



# SCHOOL CLIMATE AND EQUITY

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Schools can create more equitable communities through the following promising strategies:

1. Encourage reflective practice and build cultural awareness in students and adults.
2. Increase understanding of diverse cultures.
3. Keep diverse schools physically and emotionally safe.
4. Make high expectations culturally responsive.
5. Design multiple pathways to meaningful participation.
6. Demonstrate caring by knowing students' unique emotional needs.

## Overview

School climate reform, an evidence-based strategy, supports K-12 students, school personnel, parents/guardians and community members learning and working together to promote pro-social education. Done well, these efforts will result in even safer, more supportive, engaging, helpfully challenging and harmonious schools. The U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute for Educational Sciences, President Obama's Bully Prevention Partnership, the US Departments of Justice and Education's School Discipline Consensus project, a growing number of State Departments of Education and foreign educational ministries support and/or endorse school climate renewal as a strategy to increase student learning and achievement, enhance school connectedness, reduce high school dropout rates, prevent bullying and other forms of violence, and enhance teacher retention rates.

## School Climate and Equity

Equity is intrinsic to all aspects of school climate work. It is not a separate issue. From this perspective, the National School Climate Council definition could be modified to describe an "equitable school climate" as referring to "The quality and character of school life that fosters children's, youth's, and families' *full access to*: (1) Appropriately supported, high expectations for learning and achievement; (2) Emotionally and physically safe, healthy learning environments; (3) Caring relationships with peers and adults; (4) Participation that meaningfully enhances academic, social-emotional, civic, and moral development. An equitable school climate responds to the wide range of cultural norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, leadership

practices, and organizational structures within the broader community.

**Self-knowledge/reflection:** All work on equity concerns begins with one's own self-reflection. Most of us grow up within cultural "bubbles" of race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender, sexual orientation, and first language. These "bubbles" create worldviews. Sometimes the experiences of where we live, socialize, emigrate, go to work or school help us see that others may have very different worldviews from ours. For educators, unbroken "bubbles" are particularly troublesome. Our worldview becomes a paradigm that too often typecasts different as deficient. This is especially clear when we consider students with intellectual or other disabilities. We carry with us value systems, expectations, and unrecognized stereotypes of our worldview into our work with children and families, seeing their deficits rather than their strengths. Becoming aware of our "bubbles" and breaking out of them can happen through high quality "diversity training" (Lee, StirFry Seminars), reading books to challenge our deepest assumptions (see References for suggestions), or simply being open to noticing subtle thoughts and behaviors rooted in unacknowledged stereotypes (Harvard, Project Implicit).

**Broad knowledge using a framework of cultural awareness:** We need a framework to understand how we experience the complex interconnections of various "bubbles" within which we all live. One particularly useful framework for understanding equity in school climate identifies three levels of cultural awareness: overt, covert, and subtle (Kalyanour & Harry, 2012). Seeing and appreciating differences in external elements such as dress, food, and holidays is an example of *overt* cultural awareness. At the *covert* level, aspects of "invisible culture" (such as relationship patterns, concepts of time, individual vs. collective goals, etc.) are most important. At the *subtle* level, we do the

deepest work in examining how our values, educational practices and expectations are rooted in unexamined assumptions and institutional structures. For example, we see survey data as fundamental to our school climate improvement process, but for some students, such as a Somalian refugee with little or no prior formal schooling, the opportunity to share stories (as in a focus group) might be a more culturally responsive methodology.

### **Specific knowledge of the different cultural experiences of our students and families:**

Culturally responsive education requires some knowledge of the specific cultures of the students and families in the school community. This knowledge must go beyond "heroes and holidays" in the designated "months." This means that the formal curriculum (studying the civil rights movement in Social Studies or reading *House on Mango Street* in Language Arts) should be as inclusive as possible so students can "see themselves." Equally important is the hidden curriculum of classroom management, school rules, and interaction/communication styles: student groupings, teacher wait-time, praise, physical contact, pictures and posters reflecting students' identities, etc. Making the effort to know students both culturally **and** as individuals is fundamental. We must see them as they are, not as they are different than the normative reference point of Euro-American, middle class students.

