



School Climate and Positive Developmental Relationships

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What Is the Topic

[The National School Climate Center](#) defines school climate as the overall quality of the school environment, including how students, staff, and families interact, as well as the levels of safety, support, and general atmosphere within the school. A positive climate is characterized by respect, inclusivity, and a strong [sense of belonging](#), which contribute to better academic performance, such as improved grades and test scores, and higher levels of student engagement (Berkowitz et al., 2016; Osher et al., 2018). [Research](#) shows that when students feel safe, valued, and trusted, their academic performance improves and the [negative impacts of poverty on learning](#) are reduced (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020). For English learners, an effective school climate includes key elements like believing in their abilities, valuing their cultural backgrounds, and maintaining positive relationships with their families (LeClair et al., 2009; Sanders et al., 2018). However, despite the benefits of a positive school climate, ELs often face challenges in feeling fully integrated and valued compared to their non-ELL peers (Yough et al., 2024). [Positive developmental relationships](#) empower children and adolescents to manage stress, stimulate cognitive function, and foster the connections essential for developing complex skills and competencies necessary for academic success and engagement. These relationships also enhance well-being, positive identity formation, and students' confidence in their abilities (Allen et al., 2013).

[Family and community engagement](#) are crucial for creating and maintaining a positive school climate and positive developmental relationships for the students. Schools should actively engage families by valuing their input and incorporating their cultural backgrounds into the school environment. Effective communication, such as providing translation services and scheduling meetings at convenient times, helps bridge the gap between home and school. Building strong relationships with community organizations also provides additional support and resources for ELs and their families, enhancing their school experience.

[Improving school climate](#) and developing positive relationships is a gradual process that cannot be achieved through a single effort or quick fix. It is not a one-time project but rather an ongoing commitment that requires sustained attention and effort (Pickeral et al., 2009). Successful enhancement of school climate depends on the continuous support of building leaders, who play a crucial role in setting the tone and guiding the ongoing improvements within the school.



What Is the Evidence Base

[Various studies](#) have demonstrated that a positive and equitable school climate is essential for both school and student success, as it enhances student achievement and [sense of belonging](#). Additionally, when educators and school leaders foster positive developmental relationships, students are more likely to develop resilience, grow, learn, and enhance their social-emotional skills. Figure 1 below, shows the components for developing healthy relationships. With support of [research evidence](#), many educators confirm that school is a relational environment where students can fulfill their need to belong through reciprocal relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults. This sense of belonging, defined by students feeling accepted, respected, included, and supported, plays a crucial role in promoting connectedness (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2008). When students identify with their school, they internalize this sense of belonging, making the school an integral part of their lives. Conversely, a lack of belonging leads to feelings of alienation (Berkowitz, 2022; Collins & Steinber, 2006).



Figure 1. Components to Develop Healthy Relationships in Schools

Framework 1: [National School Climate Standards](#) (NSCS): The National School Climate Standards offer a research-based model and benchmark criteria designed for educational leaders—including School Boards, State Departments of Education, Superintendents, Principals, and After-School leaders—to support, evaluate, and hold accountable district and school initiatives aimed at improving school climate. The five standards of this framework are grounded in the main components of school climate as defined by the NSCS (see Figure 2), which include:



1. The school community develops policies to:
 - support the growth of social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills and engagement.
 - create a system to address learning barriers and re-engage disengaged students.
 - establish a shared vision and plan to promote and sustain a positive school climate.
 2. Practices are identified and supported to:
 - advance students' development.
 - boost engagement in school activities.
 - address barriers to learning and re-engage students.
 - build the necessary operational infrastructure.
 3. The school creates an environment where all members feel:
 - welcomed, supported, and safe socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically.
 4. The school fosters practices and norms that encourage:
 - social and civic responsibilities.
 - commitment to social justice.
-
- Using principles from the National School Climate Standards, Rodriguez et al. (2009) examined the perceptions of 123 students—57 monolingual and 66 English Learners (ELs)—at a rural public elementary school, focusing on school climate, extracurricular activities, and self-esteem. The findings indicated that as teachers implemented culturally responsive extracurricular activities, it helped students feel more connected to the school and their teachers.
 - Garret and Eishner (2019) found that English Learners achieved higher scores in English Language Arts at schools where there was a greater perception of academic rigor and a supportive learning environment.

