



The Effects of School Climate & Culture on K-12 Academic Achievement

The term "school culture" is often used interchangeably with "school climate" and "school environment," but the general meaning of all terms are students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and its associated norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.¹

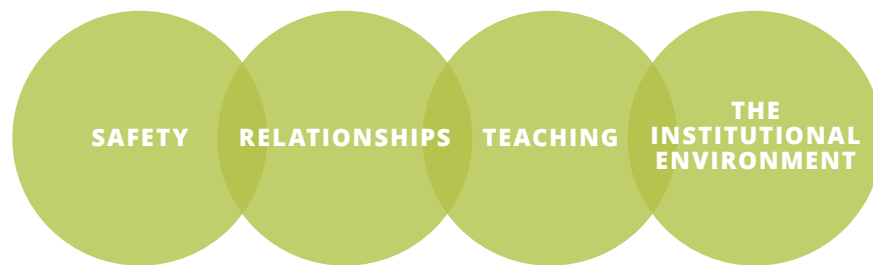
A GROWING BODY OF RESEARCH HAS EXAMINED HOW THESE FACTORS INFLUENCE STUDENT LEARNING.

In this brief, we amass and review the literature to create a comprehensive view of the interplay of school culture and student performance, and actions schools can take to improve their own cultures.



Four major elements are responsible for shaping school climate & culture:

Safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment.²



The attributes of a positive culture include the following:

- Positive teacher-student interactions ^{3,4,5}
- Students who feel safe, connected and engaged ^{2,3,6}
- Policies promoting social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge, dispositions and engagement, plus a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged ⁷
- Clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors ⁸
- Parental involvement³
- Collaborative relationships between the school leader and faculty ^{5,9,10} as well as between faculty members ^{5,9,10,11}
- Focus on learning and high expectations for student achievement (or “academic press”) ^{3,5,10}
- Decreased teacher turnover and increased teacher satisfaction ⁸



Effects of Positive School Climate & School Culture

Researchers have confirmed links between a positive school culture and students' learning achievements.^{3,8,9,11}

A McREL study cited school environment as one of three areas that most clearly differentiate high-performing high needs (HPHN) schools from low-performing high-needs (LPHN) schools; in fact, the researchers found that the largest differences between the HPHN schools and the LPHN schools, were teachers' reports of school environment influences.³

Likewise, a 2012 survey on the types of school cultures that bolster student learning found that the average student proficiency rates at schools with strong instructional cultures were 21 percentage points higher in math and 14 percentage points higher in reading compared to schools with weak instructional cultures in the same district or charter sector.¹⁰

Several elements of a positive school culture have been cited by researchers as **supporting student academic achievement**.

For example, schools exhibiting the characteristics of a positive school culture have fewer suspensions and increased attendance rates.⁹ Additionally, positive school climates are linked to increased high school graduation rates, turnarounds in low-performing schools, reduced school violence, and increased communication among students, families and faculty.⁸



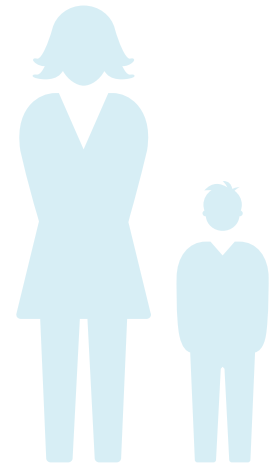
A school cultural element of special note was **teacher-student interactions**.

While early elementary school students' academic achievement is not affected by teacher-student conflicts, such conflict does negatively affect how well young children adjust to the school experience,^{12,13} potentially laying the groundwork for disengagement. However, researchers did find a direct link between adolescent students' academic success and their emotional rapport with adults at school.

A study of 643 students in 37 secondary school classrooms indicated that three domains of teacher-student interaction (emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support) were predictive of higher student achievement test scores at the end of the year.⁴

Of particular interest was the **emotional support domain**, which was further broken down into three components:

- Teachers' ability to establish a positive emotional climate
- Teachers' sensitivity to student needs
- Structuring of the classroom and lessons in ways that recognize adolescents' needs for a sense of autonomy and control, an active role in their learning, and for peer interaction opportunities.



Those subcomponents were all associated with higher relative student achievement.⁴

The researchers posited that, "...engaging adolescent students emotionally may be critical to maximizing their academic motivation in the classroom."⁴ Also, they suggested that as adolescents seek greater autonomy from their parents, receiving emotional support from adults at school might provide those students with powerful motivation to engage in their school setting.

Specific Practices for School Climate & Culture Reform

Researchers and school climate experts recommend a **holistic school culture approach** rather than stand-alone programs that target individual symptoms like bullying or poor attendance in order to make a truly positive change in school climate.^{6,14}

While reform practices will vary according to the needs and circumstances of individual schools and districts, a few specific practices were identified or recommended for universal implementation.



ACCORDING TO THE 2012 SCHOOL CULTURE SURVEY, ALMOST 90 PERCENT OF TEACHERS AT SCHOOLS WITH STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL CULTURES:

Feel that their school sets high standards for students, compared to only about half of teachers at low-performing schools.

Reported tracking their students' progress toward measurable academic goals throughout the year, compared to only 56 percent at the bottom quartile schools.¹⁰

The near universality of these two practices in successful schools indicate that they should be included in any school's culture reform plans.

Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education has recommended that schools striving for culture reform in the area of discipline adopt a recordkeeping system that includes student demographic information (race, sex, disability, age, and English learner status) as well as "a description of the misconduct, grade level of each student referred for discipline, attempts to address the behavior prior to the referral for discipline, witnesses to the incident, prior history of the student, referring staff member, discipline imposed, and law enforcement involvement, if any."

The federal department also recommends that schools regularly solicit student and family input regarding disciplinary practices and comprehensive needs assessments to determine whether the actions taken are helping the school reach its climate goals and to identify any new areas of need that may emerge.⁸

These findings have important implications for schools' approach to academic success.

These implications include the need to take a holistic view of students' academic performance, factoring in **a mix of academic and non-academic elements in order to maximize student success.**



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