Best Practices, Strategies, and Recommendations for Improving School Climate and Culture

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Report Navigation

This Information Request (IR) report contains a navigation scheme that may be viewed in the sidebar on the left side of the document. To display the sidebar, from the toolbar on the left side of the page, select the Bookmarks icon. From within the navigation, click the desired section heading or subheading to move to that particular area of the report. The IR is organized into the following sections:

- Background
- Procedure
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Background

A state education agency (SEA) that is served by the Southeast Comprehensive Center (SECC) at American Institutes for Research (AIR) will release its local education agency (LEA) Title IV application to its school districts in Spring 2018. To inform and support these efforts, the SEA requested SECC's assistance in developing a report, to be distributed to its LEAs, identifying resources that discuss best practices, strategies, and recommendations for potentially improving school climate and culture. The SEA plans to reference this information during LEA application training sessions and will have school district staff utilize the report in completing their Title IV applications.

"Using, generating, and sharing evidence about effective strategies to support students gives stakeholders an important tool to accelerate student learning. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) emphasizes the use of evidence-based activities, strategies, and interventions (collectively referred to as 'interventions')," (U.S. Department of Education [ED],

2016, p. 2). ED's guidance is developed to assist stakeholders with effectively selecting and implementing supports that work to improve outcomes for children.

A component of ED's guidance recommends criteria for identifying "evidence-based" interventions based on the Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) four evidence levels in Section 8101(21)(A) of ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The SECC IR team utilized the ESSA four evidence levels— strong evidence, moderate evidence, promising evidence, and demonstrates a rationale—to inform review of the interventions and approaches described in the resources that were selected for inclusion in this report. Additional information is provided in the Overview and Resource Summaries sections.
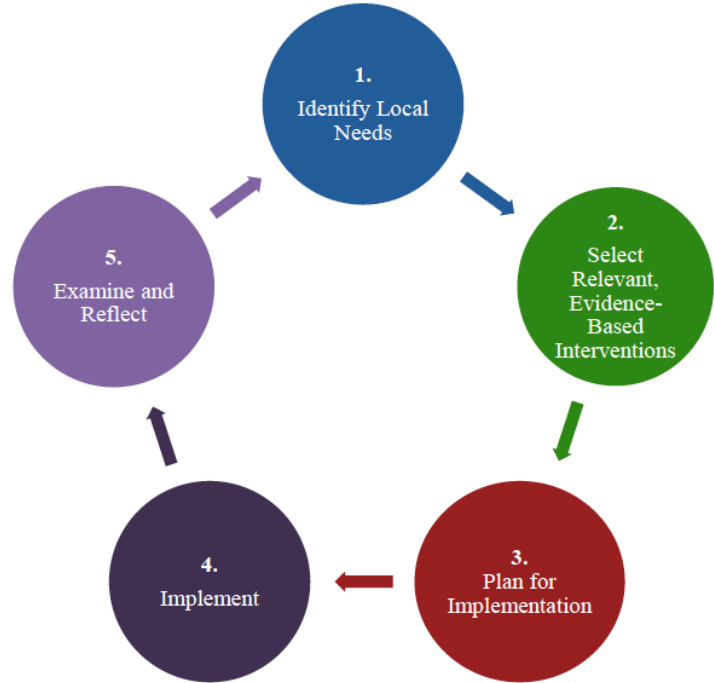
In addition to the four levels of evidence for choosing interventions, the ED guidance document emphasizes that "ways to strengthen the effectiveness of ESEA investments include identifying local needs, selecting evidence-based interventions that SEAs, LEAs, and schools have the capacity to implement, planning for and then supporting the intervention, and examining and reflecting upon how the intervention is working," as illustrated in the figure from the guidance document (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 3).

Procedure

To locate resources for this report, the SECC IR team conducted online searches of the EBSCO*host* research database and Google and Google Scholar search engines, using a combination of the terms listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Terms Used for Resource Search		
school culture and teacher practices school culture and classroom practices school culture and student discipline school culture and student discipline and/or practices school culture and student discipline and evidence-based practices culturally responsive classroom cultural diversity	management practices culturally responsive classroom management strategies culturally responsive classroom classroom practices teacher practices school culture and school discipline school connectedness protective factors and schools cultural deficits	restorative justice alternative discipline strategies and classroom practices and discipline culturally responsive approaches and discipline culturally responsive behavior interventions culturally responsive behavior interventions and discipline positive behavior support system

Upon review of 48 resources located in the above searches, the team selected 15 for inclusion in this report, based on these criteria: (a) publication date within the past 10 years; (b) interventions or approaches detail best practices, strategies, or recommendations for potentially improving school climate and/or culture; and/or (c) content is relevant to the client's topics of interest. Detailed information on the selected resources is provided in the Resource Summaries section of this report, which follows the Overview.

