

Why School Climate Matters and What Can Be Done to Improve It

Educators' abilities to forge strong relationships with students lie at the heart of strong schools.

For much of the last two decades, the narrowed focus on raising test scores under No Child Left Behind left important aspects of education untended. Since 2016, when the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enabled a more comprehensive look at accountability, state leaders have heard growing demands for a whole-child approach that emphasizes students' social and emotional well-being along with a broader approach to academic development.¹

ESSA renewed attention on the learning environment itself, which plays a critical role in children's ability to learn and thrive. A positive school climate—where students feel a sense of safety and belonging and where relational trust prevails—improves academic achievement, test scores, grades, and engagement and helps reduce the negative effects of poverty on academic achievement.

To bring about such environments, teachers, paraprofessionals, and school and district leaders must be prepared to create the school and classroom structures that encourage secure relationships. Preservice preparation programs and professional development should cultivate knowledge, skills, and beliefs that build educators' understanding of student needs and their ability to support learning and development.

Stable, caring relationships are front and center in every school building that exemplifies positive climate. Such relationships with teachers and other adults foster students' brain development and are linked to better school performance and engagement, increased emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges.

School relationships are especially critical for the 46 million U.S. children exposed each year to abuse, neglect,

hunger, homelessness, the death of a parent, or community violence. Trauma and adversity can lead to chronic stress, which damages the chemical and physical structures of a child's developing brain and can lead to problems with attention, concentration, memory, and creativity. Even one stable relationship with a committed adult can help buffer a child from the effects of serious adversity. Being in a supportive environment has even stronger effects on healing.

Principles for Practice

Creating a positive school climate buoyed by supportive relationships depends largely on schools providing time and opportunity for teachers to get to know their students, identify and respond to their needs, and develop greater alignment between school and home. Designing more personalized school structures can facilitate the creation of consistent, secure relationships for every child:

- **small learning environments**, achieved through reduced overall school size or by creating smaller units or teams in larger schools, which allow educators and students to know each other more fully, work more closely together, build community, and reduce the risk of students falling through the cracks;
- **advisory systems**, in which teachers regularly meet with a small group of students, advise, advocate, and support their academic, social, and emotional development, and build a small community of students to support one another;
- **block scheduling** with fewer, longer class periods to decrease the number of students teachers see each day and allow more time for in-depth teaching and learning;

**Linda Darling-Hammond
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- **interdisciplinary teaming and co-teaching partnerships** with common planning time for teachers, which lets them create learning connections within and across subject areas, develop a collaborative, supportive community of practice, and share knowledge about students to better meet students’ needs;
- **looping**, in which students stay with the same teacher for more than one school year to deepen teacher knowledge of students and support consistent relationships with children and families;
- **reduced class sizes** to lower pupil load and give teachers greater capacity to know and understand their students’ academic, social, and emotional needs;
- **longer grade span schools** (K-8 or 7-12, for example), which mitigate the difficulties of school-to-school transitions and help establish stronger relationships in school and between school and home; and
- **stronger school-family connections** by building in time and supports for teachers and administrators to engage parents as valued partners, maintaining regular exchanges between home and school, planning teacher time for home visits, positive phone calls home, school meetings and student-teacher-parent conferences flexibly scheduled around parents’ availability.

Several classroom practices can help build respectful relationships based on trust:

- **classroom design and management** based on establishing mutual respect can promote student voice and agency, as well as develop interpersonal awareness and skills. When students are involved in co-development of classroom rules and norms, for example, they help create a collaborative environment in which the responsibility for learning is shared between teachers and students.
- **identity-safe environments** are built when educators confront biases based on race, ethnicity, language background, gender, or socioeconomic status that may affect their students, within or beyond the school. By affirming and supporting all students’ learning and development and by creating a psychologically safe learning environment, educators

can mitigate stereotype threats and support student agency and learning.

