

# School Climate Improvement Action Guide for School Leaders

Improving school climate takes time and commitment from a variety of people in a variety of roles. This document outlines key action steps that school leaders—including principals, assistant/vice principals, and building leaders—can take to support school climate improvements.

## Understand the Importance of School Climate

Students learn best when they are in an environment in which they feel safe, supported, challenged, and accepted. Research shows that when schools and districts<sup>1</sup> focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, develop positive relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors.

Strengthening school climate can help your school in the following ways:

- **Boost** student achievement and close achievement gaps.
- **Increase** attendance.
- **Decrease** teacher turnover and increase teacher satisfaction.
- **Turn around** its low performance.
- **Lower** dropout rates and increase high school graduation rates.
- **Improve** school safety, student morale, and discipline.<sup>2,3</sup>

Of course, improving school climate is not something that happens overnight. It is not a “project” that you can do once and then move on. Rather, improving school climate is an ongoing process, one that takes time and requires the support of building leaders, who can help set the tone for continuing improvement in their school. The [Safe and Supportive School \(S3\) grantees](#) provide an example of the important role school leaders have in school climate reform. Between 2010 and 2015, 11 states embarked on an effort to comprehensively improve school climate within a selection of schools through their S3 grants. Those state grantees repeatedly expressed that the most successful schools were those in which the school leader considered climate to be a priority.

<sup>1</sup> This document provides strategies applicable to public schools and districts, including charter authorizers, charter management organizations, education management organizations, individual charter schools, and charter local educational agencies.

<sup>2</sup> National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2011). *Making the case for the importance of school climate and its measurement* [Webinar]. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/events/webinar/making-case-importance-school-climate-and-its-measurement>

<sup>3</sup> Osher, D., Moroney, D., & Williamson, S. (2018). *Creating safe, equitable, engaging schools: A comprehensive, evidence-based approach to supporting students.* Harvard Education Press. <https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/creating-safe,-equitable,-engaging-schools>



# Participate in Planning for School Climate Improvements

Planning for school climate improvement provides a foundation to ensure that your efforts are targeted to meet your school's needs. School leaders are critical players in a successful planning process.

## What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Plan where and how school climate improvements can be incorporated into and enhance your existing work—make it part of your overarching theory of change or logic model for the school's strategic planning efforts.
- Determine what data the school already collects can be useful in improving school climate and what new data will be needed. Think about how your school will collect the new data (e.g., surveys, focus groups, and interviews).
- Note where and how new efforts will need to be added to see measurable school climate improvements. Consider how to fund new efforts or needed resources.
- Enlist a strong staff member to lead the charge—someone you can support but whom you also can count on to move things forward with a core team of committed individuals, even when you are not able to focus on the efforts.
- Support the development of a school climate team or the inclusion of school climate improvement work within an existing team.
- Work with the team on incorporating professional development related to school climate into the school's overarching professional development plan for the year.
- Build buy-in from community agencies, families, and other key partners so that all parties are on the same page about why improving school climate is important in your school.
- Think about your overall hiring practices and how to identify staff members who are committed to building supportive conditions for learning for all students.
- Develop a plan for disseminating information about your school's climate improvement process to various stakeholders.
- Consider sustainability in the early stages of planning to ensure that the school climate improvements continue.



### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Connecting your school climate improvements to other school systems, practices, and policies to promote alignment and efficiency.
- Thinking of systems, policies, and practices that need to be adjusted and then making those adjustments early in the process.
- Identifying existing data collection procedures that will be useful in the school climate improvement process and utilizing new data collection as needed.
- Clearly designating a key staff person to lead this effort, communicating to the school community that this person is the leader, and showing the staff person constant and public support.
- Creating or participating in a core school climate team.
- Communicating about school climate improvements with all of the school's key stakeholders.
- Hosting relevant, ongoing, job-embedded professional development that promotes engagement in school climate improvements.
- Being realistic about what can be accomplished and setting a timeline for improvement based on your school's capacity.
- Determine how your school can tell whether its efforts are moving things in the right direction, even if it is too soon to see changes in outcomes.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Treating this initiative as though it is one more thing to do on top of other work.
- Failing to promote necessary adjustments to your systems, policies, and practices.
- Reinventing the wheel—you do not have to start everything “from scratch.”
- Underestimating the importance of your role as the lead communicator for your school.
- Dominating school climate team discussions or not actively engaging in school climate team discussions.
- Limiting your communication about the school climate improvements—providing basic details only or not sharing them with all stakeholders—thus preventing effective implementation.
- Not attending to professional development needs.
- Overestimating your school's capacity to do this work—you may need to break the work into steps. Taking on too much at the beginning can lead to frustration.
- Focusing on the negative and assigning blame (rather than finding successes—no matter how small—and using them for encouragement and growth).

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## Questions You Can Ask Other School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Planning School Climate Improvements

- What interventions or practices are we already implementing that can support school climate work?
- Are these the right interventions, given our school's current population and needs?
- What systems, policies, and practices need to be adjusted to successfully make sustainable school climate improvements?
- Are there initiatives at other schools from which we can learn?
- Do these interventions work together coherently? And are any interventions that duplicate or overlap? Any programming gaps?
- What supports at the district and school levels do we have available? What additional supports will we need to be successful?

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- What professional development is needed, and what do we already have in place that we can build upon? How can we embed the professional development on an ongoing basis?
  - How can I best support this work? How can I get other school and district leaders to support this work?
  - What capacity do we have to do this work? What additional supports will we need to be successful?
  - What is a realistic timeline and what are realistic goals for the school climate improvement process in this school?

## Engage Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

For school climate improvements to be successful, everyone with an interest in the school—staff, students, families, community partners, and your direct reports—needs to be informed and involved. People who feel engaged are more likely to partake in the school climate improvement process as planned versus those who feel disconnected or do not understand its purpose. As a school leader, you play an important role in encouraging engagement and buy-in from many different stakeholders.

### What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Make sure that staff, community partners, families, and students know why they are implementing school climate improvements and the overarching goals of the effort.
- Let everyone know that improving school climate is not a one-off, quick-fix reform. Rather, it is a continuous improvement effort that operates in cycles of data collection and analysis, choosing and implementing interventions based on that data, and continually monitoring and adjusting future efforts as necessary.
- Communicate with instructional staff, noninstructional staff, families, students, and community partners about their role in the climate improvements. Teachers may play a key role in collecting data. Families may be asked to review information, provide feedback, and help improve school climate survey response rates. Community partners may be asked to participate in planning and to help with improving survey response rates or coordinating student supports.
- Ask each of these groups for their opinions. Get their feedback and use it to improve or refine your school climate improvement efforts. Everyone will feel more engaged if they have been a part of the planning process.
- Explain the importance of all data collection activities so that everyone involved understands why they are being asked to participate in surveys and how important good data collection practices are.



### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Sharing the school climate improvement process vision and how it fits with the overarching school mission and vision.
- Communicating clearly and consistently about school climate improvement and school priorities.
- Providing all staff, community partners, families, and students with opportunities to play a concrete role in the school climate improvement process.
- Engaging staff, community partners, families, and students throughout the school climate improvement process, not just at the beginning (e.g., planning, data collection, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation).
- Giving opportunities to those who are not the usual participants to ensure that you hear a diversity of voices and empower long-term engagement and buy-in.
- Sharing success stories that can engage everyone—powerful examples can help get people on board. This includes highlighting areas of strength in your school; successes that staff, community partners, families, and students have experienced; and plans for future activities.
- Appreciating staff, community partners, families, and students for their contributions by thanking and acknowledging them publicly.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Talking about school climate as separate from the overarching school vision—not “connecting the dots.”
- Sharing misinformation about the school climate improvement effort, which leads to confusion and frustration.
- Sharing data without context— anecdotes and stories bring data to life.
- Merely informing staff, partners, families, and students about the work but not engaging them.
- Including only the leaders or usual participants (e.g., parent-teacher organization [PTO] volunteers) in the improvement process. Although they have an important perspective, it is narrow and would benefit from the thoughts and experiences of others.
- Disengaging staff, community partners, families, and students through multiple cycles of improvement efforts that are not carried out thoughtfully.
- Forgetting to acknowledge the important contributions of everyone involved in school climate improvements.