General Limitations

As with many topics in education, there is a limited research base of information on school climate and culture. However, resources cited in this summary include a few research-based strategies and practices grounded by strong or moderate evidence as defined by the criteria established in the ESSA guidance. The majority align with the criteria of "demonstrates a rationale," and describe approaches that various educational institutions identified as positive in impacting school climate and culture.

The SECC does not offer conclusions regarding the research featured in this report and does not endorse any of the strategies or practices discussed. Instead, the information is provided to inform stakeholders of approaches used by others that may help to improve school climate and culture.

Overview

This report centers around a review of resources that discuss interventions or approaches that may help to improve school climate and culture; therefore, a brief look at how these terms are defined follows. The terms climate, culture, and context are frequently used interchangeably in education, but some argue that differences exist between these constructs (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Each term has different meanings, and no set list of variables is assigned to each term.

According to Clifford, Menon, Gangi, Condon, & Hornung, climate is defined as "the quality and the characteristics of school life, which includes the availability of supports for teaching and learning. It includes goals, values, interpersonal relationships, formal organizational structures, and organizational practices. Culture refers to shared beliefs, customs, and behaviors," (2012, p. 3). Culture can be measured, and it represents people's experiences with ceremonies, beliefs, attitudes, history, ideology, language, practices, rituals, traditions, and values. "Context is the conditions surrounding schools, which interact with the culture and the climate in a school," (Clifford, Menon, Gangi, Condon, & Hornung, 2012). School context also can be measured.

Regarding the resources that were selected and included in this report, a number contained information that related to both topics, school climate and culture. Also, these terms were sometimes used interchangeably, thereby making it difficult to categorize a resource as addressing only one of these topics.

As stated previously, the SECC IR team utilized the ESSA four evidence levels—strong evidence, moderate evidence, promising evidence, and demonstrates a rationale—to inform review of the interventions or approaches described in the selected resources. In addition, upon review of the intervention or approach detailed in each resource, the team compiled a list of best practices, strategies, or recommendations, which is provided at the end of each resource summary. The subheadings for these items are color-coded as follows and can be conveniently accessed via the navigation sidebar:

- Strategies (blue)
- Best Practices (green)
- Recommendations (purple)

In the Resource Summaries section, each resource summary includes the title, descriptions of the resource type or approach, category (climate, culture, or climate and culture), audience (teachers, district administrators, school leaders, principals), and level of evidence (strong evidence, moderate evidence, promising evidence, demonstrates a rationale), and an overview.

Resource Summaries

The 15 selected resources are listed in alphabetical order by author. The interventions identified within these resources have varying levels of evidence, which along with the category, audience, and overview, are discussed below. In addition, hyperlinks are provided for each resource.

Note: If a hyperlink does not work when it is clicked, please copy and paste the hyperlink into your web browser to access the resource.

1. Ashley, D. M. (2016). It's about relationships: Creating positive school climates. *American Educator*, *39*(4), 13–16. **Retrieved from** **https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ108642.pdf**

Intervention: Positive Learning Collaborative

Category: Climate

Audience: Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This article, by the director of the Positive Learning Collaborative (PLC) established by the New York City Department of Education and the United Federation of Teachers, describes the author's work in empowering teachers to create positive school environments. The author advocates a multitiered system of support that explains to teachers how to use reflective and restorative practices that center on building student relationships. The model emphasizes the importance of understanding how student misbehavior is often an outgrowth of poverty and trauma.

The PLC provides schools with a method to build capacity and sustainability of their efforts to transform school climate by using the following elements:

- Create trainings for school leadership teams in behavior intervention systems and restorative practices (p. 14).

- Have visits from a PLC behavior specialist at least twice a month (p. 16).

- Develop a system to identify student behavior patterns that precipitate misbehaviors (p. 16).

The author concludes the article with brief examples of relationship-building practices, such as morning check-ins and identifying and responding to student needs.

⟨⟩ Strategies

- Build relationships (p. 14).
- Gather additional information (p. 16).
- Find out why behavior is happening (p. 16).
- Develop strategies for helping students (p. 16).
- Plan morning check-ins (p. 16).
- Determine the feelings and needs of each student (p. 16).

2. Banks, T., & Obiakor, F. E. (2015). Culturally responsive positive behavior supports: Considerations for practice. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, *3*(2), 83–90. Retrieved from http://www.redfame.com/journal/index.php/jets/article/viewFile/636/623

Intervention: Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports

Category: Climate and Culture

Audience: Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This paper describes an approach for strengthening Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (SW-PBIS) by integrating culturally responsive strategies into the existing model. This new model, Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (CRPBIS), is defined as "a system that specifically acknowledges the presence of [culturally and linguistically diverse] (CLD) students and the need for them to find relevant connections among themselves and with the behavioral goals and objectives that schools ask them to perform" (p. 83).

The SW-PBIS, designed to improve school safety and climate, includes having educators "develop a set of behavioral expectations" (p. 83), teach students how to meet those expectations, and acknowledge when those behaviors are being met.

