

how-to guide to school climate committee

MAKING
CARING
COMMON
PROJECT



GRADES

6–12

IMPLEMENTED BY

Teaching staff, students

TIME & RESOURCE INTENSITY



CAPACITIES PROMOTED

Responsibility; Positive school climate; Youth leadership; Data-driven decision making

Overview

A growing body of research supports the key role of school culture and social norms in preventing a wide array of social and emotional problems and promoting the development of caring, responsible, and respectful children. As children enter adolescence, they are especially influenced by social norms—by what other teens consider important, by how other teens define who is and is not worthy of concern, and by how other teens gain power and respect. While in some schools students feel respected and powerful by degrading or excluding others, in other schools students are more apt to feel respected and powerful when they are inclusive and have diverse friendships.

Because students primarily take signals from other students about social norms and what is ethically acceptable, and because students have inside knowledge about social dynamics, it is mainly students—especially acting together—who can change norms. One way to empower students to create positive social norms is by creating school climate committees comprised of students who work with students and staff to develop these norms or by charging student councils with this responsibility. Too often student councils are charged with simply planning a school dance or a pep rally or some other social activity. Yet students can play a key role in shaping social norms and are often deeply invested in shaping the social environments that shape them.

While students should be given a major role in creating norms, the adult role remains critical. Adults need to assure that key school values—such as caring, fairness, and honesty—are firmly upheld, and they need to help facilitate students' efforts to create norms and solve problems.

Key Elements

Create a diverse, representative school climate committee.

The composition of School Climate Committees is critical. To have leverage with other students, some members of the committee need to have social power in the school. At the same time, school climate committees should represent diverse voices in the school.

Students lead initiatives to improve school climate.

Students on the committee use school climate survey data to make decisions. Students use data to develop solutions and action plans. Students develop responses to certain violations of school values and norms as they arise. As a result, students are given meaningful responsibility and become agents of change.

Key Benefits

Improves school climate and fosters student driven change and leadership.

Degree of Difficulty

The School Climate Committee is moderately difficult to do.

The School Climate Committee is a key mechanism for creating positive social norms, for reducing bullying, and for developing more respectful, caring children. It also gives students agency in creating positive social norms. Students on the committee gain leadership skills and work to strengthen relationships between students and between adults and students in the school community.

The School Climate Committee Guide document provides a general structure and instructions for implementation. To get the most from the School Climate Committee, you need:

- *Location* – Activities take place in, or are grounded in, the school community.
- *Time* – The committee should meet weekly or bi-weekly in the first few months and at least bi-weekly for the duration of the school year.
- *Leadership* – Two adults who will co-facilitator the committee. Adults should be school staff with authority who are well respected and trusted by students.

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Objectives

- To create a strong, effective School Climate Committee of youth leaders that represents the voice of the entire student body and works with school staff to prevent bullying and other school social problems
- To use data to inform decision making and improve school climate, including creating more caring, inclusive social norms
- To provide students with a sense of agency and empowerment



Time Required

- The time it takes to form a School Climate Committee will vary depending on the process a school chooses to select committee members (e.g., appointed vs. elected)
- Once formed the committee should meet weekly or bi-weekly in the first few months and at least bi-weekly for the duration of the school year



Materials Required

- Basic requirements include two adult facilitators, 8-12 dedicated students, a space for meetings, and low-burden training for students and staff
- Additional materials may be required depending upon the choices and priorities of the committee



Advance Preparation

- Planning and design should take place early in the academic year or during the summer. The sooner in advance the committee can prepare, the better the likelihood of positive outcomes.



Other Considerations

- Schools that already have a student government or council may elect to have this group serve as the School Climate Committee.

Implementation

STEP ONE: FORMING THE SCHOOL CLIMATE COMMITTEE

Two school adults should co-facilitate and oversee the School Climate Committee. The co-facilitators should take an active role in the composition of the committee to ensure that it is diverse and balanced. It is also vital that some students on the committee are widely respected and have social status with the student body (see below).

The ideal size of the committee varies, depending on the school community. Generally, between 8-12 students are recommended to represent a committee.

Here are a few suggestions to make sure that the committee is diverse, respected, and representative of the student body. Before forming the committee, consider which process is the best fit for your student body given the size, social dynamics, etc.

