

Using Data to Improve School Climate

FACT SHEET

What is school climate, and why is it so important?

Across the United States, there is increased interest in improving school climate, reflecting a deepening understanding of the foundational role that school climate can play in supporting students' well-being, learning, and development. School climate incorporates many aspects of school, such as emotional and physical safety, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and inclusiveness.

Research from the science of learning and development shows that strong relationships and students' feelings of safety and support are foundational for effective learning and development. Positive school climates are associated with increased academic achievement and attendance, higher graduation rates, improved behavior, and lower teacher attrition rates.

This deepened understanding of the role school climate plays in student growth and development underlies the educational priorities in the Every Student Succeeds Act, which introduced a more holistic approach to assessment and permits states to include data about school supports—including school climate—in their accountability systems. Currently, 14 states incorporate school climate surveys in their accountability or reporting systems.

What is the challenge?

Given the importance of school climate in supporting student development and growth, schools need to assess their climate's health to inform improvement efforts. This requires gathering and interpreting multiple types of data to inform changes to practices and policies. Yet the field lacks a comprehensive understanding of how district and school leaders make sense of school climate data and use it for improvement. This [LPI case study](#) is based in California, a state that has emphasized the importance of school climate assessment and improvement through several policy initiatives. It focuses on three geographically diverse middle schools using innovative and varied approaches to engage with their school climate data. The schools studied are in districts that systematically support climate data use, which allows for an examination of district-level conditions that enable data use at the school level.

What can state, district, and school leaders learn from this study?

This study elevates key considerations for how climate data can support improving school environments.

- **States can encourage or require local educational agencies (LEAs) to administer school climate surveys and integrate disaggregated results into reporting and continuous improvement systems.** California has established some essential building blocks that allow schools in the state to learn from school climate data. Starting in 2024, the state requires LEAs to administer school climate surveys annually (before that it was every 2 years) and to report results as part of their Local Control and Accountability Plans and the California School Dashboard. Other states can consider implementing similar policies so that districts and schools have baseline infrastructure systems in place to support climate improvement. Additionally, states can support disaggregated data use by requiring LEAs to draw on disaggregated climate outcomes in their strategic plans and to report on disaggregated climate outcomes on public data dashboards.

- **Districts can structure data collection timing to increase utility.** Findings from this study suggest that the schedule for collecting survey data limited data use. Districts can maximize the usefulness of school climate data by modifying the schedule for data collection to ensure that schools receive climate survey results on a timeline that leaves them sufficient time to analyze their data and use it to inform strategic planning and climate improvement practices.
- **States, districts, and schools can invest in professional learning and collaboration time to build schools' capacity to use their climate data.** Meaningful engagement with school climate data is time-intensive, skilled work that requires staff capacity. States, districts, and schools can use resources strategically to build staff capacity. States can consider investments that support district and school capacity for using climate data. Districts can provide professional learning opportunities focused on data analysis and using data to inform school climate practices and policies. Lastly, districts and schools can promote policies and systems that encourage greater collaboration among staff in schools, such as revised calendars and schedules and compensation for staff who participate in school-based climate teams.
- **States and districts can support the engagement of students, staff, and families in school climate data use.** Schools in this study reported that including staff and students in school climate work created opportunities for shared leadership and increased the overall investment of school community members in efforts to improve school climate. Districts can support the engagement of students, staff, and families by developing school climate work structures and teams that encourage the participation of various school constituents. Additionally, states and districts can support schools by communicating the benefits of engaging members of the school community in their data use processes and encouraging school leaders to adopt practices for sharing climate data with students, staff, and families.
- **District- and school-level tools to assess school climate can be designed and utilized in complementary ways.** Districtwide surveys and school-developed measures are intended for different purposes and are, therefore, most effectively utilized at different stages of the school improvement process. While large-scale surveys work well to diagnose problem areas at schools, they may not be ideal tools for schools to assess the effectiveness of newly implemented strategies and interventions. Typically, large-scale climate surveys measure perceptions of school climate, while school-developed tools assess the presence of and students' exposure to various school practices. States and districts can support schools through communication about when to use different data sources and how to develop practical, school-level climate measures that meet their specific needs and allow them to evaluate and improve upon the climate interventions they have put into place.

Learn more

Access the [Using Data to Improve School Climate](#) report for further details on this case study and its findings. Insights from this study can guide educators and policymakers nationwide in using climate data to improve school environments.