

SAFE, CARING and INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Promoting a Positive and Inclusive School Climate

Preamble

The Waterloo Region District School Board recognizes that providing students with an opportunity to learn and develop in a safe, caring and respectful society is a shared responsibility in which the Board and schools play an important role. Schools that have a variety of prevention and intervention strategies foster a positive learning and teaching environment that supports academic achievement for all students and that helps students reach their full potential. A positive school climate is a crucial component of prevention. Not having appropriate prevention and intervention strategies adversely affects a school's ability to educate its students, students' ability to learn, as well as healthy relationships and the school climate.

“Building a safe, caring and inclusive school culture means teaching it minute by minute, day by day, integrating it into discipline practices and curriculum, using instructional models that provide practice in social and relationship skills and, most importantly, modelling it.” – Vicki Mather

Some educators assert that schools with a healthy culture are already successfully “doing” character and citizenship education, even though they may not explicitly identify it as such. Others argue simply that school culture is a necessary component of any kind of school improvement initiative: “In study after study, where culture did not support and encourage reform, it did not happen ... if you don't have a strong and healthy school culture, none of the rest will matter” (Peterson 1998, p. 1). Both positions agree that a successful effort to change what happens in the school environment is directly linked to school culture.

WRDSB Beliefs

- Learning is optimized in a safe, caring and inclusive environment
- All students can achieve to a high standard
- All staff can teach and support students to a high standard
- High expectations and early intervention are essential
- Staff can articulate why they teach or support students the way they do
- Collective responsibility and collaboration are critical in optimizing learning for all

Characteristics of a Positive School Climate

- There is a culture of high expectations which emphasizes the improvement of learning outcomes for all students.
- Healthy and respectful relationships are promoted among all members of the school community.
- Students are encouraged to be leaders and positive role models in their school; for example, to speak up about issues such as bullying.
- Parents and community members are actively engaged.
- Positive behaviour is reinforced, and students are given opportunities to develop relationships that are free from racism, discrimination and harassing behaviour.
- Schools ensure that all cultures are respected and valued, and as a result, students, parents and staff feel safe, comfortable and accepted.

Whole School Approach

What is a Whole School Approach?

A positive learning and teaching environment is essential if students are to succeed in school. Research shows:

That there is a direct link between students' success and the school environment in which learning takes place (Jaffe, 2010).

An effective school is more than achieving academic markers; it involves the development of relationships among staff, among students, and between staff and students to promote a safe environment and a positive school climate (Jaffe, 2010).

Building and sustaining a positive and inclusive school culture is a complex challenge and requires complex solutions. Schools alone cannot end bullying (Pepler, 2011).

A whole school approach involving all education and community partners is an important step to bring about the necessary systemic changes. Canadian and international research calls for the adoption of safe schools policies and safe schools initiatives (Fox et al, 2003; Olweus, 1993; Pepler & Craig, 2004).

It is important to engage all key learning areas, all grades and the wider community. All aspects of school life are included in a whole school approach, such as curriculum, culture, teaching practices, policies and procedures.

To bring about a cultural change in schools, it is necessary that adults in the school and the wider community develop awareness and understanding of behaviour issues in their school. Believe that students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to engage the world and others critically, which means developing a critical consciousness that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people.

A whole-school approach is required, and that everyone — administrators, school staff, parents, students and the wider community — has a role to play in creating a positive school climate.

Keys to Implementation –Leadership and Evidence

Leadership is essential in establishing a vision, policies, and procedures that promote a positive school culture to prevent bullying and violence. Moreover, it is the principals' leadership that is essential to establishing a foundation of collaboration across the groups within the school community (Jaffe, 2010).

A pre and post evaluation strategy is critical. The pre phase creates a baseline and identifies areas of concern and gaps in service. The purpose of post evaluation is to gather evidence to test the efficacy of the intervention.

