

Safe School Design Task Force

OBJECTIVE, RESEARCH, & TRENDS FRAMEWORK

Welfare: SCHOOL CULTURE & CLIMATE

A. Objective Statement

Our AIA NJ Safe School Design Task Force is focusing attention on the timely and important topic of “**School Culture & Climate**” and how it relates to the framework of designing safe and secure schools in New Jersey. Our Task Force objective is to share national best practices in K-12 school designs and to show how to apply these practices to local NJ communities to help meet our schools’ *health, safety, and welfare* needs. The strategies used by NJ Architects to design and renovate schools shall not only protect building occupants but also create highly successful learning environments by applying innovative design solutions integrated with facility management, physical security, and wellness practices.

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GOAL: Promoting a Positive Climate and a Safe School Culture

Over the past decade, campus safety and the promotion of a safe school culture have taken on more importance for institutions. What was once considered an afterthought in operations is now taking on a top priority focus for campus leaders due to a better understanding of how school climate and culture impacts student learning and well-being. *The more students trust those who keep campuses safe, the more comfortable they will be focusing on their academic pursuits.*

Educators are now aware of the profound effect that a safe and positive school culture can have on students and their ability to excel in their academic careers. Understanding the ways that facility design impacts school culture can deepen our understanding of the important role that school culture plays in students’ lives. It is helpful to review what contributes directly to a positive climate and how school culture impacts student perceptions of safety, security, and general well-being.

A school’s climate is the “perceived general feeling of safety and security” within a setting. Culture, on the other hand, is the “shared ethos, expectations, and accepted practices” common to the community. The relationship between the two is correlative and causal as well.

Overall, the atmosphere of a school climate and culture includes:

- Relationships between students and staff + school and community
- Assessed level of holistic safety & sense of belonging on the campus
- Assessed level of respect & strong relationships between individuals
- General moods & collective attitudes of teachers, staff, and students
- Community values promoted, embedded, and felt on campus.

Climate and culture serve the dual roles of being foundational elements for both effective education as well as for creating a safer and more secure campus. The combination of relationships, perceptions, and learning communities helps to shape where and how students grow and learn. When these factors are positive and well-developed, they create a good school culture. Conversely, when the values are deficit or ill-defined, they contribute to a negative or bad school culture. While teachers and students play key roles in establishing school culture, the specification of security systems and use of layout safeguards contribute to the physical structure and controlled environmental design inherent in “safe schools” thereby equally impacting student lives and affecting how they learn and evolve as individuals.

Building a safe school culture relies on balancing facility features with safety systems AND with people interactions. It is important to realize that people keep schools safe and that collaborative learning communities which create a culture of learning can make students and staff feel valued, engaged, and connected.

Schools designed for future-ready learning are replacing traditional classrooms with studios, common areas, labs for experimentation, small group areas, and dedicated workspaces. Spatial restructuring is moving teachers away from positions of isolated teaching and towards a collective model of interactions. Research shows that inclusive, supportive learning environments increase students’ feelings of belonging and improve their quality of learning habits. The question is how to integrate these future-ready learning environments which cultivate interactivity and collaboration with aspects of physical school security.

As a rule, high-tech systems for access control, visitor management, video surveillance, motion detectors, and other “hardscape protections” do not *on their own* keep schools safe. Equally, a school’s anti-bullying or reporting programs, emergency plans, shooter response protocols, and behavioral threat assessments alone do not keep schools totally safe. At the end of the day, these components and strategies are tools used by people. Many may fail to some extent, UNLESS a school climate and culture is developed to care for students in an environment that is supportive, nurturing, and committed to safety, security, and wellness. *An integrated and networked approach is needed to foster student engagement and social-emotional learning, while expanding supervisory oversight by staff.*

B. Design Innovations & Creative Solutions

School climate and culture refers to perceived qualities of school life and to students developing trustworthy connections with their peers, educators, and communities in meaningful ways. Research suggests that a positive climate can lead to a significant decrease in the likelihood of crime, aggression, and violent behavior. Therefore, schools should install social, emotional, and behavioral support systems to create a climate responsive to behavioral needs. School leaders should make teaching character development a priority by supporting classroom practices as well as collaborating with families and community organizations.

