



Talking Points

*For use by school leaders in presentations
about important issues related to public education*

Climate Control

Does it matter?

Key Messages

- ▲ **Student achievement and behavior are impacted by school climate.**
- ▲ **School climate can be influenced and improved.**

What is school climate?

School climate is the social atmosphere of a setting or "learning environment" in which students have different experiences, depending upon the protocols set up by the teachers and administrators. Psychologist and scholar R. H. Moos divides those social environments into three categories: ¹

- **Relationship**, which includes involvement, affiliation with others in the classroom, and teacher support.
- **Personal growth or goal orientation**, which includes the personal development and self-enhancement of all members of the environment.
- **System maintenance and system change**, which includes the orderliness of the environment, the clarity of the rules, and the strictness of the teacher in enforcing the rules.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals identifies three dimensions of school climate, including the following: ²

- **Physical dimension**
 - The appearance of the school building and its classrooms
 - School size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom
 - Order and organization of classrooms in the school
 - Availability of resources
 - Safety and comfort
- **Social dimension**
 - Quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff
 - Equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff
 - Degree of competition and social comparison between students
 - Degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school

➤ **Academic dimension**

- Quality of instruction
- Teacher expectations for student achievement
- Monitoring student progress and promptly reporting results to students and parents

Despite the complexity of those dimensions, school climate is often described simply as the “feeling” or personality of a school. That feeling is shaped by district and school governance, parents, students and staff.

Does school climate matter?

Research shows school climate is very important and closely associated with student outcomes.

- A Search Institute review of many studies found that a caring school climate is associated with:³
 - Higher grades, engagement, attendance, expectations and aspirations, a sense of scholastic competence, fewer school suspensions, and on-time progression through grades (19 studies)
 - Higher self-esteem and self-concept (5 studies)
 - Less anxiety, depression and loneliness (3 studies)
 - Less substance abuse (4 studies)
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- Another study, by John Schweitzer of Michigan State University, found that when students in Detroit schools felt a sense of community with one another and a sense of belonging to their schools, they achieved higher scores on MEAP tests.³
- A national study of more than 12,000 seventh to twelfth graders found that connectedness to family and school significantly protects youth from seven of eight behaviors risky to their health.³

What influences school climate?

- Specifically, researchers have identified the following factors that influence school climate:⁴
 - Number and quality of interactions between adults and students
 - Students’ and teachers’ perception of their school environment, or the school’s personality
 - Environmental factors (such as the physical buildings and classrooms, and materials used for instruction)
 - Academic performance
 - Feelings of safeness and school size
 - Feelings of trust and respect for students and teachers

While school climate, or the feeling of a school, may be perceived as an abstract concept, experts have spent years exploring its importance and—as a result of their findings—establishing ways to assess and improve it.

How can school climate be improved?⁵

- Educators and parents have multiple options to enhance school climate and students' overall educational experience. The following is a list of possible interventions to improve school climate:
 - Increased parent and community involvement
 - Implementation of character education or the promotion of fundamental moral values in children
 - Use of violence-prevention and conflict-resolution curricula
 - Peer mediation
 - Prevention of acts of bullying
 - Teachers and principals treating students fairly, equally and with respect
 - Safe environment for staff and students
 - Personalization of the school experience
- Family involvement is an important element in creating positive school climates. Research suggests that schools with positive climates do the following:
 - Allow families to participate and develop relationships with the faculty and staff as well as with other families.
 - Contribute to the personal growth of families in terms of their knowledge of child development and parenting skills as well as their own self-esteem.
 - Encourage families to have a say and be an integral part of decision making on issues affecting their children's education.

Moving Forward Together

- Engage all participants in the school climate (leadership, staff, parents, students, community) in discussions about the importance of school climate and ways to improve it. The following discussion starters may be helpful.
 1. How can we work together to enrich relationships in any or all of the following areas: involvement, within the classroom, and teacher support?
 2. How can we work together to increase personal growth and/or goal orientation in the following areas: development opportunities, expectations, goals, and participation.
 3. How can we work together to support classroom norms and school values in the following areas: orderliness, personalization, clarity of rules, and enforcement of rules?

Question for personal reflection: What is *your* role in improving school climate?

¹ Moos, R. H. (1979). *Evaluating educational environments*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

² University-Community Partnerships @ Michigan State University, *Best Practices BRIEFS* 1, No. 31, December 2004 (for more information, go to outreach.msu.edu/bpbriefs/issues/brief31.pdf)

^{3*} Loukas, Alexandra, *Leadership Compass*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007

^{4*} Marshall, Megan L., *Examining School Climate: Defining Factors and Educational Influences*. Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate and Classroom Management, Georgia State University

^{5*} North Central Regional Laboratory, 1996

*These citations include references to specific studies that are available upon request.