

# Understanding and Cultivating a Positive School Climate

— A WHITE PAPER —



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AND FAMILY STUDIES  
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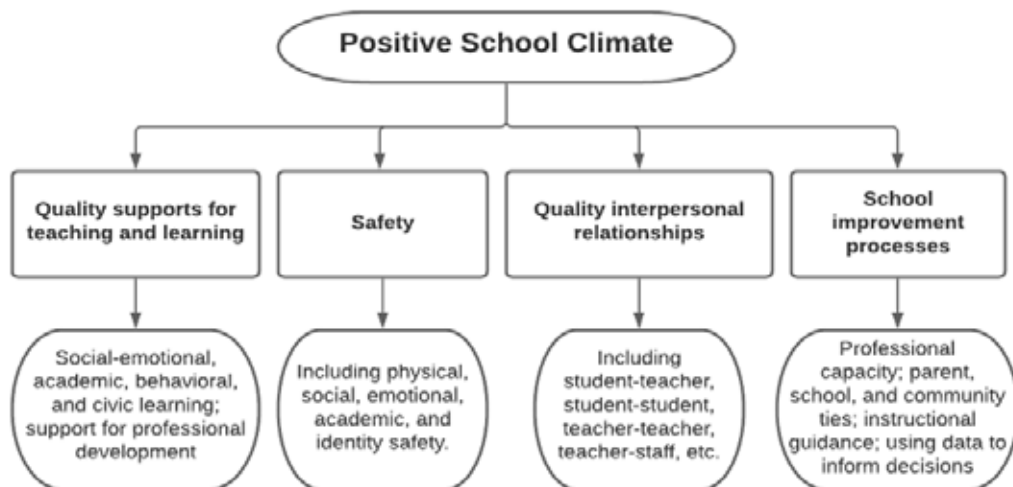
Decades of research emphasize the need for schools to prioritize more than just students’ academic development. As children in Colorado spend over 160 days per year (nearly 14,000 hours during K-12) in school, it is critical that systemic factors at the school, district, and state level provide adequate resources and opportunities for students to learn and grow intellectually, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally. This paper provides current and relevant information regarding the student outcomes of a positive school climate, including quality interpersonal relationships, supports for teaching and learning, safety, and school improvement processes. Additionally, this paper will outline methods to support school climate improvement processes within Colorado.

## Background

School climate is a broad and multidimensional perspective on the structural and systemic qualities of a school environment, including the academic, social, emotional, physical, and institutional qualities of a school (Schweig et al., 2019; Wang & Degol, 2016; National School Climate Council, 2007). Although definitions of school climate and its specific dimensions vary, there is a consensus that it is, in essence, the “character and quality of school life” (Cohen, 2017, p. 3; Cohen et al., 2009). Schools fostering a positive climate provide structure for students’ learning (e.g., rules, norms, and expectations) while ensuring all students feel welcome, safe, and supported (Wang & Degol, 2016). The Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2020) has further defined a positive school climate as “the work of a school community to create a quality experience for all students, staff, and families.” To promote a **positive school climate**, schools should encourage:

1. The cultivation of **safety**, including, social, emotional, physical, academic, and identity safety.
2. The encouragement and maintenance of **respectful, empathetic, and trusting relationships**.

Schools provide a central context for students to develop cognitively, physically, emotionally, and socially. The **Whole Child** approach, developed through extensive research, assists with implementing a positive climate by considering the school environment as an essential foundation for children’s learning, achievement, and development in all life domains, not just academic. Research on positive school climate demonstrates that creating and sustaining a positive school climate helps establish students’ sense of belonging and connection with their school, which simultaneously increases the likelihood of other positive student outcomes (Generation Schools Network [GSN], 2019; Mitchell et



**Figure 1.** Focal areas within a positive school climate to support the Whole Child.

Note: Dimensions adapted from Thapa et al., 2013.

al., 2016). Through the cultivation of a positive school climate, schools can construct a necessary foundation for a myriad of positive outcomes for students and the entire school community (Wang & Degol, 2016; Thapa et al., 2013).

Research has highlighted several essential focal areas within school climate, including the quality of supports for teaching and learning, safety (i.e., physical, social, emotional, academic, and identity safety), the quality of interpersonal relationships, and school improvement processes. The positive school climate approach thus focuses on prevention (i.e., Tier 1 and Universal supports) rather than intervention alone (i.e., Tier 3 supports), and emphasizes the needs of the Whole Child. Figure 1 provides examples of each of the school climate focal areas.

## School Climate: Student and Teacher Outcomes

### **Positive School Climate and Student Outcomes**

Various positive student outcomes demonstrate the importance and impact of a positive school climate. Positive school climate is associated with decreased bullying (Brown et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2012) and youth suicidal ideation (Holt et al., 2015), and is associated with increased student safety and engagement (Payne, et al., 2018; Vossekuil et al., 2004). Unfortunately, environments lacking safe and supportive qualities may increase student stress, fear, and trauma, all of which can impair learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). While children with unsupportive teachers tend to have behavior problems and low academic performance, research shows that close teacher-student relationships support students' academic performance, social well-being, and school engagement and completion (Baroody et al., 2014). A positive school climate can foster a sense of belonging, and create quality student-teacher relationships while decreasing the likelihood of problematic behaviors (O'Brennan & Bradshaw, 2013; Ramelow et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2016). Schools that maintain quality teachers, academic rigor, and clear expectations paired with a culture of kindness, friendliness, and warmth allow students to develop in all facets of life.

Note: The following section highlights and explores a few of the outcomes of a positive school climate in more depth. For a skimmable chart of the positive effects listed here, see Figure 2.

### **School Connectedness and Belonging**

Evidence confirms the importance of cultivating a positive school climate to foster **a sense of belonging**, which is a critical protective factor against adverse social and academic outcomes (GSN, 2019). The creation of an environment that is safe and welcoming for students of all backgrounds opens the space for interpersonal relationships to flourish, and through these positive and trusting connections to their peers and teachers, students may develop a sense of identification with their school (Mitchell et al., 2016; Reynolds et al., 2017; Lester & Cross, 2015). Students who feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, teachers, and peers are significantly more likely to experience other positive outcomes. Additional outcomes include increased academic

achievement (Niehaus et al., 2012; Reynolds et al., 2017), self-efficacy (Frazier et al., 2021), and resilience (Frazier et al., 2021). Students who feel a sense of belonging are also more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (Lester & Cross, 2015).

In addition to the heightened positive outcomes, students who feel a connection or sense of belonging to their school also experience lower rates of depression, anxiety, and stress (Lester & Cross, 2015). These students also demonstrate lower rates of hyperactivity and fewer instances of emotional conduct and issues with peers (Lester & Cross, 2015). Prioritizing efforts to create a positive school climate supports students in feeling like they have a safe space to proudly identify with and belong to. This sense of belonging, in turn, increases the likelihood that these students will experience a multitude of other positive outcomes.

