



SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEYS: WHAT ARE STATES MEASURING?

The Astra Center for Innovative Education, Spring 2020

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call *Radically Reimagined Relationships*—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. We also believe that what we measure is a reflection of what we value, and so we've been interested in exploring how schools, districts, and states measure the quality of relationships among students, staff, and families. What we've found is encouraging: a growing number of states are asking all three groups about their school-related relationships, most often through school climate surveys.

School Climate Surveys in Context

There's a growing recognition of the importance of school climate and its positive contribution to student engagement and achievement.¹ For many years, organizations including the National School Climate Center and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) have championed the so-called “non-academic” factors that contribute to a child's success in school; more recently, initiatives like the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development have deepened our understanding of the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of learning and how they are inexorably linked to academic improvement.²

The federal government has fueled this movement as well: the US Department of Education has funded the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments, School Climate Transformation Grants for districts and states, and other programs that focus on school climate. Additionally, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in 2015 requires states to report on at least one indicator of school quality or student success alongside more traditional indicators like student achievement on state assessments and graduation rates. In many states' ESSA plans, this “fifth indicator” of school quality is identified as healthy school climate.

Under ESSA, every state must track and report rates of school-related arrests, referrals to law enforcement, suspension rates, expulsions, school violence, bullying, and harassment. Some states use one or more of these measures as proxies for school climate, but increasingly states are going above and beyond these baseline reporting measures to evaluate school climate more comprehensively using a variety of tools, including but not limited to school climate surveys. A number of for-profit and non-profit companies offer robust, validated school climate survey tools (see “Resources” below). The US Department of Education launched its own school climate survey platform (EDSCLS) in 2016; several state education agencies have opted to utilize EDSCLS or to develop their own custom surveys.

Which States are Measuring, and Who Are They Asking?

The growth in state adoption of school climate surveys has been extraordinary: whereas in 2018 only 15 states had implemented school climate surveys, two years later that number has more

¹ See, for instance, the Learning Policy Institute's excellent 2018 report [Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success](#).

² See the Commission's 2018 research brief [The Brain Basis for Integrated Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#).

than doubled. (See the chart “States Measuring School Climate” for a complete listing.) In 16 of the 31 states now implementing school climate surveys, schools and districts are required to participate and report results; in the remainder, climate survey(s) are offered by the state as a tool for school improvement and/or staff evaluation, but utilization is optional.

Seventeen of the 31 states are regularly surveying students, school staff, *and* families about their perceptions of school climate. Five states (KY, MD, MA, MN, VA) survey students and staff; Maryland, which just launched its survey effort in the 2018-19 school year, reports that it plans to add a parent survey in the near future.

New Mexico surveys students and parents, but not staff; conversely, North Carolina has only surveyed employees.³ Pennsylvania is the only state that fields a survey of community members’ perceptions of school climate.

Seven states (ME, MI, NV, ND, SC, WA, WY) regularly survey students, but not other groups. Of these, Nevada reports that it plans to add family and staff surveys in the near future.

