



Creating a Positive School Climate for Learning

*A tool kit for building leaders, teachers and staff of
Minneapolis Public Schools*



With funding from
 Safe Schools
Healthy Students

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Introduction

A positive school climate is an environment where learning and achievement can take root and grow. The foundation for a positive school climate rests on the integration of academic and behavior approaches that address the student as a whole person. Instructional practices teach to the standards and are culturally relevant. Curriculum and instruction engages students by providing personal meaning for them. Behavior is approached positively, with an emphasis on prevention. There are clear, positive expectations and behavior supports to increase academic achievement. There are systems in place to assure that continuums of strategies are used to match the need of the students. Adults have high expectations and team effectively with colleagues to help students achieve at their maximum level. The environment welcomes and values all cultural and racial groups, and staff view difference as a strength upon which to build.

Students will learn more and achieve at higher levels when:

- **Data drives decision-making**
- **Students are engaged**
- **School buildings are safe**
- **Staff and students are culturally competent**
- **Families and the community are involved**
- **School systems support instruction**

This tool kit addresses each of these areas and provides tools that school leaders can implement today. It reflects the work of the Minneapolis Public Schools Positive School Climate Team (PSCT). Tools not developed by the PSCT are cited and sources are referenced. It is supported by Safe Schools Healthy Students, an initiative of the Minneapolis Public Schools, Hennepin County Children's Mental Health, and the Minneapolis Park Police.

School Climate Leadership

Leadership is key in developing a positive school climate. While leadership is clearly not the job of just one person, the principal must be a key player in guiding, leading, inspiring, and supporting staff and students in establishing relationships where they can work and learn:

- Create and communicate the vision of a positive school climate and provide direction, modeling, and support to others as they move toward that vision.
- Maintain a vigilant watch on the environment, providing feedback about the school's progress with climate and how to stay the course even in difficult times.
- Pay attention to the needs of others in the school, assuring that they have the training, knowledge, and skills required to help create a positive climate.
- Establish, use, and maintain effective communication systems so that all school stakeholders can contribute to the positive climate.
- Make it clear that decisions about climate have to do with student learning rather than adult convenience.

Effective principals recognize the importance of staff leadership in all successful reform efforts. They rely on staff leaders to develop and move efforts ahead, to inspire peers and build ownership.

How to Use this Tool Kit

Purpose: This tool kit provides evidence-based strategies to build and maintain a positive school climate. It presents processes that have worked in schools. The information is not meant to fully represent official district procedures, but to convey best practices that will put schools on the path to a positive climate.

Audience: The tool kit is meant to guide the work of school building leaders: principals, teachers, staff, and others involved in school climate committees or task forces.

Format: Each section addresses an aspect of building a positive school climate and contains:

- An introduction to the section, with specific **roles for building leaders**.
- Examinations of **focus areas**.
- **Tools:** assessments, resources, and tip sheets.

Flexible use: This tool kit can be used in a variety of ways.

- Use all eight sections to assess what is and is not working in a school.
- Use one section as a framework for developing school-wide initiatives.
- Use the assessments, resources, and tip sheets for staff development.

Strategies for implementing tool kit ideas:

- Discuss sections in small groups.
- Discuss areas for professional development.
- Identify strength areas among staff and have them provide support to others.
- Provide sections to school committees or task forces responsible for improving climate.

What is School Climate?

School climate refers to the sum of the values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures within a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways. Climate encompasses the physical attributes of a school as well as levels of order, satisfaction, and productivity. It includes how students, staff, and community interact and what approaches are used to solve school problems. Climate reflects whether students and families feel they belong at the school and how school rules are determined, expressed, understood, and enforced.

Research identifies two important elements present in safe and orderly schools:

1. There is a **school-wide system with a clear, predictable structure**, age-appropriate expectations, and standards that are consistently implemented.
2. There are **positive relationships between students and adults** that promote respect for students as individuals, that respect ethnic, cultural and racial groups, and that establish strong student connections with school.

These elements inform the physical environment, organizational structure, leadership, curriculum and instruction, and discipline policies and procedures.

A school with a positive climate has effective strategies in place to support student learning at all levels. The needs of the students drive the range and intensity of the interventions and strategies. *(See model on next page.)*

Designing School-Wide Systems for Student Success

The triangle graphic below, developed by George Sugai, portrays a framework for service in a school setting.

Intensive Targeted Interventions (apply to approximately 5% of students) are individualized plans to help students function successfully within the school environment. Examples include use of the problem-solving model, individual behavior plans, and wrap-around case management.

Targeted Interventions (apply to approximately 15% of students whose social/emotional needs present barriers to learning) are driven by the needs of the student with the goal of getting the student back to the 80% group. Examples of targeted strategies include mentoring, specialized classroom interventions, small-group behavior plans, and issue- and culturally specific counseling groups.

Universal Interventions (apply to 100% of the staff and students) are used to create an environment for learning. Given effective classroom management and instruction, approximately 80% of the students and staff will not need additional supports. Examples of universal strategies include positive behavior intervention and support, building-wide social skills curricula, anti-bullying initiatives, and conflict mediation.