Common Elements

Implementation of the whole-school approach needs to occur at four levels; school, class, individual and community (Olweus & Limber, 2010; Steinberg, Allensworth & Johnson, 2011).

School policies/procedures, views and attitudes toward student behaviour must be consistent regardless of the individual involved or the context.

Although activities are different at the various levels, there are common overlapping themes of prevention, intervention (response and support) that occur at all the levels. At each level;

- Roles and responsibilities must be identified;
- Staff, student, parent and community engagement is critical.
- A pre and post evaluation strategy. The SCIS School Climate Survey's are useful tools.

Components

According to research (Eslea & Smith 1998; Olweus & Limber, 2010), the following types of activities should occur within each component:

School level:

- Establish a coordinating committee (e.g. a Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Team as referenced in Policy and Program Memorandum 144.
- Conduct a pre and post evaluation
- Provide committee and staff training.
- Establish school rules regarding behaviour, prevention and support.
- Review and refine the school's supervision plan, which should identify "hotspots" or those areas difficult to supervise.
- Involve parents and community.

Classroom Level:

- Communicate and enforce school-wide rules on behaviour.
- Hold regular class meetings, hold meetings with students' parents.
- Learn and practice prevention and intervention strategies that address behaviour concerns.

Individual Level:

- Supervise students' activities.
- Hold meetings with students and their parents when misbehaviour occurs.
- Develop individual intervention plans for students involved in serious incidents.

Community Level:

- Involvement of community members in the policy development process.
- Development of school-community partnership to support school's program.
- Communicate the school's Code of Conduct and expectations on appropriate behaviour to the school community.

Getting Started**A. Exploring the Culture of the School**

What is school culture and how does it relate to the promotion of a positive school climate where students feel safe, cared for, included and accepted?

The "culture" of a school encompasses all conditions, expectations, beliefs and behaviours prevalent within that school community. A school's culture reflects values and attitudes of its members and the nature of relationships within that environment. Values and attitudes are more significant for a school culture if they are shared.

Although individual members of the school community construct their own meaning for core values, the act of sharing gives these values significance in the school culture. Although the two terms "school culture" and "school climate" are often used interchangeably, school climate refers mostly to the school's effect on students, and the feelings and opinions about the various aspects of the school and how it operates, as perceived by students, teachers and administrators. School culture, on the other hand, refers more to ways members of the school community work together. Research consistently shows that making changes to an organizational culture is about a seven year process.

The Waterloo Region District School Board defines a safe, caring and inclusive school culture as "one that is physically, emotionally and psychologically safe and is characterized by:

- caring
- common values and beliefs
- respect for democratic values, rights and responsibilities
- respect for cultural diversity
- respect for law and order
- common social expectations
- clear and consistent behavioural expectations
- appropriate and positive role modelling by staff and students
- respect for individual differences
- effective anger-management strategies
- community, family, student and staff engagement

Before schools begin to make changes to strengthen culture, they need a complete and realistic picture of existing school culture. Assessment can help schools understand and describe current culture while identifying desired changes and results. Assessment needs to be a collaborative process centred in the school environment.

It may begin with students, parents, staff and community members identifying values that they believe are inherent to a positive school culture.

B. Conducting Assessments of School Culture

Cultural scans, school climate surveys or audits provide opportunities for collaboration and dialogue, and starting points for reflection on the existing culture of the school. The Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools surveys, based on a synthesis of the research literature offer a series of questions to help assess school culture/climate with regard to safe schools, character development, equity and inclusion, and healthy school environment

A positive learning and teaching environment is essential if students are to succeed in school. Research shows that there is a direct link between students' success and the school environment in which learning takes place. Students are more motivated to do well and to realize their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate, where they feel safe and supported.

A Safe, Caring and Inclusive School is a place where all partners – students, staff, parents, and community members treat one-another fairly, with respect and kindness, and act in a socially responsible way towards all members of the school community. It is an inclusive community where diversity is affirmed within a framework of common values, and where all members participate in decision making and cooperate to promote the well-being of all. Students feel that adults care for them as a group and as individuals. High expectations exist so that students are engaged academically, socially and intellectually. Studies emphasize the contribution of a positive learning environment to student success.