### **Student Well-being**

Students' social and emotional well-being is improved through the school climate's relationship with school connectedness and belonging (Lester & Cross, 2015). According to Soutter and colleagues (2014), student well-being contains seven domains:

1. **Having:** having access to resources (e.g., materials, tools, opportunities)
2. **Being:** growing and developing in all life domains
3. **Relating:** developing positive relationships with others
4. **Feeling:** experiencing positive emotions, such as contentment and gratitude
5. **Thinking:** succeeding academically and utilizing positive decision-making skills
6. **Functioning:** optimally functioning and engaging in positive activities and behaviors
7. **Striving:** extending past their comfort zone by engaging in positive risk-taking to reach their potential.

Many (if not all) of these domains of student well-being can be directly connected to the aspects of school climate listed on **page 2**. For example, the "Having" domain relates to the institutional availability of physical resources such as computers, writing materials, and textbooks. The "Being", "Relating", and "Feeling" domains relate to the institution's availability of social and emotional supports such as mental health counselors, social workers, and evidence-based programs. The ability for students to function and strive for their best is managed through the opportunities, quality of supports for teaching and learning, and positive relationships with teachers. As such, positive school climate, belonging, and students' social and emotional well-being are inextricably linked. Research has shown that the characteristics of a positive school climate can enhance students' well-being, resilience, life satisfaction, ethnic identity, and moral identity (Aldridge et al., 2015; Lombardi et al., 2019).

When schools meet students' basic psychological needs for autonomy (individuality and independence), relatedness (a sense of belongingness), and competence (feelings of self-efficacy, ability to overcome challenges), students are more likely to experience satisfaction with life, heightened positive emotions, and meaning in life (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Demirbas-Celik, 2018). Therefore, a school providing structure, resources, opportunities for growth, a supportive and welcoming culture, and opportunities for relationship-building creates an ideal space for students to thrive. Well-being outcomes such as resilience and relatedness



act as strengths and resources for students to draw upon, allowing them to effectively engage in healthy behaviors and excel in school and life.

### **Academic Achievement and Engagement**

Forty years of research support the well-established relationship between positive school climate and academic achievement (Thapa et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2009; Reynolds et al., 2017; Daily et al., 2019). The literature on school climate has found that, compared to students who view their school climate as poor, students who perceive their school's environment as positive are significantly more likely to be engaged in school and extracurricular activities (Konold et al., 2018; Lombardi et al., 2019; Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018), attain higher grades (Maxwell et al., 2017; Daily et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2017), and graduate high school (Buckman et al., 2021).

Studies have established that each focal area of school climate (i.e., quality interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, safety) is uniquely able to predict academic achievement even when controlling for individual demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status (SES; Daily et al., 2019). In particular, research affirms that academic support, positive student-teacher relationships, and academic satisfaction are especially critical to target within the school's climate to best support students' academic success (Daily et al., 2019). Although student engagement and compliance tend to decrease between middle and high school, research points to school climate characteristics, including positive peer, teacher, and parental social support, as promising mechanisms to reduce this decline (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The promotion of social support and positive relationships for enhancing academic achievement and engagement is especially important for individuals of historically underrepresented backgrounds. Therefore, school climate is a critical target for reducing disparities for racial/ethnic minorities, students from a lower SES, and LGBTQIA+ students (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

### **College Transition**

In addition to predicting aspects of K-12 achievement, student perceptions of positive school climate also influence college outcomes (Knight & Duncheon, 2019). High schools, in particular, play an essential role in students' postsecondary success. Research has emphasized the importance of implementing college-related interventions and practices (e.g., course offerings and college counseling) to prepare students for higher education (Daun-Barnett & St. John, 2012; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). While these practices are important and can facilitate students' desire to pursue college, recent research also suggests that school climate, specifically environmental factors including perceived school safety and extracurricular opportunities, can play a role in postsecondary success. Knight and Duncheon (2019) found a greater likelihood of students enrolling and persisting in higher education if their schools offered college-oriented interventions and had a positive school climate. Furthermore, research shows that a positive school climate may moderate the effectiveness of college-oriented practices and implemented processes (Knight & Duncheon, 2019).

### **Prevention of Bullying, Violence, and Suicidal Ideation**

In 2019, as many as 35% of Colorado high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless, 16.1% of them reported being bullied on school property, and 11.1% of students reported not going to school because they felt unsafe either at, or on their way to and from school (HKCS, 2019). A positive school climate has been identified repeatedly as a main target for prevention and intervention with significant prosocial impacts on students (Perkins & Borden, 2003). Overall, research suggests that a positive school climate is a protective factor that directly relates to a decrease in substance use, violence, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Jones et al., 2020). Social-emotional interpersonal programs that are integrated into classroom and school curricula have been proven in research to successfully reduce youth violence, disruptive behaviors (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007), and bullying (Brown et al., 2011). There is a national need for **school-based prevention programs** that are **evidence-based** and promote growth in youth's interpersonal and social-emotional development (Espelage et al., 2015). Target areas for school-based social-emotional violence prevention approaches include violence, bullying, school crime, sexual harassment, hate-based language, and physical assault (Hamby & Grych, 2013; Nation et al., 2003).

Most importantly, bullying and **school climate strongly impact school violence and shootings**. School shootings have become more common, creating a sense of fear within staff, students, and parents. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Service teamed together to understand and prevent school shootings. Their analyses found several factors needed to develop a safe and connected school climate (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Two components are a **school's emotional environment** and **bullying prevention and intervention**. Improving the psychosocial aspects of a school's climate enhances the overall emotional climate, reducing instances of bullying. *Both the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service agree that the creation, development, and maintenance of positive school climate should be a priority for schools in the U.S.* (Vossekuil et al., 2004). Assisting schools with developing and implementing evidence-based programs focused on improving school climate, like the socio-emotional violence prevention programs, is vital for reducing the likelihood of school violence and shootings. Having a positive school climate where students and staff feel safe and connected ensures a secure educational environment for all (Vossekuil et al., 2004).

In addition to addressing bullying, it is imperative for academic administrators and systems to advocate for youth facing mental health issues by establishing or enhancing a positive school climate (Mariani et al., 2015). There are proven associations between suicide-related behaviors and bullying among youth, and unfortunately, outcomes from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey suggest that certain risk factors (i.e., substance misuse and abuse, illicit drug use, being in a fight/attacked or insulted) related to suicidal ideation are steadily increasing (CDC, 2013 & 2019; Hertz et al., 2016; Holt et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2015). Compared with data obtained in 2013, results from 2019 report that adolescent perceptions of hopelessness and suicidal ideation have increased more than 10%; in 2013, 24.1% of adolescents reported feeling hopeless or sad, compared to 35% in 2019. Additionally, in 2013, 14.3% of adolescents reported seriously considering suicide

compared with 17.1% in 2019 (CDC, 2010 & 2019: CDC, 2010; CDC, 2019). Conversely, reducing bullying and enhancing school climate has been associated with improved mental health and reduced suicidal ideation among youth (Holt et al., 2015).