- The adult facilitators might appoint the majority (about two thirds) of the committee to assure diverse representation on the committee and then have students nominate the remaining one third of the committee.
- In some schools, it may be beneficial for the adult facilitators to appoint all of the committee members. In this case, adults can talk to colleagues and a variety of student-group representatives to help identify students who are both respected by their peers and are likely to be inclusive and positive members of the committee.

Lake View High School

Lake View High School decided to form a student-led School Climate Committee. After consulting with other schools leaders, the principal introduced the idea at a staff meeting and appointed two adults interested in co-facilitating the committee. In an effort to recruit a diverse group of students to serve on the committee, five members were nominated and selected by staff and five members were nominated and selected by students. Students were nominated by secret ballot so students did not always know who were the appointed and who the nominated members were. Participation was limited to juniors and seniors and selected students were given the opportunity to decline participation. This strategy worked well and the committee was comprised of students with different backgrounds, interests, and experiences.

CONSIDER THIS

Co-facilitators can be anyone on the school staff with authority who is well respected and trusted by students. Co-facilitators might include teachers, administrators, coaches, or guidance counselors.

CONSIDER THIS

Ideally the School Climate Committee will evolve into an integral and respected school institution. In its earlier years, you may want to organize efforts to inform students about the committee and how they can get involved. This may be done through bulletins, assemblies, advisories, etc.

STEP TWO: LAUNCHING THE SCHOOL CLIMATE COMMITTEE

When and How to Conduct Meetings?

Guidelines for school surveys

- Assess relationships, physical and emotional safety, bullying, school connectedness and support
- Confidential and anonymous
- Evidence-based
- Administered at least once per year

We recommend that students on the School Climate Committee adopt formal process procedures for conducting their meetings (e.g., code of conduct, rules). Once the committee has been formed, the students, guided by adults, can help develop the by-laws as part of their initial meetings.

- The facilitators' responsibilities include assuring that the committee upholds the schools' core ethical values, helping students understand data, and planning with students based on the data. Facilitators are also responsible for securing a meeting space, creating expectations about committee responsibilities, and providing necessary resources for projects

Student and Staff Training

Adult facilitators must be prepared to set clear expectations and support the development of student leadership skills including communication, teamwork, and collaboration. For additional information about staff training, please see the 'Supplementary Documents' section following this guide.

- The facilitators should initially facilitate discussions among student committee members to help delegate responsibilities and solidify group norms such as respecting others' opinions, communicating respectfully, and setting clear expectations about how meetings will be conducted (e.g. confidentiality, meeting format, agenda, etc.).
- Over time, the facilitators can gradually step back and gently guide student members to fulfill these facilitation tasks on their own.

CONSIDER THIS

It may be beneficial to document group expectations and responsibilities. The committee may decide to create a poster or sign of expectations or norms. Alternatively, the group may choose to have all members sign and keep a copy of the expectations.

The following should be included in the committee training:

COMMITTEE GOALS AND TASKS:

- Outline the main goals of the School Climate Committee
- Explain key tasks and responsibilities

DATA SOURCES:

- Discuss possible sources of data (school climate surveys, focus groups, parent surveys)
- Be sure to check with the school administration about what data they are willing to share

LEADERSHIP AND TEAM-BUILDING EXERCISES:

- Consider using team-building or trust exercises to help committee members get to know and trust one another and work together
- For additional ideas and resources to support team-building, please see the 'Supplementary Documents' section following this guide

STEP THREE: GATHERING DATA

The first step in the committee's work should be to gather data from a school-wide student survey of school climate and culture that includes questions about students' perceptions of relationships with school staff and peers and feelings of physical and emotional safety.

- In schools where these surveys are already being conducted, the committee should be given access to the results in order to inform their goals and plans.
- In schools where surveys are not already being conducted, the committee should work with school administrators to select and implement one. (For more information about schools surveys, please visit the Making Caring Common Project's website.)

STEP FOUR: USING SCHOOL CLIMATE DATA

The committee should first review the data, observing any responses or patterns that are surprising, disappointing, or exciting. Here are five questions to consider as you review:

1. *What were you most excited/happy about?*
2. *What was most concerning about these results?*
3. *What additional data would be useful to know?*
4. *Are there current programs, strategies, and supports already in place that address challenge areas?*
5. *Do you see any differences between groups of students at this school (e.g., girls vs. boys, freshmen vs. seniors, etc.)?*

CONSIDER THIS

The committee should consider sharing a summary of the data with the student body. Doing so acknowledges the importance and value of student perceptions. Sharing the data may also increase support and interest for the committee.

