

PROMOTING A POSITIVE AND EQUITABLE SCHOOL CLIMATE DURING THE PANDEMIC IN OHIO'S DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

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I. INTRODUCTION

2020-2021: An unprecedented year in education. COVID-19 drove Ohio's K-12 schools to close their buildings in the spring of 2020 and shift to remote learning. School districts are challenged with creating and maintaining a sense of community, both remotely and in person. Issues of pandemic-induced trauma and general well-being among students, staff, and families must be addressed. The total effects of COVID-19 on schools remain to be seen, but evidence from past educational disruptions suggest negative effects on students' learning and social and emotional outcomes. The harm from COVID-19 has likely been more severe for traditionally marginalized groups. In addition to and alongside the pandemic, numerous episodes of police violence against African Americans and rising anti-Asian violence this year have brought issues of racism and inequality into the public consciousness. Many schools and districts are rising to the moment, ready to become better stewards of equity, inclusions, and justice.

Goals for improvement. We offer ten research-based school climate improvement strategies to help schools and districts build safe and supportive communities that support the whole child amidst the pandemic and the racial justice movement. These strategies can be used inside the classroom and remotely. Our goal is to provide guidance to schools and districts in Ohio on how to thrive and be better than we were before by:

- Promoting a positive, equitable school climate where all students feel safe, supported, and well.
- Strengthening schools and districts as anti-racist, justice-promoting institutions where all students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

The remainder of this report is organized around a series of ten research-based strategies that schools and districts can utilize during the 2020-2021 academic year and beyond. The ten strategies are as follows: (1) State a school vision and mission that includes values of community and inclusion; (2) Use data to provide support for students, teachers, and families; (3) Integrate multi-tiered systems of support; (4) Cultivate positive relationships amongst school staff and students; (5) Promote social and emotional learning; (6) Foster a positive school racial climate; (7) Engage students in social action to address problems; (8) Address experiences and emotions tied to the pandemic and to equity and inclusion; (9) Incorporate trauma-informed practices and staff professional development; and (10) Provide behavioral health support and interventions.



II. STRATEGIES

Below, we outline ten evidence-based¹ strategies for fostering a positive school climate amidst closures or emergencies and supportive of racial justice. The strategies are listed in no particular order. Though not a "strategy" per se, there is ample evidence that simply reestablishing the routines of school following a traumatic event can be immensely helpful for young people. The strategies below assume that schools and districts will reestablish that routine with the understanding that there may be variation in the proportion of it that is in-person.

STRATEGY 1. STATE A SCHOOL VISION AND MISSION THAT INCLUDES VALUES OF COMMUNITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE

In order for schools and districts to create a positive climate that can support students, staff, and families through these challenging times, their guiding principles should emphasize themes of community and racial justice. Further there must be strong alignment between these guiding principles (i.e., policies) and procedures and practices on the ground. School and districts should review existing policies to ensure they promote a positive school climate for all students (e.g., homeless students, English language learners, students with disabilities). A good starting point for refreshing policies is a revisitation of vision and mission statements to ensure that they convey messages of togetherness and equity. Now is an ideal time for schools and districts to revisit and refresh their vision and mission statements to ensure that they are responsive to the moment we are in. A vision statement is concise and articulates the broad goals and values of the schools. A mission statement is longer and provides some detail as to how the school's and district's vision will be achieved. The strategies listed below can support schools and districts as they strive to be more inclusive, be more supportive of diverse students, and better prepare students for success.

- Be aware of and help with the development of school and district policies leading to equitable treatment of all students and challenge school policies that hinder equitable treatment of any student within the academic setting.
- Ensure vision, mission, policies, and procedures align with a positive school climate.
- Engage stakeholders (e.g., families, educators, students, community members) in the process to ensure that policies, procedures, and practices are implemented to promote an equitable and inclusive environment for all students.
- Confirm that the vision and mission emphasize community engagement and resilience may help students, staff, and families feel safe and supported.

