



# The importance of building a safe and caring school climate

(Wellbeing@School research brief: March 2012)

## Developing a safe and caring school climate

Providing a caring, safe and respectful school climate in which learning can flourish is a key priority for New Zealand educators. This need is reflected in policy through the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) for schools.<sup>1</sup>

NAG 5(i) states that each school board of trustees ...

**... is expected to provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students.**

## Why is it important to build a positive school climate?

There is a growing evidence base that shows an association between **positive perceptions of school climate** and **improved outcomes for students and teachers** (O'Malley, Katz, Renshaw, & Furlong, 2012) (see *text box*).

O'Malley et al. report that student and teacher perceptions of school climate influence each other in a cumulative way over time, and that a positive climate facilitates both **academic success** as well as **student and staff wellbeing**.

In a similar vein, Cohen and Greier (p.3, 2010) state that evidence suggests a "safe, caring, participatory and responsive" school climate provides the optimal foundation for learning.

For **students**, positive perceptions of school climate are associated with:

- higher levels of academic motivation, achievement and success at school
- increased prosocial attitudes and behaviours
- feelings of enjoyment, safety and connectedness to school
- lower levels of risky and aggressive behaviours.

For **teachers**, positive perceptions of school climate are associated with:

- higher levels of teacher efficacy, job satisfaction, productivity and retention
- thoroughness in implementing new initiatives
- lower levels of reported burnout.

(Summarised from O'Malley et al., 2012)

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/PolicyAndStrategy/PlanningReportingRelevantLegislation/NEGSAndNAGS/TheNationalAdministrationGuidelinesNAGs.aspx>



## What is “school climate”?

The term “**school climate**” is usually used to describe people’s subjective experiences of school life and the “**ethos**”, “**feel**”, “**spirit**” or “**morale**” of a school.

Researchers such as O’Malley et al. (2012) suggest we need more focus on ways to improve the climate of schools. However, researchers also note there is **no common definition** of what **school climate** actually is (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; O’Malley et al., 2012; Tableman, 2004).

One commonly cited definition of school climate was developed by members of the National School Climate Council (2007) in the USA. A recent update of the full definition is shown in the text box.

### A definition of school climate

*School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.*

*A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society.*

*This climate includes:*

- *Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.*
- *People are engaged and respected.*
- *Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.*
- *Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.*
- *Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.*

*(from <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/>)*

## How is school climate different from school culture?

The term “school climate” is often used synonymously with other terms like “school culture”. However, **school culture** has a different meaning. It refers to the beliefs and expectations that members of the school community share about **how the school operates** (Tableman, 2004). As summarised by Gruenert (2008), **school culture** is about “**the way we do things** around here” and **school climate** is about “**the way we feel** around here”. Gruenert suggests that, if school leaders want to shape a new culture over time, one of the first things they could do is an assessment of school climate. This will assist them to collect information on aspects of school life that could be improved. Supporting this type of self-review is the main focus of the Wellbeing@School tools and resources.

## What are common dimensions of school climate?

Researchers note that because “school climate” is an umbrella term, there is no standard list of dimensions of school life that can be included within this construct (Cohen et al.,



2009; Tableman, 2004). There are also a number of related and overlapping constructs such as “school connectedness” and “student engagement” (Wilson, 2004).

However, agreement is starting to develop about some of the more common dimensions of school climate (Cohen & Greier, 2010; Tableman, 2004). Tableman (2004) notes that most researchers emphasise “**caring**” as a core element, and many also place “**safety**” in the forefront of their definitions. Cohen and Greier (2010) identify four components that are common to most definitions:

- **safety** (e.g., rules and norms promote social and physical safety)
- **relationships** (e.g., the school promotes caring and connectedness, respect for diversity, as well as effective relationships with parents and whānau)
- **teaching and learning** (e.g., the learning environment promotes and supports learning for all students)
- **physical environment** (e.g., the physical environment is looked after and promotes a sense of community).