Before schools can build and/or strengthen a safe, caring and inclusive school culture, they need to get greater insight to the existing culture. Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools surveys will assist schools in understanding and describing the current school culture while identifying areas for improvement. It is important to ensure that representatives from all sectors of the school and its community participate in any type of survey or assessment. To get an accurate picture of the school culture, it is essential to gather data from students, since research about bullying suggests that adults in a school may not witness the majority of this student behaviour.

The school climate surveys and report templates are intended to provide a general understanding of school climate. The results should assist in identifying the strengths and challenges of the school's climate and allow resources to be focused on areas that may need improvement.

Several sources were reviewed in the development of these surveys, including the school climate surveys distributed by Ontario's Ministry of Education, the *Tell Them from Me* commercially available surveys, and several surveys developed by universities for use with school aged students in the United States (e.g., *Virginia High School Safety Study*, Bandyopadhyay, Cornell & Konold, 2009; *California School Climate and Safety Survey*, Furlong, Grief, Bates et al, 2005).

The generally accepted factors that comprise school climate include: relationships between students, and between students and faculty; teaching and learning environment; school safety and the physical school environment.

There are four surveys available:

- one for students in grades 5, 7, 9 and 11
- one for school staff
- one for parents and guardians.
- one for parents and guardians with more than one student

All surveys are available in electronic format known as *Survey Monkey* or available in a basic Word format for those that need a print version. Surveys can be accessed through the Waterloo Region District School Board website at: <http://www.wrdsb.ca/climatesurvey>

C. Collaborative Problem Solving

A collaborative problem-solving process extends initial exploration of school culture and leads the way for developing an action plan. This process helps staff, administrators, parents, students and community members explore differences and search for solutions to support individual and group needs. Collaborative problem solving focuses on mutual gains and increases likelihood of reaching agreement on potentially divisive issues. Commitment to collaborative problem solving encourages collective action. Although problem-solving models vary, all are built on a collaborative process that includes the following basic stages.

Preparation: identify key individuals or groups to participate, establish commitment to collaborative process and make necessary arrangements with representative members.

Direction setting: establish expectations, determine guidelines and communicate ground rules for process, build support for shared planning, decision making, leadership, and identification and discussion of shared problems, issues and concerns.

Generating and analyzing options—generate and analyze options, and gain consensus on plan of action.

Implementation: outline and clarify action plan, anticipate potential problems and methods of handling them, establish monitoring and evaluation plan.

Monitoring and refining: monitor what has worked, and adjust parts of the action plan that are not successful. Collaborative problem solving emphasizes group leadership and requires participants to demonstrate strong interpersonal communication skills.

D. Leading for Change

The development of a strong school culture begins with the school principal. The principal “sets the tone for the entire school, models behaviours that encourage and support other staff members, and helps them develop positive interactions with students” (Alberta Learning 1999, p. 53). The principal is more than just an instructional leader. He or she is also a change leader who focuses on improvement of school culture. Change leaders share five characteristics:

- moral purpose
- an understanding of the change process
- the ability to improve relationships
- a desire to create and share knowledge throughout an organization
- the ability to generate coherent reform

As principals and other school leaders develop plans to change school culture, they consider the following principles of effective leadership.

1. Take responsibility for Student Learning

a. Challenge assumptions.

School leaders help staff members question assumptions about how much they can affect student learning. Volumes of research demonstrate that what happens in school makes a difference in student achievement. Leaders share findings and talk with staff about these studies.

b. Create small victories.

Leaders demonstrate patience and take a long-range view. They also identify, achieve and celebrate smaller objectives that provide evidence of growth along the way.

c. Celebrate success.

