

Creating Conditions for Student Success:

A Policymakers' School Climate Playbook

January 2021

INTRODUCTION

Americans have never been more aware of the crucial role schools play in fostering safety, connectedness, and healthy conditions for students' learning and development. As schools seek to recover from pandemic-related disruptions, an intentional focus on school climate is essential to support student success. While an individual school's climate happens at a very local level—in local communities and in the relationships between students, staff, and families—there is much state leaders can and must do to make positive school climate a policy priority and a reality for each and every student.



What is School Climate?

School climate describes the quality and character of school life and the experiences of students, teachers, and other staff within a physical school or online learning environment. A positive and healthy school climate enables learning by providing students with healthy adult-student relationships, rigorous expectations for learning, and conditions of mental and emotional safety and belonging among students and staff—all of which are essential to student success.



Why Does School Climate Matter?

Research shows that students master academic content most effectively when they experience trusting and affirming relationships and feel emotionally and physically safe so they can focus on learning. Just as important, schools teach by example what it means to be part of a community, imparting vital lessons on getting along with others, being part of a team, and building a strong work ethic. All of this—academic learning, life skills, and character development—is impacted directly and profoundly by school climate.



Why is School Climate Important for State Leaders and Why Now?

State leaders, including Governors, legislators, state board of education members, state education chiefs and their staff are uniquely positioned to promote a healthy school climate. State leaders—in collaboration with stakeholders—have the opportunity to re-define a state-wide vision for school success that includes policies and incentives to support districts and schools to establish a healthy school climate that both enables learning and a sense of security for all students. There is a clear equity imperative: school climate affects how much students learn and whether they are prepared for the challenges of college, work, and life; committing to every student experiencing a positive and healthy school climate increases equity for students of color and students from low-income families. Importantly, focusing on school climate represents an opportunity for a paradigm shift; from a system and policy frame that measures students, to one that measures systems, and holds systems and system-leaders accountable to students and their families.

State policymakers, practitioners, community leaders, students, and families have made great strides in defining and promoting positive school climates over the past decade. With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 and its requirement to include at least one indicator of school quality or student success in school accountability systems, some state leaders are considering the role of school climate as a strategy to improve education for students and their families. COVID-19 and related concerns raised over child well-being have further accelerated those discussions.

The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program and ExcelinEd have partnered to create *Creating Conditions for Student Success: A Policymakers' School Climate Playbook*.

This guide features 12 recommendations linked to existing state policy examples policymakers can use to build a comprehensive, coherent state-wide approach for improving school climate and student success. Visit <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/creating-conditions-for-student-success-a-policymakers-school-climate-playbook/> for an additional suite of resources to support policymakers to lead on this issue, including a Letter of Support for State Leadership on School Climate signed by leading education organizations, information about using federal relief funding for school climate, a school climate policy checklist, and a school climate infographic.

SCHOOL CLIMATE IN STATE POLICY

The relationship between school climate—or how people experience school—and student success is *well-known*, and **school climate-related policies** already exist in every state, including:

- SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
- HEALTH SUPPORTS & COORDINATION OF SERVICES
- SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING
- FAMILY, STUDENT & COMMUNITY VOICE & ENGAGEMENT
- TEACHER & ADMINISTRATION PREPARATION, TRAINING, SUPPORT AND EVALUATION
- TEACHER RETENTION
- CURRICULA & INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS
- DATA SYSTEMS
- ACCOUNTABILITY
- STUDENT DISCIPLINE & BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT
- SCHOOL SECURITY, PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE & PROTECTION MEASURES

Policies are often piecemeal, however, and lack a comprehensive approach for improving school climate and the student experience in a way that facilitates collaboration and builds on a multi-tiered system of support.

Existing policies do, however, serve as a foundation upon which a more comprehensive school climate policy focus can be built.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<p>School Climate</p>	<p>Refers to what members of the school community experience—whether in or outside of a classroom—including interpersonal relationships, teacher and other staff practices, and organizational arrangements. Sometimes referred to as the “learning environment,” climate includes psychological, emotional and physical safety, relationships, teaching and learning, sense of belonging, and institutional environment. (AIR, US Department of Education)</p>
<p>School Culture</p>	<p>While school climate is what the members of a school community experience, school culture is a deeper layer of the set of beliefs, values, and assumptions shared by members of that community who influence the way they work together. This includes rituals, compacts, commitments and norms that school stakeholders make as members of a community (ASCD)</p>
<p>Conditions for Learning</p>	<p>Conditions that help create a conducive learning environment and positively affect attendance, motivation, engagement, achievement and student well-being, as well as boost teacher satisfaction, attendance and retention. Conditions include: physical and emotional health and safety, belonging, connectedness and support, identity development, academic challenge and engagement, and adult and student social and emotional competence. Conditions for learning collectively make up school climate. (AIR, 2008; AIR and Attendanceworks, 2019)</p>
<p>Learning Environment</p>	<p>Anywhere that students experience learning. Classroom and other settings (hallways, cafeterias, buses, playgrounds and other shared spaces) where management/structure and practices support and enable social, emotional and academic development and contribute to students’ sense of emotional and physical safety, and belonging</p>
<p>School Safety</p>	<p>Schools and school-related activities where students are safe from physical and psychological harm including violence, bullying, harassment, discrimination and substance use</p>
<p>Opportunity to Learn</p>	<p>A way of measuring and reporting whether students and educators have access to the different inputs that research shows make up quality schools, such as tracking which schools provide advanced coursework and extracurricular opportunities to which students. (UCLA)</p>
<p>Culturally Responsive Education</p>	<p>An approach to education that calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings. Culturally responsive education centers students’ voices, life experiences, home language, and assets in all elements of education, including academic content and social and emotional development. (Ladson-Billings, Hammond)</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS SNAPSHOT



DEFINE SCHOOL CLIMATE

1. Establish a statewide definition of school climate. Integrate factors that affect school climate into definitions of related issues and policy to foster coherence.



MEASURE SCHOOL CLIMATE

2. Prioritize and improve measures of school climate and conditions for learning.
3. Engage stakeholders, including students and families, as valued partners.
4. Partner with youth-development organizations.



IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

5. Integrate measures of school climate into evaluations of school quality and include school climate data in school improvement plan.
6. Invest in developing the knowledge and skills of school personnel to improve school climate.
7. Dedicate resources and student support personnel to helping build a healthy school climate.
8. Make information about school climate publicly available.
9. Use school climate data to ensure that schools and systems take responsibility for improving climate and the student experience.
10. Connect student discipline policies and practices to improve school climate.
11. Identify and promote best practices for improving and maintaining a positive school climate.



ESTABLISH AND ENABLE A RESEARCH AND LEARNING AGENDA

12. Seek continuous feedback and improvement on efforts to measure and improve school climate.

A STATE POLICY APPROACH TO BUILDING SCHOOL CLIMATE



DEFINE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Recommendation 1: Establish a statewide definition of school climate and integrate factors that affect school climate into definitions of related issues

Establishing a Statewide Definition of School Climate

State policy sets essential expectations for schools; adopting a definition of school climate is an important first step in ensuring every student has a healthy, supportive environment for learning.

Several states have created their own definitions, highlighting areas of priority, which may include respectful relationships, a sense of physical and psychological safety (including the absence of bullying and discrimination), or a welcoming environment. The definition established by the state, in partnership with a diverse representative body of stakeholders, communicates the goals and objectives set by the state and the outcomes it expects to see from schools and state education agencies (SEAs).

Establishing a consistent definition of school climate is also essential infrastructure for understanding and improving it. A national survey of building and district leaders and school climate coordinators revealed that while 95% reported they believed school climate to be “important” or “very important,” over 75% reported that they needed clarity about what school climate and effective school climate improvement means, as well as guidelines about policy reform, measurement, practical school-based improvement benchmarks and professional development opportunities ([Cohen, 2017](#)). This need for greater clarity creates an opportunity and a responsibility for state leadership in creating definitions of school climate that are specific enough to be measured

but broad enough to enable local leadership to make decisions on additional dimensions of climate as well as the “how” of improving school climate. Most state-level definitions were provided by SEAs, however, developing a definition and overarching state strategy should ideally engage governors and legislators, state boards, and other stakeholders who have a role in ensuring students experience a healthy and positive school climate.