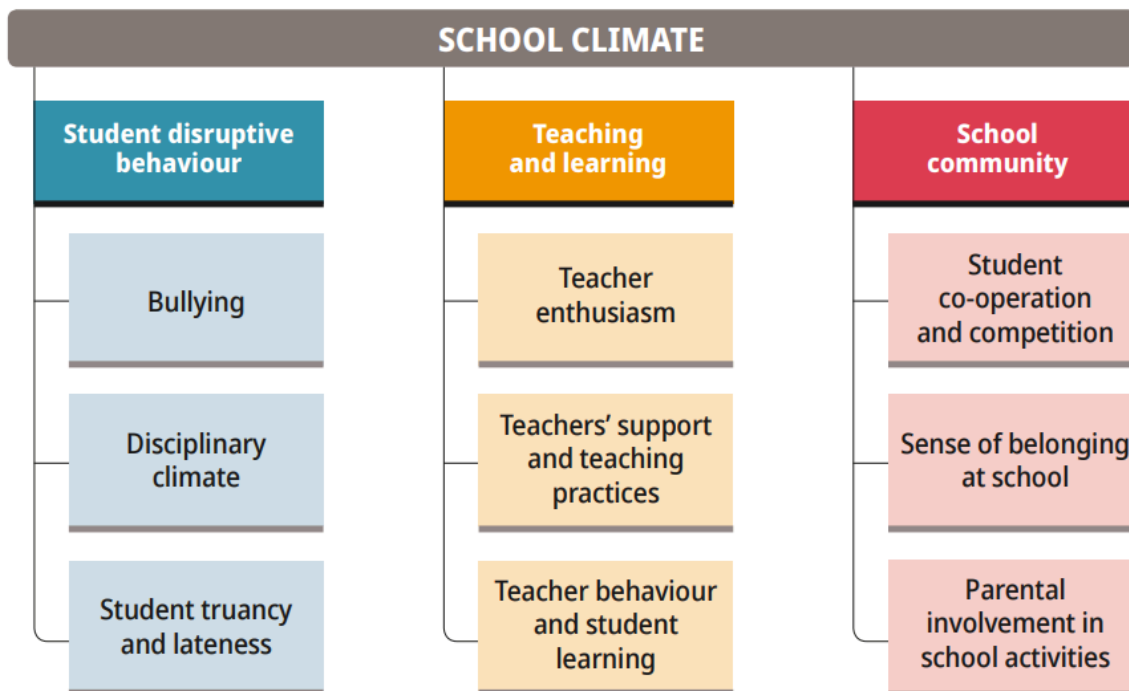


Figure 2. Components of School Climate

Framework 2. [Responsive Classroom](#): The Responsive Classroom approach emphasizes the integration of social and emotional learning with academic instruction. It focuses on creating a safe, supportive learning environment. The goals of this environment is to build positive relationships and develop social-emotional competencies through practices such as [morning meetings](#), [positive teacher-student interactions](#), and [cooperative learning](#) (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). [Research](#) shows that the Responsive Classroom approach can improve students' academic performance, enhance social skills, and increase positive behavior.

Benefits of a Responsive Classroom:

- **Positive Student Behavior:** Responsive classroom practices reinforce constructive habits and improve social skills, facilitating better communication and interactions among students, which enhances their self-esteem and mental health.
- **Academic Growth:** Students in responsive classrooms show higher levels of academic success, engagement, and grades. Research also indicates significant improvements in math and reading skills, with lasting positive effects on students even as they progress to higher grades.
- **Fewer Behavioral Issues:** By supporting emotional skills such as labeling feelings, staying calm, and coping, responsive classrooms reduce negative behaviors and promote self-control and productive problem-solving during conflicts.



