

School Climate & Student Voice Research Brief

Andrea L. Ochoa, Johns Hopkins University

The EAD Research and Evaluation Task Force is pleased to share these research briefs which summarize findings from research on various practices and priorities associated with EAD. The authors of each brief were asked to highlight the main findings from research on the given subject.



Principle 3 of the Educating for American Democracy (EAD) core pedagogical principles emphasizes the importance of a school climate that encourages all constituents within a school community—students, families, teachers, administrators, and others—to engage in meaningful discussion to learn about American constitutional democracy from multiple perspectives. An environment that supports this level of inquiry must also ensure that all students feel they belong and can contribute substantively to rigorous debate and respectful conversation.

Why School Climate?

School climate refers to the multiple dimensions of a school environment that contribute to teaching and learning. A substantial body of literature has attempted to define school climate, but broadly the term refers to the academic, institutional, and interpersonal processes that inform school discipline policies, students' sense of belonging, and safety, which have implications for the quality of relationships between school staff and students and their families.¹

A positive school climate in K-12 settings has been found to be one of the strongest predictors for developing democratically engaged students.² Additionally, studies conducted in secondary school settings have found school climate to be positively associated with student outcomes such

¹ Meagan O'Malley et al., "School Climate, Family Structure, and Academic Achievement: A Study of Moderation Effects," *School Psychology Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (March 2015): 142–57, <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000076>; Ming-Te Wang and Jessica L. Degol, "School Climate: A Review of the Construct, Measurement, and Impact on Student Outcomes," *Educational Psychology Review* 28, no. 2 (June 2016): 315–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9319-1>; Niobe Way, Ranjini Reddy, and Jean Rhodes, "Students' Perceptions of School Climate During the Middle School Years: Associations with Trajectories of Psychological and Behavioral Adjustment," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 40, no. 3–4 (December 2007): 194–213, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9143-y>.

² Jonathan Cohen, Terry Pickeral, and Peter Levine, "The Foundation for Democracy: Promoting Social, Emotional, Ethical, Cognitive Skills and Dispositions in K-12 Schools," *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy* 3, no. 1 (2010), www.ried-ijed.org.

as academic achievement, healthy habits (i.e., avoiding friendships with individuals who use drugs and alcohol), engagement, motivation,³ and teacher outcomes such as retention, and reduced victimization.⁴ Moreover, in K-12 settings a positive school climate has been found to reduce the effect of socioeconomic status and family structure on achievement measures.⁵

The benefits of a positive school climate showcase it as a prime lever for holistic school reform. Modifying a K-12 school's climate over time can result in positive change for all stakeholders in a school community.⁶ Measuring school climate and implementing interventions to address concerns or areas for growth, can be a meaningful part of a system- or school-wide continuous improvement effort. Research supports using surveys consisting of validated scales that measure school climate in elementary and secondary school settings from the perspective of students, school staff, parents, and other constituents who participate in the school community.⁷

³ Stephen Brand et al., "Middle School Improvement and Reform: Development and Validation of a School-Level Assessment of Climate, Cultural Pluralism, and School Safety," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95, no. 3 (September 2003): 570–88, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.3.570>; Stephen Brand et al., "A Large Scale Study of the Assessment of the Social Environment of Middle and Secondary Schools: The Validity and Utility of Teachers' Ratings of School Climate, Cultural Pluralism, and Safety Problems for Understanding School Effects and School Improvement," *Journal of School Psychology* 46, no. 5 (October 2008): 507–35, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2007.12.001>; Cohen et al., "School Climate"; Dongping Li et al., "Perceived School Climate and Adolescent Internet Addiction: The Mediating Role of Deviant Peer Affiliation and the Moderating Role of Effortful Control," *Computers in Human Behavior* 60 (July 2016): 54–61, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.02.015>; Herbert W. Marsh, Andrew J. Martin, and Jacqueline H. S. Cheng, "A Multilevel Perspective on Gender in Classroom Motivation and Climate: Potential Benefits of Male Teachers for Boys?," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 100, no. 1 (February 2008): 78–95, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.100.1.78>.

⁴ Cohen et al., "School Climate"; Gary D. Gottfredson et al., "School Climate Predictors of School Disorder: Results from a National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 42, no. 4 (November 2005): 412–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427804271931>.

⁵ O'Malley et al., "School Climate, Family Structure, and Academic Achievement"; Ruth Berkowitz et al., "A Research Synthesis of the Associations Between Socioeconomic Background, Inequality, School Climate, and Academic Achievement," *Review of Educational Research* 87, no. 2 (April 2017): 425–69, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669821>.

