

Creating a Safe and Connected School Climate

Editor's Note: After months of intensive research of school shootings, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service released a guide on threat assessment in schools. Campus Safety Journal met last year with the Safe School Initiative study's authors, and this month reports on safe school climates.

Creating cultures and climates of safety is essential to the prevention of violence on campus. How can a school, its teacher, its administrators and its students work toward implementing cultures of connection and climates of safety?

From our research, we've determined that there are no fewer than 11 major components and tasks for creating a safe and connected school climate:

1. Assess the school's emotional climate.

Although no one wants to believe that this country's educational institutions are anything other than safe and positive environments that support the learning experience, it is incumbent upon those in positions of responsibility to take a "step back" and gain perspective on the emotional climate of their schools.

This perspective can be gained by systematically surveying students, faculty and other important: "stakeholders" (such as parents, administrators, school board members, and representatives of community groups who interact with the school) about the emotional climate of schools. Anonymous surveys, face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and psychological measures integrated into a total assessment package all have been used to varying degrees to gather key "real time" data.

It is essential that school administrators,, parents, and community leaders not assume that they know school climates as do those individuals - especially students -- who are most directly affected by the educational experience on a daily basis. Absent a thorough assessment of climate process, school officials and leaders may never have the opportunity to find out what they did not know.

The findings of climate surveys can inform efforts to plan ways to enhance safety and respect within the educational environment. It is important to give feedback about school climate data to all involved and affected parties. Sharing climate data establishes a foundation for building an integrated systems approach that will bring the central "players" to the table; empower students to make change; and connect the school to the community and parental support.

2. Emphasize the importance of listening in schools.

Pupils must listen respectfully to adults and to their peers, and teachers, administrators, and other adults must listen respectfully to their students and to each other. Grownups often expect that students listen to adults in authority. However, all too frequently adults forget that respectful listening is a "two-way street." A school with a culture of "two-way listening" will encourage and empower students to have the courage to break the ingrained code of silence.

Listening also must be expanded beyond academic concerns. Communications between teachers and students also should include listening to feelings, especially those of hurt and pain. In addition, it is important to "listen" to behaviors. Many students, including some who consider violence an appropriate way to solve problems, have a difficult time finding the words to articulate the disenfranchisement, hurt or fear that they may feel. Not knowing how to express their problems and feelings may prompt these students to take action. Adults who listen to behavior and assist students in learning how to articulate their feelings and experiences provide students with critical skills that can contribute to preventing and reducing violence.

3. Take a strong but caring stance against the code of silence.

Silence leaves hurt unexposed and unacknowledged. Silence may encourage a young person to move along a path to violence.

4. Work actively to change the perception that talking to an adult about a student contemplating violence is considered "snitching."

A school climate in which students connect to each other and to adults is one that promotes a safe and secure educational environment. A student who finds the courage to tell a caring adult about a friend in pain may save a life.

5. Find ways to stop bullying.

Bullying is a continuum of abuse, ranging from verbal taunts to physical threats to dangerous acts. Bullying is not playful behavior. In bullying, one student assumes power by word or deed over another in a mean-spirited and/or harmful manner. In a school with a culture of safety and connection, both the bully and the student who is the victim of the bullying are attended to in a respectful manner.

Schools with climates of safety and respect are establishing foundations for pro-social behavior. These climates teach conflict resolution, peer mediation, active listening and other non-violent ways to solve problems. In a safe school

climate, adults do not bully students and do not bully each other and they do not turn a blind eye to bullying behavior when they know that it is going on in the school.

6. Empower students by involving them in planning, creating and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect.

Creating a safe school climate is a process that should involve all members of the school community, including teachers, students, parents, counselors, administrators, health staff, security professionals and support personnel. Climates of safety should be collaborative ones. Helping students to engage in positive, productive activities or work in their local community can diminish isolation and enhance connection and safety.

7. Ensure that every student feels that he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school.

Trusting relationships between adults and students are the products of quality connection, interaction and communications. These relationships evolve and do not develop simply because an adult, such as a homeroom teacher or a guidance counselor, and a student have been ordered or assigned to interact with one another. Schools with cultures and climates of safety monitor students on a regular basis. School administrators should take steps to ensure that at least one adult at school knows what is happening with each student.

8. Create mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.

A mechanism for developing and sustaining safe school climates should serve as a vehicle for planning and monitoring the climate and culture of the school. This mechanism may involve administrators, teachers, counselors, students, school law enforcement and security staff, and other personnel.

Questions to be considered in implementing this mechanism might include: What should be done to develop and support climates of safety? To what extent are teachers, administrators and other school staff encouraged to focus on students' social/emotional learning needs? How close is the school to achieving the goal of ensuring that every student feels that there is an adult to whom he or she can turn for talk, support and advice if things get tough?

9. Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones.

Building structure, facility safety plans, lighting, space and architecture (among other physical attributes of educational institutions) all can contribute to whether a school environment feels, or is in fact, safe or unsafe. In large schools, school administrators may wish to explore changes in the physical characteristics of the school that would permit the assignment of teachers and students to smaller, mutually intersecting and supportive groupings within the broader educational community.

10. Emphasize an integrated systems model.

People support most what they believe they have had genuine input in creating. This requires the difficult but necessary task of bringing all of the stakeholders to the table. Stakeholders include: students, teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, law enforcement personnel, after-school and community-based groups, and others. Stakeholders must struggle with questions such as the definition of "fairness," "threat," "consequence," and "change" as these concepts fit into the unique context of each school, school system and the surrounding community.

11. All climates of safety ultimately are "local."

Many local factors contribute to the creation of a culture and climate of safety. These factors include:

- Leadership and the "open door" role of the school principal.
- Empowered buy-in of student groups.
- Connections to the local community and its leaders.
- Respectful integration into the safe school climates process of "safe keepers," such as parents and law enforcement personnel close to the school.

Schools that have succeeded in creating safe school climates have done so because of their recognition that such climates of safety actually "raise the bar" on sound educational expectations, which, in turn, keep students engaged and learning at high levels. Such schools achieve their aims by realizing that safe school climates are not created overnight.

Implementation of the safe! school climates process requires planning and dedicated work. Participants in this process need adequate feedback and evaluative processes to sustain and continually improve educational environments. To work effectively, safe school climates that create relationships of respect and connection between adults and students must be accepted as integral to the mission of threat assessment and management, and understood from "the top down" as integral to the success of the learning experience.