

School Climate

The school's climate refers to both the physical and aesthetic qualities of the school, as well as the emotional and psychological qualities of the school. The emotional and psychological qualities of a school refer to the attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of the faculty, staff, and students (1). The physical environment includes campus walkways and grounds, parking lots, school vehicles, cafeterias, bathrooms, gymnasiums, classrooms, and the equipment that is used in each of these places (2). Both qualities have a direct affect on the health, safety, performance, and the feeling of connectedness the staff and students have for their school.

Connectedness

Research has shown that students who feel connected to their school (e.g., felt teachers treated them fairly, felt close to people at school, felt like a part of their school) are less likely to experience suicidal thoughts and experience emotional distress (2,4,47). The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health surveyed more than 90,000 students (grades 7–12) and found that students' feeling of connectedness was the number one protective factor against suicidal behavior (3). Students who feel connected to the school are also less likely to drink alcohol, carry weapons, or engage in other delinquent behavior (2). Research suggests that schools that wish to foster a feeling of connectedness in students should consider providing students with after school activities or clubs (4,5), allowing students some involvement in decision making relating to issues that will affect them within their school (2,4), and creating small-sized student learning groups where students can discuss bias, prejudice, and the fair and equal treatment of all students in the school (5).

Participation

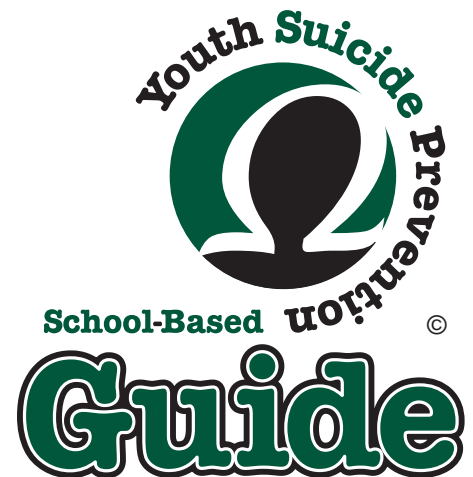
Research has shown that when students participate in decisions regarding their school and their community they tend to be healthier and more productive (4,9,10,48). Assigning students roles in the school is an essential element for ensuring a healthy school climate (2,4,5,10,11). A comprehensive 15,000-hour study of classroom strategies by the Surgeon General on Youth Violence found that academic achievement increased as the number of meaningful roles that the school assigned to students increased (45). It is important for schools to involve students in

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Issue Brief



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meaningful school roles and decisions in order to foster a sense of ownership in students. Students can play important roles in the school, acting as office helpers, classroom helpers, hallway monitors, school council members, or play a primary role in any number of student school committees such as a safe school planning committee. In the past, these jobs have been under-advertised to students who don't "excel". These jobs have been offered more as a reward to those who have succeeded in the past instead of as an opportunity for those who may have failed in the past and now feel discouraged or intimidated. Some suggest that these "underachievers" should be actively involved in such opportunities because these individuals may be the most at-risk for suicidal or violent behavior (2). Through their involvement with the school, these students (those potentially at-risk) may feel more connected to the school, which has been found to be an important protective factor for suicidal behaviors and ideations (2,4,39,46,47).

Academic Achievement

Two of the main focal points for schools are academic achievement and supporting students so that they may achieve these high academic standards. Schools should set academic goals for success and advancement (7) and provide encouragement to students when they meet or exceed these goals (2). A school may choose to use the media to put the names or faces of students who achieve their goals in print or on screen as well as displaying students' work in and around school (7). In order for students to achieve their academic potential and in order to decrease their likelihood of suicidal behaviors or other violent behaviors, students must feel safe.

Safety

Lack of physical and/or emotional safety is likely to result in unconstructive educational outcomes such as poor academic performance or truancy. Research has shown that students who feel victimized by other students or staff have an elevated risk of suicidal ideations and behaviors (12,13,20).