Implementing CRPBIS provides schools with a system for addressing the discrepancy between the culturally bound expectations of the classroom and CLD students. Employing culturally responsive practices:

- Allows teachers to capitalize on the "knowledge, experiences, strengths, and learning styles" (p. 84) of CLD students and use them to enhance positive behavioral and academic outcomes;

- Recognizes students for who they are;

- Provides a cultural lens through which behavioral and learning norms/expectations can be viewed and established; and

- Creates an environment that appreciates and accepts cultural diversity (p. 84).

The authors also provide discussion topics for educators to examine and act on as they consider the impact of culturally responsive practices.

⟨⟩ Best Practices

- Provide in-service training on how to infuse culturally responsive strategies into an SW-PBIS (p. 83).

- Teach students the behavioral skills they need to be successful in their school environment (p. 84).

- Relate social skills instruction to the students' cultures (p. 85).

- Ensure that schoolwide behavioral supports are proactive and promote a positive culturally responsive climate conducive to the needs of all learners (p. 86).

- Enhance the cultural knowledge and cultural self-knowledge of staff (p. 85).

- Validate other cultures (p. 85).

3. Christofferson, R. D., & Callahan, K. (2015). Positive behavior support in schools (PBSIS): An administrative perspective on the implementation of a comprehensive school-wide intervention in an urban charter school. *Education Leadership Review of Doctoral Research*, *2*(2), 35–49. Retrieved from **https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1105721.pdf**

Intervention: Positive Behavior Support in Schools

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Moderate Evidence

Overview

This research study examined the impact that Positive Behavior Support in Schools (PBSIS) had on school climate and discipline in a New Jersey urban K–4 charter school.

The researchers used a mixed method research design that included data gathered from climate surveys administered to students, staff, and parents; a Schoolwide Evaluation Tool (SET) to assess fidelity of implementation; and office discipline referrals to identify the number of total office referrals and the number of out-of-school and in-school suspensions given.

The PBSIS model was implemented to provide school staff with a proactive schoolwide approach to address the school's discipline concerns that were interfering with classroom teaching and learning. The results of this study indicated that implementing PBSIS "had a positive and significant impact on improving student behaviors and school climate" (p. 35). Specific findings were that PBSIS implementation resulted in the following:

- A significant reduction in the number of office discipline referrals;

- A significant reduction in the in-school suspension rates;

- No significant difference on out-of-school suspensions; and

- An overall perception by students, staff, and parents that school climate had improved (p. 35).

Christofferson and Callahan conclude with a set of recommendations to help the school decrease the rate of out-of-school suspensions, sustain the fidelity of PBSIS implementation, and continue making gains in improving school climate and student behaviors.

⟨⟩ Recommendations

Administrators:

- Review the protocol and procedures for office discipline referrals;

- Provide professional development to staff to ensure that they understand school procedures;

- Examine office discipline referrals and discuss the underlying issues to identify patterns and trends;

- Develop, execute, and monitor the progress of a proactive plan for addressing those underlying issues;

- Provide ongoing professional development to teaching staff on positive interventions for disruptive behaviors;

- Identify teachers with the highest numbers of student discipline referrals and develop a data-based individual action plan to help them with classroom management;

- Identify students with the highest number of discipline referrals to find and address root causes of disruptive behavior; and

- Review office disciplinary referrals to see if there is a pattern regarding race, gender, and/or age (p. 46).

Teachers (whole class):

- Identify desired student behaviors;

- Teach desired behaviors to students through modeling;

- Set expectations for using desired behaviors; and

- Acknowledge and reward desired behaviors (p. 47).

Teachers (student level):

- Recognize recurring behavior problems in individual students prior to the infractions reaching the administrative level and create a student-specific Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) to address them;

- Enforce the BIP with fidelity and consistency;

- Monitor student progress in meeting the short- and long-term goals of the BIP; and

- Acknowledge and reinforce student progress in meeting his/her BIP goals (p. 47).

4. Epstein, M., Atkins, M., Cullinan, D., Kutash, K., & Weaver, R. (2008). *Reducing behavior problems in the elementary school classroom: A practice guide* (NCEE Report No. 2008-012). Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/behavior_pg_092308.pdf

Approach: Reducing Behavior Problems (IES Practice Guide)

Category: Climate

Audience: District Administrators, Principals, and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Level of evidence is not specified because this resource is a practice guide. Each practice outlined in the document is identified as meeting one of the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards as either strong or moderate.

Overview

This practice guide from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) is intended to help elementary staff, principals, and district administrators "develop and implement effective prevention and intervention strategies that promote positive student behavior" (p. 1). The guide provides five recommendations to reduce behavior problems and indicates the quality of the evidence that supports them (as evidenced by WWC standards). In addition, each recommendation contains a summary of the research supporting it, a how-to for implementation, and potential roadblocks and solutions for implementation. The five recommendations are below, with the quality of evidence in parentheses.

❮❯ Recommendations

- Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it (moderate) (p. 6).

- Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior (strong) (p. 6).

- Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate (strong) (p. 6).

- Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for continued guidance and support (moderate) (p. 6).

- Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions (moderate) (p. 7).

All recommendations will not work for all schools; recommendations must be differentiated based on school characteristics. Therefore, school leaders must assess and implement specific recommendations based on the needs of each school. The authors also provide a checklist for carrying out recommendations.

5. Hamedani, M. G., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2015, March). *Social emotional learning in high school: How three urban high schools engage, educate, and empower youth* **(Issue Brief). Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Retrieved from https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/scope-pub-social-emotional-learning-research-brief.pdf**

Approach: Social and Emotional Learning

Category: Climate and Culture

Audience: Teachers

Level of Evidence: Promising Evidence

Overview

This research brief describes the findings from the Social and Emotional Learning in Diverse High Schools study conducted by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. This study investigated how social and emotional learning (SEL) was effectively implemented at the high school level across three key areas of the school: school climate and culture, organizational features and structures, and school practices.

Hamedani and Darling-Hammond conducted their study in three small, urban high schools that all had (a) schoolwide social emotional learning and social justice education and (b) populations that were racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse (p. 2). Survey results found that students in schools that focused on SEL and social justice learning "reported more positive educational experiences; felt more connected to their schools; demonstrated higher levels of

psychological and emotional support, engagement, and empowerment; and were more socially engaged" (p. 7).

⟨⟩ Recommendations

The document includes seven recommendations for policymakers and practitioners that have emerged from the study data:

- Erase the cognitive/non-cognitive divide in education;

- Leverage a "whole child" perspective on student development;

- Engage systemic, whole-school change;

- Teach social emotional skills explicitly and ensure that they are reflected and reinforced by school practices;

- Include a social emotional perspective in curricular and assessment policies;

- Establish approaches to discipline through practices that preserve relationships, respect dignity, and provide psychological support; and

- Enable educators to become psychological, as well as academic, experts (p. 12).

Hamedani and Darling-Hammond conclude that integrating SEL into the school processes is an effective way of meeting students' "psychological, social, emotional, and academic needs" (p.13).

⟨⟩ Strategies

- Put social and emotional learning front and center (p. 7).

- Promote strong relationships and a respectful, caring, and cohesive community (p. 7).

- Consider the psychological needs of students alongside their academic needs (p. 7).

- Provide clear, explicit norms in multiple domains (e.g., relationships, classrooms, work groups) (p. 7).

- Support empathy, social responsibility, and action as hallmarks of being members of an interdependent community (p. 8).

- Integrate SEL and social justice learning into curriculum content and instructional processes (p. 8).

- Use collaborative, project-based learning as a vehicle for student application and practice of SEL (p. 10).

- Use performance-based assessments that provide students with the opportunity to be reflective, resilient, and responsible, and to develop a growth mindset (p. 10).

- Employ restorative disciplinary practices to help students preserve relationships, foster responsibility, and respect the dignity of others (p. 10).

- Use a variety of traditions, clubs, rituals, and activities to build community, honor students and their families, give students a voice, and promote a school culture of positive engagement (p. 10).

6. Hanover Research. (2017). *Best practices in evaluating and improving school climate***. Retrieved from https://www3.bucksiu.org/cms/lib/PA09000729/Centricity/Domain/70/Best%20Practices%20in%20Evaluating%20and%20Improving%20School%20Climate.pdf**

Approach: School Climate

Category: Climate and Culture

Audience: School Leaders

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

Hanover Research prepared this report for districts in California and throughout the nation to inform efforts to improve school climate. The authors organized their findings around three key areas—"Understanding School Climate," "Evaluating School Climate," and "Improving School Climate."

Section I, Understanding School Climate, includes several research-based definitions of school climate, as well as characteristics that describe what a positive school climate might look like in practice. This section also details how various organizations and researchers classify and characterize what they consider to be the essential dimensions of school climate.

Section II, Evaluating School Climate, begins with an overview of the various measures schools use to assess school climate and then focuses on the most commonly used measure: climate surveys. Effective assessment tools have the following characteristics: (a) a strong research base, (b) vigorous field-testing, (c) are administered to the core populations, (d) are easy to administer, and (e) meet the needs of the community (p. 15). This section also includes descriptions of three climate surveys recommended by researchers or research-based organizations: Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI), and California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CAL-SCHLS) System.

Section III, Improving School Climate, includes a set of "recommended standards to support school climate improvement efforts" (p. 24). These standards cover the following areas: (a) school vision and plan, (b) school policies, (c) school community practices, (d) welcoming and supportive school environment, and (e) promotion of social and civic responsibilities (pp. 24–25).

The authors also outline a recommended process to guide school climate improvement efforts, provide suggestions for using data in the improvement of school climate, and identify additional best practices for evaluating and improving school climate.

⟨⟩ Strategies

- Start with a mutually agreed-upon, locally relevant, and research-based definition of school climate before beginning efforts to measure and/or improve it (p. 3).

