Understanding School Climate:
An Overview of School Climate Domains

Nakanya Magby and Rebeca Cerna

A positive school climate fosters healthy interactions and promotes the equitable well-being of students, staff, families, and the school community. This brief defines *school climate*, identifies its domains, and provides recommendations for assessing school climate.

"A supportive school environment encourages students to pursue their interests and focuses on the well-being of the student population. I feel better going to school knowing that teachers and staff want me to succeed both academically and in life."

— Alexa Southall, California Center for School Climate youth advisory team member

What Is School Climate?

School climate is a multifaceted concept without a single definition. In general, school climate is defined as the qualities of a school environment experienced by students and staff and encompassing relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Center, n.d.). The climate of a school profoundly influences the experiences of all individuals in a school community, including students, staff, family members, and community partners. Positive school environments are those that

» prioritize student and staff wellness;

» foster supportive relationships;

» engage students, staff, families, and community members in an authentically collaborative way;

» create conditions that allow for cocreating a schoolwide commitment and shared purpose;

» center equitable supports in every aspect of the school community; and

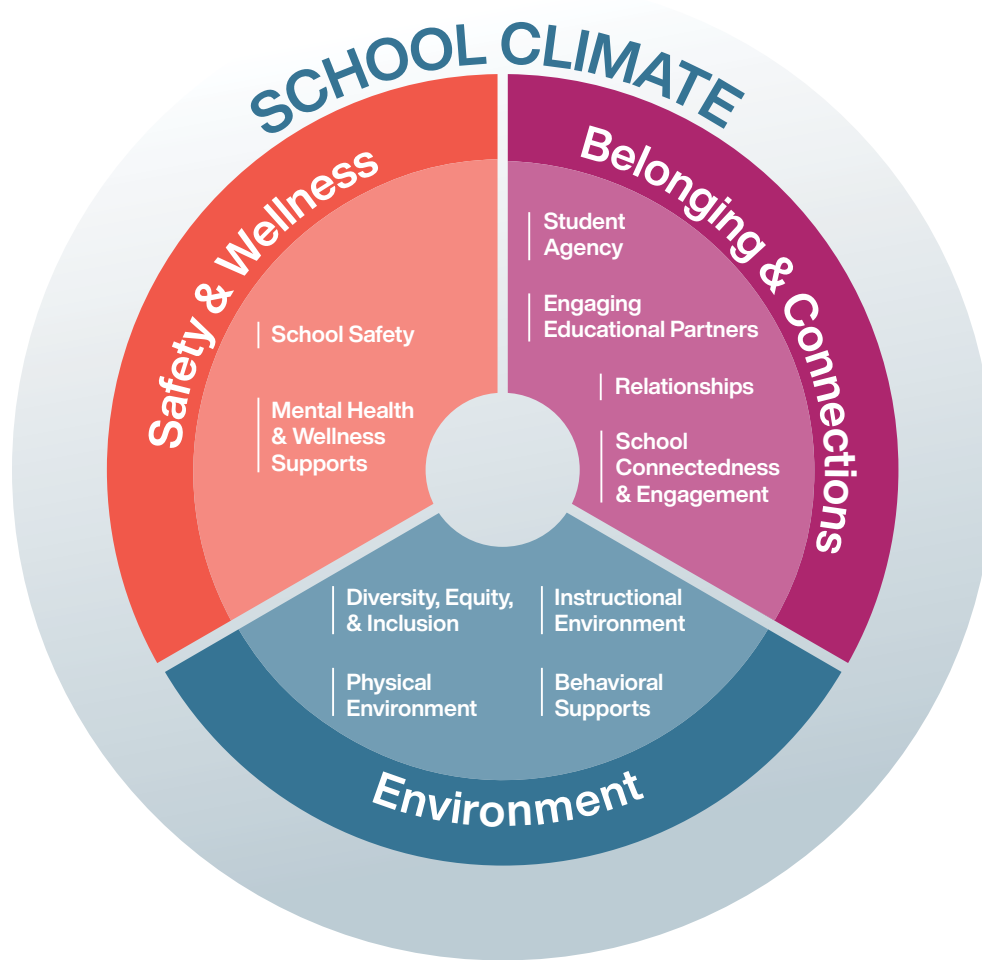» collect and monitor data for continuous improvement efforts (Hashmi et al., 2022).

