

School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Working With Families

Improving school climate takes time and commitment from a variety of people in a variety of roles. This document outlines how family members—including guardians of students—can 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.

When communicating to families about what school climate is and why it is important, focus on the benefits of strengthening school climate:

- ✓ Help their children do better in school.
- ✓ Improve school safety.
- ✓ Improve the school's overall performance.
- ✓ Help students graduate from high school.
- ✓ Improve relationships between teachers and students.
- ✓ Make school more enjoyable and motivating for their children.

Of course, improving school climate is not something that changes 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 everyone in the school community, including parents and family members.

Participate in Planning for School Climate Improvements

Planning for school climate improvement provides the foundation to ensure that a school's efforts are targeted to meet its needs. Families play a key role in how they and their children view and interact with the school. It is important to engage family members in planning efforts to ensure their voices and opinions become part of the improvement plan.

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.



What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Share information about school climate improvements at events when families are present, such as parent-teacher organization meetings, open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and family information nights.
- Invite a few family members to participate on the school climate team. Ask family members who have been engaged with the school in the past, as well as those who have been less active in the school community. Both may have perspective on what needs to be changed or improved in relation to school climate.
- Solicit input from families on planned activities and ask for their opinions about what is needed to improve school climate.
- Involve families in developing a communication plan. Identify a group of family members who are willing to support the effort by reaching out to others and sharing information about the school climate improvement plans.
- For all activities with families, take time up front to help them become informed participants (such as by defining terms and explaining what data mean).

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

- Engaging members of multiple families who represent a cross-section of the student population. For example, if a large percentage of your population speaks a second language, engage family members who speak it and can share information about the school climate improvements with other families in their native language.
- Use trusted liaisons to reach out to families from groups that have not been well connected to your school.
- Taking family input seriously—family members are key to the success of your improvement efforts.
- Engaging families in multiple ways throughout the school climate improvement process using a variety of communication methods

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

- Only asking the most engaged family members to participate—it is important to include diverse families to understand things such as barriers to involvement and how they would like to engage with the school.
- Dismissing family member input as irrelevant or out of touch.
- Only asking family members to participate in planning at the beginning of your efforts rather than keeping them engaged throughout the improvement efforts.

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

- What families do we need to work the hardest to reach? What insight can they offer?
- What existing events or committees can we tap for family member participation?
- Are our family participants representative of the diversity of our student population?
- What should our communication plan be to reach the largest number of families?
- What languages do we need to represent in our materials and outreach?



Engage Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

For school climate improvements to be successful, everyone with an interest in the school 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. Families are an important group to reach and engage. Once some families are engaged, they can help you reach other key groups, such as community partners, students, and other hard-to-reach families.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Ask family members who are more active in the school to help you reach out and engage other families. They may feel more comfortable talking to and hearing from other families. They also may trust the information more if it is coming from another parent or guardian rather than a teacher or principal.
- Encourage family members to brainstorm with community organizations with which they have a relationship and ask for their help in engaging those agencies. For example, individuals may participate in community centers, religious institutions, libraries, and parks and recreation facilities and may be able to talk with the leaders of those organizations about supporting the school climate improvement process.
- Enlist family members, through communications such as e-mail and in-person events, in reinforcing efforts to improve school climate at home and when students are not at school.

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

- Encouraging a wide range of family members to participate.
- Hearing what families think about improving school climate and about the importance of school climate during events where family members are present.
- Asking family members for their ideas about how to engage other families, their students, and the community.
- Asking families to recruit others to help with the school climate improvement process.
- Asking family members what would help them feel more engaged and using that information to create a plan to reach others.
- Acknowledging the help that families provide by hosting thank you lunches or coffee hours, sharing key information with them, and thanking key individuals publicly in writing or at events.

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

- Not preparing families in advance so that they understand key vocabulary, data, and so on.
- Doing a presentation that does not engage families in what school climate means to them and their children.
- Forgetting to ask families for their input.
- Ignoring family input on how best to reach students and other families.
- Underestimating the importance of families in engaging students and others in school climate improvements.
- Focusing only on those family members who are easiest to reach.
- Forgetting to thank and recognize family members for their efforts.



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


- What ideas do families have about engaging students?
- What specific activities can we engage families in and how?
- Which family members are most active in our community? How can we use their influence to reach others?
- How can we engage families that are not typically involved? What can we learn from families that are involved about how to do it?
- What community agencies do family members have connections with and how can they help us engage these organizations in this process?