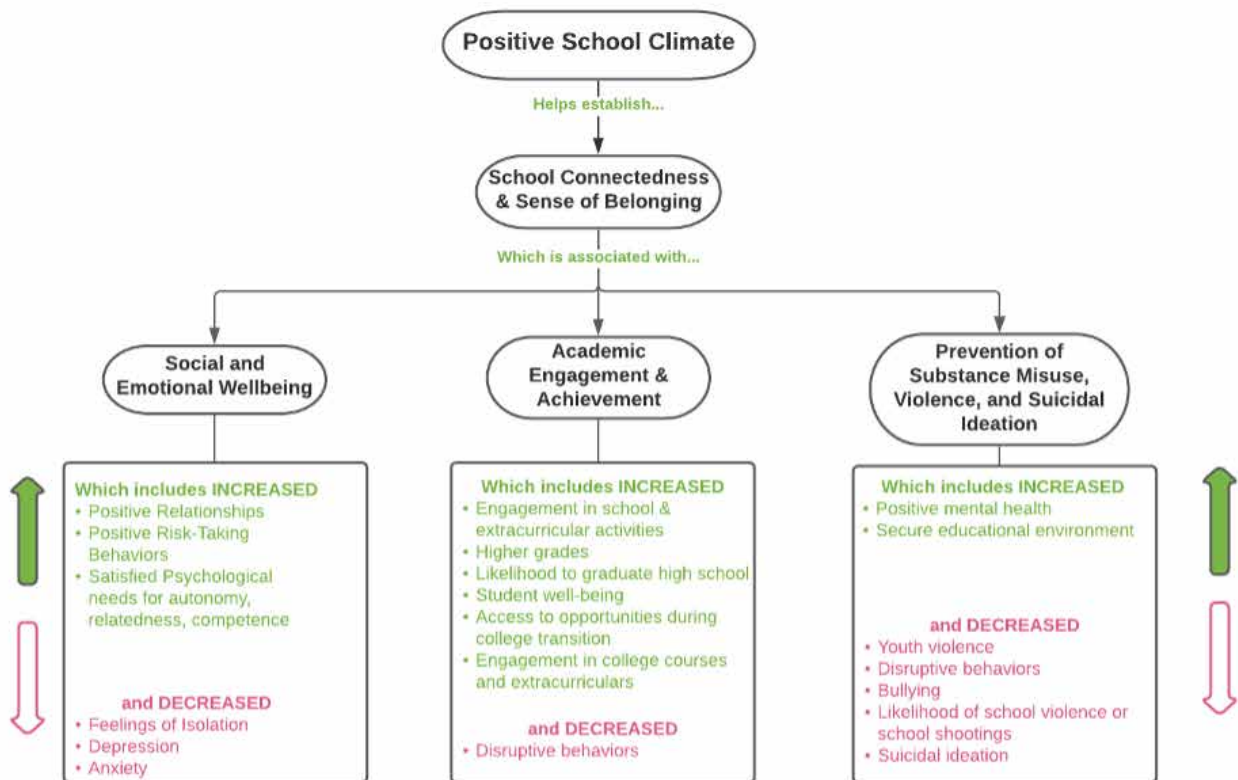
Furthermore, because there is an increase in youth who are openly exploring and expressing their sexuality and identity, schools need to focus specifically on the **prevention of gender-based bullying**; this explicitly includes bullying based on gender identity, sexual orientation, gender perceptions, etc. Research has found that schools implementing social-emotional violence prevention programs report significant decreases in name-calling and homophobic bullying towards their youth compared to schools not implementing social-emotional programs (Espelage et al., 2015).

### Prevention of Substance Misuse and Abuse

Positive school climate is a protective factor for student substance misuse and delinquent behavior (Battistich & Horn, 1997; Daily et al., 2020; McNeely et al., 2002; Stalker et al., 2018). Data obtained from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS), Colorado’s state-specific version of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that of early substance consumption, including binge drinking (16.5%), marijuana use (22.45%), and misuse of prescription opioids (7.4%), are continuing problems facing Colorado students (CDPHE, 2019; Colorado Substance Abuse Trend and Response Task Force, 2021; Jones et al., 2019). Comparative to national averages, among Colorado youth, alcohol is rated as the most frequently misused substance with 31% of respondents reporting currently consuming alcohol (CDPHE, 2019; Substance Abuse Trend and Response Task Force, 2019; CDC, 2019).

Cannabis use is the next most frequently used substance with 20.6% of Colorado high school students and 5.2% of middle school students reporting use in 2019 (CDPHE, 2019). In addition, the Colorado Substance Abuse Trend and Response Task Force (2021) found that marijuana was the most common drug violation involved in school suspensions and expulsions. In a longitudinal study conducted by Jones et al. (2020), 36.8% of high school students reported a lifetime prevalence of marijuana use, followed by 14.3% reporting a lifetime misuse of prescription opioids. Students who reported improper use of opioids also commonly report the abuse of other substances, including alcohol and marijuana, highlighting the need to focus on protective factors that prevent early use of substances and abuse. Notably, there are direct associations between youth substance abuse and academic underachievement and increased acts of violence, mental health problems, and delinquency (Jones et al., 2020). Youth who identify as LGBTIA+ demonstrate increased risk factors regarding attitudes towards substance use (Colorado Substance Abuse Trend and Response Task Force, 2021). Furthermore, suicide and substance abuse are risk factors that co-occur with suicidal ideation among both bullying victims and perpetrators (Borowsky, et al., 2013).

A positive school climate promotes student-teacher connectedness and student mental health and overall wellbeing, helping to prevent student substance misuse (Daily et al., 2020; Faggiano et al., 2014; Stalker et al., 2018). Specifically, school based SEL programs combining an array of social competency skills through models, like MTSS, allow for social competency promotion that positively influences behaviors towards lack of substance use (Daily et al., 2020; Stalker et al., 2018). For example, Stalker et al.



\*Note: This list is in summation of the section above and is not exhaustive. Factors listed may also influence each other and school climate.

Figure 2. Section Summary: Enhanced Protective Factors and Associated Outcomes

(2018) notes the impact of the Positive Action program in improving school climate by decreasing bullying and violence, which in turn promoted reductions in alcohol use, depression, aggression, and anxiety. Their findings provide evidence for the mediating impact of school climate on student outcomes.

## School Climate and Teacher Satisfaction and Retention

In addition to the many positive outcomes for students, positive school climate also enhances teacher well-being and retention. Research demonstrates that positive school climate is associated with increased teacher commitment to work (Singh & Billingsley, 1998), job satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2009), sense of personal accomplishment, and perceived ability to positively affect students (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Guo & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2011; Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2002). Positive school climate is also associated with reductions in teachers' emotional exhaustion and burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).

National estimates indicate that 46% to 60% of teachers leave the profession before their fifth year. However, promoting a positive school climate is associated with increased teacher retention (Boyd et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2016). Ingersoll (2001) found that many of the primary reasons for teacher attrition were related to school climate, including inadequate support from administrators, limited faculty input, and student discipline problems (Cohen et al., 2009). However, in schools with positive climate, teachers had a sense of agency and felt they had input in the decision-making process. Teachers also experienced positive relationships and collaborations with their colleagues and students, and a sense of community within the school (Cohen et al., 2009; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2016).

## Frameworks and Models to Support School Climate

There are various evidence-based frameworks, models, and programs that can support the cultivation of a positive school climate in different ways. The following section describes select models that districts in Colorado are presently using to support positive school climate.

### FRAMEWORK 1

#### **Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)**

In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum (ASCD) collaboratively released the most recent model of the Coordinated School Health (CSH) approach, the "**Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child**" (WSCC) model. The purpose of this model is to provide a holistic perspective from students, schools, and communities to "improve the uptake of CSH principles" and "directly address the relationship between education and health" (Lewallen et al., 2015). This model additionally includes the domains of community involvement and family engagement.

