



## School Culture and Climate Needs Assessment

20 Points School

A positive school culture and climate is integral to students' academic success and their social, emotional, and physical well-being. This program action awards points for completing a comprehensive assessment of a school's culture and climate that comprises **two** of the following components: 1. an inventory of the school's programs and practices; 2. a survey of student, staff, and parent perceptions of school culture and climate; and 3. focus groups with key stakeholders in the school community.

Doing a comprehensive school culture and climate assessment is the critical first step in school improvement efforts. It ideally includes an **inventory of all programs and practices** aimed at improving school culture and climate as well as students' health and social-emotional and character development. This exercise provides opportunities to see how well schools are addressing culture and climate through programming, where there are gaps and overlaps in program offerings, how culturally appropriate and sensitive the programs and practices are to diverse students, and which students are or are not being engaged in the efforts. From here, the school can address how to better support underserved populations and discuss what might be added to engage more students, as well as celebrate the most successful and robust activities already addressing students' social-emotional learning and overall climate and health of the school.

In addition to completing an inventory of existing offerings, schools should conduct a **survey of student, staff, and parent perceptions of school culture and climate**. In New Jersey there are three recommended survey instruments that can be used for this purpose: the New Jersey State Climate Survey from the NJ Department of Education, the Climate Survey from the National School Climate Center, and the survey of the School Culture and Climate Initiative, a partnership of United Way and the College of Saint Elizabeth. (Information on these is found in Resources below.) Ideally, a cross-functional school team should select the instrument and develop the process for administering it. Once the data has been collected and analyzed, the school team should review and discuss the data to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement based on the survey results (the perceptions of school community). The team should then decide how to share this information with the broader school community, starting with the staff, students, parents, and community members.

To complement the quantitative school culture and climate survey, schools should also collect qualitative data by conducting **focus groups with different key stakeholders**. By engaging focus groups to take a deeper look at the climate survey data and discussing their perceptions of the school environment, the school is taking an important step toward using the data results to foster change. Focus groups add depth to the survey responses and are helpful to identifying the root causes of problems. Focus groups also enable the testing of assumptions that may be driving change efforts.

### Why is it important?

School culture and climate is an integral part of the overall school environment. Not only do students learn best when they are in a positive and supportive school environment, but they also develop health-promoting social-emotional skills and a positive attitude toward themselves and others. A positive school environment has core elements of education for sustainability such as an intentional focus on developing students' sense of individual responsibility to self and others and their understanding that each individual is part of interdependent social and natural systems. However, the process

of creating a sustainable positive school climate must begin with understanding a school's present strengths and areas for improvement that comes from completing a comprehensive school needs assessment. Ideally this assessment process would be led by a cross-functional school team, involve the use of a variety of assessment methodologies, and engage the voice of all school community stakeholders- students, staff, administrators, parents, and the local community.

## **Who Should Lead and Be Involved in this Action?**

The concept behind this action is to be inclusive in involving sectors of the wider school community in looking at and responding to a variety of data points culled from the program inventory, the climate survey results, and the resulting focus group dialogue. The improvement effort itself should have central administration and Board of Education approval since it will involve a financial commitment – at least in terms of release time for the groups/teams to meet. This action requires participation by administration, faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members as appropriate. Please note that schools are already required to have School Safety and Climate Teams including administration, faculty, staff, and parents and many schools may choose to use this existing team as the core of the cross functional team mentioned above. An important decision here is how to involve students in the process. Student voice and student engagement is very important. Students may be involved in various ways – as a part of the main team or focus groups where appropriate, or the school can create a separate student climate team with broad student representation. Schools will have to decide on the make-up of their teams and focus groups. For any of the parts of this action, a school/district may decide to work with an outside organization to facilitate the process.

## **Timeframe**

The timeframe for this action will vary as the school/district leadership and the project team will first have to decide on which of the three components of this action (program inventory, survey and focus groups) will be undertaken with a minimum of two of three required. The team should have the responsibility of determining the actual time line for this action. Typically, this action may take 3-6 months.

