



Maximizing Florida's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): A Focus on School Climate and Relevance to School Psychology

In December of 2016, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) – the most recent reauthorization of our nation’s educational law (formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) and replacement for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Since its passage, individual states were required to submit plans detailing their plans for compliance with federal ESSA requirements. Florida’s initial plan (which included revisions based on public input) was presented to the U.S. Department of Education on September 20, 2017, but it did not successfully pass review. The proposed plan is still under revision (as of March 2018) by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE).

ESSA’s guidelines seek to ensure success for students and schools through educational equity, high academic standards, and accountability among stakeholders. While school improvement and student success are priorities for any school, the way in which these goals are obtained often neglect the influence of school climate. Districts in Florida and other states, however, have taken a more active role in understanding the factors that promote safe and inclusive environments that impact school and student outcomes.

Maximizing and sustaining these efforts require schools and districts to promote practices that school psychologists can use to leverage ESSA policy opportunities. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) refers to these as “*essential school practices*.” Now that ESSA recognizes the strong relationship between positive school climate and student learning and success, school psychologists are in a pivotal position to inform district leaders and other key stakeholders of their specialized training and expertise in data-based decision making, program evaluation, crisis prevention and intervention, and systems change.

School Climate Variables

The FDOE has embraced the University of Chicago’s “Five Essentials” as the foundation for school improvement efforts in our state. These five principles acknowledge that school performance and educational reform efforts extend beyond simply test scores; and therefore, all of Florida’s 67 school districts are required to address these components within their school improvement plans. The research-based five essentials with accompanying descriptors are:

- **Effective Leaders:** The principal works with teachers to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success.
- **Collaborative Teachers:** The staff is committed to the school, receives strong professional development, and works together to improve the school.
- **Involved Families:** The entire staff builds relationships with families and communities to support learning.
- **Supportive Environment:** The school is safe and orderly. Teachers have high expectations for students. Students are supported by their teachers and peers.
- **Ambitious Instruction:** Classes are academically demanding and engage students by emphasizing the application of knowledge.

Per the University of Chicago, research has shown that schools strong on three or more of these five essentials were 10 times more likely to improve student learning than schools that were weak. It is powerful to note that three of the five essentials (i.e., involved families, supportive environment and ambitious instruction) are *directly* related to school climate. A school's climate is defined by the overall quality and character of its daily life. Although there are various elements to measure school climate, the most widely accepted variables include: 1) overarching goals, values, and norms; 2) physical environment; 3) personal and social-emotional safety measures; 4) interpersonal relationships (e.g., diversity, engagement, and leadership); 5) instructional and learning practices (i.e., content and supports); and 6) individual experiences. Given that students and teachers, on average, spend nearly one-third of their day at school, their overall well-being is subjective to the campus' climate and culture.

The Importance of School Climate and Related Outcomes

Florida's recent initiatives to detect factors that prevent school dropout also align with the need to promote positive school climates. Negative outcomes, such as tardiness, absenteeism, aggressive behavior, and discipline referrals can be reduced when intervened at the middle school level (Caldarella et al., 2011). Researchers also found that student educational outcomes – both academic and behavioral – can be improved as a result of a positive school climate. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by the National School Climate Center (2012) found increased reports of:

- Perceived social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety
- Positive youth development, mental health, and healthy interpersonal relationships
- High school graduation rates
- Academic achievement
- Social, emotional, and civic learning
- Effective school reform

Positive school climates promote a sense of connectedness and belonging among students and staff. Orpinas and Horne (2009) and Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) found that instances of school bullying – particularly towards Lesbian, Gay, Transgendered, Bisexual and Questioning (LGBTBQ) youth – were prevented, reduced, and deterred as well.

Given the critical shortage of school psychologists and teachers in Florida, it is helpful to know that teacher retention can be mediated by collaborative relationships, high academic expectations, and accessibility to professional development and resources (i.e., school climate; Kraft et al., 2016). When teachers feel they have strong pedagogy skills, are able to focus on content rather than behavior management, and can maximize academic instruction time due to the reduction in problem behaviors, they are able to fulfill their purpose for working in the classroom. Ultimately, those who report greater feelings of job satisfaction would be less likely to leave their chosen profession.

Furthermore, current state legislation mandates that Florida school districts develop and implement Early Warning Systems (EWS). House Bill 7069 (2017) has expanded the EWS requirements to include students in kindergarten through grade 8. The intent of the legislation is laudable as it tracks students and school trends on several school variables related to school climate (i.e., in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and absences). Research consistently indicates that even minimal numbers of any of these factors not only negatively impact individual students, but has a negative outcome for all students in the school.

Through the structured school improvement plan process and legislated requirements for EWS, Florida has shown its commitment to proactively and strategically address school climate. Additionally, several of the existing infrastructures and FDOE discretionary projects (e.g., FDOE Student Services Project, Problem Solving/Rtl, Positive Behavior Interventions and Support, SEDNET, Florida Inclusion Network) focus on supporting schools and districts on practices embedded within school climate dimensions. ESSA provides further opportunities for FDOE, districts and schools to align and commit to resources that will enable stakeholders to strongly and strategically address school climate and ultimately improve outcomes for all students.