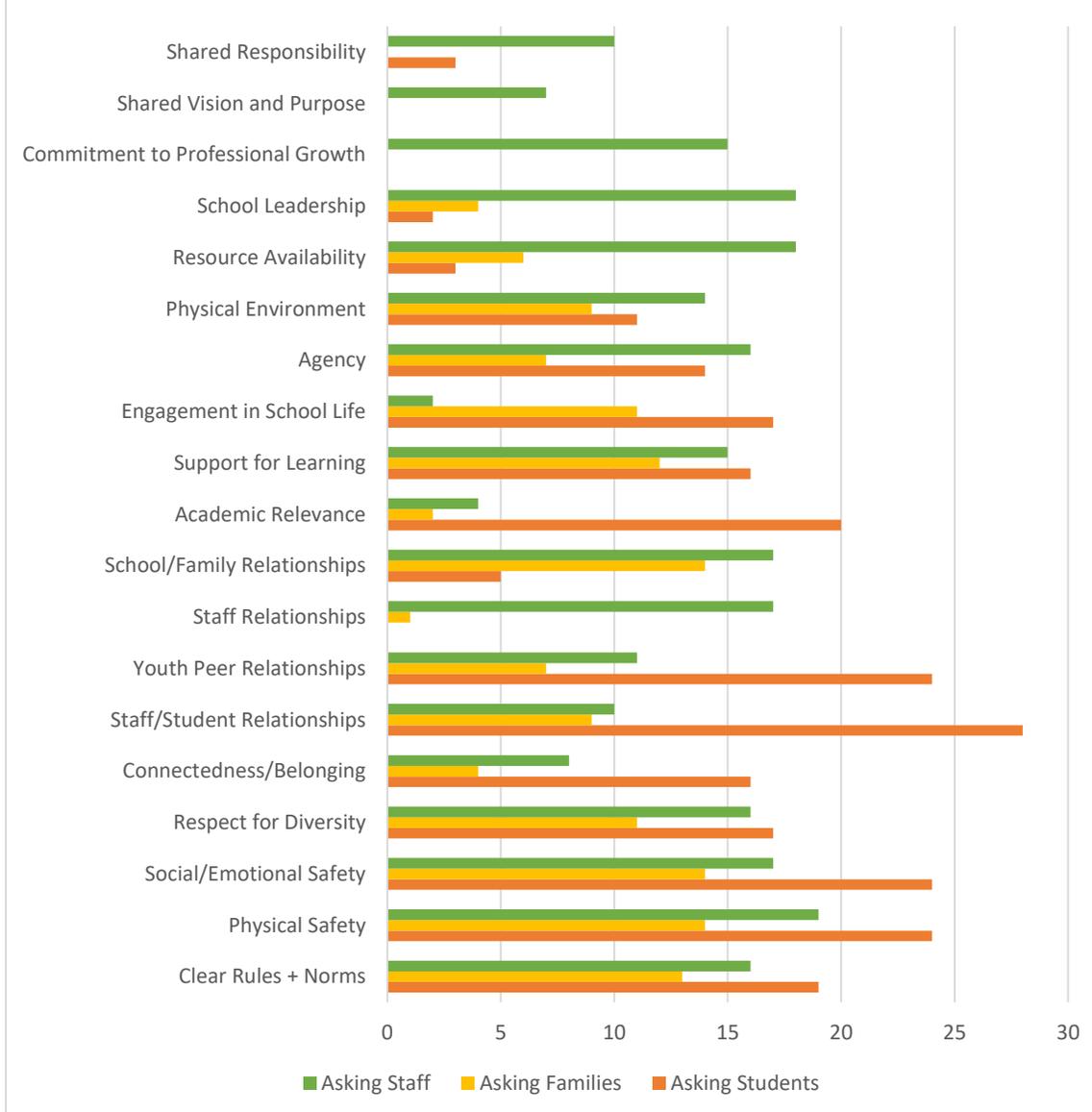
What Are They Asking?

We began by identifying the 19 attributes of school climate listed in the chart below. We drew these from the National School Climate Center’s Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, the U.S. Department of Education’s school climate surveys, Panorama Education’s school climate surveys, and the University of Chicago’s 5Essentials System, as well as our own experiences working in and visiting schools.

As illustrated in the chart, relationships between staff and students, youth peer relationships, and school safety are the most frequent attributes of school climate being measured in state survey efforts.

³ In both cases, states have asked staff about working conditions through the New Teacher Center’s Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) survey. Kentucky reports that in 2020 it will replace TELL with the Impact Kentucky Working Conditions Survey for staff statewide.

School Climate Attributes Being Measured by States



As we examined these school climate survey topics and questions, we noted several strengths and weaknesses in how states are evaluating relationships as an attribute of school culture, and how they approach related attributes like safety and respect for diversity.