- Use research-based, field-tested surveys to assess school climate, as part of a multi-method evaluation framework (p. 4).

- Organize a school climate leadership team, led by a school climate coach, to (a) establish procedures for using school climate data to set, monitor, and adapt school climate goals and implementation strategies and (b) lead a multistage, comprehensive, schoolwide, cyclical school climate improvement process (p. 5).

- Foster positive school climate, and focus on prevention (p. 10).

- Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors (pp. 28–29).

- Ensure that discipline policies are fair and enforced equitably for all students (p. 29).

7. Klevan, S., & Villavicencio, A. (2016). *Strategies for improving school culture: Educator reflections on transforming the high school experience for Black and Latino young men* **(Research Report). Retrieved from https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/sg158/PDFs/esi_school_culture/Strategies_for_Improving_School_Culture.pdf**

Intervention: Expanded Success Initiative

Category: Culture

Audience: Teachers

Level of Evidence: Promising Evidence

Overview

This report by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools provides education stakeholders with strategies for developing a supportive school culture in schools that serve Black and Latino male students. This document focuses on the evaluation of New York City's Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), an effort to improve college and career readiness for Black and Latino male high school students. Four practices are presented, detailing the strategies found to be effective based on interviews, focus groups, and selected in-depth case studies across 40 ESI schools.

⟨⟩ Strategies

The strategies found to be effective with Black and Latino males include the following:

- Develop culturally relevant education, incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the classroom and making class discussions and work relevant to their lived experiences (p. iii).

- Adopt restorative approaches to discipline, developing peer mediation and conflict resolution programs and fostering a new mind-set about student discipline (p. iv).

- Promote strong in-school relationships, establishing mentoring programs and advisories (p. v).

- Provide early support for students' post-secondary goals, ensuring that students engage in communication about higher education and that they understand the application and financial aid processes, as well as provide academic support (p. vii).

8. Krasnoff, B. (2016). *Culturally responsive teaching: A guide to evidence-based practices for teaching all students equitably.* **Retrieved from**
http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/resources/culturally-responsive-teaching.pdf

Approach: Culturally Responsive Teaching

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This guide by Region X Equity Assistance Center at Education Northwest describes best practices in culturally responsive teaching for administrators, teachers, and other education stakeholders. The author presents practices for implementing culturally diverse instructional techniques from the district level to the classroom.

❰❱ Recommendations

To address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, the author recommends the following:

- Require teachers to be certified and to receive professional development;

- Increase teacher motivation to recognize diverse learners' strengths and needs;

- Decrease dependence on packaged instructional materials, and increase the use of strategies targeted to specific student groups' needs;

- Integrate the use of technology to bridge the generational divide; and

- Recruit and retain high-quality teachers for schools in rural and remote areas (p. 1).

⟨⟩ Strategies

The author also describes five actions that culturally responsive teachers consistently demonstrate:

- Hold high expectations for all students;
- Contribute to positive academic, attitudinal, and social outcomes for students;
- Use diverse resources;
- Contribute to the development of classrooms that value diversity; and
- Collaborate with colleagues, administrators, parents, and educational professionals to ensure student success (p. 3).

Lastly, Krasnoff asserts that the Teacher Expectations Student Achievement (TESA) Interaction Model is an effective tool to combat teacher's low expectations of students. TESA specifies 27 observable and measurable teacher behaviors that communicate high expectations, which are specified below:

- Welcome students by name as they enter the classroom (p. 4).
- Equitably use eye contact with high- and low-achieving students (p. 4).
- Equitably use proximity with high- and low-achieving students (p. 4).
- Use body language, gestures, and expressions to convey a message that all students' questions and opinions are important (p. 4).
- Arrange the classroom to accommodate discussion (p. 4).
- Ensure bulletin boards and instructional materials reflect students' racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (p. 4).
- Use a variety of visual aids and props to support learning (p. 5).
- Learn, use, and display some words in students' heritage language (p. 5).
- Model the use of graphic organizers (p. 5).
- Use class-building and team-building activities to promote peer support for academic achievement (p. 5).
- Use random response strategies (p. 5).
- Use cooperative learning structures (p. 5).
- Structure heterogeneous and cooperative groups for learning (p. 5).
- Use probing and clarifying techniques to assist students to answer (p. 5).
- Acknowledge all students' comments, responses, questions, and contributions (p. 5).
- Seek multiple perspectives (p. 6).
- Use multiple approaches to consistently monitor students' understanding (p. 6).

- Identify students' current knowledge before instruction (p. 6).

- Use students' real-life experiences to connect school learning to students' lives (p. 6).

- Use "wait time" (p. 7).

- Ask students for feedback on the effectiveness of instruction (p. 7).

- Provide students with the criteria and standards for successful task completion (p. 7).

- Give students effective, specific oral and written feedback that prompts improved performance (p. 7).

- Provide multiple opportunities to use effective feedback to revise and resubmit work for evaluation against the standard (p. 7).

