Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools

THE Challenge

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"We are all living examples of social, emotional, ethical and civic teaching in everything we do: intentionally, consciously and helpfully or not."

—Jonathan Cohen, National School Climate Center

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Online *at www.thechallenge.org*

Jonathan Cohen on School Climate: Engaging the Whole Village, Teaching the Whole Child

Jonathan Cohen

Jonathan Cohen is the cofounder and president of the National School Climate Center (formerly the Center for Social and Emotional Education). He is adjunct professor in psychology and education at Columbia University, adjunct professor in education at City University of New York and a practicing clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst. Cohen has worked in and with K–12 schools for over 30 years in a variety of roles: as a teacher, program developer, school psychologist, consultant, psycho-educational diagnostician and mental health provider.

1. How would you define "school climate"?

The following definition of school climate and a positive, sustained school climate was developed by the National School Climate Council, which is collaboratively led by the National School Climate Center and the Education Commission of the States. It synthesizes current thinking and research about school climate.

> School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.
>
> A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes: norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment (National School Climate Center, 2010).

2. How do you think school climate affects academic achievement? What does the research tell us?

Over the last 30 years a growing body of empirical research has shown that a positive and sustained school climate is associated with and may be predictive of positive youth development, effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention. (*For recent and detailed summaries of this research, see references at the end of this interview*).

3. Is that research affecting policies and practices?

There has been a terrible gap between school climate research and policy and practice. But the National School Climate Council has established standards that recognize these aspects of school life (National School Climate Council, 2009) and the need to measure these aspects, since we know that in many cases they are not being measured. In addition, our center offers many guidelines and tools for school communities to use in measuring and improving school climate.

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The U.S. Department of Education and a growing number of state departments of education are examining ways to use school climate to organize the many data-driven processes that encompass a broad range of pro-social efforts that protect children and promote learning.

4. How can champions of school climate better respond to the available research to create data driven improvement systems?

Below are six steps that will help to close the gap between school climate research and school practices:

1. Define school climate in ways that are aligned with recent research;
2. Recommend that schools routinely and comprehensively evaluate school climate, recognizing student, parent and school personnel "voice" as well as all of the major dimensions (e.g. safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment) that shape school climate;
3. Adopt standards for positive school climate as well as school climate assessment procedures;
4. Use school climate assessment as a measure of accountability;
5. Encourage teacher preparation programs that give teachers and administrators the tools to evaluate classroom [and] school climates and take steps to use these findings to promote a climate for learning; and
6. Increase research on the evaluation and dissemination of resources focused on improving school climate (Cohen, Fege & Pickeral, 2009).

5. What is the most important thing a school can do to improve its climate?

I believe that the most important thing a school community can do is to continually learn and work together to understand what school climate-related strengths and needs exist and to use this information to collaboratively develop instructional and systemic or schoolwide improvement efforts. Schools need to measure school climate with scientifically sound survey instruments that are comprehensive in that they (1) give a voice to all involved—students, school personnel, and parents or guardians, and (2) assess the major dimensions of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching, learning and the institutional environment. School climate improvement is a *continuous* process that must include the following steps:

1. Plan and prepare for the next phase of the improvement process.
2. Evaluate the climate.
3. Understand the evaluation findings and create an action plan.
4. Implement the action plan.
5. Begin the cycle anew.

By definition, effective school improvement efforts involve the "whole village"—students, parents and guardians, school personnel and community leaders. We now have guidelines and detailed sets of tools that support school leadership teams and communities in addressing the tasks associated with the five improvement steps noted above.

6. What part does teacher job satisfaction play in school climate?

School climate has a profound impact on teachers' job satisfaction. Naturally, how safe teachers feel, how connected they are to the school, how satisfying their relationships are with students and fellow adults all powerfully color how they feel about teaching in a given school. Too often teachers do not feel safe, supported and effective as educators, which is one of the important reasons why close to 50 percent drop out of the profession within their first five years of teaching (Anderson, 2008). And, naturally, the way teachers feel about being in school has a big impact on their relationships with students and their teaching style.

7. How do you suggest that teacher education programs be expanded to include training in school climate?

School and classroom climate need to be explicit topics and ongoing facets of all teacher education programs. Climate issues will always shape and even determine education and school improvement outcomes. However, my impression is that very few programs include much in their curricula about school climate.

While teacher education programs do include information and guidelines about classroom management, I find that the vast majority of teachers I work with say that they have not learned enough about how to effectively manage classrooms and too often the model they have learned is a punitive one. The Bank Street College of Education in New York City is an exception. Since its inception in the 1940s, it has focused on promoting reflective educators who are attuned to the whole child.

Education programs can provide more instruction about school climate research: they can teach classroom management strategies that create a climate for learning in classrooms and the school as a whole; they can introduce future teachers to the climate assessment tools and the process for planning, implementation and evaluation; and they can prepare teachers to actively promote a positive climate.

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Is Our School Climate Positive?

Learning occurs within a mix of students' cognitive and emotional abilities, social influences and environmental factors, most of which interplay with the school's climate. We know that there are many paths to learning and we know that the school climate sometimes helps and sometimes hurts the process. When we take a closer look at a school's climaste, we are able to objectively identify areas that need attention so students are better able to learn.

The overarching conditions for learning that influence school climate—school engagement, school safety and school environment—are flexible enough that any school, no matter its size, location or budget, can monitor and take steps to improve them.

Using this framework, the components of a positive school climate include:

Engagement

• Caring relationships among and between students, staff and families

• Respect for diversity within the school community

• Active school participation among students and their families, including effective school–community partnerships

Safety

• A physically safe setting free from substance use and violence

• An emotionally safe setting free from bullying and harassment

Environment

• High academic standards for every student

• Clear rules and policies that are fair and consistently enforced

• Mental and physical health supports for students that promote fitness, good nutrition and mental well-being

• A clean, functioning, hazard-free physical environment

Positive climates are those that encourage every student to feel safe, connected and

academically engaged at school. It takes a lot of work to make this happen, even when it looks easy from the outside. And it can be done in any school, even when it looks impossible from the outside.

The Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) Early College in Denver is a public school with a history of poor academic performance and significant discipline problems. Principal Allen Smith said, "When I first walked through the hallways like everybody else, I had the perception that MLK was this horrible school."

During Smith's tenure, which began in 2007, the school has, however, undergone a significant transformation. According to Smith, discipline infractions have been reduced by 60 percent and attendance for both middle school and high school students is a combined 93 percent. The school was targeted for revitalization by Denver Public Schools in 2005, and Smith and his staff have worked hard to improve the school climate and student outcomes.

