

## Technical Brief

# School Climate: Academic Achievement and Social Behavior Competence<sup>1</sup>

Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports<sup>2</sup>

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### 1. *What is the purpose of this technical brief on school climate?*

The purpose of this technical brief is to provide an operational and applied overview of school climate that can guide decisions related to policy, professional development, and practice and systems implementation at the classroom, school, district, and state levels.

Rather than providing a comprehensive review of the school climate literature, we address common questions from a prevention-based and behavioral science perspective (Biglan, 1995, 2015). We emphasize observable applications, measurable outcomes, defensible practices, and data-based decision-making. In addition, we adopt a multi-tiered support systems (MTSS) framework to guide implementation and decision-making. In addition, we give priority to (a) a behaviorally-based theoretically approach, (b) peer-reviewed empirically supported practices, (c) important outcomes related to academic achievement and social competence, (d) operationally defined and decision-based data measures and systems, and (e) data-informed implementation systems.

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## 2. *What is school climate?*

Generally, school climate represents the shared norms, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors that shape the nature of interactions between and among students, teachers, and administrators (Emmons et al., 1996; Johnson, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2015; La Salle, Meyers, Varjas, & Roach, 2014). As such a social or educational validation approach is accentuated (Gresham & Lopez, 1996; Wolf, 1978), meaning that key stakeholder perceptions are examined relative to one's expectations about experiences within a given place or organization and with a particular intervention or practice. As such, individual culture, context, and learning history influence one's perceptions, experiences, and actions (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012).

These organizational, instructional, and interpersonal expectations and experiences also set the normative parameters of social behavior within the school (Anderson, 1982; Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008) and function as the basis for how students, educators, parents, and visitors report on the relative quality of the educational and personal culture and climate of classrooms and the school (e.g., safety, respectfulness, responsibility, community).

Perceptions of school climate are shaped by one's instructional, personal, and interpersonal experiences in classroom and nonclassroom settings. For example, in settings described as having negative climates, an observer is more likely to see and experience students engaged in antisocial and atypical student behavior and reactive punishing adult behavior. In contrast, an observer of positive climates is more likely to see students displaying setting-specific prosocial behavior and social skills and educators engaged in more preventive and constructive instructional and social support actions.

In the following table, we present examples of observable student and educator behaviors to illustrate how negative and positive classroom and school climate perceptions are shaped and influenced. Although they are presented separately, the interactive nature of these social behaviors must be emphasized, that is, student alone, student-student, student-educator, educator-educator, and educator-parent.

<b>NEGATIVE School/Classroom Climate Examples</b>	
<p><b>STUDENTS</b> are more likely to be seen and heard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using inappropriate language</li> <li>• Being verbally and/or physically aggressive</li> <li>• Failing academically</li> <li>• Being noncompliant or defiant behavior</li> <li>• Displaying unregulated emotions</li> <li>• Being late or skipping class</li> <li>• Verbal and nonverbal teasing, intimidation, &amp; harassment</li> <li>• Crying easily</li> <li>• Being unresponsiveness</li> <li>• Damaging property</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p><b>EDUCATORS</b> are more likely to be seen and heard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving verbal reprimands</li> <li>• Removing students from instructional groups, classrooms, or school</li> <li>• Withholding academic instruction</li> <li>• Administering corporal punishment</li> <li>• Engaging in public humiliation or blaming</li> <li>• Coercing compliance</li> <li>• Threatening or using physical responses</li> <li>• Engaged in public humiliation</li> <li>• Avoiding student engagements</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

<b>POSITIVE School/Classroom Climate Examples</b>	
<p>STUDENTS are more likely to be seen and heard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using setting appropriate language</li> <li>• Following directions appropriately</li> <li>• Experiencing academic success</li> <li>• Handling problems and conflicts calmly and effectively</li> <li>• Expressing feeling and emotions appropriately</li> <li>• Asking for assistance in acceptable manner</li> <li>• Playing/working cooperatively</li> <li>• Listening and following along with instruction</li> <li>• Problems solving conflicts</li> <li>• Restoring environments and relationships</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p>EDUCATORS are more likely to be seen and heard</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving positive and informative reminders</li> <li>• Having more positive than negative interactions</li> <li>• Teaching and reinforcing important classroom routines</li> <li>• Expressing high academic and behavioral expectations of their students</li> <li>• Maximizing their use of instructional time with high rates of opportunities to respond</li> <li>• Modeling expected prosocial skills</li> <li>• Handling problem behaviors and rule violations calmly and consistently</li> <li>• Positively, actively, and continuously supervising</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

