

SCHOOL CLIMATE



School climate influences feelings of safety and connection for students, staff, and families.

What is School Climate?

School Climate is a comprehensive term that refers to the quality of school life for everyone in the school community. School climate encompasses the social, physical, and academic aspects of a school. Examples of these include:

Social:	Physical:	Academic:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expectations for student engagement• Healthy interpersonal relationships between and amongst students, school personnel, and families• Sense of belonging, feeling valued and cared for	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appearance of buildings• Location of classrooms• Quality of indoor and outdoor space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student achievement• Student matriculation• High quality, effective teaching• Varied class offerings for students

Research suggests that focusing on creating a supportive school climate facilitates positive outcomes for students and staff. Students, school personnel, and families need school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to teaching and learning. Keys to creating positive school climate are:

- collaboratively creating and consistently communicating academic and behavioral expectations.
- fostering healthy relationships between and amongst all individuals.
- teaching students the importance of school so that they are able to succeed academically.

Additionally, research shows zero tolerance policies, which are disciplinary practices and policies that mandate severe consequences that are often punitive or exclusionary, are harmful as these policies may inadvertently convey that students are not wanted or valued. These policies have a negative impact on students' relationships with school staff and their peers and leads to disengagement. Experts advocate for schools to focus on creating supportive school climates that decrease the use of suspension and expulsion and are proactively communicating expectations for academics and behavior.



Student Outcomes

Research shows that exclusionary practices such as expulsion and suspension, negatively affect students. Conversely, a positive school climate correlates with positive student outcomes. Schools that implement policies, practices, and procedures that promote a positive school climate may experience one or more of the following:



Increased academic performance



Reduced rates of disruptive behavior / misconduct



Strengthened skills in emotional regulation

What are the Features of a Positive School Climate?

Positive school climates focus on nurturing trust and positive interactions among students, school personnel, and families. By focusing on trust and relationship building, members of the school community have a sense of safety, security, and efficacy. In schools with a positive climate, stakeholders have reported that they:

Students

- Understand behavioral expectations and discipline policies and feel they are applied equitably.
- Receive praise for following rules and expectations.
- Actively engage in their learning.
- Feel psychologically and physically safe at school.
- Feel valued and welcomed by their peers and adults at school.
- Receive quality instruction and feel supported to succeed academically by adults.

School Personnel

- Receive training and professional development to cultivate positive student behavior.
- Feel equipped to identify supports and resources to best meet student needs.
- Feel they have resources and time to foster positive relationships with students.
- Have high job satisfaction.

Families

- Feel connected and engaged in the school community to inform equitable school behavioral expectations and policies.
- Perceive that their students have a positive relationship with school personnel.
- Feel they have positive relationships with teachers, counselors, and other school personnel.



Student suspensions may increase school drop out rates.

What Can Schools Do?

Environment, policies, and practices all contribute to creating a positive school climate. Broad strategies to consider include:

- Fostering an environment that promotes respect, trust, care, and healthy relationships so that all members of the school community feel valued.
- Creating an environment that welcomes student, staff, and family input when developing behavior expectations. Once established, school personnel firmly and consistently uphold those shared expectation.
- Using proactive and prevention-based practices and programs that seek to address the causes of behavior and reinforce positive behavior instead of using punitive practices.
- Maintaining the integrity of school buildings and creating a visually welcoming physical environment.



BY THE NUMBERS

The disproportionate effects of punitive discipline policies

Punitive discipline policies and procedures detract and interfere with efforts to create a positive school climate. These practices have negative outcomes for all students. Moreover, students of color and students with marginalized identities are disproportionately impacted. The statistics highlighted below are to encourage you to examine your own data to understand how diverse identities and marginalized students are disproportionately impacted by punitive discipline practices.

3X

Black students are 3x more likely to be suspended and expelled compared to their white peers.

2X

Students with disabilities are roughly 2x more likely to be disciplined as compared to students without disabilities.

#1

The number one reason LGBTQ students identified for not planning to graduate high school or being unsure if they would graduate was an unsupportive or hostile school environment.

School Climate and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model is designed to guide all school community

stakeholders to collaboratively address health behaviors and create environments that promote health and wellness for students by integrating the ten component areas. Through this interconnected and collaborative approach, the WSCC model aims to support the whole child to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and

challenged. For any given health issue at any given school, the resources and involvement of each component area may vary. In regard to this topic, Physical Environment, Social & Emotional Climate, and Health Education may be more involved in cultivating a positive school climate.

