



SCHOOL CLIMATE AND MORAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Schools can effectively address moral and social development through the following promising strategies:

1. Make positive teacher-student relationships a priority.
2. Expect school staff to model moral, ethical, and prosocial behavior.
3. Provide opportunities for students to develop and practice skills like empathy, compassion, and conflict resolution.
4. Mobilize students to take a leadership role.
5. Use discipline strategies that are not simply punitive.
6. Conduct regular assessments of school values and climate.

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 Moral and Social Development

At the heart of positive school climate are strong relationships. When you walk into a school with positive climate, you see students and staff who are caring, respectful, and committed to their communities, both their immediate communities (e.g., school and neighborhood) and the broader world. You don't just see posters proclaiming these values – in these schools, these values live and breathe. People are more likely to greet one another in the hallways, offer to help one another, take pride in one another's successes. In these schools adults don't just ignore students making derogatory remarks in the hallways. These practices become part of the fabric of the school, permeating day to day

interactions and instructional practices. School leaders and staff foster caring and respectful behavior by attending to moral and social development. In other words, they see it as part of their daily work to inspire students to be caring and respectful people, to help students manage social relationships and navigate difficult ethical situations, and to guide students to think more clearly about justice and become committed to it. Moreover, they do so in ways that are ongoing and long-term. They listen to students' perspectives and connect key moral values to these perspectives. They steadily model, teach, and reinforce prosocial values and skills so that these values are more likely to become part of a student's identity. They expand students' moral awareness by helping them consider other students and adults (e.g., the custodian or school secretary) who may have been invisible to them. The degree to which this happens depends in large part on whether all school adults, not just teachers and administrators but secretaries, lunch staff, sports coaches, and other staff, commit to the importance of moral and social development and establish norms and guidelines for interacting with students.

Strategies to Guide Effective Practice

There are things all schools can do to ensure that values of caring and respect live and breathe in the building, closing the gap between school rhetoric and reality. Here are six strategies that can make a significant difference:

1) Make positive teacher-student relationships a priority. Teachers' relationships with students are fundamental to moral and social development. Children and teens learn moral values from adults they respect. And when they feel cared about and respected, students are more likely to develop key emotional and social capacities (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman, & Hamre, 2010). They may also be more receptive to supports and activities designed to develop those skills. Teachers usually believe that they have positive

relationships with their students, but few take regular opportunities to truly reflect on those relationships, to assess students' perceptions of them, and how they might be enhanced.

Teacher-student relationships will improve in schools that expect and provide more opportunities for teachers to be intentional about their relationships with students and committed to growing them over time.

One way to begin is to ask teachers questions such as these: What do you think it's like to be a student at this school? How do you think your students view you – do they trust you, do they feel respected by you? This kind of exercise can be particularly powerful when teachers have the opportunity to consider each of their students individually. This allows them to identify how their behavior may vary with different students and where they might focus their relationship-building efforts. Building on activities like these, schools can use professional development systems that have recently been developed to assess student-teacher relationships and provide individualized coaching about how to improve them.¹

Another strategy is to ensure that every student has a relationship with at least one school adult. Some schools do this by assigning all students an advisor (usually a teacher or counselor) who will meet with them regularly over a multi-year period to discuss both academic and non-academic issues. Other schools do "relationship mapping," in which school staff work together to identify which students do and do not have a relationship with one or more adults. The goal is to identify students who are not connected to any staff and choose staff members to reach out to those students.²

¹ One example is the My Teaching Partner system. More information is available at: <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl/mtp>.

² To read about one school's approach, see Walser, N. (2006). "R" is for resilience. *Harvard Education Letter*, 22(5).

2) Expect school staff to model moral, ethical, and prosocial behavior. Children and teens internalize moral values and behaviors, as well as strong social skills, when they see them modeled by adults they respect. Teachers and other staff are models for students, whether they realize it or not. They don't choose *whether* they are influencing students' moral and social development but they can choose *how* they do so.

School adults can model positive moral and social skills in a range of ways. These include simple everyday actions, like praising admirable qualities and achievements in those who are not often recognized, treating all students fairly and taking an interest in all of them (even those who may be seen as "difficult"), dealing with frustration or anger in productive ways, and encouraging students to reach out to others who are often excluded. They also include more complex actions, such as alerting students to injustice in the world around them and discussing how to remedy it, making time in busy schedules for students who need to talk about personal issues, and discussing with students how they have navigated a difficult ethical situation in their own lives.