There are **ten domains of the WSCC model** (ASCD & CDC, 2014; See Image 1, below):

1. Health education;
2. Nutrition environment and services;
3. Employee wellness;
4. Social and emotional school climate;
5. Health services;
6. Counseling and psychological services;
7. Community involvement;
8. Family engagement;
9. Physical education and physical activity; and
10. Physical environment

The most significant and essential CSH shift presented in the



**Image 1.** The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model

recent WSCC model is placing the child at the center of these domains. This **Whole Child focus** supports comprehensive child and adolescent development while emphasizing the contextual implications in which school communities operate.

The WSCC model is designed as a framework to help school communities in considering policies, processes, and practices across these ten domains, to emphasize the interrelatedness of health and learning (ASCD & CDC, 2014). WSCC uses a socio-ecological theoretical framework to highlight the interconnected and collaborative systems approach, supporting healthy development (ASCD & CDC, 2014; Lewallen et al., 2015).

The WSCC model posits that children's methods of learning are impacted by various factors, including instructional, environmental, and relational influences; as well as by their individual cognitive, social, and emotional development (Fischer & Bidell, 2006). Because each child has a unique home and community environment and developmental trajectory, it is important for schools to adapt their structure to meet students' individual needs, including promotion of healthy development, secure relationships, and services focused on the Whole Child (Dar-



ling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Adopting a socio-ecological approach that considers the Whole Child may decrease disparities in educational environments by addressing the quality of the child’s surrounding support and matching support levels to meet each child’s individual needs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Furthermore, the WSCC model helps educators understand how to build competence, motivation, and confidence in students in addition to their academic goals. In fact, educators play an essential role in the WSCC model, as they set the tone within the classroom environment and beyond. (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). For the WSCC model to be successful, school administrators must provide opportunities for educators and staff to understand how to redesign school climate and how to engage in practices that support a positive school climate and the Whole Child’s development (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). When implemented successfully, this model has the power to improve both student and educator outcomes.

The WSCC model promotes positive peer-educator relationships and an overall positive environment, the WSCC model assists in creating a positive, supportive environment that provides students with the opportunity to immerse themselves fully and excel in their education (Thapa et al., 2013, Cohen et al., 2009; Ramelow et al., 2015) through the provision of a variety of high-quality supports for both teachers and students. Additionally, the WSCC model establishes the importance of a physically, socially, and emotionally safe environment for individuals of all identities (Thapa et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2009; Ramelow et al., 2015).

## FRAMEWORK 2

### *The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)*

While similar in many ways, school climate and social and emotional learning (SEL) are described as two different “prosocial camps” (Cohen, 2017). SEL is a tool used to promote a positive school climate through its focus on the development and well-being of core competencies at both the individual and systemic levels, making it an excellent complementary approach to supporting the well-being and development of students. Integrating SEL supports into schools can enhance and sustain a positive school climate by building emotional and social competence within the school community (Durlak et al., 2011).

CASEL defines SEL as, the “process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2020; See Image 2). A growing cultural awareness of inequities in education have further led to Transformative SEL programming, which seeks to empower schools and students with the knowledge and skills necessary to critically examine and act upon root causes of inequalities (Jagers et al., 2019). This addition to the SEL program is critical as more educators understand the systemic inequities that infiltrate schools and seek policies, action plans, and resources to help reduce these inequities.



Image 2. CASEL Framework

When schools (1) integrate progressive SEL skills curriculum into their classrooms, (2) use interactive methods to teach skills, (3) focus on skill development regularly, and (4) explicitly outline learning goals, students experience a multitude of positive outcomes (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). Research has established that the implementation of SEL programs can enhance students’ capacity for academic achievement, reduce problem behaviors, supplement students’ social and emotional competencies and improve other positive outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Jenson & Bender, 2014). Additionally, research shows that teachers who are comfortable implementing SEL are substantially less likely to experience stress related to student behavior and discipline, resulting in elevated teaching efficacy and job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2012).

Teachers’ and students’ social and emotional skills can impact their ability to form relationships, engage in prosocial behaviors, ask for help, and share safety concerns (Durlak et al., 2011). Thus, implementing SEL in schools can improve teachers’ and students’ capacity to build a positive school climate and create a broad mindset to support positive relationships across the school community.

## FRAMEWORK 3

### *Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS)*

In addition to supplying integrated supports for social and emotional health, it is crucial to establish school environments that are predictable, consistent, positive, safe, and equitable. To create this type of environment, schools can benefit from utilizing the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) framework. The PBIS framework thus utilizes evidence-based positive reinforcement and restorative practices rather than the punitive disciplinary practices that have historically led to disparities and poor outcomes for students (CDE, 2020).

Colorado has defined eight guiding principles for PBIS, namely:

1. Administrative Leadership
2. Team Implementation
3. Define Concrete Expectations
4. Teach Behavior Expectations
5. Acknowledge and Reward Positive Behavior
6. Monitor and Correct Behavior
7. Use Data for Decision Making
8. Family and Community Partnerships



Image 4. CO-MTSS

supports. For example, CO-MTSS’s encouragement of ongoing universal screening and progress monitoring allows schools to make data-driven decisions on the allocation of resources to improve aspects of the school (CDE, 2016). This organized process is foundational to creating and sustaining systemic school climate supports over time.

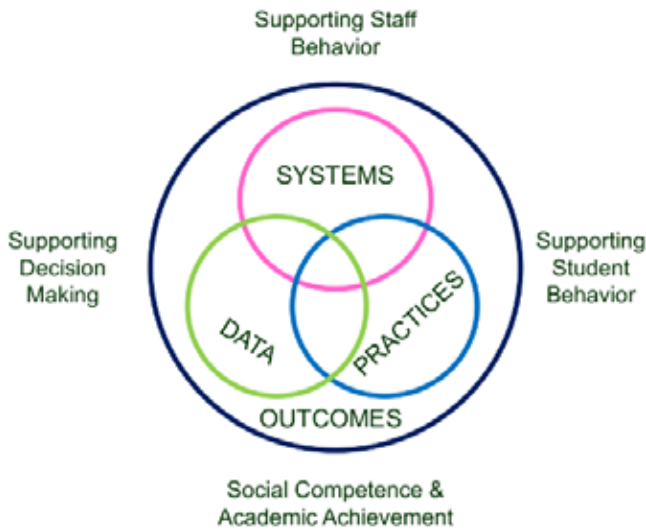


Image 3. PBIS Framework

#### FRAMEWORK 4

##### Colorado Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

MTSS is a team-driven, prevention-based framework that utilizes a layered, continuous sequence of evidence-based practices throughout all levels of the education system (i.e., classroom, school, district, region, and state). Combining data-driven problem solving and utilizing evidence-based practices and partnerships formed with families, schools, and communities, ensures improved outcomes for every student (CDE, 2016; See Image 4). This tiered system of supports utilizes progressing intensities of supports to amplify positive outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011). There are 3 tiers of supports:

