

School Culture Resource Kit

Overview

School culture reflects the way teachers and staff members work together and demonstrate their shared set of beliefs, values, and assumptions. A school's culture is reflected in perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and rules—both written and unwritten. School culture is also reflected by the physical and emotional safety of students; the appeal of classrooms and public spaces; the ways that a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity. A positive school culture promotes learning. (Harvard Graduate School of Education)

The 3 Levels of School Culture

Level 1:

- What you might see on your first visit--first impressions

Level 2:

- Values, beliefs, "the way things should be done"
- These are "testable" by evidence in the school environment

Level 3:

- Fundamental beliefs about school, staff, students, families, and community
- The school's reason for being

(Adapted from Professional Development Service for Teachers [PDST])

WHAT WE KNOW

5 Elements Shape School Culture

- **Fundamental beliefs and assumptions**, or the things that people at your school consider to be true. For example: "All students have the potential to succeed."
- **Shared values**, or the judgments—right or wrong—that people at your school make about those belief and assumptions. For example: "All kindergartners should have the same opportunity to graduate from a 4-year college."
- **Norms**, or how members believe they *should* act or what they think is expected of them. For example: "We all should be present and engaged at our weekly grade-level meetings."
- **Patterns and behaviors**, or the way people *actually* act and behave in your school. For example: Scheduled themed parent events occur.
- **Tangible evidence**, or the sensory signs that demonstrate the behaviors of the people in your school. For example: Displays showcase student and school success.

(Adapted from "What Makes a Good School Culture" by Leah Shafer, from the Harvard Graduate School of Education's *Usable Knowledge: Relevant Research for Today's Educators*)

The Role of Diversity in Building School Culture

Why?

This is important because:

- ❑ Key to building a strong school culture is recognizing and embracing the diversity among students and staff.
- ❑ Recognizing and acknowledging differences is part of treating students fairly.
- ❑ Diversity is not straightforward; nor is it only racial or ethnic. Not only does diversity exist between racial groups but also within each group.
- ❑ All students begin school with a framework of skills and information based on their home cultures.
- ❑ Recognition of a student's cultural differences provides a positive basis for effective learning, and a "safe" classroom environment.

(Adapted from "4 Reasons Why Classrooms Need Diversity Education" by Matthew Lynch.

How?

Here are some steps you can take today:

- ❑ **Take time to learn about students:** Adapt the **2x10 Strategy** as an easy yet effective classroom management strategy to become more culturally responsive and build connections with students.
- ❑ **Use culturally responsive language:** Using more culturally responsive words can help students engage & more process content.
- ❑ **Bring in diverse guest speakers:** Invite diverse speakers to share their knowledge & engage students who share a culture with them.
- ❑ **Deliver diverse forms of content:** Consider your curriculum & modify your instruction to include all students' backgrounds.
- ❑ **Use technology:** Using different forms of technology & media can help boost student engagement levels while depicting cultures that students wouldn't have been exposed to without technology resources.
- ❑ **Present real-world problems:** Presenting relatable problems lets students look for cultural links & use their own cultural awareness to solve the question.

(Adapted from "Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies" by Janelle Cox, TeachHub)

Family & Community Resources: *School Culture*



Read

Palmyra Public Schools (in New Jersey) offers a list of tips for parents, "[11 Way Parents Can Support a Positive School Climate](#)".

The **National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments** published this [School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Community Partners](#).

In this article on [ChildTrends.org](#), **Kristin E. Darling and Deborah Temkins** discuss the effects of a positive school climate: "[A Positive School Climate Can Mean a Successful School Year](#)."



Listen

Brad Ritchey, an Ohio superintendent, discusses the importance of communication with families and communities in the podcast, "[Student Celebrations, School Climate and Communication](#)," on the weekly podcast, [We Love Schools](#).

Also from [We Love Schools](#), hosts **Carole Dorn-Bell and Joel Gagne** discuss ways schools can effectively communicate school culture and climate topics with parents and community members in "[How SHOULD Your School Communicate with You?](#)"



Watch

PTOtoday published this 2 minute video, "[Parent Involvement Matters](#)," that showcases what research says about parent involvement: students' attendance, grades, and social skills are positively impacted.



Do

Volunteer in your child's school by chaperoning a field trip, attending board meetings, spending time with an afterschool club, or be a classroom, PE, lunch, or computer lab helper. Find more ideas about how to volunteer from this [Kid's Health article by Elana Pearl Ben-Joseph, MD](#).

'**Offer to host a focus group, offer expertise, help schools connect to other community partners,**' are some of the actions recommended in the [School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Community Partners](#) (referenced in the 'Read' section above).

Attend school events. This is an important - and sometimes overlooked - way for parents and community members to be involved. Read about this action step and more from [ColorinColorado's](#) article, "[Parent Participation: How to Get Involved in Your Child's School Activities](#)."

School Resources: *School Culture*



Read

The **National Center on Safe Supportive Learning** has developed Resource Packages and action guides for school and district personnel. Each guide focuses on steps that educators can take to improve school culture and climate:

"School Climate Improvement Action Guide for District Leaders"

"School Climate Improvement Action Guide for School Leaders"

"School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Instructional Staff"

"School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Noninstructional Staff"

The **Illinois State Board of Education**, a guide for ways schools can include families in building a strong school culture, *"Improving School Climate and Culture Through Meaningful Family Engagement."*



Listen

Each of the podcasts in **Phil Boyt's** series, *School Culture by Design*, reflects his belief that all school staff members, no matter what role they play, have a hand in "creating a school no one will want to leave."



Watch

ASCD Shorts features **Todd Whitaker** who explains how the culture and climate of a school develops, and why it's important to gain an understanding of your school's culture in order to improve it, *"Climate and Culture with Todd Whitaker."*

In this video the facilitators of the **Academy for Social-Emotional Learning** in Schools define school culture and climate and discuss its importance in our schools, *"What is School Culture and Climate."*



Do

Make school culture and climate the foundation for learning. Discover the *"8 Ways Principals Can Build Positive School Culture Now"* from Dana Truby at *School Leaders Now*.

Apply a one day at a time approach. Integrate ASCD's *"Three Step Process to Improve School Culture,"* developed by Oran Tkatchov, author of *Success for Every Student – A Guide to Teaching and Learning*.

Build a strong culture in every classroom. Follow suggestions from *education.com* guest author, April Brown, who offers *"5 Ways to Improve Your School's Culture."*