- **More Successful Learning Environment:** The approach builds resilience and provides effective classroom management, creating a safe and supportive learning environment that fosters focused and productive learning (Yu et al., 2018).
 - Researchers in [this study](#) found that responsive classroom practices significantly strengthen teacher-student relationships, with lasting positive effects even as students progress to higher grades. Students exposed to these practices showed higher levels of academic success, engagement, and improved grades.
 - Baroody et al. (2014) explored how Responsive Classroom (RC) training affected student-teacher relationships in 20 schools with 63 fifth-grade teachers and 387 students. Although RC training did not directly influence the quality of these relationships, it indirectly improved closeness by increasing teachers' use of RC practices. No effect was found on reducing conflictual relationships. The results indicate that RC practices can enhance positive student-teacher relationships when implemented effectively.

Summary

Review of relevant literature: Theoretical basis	Review of relevant literature: Support of identified research and practice	Empirical evidence on how it serves students and promotes systemic change
National School Climate Standards (NSCS) provides a research-based model to support and evaluate school climate initiatives. It focuses on developing social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills.	Rodriguez et al. (2009) examined student perceptions of school climate, finding that culturally responsive extracurricular activities enhanced student connectedness. Garret and Eishner (2019) reported higher English Language Arts scores in supportive learning environments.	Positive impact on students' perceptions of school climate and self-esteem. Enhanced connection between students and teachers through inclusive practices.
Responsive Classroom integrates social and emotional learning with academic instruction to create a safe, supportive learning environment	Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) demonstrated that the Responsive Classroom approach enhances academic performance, social skills, and positive behavior.	Strengthened teacher-student relationships and improved academic success. Reduced negative behaviors and increased resilience and social skills.



Equity Considerations

As we navigate the complexities of creating inclusive and supportive educational environments, it is important to expand our vision of different equity perspectives to support a better school climate and the development of healthy relationships in schools.

LGBTQ2SIA+ students often face unique forms of oppression in schools, including bullying, harassment, and discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can lead to significant psychological distress, increased absenteeism, and higher dropout rates. The stigma and negative stereotypes associated with being LGBTQ2SIA+ can also result in social isolation and a lack of peer support. Findings from the [Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\) 2021 National School Climate Survey](#) revealed that most LGBTQ2SIA+ secondary school students in Oregon did not feel safe in their schools. Additionally, many of these students in Oregon lacked access to crucial school support services.

Example from the Field

"Our team holds the mission true by supporting the building, transforming, and implementation of the systems and processes within our schools that promote the conditions for students to thrive as their authentic selves" ([Reynolds School District](#)).

For English learners who identify as LGBTQ2SIA+, the challenges can be even more pronounced due to the intersectionality of their identities (Calderón et al., 2011). These students not only experience the typical barriers associated with learning a new language and adapting to a different cultural environment but also contend with the added stressors of navigating their sexual orientation or gender identity within school settings (Kosciw et al., 2021). The compounded discrimination and bullying based on both their EL status and LGBTQ2SIA+ identity can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, social isolation, and academic difficulties. It's essential for schools to adopt inclusive practices that address the unique needs of LGBTQ2SIA+ ELs, such as providing language support services that are sensitive to their cultural and personal identities and creating a safe space where they can express themselves without fear of judgment or harassment (Kosciw et al., 2018).

To improve the academic success and socio-emotional well-being of LGBTQ2SIA+ students, the Oregon Department of Education has established the [LGBTQ2SIA+ Student Success Plan](#). Among other multiple resources, this plan recommends the following strategies to better support these students:

- Implement inclusive and supportive school policies, including comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, as well as policies supporting transgender and nonbinary students.
- Support Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).
- Offer professional development for school staff focused on issues affecting LGBTQ2SIA+ students.
- Enhance student access to LGBTQ2SIA+ inclusive curricular resources.

