

# School Climate & Culture

Tier 1

## Strategy Brief, February, 2016

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Students spend a significant amount of time in school. Therefore, students' feelings about their school experience can have a big impact on their daily lives. Students not only need to feel safe at school, but should also feel comfortable, and that they are part of a supportive environment. Persistent positive school climate has been linked to positive student development, learning, academic achievement, effective risk prevention and health promotion, high graduation rates, low dropout rates, and teacher retention (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). A positive school climate should be a priority because learning in a safe, engaged, and responsive environment sets the foundation for positive academic, social, and emotional development (Blum, McNeely, & Reinhart, 2002).

### What is School Climate and What is School Culture?

Although there is no one clear definition, school climate is commonly defined as the "quality and character of school life" (School Climate Council, 2007, p. 5). The School Climate Council (2007) suggests that school climate encompasses the experiences of individuals in the school, including learning and building relationships, while also capturing the collective beliefs and attitudes that are present within a school. School climate is more than one individual's experience; rather, it is an overarching experience or "feel" of the school.

On the other hand, school culture is defined as the shared values, rules, belief patterns, teaching and learning approaches, behaviors, and relationships among or across the individuals in a school (Çakiroğlu, Akkan, & Guven, 2012). Culture encompasses a school's norms, unwritten rules, traditions, and expectations. These may influence the way people dress to the way they interact with each other (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Culture is more deeply ingrained in a school, and therefore may only be altered over a longer period through systematic change in a school's climate (Gruenert, 2008).

### Comparing School Climate & Culture

School culture is often used interchangeably with school climate; however, "school climate" refers to the individual experiences and feelings that students, teachers, and staff have about the school, while "school culture" typically refers to the long-term physical and social environment, as well as the values or beliefs of the school shared across individuals and time (National School Climate Center, FAQ's About School Climate, n.d.). Another way to differentiate the two terms is by categorizing climate as the "at-



titude or mood” of the school and the culture as the “personality or values” of the school. Climate is perception-based, while culture is grounded in shared values and beliefs (Gruenert, 2008). In this sense, climate is how people feel in the school, and culture is a deeper sense of how people act in the school.

Although both school climate and culture are important in understanding the school environment and students’ experiences, this brief will primarily emphasize school climate as it is a building block of school culture.



## What do we know about School Climate?

A large collection of literature supports the importance of school climate. In fact, a search of “school climate” in research databases (i.e., ERIC, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO) produced anywhere from 2,710 to 2,680,000 documents related to school climate. The articles produced from the search covered a wide breadth of topics related to school climate. Some of the keywords that appeared in the searches are displayed in the Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Common Keywords Produced in a Search of “School Climate”**

- Academic Achievement
- Aggression
- Bullying Program Implementation
- Classroom Management
- Conflict Resolution Strategies
- Discipline Referrals
- Family-School Engagement
- Leadership Strategies
- Parental Involvement
- Peer Victimization and School Violence
- Positive Behavior Intervention & Support
- Principal Leadership
- Program Implementation
- Safety
- School Physical Environment
- School Composition
- School Environment
- School Composition
- Social-Emotional and Character Development
- Teacher Development and Efficacy
- And many more...

Based on these keywords, it is clear that school climate encompasses a large portion of a student’s school experience, and can be connected to almost any issue of concern in school, along with the outcome of expected of education. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) recently completed a comprehensive review of school climate research from 1970-2013. They consulted with experts in the field and used over 200 citations in their review (Thapa et al., 2013). The sources and outlined school climate dimensions included in NSCC’s review help to narrow and focus this discussion of climate.

## Dimensions of School Climate

Although there is not one standard break down of school climate, researchers involved with the National School Climate Center (NSCC) have synthesized school climate research and proposed five major areas of school climate (i.e., external environment, safety, teaching and

learning, relationships, and staff only). Each of those has sub-scales making a total of 12 school climate dimensions (The 12 Dimensions of School Climate, n.d.). A more detailed explanation of indicators of the 12 dimensions of school climate is in the NSCC’s chart reproduced in Figure 2. While this is a well-accepted explanation of components of climate, it is only one example of how it can be broken down. School climate affects, and is affected by almost every aspect of a school.