**3. *Why is school climate important for all students and educators?***

Although academic achievement and classroom and school climate are often considered independently, their interactive nature and influence are overlooked (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Positive school climate has been linked to several important outcomes including increased student self-esteem and self-concept, decreased absenteeism, risk prevention, reduced behavioral problems, and school completion (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Lindstrom Johnson, Pas, & Bradshaw, 2015).

Over several decades, researchers, policymakers, and educators have increasingly recognized school climate as a critical component of school improvement efforts because of its effect on students’ outcomes (Anderson, 1982, Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011; Cohen et al., 2009; La Salle, Meyers, Varjas, & Roach, 2014; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2014).

#### 4. How is school climate measured?

School climate data are collected using three general approaches: (a) social validation, (b) archival data, and (c) observation.

- a. *Social Validation.* Stakeholder perceptions are surveyed using descriptors that range from general (e.g., “I feel safe at school”) to specific (e.g., “Teasing, harassment, and bullying behavior is a daily occurrence in my school”) along a continuum of responses (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree). Perceptions are obtained through surveys, focus groups, and rating scales that are completed by students, family members, educators, and community members.
- b. *Archival Data.* Archival data on student and/or educator behavior are collected and stored for later examination. For students, indicators may be related to attendance, dropping out, academic records, disciplinary infractions, participation in extracurricular activities. For educators, similar extant data include, for example, attendance, punctuality, illness, transfers, and activity engagement.
- c. *Observation.* Data are collected directly on what students and educators are observed doing (e.g., frequency, rate, duration, latency) in particular settings (e.g., classroom, hallways, lunchrooms, playgrounds, assemblies) or contexts (e.g., in small group, with certain individuals, doing specific academic content). Examples of observation indicators may include the following student and/or educator behaviors:

Student Behaviors	Educator Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # teasing and harassment behaviors</li> <li>• # positive interactions with others</li> <li>• # minutes playing alone and/or with others</li> <li>• # positive initiations</li> <li>• # destructive property acts</li> <li>• # aggressive (verbal/aggressive) acts</li> <li>• # minutes to comply to requests</li> <li>• </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # reprimands or reactive responses</li> <li>• Ratio # of positive to negative interactions</li> <li>• # positive acknowledgements and recognition</li> <li>• # opportunities to respond</li> <li>• # opportunities for academic success</li> <li>• # precorrection prompts</li> <li>• </li> </ul>

Regardless of the approach to measuring school climate, the information must be contextualized by determining (a) where and when, (b) with whom, (c) how often, (d) where and under what contexts, and (e) why (e.g., motivation, function). In addition, the cultural context of students and educators must be considered, that is, family, neighborhood, school, district, community, etc. (Fallon, O’Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012; La Salle, Meyers, Varjas, & Roach, 2014; Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012). As such, school climate data can assist in considering questions related to equity, disproportionality, and cultural responsiveness and appropriateness.

**5. What practices and systems are associated with the development, sustainability, and enhancement of positive school climates?**

Given the above prevention-based, behavioral sciences approach, we propose that priority must be given to selecting systems that improve the high fidelity and sustainable implementation of effective practices. In general, *practices* are those strategies, interventions, programs, curricula, etc. that are experienced by students, parents, and guardians to enhance their contributions to a positive school climate. *Systems* are those structural and organizational supports that are experienced by educators to insure the best selection, adaptation, and accurate and long term implementation of effective practices. These practices and systems are summarized below:

