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.\textsuperscript{7,8,9} Specifically, feeling connected to teachers has been identified as an important factor in inhibiting school connectedness.

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 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.\textsuperscript{1}

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.\textsuperscript{3} For younger students, their connectedness is more affected by relationships with teachers, whereas for older children peer interactions are paramount.\textsuperscript{4,5,6}

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 performance (test scores and grades) and school behavior.\textsuperscript{7} 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.\textsuperscript{7,8,9} Specifically, feeling connected to teachers has been identified as an important factor in inhibit-
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. 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.

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. 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.

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

- Decreased behavioral and emotional problems
- Improved school performance
- Improved personal relationships
- Increased job satisfaction for school personnel
- Enhanced parent and family involvement in the schools
- Decreased student engagement in risky behaviors such as cigarette smoking, drug use, sexual intercourse, and violence

A positive school climate can be promoted by:

- 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

Student Characteristics Related to Increased School Connectedness:

- Higher academic achievement
- Participation in extracurricular activities
- Good attendance
- Relationships with multiple social groups in school

School Factors Related to Increased School Connectedness

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

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What strategies can schools apply?

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (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.

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. 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.

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), 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.”

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.

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 respectful 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.

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

School as Caring Community Profile-II (Center for the 4th and 5th Rs., 2003) - measures perceptions of elementary school students and adults (www.cortland.edu/character/sscp--ii.htm)


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)

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)

CASEL website has articles, guidelines, and activities to help improve the school environment (www.casel.org/sel_resources/learningenviroreces.php)

Footnotes


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 overarching 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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