- **social and emotional learning (SEL)**, as stand-alone instruction and integrated into the core academic curriculum, can cultivate greater self- and social awareness, improve relationship building and communication skills, and promote empathy and mindfulness. Such learning can reduce misbehavior and stress, help students develop confidence and resilience, and engender a growth mind-set that undergirds academic success.
- **restorative discipline practices** recognize students’ behavior as a demonstration of a developmental need and teach students problem-solving skills. Restorative practices replace punitive, coercive, and exclusionary disciplinary approaches with proactive skill development in self-regulation and conflict resolution and help students develop empathy and understanding of their behavior in a supportive manner. For example, schools can engage students in peer mediation to help prevent conflicts from escalating or in “restorative circles,” which repair peer relationships after a conflict has occurred.

Preparing Educators

To cultivate learning environments in which strong adult-student relationships can flourish, educators must gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet their students’ needs. They need deep knowledge of the individual assets and experiences of the children in their care, the social and emotional skills to cultivate empathy and help students develop those skills, and both the teaching competencies and beliefs that enable students to achieve at high levels.

Child Development. Building environments in which learners feel valued and supported requires educators to know a great deal about children’s developmental pathways and progressions in all areas—social, emotional, cognitive, academic, physical, and psychological—and how to support development in each domain. It also means appreciating that children develop in each area at different rates and in different ways and holding space in the classroom for these individual pathways rather than enforcing standardization or labelling children as “fast” or “slow.”

Within a wide range, the speed at which skills are acquired does not predict ultimate proficiency.

Trauma and Social Identity Threat.

Educators must also be firmly equipped to address childhood stress, adversity, and trauma. By receiving training in a trauma-informed approach, which shifts the focus from what is wrong to what is needed, teachers can develop the tools they need to learn from their students' experiences and support their ability to build healthy relationships and disrupt trauma's harms.

Students can also feel stress in the form of social identity threat—when they receive societal- or school-delivered messages that they are less capable or worthy because of their race, ethnicity, language, background, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, disability, or other status. These messages lead to negative self-perceptions, which can impair performance. Social identity threats can come from media, from adults who communicate low expectations or negative views of some children, or from peer ostracism or bullying.

Teachers, paraprofessionals, and school leaders need to be trained to recognize the conscious and unconscious biases that can be expressed in many aspects of school life and student treatment, ranging from tracking systems to disciplinary actions to questions about which students have access to high-status extracurricular opportunities. Educators who are aware of social identity threats can affirm and convey confidence in their students, set high expectations, and provide the supports to ensure that they reach them.

Cultural Competence. Training teachers in culturally responsive pedagogies and developing culturally competent practices support student success. Culturally competent educators view student experiences through an asset-based lens: elevating students' voices in the classroom and providing materials and activities that draw on diverse cultures enable educators to capitalize on students' culturally grounded experiences and promote equity. Such teachers learn about the communities where their students come from and develop strong connections with students' families and larger social networks. These ties can be sustained through check-ins and class meetings, conferencing, journaling, close observations of students, and consistent, positive communication with students' families.

School and district leaders can also create an affirming culture by prioritizing the hiring of teachers and staff of color. Members of a diverse teaching force can help each other understand the varied experiences and cultures of their students. Students of color often achieve at higher levels, attend school more regularly, feel more cared for in the classroom, and are less likely to be suspended when they have teachers of color, and these teachers are appreciated by all students.

Social and Emotional Learning. Creating nurturing learning environments also requires teachers to support the development and integration of SEL into academic learning. Teachers must be able to teach and model critical social skills such as cooperation and communication and emotional skills including empathy, emotional recognition, and self-regulation. Practicing empathy specifically helps teachers view student behavior through the lens of child development. This approach leads teachers to identify problematic behavior as a symptom of unmet needs or negative experiences that can be addressed through targeted supports rather than as a sign of willful defiance or disrespect.

Wellness. It is important to focus on teachers' mental health and wellness as well. Higher levels of teacher stress and burnout, coupled with the inadequate skills to manage stress, are associated with poorer student academic and behavioral outcomes. Further, they contribute to teacher attrition and shortages.