Example strategies for aligning and coordinating positive school climate practices across the ten WSCC component areas:

Community Involvement

- Collaborate with community organizations to provide trainings to students and school personnel on pro-social conflict resolution.
- Engage adults in the community to volunteer at school to help build supportive relationships between students and adults.

Family Engagement

- Communicate the school's student behavioral expectations to families.
- Regularly survey families for their perceptions and suggestions about the school climate.
- Build a sense of belonging and connectedness with families that respect diverse cultures.

Employee Wellness

- Provide training to foster pro-social behavior and effective communication skills amongst students.
- Encourage school personnel to model healthy social and emotional behaviors in relationships across the school community.
- Plan ongoing well-being activities to improve employee morale and engagement.

Physical Environment

- Establish a designated, central gathering spot for students to socialize and connect with each other.
- Perform regular building maintenance (e.g. change lightbulbs, paint interior and exterior, maintain landscaping).
- Maintain clean and organized classrooms.
- Use visuals throughout the school to communicate academic and behavioral expectations.

Health Education

- Integrate explicit teaching of pro-social behavior and allow students the opportunity to practice these behaviors.
- Explicitly teach social and emotional competencies (e.g. boundary-setting, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making).

Physical Education & Physical Activity

- Create games and activities where students, across all abilities, can interact and connect with each other.
- Support students to set physical activity goals for themselves that focus on their strengths and abilities.
- Encourage peer-to-peer support so that all students are engaged and participating.

Nutrition Environment & Services

- Invite staff to eat lunch with students to build school connectedness (e.g. one day per week teacher interacts with students at lunch).
- Provide opportunities for students to share their opinion on food offerings (e.g. school meals, concessions, a la carte, grab n' go's).

Health Services

- Prioritize relationship-building as part of any health service.
- Universally screen for behavioral and mental health and provide supports as needed.
- Create and post materials that communicate available student services and different ways students can seek support in order to reduce stigma around mental health.

Counseling, Psychological, & Social Services

- Provide individualized interventions for students who struggle to meet behavioral expectations.
- Provide group interventions to build and strengthen relationship skills.
- Establish mentoring programs based on the needs of the school community.

Social & Emotional Climate

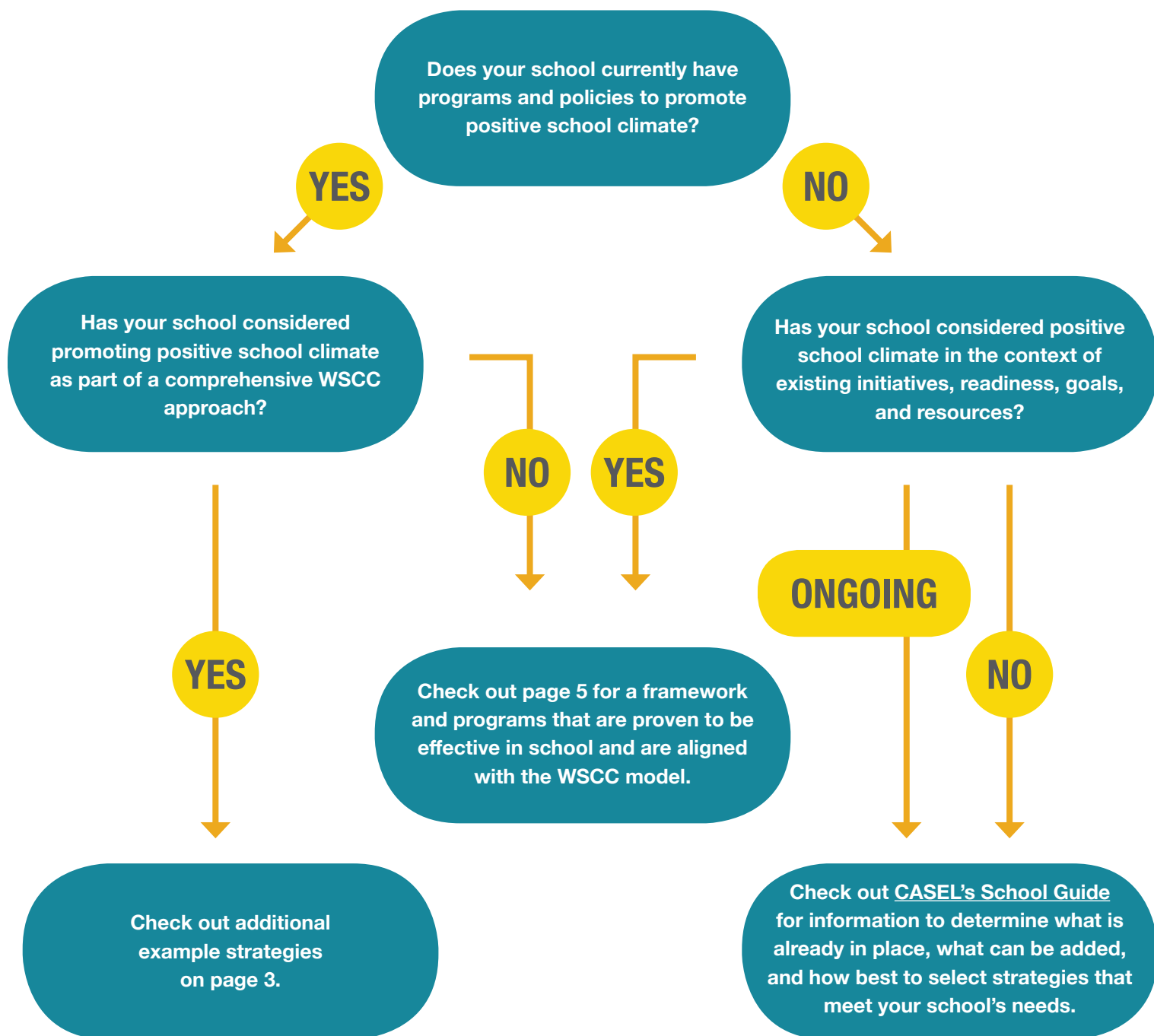
- Facilitate conversations with students on topics relating to academics, emotions, and classroom expectations.
- Create a safe, well-managed, and participatory learning environment that is respectful of diversity and cultures.
- Prevent harassment, bullying, and violence through education, policies, and practices.
- Ensure teachers have lesson plans to teach SEL skills.