SEAs in **Georgia, Illinois, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Kentucky,** and **Vermont** publish the definition provided by the National School Climate Center which reads: “the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices and organizational structures.” The Georgia Department of Education augments the definition by noting that a “positive school climate supports people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe. In a positive school climate people are engaged and respected. By contrast, disruptive and aggressive behavior such as threats, bullying, teasing and harassment creates a hostile school environment that interferes with academic performance.” ([KY](#), [ND](#), [VT](#), [PA](#), [IL](#))



- **Connecticut** provides a definition of school climate in statute, describing it as the quality and character of school life with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community between and among students and adults as they relate to bullying. Local safe school climate plans are in turn required to address the existence of bullying and teen dating violence in its schools, specifically. ([CT](#))



- In **Ohio's** School Climate Guidelines, created by the State Board of Education and the Ohio Department of Education, school climate is described as how schools create an environment where every student feels welcomed, respected and motivated to learn. ([OH](#))



- Some states may also use related terms, such as conditions for learning. The **Iowa** Department of Education, for example, defines conditions for learning in its ESSA plan as having three domains: (1) safety, including the extent to which students are safe from physical harm while on school property, as well as safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion, (2) engagement, as it relates to the extent to which students and adults demonstrate respect for each other's differences, the extent to which students demonstrate care for, respect for, and collaborate with one another, and the extent to which adults demonstrate caring and respect for students and acknowledge students' work, and (3) environment, measured by the extent to which clear rules are delineated and enforced. ([IA](#))

Connecting, Refining or Expanding Related Definitions and Roles

Many related concepts that are already on the books—definitions of things like student engagement, school safety and the principal role—can be updated to be more inclusive of the research on school climate.

Student Engagement

Students must be engaged in the learning process in order to achieve academic success and feel a sense of connection to and agency in their school. Yet engagement levels tend to fall as students progress through school, hitting their lowest point in high school ([Gallup, 2009](#)). On average, research finds half of K-12 students are disengaged in school and are more likely to perform poorly academically, be chronically absent and drop-out of school. In fact, surveys indicate that students who drop out cite a lack of engagement as their primary reason for leaving school. ([Bridgeland, Dijulio, Morison, 2006](#))

Defining student engagement in state policy and highlighting the multiple avenues with which it can be measured and fostered can help schools and districts focus improvement efforts on conditions of learning that foster engagement. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the definition of student engagement requires expansion, with 67% of students receiving distance learning in the Fall 2020 school year—requiring creative new ways to engage students through a computer screen. ([REL, 2011](#)) (KidsCount) ([Aspen Institute](#))



- The **Tennessee** Department of Education states that “for students to feel supported and motivated to achieve, they must feel valued and supported in their relationships with other students, teachers, and school leaders, feel a sense of connection to school, and be meaningfully engaged in the school community.” Five components of school engagement are provided, including: (1) Supportive Peer Relationships, (2) Supportive Relationships with Teachers, (3) Supportive Relationships with School Leadership, (4) Parental Involvement, and (5) School Connections and Learning Supports. ([TN Department of Education](#))

School Safety

The Department of Homeland Security connects school safety to school climate because of research showing that “a positive school climate can lead to a significant decrease in the likelihood of crime, aggression, and violent behavior.” ([Schoolsafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov)) Traditional definitions of school safety primarily focused on protecting the physical well-being of students and staff, but more recent iterations

also include the protection of student psychological or emotional safety and mental health. It’s particularly important to define and measure students’ perception of safety, as research suggests that the school safety dimension of school climate has the strongest relationship with student achievement. ([Kraft, 2017](#))



- Similarly, the recommendations produced by the School Safety Task Force created through governor’s Executive Order in 2018 **Nevada** include making significant investments in school-based mental health professionals and services, integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into the fabric of all Nevada schools, and requiring a statewide framework for, and encourage the use of, restorative practices in schools as an alternative to out-of-school consequences for behavioral infractions. ([NV](#))



- The **Tennessee** Department of Education provides a comprehensive definition of school safety that includes four components: (1) Physical safety, (2) Freedom from Substance Abuse, (3) Freedom from Bullying and (4) Acceptance of Differences. ([TN Department of Education](#))

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Whole-Child

Social-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions ([CASEL](#)). School climate is integrally related to SEL and attending to the needs of the whole child. School climate reflects the social-emotional skills demonstrated by adults

and students in a school and enables healthy SEL. Likewise, whole-child approaches inevitably focus on some of the foundational elements of school climate, such as positive developmental relationships and students’ experience of safety. These initiatives sometimes use different terms and are situated in different offices within a school system; policy can make the connections explicit and encourage coherence in improvement efforts.



- The **New Jersey** Department of Education fosters coherence between SEL and school climate by providing a resource guide detailing how SEL and school climate and culture are connected and providing strategies and tools to foster greater connection. ([NJ](#))

Culturally Responsive Education

Drawing from students’ identities and cultures to inform teaching and learning is not new. In response to 2020 protests and an increased recognition that education is not meeting the needs of Black and Brown students in particular, however, more states are passing legislation

and resolutions related to culturally responsive pedagogy or education and reviewing existing practices and instructional materials to center the knowledge, language, cultural background and experience of students of color. State education leaders must be intentional in

ensuring that CRE is not just about diversifying textbooks, but is about ensuring students from historically under-represented groups experience a sense of belonging in the academic community. One way to do so is to disaggregate climate survey data to understand if students of different genders, races, cultures, etc are having different experiences in school.

Systems can have a common set of questions to assess student experience, and states can support a tailored school-level approach to responding to student

experience. For example, The PERTS Copilot/Elevate assessment includes a measure of “Affirming Cultural Identity,” and it includes these 3 items:

- In this class, I feel proud of who I am and my background.
- In this class, I’ve learned new things about my culture and/or community.
- In this class, I have the chance to learn about the culture of others.

True cultural responsiveness, however, has to come in an appropriate response to the data.



- To respond to an equity lawsuit and to help foster coherence between culturally responsive education and school climate, the **New Mexico** Public Education Department (NMPED) requires every local education agency to form an Equity Council. With the support of the Equity Councils, each New Mexico school was required to submit, by June 2020, a culturally and linguistically responsive education framework that is sustainable and student-and-family centered. Feedback from climate surveys are mentioned as a possible tool to identify equity challenges and solutions, including the allocation of resources, professional learning, staffing and curriculum development. The NMPED indicates its plans to formalize the requirement that districts create an Equity Council in New Mexico Administrative Code (NMAC). ([NM](#), [NM2](#))

School Leadership/Principal Roles and Responsibilities

State policy defines the role of school leadership and sets baseline expectations for school principals. Because research suggests that “principals influence school achievement primarily through changes in the

school climate,” it is important to cross-reference the state’s definition for school climate wherever the state defines a principal’s responsibilities to forge coherence. ([UChicago, 2018](#))



- In its Transforming School Leadership policy, **West Virginia** describes school climate and culture observed in high quality schools as reflecting strong leadership that develops shared beliefs and values among the staff, high expectations for all, and a safe, orderly and engaging environment. ([WV](#))



- In **New Mexico’s** Administrator licensure competencies and indicators in state law, school leaders are expected to maintain a positive school culture by promoting the success of all students including students with disabilities and students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and ensuring a successful instructional program that applies best practice to student learning that capitalizes on multiple aspects of diversity to meet the learning needs of all students, as well as design comprehensive professional growth plans for staff. ([NM](#))



- Similarly, **Colorado’s** Standards for School Leadership requires that principals demonstrate inclusive leadership practices that foster a positive school culture and promote safety and equity for all students, staff, and community by creating an orderly and supportive environment that fosters relationships and a sense of safety and well-being, and meets the needs of all students and promotes the preparation of students to live productively and contribute to the diverse cultural contexts of a global society as well as to family and community engagement and support. ([CO](#))



MEASURE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Recommendation 2: Prioritize and improve measures of climate and conditions for learning

Measurement is the lifeblood of improvement. States can exercise important leadership in ensuring that schools and systems have accurate and reliable school climate data by providing guidance on measurement tool selection, requiring collection and reporting from every school, data analyses, and utilizing findings to inform school improvements. A school's climate is impacted by many factors, requiring multiple measures to provide a complete picture and to ensure reliability and validity. Multiple measures allow for more complete analyses, with

disaggregated data to capture differences in how different groups experience the learning environment. Doing so can help schools shine a light on disparities and inequities rather than obscure them in averages or ambiguous data. IClimate surveys across California's CORE districts reveal that Black female students experience the lowest sense of belonging among all groups, which is negatively associated with academic and behavioral outcomes. ([Mindset Scholars Network](#)). Only disaggregated data can illuminate these disparities so they can be addressed. ([Future Ed](#))

Climate Surveys

A majority of states and LEAs who seek to capture the status of school climate do so by surveying students, teachers and parents to capture their attitudes about the school environment. Surveys are typically administered in the latter elementary years up through high school. Parents and teachers responses are typically collected across all grades.