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 tell you what is working and where you can make improvements. Family members have a role to play in planning for, participating in, and implementing data collection.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Administer school climate surveys to families to learn about how school climate is currently perceived by them. Family members can provide an important view of school climate.
- Conduct focus groups with families to get context on what the school climate survey data means.
- Enlist those families that are active and engaged in getting others to take the survey or participate in focus groups.
- Recruit family members to distribute surveys and share information about why the school is collecting data at events such as a parent-teacher conferences.
- Reach out to families who have limited literacy skills to ask them the survey questions orally, in a language they understand.
- Inform family members about student surveys and ask them to talk to their children about the importance of taking the surveys seriously and answering honestly.



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

- Asking family members to pilot a family survey. Ask them to provide feedback on the survey and the best way to collect data from others—aiming for a high return rate to ensure you are reaching hard-to-reach families.
- Hearing families tell their students that the survey is important or hearing students say that their families said it is important.
- Seeing families show interest in looking at and analyzing school climate data.
- Asking what families think of the school climate data and how they think the data should be used.
- Getting calls, questions, and suggestions from families about what can be done to improve school climate.

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

- Being satisfied with a return rate of less than 50 percent on family surveys.
- Giving up if families are hard to reach—not using multiple strategies at a variety of events and venues to capture input.
- Forgetting to enlist families in gathering data from students.
- Sharing only the positive school climate data with families and not acknowledging issues out of fear of criticism.
- Not asking families to review and provide input on school climate data.

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

- How can we make it easy for families to provide their input?
- What do family members need to know about data collection?
- What existing events do we have where we can tap diverse groups of family members to take the surveys?
- How can family members help inform their students about the importance of data collection?
- How can families help with collecting, analyzing, and reporting the school climate data?

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). Family members should be included in the process of deciding which intervention to implement.



What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Include family members on the school climate team that is reviewing and selecting intervention options. Make sure to solicit family member input.
- Consider hosting a family event where you present a variety of intervention options to families, share pros and cons, and solicit input from a broader group.
- Consider the home school components of any intervention you are selecting and ask family members to reflect on how well those components will work in practice.
- Ensure you are picking interventions or strategies that are realistic and will resonate with your families.

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

- Asking family members for their opinion in a clear, straightforward way (e.g., giving them a simple overview of the intervention choices and asking what they think) and receiving constructive responses.
- Reaching out to a broad group of families, not just a handful that you talk with regularly, and getting a range of opinions.
- Looking at a variety of interventions that include a range of family components, from minor family commitment to extensive family involvement.
- Keeping in touch with families throughout the implementation of the selected intervention and asking for feedback on what is working and what is not working.

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

- Getting too technical or sharing too many details about possible interventions.
- Talking to only a few engaged family members about the intervention choices and not getting feedback from others.
- Making assumptions about what families will like and not like or be willing to do at home rather than asking them.
- Failing to engage family members throughout the school climate improvement process.
- Failing to engage a diversity of families that represent the community.

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

- How can we best solicit input from families about the intervention choices?
- What is most important to share with families about the interventions and what is an effective way to share it?
- How involved does the school want families to be? How involved do families want to be? Do families want to be involved in implementing components of the intervention?
- How can we continue to engage families in the intervention implementation over time?



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 of those efforts on your school and students. Evaluation builds on and uses the data you have already collected on school climate and can inform your ongoing work. Family members want to know how interventions are going, what is happening at the school, how the school climate improvement process is impacting their student's experience, and how they can provide input.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Hold family member focus groups to ask for their input on the implementation of school climate interventions, such as how they liked the home school activities, what they are noticing about the intervention's impact on the school or their children, and how they would like to be engaged in the future.
- Share findings, including progress and challenges, from the evaluation and monitoring efforts with families through e-mail, newsletters, and in-person events.
- Host a family event to share the results and solicit feedback on what changes should be made based on the data.

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

- Getting feedback from a broad array of family members on the initiative through a survey and asking what they would like to see changed.
- Seeing a diverse group of engaged family members attend an event where the results of the evaluation and next steps are discussed.
- Asking for thorough and detailed input on findings, as well as suggestions for sharing information with other families.
- Hearing families ask about the impact of the school climate improvement process.

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

- Forgetting to share evaluation data with families.
- Only sharing the evaluation information with or getting input from the most engaged families (e.g., active parent-teacher organization leadership).
- Sharing data without providing guidance on what those data mean, using straightforward language to help families understand what they are seeing.
- Getting only surface-level feedback from families—make sure to interview or conduct focus groups with some families to get detailed feedback.
- Underestimating the importance of reflection and feedback from families during the process.



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

- How can our core group of family members help us reach others? What are ways we can reach less engaged families?
- What do a diverse set of families consider as success? How do we know?
- How can we best share the data we have collected with families?
- How can we best reflect with families? What information do we want to get from families?

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>.