### **Strategies to Guide Effective Practice**

While many strategies support fostering equitable school climates, we must identify the broad categories that form the foundation of such climates:

- **Keep diverse schools emotionally & physically safe:** When students experience a safe, supportive school climate, they are more able to achieve academically and

become responsible, caring citizens. School violence, especially bullying, has received significant attention in the past decade. Bullying is usually conflated with peer-to-peer discriminatory harassment, defined by federal civil rights laws as covering harassment based on race, color, religion, national origin, disability, sex, and sexual orientation (or “gender-based harassment”). These laws have more requirements than do most state bullying laws to prevent “hostile environments.” Reducing a racially or sexually hostile environment means not only improving the district’s incident reporting process, but also educating students and staff about bias and stereotypes. Knowing and implementing these requirements is a critical strategy for schools to sustain an emotionally and physically safe climate for all students (US Department of Education, 2010).

- ***Make high expectations culturally responsive:*** Stereotyped low expectations of many students (such as those whose first language is other than English, who have special needs, are of color, female, or from families in poverty), are rampant in our schools. Educators often mask these low expectations as “being kind.” In fact, they are the opposite and derive from a deficit model. Clearly expecting all students to work hard and therefore be able to succeed is a step toward culturally responsive high expectations. Making teaching and learning needs congruent may mean differentiating curriculum content and/or pedagogy. For example, scaffolding for English learners requires understanding their prior experience, which may differ from students whose background is similar to the teacher’s (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2005; Nieto & Bode, 2011).
- ***Design multiple pathways to meaningful participation:*** When the participation of all

members of the school community is valued, we create multiple pathways with options meeting varying interests, schedules, financial resources, language needs, etc. Older students often seek extra-curricular activities, such as students of color associations or gay-straight alliances, that reflect their developing racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Culturally and linguistically diverse families wishing to participate in school events or meetings may require childcare, translators, or flexible timing. Many parents from other countries believe that teachers are responsible for what goes on at school and they are responsible for home.

This is not a “lack of engagement, as is often misinterpreted.” It is a different way of seeing engagement than we have come to believe in the past few decades. For school climate teams to be truly inclusive of a diverse community, planning with attention to such varying needs is critical.

- ***Demonstrate caring by knowing students’ unique emotional needs:*** Building equitable, caring relationships requires awareness of students’ cultural experiences. Finding school to be an emotionally supportive home, however different than one’s actual home, increases students’ sense of belonging, connectedness, and hence academic engagement. This is especially true for immigrant and refugee students, as well as many African American, Asian and Latino/a students who are born here. Like others, these students seek warm but firm relationships with adults. Finding the right balance of warm and caring with firm discipline and high academic expectations is difficult for many white, middle class educators, yet this is the vast majority of those leading our increasingly diverse classrooms and schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). It is important to

remember that many students and families from diverse backgrounds have experienced serious trauma in their countries of origin or in their communities here. Learning about how trauma impacts brain development is another significant strategy to build caring relationships based on students' unique emotional needs.

## Summary

In 2011, for the first time, more than 50% of the babies born in the U.S. were not white. Yet 83% of current teachers are white. The rapid demographic changes in the U.S. demand that we address school climate from an equity perspective, challenging ourselves to reach beyond the limits of our experience, our own “bubbles,” to make school a welcoming, engaging place for all young people to learn and grow into caring, responsible citizens. This is not just a demographic imperative. It is a moral imperative. We say that we must have high expectations for students, but do we have high enough expectations for ourselves, as educators? How well are we preparing ourselves to understand the equity needs of this diverse population? One pre-service course or annual in-service workshop on diversity hardly touches the depth and complexity of change required of us individually and collectively. By integrating equity in all dimensions of school climate work exemplified by the range of Practice Briefs in this series, we will help to foster equitable school climates.

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*This School Climate Practice Brief is one of 11 briefs presenting the latest in research and best practice for effective school climate reform from leading experts. All School Climate Practice Briefs can be found at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/practice-briefs.php>*

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