1. **Universal:** supports that are integrated throughout the school, for all students (the Green section of Image 3)
2. **Targeted:** group-based basic supports given to students who the school has identified as struggling (the Yellow section of Image 3)
3. **Intensive:** individualized supports given to a select few students who need it most (the Red section of Image 3)

**The CO-MTSS framework considers the school climate approach as a Universal Strategy**, as it seeks to support the well-being of all school community members (Daily et al., 2020). As such, this approach to student well-being is relevant to all members of the school community. Whereas a general school climate approach primarily uses data to recommend ‘what’ community members need within their environment, CO-MTSS supplies the ‘how.’ More specifically, CO-MTSS provides an implementation framework to organize roles and execute processes to establish that environment via an evidence-based continuum of

## Cost-Benefit Analyses of Prevention Programming

Despite common beliefs that implementing preventative programming may be cost-prohibitive, **current research displays significant cost-benefits** relating to such programming for students, staff, and communities (Belfield et al., 2015; Washing State Institute of Public Policy [WSIPP], 2019). Cost-benefit analyses (CBAs) are the most current measure for understanding the fiscal impact of community and educational programming through assessing the weakness and strengths of the various outcomes associated with a specific program. These evaluations assist organizations to determine the best method for maximizing financial benefits while preserving savings (Belfield et al., 2015; WSIPP, 2019). For academic institutions, CBAs typically calculate the economic impact of educational attainment and student test scores. Within the past decade, however, there has been a push to design CBA’s that assess the intangible outcomes associated with SEL (i.e., aggression, self-concept, emotional management, antisocial behavior, etc.). Organizations like the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education Teachers College, Columbia University (CBCSE; Belfield et al., 2015), and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP, 2019) are at the forefront of creating methods for analyzing the value and costs of implementing SEL programs in schools. Their analyses utilize formal economic evaluations to examine measurable outcomes; determine methods for assigning monetary values to effects which typically have no designated value (i.e., shadow pricing for decreased aggression and increased prosocial skills); and consider potential benefits and costs to taxpayers, students, teachers, staff, and communities.

In 2015, Belfield et al. reviewed current evidence on the economic value of six standard SEL programs, considering costs and benefits during the intervention and short-term (youth) and long-term (adult) outcomes post-intervention. The CBCSE cost estimates account for personnel, materials/equipment, facilities,

and shadow pricing (as discussed above). Overall, their findings combined across all six interventions revealed **measurable benefits that far exceed the costs, often by substantial amounts.** For every dollar invested in SEL intervention, there was, on average, an eleven-dollar return on investment (11:1).

Research shows that such programs reduce aggression, hostile attitudes, and depression with teachers reporting improved attention skills, and socially competent behavior (Belfield et al., 2015). Notably, such outcomes may differ depending on the resources available, the direct measurability of the associated benefits, and the overarching district’s goals. **District values are essential** in determining what benefits outweigh the costs to reduced time in other academic activities, adjustments to teaching schedules, and continued training. Despite these caveats, SEL programs show a **positive financial impact for schools, students, taxpayers, and society.** Positive economic outcomes may include higher tax revenues and lower costs for public health services, public assistance, and criminal justice. Furthermore, when utilizing statistical outcomes from various SEL intervention studies (see p. 12) and results from the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey, the CBCSE calculates an average increase of \$23,000-\$46,000 (4-15%) in lifetime earnings per 100 students because of implementing SEL programs in 3rd grade classrooms. Assuming such student SE outcomes remain stable over time, these figures indicate a substantial long-term value for the labor market and students (Belfield et al., 2015). While this section does not go into depth about the extensive economic benefits of such programs, a table can be seen below summarizing the main financial outcomes per 100 students for five of the most utilized SE interventions in the United States.

For more information on CBCSE’s Benefit-Cost Analysis, visit: [The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning](#);

For more information on WSIPP’s Benefit-Cost Summary, visit: [Washington State Institute for Public Policy](#)

# Current School Climate Policy

Approaches that enhance school climate produce positive outcomes are cost effective and improve the overall ability for schools to support the **Whole School** community. However, if school and district leaders and educators are not aware of, buy into, and/or do not have adequate resources to start and/or maintain their approach, a supportive environment can be incredibly challenging to implement.

Policy drives the evidence-based programs and resources that schools, districts, and states can utilize. Although a positive school climate is integral to supporting safe, happy, and productive students, schools can only do as much as the policies, procedures, and resources that govern them allow. A lack of adequate resources or systemic support for school climate efforts makes it incredibly challenging to implement the desired supportive environment, whereas having access to key supports allows schools to sustain and maintain their efforts. For example, the U.S. Department of Education developed the Safe and Supportive Schools Project to encourage the use of school climate assessments and evaluation statewide and to monitor what is working (Thapa et al., 2013). Supports such as these provide opportunities for schools to both gather and broadly understand how their work is influencing school climate, which allows room for schools to adjust or maintain their trajectory of resources and time effectively. Administrators and elected officials thus play a pivotal role in disseminating information about evidence-based prevention programs to the general public, in addition to providing implementation supports (Jenson & Bender, 2014).

Colorado is currently experiencing shifts in policy towards prevention efforts for opioid abuse, which sets an opportune context to advance prevention efforts in schools. Earlier in the year of 2021, Governor Polis signed House Bill 21-1276, which included the creation and funding of a collaborative between of the

## BENEFIT-COST ANALYSIS SUMMARY FOR FIVE COMMON SEL PROGRAMS

Intervention	Description	Grades & Student Groups	Costs per 100 Students	Benefits per 100 Students	Net Present Value
<b>4Rs</b>	Learning & literacy program to combat aggression/violence	K-5 Disadvantaged	\$68,000	\$832,000	\$764,000
<b>Positive Action</b>	School curriculum/activities to promote positive thinking, actions, & self-concept	3-8 All	\$51,000	\$258,000	\$207,000
<b>Life Skills Training</b>	Classroom intervention to reduce substance abuse/violence	6-12 At-risk students	\$13,000	\$45,000	\$32,000
<b>Second Step</b>	Social skills curriculum to improve problem-solving/emotional management	PK-10 Disadvantaged	\$44,000	\$432,000	\$388,000
<b>Responsive Classroom</b>	Improve teacher efficacy to influence SE skills & school community	3-5 All	\$90,000	\$892,000	\$802,000

Note: Costs exclude instructional time as this varies from district to district. Table adapted according to baseline estimates from The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning by Columbia University’s Center for Benefit Cost-Studies in Education Teachers College. For more information on this CBA, see: (The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning)

office of behavioral health in the department of human services with higher education institutions, nonprofit agencies, and state agencies. This collaborative will seek to establish and bolster prevention systems, policies, and procedures in institutions across Colorado; this includes the implementation of effective primary prevention programs in Colorado communities, and funding to increase public awareness of the cost-effectiveness of prevention efforts. The creation of these measures may increase Colorado communities' readiness for additional policies and resources to successfully implement Tier 1 (Universal) programs to support School Climate.

## IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE

As described above, there are many benefits for students, staff, and communities associated with improving school climate. Understanding how and where to start, where to allocate the appropriate resources, and how to plan a sustainable program with both school and community buy-in for the long term can be challenging. To address this challenge, the Colorado Department of Education and Colorado State University's Prevention Research Center collaboratively conducted an extensive literature review in 2020 to understand the best practices and approaches to effectively improve school climate factors. The product of this literature review was the [School Climate Improvement Strategies](#) document (Duey et al., 2020). Below, we briefly discuss the nine school climate improvement strategies found from this literature review and provide some additional resources schools can reference to support making school climate improvements.