Bullying is the repeated infliction or attempted infliction of injury, discomfort, or humiliation of a weaker student by one or more students with more power (14,15). Students at-risk for being bullied include those that "don't fit in" (16,17), those perceived as homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered (6,18,19), those who are socially isolated or lack social skills (59), and those that differ from the majority of their classmates in regards to race, religion, or ethnicity (2). It is essential that schools train their staff to identify harassing behavior and how to effectively intervene (2,6,11,21). Research also suggests that schools implement tolerance education into existing curriculum (if they do not do so already) and train school staff to teach tolerance in the classroom (6,7).

Teachers need not be the only source contributing to a school climate that reduces bullying. Adolescents tend to watch and mimic the behaviors they observe in adults, which means that schools which set high expectations on all staff to behave respectfully and kindly to others have the potential to increase these positive characteristics in their students (2,22). However, teachers are the primary source of contact with students and they are primarily responsible for educating and promoting the success of the students. For this reason, schools need supportive teachers who have the ability to develop positive relationships with the students.

Teachers should fashion a classroom where students feel respected, supported, and feel comfortable approaching an adult when confronted with problems (2,4,7,46,48). Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult, not necessarily with a teacher, is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence, suicide, and bullying (5,10,46,48). A positive relationship with an adult is also important in order for students to feel comfortable enough to share information about a potentially dangerous situation (5). In roughly three out of four school shootings studied by the U.S. Secret Service, the attackers told someone of their plans before the attack (23).

Research has also found that adolescents are most likely to know in advance about a potentially dangerous and violent situation, particularly suicidal behavior or thoughts from peers (35,49-52).

For this reason, it is important for schools to create ways for students to feel comfortable enough about providing information to an adult when confronted with a potentially dangerous situation. Students should be provided a list of adults in school that they may contact if they feel unsafe or if they have knowledge about a potentially dangerous situation. Students are more likely to feel connected to their school if they believe that they are being treated fairly, feel safe, and believe that teachers are supportive (8).

In order for schools to maintain a caring and supportive staff, schools may wish to train teachers on the importance of acting in a caring and nurturing manner to students, remaining attentive to students' needs and wishes, recognizing signs of distress in students, and being able to recognize and intervene in a bullying situation (4,6). Research has found that teachers make effective informants about students' mental health issues (24,25,26) and although they should not diagnose and treat adolescents who may be suicidal, they should certainly be taught how to recognize and refer students who may be at-risk for engaging in suicidal thoughts or behaviors, which research has found to be an essential component of any suicide prevention program (11,37,43,51-58). Research suggests that training be done at the beginning of the school year and that teachers be given periodic opportunities to discuss students who may be displaying worrisome behavior (7). Training done at the beginning of the year will also allow a school to review its safety plan and the policies governing a safe school climate. Training should be done by someone who has experience with social-skills programs and who has the skills needed to conduct in-service training (5). By training staff in such a way, schools become more safe and the potential to reach a student at-risk for suicidal thoughts and actions (as well as other violent acts) becomes greater, thereby decreasing the likelihood of a school tragedy.

Training

Just as teachers should be trained and educated, students should be taught about how to interact with peers and adults, particularly about how to solve interpersonal conflicts in a nonviolent fashion (5). A safe school is one that helps students develop appropriate problem-solving and conflict resolution strategies. Skills training that focuses on problem solving, coping, and conflict resolution strategies have shown positive results on distress coping skills (38,39). These training programs have also been shown to reduce completed and attempted suicides in adolescents (37) and may be one of the most effective ways to prevent adolescent suicide (36). Empirical evaluations of programs that have focused on such skills training strategies have found an increase or enhancement of factors that protect adolescents from suicide while reducing the risk factors for suicide in these adolescents (40,41,42,46,48).

