

## School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Noninstructional Staff

Improving school climate takes time and commitment from a variety of people in a variety of roles. This document outlines key action steps that noninstructional staff—including guidance counselors, social workers, school psychologists, office staff, bus drivers, maintenance and facility staff, and food service staff—can take to support school climate improvements. Although most of the action steps within this document can be completed by all noninstructional staff, some action steps will need to be done by school counselors, psychologists, and social workers but not by others. In those cases, action steps are marked with an asterisk (\*).

### Understand the Importance of School Climate

Students learn best when they are in an environment in which they feel safe, supported, challenged, and accepted. Research shows that when schools and districts<sup>1</sup> focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, develop positive relationships, and demonstrate positive behaviors.

Strengthening school climate can help you and your school:

- ✓ **Boost** student achievement and close achievement gaps,
- ✓ **Improve** relationships between students and staff,
- ✓ **Decrease** teacher turnover and increase teacher satisfaction,
- ✓ **Improve** behavior both inside and outside the classroom,
- ✓ **Increase** students' sense of connection to school,
- ✓ **Lower** dropout rates, and
- ✓ **Improve** school safety and student morale.

Of course, improving school climate is not something that happens overnight. It is not a “project” that you can do once and then move on. Rather, improving school climate is an ongoing process, one that takes time and requires the support of everyone in the building, especially staff who work with students on a daily basis outside the classroom.

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<sup>1</sup> This document provides strategies applicable to public schools and districts, including charter authorizers, charter management organizations, education management organizations, individual charter schools, and charter local educational agencies.



# Participate in Planning for School Climate Improvements

Planning for school climate improvement provides the foundation to ensure that your efforts are targeted to meet your school’s needs. All noninstructional staff are critical to the planning process because they interact with students and their families in various ways and can take concrete steps to improve school climate.

## What Are the Key Things to Do?

- If you are committed to this work and believe you can dedicate time and energy to planning, identifying strategies, collecting data, and sharing information with your colleagues and stakeholders, consider becoming part of the team that addresses school climate improvements. Some schools and districts already have teams that address school climate issues (e.g., Positive Behavior Interventions and Support [PBIS] team and school improvement team).\*
- Learn everything you can about the school improvement efforts and how you can play a role in supporting these efforts. If you are not a team participant, you still have an important role in supporting them and interacting with school staff, families, and guardians.
- Ask questions, listen, and offer advice when it is solicited.
- Think about how you can improve school climate in the settings where you interact with students, such as the hallway, informal or small-group meetings, cafeteria, school bus, and playground.
- Respond to school climate surveys/questionnaires and/or participate in focus groups to help inform school climate improvements.
- Attend professional development sessions on matters related to school climate.

### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Participating on the school climate team.
- Actively participating in improvement efforts by asking questions, listening, attending meetings, and attending professional development.
- Sharing feedback when it is requested and when you have an idea or observation.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Assuming that this is a passing phase, like so many other reform efforts, and ignoring it—school climate is core to the work of schools, and successful schools have strong school climates.
- Not engaging actively in the work—for example, missing meetings or not attending or actively engaging in professional development.
- Underestimating the importance of your contribution—everyone needs to be involved, even staff who do not work with students in the classroom or on a long-term basis!



## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Planning School Climate Improvements

- What are the goals of the school climate improvement process?
- How can I help?
- What do you expect of noninstructional staff?

## Engage Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

Improving school climate is a schoolwide endeavor. For school climate improvements to be successful, everyone with an interest in the school needs to be informed and involved. People who feel engaged are more likely to partake in the school climate improvement process as planned versus those who feel disconnected or do not understand its purpose. All noninstructional staff can play an important role in engaging stakeholders, including other staff, school and district leadership, community partners, students, and families especially.

### What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Understand as much as you can about the school climate improvement process so you can communicate accurate information to others, including community partners and families.
- Encourage your colleagues to participate and engage in the school climate improvement efforts. Some noninstructional staff may not see themselves as key players in the school climate improvement process and may not be supportive. You can share how they can help and get them on board.
- Talk to students about the school climate improvement process. Ask students for their ideas on improving their school's climate and invite them to be involved in the process.
- Share information with the family members of students. Often, noninstructional staff have relationships with families that other school staff do not have, and they can communicate about the school climate improvement process through those informal channels.



### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Being well informed and learning as much as you can about the improvements.
- Telling your colleagues why you are excited about or supportive of this work. Sharing stories about what you notice changing among students or for the school as a whole as a result of the initiative.
- Expressing concerns constructively—changing the way in which schools do their work can be challenging. Consider how to overcome the challenges.
- Using informal opportunities—such as one-on-one meetings, checking into the office, small groups in the hallway, or lunch periods—to talk to students with whom you interact on a regular basis about improving school climate, how you can collectively contribute, and what you as a staff member can do.
- Sharing information about the school climate improvement process with family members throughout the year.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Sharing information when you are not well informed—it is important that a consistent message comes from the school.
- Assuming that your colleagues are as excited about the school climate improvement process as you are—tell them what you think is working so they may learn from you about the value of this work.
- Forgetting that you play an important role in school climate change and that you have many opportunities to engage students in conversation, even if you do not formally teach them in a classroom.
- Sending information home to families about the school climate improvements without first touching base with the school climate team.

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## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Engaging Stakeholders

- Are there any students, staff, families, or community partners you could use some help with engaging in the school climate improvement process?
- What are the main messages and resources I should use when speaking with stakeholders about school climate improvements?

## Support the Collection and Use of Reliable and Valid School Climate Data

Collecting and using school climate data is essential to the school climate improvement process. Noninstructional staff are an important part of data collection; school counselors, social workers, and psychologists can help collect data from students, and all can complete surveys and/or participate in focus groups about their own experiences. These data will tell you what is working and what is in need of improvements.



## What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Attend trainings or professional development on the data collection.\*
- Help administer student surveys at the request of the school climate team.\*
- Talk with students about the importance of data and taking surveys seriously; in consultation with the school climate team, create an environment that is conducive to survey taking.
- Complete staff surveys or participate in focus groups or interviews when they are requested and share your thoughts on the school's climate and what needs to be improved in informal and noninstructional spaces.
- Offer suggestions to the school climate team on how student voice can be included in collection, analysis, and reporting efforts (e.g., through student focus groups).
- Participate in meetings to discuss the results once they are available and help the school reflect on and use data for improvement and planning.

### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Participating in all data collection activities and asking good questions on how to collect the school climate data reliably.
- Encouraging students to provide honest answers and creating an atmosphere conducive to taking a survey without swaying student responses.
- Responding to all surveys and interview requests—noninstructional spaces and times are just as important as instructional ones in contributing to overall school climate. Your input on those spaces and times is essential!
- Providing thoughtful suggestions on how to improve data collection, analysis, and reporting.
- Participating in data reflection meetings.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Treating surveys as unimportant or rushing through them—you need to set the tone for the importance of data collection.
- Ignoring surveys requesting your input or assuming that your voice is not valuable and needed.
- Keeping your ideas to yourself rather than sharing them with the improvement team.
- Dismissing surveys and focus groups as unimportant—school climate improvement is a process that requires constant input and adjustments to be successful.
- Failing to attend meetings to reflect on the data once they are available or not actively engaging in those meetings.

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## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Supporting Data Collection and Use

- What data do you want to collect/are you collecting?
- What survey response rate are you hoping to get?
- How can I help with survey administration?
- How can I support collecting other feedback through focus groups, interviews, or discussions?
- What are the results of the survey and other data collection? How can I participate in reflecting on the data?



# Help Choose and Implement School Climate Interventions

Choosing the right intervention(s) is an important part of school climate improvements. The intervention does not have to be a program, although choosing an evidence-based program is one option. Interventions also can be strategies, activities, policies, or services. There is no single “right” type of intervention. The important thing is whether it matches your school’s needs, as identified by climate data collection; your school’s readiness to implement it; and how it is implemented (i.e., this is not an “activity” but a process of changing how things get done). Noninstructional staff are key players in implementing interventions. School counselors, social workers, and psychologists should take part in the selection process and help develop plans for implementation. All noninstructional staff can provide feedback on what you see working or not working and participate in training to support implementation.