The MLK Early College, formerly a middle school only, now includes a college-prep high school that serves sixth through 12th grades. Staff and community partners provide rigorous support for students as they work toward college. Students must meet strict application requirements to attend the high school, which begins with ninth grade.

Since the transformation began, Smith tells *The Challenge* that every student in the inaugural senior class of 2010 has graduated—each one accepted into a four-year college or university. And the school continues to improve its climate for future graduates.

Measure the Climate Routinely

School staff, students and parents—each group has a unique perspective about its school climate. Each group's viewpoint offers valuable insights about the classroom activities, campus events and relationships that shape the school's culture.

A well-designed climate assessment survey will reveal patterns of behavior and attitudes that administrators may use to guide procedural changes in order to improve school climate and academic progress. Combined with student test scores, attendance records and graduation rates, these data create a comprehensive view of the underlying factors that contribute to a school's success and its challenges.

Scientifically based and tested: A reliable survey is based on the research about school climate. The best student surveys ask questions about topics such as relationships, emotional safety, physical safety, school engagement, and health-related behaviors, including substance use, nutrition and fitness. Staff surveys ask about topics like campus safety and supervision, staff morale, teacher support and perceptions of student behavior. Good assessments must be tested and adjusted to ensure appropriate validity and reliability. Validity refers to the survey's ability to measure what it intends to. Reliability refers to its ability to measure consistently from one survey administration to the next.

Easy to use: Many schools now use online surveys administered from a secure website and completed in the school's computer lab. Student surveys consist of easily answered questions that can take as few as 20 minutes to complete, depending upon the students' ages and abilities. Staff and parent surveys are also completed online and typically take 15 minutes or less

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The Right Thing to Do: Spotlight on Sullivan County, Tenn.

The Challenge *spoke with Jack Barnes shortly before his retirement as director of schools in Sullivan County, Tenn. Barnes has devoted 37 years to public education in Sullivan County and has served at every grade level. The county serves approximately 11,500 students in northeast Tennessee and is among the largest counties in the state.*

During the late 1990s, an incident described as "racial unrest" at Sullivan East High School in Sullivan County, Tenn., led to a complaint filed by the U.S. Department of Justice. The case was settled out of court and the school agreed, among other things to (1) train all staff and students on the school district's policies prohibiting harassment and discrimination; (2) conduct a school climate assessment; and (3) develop a plan to prevent, identify and remedy harassment and discrimination. Documents related to the case are available online at **http://www.justice.gov/crt/edo/documents/classlist.php**.

The Sullivan County Department of Education decided to use this incident as an opportunity to focus on school climate throughout the district's 28 school buildings. The school district contracted with Main Street Academix to conduct an assessment on school climate by surveying all students, staff and parents from every school. The district also partnered with the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence to annually train all employees, including bus drivers, cafeteria and janitorial staff, on common types of bias, including those related to race, gender, religion and disabilities.

Assessment results and analysis identified key problem areas in the school, such as location hot spots, behaviors, patterns and times of day. Initially, there was resistance from administrators and teachers to the "climate profile" as findings showed that students' views differed from those of the adults. These results, however, became the foundation for each school's action plan, and the district then began to enlist the help of students—as well as adults—to work together to improve their schools.

The surveys have evolved into an important component of the *school improvement plans* and are administered on a bi-annual basis. A diverse group of students are chosen to participate on *respected leadership teams* where they are trained and empowered to help with the surveys. Staff and students in each building and throughout all district levels continue to use the results to identify ways to improve school climate.

> *"Our goal is to give our students and staff the best opportunities possible with the resources we have."*
>
> —Jack Barnes
> Former Director of Schools,
> Sullivan County, Tenn.

The impact of this work is beginning to show positive results. Several areas of improvement include:

• **Academic performance**. Data from 2003–08 indicate an 11 percent increase in academic outcomes based on standardized testing scores.

• **Disciplinary referrals.** The district is seeing a decrease in problem behaviors and issues through times and places of transition (i.e., in the hallways during class changes, between fifth grade and middle school, etc.).

• **Communication.** Schools document increased positive communication among adults, among students, and between adults and students. Adults use the "same language" as students to discuss with them issues such as harassment; the "code of silence" has been broken; teachable moments are not ignored; and barriers have been minimized.

Barnes continues to emphasize how important it is for schools to:

• Engage students as partners—they know what's going on. Empower them, give them a voice, and provide them with opportunities for civic engagement;

• Enlist administrative support. It is needed at all levels—the district, the school level, and the building level;

• Encourage teachers and staff to model respect and civility. Actions speak louder than words, especially when they don't mirror each other;

• Review and improve school policies, procedures and rules. Promote consistent enforcement, ensure a process for dealing with complaints, and reinforce civility;

• Identify high-need times and places for increased supervision. Provide additional protection to increase safety and avoid unnecessary incidents;

• Acknowledge that students learn differently. By differentiating instruction, the educational process addresses different learning styles and shows respect for individuals; and

• Take advantage of the teachable moments. Don't ignore incidents in hallways, in the cafeteria or on the bus. Don't let inappropriate remarks or behaviors go unchallenged.

Barnes reminds us that improving school climate and changing the environment takes time and patience. The process includes making the benefits of working together clear to school populations—not to add to requirements, but to enhance outcomes for all students and staff. He states, "Our goal is to give our students and staff the best opportunities possible with the resources we have."

Note: *Using the same contractors, Sullivan County Department of Education continues to assess and train all staff and students. The Board of Education approved the addition of 30 minutes to the school day to address the need for staff training, planning, colleague collaboration, and prevention and intervention efforts, and to make better use of instructional time. Each school uses the extra time based on specific school plans and needs. The district maintains its use and analysis of the annual and bi-annual Assessment of School Climate as a component in the development of each School Improvement Plan.*

School Climate Surveys Uncover the Extent of Bullying

A positive school climate is one that cultivates several positive characteristics, including a sense of safety for each and every student. Bullying that goes unchecked can shatter a young person's sense of well-being and safety, making it difficult if not impossible to learn.

Anyone can be the target of bullying. However, numerous research studies report that certain groups are more likely to experience bullying and are more vulnerable to its harmful impact. Children and adolescents who have certain physical or emotional traits or sexual orientation are at greater risk for physical, verbal

and relational bullying. For example, multiple studies find that overweight and obese children are more likely to be bullied than their normal-weight peers (Janssen, Craig, Boyce and Pickett, 2004). Similarly, Toronto researcher Faye Mishna (2003) reports that children with learning disabilities are more likely to be bullied. Other research indicates that youths who suffer medical conditions that affect appearance or ability are more likely to be bullied (Dawkins, 1996).

