

Making Your School Safe¹

Strategies to Protect Children
and
Promote Learning

What follows is a summary of the chapters contained in the work authored by Devine and Cohen. Copies of the text are available through Teachers College Press.

CHAPTER ONE: The Relationship between Social Emotional Education and Safety in a School²

Feeling safe is a basic need for students, educators, and other school personnel. Most schools focus on physical safety alone and overlook how social emotional safety provides an essential foundation for learning and positive youth development. Comprehensive and effective K-12 school safety program need to be grounded in three overlapping levels:

- Individual: recognizing, addressing, and anticipating the needs of out-of-control and at-risk students
- Classroom: teaching students the social, emotional, and ethical as well as cognitive skills and dispositions that support nonviolent conflict resolution, flexible problem solving, and learning
- School wide: adults and students working together to create a climate for learning and safety.

REFLECTING ON YOUR CURRENT PRACTICES

- Do you (as an educator or parent) feel physically, socially, and emotionally safe in your school?
- Is the learning environment such that it promotes academic exploration and an atmosphere for thoughtful reflection, scholarly discourse, and study?
- Do staff members uniformly attempt to instill social and emotional learning and inculcate respect?
- Is there a conscious effort to teach respect and link it to safety? For example, do the school safety officers address students with respect?
- Do staff members treat one another with respect and courtesy, thereby setting an example for students?
- Do teachers, as a group and as individuals, attempt to inculcate social and emotional skills in the corridors and stairwells and the cafeteria, as well as their classrooms?
- What social emotional learning and character education (SEL/CE) practices are you engaging in already in your school that might serve as models for other schools?
- Are SEL/CE, safety, and academic learning intertwined in your school? How/

CHAPTER TWO: Preparing Your School to Deal with a Crisis; Principles of School Crisis Preparedness and Response³

Making schools safe necessarily includes crisis preparedness planning. Such planning and related prevention efforts that address school safety and security reduce the likelihood that a crisis will occur. Yet crises can and will occur in schools. If a school has developed a thoughtful and sustained crisis preparedness plan, it will dramatically reduce the negative impact of actual crises.

¹ *Making Your School Safe*, Devine & Cohen, Teachers College Press, 2007.

² Ibid, page 7-8.

³ Ibid, page 17-18.

Crisis preparedness planning needs to address physical dangers but also the social emotional needs of students and school personnel. There is a series of procedures, roles, and responsibilities that define effective crisis preparedness planning. A good resource is the practical Guide to Crisis Planning⁴ found on the Kansas Safe Schools Resource Center website.⁵

REFLECTING ON YOUR CURRENT PRACTICE

- What does it mean to be safe at your school?
- How do you define safety within the confines of your own school?
- Feeling safe and being safe are not identical concepts. Are there physical barriers such as locked doors or gates at the gym) to safety in your school? How could these be eliminated?
- How have terrorist alerts, anxieties provoked by war, or shooting incidents in schools affected students and staff?
- What are you already doing to make your school safe 1) physically 2) socially, and 3) emotionally?
- Do you have a team approach to safety and an ongoing process for crisis preparedness?
- What does your school crisis plan delineate? What are the most important details?
- How many people in your school know about the existence of the plan?
- How many people really know what to do?

CHAPTER THREE: Creating a Climate for Social and Emotional Safety⁶

Promoting students' experience of feeling socially and emotionally safe enhances learning and healthy development. There is a series of specific steps that school leaders can take to actualize this goal. At the level of individual students, we need to develop systems to recognize and address the needs of troubled youths. Students in dire need will signal, directly or indirectly, that they are in trouble until someone engages them. Two common ways that these students signal their need for help is to act out and hurt others or to "act in" and become self-destructive. School leaders need to consider to what extent they are teaching students specific social and emotional skills that promote reflective, empathic, problem solving, communication, and collaborative capacities. These are the underlying skills that support students talking about and meeting healthy needs as well as recognizing other students who may be signaling that they are in trouble. These skills provide an essential foundation for sustained and effective violence prevention in schools. Finally, school leaders need to think systemically about how to make the school community a safe place where people can tell the truth and learn to be "upstanders."⁷ These systemic interventions and processes create the foundation for effective violence prevention efforts.

Typically, the social and emotional dimensions of feeling safe influence one another interactively. Social experience (e.g., being teased) affects internal emotional experience (e.g., "I am worried I will be teased again"). Positive social experiences (e.g. "People stand up for me when I am being teased") affect emotional experience (e.g., "People have stood up for me and now I will want to stand up for others"). And our emotional experiences (e.g., "I feel strong and have a good group of friends") shape our social behavior (e.g., "I will stand up and tell that bully to stop being mean").