While it is beyond our scope to discuss all of these dimensions or their indicators here, several of these characteristics can have a strong impact on the behavior of students in school and the way students maintain their connections to school.

**School safety.** Student safety goes beyond physical security; safety is important because it creates a sense of security in school that fosters student learning and support (Gregory et al., 2010). A good strategy to increase school safety is to implement good classroom management practices.

**Interpersonal relationships.** Students are more likely to be engaged in their work and less likely to misbehave when teachers positively interact with and display support for their students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Interpersonal relationships between students and school staff affects school climate. For high-risk elementary school students, having adult support in school is significantly related to reduction in class bullying. Conversely, for high-risk secondary students, peer support is significantly related to reduction in class bullying (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014).

Figure 2. 12 Dimensions of School Climate.

**The 12 Dimensions of School Climate Measured**

Dimensions	Major Indicators
<b>Safety</b>	
1 Rules and Norms	Clearly communicated rules about physical violence; clearly communicated rules about verbal abuse, harassment, and teasing; clear and consistent enforcement and norms for adult intervention.
2 Sense of Physical Security	Sense that students and adults feel safe from physical harm in the school.
3 Sense of Social-Emotional Security	Sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing, and exclusion.
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	
4 Support for Learning	Use of supportive teaching practices, such as: encouragement and constructive feedback; varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills; support for risk-taking and independent thinking; atmosphere conducive to dialog and questioning; academic challenge; and individual attention.
5 Social and Civic Learning	Support for the development of social and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions including: effective listening, conflict resolution, self-reflection and emotional regulation, empathy, personal responsibility, and ethical decision making.
<b>Interpersonal Relationships</b>	
6 Respect for Diversity	Mutual respect for individual differences (e.g. gender, race, culture, etc.) at all levels of the school—student-student; adult-student; adult-adult and overall norms for tolerance.
7 Social Support—Adults	Pattern of supportive and caring adult relationships for students, including high expectations for students’ success, willingness to listen to students and to get to know them as individuals, and personal concern for students’ problems.
8 Social Support—Students	Pattern of supportive peer relationships for students, including: friendships for socializing, for problems, for academic help, and for new students.
<b>Institutional Environment</b>	
9 School Connectedness/Engagement	Positive identification with the school and norms for broad participation in school life for students, staff, and families.
10 Physical Surroundings	Cleanliness, order, and appeal of facilities and adequate resources and materials.
<b>Staff Only</b>	
11 Leadership	Administration that creates and communicates a clear vision, and is accessible to and supportive of school staff and staff development.
12 Professional Relationships	Positive attitudes and relationships among school staff that support effectively working and learning together.

*The 12 Dimensions of School Climate is copyrighted by the National School Climate Center and cannot be reproduced in whole or in part without express written consent from NSCC.*

**School connectedness.** School connectedness has been a focus in school climate research. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2009) describe school connectedness as, “the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 3). It is also associated with student health and academic outcomes (Hong & Espelage, 2012; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Thapa et al., 2013). Additionally, students’ feelings of connectedness to their school mediate the association between school climate and level of aggression (Wilson, 2004). The CDC provides several resources for improving school connectedness: a strategy guide, a staff development program, and fact sheets for school districts and administrators, teachers and other school staff, and for parents and families (National School Climate Center, 2014).

**School physical plant characteristics and size.** Facility quality (lighting, sound, heating, maintenance, etc.) influences student achievement, with school climate as a mediator (Uline



& Tschannen-Moran, 2008). School size also plays a role in school climate. Researchers found that school size negatively correlates with school connectedness, indicating that smaller schools may have stronger school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). Smaller school size

is also correlated with improved academic performance, particularly at the middle school level (Stevenson, 2006).