Next Steps

One of the most effective ways to address positive school climate at your school, is to implement a program and framework that focuses on social and emotional learning (SEL), positive school climate, and/or school safety. When selecting one of these programs or

framework for your school, a comprehensive analysis of existing initiatives, readiness, and aims and goals is important. This flow chart will help you get started in selecting the best approach for your school.



For additional information, including the Menus of Best Practice, visit [HealthySchoolsHub.org](https://www.healthyschoolshub.org).

When considering prevention and intervention strategies, it is important to implement frameworks and programs that are proven to be effective in school settings. The framework and programs highlighted below are comprehensive and are aligned with the WSCC model.



Positive Action:

**GRADES
K-8**

Positive Action (PA) is a learning program for students in elementary and middle schools aimed at increasing positive behavior, reducing negative behavior, improving social and emotional learning, and contributing to a positive school climate. PA is a classroom-based program with a uniform scope and sequence that enables schools to align the program messages across classrooms and the entire school community. In addition to classroom content, there are resources for school counselors to reinforce content throughout the entire school.

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies:

**GRADES
PreK-6**

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is a comprehensive social emotional learning program for elementary school students to reduce aggression and behavior problems. The PATHS curriculum is designed to enhance the educational environment in the classroom, as well as throughout the entire school. The program includes resources for classroom teachers and school counselors.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports:

**GRADES
K-12**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a schoolwide framework for improving and integrating systems, data, and practices that impact students, staff, and the school climate. PBIS utilizes three-tiers, starting first with universal prevention that impact everyone, then moving into targeted prevention for students who require more support, and finally supporting intensive, individualized prevention for specific students to improve their academic and/or behavioral outcomes.



To cultivate a positive school climate, it is imperative that schools assess current practices. Recommendations on relationship-focused strategies that foster belonging and inclusive engagement, include:

- Assess your current policies and replace those that use punitive or exclusionary strategies.
- Survey students, families, and school personnel to inform your school's development of academic and behavioral goals that promote positive school climate.
- Integrate your school's academic and behavioral goals into teachers' lesson plans.

The example WSCC aligned strategies (pg. 3), flow chart (pg. 4), and suggested framework and programs (pg. 5) are distilled from a comprehensive, systematic, and rigorous review of relevant research. This research compilation and supporting tools are available on [HealthySchoolsHub.org](https://www.healthyschoolshub.org).

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