Additional resource: ODE Cultural Competency Resources

¹ See references appendix for works cited



STRATEGY 2. USE DATA TO PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND FAMILIES

Understanding the perceptions, needs, and feelings of the school community is an important component of promoting a positive school climate. There is a growing base of empirical evidence that students' experiences of school climate and their academic achievement are linked. Although the term "school climate" implies that it is a characteristic of school buildings, research shows that students in the same school may experience safety, support, and connection differently based on their unique identities. Further, the relationship between climate and achievement may be stronger for students from lower socioeconomic status and students of color compared to their peers. Using data to promote a positive school climate and inform education policy is not a new strategy. However, due to the recent pandemic and racial justice issues, a nuanced examination of student needs to inform services is imperative in both face-to-face and remote contexts. Schools and districts should include data from a variety of stakeholders (e.g., parents, students, personnel, community members, and outside sources) to inform their needs assessment and work in creating a positive school climate. Schools and districts can also consider using non-educational data (e.g., community-based data, unemployment data, Medicaid) to help understand the challenges students face. Below is a list of strategies for using data to promote a positive school climate for all students.

- Assess the needs of students, families, and staff multiple times throughout the year. Collaborate with partners to access existing data that may also help identify needs.
- Use both quantitative and qualitative data to identify and address achievement, opportunity, and social and emotional gaps among students.
- Collaborate with stakeholders throughout the school and district to gather and analyze data and share outcomes with stakeholders.
- Based on data, utilize evidence-based practices to support students.

- CASEL Data Reflection Protocol
- <u>Data-Based Decision Making Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</u>
- National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments School Climate Measurement
- Reset and Restart Guide for Serving English Learners
- Sample Surveys from Panorama
- Considerations for District and School Administrators Overseeing Distance Learning for Students with Disabilities



STRATEGY 3. INTEGRATE MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

One of the most prominent systemic approaches to improving social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students in K-12 schools that may have particular relevance during the pandemic is multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS). MTSS includes three tiers of support. Tier one includes universal interventions to support all students and staff. Tier two interventions are more targeted to students and staff with demonstrable needs and typically apply to about 15% of the school population. For students and staff with the most intensive needs, tier three interventions are individualized. Schools should select evidence-based practices for each of the three tiers, and they should use their own needs assessment data to determine which interventions are needed and for whom. Below are strategies to support MTSS that is culturally sensitive to the needs of all students and staff.

- Collaborate to (re)establish, teach, and model school-wide expectations for students and staff members every school year with regular opportunities for recognition of positive behavior. It is pertinent that these expectations are communicated to families as well.
- Disaggregate data to determine if certain groups may have particular needs for support.
- Engage all school staff in ongoing professional learning about tier-one, universal strategies for relationship building, proactive classroom management, equity, and implicit bias.
- Greet students at the start of the school day and implement social-emotional learning and community building activities face-to-face or virtually.
- Use restorative practices as a holistic framework to relationship building and conflict resolution that extends beyond specific disciplinary incidents and is integrated into the broader workings of the school.
- Use parent-teacher home visits.
- Provide trauma-informed practices professional development for teachers, staff, and administrators to support students at each tier within MTSS.

- ODE PBIS Resources
- Restorative Practices for Educators
- Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts,
 Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework during the 2020-2021 School Year



STRATEGY 4. CULTIVATE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG STUDENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

The relationships between students and staff in a school are one of the defining aspects of school climate and one that may have particular importance during a time of disruption to schooling. In order to foster positive student-staff relationships, schools must proactively address any barriers that may impede such relationships, including prejudging students and families based on past experiences, being overwhelmed by testing and other procedures, enduring student or staff traumatic experiences, and mistrust. Below are effective strategies for building positive student-staff relationships.

- Ask open-ended questions to learn about the needs of the students and staff.
- Organize professional development opportunities related to recognizing stereotypes and biases and evidence-based strategies to support all students and staff in the academic setting.
- Start rapport-building strategies among students and staff early in the year.
- Greet students at the start of the school day and implement social-emotional learning and community building activities face-to-face or virtually.
- Create virtual platforms for students to informally check in with school staff.

