

School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Working With Students

Improving school climate takes time and commitment from a variety of people in a variety of roles. This document outlines key action steps to engage students in the school climate improvement process.

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 students about what school climate is and why school climate is important, focus on how strengthening school climate can do the following:

- ✓ **Make** school fun and enjoyable so they want to come.
- ✓ **Help** students do better in school.
- ✓ **Help** teachers and students get along better.
- ✓ **Improve** school safety.
- ✓ **Help** students graduate from high school.

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 everyone in the building, including students.

Participate in Planning for School Climate Improvements

Planning for school climate improvement provides the foundation to ensure that your efforts are targeted to meet your school’s needs. It is important to engage students in planning to ensure their voices and opinions become part of your school climate 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?

- Form a student school climate improvement committee made up of six to eight interested and motivated students who can help you think about things such as how to implement a student survey in a way that is not stressful, what aspects of the school climate need to be improved, how to gather meaningful input from other students, how to incentivize student participation in data collection and other school climate improvement efforts, and so on.
- Give older students an opportunity to communicate about the school climate improvements to their peers rather than hearing about it from a teacher or the principal. Students in higher grades can be important role models for younger students in their school.
- Gather input from a majority of the student body about what school climate issues are most pressing.

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

- Identifying a core group of well-respected student leaders, as well as some students who are struggling but could feel empowered by participating in the school climate improvement process.
- Describing the role of students and obtaining their commitment for ongoing, constructive participation.
- Incorporating student voice and feedback into improvement plans.
- Offering meaningful opportunities for student input and participation in all major school climate improvement activities.
- Giving students the coaching and preparation they will need to engage in meaningful participation.

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

- Excluding students who are not “model” students and underestimating the importance of their perspectives and influence.
- Asking for student input only at the beginning rather than continuously involving students in planning throughout the process, by, for example, forming a committee of students to participate in the work across time.
- Getting caught up in making input fun and gimmicky for students rather than providing authentic opportunities for students to share their opinions.
- Giving students a token role—they will find this frustrating and ultimately demoralizing.

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

- How can we gather input from a majority of students about school climate needs?
- What meaningful roles can we give students in the planning process?
- How can we engage students from marginalized populations in planning (in ways that they feel comfortable speaking freely, and their viewpoints are not drowned out by the majority)?
- Which students can we engage in our school climate efforts? Which student leaders should we approach? Which struggling students could flourish by being included?
- Who will approach the students and how?



Engage Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

Improving school climate is a schoolwide endeavor. For school climate improvements to be successful, everyone with an interest in the school needs to be informed and involved. Students are most likely to support school climate improvement efforts when they understand how they can play a role in making their school a better place. Students can play a key role in helping to engage other students, families, and even staff and community partners.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Encourage students to reach out to other students. A core group of engaged students can serve as ambassadors of the school climate improvement process. Allow them to present information on the importance of school climate at an assembly or in classrooms.
- Ask students to engage their families by bringing information home to share about upcoming efforts to improve the school climate. Another option is to bring families together at the school for a family night where students can share information about the school climate improvement process with their families in the school setting.
- Allow committed students who believe in the importance of school climate to present to teachers during a faculty meeting, talk to community partners after school, or appeal to district staff or the school board at a districtwide meeting.

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

- Making sure that your school climate improvement ambassadors reflect a diversity of backgrounds, school social groups, and levels of academic performance.
- Encouraging students to use their own voice—let them determine what to say and how they would like to share.
- Asking students how they would recommend engaging other students, families, staff, and community partners and allowing students to reach out to these stakeholders themselves.
- Asking for student volunteers to talk with families, faculty, community partners, and district staff about why school climate improvement is important to them.

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

- Using only (or mostly) “model” students as school climate improvement ambassadors.
- Telling students what to say.
- Playing politics—students can advocate for the importance of school climate improvements but should not be used as pawns in a battle over resources, for example.
- Requiring or pressuring students to help engage other students, staff, families, and community partners. Some may be shy or uncomfortable in this role.



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


- In which existing events can we ask students to participate to support school climate improvement efforts?
- What ideas do students have about reaching staff, other students, families, and community partners?
- How can we best harness student energy and input to speak with various stakeholders (e.g., school board, district leadership, school leadership, and community partners)?
- In what ways can students encourage their families to participate in the school climate improvement 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. Students play an important role in planning for and implementing data collection. All students can complete surveys and/or participate in focus groups about their own experiences, as well as encourage their peers and families to participate. These data will tell you what is working and what is in need of improvements.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Consider asking a small group of students to review or test the student survey you plan to use. This input can provide a realistic estimate on how long the survey will take to complete and if there are questions that are difficult to answer or not appropriate for certain grade levels. Use the input from the student pilot test to refine the survey implementation process.
- Ask your core group of students to communicate with their peers about the importance of taking the surveys seriously. They could go classroom to classroom or present to the whole school in an assembly and share why the data are important, how they can help their school improve, and how to take the survey (e.g., think about each question carefully, answer truthfully, take your time, and raise your hand if you do not understand a question).
- Allow students to conduct focus groups or interviews with peers and staff to provide context for interpreting survey data. (If using this approach, ensure that the students receive clear guidance and training about protecting the privacy of participants.)
- Include students on a team of people reviewing and reporting on the data. Students can have their own data team or be part of a larger team with adults, but they should be involved in some way in interpreting the data and sharing results with the school community.
- Spend time preparing the students beforehand to ensure that they understand the data, review process, and so forth. This preparation will help maximize the value of their participation.