To be positive role models, staff need to commit to the ongoing development of their own moral and social capacities. Many adults don't see themselves as moral and social works in progress. They see their qualities as set in stone—they don't think about becoming more fair or generous or better able to learn from multiple perspectives. But moral and social development occur across the lifespan and adults' active engagement in their own moral development can influence students.³ Similarly, all adults can and should continually develop their social and emotional skills over time (such

³ For more information, see Weissbourd, R. (2012). Promoting moral development in schools. *Harvard Education Letter*, 28(1).

as maintaining calm under stress; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

3) Provide opportunities for students to develop and practice skills like empathy, compassion, and conflict resolution. In order to make caring and respect reflexive behaviors, students need more than discussions about why they matter. They also need opportunities to practice the skills and to plan for how to use them in daily life. Well-designed social and emotional learning (SEL) programs can include role plays, skills practice, training in routines students can use (such as a three-step process for navigating social conflicts), and other opportunities.⁴ It's important to choose an evidence-based program because too many programs simply don't work (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, et al., 2011).

But programs are not the only way to build these values and skills. There are many ways, for example, to help students develop moral awareness, including empathy for those who are different from them. One strategy is for teachers or other staff to conduct a circle of concern exercise during an advisory period, class council meeting, or writing exercise in an academic class. In this exercise, an adult asks students to identify who they care about at school outside of their friend group. They help students notice who is in and outside of their circle of concern and pose questions like these: Is a new student, a student who is a loner, or the bus driver outside their circle of concern? Why? How could this be hurtful to those people and to the community? The adult then asks students to consider how their circle might be expanded. Who could they reach out to and how? How would this change the school community for the better? The adult might also ask them to make a pledge to reach

⁴ For more information and an example, see Aber, J. L., Brown, J. L., Jones, S., & Roderick, T. (2010). SEL: The history of a research-practice partnership. In *Better: Evidence-based Education, Special Issue on Social-Emotional Learning* (pp. 14-15). Institute for Effective Education, University of York, Heslington, York, UK.

out to one new person each week and have another discussion or writing assignment the following week about the impact of that action. It's important to repeat this exercise several times a year and to regularly reinforce and reflect on new skills that are learned as students expand their circle of concern.

Another activity teachers can lead is a semester- or year-long project in which students explore the importance of empathy, caring, and positive community building. The project can include readings, writing assignments, and a culminating project, such as a community research project (e.g., making a video about a community member or group that has been invisible to the students or a community-building effort such as a campaign to end sexist or homophobic language in the school).

4) Mobilize students to take a leadership role

Students are powerful agents of change. They have the most wisdom about how the social dynamics of their schools work and the most leverage with their peers. They can and should take leadership for making their schools caring and respectful places. Middle and high schools can create volunteer committees to generate ideas and implement solutions. It's important to recruit a diverse range of students, including trusted, socially prominent students. This committee should generate ideas and to help implement solutions. Your formal student council could also make positive school culture for all students its main goal.

5) Use discipline strategies that are not simply punitive. Enforcing the school's commitment to moral values and positive social interactions is a critical part of maintaining a positive school climate. Students should be held accountable for their actions and for their responsibility to the school community. But too often, well-meaning staff respond to violations of school values and policies with "zero tolerance" policies that don't work (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008), or

with other forms of discipline that punish without teaching. Violations of school values and policies can provide opportunities for everyone, from students to teachers to administrators, to reflect on why the incident occurred and what should be done differently next time. This means including formative consequences that are both constructive and instructive (such as writing a letter to the person that was harmed by the incident) as well as staff discussion about potential student and community needs that should be addressed.⁵

6) Conduct regular assessments of school values and climate.

Just as staff need information about how students are progressing academically, they need to understand where the school and its students stand when it comes to moral values, norms of kindness and respect, relationships, and commitment to meeting all students' social and emotional needs. Student surveys on these topics are vital. Students, after all, are those with the most wisdom about their social environments. The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI) is a nationally-recognized school climate survey that provides an in-depth profile of your school community's particular strengths and needs.⁶ With the CSCI, you can quickly and accurately assess student, parent, and school personnel perceptions, and get the detailed information you need to make *informed decisions* for lasting improvement. Schools should collect data, for example, about whether and where students feel emotionally and physically safe and unsafe, whether there are adults they can consult if they feel harassed or isolated, and whether they view the school community as caring about them and others. With this information, staff are better informed to allocate resources accordingly and make changes where necessary. It's important to

⁵ For tips on using formative consequences effectively, see http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/bullying/formative_consequences_teachers.pdf.

⁶ www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php.

conduct such assessments on a regular basis (e.g., twice a year) to measure change. It's also important for school staff to hold themselves accountable for making progress by sharing the results with students, staff, and parents.

Summary

While schools are certainly not the only place where students develop moral and social capacities, they are one of the most important settings, in part because they are rich with opportunities for discussion and interaction. School adults can and do play a vital role in these interactions. Their success depends in large part on their capacity for self-reflection, their commitment to making caring and respect priorities, and their ability to mobilize the moral energy and wisdom of students. With these capacities, adults can create the kind of school communities and climate that inspire students to be caring day to day and to imagine and work to create a better and more just world.

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