

## Technical Brief

# Every Student Succeeds Act: Why School Climate\* Should Be One of Your Indicators

Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports<sup>1</sup>

November 29, 2016

### 1. *What is purpose of this FAQ?*

With the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), State education agencies (SEA) have a great opportunity to revisit and update their state-wide school improvement plans. A particularly important emphasis of ESSA is school climate and safety, which are so integrally linked to academic achievement, active student and teacher engagement, and tiered systems of support for all students, but especially students with high failure risk (e.g., students with disabilities English language learners, students from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds and environments).

Because of the importance of school climate and safety to the academic enterprise, a number of questions and answers are presented to guide SEAs and local education agencies (LEAs) in considering School Climate and Safety as one of their ESSA indicators.

### 2. *What does ESSA require for SEA plan indicators?*

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015, reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provides Federal funds to improve elementary and secondary education in the Nation's public schools. 20 U.S.C. 6301. Under ESSA, States set their own ambitious goals, and measurements of interim progress, for academic outcomes. ESSA also requires States to have robust, multi-measure statewide accountability systems, which include indicators of academic achievement, graduation rates (for high schools) or academic progress (for elementary and middle schools), and progress towards English language proficiency. ESSA also gives States the flexibility to choose new statewide indicators that create a more holistic view of student success. Under this flexibility, States have the opportunity to select a new valid, reliable, and comparable indicator of "School Quality or Student Success", which may include a school climate and safety indicator. 20 U.S.C. 6311(c). 34 CFR § 200.14(b)(5). States must ensure that this new indicator measures the performance of all students in all public schools (including public charter schools), allows for comparisons between subgroups of students, demonstrates variation across schools in the State, and is likely to increase graduation rates or academic achievement.

---

<sup>1</sup>Authors' Note: George Sugai, Brandi Simonsen, Jennifer Freeman, and Tamika La Salle, Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut. November 29, 2016. Development and preparation of this document were supported in part by a grant from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education (H029D40055). Opinions expressed herein are the authors and do not reflect necessarily the position of the U.S. Department of Education, and such endorsements should not be inferred. Contact: George Sugai (george.sugai@uconn.edu), OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (www.pbis.org), Center for Behavioral Education and Research (www.cber.org), Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

### **3. What is school climate?**

Generally, school climate represents the shared norms, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and behaviors that shape interactions between and among students, teachers, and administrators.<sup>1 2 3</sup> As such, individual culture, context, and learning history influence one's perceptions, experiences, and actions and vice versa.<sup>4</sup>

These perceptions, experiences, and actions set the norms for acceptable and unacceptable social behavior within the school<sup>5 6</sup> 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).

In turn, classroom and school climate affect the effectiveness of academic programming and student achievement for all students, especially those with academic and behavior risk (e.g., disability, mental health, disadvantaged, language).

### **4. Why should states and districts make school climate a high priority for all students and educators as one of their ESSA indicators?**

Historically, school improvement efforts have emphasized academic achievement and curriculum and instruction. However, ESSA accentuates school and classroom climate. Rather than considering academic achievement and classroom and school climate separately, their interactive nature and influence are viewed as essential to school success.<sup>7</sup>

- a. Positive school climate has been linked to several important outcomes including increased student self-esteem and self-concept, decreased absenteeism, enhanced risk prevention, reduced behavioral problems and disciplinary actions (in-school detention and out-of-school suspension), and increased school completion.<sup>8 9</sup>
- b. School climate has been recognized as a critical component of school improvement efforts because of its effects on students' outcomes.<sup>10 11 12 13 14</sup>
- c. Establishing and maintaining a positive school climate benefits all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, children and youth from economically disadvantaged families, and students from culturally and racially diverse groups.<sup>15</sup>

**5. How is school climate measured?**

School climate data are collected using three general approaches: (a) social validation, (b) archival data, and (c) observation.<sup>16</sup>

- 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, and 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).

Regardless of the approach to measuring school climate, the information must be contextualized by determining (a) 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.<sup>17 18 19</sup> As such, school climate data can assist in considering questions related to equity, disproportionality, and cultural responsiveness and appropriateness.