Lake View High School

In reviewing the school climate survey data, the School Climate Committee observed several concerning and surprising responses. Prior to their committee meeting, each member reviewed the student data and generated a list of observations. Each member shared their observations and a master list was put up on a board for the group to see. The group discussed their reactions to the data and together the committee agreed on the key strengths: students felt physically safe in school buildings and students felt that diversity was respected among students.

When the group started to discuss key challenge areas, members of the committee held varying opinions. Several of the students felt that bullying was a major issue and should be prioritized, while other members were most concerned about the large numbers of students who indicated that they did not have adult support at school.

When the group met the following week, the students looked at both issues again. For each, they listed data from the survey supporting the need as well as programs already in place to address them. As a result, the group was able to see that more students had reported a lack of support from adults than those who had reported being bullied. Likewise, the school had several activities and assemblies dedicated to preventing bullying, whereas the committee found few examples of efforts to connect students and teachers. Before moving forward, the committee met with the principal and guidance team to share concerns and gather additional information.

STEP FIVE: LEADING INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Now the committee can form an action plan for celebrating strengths and addressing the challenge area(s) chosen.

Celebrating Strengths

It is important that the committee acknowledge strengths rather than focusing solely on negatives. This might include recognizing works of student art or new student groups that contribute to a positive school climate. The committee can also think about how current activities or expectations have promoted these strengths, which may provide insights for addressing challenge areas.

Addressing Challenge Areas

To begin, the committee should brainstorm possible responses to the challenge area they have chosen.

Once the group has a list of ideas, members must work together to choose a suitable and feasible action plan. Here are some questions to consider:

- *What resources are required?*
- *What is the specific purpose of the action plan? What is the intended outcome? How will the strategy/strategies achieve that outcome? How will we measure success?*
- *What evidence do we have that this action plan could work?*

When the group has selected a response, members should create an action plan that includes:

- A clear timeline for preparation and implementation
- Identification of needed resources
- Delegation of responsibilities

Projects should be ongoing and continuous. One-time events won't make change, but strategic, thoughtful, ongoing efforts and sustained attention and projects will.

Lake View High School

Having chosen to focus on strengthening student-teacher relationships at school, the School Climate Committee created a list of possible ideas:

- Assign students to several different advisors throughout the year
- Increase homeroom time
- Introduce student-teacher lunch days

Given that many students indicated on the survey that they did not have an adult they felt comfortable talking to and did not feel like teachers cared about their lives outside of the classroom, the committee decided that introducing student-teacher lunch days seemed like the best option. Unlike some of the other ideas, this option required few resources. Since teachers ate lunch at the same time as students, no additional time was needed. This option also provided a casual and informal atmosphere for students and teachers to get to know each other outside the classroom walls. Lake View's Action Plan has been included in the appendix.

STEP SIX: RECOGNIZING AND HONORING POSITIVE SCHOOL-WIDE ACHIEVEMENTS

While the committee is encouraged to engage the student body throughout the year, it is beneficial for both the school community and the committee itself to recognize and celebrate their achievements. For example, the committee may create a visual display of the school's accomplishments or organize a celebration at the end of the school year.

The School Climate Committee should continually assess the results of its efforts. Co-facilitators and committee chairs should lead discussions with questions like these:

- *What have we accomplished this month?*
- *Who did the effort(s) reach? How can we reach more of the school community?*
- *What types of evidence of impact did we witness? Did anyone comment on it? Do students seem to be acting differently?*
- *How well did the effort meet our stated goal?*
- *What should we do differently?*
- *Do we need to revisit our goals? What should we do next?*

The school committee cannot really know if progress has been made until they collect anonymous data again, so the school should re-administer the survey. Continually collecting data will help the committee evaluate the impact of its efforts and guide next steps (e.g., making changes to implementation, identifying additional strengths and challenge areas, etc.).

In addition to collecting data by re-administering the survey, the committee may also want to develop follow-up surveys or conduct focus groups to get feedback from students and staff.