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## Questions You Can Ask Other School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Engaging Stakeholders

- How can we share our vision for school climate improvement with stakeholders, including community partners, school staff, families, and students? How can we ask them for feedback on the vision?
- Which staff are interested in or most suited to lead this effort in our school? What roles do you suggest they take?
- Which community partners should we engage and how?
- How can we effectively engage students on an ongoing basis?
- How can we build on existing family engagement activities or events? How can we expand opportunities to families not already engaged in school activities (beyond the usual PTO volunteers)?
- How can we celebrate and share the school’s successes around climate improvement with others?



# Support the Collection and Use of Reliable and Valid School Climate Data

Collecting and using school climate data is essential to the school climate improvement process. These data will help you identify what is working and where you can make improvements. Data collection takes time, resources, and infrastructure, making support from school leaders a critical part of this step in the process.

## What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Provide opportunities and resources for professional development on making school climate improvements, including best practices in data collection.
- Show support for data collection by communicating its importance to school staff.
- Include youth voice in data collection efforts. For example, several of the Safe and Supportive Schools grantees instituted student “fishbowls” in their schools, during which students expressed their concerns about climate in a nonthreatening environment and in the presence of school staff.
- Encourage your school climate team to periodically collect and report school climate data using a reliable, valid, and actionable school climate survey (such as the U.S. Department of Education’s [ED] suite of [School Climate Surveys \[EDSCLS\]](#)) to get information from students, instructional staff, noninstructional staff, and parents/guardians.
- Collect data on a range of school climate topics, including the following:

### *Engagement*

- Cultural and Linguistic Competence
- Relationships
- School Participation

### *Safety*

- Emotional Safety
- Physical Safety
- Bullying/Cyberbullying
- Substance Abuse
- Emergency Readiness and Management

### *Environment*

- Physical Environment
  - Instructional Environment
  - Physical Health
  - Mental Health
  - Discipline
- Know who can help with issues and challenges that may arise during survey administration and have a system in place for resolving the issues.
  - Emphasize and monitor acceptable survey response rates overall (try for 80 percent for students and staff) and for your respondent subgroups of interest.
  - Ensure that the data inform the intervention(s) your school chooses and implements.

- Foster an atmosphere of continuous quality improvement by examining and using data throughout the school climate improvement process.
- Support the use of school climate survey data, as well as related administrative and qualitative data. Utilize focus groups and interviews to provide context for other data.

#### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Providing opportunities and resources for professional development that are ongoing and job embedded.
- Communicating the importance of data and good data collection techniques.
- Actively engaging students in the data collection, analysis, and reporting process.
- Developing creative strategies to engage students, staff, and families in the importance of accurate data collection.
- Using reliable and valid instruments to collect actionable data.
- Having a system in place to quickly resolve survey administration problems.
- Emphasizing and monitoring acceptable survey response rates overall (try for 80 percent for students and staff) and for subgroups of interest.
- Using survey data as one way of assessing your school's climate, while incorporating other methods (e.g., focus groups and interviews).
- Supporting the collection of administrative data (e.g., on attendance and discipline) and qualitative data (e.g., through focus groups and interviews) to provide context for the school climate survey data.
- Ensuring that students, families, instructional staff, and noninstructional staff are well prepared to engage, such as by ensuring that they understand key terminology, and understand what school climate data mean.
- Using data strategically for planning and problem-solving through careful (but not excessive) data analysis and reflection.

#### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Not providing training for teachers and other staff on how to collect and use data.
- Forgetting to communicate in a variety of ways with staff, students, and families about the importance of data and good data collection techniques.
- Ignoring the role that students can play in data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Cutting corners when collecting and analyzing data, which could sacrifice data quality—always use high-quality survey instruments that have been demonstrated to be effective.
- Collecting data that are not reliable, valid, or actionable (e.g., surveys that are not tested for the appropriate age group, results from surveys that have a response rate of less than 50 percent).
- Letting problems or challenges with survey administration linger or go unresolved.
- Using the survey as a one-shot event or as the only data collection method. Drawing conclusions about survey data without complementing quantitative data with qualitative data.
- Ignoring the data you have collected when planning and problem-solving for your school.



## Questions You Can Ask Other School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Supporting Data Collection and Use

- What data do we already have? What data do we need to collect?
- What professional development or support do we need to provide survey administrators?
- What mechanisms do we already have in place to get feedback or input from staff, community partners, families, and students?
- What surveys do we currently use for students, families, and staff? Can we build on those or can a new climate survey replace those?
- How can we prevent students from feeling over-surveyed? How can we time our data collection to prevent burnout?
- How do we solve problems that come up during the survey administration?
- What do the data say? What are our strengths? What are areas for improvement?
- What additional data should we collect through interviews or focus groups to provide context for the survey data?
- How will we present the data to facilitate planning for school climate improvements to different stakeholders, such as staff, students, family, and the community?
- How did stakeholders respond to the data when presented?
- How can we improve the data collection process next time?

## Help Choose and Implement School Climate Interventions

Choosing the right intervention(s) is an important part of school climate improvements. The intervention does not have to be a program, although choosing an evidence-based program is one option. Interventions also can be strategies, activities, policies, or services. There is no single “right” type of intervention. The important thing is whether it matches your school’s needs, as identified by climate data collection; your school’s readiness to implement it; and how it is implemented (i.e., this is not an “activity” but a process of changing how things get done). The school leader must play a role in selecting, approving, and overseeing implementation of the selected intervention.

### What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Review evidence-based interventions to choose one that has proven to be effective with your student population and context.
- Ensure that the selected intervention(s) will be coherent with other programming you have (or will have) in place.
- Consider the kinds of interventions that could be implemented (or enhanced, if already in place) to maximize strengths and address needs with your school climate team.



- Review the logistics, required training, materials, and resources needed for each potential intervention to ensure that your school has the capacity and funds to implement the intervention as it was designed.
- Make sure to get input from everyone (staff, community partners, families, and students), and consider a range of programs and strategies to ensure that the final strategy selected is right for your school.
- Communicate about the chosen intervention with staff in a variety of ways (e.g., faculty meeting, e-mail, or distributing written materials) to help them fully understand its components and their role in implementing it.
- Show constant support for implementation by checking in regularly with the team, ensuring that resources are available, and communicating with the school community about what is happening.
- Gather feedback continuously on implementation quality and what is and is not working about the chosen intervention. Use the feedback to make adjustments.

**What Does This Look Like  
When You Do the Work Well?**

- Referring to evidence-based registries to identify interventions that research has shown to be effective with your population of students and considering other strategies and interventions as appropriate to meet the needs of your school.
- Connecting your various improvement efforts so that they are aligned and support one another.
- Getting input from everyone involved as you select the intervention—people will be more engaged if they help choose the intervention.
- Ensuring that systems are in place to support the implementation. Providing adequate training and opportunities for professional development.
- Setting expectations for staff and yourself by acknowledging that this work will take time. Providing a timeline and process for tracking progress. Your patience and “can do” attitude is essential for others to model.
- Identifying intermediate outcomes that can indicate whether you are heading in the right direction.
- Regularly soliciting feedback on the intervention through formal and informal means.
- Monitoring implementation efforts, consulting on problems, and making appropriate adjustments based on expert recommendations.