Leaders find ways to recognize individual teachers for students' accomplishments, teaching teams for reaching student achievement goals, and the whole staff for evidence of improving student performance.

2. Create a Collaborative Culture

a. Cultivate effective teams.

Schools plant seeds of collaborative culture when they develop capacity of teachers to work together. All teachers are assigned to teams focused on student learning. Team structure (e.g., course, grade level, interdepartmental, vertical) is less important than having all staff participate as a part of teams with student learning as the focus.

b. Provide time for collaboration.

A school is more likely to have a collaborative culture if there is a master schedule with a consistent time each week for teams to work together during the school day. Principals need to protect collaborative time for teamwork just as teachers protect instructional time for students.

c. Ask each team to develop operational protocols.

Teachers may benefit from establishing protocols to guide their work. Team protocols outline commitment of members to one another in carrying out their work.

d. Monitor and celebrate the work of teams.

School leaders do more than provide teachers with time to meet in their teams; they monitor the work of teams, collect and review documents and artifacts produced, and celebrate successful completion of group tasks.

3. Emphasize Common Goals

a. Find common ground.

School leaders acknowledge differences but concentrate on identifying a few "big ideas" for others to rally around. They generate support for big ideas by helping everyone understand best practices and presenting information that allows staff and community to assess how the school measures up to those practices.

b. Ask for commitments.

A school community that identifies specific actions and behaviours expected of members is more likely to create a healthy culture than one that focuses on failures. School leaders help groups shift the focus from shortcomings of others to their own sphere of influence, asking each group's members to share what they are prepared to do to bring critical concepts to life.

4. Focus on Results

a. Develop targets and timelines.

When schools focus on a few critical goals and establish benchmarks to monitor progress toward those goals, they are more likely to focus energies on well-researched innovations aligned with their goals.

b. Be selective.

Effective school leaders are a buffer between staff and well-intentioned groups or individuals (e.g., lobby groups, media, etc.) who want to press agendas on schools.

School leaders understand that not all ideas for school improvement are practical or desirable, and recognize limits to a staff 's capacity to implement meaningful change.

E. Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Teams

Role of the SCIS Team

- assessing both school culture and individual students to identify areas for improvement or intervention
- interpreting SCIS School Climate Survey data (gap analysis) to clarify needs
- consulting with stakeholders and experts to set goals, expectations, and priorities
- identifying appropriate implementation strategies and resources, assigning responsibilities, and setting
- tracking to assess progress and results, adjust goals and actions as required

Terms of Reference

The purpose of the School-Based Safe Caring and Inclusive Schools Team is to support the promotion of a positive school climate within their school and school community. By definition, the Ministry of Educations states a positive “school climate is a crucial component of prevention; it may be defined as the sum total of all of the personal relationships within a school. When these relationships are founded in mutual acceptance and inclusion, and modelled by all, a culture of respect becomes the norm.” The Safe, Caring and Inclusive School Team will operate in an advisory capacity to the Principal in supporting a positive and engaging school climate.

A positive school climate is one where:

- Healthy and respectful relationships are promoted among all diverse members of the school community
- Students are encouraged to be leaders and positive role models – for example, by speaking up about issues such as bullying, segregation, voice;
- Parents and community members are actively engaged;
- Positive behaviour is reinforced and student are given opportunities to develop relationships that are free of racism, discrimination and harassing behaviour;
- There is a culture of high expectation in which the improvement of learning outcomes for all students is emphasized;
- Schools ensure that all cultures are respected and valued, and as a result, students, parents and staff feel safe, comfortable and accepted.
- Everyone feels accepted and included in the school community. In this environment, disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour, such as racist, sexual, sexist or homophobic comments, is not acceptable.
- There is a culture of high expectations which emphasizes the improvement of learning outcomes for all students. Schools ensure that all cultures are respected, valued and as a result, students, parents and staff feel safe, comfortable and accepted.
- Everyone feels accepted and included in the school community. In this environment disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour, such as racist, sexual, sexist or homophobic comments, is not acceptable.