Considerations for Local Context: Strategy Selection

As we determine the best ways to assist school leaders and educators in implementing socio-emotional well-being and mental health literacy principles, it is crucial to consider the local context of each district or school. In this brief, "local context" refers to the unique community factors that can influence how educators apply strategies and frameworks to foster a positive school climate and healthy developmental relationships.



[Educators and school leaders](#) play a key role in shaping this positive climate. In particular, school leaders set the overall tone by establishing inclusivity goals and providing necessary resources, while educators influence the classroom environment through culturally responsive teaching and strong student relationships.

As we have discussed in the sections above, a positive school climate encourages healthy interactions and promotes the well-being of students, staff, families, and the community. The three domains of school climate include:

- Belonging and connection
- Safety and wellness
- Inclusive environment.

School and district administrators can use the following recommended questions to foster a positive school climate:

1. Which current practices are contributing positively to the school climate and how can these be improved?
1. What additional measures can be implemented to further advance our efforts in improving the school climate? Are there innovative strategies or practices we should consider?
2. Are there particular student populations or groups whose needs should be specifically addressed in our climate improvement strategies? How can we tailor our approach to support these groups effectively?
3. How can we ensure that all staff members are well-informed about both the positive aspects and the areas needing improvement in the school climate? What communication strategies can be used to keep staff engaged and aware?
4. What types of data regarding school climate are currently being collected, and how are these data utilized? Are there gaps in the data that need to be filled?
5. How can school climate data be integrated with other indicators of school success to provide a holistic view of school performance? What methods can be used to combine and analyze these data?

School districts may offer different resources like programs or other initiatives aimed at fostering a positive school climate (also known as school culture or environment) programs. Some examples to consider include: [Portland Public Schools](#), [Oregon City School District](#), and [West Linn- Wilsonville School District](#).

What Can Educators Do: Strategies for Success

Developing a positive school climate is crucial for effectively supporting English learners. To improve their success, consider the strategies outlined in [this article](#), which emphasize that a positive school environment addresses both the academic and non-academic needs of all students, including English learners. The article recommends the following considerations:



1. **Foster a Supportive Environment:** Ensure a positive school climate to boost English learners' engagement and performance.
2. **Set Inclusive Goals:** Develop goals to improve English learners' proficiency and participation, using assessment data to guide these targets.
3. **Engage Stakeholders:** Involve educators, parents, and the community in supporting English learners and addressing their needs collaboratively.
4. **Celebrate Diversity:** Recognize and appreciate the cultural backgrounds of English learners to create an inclusive atmosphere.
5. **Promote Collaboration:** Encourage teacher collaboration and provide professional development focused on effective practices for supporting English learners.

The following strategies are illustrative rather than definitive recommendations. Effective approaches should be tailored to the specific context of each school or district, considering existing programs and practices that support socio-emotional well-being and mental health literacy. The resources offered can guide educators in identifying and adapting strategies to fit the unique demographics and needs of their students and families.

Strategy 1: Morning Meetings

Primary audience: educators, school administrators, and policymakers looking to improve school climate positive relationships

Description: Morning meetings are structured 20-minute sessions held at the start of the school day, designed to strengthen the teacher-student connection and build essential social and emotional skills. Created by the Responsive Classroom framework, these meetings include greetings, engaged sharing, teamwork activities, and a morning message from the teacher (Tripp, 2022).

- **How to use it?**

Implement morning meetings by dedicating the first 20 minutes of the school day to the four key components:

- Greetings: Begin with welcoming interactions between the teacher and students.
- Engaged Sharing: Allow students to share personal experiences while practicing active listening and asking follow-up questions.
- Activities: Incorporate teamwork activities to enhance social and emotional skills.
- Morning Message: Provide a brief overview of the day's events and objectives through a message from the teacher.