The same is true for students whose sexual orientation is lesbian, gay or bisexual; those who are questioning their sexual orientation; and those whose gender expression is different from their biological sex. Recent studies find that sexual minority youths and those perceived to be sexual minorities are subjected to bullying and verbal bias at higher rates than their heterosexual peers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., Tip sheet #33).

The outcomes for those who are bullied can be devastating. The body of research among social scientists and medical doctors indicates these youths are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, physical ailments, truancy and suicide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., Tip sheet #24). In this context, the school climate is not safe for bullied students or bystanders who may want to help but aren't sure how or if they'll be targeted next.

Dan Olweus (1993), a pioneer in the research and reduction of bullying, has long been an advocate for two basic principles to put an end to bullying behaviors: adults at school, and to a smaller degree at home, must be aware of the true extent of bullying among their youths; and the adults must commit to changing the situation.

School climate surveys discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The Challenge* are available to schools to clarify the extent and nature of bullying at school. Anti-bullying resources are available to assist schools that are committed to changing the culture of bullying among students.

For more information about this research, including prevalence, harmful effects, and action steps, visit the Stop Bullying Now! website. Tip sheets like *Bullying Among Children and Youth on Perceptions and Differences in Sexual Orientation* and *Bullying Among Children and Youth with Disabilities and Special Needs* can be found at **http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov**.

All children, regardless of differences, deserve to be safe, healthy and supported in their classrooms, schools and communities.

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Additional Resources

National Education Association

Diversity toolkit is at **http://www.nea.org/tools/18834.htm**.

American Academy of Pediatrics

Information about sexual orientation is available at **http://www.aap.org/featured/sexualorientation.htm**.

Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association)

Factsheets on bullying and an anti-bullying campaign called *What Does Gay Mean?* are available at **http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net**.

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to complete. Results are confidential and no identifiers are collected. Online surveys cut down on the cost of survey administration and the time required to analyze results, which can be done automatically as soon as the survey closes. Expect reports to be delivered quickly with data that are easy to understand and use.

Comprehensive: The school climate evaluation must represent the entire school community. This includes at a minimum students and staff (including support personnel and administrators). If possible, parents should be surveyed as well. Each group sees things the others may not be aware of, and each has its own interpretation of events and the climate.

Versatile: Many surveys consist of a core set of questions and can be tailored with optional questions that are important to your school. If a particular issue, such as gang activity or truancy, appears to be a problem, address it in your climate survey. Assessment results must be made relevant for students and parents, teachers, administrators and school officials. At every level from practitioner to policymaker, school climate information can be used to make the classroom a safe and rich learning environment for each student.

Reliable assessments are available from school districts, state departments of education, and research organizations. Find more information online at the sites below:

American Institutes for Research **http://www.air.org**

Barometers of School Safety **http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools/assessments/index.html**

California Healthy Kids Survey **http://www.wested.org/cs/chks/print/docs/chks_home.html**

Comprehensive School Climate Inventory **http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php**

Minnesota Student Survey **http://www.mnssc.state.mn.us/research_data.asp**

Ohio School Climate Survey **http://ohio.schoolclimate.net/sample/Home/tabid/235/Default.aspx**

News From OSDFS and the Field

ED Announces Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Awards

The U.S. Department of Education has awarded $38.8 million in Safe and Supportive Schools grants to support statewide measurement of, and targeted programmatic interventions to improve, conditions for learning in order to help schools improve safety and reduce substance use.

The grant award recipients are state education agencies in Arizona, California, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia and Wisconsin. The award amounts range from $1.7 million to $5.9 million.

To best formulate intervention and prevention strategies and thereby ensure that schools are safe places for students to learn, schools should understand the issues their communities face and the conditions that may influence student risk behaviors. School communities are complex systems that include multiple stakeholders and interconnecting environmental factors that influence student health and safety. As such, comprehensive needs assessments of conditions for learning should include the evaluation of school engagement, school safety and the school environment.

Race to the Top Awards: Phases 1 and 2

Delaware and Tennessee were the two states winning awards in the first phase of the Race to the Top competition. Delaware will receive approximately $100 million and Tennessee $500 million over the next four years. The two states received high marks for the commitment to reform from key stakeholders, including elected officials, teachers, union leaders and business leaders. All school districts in each state committed to implementing Race to the Top reforms. Delaware and Tennessee have aggressive plans to improve teacher and principal evaluation, use data to inform instructional decisions, and turn around their lowest-performing schools.

In late August, 10 additional grantees were announced in the Race to the Top competition's second phase with awards ranging from $75 million to $700 million each. The District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island are the recipients of grants that will serve 13.6 million students and 980,000 teachers in 25,000 schools around the country.

OSDFS Announces Grant Awards

In FY 2010, OSDFS made grant awards in the following programs: Building State Capacity for Preventing Youth Substance Use and Violence; Cooperative Civic Education and Economic Education Exchange Program; Carol M. White Physical Education Program; Educational Facilities Clearinghouse; Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Programs; Emergency Management for Higher Education; Foundations for Learning Grants; Grants for Coalitions to Prevent and Reduce Alcohol Abuse at Institutions of Higher Education; Grants for the Integration of Schools and Mental Health Systems; Grants to Reduce Alcohol Abuse; Models of Exemplary, Effective, and Promising Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Prevention Programs on College Campuses; Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Grant Program; and Safe and Supportive Schools. Abstracts and award information is online at **http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/programs.html**.

OSDFS Safe and Supportive Schools News Bulletin

If you would like weekly e-mail updates on OSDFS programs, as well as other information related to school safety, substance abuse and violence prevention in education, and the promotion of student health and well-being, you may be interested in subscribing to the *OSDFS Safe and Supportive Schools News Bulletin*.

Subscription information is at **http://www2.ed.gov/news/newsletters/listserv/preventioned.html**.

Research Findings

Research on Bullying Looks at Impact on Bystanders

Recent research discovered an increased risk to the mental health of students who witnessed, but had no involvement in, bullying among their peers at school. Observing bullying was found to predict elevated levels of substance use; worry about becoming a future target of bullying; conflicted feelings about intervening; and increased anxiety about peer relationships. Further, the findings indicated that 63 percent of students had been a bystander to bullying during the current school term. The study recommends increased attention to possible impacts on all students, "Overall, our findings add support to previous studies that recommend whole school approaches to tackling bullying." Researchers surveyed 2,002 students ages 12 to 16 in northern England.

