



# Illinois State Board of Education

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## Positive School Climate

### *Webinar Study Guide*

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**1. CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING:** Research has shown that when districts and schools promote the necessary **conditions for learning** (i.e., a positive school climate and the development of academic, physical, social, emotional, and behavioral competencies) **and** address barriers to learning and teaching such as: bullying and disengagement, the following positive outcomes are more likely to occur:

- mental wellness;
- the prevention of behavioral health issues;
- school connectedness;
- reduction in **student** absenteeism;
- reduction in suspensions;
- adoption, implementation and institutionalization of new practices; and
- **improved** academic outcomes.

And when these practices are implemented through a coordinated and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports that is fully integrated into the **Curriculum** and **Instruction** and **Governance** Systems through the Statewide System of Support Continuous Improvement Process, **outcomes improve** and are more likely to sustain over time.

**2. SCHOOL CLIMATE:** According to the National School Climate Council, “School climate refers to 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.” Safe, caring, participatory and responsive **learning** environments are elements of a positive **school** climate.

School **climate** can be organized into the following areas of focus: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment.

- **Safety** encompasses **rules** and **norms**; physical safety; and social-emotional safety;
- **Relationships** include respect for **diversity**; school connectedness/engagement; social support from adults; social support from other students; and **leadership**;
- **Teaching and Learning** often consists of social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; support for learning; and **professional** relationships);
- **Institutional Environment** typically involves the **physical** surroundings.

A. **SAFETY:** Students’ sense of **safety** in schools impacts student learning and healthy development. Many students, however, do not feel safe in **school** due to the violence and verbal bullying that they may experience on a regular basis.

To improve safety issues, including but not limited to bullying, district and schools can implement a variety of **strategies** through a multi-tiered system framework. Universal programming could include activities such as teaching and modeling social and emotional

competencies, defining and promoting positive behavior and addressing **misbehavior** through **correction** measures.

One such activity that teaches and models social and emotional competencies is the implementation of Restorative Justice Measures (RJM). RJM allow students to be **empowered** to create their own safe environment, resolve conflicts, hold each other **accountable**, and assist each other by repairing harm and sustaining peaceable schools through a peer jury.

Schools can also improve safety issues by attending to the physical environment through the promotion of **natural** surveillance, limited access in and out of buildings, and reinforcement of ownership through signs and maintenance. In addition, schools can work with first responders in their community, to review and revise school **emergency** and crisis **response** plans to better protect students and staff during crisis situations.

A number of the findings from Early Warning, Timely Response indicate strong support for discipline policies that endorse **positive** behavior management. For example, the Report states that, “A growing number of schools are discovering that the most effective way to reduce suspensions, expulsions, **office referrals**, and other similar actions – strategies that do not result in making schools safer – is to emphasize a proactive approach to discipline” through a **multi-tiered** system framework.

Effective schools establish **high** behavioral expectations, provide support for socially **appropriate** behavior and highlight sanctions against aggressive behavior. The Report also states that best practices include the development and consistent enforcement of rules that are **clear**, broad-based, and **fair**. Rules should be developed collaboratively by **representatives** of the total school community, communicated clearly and consistently enforced.

Early Warning, Timely Response is also clear about the response to inappropriate behaviors. Responses must match the offense, take into account student differences and be applied in a **nondiscriminatory** manner. If a negative correction is used, it is **combined** with positive strategies for teaching socially appropriate behaviors.

- B. **RELATIONSHIPS:** When students perceive that adults and friends in the school **care** about their learning and about them as individuals, there is a **positive** correlation with adolescent health and academic outcomes, including school **attendance**. This important aspect of relationships is referred to as school **connectedness**.

School connectedness is also a **protective** factor against a variety of issues including violence and drug use behaviors. Adults in school buildings can improve school connectedness through the multi-tiered system framework by:

- establishing high and realistic **expectations** that are communicated regularly and consistently reinforced;
- providing opportunities for students and families to participate in **meaningful** ways;
- dedicating time, interest, attention and emotional support to students; and
- encouraging **personal** relationships and allowing for personalized learning using a variety of strategies such as cooperative learning activities that foster peer support.

- C. **TEACHING & LEARNING:** Positive school climates that promote cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect and mutual trust improve the environments for **learning**. Research also shows that academic achievement **increases** with student classroom participation.

Teacher-student interactions impact students' engagement in the classroom. Strategies teachers can utilize to improve the learning environment and student engagement include:

- attending to the students' social and emotional well-being through direct skill instruction and modeling SEL **competencies**;
- utilizing personal student data which encompass each student's learning style to inform teaching practices and meet the **individual** and **collective** needs of the students in his/her classroom; and
- providing students with opportunities to apply classroom lessons to real life situations (e.g., authentic projects that embrace **collaborative** learning with a civic mission).

**D. INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT:** The institutional environment often refers to the school building and the area **surrounding** it, and conditions such as temperature, noise, lighting and air quality. The physical environment can **positively** or **negatively** impact student and teacher **attitudes** as well as student **achievement**.

Several studies have shown that substandard facilities negatively impact student achievement. Other conditions that negatively impact student achievement included graffiti and **noisy** external environments. One study found temperature, heating and air **quality** as the most important individual environmental elements on student achievement.

Other conditions of the physical environment, such as the size of the school, placement of **desks**, and displays of student work also impact the school **climate**. Large anonymous schools that cannot focus on its' members and in turn emphasize compliance tend to **counteract** the fostering of a caring and supportive school. To address this issue, large schools might look for opportunities to form smaller **communities** of **learning** in each grade and classroom. The placement of desks can also influence learning. Although desks organized in rows better promote task completion, desks organized in a "horseshoe" formation where students can see each other and the teacher, can create greater **participation**. Displaying student work has also positively impacted school climate.

**3. ASSESSMENT:** Surveys on school climate and learning conditions are designed to measure **intangible**, yet **essential**, aspects of a school's learning and teaching environment.

They address the gestalt of a school by asking specific stakeholders about their **perceptions** of issues such as **trust** between students and teachers; school-parent communication; the physical and emotional safety of the facility; the level of **support** that teachers feel is available and present in the working environment; and how instructional staff is included in learning and decision-making processes. More information on the administration of the school climate surveys can be found at [www.isbe.net](http://www.isbe.net)

**4. LINKS:** Thank you for taking the time to listen to this webinar on a **Positive School Climate**. We encourage you to learn more about School Climate and available **resources** by visiting the ISBE website and linking to the Learning Supports **web** page.

