

Indicators of School Quality: School Climate

What is school climate?

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions. School climate reflects how members of the school community experience the school and sets the tone for all the learning and teaching done in the school environment. School climate includes factors that serve as conditions for learning and promote physical and emotional safety, engagement, connection and support. A positive school climate reflects focus and attention on providing support. It enables students and staff to realize high behavioral and academic standards while encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting and caring relationships throughout the school community.

Why is school climate important?

The way students, families, teachers and other school staff experience the school and school-related activities is predictive of students' ability to learn and develop in healthy ways, affecting student attendance, learning and achievement. Over the last three decades, a growing body of research has attested to the importance of school climate, as it directly impacts indicators of success such as increased teacher retention, lower dropout rates, decreased incidences of violence and higher student achievement.¹ Changing a school's climate for the better is associated with increases in student performance in reading, writing and mathematics.^{2 3} Students who experience positive learning environments that are safe, supportive and engaging are more likely to improve academically, participate more fully in the classroom and develop skills that will help them be successful in school and in life. In addition, students who experience positive school climates are less likely to participate in disruptive behavior.⁴ Similarly, the way in which teachers experience the climate of their school has an impact on their levels of stress and burnout.⁵

How is school climate measured?

School climate is best measured through surveys that recognize student, parent and school personnel voices. The National School Climate Center defines a climate survey as a comprehensive school climate tool that provides data used as a springboard for community-wide understanding, unified improvement planning and implementation efforts as well as accountability. Research

¹ Thapa A., Cohen J., Guffey S., and Higgins-D'Allessandro, A. A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 2013; 83: 357-385.

² Spier E., Cai C., and Osher D. School climate and connectedness and student achievement in the Anchorage School District. Unpublished report, American Institutes for Research, 2007, December.

³ Spier E., Cai C., Osher D., and Kendziora, D. School climate and connectedness and student achievement in 11 Alaska school districts. Unpublished report, American Institutes for Research, 2007, September.

⁴ Center for Social and Emotional Education. (2007). *School climate research summary*. New York: Author. Available: http://nsc.csee.net/effective/school_climate_research_summary.pdf

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. Quick guide on making school climate improvements. Washington, DC: Author, 2016. <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/SCIRP/Quick-Guide>

demonstrates that using a climate survey tool recognizes the unique nature of each school's history, strengths, needs and goals, and provides benchmarks as well as a road map for school improvement efforts.

A compendium of available school climate surveys is available through the U.S. Department of Education (ED) Climate Surveys platform. This platform also provides a free resource to help collect, analyze and report school climate data. Survey measures of school climate that states and schools might include in accountability systems include percentage of students who report attending school with a positive school climate; percentage of students who report that discipline policies are applied fairly and equitably to all students; percentage of students who report that teachers and other adults have high expectations for them.

Additional indicators that can be used to measure school climate that do not require school climate surveys include those based on incident data, such as tracking disciplinary or bullying incidents, or crime and safety data, such as the percentage of students who attend schools with ongoing safety or crime problems (based on thresholds established by the state).

How has this school quality measure been used to date?

Schools are currently required to report on a number of school climate measures as a part of the ED's Office for Civil Rights Data Collection. These include measures related to bullying and harassment, such as the number of allegations of harassment or bullying and the number of students who were reported as harassed or bullied, and the number of instructional aides, administrative staff, nurses, counselors, security guards and law enforcement officers on site.

Many states have also taken steps to prioritize school climate by adopting statewide policies and programs that support efforts to improve school climate. For example, 22 states have integrated school climate policy into their school improvement and accreditation systems.

ESSA recognizes the importance of school climate data in measuring school success. Measures of school climate and safety, such as chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence, are highlighted as allowable examples of measures of school quality or student success in state accountability systems. In addition, states and school districts are required to include the following measures of school quality, climate and safety in their report cards: rates of in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment.

This document was prepared by Healthy Schools Campaign and Alliance for a Healthier Generation to support the resource [State ESSA Plans to Support Student Health and Wellness: A Framework for Action](#). Learn more at healthyschoolscampaign.org/state-essa-framework.