Helping educators learn stress management and supporting their social and emotional health is key to their effectiveness in the classroom and translates into greater job satisfaction and decreased burnout and turnover. One tool is training in mindfulness, which develops a calm attentiveness and awareness of experiences. In a classroom environment where there are many competing demands, the ability to recognize what is happening in the moment and respond skillfully is a critical skill and one that, with practice, can decrease adult and student stress. The physical and mental benefits of mindfulness practice include reduced emotional distress; improved emotional regulation; a greater sense of social-emotional competence, efficacy, and well-being; improved instruction; and better emotional support for students.

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Self-Efficacy. Fostering teachers' self-efficacy—the beliefs they hold about their ability to succeed with students—is key to shaping the learning environment and is molded both by preservice preparation and ongoing professional development. It is associated with more positive student-teacher relationships, as well as increased student motivation and achievement. Teachers' efficacy affects their level of effort, enthusiasm, and commitment to the profession. Teachers with preparation in child psychology and learning theory, selection and use of materials, and extensive clinical practice involving classroom observations, opportunities to practice, and constructive feedback on their performance are much more likely to remain in the classroom than beginning teachers without this preparation. Once in the classroom, teachers are more likely to feel a sense of efficacy when they experience a sense of belonging, are able to exercise leadership, and have a strong professional learning community—all of which in turn strengthens their knowledge and skills for teaching.

Considerations for Policymakers

The ways in which states design accountability and improvement systems, offer guidance, and provide funding can guide schools and educators as they seek to build positive climates. State education agencies and boards can do the following:

Support the development and use of valid measures of school climate, social-emotional supports, chronic absenteeism, and school exclusions in school reporting and accountability systems so that schools focus their attention on them and the data are regularly available to guide continuous improvement. For example, **Maryland** is using school climate surveys of students and educators as an accountability indicator in all grades. Student and educator surveys alike include items on relationships, safety, engagement, and environment. These domains include attention to cultural and linguistic competence, relationships, school participation, emotional safety, physical safety, bullying, substance abuse, instructional environment, physical and mental health, and discipline. To respond to the data provided by school climate surveys and other indicators, the Maryland

Department of Education is developing and implementing a multitiered system of support that includes partnerships between schools and community members to further sustain conflict resolution programs, reduce and eliminate disproportionality in discipline, provide a Youth Mental Health First Aid curriculum for staff, and implement wraparound services.

Establish standards for social, emotional, and cognitive learning that clarify the competencies students should be helped to develop and supporting practices. At least 14 states have articulated SEL competencies/standards for grades preK-12 and state-specific guidance/tools to support the implementation of SEL.² States have used these standards to inform teacher practice, provide guidance to school and district administrators on developing systems that fully embed SEL, and empower parents and families to support SEL at home.

Replace zero-tolerance school discipline policies with policies focused on explicit teaching of social-emotional strategies and restorative discipline practices that support young people in learning key skills and developing responsibility for themselves and their community. **Rhode Island**, for example, has effectively eliminated its zero tolerance policies and has incorporated student suspension rates as part of the school quality and student success indicator in its ESSA plan. The state reports out student suspensions annually for all student subgroups at the state and school level in a state-wide repository that allows users to compare schools on multiple measures, including the types of infractions that resulted in suspensions, the type of disciplinary response, and rates of suspensions by student race. The Rhode Island Department of Education provides resources to help schools reduce the need for disciplinary actions, including suspension. It uses ESSA Title IV, Part A funds for school-based mental health services, mentoring and school counseling, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and programs to reduce exclusionary discipline. The department supports a community of practice which hosts an open forum three times a year for educators and mental health practitioners.

