

School Climate Improvement Action Guide for District 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 district leaders—including superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of student support services, or others—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 districts¹ focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, develop positive relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors.

Strengthening school climate, including conditions for learning, can help you in the following ways:

- ✓ **Boost** student achievement and close achievement gaps.
- ✓ **Increase** attendance.
- ✓ **Decrease** teacher turnover and increase teacher satisfaction.
- ✓ **Turn around** low-performing schools.
- ✓ **Lower** dropout rates and increase high school graduation rates.
- ✓ **Improve** school safety and student morale.^{2,3}

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 district leaders, who can help set the tone for continued improvement in their schools.

¹ 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.

² 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>

³ 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 district's needs. District leaders are critical players in a successful planning process. Many districts and schools are implementing improvements that affect school climate based on goals and systems that are already in place. Planning efforts at the district level should be integrated into these pre-existing plans, while exercising care in achieving complementary efforts.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Review the systems, plans, and goals that are already in place in your district.
- Consider what, where, and how school climate improvements can be incorporated into this existing work: How will they bolster current efforts and goals already in place?
- Plan what, where, and how new efforts will need to be added to improve school climate.
- Get your constituency groups—such as the school board, school leaders, community partners, families, and students—on board and involved in the planning process. It is particularly important to ensure that your school board knows about and buys into improving school climate.

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

- Recognizing and building on previous work.
- Sharing with schools and stakeholders how school climate improvements are aligned with and enhance existing systems, plans, and goals.
- Getting buy-in from your school board based on your explanation of the value of school climate improvement and what improvements would involve in the district (i.e., resources, process, and expected outcomes).
- Engaging in initial planning with district and school leaders.
- Being realistic about what can be accomplished and setting a timeline for improvement based on your district's capacity.
- Leading and supporting your school leaders' efforts to get the school climate improvement process up and running.
- Providing appropriate planning, professional development, and implementation support to help schools, staff, families, students, and community partners understand school climate.

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

- Not looking for previous efforts to improve school climate—most schools have done some work that affects the school climate, even if informally. Build on the lessons learned.
- Piling this effort on top of other school improvement efforts—this should be integrated into, rather than added onto, existing systems, plans, and goals.
- Starting an initiative without school board support.
- Neglecting to find ongoing roles for stakeholders, including school leaders, instructional staff, noninstructional staff, students, families, and community partners.
- Underestimating the importance of your role as the leader of an improvement effort—district leaders are key to ensuring focus, resource availability, and support.
- Overestimating your district's capacity to do this work—you may need to break the work into manageable steps. Taking on too much right away can lead to frustration.
- Not providing sufficient or appropriate professional development and support to schools, staff, and partners.



Questions You Can Ask Other District and School Leadership About Planning School Climate Improvements

- What efforts does the district/your school already have in place that can support school climate improvements?
- Are there other districts from whom we can learn?
- Should this be a districtwide effort or should we focus on a selection of schools?
- What capacity do we have as a district to do this work?
- What is a realistic timeline and what are realistic goals for the school climate improvement process in this district?
- How can I best support this work? How do I get other district and school leaders to support this work?
- What supports at the district level do we have available to schools? What additional supports will we need to be successful?
- What professional development is needed? What do we already have in place that we can build upon? How can we embed the professional development on an ongoing basis?

Engage Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

For school climate improvements to be successful, everyone with an interest in the district's schools—school leaders and staff, students, families, and community partners—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 district leader, you play an important role in encouraging engagement and buy-in from many different stakeholders.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Get school leaders on board. The on-the-ground school climate work is going to happen in school buildings. This step is essential to a successful school climate improvement process, as evidenced by the work of the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) [Safe and Supportive School grantees](#). These grantees repeatedly expressed that the most successful schools were those in which the school leader considered climate to be a priority.
- Share your district's vision for school climate change with families and students and solicit their input and ideas through town hall meetings, school assemblies, informational handouts, and other methods.
- Support school leaders in the work they will be doing and let them know that the district stands behind them in their efforts.
- Show support for school leaders' efforts to engage staff. This could include attending meetings with school staff to share your vision and partnership. A coordinated effort shows how this work is being prioritized and helps motivate engagement.
- Ask school leaders to identify school climate “champions” and staff who can serve on a school climate team and lead the measurement and implementation efforts in their buildings.