### 1. Cultivating a Supportive Environment

Create a welcoming school environment that is positive, consistent, and predictable, with explicit expectations, and where all students, staff, families, and community partners are active participants in improving outcomes.

- Engage students, staff, and families in important decision-making processes
- Identify relevant community resources and develop partnerships to serve students' needs better
- Offer opportunities for the school community to provide feedback on programs, systems, and policies
- Create consistent and predictable environments where expectations are explicit so that the whole school community knows how to be successful (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports)

Along with staff culture, structuring support networks is of benefit to students and families. A support network can be created by identifying community resources and developing partnerships to serve student and family needs. Family School and Community Partnering (FSCP) is defined as: Families, early childhood programs, schools, and communities actively partnering to develop, implement, and evaluate effective and equitable practices to improve educational outcomes for children and youth ([https://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/p-12\\_fscp\\_framework](https://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/p-12_fscp_framework)). The FSCP Framework is aligned with the school climate improvement strategies noted in this section and focus on four elements:

1. Create an Inclusive Culture
2. Build Trusting Relationships
3. Design Capacity Building Opportunities
4. Dedicate Necessary Resources

Additionally, school-community partnerships are an important consideration as they can often provide additional supports to students and families to improve outcomes. Well-matched community members can help schools personalize students' school experience by co-designing the learning environment to best support student wellbeing, in addition to providing additional perspectives to rethink staffing models and other organizational structures within the school. ([http://www.coloradoinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CEI\\_CommunityPartnershipToolkit.pdf](http://www.coloradoinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CEI_CommunityPartnershipToolkit.pdf)).

Along with staff culture, structuring support networks is of benefit to students. A support network can be created by identifying community resources and developing partnerships to serve students' needs. Community members include any school staff members involved in the academic performance of students. Training staff and students on reporting safety concerns and having a system for follow-up can build onto the support needed to meet mental and behavioral needs. Teachers who have close relationships can create an environment in which the students are cared for, advocate for themselves, pursue academic success, and have their needs/interests/strengths recognized (Baroody et al., 2014).

### 2. Supporting All Aspects of Safety

School safety is defined as schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and substance use. Safe schools promote the protection from violence, exposure to weapons and threats, theft bullying, and the sale of or use of illegal substances on school grounds. – National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

CDE expands on the definition above to specifically draw attention to different types of safety schools need to consider in creating a safe and supportive learning environment:

- **Physical Safety:** the protection from violence, theft, and exposure to weapons and threats, and substance use in order to establish a secure learning environment.
- **Social and Emotional Safety:** An experience in which one feels safe to express emotions, is free from harassment and bullying, and whose voice is valued and respected.
- **Identity Safety:** is created when students (and all school stakeholders) are made to feel that their social identity is an asset rather than a barrier to success and where schools are intentional in refuting negative stereotypes, countering stereotype threat, and ensuring that all backgrounds are welcomed, supported, and valued. For more information, please visit: <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/fostering-identity-safety-in-classroom-shane-safir>.
- **Academic Safety:** refers to the feelings of security and confidence to take risks academically knowing that failure is part of the learning process. Academic safety allows students to feel challenged and excited to try something new.

It is recommended that schools foster an environment that supports all aspects of safety, including physical, social – emotional, identity, and academic security. Prioritize practices to prevent and address harassment and bullying.



- Ensure students are physically safe, feel safe to express emotions, express their unique identities, and are encouraged to take academic risks to further their learning.
- Train staff and students on an anonymous reporting system for all types of safety concerns (e.g., Safe2Tell) and have a process for following up
- Implement clear school bullying and harassment policies and recognize and celebrate students when they are engaging in successful behaviors

All aspects of safety are linked to improved student outcomes.

According to the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, students who feel emotionally and physically safe are more likely to attend courses and academically perform. Meanwhile, students who experience physical or emotional harassment or are involved with the sale and/or use of illicit substances are less likely to attend classes and more likely to fail their courses or drop out of school altogether. (<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/safety>). As discussed in the Student Outcomes section, a positive climate in which everyone feels safe, valued, and respected can help increase each student's sense of belonging in school. When all students feel like they belong, they are more engaged, more motivated, and healthier—and they achieve more (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/social-emotional-learning.pdf>).

To cultivate an environment that ensures student safety, access to mental health supports and resources is critical. Mental health supports within the school can help build and maintain structures to support positive relationships, which can then lead to behavioral improvements, and academic success—all of which contribute to overall school safety. ([https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/Rethinking\\_School\\_Safety\\_Key\\_Message.pdf](https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/Rethinking_School_Safety_Key_Message.pdf)).

### 3. Fostering Positive Relationships

Build positive, respectful, and trusting relationships between all school stakeholders. Ensure students feel safe and supported by adults in the building through meaningful engagement around their life experiences and interests.

- Ensure every student has a meaningful connection to at least one trusted adult in school that is not dependent on academic performance
- Intentionally create opportunities for administrators to engage with students outside of school discipline measures

Schools can provide deliberate time and space for student-staff, student-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-administrator connections to foster a positive school climate and ensure each student has a positive relationship with at least one adult in their academic environment (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014). This could also include the creation of opportunities for administrators to intentionally engage with students outside of school discipline measures or for teachers and administrators to celebrate successes together (Baroody et al., 2014).

The Search Institute has created the Developmental Relationships Framework which focuses on five elements that are intended to be actionable for anyone working with young people and can make relationships powerful in young people's lives.

These are: 1) Express Care, 2) Challenge Growth, 3) Provide Support, 4) Share Power, and 5) Expand Possibilities (<https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework>).

### 4. Utilizing a Whole Child Approach

Attend to the Whole Child's needs by shifting from a narrow focus on academic achievement to meeting the individual needs and interests of the student. CDE defines a Whole Child Approach as: "the policies, practices, and relationships that focus on the comprehensive and interconnected needs of students that ensure that each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

- Create a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that collectively address the physical, mental, social, emotional, and academic needs of all students
- Develop and implement inclusionary discipline policies that reinforce and shape positive behaviors

"A whole child approach to education is premised on the fact that children's learning depends on the combination of instructional, relational, and environmental factors the child experiences, along with the cognitive, social, and emotional processes that influence one another as they shape the child's growth and development" (Fischer & Bidell, 2006) and relies on 5 tenets:

1. Each student enters school **healthy** and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
2. Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally **safe** for students and adults.
3. Each student is actively **engaged** in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
4. Each student has access to personalized learning and is **supported** by qualified, caring adults.
5. Each student is **challenged** academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment. (<http://files.ascd.org/pdfs/programs/WholeChildNetwork/2020-whole-child-network-learning-compact-renewed.pdf>)

### 5. Implementing Data-Driven Decision-Making

Assess and analyze perceptions of school climate with students, staff, and families. Utilize academic and non-academic data to drive decisions and adopt a team-based approach in examining multiple data sources.