Preparing Staff to Support Student Leadership

- School leaders and staff members should recognize and address their own attitudes and beliefs about students and their ability to act as effective leaders. This may be done through self-reflection or discussion. Consider asking the following questions:
 - Who benefits from student leadership opportunities and initiatives?
 - Do you believe students can make positive change?
 - What structures and supports must be put in place to see successful outcomes from student-led initiatives?
 - How can staff and students work together as partners in change? What challenges do you foresee?
- School leaders should clearly establish adult expectations and responsibilities. This includes not only the adults who are directly involved in facilitating student leadership initiatives, but all other adults at school. Teachers, administrators, and staff should be aware of these initiatives and understand how staff and students will be impacted and how they can support other staff members as well as students.
- Adult facilitators who will be working directly with student leaders should be given opportunities to build their own leadership skills and prepare to share power and responsibility with student leaders. For additional information and suggestions, check out the following:

Fletcher, A. (2008). The architecture of ownership. *Educational Leadership*, 66(3). Retrieved from [http:// www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/The-Architecture-of-Ownership.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov08/vol66/num03/The-Architecture-of-Ownership.aspx)

Hughes, W.H. & Pickeral, T. (2013). School climate and shared leadership. In *School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability* (A School Climate Practice Brief, Number 1). Retrieved from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/publications/documents/sc-brief-leadership.pdf>
- Let students lead, but give them support and recognition and make sure discussion is guided by your school's core values. It is important that students are given genuine autonomy and control over their own decisions, yet the facilitators and administrators must be prepared to serve as a strong pillar of ethical values and of support when needed.
- Emphasize that change takes ongoing effort and patience. A one-time school activity will not be sufficient, yet a series of meaningful activities throughout the year can effectively contribute to a school culture change.
- Encourage students to continually reassess and build on their efforts.

Reference:

MacNeil, C. A., & McClean, J. (2006). Moving from “youth leadership development” to “youth in governance”: Learning leadership by doing leadership. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2006(109), 99-106. doi:[10.1002/yd.157](https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.157)

Supporting Student Leadership Development

Communication Skills

- Teach students how to ask others for clarification and encourage active listening
 - Have students practice restating another student's opinion in their own words
 - Provide students with “sentence starters” to use when communicating with others. Here are some examples:
 - ✓ What I hear you saying is...
 - ✓ One question I have is...
 - ✓ To answer this question, we need to know...
 - ✓ I don't understand why/how...

Problem-Solving Skills

- Discuss strategies for problem solving, particularly in group settings
- Emphasize the importance of listening and allowing everyone in the group to have their voice heard and respected
- Review effective problem solving steps. Have students discuss what each step requires and how it may be helpful. Here is an example of steps to problem solving:
 1. Define the problem
 2. Analyze the problem (e.g., causes and effects)
 3. Establish criteria for solutions
 4. Generate potential solutions
 5. Select the best solution
 6. Implement the solution

Action Planning

- Discuss the benefits of action planning (e.g., better understanding of roles and responsibilities, better use of resources, shared decision making, etc.)
- There are many variations of action planning and templates can easily be found online. Students may choose to create their own template for planning. Regardless of the template used, an action plan should include the following:
 - Clearly stated goal(s)
 - Steps or activities required
 - Responsibilities and roles
 - Resources needed
 - Timeline and/or deadlines
 - Expected outcomes
 - Evaluation plan

SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

- Have students practice creating an action plan together. Be sure to give students the opportunity to reflect on the experience (e.g., What worked? What could we have done differently? What challenges came up?)

Reference:

Levinson, M. (2012). *No Citizen Left Behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

Team-Building Exercises

Games and Activities:

http://www.lehigh.edu/~insi/leadership/Teambuilders_and_Activities.pdf

http://www.deca.org/_docs/chapter-resources/DECA-teambuildinggames.pdf

<http://www.peacefirst.org/digitalactivitycenter>

<http://www.nea.org/tools/52725.htm>

Additional Resources:

<http://www.edutopia.org/student-engagement-resources>

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/importance-good-communication-skills/>

SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

Lake View High School Action Plan

Goal: To strengthen student-teacher connections and relationships by implementing student-teacher lunches once a week		
Steps	Responsibilities	Timeline
Meet with lunch coordinator and principal to discuss lunch assignments and scheduling	Two committee members will schedule a meeting and meet with principal and lunch coordinator.	Before next committee meeting (October 2 nd)
Assign teachers to lunch tables on a rotating schedule	Two committee members will create a map of the cafeteria and use student and teacher schedules to assign lunch tables.	Before committee meeting on October 18 th
Introduce student-teacher lunches to students and staff	Principal will help committee introduce lunches at a staff meeting	Will be presented at October 20 th staff meeting
After one month, the committee will solicit feedback from students and teachers via feedback forms completed during homeroom or staff meeting	The committee will discuss the feedback questions they are interested in asking. Two committee members will create the forms, print them, and distribute the student form to homeroom teachers and the staff teacher form to the principal.	Forms will be developed December 15 th Forms will be distributed to homeroom teachers and principal by December 18 th Forms administered December 20 th
Lunch program will be adjusted as needed based on feedback	Committee will review feedback and consider necessary changes	To be determined depending on changes needed
Students will be surveyed again before the end of the school year to evaluate impact	Committee members will coordinate with school administrators to set a date and prepare to survey students	To be determined