⁴ http://www.ksde.org/KS_SAFE_SCHOOLS_RESOURCE_CENTER/crisis%20planning%20full%20manual.pdf

⁵ http://www.ksde.org/KS_SAFE_SCHOOLS_RESOURCE_CENTER/index.html

⁶ Ibid #1, pages 26-30.

⁷ Ibid, Chapter 6.

Children do not feel safe when they see violence on a regular basis, either in their neighborhoods or at school. Feeling safe is clearly related to the effectiveness of public safety (the police) in keeping overt violence in a community at a low level. Even in middle-class neighborhoods, young people are exposed to a culture of violence through the media, the entertainment industry, and the casual acceptance of violence, what is known as the *normalization of violence*. Many seemingly ordinary features of our culture contribute to this desensitization. For example, school metal detectors, although they may be necessary for a number of reasons, also convey the message that violence is normal and is to be expected.

Many school attendance problems and truancy problems have their basis in students' desire to avoid hostile conflicts. One key factor in making a student feel safe consists simply of having a safe place (office, activity room, a safe after-school program) to go to, both during and after school. Feeling safe is also related to the social climate in a school: When students are encouraged to engage in altruistic behaviors (helping other students, counseling), academic performance improves and students feel safer. The presence of a meaningful relationship with a single adult is one of the key factors in feeling safe. One of the most powerful forces in schools is the presence of mentors.

Many kids feel that they are academic failures and do not believe that it is emotionally safe to keep on trying. Some students, both boys and girls, will tease a student who is trying to cooperate with a teacher, volunteering information, or raising questions. Schools need to have a clear policy that they will not tolerate teasing or putdowns.

The following approaches represent research-based systemic interventions that tend to foster a safer, more caring, participatory, and responsive school climate:

- fostering teacher-parent-student discussions and related action planning about what kind of school they want, this dialogue can create a schoolwide ethos that fosters positive discipline, academic success, and social and emotional wellness
- assessing what is being done that is effective and ascertaining that efforts are not being duplicated
- explicitly stating that the school community values and is committed to fostering a sense of social, emotional, and physical safety
- parents, teachers, and optimally students deciding on year-long themes (e.g., the bully-victim-bystander cycle) that provide ongoing opportunities to reflect and learn about what promotes or inhibits safety and learning
- working to create smaller learning communities
- working to ensure that every student feels connected to at least one adult in the school building
- coordinating existing risk prevention and health promotion efforts
- identifying at-risk students from the pre-K level on and intervene with 10-15% of students who are at risk for severe academic or behavioral problems through an identification process developed by the building-level student and support team
- eliminating bullying by actively addressing bullying, victim, and bystander behaviors and teaching students to recognize such behavior
- promoting tolerance by teaching students to understand issues of diversity
- being positive role models for students; solving problems with colleagues nonviolently and respectfully

REFLECTING ON CURRENT PRACTICE

- Do students tell adults when they feel unsafe at school?
- Are rules for student behavior clearly communicated?
- Are rules for student behavior consistently and fairly administered?
- Is there a shared sense of responsibility among adults for student discipline?
- To what extent do students have a shared sense of responsibility for student discipline?
- Do teachers have input regarding the school discipline policy?
- To what extent do teachers address problems with student behavior in a positive, proactive manner? To what extent has professional development fostered this?
- To what extent are rules and regulations reasonable?
- To what extent do students feel socially and emotionally comfortable in school?
- Are teachers and staff trained to recognize student-at risk behaviors?
- Are children who demonstrate at-risk behaviors identified and assisted in the area of effective problem solving?
- Are students with emotional problems referred to and followed up by mental health personnel?
- Is there ongoing professional development for teachers on topics related to effective discipline, bullying, and school climate?
- To what extent is the school working to create smaller learning communities?
- Do you agree that smaller is better? What are the implications of this adage in your own academic setting?
- Many student disruption and suspension issues could be better addressed if schools could provide one-on-one or small-group learning settings for students. How can individualized or small-group interactions be better promoted within your school?
- To what extent do the adults in the school building work to be active and positive social emotional learning role models?
- To what extent is there an ongoing reflective discussion in the school about diversity, in-group and out-group behavior, and the importance of being tolerant?
- To what extent are the adults committed to ongoing assessment so that they can learn about what is and is not working in these areas? How is this being done?

CHAPTER FOUR: Promoting Social Emotional Competencies and Healthy Relationships⁸

Teaching students the skills, knowledge, and beliefs that foster core social and emotional competencies is one of the two major strategies that creates safer and more caring schools. There is a group of core social and emotional competencies that is predictive of students' ability to learn, to solve problems in nonviolent ways, and to act in caring, related ways. Although researchers have used various labels to describe the core social and emotional competencies, the following list represents one generally agreed-upon framework for the competencies:

- reflective and empathic abilities
- problem-solving and decision-making abilities
- communicative capacities
- impulse control and anger management abilities
- cooperative capacities
- ability to form friendships
- ability to recognize and appreciate diversity; and
- altruistic capacities

⁸ Ibid, pages 31-54.