"Observing Bullying at School: The Mental Health Implications of Witness Status" Ian Rivers, V. Paul Poteat, Nathalie Noret, and Nigel Ashurst *School Psychology Quarterly*, Volume 24, No. 4, December 2009

View the article online at **http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/spq-24-4-211.pdf.**

Academic Achievement Tied to Positive School Climate

A review of the literature reveals that a growing body of empirical research indicates that positive school climate is associated with and predictive of academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, students' healthy development, and teacher retention. The authors said, "There is a glaring gap between these research findings, on the one hand, and state departments of education, school climate policy, practice guidelines, and teacher education practice on the other."

"School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice, and Teacher Education" Jonathan Cohen, Libby McCabe, Nicholas M. Michelli, and Terry Pickeral *Teachers College Record*, Volume 111, No. 1, 2009

View the article online at **http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=15220.**

Resources

California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)

The CHKS gathers data from students and school staff that are used as a catalyst for positive change within schools and communities. The CHKS enables districts to identify the health and safety needs of students, establish program goals and monitor progress in achieving those goals. By sending a positive message on the importance of a healthy lifestyle and promoting the development of comprehensive school health programs, districts can help foster the school-community collaboration that is essential to tackling these critically important issues.

For more information on the CHKS, which is easily customized, visit **http://www.wested.org/cs/chks/print/docs/chks_home.html.**

The National School Climate Center (NSCC)

The National School Climate Center offers education and resources to support schools, districts and states in effectively aligning school climate policy with practice. The *School Climate Implementation Road Map* includes information, guidelines and, most important, tools designed to support school leaders and community members who want to improve school climate. NSCC offers the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), a research-based needs assessment that provides immediate feedback on how students, parents and school personnel perceive the school's climate. The center also conducts a summer institute with an optional school climate improvement leader certification.

View the NSCC website at **www.schoolclimate.org/.**

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV)

The Safe Communities-Safe Schools initiative at CSPV offers research-based assessment tools specific to elementary, middle and senior high school students, staff members and parents. Surveys contain core questions about topics related to school climate, safety, risky behaviors and protective factors. Student surveys can be tailored by adding optional questions about specific concerns, such as dating violence or weapon carrying. Schools administer these surveys online and receive a comprehensive report on their assessment results. As part of the package, they also receive technical assistance with next steps, such as strategic planning, program selection, information sharing and more.

The center's website is **http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools.**

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

CASEL works to advance the science and evidence-based practice of social and emotional learning (SEL). The nonprofit organization publishes books, articles and briefs that synthesize scientific advances in SEL and explain their implications for practice. Major topics covered are the benefits of preschool through high school SEL programming; how SEL coordinates with other education priorities; research and training in implementation; assessment; school and district leadership development; education policies; and communications.

CASEL's website is **http://www.casel.org.**

Safe, Supportive, and Successful Schools Step by Step

David M. Osher, Kevin Dwyer and Stephanie Jackson, 2003

This book of school improvement ideas provides strategies for the development, implementation and regulation of interventions. It includes a CD-ROM with an award-winning video, Spanish and English versions of the *Early Warning, Timely Response Guide* and *Action Guide*, and reproducible classroom materials. Schoolwide interventions focus on the social, ethical and emotional development of all students. Early interventions modify behavior patterns of students with minor behavioral issues. Intensive interventions engage students with significant emotional and behavioral disorders in appropriate interactions.

For more information, visit **http://store.cambiumlearning.com.**

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The Challenge provides information and resources to help schools create safe and healthy learning environments for students. It is a publication of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. We encourage reproduction and distribution of this publication.

Current and previous issues are available on *The Challenge* website at http://www.thechallenge.org.

Professional Environment Plays Large Role in School Climate

Discussions of school climate are incomplete without including the professional climate among staff, teachers and administrators. District financial strain, concerns about job security and uncertainty about the future can negatively affect morale and job satisfaction. A focus on school climate and relationships among teachers, staff and administrators can be challenging to maintain in the midst of these pressures.

Trust is a core component of a strong professional climate and healthy administrator-teacher relationships, both of which, in turn, affect job satisfaction and teacher effectiveness. Studies on academic leadership and school climate show that trusting, supportive environments promote better job performance, ease the pain of change and encourage more effective collaboration. In addition, teachers who feel that they are safe in the workplace, have adequate supplies and access to professional development and career growth opportunities will have higher levels of job satisfaction, according to Susan Moore Johnson at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2006, see S. M. Johnson's paper via the link at the end of this article to access a list of related resource materials).

Job satisfaction is an important factor in teacher turnover, which is a concern for many districts and the profession as a whole. As Jonathan Cohen mentioned in his interview included in this issue, nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years. According to an article by Richard Ingersoll (2003), "Almost half of all departures report as a reason either job dissatisfaction or the desire to pursue a better job, another career, or to improve career opportunities in or out of education."

The cost of teacher turnover can be measured in both dollars and outcomes for students. A 2007 national study conducted by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future found that the cost to recruit, hire, process and train one new teacher ranged from $4,000 to $18,000 depending on district size and location. In addition, schools with high teacher turnover may have a more difficult time organizing, planning and implementing a strong, clear curriculum, including intervention programs that address school climate issues like truancy, bullying or substance abuse.

A healthy professional environment is vital to a positive school climate and, thus, important to the success of each student. School administrators can strengthen the relationships among their staff members through many actions. Consider these suggestions from the research literature mentioned below on academic leadership and climate:

- Provide emotional support to staff.
- Include teachers and staff in decision making.
- Support innovation in the classroom.
- Encourage teachers to be leaders.

(See this edition of *The Challenge* online at **http://www.thechallenge.org** for a list of related research materials.)

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING PROTECTIVE FACTORS AMONG YOUTH

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES · USA

CDC
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

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Families, schools, and communities all need to work together to create an environment that facilitates healthy development of children and adolescents.

Efforts to improve child and adolescent health typically have featured interventions designed to address specific health risk behaviors, such as tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, violence, gang involvement, and early sexual initiation. However, results from a growing number of studies suggest that greater health impact might be achieved by also enhancing protective factors that help children and adolescents avoid multiple behaviors that place them at risk for adverse health and educational outcomes. Enhancing protective factors also might buffer children and adolescents from the potentially harmful effects of negative situations and events, such exposure to violence.