## **Project Costs and Resource Needs**

Coverage for teachers and staff to attend team meetings will need to be agreed on and be supported by the school and district. There may also be some costs for the formal assessment instrument and subsequent data analysis as well as copying, printing, etc. In some cases, additional resource materials may need to be purchased or created. Cost for the school culture and climate assessment varies greatly depending on the choice of survey instrument, who and how the data will be analyzed, and whether the school chooses to bring in an outside consultant support. If the school/ district chooses to use external support there may be additional costs involved.

## **What to do, and how to do it (“How to”)**

In order to earn points for this action a school needs to complete at least two of the three assessment components listed below. It is important to complete the Program Inventory first as it provides the foundation for the qualitative and quantitative assessments that follow.

### **1. School Culture and Climate Program Inventory**

This self-assessment helps a school identify what they already have in-place (programs, resources, supports, activities, clubs) regarding culture, climate, physical and mental health, social and emotional learning and character development. Ideally this exercise would be led by a cross-functional school team and involve the entire faculty/staff in this exercise in order to obtain a complete and comprehensive view.

The first step is to determine an efficient way to collect and organize data – for example, develop a list of in-school and after-school programs, including curricula, health initiatives, cultural events, clubs, assemblies, workshops and anything else that addresses social emotional learning, school culture, climate, physical or mental health. Examples may include particular units of study, activities such as a Gay-Straight Alliance, events celebrating various cultures, parent engagement programming, and anti-bullying efforts among others. [Click here for a sample Program Inventory Worksheet.](#)

The results of the inventory should be discussed as a team with representatives of the student body, administration and staff. The discussion should aim to identify any duplicated efforts, programming that may seem outdated or underutilized,

missed opportunities or gaps in programming, as well as identify groups of students who are and who are not benefiting from the programming. Further, it is important to note any other observations made through the exercise including connections of the programming to the school's core values and mission.

Click [here](#) for a sample Program Inventory Worksheet.

**2. Quantitative School Culture and Climate Survey** In New Jersey there are three recommended survey instruments that can be used for this purpose. These are the New Jersey School Climate Survey from the NJ Department of Education, the Climate Survey from the National School Climate Center, and the School Culture and Climate Survey from the School Culture and Climate Initiative which is a partnership between United Way of Northern New Jersey and the College of Saint Elizabeth (see Resources below). The project team should review these instruments and any others that are available and select the one that aligns best with its objectives. Once the tool is selected, the team needs to decide whether it wants to involve an outside organization in the assessment process and then gain support from central office administration and the board of education to commence with the project.

As part of the project planning process the details regarding survey administration and the analysis of survey responses needs to be addressed. The data analysis could be done internally or externally. Data analysis may likely involve several rounds of data review/conversations and follow-up. The survey data must be disaggregated by key demographic indicators of students, staff, and parent samples as pre-determined by the team. Examples of demographic indicators are gender, grade, and ethnicity for students; gender, professional position, ethnicity for staff. During the data review process, the team will identify strengths and opportunities from the data and have conversations as to next steps. An outside organization, if utilized, may provide support and outside validation of this process. Once the team has completed its review and analysis of the data it should create a communication plan to share the results of the survey with the various school community constituents. It is recommended that overall school climate strengths and opportunities for improvement be shared with these key stakeholders in order to collectively identify trends, brainstorm ideas for improvement actions, and agree on next steps.

### **3. School Culture and Climate Focus Groups**

After the quantitative analysis is complete schools may choose to engage focus groups of key stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding from the school community about trends, issues, questions, and opportunities that emerged. The project team should (a) look at existing data from the quantitative survey as well as from other school data sources (New Jersey State School Report Cards, for example); (b) from this data, develop a set of questions that can lead to deeper insight of strengths/opportunities/issues surfaced from these data; and (c) solicit input from students, faculty, parents, and other relevant community members, allowing for a meaningful dialogue between a skilled facilitator and thoughtfully-chosen participants representing various sectors of the school community. The number of the participants should be limited so that the group is of a manageable size, yet diverse enough to provide feedback from the broader population.

As part of the focus group planning effort, the project team needs to identify whether school personnel will lead the focus groups or whether an outside group will facilitate them and agree on the protocols to be used in the focus groups. The facilitators should be properly trained and experienced in leading focus groups and be removed/impartial relative to the content to be discussed. The groups should be carefully planned to maximize the value derived from them. This includes using a structured and vetted discussion guide, advanced scheduling of the location and room, selecting and confirming participants, designating scribes, time keepers, etc., and prepare minutes or summaries and the group findings. (For more information on conducting focus groups see the Resources section below.)