Meaningful learning happens when a school's climate is positive, respectful, and productive.

Schools that recognize and implement practices that contribute to a supportive school climate have students and staff who report greater levels of physical and emotional safety, higher morale, and a greater sense of pride. As a result, staff, students, and families feel a sense of connectedness to the school. When staff and students perceive that they are in a school with a positive school climate, student achievement, student attendance, and teacher retention are higher and student dropout rates are lower (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments [NCSSLE], 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

School Climate Domains

Examining school climate domains can help provide a framework for identifying strategies and practices, action planning, and assessment. There are multiple domains that characterize a school's climate. Several models of school climate domains exist, including one from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The three domains highlighted in Figure 1, adapted from the NCSSLE model and California Safe and Supportive Schools (Mahecha & Hanson, 2020), are belonging and connections, safety and wellness, and environment, and the ten subdomains are interrelated.

Figure 1: School Climate Domains

Source. Adapted from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2022). *School climate improvement*. American Institutes for Research. https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement and Mahecha, J., & Hanson, T. (2020). *Measurement structure of the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys: Student, staff, and parent surveys*. WestEd. https://calschls.org/docs/measurementstructurecalschls_final.pdf

Belonging and Connections

Relationships

The quality of the relationships within the school is at the heart of school climate. Having positive relationships at school is one of the strongest predictors of student academic achievement and teacher work satisfaction. Consistent, positive relationships among all who interact within a school—including students, school staff, family members, and other adults who support the school—are essential to facilitating connections at school and providing a safe and supportive school environment (National School Climate Center, n.d.).

School Connectedness and Engagement

Building and sustaining a culture of school connectedness and engagement is vital for young people to thrive and for creating a positive school climate. When students feel connected to school, they have better attendance, grades, and test scores and are more satisfied with

school (O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011; Blum, 2005). Students are also more likely to engage in healthy behaviors when they feel connected to school and are less likely to experience emotional problems. Connectedness and engagement often result in greater class participation, completion of coursework, and extracurricular activities (NCSSLE, 2022).

Engaging Educational Partners

Ongoing research shows that engaging educational partners in school—including family members, school staff, and community partners—improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism, and fosters parents' confidence in their children's education (NCSSLE, 2022). Students with involved family members achieve at higher levels, exhibit greater confidence in social settings, and display positive behavior on a more consistent basis (Long, 2007).

Student Agency

Students have agency when they drive their own learning through activities that are inclusive, meaningful, and relevant. Having opportunities that allow students to be self-directed helps them utilize critical-thinking and problem-solving skills and can increase their connectedness to school by providing autonomy to be active participants in their own academic career. By encouraging students to have more control over their learning, students graduate from school with a range of skills that support them in being lifelong learners (Blum, 2005).

Safety and Wellness

School Safety

Students and adults should feel safe emotionally, psychologically, and physically. A safe school environment is crucial for the healthy academic and social development of students. Learning occurs best when everyone feels safe and secure from perceived and actual threats. Common schoolwide practices that create an environment of safety

and wellness include establishing a climate of inclusion and respect, promoting relationship building and conflict resolution, putting universal violence prevention programs that support the entire school community into place, and creating proactive policies and programs to prevent bullying and harassment (NCSSLE, 2022).

Mental Health and Wellness Supports

The mental health and wellness supports of both students and staff are a vital part of holistic supports. Schools play a critical role as the first line of defense for mental health awareness as students increasingly report struggling with anxiety, chronic sadness, and psychological stress (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2022). Having higher levels of life satisfaction and optimism can improve self-esteem and academic performance and can reduce a sense of hopelessness and suicide ideation (Hirsch & Conner, 2006; Vargas-Medrano et al., 2020). Early identification through the use of universal screeners can identify students who need interventions, increase awareness of the complexity of their needs, inform decisions and provision of services, and reduce the stigma of mental health.