⁶ Thomas D Cook, Robert F Murphy, and H David Hunt, "Comer's School Development Program in Chicago: A Theory-Based Evaluation," *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2000): 535–97; Wang and Degol, "School Climate."

⁷ Carolyn Barber, Christopher H Clark, and Judith Torney-Purta, "Learning Environments and School/Classroom Climate as Supports for Civic Reasoning, Discourse, and Engagement," in *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Education, 2021), 273–318; George Bear et al., "Technical Manual for the Delaware School Survey: Scales of School Climate; Bullying Victimization; Student Engagement; Positive, Punitive, and Social Emotional Learning Techniques; and Social and Emotional Competencies" (Delaware, 2021); Crystal Spring and Andrea Ochoa, "Validation of the Academic School Climate Scale for Students," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, April 26, 2024, 07342829241249353, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829241249353>; Ashley Berner, Crystal Spring, and Andrea Ochoa, "Assessing the Civic-Building Capacities of Schools: Early Findings from a Survey of Parents and Students," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (January 2023): 118–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231179825>; Keith J. Zullig et al., "School Climate: Historical Review, Instrument Development, and School Assessment," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 28, no. 2 (April 2010): 139–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282909344205>.

At the classroom level, K-12 teachers can develop trust with their students, provide constructive feedback, offer opportunities to develop public speaking skills, and scaffold class discussion to build a positive classroom climate.⁸ Additionally, teachers can model civic behaviors and engage in sociopolitical topics, as this has been found to increase students' sense of belonging.⁹

Thus, school climate can be addressed from multiple entry points such as the classroom, school, or system level. The key to improving school climate is addressing feedback from those constituents most impacted by school practices and policies. While the voices of all constituents should be considered to a certain degree, the following section provides an overview of the importance of incorporating student voice for improving school climate.

Student Voice

Incorporating student voice into classroom- and school-level decision-making also improves school climate.¹⁰ This level of engagement increases a sense of belonging and can foster a culture of acceptance toward all students, including those from historically marginalized groups.¹¹ Policies and practices that encourage student input have been found to be positively associated with the prominence of civic discourse in secondary schools.¹²



Such practices include implementing student councils to support students in contributing to school governance by providing meaningful input in a variety of contexts. For example, student councils that minimize faculty oversight and give students authority over certain funds and programming can result in students feeling empowered and included. On the other hand, student

⁸ Hilary G Conklin et al., “Pedagogical Practices and How Teachers Learn,” in *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Education, 2021), 353–396; Ming-Te Wang and Jessica L. Degol, “School Climate: A Review of the Construct, Measurement, and Impact on Student Outcomes,” *Educational Psychology Review* 28, no. 2 (June 2016): 315–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9319-1>.

⁹ DeLeon L. Gray, Elan C. Hope, and Jamaal S. Matthews, “Black and Belonging at School: A Case for Interpersonal, Instructional, and Institutional Opportunity Structures,” *Educational Psychologist* 53, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 97–113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2017.1421466>.

¹⁰ Barber, Clark, and Torney-Purta, “Learning Environments and School/Classroom Climate as Supports for Civic Reasoning, Discourse, and Engagement.”

¹¹ Gray, Hope, and Matthews, “Black and Belonging at School”; Lies Maurissen, Carolyn Barber, and Ellen Claes, “Classroom Discussions and Political Tolerance towards Immigrants: The Importance of Mutual Respect and Responsiveness,” *Acta Politica* 55, no. 2 (April 2020): 242–66, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-018-0114-0>; Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn H. Barber, and Britt Wilkenfeld, “Latino Adolescents’ Civic Development in the United States: Research Results from the IEA Civic Education Study,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 2 (January 22, 2007): 111–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-006-9121-y>.

¹² Lee H Ehman, “The American School in the Political Socialization Process,” *Review of Educational Research* 50, no. 1 (1980): 99–119.

councils that include substantial adult oversight and give students little authority except over social events are likely to result in lower perceptions of school climate and student autonomy.¹³

Restorative justice circles represent another strategy that elicits student voice with the intent of improving school climate. When implemented correctly—for example, by ensuring all students feel safe and able to contribute—students learn empathy, how to be a good listener, and feel sufficiently supported to tell their own story by leveraging their voice. A recent study on restorative justice circles in high schools found that student “circle keepers” helped young people influence school climate to benefit student needs.¹⁴