Protective factors include personal characteristics such as a positive view of one's future; life conditions such as frequent parental presence in the home at key times (e.g., after school, at dinner time);[2] and behaviors such as active participation in school activities.[3] School connectedness is a particularly promising protective factor. This publication defines and describes the components of school connectedness and identifies specific actions that schools can take to increase school connectedness.

Risk Factors are individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that increase the likelihood that a negative outcome will occur.

Protective Factors are individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events; increase an individual's ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future.[1]

School Connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.

What Is School Connectedness?

In 2003, the Wingspread Conference was sponsored by CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health and the Johnson Foundation to bring together key researchers and representatives from the education and health sectors to assess the state of knowledge about school connectedness and its effect on health and education outcomes. Through an extensive review of research and in-depth discussions, the interdisciplinary group defined school connectedness and identified, in the *Wingspread Declaration on School Connections*,[4] strategies that schools could implement to increase it. School connectedness was defined as the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Because studies indicate that individual students' feelings of being connected to school are influenced by their peers as well as by adults,[3,5] this publication has expanded that definition to include peer influence.

How Was This Publication Developed?

The strategies and actions recommended in this publication are based on the *Wingspread Declaration on School Connections* and a synthesis of school connectedness and related research from the fields of education, health, psychology, and sociology. Materials in the review include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports from government agencies and non-governmental organizations, and Web sites. Information from these sources was summarized to identify policies and practices that demonstrated an impact on students' sense of connectedness to school. In addition, recommendations were informed by the opinions of expert researchers, public health practitioners, and educators. This process identified six evidence-based strategies that could be implemented to increase students' sense of connectedness to school, along with specific actions that can be taken to implement each of the strategies. The audiences for this publication include school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents, as well as others interested in promoting school connectedness. Each audience, however, has different roles and responsibilities related to garnering support for, and implementing, these actions.

Only a limited number of studies have evaluated the impact of specific actions designed to foster school connectedness on health and academic outcomes. Therefore, many of the actions suggested in this publication are recommended on the basis of a single study of interventions that implemented multiple actions simultaneously, and it is difficult to isolate which components of the overall intervention contributed to observed positive changes in behavior and outcomes. However, actions were included only if CDC scientists and the panel of advisors for this project believed there was a logical connection between the action and school connectedness; the action was consistent with recognized standards of practice and feasible for most schools to implement; and the action was considered highly unlikely to be harmful to students.

Why Is School Connectedness Important?

Students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically when they feel connected to school. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health looked at the impact of protective factors on adolescent health and well-being among more than 36,000 7th–12th grade students. The study found that family, school, and individual factors such as school connectedness, parent-family connectedness, high parental expectations for academic achievement, and the adolescent's level of involvement in religious activities and perceived importance of religion and prayer were protective against a range of adverse behaviors.[2,6,7] School connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (e.g., drinking and driving, not wearing seat belts).[2] In this same study, school connectedness was second in importance, after family connectedness, as a protective factor against emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation and attempts.[2,3,6]

Research has also demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes,[8–12] including school attendance;[10] staying in school longer;[11] and higher grades and classroom test scores.[9,12] In turn, students who do well academically are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.[13,14] Compared with students with low grades, students with higher grades are significantly less likely to carry a weapon, smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and have sexual intercourse.[14]

What Are the Factors that Can Increase School Connectedness?

Adult Support: School staff can dedicate their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to students.

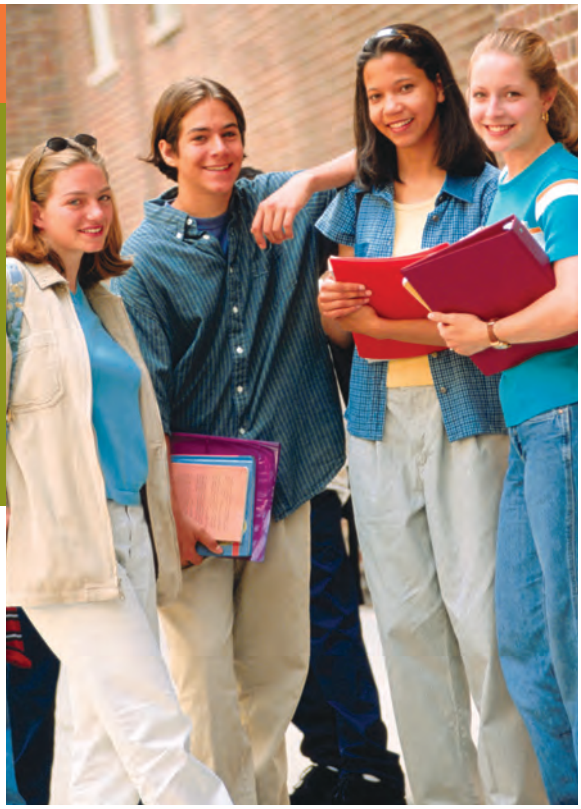
Belonging to a Positive Peer Group: A stable network of peers can improve student perceptions of school.

Commitment to Education: Believing that school is important to their future, and perceiving that the adults in school are invested in their education, can get students engaged in their own learning and involved in school activities.

School Environment: The physical environment and psychosocial climate can set the stage for positive student perceptions of school.

Adult Support

According to research by Blum and colleagues, children and adolescents' beliefs about themselves and their abilities are shaped by the extent to which they perceive that the adults in their lives care about them and are involved in their lives.[3] Children and adolescents who feel supported by important adults in their lives are likely to be more engaged in school and learning.[15] In the school setting, students feel supported and cared for when they see school staff dedicating their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to them.[16] Students need to feel that adults care about them as individuals as well as about their academic achievement.[2] Smaller schools may encourage more personal relationships among students and staff and allow for personalized learning.[17–19] Schools can form schools-within-a-school or create multidisciplinary teams of teachers in which a small number of teachers know each student and can ensure that every student has an identified advisor.[20]



Belonging to a Positive Peer Group

Students' health and educational outcomes are influenced by the characteristics of their peers, such as how socially competent peer group members are or whether the peer group supports pro-social behavior (e.g., engaging in school activities, completing homework assignments, helping others).[21] Being part of a stable peer network protects students from being victimized or bullied.[22] However, if the norms in the peer group support socially irresponsible behavior (e.g., bullying, graffiti), students are less likely to be involved in school activities, and their sense of connectedness to school, achievement levels, and health behaviors can suffer.[21,22]

Strong interpersonal skills enable students to maintain healthy relationships. Students who report feeling most connected to school also report having the most friends at school and having friends from several different social groups that are integrated by race and gender. Conversely, those students who report feeling less connected to school have more friends from outside school than inside or are socially isolated, reporting few friends either inside or outside of school.[3]