- Let school leaders and staff know that administering school climate surveys is a way to assess strengths and needs and can help guide school climate improvements.
- Build partnerships with community organizations. Community partners can support data collection, implementation, and evaluation. For example, corporate partners within the community may provide monetary resources and other supports for the effort (e.g., by furnishing incentives for responding to surveys or marketing materials for engaging the school community in the effort). Service providers can help coordinate services for students who need support.

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


- Sharing the vision for school climate improvements and how it fits with the overarching district mission and vision.
- Communicating consistently and clearly about school climate improvement and district priorities.
- Providing community partners, staff, families, and students with opportunities to play a concrete role in the school climate improvement effort.
- Conveying the importance of outreach and engagement with all kinds of stakeholders, including families and portions of the community that are typically less involved or overlooked in school improvement efforts.
- Engaging community partners, staff, families, and students as school climate improvements are made, not just at the beginning.
- Sharing success stories that can engage everyone involved in the school climate improvement process—powerful examples can help get people on board. This includes highlighting areas of strength in your schools; successes that staff, students, and families have experienced; and plans for future activities.
- Appreciating community partners, staff, families, and students for their contributions by thanking and acknowledging them publicly.

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

- Not being clear about the vision for school climate improvement and how it fits into the district's broader goals.
- Sharing misinformation about the school climate improvement effort, leading to confusion and frustration.
- Informing community partners, staff, families, and students about the work rather than engaging them in it.
- Communicating with everyone involved only at the beginning of the school climate improvement process.
- Disengaging community partners, staff, families, and students through multiple cycles of improvement efforts that are not carried out thoughtfully.
- Failing to talk about the improvement effort in the district or to acknowledge the hard work and success of partners, staff, families, and students.
- Only engaging with a subset of stakeholders based on existing relationships (and not going beyond them).

Questions You Can Ask Other District and School Leadership 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?
- How can we tailor our efforts to reach all kinds of stakeholders, including those who do not speak English or whose viewpoints are not usually considered?
- Which district leaders are interested in or most suited to lead this effort? What roles would you suggest they take?

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- Which school leaders could be good advocates for the district effort? What roles could they have?
 - 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 celebrate and share successes that schools have in improving their climates?

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. Data collection takes time, resources, and infrastructure. Thus, district leaders need to support this work in coordination with other district-level activities and priorities. Expressing a real commitment to improving the climate for students, staff, and families and using data for continuous quality improvement will foster sustained engagement in the district's efforts. These data will help you identify what is working and where you can make improvements.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Develop and support schools' capacity to collect data.
- Provide opportunities and resources for professional development on making school climate improvements, including best practices in data collection.
- Develop strategies to help schools, students, staff, and families understand the importance of accurate data collection.
- Encourage schools' school climate teams to periodically collect and report school climate data using a reliable, valid, and actionable school climate survey (such as [ED's suite of School Climate Surveys \(EDSCLS\)](#)) to obtain information from students, instructional staff, noninstructional staff, and families.
- Collect data on a range of school climate topics, which may include 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
- Help resolve any survey administration problems as they arise.
- Emphasize and monitor acceptable survey response rates overall (try for 80 percent for students and staff) and for your respondent subgroups of interest.
- Use survey data as one way of assessing school and district climate, while incorporating other methods (e.g., focus groups, and interviews).
- Include youth voice in data collection efforts.

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

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

- Providing opportunities and resources for professional development that are ongoing and job-embedded.
- Communicating the importance of data and good data collection techniques.
- Using reliable and valid instruments to collect actionable data.
- Having a system in place to quickly resolve any survey administration problems.
- Reaching acceptable survey response rates overall (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).
- Actively engaging students in the data collection, analysis, and reporting process. For example:
 - Several of the Safe and Supportive School 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.
 - Other grantees found students to be so enthusiastic about improvement activities that they conducted their own in-depth surveys, created videos, and visited state lawmakers to discuss their schools' improvement process.
- Using data strategically for planning and problem-solving through careful (but not excessive) data analysis and reflection.