Environment

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In an increasingly multicultural and diverse society, respect for diversity and culturally responsive practices creates a school environment that is more open and accepting. Being respectful of diversity by creating practices and experiences that affirm culture and language supports positive outcomes for all student groups. Building on identities—including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability—as assets helps support learning. Students who learn about various cultures and identities are more confident and empathetic toward others. An environment that is inclusive provides a safe experience for all (Warner & Browning, 2021).

Instructional Environment

Research has linked positive instructional environments to higher student achievement and graduation rates. Positive instructional environments provide high-quality instruction with opportunities for student voice, culturally responsive content, and social–emotional learning that is integrated into an instructional approach. A positive instructional environment engages all students and allows classrooms to become communities in which students feel connected and become active participants in their academic experience (NCSSLE, 2022).

Physical Environment

Safe, clean, and comfortable surroundings make for a space in which students can learn (NCSSLE, 2022). Students and staff are more receptive to the learning environment when it is physically maintained, and each member of a school community has a role in contributing to the care of the physical environment. Level of upkeep, access to clean water, and ambient lighting and noise are all critical to the quality of a physical environment. A well-maintained physical environment promotes institutional pride, positive behaviors, and a sense of safety (PennState Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis, 2022).

Behavioral Supports

Clarity and fairness regarding rules, discipline practices, and routines should be considered as school and district behavioral support policies are reviewed. Providing a safe and supportive environment includes ensuring that discipline policies and responses are developed collaboratively with educational partners—such as students, staff, and family members—and are developmentally appropriate and equitable. Policies that are culturally responsive and developed collaboratively are most effective when they align with districtwide expectations. Disciplinary responses should progress from less severe to more severe, should respect individuals, and should be logical, consistent, and instructive.

District Spotlight: Davis Joint Unified School District

"'We all belong' is a phrase we use. We strive to make this a place where everyone truly belongs. That means we stand by the philosophy of restorative justice. We do not exile. . . . We see the whole child and the whole story. We are responsible for giving young people as wide a set of opportunities as we can."

— Kate Snow, district coordinator of school climate at Davis Joint Unified School District

As part of its mission, Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD) strives to provide optimal learning conditions and environments and to support the well-being of students. Over time, DJUSD has continued to evolve in how it supports positive school climate efforts. One integral element of this support has been the creation of the role of school climate district coordinator in order to oversee climate efforts at the schools. Initially this role was filled by one person but has since evolved into a team that supports not only school climate efforts, but also the district's equity and culturally responsive practices. DJUSD's current school climate district coordinator, Kate Snow, describes her role as one that allows her team to hold "a mirror up to this district, taking personal power and building relationships to help the district set its sights on what it truly takes to create environments conducive to learning for all" (personal interview, June 30, 2022).

Taking a deep dive into school climate has helped the district create new processes and mechanisms that support campuses in the work of maintaining or improving a positive school climate. In addition to working toward ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all students, the district has made it a policy to implement strategies that support not only the schools' students but also the adults. As a result, the school climate team has introduced several initiatives and practices that support adults, including restorative practices. The team also works closely with DJUSD's instructional services and multilingual offices. The team and these offices collaborated to complete a language justice process that resulted in another new role: language, justice, and family partnership coordinator. The person who fills this role serves as an interpreting coordinator and builds the district's capacity to communicate with all families in a culturally responsive way.

Quantitative and qualitative data are yet another core component of monitoring school climate practices at DJUSD. The school climate team also oversees the administration of two surveys on school climate: the California Healthy Kids Survey and the YouthTruth Student Survey. Going beyond assessing the quantitative data collected with these surveys, the team also takes the time to visit and explore each school campus to get the "feel" of each school. For example, what does lunch or recess look like? What does the front office feel like? The valuable qualitative data collected through these visits enables the team to provide principal coaching and supports as needed. Supports are also provided to site teams on how to better engage with their site-level data by helping them make sense of the data.

