

# School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning

The Integration of Two Approaches



This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the need for research, practice and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

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## Executive Summary

Healthy schools support student learning, development, and well-being by providing safety, support, academic challenge, healthy foods, time and space to be active, and opportunities for social and emotional development. In healthy schools, both students and educators feel respected and supported. Healthy schools require a positive school climate that supports the social and emotional development of students and adults. Such a climate can reduce inequities and enable students to thrive.

School climate has been conceptualized to include the physical, academic, social, and disciplinary environment. School climate and social and emotional learning (SEL) have often been treated separately by researchers and practitioners, but both are necessary to build healthy schools, are co-influential, and benefit each other. A positive school climate creates the conditions for SEL; the social and emotional competence of each member of the school community, both individually and collectively, affects school climate.

This brief reviews research on how positive school climates support SEL and how improved SEL contributes to improved school climate in elementary and secondary schools. The brief discusses school climate, SEL, and blended models that have effects on school climate and social and emotional competence.

Efforts to improve school climate and SEL can be aligned. Schools can actively foster resilience-building interactions through inclusive school-level policies and initiatives, as well as comprehensive, multi-tiered, whole-school approaches that contribute to positive climates and actively develop social and emotional competencies in students and adults. However, there is still a need for rigorous research that carefully assesses individual and school development in, and provides practical understanding of the application of best practices for, building positive school climates that create opportunities for SEL.



## Introduction

Healthy schools are characterized by positive school climates that support student learning, development, and well-being by providing safety, support and connectedness, academic challenge and engagement, cultural responsiveness, healthy foods, time and space to be active, and SEL.

School climate and social, emotional, and academic competencies have public health benefits.<sup>1,2</sup> They both are multifaceted and complex constructs, and have been conceptualized and measured in many ways:

School climate has been conceptualized to include the physical, academic, social, and disciplinary environment. This definition includes culture, norms, goals, values, practices, characteristics of relationships, and organizational structures.<sup>3,4</sup> In this brief, we focus on components of school climate that are most directly related to learning, behavior, development, and well-being, including: student and adult experiences of emotional, physical, social, and intellectual safety, connectedness, respect, support, engagement, relational trust, and cultural responsiveness. These concepts have been conceptualized as conditions for learning.<sup>5</sup>

SEL refers to the process of learning, practicing, and building competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. SEL interventions in schools have been shown to both improve school climate and student's behavioral and academic functioning.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>

School climate and SEL have been studied separately. The school climate tradition was informed by organizational and school effectiveness research.<sup>10</sup> School climate includes the interactions of all members of the school community; larger organizational patterns including culture, structure, and resources; and how individuals experience and appraise these interactions and patterns.

The emergence of SEL as a field was influenced, in part, by ecological and transactional models of development, which carefully consider the bidirectional relations between children and contexts in which they are embedded that foster students' social, emotional, and academic competence.<sup>11,12</sup> The goals of SEL programs are to simultaneously nurture children's skills and classroom and school practices that provide opportunities for development in everyday situations.<sup>13</sup> Most SEL programs have, until recently, been confined to teaching skills through designated lessons in the classroom and have not been fully integrated into the daily lives of students and adults in school.<sup>14</sup> The research evidence is largely based on evaluations of these programs, and the lack of integration into regular routines of classrooms and schools is one reason for modest effect sizes of SEL programs.

This disconnect between an historical focus on SEL programs and the need to develop broader school climates that support SEL can be attributed to factors including lack of funding, lack of teacher preparation, and lack of school and district infrastructure to support coordinated efforts.<sup>15</sup>

In the past decade, a new wave of programs has acknowledged this limitation. There is now a significant move towards coordinated, systematic, schoolwide and districtwide programming that is ecological, integrates school climate and SEL approaches, and prioritizes the engagement of the larger school community.<sup>16</sup> This new wave includes systematic efforts to integrate and build positive school climates that support SEL, such as the ASCD's Whole Child Initiative,<sup>17</sup> the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development,<sup>18</sup> and recent efforts to create a Science of Learning and Development.<sup>19</sup>

School climate and SEL have considerably more overlap and are more mutually influential than their traditions would suggest. Positive school climates and effective SEL approaches are essential components of safe, supportive, and academically productive schools.<sup>20</sup> School climate is the collective phenomenon that both reflects and creates the conditions for the development of social, emotional, and academic competence in both adults and students. Aligning school climate and SEL can create synergies, reduce fragmentation and burden of practice change, and advance research.