<b>Examples of Effective Practices and Supporting Systems</b>	
<p><b>PRACTICES</b> include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective academic instruction that provides frequent opportunities for maximum instructional engagement, active responding, and academic success on challenging content</li> <li>• Preventive, continuous, and active supervision across all academic and nonacademic contexts and settings throughout the school day</li> <li>• Explicit, culturally responsive, and active social skills instruction that is taught, practiced, and acknowledged within and across all academic and non-academic contexts and settings throughout the school day</li> <li>• High rates of positive and informative feedback for both academic and nonacademic responses within and across settings</li> <li>• Differentiated academic and behavioral supports that increase in intensity, frequency, duration, individualization based on responsiveness to intervention, learning history, and student characteristics (e.g., disability, medical/physical status)</li> <li>• Frequent reminders about expected</li> </ul>	<p><b>SYSTEMS</b> include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active participation and implementation by school leadership</li> <li>• Active participation and implementation by majority of staff (&gt;80%).</li> <li>• Active and frequent educator modeling of expected student social skills</li> <li>• Action plan that schedules activities for a 2-3 year implementation</li> <li>• Coordinated school-wide implementation by leadership team representing grade/department, non-teaching staff, behavior specialists, leadership, students, families, etc.</li> <li>• Decision-based data system addressing student responsiveness, implementation fidelity, and implementation capacity development</li> <li>• Multi-tiered framework for selection, organization, and implementation of effective practices for all students, including data decision rules, expected outcomes, and implementation supports</li> <li>• District-level supports and</li> </ul>

<p>social skills, behaviors, and routines within and across contexts and settings</p>	<p>participation in the school-based implementation (e.g., policy, funding, personnel, priority)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal and external coaching supports to prompt, remind, and reinforce implementation action plan</li> <li>• Procedural guide for comprehensive integration and implementation of all behavior related initiatives under a school climate umbrella and within a multi-tiered framework</li> </ul>
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**6. How does school climate relate to other social, emotional, and behavioral initiatives (e.g., bullying, disproportionality and culture, character education, school violence and safety, classroom management, reactive discipline, attendance, restorative practices)?**

What students, educators, parents, guardians, and others experience within and across classroom and nonclassroom settings affects how they perceive and describe their experiences. If they see or experience bullying or victimization, aggressive acts, humiliation or embarrassment, discrimination, sadness, unsafe actions, etc., they are more likely to perceive and report a negative school climate. If they see or experience more cooperative, helping, effective self-management, safe and caring acts, responsible behaviors, etc., they are more likely to describe these setting has having positive climates.

When social and/or behavioral challenges are experienced, initiatives, programs, and procedures are put in place to address them, for example, bullying prevention, restorative practices, character education, and life skills training. If the focus is on individual students, more specialized supports, like school mental health, special education, and clinical counseling are initiated so that intensive strategies can be provided (e.g., cognitive behavior therapy, function-based behavior intervention plans, targeted social skills instruction).

Regardless of whether the emphasis is school-wide, classroom, or individual, the responses are often independently developed and implemented, and they collectively affect our experience and perceptions of those experiences, that is, school climate (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). If any one or combination of behavioral responses or practices is to have the desired effect and expected outcome, an implementation framework is needed to organize (i.e., align, eliminate, merge, sequence) how they relate to each other and how they would be implemented across all school settings for all students and staff (La Salle, Sugai, & Freeman, in preparation).

Thus, the multi-tiered framework becomes the operating continuum for sequencing, aligning, and integrating multiple behavior related practices that contribute to school climate. Examining stakeholders’ perceptions of school climate serves to (a) understand how key members of the school community perceive the school environment

along a number of variables including safety, interpersonal relationships, behavioral expectations, etc.; (b) inform educators about the effectiveness of school interventions; and (c) facilitate contextually relevant data-based decision making within a multi-tiered framework.

This framework generally includes three tiers: (a) Tier 1 - school-wide practices and systems for all students and educators across all classroom and school settings, (b) Tier 2 - extended Tier 1 practices and systems for students who require small group supports, and (c) Tier 3 - individualized practices and systems for students who require more intensive supports than provided at Tiers 1 and 2.

Three implementation implications are associated with a multi-tiered approach to school climate efforts:

- a. Classroom and school practices must be selected based on factors that are contributing to a negative climate and needed for developing a positive climate.
- b. Priority is given to choosing and implementing a few effective practices that are (a) clearly aligned with a documented need and achieving desired and expected outcomes, (b) sequenced in a continuum from universal to targeted, (c) doable with fidelity in specific contexts and settings, and (d) culturally and contextually appropriate for the students and staff members of the school.
- c. Systems capacity exists to support data-based decision making, practice selection, high fidelity sustainable implementation, and continuous adaptation and regeneration.

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