- Harvard Relationship Mapping Strategy
- Search Institute 40 Developmental Assets



STRATEGY 5. PROMOTE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a priority for the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), which released its K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards in 2019 (see additional resources below) as a guide for Ohio schools and districts. The standards focus on five competencies for social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skill, and responsible decision-making. When students grow these competencies, they build stronger, more empathic relationships and become more engaged at school, which in turn promotes an overall positive school climate. Schools and districts need also be mindful of the social and emotional health and competence of staff. Indeed, school staff should model SEL competencies to reinforce students' learning. Students and staff alike are impacted by the pandemic, and social and emotional competence may offer resilience to stressors. SEL intervention is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather must respond to the specific needs of students, staff, and families. Below are strategies to consider when implementing SEL.

- Know the five ODE SEL competencies specific to the grades in your building and/or that you teach.
- As school staff, model SEL competencies for students and families, including being aware of triggers.
- Intentionally integrate SEL into the regular curriculum.
- Create emotionally and physically safe and supportive spaces for students to thrive in both face-to-face and remote learning.
- Use data to understand the SEL needs of students, staff, and families.
- Evaluate SEL strategies that your school or district used during the pandemic to see if they were impactful and make necessary adjustments for continuous improvement.

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, & Emotional Learning (CASEL)
- George Lucas Educational Foundation Social and Emotional Learning Video Series
- Learning Policy Institute Leveraging SEL Learning
- Ohio Department of Education SEL Resources
- Ohio's Early Learning and Development Standards from Birth to Kindergarten
- Ohio's K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards
- SEL 3 Signature Practices
- Supporting Teachers SEL
- Trauma-Informed SEL



STRATEGY 6. FOSTER A POSITIVE SCHOOL RACIAL CLIMATE

Many schools work to build a positive climate, but studies consistently show that students of different races experience the school environment differently, with Black and Latinx youth reporting lower perceptions of the school environment than their peers. It is important for schools to be mindful of race-based disparities in school climate perceptions and consider how the policies, programs, practices, and interactions in the school may affect students differently. In thinking about school climate interventions, schools can pay particular attention to the dynamics of cross-racial interpersonal interactions among students and teachers, overall race relations in the school, the degree to which racial stereotypes may be perpetuated, fairness in the implementation of practices and policies, support through the creation of supportive spaces for students who may feel marginalized, and inclusive racial representation in the curriculum. This requires a collaborative approach and systemic planning to ensure that all stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, and families) are heard and engaged in helping to foster a positive school racial climate. Below are strategies to assist schools with integrating practices that promote a positive school racial climate.

- Collect, analyze, and use data from families to get their input and increase cultural responsiveness of teaching and learning in the school.
- Create "identity safe" classrooms--classrooms in which all students are treated as welcomed, valued, and contributing members of the class. This can be done face-to-face or through remote learning. Setting up virtual "hangouts" for students to come and chat with a trusted adult can be beneficial to continuing to build rapport outside of school.
- Infuse the curriculum with material from diverse groups so that students can see themselves and other populations represented in the curriculum (e.g., new authors, new historical material).
- Work to eliminate stereotypes and prejudice by intentionally and actively working to reduce prejudice and stereotyping of students and families in the school such as through the inclusion of an explicitly antiracist curriculum and open conversations about race and racism.
- Provide wise critical feedback accompanied by the wise assurance of students' potential to reach a higher standard to bolster minority adolescents' school trust and improve their academic behavior in response to critical feedback.

- ASCD Resources for Addressing Racism and Hatred in the Classroom
- Center for Racial Justice in Education
- Race Conversations in the Classroom



STRATEGY 7. ENGAGE STUDENTS IN SOCIAL ACTION TO ADDRESS PROBLEMS

Student voice is an important component of any school climate improvement work. When students are partners in naming problems and generating and helping to implement solutions, they feel more ownership over the school community, become more engaged, and develop stronger relationships with peers and adults at school. Further, students are experts on the school environment in ways adults often are not. Having students involved can help teachers, administrators, and student support staff understand issues in new ways. There are also clear benefits to getting students involved in solving problems beyond the walls of the school. Tackling social issues through service-learning, community service, organizing, and other means of action confers positive academic and psychological outcomes for young people.

