



STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING CLIMATE: PRACTITIONER'S BRIEF

K20 IDEALS

Introduction

School climate is a multifaceted concept related to the feelings and attitudes fostered by all aspects of a school's environment. A student-centered learning climate (SCLC) focuses on students' physical, social, and emotional well-being and success. School leaders can foster a student-centered learning climate by establishing procedures, norms, and expectations that ensure safety and order within the school; supporting teachers in establishing high academic expectations and positive personal relationships with students; and encouraging positive peer interactions that result in a collective appreciation for learning and a sense of belonging. It evolves when student and educator beliefs, values, and day-to-day behaviors unite to support a positive, safe, orderly, and inclusive learning community.

This brief explores the key aspects of SCLC grouped into three themes: School order and safety, teacher expectations and supportive relationships, and student academic and social norms.

School Order and Safety

Order within schools is necessary for students to feel safe; feelings of safety are prerequisites for learning and classroom engagement. Studies have shown that when students perceive their school environment is orderly and safe, they perform more effectively in their studies, feel happier, become more involved in activities, and are less likely to disrupt class or take on risky behaviors.¹ These benefits contribute to a positive outlook toward school environments and learning, thus explaining why students in orderly and safe school environments are more likely to enroll in a four-year college.²

Cultivating Order

It's important to point out that an orderly learning environment does not equate to rigid top-down control. Order is about school leaders establishing an environment of trust through shared norms (i.e., routines, rules, regulations, and cooperative relations). Such shared norms are co-created by the school community, including leadership, staff, families, and students.³ These norms are visible, clearly communicated, and upheld by the school community. They serve as guideposts for behavior and play a critical role in creating a sense of trust, respect, and cooperation among students, faculty, and families.⁴ Students, faculty, and families should feel encouraged to seek help when they need it and should know where they can go to report problems or to find the kind of help they need. Leadership should ensure that the school community has the resources and guidance necessary to successfully uphold the norms of order in the school, whether that be procedural, professional learning, or material needs.⁵ Also, an essential part of upholding order is how teachers manage their classrooms.

Effective classroom management includes the creation of organized and student-centered learning environments that set clear expectations for student engagement with learning. Teachers must consistently enforce those expectations by promoting mutual respect, recognizing and rewarding students for their prosocial behavior, and skillfully managing classroom transitions. An important aspect of setting expectations for engagement with learning is that the teachers provide learning opportunities that are active, collaborative, and that meet the whole child.⁶ When implemented school-wide, shared norms for school and classroom behaviors collectively encourage cooperativeness, creating whole-school learning environments conducive to academic growth and promoting a climate of respect and support.⁷

Safety Grows from Order

When we sow the seeds of order through the measures described above, safety is what grows. A safe and supportive school environment involves not only physical safety but also social and emotional well-being, resulting in positive school climate ratings as well as overall improved student performance. In this way, order establishes the conditions for feeling safe by adopting policies that preserve disciplinary practices to prevent bullying and harassment.⁸ Building a positive climate revolves around cultivating trust, fostering relationships, and implementing social-emotional learning strategies that enhance students' well-being and belonging.⁹ Students experience a profound sense of safety and connection to their school community within such an environment. Support is responsive to individual student needs, and teachers are empowered to truly know their students, nurturing their character and personal growth.

Teacher Expectations and Supportive Relationships

What educators believe about students and how they learn has been shown to influence student learning and engagement.¹¹ In particular, research shows that teachers who hold high expectations for all of their students cultivate positive academic outcomes.¹²

Warm, caring relationships between teachers and students support teacher efforts in setting higher expectations and have also been shown to increase school performance and engagement.¹³

High Expectations for Academic Understanding

Communicating high academic expectations to students in the classroom involves using healthy academic pressure in which students are given appropriate challenges, academic support, and consistent feedback. This type of pressure has been shown to more effectively encourage students to achieve at higher levels.¹⁴ It is important that this academic pressure be geared toward the process of learning rather than specific achievement outcomes. This helps students gain a sense of efficacy, autonomy, and ownership of their learning.¹⁵ When teachers challenge students to work harder, seek greater understanding, and go beyond what they know (rather than pressing for high grades or test scores), it has been shown that students produce more thoughtful work, achieve at higher levels, and develop better problem-solving skills.¹⁶ In short, students are better served when pressed with high expectations for understanding concepts rather than simply focusing on getting the “correct answer.”