It's also important to acknowledge that there are disparities in how students experience school climate. Students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged are more likely than their peers to report poorer school climates, including experiencing harsh and exclusionary discipline. By developing practical understanding and applications of how to create inclusive, culturally competent school climates for all students and staff, schools can reduce inequities and contribute to healthy development and well-being.

This research brief reviews how positive school climates support SEL and how improving social, emotional, and academic competence contributes to improved school climate. Specifically, the brief describes the components of positive school climates that support SEL in elementary and secondary schools.

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***Aligning school climate and SEL can create synergies, reduce fragmentation and burden of practice change, and advance research.***

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## Key Findings

**Supportive relationships, engagement, safety, cultural competence and responsiveness, and academic challenge and high expectations create positive school climates that can help build social and emotional competence.**

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between climate and social and emotional competence. The circle on the left shows the components of school climate that indirectly shape SEL. The circle on the right identifies competencies that shape and are shaped by school climate. The overlapping area in the center identifies the elements of positive school climates that directly support SEL. Here we focus on the central area—those elements of positive school climates that create conditions that support intentional as well as informal SEL.

At the heart of what it takes for students to thrive are **supportive, respectful, trusting relationships**. Overlapping components (see Figure 1) support these relationships:

**Engagement.** When students experience engagement and feel a sense of belonging and connection with adults and peers at school, they can build social capital and more readily use adults as social models, accept feedback, and navigate and persevere through challenges.<sup>21</sup>

**Safety.** When students and staff feel safe, they are more willing to focus on learning from and with others and take academic risks.

**Figure 1. A model of the distinct and overlapping elements of school climate and social and emotional competence with illustrative components**



**Cultural competence.** Cultural competence is a set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enables schools, agencies, and teachers to work more effectively in bicultural and multicultural settings and interactions.<sup>22</sup> Cultural competence can help adults be aware of privilege, implicit bias and micro-aggressions. Culturally competent schools help educators engage students and families by creating conditions where students and families feel a sense of belonging, support, respect, and safety.<sup>23</sup>

**Cultural responsiveness.** Culturally competent teachers can use their knowledge of students to be more instructionally responsive. Culturally responsive instructional approaches are engaging, participatory, and use diverse instructional models to scaffold learning by using students' own cultural knowledge to teach new concepts, connect experiences inside and outside the classroom, and master new information.<sup>24</sup> Such approaches can address the social and emotional and learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students by creating learning environments where students feel emotionally and intellectually safe, supported, and challenged.<sup>25</sup>

Culturally competent school climates and culturally responsive approaches and practices can help students build strengths-based individual and collective narratives and can help students counteract negative dominant narratives, such as prejudicial stereotypes.

**Challenge and high expectations.** Students are more personally motivated to succeed, more actively engaged in learning, and work better with others when they, their peers, and adults have high expectations for achievement that are experienced as relevant to them; when they are surrounded by peers who have academic aspirations; and when curricula, pedagogy, and opportunities to learn are rigorous, engaging and aligned with their goals.<sup>26</sup>

Leaders are essential to creating the conditions to build teachers' social and emotional competencies. Teachers are more likely to develop these skills when leadership both prioritizes and models these competencies. Teachers who have social and emotional competence (SEC) can model it to support student behavior and learning.<sup>27</sup>

## **The relationship between positive school climate and SEL is interactive and co-influential, it occurs in all settings and student-teacher-staff interactions, and influences students and teachers directly and indirectly.**

There is a dynamic relationship among aspects of school climate and SEL. Student and adult social and emotional competencies influence and are influenced by interactions among students and adults. These interactions can intentionally develop SECs through direct instruction, modeling, and reinforcement. These interactions occur across the various settings of the school building. In addition, factors such as class size, how students are grouped, student-faculty ratios, policies, resource allocation, the physical features of the school, rituals, narratives, school culture, and the demographic composition of the school also affect interactions. In turn, these features influence and are influenced by out-of-school contexts that include availability of community centers and other community supports, community risk and protective factors, family needs and concerns, how students get to school, and social networks.