### **Benefits of Positive School Climate**

Researchers have found that school climate has many positive benefits in the overall school system. More specifically, school climate has a positive influence on academics, students, educators, relationships, safety, and the physical environment. According to the CDC’s School Health Index, a positive psychosocial school climate “is characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships, opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making, and shared positive norms, goals, and values” (2014, p. 14). Furthermore, the School Climate Council states:

*“A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.” (2007, p. 5).*

Perceptions of school climate are particularly important, since perception of a positive school climate has a positive impact on teachers and students, motivating teachers to teach and students to learn to the best of their ability (Bulach, 1994; as cited in Center for the Study of School Climate, 2011). Positive perceptions of school climate have been found to affect student’s overall mental health status with increases in life satisfaction



and decreases in internalizing and externalizing problems (Suldo, McMahon, Chappel, & Loker, 2012).

**Academics.** Another area on which school climate has a positive effect is academic achievement, across all school levels (i.e., elementary, middle, high). Numerous studies support the significant correlation between school climate and academic achievement. Thapa et al. (2013) analyzed an extensive set of research studies which supported this positive correlation. Positive school climate is correlated to academic achievement at each of these levels.

Additionally, researchers found that school climate was significantly associated with students' GPAs; with each one-point increase in school climate scores, there was an equal increase in teacher-reported student GPA (Wang et al., 2014). Moreover, students who perceived a stronger school climate also reported their own GPAs as higher. Overall, the effect of positive school climate perceptions on self-reported GPA was strongest for homeless youth and youth from one-parent homes, suggesting that school climate acts as a protective factor for students living in these family structures (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, & Eklund, 2014). Therefore, an important benefit of school climate is that it can help close achievement gaps by alleviating the negative impact of poverty (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009).



**Risky behavior.** In addition to promoting academic achievement, school climate is negatively correlated with risky behavior. These relationships generalize across gender and minority/nonminority groups, indicating that school climate can serve as a protective factor against the development of risky student behavior across diverse populations (Klein, Cornell, & Konold, 2012). For example, researchers have found that positive school climates appear to be related to lower rates of psychiatric problems and drug use in high school students (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008), as well as, reduced aggression and violence (Gregory et al., 2010). Subsequently, positive school climate has been linked to decreased suspension in high school (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011) and lower dropout rates (Barile et al., 2012).

**Bullying.** In a recent study of 33 elementary schools over a one-year period, Low and Van Ryzin (2014) found that positive school climate plays an important role in forming the foundation for bullying prevention and can help improve the benefits of stand-alone bully prevention programs. Thapa et al. (2013) identified several other studies that found similar results indicating a relationship between positive school climate and reduced bullying behavior (Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw & Elizabeth, 2006; Meraviglia, Becker, Rosenbluth, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006; as cited in Thapa et al., 2013). Improved school climate has also lead to reductions in sexual harassment across sexual orientations (Attar-Schwartz, 2009).

**Other benefits.** Students are not the only ones who benefit from positive school climate. Research supports that school personnel's emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low feelings of personal accomplishment are lessened when school climate is improved (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2002). Positive school climate also has minimizing affects on teacher attrition (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999).

## **Influence of a Negative School Climate**

While positive school climate is clearly beneficial for all individuals involved in schools, having a negative school climate, naturally, has adverse effects. A negative school climate may be assumed as having the opposite characteristics of a positive school climate, such as lower academic achievement, increased risky behaviors, a diminished perception of safety, poor relationships, lack of encouragement, low school connectedness, reduced teacher retention, and increased bullying and victimization. Perceived negative school climate increases the risk of harm to students, as well as liability problems for schools (American Institutes for Research, School Climate, n.d.), as they are associated with increased bullying (Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014; Wang, Berry, & Swearer, 2013), increased violence, increased suicide rates, and diminished student achievement and diminished graduation rates (American Institutes for Research, School Climate, n.d.). Additionally, schools with climates characterized as harsh and punitive have lower levels of student connectedness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). The hostile environment and victimization that may be present in a school with a negative climate can lead to poor psychological and academic outcomes; furthermore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth may be particularly at risk for these harmful effects (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013).

## **Measuring School Climate**

Measuring and evaluating school climate in schools is a crucial step toward reaping the benefits of a positive school climate. According to the National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, measurements of school climate give educators and administration data that is essential to identifying what schools need, setting subsequent goals, and tracking development of goal achievement. Measurement is the first step in the process of improvement, and can be utilized to maintain school accountability as it provides evidence-

based identification of school needs (American Institutes for Research, School Climate Measurement, n.d.). Every school has a unique climate, and thus, each school's climate must be individually assessed in order to be changed effectively (Doll & Cummings, 2008). School climate should be measured regularly to ensure accurate understanding of the school environment. Some states and school districts have policies regarding the regular assessment of school climate.