- **How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?**

Morning meetings benefit both students and teachers by:

- Strengthening Connections and Relationship Skills: Enhancing communication, cooperation, and relationship-building skills among students and between students and teachers.
- Increasing Self-Confidence: Offering a safe environment for students to share personal stories and build trust.
- Promoting Social Awareness: Teaching and practicing empathy, perspective-taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect.
- Encouraging Positive Behavior: Fostering a positive school culture where every voice is valued, promoting mutual respect.



- **How does it support changes in the systems?**

This strategy supports systemic changes by embedding [socio emotional learning principles into the daily routine](#). It contributes to a positive school climate, reduces behavior incidents, and improves overall school culture. This consistency helps integrate SEL into the fabric of school life, reinforcing the importance of emotional and social competencies alongside academic learning (Douangvilay, 2020).

- **Known or potential cautions? What not to do?**

- Inconsistency: Avoid sporadic implementation. Consistency is crucial for effectiveness.
- Lack of Engagement: Ensure activities and sharing time are genuinely engaging and relevant to students.
- Overloading: Do not overwhelm students with too many activities or overly complex discussions. Keep the focus on meaningful, age-appropriate interactions.

Strategy 2: [Cooperative Learning](#)

Primary audience: educators, school administrators, and students

Description: This is an instructional method that engages students in small, diverse groups to achieve individual and shared goals through structured activities (De Luna-Vazquez & Estrada-Oliver, 2024). This strategy emphasizes positive interdependence, where students' success is linked to the success of their group members. Cooperative learning fosters [positive student-teacher relationships](#), collaboration, and mutual support among students.

- **How to use it?**

- Form Groups: Create small, diverse groups that include a mix of skill levels and backgrounds, ensuring each group has a balance of students, including ELs.
- Assign Roles: Designate specific roles within each group (e.g., recorder, timekeeper, facilitator) to promote active participation and accountability.
- Set Clear Objectives: Clearly define the academic and social goals for the group task, and explain the importance of collaboration and individual contribution.
- Monitor and Support: Observe group interactions to provide guidance and support, ensuring that all members, including ELs, are engaged and contributing.
- Evaluate and Reflect: Assess both the academic outcomes and group dynamics, and provide feedback to help students improve their collaborative skills.

- **How is it beneficial? Who benefits from it?**

It benefits students and the school community by:

- Enhancing Social Skills: Promotes communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork skills among students, which are crucial for building positive relationships.
- Boosting Self-Confidence: Helps students, including ELs, develop confidence through active participation and support from peers.
- Improving Academic Performance: Studies show that cooperative learning can enhance course completion rates and performance by encouraging deeper engagement with the material (Keeler, 2023).



- Fostering Inclusivity: Encourages cross-cultural interactions and mutual respect, creating a more inclusive school environment for all students.
- **How does it support changes in the systems?**

By fostering a collaborative culture where cooperation and mutual support become ingrained in the school environment (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). This approach not only creates a positive and inclusive atmosphere but also supports diverse learners, including English learners (ELs), by offering them valuable opportunities to practice language skills and interact with peers in a structured and supportive setting. Additionally, this strategy enhances student engagement and motivation by turning learning into a shared experience with clear goals and defined roles, which helps students stay motivated and connected to the material and each other (Casey & Goodyear, 2015).
- **Known or potential cautions? What not to do?**
 - Neglecting Group Dynamics: Avoid forming groups without considering students' existing relationships and dynamics, which can impact effectiveness.
 - Overlooking Individual Accountability: Ensure that each student, including ELs, is held accountable for their contributions to prevent reliance on more dominant group members.
 - Inadequate Role Assignment: Be mindful of assigning roles that match students' strengths and interests to prevent disengagement and ensure effective participation.

