



WHOLE CHILD

Fueling Development for Learning and Life

January 2026



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CLIMATE:

Evidence-Informed Practice Brief

This brief is part of our series of evidence-informed practices supporting the whole child. We organize the series using the ten domains of the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\)](#) model. In this brief, we introduce the **Social and Emotional Climate** domain.

WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Social and Emotional Climate refers to the psychosocial aspects of student experiences. A positive social and emotional school climate (which we also refer to as social and emotional climate or school climate) fosters psychological, social, and physical safety for students and staff, provides support for students' academic and behavioral success, cultivates respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community.¹ A positive social and emotional climate can reduce stress, increase academic achievement, foster positive attitudes toward self and others, and support positive learning environments.² Further, a positive school climate supports students' general health and development by ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment for every student.³

A positive social and emotional climate is important for all students. A supportive social and emotional climate considers the range of student experiences and serves the varied needs of students through programs that promote school connectedness.⁴ Schools are encouraged to address prevention efforts by implementing social and emotional climate goals and policies.⁵ Additionally, providing clear and consistent expectations, offering opportunities for students to build agency, and fostering positive relationships between students and staff can promote a healthy social and emotional climate.^{5,6} Federal guidelines addressing school climate efforts recommend that schools use social and emotional learning to promote self-awareness, resilience, and self-management, all of which contribute to positive behavior at school.⁵ Schools can also collaborate with community organizations to help identify needs, pool resources, or assist in opportunities for professional learning to further facilitate positive social and emotional climate.⁵ Overall, a safe and supportive school climate is made possible when evidence-based practices are implemented with fidelity, resulting in improved student success, clear academic and behavioral expectations, student connectedness, and a general sense of community among students and staff.⁷



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1

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WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO CHILD OUTCOMES?

Physical Health Outcomes

Social and emotional climate has been associated with physical health outcomes for students. A healthy social and emotional climate can provide students with education involving proper nutrition, dietary habits, and physical activity.⁸ Acquiring knowledge in these health-related areas can improve physical health outcomes in a variety of ways. Previous research has documented a relationship between positive school climate and decreased substance use, as well as reduced engagement in risk-taking behaviors.⁹ Specifically, a positive social and emotional climate that fosters school connectedness has been associated with positive physical health outcomes such as reduced drug and alcohol use,^{10,11} sexual risk behaviors,¹⁰ violence,¹⁰ delinquency, and suicide.¹⁰

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes

Supportive school and classroom climates can positively impact student social, emotional, and behavioral health.¹² Specifically, a social and emotional climate that encourages independence, supports shared decision-making and responsibilities among students and staff, maintains high expectations, and fosters supportive teacher-student relationships has been shown to reduce problem behaviors for high school students.^{13,14} Teachers play a role in encouraging prosocial behaviors, and a strong link has been found between positive classroom management and student-to-student interactions, such as caring and respectful behaviors.¹⁵ In addition, the use of positive, proactive strategies (e.g., tiered supports, restorative practices) can reduce exclusionary discipline practices.¹⁶ Fostering school connectedness through student participation in extracurricular activities has been shown to decrease problem behaviors¹⁴ and increase positive student-adult interactions.¹⁷ Additionally, a positive school climate has been connected to a decrease in internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression.¹¹

Academic Outcomes

A positive social and emotional climate can benefit student academic outcomes in a variety of ways. When school districts focus their attention directly on improving school climate, the likelihood that students engage with the curriculum and succeed academically increases.¹⁸ Specifically, positive school climate has been associated with increases in grade point average, standardized test scores, reading levels, academic writing, and school adjustment.¹⁹ Students who report feeling more involved in their school through decision-making processes or close student-teacher and student-student relationships experience better academic outcomes.¹⁸ In summary, fostering school connectedness has the potential to generate positive academic outcomes for students.¹⁸



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CLIMATE: EVIDENCE IN ACTION

The strategies provided here summarize a review of available evidence and best practice recommendations in this domain. Strategies are grouped by anticipated resource demand (e.g., funding, time, space, training, materials).*

Level 1 Strategies: Low resource demand

Promote positive relationships among students and staff

- School connectedness promotes positive educational and health outcomes for students through fostering supportive relationships with adults²⁰ and peers; school connectedness may also serve as a protective factor against emotional distress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and substance use.²¹
- Schools can promote positive relationships and school connectedness by ensuring that students have a connection or relationship with at least one adult in the building.²² Using a strategy such as Two-by-Ten, where an adult checks in with a student for 2 minutes each morning for 10 days, can strengthen relationships between students and staff.²³