**The relation between school climate and SEL is bidirectional.** School climate affects SEL and vice versa in a dynamic manner. For example, when there is less bullying and violence in the classroom and school, students become less fearful, employ non-violent methods of conflict resolution, and interact more effectively, cooperatively, inclusively, and productively. As a result, there are fewer disciplinary incidents and disruptions of learning, allowing for better resource allocation leading to positive learning outcomes.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the acquisition of SEL contributes to a safer school environment.<sup>29</sup>

**The relation between school climate and SEL occurs across levels of the school system.**

The mutually reinforcing relationship between school climate and SEL occurs in moment-to-moment interactions within classroom and school settings. It also is embedded within other climate-related factors (e.g., organizational systems, policies, procedures, the physical environment, and cultures and norms), which are in turn embedded within community settings. These repeated interactions set patterns and norms in one-on-one and larger group interactions. School climate and SEL also shape and are shaped by the policies and procedures that determine responses to misbehavior, resource allocation, the level of collaboration among staff and between schools and the community, and access to prevention and intervention services in schools.

**The relation between school climate and SEL is multidimensional.** School climate and SEL each have multiple components. School climate includes elements of safety, engagement, relationships, teaching and learning, and environment, and can be measured at the school and classroom levels. SEL involves the development of individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions. One component of school climate can mutually influence other components of school climate as well as one or more SEL components. For example, teacher support contributes to how students regulate their behaviors in the classrooms, just as students' self-regulation skills contribute to teachers' capacities to create supportive classroom conditions.

Most often, multiple components of school climate and SEL are present at the same time. For example, culturally responsive relationships both create and are aided by how emotionally and physically safe students and adults feel. These two components of school climate, in interaction, can create and aid the development of multiple social and emotional competencies in students and adults, such as social awareness and confidence.

**The interaction of school climate and SEL creates ripple effects in the school.** A specific interaction between a student and a teacher may affect not only those directly involved but also surrounding students and adults. For example, disruptive student behavior may distract teachers or cause teacher stress, both of which can have effects on how the teacher appraises the behavior of and responds to other students. Similarly, a positive or negative principal-staff interaction may have ripple effects across the staff that may impact students when they witness and potentially model adult behaviors.

**Rigorous evaluations of school climate and SEL approaches have provided some direct evidence that one can improve the other.**

**School climate approaches.** Schools have the potential to serve as powerful protective factors in students' development.<sup>30</sup> Schools are relatively self-contained environments and can be safe spaces for children and their families.<sup>31</sup> Schools can counteract alienation and isolation students may feel by actively fostering resilience-building interactions.<sup>32</sup> Schools that foster a sense of belonging can help reduce depression, increase self-efficacy, and provide opportunities to build self-confidence and relationship-building skills.<sup>33,34</sup> School-level policies and initiatives such as anti-harassment policies, providing safe spaces for youth who are marginalized, and enlisting the resources of families and other community members from marginalized groups can reduce negative outcomes in young people.<sup>35,36</sup>

The most effective approaches to improving school climate can create conditions for SEL and engage multiple members of the school community. These efforts have not been entirely separate from SEL approaches and are sometimes used as an organizing approach for prevention efforts, including character and moral education, civic education, and risk/mental health promotion efforts.<sup>37</sup> Although there is great interest in improving school climate, limited direct evidence exists for the effectiveness of school climate or whole-school approaches