There is a range of ways in which educators can actively promote students' social and emotional competencies:

- through stand-alone courses of study
- by integrating social emotional education into the existing curriculum
- by infusing social emotional education into the nonacademic aspects of classroom life
- through service learning, community service and restorative practices; and
- by example: To the extent that we are active social emotional learners, we become vital role models for our students

It is essential that we are actively involved with being social emotional learners ourselves and that professional development activities support this goal. Social and emotional competencies should be an explicit and valued goal throughout the school. Teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities to increase their awareness of social and emotional skills. Adults and children can work collaboratively to develop a list of common values regarding rights and responsibilities within the school and make that list visible in every room.

REFLECTING ON CURRENT PRACTICE

- What are your goals?
- What can you do to clarify whether current as well as planned efforts are actually furthering your goals?
- Are students given work that is appropriate to their academic needs?
- Are there opportunities for children to excel in academic, artistic, and social domains?
- Are grouping practices flexible to help meet individual students' needs?
- Are teachers provided with professional development opportunities to help them recognize and meet the diverse needs of learners?
- Are administrators involved consistently in the teaching and learning process?
- Do teachers ask administrators for instructional assistance?
- Do teachers believe that it is important to be a reflective practitioner and to self-evaluate?
- Do teachers believe that an important part of their job is to teach social and emotional skills, knowledge, and beliefs?
- Are professional development opportunities in social and emotional learning offered to faculty and staff?
- Is social and emotional skill building a clearly articulated piece of the curriculum?
- Are teachers given ongoing administrative support in the area of social and emotional learning?
- Do adults in the school demonstrate an understanding of students' social and emotional needs?
- Do adults in the school role model effective social and emotional skills?
- Do adults in the building see a relationship between their own behaviors and those of their students?
- Are students encouraged to take intellectual risks?

CHAPTER FIVE: Fostering Students' Emotional Safety for Learning⁹

Emotional safety refers to accepting and feeling safe enough with your own internal feelings, thoughts, and impulses. Feeling safe emotionally provides the foundation for healthy risk taking as well as for learners to be able to openly not know and be confused. It is normal that children often feel embarrassed

⁹ Ibid, pages 55-60.

about not knowing, being confused, and a variety of other experiences that contribute to feeling not fully in control. Feeling emotionally safe creates a platform for discovery and learning. Optimally, the climate of the school echoes the climate of the classroom. For example, both the principal and the classroom teacher focus intermittently on the importance of trusting and caring relationships.

REFLECTING ON CURRENT PRACTICE

- How important do I think it really is for students to feel emotionally safe?
- When I was a child, what was the most important experience or experiences in school that fostered my emotional safety as a learner? What were the most important experiences that made me feel unsafe?
- What do I do now as an educator to foster students' emotional safety in my class?
- What do I do now as an educator to foster students' emotional safety in school?
- What do you think are some major factors that contribute to students feeling emotionally unsafe?
- To what extent do I explicitly talk about the importance of being able to not know and be confused? How do I actually reinforce this with my students?
- Do I have a formal or informal class policy about how it is okay or not okay for students to react to one another (e.g., laughing at mistakes)?
- To what extent is this issue discussed in department meetings, faculty meetings, and professional development forums? So often, physical and social safety issues (e.g., bullying) are so problematic in school that we rarely focus on creating the internal climate for learning.
- To what extent do my goals for creating a caring classroom echo the school's goal for creating a caring school?

CHAPTER SIX: Bullying: The Triangle of Bully, Victim, and Bystander¹⁰

MYTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT BULLYING

People in the United States have been slowly becoming aware of the toxic effects of bullying. Nevertheless, numerous myths about bullying persist. Here are a few of the more common myths you might hear both inside and outside of schools:¹¹

- Bullying will always be with us, there is nothing we can do about it.
- Bullies are tough or mean kids who will not change.
- Victims need to toughen up and not be so sensitive.
- Dealing with bullying is not in my job description.
- Girls rarely bully.
- It's just a little teasing, for God's sake.
- It's part of the culture. You'll never change it.
- What do you expect from some unruly teenagers?
- There are some forms of bullying that are impossible to eradicate.
- Boys need some taunting to toughen them up. It builds character.
- What harm can a little bullying do?

Over the last decade, there has been growing awareness that bullying and bully-victim behavior are serious and pervasive problems that complicate K-12 students' ability to learn and develop in healthy ways. In fact, they are among the most common social problems that prevent students from feeling safe

¹⁰ Ibid, pages 61-79.

¹¹ Ibid, pages 69-70.

in schools. Within the context of schoolwide, classroom, and individual considerations, we have suggested that it is essential that we expand our thinking about bully-victim behavior to include the witness. When people bully, there is virtually always someone else who sees, hears, or learns about it: There are witnesses. So often, students and adults alike fall into the role of passive bystander: We see bully-victim behavior and do nothing. Passive bystanders collude with bully-victim behavior and implicitly communicate that this behavior is okay.