- Explain and model positive self-talk (p. 7).

- Ask higher-order questions equitably of high- and low-achieving students (p. 7).

- Provide individual help to high- and low-achieving students (p. 7).

9. McKevitt, B. C., & Braaksma, A. D. (2008). Best practices in developing a positive behavior support system at the school level. In Thomas, A. E., & Grimes, J. E., *Best Practices in School Psychology V***, 735–747. Retrieved from https://thewatsoninstitute.org/nu_upload/files/PBIS%20Best%20Practices.pdf**

Approach: Positive Behavior Support System

Category: Climate and Culture

Audience: Principals and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This chapter, entitled "Best Practices in Developing a Positive Behavior Support System at the School Level" from *Best Practices in School Psychology V,* reviews the core features of schoolwide implementation of a positive behavior support system (PBS). Educational stakeholders can use this resource to promote the behavioral success of all students, which in turn can have a "profound impact on the climate, culture, and achievement of the school community" (p. 745).

The authors present school leaders with eight basic considerations for schoolwide implementation of PBS:

- Importance of teaming,

- Obtainment of staff buy-in,

- School policy,

- Staff development,

- Funding,

- Engagement of families and community members,

- Sustainability, and

- Role of the school psychologist (pp. 736–740).

⟨⟩ Strategies

The authors also detail seven best practice considerations for schoolwide implementation of PBS:

- Establish and define expectations (p. 740).

- Teach expectations to students (p. 740).

- Acknowledge students for demonstrating desired behavior (p. 741).

- Develop the consequence system (p. 742).

- Use data (p. 743).

- Establish targeted group interventions (p. 744).

- Establish intensive individual interventions (p. 744).

10. McMurrer, J. (2012). *Changing the school climate is the first step to reform in many schools with federal improvement grants* **(Research Report). Retrieved from** **https://www.cep-dc.org/cfcontent_file.cfm?Attachment=McMurrer%5FReport3%5FChangingtheSchoolClimate%5F071112%2Epdf**

Approach: Whole School Reform (School Improvement Grant)

Category: Climate and Culture

Audience: Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This research report addresses the importance of school climate in school reform initiatives by documenting the first-year-and-a-half experiences of six School Improvement Grant (SIG) recipients in Maryland, Michigan, and Idaho. McMurrer posits that school climate plays an important role in overall school success and that federal and state policymakers should consider school climate as part of the SIG grant evaluation process. A positive school climate includes creating and sustaining positive relationships among and between students and staff as well as providing supports that facilitate a productive learning environment.

Using case studies and interviews of state, district, and school officials from the 2010–2011 school year, McMurrer found that all six schools developed specific strategies to improve school climate, and that school administrators and staff agreed that improving school climate was their greatest success. The findings also indicated that a positive school environment fosters staff collaboration, student motivation, and student achievement.

❲❳ Strategies

- Create and sustain positive relationships with students and staff (p. 4).
- Provide supports that facilitate a productive learning environment (p. 4).
- Increase teacher collaboration (p. 14).
- Hold student-led conferences (p. 13).
- Employ positive behavior intervention strategies (p. 4).
- Create student grade-level communities and teams (p. 9).
- Have students set goals on benchmark assessments (p. 13).
- Provide incentives (p. 13).

11. Okonofuaa, J. A., Paunesku, D., & Walton, G. M. (2016). Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents. *PNAS*, *113*, 5221–5226. Retrieved from http://www.pnas.org/content/113/19/5221.full.pdf

Approach: Empathetic Mindset

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Strong Evidence

Overview

This article describes studies conducted by researchers at Stanford University in developing and testing an intervention to reduce suspensions by changing the attitudes of teachers who view discipline from a punitive mindset. The intervention consisted of one 45-minute online module and one 25-minute online module that teachers completed. In the modules, teachers read powerful stories and completed guided writing exercises designed to help them adopt an empathetic mindset about discipline. The intervention was evaluated at five middle schools in three districts, with 31 teachers, where student suspension rates dropped from 9.6% to 4.8% (p. 5221).

⟨⟩ Best Practices

The success of the intervention suggests that developing an empathetic mindset toward discipline can change the way teachers interact with students and reduce the number of suspensions. The following strategies were embedded in the intervention and can serve as a guide for similar efforts:

- Provide teachers with non-pejorative reasons for student misbehavior (p. 5223).
- Inform teachers how positive student-teacher relationships can facilitate growth (p. 5223).
- Discourage teachers from attaching labels (p. 5223).
- Emphasize the value of students' experiences (p. 5223).
- Encourage teachers to value students' negative feelings (p. 5223).
- Reinforce empathetic mindset principles with stories (p. 5223).

