AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Schools should also engage community members, including parents and students, in the development of learning environments. This type of co-creation affirms the value of all members of the school community to collaboratively explore and discuss decisions. Research demonstrates a link between engaging communities and high student achievement, attendance, and school engagement (Paredes, 2021). Family partnerships, in particular, can result in enhanced community participation and understanding of the education system, greater trust between schools and communities, more inclusive school climates, and improved student outcomes (Ishimaru, 2014). When schools seek input and regard all families — including families of color from low-resourced communities — as **equal partners and experts** on their students' needs, families get a message of acceptance and empowerment. Their sense of genuine partnership allows them to play a key role in reducing opportunity gaps (Ishimaru, 2014).

To foster such family engagement, schools need to continuously develop and improve the skills of staff and leaders through professional learning focused on high-impact strategies such as personalized family outreach (Paredes, 2021). Schools can also enlist students as active partners in creating safe and positive school environments through strategies such as youth participatory action research. This kind of student participation can promote engagement, strengthen teacher-student as well as peer relationships, and give students a sense of ownership over school improvement (Voight, 2015).

### SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The quality of relationships at school is one of the strongest predictors of both student academic achievement and teacher satisfaction (Hattie, 2009; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; da Luz, 2015; Varga, 2017). Supportive relationships foster positive social interactions and establish an environment of trust. They provide the academic and

social-emotional support that enables students to be open to new learning experiences. Caring relationships between and among students, staff, family members, and community partners also promote school connectedness. Students who feel connected at school report higher attendance rates; experience positive, supportive peer relationships; and have lower rates of emotional distress than peers who do not feel a sense of school connectedness (O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011). Those same positive relationships keep staff motivated to be innovative, connected, and inspiring (O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011).

To support quality relationships, school and classroom practices should be designed to create a community that ensures a sense of belonging and safety for all students (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). For example, creating dependable, supportive classroom routines for both managing classrooms and responding to student needs can deepen teacher-student relationships. Developing culturally responsive learning environments can also help ensure that all students feel valued, cared for, and affirmed in their identities (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

### SCHOOLWIDE COMMITMENT AND SHARED PURPOSE

Building a positive school climate and culture is a continuous process that requires a commitment from the entire school community. That commitment develops when school leaders bring all community members together to determine shared beliefs and co-create common goals and agreements about roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each other. **When these agreements are created in partnership with educators, parents, students, and other community members, the school can come together around a shared sense of purpose. The process also promotes transparency, consistency, and sustainability over time and despite staffing changes.**

Developing partnerships across the school community can require a shift in staff mindsets about who should be involved, how we will work together, and how change toward a more positive, equitable school climate happens (Kania et al., 2014). For that shift to occur, staff must come together

to examine their current assumptions about their school's communities, including common beliefs that attribute educational disparities to the skills, knowledge, culture, values, or engagement of students and families. To support mindset shifts needed for collective change, school leaders must consider what kinds of training and support staff may need (Ishimaru, 2014).

### CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS

Schools that successfully foster and maintain a positive learning environment collect data to help them plan, implement, and monitor climate improvement efforts. Data on such indicators as engagement, safety, and learning supports can provide a critical window into student and staff perspectives on the school learning environment and on other aspects of school community members' daily experiences (Hanson et al., 2012). Given differing student experiences within the school, data can be intentionally collected and disaggregated by key student and staff demographics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Schools that conduct these analyses position themselves to recognize and adapt to the assets and needs of the entire school community.

When school leaders routinely review climate data with students, families, and other community members in data-sharing meetings, they facilitate open discussion of key questions, suggestions, and concerns. These discussions promote a **culture of transparency and growth that bolsters engagement and enhances responsiveness to community needs**. Moreover, including students and families in regular conversations to interpret and make meaning from data findings supports the practice of developing continuous improvement efforts **with communities, not for them**.

### Conclusion

Research has established a clear connection between positive school climate and a variety of desirable student outcomes. By integrating these school climate essentials, schools can put in place the conditions that support the ability of all students to achieve and thrive. Building a positive

school climate — one that involves the entire school community and is anchored in respectful and affirming relationships — can help ensure that every student has access to the resources and experiences that support an equitable learning environment.

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