There are many school climate surveys available, so there is an important role for states in assuring quality, fitness for purpose, and good value in procuring these tools. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) offers an [open-source, research-based school climate survey](#) commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education that is available for use free of charge; there is an online portal that enables local administration and data collection (but does not collect the data), and the survey can be customized and adapted by end-users to reflect local priorities and terms. Utilizing this survey does not give the federal government access to any student data, ensuring protections of student privacy. In addition, there are many other products available on the market, many of which are described in this [tools index](#) from NCSSLE, which describes for each tool the grade levels it covers, the constructs that are measured, and how long it takes to complete/administer.

It's important to select or create a survey that captures information that aligns with state or local school climate goals. Some states utilize surveys focused on teaching and learning conditions while others include more questions related to school safety. States can vet and procure [measurement tools](#) for LEAs and schools, and also make it easier for schools to access formative classroom-level tools for teachers (but these data should not be aggregated or publicly reported). ([PERTS Co-Pilot](#))

It's a best practice in education initiatives, including but not limited to surveying students, to communicate with students why surveys matter and how data will be used. While student surveys will be most effective when co-created, studied, and implemented in partnership with students, communicating clearly how and why survey results will be used is a critical step to ensure student buy-in, which ultimately makes results more effective. ([Student Voice](#))



Illinois requires a survey be administered in all schools statewide and allows for five questions to be added to the state survey as a way for local administrators to ensure results reflect challenges faced by the local community. The Partnership for Educator Preparation in Illinois has also sought data from the survey when looking at how supportive schools are for educators including effective leadership, involvement in decision making, quality of professional learning/development, time for collaboration, and more. See more on Illinois' experience in the highlight box on page 15. ([IL](#))



Rhode Island regulations require districts to ensure schools promote a positive climate with emphasis on mutual respect, self-control, good attendance, order and organization, and proper security. ([RI Regs](#)) To evaluate school culture and climate, the state administers its SurveyWorks climate survey annually to students in grades 3-12, teachers and families. Findings are included in the state's new publicly available School and District Report Card Platform although it is not included in the state's formal accountability system. ([RI](#)) In its ESSA addendum due to Covid-19, Rhode Island permits schools to use participation rates and/or other possible measures based on SurveyWorks to replace its Student Chronic Absenteeism, Teacher Chronic Absenteeism, and/or Suspension accountability measures that were suspended for the 2020-2021 school year.



The **California** Department of Education administers its California Healthy Kids, Staff, and Parent surveys biannually. Participating students are in grades 7 and 9 and staff members are from K-12 classrooms. The content of the three surveys is aligned so that responses on common questions and summary measures can be compared across students, staff, and parents and data is disaggregated. For the 2020-2021 school year, California also expanded its survey to help districts better understand the impacts of COVID-19 and how best to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs. ([CA](#))

Additionally, in a consortium of districts in California, known as the **CORE (California Office to Reform Education) districts**, students in grades 5-12; teachers and staff; and caregivers participate in surveys that assess Teaching and Learning, Interpersonal Relationships, Safety, and School & Community Engagement. ([CORE](#))



New Mexico's Opportunity to Learn (OtL) Survey focuses specifically on student's classroom experiences in grades 3-12 in order to determine if teachers are using good learning practices and to evaluate school safety, culture and responsiveness to community needs, as well as student attendance. Parent Surveys are collected for children in grades K-12. Scores are incorporated in the state's accountability system. ([NM](#))



North Dakota is utilizing student engagement as an indicator of school quality and student success under ESSA measuring via a student engagement survey that measures cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement. The survey also measures whether students are committed, compliant or disengaged in their approach to classwork. Committed means the student values the work and makes it a priority to complete it as well as he or she can. Compliant means the student devotes only as much time, energy and resources that are needed to finish the work. Disengaged means the student is uninterested in the work, and either refuses to do it or responds to urgings by doing only the bare minimum. ([ND](#))

It is important to ensure that surveys are culturally relevant. The non-profit organization, Village of Wisdom (VOW), working to eliminate racial injustice in schools, offers schools and districts access to a Culturally Affirming Climate Survey. The purpose of the survey is to "extract the racialized experiences of youth of color in school to highlight opportunities to mitigate issues of racial bias and discrimination" in addition to measuring student well-being, belonging, and engagement more broadly.

An evaluation to assess the measure's validity found that all six elements of the framework were correlated to either student attendance or disciplinary data and that three of the 7 were each correlated to some metric of academic performance (i.e., GPA or End of Course Test performance). Like VOW, states can partner with local higher education institutions, especially HBCUs and tribal colleagues, as well as community partners and students to vet and inform climate surveys for cultural relevance. ([AECF](#))

Illinois Case Study

Illinois has a long history of using school climate data to improve education. After enacting a bipartisan law in 2011 requiring every school to measure school climate annually, the Illinois State Board of Education selected the 5 Essentials survey (5Es), a product of unique collaboration between the University of Chicago and Chicago Public Schools over 20 years. The 5Es is a statewide endeavor that builds on and extends a journey of implementation, study, further refinement—and policy support—that continues today. Data from the 5Es is now woven into the fabric of school improvement in Illinois, centering the lived experiences of students, staff, and families in these important efforts.

The 5Es embodies seminal research about the specific, measurable aspects of school climate that predict student achievement and other important outcomes, like attendance, graduation, and college-going. The survey covers five domains:

- (1) Effective Leaders
- (2) Collaborative Teachers
- (3) Involved Families
- (4) Supportive Environment
- (5) Ambitious Instruction.

Schools that demonstrate strength on at least three of these measures are ten times more likely than other schools to improve test scores, and schools where students report healthy learning environments also [have better attendance and fewer discipline problems](#)—and better long-term outcomes. Indeed, principals primarily improve student outcomes by improving school climate, according to recent research on the 5Es; if school climate does not improve, nothing else principals do makes [much of a positive difference](#).

Illinois has taken a steady approach to embedding the 5Es in school improvement efforts. Initially, every school was required to field the survey every other year, then every year; then additional grades were added to include elementary students; then disaggregated survey data were added to school report cards (local school systems can propose an alternate survey,

but most stick with the 5Es). In 2017, Illinois added participation rates on school climate surveys to include school accountability data under ESSA. This is important for two reasons: (1) it emphasizes policymakers' belief that schools need feedback directly from students and staff and, (2) by focusing on participation rates and not the ratings given, this policy minimizes pressure to "game" survey responses to make schools look better. The policy is aimed at schools and communities having the necessary data for improvement.

One remarkable aspect of requiring school climate surveys in Illinois is the breadth and endurance of support, across teachers' unions and education reformers, Republican and Democratic administrations, and across the regional diversity of Illinois' 846 school districts, from urban, suburban, and rural downstate systems. According to Audrey Soglin, executive director of the Illinois Education Association, the 5Es "creates shared language around school quality, moving the conversation beyond test scores to the actual work of getting better," a sentiment that is echoed by other stakeholders.

The 5Es improvement journey is ongoing. The state department of education offers a regular menu of professional development activities, and will be fielded in Spring 2021, providing crucial data on the experiences of students, teachers, and families during the covid-19 pandemic.

According to Carmen Ayala, Illinois State Superintendent of Education, "the 5 Essentials Survey is a crucial tool for helping each school evaluate strengths and opportunities for growth. Remote learning and the pandemic have obviously had a major impact on how students, families, and educators experience their school and what they need going forward to be successful. We need this survey information now more than ever to help steer each school's recovery from the disruptions of 2020 and inform the transition back to in-person instruction. Thankfully, the 5 Essentials Survey is already administered online, so we're prepared for a remote administration."

Chronic Absenteeism

Students cannot learn if they are not in school, and those who become chronically absent typically have lower levels of academic achievement, higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and are generally less engaged than their peers who attend school regularly. ([UChicago](#))

Chronic absenteeism and school climate are interrelated; a negative school climate may deter students from attending school while schools with low attendance rates struggle to build the kind of school community that fosters a positive school climate. ([Van Eck et. al](#)) Chronic absence data can be a helpful early warning indicator to identify schools where students may not be experiencing a positive school

climate. All states are required under ESSA to collect and report data on chronic absenteeism, usually defined as a student missing 10% or more school days, and close to three-quarters of them include it in their accountability systems. ([Learning Policy Institute](#))

Attendance is one of the many components of school accountability that has been significantly affected by the pandemic, as over 60% of K-12 students have shifted to distance learning, requiring better definitions of attendance, absenteeism and engagement during remote learning.



- In 2015, **Connecticut** Senate Bill 1058 directed the state Department of Education to create a chronic absenteeism prevention and intervention plan that includes information about absenteeism, a data and tracking system, a mentorship model of support for students at risk of chronic absenteeism, and incentives for schools and students that improve attendance.