12. Osher, D., & Berg, J. (2018). *School climate and social and emotional learning: The integration of two approaches* **(Issue Brief). Retrieved from** https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/School-Climate-and-Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Integrative-Approach-January-2018.pdf

Approach: Social and Emotional Learning

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This issue brief from American Institutes for Research, in partnership with Pennsylvania State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one in a series of briefs to help administrators and teachers address the need for social and emotional learning (SEL) in elementary and secondary schools. The authors highlight the elements of school climate that support SEL and discuss the reinforcing relationship between a positive school climate and improved SEL. Research has found that "supportive relationships, engagement, safety, cultural competence and responsiveness, and academic challenge and high expectations can help build social and emotional competence" (p. 5). Each of these elements is briefly discussed followed by action steps to help educators understand student behavior, motivation, and learning.

Osher and Berg posit that the mutually reinforcing relationship between school climate and SEL influences teacher-student interactions and behaviors. Finally, the authors discuss a variety of school climate, SEL, and blended approaches and their effect on creating positive school climates and social and emotional competencies among students and adults.

This brief concludes with the following conclusion and recommendations:

- There is an inextricable link between school climate and SEL. Attention to school climate is necessary for knowledge building and promotion of SEL in students and adults, just as attention to SEL is necessary for knowledge building and improvement of school climate.

- Although attending to all components of school climate may be useful to build healthy schools, attention to those components most proximal to building students' social, emotional, and cognitive competence may most efficiently drive and reinforce changes in students and adults (p. 12).

❮❯ Strategies

- Build supportive, respectful, trusting relationships between adults and students (p. 5).

- Promote positive adult-student interactions (p. 6).

- Create a safe school environment (p. 8).

- Develop a sense of belonging or connection between adults and students (p. 5).

- Develop teacher cultural competence and responsiveness (pp. 5–6).

- Have high expectations for students (pp. 5–6).

- Have anti-harassment policies (p. 8).

- Provide safe spaces (p. 8).

- Enlist family and community members for support (p. 9).

- Include character and moral education, civic education, and risk/mental health education (p. 8).

- Implement School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (pp. 9–10).

- Implement universal trauma-sensitive interventions (p. 9).

- Create structured and cooperative learning environments (p. 9).

13. Public Counsel. (n.d.). *Fix school discipline: How we can fix school discipline for educators.* **Retrieved from https://view.joomag.com/fix-school-discipline-toolkit-for-educators/0264187001429224353?short**

Approach: Whole School Reform

Category: Climate

Audience: District Administrators, Principals, and Teachers

Level of Evidence: Demonstrates a Rationale

Overview

This toolkit from Public Counsel outlines evidence-based practices that principals, teachers, and other education stakeholders can use to implement schoolwide alternatives to traditional discipline strategies. Although this toolkit was developed for California schools, the resources are adaptable. The toolkit provides a holistic approach to improving school climate and culture by highlighting the cooperative relationship among schools, communities, and mental health services. Schoolwide solutions such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, restorative justice and restorative practices, and social emotional learning are combined with other strategies (e.g., trauma sensitive strategies, racial bias and discrimination, and school-to-prison pipeline) to stop behaviors that precipitate out-of-school suspensions.

The schoolwide alternative strategies and systems that affect student success—both behaviorally and socially/emotionally—are listed below.

⟨⟩ **Strategies**

- Schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (p. 13),

- Restorative justice and restorative practices (schoolwide) (p. 29),

- Social emotional learning (schoolwide) (p. 48),

- Good behavior game (p. 54),

- Trauma-sensitive strategies (p. 57),

- Prevention of racial bias and discrimination (p. 61),

- Prevention of the school-to-prison pipeline (p. 64),

- Implementing school discipline reform in schools and districts (p. 67),

- Getting the message out (p. 83), and

- Systems for implementation and monitoring (p. 86).

14. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/connectedness.pdf

Approach: School Connectedness

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals, Teachers, Support Staff, Parents, and Stakeholders

Level of Evidence: Level of evidence is not applicable because this is a review of the salient practices and/or strategies published by the U.S. Department Health and Human Services.

Overview

This publication by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies school connectedness as an important protective factor in impacting student outcomes. School connectedness is second in importance to family connectedness as a protective factor against emotional distress, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempts.

❮❯ **Strategies**

To address students' sense of school connectedness, the authors recommend six strategies for administrators and teachers:

- Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment (p. 10).

- Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life (p. 11).

- Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school (p. 12).

- Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment (p. 13).

- Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents (p. 14).

- Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities (p. 15).

For each of the six strategies, action steps are provided for teachers. This CDC publication also highlights four factors that increase school connectedness: (a) adult support, providing students with academic and emotional support; (b) belonging to a positive peer group, creating positive perceptions of school; (c) commitment to education, where students believe in the value of education and that adults are invested in them; and (d) school environment, where the physical and psychosocial environment positively affects student connectedness (pp. 5–7).

15. U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding principles: A resource guide for improving school climate and discipline.* **Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf**

Approach: Guiding Principles for School Climate and Discipline

Category: Climate

Audience: Principals, Teachers, and Stakeholders

Level of Evidence: Level of Evidence is not applicable because this is a review of the salient practices and/or strategies published by the U.S. Department of Education.