## What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Review intervention options and offer your honest, constructive feedback (e.g., how informal or noninstructional spaces and times can be used to implement school climate improvements; what kinds of interventions would be targeted to a group of students or individualized for a few students).\*
- Attend trainings on the selected intervention(s) to ensure that you understand your role and know how to effectively implement the strategies.\*
- Share with your colleagues what is working well and solicit their input when you run into problems, have questions, or hear feedback.

### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Giving feedback on the intervention options based on your past experiences.
- Asking questions and learning all you can about the intervention.
- Considering how to integrate the intervention with what you are already doing.
- Giving your best effort by implementing the strategies as well as you can and being patient, understanding that the work takes time and that you may not see results immediately.
- Sharing your observations with your peers to find out whether they are facing the same issues and discuss problem-solving.
- Communicating your experiences with the school climate team and providing feedback when it is requested.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Failing to share your opinions about the intervention options and then bad-mouthing the chosen intervention.
- Skipping trainings or assuming that you do not have a role to play because you are not a classroom teacher.
- Giving up if you do not see change among students right away.
- Forgetting to share your experiences about what is working and what is not—this is the only way that your experiences can inform improvements.



## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Choosing and Implementing School Climate Interventions

- How can I help in the intervention selection process?
- Why did we choose this intervention or set of strategies?
- What are the most important components for me to implement so that the intervention is successful?
- What kinds of support will we have?
- How and with whom can I share my feedback on intervention implementation?

## Support Ongoing Monitoring and Evaluation of School Climate Improvements

Monitoring and evaluation provide evidence of how well you and your colleagues are implementing school climate improvements and the impact those efforts have on your school and students. Noninstructional staff play an important role in supporting data collection and offering feedback throughout the monitoring and evaluation process.

### What Are the Key Things to Do?

- Keep track of things you notice about efforts to improve school climate throughout the implementation process so that you can provide the school climate team with concrete suggestions for change when the time arrives to consider and share improvements.
- When your feedback on the process is requested, be honest about what is and is not working.
- Offer constructive feedback, both when you see an intervention working well and when you see an issue that needs to be addressed.
- Talk to students about what they felt worked and did not work and support the administration of student surveys if requested.
- Attend meetings where data are shared and listen for opportunities to make changes to the school climate improvement process based on the data.



### What Does This Look Like When You Do the Work Well?

- Keeping track of what works and what does not work during implementation.
- Staying connected to the school climate improvement effort by sharing feedback and helping to problem-solve.
- Asking students what they think.
- Actively engaging in professional development activities.
- Attending meetings or planning sessions to learn about the evaluation results and reflecting on the data to change how you implement the intervention based on the results of evaluation activities.

### What Do You Want to Avoid? What Are Potential Pitfalls?

- Forgetting to write down and track your thoughts during implementation—this can lead to incomplete or inaccurate feedback when it is time to share your thoughts with the school climate team.
- Disengaging from the school climate improvement effort.
- Leaving students out of the monitoring and evaluation process.
- Being disheartened by insignificant results—student outcomes take a long time to change, and your school may not see huge gains in the first year of implementation. Hang in there!

## Questions You Can Ask School Leadership and School Climate Team Members About Monitoring and Evaluating School Climate Improvements

- What do the student outcome results mean?
- How can I share my feedback on the school climate improvement process so far?
- How can I capture student feedback?
- How can we adjust our school climate improvement process, including how we are implementing interventions, based on feedback we receive?

### School Climate Improvement Resource Package

This action guide is one of many resources within the School Climate Improvement Resource Package (SCIRP), a suite of manageable, action-oriented, and evidence-based resources that States, districts, and schools can use to make school climate improvements. The SCIRP was developed by the U.S. Department of Education with the support of the [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#).

For more information about the SCIRP, go to <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about>.