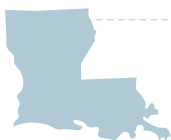


- **Tennessee** incorporated chronic absenteeism into its ESSA accountability system through its Chronically Out-of-School Indicator. The indicator accounts for 10% of a school's grade is based on the number of students who are chronically absent. ([TN](#))

Suspensions and Expulsions

High rates of exclusionary discipline practices negatively impact school climate. When students are removed from the classroom, they become less engaged, and lose critical learning time, negatively impacting educational outcomes and lifelong success. Each state and district is required to measure and report on the rates of in- and

out-of-school suspensions and expulsions annually. When this data is disaggregated by student groups, it can also reveal inequities among student populations impacted by exclusionary discipline policies and allow for targeted policy and programmatic improvements.



- **Louisiana** identifies schools exhibiting what the state defines as “persistent excessive out of school discipline”—defined as approximately twice the national average—to be considered for identification as targeted support and improvements. Specifically, elementary/middle schools with three consecutive years of out-of school suspension rates above five percent and high schools with three consecutive years of out-of school suspension rates above 20 percent will be identified. ([Louisiana ESSA Plan](#))

Classroom Observations or Inspectorates

Students perform best in classes where they feel welcome, respected and engaged. A positive relationship between teacher and student has a significant influence on how the student experiences school.

Classroom observations that focus on the overall relationship between teacher and student, have the capacity to provide information on the quality of classroom engagement and inform school climate improvement efforts. Because observation data are not easily disaggregated by student groups, however, it should only be used in conjunction with other measures of school climate. rather than a stand-alone tool for evaluating school climate.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is an observational instrument developed by researchers at the University of Virginia that places equal weight on a teacher's ability to provide students with social and emotional support as it does with other measures of quality. Although the tool was created for prek-12 classrooms, the observational tool is currently utilized primarily by early childhood programs. Louisiana child care centers and preschools in Louisiana are required to use the CLASS rubric when observing classrooms in their programs under Board regulations. ([LA Admin Code Part CLXVII. Bulletin 140 §503](#))

Additional Opportunity to Learn Indicators

There are countless ways a school can positively influence its learning environment.

Students benefit from the presence of and relationships with support personnel like mentors, tutors, counselors, social workers and school nurses. Similarly, program offerings like extracurricular activities and community partnerships, access to advanced coursework, and exposure to a diverse teaching staff can positively experience a student's experience and connectedness to school. Data on school inputs can be integrated into multi-measure assessments of school climate to help identify ways in which schools can improve their climate.

Acknowledging the importance of healthy relationships among students and staff, The Christensen Institute offers recommendations of ways to assess the quantity, quality and access to those relationships, as well as the connections and communication that exists between the adults involved in them. ([Christensen Institute](#)) In fact, the Search Institute offers a Developmental Relationships survey for schools and youth-serving organizations to use to assess the presence and impact of adult-child relationships, arguing that young people need a web of relationships with adults who challenge growth, provide support, expand possibilities, and share power, in addition to express care. ([Search Institute](#))

Recommendation 3: Engage stakeholders, including students and families, as valued partners

The most effective policies are not created in isolation, absent input from the stakeholders who will be most impacted by them. Engaging stakeholders invites varying perspectives, provides insights into priority areas for meeting student and teacher needs (disciplinary measures, student/teacher interactions, for example), and strengthens critical buy-in and participation in data collection.

It's essential that engaged stakeholders be reflective of those whom the policy is meant to serve, based on factors such as race, gender, language, or socioeconomic or disability status, from rural or urban districts, and from students, teachers, and family members, as well as community members who have a role in supporting schools and students in a variety of ways. Including diverse voices is an important step in limiting racial, gender and cultural bias and ensuring measures like surveys are

developmentally, culturally and linguistically relevant. Engaging diverse stakeholders reflective of the local population gives policymakers and education leaders unique insights into the ways in which policies affect groups differently, the unique needs of the community, guidance on effective communication engagement strategies and a better understanding of the ways help will be accepted and received.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led school and district leaders to re-evaluate current family engagement strategies and update them in ways that reflect a new at-home learning environment that families have a significant influence over. Identifying effective communication strategies and collecting regular feedback from families to inform improvements has never been more important.



- That's why **California** updated its school climate survey to help districts better understand the impacts of COVID-19 and how best to support students' social, emotional, and academic needs. Panorama, a company that provides climate surveys to states has also responded to changing needs through its offer of a new survey that focuses on distance and hybrid learning models. ([Panorama](#))



- In 2019, **Connecticut** lawmakers established a social and emotional learning and school climate advisory collaborative that includes representatives from the state board, school and district-level administrators, parent groups, the Social Emotional Learning Alliance for Connecticut, school counselors, groups education groups. The Collaborative is tasked with a model positive school climate policy, collecting information and directing resource for school climate improvement efforts, document any local and regional needs for technical assistance and training relating to fostering positive school climates, developing a suicide screening assessment, and developing a biennial state-wide school climate survey.



- In **Ohio's** Strategic Plan for Education, Strategy 7 reads, "work together with parents, caregivers and community partners to help schools meet the needs of the whole child." Included in its School Climate Guidelines, which "describe how schools can create environments where every student feels welcomed, respected and motivated to learn," Ohio also encourages districts to engage a diverse group of stakeholders comprised of local emergency responders, social and health services, faith-based groups, parents, students, faculty, and district administrators a minimum of 4 times a year to monitor progress and provide feedback. ([OH](#))



- As a way to build community and student buy-in to its climate survey, **Rhode Island** has actively engaged high school students through summits and a formal Student Advisory Council, enabling students to define what they believe to be important about school culture and community and have assisted in rewording questions and raising awareness of the survey's importance. ([RI](#))



- The non-profit, **Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence**, focused on improving educational opportunities for students across Kentucky includes a **Student Voice Team** of middle and high school students who are amplifying the voices of Kentucky youth on the classroom impact of education policy issues. School climate is a central focus of the Student Voice Team, who provide research and guidance to state and district leaders and students and parents, on effective improvement avenues. ([Prichard](#))



- For the purposes of ensuring coordination and cooperation among officials, agencies and programs involved in compulsory attendance issues, **Georgia** law requires the creation of a Student Attendance and School Climate Committee in each county. Committee members are to include attorneys and judges, Department of Juvenile Justice, the superintendent, certificated school employees, and local school board member, policy departments, the county board of health, mental health, and Family Connection commission. The Committee is to review and make recommendations for policies relating to school climate for the purpose of promoting positive gains in student achievement scores, student and teacher morale, community support, and student and teacher attendance, while decreasing student suspensions, expulsions, dropouts, and other negative aspects of the total school environment.



- **New Hampshire** Governor Sununu established a School Safety Task Force in 2018. The Task Force released 59 recommendations to improve the safety of New Hampshire’s public school students and eight of those recommendations focus on improving student mental health by expanding social and emotional learning programs, providing education and training to school personnel, and expanding programs that emphasize multi-tiered behavior support systems. Several state laws were enacted in 2019 that support these recommendations. ([NH](#))



- In March, the **Michigan** Department of Education hosted a group of students and educators to have a virtual discussion on how to transform the school environment and improve the culture through an equity lens. Students had the opportunity to share insights into remote learning experiences and are working with school administrators to change policies on issues such as in-school suspensions, detention and tardiness when school reopen. ([The Plug](#))



- Some states have initiatives to include stakeholders in co-designing and redesigning schooling. These efforts often include a focus on improving school climate and the student experience. **Kansas** is in the process of redesigning its education system one school at a time, centering its efforts on creating a personalized learning experience for every student, grounded in social-emotional skill building and real-world applications, and mentoring. From the start, the Kansas State Department and Board of Education sought feedback from community members from across the state, such as teachers, parents, and business leaders across the state. They found that Kansans believe that while academic skills are important, nonacademic skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, perseverance and civic engagement are even more so. Kansans also said we need to move away from a “one-size-fits-all” system that relies exclusively on state assessments to measure student success. ([Kansas](#))

Engaging Students as Stakeholders: The KY Student Voice Team

By Gabriella Staykova and Krupa Hegde

The Student Voice Team: The Kentucky Student Voice Team has supported students as research, advocacy, and policy partners in the efforts to improve Kentucky schools for the last eight years. Our team amplifies and elevates youth voices in Kentucky through the Student Voice Forum and Get Schooled, an independent student-produced blog and podcast respectively. We also engage students, educators, and policymakers through publications like our book, policy briefs, and op-eds, and through our professional development workshops and school climate audits.

School Climate Audits: Schools often hire external contractors for thousands of dollars to survey students, yet these results are rarely shared back with these students. Our school climate audits flip this strategy through a student-driven examination of school communities, where students lead the charge to design, deliver, and analyze school climate studies. Students survey key stakeholders, facilitate focus groups, and conduct classroom observations.

Initially, these projects were conducted by our members visiting schools as an independent group, but we now coach students to conduct audits in their own schools.