Once the data collection and analysis is complete, the project team should identify a list of strengths and opportunities which emerged from the analysis and develop an action plan that includes a list of next steps. This information should then be shared within the school community to garner support for moving forward.

## **What to submit to earn points for this action**

In order to earn points for this action, the following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met.

**1. Description of Implementation** – In the text box provided on the submissions page for the action, provide a summary (about 300 words or less) of your assessment process and how the results and action plans were shared with the school

community.

**2. Upload** the following documentation for at least **two** of the three assessment components listed:

- *School Culture and Climate Program Inventory:*  
A copy of the completed program inventory. Click [here](#) for a sample Program Inventory Worksheet.
- *Quantitative School Culture and Climate Survey:*  
A copy of the survey instrument. Explain how the survey was administered including when, how, to whom it was distributed, % of target audiences completing it, and how the data analysis was completed. Show documentation regarding how information about the survey was communicated to the school community. See Resources below for links to survey instruments.
- *School Culture and Climate Focus Groups:*  
A copy of the focus group discussion guide. Summarize how the focus groups were executed including the number, how participants were recruited, the ultimate composition of the groups, when they were held, and who facilitated them. Show documentation regarding how information about the focus groups was communicated to potential participants (i.e. a copy of the invitation letter/email)

**3. Upload** a copy of the action plan developed as a result of the assessment with the status of each activity provided if the plan was completed in the prior school year.

**IMPORTANT NOTES:** There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

### **Resubmission Requirements**

To resubmit for this action in subsequent certification applications the applicant can provide an analysis of the impact of the initiative on school culture and climate including quantitative and qualitative measures up to and including the current school year.

### **Approved Action Expiration Date**

Approved actions will be set to expire three years from when the action plan was completed. For example, if the school culture and climate assessment and action plan was completed in the 2016 -2017 school year, the approved action would be set to expire on August 31, 2019.

## **Spotlight: What NJ Schools are Doing**

All New Jersey schools are required to assess their school culture and climate annually to be in compliance with the Anti-bullying Bill of Rights. However, the law does not mandate how the assessment must be done or who should be involved in the process. The action described here is a more robust school culture and climate assessment than the law requires. Schools engaging in this action move beyond mere compliance by analyzing perceptions of the school culture and climate among all key stakeholders- students, staff and parents through a survey instrument and/or focus groups, engaging all key stakeholders in the data analysis and review process, as well as in determining the resulting actions to be taken by the school in its improvement process.

There are many examples of schools throughout the state that have engaged in an assessment process that has led to significant improvements in overall culture and climate. These examples may be found in the work of the New Jersey Alliance for Social Emotional and Character Development (NJASECD), the School Culture and Climate Initiative, a partnership of United Way and College of Saint Elizabeth, and Campaign Connect. All of these organizations use an assessment instrument and a data analysis protocol.

### **James F. Cooper Elementary School, Cherry Hill School District**

At the start of the 2017-18 school year, the climate and culture surveys were conducted with all students, staff, and parents. We have examined feedback from the school climate surveys and informal feedback from parents to evaluate

our climate and culture needs. Information has been gathered and shared at faculty and PTA meetings regarding our current status. The school climate survey helped our teachers to understand student perceptions with regard to the adults in the building. To view a description and advertisement of the James F. Cooper Elementary School surveys click [here](#).

### **Riverview Elementary School, Denville School District**

Riverview Elementary School in Denville, New Jersey decided to collaboratively focus on school culture and climate. In 2015, they became involved with the School Culture and Climate Initiative and surveyed their school community using a process resembling the action described here.

The positive change that emerged from the assessment was due to the engagement of staff and students looking at the data survey results and identifying several short and long term goals to improve the school. Short and long term goals included whole school social emotional learning, environment and sustainability and staff and student morale and engagement.

The key to their success was learning to collaborate and use the results of the assessment to shift their school's culture.