**Perceptions.** Classroom climate is the “perceived social and psychological environment of a classroom as reported by students and staff who are learning and teaching there” (Doll et al., 2014, p. 54). It is important to measure perceptions of school climate of all individuals involved in the school. According to Bandura's social-cognitive theory (2001), while teachers and students share the same school environment, they have very different roles in the school, which leads to different perceptions of the same experience. Although parents and families are not consistently in the schools, their perceptions are also important because they often dictate their children's attitudes about school, where they send their children to school, and the degree to which their family engages or participates with the school (Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2014). Gender, ethnicity, and age also affect perceptions of school climate (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Therefore, individual factors and diversity should be considered when measuring perceptions of school climate.

**Surveys.** School climate is often measured using surveys. Surveys can measure the perception of school climate from students, staff, and family perspectives. Positive perceptions determine the strength of a school's climate (Doll, Brehm, & Zucker, 2014). Schools use many scales, assessments, and inventories to measure school climate. Selecting the appropriate school climate instrument is crucial because it guides subsequent school improvement processes. Schools must determine what data needs to be collected, who data needs to be collected from (e.g., students, teachers, parents, community), and the current environment of the target population; as well as determine

if there is an existing validated instrument that meets the school's needs (Kohl, Recchia, & Steffen, 2013).

Faster and Lopez (2013) suggest that when looking for the appropriate assessment instrument to use at your school, look for the following factors:

- A solid research-base with strong reliability and validity,
- Thorough field-testing,
- Recognition of all important populations or stakeholders (i.e. students, parents, school personnel, and community if possible),
- Short and easy administration,
- Addresses all needs of your particular community, and
- suggests resource supports.

Additionally, Kohl et al. (2013) support the advantages of adapting existing scales. This can be particularly beneficial when schools face unique issues and want to ensure all desired variables are measured. However, new scales must go through thorough validity and reliability testing in order to ensure effectiveness (Kohl et al., 2013).

**Locating climate surveys.** The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments has a collection of surveys, assessments, and scales of school climate (as of December 20, 2011); all the scales were found to be valid and reliable through testing. The NCSSE's list of climate assessment materials is available on their website. Additional information about measures is in the Resource Brief on School Climate & Culture.

## Improving School Climate

There is no shortage of evidence demonstrating the positive effects of school climate; yet, there is an alarming gap between research and implementation of school improvement and teacher education (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Despite the vast research on the topic and clear importance of positive school climate, a definitive and clear-cut process of improving school climate has not been devel-

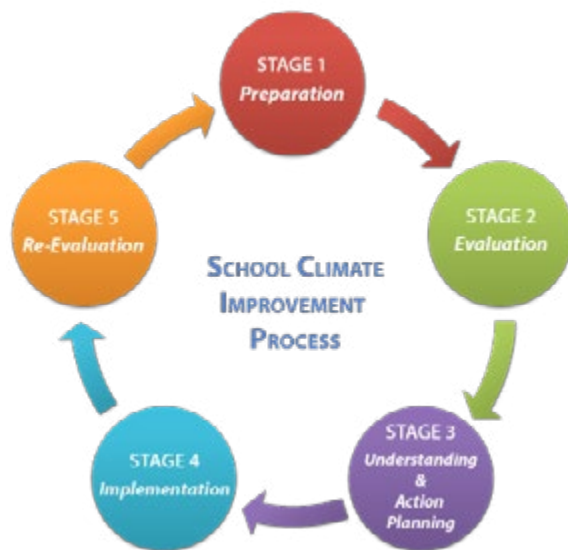
oped. Improving school climate is a continuous process that must involve all levels of the school system and everyone that influences students' academic career. Once school climate has been assessed, data should guide and inform school professionals of areas in need of improvement and which evidence-based strategies would be most beneficial for the specific population needs (American Institutes for Research, Implementation, n.d.). According to Doll (2010), in order to enhance school climate, schools must work to build relationships, minimize and manage conflicts, prevent bullying and victimization, support adults, and promote autonomy. Changing the perceptions of students and school personnel will be of particular importance in promoting academic achievement, particularly for students from high-risk family structures (O'Malley et al., 2014).