There are two crucial elements to our audits. First, students lead the charge, granting students ownership over the data and empowering them to explore questions most relevant to their own experiences. Second, students share these results with their peers, not just school administrators, enabling the primary stakeholders to better understand their school and explore their own roles in making it safer and more inclusive.

Coping with COVID: The “Coping with COVID-19 Student-to-Student Study” is a student-driven initiative

launched in the wake of statewide school closures to understand Kentucky students’ social-emotional and learning experiences during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis. Rooted in our climate audits, the statewide survey was co-designed by students and adult research advisors and disseminated via peer-to-peer communication, administrative school-wide dissemination, and partnerships with youth and community organizations. It garnered over 9,400 responses from all but one of Kentucky’s 120 counties.

Collaboration with Policymakers: We work with policymakers at the school, district, and state level to further educational equity through a combination of data sharebacks, media messaging, and direct lobbying.

The results of our school climate studies, including the statewide Coping with COVID Study, are shared back with partners across the state through reports and presentations to inform leaders about student experiences. In the last few months, among others, we have presented to the state Department of Education findings and recommendations about school during COVID, the General Assembly’s School Safety Working Group about student perceptions of safety and metal detectors, and district superintendents about student needs and wellbeing.

Our research is paired with policy recommendations. At the most local level, these recommendations are shared with administrators and developed by students in the school, whom we support to advocate for their policies. At the state level, we lobby for our policy recommendations. In the past, our team has met with politicians, testified to working groups and committees, and held lobbying days and rallies to raise awareness about key issues that have emerged from our school climate data.

Recommendation 4: Partner with youth-development organizations.

Young people continue to learn, develop and be influenced by their environment after school ends. High-quality after-school programs that offer safe and supportive learning environments, positive relationships between participants and staff and culturally responsive practices, have been shown to have similar impacts on student achievement and success as schools with positive climates, increasing academic outcomes and high school graduation rates and reducing negative behaviors. ([Washington](#)) Thus, including after-school and out-of-school time (OST) partners and organizations in climate improvement efforts is an important strategy to build upon the positive experiences created in a school setting. State leaders can play a crucial role in bringing these actors together to collaborate on improving healthy climates for youth. The more coherence state leaders can forge across schools and different youth-serving organizations, the more positive environments and reinforcements young people will experience. Building partnerships means that all stakeholders can have input in how school climate is defined, measured, and analyzed, so they are working towards a shared goal.

Like schools, the out-of-school time community have begun using surveys to collect feedback from participants. The Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA) survey, for example, was designed to measure the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. Questions focus on the safe and supportive nature of the environment and the quality of interactions and engagements with staff, among others. ([FYI](#)) Nine cities across the country are working with the Wallace Foundation to help how afterschool systems build their capacity to capture, describe, and improve their practices through the data systems. ([Wallace](#)) Another Wallace Foundation funded initiative is helping six communities improve social and emotional learning practices (SELs) across school and out-of-school settings. A preliminary finding indicates that success depends on the creation of a common language for SEL to aid in a shared understanding between and among system- and site-level staff. Doing so has helped partners determine roles and responsibilities and identify which SEL skills to focus on. ([Wallace 2.0](#))



- **Rhode Island** directs districts to facilitate partnerships with community organizations and agencies, municipal entities, and businesses to meet the needs of students and families. Districts are to establish communication strategies that will engage community partners, including soliciting community organizations or business members to mentor students and facilitating on-site services of local organizations at the school, such as counseling and food pantries. ([RI](#))



IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Recommendation 5: Integrate measures of school climate into evaluations of school quality and include school climate data in school improvement plan

Defining and measuring school climate is essential to setting priorities, but to make the results meaningful, data must be analyzed and used to directly inform school improvement efforts. The information can be used to identify schools in need of support, assess the effectiveness of current interventions, identify new issues or student groups that

require attention or support, and to highlight areas of success and opportunities for replication. ESSA requires districts to conduct needs assessments for schools that are identified for comprehensive support and improvement, and states can support districts in using school climate data as part of that required needs assessment.



- In its **ESSA plan, Missouri** indicates that an on-site visit to assess the climate and culture of a school identified as in need of improvement be completed prior to implementing an improvement plan. ([MO](#))



- **California's CORE Districts** used information from the CORE Student Culture and Climate Survey to identify race-based gaps in student learning experience, develop district-level strategic plans, and implement interventions intended to address educational inequalities. ([RAND](#))



- The **Michigan** Department of Education developed a framework to guide the creation of school improvement plans and includes an assessment of leaders' focus on school culture and climate and emphasizes a need for family and community engagement and communication. ([MI](#))



- To identify schools for support and improvement, **South Carolina** uses a student engagement survey to measure school climate for students in grades 3-12. ([SC](#))



- **Hawaii's** survey results are aggregated to the school-level and the data and are used to highlight school and district priorities, track improvements, and evaluate educational programs and interventions. Schools also use survey results both to assess teacher accountability and to provide formative feedback to teachers. ([RAND](#))



- Similarly, an **Oregon** law passed in 2017 requires the Department of Education to develop a statewide education plan to address chronic absences and distribute funds to applicants based on their proposal to design and implement a pilot program to decrease rates of school absenteeism. Proposals must utilize trauma-informed approaches that recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma and fully integrate that information into practice for the purpose of resisting the recurrence of trauma and promoting resiliency, health services and intervention strategies that are based in schools and take advantage of community resources. ([HB 4002, 2017](#))



- In response to Governor Abbott's School Safety Action Plan, several districts across **Texas** have also taken steps to support students' mental health by creating mental health intervention teams that identify students who are at risk academically and behaviorally and offering screenings and counseling services, and connecting families with resources in the community. ([TX](#))

Recommendation 6: Invest in developing the knowledge and skills of school personnel to improve school climate

Whether students experience a healthy school climate depends on the learning environment created collectively by all the adults in a school: teachers and principals, counselors and cafeteria workers, bus drivers, partners from youth-serving organizations, school resource officers, and more. Every person a student comes into contact with impacts the way they experience school and staff can take advantage of their role by modeling positive communication and behavior.

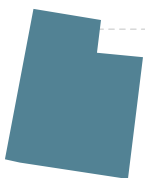
Furthermore, for students to experience a sense of belonging in schools and build trusting relationships with staff and peers, they need to feel seen and understood as individuals. Culturally competent educators and staff have the skills to recognize the differences between themselves and their students and take the time to get to know who their students are, and learn about the cultures and community from which they come so that they can engage them in more meaningful ways. Similarly, all students benefit from being taught by a diverse teaching force, serving to build connection between students and teachers from similar backgrounds and exposing those with differences to cultures outside their own.

Policy makers have a responsibility to invest and support

state and local leaders in the recruitment, training and development of teachers and school personnel to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to make a healthy climate for learning a reality in every school and classroom. State policy can influence expectations for the training and professional development of educators and others who work in schools, establish licensure and certification requirements, and set guidelines and rules for evaluation.

One way to foster a positive climate for students of color is to diversify the education workforce. In the last several years, several states have advanced such initiatives, including **Colorado, Delaware, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico and New York.** ([CCSSO](#))

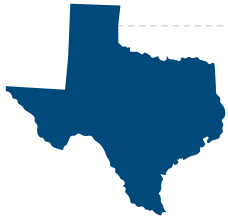
Additionally, states can train and support future and current educators in effectively teaching students of different cultural backgrounds by offering, prioritizing or highlighting professional development to promote teacher mindsets that help engage students and make them more comfortable as learners and feel more welcome in school. This includes revising professional teaching standards to reflect cultural competence. States like Illinois have established initiatives ([IL](#)) to support educators in becoming “learner ready.”



- **Utah's** Effective Teaching Standards require teachers work with students to “create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, positive social interactions, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation” and demonstrates an understanding of “individual learner differences and cultural and linguistic diversity.” The Utah Board of Education designates the Standards as the foundation of the state’s educator development, requiring alignment with teacher and administrator preparation programs, licensure requirements, and screening, hiring, induction and mentoring of beginning teachers and administrators. ([UT, Rules](#))



- One way to improve school climate is to analyze school climate data by demographics to understand which students have access to a positive school climate and which students do not, and to provide in-service training and resources for educators to respond to the specific needs of those students. For example, in 2019, the **California** legislature passed a bill requiring the State Department of Education to update or develop resources for in-service training on school site and community resources for the support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students. ([LPI](#)) ([AB 493](#)) GLSEN provides multiple examples of how SEAs can support LEAs in implementing similar targeted approaches. ([GLSEN](#))



- **Texas** requires that educator preparation programs include instruction regarding mental health, substance abuse and youth suicide in educator training programs. It also requires that the instruction include effective strategies for teaching and intervening with students with mental or emotional disorders, including de-escalation techniques and positive behavioral interventions and supports. In a similar vein, Texas recently expanded continuing education requirements for school counselors to include mental health and substance abuse counseling, including through the use of grief- and trauma-informed counseling interventions and crisis management, and suicide prevention strategies. (S.B. 674 (2015) and HB 18 (2019))



- State law requires that the Office of the State Superintendent of Education in **Washington, DC** provide school districts with regular, high-quality professional development opportunities and technical assistance that include fostering a positive school climate, the effects of trauma and chronic stress on students and learning, disciplinary approaches that utilize restorative practices and other evidence-based or promising behavioral interventions; and implicit bias and culturally responsive corrective action techniques. ([§ 38-236.06](#))

Recommendation 7: Dedicate resources and student support personnel that help build a healthy school climate.