These strategies have also been suggested as a way to reduce depression, hopelessness, and drug abuse in adolescents, all risk factors for suicidal behaviors and/or thoughts (43). These skills can be taught by focusing on social skills and problem-solving skills directly through lessons or indirectly by incorporating these skills into existing classes, such as a health class, drivers education class, physical education class, or a reading class (5). Strengthening social skills has also been found to have a positive effect on cognitive development and learning in adolescents (27). How a school chooses to address implementing problem-solving and/or social skills education will vary due to resources and a school's individual culture, however it is essential that schools provide students with these skills, which may help control their behavior in a productive manner when faced with a challenging situation.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2) suggest the following guidelines regarding curriculum concerning safety education and instruction that helps students develop appropriate attitudes and behavioral skills needed to get through difficult situations:

1. Choose a prevention program and curricula that are grounded in theory or that have scientific evidence of effectiveness.

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2. Implement unintentional injury and violence prevention curricula consistent with national and state standards for health education.
3. Use active learning strategies, interactive teaching methods, and proactive classroom management to encourage student involvement in learning about violence prevention.
4. Provide adequate staffing and resources, including budget, facilities, staff development, and class time to provide violence prevention education to all students.

Programs that have utilized social skills training include the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), which is one of the longest and largest-running programs for conflict resolution in the country, and the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATH) curriculum. Both of these programs are evidence-based programs and have been found to have a positive impact on students, however, these are only two of the many that are available for use in schools. A school should adopt a problem-solving program that fits their school culture and their resource availability. For more information about such programs please refer to the U.S. Department of Education's Action Guide's additional resources section (5).

Discipline

Just as educating students about socially appropriate ways to deal with difficult situations is an important component of a positive school climate, the disciplining of students may be just as important because discipline is one process by which appropriate behaviors are taught (2). Disciplinary policies must be explicitly stated, use language that is easy to understand, applied fairly, and above all be applied consistently (2,7,10), in order to avoid creating an environment of favoritism and bias. Research has found that the best approach to disciplining students is a proactive and positive approach used by all staff and faculty (2,7,5). Such an approach focuses on such things as intervening before an argument escalates to a physical fight, identifying and intervening when faced with a bullying

situation, teaching problem-solving skills, teaching conflict resolution strategies, and teaching socially appropriate behaviors (2,5). Research also suggests that disciplinary approaches avoid emphasizing punishment (5,7). Humiliating, harassing, scolding, nagging, physically aversive punishment, and other behavior-corrections that disrupt the flow of instruction should be prohibited (2). Research has found that when these correction methods are used, behavioral problems in adolescents increase (44).

Physical Environment

Another component of a safe school and one that frequently gets ignored is the physical environment of the school (28). Although most research concerning the physical environment of the school does not directly discuss the physical environment as it relates to suicide, research has found that flaky ceilings, graffiti-tainted walls, scuffed-up floors, dirty bathrooms, crumbling sidewalks, and leaky toilets all contribute to a “why bother, no-one cares attitude” among students (1,4). This “why bother” attitude may facilitate feelings of isolation and a lack of connectedness, which could contribute to a student’s suicidal risk. Schools that have an aesthetically pleasing environment, however, motivate students to take more pride in their school (1). Negativism about a school has also been found to decrease the quality of teaching, the extent of learning, school attendance, and the rate of school completion (29). Although research is lacking on the influence of the physical environment on suicidal behaviors and thoughts, schools should examine the safety of their schools in order to avoid unintentional injuries as well as other problems, such as violence and bullying, which have been shown to be risk factors for suicidal behaviors and thoughts (12,13,20).