**6. What school climate practices and systems are associated with school improvement efforts?**

States and districts that make improvement of school climate one of their four ESSA Plan indicators adopt and implement a continuum of evidence-based practices and systems to specifically support this effort. Examples of 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>• An environment that is structured (e.g., clear routines) and purposefully designed (e.g., physical arrangement of furniture, marked traffic patterns) to</li> </ul>	<p><b>SYSTEMS</b> include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active participation and implementation by school leadership and a 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> </ul>

<p>encourage appropriate behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><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, and individualization based on responsiveness to intervention, learning history, and student characteristics (e.g., disability, medical/physical status, learning history)</li><li>• Frequent reminders about expected social skills, behaviors, and routines within and across contexts and settings</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><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 participation in the school-based implementation (e.g., policy, funding, personnel, priority)</li><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><li>• Effective professional development (e.g., training, coaching, and feedback mechanisms) and staff recognition systems to support and encourage staff members' implementation of evidence-based behavioral practices</li></ul>
--	---

**7. How are school climate practices and systems organized and implemented effectively, efficiently, and relevantly within a comprehensive school improvement effort?**

Because each classroom, grade level, school, and neighborhood has unique combinations of characteristics (e.g., culture, race, gender, disability, language) that contribute to perceptions and experiences of positive and negative climate, an explicit and informed school improvement approach is necessary.

In addition, rather than addressing each behavior issue (e.g., bullying behaviors, tardies, aggressive acts, substance abuse, trauma exposure) or climate condition (e.g., safety, respect, discrimination, mental health, civility) as separate initiatives (e.g., restorative practices, classroom bully-proofing, character education, life skills training, trauma informed care), related interventions, practices, personnel, and programs (e.g., school mental health, special education, nursing, school psychology and counseling) must be organized around common need or outcome.

Thus, school climate is the main foundation for organizing and implementing school climate improvement efforts, and this foundation is based on a multi-tiered implementation framework. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) becomes the operating continuum for sequencing, aligning, and integrating multiple behavior related practices that contribute to school climate.

This tiered framework generally would include 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.

Development of this continuum of positive school climate supports generally follow these steps:

<b>School Climate MTSS Implementation Steps</b>
<p><b>Step 1.</b> Identify, merge, modify, and/or develop a school, district, and/or state leadership team to lead and coordinate school climate improvement effort.</p> <p><b>Step 2.</b> Identify factors that contribute to perceptions of negative school climate for all students, groups of students, and/or individual students and specify measurable improvement indicators at each tier.</p> <p><b>Step 3.</b> Identify existing and new practices and systems (interventions, programs, personnel, resources) that are evidence-based, specifically address factors identified in Step 1, and can be organized within an MTSS framework.</p> <p><b>Step 4.</b> Eliminate, merge, and integrate practices and systems that are redundant, not contextually/culturally relevant, non-evidence-based, misaligned, not implementable, etc.</p> <p><b>Step 5.</b> Develop a decision-based data system that includes (a) regular universal screening, (b) continuous progress monitoring, (c) evaluation of practice implementation fidelity, and (d) assessment of school climate status.</p> <p><b>Step 6.</b> Prepare and organize resources, policy, personnel, etc. for sustainable and high fidelity implementation of the full continuum of support across classroom and non-classroom settings.</p> <p><b>Step 7.</b> Adjust MTSS continuum of practices and systems based on regular assessment of need, student responsiveness to intervention, and implementation fidelity.</p>

**8. What implementation considerations are important when addressing school climate as a priority ESSA indicator?**

School climate is proving to be essential for supporting the academic and social behavior success of all students, and is an important SEA and LEA consideration in ESSA school improvement efforts.

In general, SEAs that identify school climate as one of their 4 ESSA indicators should consider the following in their planning and implementation efforts:

<b>SEA School Climate Indicator Considerations</b>
<p><b>a. Continue to emphasize the strong and influential relationship between academic and behavior instruction and success.</b> Sound academic instruction is necessary for students to learn; however, social and behavior success is also needed to maximize impact of academic instruction. Similarly, effective behavior supports are necessary for students to be socially competent and contribute to a positive school climate; however, academic engagement and success is also needed to support the social and behavioral competence of students.</p> <p><b>b. Establish school-wide social culture or climate as the comprehensive implementation “umbrella” for organizing all behavior-related initiatives</b></p>

**(including academic instruction) into a single MTSS implementation.**

Because school climate ratings vary based on student and staff member academic and social behavior experiences in their unique local context, efforts to assess and enhance school climate must consider all academic and behavior-related contributors. As such, individual initiatives (e.g., bullying, character education, attendance, life and social skills, trauma-informed interventions, restorative practices) must be considered under school climate and organized using an MTSS framework.