Relationships: Nearly all states are asking questions about staff/student relationships. When students are surveyed about this, most commonly they are asked whether teachers treat them with respect and whether they have at least one trusted adult in the building with whom they can share a problem. It's far less common for states to ask students whether these relationships are the norm rather than the exception, whether trust and respect are reciprocal between teachers

and students, or whether they think their teachers really take the time to get to know them (for example, in Tennessee's survey which asks students to rate the statement "I have at least one teacher who knows me well.")

In 100% of the cases where states are surveying students, they're asking about staff/student relationships. However, among states surveying staff, this same question is being asked less than 50% of the time. Clearly, there's room for improvement in asking staff to reflect upon the quality of their relationships with the young people in their schools.

Roughly three-quarters of the states surveying staff and families ask each group about their perceptions of school/family relationships, but it is far less common to ask students about this—only 23% of student surveys we examined include question(s) on this topic (AK, CA, IA, MA, MI, TN, WA.) As to the substance of these questions, it is far more likely for states to ask whether school staff members treat families with respect than whether families respond in kind. We also wonder how staff and family perceptions of this relationship compare: are families and staff equally satisfied?

As for relationships among staff, nearly three-quarters of all staff surveys explicitly address this topic. Only New Jersey asks families about their perceptions of staff relationships ("Adults in my child's school seem to work well with one another") and in no cases are students asked how well they see adults working together. When staff are queried about their relationships with colleagues, the questions generally focus on collaboration, trust, and respect. It's less common for states to ask school staff whether they feel known and cared for by their coworkers, or whether they have at least one trusted colleague they can go to with a problem—the adult culture corollary to the questions students are asked about their teachers and peers.

Safety: If school climate surveys are a yardstick to gauge the relative importance of students' social/emotional safety and their physical safety, then we are encouraged to see that states are paying attention to both. What's more, many of the surveys we examined include fairly nuanced questions in the social/emotional safety realm, going beyond basic questions like "Have you ever been bullied at school?" to include rating scales for items like "Students at this school are teased or picked on about their physical or mental disability" (in the US Department of Education's EDSCLS).

School safety came up in 19 of the 23 staff surveys we examined. Most often, staff members are asked for general impressions about school safety (e.g., West Virginia's question "How much of a problem at this school is gang-related activity?"). Somewhat less frequently, states ask staff members about their own physical and social/emotional safety (like Georgia's question "I have been concerned about my physical safety at school.")

Respect for Diversity: In this analysis, we made a distinction between Respect for Diversity and Social/Emotional Safety. When surveys asked about instances of verbal or physical violence or harassment of students based upon some aspect of their identity, we identified these as Social/Emotional Safety questions. In contrast, Respect for Diversity included questions covering equal treatment in policy and practice, culturally diverse curricula and

instructional materials, respect for different viewpoints, and whether families of different backgrounds feel welcome at school.

While a majority of the state surveys we examined for students, staff, and families include Respect for Diversity questions—above 60% of surveys for each group—not all surveys do. We encourage states to consider that the absence of negative reporting (in Social/Emotional Safety) is not the same thing as affirmative reporting that schools and districts are intentionally and proactively developing policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Shared Vision, Purpose, and Responsibility: Only about 40% of the staff surveys include questions about shared vision and purpose. Most often, these ask whether the school’s vision, mission, and/or purpose has been communicated clearly to staff by the school’s leadership (for example, in Kansas, “Teachers at my school have a clear understanding of my school’s mission.”) It’s less common to see questions about the staff’s involvement in developing the vision/mission/purpose.

Somewhat more frequently, in just over half of the staff surveys we examined, employees are asked about shared responsibility. Most often these questions narrowly focus on shared responsibility for student success and don’t ask about shared responsibility for a healthy school culture, staff members’ professional growth and well-being, or family engagement.

No state surveys ask students and families about shared vision and purpose. None asks families questions about shared responsibility, and only three ask students about whether they feel a responsibility to the school community (CA, GA, MA).

School Leadership: While nearly all staff surveys ask about school leadership, only four family surveys (HI, ID, KS, TN) and just two student surveys (AK, TN) do so. Families and students have different kinds of engagement with school leaders than do staff members, and it’s worth evaluating how well school leaders attend to their relationships with each of these stakeholder groups. We believe that even students in the lower grades can thoughtfully answer age-appropriate questions about how principals and other school leaders interact with them.