We have continued to outline a series of steps that school leaders need to consider systemically, instructionally, and individually. On a school wide basis, it is essential that school leaders communicate that bullying is unacceptable. Although there is no single best way to communicate this, we have outlined a series of steps that school leaders can consider to set in motion a discussion about the kind of school people want. These include:¹²

- school wide interventions (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2002)
 - awareness campaign;
 - form a bullying prevention committee;
 - survey students, staff and parents;
 - increase supervision;
 - adopt school wide policy and rules against bullying;
 - include an examination of the role of the witness;
 - recognize and honor “upstander” behavior
- classroom interventions
 - classroom rules;
 - class meetings to discuss bullying;
 - informational meetings for parents;
 - provide students opportunities to practice “upstander” behavior (strategies and scripts);
- individual interventions
 - level three interventions with individual students (bullies, victims and witnesses);
 - use of local mental health partners;
 - parent involvement; and
 - school, mental health and parent team approach (Cohen, 2006).

Students like all of us, want and need to feel safe. Naturally, this leads to questions about how we want others to act if we are in trouble, passive bystanders, and upstanders. But raising awareness is not enough. Students need to learn strategies and scripts that they can use when they see bullying. They need to be able to practice being upstanders. This instructional level is key. It is also important that school leaders consider how they will recognize and reinforce upstander behavior. School wide strategies that recognize and reinforce upstander behavior send a powerful message to the school community. We care about and value upstander behavior.

When schools adopt a bully-victim-bystander/upstander campaign, we are not just reducing school violence. We are also setting in motion a process of social justice and democratic education. What kind of school do we want? How do we want to treat one another? How do we ensure that no one in our community is abused? These are questions that touch on our vision for democratic communities. Promoting upstander behavior also promotes some of the essential skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for participation in a democracy (Cohen & Mischelli, 2006).

¹² Pages 71-73.

REFLECTING ON CURRENT PRACTICE

- How prevalent is bullying in your school community? Student bullying? Adult bullying? *Very importantly, how do you know this?*
- How does your school currently recognize and address bully behavior?
- To what extent is there a school wide commitment to not tolerating bullying and to the notion that we must all actively stand up to bully-victim behavior as opposed to inadvertently falling into a passive bystander role?
- What are you doing at school wide, instructional (teaching skills that will reduce bully-victim behavior) and individual (educator, parent, mental health professional partnership) levels? What is the most and least effective about these efforts?

CHAPTER SEVEN: Recognizing and Assisting Traumatized Children¹³

In this chapter the following points are made:

- A significant percentage of children suffer emotional trauma.
- Without assistance, traumatized children will have marked impairment in their ability to learn and will often disrupt others' attempts to learn.
- Trauma can lead to agitation and aggressiveness or to anxiety and clinginess, to withdrawal and numbing, or to inappropriate sexual behavior.
- Even skilled clinicians often fail to realize that underneath a child's anxiety, depression, oppositional behavior, aggression, hyperactivity, or difficulty concentrating is a history of trauma or high levels of current stress.
- A significant change in behavior is the key sign of trauma.
- Chronic trauma, in particular, has a profound impact on emotional development, including identity, images of the world, and a person's ability to learn to contain and correctly express emotions.
- Effective treatments for trauma have been developed in recent years. Traumatized children should be referred to professionals specially trained to deal with trauma.
- By recognizing the signs of trauma and referring children, schools can do an enormous service to traumatized children and improve the learning environment.

REFLECTING ON CURRENT PRACTICE

There are many possible signs of trauma. As you reflect on students you know who have been traumatized, or that you suspect are traumatized, consider the following signs of possible trauma:

- Does the student show disruption in peer relationships, as indicated by conflict or isolation?
- Has there been a significant decrease in school performance and concentration?
- Do you hear about ongoing physical complaints with no apparent cause?
- Have you seen an increased use of chemical substances and alcohol?
- Has the student reported or talked about repeated nightmares or other problems sleeping, strong fears of death, violence, and so on?
- Have you seen indications of a drop in self-esteem?
- Have you seen a general lack of energy and interest in previously enjoyed activities?
- Have you seen tantrums and other persistent controlling and aggressive behaviors, irritability, and uncontrollable rage attacks?

¹³ Ibid, pages 80-92 (with Dr. Roy Lubit).

- Does the student present with blunted emotions?
- Has the student become hyperactive or shown an exaggerated startle reflex?
- Has the student become forgetful?
- Is the student showing excessive belligerence or shyness, withdrawal or fearfulness?
- In the case of a young child, has he or she been playing repetitively, reenacting traumatic events?
- Has the young child become very anxious about separation or clingy?