A critical element of high academic expectations is the development of a growth mindset. When students believe that their abilities can grow through hard work and persistence, they are more likely to accept challenges, view failure as a learning opportunity, and be open to constructive feedback.¹⁷ Educators can encourage students to develop a growth mindset by modeling it themselves, praising effort rather than intelligence, and emphasizing the idea that learning should feel challenging rather than easy.¹⁸

Research highlights a number of practices to help communicate high expectations to students, such as: 1) having students explain why their answers are correct, 2) providing students with challenging but achievable tasks, and 3) encouraging students to attempt more difficult problems once they master their present work.¹⁹ Authentic task design and inquiry-based learning can support teachers who strive to create more challenging work, encourage students to seek greater understanding and scale up difficulty according to students’ individual comfort zones.²⁰ The principles of discourse can equip students with the confidence and language to explain why their answers are correct.²¹

Personal Support and Respect

Supportive teacher-student relationships characterized by warmth, caring, open communication, and cultural sensitivity are linked to better school performance and engagement, greater emotional regulation, social competence, and willingness to take on challenges.²² Positive student-teacher relationships also contribute to students’ overall sense of safety and belonging.²³

Teaching norms that include providing emotional support and affirmation of students’ personal and cultural assets further the development of positive personal connections between teachers and students.²⁴ These connections have been shown to promote mutual respect and increased student engagement.²⁵ Additionally, the inclusion of student perspectives and ideas in the creation of school norms and classroom practices increases their sense of ownership and relatedness within the school.²⁶ At-risk students—such as those from low-income families, students of color, and those with learning difficulties—particularly benefit from positive relationships with teachers and can also be harmed by negative emotional experiences with teachers.²⁷

Personable teachers model a sense of friendliness, encouragement, fairness, and personal support for their students. They praise good behavior, make themselves available both personally and academically, and get to know their students through active listening.²⁸ Classroom and school-wide norms that encourage positive and respectful interactions between students and teachers contribute to a student-centered learning climate in which students feel a sense of security and connectedness.²⁹

Student Academic and Social Norms

Students play an active role in supporting a learning environment. Through behavior, academic engagement, and peer support, they contribute to the school’s overall success. Students do not engage in this work alone. Teachers model behaviors and have clear and consistent expectations to ensure students understand their roles and responsibilities.

Behavior

Teachers set the tone for classroom behavior by ensuring that students understand the expectations and that their teachers personally care about their success while expecting them to participate actively.³⁰ Teachers’ awareness of the school’s social climate for students can leverage peer dynamics to promote positive behavior.³¹ Peers are a critical piece of student development that cannot be ignored.³² The work of building a community of positive behavior is not easy. Teachers have much to manage, but awareness and connection to students can promote the environment required for learning and growth. It takes time and consistency to ensure long-term success.³³

Academic Engagement and Peer Support

Engagement for students includes both in-class and extracurricular participation. Meaningful engagement requires both teacher and peer support. Active learning environments can garner increased student engagement.³⁴ Peer norms, or a student’s perceptions of those norms, can also heavily influence student engagement.³⁵ Peer engagement then predicts individual engagement.³⁶ The high school years are a critical time for engagement as students prepare for the world of college and careers, yet this can be a time

of disengagement for many young people.³⁷ Schools can foster a setting where students see their peers engaged in studying and academic pursuits as part of the culture.³⁸ Additionally, the school should reinforce positive peer interactions, which can be tied to positive academic outcomes and include acceptance and care for one another.³⁹

Student-Centered Learning Climate in Practice

To actively promote a positive student-centered learning climate, there are a number of strategies schools can employ to establish norms, encourage active participation, and maintain high academic standards. It is the responsibility of district and school leaders to provide essential support that fosters and sustains a positive climate. These supports include:

- Involve all members of the school community (principals, teachers, parents, staff, and students) in efforts to create a safe and positive learning environment.⁴⁰
- Communicate district-wide and school-wide norms and expectations to all stakeholders.⁴¹
- Build consensus around learning and community rules and procedures through shared leadership and a common purpose.⁴²
- Collect school climate and learning data through a variety of sources. Work collaboratively with school staff to make evidence-based decisions and monitor their effectiveness.⁴³
- Foster trusting relationships with teachers, students, and parents through consistently honest, open, and compassionate interactions.⁴⁴
- Provide teachers with the necessary materials and professional development to implement student-centered instruction.⁴⁵

Teachers and school staff have the responsibility to ensure that each student feels safe and respected as they strive to become independent learners. Teachers place students at the center of the learning process by creating an environment that provides appropriate challenge, relevance, and support. This occurs when teachers:

- Consistently enforce rules and reinforce positive behavior.⁴⁶
- Create a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable speaking out and advocating for their needs.⁴⁷
- Support students in learning how to self-regulate their own emotions and behavior rather than focusing on behavioral problems.⁴⁸
- Ensure all members of the classroom respectfully listen and respond to others.⁴⁹
- Show personal care and respect for students and acknowledge their efforts.⁵⁰
- Provide intellectually demanding and accessible learning activities.⁵¹
- Hold the expectation that students actively participate in classroom activities and explain their work.⁵²
- Use strategies for differentiating instruction that challenges each student at their level of prior knowledge, ability, and interest.⁵³

Conclusion

A student-centered learning climate is the responsibility of all school stakeholders working together to create a welcoming environment of mutual trust and respect.⁵⁴ It is fostered by clearly communicated academic and behavioral norms that support physical, social, and emotional security within the school community. Student academic engagement and growth are sustained through positive student-teacher relationships, high teacher expectations for all students, and student acceptance of the value of academic work.

References

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