Student voice is particularly important during this time. Empowering students to help navigate problems both within and without the school can help schools identify creative strategies for addressing the pandemic and racial injustice. Additionally, many students may feel disconnected and disengaged in the present circumstances, and participating in collective action may help ameliorate that alienation. Specific practices that schools might consider include:

- Forming a student advisory council or inviting student members to participate in adult teams tasked with crafting re-opening and racial justice plans and otherwise addressing the challenges of the day.
- Implementing student voice strategies like youth participatory action research (YPAR) in schools, including in the regular curriculum.
- Connecting and networking with outside organizations that specialize in student voice work to help facilitate opportunities for students.

- John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning
- Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services "Youth-Led"
- Ohio Student Association
- YPAR Hub



STRATEGY 8. ADDRESS EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS TIED TO THE PANDEMIC AND TO EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Throughout 2020-21, students have experienced many changes and uncertainty due to the pandemic and civil unrest across the United States. In the 21st century, students are also exposed to many events on social media that can add additional stress. Due to the recent events, students may experience a range of emotions, including anger, fear, frustration, disappointment, and hurt. These emotions may mask some of the broader concerns that students face, and that ultimately impact their academic performance. By schools and districts taking an actively inclusive stance and creating a school climate that allows students to express themselves allows for students to feel safe in their academic environments. Below are strategies to support students' emotional expression and to promote a positive school climate in which students can thrive.

- Provide small groups in schools (face-to-face or virtually) for students to express themselves to ensure that they have a safe place to process their emotions. These groups can be facilitated by school counselors, clinical counselors, school psychologists, or social workers, as well as peer-to-peer support groups. This type of support can be offered through collaboration with local counseling agencies, hospices, and other entities that support students who need additional support.
- Teach students the proper social skills that are related to identifying their emotions and expressing them in a meaningful way.
- Promote safe places throughout the school that are conducive for students to have conversations with trusted adults.
- Build rapport early in the year with students so they are comfortable sharing when they experience a situation that needs to be processed.
- Ensure that students have equitable access to resources by providing community resource lists and access to resources that are available in the academic setting.
- Encourage students to participate in developmentally appropriate conversations and classroom lessons that discuss the recent events throughout the country including but not limited to the traumatic experiences of the recent deaths, civil unrest, and the pandemic on themselves, their families, and their communities.

- Creating Safe Spaces in Schools
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement



STRATEGY 9. INCORPORATE TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES AND STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

During the pandemic, many students, staff, and families have experienced trauma. Almost all students have been abruptly taken out of their daily routines of spending time at school and learning in a face-to-face environment. However, schools and districts are likely unaware of other traumatic experiences that students and staff may have faced. These include the loss of a loved one, institutional racism, community violence, school shootings, parental incarceration, divorce of parents, mental illness of parents/caregivers, and substance abuse in the home. Traumatic experiences can have a lifelong effect on learning and may negatively impact academic achievement. Within the school setting, the negative impact of trauma on students may lead to poor concentration, declining academic performance, school absenteeism, and drop out. These challenges create barriers for the success of students in the academic setting. Due to the pandemic, students of all races and socioeconomic statuses may be impacted by trauma. It is imperative for educators to be aware of the impact of trauma within the academic setting. Below are practices to use within K-12 settings to promote a trauma-sensitive school climate.