CHAPTER EIGHT: Promoting Learning and Safety in School: A Model and Process¹⁴

To a greater or lesser extent, all school leaders and leadership teams are invested in school improvement. In this final chapter a model for improving school climate that integrates research from risk prevention, K-12 education, physical and mental health promotion, social emotional learning, and character education is suggested.

Although educators have appreciated the importance of school climate for almost 100 years (Perry, 1908), there is no universally accepted definition. The terms *school climate* and *school culture* often overlap. Practitioners and researchers use a range of terms such as *atmosphere*, *feelings*, *tone*, *setting*, or *milieu* (Freiberg, 1999; Tagiuri, 1968). In essence, school climate refers to our subjective experience in school. As such, school climate recognizes and reflects people’s social, emotional, ethical, and cognitive experience (Cohen, 2006). Positive school climate refers to a safe, caring, responsive, and participatory place for students and teachers to learn, teach, and develop in healthy ways.

The process of improving the social, emotional, ethical and academic school climate brings the community together to understand the current strengths and challenges to school safety in order to promote learning and the healthy development of K-12 students. This model for improving school climate involves a practical strategy that recognizes and integrates the issues we have outlined in previous chapters. The model has **five stages**.¹⁵

- planning
- data gathering and evaluation
- implementation
- reevaluation; and
- further planning

STAGE ONE: Planning: Creating the Foundation

What is it?

- bringing key stakeholders together: inspiring leadership and evaluation teams
- reflecting on past efforts and current needs, including crisis management
- reflecting on short and long term needs; and
- creating evaluation plans to support an authentic learning community

Why is this stage important?

- creating leadership teams that represent the community provides the foundation for effective school reform
- the crisis team and school safety committee can be energized; and
- top down leadership by itself fails, what is needed is bottom-up and top-down working together

¹⁴ Ibid, pages 93-111.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 94.

Tasks at this stage:

- Form a diverse leadership team representing key stakeholders groups (teachers, parents, business, community, faith based, youth development and government).
- Develop inclusive guidelines and procedures for working together as a team.
- Revisit the school mission. Discuss specific ways in which the mission statement is and is not a reality. Explicitly talk about how your school, like all schools, has strengths, weaknesses, needs, and emerging goals that grow out of its history and current reality.
- Understand the five-stage social, emotional, ethical, and academic school improvement process outlined above.
- Discuss how the school improvement initiatives might address gaps between the school's mission and reality.
- State preliminary goals for the improvement initiative.
- Anticipate potential challenges that may prevent staff, students, parents, and community members from coming together to support school improvement efforts:
 - time constraints: Finding time to plan and discuss the process of substantive and sustained school improvement is difficult.
 - fear: School leaders know that unhappy members of the school community may want to use evaluation findings to prove their point.
 - creation of teams that really represent the school community, particularly traditionally marginalized groups.
- Develop a preliminary strategy to address these challenges, including a plan for introducing and getting inputs from students, parents, and teachers on the initiatives outlined.

Indicators of success at this stage:

- An inclusive, representative leadership is created.
- A plan for introducing and gathering input for all constituents regarding school improvement initiatives is developed.
- Students, staff, and parents feel that their needs and interests are being heard.
- School staff understand that all schools have strengths and weaknesses; what is important is to recognize the need to develop collaborative plans for school improvement.
- School staff appreciate that change is difficult and takes place over time.
- School staff have clear goals for the initiatives.

STAGE TWO: Data Gathering and Evaluation

What is it?

- Evaluating the school's strengths and weaknesses pedagogically and systemically with a scientifically sound school climate measure that assesses how all members of the school community feel about school life. Educational research has revealed that there are ten overlapping dimensions that color and shape our experience in schools or school climate (Cohen, 2006).
 1. Environmental (cleanliness, adequate space and materials; inviting aesthetic quality);
 2. Structural (size of school, curricular and extracurricular offerings);
 3. Safety: physical (crisis plan, clearly communicated rules, clear and consistent violation response, people in the school feel physically safe, attitudes about violence); and social emotional (attitudes about individual differences, students' and adults'

attitudes about responses to bullying, conflict resolution taught in school, belief in school rules)