A strong school leader and talented teachers can have a dramatic effect on student success, but sustaining a healthy school climate requires an integrated system of support that can break down barriers to learning and meet unique student needs. Addressing these barriers with school and community-based resources, from tutoring and mentoring, enrichment and extracurricular activities, to linking students and families to mental health professionals, telehealth and health clinics, and family representatives or liaisons can better ensure unique student needs are being met and can ease the burden on teachers and school leaders of being everything to all students.

The Communities in Schools (CIS) program surrounds students at-risk of dropping out with a strong support system for the student and family to address academic, attendance, behavior, retention, graduation, and/or social service needs related to improving student achievement, including health and human services, guidance counseling, family engagement and enrichment activities. Texas directly funds Communities In Schools (CIS) to augment available federal and private funding sources, dramatically increasing the support available to schools. A \$30 million direct appropriation in 2020 supported CIS services in close to 1,000 schools across the state. ([TX](#), [TX](#)).



- **California** established the California Student Success Coach Grant Program in state policy to award competitive grants to local- and state-operated AmeriCorps programs to support and expand the presence of student success coaches, AmeriCorps members who collaborate with teachers to provide students with evidence-based academic, social, and emotional supports that prepare students for postsecondary and workforce success, in high-need schools. Evaluations of the AmeriCorp program show partner schools three times more likely to see increases in math achievement and two times more likely to see increases on state English [assessments](#).

Like California, SEAs or state boards can create guidelines to ensure that student success coaches are prioritized for placement in “high-need” schools, based on a combination of opportunity to learn gaps, academic data, and climate measures.



- A 2015 **Nevada** law required the SEA to distribute block grants to school districts and charter schools to provide for contract social workers or other licensed mental health workers in schools with identified needs. The state's school climate survey served as the needs assessment for the block grant. Through the Nevada Social Workers in Schools Initiative, the Nevada SEA is supporting school districts and charter schools with funds to contract with social workers or other mental health workers to support social emotional learning, a caring school climate, and intervention and treatment services to students and families who are struggling with food and shelter insecurity, behavioral health concerns, or overcoming trauma. ([NV](#))

Five states, including **Nevada** and **Wisconsin**, won the U.S. Department of Education's School-Based Mental Health Services Grant Program this year, increasing students' access to qualified mental health service professionals. ([NV-SB 515, Sec.23](#))

School Safety

In response to a steady increase of gun-related violence in schools over the past several decades, school safety policies initially largely focused primarily on the physical well-being of students and staff, including safety drills, security infrastructure, school resource officers, and weapons for school personnel. Yet, research indicates that to ensure students feel safe and supported in school, a comprehensive approach to school safety is necessary;; one that supports students' physical and psychological safety. Investing in protecting and improving the mental health of students may not only serve to improve student engagement but also deter students from putting themselves or others in harm's way, given a majority of school shooters have been victims of bullying in school and suffer from at least one mental health disorder. ([ECS, American Counseling Association, *ibid*](#))

In addition to enacting legislation that put physical protective measures into place following the Parkland and Sandy

Hook shootings in **Florida** and **Connecticut**, both states put policies in place to protect the emotional well-being of students. Similarly, a **New Hampshire** law passed in 2016 directed the New Hampshire Department of Education, in coordination with the state's Department of Health and Human Service, to create a multi-tiered system of behavioral health supports in New Hampshire schools and early childhood programs that are family-driven, youth-guided, community-based, and culturally and linguistically competent. The system is to include a performance measurement system and accountability for monitoring quality and access. The Departments were also directed to join in an interagency agreement that creates a provision of technical assistance to support development of coordinated services by school districts, other education providers, area agencies, community mental health centers, and other entities participating in the system of care.

Texas Climate Case Study

On May 18, 2018, a school shooting occurred at the Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas. In response to these tragic events, policymakers, educators, and advocates came together across partisan divides to focus on a variety of educational issues, including school safety and a positive school climate. In 2019, Texas lawmakers passed sweeping and historic legislation that restructured the school finance system, increased teacher compensation, and provided resources for classrooms, including increased safety and mental health supports in Texas schools. Among the changes is a new requirement that every school must administer a school climate survey every year, so student and staff experiences of safety are understood and addressed.

Two specific pieces of legislation created a pathway for this increased focus on climate and safety in Texas schools: Senate Bill 11 (SB 11) and House Bill 3 (HB 3). SB11 expands mental health initiatives to increase safety and security on school campuses. Importantly, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) approves a list of school climate surveys ensuring quality control, and providing vetting that would be burdensome and inefficient to do in every local school district. This structure also ensures districts and schools have the authority and flexibility to make decisions at the local level, while requiring that every school every year brings in the perspectives of stakeholders through school climate data to ensure student safety. HB 3 provides funding for a number of initiatives that can (but aren't required to) address school climate (New funding also can be used for other approaches to safety including metal detectors, gun active shooter vestibules, rewiring security systems, at local discretion).

According to the Suicide & Crisis Center of North Texas, suicide is the the second leading cause of death for ages

10-24 in Texas. In response to this issue, stakeholders sought to address the ways that schools support the mental health of students in schools. Another piece of legislation, House Bill 906 (HB 906) established a collaborative task force on public mental health services coordinated in partnership between TEA and Westat to support institutes of higher education and other stakeholders to study and evaluate mental health services and training provided at public schools. "Discussions quickly turned to the importance of school climate," said task force member Josette Saxton, Director of Mental Health Policy at Texans Care for Children, a children's policy advocacy organization in the state. "So instead of just focusing on mental health services and training, the task force is also looking at important schoolwide practices that create safe and supportive school climates. This is an important shift that needed to happen to help the state achieve the outcomes it's looking for when it comes to student learning and mental health." While the prioritization of school climate as an essential element of school safety represents promising policy progress in Texas, it is important to acknowledge that Texas is just beginning to implement the new law, amidst the backdrop of overlapping medical, economic, and racial crises. Schools and districts are facing new and intensified challenges and have new tools with which to do so. "SB 11 was a response to a terrible tragedy," said Jonathan Feinstein, State Director of Ed Trust Texas, an education advocacy group in the state. Feinstein emphasized that due to overlapping crises "students have incredible stress and mental health needs" and that we need to consider the role of school climate in meeting student needs during this time and in future efforts to improve Texas' education system.

([Suicide & Crisis Center of North Texas](#))

Recommendation 8: Make information about climate publicly available

Families and community members should know how well schools and districts meet the needs of students. Because the condition of a school's climate has a measurable effect on every aspect of a student's academic and life-long success, publicly reporting on how well schools are building and maintaining a positive school climate is essential. States can set requirements for data reporting so that stakeholders have access to district and school level climate-related data. Information must be accessible, easily digestible, and tailored to the interests of local communities. Requiring all schools to report findings allows users to compare performance both within and across districts and, with data disaggregated by student groups, allows stakeholders to identify trends, challenges and opportunities for how specific student groups experience school.

When systems take a sequenced approach—of first supporting the collection of data; then socialization processes for teachers, principals and other school personnel to review and analyze data; build capacity for the measurement, interpretation and response to data,

they can then publish data with greater likelihood in stakeholder confidence of the data, process and objective for improvement.

Unlike the limited information included in accountability systems to often offer a single score to reflect the quality of school climates, school report cards and other school and district climate reports are made to be easily-digestible and offer more detailed information that is often broken down by individual questions, can show changes over time, making it easier to identify areas of strength and weakness.

ESSA requires every state and district to publish a report card that includes rates of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, and incidences of school violence (including bullying and harassment). States and districts can also add information they believe is useful to parents and others in evaluating schools' progress and frequently include climate survey data, if applicable. Under ESSA, districts are required to collect feedback on report card content and presentation from parents. ([ESSA](#))



- **New Mexico** publishes response data from an "Opportunity to Learn" survey that includes measures of a positive school climate and is administered to students in grades K-11 and their parents, making insights about a school's learning environment available publicly [online](#).



