A positive, safe, and clean school environment is essential to sound child development and high-level learning and is directly linked to student academic performance. Students learn best and achieve to their fullest potential when they are taught in an environment where they are physically, socially, and emotionally safe. A positive school environment is associated with fewer student behavioral and emotional problems, increased academic success, and higher rates of staff retention which is important for providing a consistent set of adults whom students learn they can trust throughout their academic careers.

Feeling unsafe, however, adversely impacts student motivation, attitude, behavior, and overall functioning in school while also producing lower levels of academic achievement. The daily incidents of gossiping, bullying, and fighting that occur regularly in today’s schools are far more likely to contribute to students’ and teachers’ overall sense of safety, or lack thereof, than the major incidents of school violence that are often reported in the media. Victims of violence and harassment attend school less frequently, feel less connected to and less engaged in school, and spend less time on homework and in extracurricular activities. These daily incidents also lead to classroom interruptions and students missing class for reasons including fear of other students, removal from class, and suspension from school. Yet the research indicates that “zero tolerance” policies and high rates of suspension do not make students and teachers feel safer. In fact, schools with high suspension rates are often less safe than schools with lower suspension rates, even when they serve similar students from similar types of neighborhoods.

In addition to the school environment, external conditions around schools and in students’ backgrounds and home communities also play an important role in the level of safety in schools. The rates of neighborhood poverty, crime, and social resources in students’ home neighborhoods are related to school safety, even more than the levels in the school neighborhood. Additionally, research shows that schools with large numbers of students with low academic accomplishments are less safe, a result of the fact that low-achieving students often come from neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and crime.

Therefore, creating a safe and secure school environment involves multiple facets of a school environment, including the school climate, norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, and the physical state of the building. In order for students and staff to perform at their best, they must feel safe in all aspects of their experiences, which requires a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders. To support safe and productive learning environments, schools can engage in several evidence-based, targeted strategies to improve school climate. These efforts should be relationship-focused so that every student connects to at least one caring adult, and based on a curriculum that promotes social, emotional, and civic competencies along with content-area competencies. Also, any school-wide attempt to improve school climate should emphasize students’ unique strengths and use diverse and increasingly intensive approaches to support students’ academic abilities.

Several important strategies and resources can be used to create safe, positive, and secure school environments: the quality of relationships between staff and students and their families; additional staff and supports from the community, including law enforcement and social service agencies; and the physical state of a school building such as air quality, noise levels, lighting, and temperature.
Research shows that the quality of relationships between staff and students and between staff and families most strongly defines safe schools. Students who have a positive, trusting relationship with at least one adult in the building are less likely to drop out and more likely to achieve at higher levels. Schools serving a large population of low-achieving students must make stronger efforts to foster trusting, collaborative relationships with students and their families. These relationships play an important role in insulating students from adverse neighborhood conditions and creating safe schooling environments. To this end, schools need to ensure that every student will have a supportive relationship with at least one adult in school by designing academic and extracurricular programs with the specific goal of providing adult role models. This will require that schools have staff members willing to develop positive relationships and receive necessary training in identifying potential problems and finding resources to assist students. Organizational factors within schools can also mediate the impact of the community on school safety, such as the adoption of clear procedures that teachers and staff support, and a coherent school educational mission.

Research also shows that schools need additional staff, and other supports from the community in order to expand students’ access to counseling, anger management, and peer mediation services. Additional pro-active partnerships with law enforcement and social service agencies, including deliberate strategies to prevent bullying, gang activity, and other issues that put students and staff at risk can provide some of the supports schools need. Also, consistently disruptive and potentially violent students should be placed in alternative settings. Schools should have the ability to place students who put themselves and others at risk in high-quality alternative education programs, distance learning opportunities, or other schools that can meet their academic, behavioral, and emotional needs while also providing job training. Administrators and teachers in these alternative settings need appropriate training for working with and teaching these students. There is also research to suggest that stricter dress codes and/or uniforms, when used in conjunction with other reform efforts, can reduce the perception of violence in schools and alter the school climate in positive ways. Stricter dress codes and uniforms can lead to fewer distractions, increased self-esteem, and less gang activity in schools.

Furthermore, schools should establish a School Safety Committee comprised of students, parents, community members, teachers, support professionals, pupil services personnel, and administrators to cooperatively develop and implement a plan for establishing and maintaining safety in their schools. The Committee should also assess the need for additional professional development and resources to address school safety issues. Finally, schools should provide students with the tools and resources to know how to communicate with adults about rumors, threats, or abusive behavior. These tools and resources include school-wide anti-bullying, anti-cyber-bullying, conflict resolution, and peer mediation programs, as well as access to counselors, social workers, and mentors in the school setting. Also, schools can create anonymous tip lines or suggestion boxes for reporting potentially dangerous situations or providing ideas to improve school climate. The School Safety Committee should then be responsible for promptly reviewing suggestions and appropriate implementation.

The physical state of a school can also impact student achievement. Research has shown that several aspects of a school building can affect learning, including spatial configurations, noise, temperature, lighting, and air quality. Students need clean air, good lighting, and quiet and comfortable classrooms in order to achieve at their highest levels. The organization of classrooms, including the arrangement of furniture and well-planned and interactive lesson plans, can also impact student behavior and learning by optimizing learning time, minimizing disruptions and distractions, and maintaining an orderly and effective learning environment.
In order for students to be successful in school, they need to feel safe, secure, and connected to the school and their teachers. A variety of factors must be in place to accomplish that level of safety and connection. Students need teachers and other adults who care about them and their achievement, and they need to know that they will not be physically or emotionally harmed while at school. Students need to be armed with knowledge about the resources available to them and what to do and who to talk to if they do not feel safe. And finally, students need a clean environment that is conducive to learning with few distractions or opportunities to waste time. When these factors are in place, students are free to learn and achieve at their highest levels.

http://www.nea.org/tools/16364.htm


Adapted from: http://www.preventionworksct.org/docs/SDFSC/PDF/Case_for_climate.pdf.


Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth, [http://www.pde.state.pa.us/alt disruptive/site/default.asp](http://www.pde.state.pa.us/alt disruptive/site/default.asp).