4. Teaching and learning (high expectations for student achievement, all learning styles honored, help provided when needed, learning linked to daily life, engaging materials, use of praise and reward, opportunities for participation, varied teaching methods (differentiation), instructional leadership, creativity valued, social emotional as well as academic learning valued and taught, varied types of intelligence, appreciated, connections across disciplines);
 5. Relationships (positive adult-adult relationships between teachers, administrators, and staff, positive adult-student relationships, shared decision making, common academic planning opportunities, diversity valued, student participation in learning and discipline);
 6. Sense of school community (students and staff feel and demonstrate a sense of community in the school);
 7. Morale (students are engaged learners, staff are enthusiastic about their work, students are connected to one or more adults, students and staff feel good about school);
 8. Peer norms (students and staff feel learning is important, are invested in caring, appreciate importance of being able to say no, expect collaboration and cooperation);
 9. School-home community partnerships (mutual support and ongoing communication, school community involvement, parent participation in school decision making, shared parent-teacher norms vis-à-vis learning and behavior, student family assistance programs); and
 10. Learning community (standards and measures used to support learning and continuous improvement, professional development systematic and ongoing, data driven decision making linked to learning, school systems evaluated).
- Selecting an appropriate school climate survey (see Cohen, 2006, for a summary). Two K-12 school climate tools are scientifically sound and comprehensive in two ways: assessing students, parents, and school personnel as well as evaluating all dimensions that scholars and practitioners believe define school climate. They are: (1) HiPlaces Measure (Felner et al., 2001) and (2) the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (www.csee.net/climate/cscliassessment/; Sandy, Cohen, & Fisher, 2006). There are also school climate tools developed in scientifically sound ways that focus on character education-related issues (CHARACTER Plus, 2002; CHARACTER First, 2004) or diversity (Holt & Keys, 2003).

Why is this stage important?

- Scientifically sound and multiple evaluation measures provide a realistic snapshot of current strengths and challenges.
- Uses a 360-degree measure (i.e., a tool assessing how students, parents, and school personnel experience school life) that gathers perceptions of all stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, staff and administration).
- When parents and students are involved with this initial assessment, their voices are being heard.
- Examining your school's strengths and weaknesses both pedagogically and systemically helps you learn what is and is not working and serves as a springboard for change.
- Establishing baseline data is an important way of assessing growth.

Tasks at this stage:

- The leadership team works in collaboration with all stakeholder groups to create an effective, inclusive plan for administering the school climate tool.
- The leadership team facilitates administration of the school climate tool in a timely way and gathers additional baseline data (e.g., attendance data, dropout rates, academic information, and teacher and administrator turnover rates).
- The leadership team ensures that a representative number of parents complete the school climate measure. It is relatively easy to ensure that students and staff will complete the measure, as they are a captive audience. It is much more challenging, but essential, that a large group of parents complete these assessment tools too.
- The leadership team anticipates possible challenges that may inadvertently thwart staff, students, parents, and community members from coming together to participate in data gathering. Some parents may find completing the survey intimidating or time consuming, or feel that it is unlikely to result in significant change. Some in the school community may have been discouraged by the failure of other school initiatives. Some groups may believe that it is not their place to voice their views and will trust the school to do what is best.
- The leadership team collaboratively develops and implements strategies to address these challenges.
- The school receives a narrative, numerical, and graphic report based on the surveys.
- The leadership team promotes an understanding that evaluation is always a step in a longer-term process of school improvement. Assessment does not provide simple answers.

Indicators of success at this stage:

- A representative majority of parents, students, teachers, staff, and administrators have completed the school climate and other measures.
- The school leadership team has received the school climate report that describes and summarizes the schools' strengths and challenges from student, staff, and parental perspectives.
- There is consensus in the school community that enough information was provided about the school climate measure, as well as satisfactory time and opportunities to complete it.
- The leadership team informs the school community when the results of the survey will be shared with them.

STAGE THREE: Interpretation of the Data and Action Planning

What is it?

- understanding the initial assessment findings; and
- using these findings to develop an evidence-based action plan to promote social, emotional, ethical, and academic learning as well as a secure climate for learning.

Why is this stage important?

- Assessment findings are useful only if they are understood and used.
- Too often evaluation findings are not used and are quickly shelved.
- Providing time for staff, students, and parents to respectfully think about and communicate their thoughts and feelings about the findings is essential for building community and taking the next step. This is challenging for many reasons. For one thing, there never seems to be enough time. But even more important, various members of the community have very different points of view. Parents, for example, are often relatively difficult to engage, for many reasons. Cultural differences can exist between a group of parents on the one hand and

educators on the other. In a growing number of American communities, some parents are afraid of coming to school because they are not documented citizens. Some parents feel too busy to bother. In any case, to the extent that school leaders do not effectively reach out to all members of the community, it will undermine this process of school development.

- Setting priorities together can promote student and parent participation and can create a shared vision and a common vocabulary. This is the optimal foundation for sustained school improvement.
- Promoting student participation as well as parent-school partnerships enhances students' inclination to learn and develop in healthy ways.
- The school climate report may evoke a range of emotions. In a safe context, expressing and witnessing emotional storytelling helps members of the school community to connect with one another in deep and powerful ways that may motivate them to make needed changes.

Tasks at this stage.

There are four major tasks at this stage: (1) understanding and digging deeper into the school climate report and related data, (2) setting priorities, (3) developing an action plan, and (4) anticipating challenges.