Agency: Staff members are asked about their sense of agency in 70% of the staff surveys we examined. That percentage drops to 50% for students, and only 39% for families.

Alaska school climate surveys demonstrate careful attention to agency. The state’s parent survey asks, “How often do you participate in decision-making at school?” The student survey contains rating scale statements that include “In my school, students are given a chance to help make decisions,” “Students are involved in helping to solve school problems,” and “The principal asks students about their ideas.” In the student surveys we examined from other states, it is much more common to query students about classroom-level agency, like their role in establishing class rules and routines and the opportunity to choose the ways in which they can show what they’ve learned.

Recommendations

We are delighted and encouraged to see so many states attending to school climate and recognizing that relationships are paramount in creating a healthy culture for teaching, learning, and development.

We offer these recommendations as food for thought for states who are already measuring school climate and those who are considering it:

- 1. Extend survey efforts to include as many stakeholder groups as possible.** At a minimum, states should survey students, but every effort should be made to engage families and staff in survey initiatives as well. If resources are limited, consider surveying each group biannually (for example, elementary-level students, staff, and parents one year; secondary-level students, staff, and parents the next.) We also recommend that states consider a complementary survey effort focused on school and district leaders, like the Massachusetts VISTA surveys of superintendents and principals.
- 2. Make questioning reciprocal.** Relationships are two-way: if a student survey asks whether teachers treat students with respect, then the same state's staff survey should include questions about how students treat school personnel.
- 3. Don't underestimate students.** Students can provide valuable insights about school culture above and beyond what they're currently being asked in many state surveys. All student surveys should include questions about school leadership, agency, and a sense of shared purpose and responsibility. We give students agency when we ask them questions about their schools and their own learning that traditionally we might have reserved for school staff or parents. For example, questions about adequacy of instructional resources: 18 states ask school staff about this, but only 3 states ask students.
- 4. Go deeper with families.** School climate surveys should go beyond asking families whether their child's school communicates regularly and is welcoming. These are important, but questions like these reinforce the traditional "outsider" status for families when states could be asking whether parents participate meaningfully in school decision making, feel connected to and known by school staff, and share responsibility for the school's success.
- 5. Share what you learn from the surveys.** Many states are reporting out some measure of school climate survey data in their annual school and district report cards, but sometimes this is either cursory reporting or it is data presented in a format that's hard to digest. We are particularly impressed with the New York City Department of Education's [School Quality Snapshots](#) which rate schools across seven dimensions—only one of which is tied to test scores and other student achievement metrics. Five other dimensions—Rigorous Instruction, Collaborative Teachers, Supportive Environment, Effective School Leadership, and Strong Family-Community Ties—are measured via school climate surveys and a quality review rating from an experienced educator who visited and evaluated the school. The seventh dimension, Trust, is gauged through surveys alone. Each School Snapshot includes response rates, compares the school's

performance on these measures to district averages, and offers quite detailed drill-down reporting on subgroup responses to each question. Districts and states can also publish case studies showcasing how schools and localities are using data from school climate surveys to drive school improvement and build healthier cultures.

Resources

Learning Policy Institute (2018). [Building a Positive School Climate—Making ESSA’s Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap](#)

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. [School Climate Survey Compendium](#)

Transforming Education (2018). [Which Individual and School-Level Factors Predict Student Perceptions of the School Climate in a Diverse Sample of Charter Schools throughout the Country?](#)

The Search Institute (2017). [Getting Relationships Right: 55 Leaders Discuss What It Will Take to Create Schools and Youth Programs Where Developmental Relationships Thrive](#)

About The Astra Center for Innovative Education

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity.

Learn more about our work at www.astra.education.

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On the cover: Art class at the Science and Mathematics Institute, a public high school in Tacoma, WA. Photo courtesy of SaMI, one of the schools featured in Astra’s *Radically Reimagined Relationships* report.