Strategies to Consider:

1. **Conduct a school climate survey and collect data.** Analyze the data to identify the most appropriate measures and program to maximize safety.
2. **Identify measures and programs best suited for your school** and implement them. Incorporate input and feedback from all stakeholders.
3. **Expand beyond school culture and climate initiatives** to embrace social and emotional learning support and to provide students access to treatment programs or to professionals who can provide appropriate services.

“What does a positive school climate supporting safety and security look like?” And *“how do schools create one?”* It is instructive to review some lessons learned gleaned from reviewing hundreds of school threats and vulnerability assessments.

#1 Build a culture in which Learning Communities offer personalized guidance and instruction. A collective team approach has educators sharing responsibilities for students while modeling constructive social behavior in an interactive setting. Relationships are forged through daily collaborations in which students become seen and known. This approach offers opportunities to embrace innovation and to promote a forward-thinking mindset. Teachers offer support and mentorship within a structured environment, thereby helping students progress on their own journey to emotional maturity, self-expression, resiliency, and competencies.

#2 Build a culture of using non-threatening security measures to create a “united community of belonging and purpose”. A Photo ID worn by all staff is more than identification. It creates the “cultural expectation” that all authorized adults on campus are identified and will be known. A leader dealing with compliance issues needs to establish a sense of shared purpose and mission. When you combine visitor badging, management protocols, door locks, and surveillance they work together to help detect any unauthorized individuals on campus. This approach creates a “detection and belonging culture”. Once the community is united, then fidelity in sustaining this culture can yield effective safety over time.

#3 Build a culture of “seeing, being seen, and saying something”. Effective *behavioral threat assessment and management* (BTAM) is a tool recognized by the U.S. Secret Service as an effective way to prevent school violence. The process relies on identifying and referring for review any student exhibiting concerning behaviors or deviance from normal baseline behavior. This relies upon students being seen and known by many staff members. When this process fails, it is most often due to failing to report or refer, rather than failing to notice students of concern. School staff are well positioned to observe and identify actions which deviate from baseline behavior. Others likely to notice are fellow students.

#4 Build a culture of referrals where “students receive help before discipline”. For teachers, building this referral culture shall include in-service training, accessibility reporting, and a shift from “good teachers handle issues in classrooms” to “good teachers *notice and report behavioral shifts* in their students.” For students a similar mental shift will allow the BTAM tool to be most effective by developing an “upstander rather than bystander” active role connected to confidential reporting which allows troubled students to receive help. More reporting will likely happen when students believe their classmates will be helped rather than punished.

#5 Build a culture in which “outreach & care” for students and staff is foremost. The effectiveness of tech-based surveillance systems is based upon similar goals: *developing a climate and culture committed to making a safer and more secure school environment.* The efficacy of access control systems is often limited due to differences between “*expected*” actions and *culturally “accepted” actions.* It may be expected that all doors are secured, but the overlay of convenience may have staff and students working against expectations by propping doors open at certain times to admit a friend or reduce travel distances. Having “care for students” as a unifying element of safe school culture goes a long way in encouraging consistent compliance and engaging the entire community in a united mission to stay safe.

#6 Build a culture in which “security + safety” is expressed in everyday actions. The circumstances leading to violence are complex and far ranging, culminating after months or years of individual experiences. Gaps in school security can emerge when external mandates fail to engage community stakeholders to develop their own “culturally accepted actions”. *Without engagement or consensus-building, it is difficult for an imposed protocol to become valued or embedded as a practice integral to the community.* By embracing the maxim “assess before you treat”, school communities should first assess their climate and cultural context *before* making any physical or operational improvements. Without this assessment, measuring a school’s vulnerability could end up distorted. Knowing the context first helps to channel resources, time, and efforts to where they are needed the most within fiscal budget constraints to truly improve school safety and security, while also ensuring that remedies contribute positively to the learning environments.

#7 Build a culture which values both Surveillance AND Supervision equally. Combining security cameras with adult staff who can intervene during incidents and provide “teachable moments” optimizes the effectiveness of both cameras and personnel. At first glance, replacing supervisory staff with cameras may seem like a cost-effective approach. It is evident, however, that video surveillance alone cannot effectively supervise students or support positive behavior in K-12 settings.

