

The Essential Traits of a Positive School Climate



By [Arianna Prothero](#) — October 13, 2020 ⌚ 9 min read



Mashea Ashton, principal and founder of Digital Pioneers Academy in Washington, D.C., interacts with colleagues remotely from her Virginia home.

— Jaclyn Borowski/Education Week

The single most important job of the principal is creating a school environment where students feel safe, supported, engaged, and accepted, according to many child development and school leadership experts.

The reason?

Children who are afraid of bullying or fights have less bandwidth for learning. Negative emotions, such as feeling alienated or misunderstood, make it harder for the brain to process information and to learn.

On the flip side, brain development flourishes when children feel emotionally and physically safe, when they know they have adults who care about them, and when they are challenged in their learning.

It's no wonder, then, that research has found that a positive school climate can improve students' academic achievement, attendance, engagement, and behavior, as well as teacher satisfaction and retention.

While this may all seem like a no-brainer—of course students learn better when they feel safe and seen—the practice of creating and sustaining a positive school climate can be extremely difficult. School climate involves everyone connected to the school—students, teachers, support staff, administrators and parents—and almost all aspects of their experiences in school—from how teachers address students to whether the school building is kept clean.

What, then, are the hallmarks of a healthy school climate and what can principals do to nurture and sustain one?

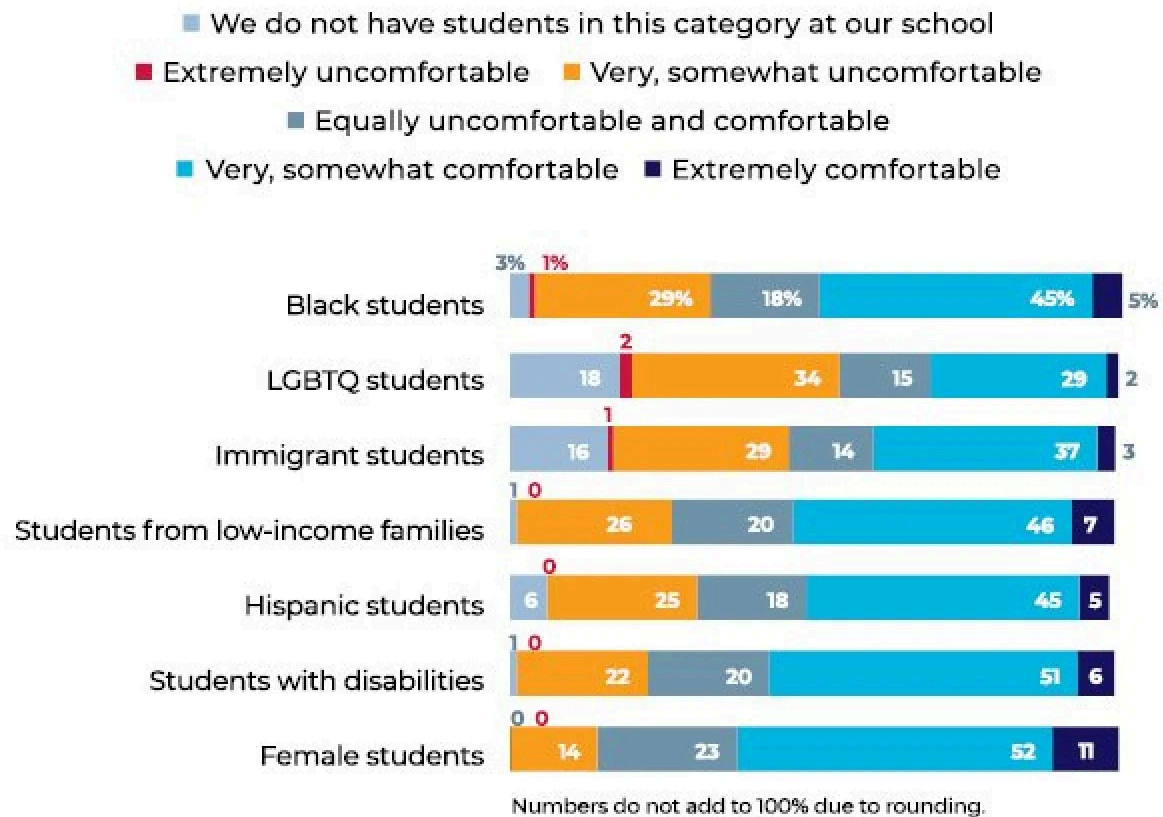
Here are four widely agreed upon components of a healthy school environment, why they matter, and how principals can improve them.

Strong relationships are the foundation.

Do students find it easy to talk to teachers in their school? Do they feel there is a teacher who would notice their absence?

Positive and stable relationships among staff, students, and caregivers undergird a school's climate. It's vital that children feel they are known and supported in school. And while this may sound obvious, it is something that many schools struggle with.

How comfortable do you believe the following groups of students feel at your school?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center, 2020

“We have found that a lot of people don’t understand what that means, it’s not about social relationships,” says Elaine Allensworth, the director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research which has extensively studied principals’ roles in shaping school climate. “Students want to know that their teachers are going to help them succeed in school.”

Strong relationships not only help students feel safe and accepted in their school, they also help students build resilience to cope with adverse childhood experiences.

There are innumerable strategies for building relationships. Teachers can greet each student as they enter the classroom. They can conduct daily check-in exercises where they ask students how they are feeling. Principals in elementary schools can “loop” classrooms keeping teachers with the same group of students for multiple years. At the middle and high school levels, they

can create an advisory system where teachers work with a small, consistent group of students weekly or daily to build a sense of community.

