

# School climate

When including courses, extracurricular and leisure activities, young people spend an average of over 30 hours per week inside the school walls. It is their primary living environment, where their friends are, where they experience successes and failures, and where they are confronted with different realities. School is a microcosm of society whose characteristics include problems (violence, bullying, etc.) but also positive phenomena such as solidarity and working toward common goals. Schools also reflect the local environment they are situated in. A study by the Quebec Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport, conducted among 3,682 young people, revealed that 72 percent of students who have a very positive opinion of their school climate also state that their grades are good or very good. Among students who feel their school has a poor climate, less than half (49%) say their grades are good or very good.<sup>1</sup>

## What the research says

Though the first study about this issue dates back to 1908, to this day there is no single definition of school climate. However, in general, when researchers speak about school climate, they often refer to how parents, teachers, students, and the community judge their experience of living and working within the school.<sup>2</sup> It reflects collective standards, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and management. It grows out of the collective life and realities that occur on a daily basis within the school.<sup>3</sup>

According to Cohen et al. at the National School Climate Center,<sup>4</sup> school climate is composed of five elements: interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, safety, physical environment, and sense of belonging.

Along the same lines, the Ontario government recently introduced resources for schools and communities to develop positive school climates, aimed at fostering student success and promoting the public education system.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Ontario government, a school has a positive climate when:

- students, parents and staff feel safe, at ease and accepted;
- all members of the school community are expected to maintain healthy and respectful relationships;
- students are encouraged to be leaders and role models;
- parents and members of the community actively participate;
- positive behaviours are reinforced and students are allowed to develop relationships that are free from racism, discrimination, and harassment;
- there is a culture of high expectations, with the focus on improving the learning outcomes of all students;
- all cultures are respected and appreciated.

For over 30 years, an increasing number of studies tend to show that establishing and maintaining a positive school climate are linked with a reduction of certain risky behaviours and with the development of healthy lifestyles. A positive climate is also linked with better academic and social learning, better grades, higher graduation rates, and greater stability of school staff. Thus, there is an interconnection between climate and that which it affects. While a good school climate can encourage students to put more effort into their studies or their lives at school, the inverse is also true. In fact, some studies have shown that the quality of school climate can play an important role in reducing the negative effects of low socioeconomic status.<sup>6</sup>

[1] Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (2003), *Et si la participation faisait la différence... Les activités parascolaires des élèves du secondaire et la réussite éducative*, Survey report.

[2] *Questionnaire sur l'environnement socioéducatif des jeunes du secondaire*: <http://www.ctreq.qc.ca/realisation/qes-web/>

[3] National School Climate Center: <http://www.schoolclimate.org>

[4] J. Cohen, E. M. McCabe, N. M. Michelli, and T. Pickeral (2009), School climate: Research, Policy, Teacher Education and Practice, *Teachers College Record*, 111180–213.

[5] Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), *Promoting a Positive School Climate*. Downloaded at: <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/climate.html>

[6] R. Benbenishty and R. A. Astor (2005), *School Violence in Context: Culture, Neighborhood, Family, School, and Gender*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

## Taking effective action

The quality of school climate is a shared responsibility. While much of this responsibility may fall to the school's staff and administration, especially in terms of relationships with students, sense of belonging, and the place for parents at the school, the involvement of students, parents and the community at large should not be minimized.

Community-driven initiatives should be aimed at developing social and community capital within schools, for example by encouraging citizens and organizations to take part in projects at the school. Employers can also encourage their employees and working students to volunteer in schools by being more flexible with work hours. Other initiatives might include a campaign to celebrate local schools, students and the staff who work in them, or actions that focus on safety, violence prevention, quality of relationships, or partner engagement.

### For more information

*Le climat scolaire : définition, effets et conditions d'amélioration*

[http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-nancy-metz/fileadmin/Stockage2/selections\\_thematiques/climat-scolaire\\_Rapport2012.pdf](http://www.cndp.fr/crdp-nancy-metz/fileadmin/Stockage2/selections_thematiques/climat-scolaire_Rapport2012.pdf)

## Avenues for effective action related to school climate

### Develop and maintain harmonious relationships among people at the school and in the community:

- by fostering respect (diversity, differences, opinions, etc.);
- by encouraging and celebrating the potential, abilities, and strengths of young people (positive reinforcement, making use of talents or knowledge, etc.);
- by developing positive, supportive, and warm adult-student relationships (trust, attachment, etc.);
- by sharing power and responsibilities with students, school staff, and members of the community (code of conduct, organization of activities, etc.);
- by developing partnerships that are beneficial to young people and their families (extracurricular activities, facilities, etc.);
- by promoting maximum participation and engagement from partners, especially from parents (fundraising, event organization, etc.).

### Ensure high-quality teaching and learning:

- by maintaining high but realistic expectations of students in terms of academic success (celebrate results and efforts, be specific about expectations, believe that students can succeed, etc.),
- by providing support for youth in need (screening, arranging services, follow-up, working with the family, etc.),
- by making sure that school staff is competent and receives ongoing training (recruitment, training plans, monitoring, etc.),
- by providing strong leadership and a shared and clear vision of the school's future.

### Ensure that there is a climate of physical, material, and psychological safety and justice in and around the school.

Provide a clean, attractive, and pleasant environment, along with suitable materials for students and for community members who attend the school.

Develop a sense of belonging to the school among students and the community (events, tournaments, social activities, etc.).