Overview

This resource guide was created by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to help educators develop school climate and school discipline policies and practices that are grounded in promising practices or current research and tailored to local needs and contexts. The non-regulatory guidance document is centered around three guiding principles for improving school climate and discipline. The three guiding principles detailed in this document are as follows:

- Create positive climates and focus on prevention;
- Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors; and
- Ensure fairness, equity, and continuous improvement (pp. ii–iii).

The document is structured with a section devoted to each of the guiding principles. Each section provides a listing of action steps for school staff and other stakeholders to implement.

⟨⟩ Strategies

The action steps for implementing Guiding Principle 1: Create Positive Climates and Focus on Prevention are as follows:

- Engage in deliberate efforts to create positive school climates (p. 5).
- Prioritize the use of evidence-based prevention strategies, such as tiered supports (p. 6).
- Promote social and emotional learning (p. 7).
- Provide regular training and supports to all school personnel (p. 7).
- Collaborate with local agencies and other stakeholders (p. 8).
- Ensure that any school-based law enforcement officers' roles focus on improving school safety and reducing inappropriate referrals to law enforcement (p. 9).

The action steps for implementing Guiding Principle 2: Develop Clear, Appropriate, and Consistent Expectations and Consequences to Address Disruptive Student Behaviors are as follows:

- Set high expectations for behavior, and adopt an instructional approach to discipline (p. 12).

- Involve families, students, and school personnel, and communicate regularly and clearly (p. 12).

- Ensure that clear, developmentally appropriate, and proportional consequences apply for misbehavior (p. 13).

- Create policies that include appropriate procedures for students with disabilities and due process for all students (p. 14).

- Remove students from the classroom only as a last resort, ensure that alternative settings provide academic instruction, and return students to class as soon as possible (p. 14).

The action steps for implementing Guiding Principle 3: Ensure Fairness, Equity and Continuous Improvement are as follows:

- Train all school staff to apply school discipline policies and practices in a fair and equitable manner so as not to disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, or at-risk students (p. 16).

- Use proactive, data-driven, and continuous efforts, including gathering feedback from families, students, teachers, and school personnel to prevent, identify, reduce, and eliminate discriminatory discipline and unintended consequences (p. 17).

Conclusion

To further assist with improving school climate and discipline, this paper concludes with a list of additional resources for each principle, some with hyperlinks, and a hyperlinked listing of all the federal guidance and resources that were referenced in the document.

As SEAs move forward with ESSA implementation and school improvement efforts, a number of them are exploring ways to improve school climate, culture, and ultimately student learning. In response to a request from an SEA client, the SECC IR team reviewed 15 resources that discuss interventions and approaches that may be helpful in improving school climate and culture. These interventions and approaches include Culturally Responsive Teaching, Empathetic Mindset, Positive Behavior Support System, School Connectedness, Social and Emotional Learning, and Whole School Reform, among others.

The ESSA level of evidence for the interventions and approaches that are discussed in this IR varied with the majority (eight) aligning with the criteria for demonstrates a rationale, one having strong evidence (Empathetic Mindset, p. 17), one having moderate evidence (Positive Behavior Support in Schools, p. 7), and two having promising evidence (Social and Emotional Learning, p. 9, and Expanded Success Initiative, p. 12). Also, the best practices, strategies, and recommendations that are listed for the specified interventions and approaches should be examined closely with respect to the school context, resources required, staff capacity, and other factors that may affect successful implementation.

As decision-makers review the information provided for the above interventions and approaches, they should bear in mind the ED guidance (2016) regarding the four levels of evidence, (see pp. 8–9 for descriptions of the criteria) and the steps for strengthening the effectiveness of education investments (refer to pp. 3–6):

Step 1: Identify local needs
Step 2: Select relevant, evidence-based interventions
Step 3: Plan for implementation
Step 4: Implement
Step 5: Examine and reflect

Using a multistep approach such as the one outlined by ED may be beneficial for promoting continuous improvement and achieving better outcomes for students and schools.

References

Note: The citations for the 15 reviewed documents are listed in the Resource Summaries section.

Clifford, M., Menon, R., Gangi, T., Condon, C., & Hornung, K. (2012, April). *Measuring school climate for gauging principal performance: A review of the validity and reliability of publicly accessible measures* (A Quality School Leadership Issue Brief No. 1849). American Institutes for Research (AIR). Retrieved from http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/school_climate2_0.pdf

Deal, T. E., & Peterson, K. D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: The heart of leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

U.S. Department of Education. (2016, September). *Non-regulatory guidance: Using evidence to strengthen education investments.* Retrieved from https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/guidanceuseseinvestment.pdf

Information Requests are customized reports that are prepared to fulfill requests for information by the departments of education of the states served by SECC (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina). The requests address topics on current education issues related to the requirements and implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). For additional information, visit the SECC website at southeast-cc.org.

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