

(5/13/26) **This continuing education resource is from the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

Featured

(1) Planning for next steps in enhancing school climate

(2) Engaging students → **less stress and anxiety** → **enhanced classroom climate**

(3) School climate reflects school culture:

Implications for Whole-Child Development and Student/Learning Supports

And, as always, you will find

(4) Links to more resources

This community of practice *Practitioner* is designed for a screen bigger than an iPhone.

For discussion and interchange:

>Planning for next steps in enhancing school climate

Everyone agrees that schools should ensure a positive school climate. Less agreement exists, however, about what this means and how to improve it. This is especially so when the call is for developing a safe and supportive environment that also is nurturing and caring and that provides all students with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Given the need for continuous improvement, enhancing school climate always is an important facet of planning for the next school year (including the summer). We suggest creating a planning work group of teachers, student support staff, administrators (with student and family input) to clarify specific objectives, recommend revision of policies, changes in daily routines, responses to struggling students, outreach to family and community, etc.

As food for thought, here is an excerpt from an article discussing:

>Creating Welcoming Schools: The Role of Positive Climates in Reducing Absenteeism

“...Our findings provide suggestive evidence that school climate, particularly dimensions related to connectedness, safety, and academic structure for learning, is worthwhile for school leaders and policymakers to target with focus and interventions to reduce absenteeism....

Recently, schools have taken approaches that focus on communication and providing systematic support to reduce absenteeism, and this practice is becoming more common in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era among school leaders. For example, a two-way text messaging system between schools and parents was found to substantially decrease chronic absence rates. Other interventions include teacher and mentor programs that develop relationships with students to provide them with the support they need to attend school..... Future research should examine whether, and to what extent, school climate moderates the relationship between these policy approaches and absenteeism....

There are several plausible reasons why focusing on school climate is a viable pathway for reducing absenteeism and should be considered alongside current interventions. Examining elements of school climate may highlight negative within-school experiences that likely influence absenteeism, but current interventions may overlook them. These within-school, climate-related

experiences likely moderate the effects of interventions seeking to improve absenteeism. Interventions like information campaigns and incentives are unlikely to be maximized if schools are unwelcoming to and unsafe for students. That is, even if we eliminate informational barriers about attendance, disproportional discipline practices—over which school leaders and teachers wield considerable influence—will likely continue to drive absenteeism, particularly among Black students, reducing the effectiveness of such initiatives....

Further, school climate is a malleable construct that educators have influence over, unlike many of the systemic barriers that other current interventions target, such as poverty, neighborhood conditions, and transportation. Evidence suggests that principals who implement routines, rules, and practices promoting a positive learning environment facilitate school climates that are conducive to learning and engagement, which are important for attendance. For instance, principals can engage in practices and nurture school climates that support student safety and well-being and build trust among families, teachers, and staff. Thus, while we must ardently pursue and realize progress on the systemic changes needed to fully remove barriers to regular school attendance, our work positions school climate as a lever that educators can operate to move the needle on absenteeism....

We view focusing on the interactions between students and school environments as an opportunity to reimagine schools as places of possibility, characterized by positive climates where students feel safe, culturally accepted, and engaged in meaningful relationships and intellectual growth. These places will send clear messages to students that they are welcomed, wanted, and cared for.... Educators play a vital role in ensuring all students experience this type of climate, which is why we should research, leverage, and implement strategies that can improve school climate concurrently with measures to rectify systemic barriers....”

Here are a Few Center Resources Related to the Topic

Schools as Caring, Learning Communities: A Center Practice Brief

Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families

Designing School Improvement to Enhance Classroom Climate for All Students

School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate

School Attendance Problems: Are Current Policies & Practices Going in the Right Direction?

We also have a Quick Find on the topic –
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm>

For discussion and interchange:

>Engaging students → less stress and anxiety → enhanced classroom climate

Student engagement involves not only engaging and maintaining engagement, but also re-engaging those who have disconnected from classroom instruction. For school personnel to do all this effectively, they must broaden their understanding of motivation, especially intrinsic motivation. Unfortunately, maintaining engagement is a widespread problem in schools. Clearly, a prominent focus of school improvement efforts should be on how to (a) motivate the many students who are hard to engage and (b) re-engage those who have totally disengaged from classroom learning. Besides a greater focus on intrinsic motivation, this also involves identifying ways to reduce factors interfering with a student’s engagement (e.g., personal anxiety and stressors). We find the more classroom instruction is personalized, the more students are engaged and the more positive the climate in the classroom is perceived.

