

Ten Keys to Safer Schools: Strategies for Improving School Climate

The following Ten Keys provide a framework for planning and implementing a school safety plan that involves and empowers youth and adults in creating safer schools. Several of the keys provide opportunities for increasing student involvement and empowerment. Other keys are typically the domain of adults, so involving students in these areas will require strong youth development practice. The information provided below informs school leaders on how to create a safer school and achieve critical educational outcomes.

Key 1: Establish A School-Community Partnership

Key 2: Start a School Climate Team

Key 3: Set Clear Behavioral Standards, Policies and Procedures

Key 4: Improve the Physical Environment

Key 5: Empower Students as Agents of Social Change

Key 6: Implement Diversity Activities

Key 7: Create More Opportunities for Least Engaged Youth

Key 8: Support Social-Emotional Skills Curricula and Instruction

Key 9: Conduct Professional Development Training

Key 10: Encourage Parent Involvement

Key 1: Establish A School-Community Partnership Coalition

Reducing incidents of bullying and violence requires a comprehensive, community-wide effort best coordinated by a school-community partnership. This coalition generally includes law enforcement, faith groups, businesses, government, community-based and youth-serving organizations, along with students, teachers, administrators and parents.

Key 2: Start a School Climate Team

A site-based School Climate Team is generally comprised of students, teachers, administrators, school resource officers, other staff, and parents. This diverse group meets regularly to address school climate issues. It provides a forum in which all stakeholders can voice their concerns, and can work together to recommend and implement specific actions that promote safety and prevent bullying, cyber bullying and harassment in the school. Students hold a critical position to the success of whatever solutions are developed and need to play a prominent role on this team.

Key 3: Set Clear Behavioral Standards, Policies and Procedures

Every school community needs to review their discipline policies and practices and set clear standards of behavior that are known and supported by all members. These standards also need to have clear consequences for those who are stepping outside the boundaries of acceptability, and these consequences need to be consistently applied. More and more schools are moving away from punitive discipline to restorative justice practices, as these are more effective and less costly financially.

Key 4: Improve the Physical Environment

Every school needs to make sure that its students and staff are protected from the most likely potential threats – student weapons on campus, armed intruders or other unwelcome visitors. However, new fencing, locks, cameras, and metal detectors are not the only way to make the physical environment safe. The overall quality of the physical environment has a significant impact on how students feel at school, which influences how they behave. Is the lighting harsh or warm? What colors are used for school walls, offices and classrooms? Are the halls and common spaces sterile, or are they student-friendly, containing plants, student art, projects, and awards? Are grounds clean or littered? How quickly is graffiti or vandalism responded to? How quickly are repairs to broken items made? The answer to these and other important questions are part of a general self-assessment about the physical environment that contribute to making timely and effective decisions about creating a climate of safety.

Key 5: Empower Students as Agents of Social Change

Increasingly, schools are seeing students as allies, and supporting them to be social change agents to address school safety and climate. Every school benefits from an organized team of students—the socially influential opinion leaders of its diverse groups and cliques—who are committed to notice hotspots and trained to cool them off. Students who have the observation skills to notice the exclusion, put-downs, teasing, relational aggression, bullying, harassment and other forms of mistreatment that usually go unnoticed by adults. Students trained in non-violent communication and intervention skills interact with their peers to prevent and stop bullying and harassment when and where it happens – on the bus, in the yard, at lunch, in the locker rooms and bathrooms, in the halls and on the fields.

Key 6: Implement Diversity Activities

Develop a year-long calendar that infuses the entire school with ongoing activities that promote tolerance, deepen understanding, and increase respect for differences. These activities will have greater impact when they are not stand-alone but are consistent with themes woven into the curricula. These efforts will decrease the tensions between the cliques and interest groups on a campus. Through opportunities to learn about other people, assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices are replaced with acceptance, tolerance, and compassion, all reducing discipline incidents on the campus.

Key 7: Create Opportunities for the Least Engaged Youth

In today's schools, many students feel disengaged and left out. Research shows that students who lack a sense of belonging are at greater risk for acting out or dropping out. Athletics, academics, and traditional activities do not meet the developmental needs of all students. Therefore, it is very effective to create new and diverse opportunities for these least engaged youth to reconnect with their school and community. Initiate dialogue opportunities and surveys that *ask* these students *what* they want to become involved in and *how* they want to become involved.

Key 8: Support Social Skills Curricula and Instruction

Especially in the elementary grades, students benefit from active teaching of the social-emotional skills that equip them to communicate effectively, establish solid friendships, and resolve their differences non-violently. This can be accomplished directly through lessons that teach these skills, and it can also happen more indirectly through the class meetings and other strategies (like cooperative learning) that teachers use in their classrooms. Success requires that students experience consistent messages in all social-emotional curricula, and in all classes. A school must encourage and support consistent instruction and use of the curricula. It doesn't work as well if a handful of teachers spend 15 minutes a week on friendship skills while the others spend 2 hours and weave it into their reading for the week.

Key 9: Conduct Professional Development Training

Whether they are classroom teachers or bus drivers, attendance secretaries or administrators, counselors or librarians, all adults have a role to play in building and maintaining a positive, healthy, and safe school climate. Unfortunately, professional development opportunities are fewer and many adults haven't received the necessary training to be fully effective in understanding cyberbullying and relational aggression, don't have enough training to intervene effectively when they do notice the more pervasive forms of bullying, and need to practice their "hall friendly" skills. Many adults fail to take advantage of readily available opportunities to build positive relationships with students beyond their own classroom. These relationships not only improve the climate of the school and students' sense of connection to it, they become the gateways students use to report information about fights, weapons, or other potential harm to people or property.

Key 10: Encourage Increased Parent Involvement

Since parents significantly influence students' opinions, values and interaction skills, parent understanding and support is essential for any school safety and climate plan to be successful. But booster nights and open houses usually draw only the familiar faces of the highly engaged parents, so schools must find other ways to connect with parents, especially those not actively involved in their children's education. Creating neighborhood meetings, hosting parent trainings using incentives, and educating more parents about the changing nature of bullying can go along way to having a safer and high thriving school.