Membership

School-based Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Teams will consist of up to seven members, as follows: an administrator, a teacher, a paraprofessional (e.g. Child Youth Worker, E.A., etc.), a parent, a community member and two students.

Adults who serve on this team ideally have an interest in safe schools, character development, equity and inclusion and be willing to take a leadership role in encouraging and maintaining a positive climate in their school and community. Student representatives will reflect the school community and may identify as being a member of a non-dominant group, including but not limited to their cultural or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, physical ability or learning disability and may or may not be current leaders in the school.

The Ontario Ministry of Education Policy and Procedure Memorandum No. 144, dated October 19, 2009 states that *“each school must have in place a safe schools team responsible for school safety that is composed of at least one student (where appropriate), one parent, one teacher, one non-teaching staff member, one community partner, and the principal.”*

The school-based Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Team will operate in accordance with existing school code of conduct, Board policies and procedures, Ministry of Education directions for school boards, and align with other relevant legislation, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Ontario Human Rights Code.

Mandate of the school-based Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Team

1. To discuss broader concerns regarding the climate of their school, not specific incidents or specific individuals.
2. To provide ideas and suggestions to help with developing and maintaining the kind of climate where everyone can welcome and safe.
3. To discuss the challenges identified in the school climate surveys and recommend practical ideas to address some of those challenges.
4. To make plans, set goals and objectives, identify indicators of success, review progress and identify future direction.
5. To identify resources within the broader school community to help with achieving goals.
6. To assist in determining strategies to engage students, parents and members of the community to more adequately reflect the diversity within their school.

Commitment

School-based Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools Teams will meet a **minimum** of four times per year.

Responsibilities of Team Members

It is the responsibility of each member of this team:

- To attend team meetings.
- To identify and forward agenda items for discussion prior to each meeting.
- To bring forward concerns about safety, bullying, diversity, inclusion, well-being, etc.
- To participate in and contribute to dialogues and discussions, offering constructive and respectful comments while being respectful of diverse and opposing viewpoints.
- To identify goals and work together collaboratively to successfully meet these goals.
- To celebrate each small success.

Responsibilities of the Team to the School Board

It is the responsibility of the chair to forward names of all team members and contact information to the Assistant (to) Superintendent – Equity & Inclusion at the beginning of each school year.

Superintendents of Education for each family of schools will follow and monitor the activities of their individual school-based Safe, Caring & Inclusive Schools Team.

F. Students' Role in supporting a Safe, Caring and Inclusive Community

School staff and parents play important roles in shaping school culture, but for meaningful change to occur, students must be an integral part of the process. The best way to do this is to create a caring, supportive community in the classroom and school, so that students feel a sense of acceptance and belonging.

There are many reasons why students should be meaningfully involved in their schools, including the following;

- Students can be a part of preventing as well as solving problems.
- Students can learn to tackle real-world problems and establish relationships with others through their involvement and participation in school leadership activity.
- Giving back to a community helps students develop empathy and tolerance for other points of view.
- Students have valuable ideas regarding school safety, leadership and responsible citizenship.
- Student involvement creates a sense of ownership for the well-being of the school community.
- Confident and connected students have fewer problems with drugs, alcohol, eating disorders and smoking.
- Student involvement encourages students to advocate for themselves, personally and collectively.

From the moment students come together in a school or a classroom, they begin to form a community. They work together on projects, spend time together at recess or during lunch, and begin to establish beliefs about each other based on their initial perceptions and ongoing interactions. Promoting a caring and supportive community is an ongoing process that takes time, energy and commitment. It not only involves daily modelling of positive character traits and exemplary behaviour but also requires a solid commitment to establishing meaningful relationships with others (both in the classroom and in the larger school community), encouraging dialogue between all involved (students, teachers, support staff, parents, board members), and making a genuine effort to listen to and understand others.

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