

The Case for Programs that Address School Climate¹

Poor school climate contributes to a host of negative outcomes.

- › Broadly speaking, school climate can be defined as the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment, including how safe, supported, and comfortable they feel in that environment.
- › Unsupportive school climates have been associated with:
 - » Behavioral and emotional problems
 - » Alcohol and tobacco use in adolescence
 - » Increased aggression
 - » Childhood psychopathology
- › School climates can promote or discourage positive and negative behavior among students. Furthermore, social norms that exist within schools may worsen behavior problems such as bullying and victimization.

Positive school climate is achieved through programs that address multiple factors of the school environment simultaneously.

- › Key factors of school climate include:
 - » Feelings of safety among staff and students
 - » Supportive relationships within the school building
 - » Engagement and empowerment of students as valued members and resources in the community
 - » Clear rules and consequences that are understood by all staff and students
 - » High expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behavior
- › The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), an evidence-based program, addresses multiple aspects of school climate. It aims to create a school climate that discourages bullying behavior by creating school-wide rules and consequences for bullying, increasing supervision where bullying frequently occurs, and holding classroom meetings to promote open communication, a supportive environment, and cohesion among students. To learn more about this program visit <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>.

Interventions that effectively address school climate have been shown to support academic success, and increase positive behavioral and social-emotional outcomes.

- › Positive elements of school climate have been shown to affect:
 - » Academic achievement
 - » Classroom engagement and educational motivation
 - » Attitudes toward schoolwork and school
 - » Attendance and suspension rates
 - » Order and discipline in the school building
 - » Amount of vandalism to the school building
 - » Students' self-concept
 - » Students' pro-social behavior
 - » Students' social relationships
 - » Bullying and other antisocial behaviors
 - » Students' overall sense of wellbeing and satisfaction

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Quality universal intervention programs should address multiple aspects of school climate and continuously monitor and evaluate the program's progress.

- › The curriculum must be one that students and staff understand and support. It must set expectations for a high level of student mastery of concepts.
- › Those practices that assume that some children will not succeed (i.e. ability grouping) should be eliminated.
- › School achievement should be affirmed in order to enhance dedication to pro-social and academic progress and goals.
- › It is essential to choose programs whose characteristics match the target population and that are socioculturally relevant.
- › Schools should implement ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress toward goals and of program effectiveness.
- › Programs should be implemented as they were intended to be implemented (fidelity).
- › Well-trained staff is essential to program effectiveness. Before implementing a program, all staff should be committed to being trained, and implementation should start immediately following training to facilitate continuity.

¹ This advocacy brief was developed for the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success (OMHNSS), by Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs (CSBMHP) graduate research assistants Jen Elfstrom, Karin Vanderzee, Raven Cuellar, Holli Sink, and Angela Volz. A copy of the brief and an expanded report of all OMHNSS advocacy briefs (with reference citations) are available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/csbmhp/network/index.html>.