Measuring School Climate

Measuring school climate is essential for school improvement efforts in that it helps identify a school's strengths, needs, and goals and it guides continuous improvement that supports whole-person efforts. The characteristics of each school climate domain and subdomain (Appendix) can help guide the identification of multiple data sources that can be used to assess a school's overall environment. Many subdomains align with data that are routinely collected in schools and districts. In addition, collecting school climate data from multiple educational partners (e.g., staff, students, family members, partnering agencies) should be a priority. Data sources to consider in measuring school climate include

» student, staff, and family school climate surveys (e.g., suite of the California School Climate, Health, and Learning [CalSCHLS] surveys);

» mental health referrals;

» universal screenings for behavioral and mental health;

» classroom and schoolwide observations;

» attendance and truancy data;

» discipline data (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions); and

» interviews or focus groups with students, staff, family members, and community partners.

School Climate Data Use in Action

DJUSD has built a culture of data-driven decision-making. The district has trained district and school leaders on how to explore data, how to lead conversations that incorporate data, and how to identify key areas of focus based on site-level data. Their goal is to explore the meaning behind the data. Areas of emphasis include the following:

- The district understands that school climate work is not a "quick fix," so school-level campus climate and safety committees meet monthly to assess strengths and needs regarding climate. Data play an integral role in these meetings, and committee members use data as a mechanism for describing what is being felt at their school site: "The data gives us a way for people to name what they feel on our campuses" (Kate Snow, personal interview, June 30, 2022).

- Using a protocol as guidance, principals select indicators to examine with staff so that, as a team, they can determine how to integrate data with site plans.

- The district and schools explore data about different groups, specifically students who are marginalized. DJUSD utilizes student data as a key lever for understanding how all students are experiencing the climate of the district's schools.

California Center for School Climate

Supporting Your School Climate Improvement Efforts

Building the skills, knowledge, and capacity of district and school leaders to address school climate improvement efforts effectively is important in maintaining a positive school climate. To improve school climate, it is important to recognize a school's strengths and opportunities for growth regarding climate, ensure consistent communication among all involved with improvement efforts, utilize data to drive decision-making, and create improvement plans at the district and school levels. The following questions can be used when planning to explore school climate efforts. Consider asking these questions for each school climate domain.

» What are the strengths of the climate at our school site? What is working well?

» What are some needs and opportunities for growth? What are some additional steps we can take to support school climate improvement efforts?

» Are there specific groups of students we need to consider in our school climate improvement efforts?

» How do we ensure staff are aware of the strengths and needs of the climate at our school or within our district?

» What existing data are already being collected? What are the sources of additional data that we should gather?

» How do we integrate school climate data and other indicators of school success?

» How can school climate data be utilized and integrated into our districtwide or schoolwide plans (e.g., local control accountability plan, school improvement plan for student achievement)?

Resources

Learn more about the CalSCHLS surveys and their analysis, reporting, and dashboard features—including those for the California Healthy Kids Survey—by visiting the CalSCHLS website: https://calschls.org

To explore valid and reliable surveys, assessments, and scales of school climate, see the NCSSLE's School Climate Survey Compendium: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium

Use the NCSSLE's *Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements*, Second Edition, for guidance on how to initiate, implement, and sustain school improvement efforts: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/quick-guide

California Center for School Climate

Appendix: School Climate Domains and Characteristics of Subdomains

There are three domains of school climate: belonging and connection, safety and wellness, and environment. Each domain includes subdomains. Tables 1–3 provide an overview of these domains, their subdomains, and sample characteristics of each subdomain. The domains were adapted from the NCSSLE and California Safe and Supportive Schools.