Understanding and digging deeper into the comprehensive school climate report

- The school leader, with the school leadership team, reviews the school climate report and develops a short term plan to engage each stakeholder group (parents, students, teachers, administrators, and staff) to dig deeper into the findings.
- School leaders remind the community that all schools have strengths and weaknesses and assessment is just one step in the school improvement process.
- School leaders meet with staff, students, and parents to talk about these findings. These meetings present an opportunity for community building and the promotion of student and parent participation. Possible focus questions of these sessions could include:
 1. What in the report resonates for you? What feelings emerge for you?
 2. What do you find surprising about this report?
 3. Do you have a story to share that might help us learn more about your personal experiences related to an issue raised in this report?
 4. What issues that emerge from this report seem most important to address?

Setting priorities

As an outgrowth of understanding the evaluation findings, the school leadership needs to identify one systemic and one pedagogical goal to focus on for the first two years. It is suggested that the process be as inclusive and democratic as possible. Goals need to be aligned with the school's mission and coordinated with the school's other initiatives.

Developing an action plan

- The leadership team needs to synthesize the priorities that have emerged from staff, student, and parent discussions.
- Subgroups conduct research about evidence-based best practices that the school might implement to address these priority areas.
- Each stakeholder group develops implementation options from which they can choose and that fit well with their roles and other responsibilities.

- The leadership team works with each stakeholder group to list the resources and assets the school community now has to address the priority goals.
- The action plan is conceptualized as a three-to-five year problem-solving cycle. Here the school is defining an initial set of goals that will be periodically reevaluated, learned from, and built on.
- The action plan includes a clear evaluation plan.

Anticipating possible challenges.

- Time constraints: schools are busy places. Finding the time to meet and discuss initial findings is a significant challenge.
- Cynicism and burnout: some members of the school community may feel and say, in essence, “We tried this. It won’t work.”
- Collaborative planning is difficult. Collaboration is more or less difficult depending on 1) the collaborative task 2) the social emotional skills and disposition of the collaborators 3) the meanings that people attribute to the collaborative process.
- Working and learning with members of the school community is inherently a difficult collaborative endeavor. It takes a deep commitment to school improvement and social, emotional, ethical, and academic educational goals to sustain this work. Dictatorship is always an easier leadership style in the short run.
- Fear and courage: It is inherently scary for school leaders to embark on a truly collaborative, democratic process of school improvement. We cannot and do not know that it will happen. It takes courage to be a social, emotional, ethical, and academic agent of school change.

Indicators of success at this stage:

- A plan for understanding and digging deeper, sharing stories, and setting priorities based on the school climate findings has been successfully implemented.
- There is general consensus (possibly using *fish to five*), based on anecdotal and formal feedback, that this stage has been well organized, respectful, and has helped to build community.
- Teams have been given time to research best practices and current school assets related to the two priority goals established during this stage.
- A preliminary written action plan has been completed and communicated to the school community.
- A final action plan has been completed and communicated to the school community.
- The action plan is aligned with evidence-based guidelines.
- Members of the school community have been individually and publicly thanked for their participation in this stage.

Questions for reflection:

- What, if anything, was most meaningful and moving about the process of understanding and digging deeper?
- In what ways was this process different and more successful than other forums we have had?
- How were traditionally marginalized voices (e.g. members of minority groups) brought forward?
- What did not work well in this stage and what lessons did we learn?

- What did I learn about myself during this process?
- Which of my assumptions about the school and its different stakeholders shifted? In what ways?
- Have we taken on too much?
- What action plan models or templates have I found to be most helpful?

STAGE 4. Implementation of the Action Plan

What is it?

- Evidenced-based pedagogical and systemic efforts designed to 1) promote students' social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and ethical dispositions; and 2) systemically create safe, caring, and responsive schools.
- A three-to-five year effort.

Why is this stage important?

- When implementation is done over a three-to-five year period, we promote academic achievement, school success, and violence prevention through sustained effort, evaluation, reflection, and revision.
- Implementing evidence-based pedagogic and systemic efforts 1) promotes students' social, emotional, and cognitive competencies and ethical dispositions; and 2) creating a climate for learning.
- We promote the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that provide the foundation for life success: being able to care, work, and participate in a democratic society.

Tasks at this stage:

- The leadership team facilitates the implementation process, providing the needed time, space, and other resources for success.
- Members of different stakeholder groups work on aspects of the implementation plan.
- Implementation groups communicate with each other and offer “critical friends” support on a regular basis, for example, supportive pairings of teachers who observe one another teaching and think collaboratively about how to promote even more effective instructional methods (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000).
- The leadership team communicates and shows the progress of the implementation plan to the school community.
- The leadership team facilitates and monitors ongoing assessment of the action plan.
- A school improvement coordinator is designated. This coordinator will be given time and support to actually coordinate this effort.
- New staff, parents, and students receive an orientation to the school improvement initiative and are welcomed and engaged in the implementation process.
- Potential challenges are recognized, and a preliminary strategy is developed to address these challenges.
 1. Staff and administrative turnover may make it difficult to sustain this initiative.
 2. Implementation results may not show immediate results.
 3. Current sources of funds may dry up and new sources need to be found.