### **Lawrence Public School District**

Lawrence Public School District in Lawrence Township, New Jersey is the first K-12 National District of Character in the state of New Jersey. All of the district's seven schools have been recognized as New Jersey Schools of Character. In order to gain this recognition, each school engaged in a self-assessment process that is based on Character.org's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. The schools used the results of this evaluation to plan and implement improvements in various aspects of the schools' culture and climate.

Character education is a unifying factor across the district schools. The district philosophy is that meaningful education reform should include a full range of social skills and moral competencies in order for students to build healthy relationships and be positive contributors to the community. The improvement efforts in Lawrence have led to a decrease in discipline referrals and an increase in academic progress and student attendance.

These positive gains have occurred across all schools in the district and provided an example of how objectively looking for improvement opportunities can make a difference in school culture and climate.

### **Lincoln Park Middle School, Lincoln Park School District**

Lincoln Park Middle School in Lincoln Park, New Jersey worked with the School Culture and Climate Initiative to assess the school culture and climate in 2012. They surveyed all staff and faculty and all 400 fifth through eighth grade students. Based on the survey data, the students decided to create more opportunities for students in different grades to interact. These efforts were very much student-led. "Students initiated team-building activities that involve mixed grades. Now, we've found that students respect each other more because they know each other" says principal, Michael Meyer. Now, when a fifth-grade student at Lincoln Park Middle School walks down the hallway, chances are he or she will feel comfortable to say hello to a passing eighth grader – and probably by name. And this seemingly simple change has positively affected the school's climate."

### **New Brunswick Middle School, New Brunswick Public Schools**

New Brunswick Middle School has used the NJ Department of Education survey and has produced a very useful data analysis using the templates. Staff report: "Since the inception of our character education initiative, we have regularly assessed the students and the staff on their perceptions of the school climate. These assessments are given annually at the end of the school year. We used the same survey for the first three years of implementing our character education and in the spring of 2015 we transitioned to using a district-wide one. Although different, both assessments includes questions on student respect, friendship, belonging, students shaping their environment, support for staff, student approval, student perceptions of the utility of learning, teacher approval, and student pride. The data is analyzed and results are used to plan for the future, focusing on constantly improving the culture and climate of the school....All data collected is analyzed by the SOCC committee and/or the LCCA committee, and the committees use the information to plan future LCCA lessons, content area lessons, as well as activities for staff and students. Lessons and activities are

created with the focus on continuously improving the culture and climate of New Brunswick Middle School.”

### **Merriam Avenue School, Newton Public Schools**

Merriam Avenue School in Newton, NJ also used the NJ Department of Education survey. Staff report: “Our School Safety/Climate Team meets bimonthly and is comprised of various stakeholders and includes administrators, counselors, a parent outreach coordinator, classroom teachers, a parent, a paraprofessional, and a school security guard who is retired from law enforcement. One of the primary roles of the team is to develop, implement, and assess ongoing initiatives within the school to improve and maintain positive school climate. The team uses data from school climate surveys, pre- and post- tests, discipline referrals, and reported incidents of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) to guide decision-making. In addition, administrators use data derived from teacher evaluations to assess the progress of our Responsive Classroom initiative. Second Step portfolios collected from students help our school counselor assess student progress in the areas of skills for learning, empathy, emotion management, and problem solving. Character education initiatives are reported to multiple stakeholders. Reports are regularly submitted to our district character education director and our building principal, both of whom submit reports to our board of education. The superintendent of schools shares all reports with our local community via our website. Our school utilizes the New Jersey School Climate Survey (NJSCS) to compile feedback from our staff, parents, and students on their perceptions of our school climate. It is also important to note that all public schools in New Jersey get graded on their efforts to implement the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act. Our School Safety Team is responsible for completing the School Self-Assessment for Determining Grades under the ABR. Each year, our team uses the results to guide school-wide program planning, implementation, and evaluation.”

### **Resources**

#### **Social Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey**

A nonprofit alliance offering convenings, shared SEL resources, shared capacity-building resources and technical assistance.

#### **Culture and Climate Surveys**

The following websites and organizations can provide material and assistance in conducting assessments of culture and climate.