**What Do You Want to Avoid?  
What Are Potential Pitfalls?**

- Feeling that you have to choose an evidence-based program—there are many good strategies and interventions that can improve school climate and for which you can measure progress over time that are not “programs.”
- Choosing an intervention that a similar school in the district has been implementing without getting input from them on what is working well and not working well.
- Separating your school climate improvement work from other interventions and improvement efforts in the district.
- Underestimating the time and resources needed for your school to implement chosen interventions.
- Leaving staff to flounder without support and ongoing feedback and training.
- Letting your initial enthusiasm wane as time goes on and forgetting that it may take time for areas of poor climate in your school to begin to show evidence of change.
- Moving forward with implementation without regular feedback from stakeholders and key experts.
- Tailoring and tweaking evidence-based interventions without talking to the developer. These interventions are evidence-based because they implement a set of specific components.



## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Choosing and Implementing School Climate Interventions

- What key aspects of school climate are we trying to change? What are our priorities?
- Do we want to select an evidence-based program or are strategies, policies, and activities a better fit for our school? Or a combination?
- What training do staff need to implement the intervention(s)? How can we embed the training into everyday work?
- How is implementation going? Is it going as planned? If not, what adjustments and support are needed? What is working? What is not working?

## Support Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation of School Climate Improvements

Monitoring and evaluation provide evidence of how well you and your colleagues are implementing school climate improvements and the impact those efforts have on your school and students. Evaluation builds on and uses the data that you have already collected on school climate and that can inform your ongoing work. As school leader, you must monitor and evaluate school climate improvements on an ongoing basis. You should play a role in this process because you are likely to be the one held accountable by the district and school board for the initiative's success.

### What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Revisit your goals and the logic model or theory of change that you developed with your team to determine what evaluation questions you have.
- Work with your school climate team to develop an evaluation plan, including identifying what data you have collected, what data you still need to collect, and how you want to report out on that data.
- Make a plan to collect input from a variety of stakeholders on the overall school climate improvements to inform the future efforts.
- Consider your audiences and how you want to share information publicly about your successes and challenges.
- Host a planning session in which you, your climate team, and other key stakeholders (e.g., school staff, community partners, families, and students) review the data, reflect on their meaning, and make plans for refining the intervention.

### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Using process and outcome data to adjust your approach to making school climate improvements as needed for the next year or phase of implementation. Process data are critically important to continued implementation and can tell you why outcome data may not be as impressive as you would like.
- Inviting a variety of stakeholders to review evaluation data and ask questions.
- Communicating the meaning of findings broadly and talking about implementation and outcomes.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Collecting only outcome data and ignoring process data that can help provide context for outcome data.
- Using technical terms that your staff, partners, students, and families do not understand.
- Keeping the findings to yourself or your small team.
- Assuming little or no movement on outcomes means that the intervention was a failure; improvement takes time—often three to five years!

## Questions You Can Ask Other School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Monitoring and Evaluating School Climate Improvements

- What improvements are we seeing in the school?
- Where have we not seen as much improvement as we would like? Why could this be? How could we change this?
- Are any populations being left behind in our school climate improvement efforts?
- What data could we collect (if not already collected) and analyze to better understand what is or is not going well?
- Are these changes what we expected to see based on what we know and given that some approaches take longer to see improvement?
- How can we share what we have learned with the entire school community?
- How can we improve the process of implementation next year?

### School Climate Improvement Resource Package

This action guide is one of many resources within the School Climate Improvement Resource Package (SCIRP), a suite of manageable, action-oriented, and evidence-based resources that States, districts, and schools can use to make school climate improvements. The SCIRP was developed by the U.S. Department of Education with the support of the [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#).

For more information about the SCIRP, go to <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about>.