Commitment to Education

It is important that both students and adults are committed to learning and are involved in school activities. Students' dedication to their own education is associated with the degree to which they perceive that their peers and important adults in their lives 1) believe school is important and 2) act on those beliefs.[23] Students who are personally invested in school and believe that a good education is important for reaching their life goals spend more time on homework and in school activities and have an increased sense of connectedness to school.[3,18,21,24,25] Students who are engaged in their own education exhibit behavioral traits such as persistence, effort, sustained attention to tasks, and a higher level of preference for challenge and mastery.[16]

School staff who are dedicated to the education of their students build school communities that allow students to develop emotionally, socially, and mentally, as well as academically. Committed adults engage students in learning, foster mutual respect and caring, and meet the personal learning needs of each student.[3,15,18]

School Environment

Connectedness is enhanced by a healthy and safe school environment and a supportive psychosocial climate. A clean and pleasant physical environment (e.g., one free from graffiti) raises expectations for safety and sets the stage for positive, respectful relationships.[26]

The psychosocial climate at school is influenced by such factors as policies related to discipline, opportunities for meaningful student participation, and teachers' classroom management practices. Research indicates that in schools with a harsh and punitive discipline climate, student connectedness is lower.[3,18] A positive school environment, often called school climate, is characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making; and shared positive norms, goals, and values.[27,28] One study found that schools with a higher average *sense-of-community score* (i.e., composite of students' perception of caring and supportive interpersonal relationships and their ability to be autonomous and have influence in the classroom) had significantly lower average student drug use and delinquency.[27,28] In addition, schools that have higher rates of participation in extracurricular activities during or after school tend to have higher levels of school connectedness.[3]

Good classroom management—including having set routines and guidelines, adequate planning, and fair consequences for misbehaviors—is critical to establishing a positive school environment and increasing school connectedness. When classrooms are well managed, relationships among students and between teachers and students tend to be more positive, and students are more engaged in learning and in completing homework assignments.[3] Teachers who promote mutual respect in the classroom foster a sense of safety and connectedness by reducing the threat of being embarrassed or teased.[29]

How Can Schools Influence Factors That Increase School Connectedness?

This publication identifies six strategies to increase the extent to which students feel connected to school. These strategies can enhance each of the four factors that influence school connectedness (adult support, belonging to positive peer groups, commitment to education, and school environment). This section describes the strategies, and specific actions under each strategy, that teachers, administrators, other school staff, and parents can implement to enhance school connectedness.

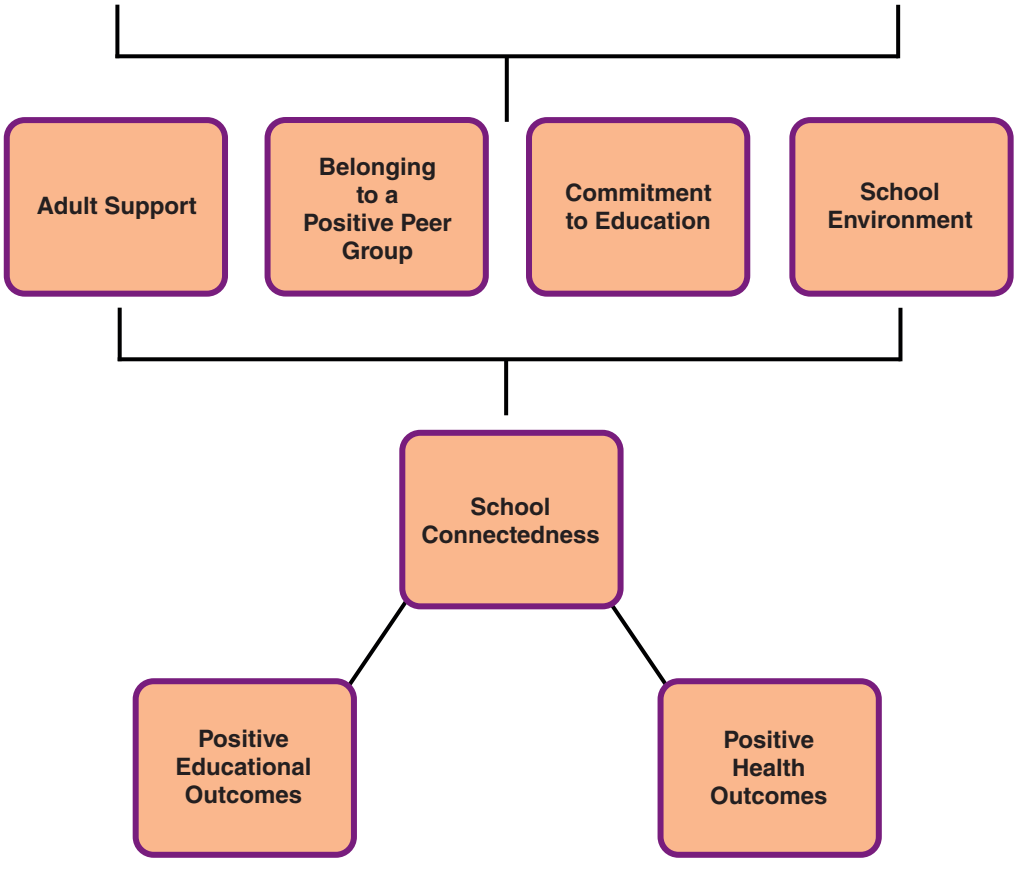
Improving students' health and education outcomes by improving connectedness to school is a large undertaking that requires efforts of not only those within school buildings but also people and organizations outside of schools. For example, parents and community organizations can provide support outside of school to enhance activities done within the school, and teacher preparation programs and professional organizations can provide teachers and school administrators with the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to implement the recommended actions. These efforts to enhance student connectedness to school align well with the Coordinated School Health approach promoted by CDC as well as educational reform efforts, which in part aim to improve the psychosocial environment of schools.

The strategies and action steps that follow are not listed in order of priority and are not intended to be exhaustive lists. Some of the actions are small changes in school processes that can be done in the short term with relative ease, whereas others might be much broader, longer-term goals that require administrative or budgetary changes. Individual schools and school districts should determine which actions are most feasible and appropriate, based on the needs of the school and available resources. Implementation will require a team effort that involves school administrators, teachers, other staff, students, families, and communities. It is important to secure buy-in from these groups and to teach them about the importance of school connectedness in improving students' health and education outcomes. It also is important to evaluate efforts to increase school connectedness to learn which actions have the greatest impact.