Invest in recruitment and retention strategies that support a well-prepared and diverse educator workforce. A strong, stable, diverse, well-prepared teaching and leadership

workforce is perhaps the most important ingredient. As teacher shortages have become widespread, many states have learned that hiring individuals without preparation for teaching undermines school climate and student support, as they often struggle in the classroom; lack strategies to create safe, productive classrooms; and leave at high rates, creating significant churn that further undermines a positive school climate and student achievement.³ States that are addressing shortages by building a stronger profession are adopting forgivable loans and service scholarships that support strong preparation, high-retention pathways such as teacher residencies, high-quality mentoring, and collegial environments for practice.⁴

Support institutions of higher education in designing high-quality, research-based preservice preparation for teachers and administrators. Supervised clinical experiences in schools should model how to create—and for administrators, design and foster—a positive, developmentally supportive climate for all students. These prep programs should provide a strong foundation in all the elements highlighted in the preceding section. The EdPrepLab, a network of preparation programs that offer these kinds of learning opportunities for teachers and leaders, documents strong preparation practices and shares them with the field. It also works with state policymakers, including state board members, to develop policies that can leverage and support such opportunities.⁵

Incorporate educator competencies for supporting social, emotional, and cognitive development into licensing and accreditation requirements for teachers, administrators, and counseling staff and provide funding to support these reforms. For example, California has increased a focus on all of these competencies in its revised teacher and administrator performance expectations, which guide licensing and program accreditation. Educators are expected to “apply knowledge of students, including their prior experiences, interests, and social-emotional learning needs”⁶ as they develop psychologically safe classrooms and schools and use restorative practices. A survey of California administrators found that recently trained principals felt significantly better prepared to support social-emotional learning, to create a positive climate, and to meet the

needs of diverse learners than principals who entered the profession before these reforms.⁷

Make in-service professional development widely available. These opportunities should help educators continually build on and refine student-centered practices; learn to use data about school climate and a wide range of student outcomes; problem solve around the needs of individual children; and engage with teams and professional learning communities on schoolwide initiatives. In addition, states and districts can provide mentoring and other programs that can improve efficacy and reduce stress, mindfulness and stress management training, social-emotional learning programs that benefit both adults and children, and supportive administration.

As the emerging science of learning and development reveals, a whole-child approach to education—which begins with a positive school climate that affirms and supports all students—is fundamental to supporting academic achievement as well as healthy development. The challenge is to take this understanding into education practice and policy to ensure that every young person receives the benefits of a safe, supportive learning environment. ■

¹This article is drawn from the following reports and articles: Linda Darling-Hammond and Channa Cook Harvey, “Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success” (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., “Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development,” *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>; Stephen Kostyo, Jessica Cardichon, and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Making ESSA’s Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap” (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018); Linda Darling-Hammond et al., “Implications of the Science of Learning and Development for Educator Preparation and Development,” forthcoming.

²Linda Dusenbury, Caitlin Dermondy, and Roger P. Weissberg, “State Scorecard Scan: September 2018” (Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2018).

³Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond, “Teacher Turnover,” in Daniel Losen, ed., *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014).

⁴Danny Espinoza et al., “Taking the Long View: State Efforts to Solve Teacher Shortages by Strengthening the Profession” (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018).

⁵See the EdPrepLab website: <https://edpreplab.org/>; see also Linda Darling-Hammond and Jeannie Oakes, *Preparing Teachers for Deeper Learning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019).

⁶Commission on Teacher Credentialing, “California Teaching Performance Expectations” (Sacramento, CA: author, 2016), <https://www.ctc.ca.gov/docs/default-source/>

Supervised clinical experiences in schools should model how to create a positive, developmentally supportive climate for all students.

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cont'd from page 11... *While School Climate Matters*

educator-prep/standards/adopted-tpes-2016.pdf; Hanna Melnick and Lorea Martinez, "Preparing Teachers to Support Social and Emotional Learning: A Case Study of San Jose State University and Lakewood Elementary School" (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2019).

⁷Leib Sutcher et al., "Learning to Lead: Understanding California's Learning System for School and District Leaders," research brief (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018).

cont'd from page 16... *What Learning and Developmental Science Says*

They can adopt new measurement and evaluation techniques that rely less on averages and instead measure individual growth over time. In doing so, state boards can significantly contribute to transformative, equitable change from the goals and purpose of the current system to a new system that establishes positive life trajectories and substantially different outcomes for many more students. ■

¹Pamela Cantor et al., "Malleability, Plasticity, and Individuality: How Children Learn and Develop in Context," *Applied Developmental Science* 23, no. 4 (2019): 207–37.