Implementation Considerations

Schools can foster school connectedness through individual actions by educators and administrators, rather than solely relying on [rules and zero-tolerance policies](#), which can create harsh environments. Educators play a crucial role in building [positive relationships with English learners](#) by making learning relevant to students' lives, creating a structured classroom with clear expectations, and encouraging cooperative learning (Schmader & Johns, 2003; Steele, 2011). Educators also break down social isolation by integrating students from diverse backgrounds and recognizing a range of student achievements, not just top performance (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Steele and Cohn-Vargas (2013) suggest the following strategies to strengthen relations in schools.

- Teaching that encourages understanding, student voice, responsibility, and a sense of belonging, along with cooperation in learning and classroom tasks.
- Utilizing diversity as a teaching asset by regularly incorporating culturally responsive materials, ideas, and activities, and maintaining high expectations for all students.
- Building classroom relationships through trusting and supportive interactions between the teacher and each student, as well as fostering positive peer relationships.
- Creating caring, organized, and purposeful environments where social skills are actively taught and practiced, ensuring students feel respected and connected in a safe and supportive classroom.



Local Context

On your own and with your team, consider the following factors to determine the successful implementation of the frameworks and strategies offered in this brief:

- **Geographical Factors:** How do the location and size of the district/school impact the practical aspects of plan implementation?
- **Learning Mode:** What considerations are needed based on the learning mode (in person/remote/hybrid/other) prevalent in the local context?
- **Duration:** How long is the plan designed to last, and what measures are in place for its continuous effectiveness?
- **Reliability:** Is the implementation plan reliable and realistic given the local context, and what factors contribute to its sustainability?

Implementation Plan and Process

The following questions can further enhance clarity and provide practical guidance for educators and school leaders as they navigate the implementation process and monitor progress effectively:

- **What is our capacity for implementation?**

The capacity for implementation involves a well-organized leadership team and a detailed plan with designated roles for overseeing execution. Leadership should provide consistent support and maintain clear [communication strategies](#) to address challenges (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2008). Educators and support staff engage in targeted training to build necessary skills, and collaboration with families and community organizations is integral to the process. Coordination across these groups ensures that the plan is executed effectively and that any issues are promptly addressed.

- **How are families involved in the implementation of the plan?**

Families are involved in the implementation through active participation and integration of their cultural backgrounds into the school environment. Schools provide effective communication by offering translation services and scheduling meetings at convenient times (Pickeral et al., 2009). Regular feedback from families is collected through surveys and meetings, allowing for adjustments based on their input. Partnerships with community organizations support [family engagement](#) and provide additional resources, strengthening the connection between home and school.

- **How will we know if the implementation is successful?**

Success can be assessed through multiple indicators. Feedback from [students, staff, and families](#) is gathered via surveys (or other means that are already in place) to evaluate perceptions of the school climate and strategy effectiveness. Academic performance is monitored, with improvements in grades and test scores serving as key metrics. Behavioral data is reviewed to identify reductions in disciplinary incidents and increases in positive behaviors. Levels of engagement in school activities from students and families provide further insight into the success of the implementation.

- **What resources do we need to implement the program, plan, or strategies?**

Resources required for implementation include comprehensive training and professional development for educators, as well as materials and supplies necessary for morning meetings, cooperative learning,



and other interventions. Technology platforms and tools are essential for effective communication with families and for collecting and analyzing data to track progress and outcomes. While funding may not always be readily available within school budgets, educators and school leaders can explore external funding opportunities. For instance, Oregon's Department of Education offers [grants and funding opportunities](#), and organizations like [Peter G. Peterson Foundation](#) may provide additional financial support. Additionally, fostering financial stewardship and involving [District Equity Committees](#) in the budgeting process can help prioritize resources based on student and community needs. Also consider the Oregon Department of Education's [Guideline](#) to spending funds responsibly.

- **Are accessibility supports in place?**

Accessibility supports ensuring an inclusive environment by providing language services such as translation and interpretation to bridge possible [communication barriers](#). Adaptive technologies are utilized to meet diverse learning needs and make materials accessible. Inclusive practices accommodate various learning styles and language needs. These measures create an equitable environment where every student has the opportunity to succeed.

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