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What Is School Climate?

High-quality school climate is advantageous for all students and may be particularly beneficial for at-risk students.

by Alexandra Loukas

School environments vary greatly. Whereas some schools feel friendly, inviting, and supportive, others feel exclusionary, unwelcoming, and even unsafe. The feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment are referred to as school climate. Although it is difficult to provide a concise definition for school climate, most researchers agree that it is a multidimensional construct that includes physical, social, and academic dimensions.

The physical dimension includes:

- Appearance of the school building and its classrooms;
- School size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom;
- Order and organization of classrooms in the school;
- Availability of resources; and
- Safety and comfort.

The social dimension includes:

- Quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff;
- Equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff;
- Degree of competition and social comparison between students; and
- Degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school.

The academic dimension includes:

- Quality of instruction;
- Teacher expectations for student achievement; and
- Monitoring student progress and promptly reporting results to students and parents.

Rating School Climate

How students, teachers, and staff feel about their school climate underlies individual attitudes, behaviors, and group norms. Schools that feel safe, for instance, foster high-quality relationships among students and teachers while decreasing the probability of violence. However, it is important to note that the climate of a school is not necessarily experienced in the same way by all of its members. Rather, there is variability in individual perceptions of a school's climate, and researchers propose that it is the subjective perception of the environment that influences individual student outcomes. Thus, if a student feels that a teacher does not care about her, this perception will impact the student's behavior in the classroom. Moreover, individual characteristics may impact these perceptions so that students who are aggressive may perceive their school climate more negatively than those who are not.

Because of the importance of individual perceptions, schools often assess how students feel about their school. A number of assessment instruments are available for examining student perceptions of school climate, including the Elementary and Middle School Climate Survey (Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993), the Quality of School Life Scale (Epstein & McPartland, 1976), and the Elementary School Environment Scale (Sinclair, 1970). Schools may use these instruments as-is, but may also modify them to create their own. No instrument assesses every aspect of school climate. Nonetheless, findings from such surveys provide a glimpse into how students feel about certain dimensions of the school's climate and allow school personnel to take the initial steps to improving their quality.

Impact on Student Behavioral and Emotional Problems

A great deal of research shows that student perceptions of school climate affect academic motivation and achievement. Increasingly, research is showing that perceptions of school climate also influence student behavioral and emotional problems. Behavioral problems are characterized by acting-out behaviors such as fighting, lying, and cheating. Unlike behavioral problems, which tend to be external and observable, emotional problems are more difficult to identify because of their internal nature, but include anxiety, sadness, loneliness, hopelessness, and worthlessness.

In addition to being directly predictive of their outcomes, student perceptions of the school's climate may offset or counteract the negative impact of risk factors that elevate the probability of behavioral and emotional problems. For instance, research has shown that student perceptions of a high-quality school climate offset the negative effects of a difficult temperament, self-criticism, and low levels of self-efficacy. Such findings indicate that although a perceived high-quality school climate is advantageous for all students, it may be particularly beneficial for students at-risk for negative outcomes.

How Does School Climate Affect Student Outcomes?

Knowing that students' perceptions of school climate are related to their behavioral and emotional problems is important, but understanding the processes or mechanisms that underlie this relationship is critical to developing effective interventions to improve school climate. One of the mechanisms that may explain how school climate affects individual outcomes is school connectedness. School connectedness is defined as student perceptions of belonging and closeness with others at the school. Some researchers consider school connectedness a component of school climate, but others suggest that it is a factor that intervenes between school climate and student outcomes to explain their relationship. According to the latter perspective, high-quality school climates cultivate a connection to the school and in this way protect youths from negative outcomes. That is, quality of school climate impacts student feelings of connectedness to the school and, in turn, the level of connectedness is directly predictive of how students behave and feel. Empirical research supports this perspective and shows that school connectedness explains or accounts for the school climate effects.

Given that student perceptions of the school climate may counteract certain risk factors, understanding how students feel about their school is an important first step in decreasing the probability of negative student outcomes. However, given the numerous components that comprise school climate and the prohibitive nature of assessing the perceptions of each one, research indicates that interventions focused on increasing students' sense of connectedness or belonging to the school may be an effective means of decreasing behavioral and emotional problems.

How can school personnel increase students' sense of belonging? Various ideas have been proposed, including

- Increasing school safety and improving interpersonal relationships by adopting violence-prevention and conflict-resolution programs;
- Increasing student, teacher, and staff acceptance of diversity;
- Treating students with care, fairness, and consistency;
- Promoting student decision-making skills, individual and civic responsibility, and commitment to the larger school community; and
- Decreasing the emphasis on student competition.

Improving students' perceptions of school connectedness will not occur overnight and likely will require an extended period of time. But concerted effort can result in improved student behavioral and emotional functioning and, in turn, increased academic motivation and achievement.

References

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussions about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are your assumptions about how our students rate school climate in terms of physical, social, and academic dimensions?

2. How would our school benefit from using one of the climate assessment tools mentioned by the author?

3. What is the difference between behavioral and emotional problems, and how can school climate affect both?

4. How can we, as individuals, foster a sense of school connectedness for our students? What can the school administration do to foster a sense of school connectedness for our students?

5. How can improved school climate impact the teaching and learning going on in our school, especially as it relates to at-risk students?