



A Union of Professionals

OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

All students play a part in maintaining the school environment. Assigning and alternating school maintenance duties, such as wiping the board, will exhibit the shared responsibility of caring for the school and peers. In addition, research shows that a strong academic and disciplinary climate is correlated with an increase in mathematics achievement for students.² Students, families and educators should build a collaborative school vision to create a community where all members can thrive.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline needs to work with students, not against them. Zero-tolerance policies create a culture that overuses exclusionary discipline policies such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion. Exclusionary discipline policies disrupt learning for students and teachers. Once students are removed from the classroom, it becomes harder for them to catch up on missed material. The American Psychological Association found no evidence to suggest that zero-tolerance policies improve student behavior.³

When students are absent from school, they may engage in negative behavior that can result in contact with the criminal justice system. Research shows that a single suspension increases the likelihood of low achievement and dropping out of school. African-American and Latino students are more likely to receive harsh punitive consequences than their white peers. Many of the suspensions and expulsions are for nonviolent or noncriminal behaviors such as disrespect or willful defiance.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices are alternatives to exclusionary discipline policies that will help improve school climate and academic outcomes for all students. Restorative practices encourage students to understand the impact of their behavior, take responsibility for their actions, repair the harm they have done, and mend relationships with students and teachers. In April 2008, West Philadelphia High School implemented restorative practices; by December of that year, school suspensions had decreased by 52 percent.⁴

Multitiered approach

Research shows that schools which engage in a positive school wide reform effort see a positive increase in test scores, less aggression in students and improved behavior of students in the classroom. Schools should implement universal, targeted and interventional restorative justice practices depending on the behavioral and developmental needs of students.

- The **whole school** engages a universal approach through a social and emotional learning inclusive curriculum and sets expectations for all students equally. A social and emotional curriculum requires students to work together on projects which enhance their ability to deal with conflict and support character development.
- A **targeted** approach, including peer mediation, intervention, peer mentoring, restitution, peer juries and peace circles is used in the classroom with groups of students.
- **Interventional support** systems are used for students who show severe forms of misbehavior. These approaches will include counseling, utilizing local agencies for outside support and individual attention.





BULLYING PREVENTION POLICIES

Bullying affects everyone in a school; teachers and administrators need to address bullying so that all students are comfortable attending school. Using restorative practices is a proven mechanism to improve school conditions. At a Michigan middle school, nearly 90 percent of participating students reported learning new skills after the implementation of restorative practices, and 86 percent used these new skills to peacefully resolve or avert conflicts, resulting in a 15 percent decrease in suspensions.

Successful bullying prevention programs:

- Make schools and classrooms places of respect.
- Have school policies that reflect behavior expectations for teachers and students.
- Take immediate action when bullying is observed.
- Listen to students and parents who report bullying in the classroom.
- Refer students affected by bullying to mental health staff.
- Host class meetings where students can openly talk about bullying and peer-related issues.
- Create a shared understanding between peers to foster empathy. Bystanders are more likely to intervene when they feel empathy for the victims. Students take note of teacher actions, so be sure to show empathy toward students and fellow teachers.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Social and emotional learning helps children understand their feelings and how to control their emotions. Research shows that evidence-based SEL programs improve achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points.⁵ Awareness of your students' social and emotional needs will help identify students who may need help now, to prevent disruptive behavior later. Social and emotional learning encourages self-development through these six characteristics:

SELF AWARENESS

Students accurately assess their feelings, interests, strengths and abilities. Encourage students to set personal goals and to support their peers in achieving their goals.

PEER AWARENESS

Help students understand the emotions and point of view of others.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Students learn to regulate emotions in order to productively handle stress, control impulses and overcome obstacles. Teach students to respond to conflict in a calm and assertive way.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE

Encourage students to face new challenges with a positive attitude by asking for help if they need it and taking action to accomplish their goals.

UNDERSTAND THE RULES

Teach students the importance of following the rules and the reasoning behind the rules. Students should understand the consequences of negative behaviors.

REFLECT

Have students reflect on spiritual, moral, cultural and social issues in order to understand themselves, their peers and society.

For more information, please contact schooldiscipline@aft.org.

1. Hines, E. W. (1996). *Building Condition and Student Achievement and Behavior*. Blacksburg, Va.: Educational Administration.

2. Bodovski, K., Nahum-Shani, I., Walsh, R. (2013). *School Climate and Students' Early Mathematics Learning: Another Search for Contextual Effects*. The University of Chicago Press.

3. Russel, Skiba et al., (2006). *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?* The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force.

4. International Institute for Restorative Practices. (2009). *Improving School Climate: Findings from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices*. IIRP Graduate School.

5. Payton, J., Weissberg, R., Durlak, J. A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., Schellinger, K. B., Pacheco, M. (2008). *The Positive Impact of Social and Emotional Learning for Kindergarten to Eighth-Grade Students: Findings from Three Scientific Reviews*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

School Climate

Take a moment to think about the times you were most successful in school. Supportive teachers, classmates and a positive school environment probably played an important role. School climate is measured by how students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators feel about school life. Every interaction—from the way a school resource officer greets children in the morning to the condition of the restrooms—plays an important role in the school climate. **A positive school climate prevents problem behavior.** Such prevention can decrease bullying, lower dropouts and physical violence, while also **increasing academic achievement and positive youth development.** Use these tips to help create a positive climate in your classroom and school.



ENSURE STUDENTS FEEL SAFE

PHYSICALLY

Research shows that schools with positive conditions for learning, such as air conditioning, exterior paint on the building or frequently mopped floors, tend to have higher student achievement and test scores.¹ Increases in student reading comprehension, mathematics and written expression are correlated with an improving school climate. If there is a structural problem in the building or a continuously messy space, try your best to resolve the situation so that students are comfortable in all areas of the school.

MENTALLY

Students should feel that the classroom is a safe zone where they can express themselves and participate in a way that is accepted by all teachers and students.

EMOTIONALLY

Schools should set high expectations for all community members to respect one another. Students should be comfortable sharing any concerns that may affect their schoolwork with counselors. Inform students of the school resources available to assist them with their problems.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Professional learning communities are groups of teachers, administrators and staff dedicated to reforming school culture. PLCs involve teachers in decision-making and allocate time for teachers to share ideas and wisdom. Successful PLCs focused on school climate:

- Develop a shared vision that guides teaching and learning in school.
- Establish a trusting environment among teachers.
- Provide continuous feedback.
- Use peer evaluation to review each other's work.
- Instill the belief in your classroom that all students are capable of learning.
- Ensure law enforcement is used for improving school safety. Reduce inappropriate use of referrals to law enforcement entities.