- *National School Climate Center* [www.SchoolClimate.org](http://www.SchoolClimate.org)  
*Measuring School Climate:* <https://www.schoolclimate.org/services/measuring-school-climate-csci>
- *New Jersey Department of Education*  
New Jersey School Climate Survey: <http://www.nj.gov/education/students/safety/behavior/njscs/>
- *School Culture and Climate Initiative, a Partnership of United Way of Northern New Jersey and College of Saint Elizabeth.* [http://unitedwaynj.org/ourwork/ed\\_youthempower\\_schoolcultureclimate.php](http://unitedwaynj.org/ourwork/ed_youthempower_schoolcultureclimate.php) Contact: Liz Warner at [liz.warner@unitedwaynj.org](mailto:liz.warner@unitedwaynj.org)
- *Association of Alaska School Boards.* Contact Jenni Lefing, School Climate Coordinator at [jlefling@aab.org](mailto:jlefling@aab.org)

#### **Qualitative Analysis - Focus Groups and Culture and Climate Teams**

Although focus groups must be thoughtfully planned and run, most school communities can successfully complete this action. Note that some culture & climate service providers will implement focus groups for their partnering schools, while other service providers offer tools and support to build the capacity of school stakeholders to facilitate and analyze their own focus group initiative. Two examples of New Jersey resources that are already supporting schools in this action are as follows:

- *Campaign Connect*, a New Jersey climate & culture initiative implemented by Center for Supportive Schools: This capacity-building initiative includes tools and technical assistance to plan, organize, and facilitate and collect data from school focus groups. Once the focus groups are completed, Campaign Connect provides participating schools with a protocol to use in order to analyze the focus group data. Please note that this support for focus groups is one aspect of a complete cycle of data analysis and action in support of school improvement; however, documents

supporting focus groups can be obtained at no cost. Contact information: Kristina Knight, [kknight@supportiveschools.org](mailto:kknight@supportiveschools.org)

- *School Culture & Climate Initiative*, a partnership of United Way of Northern New Jersey and the College of Saint Elizabeth provides a comprehensive approach to supporting schools as they work to improve their culture and climate. In addition to providing a culture and climate assessment tool (for students, staff and parents) that disaggregates by gender, grade, ethnicity, and position in school as part of a complete cycle of continuous school improvement, the Initiative also incorporates into its process focus groups. Consultants collect and analyze quantitative and focus group (qualitative) data from participating schools, and through a variety of exercises and school-wide assessments, support schools as they develop and implement improvement plans that engage the entire school community. *Contact information:* Liz Warner, [liz.warner@unitedwaynj.org](mailto:liz.warner@unitedwaynj.org)
- National School Climate Center <http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php>

**The following information is about using protocols and asking appropriate questions to understand the data that is provided to the focus group or Culture and Climate Team.**

*The Facilitator's Book of Questions: Tools for Looking Together at Student and Teacher Work* by David Allen

- Paperback: 160 pages
- Publisher: Teachers College Press; Second Printing edition (April 1, 2004)
- Language: English
- ISBN-10: 0807744689
- ISBN-13: 978-0807744680

**The following book on protocols is an essential tools for facilitators of groups working together to examine student and teacher work. A follow-up to *Looking Together at Student Work and Assessing Student Learning*, this resource considers the purposes for engaging in collaborative review and provides some of the most effective strategies for successful collaboration. A professional learning community (PLC) is a small group of teachers or administrators that meets regularly and works between meetings to accomplish shared goals. PLCs are vehicles for connecting teacher practice and student outcomes, improving both.**

*Protocols for Professional Learning (The Professional Learning Community Series) (PLC)* by Lois Brown Easton

Publisher: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development (April 15, 2009)

ISBN-10: 1416608370

ISBN-13: 978-1416608370

#### **Other Resources**

*The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice, Second Edition 2nd Edition* by Joseph P. McDonald

Publisher: Teachers College Press; 2 edition (April 1, 2007)

ISBN-10: 0807747696

ISBN-13: 978-0807747698

*Building Learning Communities with Character: How to Integrate Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* by Bernard Novick, Jeffrey S. Kress, and Maurice J. Elias

Publisher: ASCD

ISBN-10: 0-87120-665-X

#### ***Foundation for Educational Administration (FEA)***

The Foundation for Educational Administration is the professional development organization of the New Jersey Principals & Supervisors Association. It offers many training programs and activities that impact directly upon a school's climate and culture. Visit the [website](#) for more information.