- **Nevada** created an interactive school climate data tool to provide the public with detailed school-level information. The tool provides data on responses to individual questions, social emotional competencies disaggregated by race, sex, and grade level, data comparisons with "peer" schools, and offer a resources section for schools and districts that want to improve in areas such as emotional or physical safety, cultural and linguistic competence and relationships. ([NV](#))

In addition to posting data online, states can share with the media, community partners, and student groups, include in mailings and newsletters, and create easy to use templates (in multiple languages) to enable local leaders, students and families to understand differences in student experience by race, gender, disability, language,

and socioeconomic status. These resources should also support school and district leaders in comparing climate data alongside attendance, exclusionary discipline data, and surveys of staff working conditions to provide a complete picture of the school climate, for example in a data dashboard.

Recommendation 9: Use data from school climate surveys to ensure that schools and systems take responsibility for improving school climate and the student experience

Schools are responsible for preparing students for college, career and life-long success. It is clear that a school climate will either help or hinder a school's ability to fulfill its mission. States play a critical role not just in holding schools accountable but to also foster continuous improvement by helping school leaders define goals and objectives, identify measures to assess progress, and providing support needed to improve or elevate successes. When ESSA set the requirement that states include non-academic factors in their accountability systems, it reignited conversations around the importance of focusing on the whole child to improve student success. Holding schools and districts accountable for helping students succeed should go beyond requirements included under ESSA. State leaders have an opportunity to be innovative in how they shift the focus from just measuring students to also measuring systems and to foster more transparent, coherent, and equitable systems of support.

Because climate data shows how students, parents, and staff are each experiencing school, this data can be disaggregated by multiple demographic factors (race, gender, home language/English learner status, disability status, etc.) to determine which student groups are lower on key indicators like safety and belonging. Looking for trends, outliers and gaps between student groups and among stakeholder groups (e.g., parents and students, staff and parents), is important to identify areas for improvement. For example, if a majority-White school has fairly positive school climate data overall, but the students of students of color in that school report a much lower sense of belonging, the state or district should hold that school accountable for improving the experience of the students of color.



- **Illinois** holds schools accountable for building a positive climate by requiring all schools to administer a school climate survey (see highlight box on page X). This survey counts for 5% in the statewide accountability system IL-Empower, which identifies schools in need of support and improvement. The climate survey, along with other indicators like chronic absenteeism, 9th grade on-track measures and academic growth and proficiency provide a more complete picture of school quality than a single measure alone ([LL](#)).

As a reminder, no single measure of school climate can or will tell the whole story about how successful a school is at engaging with and supporting students. Thus, [experts stress](#) the need to couple survey results with other data such as classroom observations, graduation, drop-out and teacher retention rates, and attendance and disciplinary infractions, in order to present a more complete picture of a school's climate.

When the federal Every Students Succeeds Act replaced NCLB in 2015, Congress gave states and districts more flexibility over what metrics to use for school accountability, including a requirement that one measure of school quality or student success, such as school climate, be

included. As a result, eight states include student climate surveys in their formal accountability systems, three states include a measure of suspension rates, and thirty-six states and Washington, DC include chronic absenteeism in their accountability systems. ([LPI](#)) Many states are also publishing climate data in school report cards to inform improvement efforts and needs assessments.



- **North Dakota** includes data from its student engagement survey, administered to students in grades 3-12 in its state accountability system, accounting for 30% of elementary and middle school accountability, and 20% for high school accountability. (ND)



- Prior to the passage of ESSA, **Georgia** lawmakers required the development and use of a “star rating” system to address school climate in its accountability system. Schools receive a 1-5 star rating based on student, teacher, and parent perceptions of a school’s climate gleaned from survey results, as well as suspension rates; school discipline incidents; student survey responses on use of illegal substances and the prevalence of violence, bullying, and unsafe incidents within a school; average daily attendance of teachers, administrators, and staff members; and the percentage of students absent less than 10% of excused days. ([GA](#))



- In 2019, **New Mexico** passed a law requiring that the School Support and Accountability System include indicators of school quality and student success that are valid, reliable, comparable and statewide, including: (a) chronic absenteeism; (b) college, career and civic readiness; and (c) the educational climate of the school. These factors are combined to create the overall score, but they are also given their own score. Also included in the overall score are data on educator quality and discipline, each contributor’s overall school climate. ([SB 229 \(2019\)](#))



- In its accountability system, **Ohio** requires that, in addition to the graded measure, school district or building report cards must indicate whether the school district or building has implemented a positive behavior intervention and supports framework, notated as a “yes” or “no” answer.



- **California’s CORE Districts**, utilize a combination of academic and nonacademic factors, to provide transparency and exert pressure on participating districts to improve student learning experiences. One factor is surveys measuring components of school climate and social emotional learning, along with suspension rates and chronic absenteeism.

Recommendation 10: Connect student discipline policies and practices to improving school climate

There is a significant interplay between student behavior and school climate. By putting school climate at the forefront of any disciplinary policy, strategies can be focused on creating safe and supportive learning spaces, strengthening interpersonal relationships, and reinforcing positive behaviors. By doing so, students' increased satisfaction with their school environment has been shown to deter them from engaging in common negative behaviors such as poor social conduct or skipping school. (*EdTrends*) When disciplinary action is necessary, outside of serious offenses that pose a direct threat to self or others, efforts to replace punitive measures like suspension and expulsion with approaches that encourage restoration of positive behavior have also been shown to be more effective in many cases, as these practices foster a greater sense of belonging among students, rather than leading them to feel pushed out. When students are suspended

or expelled from school, they become less engaged and more disconnected to their school and are more likely to perform poorly academically, skip school and permanently drop out. Conversely, discipline policies like zero-tolerance approaches *do not have a strong evidence base* indicating they improve school climate and/or the student experience.

If done well, evidence indicates Positive Behavioral Interventions (PBIS), a strategy that relies on explicitly teaching behavioral expectations, providing supports before negative behavior worsens, and limiting punitive disciplinary measures by using logical consequences when possible has increasingly shown up in state policy and can positively impact student behavior, achievement, graduation rates and student's chances of lifelong success. (*ED, NASSP*)

Restricting Expulsion and Suspension

In PreK-12 public schools there are widespread disparities in exclusionary discipline (suspensions, expulsions, arrests) by race, gender, and disability status (OCR).

Black students, for instance, make up only 15% of public school students, but represent 39% of those suspended from school (*GAO*). Experts most commonly attribute these disparities not to increased rates of misbehavior by students of color, boys, and students with disabilities, but rather to policies, procedures and adult mindsets that have disparately negative consequences for these groups (*Skiba*). Girls of color and children of color in

preschool through third grade have some of the highest rates of suspension and expulsion. (*Education Trust, Institute for Children Success*) This inequitable application of discipline communicates to students of color and students with disabilities that they do not belong in school and contributes to lack of trust, negatively impacting the student engagement and school climate (*Yeager et al.*)



- In 2016, the **Rhode Island** legislature directed all school superintendents to review discipline data for their school district, to decide whether there was an unequal impact on students based on race, ethnicity, or disability status, and to respond to any disparity. Every school district was required to submit a report to the council on elementary and secondary education describing any action taken on the disparity. (*RI*)



- **New Jersey** prohibits the expulsion and out-of-school suspension of students in kindergarten through second grade, except when the suspension is based on conduct that endangers others and requires districts to develop early detection and prevention programs. (S 2081) (*ECS*)

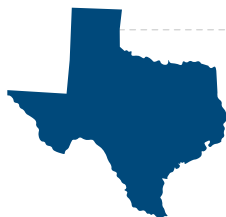


- In 2016, the **Washington** legislature adopted policies and procedures recommended by the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee which include reducing the length of time students of color are suspended and/or expelled, and providing students support for re-engagement plans. (*WA*)

Prevention

Some of the greatest effects on student behavior are focused on preemptive measures such as setting consensus-driven behaviour expectations, building strong relationships among students and school personnel, fostering character development, providing positive reinforcement and

integrating continuous program improvements based on outcomes data. Further, a key finding in a 2019 study indicates that the first disciplinary consequences is associated with the largest academic decline, further indicating the value of focusing on preventative measures.



- Just weeks following the tragic school shooting at Santa Fe High School in May 2018, **Texas** Governor Greg Abbott released his School Safety Action Plan. In conjunction with an emphasis on increasing protections for physical safety, Abbot recommended school counselors and mental health services be available to students, mental health first aid training be offered to school personnel, reporting systems be in place, and restorative justice programs designed to address the underlying mental or behavioral health issues for minor infractions are implemented. The following year, the Texas legislature passed four related laws that expand mental health education and services for students, training for staff, positive behavior.