Here's an excerpt from an article that discusses the relationship of anxiety and engagement.

From: *Engagement eases dysregulation in students with anxiety and trauma*

"... A student whose brain is flooded with negative thoughts, such as "This is too hard for me," "I don't have the skill to do this activity," or "This is going to take forever," is highly likely to disengage and avoid tasks.

Most strategies used to reengage students fail to recognize that negative thinking is often the root cause of disengagement in students with histories of anxiety or trauma....

When we prioritize engagement, students are more likely to stay on task, cooperate, remain in class, learn effectively, and feel connected to the classroom community. The subsequent success then leads to increased feelings of competence and belonging and positive associations with the academic experience and the class in general. This, in turn, results in an increased likelihood of engagement the next day

A key way to prioritize engagement is to set students up for success with independent tasks. The effects of anxiety and trauma are the most significant when a student is asked to do independent work. Negative thoughts about tasks may emerge as soon as the student views the materials, so we want to be thoughtful in what we ask students to do independently. Teacher support can mitigate the effects of negative thoughts and inaccurate perceptions of the task. A student who is able to engage in a task with teacher support (e.g., following along in a whole group, participating in a small group, or working one-on-one with a teacher) may not be able to engage as successfully when working independently....

Assessing the student's independent work level allows us to meet them where they are and promote accurate thoughts and engagement. If a student engages with a computer-based game (where they must click on the correct answer and the lights flash), but becomes agitated and disengaged with a worksheet, we must adopt a flexible approach to what independent work looks like for them.

Once we find the student's entry point to successful engagement with independent work, we can gradually increase the difficulty.... This should be a gradual process, paced based on data, that ensures students are engaged and learning while also increasing their tolerance and comfort for more anxiety-provoking tasks....

Engagement helps prevent the negative impact of anxiety and trauma on learning, offering stability, regulation, and promoting mental well-being for students facing mental health challenges. Focusing on engagement first not only reduces the risk of dysregulation and disengagement but also fosters a stronger sense of connection to the classroom community. This sense of belonging deepens learning and supports both academic and emotional growth for the whole class."

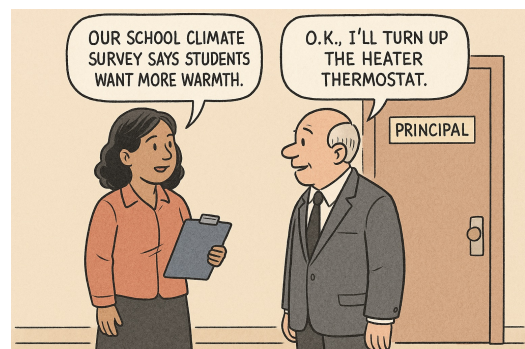
Here are a Few Center Resources Related to the Topic

Student Engagement and Disengagement: An Intrinsic Motivation Perspective and a Mental Health Concern

Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School

School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate

We also have a Quick Find on the topic –
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>



For discussion and interchange:

>School Climate Reflects School Culture:

Implications for Whole-Child Development and Student/Learning Supports

No single definition of school climate dominates the field. Rather, school climate is widely recognized as a multidimensional, perceptual construct, with broad scholarly consensus around core elements related to relationships, safety, teaching and learning, leadership, and organizational conditions (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Young & Hart, 2026).

The following, offered by the *National School Climate Council* in 2007, remains highly representative of the dominant conceptual consensus.

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures.

School and classroom climate often are described as the learning environment, as well as terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, milieu. They are the conditions for learning experienced by students and the conditions for teaching.

These conditions range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and fluctuate over time. A positive climate supports students' social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; fosters engagement and respect; and encourages collaboration among students, families, educators, and community partners. These conditions are central to whole-child development and whole school, whole community frameworks (ASCD, 2012; CDC, 2024).

Climate is a key concept in planning to enhance the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support.

Distinguishing School Climate and School Culture

Although the terms climate and culture are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct but interrelated constructs. Here is a synthesis of school culture definitions;

School culture refers to the deeply embedded values, beliefs, norms, expectations, assumptions, traditions, and ways of thinking and behaving that characterize a school as an organization and shape how people interact, make meaning, and carry out their work. It represents "how things are really done around here" and provides the underlying logic that guides decisions, relationships, and practices within the school (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Plaku & Leka, 2025; Schein, 2010).

