Establishing a Supportive School Climate
and an Effective Approach to Discipline

Center on Innovation & Improvement

A safe, orderly school climate is one of several characteristics of schools that consistently show good achievement gains (Redding, 2006). Individuals' experiences of school climate are shaped by perceptions of safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships (including among students, among adults, and between students and adults), and the institutional environment (Center for Social and Emotional Education, n.d.). When considering climate, the evidence of the close relationship between academic and behavioral difficulties calls for integrating intervention efforts through a single system that can monitor progress in both areas and respond accordingly with intervention as needed (Center on Instruction, 2008). Positive relationships and effective classroom management strategies are necessary to establish contexts that support the academic and behavioral competence of all students at all grade levels, including students with disabilities, and they can also promote student connectedness and reduce behavior problems, achievement gaps, dropout rates, and teacher attrition (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; National High School Center, 2008; Oliver, 2007). Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) and other similar frameworks or programs may provide a more consistent school climate by helping educators structure the environment and provide positive reinforcement (see http://www.pbis.org/). Schools using a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework explicitly teach SEL skills and foster an overall climate of inclusion, warmth, and respect, which can prevent bullying and promote educational success (Ragozzino & Utne O'Brien, 2009).

Several cited examples of "quick win" turnaround catalysts used by leaders as levers for change are related to improving school climate: significantly reduce discipline referrals by altering class transition schedules; reduce truancy by locking superfluous entrances and communicating to parents that the school day is protected instructional time; and improve the physical plant by cleaning up debris and painting walls (Public Impact, 2007). Case study schools have improved school climate with a number of methods, including: administrators increasing their visibility in the community and building trust relationships; adopting a college-bound focus; implementing approaches such as a proactive behavioral program, support for healthy lifestyles, and an emphasis on local historical culture; increasing communication via partnerships with faith organizations; requiring teachers to meet with families; improving the physical plant; targeting students known for making the school feel unsafe and implementing a consistently enforced discipline policy; implementing positive behavior supports; switching middle school students to self-contained classrooms (citing stronger teacher-student relationships, increased safety, and decreased time in transition); and requiring staff to emulate the actions and behavior they expect from their students (Brinson, Kowal, & Hassel, 2008; Brinson & Rhim, 2009).

Action Principles

For District

1. Provide professional development and/or peer coaching to support teachers and administrators as they manage school and classroom climate and promote positive behaviors.

2. Communicate and teach social and emotional learning standards for all students (required in some areas, examples available at http://www.casel.org/standards/learning.php).

3. Implement strategies or programs in large schools (such as smaller learning communities) to encourage the development of supportive relationships.

4. Address physical plant needs to ensure schools are clean, attractive, and safe.

For School

1. Link individual classroom management strategies to the schoolwide behavioral support system.

2. Utilize effective universal classroom management practices for all students and then determine which students need additional support and more individualized interventions.

3. Ensure that the relationships between and among students and adults in the school are grounded in respect and trust by providing high expectations, fair and consistent discipline, and by modeling and teaching good social, emotional, and academic skills.

4. Collect and use data regarding discipline and school climate to guide decision making.

5. Provide opportunities for celebration and association—face-to-face connection among members of the school community.

References and Resources

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