**Role of administrators.** Administrators are crucial in setting the tone of school climate. Administrators and principals play an important role in fostering relationships, creating positive framework, commending successes, and selecting suitable staff (Doll, 2010). Administrators should promote a positive school climate by simultaneously embodying feelings of support and structure. School leaders should clearly communicate rules to their students and demonstrate that the behavior standards are followed consistently and objectively. They should also ensure that children feel safe talking to and seeking help from at least one adult in the building (Gregory et al., 2010).

**The improvement process.** The improvement process should begin with an analysis that determines how well the current educational climate functions for student, parent, teacher, and staff support. The improvement process should include the development of a hypothesis of how instructional and intervention efforts can lead to better support for students, educators, and parents (Thapa et al., 2013). It is important to understand that significant behavioral programming efforts, such as improving school climate, will take at least three to five years to show positive effects and systematic changes at the school level (Doll & Cummings, 2008). The National School Climate Center and

National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments have both developed general processes for school climate improvement. Both are discussed in this brief, although the vast array of school improvement ideas and strategies are too broad for the scope of this paper. Please refer to the School Climate Resource Document for more specific programs and strategy ideas.

**Figure 3. National School Climate Center's Improvement Process.** <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/ResearchSupport-FiveStages.pdf>



**The National School Climate Center.** The National School Climate Center's "Improvement Process" is designed as a continuous and cyclical five-step process of preparation, evaluation, action planning, implementation, and re-evaluation. See Figure 3. The process is cyclical because these steps should be repeated to continue addressing issues facing school climate and promoting student success. The five-step process is designed to address five goals: (1) create a shared vision and plan for school climate improvement; (2) create policies that endorse aspects of positive school climate; (3) establish practices to promote learning, increase engagement, and address barriers; (4) generate a supportive, welcoming, and safe environment; and (5) develop norms and practices that emphasize social justice and social/civic responsibilities.

Over the past few decades, positive school climate has gained recognition as a crucial step in K-12 school improvement. The U.S. Department of Education promotes and supports school climate research through their National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments among other avenues. The center highlights research that indicates schools with positive school climate have higher attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates, and graduation rates (American Institutes for Research, School Climate, n.d.). To help foster schools to build positive school climates, the U.S. Department of Education awards Safe and Supportive Schools grants to provide support and training to states, schools, educators, parents, and students with the intent of improving learning environments and ensuring that students feel supported, safe, and able to achieve academic success (American Institutes for Research, About Safe Supportive Learning, n.d.). Their website provides information about their training, products and tools, research findings, and publications.

Additionally the U.S. Department of Education released the School Climate Transformation Grant Program, which has made awards to 125 school districts to improve school climate and student safety. This program "provide[d] competitive grants to local educational agencies to develop, enhance, or expand systems of support for, and technical assistance to, schools implementing an evidence-based multi-tiered behavioral framework for improving behavioral outcomes and learning conditions for all students" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

According to the National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, implementing a school climate improvement plan comprises of putting the proposal into effect, monitoring the effects, making necessary adjustments, and evaluating its overall impact (American Institutes for Research, Implementation, n.d.). This implementation process involves Programmatic Interventions, which the NCSSE defines as a program or method that:

- "Prevents and reduces youth crime, violence, harassment, bullying, and the illegal



- use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco
- Creates positive relationships between students and adults
- Promotes parent & community engagement
- Promotes the character, social, and emotional development of students
- Provides or improves access to social services” (American Institutes for Research, Implementation, n.d.)