²George M. Slavich and Steven W. Cole, "The Emerging Field of Human Social Genomics," *Clinical Psychological Science* 1, no. 3 (2013): 331–48.

³Benjamin S. Bloom, "The 2 Sigma Problem: The Search for Methods of Group Instruction as Effective as One-to-One Tutoring," *Educational Researcher* 13, no. 6 (1984): 4–16.

⁴Todd Rose, *The End of Average: How We Succeed in a World That Values Sameness* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016).

⁵Pamela Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development: A Dynamic Systems Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁶David S. Moore, *The Developing Genome: An Introduction to Behavioral Epigenetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); George M. Slavich and Steven W. Cole, "The Emerging Field of Human Social Genomics," *Clinical Psychological Science* 1, no. 3 (2013): 331–48.

⁷Richard M. Lerner, *Concepts and Theories of Human Development*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁸Jack P. Shonkoff et al., "The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress," *Pediatrics* 129, no. 1 (2012): 232–46.

⁹Vincent J. Felitti et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58.

¹⁰Richard M. Lerner, *Liberty: Thriving and Civic Engagement among America's Youth* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012); E. Tobach and T. C. Schneirla, "The Biopsychology of Social Behavior of Animals," in R. Robert E. Cooke and Sidney S. Levin, eds., *Biologic Basis of Pediatric Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968).

¹¹Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development*.

¹²Rose, *End of Average*; Lerner, *Concepts and Theories of Human Development*.

¹³Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development*; Rose, *End of Average*.

¹⁴K. Brooke Stafford-Brizard, "Building Blocks for Learning: A Framework for Comprehensive Student Development" (New York: Turnaround for Children, 2016).

¹⁵Ibid.; Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development*.

¹⁶Ibid.; Bloom, "2 Sigma Problem"; Kurt W. Fischer and Thomas R. Bidell, "Dynamic Development of Action and Thought," in William Damon and Richard M. Lerner, eds., *Handbook of Child Psychology, Vol. 1: Theoretical Models of Human Development*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006).

¹⁷Drawn from scientific literature as summarized in three papers published in *Applied Developmental Science*, with emphasis on the 2019 article "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," by Linda Darling-Hammond and others. We modified the graphic to ensure applicability to and beyond K-12 settings while retaining the core design principles.

¹⁸Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development*.

¹⁹Turnaround for Children, "Vision for School and Student Success" (New York and Washington, DC: TFC, 2020).

²⁰Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development*; Lerner, *Concepts and Theories of Human Development*.

cont'd from page 27... *School Climate and Measurement*

English only. The EDSCLS can be downloaded and administered free of charge. Education agencies administering the survey can store the data locally; ED has no access to the data.

Directories of Federal School Climate and Discipline Resources. This set of directories, last updated in 2017, includes federal resources on school discipline and climate for different groups of education stakeholders. The directories contain information on capacity-building tools; data, measurement, and reporting; policy guidance; and a compilation of technical assistance centers. There are specific resources for state staff. ■

¹Washoe County School District, "Welcome to the School Climate Survey Project," web page, <https://www.washoe-schools.net/domain/231>.

²For example, Linda Darling-Hammond et al., "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Journal of Applied Developmental Sciences* (February 2019).

³Amrit Thapa et al., "A Review of School Climate Research," *Review of Educational Research* 20, no. 10 (2013).

⁴See, for example, David Osher, Deborah Moroney, and Sandra Williamson, *Creating Safe, Equitable, Engaging Schools: A Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach to Supporting Students* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

⁵David Osher et al., "School Influences on Child and Youth Development," in Zili Sloboda and Hanno Petras, eds., *Defining Prevention Science* (Boston: Springer, 2014).

⁶On how climate affects attendance, see Hedy Chang et al., "Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning" (Washington, DC: AIR and Attendance Works, September 2019).