4. The person designated as the coordinator does not actually have time or support to perform in this role.

Indicators of success at this stage:

- Each staff member and the student body are engaged in implementing a self-selected aspect of the implementation.
- Groups of parents are implementing self-selected parts of the plan and have successfully kept the action plan timeline and fulfilled their responsibilities.
- Adequate resources are allocated to support implementation efforts.
- The coordinator is actually coordinating this effort and being an ongoing learner and teacher about the process.
- Members of the school community celebrate their own and other's progress.

Questions for reflection:

- How can we celebrate ongoing progress and at the same time make the necessary shifts when they are needed?
- How can we keep our focus on the students?
- Can we resist adding further goals without removing some other tasks?
- In what ways can we support each other when things get rough?
- What are practical and informative methods to track the implementation process that supports authentic and continuous learning?

STAGE 5. Reevaluation and Further Planning

What is it?

- Reevaluating the school's strengths and challenges.
- Discovering what has changed and what has helped to further the school improvement process.
- Learning about what has not changed and the barriers to school improvement.

Why is this stage important?

- Although schools may have anecdotal and intuitive sense about how the initiative is progressing, it is important to gather multiple forms of assessments data on an ongoing basis every 12 to 24 months.
- Data can help pinpoint areas that have made improvement and those that need further work of different strategies.

Tasks at this stage:

- At nine to twenty four months, the school climate measure and any number of other measures are readministered to obtain data showing gains in areas that have been the focus of the school improvement initiative.
- Other data, such as attendance, dropout rates, discipline referrals, and academic achievement, are gathered and discussed with respect to the school climate data.
- The leadership team synthesizes the assessment information as it relates to the implementation effort and shares it with each of the constituent groups.

- Action plans are revised slightly in response to the evaluation data.

Indicators of success at this stage:

- The school climate measure, as well as other possible tools have been readministered and stakeholder groups have discussed the report. Success is celebrated and plans are made to address challenges.
- The school community can feel positive subtle and more obvious changes in the school's climate in areas that have been the focus of the action plan.

Questions for reflection:

- Who in particular has contributed to the success of this initiative? What are the attributes of their contribution? What can we learn?
- Do we take time to celebrate what is working?
- Who owns this initiative?
- How might we continue to expand the ownership of this effort?

SUMMARY

The final sections of this document have outlined a process of school climate improvement that builds on research and best practices from K-12 education, social emotional learning, character education, risk prevention, and physical and mental health. It is a process anchored in two essential goals that prevent physical, social, and emotional violence as well as promoting health: 1) purposefully promoting social, emotional, and cognitive competencies as well as ethical dispositions over time; and 2) creating a climate for learning and a positive school climate.

The five-stage school climate cycle that is outlined is a road map of sorts. It is a series of tasks and frameworks that support community-wide learning and change. In doing so, we are truly making schools safer physically, socially, and emotionally. We are creating a true community of learners and teachers who are invested in listening to themselves and others. There is a wide range of school improvement issues not explored here. For example, we have not described assessing readiness for change, identifying curricula that may address your school's goals and needs, school climate policy, the range of costs and state as well as federal funding sources, and the range of barriers to school climate improvement, as well as lessons learned from practitioners and research. The Center for Social and Emotional Education is committed to supporting a larger community of learners and teachers to further understanding, evaluating and positively shaping school climate. Their website (www.csee.net) has information about all of these issues and more. Perhaps most important, it provides a forum where we can learn from one another about how to foster substantive and sustained school climate improvement.

The process of school climate improvement promotes the skills and dispositions that provide the foundation for participation in a democracy (Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Michelli, 2006). It is interesting to think about what it means to be a member of a democracy. There is a series of skills: learning to listen to ourselves and others; being able to think in critical and reflective ways; being able to solve problems and conflicts and make decisions flexibly, creatively, and nonviolently; and being able to communicate and collaborate with others. Being an engaged member of a democracy also entails a series of dispositions: being responsible, appreciating that we are social creatures and need others to survive and thrive, appreciating that a nation is only as strong as its weakest members, and appreciating that it is an honor and a pleasure to help and serve others.

Making your school safe: socially, emotionally and physically, has to involve more than violence prevention curriculum or intervention. To be safe, we need to know that others care and will notice. To do so necessarily involves promoting a caring and democratic community. It is extraordinary that we now have research-based guidelines to do just this (American Psychological Association, 2003; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Greenberg et al, 2003). Yet, so often we do not translate these research findings into practice.

Our children deserve better. Kansas deserves better.

DRAFT