- c. Invest in development of local implementation capacity.** While initial implementation results are encouraging, implementation fidelity must continue to be a system level priority. Students cannot benefit from evidence-based practices if they are not implemented with high levels of commitment, accuracy, and fluency.
- d. Invest in decision-based data systems to guide implementation decisions.** Given the increasing number of initiatives competing for resources, schools must use information to guide selection of interventions, implementation fidelity of those interventions, and student responsiveness.
- e. Enhance school, LEA, and SEA leadership capacity to implement evidence-based practices within MTSS with fidelity and sustainability.** Educators are critical implementers of best practice; however, leadership is needed to maximize student outcomes, sustain fidelity implementation, and adjust implementation over time to sustain outcomes and accommodate new needs.
- f. Select, align, and integrate evidence-based practices effectively, efficiently, and relevantly.** Implementers must resist urge that “more is better,” and instead focus on (a) clearly defining and prioritizing need, (b) aligning most effective practice with need, (c) integrating or eliminating ineffective or un-aligned practices, (d) adapting practice to local context and/or culture, and (e) adjusting practice implementation over time based on student responsiveness.
- g. While Tier 1 is being established, focus on development of capacity for implementation of advanced tiers (2/3) of support.** Investing in school climate, however, does not stop with Tier 1 practices. In addition, the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of tier 2/3 practices and systems is influenced by the fidelity and impact of tier 1 practice and system implementation. Equity in behavior support requires extending the intensity of support practices to Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels that are more individualized, technically demanding, and combinations of academic, mental health, and behavioral assistance.
- h. Consider local context and culture when implementing MTSS.** Effective practices and systems are necessary, but their implementation must consider the norms, routines, language, etc. of the local context or culture of students and staff and family members.

## Resources

OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports ([www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org))

OSEP Center on State Implementation and Scaling of Evidence-based Practices ([www.scalingup.org](http://www.scalingup.org))

Midatlantic Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Network ([www.midatlanticPBIS.org](http://www.midatlanticPBIS.org))

Pacific Northwest Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Network ([www.PNWPBIS.org](http://www.PNWPBIS.org))

Northeast Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Network ([www.neswpbs.org](http://www.neswpbs.org))

Midwest Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Network (www.....)

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Emmons, C. L., Corner, J. P., & Haynes, N. M. (1996). Translating theory into practice: Comer's theory of school reform. In J. P. Corner, N. M. Haynes, E. Joyner, & M. Ben-Avie (Eds.), *Rallying the whole village* (pp. 127–143). New York: Teachers College Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Johnson, S. L., Pas, E., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2015). Understanding the association between school climate and future orientation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. DOI 10.1007/s10964-015-0321-1
- <sup>3</sup> La Salle, T. P. L., Meyers, J., Varjas, K., & Roach, A. (2015). A cultural-ecological model of school climate. *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 3(3), 157-166.
- <sup>4</sup> Sugai, G., O'Keeffe, B., Fallon, L. (2012). A Contextual Consideration of Culture and School-Wide Positive Behavior Support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Supports*, 14, 197-208.
- <sup>5</sup> Anderson, C. S. (1982). The search for school climate: A review of the research. *Review of educational research*, 52, 368-420.
- <sup>6</sup> Koth, C. W., Bradshaw, C. P., & Leaf, P. J. (2008). Examining the relationship between classroom-level factors and students' perception of school climate. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100, 96-104.
- <sup>7</sup> Stronge, J., Ward, T., & Grant, L. (n.d.). What makes good teachers good? A cross-case analysis of the connection between teacher effectiveness and student achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(4), 339-355.
- <sup>8</sup> Cohen, J., McCabe, E., Michelli, N., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate: Research, policy, practice and teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, 111, 180-213. Conley, D. T. (2010). *College and career ready: Helping all students succeed beyond high school*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- <sup>9</sup> Lindstrom Johnson, S., Pas, E.T., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2015). Understanding the association between school climate and future orientation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Retrieved from <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10964-015-0321-1>
- <sup>10</sup> Anderson, C. S. (1982).
- <sup>11</sup> Bear, G. G., Gaskins, C., Blank, J. , & Chen, F. F. (2011). Delaware School Climate Survey Student: Its factor structure, concurrent validity, and reliability. *Journal of School Psychology*, 49, 157-174.
- <sup>12</sup> Cohen, J., McCabe, E., Michelli, N., & Pickeral, T. (2009).
- <sup>13</sup> La Salle, T. P. L., Meyers, J., Varjas, K., & Roach, A. (2015).
- <sup>14</sup> Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357-385.

<sup>15</sup> Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2016). *Technical brief on school climate: Academic achievement and social behavior competence*. University of Connecticut, Storrs.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Fallon, L. M., O'Keeffe, B. V., & Sugai, G. (2012). Consideration of culture and context in School-wide positive behavior support: A review of current literature. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14, 209-219.

<sup>18</sup> La Salle, T. P. L., Meyers, J., Varjas, K., & Roach, A. (2015).

<sup>19</sup> Sugai, G., O'Keeffe, B., Fallon, L. (2012).