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in promoting social and emotional development. One noteworthy exception is the Caring School Community program, which, by aiming to create a sense of community while also developing social and emotional skills, combines elements of both school climate approaches and SEL programs.<sup>38</sup> In addition, there is some evidence that schools with more positive school climate have higher implementation of SEL programs. The universal components of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), a prevention framework for both improving school climate and providing additional tiers of behavior supports to appropriate students, has also shown positive impacts on students' emotion regulation, prosocial behavior, and concentration, in addition to improving perceptions of safety, academic performance and reducing bullying and office disciplinary referrals.<sup>39,40</sup>

Some approaches show promise but have not yet been rigorously evaluated. Disciplinary approaches such as authoritative discipline and restorative practices show promise for reducing re-traumatization and contribute to emotional and physical safety and equity.<sup>41,42</sup> Universal trauma-sensitive interventions can include creating a warm and caring school, teacher training on the impacts of trauma, alternatives to suspension, and classroom presentations on coping with trauma and violence. Trauma-informed interventions can include trauma-informed approaches to SEL that address individual needs, trauma-informed approaches to discipline, and trauma-informed psychotherapies.<sup>43</sup>

**SEL approaches.** SEL programs and practices vary in their approaches.<sup>44,45</sup> Some programs focus solely on teaching skills exclusively in a lesson format, while others also nurture students and teachers to use these skills across the school day and school settings. Programs also provide professional development to different people; some focus only on classroom teachers, while others extend to all adults who work in the schools (from the principal to playground, lunchroom and transportation staff). Based on a review of evidence-based SEL programs, The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders identified 10 instructional strategies for improving SEC.<sup>46</sup>

Some SEL programs take more comprehensive approaches by providing procedures for community-family-school involvement and partnership. These more comprehensive programs aim to develop the environmental conditions for skill acquisition, reinforcement, and recognition.<sup>47,48</sup> For example, some SEL interventions strive to provide high expectations for students, support from adults, structured and cooperative learning environments, and safe and orderly schools to produce improvements in children's engagement, prosocial behavior (and reduction in antisocial behavior) and academic success.<sup>49</sup> Evaluations of these programs have shown positive short-term effects, but implementation is often difficult to sustain on a long-term basis.<sup>50</sup> A four-year evaluation of an eight-district demonstration program of systemic, district-level SEL approaches suggests that systemic SEL leads to improvements in student perceptions of school climate.<sup>51</sup>

## The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders identifies 10 teaching practices that promote students' social and emotional competencies

1. Student-Centered Discipline
2. Teacher Language
3. Responsibility and Choice
4. Warmth and Support
5. Cooperative Learning
6. Classroom Discussions
7. Self-Reflection and Self-Assessment
8. Balanced Instruction
9. Academic Press and Expectations
10. Competence Building—Modeling, Practicing, Feedback, Coaching

Source: Yoder, N. (2014). Teaching the whole child: Instructional practices that support social-emotional learning in three teacher evaluation frameworks. Washington DC: American Institutes for Research.

A number of rigorous evaluations of SEL programs (including 4Rs, RULER, Tools of the Mind, PATHS, Incredible Years, Responsive Classroom, and Chicago School Readiness Project) have demonstrated improvements in classroom climate that are significant, with moderate to large effect sizes.<sup>52,53,54,55,56,57,58</sup> A handful of evaluations of SEL programs including PATHS, Steps to Respect, and Raising Healthy Children have found impacts on school climate more broadly, including student attitudes toward school and school bonding.<sup>59,60,61</sup>

The evidence for the effects of SEL programs on improvements in classroom and school climate comes primarily from efforts in preschools and elementary schools. There exists less consistent evidence that SEL programs are effective for adolescents and little evidence of SEL programs' effects on secondary school or classroom climate. However, a recent review of SEL programs for adolescents suggests that creating climates and mindsets that increase respect towards adolescents and help them cope with challenges shows great promise.<sup>62</sup>

