



## Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action

*News You Can Use*

# Enhancing Student Connectedness to Schools

With continued concern about school violence, disruptive classroom behavior, bullying, and premature school drop-out, interest in promoting safety and positive student experiences at school is rising. School efforts to decrease violence, such as implementing zero tolerance policies have not produced the desired changes in climate and student attitudes.

Schools are also under increased pressure to deliver higher academic performance due to national, state, and local mandates to improve test scores. Student connectedness to school and positive school climate have been identified as two critical factors that may help schools improve both academic performance and safety.

### School Connectedness

*School connectedness* is also known as engagement, bonding, belonging, attachment, and commitment related to school. It has been described as feeling positively about education, a sense of belonging in the school environment, and having positive relationships with school staff and other students. Across the literature base, the school connectedness concept has been measured in terms of five primary content areas: classroom behavior, academic performance, extracurricular involvement, interpersonal relationships, and school community<sup>1</sup>

School records and/or teacher reports are common data sources when

measuring educational achievement and discipline outcomes. Conversely, more subjective aspects of connectedness are often represented by student perspectives taken from interviews and surveys. Opinion estimates among our country's youth have indicated that about half of youth in grades 7-12 identify their school as a supportive environment, whereas the other half report less favorable feelings.<sup>3</sup> For younger students, their connectedness is more affected by relationships with teachers, whereas for older children peer interactions are paramount.<sup>4,5</sup>

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Some of the various definitions of school connectedness are more focused on academics and others are more focused on relationships<sup>1,2</sup>

#### Academic features of school connectedness

- Motivation to attend school
- Persistence in academic work
- Belief in future importance of educational efforts

#### Relationship features of school connectedness

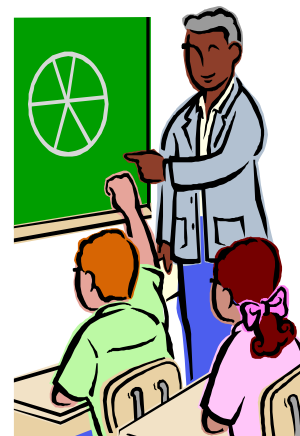
- Perceptions of support and caring
- Feelings of inclusion and acknowledgement
- Positive attitude toward school

### Why is school connectedness important?

To increase positive student outcomes, it behooves schools and families to find ways to link students to a positive school culture and value system. Regardless of socioeconomic status, several studies have found that connectedness is reliably linked to higher academic perform-

ance (test scores and grades) and school behavior.<sup>6</sup> Students who report higher connectedness are less likely to drop out, be absent, or exhibit behavior problems. Research findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health indicated that initiation of many adolescent risk

behaviors (including emotional distress, suicidal ideation and behavior, substance use, weapon related violence, and early sexual activity) have been linked to poor connections to school.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Specifically, feeling connected to teachers has been identified as an important factor in inhibit-



ing the initiation of health risk behaviors such as substance use and violent behavior.<sup>8,10</sup>

### **Student Characteristics Related to Increased School Connectedness:**

- Higher academic achievement<sup>6,11</sup>
- Participation in extracurricular activities<sup>12,7</sup>
- Good attendance<sup>6,7</sup>
- Relationships with multiple social groups in school<sup>11</sup>

### **School Factors Related to Increased School Connectedness<sup>7</sup>**

- Small school size
- Effective classroom management strategies
- Moderate, less harsh school discipline policies

## School Climate

*School climate*, which encompasses the values and practices of a school, is critical to school connectedness. In schools with positive climates, students experience greater attachment and commitment to their schools.<sup>14</sup> Across studies, school climate has been measured in multiple ways. However, there are several common factors that have been identified as contributing to the overall climate of a school. Characteristics of schools such as the degree of safety and respect that are present, quality of interactions between students and staff, perception of the environment, mutual goals of stakeholders, opportunities for meaningful involvement, and academic performance are all factors that have been identified as important factors related to school climate.<sup>2,15</sup>