Challenges

Simply prioritizing a positive classroom climate may not fully empower students who have been historically marginalized. Thus, teachers should consider explicitly encouraging differences in perspectives and points of view. Research supports creating a safe space where students from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds can perceive an equitable climate so middle and high school students can feel confident contributing and disagreeing productively in class discussions.¹⁵ Findings from this research can also inform how elementary school teachers support students in developing the building blocks of productive discussion.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development



Professional development and preservice teacher training can include focusing teachers on their biases and privileges. In this way, teachers learn how their role will impact student participation and school climate—and what they can do to make students feel at ease.¹⁶ For example, K-12 teachers new to a city or school community should receive context-specific training to understand *who* they are teaching and *how* the history of the community interacts with school policies and curricula. Such experiences can

¹³ Barber, Clark, and Torney-Purta, “Learning Environments and School/Classroom Climate as Supports for Civic Reasoning, Discourse, and Engagement”; Daniel A. McFarland and Carlos Starmanns, “Inside Student Government: The Variable Quality of High School Student Councils,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 111, no. 1 (January 2009): 27–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100106>; Ester Halfon and Shlomo Romi, “High-School Student Councils: A Typological Approach,” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 16, no. 2 (July 2021): 114–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197919886880>.

¹⁴ Maisha T. Winn, “Restorative Justice, Civic Education, and Transformative Possibilities,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (January 2023): 156–71, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231188566>.

¹⁵ Matthew A. Diemer, Chueh-an Hsieh, and Tianshu Pan, “School and Parental Influences on Sociopolitical Development Among Poor Adolescents of Color,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 37, no. 2 (February 2009): 317–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000008315971>; Robert J. Jagers et al., “Classroom and School Predictors of Civic Engagement Among Black and Latino Middle School Youth,” *Child Development* 88, no. 4 (July 2017): 1125–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12871>.

¹⁶ Conklin et al., “Pedagogical Practices and How Teachers Learn.”

help teachers engage positively with students and support positive school climate.¹⁷

Moreover, teachers' stating where they stand on a given topic may result in the perception that students can only contribute if they are in favor of their teacher's position. Research on teachers in secondary school settings has found that teachers' own views might obstruct rather than nurture an open classroom climate.¹⁸ Further, teachers' opinions might manifest in the materials selected for discussion, giving more weight to one side of an argument.¹⁹ Though this research focuses on middle and high school teachers, all K-12 educators should receive professional development in selecting materials that provide access to multiple perspectives and facilitating discussion presented in a manner that allows students to actively engage rather than passively absorb content. This type of discourse is likely to ensure more perspectives are represented so students can feel that they can contribute to a fruitful discussion.²⁰

Finally, K-12 teachers might benefit from learning specific strategies to develop equitable classroom discussion. For example, they should learn what scaffolds must be in place for children to learn to state their point of view, support it with facts, listen to others, and understand how other (competing) points of view add complexity and richness to a discussion.²¹

[Annotated Bibliography](#)

www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org | iCivics, Inc. 2024 ©

¹⁷ Lorena Guillen and Ken Zeichner, "A University-Community Partnership in Teacher Education From the Perspectives of Community-Based Teacher Educators," *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (March 2018): 140–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117751133>; Robert E. Lee, "Breaking Down Barriers and Building Bridges: Transformative Practices in Community- and School-Based Urban Teacher Preparation," *Journal of Teacher Education* 69, no. 2 (March 2018): 118–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487117751127>; Kavita Kapadia Matsko and Karen Hammerness, "Unpacking the 'Urban' in Urban Teacher Education: Making a Case for Context-Specific Preparation," *Journal of Teacher Education* 65, no. 2 (March 2014): 128–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487113511645>; Peter Williamson, Xornam Apedoe, and Christopher Thomas, "Context as Content in Urban Teacher Education: Learning to Teach in and for San Francisco," *Urban Education* 51, no. 10 (December 2016): 1170–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085915623342>.

¹⁸ Nancy S. Niemi and Richard G. Niemi, "Partisanship, Participation, and Political Trust as Taught (or Not) in High School History and Government Classes," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 35, no. 1 (January 2007): 32–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2007.10473325>.

¹⁹ Christopher H. Clark, Mardi Schmeichel, and H. James Garrett, "Social Studies Teacher Perceptions of News Source Credibility," *Educational Researcher* 49, no. 4 (May 2020): 262–72, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20909823>.

²⁰ Conklin et al., "Pedagogical Practices and How Teachers Learn."

²¹ Carol D. Lee, Na'ilah Suad Nasir, and Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, "What the Sciences of Human Learning and Development Tell Us about Civic Reasoning and Discourse," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 705, no. 1 (January 2023): 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231188575>.