Security

One of the most obvious aspects of the school environment, which a school should certainly address, is ensuring that the school is free from weapons. Security cameras and metal detectors have been used effectively in order to keep weapons off school property (33,34). How a school chooses to prevent weapons on school grounds will vary,

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however, all schools should comply with the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), which requires each educational agency to expel any student who brings a firearm to school for at least one year and that any student who does so should be referred to the criminal justice system. Research suggests that schools should work with parents and community agencies in order to supervise students and reduce the likelihood that they will bring a weapon to school; this may also reduce the likelihood that students will have access to a weapon (1,2,4,5,6,11,32). Schools may also find it helpful to use parents and community agencies in order to broaden the web for identifying students at-risk for suicidal behaviors, thoughts and for those who may be at-risk for other violent behavior. An essential part of any safe school is a well-established system of community links and parental involvement (1-7,10,11,21,24,32). For more on the necessity of community and family links please refer to Issue Brief 9: “Community Partnerships.” Other physical characteristics that a school may wish to address besides firearm/weapon control includes the following:

- Number and types of exits
- Adequate lighting
- Comfortable rooms and furnishings in order to communicate to students that they are important and their comfort is considered
- Locker use, visibility, and supervision
- Parking areas
- Positive posters, bulletins, and signs
- Patterns of supervision
- Density of traffic patterns during different parts of the day
- Isolated areas, which may be ideal areas for bullying to take place
- Location and design of bathrooms
- Guardrails on stairways
- Hallway design
- A closed campus to limit truancy and contact between students and outsiders (research suggests that a large number of outsiders intimidate and sell drugs to students).

Research suggests that schools should conduct comprehensive safety assessments at least once a year (30) and that more frequent assessments may be necessary for certain areas of the school such as playgrounds (31). For more information about a safe physical environment, schools should refer to and comply with OSHA regulations for safety. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s NIOSH branch has compiled a CD-ROM that provides information about OSHA regulations in schools. Schools may also wish to utilize California’s Department of Education guide, which provides reasons why and specific methods for examining the aforementioned physical characteristics (7).

In order for a school to provide a safe learning environment and positive school climate, schools should:

- Provide staff with in-service training that addresses the importance of acting in a caring and nurturing manner to students, remaining attentive to students’ needs and wishes, recognizing signs of distress in students, and being able to recognize and intervene in a bullying situation.
- Ensure that there are established policies explicitly focused on harassment and bullying.
- Provide opportunities for staff to share their concern about students who may be displaying worrisome behavior.
- Emphasize positive relationships between students and all staff.
- Have a system in place to refer students suspected of abuse/neglect.
- Treat students with equal respect, support, and care.
- Continually monitor the safety and cleanliness of the physical aspects of the school such as the halls, restrooms, and floors.
- Consistently enforce disciplinary, harassment, and civil rights policies.
- Inform students about who they may contact within the school if they do not feel safe.
- Help students feel safe about approaching an adult when they are confronted with a potentially dangerous situation.

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- Address problem-solving and/or social skills strategies either by incorporating these strategies into existing curriculum or by focusing directly on these strategies.
- Ensure high academic standards.
- Make sure that students are involved in school decisions and that they have an equal opportunity to help in school activities.
- Develop links to the community (police agencies, environmental health professionals, mental health agencies, or crisis centers).
- Encourage and utilize parental involvement.
- Educate students on issues such as tolerance, harassment, bullying, and the importance of respecting others.
- Ensure a safe physical climate exists by conducting safety assessments at least once a year.
- Ensure that there are policies and procedures in place that focus on weapons in the school. It is recommended that these policies utilize outside resources such as parents or law enforcement.
- Develop after school activities or events to foster student connectedness.
- Use a positive and pro-social approach and avoid an approach that emphasizes punishment.

Three examples of school climate programs include Halfmoon Bay “Growing Pains” project, The School Transition Environment Program (STEP), and the Alberta Safe and Caring Schools Initiative. For more on safe school programs refer to the US Department of Education.

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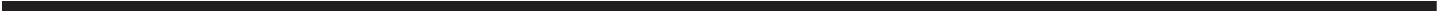
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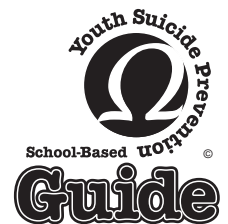
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Notes



Notes



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