Responding to Data: Examples of School Climate Committee Initiatives

Promoting Kindness and Empathy

- Conduct a Circle of Concern exercise to encourage students to get to know and value individuals outside of their circle of friends. For more information on conducting a Circle of Concern exercise, please visit the [Making Caring Common Project's website](#).
- An initiative to post compliments to classmates on Facebook or Twitter, with the intent to reach all students over the course of the year. Better known as “cyber graciousness,” a success story can be found at this NBC news link: http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/12/09/15797908-cyber-graciousness-students-set-up-facebook-sites-for-compliments?lite
- A random acts of kindness campaign, with a Facebook page or school event that highlights examples. Daily and random acts of kindness can be reinforced with positive attention to motivate students to be thoughtful citizens and to create a kinder and more accepting school atmosphere. <https://www.facebook.com/therandomactsofkindnessfoundation>
- A project to highlight anonymous examples of kindness and bravery at prominent social events like homecoming games and parades, school dances, and assemblies. Students do not need to be named, but in some schools, they may wish to be. (Students should always be asked before their names are used, in case they do not want to receive attention.) <https://www.facebook.com/KindnessStartsWithMe> or <http://www.onemillionactsofkindness.com/>
- A student-designed video game that rewards kind actions. Research has shown that exposure to violent media increases students’ propensity for aggressive behaviors, thus others hypothesize that media promoting kindness will have a positive influence: <http://www.futurity.org/virtual-superpowers-prompt-real-kindness/>.

STUDENT-LED PROJECTS

For more examples:

“Joining Hands Against Bullying” by Richard Weissbourd and Stephanie Jones, in *Educational Leadership*, October 2012 (Vol. 70, #2, p. 26-31) www.ascd.org

For additional resources:

- [Not in Our School](#)
- [Dosomething.org](#)
- [Change.org](#)
- [Startempathy.org](#)

Decreasing Bullying, Teasing, and Disrespectful Behavior

- Participation in Pink Shirt Day to support students who have been bullied or teased. <http://www.pinkshirtday.ca/about/>
- An awareness week related to a specific goal, featuring speakers, events, contests, and apparel — like bracelets and t-shirts. Click here for a See-A-Bully, Stop-A-Bully example: <http://tachyonlabs.com/wearing-my-heart-on-the-end-of-my-sleeve/see-a-bully-stop-a-bully>.
- A Respect for All pledge, anti-bullying pledge (<http://www.antibullyingpledge.com/>), or peacekeeping pledge (<http://www.kidsaspeacemakers.org/pledge-of-nonviolence.pdf>).
- Start an initiative to reduce bullying and disrespectful behavior in the bathrooms, hallways, and other non-classroom spaces

Increasing Student Connectedness and Peer Social Support

- Mix-it lunches where students are encouraged to sit with someone they don’t know in the cafeteria. (See the Talking Teenage discussion forum on the pros and cons of assigned seats at lunch: <http://www.talkingteenage.com/discussion-board/post/1336154>.)

SUPPLEMENTARY DOCUMENTS

- Create a buddy system for new students or students with disabilities. Assign the student with a peer buddy when transitioning throughout the school, playing at recess, or attending assemblies and other school events. It is recommended that each student is assigned multiple peer buddies in order to reduce dependency on one student and to foster multiple friendships.

Celebrating and Encouraging Positive School-Wide Achievements

- Posters highlighting the positive findings from school climate surveys to show that prosocial behaviors are the norm. Research shows that “perceptions about school climate impact teacher morale and student achievement. Positive school climate benefits students, teachers, and staff. Teachers are motivated to teach, students are motivated to learn” (Bulach, 1994). For examples of images that can inspire your school, see posters from The Foundation for a Better Life: <http://www.values.com/at-your-school/posters>.
- Rally the student body to generate a meaningful and practical list of the ways students can make a positive change in their school. See Sound Out: Student Voice in Schools for an excellent example: <http://www.soundout.org/article.115.html>

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