- Administer climate surveys to students, staff, and families and review the data with a multi-disciplinary school team
- Use an action planning process and a multi-disciplinary team to determine strategies to address data-identified needs

### 6. Applying an Equity Lens

Consider equity in all decision-making by examining disparities in sub-group data and intentionally designing programs and policies for those at the margins. Ensure culturally and linguistically responsive education practices and regularly engage in discussions on bias.

- Ensure your school’s multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) addresses the needs of your most vulnerable or underserved students through culturally and linguistically responsive practices and an intentional dismantling of bias and discrimination
- Look for disparities in school climate data according to race, gender, SES, sexual orientation, etc. and develop plans to address these disparities

To support students’ needs, a district must invest in staff and faculty professional development, data-driven decision making, and equity education. Such resources will allow for staff and faculty to address their own social and emotional needs connected to their work, create a space for a team-based approach to decision-making, and promote an equity lens when addressing biases (Rivers et al., 2013; Rowe & Trickett, 2017). Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Education (CLRE) is an approach to education that “calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings by ensuring that learners have the confidence, competence, and interpersonal skills to master academic content, the ability to apply knowledge and new skills, and the self-motivation that will enable them to be successful in postsecondary education, the world of work, and life” ([https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AESP-CLRE-Recommendations.pdf?\\_ga=2.22477947.1596544927.1596061475-511349086.1588708031](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AESP-CLRE-Recommendations.pdf?_ga=2.22477947.1596544927.1596061475-511349086.1588708031)).

The collection of school climate data is vital, as it allows schools to better understand and act upon disparities—especially when disaggregating the data by race, sex, gender identity, SES, sexual orientation, etc. Understanding which areas of the school climate need the most improvement allows the schools to delegate resources effectively within their action plans to best address problem areas. As such, collecting and reviewing school climate data should occur using an equity lens to promote an environment that is inclusive, safe, and engaging for all students (Rowe & Trickett, 2017).

## 7. Focusing on Prevention

Utilize prevention science in your school’s universal supports to meet students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs. Integrate these supports throughout the school day and assess implementation.

- Build staff’s understanding of the importance of prevention as part of the universal/Tier 1 support
- Implement universal or Tier 1 programs to meet the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of students
- Integrate social-emotional learning school-wide in policies, student supports, everyday learning, and school structure
- Assess existing prevention strategies to ensure they are relevant and consistent with current best practice recommendations

Prevention Science focuses on the development of evidence-based strategies that reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. Prevention Science is focused on avoiding negative health and social outcomes (e.g., addiction, academic failure, violence, mental illness) and strengthening conditions that enable individuals, families, and communities to

thrive through the promotion of health equity and reduction of disparities. – National Prevention Science Coalition (<https://www.npscoalition.org>)

Prevention-focused strategies in schools often occur at the Universal tier (tier 1) in a Multi-Tiered System of Support and may include the following:

- **Social Emotional Learning (SEL):** is the process through which “young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions”. –CASEL <https://casel.org/what-is-sel>.
- **Trauma Responsive Schools:** are schools in which the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. Those adults include administrators, teachers, staff, and parents. In addition, students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The goal is to not only provide tools to cope with extreme situations but to create an underlying culture of respect and support. – [Trauma Aware Schools.Org](https://www.traumaware.org/)
- **Restorative Practices:** are a whole-school, relational approach to addressing student behavior that fosters belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and meaningful accountability over punishment. Its practices replace fear, uncertainty, and punishment as motivators with belonging, connectedness and the willingness to change because people matter to each other. – [The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue](https://www.instituteforrestorativejustice.com/)
- **School Physical Health Services:** are the health policies and practices in place at a school that provide students with the opportunities to improve dietary and physical activity behaviors and manage and prevent chronic health conditions (asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, food allergies, and poor oral health. – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## 8. Utilizing a Systems Approach

Ensure that a commitment to a positive school climate is evident in your mission and vision, strategic plans, communications, and accountability measures to ensure integration and alignment.

- Use existing multi-disciplinary school teams (e.g., MTSS, PBIS) to participate in a strategic planning process that updates school visions, policies, and communications to support a positive school climate
- Integrate school climate measures and strategies into Unified Improvement Plans and continuously monitor progress
- Ensure integration and alignment of initiative into a layered continuum that matches supports to student needs

A positive school climate is dependent on numerous inter-related factors and is therefore, dependent on the larger system to be effective. There is now a significant move towards coordinated, systematic, schoolwide and districtwide programming that is ecological, integrates school climate and SEL approaches, and prioritizes the engagement of the larger school community

(<https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/School-Climate-and-Social-and-Emotional-Learning-Integrative-Approach-January-2018.pdf>)

Using data to review your school improvement plan (known in Colorado as the Unified Improvement Plan) and engage the whole community in updating the school's mission and vision so that goals related to school climate are at the forefront of every decision the school makes ([https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/UPDATED-FINAL-Aspen\\_Integrating-Report\\_4\\_Single.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/UPDATED-FINAL-Aspen_Integrating-Report_4_Single.pdf)). The monitoring and evaluation of school improvement efforts has traditionally focused on test scores as a primary outcome measure however, there are numerous forms of data that can be used in Unified Improvement Plans (UIPs) including school climate, SEL and family partnership data (<http://www.cde.state.co.us/uip/using-non-assessment-data-09-09-2020>).

### 9. Prioritizing Staff Professional Development

Develop the mindsets and skillsets of all staff through quality professional development and coaching on the factors that most contribute to a positive school climate.

- Train educators to increase their mindset and abilities to support and address the social and emotional needs of students and themselves
- Ensure coaching supports and ongoing technical assistance to avoid “one-and-done” training by providing opportunities to follow-up, apply what was learned, and practice skills.
- Expand the ability of educators to support and address the social and emotional needs of students and themselves
- Provide opportunities for educators to learn about and implement social-emotional skills with their colleagues and integrate social and emotional learning into staff culture.
- Avoid “one-and-done” trainings by offering opportunities to follow-up, apply what was learned, and continuously practice skills (Duey et al., 2020; Low & Van Ryzin, 2014).
- For professional development related to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), school climate and mental health, please visit the MTSS Online Academy – <https://sitesed.cde.state.co.us/course/view.php?id=225&section=1>.

### ESTABLISHING BUY-IN AND READINESS FOR CHANGE

One of the first actions necessary to create joint or collaborative policies, processes, and practices to support the Whole Child is to establish a school community that understands the connection between learning and health (ASCD & CDC, 2014). A review of the implementation literature discusses the mechanisms, practices, and strategies that facilitate the shift from individualized interventions to framework models in CSH. A study conducted by Taylor, Nelson, and Adelman (1999) explores previous school reform efforts. This study emphasizes the important role of readiness in establishing and sustaining school reform efforts, specifically the risks associated with failing to match motivations and approaches with key stakeholders. Culture, local ownership, and clear policies are also vital factors contributing to the success of systems change in schools (Taylor et al., 1999). This reinforces

the current recommendations in the CSH field and aligns with the work in implementation science.

The WSCC model integrates the role of community as a critical factor in the promotion of school health and wellness. Building on the work of Taylor et al. (1999), Chilenski-Meyer, Greenberg, and Feinberg (p. 360, 2007) present community readiness as a multidimensional construct that includes “community demographics, perceived school functioning, substance abuse norms, and team members’ personal history of collaboration.” Schools implementing the WSCC can use this construct as a lens to analyze potential barriers or facilitators in their process.