Students aren't the only ones who benefit from investing in relationships. Stronger connections between teachers and students makes teachers feel like their work is more effective and closer relationships among teachers helps them feel more supported. Caregivers are more comfortable asking the school for help for their child if they feel they have strong relationships with their children's teachers and principal.

Principals can forge deeper relationships with parents by actively seeking their input on how school is working for their children—either by asking teachers reach out to parents for informal chats or distributing surveys to families to fill out.

Principals can help foster positive connections among teachers—whether in person or remotely—by setting a few minutes aside during staff meetings for exercises that build relationships. One simple idea: a gratitude circle where staff members are given time to reflect on small things their

coworkers have done for them recently and to directly thank one another for the favor or kindness.

High academic expectations, yes, but also strong supports.

Do teachers feel that it is part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college? Does the school encourage students to take challenging classes no matter their race, ethnicity, or cultural background?

Another hallmark of a healthy school climate is one where educators have high academic expectations for all students.

Educators assist students in setting meaningful academic goals for themselves and promote a strong academic culture where post-secondary education is a goal.

But it's not enough for teachers to, say, constantly talk to students about going to college or following their dreams. Schools must also provide students with the tools they need to meet the expectations they are raising for students.

High expectations without support just sets students up for failure, undermining their confidence, says Allensworth.

Principals must carve out space in the school schedule to give students the extra time and help they need, said Jack Baldermann, the principal of Westmont High School in Illinois. For example, "we have a period every Wednesday at the end of the day ... where students and teachers can work on their assessment information and fine tune where they are strong and where they can get stronger," he said.

Additionally, that support should be given automatically. Principals should create support systems where students must opt-out of help rather than opt-in, said Allensworth.

Whether a student struggling academically gets the additional support they need shouldn't depend on a student feeling comfortable enough to ask for help or a teacher taking it upon themselves to follow up with a student.

Consistency in expectations for behavior and discipline for misbehavior.

Do adults reward students for positive behavior? Are school rules applied equally to all students? Do students see discipline as fair?

A safe and orderly environment is another key aspect of a good school climate, and rules and discipline are tools that principals and teachers use to make that happen. But schools must have clear expectations for behavior, teach students how to meet those expectations, and acknowledge when students are doing so.

In a school with a healthy climate, principals, teachers, and staff focus on prevention. When discipline is used, it's attuned to preserving relationships and respecting students' dignity.

Discipline, when doled out, should be appropriate to students' developmental stage and proportional to their behavior, taking care to ensure there are procedures for students with disabilities, and that all students are disciplined following established rules.

Students should be taken out of class only as a last resort, and if they are removed, they should be placed in an alternative setting that provides them with academic instruction.

There are many strategies for improving school discipline such as using restorative justice practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports.

But whatever strategy a school is using to address misbehavior, it is of utmost importance that rules be consistently enforced among all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and disability state, said Francis Huang, an associate professor in the college of education at the University of Missouri and an expert on school climate.

When rules aren't applied equitably, students don't see them as fair, he said. "If they don't think they're fair, it may challenge students to test those rules."

To make sure rules are being applied consistently, principals can start by reviewing the discipline data to look for trends as well as the procedures for discipline referrals.

A next step is to directly ask students, teachers, and parents—either in-person or through anonymous surveys—whether they feel school rules are applied equitably and discipline is fair.

Any changes to discipline policies can become a major source of friction between principals and teachers, so it's important principals clearly communicate new expectations to staff and provide them with adequate training on how to implement new discipline programs.

Regular collection of feedback, followed by adjustments.

Once the school starts a new program, does leadership follow up to make sure that it's working?

Underneath the robust relationships, high but supported academic expectations, and thoughtful discipline, school leaders who are successful at setting and sustaining a healthy school climate are consistently gathering feedback on how the school community is experiencing school life.

This is primarily done by surveying students, staff, and parents a few times a year, asking the kinds of questions posed throughout this article.

Combined with data on discipline, attendance, test scores, and even small focus groups, principals can get a quantitative and qualitative read on the health of the school's environment and how to improve it.

Not having data is like trying to fly a plane without any instruments, said Huang. Without data, principals can't know what adjustments need to be made to stay aloft or how far they are from their destination or goals.

Data illuminates weaknesses that need shoring up and provides feedback on whether a new intervention is working and improving school climate.

Data is also important for supporting equitable outcomes because it can help unearth inequities among student groups, such as whether students of a particular race are getting suspended at higher rates or report feeling less supported by the adults in their school.

It's important to remember that not all students will experience their school the same way and that individual students' perceptions of their school's environment and culture matter to their learning.

Share the data widely—incorporate it into staff meetings, parent meetings, share it in newsletters and townhalls—to broaden its impact and communicate the importance of building and keeping a positive school climate.

Other components of school climate:

There isn't total consensus on all the components that add up to a healthy school climate and culture.

While some definitions focus on the social and academic aspects of school climate, the concept can also include physical features such as how clean the building is and whether the lights and heating work properly, which creates a welcoming environment and demonstrates to students that school leaders care about their comfort. Procedural considerations such as having emergency plans in place, which factor into feelings of safety, can also fall into the school climate bucket, as can community-building extracurriculars such as clubs and events.

But the bottom line, school leadership experts say, is that principals must decide what the definition of a positive climate is for their school—one that is relevant to their community and based on research—before they can take steps to strengthen it.



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