

Lessons Learned



Linking a Healthy School Climate to Academic Achievement

*School climate is the synthesis of policies, procedures, activities, programs, and facilities, both formal and informal, within a school infrastructure that affect the attitudes and behaviors of all people in the school—staff, students, parents, and visitors. Constant attention must be paid to the creation and continuation of a school climate that is warm, welcoming, supportive, and encouraging.*¹

Maine Guidelines: School Climate, 2004

*Personalization is the single most important factor that keeps kids in school.*²

Ted Sizer, Founder, Coalition for Essential Schools

Fostering students' social, emotional and ethical growth, also helps students grow academically. The school climate provides a vehicle to simulate this growth. A variety of conditions related to improving achievement have been identified: academic engagement, connectedness, participation in extra-curricular activities, liking school, having a student voice, positive peer relations, safety, fair and effective discipline, and/or teacher support. Although different researchers measured these conditions differently, students do better academically if they experience these conditions.³

Engagement

Engagement has been defined as “the attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning.”⁴ Student engagement is an indicator of both student behavior and student achievement. Those students who are engaged in school:

- Are more likely to earn higher grades⁵⁻⁷
- Have on average higher test scores⁶⁻⁸
- Are less likely to drop out^{7,9-10}

A study of students with self reported high levels of engagement have shown that:

- 44 percent of elementary aged students were more likely to do well on performance and attendance indicators.⁷
- 75 percent of middle school students were more likely to do well on attendance and achievement indicators.⁷
- Both elementary and middle school students, whose teachers identified them as highly engaged, were more than twice as likely to do well on the performance and attendance indicators.⁷

Connectedness

Connectedness has two components: 1) attachment which is characterized by close affective relationships with peers/teachers at school and 2) commitment in which students try to do well in school.¹¹ (The second component would be similar to engagement).

References

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Students experienced significant positive academic outcomes throughout their school career when the following interventions were implemented in elementary school:¹¹⁻¹²

- Teachers were provided skills in classroom management, interactive teaching and cooperative learning;
- Students were provided with personal and social skills in interpersonal problem solving;
- Families were provided with skills in behavior management, academic support and drug use reduction.

Students experiencing these interventions:¹¹⁻¹²

- Had higher official grade point averages;
- Reduced grade repetitions;
- Reduced school dropouts;
- Reduced school misbehavior;
- Reduced high risk behaviors that can undermine a focus on learning.



To improve the school climate and promote learning, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development¹³ recommends schools promote four core elements:

1) Facilitate a supportive learning climate that includes:

- A challenging and engaging curriculum for all students;
- Respectful, supportive relationships among and between students, school staff and parents;
- Frequent opportunities for student participation, collaboration, service and self-direction;
- A physical plant that promotes safety and community.

2) Implement systematic approaches to supporting safety and positive behavior that includes:

- A school wide approach to climate, safety, and discipline;
- Orderly, well managed classrooms focused on learning;
- A continuum of supports for the students who need them including mechanisms for early identification, appropriate early and intensive interventions for troubled or violent students.

3) Involve families, students, school staff and surrounding community in determining the school's basic values, goals, rules and safety measures as well as providing regular opportunities to strengthen working relations between school, families and community resources.

4) Utilize standards and data to promote continuous improvement in fostering the social, emotional and ethical indicators that lead to student achievement.

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