

## Provide a positive and safe school climate

Students learn best and achieve their full potential when they are physically, socially, emotionally, and academically safe – in safe and orderly classrooms.<sup>1</sup> PSEA supports comprehensive, evidence-based efforts to increase student achievement by establishing a positive school climate as reflected in the character and quality of school life. School climate reflects multiple aspects of people's experience of school life, including: norms, goals, values, and interpersonal relationships.<sup>2</sup>

### PSEA Recommendations

- Build a system of standards and accountability that takes account of school climate measures. This includes adopting statewide, evidence-based standards for school climate, developing tools to help measure school climate, creating accountability expectations that extend beyond academics to account for all the needs of children, and provide resources and technical assistance to help all schools achieve the school climate standards. Within this structure of standards and accountability, schools should be required to ensure that professionals also are safe. Staff should have a constant communications device while teaching, a system to locate students who are in the school building but not attending class, security cameras, and other appropriate safety equipment where necessary.
- Support and disseminate evidence-based models of school practice. Schools need to ensure every student will have a supportive relationship with at least one adult in school; design academic and extracurricular programs with the specific goal of providing adult role-models; provide students with the tools and resources to know how to communicate with adults about rumors, threats, or abusive behavior; and ensure that all students and staff know how to identify and respond to potentially violent students. Schools also need successful models to create pro-active partnerships with law-enforcement and social-service agencies, including deliberate strategies to prevent bullying, gang activity, and other issues that put students at risk.
- Provide funding to ensure adequate staffing. Ensure that all schools have a sufficient number of clearly identified security guards and that security staff receive adequate training and supervision from trained professionals.<sup>3</sup> Schools also require resources to expand access to counseling, anger management, and peer mediation services.<sup>4</sup>

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- Require that schools plan for a safe, positive school climate. Require that each public school establish a Safety Committee to bring staff, students, administrators, and parents together in a cooperative effort to maximize safety in each school building.<sup>5</sup> Ensure that schools engage in planning and professional development and have adequate resources to address safe school issues.<sup>6</sup>
- Enact a legislative package that addresses gaps in current statute, such as: establishing a Safe Schools Advocate for urban school districts which traditionally have a higher number of violent incidents;<sup>7</sup> provide civil and criminal immunity to school employees when they exercise in loco parentis (“in the place of parents”) authority in disciplining students; and requiring every school vehicle and school bus to be outfitted with backup warning devices to provide additional safety protections for students and staff on and around school property.
- Establish policies, such as placement in an alternative school, for students who place other students or staff at risk for serious bodily injury or who are habitually disruptive. Require that all districts establish alternative schools and provide training to teachers assigned to those schools (alternative schools are often best suited to meet the needs of students who are violent or disruptive because they are designed to address behavioral and mental health issues).<sup>8</sup>

Safe school climate indicators are directly linked to student academic performance,<sup>9</sup> and a positive school climate is key to fostering healthy child development and high-level learning and is directly linked to student academic performance.<sup>10</sup> A positive school climate also is associated with fewer student behavioral and emotional problems.<sup>11</sup> Research examining the impact of school climate in high-risk urban environments finds that a safe, supportive school climate can have a particularly strong impact on the academic success experienced by urban students.<sup>12</sup> Finally, a positive school climate is associated with greater job satisfaction among school staff<sup>13</sup> and higher rates of staff retention.<sup>14</sup>

To support safe and productive learning environments, schools can engage in several evidence-based, targeted strategies to improve school climate. Efforts should be:<sup>15</sup>

- Relationship-focused: Connect every student to at least one caring adult;
- Curricular-based: Ensure that curriculum promotes social, emotional, and civic competencies along with content-area competencies;<sup>16</sup>
- School-wide focus: Adopt community-wide practices to build character and support appropriate student behavior;

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- Emphasize Resiliency: Help at-risk students use school and community-based supports to build upon their unique strengths;
- Response to Intervention model: Use diverse and increasingly intensive approaches to support students academically;
- Data-driven: Track and analyze school data that goes beyond test scores and includes perceptions of key school climate indicators; and
- Coordinated: Build systems to link educators, students, parents and caregivers, and the community to create schools that are safe and caring.

(01/10)

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<sup>1</sup> School Safety; <http://www.nea.org/tools/16364.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> National School Climate Council. <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/faq.php>.

<sup>3</sup> Monk, D. (2008). "School Safety: The Twelve Myths and Realities." Presentation at the May 2008 PSEA House of Delegates.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Monk, D. (2008). "Ten Essential Elements to Examine to Enhance School Safety," Presentation at the May 2008 PSEA House of Delegates.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Understanding School Violence Fact Sheet, [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention).

<sup>8</sup> Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth, [http://www.pde.state.pa.us/alt\\_disruptive/site/default.asp](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/alt_disruptive/site/default.asp).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Freiberg, H. J. (Ed.). (1999). "School climate: Measuring, improving and sustaining healthy learning Environments," Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.; Good, T.L. & Weinstein, R.S. (1986). "Schools make a difference," *American Psychologist*, 41, 1090-1097.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Kuperminc, G. P., Leadbeater, B. J., Emmons, C., & Blatt, S. J. (1997). "Perceived school climate and difficulties in the social adjustment of middle school students," *Applied Developmental Science*, 1(2), 76-88. Cited at: <http://education.gsu.edu/schoolsafety/downloadpercent20files/wpppercent202002percent20schoolpercent20climate.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Haynes, N. M., & Comer, J. P. (1993). "The Yale School Development Program process, outcomes, and policy implications," *Urban Education*, 28(2), 166-199. Cited at:

<http://education.gsu.edu/schoolsafety/downloadpercent20files/wpppercent202002percent20schoolpercent20climate.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, D. L., & Tashakkori, A. (1995). "Decision participation and school climate as predictors of job satisfaction and teacher's sense of efficacy," *Journal of Experimental Education*, 63(3), 217-227. Cited in

<http://education.gsu.edu/schoolsafety/downloadpercent20files/wpppercent202002percent20schoolpercent20climate.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> National School Climate Council. (2007). "The School Climate Challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate research and school climate policy, practice guidelines and teacher education policy," New York: Center for Social and Emotional Education.

<sup>15</sup> Adapted from: [http://www.preventionworksct.org/docs/SDFSC/PDF/Case\\_for\\_climate.pdf](http://www.preventionworksct.org/docs/SDFSC/PDF/Case_for_climate.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Cohen, J., Fege, A. & T. Pickeral. (2009). "Measuring and improving school climate: a strategy that recognizes, honors, and promotes social, emotional, and civic learning—The Foundation for love, work, and engaged citizenry," *Teachers College Record*.