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

- Piloting your survey instrument with students and using data from the pilot test to improve the survey process—you should be using a valid and reliable survey, so do not change the items. However, you can change the time allocated for the survey, the age group you give it to, and the logistics based on student input.
- Having students communicate about the importance of data collection.
- Having students assist in collecting data from peers and staff.
- Including students in reflecting on and using the data for improvement—they may have critical insights into the data that can be useful in future planning.
- Spending time preparing students so that they can make informed and meaningful contributions to planning.

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

- Changing individual survey items based on student feedback, thus impacting the validity and reliability of the survey.
- Asking students to share their answers on the pilot survey. They should remain anonymous and be used only for testing the process and comprehension, not gathering input on school climate.
- Downplaying the importance of students in communicating with their peers about capturing good data on school climate.
- Excluding students from the reflection and data use conversations.
- Asking students to participate in a “token” manner and/or not preparing them adequately beforehand.

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

- How can students share the importance of survey data with their peers?
- What additional information do we need to help us understand the survey data? How can students help us gather those data?
- How can we engage students in reflection on the 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; how it is implemented (i.e., this is not an “activity” but a process of changing how things get done); and how it is or can be coherent with your school’s other programming. Students should be included in the process of deciding which intervention to implement because they have insight into what students might respond to and can help review possible options.



What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Give students an opportunity to work with the school climate team to select the intervention by reviewing different aspects of the various intervention options. For example, they could review the materials from an intervention package or participate in a sample activity and provide feedback on what they like and do not like.
- Select students to be “ambassadors” after the intervention is chosen and ask them to share information about the intervention with other students at assemblies or in small groups.
- Include students throughout the implementation process, asking for their feedback and incorporating it into improvement efforts.
- Ensure that these activities include a variety of students, not just “model” students. If an intervention is designed for a particular group of students, ensure that they play a central role in this process.

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

- Asking students to share their opinions about what intervention to use and how students would respond to it—give them a simple overview of the intervention choices and ask what they think.
- Testing out materials from the intervention for how they will be received by students (but be sure to protect students’ privacy by finding ways for them to share their opinion without having to speak in front of other students).
- Asking students to share information about the intervention(s) with their peers.
- Continuing to ask for student feedback throughout the implementation process.
- Selecting a variety of students for these activities (including those who may be most in need of the intervention).

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

- Getting too technical or sharing too much detail with students about the intervention.
- Forgetting to test materials with students for hands-on and concrete input.
- Making plans for communicating with other students and stakeholders too complicated.
- Engaging students only at the beginning, rather than continuing to seek their opinions throughout the process.
- Selecting only or mostly “model” students for these activities.

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

- How will we select our students for these activities to ensure representation from a diversity of perspectives? How do we ensure that the kinds of students who most need these interventions are represented in these activities?
- What questions do we want to ask students to assess the kinds of interventions needed?

- When, where, and how can students best share their opinions about potential interventions?
- How will we share with students what interventions we selected and how we plan to implement them? Can we ask some students to share this information?

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. Student input on the intervention and implementation process can be an important part of making improvements for the future and letting stakeholders know about the success of the initiative.

What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Hold student focus groups to ask for their input on the implementation of the school climate intervention, such as how they liked the activities, what worked and did not work, and whether they think it is having an impact on the school. Ensure representation from different types of students in this process.
- If they are old enough, have the student school climate improvement team interview staff about the implementation process and what could be improved.
- Share findings from the evaluation and monitoring efforts with students in reflection meetings. Get their input on what changes should be made based on the data.

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


- Asking a diversity of students what they thought worked and did not work and what has changed at the school as a result of the intervention.
- Engaging a small group of students in data collection (e.g., interviewing teachers and staff about implementation).
- Engaging the whole student body in a reflection process after the first year or period of implementation.

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

- Leaving students out of the data collection process—they can often be better at getting information from teachers, staff, and other students than adults!
- Deciding not to share and reflect on data with students after the implementation process.
- Only or mostly reaching out to “model” students for their viewpoints.

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

- How can we engage a large number of students in giving feedback and reflecting on the intervention and process?
- What interventions do students feel are most aligned with the school’s climate improvement needs?

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- What data can students gather?
 - How can students help interpret the data and share it with their peers?
 - How will students get feedback from other students about how the interventions are helping or not?

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>.