Promoting School Connectedness

Strategies to Increase School Connectedness

1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.
2. Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.
3. Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.
4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.
5. Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.
6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.



Six Strategies to Promote School Connectedness

School administrators, teachers, and other school staff can use the following six strategies and the supporting action steps to increase school connectedness:

1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.

a. Lead the school community in a process to develop a shared vision of high standards for learning and behavior.[30,31]

b. Solicit teacher and staff input and involvement in all efforts to improve the school climate and students' sense of connectedness to school.[32]

c. Engage students, parents, school staff, and community members in teams to develop school policies and plan school-wide activities. These teams can also assist in writing proposals for grants and solicit support and supplies from local businesses.[33]

d. Give teachers and principals appropriate decision-making authority over how school resources are used, including people, time, facilities, and funds.[34]

e. Work with students, faculty, staff, and parents to identify simple changes or modifications that would make the school's physical environment more pleasant.[3]

f. Assign students developmentally appropriate levels of responsibility for classroom decision-making and management.[35,36]

g. Empower students to communicate openly with school staff and parents by providing a mechanism for students to give in-depth evaluations of their teachers, and hold student-led parent-teacher conferences to actively involve students in the discussions.[34]

h. Engage community partners to provide a range of services at the school that students and their families need (e.g., dental services, health screenings, child care, substance abuse treatment).[37]

2. Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.

a. Provide opportunities for parents to increase their own skills and competence in areas that will help them be more involved in their children's school life. Opportunities could include educational courses such as General Education Development (GED), English as a second language, and effective communication and leadership skills.[38]

b. Implement training workshops that provide parents with skills to better manage their children's behavior. Skills can include identifying desirable and undesirable behaviors, communication strategies, conflict resolution, listening skills, setting expectations for behaviors, and appropriate praise. Parents also can learn about how to teach their children self-restraint and problem-solving.[25,39–42]

c. Provide parent workshops that teach academic support skills, such as how to talk with teachers about ways parents can help their children develop academic skills.[25,39,40,43,44]

d. Seek alternative ways to provide hard-to-reach parents with skills training, such as by using a telephone-based parent education program.[45]

e. Communicate the school's behavioral and academic expectations to families, and encourage them to reinforce those expectations at home. Expectations can be communicated through newsletters, parent–teacher–student conferences, and school Web sites.[44,46]

f. Encourage parents to create a supportive learning environment in the home. This includes providing homework guidance, ensuring adequate educational supplies such as computers or books, and assisting their children with time management.[25,39,43,44]

g. Create a mechanism to strengthen family involvement in student achievement. This could include creating a full-time staff position to coordinate school-wide activities and parent involvement or assigning school staff members to be liaisons to specific students and their families. The school–family liaison can work with the family to identify ways to be involved in the classroom and school; organize meetings with the family and relevant staff to discuss student progress and other issues; ensure that the student and family feel welcome in the school; help set academic and behavioral goals; and connect the student and family with community resources.[39,46,47]

h. Establish regular meetings with parents to discuss their children's behavior, grades, and accomplishments. These could include home visits, which are especially beneficial during key transition times (i.e., elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and high school to college/career).[42,46]

i. Have the first communication from the teacher to the parent be about a positive experience the student has had, not a negative one.[48]

j. Offer multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in meaningful school and classroom activities that can fit diverse schedules, skills, and abilities. Examples include assisting in the classroom, attending after-school events, collaborating on homework activities, participating in a school health team or parent organization, and assisting with linking community resources to the school.[27,41, 49–54]

k. Reduce barriers to parent involvement by providing services such as babysitting, transportation, and alternate meeting locations.[55]

l. Create opportunities and mechanisms for parents to share important aspects of their culture, needs, and expectations for their children.[56]

m. Translate materials into languages spoken most commonly in students' homes. Provide bilingual interpreters to assist non-English-speaking families at school events.[56]

3. Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.

a. Implement tutoring programs to provide one-on-one assistance to students. Tutors can provide weekly academic help in reading and math, help students with decision-making, and work with students to develop specific academic and social goals.[16,42,51,52]

b. Support positive academic competition within and among schools.[57] For example, schools can establish interscholastic team competitions in academic subjects and offer activities such as debate and physics projects.

c. Offer extended learning opportunities for all students, such as summer and vacation camps, to improve academic and social skills.[39,43,51]

d. Provide opportunities for students to improve their interpersonal skills, such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-control, communication, negotiation, sharing, and good manners. Other skills that could be taught include listening, stress management, and decision making.[25,39,41,44,58,59]

e. Foster pro-social behavior by engaging students in helping activities such as service learning, peer tutoring, classroom chores, and teacher assistance.[60] Use classroom activities and lessons to explore and discuss empathy, personal strengths, fairness, kindness, and social responsibility.[40,49]

f. Teach refusal and resistance skills, including how to recognize social influences to engage in problem behaviors, identify consequences of problem behaviors, generate and suggest alternatives, and invite peers to join in those alternative activities.[39,43,59,61]

g. Correct inaccurate perceptions about what are normal behaviors among students (e.g., how many students smoke or drink alcohol).[44]

h. Use incidents in the classroom as "teachable moments" to educate students on self-control, empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills.[35]

i. Provide opportunities throughout the school day that allow students to identify and label their feelings, express their feelings, and assess the intensity of their feelings.[36,49]

j. Engage students in planning for their future, including career and personal goals. Assist them in mapping out steps to take to meet their goals.[40,62]

k. Use school sporting events and physical education classes to promote teamwork and sportsmanship and emphasize fair play and nonviolence.[26,63]

4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.

a. Communicate clear expectations for learning and behavior.[39,43,64] Ensure that expectations are developmentally appropriate and that all students are held to the same expectations.

