

How to Create a Positive School Climate

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If you're a school leader, you have problems to solve: bullying, teacher burnout, disengaged students, casual vandalism and litter, and cultural and socio-economic differences, among others. Big issues that affect a lot of people.

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Researchers have found that a [positive school climate](#) can help solve a lot of those problems. Studies find that it decreases absenteeism, suspensions, substance abuse, and bullying, and increases students' academic achievement, motivation to learn, and psychological well-being. It can even mitigate the negative effects of self-criticism and socioeconomic status on academic success. In addition, working in this kind of climate lessens teacher burnout while increasing retention. All really good stuff!

But here's the catch: Creating a positive school climate is really, really hard to do, as any principal will tell you. People have minds of their own, and you can't make them feel peppy and optimistic on command. It takes elbow grease and much care to implement, simply because human motivations and needs are so complex. Here are some research-tested tips to get you started.

What does it look like?

Let's take a moment to paint a picture of positive school climate. When you walk onto a school campus, you can immediately get a sense of the school climate by watching the interactions between people and noticing the school's physical environment.

Do the teachers, students, and school leaders seem happy to be there and are they treating each other with respect? Is the school clean and orderly? Are the bulletin board displays sending out positive messages? Are students engaged in their learning?

In 2007, the [National School Climate Council](#) spelled out specific criteria for what defines a positive school climate, including:

- Norms, values, and expectations that support social, emotional, and physical safety.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families, and educators work together to develop and live a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

So while creating a positive school climate is not easy, it's also not impossible.

Three steps to a positive climate

When building a positive school climate, it's important to remember that there is no magic formula—much will depend on the leaders' values and vision and how much everyone else gets on board with those things.

It starts with [trust](#), which researchers say is an essential prerequisite to a more positive climate. The following steps are in part designed to build trust, mainly by giving teachers, staff, and students some say

in the process—and leaders who guide the process must never miss an opportunity to prove themselves trustworthy and to facilitate trust-building between stakeholders.

Here are some research-based suggestions for school leaders on how to start cultivating a positive school climate:

1) Assess the current climate. You have to know where you're starting from in order to know where to go. And for those on your staff who might be less-than-enthusiastic about creating a positive school climate, asking them about their current experience will help get them on board because they'll feel like their voice is being heard. Also be sure to include everyone's voices: teachers, other school staff, students, parents—and your own.

There are a number of ways to assess your school climate. The [Safe and Supportive Schools website](#) provides a list of validated survey [instruments](#)—some of which are free. However, I would caution against relying on just a survey.

According to [Edgar Schein](#), one of the foremost organizational psychology experts, a survey will not reveal people's underlying assumptions and beliefs which have a profound effect on the school climate—and those are what you need to understand in order to effect real change. On surveys, people can interpret the questions differently. For example, the statement, "I believe this school is headed in the right direction" could be interpreted in a myriad of ways. Also, it is very difficult to know which questions to ask on a survey and how deeply a person feels about a particular area.

Schein suggests meeting in small groups to examine together the school's climate. He outlines a simple method in his book [The Corporate Culture Survival Guide](#) that is easily adaptable to schools. (Note: researchers consider climate and culture to be two different constructs. However, the National School Climate Council's definition above combines the two.)

Individual interviews are also another way to get a sense of the school climate, and should be conducted by someone outside the school to ensure honesty and impartiality, e.g., a consultant or local grad student in organizational psychology.

2) Create a shared vision—but start with personal visions. Research suggests that bringing everyone together to create a shared vision of the kind of climate they want increases the likelihood that the vision will actually be carried out. But according to [Peter Senge](#), director of the [Society for Organizational Learning](#) that originated at MIT, a shared vision must emerge from our personal visions—otherwise people won't be committed to the shared vision.

Senge defines personal vision as "a specific destination, a picture of a desired future" that is rooted in a person's values, concerns, and aspirations. For example, part of my personal vision is wanting schools to be socially and emotionally healthy places for everyone which comes from my deeply held belief that human beings thrive in positive environments.

So before creating a shared vision together, ask everyone to write down his or her personal vision. You might even have them read the section on personal vision in Senge's book, [The Fifth Discipline](#). To ensure student participation, have teachers guide students through this process.

When you're ready to create a shared vision, it's important to create a safe space where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas. I highly recommend using a positive approach to discussion such as [World Café](#) or [Appreciative Inquiry](#). That way, [positive emotions](#) are generated, which will help to cultivate trust amongst group members and also make everyone's thinking more creative and flexible. Be sure to include the students in whatever way possible.

3) Work together to carry out the shared vision—and make it fun! Creating a positive school climate is an ongoing process that never really ends, but it's a joyful one. However, if you find your school off to a slow start, you might try one of these simple motivating ideas that will give a quick boost of positive emotions:

- **“Behind Your Back.”** Click [here](#) for this fun twist on gossiping that can easily be done at the start of class or before a staff meeting. One participant at the Greater Good [Summer Institute for Educators](#) told us that when her school did it at a staff meeting, some long-held grudges between staff members were healed.
- **Gratitude Board.** Provide places in the hallways *and* the teachers' lounge where people can post notes expressing their gratitude for each others' actions. [Gratitude](#) has the wonderful effect of helping us feel more connected to one another and also gives us a boost in our own self-worth—both important aspects of a positive school climate.

While it may seem like a lot of work, the tremendous benefits of a positive school climate far out-weigh the time and effort required. And, while researchers haven't measured it yet, I would guess that a positive school climate can also bring the joy and fun back into teaching and learning. Who wouldn't want to be part of a school like that?

Throughout this next school year, watch for articles on more specific, research-based ideas for building a positive school climate.

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