- Not providing training for district 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.
- Using survey instruments that have not been demonstrated to be effective.
- Collecting data that are not reliable, valid, and actionable (e.g., surveys that are not tested for the appropriate age group, results from surveys that have less than 50 percent response rate).
- Letting problems or challenges related to 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 the quantitative data with qualitative data.
- Ignoring the role that students can play in data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Ignoring the data you have collected when planning and problem-solving for your district.



Questions You Can Ask Other District and School Leadership 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 upon 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 areas need improvement?
- What additional data should we collect through interviews or focus groups to provide context for the survey data?
- How can we make a special effort to hear from students whose voices tend to be underrepresented in school (such as those who are not doing well academically, or who are English learners)?
- 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 district’s needs, as identified by climate data collection; your district’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 district leader plays an important role in ensuring that resources are being used efficiently and effectively when choosing and implementing interventions to support school climate improvement.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Ensure that effective strategies are in place for choosing and implementing interventions (e.g., provide schools with data that is easy for them to interpret and use when making decisions; provide school staff with necessary training and professional development related to the interventions being implemented).

- Encourage schools to assess what related interventions already exist, the extent to which they are improving student outcomes and being implemented as designed, and whether other interventions may be a better fit.
- Capitalize on resources that already exist but be careful not to do what has always been done because that may not have the impact that you need.
- Review the logistics, required training, materials, and resources needed for each potential intervention to ensure that your district and schools have the capacity and funds to implement it with fidelity.
- Once the intervention is chosen, communicate about it with staff in a variety of ways (e.g., faculty meetings, e-mails, or distributing written materials) to help them fully understand the intervention's components and their role in implementing it.
- Give your school leaders and staff ongoing support for implementation.
- Gather feedback continuously on implementation quality and fidelity, as well as what is and is not working about the chosen intervention.

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 students⁴ and considering other strategies and interventions as appropriate to meet the needs of your community.
- Implementing a combination of programs and strategies across time and connecting your various school climate improvement efforts so that they are aligned and support one another.
- Supporting your school leaders' selection of interventions with resources and 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 are 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 school leaders' 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 the district or school has 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."
- Separating your school climate improvement work from other interventions and improvement efforts in the district.
- Underestimating the time and resources needed for your schools to implement chosen interventions.
- Letting your initial enthusiasm wane as time goes on and forgetting that it may take time for areas of poor climate in the district's schools 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.

⁴ Potential registries include the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) from ED; [youth.gov](#) from the U.S. government; the [Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center](#) from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; [Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development](#) from the University of Colorado–Boulder Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence; the [Model Programs Guide](#) from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the [2021 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs](#) for elementary (including prekindergarten), middle, and high schools.



Questions You Can Ask Other District and School Leadership About Choosing and Implementing School Climate Interventions

- What key aspects of school climate are we trying to change? What are our priorities?
- Do we (district and schools) want to select an evidence-based program or are strategies, policies, and activities a better fit for our district/schools? 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 districts and schools are implementing school climate improvements and the impact those efforts have on schools and students. Evaluation builds on and uses the data you have already collected on school climate and can inform ongoing work. District leaders play a key role in ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the school climate improvement process because they are likely to be the ones held accountable by the school board for progress.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Work with school leaders to revisit goals and the logic model or theory of change that they may have developed to determine what evaluation questions would be effective.
- Develop an evaluation plan with school leaders. The plan should include what data have been collected, what data still need to be collected, and how data should be reported out.
- Plan with school leaders for collecting input from a variety of stakeholders on the overall school climate improvement process. This information can help inform 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, school leaders, and other key stakeholders (e.g., school staff, community partners, families, and students) review data, reflect on its 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.
- Communicating the meaning of findings broadly and talking about implementation and outcomes.
- Inviting a variety of stakeholders to review evaluation data, ask questions, and reflect.
- Supporting sustainability efforts within the district.

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

- Collecting only outcome data and ignoring process data that can help provide context.
- Keeping the findings to yourself or a small team.
- Using technical terms that staff, partners, students, and families do not understand.
- 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 District and School Leadership About Monitoring and Evaluating School Climate Improvements

- What improvements are we seeing in schools and in the district as a whole?
- Where have we not seen as much improvement as we would like? Why could this be? How could we change this?
- 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 all stakeholders?
- How can we improve the process of planning, stakeholder engagement, data collection and implementation, and monitoring and evaluation for 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>.