Their model of implementation also involves five steps, which are described in Figures 4 & 5. The NCSSLE suggests that schools should acquire survey data once a year in order to pinpoint areas in need of improvement. The

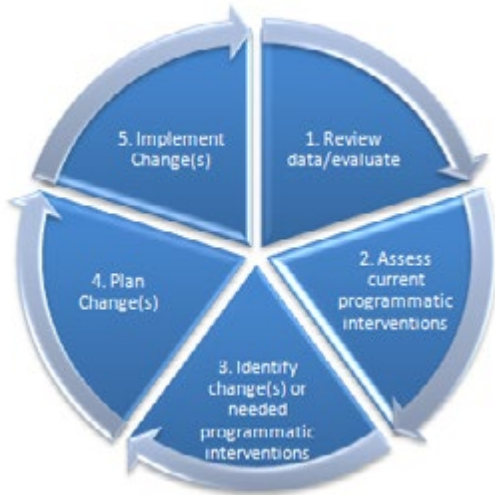
model has empirical support from the National Implementation Research Network, and further detail can be found at NCSSLE’s implementation webpage.

**Other programs.** Implementing other school-wide programs or frameworks can also positively affect school climate. For example, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has received a lot of attention related to school climate. PBIS is a school-wide framework for preventing, reducing, and replacing problem behaviors. It has been implemented in thousands of schools across the nation with the

**Figure 4. National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments Programmatic Interventions (American Institutes for Research, Implementation, n.d.)**

<p>Step 1: Review Data and Evaluate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create school climate team and work together to review data, plan, and implement programmatic interventions</li> <li>• Develop a communication plan for informing stakeholders on activities and timelines</li> <li>• Analyze survey and incident data to determine needs</li> <li>• Utilize 3 tier models of intervention</li> <li>• Review existing plans addressing needs and priorities</li> <li>• Select target areas related to identified needs</li> <li>• Use data to develop vision goals</li> </ul>
<p>Step 2: Assess Current Programmatic Interventions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have team identify current programmatic interventions that are currently in place at each tier</li> <li>• Determine if current interventions are working at each level through data review</li> <li>• Target unsuccessful interventions, which may need to be strengthened or replaced with better fit interventions</li> </ul>
<p>Step 3: Select Programmatic Interventions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use collected data and existing programmatic interventions to determine whether changes are necessary</li> <li>• Find additional programmatic interventions needed to address all of the needs targeted by data</li> <li>• Consider the following when identifying new programmatic interventions: need, fit, available resources, strength of evidence, readiness for replication, capacity to implement, and cost</li> </ul>
<p>Step 4: Plan Change(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin planning needed changes</li> <li>• Confirm all information of selected intervention and how it will address the school’s specific needs</li> <li>• Develop a logic model that will help guide team planning and activities for the year throughout intervention implementation</li> </ul>
<p>Step 5: Implement Change(s)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin work of implementing selected programmatic intervention(s) in each tier</li> <li>• Professional development, training activities, provide access to technical assistance and support, regular monitoring of progress, provide feedback about progress, assess needs of implementers, and respond as needed</li> <li>• Continue to gather, assess, and analyze data on progress and student outcomes</li> <li>• Return to step 1 to address new data, information and/or students populations</li> </ul>

**Figure 5. National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments Programmatic Interventions (Implementation, n.d.)**



purpose to explicitly teach positive, appropriate behaviors while creating an environment in which these behaviors are more attractive than are other negative, inappropriate behaviors. Such efforts continuously strengthen school climate through its school-wide focus on the importance of a student’s environment and the role it plays in encouraging positive behavior.

The idea behind PBIS is that positive behaviors are being consistently reinforced, while negative behaviors are being corrected in a systematic way (tiered supports), rather than punished. Schools should look into school-wide programs such as PBIS and other frameworks that support and encourage a positive school climate.

### Conclusion

A vast amount of research supports the idea that positive school climate has many benefits for school systems. The positive benefits affect students, staff, families, and the local community. Benefits range from improved academic achievement, personal and mental health, and relationships; as well as reduced bullying, victimization, suspension, drop out, and teacher turnover. Appropriate assessment and intervention procedures are key to reducing the gap between research and practice. Although school climate enhancement is not a simple or quick task, it is a crucial piece of school improvement and can have profound effects on student well-being and academic success.



### Related Briefs

Character Education; Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports; Program-Character Counts!; Reinforcement.

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