## Why is school climate important?

An improved school climate is an important goal for educators and school administrators to pursue as it helps to maintain a positive atmosphere within the school setting. The school climate affects how a school operates and has a significant impact on student and staff performance.<sup>16</sup> The climate of a school can significantly impact anyone who is associated with the school, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the broader community. In a positive school climate, students feel safe, valued, and content in their surroundings. Developing a positive school climate can help foster meaningful relationships within the school and create opportunities for academic success.<sup>16,17</sup>

### **A positive school climate has been related to several factors including:**

- Decreased behavioral and emotional problems<sup>18</sup>
- Improved school performance<sup>19</sup>
- Improved personal relationships<sup>16</sup>
- Increased job satisfaction for school personnel<sup>20</sup>
- Enhanced parent and family involvement in the schools<sup>21</sup>
- Decreased student engagement in risky behaviors such as cigarette smoking, drug use, sexual intercourse, and violence<sup>8</sup>

### **A positive school climate can be promoted by:<sup>14,22</sup>**

- Recognizing student successes
- Increasing parent and community involvement with the school
- Implementing character education and extracurricular programs for students
- Teachers and administrations demonstrating respect for all students
- Developing a sense of community in the school
- Enhancing safety at the school
- Initiating violence-prevention, conflict resolution, peer mediation, and anti-bullying programs

## How can families become more involved in schools?

The National Education Association recommends that adults can increase their involvement in schools by:

- Meeting teachers
- Attending parent-teacher conferences
- Joining the Parent Teacher Association
- Communicating with teachers about your concerns
- Visiting your student's classroom

## What strategies can schools apply?

*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* ([www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)) is a research-based, school-wide approach designed to generate positive changes in the school climate. Representing a shift from reactive zero-tolerance approaches, PBIS's approach to behavior management is "preventive and positive" and focuses on school staff teaching and encouraging appropriate behaviors in all students. Documented successes have included decreases in office discipline referrals (20-60%) and problem behavior and improvements in staff responding to appropriate and problem behavior. Better school-wide behavior management results in more teaching time and improved academics. To date, PBIS has been implemented in 1300 schools across the United States sometimes as a part of a legislative mandate. For example, in Maryland in 2004, implementation of PBIS was mandated in elementary schools with suspension rates of 18% or higher. Costs of the program in Maryland were estimated to be \$8,000 per school the first year and \$1000 each following year.

*Project Achieve* ([www.projectachieve.info](http://www.projectachieve.info)), a SAMHSA model program, is another school-wide research-supported intervention that

aims to improve school climate, academic performance, student social skills, and parent involvement. Developed for preschool, elementary, and middle schools, the goal of Project Achieve is to develop a school-wide behavior management program targeting the development of positive skills. In the Stop and Think Social Skills Program, teachers instruct on and model interpersonal, problem-solving, and conflict resolution techniques with the aim of encouraging consistent use in the classroom. A longitudinal evaluation of Project Achieve by its developers found decreases in office discipline referrals (16%), suspensions (29%), grade retentions (47%), special education referrals (61%) and placements (57%). Costs of the program are estimated to be between \$25-\$50 per student each year for the first 3 years and \$10-\$15 a year once the program has been established.

A number of school reform initiatives are focusing on changing climates by subdividing schools into learning communities. Advocates of smaller schools cite research that smaller learning environments are more conducive to higher achievement, better discipline, higher rates of attendance and graduation, safety, positive

teacher/student relationships and incur less financial costs.<sup>23-26</sup> Because they utilize existing structures, schools within schools can be cost effective approaches. However, research has indicated that they have the potential to generate divisiveness between the smaller school units and thus need to be implemented carefully.<sup>27,28</sup>

The Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health was recently awarded a grant to create the Military Child Initiative (MCI; [www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth/Products/MilitaryChildInitiative/index](http://www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth/Products/MilitaryChildInitiative/index)), designed to help children of military personnel with the specific challenges they face, including frequent moves and parental separation and losses. Over the next three years, the MCI will be working on identifying effective programs and strategies that promote school connectedness for these youth and making this information available to schools, parents, and the community. Technical assistance to start up and maintain these programs will also be given to schools and communities with large numbers of military youth.

