Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

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What is a Safe School?

A positive school climate is necessary in developing a safe school.

Schools with a positive and welcoming school climate increase the likelihood that students can succeed academically while protecting them from engaging in high risk behaviors like substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and violence. A positive school climate encourages administrators to establish clear and widely understood consequences for violating rules as well as have rewards for meeting or exceeding expectations. School climate generally refers to the social atmosphere or learning environment of a school. School climate can also be understood as the quality of interactions among staff, students, parents, and the community.

In a positive school climate, the caring attitude of the school is clearly visible and is reflected by widespread participation in all areas and activities of the school. A student's perspective of their school climate is affected by many factors, including:

- **Student involvement:** When students are actively involved in their school and its activities, it creates a bond between the student and the school.
- **Student relationships:** The level of comfort students feel in relating to one another, the ease with which they make new friends, and their relationship to school staff have impacts on school climate.
- **Teacher support:** Teachers play an active role in creating and maintaining a positive school environment; teachers who encourage a positive learning environment also positively contribute to the overall school climate.
- **Physical environment:** The overall condition of the school building reflects the caring attitude of the school, especially when the school buildings are clean, well cared for, supervised, and safe.
- **Conflict resolution:** Rules need to be communicated to students and consistently enforced. Students need to be aware of the rules and feel that conflicts are resolved fairly.
- **Participation in decision-making:** When students, administrators, and teachers share in making decisions about school improvement, it contributes to a positive school environment.
- **Curriculum:** Students need to feel that what is taught in classes meets their needs.
- **Counseling services**: Students should have access to counseling services that provide help with personal problems, job, and career information, and concerns about drugs, alcohol, and sex.

A safe school is also prepared for emergencies, provides opportunities for students in before- and after-school activities, and has effective school–community partnerships.

While a safe school has a positive, warm, and welcoming school climate, there is more to a safe school than a good school climate. A safe school is also a school that is prepared for emergencies, provides opportunities and guidance for students with before and after school programs and involves the whole community in preventing school problems. A safe school requires balancing physical security with a nurturing school climate, as well as developing effective school and community partnerships.

Schools can use the five components of the Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools model—convene a safe school planning team, conduct a school site assessment, develop strategies and implement violence prevention programs based on need, establish a social support team, and develop a crisis plan—to guide safe school planning. In addition, school personnel can help create a protective school climate in the following ways:

- Consistently recognize and reward students and adults for participating in cooperative and philanthropic activities.
- Brainstorm with students, staff and parents about simple changes that could make the school a more enjoyable place to be.
- Establish and support a school environment that does not tolerate any form of verbal or nonverbal bullying.

Discipline

- State rules positively to tell students what to do instead of what not to do.
- Express the ideology that all students can be successful.
- Focus on giving students concrete rewards for abiding by the rules of conduct, rather than focusing primarily on misbehavior.
- Inflexible approaches to discipline do not work and may disproportionately harm minority students

Building parent relationships

- Contact parents when students do something well.
- Get parents who are currently involved to recruit other parents to participate in the school's activities.
- Ask parents and community members who are involved in the school if there are ways to increase that involvement.

Working with Community Leaders

- Hold a series of meetings with members of the community to inform them about school problems that might impact them
- Form a "School Watch" group with neighbors in the surrounding community and ask them to report suspicious behavior to school or law enforcement officials
- Use outdoor marquees or posters to announce school events and invite the community to participate

Building a safe school means involving the whole community in a collaborative effort to create a nurturing environment, prepare for emergencies, provide activities before and after school, and increase community involvement in the school. Ask the students, staff, parents, and community what can be done to make your school a safer place. Get creative and have fun!

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