**Blended approaches.** Blended programs or approaches that incorporate SEL and school climate improvements with both "bottom up" and "top down" strategies show promise of effectiveness. For example, SEL and school climate efforts have been successfully implemented districtwide in Cleveland elementary schools.<sup>63</sup> In addition, evidence suggests that a combination of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) or School-wide PBIS combined with SEL has stronger effects on student outcomes than SEL alone.<sup>64</sup> One unique approach to both bottom up and top down efforts is City Year's Whole School Whole Child model, which seeks to support and strengthen the learning environment to increase student engagement and commitment to school.<sup>65</sup> Evaluations of City Year and Diplomas Now, another whole-school reform effort, already show some evidence for improvements in social and emotional competencies, including positive social interactions with peers and adults and conflict resolution, and school climate, as well as increased attendance and reduced suspensions. City Year is now more intentionally including SEL in its efforts.<sup>66,67,68</sup>

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## Future Research Needs

There is an urgent need to ensure that teachers, administrators, other school staff, families, community members, youth, and policy makers have the best tools and knowledge at their disposal to create positive school climates and focus specifically on developing the social and emotional competencies of children and adults.

To build these tools and knowledge, the research and practice communities can benefit from greater clarity and alignment in definitions, goals, messaging, and measurement of SEL and school climate, and understand how each one can complement the other. In addition, measures that capture both school climate and SEL by students, staff, and parents align with the conceptual frame discussed in this brief and allow for greater precision in understanding how SEL and school climate interact. Developing research questions and articulating practical goals that connect fields of study will reduce research and practice silos. Interdisciplinary collaborations, innovative methods, and existing data can be leveraged to build theory. Collaborations should involve longitudinal studies that examine the co-influential relationships between and among the components of school climate and how to improve and create greater equity in individual social, emotional, and cognitive competencies.

Concurrently, rigorous evaluations are needed on the effectiveness of school approaches that are designed to simultaneously improve school climates and support SEL of students and adults, particularly in secondary school. Equally important to understanding the effectiveness of these combined strategies is understanding how systems-level factors—such as school design, principal and district leadership, implementation quality and support, and district and state policies—shape school climates that support social and emotional development.

Most climate and SEL interventions are implemented as universal interventions. Yet, as expected, they do not benefit all students to the same degree. The high rate of trauma and chronic stress present a need to design and test comprehensive multi-tiered approaches. A multi-tiered approach includes comprehensive universal climate and SEL interventions for all students, more focused early interventions for students at some greater level of need, and intensive interventions for students at the highest level of need. The universal interventions function as a foundation to support teachers and students. It is important that interventions at all levels employ the same language, nurture the same social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and components of school climate that support safety, respect, connectedness, challenge, and care.<sup>69</sup> Multi-tiered intervention frameworks have the potential to extend the benefits and reach of climate and SEL interventions and require rigorous evaluation.

## Conclusions and Implications

School climate and SEL have been implemented and studied through distinct approaches and frameworks, which have produced distinct bodies of research. This has contributed to fragmented efforts that limit knowledge, uptake and intervention effects. However, school climate and SEL are inextricably linked. Schools in which all students can thrive provide safe and supportive environments and provide opportunities for all students to develop SEC.

Developing the conditions and opportunities for learning can reduce inequities, create safe spaces for marginalized youth, and contribute to student thriving.

**The integration of efforts to improve school climate and SEL is a promising avenue for creating these conditions and opportunities.**

Research and analyses at the intersection of school climate and SEL support the following conclusions and recommendations:

- There is an inextricable link between school climate and SEL. Attention to school climate is necessary for knowledge building and promotion of SEL in students and adults, just as attention to SEL is necessary for knowledge building and improvement of school climate.
- Although attending to all components of school climate may be useful to build healthy schools, attention to those components most proximal to building students' social, emotional, and cognitive competence may most efficiently drive and reinforce changes in students and adults.

### Authors/Affiliations

David Osher, Ph.D. is Vice President and Institute Fellow at American Institutes for Research; Juliette Berg, Ph.D. is Senior Researcher at American Institutes for Research. The authors gratefully acknowledge Kimberly Kendziora, Ph.D. and Deborah Moroney, Ph.D., of American Institutes for Research, Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., of Rutgers University, and Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., of Columbia University for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this brief.

### Suggested Citation

Osher, D., & Berg, J. (2017). "School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches." Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

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