## Caring and Connectedness in International Settings

Although cultures and settings differ, many problems that youth face are similar across the world and it becomes important to draw on international comparisons. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified an international goal "that every school must provide a safe learning environment for students and a safe workplace for staff."<sup>29</sup>

Many international school systems place a great emphasis on prevention of social problems. Utilizing the national frameworks that emphasize caring and connected environments has been important in these prevention efforts. The U.S. Department of Justice identified such frameworks developed with goals to increase well-being and prevent violence in France, Australia, UK, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Denmark, South Africa, and Canada.

<http://ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/bja/186937.pdf>

The Australian Ministerial Council of

Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs established a National Safe Schools Framework. The framework provides eleven guiding principles and key elements that schools can implement to effectively provide safe and supportive learning environments.<sup>30</sup> The evidenced-based Gatehouse Project in Australia aimed to increase students' sense of connection to school to help alter health risk behaviors and well-being.

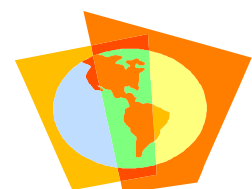
The Gatehouse Project focused interventions on improving security, communication, and participation.<sup>31</sup> <http://www.rch.org.au/gatehouseproject/>

The Canadian Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities evolved from the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) Safe and Caring Schools Project (SACS). The SACS project became a comprehensive social development, violence-prevention and character-education initiative designed to encourage socially responsible and respect-

ful behavior. The ultimate goal of the SACS programs is to foster moral motivation for positive social behavior. The Society has developed supporting a safe and caring environment as one of its focuses.<sup>32</sup>

<http://www.sacsc.ca/>

The CSMHA has assisted in the development of the International Alliance for Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Schools (INTERCAMHS). INTERCAMHS is an international forum of over 300 people from 30 countries interested in school mental health, with student connectedness and school climate being an important subject of discussion. Please see [www.intercamhs.org](http://www.intercamhs.org)



## Here are some representative measures of school climate that are free to the public:

**School as Caring Community Profile-II** (Center for the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Rs., 2003) - measures perceptions of elementary school students and adults ([www.cortland.edu/character/sccp--ii.htm](http://www.cortland.edu/character/sccp--ii.htm))

**California Healthy Kids Survey**- Measures connectedness, engagement, and school climate. Available in Elementary (Items 9-20), Middle and High School (Module B-Items B1-B15). Versions in English and Spanish ([http://www.wested.org/pub/docs/chks\\_surveys\\_summary.html](http://www.wested.org/pub/docs/chks_surveys_summary.html))

**Kettering Scale of School Climate**- has four subscales: General Climate, Program Determinants, Process Determinants, and Material Determinants, for use in middle and high schools ([www.emc.cmich.edu/CharacterEd/cfk.htm](http://www.emc.cmich.edu/CharacterEd/cfk.htm))

CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) has school climate assessment tools that can be downloaded by going to the following link: ([www.casel.org/sel\\_resources/climateassessment.php](http://www.casel.org/sel_resources/climateassessment.php))

CASEL website has articles, guidelines, and activities to help improve the school environment ([www.casel.org/sel\\_resources/learningenvirorecs.php](http://www.casel.org/sel_resources/learningenvirorecs.php))

### Footnotes

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*The mission of the Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action (CSMHA) is to strengthen policies and programs in school mental health to improve learning and promote success for America's youth. The CSMHA has four over-arching goals:*

1. *Further build a community of practice in school mental health (SMH) to facilitate analyses of successful and innovative policies and programs, to enhance collaboration between diverse stakeholders, and to develop strategies to maximize policy and program impact.*
2. *Enhance understanding of successful and innovative SMH policies and programs across urban, suburban, rural and frontier settings, and across local, state, national, and international levels.*
3. *Further develop a rapid, innovative and widespread communications framework to disseminate to all interested stakeholders findings and recommendations on successful and innovative policies and programs in SMH.*

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