- Assess how students feel when it comes to safety and promote the importance of safety among students in the academic setting.
- Understand trauma and its impact specifically on the diverse populations of students and families served within the school.
- Avoid re-traumatizing students and families.
- Provide system-wide trauma-informed care support from other educators, administrators, and other supports within the academic setting. Allow students to share their voices to empower them in the academic setting.
- Encourage relationships between students and staff to promote a positive school climate.
- Promote cultural competence among staff who serve the students and families within the school to ensure that students are being supported from a trauma-informed perspective.
- Create a safe environment for students to thrive. By asking students their thoughts about what safety looks and feels like in the school setting (face-to-face or virtually), environments can be better built to help students feel safe.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of Adverse Childhood Experiences
- ChildTrauma Academy
- George Lucas Educational Foundation Trauma-Informed Care Video Series
- Harvard University Center on the Developing Child
- Neurosequential Network COVID-19 Resources
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- Trauma Sensitive Schools



STRATEGY 10. PROVIDE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT AND INTERVENTIONS

One of Ohio's top priorities is to support the health and well-being of students in the state. Now more than ever, students and staff need to develop skills to build resiliency to face life stressors, particularly those created during the pandemic. Whether instruction is remote, in-person, or a hybrid approach, schools must consider how to best support the behavioral health needs of students and staff while ensuring their physical health and safety. Schools and districts may already partner with behavioral health providers to support students' social and emotional well-being along a continuum. Districts may implement or continue to utilize their existing multitiered system of behavioral health supports to meet the needs not only of students, but staff as well.

Over the past year, students have experienced stressors that may have a lasting impact on them academically, socially, and emotionally. These experiences are not limited to students but also to staff who serve students. It is imperative that districts are prepared to provide support face-to-face or virtually during the 2020-21 academic year and beyond. In an effort to promote a positive school climate, stakeholders must be intentional about behavioral health services that will be provided to students, staff, and families. Quite often in districts, there are various stakeholders who can support students socially and emotionally. In an effort for more collaboration between behavioral health providers and other resources, developing a tiered system of behavioral health support can be beneficial to the students. In this approach, districts should consider how they will also support staff who work with students and families. Below are strategies with a three-tiered approach to consider when creating behavioral health services in schools to promote a positive school climate for students and staff.

- Promote universal strategies to support all students and adults who serve them at a tier
 one level. In this tier, there is a level of support in which all students have access to
 behavioral health services that promote social and emotional well-being in a school
 setting.
 - o Implement social and emotional curricula for all students that are preventive in nature and that supports academic achievement by teaching self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship and problem-solving skills.
 - O Use a strengths-based approach that looks at the positive attributes of the students and builds upon those attributes to provide services.
 - o Integrate trauma-informed classroom methods into the class setting.
 - Make parents aware of social, emotional, and behavioral health services provided within the academic setting. Also, create a list of available community resources that can be disseminated.
 - o Promote the importance of self-care for the adults who serve the students in the academic setting.



- Create more targeted, short-term interventions for students who may need additional support.
 - Develop policies and procedures for early identification and referral which may include screenings, student identification criteria, referral processes, and team structures such as student assistance programs or response to intervention.
 - o Provide professional development to help staff recognize early signs of social, emotional and behavioral health needs and challenges.
 - o Consult with other stakeholders about behavior management strategies in the classroom for teachers and staff.
 - Create small group interventions to support students based on similar risk factors or needs.
 - o Implement evidence-based tier II strategies focused on relationship building and mentoring such Check In/Check Out, or Check and Connect,
 - o Provide short-term individual counseling by a behavioral health professional (eg. school counselor, school social worker, or clinical mental health provider).
 - Pursue additional professional development in areas where more resources are needed.
- Establish individualized behavioral health supports for students demonstrating behaviors that impact daily functioning and who are not responding to the other resources.
 - Develop policies and procedures for identification and referral which may include screenings, student identification criteria, referral processes, and team structures such as student assistance programs or response to intervention.
 - Assess student needs and create an individualized intervention plan.
 - Partner with community behavioral health providers or other agencies to offer mental health counseling services and additional support.
 - Use a wrap-around approach for students to ensure that students and families are supported in the home, school, and community and that their voices are heard.
 - o Pursue additional support and professional development in relevant areas.

- ASCA and NASP School Reentry Considerations
- Mental Health in Schools for Educators
- National Center for School Mental Health
- Ohio Department of Education Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
- Ohio Department of Education Trauma-Informed Schools
- Project AWARE Ohio Statewide Resources
- Secondary Traumatic Stress and Self-Care Packet



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