School Climate Inevitably Reflects School Culture

Culture is more enduring, while climate is immediate and perceptual (Cohen et al., 2009). That is, school and classroom climate reflect current perceptions and experiences that emerge from leadership, instruction, relationships, routines, and contextual pressures (e.g., political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

Research consistently links positive school climate with improved academic achievement, engagement, well-being, attendance, and equity outcomes – particularly for historically marginalized students (Wang & Degol, 2016; Osher et al., 2020). Improving school climate is now widely viewed as a system-wide strategy that includes strengthening student and learning supports and advancing whole-child outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Implications for Student/Learning Supports

School climate is foundationally related to student/learning supports. Such supports shape the effectiveness of instruction, student engagement, social-emotional development, and the overall well-being of students and staff. Student/learning supports are defined as “the resources, strategies, and

practices that provide the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to enable all students to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching.” Just as efforts to enhance instruction emphasize well delineated and integrated curriculum content, so must efforts to address external and internal factors that interfere with students engaging effectively with the curriculum. (Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2022).

At present, such supports in many schools remain fragmented, marginalized, and overly reactive. Enhancing school climate and advancing equity require a systemic redesign that fully integrates student and learning supports with instructional and management components and develops a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

Fundamental system change is urgently needed to improve how schools address factors interfering with learning and teaching. Schools must move beyond crisis-driven responses toward proactive, prevention-oriented, and coherent approaches that strengthen conditions for learning schoolwide.

To enhance school climate and ensure equity of opportunity, the school culture must embrace and articulate policy for

- establishing a component to address barriers to learning and teaching that is fully integrated with the school’s instructional and management components
- implementing the component as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/ learning supports.

For guidance and resources on how to pursue such a system, see the

>[*National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*](#).



Related Concepts

Related concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; fit between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety.

Moos (e.g., 1979) grouped such concepts into three dimensions: (1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Concluding Comments

Given the correlational nature of school and classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational culture and climate. Narrow accountability focused primarily on test scores and behavioral control tends to produce reactive, compliance-driven climates that undermine intrinsic motivation. In contrast, cultures grounded in relationships, shared responsibility, and coherent systems of support foster climates that promote engagement, resilience, and equity (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

>Links to a few other relevant shared resources

- >>Evidence-Based Practices for Out-of-School Time Programs
- >>Structural School Characteristics and Neighborhood Risk Factors: Associations with Student-Reported School Climate in a Large, Urban Public School District in the U.S
- >>Play-based learning for elementary classrooms
- >>Exploring the concept of school belonging
- >>Policies are Needed to Increase the Reach and Impact of Evidence-Based Parenting Supports: A Call for a Population-Based Approach to Supporting Parents, Children, and Families
- >>Further Down the AI Rabbit Hole: Responding to “The Digital Empathy paradox”
- >>Public Benefits and Financial Aid Support Education Beyond High School and Long-Term Economic Well-Being for Low-Income Young Adults
- >>Mapping ADHD Heterogeneity and Biotypes by Topological Deviations in Morphometric Similarity Networks
- >>Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth
- >>Integrated Student Support Research Newsletter 2026
- >>Student Mental Health and School Counselor Licensure
- >>What Declining Student Enrollment Means for Schools & What States Are Doing About It
- >>Do career ‘pathways’ work? Delaware offers early clues

A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center’s Links to *Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

- 5/14 Leadership for Student-Centered Classrooms
- 5/14 Engaging Readers, Strengthening Partnerships, and Building Community
- 5/18 Understanding school avoidance
- 5/19 Social pressure and youth substance use
- 5/20 Teaching with Precision: Using Microlearning to Move Students Toward Success
- 5/26 Understanding eating disorders
- 6/8 Nurturing Independence in Kids
- 6/10 Understanding Loneliness and Building Social Connections
- 6/17 Strong Teacher-Student Relationships
- 6/17 Coaching for Change: Providing Tier 1 Classroom and Behavior Management Feedback

How Learning Happens (Edutopia’s series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).
Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth (Webinar recording)

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

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To Listserv Participants

We hope you will share this resource with others who may find it helpful.

And let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!

Send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

@#@#@#@#

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

>Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

>Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you! Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER

Who Are We? Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and now is named the *Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports.*