What needs to be understood is how to intelligently integrate technology with physical building features and with the trained human element in our schools.

Staff supervision by its nature is proactive; staff can intervene prior to a playground fight rather than report what they observed afterwards. This is what cameras cannot do. Staff can also detect early changes in behavior by reporting on anything out of the ordinary. Most K-12 schools use video surveillance as an investigatory or forensic tool rather than as a deterrent. Surveillance has an important role to play in physical security, and cameras should be placed with the widest coverage allowed by budget. Effective video surveillance can expedite fact finding and be used as a tool in resolving disputes. A well-designed system can shorten the period between offence and disciplinary action being taken, thereby addressing the matter promptly and *adding to the cultural expectations of “consequences for actions”*.

Schools and communities need to have clear goals in mind and know what cameras do well, what people do well, what door controls and security systems do well, what building design features can contribute, and how each can be deployed to support each other. Education leaders in the state can increase the safety and success of all school districts by sharing school climate best practices and informing the public.

School architects can help put the pieces of the “safety, security, and wellness” puzzle together, especially when working closely with school clients and communities. Locating supervisory adults and equipment is as important as timing the activities and supporting security functions across a campus. Careful assessments and tracking of where incidents may occur allows for efficient stationing of staff to the greatest effect.

It is important to consider that locations where unwanted or risky behaviors are being manifested often change over time. To this end, active tracking of incident reports and reviewing “real time” data analytics can be very helpful in identifying new trouble spots and in enabling school security plans to be proactively adjusted over time. A culture which values the training of its staff is also a critical component of any school safety plan. This must include training the supplemental staff as well, such as crossing guards, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and parent volunteers, all who should receive training in de-escalation techniques, identifying mental health issues, and implementing the district’s reporting procedures.

C. Resource Reference Links

Resource Information on School Safety and excerpts taken from:

<https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/>

Since 1993, *Campus Safety* has been a news and information online and conference network for security specialists focusing on topics and trends related to safety, security, and facility management. It is a trusted source that schools, universities, institutions, and protection-affiliated professionals use when making high-level decisions related to aspects of school and campus safety, security, emergency management, and facilities management. *Campus Safety* newsletters, web publications, and seminars serve a range of professionals including police chiefs, security directors, IT personnel, emergency managers, facilities personnel, risk management and administrators responsible for the public safety, security, and emergency management of North American educational and healthcare campuses. Information on school climate includes a series of **blog articles written by Guy Bliesner**, School Safety and Security Analyst for the Idaho State Board of Education and former founder of Educators Eyes, a risk management consultancy.

References on School Design and Learning Environments:

Bielaczyc, K. & Collins, A. (1999). *Learning Communities in Classrooms: A Reconceptualization of Educational Practice*. Instructional Design Theories and Models: A New Paradigm of Instructional Theory, 2, 269-292.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). *The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions*. Child Development, 82(1), 405-432.

Hargreaves, A., & O'Connor, M. T. (2018). *Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All*.

Osterman, K. F. (2000). *Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community*. Review of Educational Research, 70(3), 323-367.

[www.SchoolSafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov/) highlights how a positive school climate can prevent violence as well as protect, mitigate, respond, and recover. Members of the school community can download this [SchoolSafety.gov infographic](#) to learn more about school climate strategies and how to access a sampling of resources related to school safety.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in partnership with the U.S. Departments of Education (ED), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Justice (DOJ), has launched a 2023-24 **public awareness campaign to highlight federal school safety resources and evidence-based practices available through [SchoolSafety.gov](#)**. The resources available at this federal website provide sound starting points for learning about school climate plus a wide range of school-safety related topics. The public is encouraged to use these resources to improve safety in their schools.

School Climate Improvement Resource Package Dept. of Education, 2018

<https://www.schoolsafety.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/School%20Climate%20Resources.pdf>

This resource tool package includes a variety of items to meet a range of needs among public schools and districts interested in improving their school climate, including a reference manual, action guides, data resources, and online modules.

Parent and Educator Guide to School Climate Resources Dept. of Education, 2019

This guide provides general information to the public about the concept of school climate improvement along with suggestions for leading an effective school climate improvement effort and additional resources for those interested in researching more information.