Use positive, proactive strategies to promote engagement and belonging

- An essential component of positive climate is student engagement and sense of belonging; student engagement, for example, is associated with increased graduation rates,²⁴ academic achievement,²⁵ and dropout prevention.²⁶
- Strategies used to promote sense of belonging include those that emphasize student voice, choice, and interest, such as involvement in school-based organizations, sports teams, art, or drama.²⁷ In the classroom, ensuring sufficient opportunities for choice and response during instruction are key to academic engagement.²⁸
- School-wide environments that use positive teaching and reinforcement should be used over exclusionary practices (e.g., removals from class, in and out of school suspensions).^{29,30,31,32} These positive behavioral support strategies are associated with reductions in exclusionary discipline and improved student behavior across grade levels.^{33,34}

Level 2 Strategies: Moderate resource demand

Collect, review, and respond to school climate data

- Data sources such as school climate surveys, office discipline referrals, use of exclusionary disciplinary practices, and evaluations of classroom management strategies can be used to continuously monitor and improve school climate, culture of inclusion, sense of belonging, and engagement.²²
- School leadership teams can implement a plan to review available school climate data and create an action plan to respond to identified areas of need.

Implement bullying and harassment prevention and intervention

- Bullying and harassment are associated with negative outcomes (e.g., mental health risk, substance use, physical illness), which may persist through adulthood.³⁵ Research supports the use of anti-bullying programs, although more work is needed to identify common components of effective programs.^{36,37}
- Current recommendations include using whole school, multi-tiered approaches,³⁸ as well as strategies such as increased student supervision throughout the school environment,^{38,39} classroom and school-wide rules related to bullying,³⁹ implementation of bystander interventions,⁴⁰ and use of multi-component interventions (as opposed to a one-time presentation related to bullying).⁴¹

Level 3 Strategies: High resource demand

Incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) across developmental stages

- SEL instruction should be sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Implementation of SEL with all students is associated with improved outcomes, including in SEL skills, behavior, and academic performance.^{42,43,44}
- Schools should consider how social and emotional learning instruction can be embedded into the school day through dedicated blocks or integrated with other subjects. They should also consider opportunities to form authentic partnerships and shared decision-making with students, families, and community members.⁴⁵
- Develop staff competence and agency in teaching social and emotional learning. Educators are not always trained in delivering social and emotional learning, and this can reduce their self-efficacy for doing so.
- Professional learning opportunities, including training, consultation, or coaching can support educators in feeling knowledgeable and confident in teaching social and emotional learning. Because the outcomes of these programs are likely to be tied to the implementer's confidence and enthusiasm teaching the material, it is important that staff be supported in building these skills.⁴⁶

**For more information about the systematic review process we used to identify evidence-based practices, please refer to our [overview brief](#).*



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3

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Note: The WellSAT WSCC allows users to evaluate district policy alignment with 'best practices' in policy associated with Social and Emotional Climate and other WSCC model domains.

American Institutes for Research **Center on Multi-tiered Systems of Supports**

This website provides descriptions and resources for work within the MTSS framework, including resources related to multi-level prevention systems and sustainable implementation.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) **The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide Social and Emotional Learning**

This webpage includes resources for implementation and assessment of schoolwide SEL.

SEL Resource Library

This webpage includes a collection of resources related to the foundations and importance of SEL and how to implement SEL programming in schools.

Greater Good Science Center **Greater Good in Education: Student Well-Being**

This webpage provides practices that promote the social and emotional well-being of students, such as SEL kernels and mindfulness activities.

Harvard Graduate School of Education **Navigating SEL From the Inside Out**

This document provides a review of 33 different pre-K and elementary level social emotional learning (SEL) programs with a comparison of competencies addressed and instructional strategies used.

Navigating SEL From the Inside Out (Middle and High School)

This document provides a review of 18 different middle and high school level social emotional learning (SEL) programs.

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) **Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data**

This webpage provides the link to a document that provides a definition of school climate, information about the importance of a positive school climate, and resources and guidance for school climate assessment.

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments) **School Climate Improvement**

This webpage provides school climate resources for families and educators.

National School Climate Center (NSCC) **Measure and Improve the Climate for Learning in Schools**

The unique resources provided by NSCC include extensive research focused on school climate, as well as resources around bullying prevention and educational services that help improve school climate overall.

PBIS **Teaching Social and Emotional Competencies within a PBIS framework**

This guide includes recommendations on how to adjust the PBIS framework to support instruction of social-emotional competencies for students.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) **Publications and Resources on School and Campus Health**

This website provides information on school and campus health.

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