Optimal conditions in which children learn are designed through intentional efforts to create physically safe and socially supportive environments. School psychologists play a critical role in fostering positive school climate through their partnership and work with students, teachers, administrators, families, community members, and policymakers. School psychologists not only advocate for schools to implement comprehensive, evidence-based initiatives, they often lead in the facilitation of such efforts.

Best Practices for Promoting Safe and Successful Schools

In order to provide a safe and supportive school environment that promotes student well-being and learning, a collaborative and cohesive partnership among an interdisciplinary team of education professionals, and organizational and community programs is a necessity. Efforts must be devoted to designing, funding, and implementing a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of academic, behavioral, and mental health supports to meet the needs of all students, especially those who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk. The emphasis must be on developing an integrated model of service delivery that offers various school and community prevention and intervention resources to address the whole child. This model offers promise for appropriately targeted instructional practices in schools that result in well-rounded educational opportunities that yield safe and healthy students. Policy and practice recommendations that have the potential to make the greatest impact in safeguarding children and schools are issued in a joint statement authored and endorsed by various national and state school psychology and education-related professional organizations (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013):

Policy Recommendations:

1. Allow for blended, flexible use of funding streams in education and mental health services;
2. Improve staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services and effective school community partnerships;
3. Develop evidence-based standards for district-level policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior;
4. Fund continuous and sustainable crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and training that uses evidence-based models;
5. Provide incentives for intra- and interagency collaboration; and
6. Support multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

Practice Recommendations:

1. Fully integrate learning supports (e.g., behavioral, mental health, and social services), instruction, and school management within a comprehensive, cohesive approach that facilitates multidisciplinary collaboration.
2. Implement multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that increase with intensity based on student need, and that promote close school–community collaboration.
3. Improve access to school-based mental health supports by ensuring adequate staffing levels in terms of school-employed mental health professionals who are trained to infuse prevention and intervention services into the learning process and to help integrate services provided through school–community partnerships into existing school initiatives.
4. Integrate ongoing positive climate and safety efforts with crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery to ensure that crisis training and plans: (a) are relevant to the school context, (b) reinforce learning, (c) make maximum use of existing staff resources, (d) facilitate effective threat assessment, and (e) are consistently reviewed and practiced.
5. Balance physical and psychological safety to avoid overly restrictive measures (e.g., armed guards and metal detectors) that can undermine the learning environment and instead combine reasonable physical security measures (e.g., locked doors and monitored public spaces) with efforts to enhance school climate, build trusting relationships, and encourage students and adults to report potential threats. If a school determines the need for armed security, properly trained school resource officers (SROs) are the only school personnel of any type who should be armed.
6. Employ effective, positive school discipline that: (a) functions in concert with efforts to address school safety and climate; (b) is not simply punitive (e.g., zero tolerance); (c) is clear, consistent, and equitable; and (d) reinforces positive behaviors. Using security personnel or SROs primarily as a substitute for effective discipline policies does not contribute to school safety and can perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.
7. Consider the context of each school and district and provide services that are most needed, appropriate, and culturally sensitive to a school’s unique student populations and learning communities.
8. Acknowledge that sustainable and effective change takes time, and that individual schools will vary in their readiness to implement improvements and should be afforded the time and resources to sustain change over time.

Resources for Improving School Climate

To equip students with the tools necessary for college and/or career readiness, school psychologists are in a pivotal position to facilitate a systems-approach through the integration of internal- and external school resources to support academic and social/emotional wellbeing. The power of systems-level change lies in a shared vision that all students can succeed. If each person does their part in support of this shared vision in a collaborative manner, every student will succeed!

[Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Support](#) - is a proactive school-wide approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional and academic success.

[Inclusive Schools Network](#) - a web-based educational resource for families, schools and communities that promotes inclusive educational practices such as safety, teaching and learning, relationships and environments as key components to improving school climate.

[National School Climate Center](#) – an organization that helps schools integrate crucial social and emotional learning with academic instruction for the purposes of promoting positive and sustained school climate.

[Florida’s Multi-tiered System of Supports](#) - systematic use of multi-source assessment data to most efficiently allocate resources in order to improve learning for all students, through integrated academic and behavioral supports.

[Olweus Bullying Prevention Program](#) - a school-wide evidence-based program designed to reduce and prevent bullying and improve school climate. The tiered program is implemented across all school contexts and includes school-wide components, classroom activities (e.g., class rules against bullying, class meetings), and targeted interventions for individuals identified as bullies or victims.

[Social and Emotional Learning](#) - a framework for developing social and emotional competencies in children based on the understanding that learning is maximized in the context of supportive relationships and engaging educational settings.

[U.S. Department of Education](#) - provides several resources to improve school climate

Resources for Measuring School Climate

[The National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments ED Schools Climate Surveys](#) – surveys middle and high school students, parents, and teachers; measures student engagement, school safety, and the school environment including discipline

[The National School Climate Center Comprehensive School Climate Inventory \(CSCI\)](#) – surveys k-12 students, parents, and school professionals; measures school safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, institutional environment, and staff contributions to school climate

[The Classroom Assessment Scoring System – Secondary \(CLASS-S; Pianta et al, 2008\)](#) – observational tool that measures emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support

[The US Department of Education \(USDOE\) with Maryland’s Safe and Supportive Schools](#) – student survey; measures safety, engagement, and environment

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