Restorative Justice Practices

An alternative to punitive discipline policies, restorative justice empowers students to resolve conflicts through an inclusive process that involves peer mediation and small-group discussions. Restorative justice encourages students to talk, ask questions, and air their grievances, fostering belonging, social engagement, and meaningful accountability.



- **Colorado** law encourages the use of restorative justice as a school's first consideration to remediate specified offenses. The state also encourages each school district to implement training and education in the principles and practices of restorative justice." ([C.R.S.22-32-144\(2b\)](#)).



- **South Carolina** has established a task force to develop and identify restorative justice practices that can be used to ensure a safe school climate. ([ESSA State Plan, pg 66 and pg 88](#))

Recommendation 11: Identify, promote and reward best practices for improving and maintaining a positive school climate

An important part of holding schools accountable for building and maintaining a positive school climate is to identify and promote best practices they can use for improvement. Celebrating wins incentivizes schools to keep focusing improvement efforts on factors that affect school climate and call attention to model policies and programs for other local leaders across the state.



- The **Connecticut Association of Schools** recognizes schools across the state for positive school climate practices. Schools that meet the initial requirements, receive a site visit to verify and validate the initial assessment. Schools selected for recognition are asked to accommodate inquiries and visitors from other schools looking to improve their school climate. ([CT](#))



- The **California Distinguished Schools Award** is given to schools that demonstrate significant gains in narrowing the achievement gap. Schools can [highlight their work around school climate in their applications](#), like the Village School did by including a four page essay on their positive school climate, and one of the indicators schools are evaluated on is chronic absenteeism and schools



- Each year, Character.org awards its **National School of Character Award** to schools and districts at the national level that demonstrate a dedicated to 11 key principles that focus on all aspects of school life, including school culture and climate, social and emotional learning (SEL), student engagement and academic achievement, as well as MTSS, PBIS, RTI, restorative practices, teacher morale, and parent engagement.



ESTABLISH A RESEARCH AND LEARNING AGENDA

Recommendation 12: Seek continuous feedback and improvement on efforts to measure and improve school climate

While policy has the potential to spur improvement, practitioners, researchers, stakeholders and policy makers can foster ongoing learning to continue to learn from early implementation efforts and improve policy. Engaging with community stakeholders and content-experts from outside a district can expand leaders' access to valuable information, support and training, in turn providing unique learning opportunities for all. These connections can offer collaborative learning opportunities, address issues that are responsive to improving school climate in specific contexts, unveiling new research and findings, defining new questions to explore, and creating a context for continuous improvement and thought partnership.

Outside entities can also support schools and districts in efforts to determine the integrity of school climate measurement system design and implementation. These partnerships are frequently developed with a local college or university research department. Climate surveys, like any qualitative instrument, should be regularly assessed for the reliability and validity of the measure and updates should be made accordingly. Outcomes of a school's

individual measures of climate should also be compared to each other in order to identify any outliers and determine the reasoning behind inconsistencies. This can proactively identify concerns about "gaming" the system. For instance, if survey data suggest a positive learning environment, but exclusionary discipline and/or staff turnover significantly increases, this should provoke an inquiry into the mixed messages. SEA leaders should have a process in place for reviewing, comparing and contrasting school climate data and outcomes, and using it to inform improvement.

State policymakers can play an important role in helping schools, districts, and state departments of education identify and develop the partnerships by setting parameters for how data can be shared and providing financing, creating new grant opportunities and/or offering incentives through those grants for schools to engage with research institutions or community organizations. States can also sponsor new research in collaboration with public institutes of higher education, to establish research priorities, use schools as places to test ideas, foster healthy [research-practice partnerships](#).



- **New Jersey** Department of Education, developed and disseminated its climate survey, in collaboration with the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at Rutgers University. In an effort to validate the tool, the NJDOE worked with Bloustein to conduct a validity/reliability study. As a result of the validity/reliability study, they were able reconstruct the distribution of the items to the school climate domains to be more efficient and descriptive. ([NJ](#))



- **The Consortium on School Research at the University of Chicago** has led a series of research studies, most recent data having been released in August 2020, aligned to the implementation of the 5Essentials Climate Survey in Illinois, validating the instrument through findings that show the survey is predictive of school improvement in elementary and high schools, that attendance, test scores, GPA, Freshman OnTrack, and college enrollment in high schools were positively and significantly related survey measures, and that Elementary GPA also improved more in schools with strong measures, among other things. ([UChicago](#))



- The **California** Department of Education regularly adds and removes survey questions in response to assessments of the reliability and validity. ([CA](#))

FUNDING SOURCE EXAMPLES

Federal

21st Century Community Learning Centers

This program supports the creation of community learning centers that provide academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The program helps students meet state and local student standards in core academic subjects, such as reading and math; offers students a broad array of enrichment activities that can complement their regular academic programs; and offers literacy and other educational services to the families of participating children. ([ERIC](#))

Flexible ESSA Fufunding in Titles I-IV, such as:

- **Title I** to improve students' non-academic skills in schoolwide and targeted assistance programs and using school improvement funds to implement evidence-based interventions
- **Title II** to offer training to teachers on non-academic student support and funding school-based professional development on culturally-responsive teaching.
- **Title III** for targeted engagement strategies of students and families of English Language Learners
- **Title IV** to expand school-based mental health services and establish or expand community learning centers that provide enrichment activities for at-risk students during nonschool hours

Through the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, the US Education Department provides a suite of free school climate surveys for middle and high school students, staff, and parents/guardians through its adaptable, web-based administration platform, ED School Climate Survey ([EDSCLS](#)). Student and parent surveys can be completed either in English or Spanish. Staff surveys are available in English only.

The Federally-funded Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety provides free resources to support states, districts, and schools in order to expand the knowledge and capacity of the field to integrate evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) and school safety practices and programs to support students' success throughout their K-12 experience and beyond.

State-Specific

The Ohio School Climate Grant: the result of a \$2 million appropriation of the 133rd Ohio General Assembly. Applicants will use the money during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. The grant program's objectives are to increase the number of districts trained to fully implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports frameworks and other social-emotional learning initiatives to decrease discipline incidents that result in suspension or expulsion of students in kindergarten through grade 3. Qualifying applicants will use the grants to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports frameworks, evidence- or research-based social and emotional learning initiatives, or both in eligible buildings. (Grant closed March 12, 2020). Ohio's budget bill also includes a significant investment to support student wellness and success in schools, enabling schools to provide additional mental health services, wraparound services, mentoring, after-school programs and more. School districts will partner with local organizations to determine the needs in their communities and use these funds to make the greatest impact for their students. ([OH](#), [OH](#))

Wyoming Positive School Climate Grant: the Wyoming Department of Education offers competitive grants to help districts and schools acquire and operate programmatically mature & evidence-based programs or innovative programs with the intent of making the largest possible impact for reducing school bullying and increasing positive school culture and climate. Any school can apply for up to \$9,000 to be used in the 2021-22 school year. No local funding is required. ([WY](#))

North Carolina Extended Learning and Integrated Student Supports Competitive Grant Program (ELISS): funds extended learning and integrated student support service programs for at-risk students that raise standards for student academic outcomes. Programs must propose to serve 1) at-risk students not performing at grade level as demonstrated by statewide assessments, 2) students at-risk of dropout, and 3) students at-risk of school displacement due to suspension or expulsion as a result of anti-social behaviors. Nonprofits working in collaboration with local school administrations that will utilize Title I and IV federal funds to supplement the ELISS program are prioritized. North Carolina's COVID-19 Recovery Act allocated \$5,000,000 to the program for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 fiscal years targeted at at-risk students whose learning has been negatively affected by COVID-19 impacts. The law allows funding to be used for, among others things, deployment of multiple tiered supports in schools to address student barriers to achievement, such as strategies to improve chronic absenteeism, antisocial behaviors, academic growth, and enhancement of parent and family engagement and expansion of student access to high-quality learning activities and academic support that strengthen student engagement and leverage community-based resources, which may include organizations that provide mentoring services and private-sector employer involvement. ([NC](#))

In 2013, **California** adopted its Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) that significantly changed how California provides resources to public schools and holds local educational agencies (LEAs) accountable for improving student performance. The LCFF includes eight state priority areas that define a quality education including parent engagement, pupil engagement, and school climate (priorities 3, 5, & 6) and requires that the accountability system consider all priorities. California also subsidizes the cost of its survey for districts. ([CA](#), [CA](#))

The Colorado School Counselor Corps grant program awards funding to increase the availability of effective school counseling. The program has been in place since 2010 and has benefitted 365 secondary schools in 98 districts. More than 270 licensed school counselors have served in various capacities throughout the state through the grant program. This legislative report outlined the return on investment of the program and this 2016 document on lessons learned provides valuable insight into the implementation of the program.

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