Most definitions of school climate are multidimensional. This assists us to consider a school as a system with interacting parts that all contribute to the climate or “feel” of the school. (For more information about systems views of schools, see the Wellbeing@School research brief: [A whole-school approach to change using the Wellbeing@School tools](#)).

## New Zealand studies about school climate

Some studies have provided data about the climate of New Zealand schools. The Youth '07 survey of New Zealand secondary schools included a teacher questionnaire and student survey items that explored the social climate of the schools in the study (Denny, Robinson, Milfont, & Grant, 2009). Denny et al.'s findings indicate that **perceptions of school climate vary widely between schools** and are related to school type, size and decile. Teachers and students from small-sized girls' schools tended to give better ratings of school climate than their peers at other schools. There were fewer differences by school decile. The researchers also found that students reported different patterns compared to staff. One example was that students from low-decile schools were more likely to feel part of (connected to) their school, and that they were cared about, than students from high-decile schools. In contrast, staff at low-decile schools tended to have poorer perceptions of their school climate.

## The link between school climate, safety and bullying behaviour

International researchers who work in the area of addressing student bullying behaviours in schools are increasingly turning their attention to the relationship between school climate and students' and staff's perceptions of safety and experience of bullying



behaviours (Bosworth, Orpinas, & Horne, 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; O'Malley et al., 2012; Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009).

In New Zealand, some data suggest that **students' sense of safety at school is improving over time**. Data from the 2001 and Youth '07 surveys showed that the proportion of students who reported feeling safe at school increased from 78 percent in 2001 to 84 percent in 2007 (Clark et al., 2009).

However, data from the Youth '07 survey also showed marked **differences between schools in relation to students' perceptions of safety** (Denny et al., 2009) (*see text box*).

**Youth '07 found that:**

- students from **small schools reported feeling safer** than their peers from larger schools
- the proportion of students who **reported being bullied** weekly or more **varied from 0 percent to 23 percent** between schools
- students who attended **boys' schools tended to report higher rates of bullying behaviour**.

(summarised from Denny et al., 2009)

Students at different types of schools also reported large variations (from 24 percent to 89 percent) in whether they considered **teachers almost always took action to stop bullying**. Students from girls' and/or high-decile schools were more likely to report this happened. There was also considerable variation in students' reports of whether they considered **other students took action to stop bullying**. Students from girls' and/or low-decile schools were the most likely to consider other students would intervene.

These data suggest that, in New Zealand, there is considerable variation in students' experiences of safety at school, and that **some schools have successfully built a safe climate** that encourages both staff and students to actively address and discourage bullying behaviours.

There is also evidence from the New Zealand primary school sector that shows a connection between the relationship aspect of school climate and students' sense that their school is caring and safe. In a study involving primary-age students from two regions, Raskauskas, Gregory, Harvey, Rifshana and Evans (2010) measured classroom climate (sense of connection to school and perceptions of student-teacher relationships) and students' empathy and reports of bullying and victimisation. They found that students' perceptions of positive teacher-student relationships and connection to school were associated with higher levels of prosocial behaviours. Prosocial behaviours were also positively related to empathy and negatively related to engagement in bullying behaviours. Raskauskas et al. concluded that these results support the importance of a positive classroom climate for enhancing empathy and fostering prosocial behaviours in ways that reduce bullying.

## Final comment

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that a positive school climate is important for promoting student learning and achievement, success at school, staff



morale and retention and students' social and emotional development. A positive school climate can act as a protective factor against risky and aggressive behaviour such as bullying. For these reasons, researchers are increasingly suggesting that we need **less focus on measuring and decreasing negative outcomes** (e.g., a focus on aggression and bullying in schools) and **more focus on increasing positive outcomes** such as fostering caring and safe school climates (O'Malley et al., 2012; Orpinas & Horne, 2010).

## Further information

For more information, see the [Wellbeing@School literature overview](#):

For more information about the New Zealand Youth '07 study of secondary students, see:

<http://www.youth2000.ac.nz/publications/reports-1142.htm>

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