b. Ensure that lessons are linked to standards and are sequential to ensure that students' learning builds upon prior lessons.[34,46,65]

c. Clearly describe lesson goals and how the information relates to students and the real world.[9,35,66]

d. Assess students continuously and use the results to guide the direction of the class and teaching methods used.[16,34,46]

e. Use interactive and experiential activities, such as group discussions, problem solving, and role playing, to engage students in learning and help them personalize the information.[9,35,36,66,67]

f. Be flexible with instructional strategies to allow for teachable moments and personalization of the academic lessons.[30]

g. Use a variety of teaching methods such as discussion questions, extra readings, and group projects to foster critical and reflective thinking, problem-solving skills, and the capacity to work effectively with others.[67]

h. Apply a variety of classroom management strategies and teaching methods that are conducive to the diverse needs and learning styles of students. Examples of strategies include assessing student knowledge before teaching, teaching to explicit learning objectives, involving students in small cooperative learning groups, and organizing and structuring the classroom in ways that prevent discipline problems from occurring.[16,39,43,44,60,68]

i. Engage students in appropriate leadership positions in the classroom and provide avenues for their voices and opinions to be heard. For example, include students in the decision-making process for setting classroom rules and consequences for breaking the rules.[44,49,67,69]

j. Establish a reward system for both academic and extracurricular achievements, such as written praise or coupons to purchase items in the school store.[39,43,44] In addition, encourage the intrinsic rewards of learning by displaying student work and accomplishments to parents, other students and teachers, and members of the community.[67]

k. Provide diverse opportunities for students to be meaningfully involved, learn, and be recognized. These opportunities could include service learning, extracurricular activities, and creative projects.[9,30,46] For example, integrate academic programs with community service (e.g., developing writing skills by working on a community newspaper, reinforcing math skills by tutoring younger students).[16,52]

l. Encourage open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints. Creating opportunities for students to challenge and debate can teach respect for diverse opinions and perspectives.[49,67]

m. Reduce class size to ensure more time for individualized assistance.[34,70]

5. Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.

a. Employ teachers who have been trained in child development, and demonstrate effective implementation of student-centered pedagogy, a variety of classroom management techniques, and teaching methods (e.g., cooperative learning).[16]

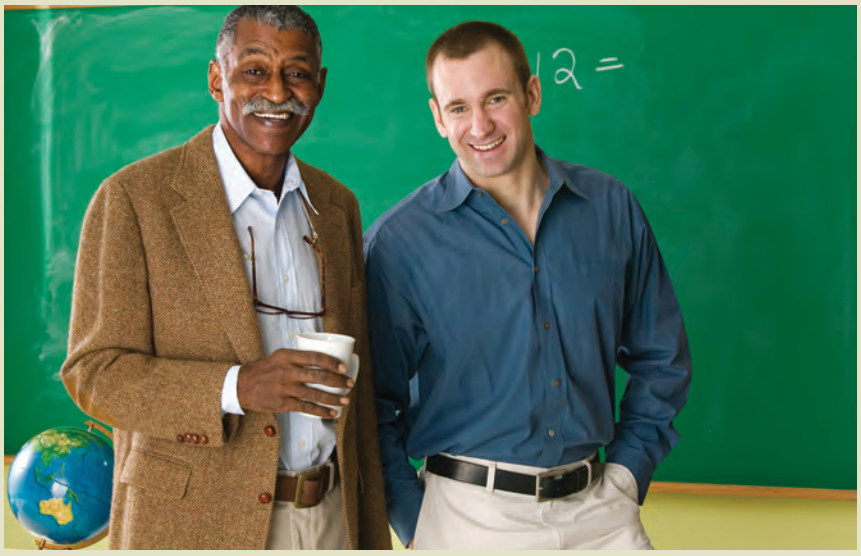
b. Offer professional development on ways to organize and structure the classroom to promote a positive environment. Developmentally appropriate discipline strategies emphasize positive behaviors and values and assist students in developing self-control.[49]

c. Educate school staff on strategies to effectively involve parents in their children's school life. Important skills include how to establish regular communication, communicate effectively with parents from diverse cultures, conduct effective parent–teacher–student conferences, involve parents in homework assignments, and organize classroom events that engage parents.[46]

d. Provide training on all curricula the school plans to use, as well as effective teaching methods (e.g., cooperative learning, active learning), to maximize the curricula's effectiveness. Ensure that teachers have the necessary materials, time, resources, and support to effectively use the skills learned in training.[36,40,44,49]

e. Enable teachers to learn from each other by building learning teams to observe experienced teachers applying effective classroom management techniques and facilitating group work in a way that values students' thoughts and opinions.[46]

f. Develop a coaching or mentoring program for teachers. Pairing teachers in this manner allows them to solve problems at school, share teaching techniques and classroom management strategies, and create a supportive work environment.[39,43,44,49]



6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

a. Consider structuring the school so that teachers stay with the same students for 3 years in elementary and middle school and 2 or more years in high school.[34] This can provide better continuity in learning and might allow the development of stronger teacher–student relationships.[16]

b. Allow students and their parents to use the school building and property outside of school hours for recreational or health promotion programs.[71] This can increase their feeling of being part of the school community.

c. Apply reasonable and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon by students and staff and are fairly enforced.[67,72]

d. Hold school-wide activities that give students opportunities to learn about different cultures, people with disabilities, and topics such as arts or sports. This will increase students' respect for diversity and form connections among students.[35] Increasing understanding of similarities and differences can engender respect.

e. Provide opportunities for students of all achievement levels to interact with one another and develop friendships, promote teamwork, and lessen hierarchical divisions between older and younger students.[9,16,35]

f. Create opportunities for students to work in partnership with adults in helping roles. For example, service learning opportunities enable students to connect with adults in the community (e.g., field trips, community volunteer events, internships).[60] Involve students in activities that traditionally involved only adults (e.g., parent–teacher conferences, curriculum selection committees, school health teams).[33,40,67]

g. Have principals, teachers, and other school staff commit to and model respectful behavior toward each other.[36,58,59]

h. Challenge staff to greet each student by name.[46]

i. Encourage school staff to make a concerted effort to reach out to students who may be experiencing academic or social issues and get to know them, opening up the possibility for stronger relationships with those students.[32]

j. Ensure that school staff members have an expert (e.g., school counselor, school psychologist) they can consult with about student issues they feel are beyond their expertise, and to whom they can refer students who need assistance they are not qualified to provide.[16,34]

k. Use a variety of methods to communicate and promote expectations, values, and group norms that support positive health and academic behaviors. Communications can be addressed to students, school staff, families, and members of the community through a variety of channels such as school assemblies, newsletters, or a school Web site.[49,60]

Conclusion

Children and adolescents are establishing patterns of behavior and making lifestyle choices that affect both their current and future health. Families, schools, and communities all need to work together to create an environment that facilitates healthy development of children and adolescents. Research has shown that students who feel more connected to school are more likely to have positive health and education outcomes. The six strategies outlined in this publication provide a framework for increasing students' connectedness to school. In combination with evidence-based health promotion programs, strategies such as these can help schools have the greatest impact on the health and education outcomes of their students.

Acknowledgments

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"American teens can have stronger health and educational outcomes. Increasing school connectedness can make it happen."

Robert Blum MD, PhD

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