Table 1. Belonging and Connection Subdomains

Subdomain	Characteristics
Relationships	• Caring relationships between adults and students • Collegial and productive relationships among staff • Positive relationships among students
School connectedness and engagement	• High expectations • School connectedness • Academic motivation • Prevention supports for attendance • Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement supports for students
Engaging educational partners	• Shared vision held by the school community • Communication from the school to family members and staff • Activities that involve families • Engagement of educational partners (e.g., staff, families, community partners)
Student agency	• Inclusive and meaningful opportunities for student participation • Student voice, choice, and participation in decision-making

Table 2. Safety and Wellness Subdomains

Subdomain	Characteristics
School safety	• Emotional, psychological, and physical safety of students and staff • Strategies to reduce violence and victimization • Prevention supports to address substance use at schools • Strategies to reduce bullying and harassment • Emergency readiness planning
Mental health and wellness supports	• Attention to life satisfaction and optimism • Social–emotional learning supports • Access to mental health wellness supports for students and staff • Awareness of mental health issues • Nonstigmatizing attitudes toward mental health

Table 3. Environment Subdomains

Subdomain	Characteristics
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	• Fair and respectful treatment among students and staff • Respect for cultural and linguistic practices • Mutual respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion • Inclusive learning environments and experiences
Instructional environment	• Supports for learning • Instructional relevance • Teachers' support for students • Supports for social–emotional learning
Physical environment	• Well-kept school facilities • Access to clean water • Appropriate ambient lighting and noise • Appropriate temperature and air quality
Behavioral supports	• Positive disciple practices • Clear and consistent routines • Clear and fair rules • Practices that support positive behavioral interventions

References

Blum, R. (2005). *School connectedness: Improving students' lives*. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. https://www.casciac.org/pdfs/SchoolConnectedness.pdf

Caskey, N., Cerna, R., Hanson, T., Polik, J., & Van Houten, L. (2016). *School climate improvement toolkit* [A resource from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd]. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/resource-school-climate-improvement-toolkit.pdf

Hashmi, S., Cerna, R., & Stern, A. (2022). *School climate essentials: A call to action*. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/School-Climate-Essentials_A-Call-to-Action.pdf

Hirsch J. K., & Conner, K. R. (2006). Dispositional and explanatory style optimism as potential moderators of the relationship between hopelessness and suicidal ideation. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, *36*(6), 661–669. https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2006.36.6.661

Long, C. (2007). Parents in the picture: Building relationships that last beyond back to school night. *NEA Today*, *3*(26), 26–31.

Mahecha, J., & Hanson, T. (2020). *Measurement structure of the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Surveys: Student, staff, and parent surveys*. WestEd. https://calschls.org/docs/measurementstructure-calschls_final.pdf

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2022). *Mental health in schools.* https://www.nami.org/

Advocacy/Policy-Priorities/Improving-Health/Mental-Health-in-Schools

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2022). *School climate improvement*. American Institutes for Research. https://safesupportive-learning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement

National School Climate Center. (n.d.). *What is school climate?* https://schoolclimate.org/about/our-approach/what-is-school-climate/

O'Malley, M. D., & Amarillas, A. (2011). *What Works brief #4: School connectedness*. WestEd. https://data.calschls.org/resources/S3_WhatWorksBrief4_Connectedness_final.pdf

Penn State Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis. (2022). *The importance of school facilities in improving student outcomes*. The Pennsylvania State University. https://sites.psu.edu/ceepa/2015/06/07/the-importance-of-school-facilities-in-improving-student-outcomes/

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. (2016). *Quick guide on making school climate improvements*.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students to the American Institutes for Research. (2018). *School climate*.

Vargas-Medrano J., Diaz-Pacheco V., Castaneda C., Miranda-Arango M., Longhurst M. O., Martin S. L., Ghumman U., Mangadu T., Chheda S., Thompson P. M., & Gadad B. S. (2020). Psychological and neurobiological aspects of suicide in adolescents: Current outlooks. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity Health, 7*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bbih.2020.100124

Warner, S., & Browning, A. (2021). *What are social and emotional learning and culturally responsive and sustaining education—and what do they have to do with critical race theory? A primer*. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/resources/sel-culturally-responsive-and-sustaining-education-and-critical-race-theory-brief/ Nakanya Magby and Rebeca Cerna

Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Magby, N., & Cerna, R. (2023). *Understanding school climate: An overview of school climate domains*. WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.