Research conducted by Brown, Feinberg, and Greenberg (2010) discusses the role of collaboration and coalition building as factors that contribute to a successful implementation process. This work reinforces the research presented by Rooney et al. (2015) and Lewallen et al. (2015) that emphasize the role of community in the WSCC framework and the necessity to connect across typical school boundaries to achieve maximum impact on their intended outcomes. The research also emphasizes the role of leadership and intentional engagement across the system in successful implementation (Taylor et al., 1999 and Chilenski-Meyer et al., 2007).

## Voices from Colorado Districts

Districts in Colorado are already seeking guidance in relation to establishing institutional policies, programs, and procedures to best support student behavioral, social, emotional, academic, and identity development. However, buy-in can differ on a school and/or individual level. Further, though districts may have individual schools buy into the school climate improvement processes, additional challenges may obstruct their readiness for change, such as capacity, accurate and timely data, or specialized training. Specifically, districts currently funded by the school climate transformation grant have asked for help with learning:

1. How to “do” social emotional learning or provide behavioral supports in a broader sense (curriculum v. integrated practice)
2. How to cultivate buy-in at the school level and shift mindsets around roles in social emotional learning
3. How to assess readiness among staff
4. How to get school staff organized around universal supports
5. How to integrate social emotional learning as a practice instead of a boxed curriculum
6. How to use data to drive positive school climate action—appropriate school climate practices of need for individual school districts— how to use data to inform decision-making.
7. What does school climate look like to a Professional Developer in a Professional Learning Community? –Combination of school culture & climate

This feedback falls into three primary categories: staffing and capacity, data-based decision making, and systemic readiness. Current school climate transformation grantees have participated

in three training sessions, two individualized coaching sessions, and completed a comprehensive survey assessing their existing school climate measures, programs, and practices. Insights gathered from these grantees both clarify and confirm the aforementioned factors that contribute to a positive school climate.

### **Staffing & Capacity**

Flaspohler, Duffy, Wandersman, Stillman, and Maras (pg. 183, 2008) define capacity as “the skills, motivations, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to implement innovations, which exist at the individual, organization, and community levels” (Wandersman et al. 2006). Capacity is strongly associated with the ability of communities to implement, sustain, and adapt their practices (Flaspohler et al., 2008). This association makes the case for prioritizing capacity as a key indicator of success in systems-change approaches. Using Flaspohler et al. (2008) as the working definition of capacity, threads pulled from the coordinated school health and implementation literature reinforce its importance in efforts to improve school climate. Taylor et al. (1999) discuss the tendency for schools to approach systems change by inadequately training staff, facilitating change, and setting unrealistic time frames.

Grantees have reported that the pace by which their schools and districts facilitate training and allocate time for professional development is inadequate. This deficiency is paired with increased turnover for both administrators and teaching staff leaving significant gaps in knowledge, skills, and time. The capacity challenges directly impact the grantee’s ability to foster buy-in, cultivate change, and sustain new programs, practices, or policies.

### **Data-based Decision Making**

Grantees have reported fragmented and varying approaches to data-based decision making. These approaches include formal surveys, training, and program evaluations to gather insights on the needs and progress of their student populations. Data collection is often dependent on the access district staff have to assessment tools including published surveys, program evaluations, or focus group materials. In consideration of the aforementioned capacity challenges, grantees are exploring innovative ways to support data collection that deepens their understanding of the factors directly impacting school climate in their districts.

Timely and relevant data analyses are critically important components for identifying these factors. Conducting a more comprehensive analysis includes disaggregating data by sub-group to strengthen findings related to disparities, disrupt bias, and build a stronger foundation by which to drive school climate improvement strategies. Grantees have reported challenges in conducting these types of analyses, particularly as it relates to school and district size. In order to avoid the disclosure of any respondent, districts with smaller populations face additional barriers related to the required suppression of their data.

How these data translate into relevant and impactful strategies to address school climate also varies greatly depending on the existing data culture and practice of the district. Grantees are working to coordinate their efforts to identify more factors related to effective team building and information sharing. This practice begins with grantees clearly identifying the outcomes they are

working to achieve. Several grantees reported developing these outcomes in alignment with existing district leadership teams, reporting tools, and strategic planning activities.

### **Systemic Readiness**

The factors relating to both capacity and data-based decision-making drive a much larger conversation about the concept of systemic readiness. Despite each grantee being at a different phase of their efforts to improve school climate, key issues related to readiness are consistently acknowledged. Effective implementation of any school climate improvement strategy requires understanding the functions and dimensions of readiness. This includes leadership, funding acquisition, staffing and capacity, and continuous improvement process driven by data and insights from key stakeholders.

The school climate transformation grant has laid valuable groundwork in synthesizing and communicating the resources available to schools and districts across Colorado. Additionally, feedback and insights from grantees affirm the iterative process that contributes to the successful implementation of school climate improvement strategies. Assessing for buy-in and readiness occurs at multiple levels and at varying points of implementation, leading to a practice of continuous improvement and collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

Colorado students spend a significant amount of their developing hours in school, making school environments a critical area of focus for administrators and educators. Many years of research on child development have indicated that, while it is important to foster academic development in schools, growth in behavioral and social and emotional domains are necessary to help children flourish in their academics and beyond. The implementation of a Whole Child approach to fostering a positive school climate benefits not only the students, but the entire surrounding community, as it seeks to establish an environment in which everyone can excel in their roles within and outside of the school. There is strong evidence supporting the need for schools to implement a positive school climate to support student academic achievement, as well as intellectual, behavioral, social, and emotional growth. A positive school climate includes quality interpersonal relationships, supports for teaching and learning, safety, and school improvement processes. Decades of research on school climate have indicated that students who experience a positive school climate are substantially more likely to experience increased positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, self-efficacy, resilience, etc.) and are much less likely to experience negative outcomes (e.g., substance use, deviant acts, etc.) than students who perceive the school climate as negative. This in turn benefits the surrounding community by decreasing crime rates and costs towards intervention.

Students who feel a stronger connection to their school environment are more likely to be engaged in extracurricular activities, attain higher grades, graduate high school, and experience greater overall well-being compared to those students who perceive their school environment as poor. The need for social support and positive relationships in promoting academic achieve-



ment and engagement is particularly important for individuals of historically underrepresented backgrounds, making school climate a critical target for reducing disparities. Fostering a sense of community means welcoming students of all backgrounds into a supportive environment where students can build trusting relationships with teachers and staff. Connectedness, that fosters an emotionally supportive and safe environment for all individuals, allows students to be better able to immerse themselves in both their academic and lifelong pursuits. Students' connectedness to teachers, their school environment, and academic success can all be positively affected through school climate. Positive school climate promotes the well-being of students, as well as teachers and staff by increasing their commitment to work through feelings of increased ability to positively impact students and job satisfaction. Recent research has highlighted the vital role school climate plays in promoting students' academic success and overall health and well-being. Taking the steps to improve school climate is a cost-effective way to improve academic achievement and decrease future adverse implications for students, schools, and surrounding communities.

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