



Welcoming Environments

Problematic substance use among youth can be prevented when administrators and school staff create welcoming environments that reflect the diversity of students' lives.

What the RESEARCH says:

Positive school climates enhance student well-being.

Positive school climates are associated with enhanced student mental healthⁱ and protect against problematic substance use.ⁱⁱ A positive school climate exists when community members feel safe, included, respected, and accepted. Learning environments that are positive emphasize equity and inclusivity and celebrate diversity. Recognizing the complexity of youths' identities (e.g., ethnicity and race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability and mental health, faith, etc.), affirming their lived experiences in and through the curriculum, and integrating varying experiences and perspectives in everyday teaching and learning promotes student well-being (i.e., experiencing positive emotions and moods [e.g., happiness], being satisfied with life, feeling fulfilled, and functioning positively.ⁱⁱⁱ Cultivating cultural identity and connectedness and promoting engagement with traditional cultural activities (e.g., advertising areas that can be used for ceremonies and cultural events, offering classes on Indigenous languages, providing education on traditional food preparation or singing/dancing, etc.) at school has been found to promote positive well-being^{iv} and diminish problematic substance use among Indigenous youth.^v

Administrators must strive to develop safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environments.

All students, but especially those who routinely experience prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Black, Indigenous, People of Colour [POC]), those living in poverty, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2+) individuals, people who are Muslim, differently abled persons, etc.), need safe and nurturing school environments. Research reveals that 97.1% of Canadian teachers believe their school is 'safe'^{vi}, yet 64.2% of LGBTQ2+ students feel unsafe at school.^{vii} Only 46.9% of teachers indicated that they used LGBTQ2+ inclusive language and examples in their classes; a mere 18.3% challenged transphobia and 16.3% critiqued heterosexual privilege.^{vi} By using inclusive language and examples, drawing on diverse educational materials, infusing multiple perspectives within class activities, and addressing negative language and behaviour (e.g., anti-semitic graffiti, bullying, etc.), administrators can work with school staff to foster safe, inclusive and welcoming learning environments.



For more information and additional resources, please visit:

<https://www.csmh.uwo.ca/research/cannabis-education.html>



Public Health
Agency of Canada

Agence de la santé
publique du Canada

Western  Centre for School
Mental Health



Positive teacher-student relationships and peer networks promote well-being among youth.

Students' wellbeing is enhanced when they feel cared for and supported by school staff. The number and quality of positive teacher-student relationships bolsters student well-being.^{viii} Healthy peer networks also boost well-being among youth. When students develop positive peer relationships they have an increased sense of belonging, connectedness, and support, which diminishes their risk for engaging in problematic substance use.^{ix}

Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) clubs positively impact school climate for all students.

Gender and Sexuality Alliances/Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) help foster positive learning environments for all students.^{vii,x} Students who attend schools with GSAs hear fewer homophobic comments, indicate that their school is more supportive of LGBTQ2+ students, feel safer and experience a greater sense of belonging at school, and can identify more supportive teachers.^{vii,x,xi,xii} LGBTQ2+ students who attend schools with GSAs experience less discrimination and victimization.^{vii}

Translating Research into Action

Create safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments

Principals and Vice Principals can cultivate safe, inclusive, and welcoming schools by addressing negative behaviours and actions (e.g., bullying, harassment, prejudice, and discrimination) and promoting respect for and understanding of individual differences at school and beyond (e.g., displaying positive space posters, developing class guidelines with students and enforcing them, etc.). To construct learning and social environments where all youth feel included, valued, and represented, administrators and school staff must intentionally nurture the cultural uniqueness of each student. This involves viewing student diversity as a strength that can enhance learning for all.^{xiii} Use and decoration of physical space, attention to inclusive language in school communications, supporting course offerings reflective of diversity, engaging in inclusive and equitable hiring practices, and supporting school events and activities

that recognize and celebrate diversity within the school community are just some ways administrators can create safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environments for all students. Student voice is critical for guiding these initiatives, and Principals should actively seek means for empowering students to contribute their views on how the school can be a welcoming place for them to learn. Similarly, Principals can and should also engage School Councils in this work. Parent and community partnership is essential for Principals to understand the composition of their communities, and parent and community voice should inform strategies for creating safe, inclusive, and welcoming schools.

Develop healthy relationships with students and between students

Caring adults show interest in youths' lives and support their personal and educational growth. Administrators and school staff can care for students by setting aside time for them, listening to their concerns in a non-judgmental manner, empathizing with their experiences, and responding to their needs in a timely manner. These approaches need to complement any kind of strategy to address challenges or activities requiring discipline, but also need to be proactive and supportive to students in all contexts. Administrators can look for ways to facilitate and support teachers in caring adult roles and contexts, and must model caring adult interactions with students on a continuous basis. Student success and support plans should emphasize the need for students to have at least one, if not multiple, connections to a caring adult within the school. Administrators can cultivate healthy peer networks by networks by

supporting teachers in developing and leading [community-building games and activities](#) to ensure that all students have ample opportunities to interact and get to know each other. Spearheading community-building activities within the classroom broadens students' support networks and enhances their sense of belonging at school.

Create safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments

Administrators can recognize and embrace students' unique identities and experiences (e.g., ethnicity and race, gender, faith, ability and mental health, sexuality, socioeconomic status, citizenship, etc.) by supporting and emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive teaching. This involves having high expectations for all students, and affirming their cultures and lived experiences in everyday teaching and learning.^{xiv} Numerous supports are available to assist schools in integrating culturally responsive pedagogy throughout their programming. Principals should seek out learning opportunities for staff in this area as part of their approach to school improvement and instructional leadership, and consider such teaching when coaching and supporting staff through annual learning plans and formal performance appraisals.

Partake in anti-oppressive training and infuse learnings in teaching to create a culture where diversity is expected and respected

Administrators and school staff can participate in anti-racism and anti-oppression (ARAO) training (i.e., professional development that explores the relationship between power, privilege, and social identities), and use learnings to address individual and institutionalized oppression in and through schooling. Principals can encourage teachers to infuse multiple experiences and perspectives in their teaching to promote respect for and understanding of diversity. For example, various books written by Indigenous authors, lesson plans that highlight Indigenous understandings and teachings, and Truth and Reconciliation resources are readily available for teachers to integrate in their classes. For more information, please visit: [Infusing Indigenous Perspectives in K-12 Teaching](#). Additionally, numerous supports are available to guide Principals in leading training and professional learning for all staff in cultural competency, and in recognizing and addressing implicit bias and other forms of systemic discrimination that impedes students' sense of safety and well-being at school.

Encourage participation in school-based activities and reduce barriers to participation

Administrators can encourage students of all backgrounds and abilities to participate in a variety of activities, teams, or clubs (e.g., cultural groups, GSAs, Social Justice clubs, etc.) to enhance their sense of belonging at school, and work to reduce participation barriers (e.g., transportation). If a club does not exist, Principals can support students who wish to establish one and offer to advise the group, and/or seek out staff in the building who would be willing to assist.

References

- ⁱ Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83, 357–385.
- ⁱⁱ Kia-Keating, M., Dowdy, E., Morgan, M. L., & Noam, G. G. (2011). Protecting and promoting: An integrative conceptual model for healthy development of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(3), 220-228.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2016). Health-related quality of life (HRQOL). Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/hrqol/wellbeing.htm#three>
- ^{iv} Snowshoe, A., Crooks, C., Tremblay, P. F., & Hinson, R. E. (2017). Cultural connectedness and its relation to mental wellness for First Nations youth. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38(1-2), 67-86.
- ^v Currie, C. L., Wild, T. C., Schopflocher, D. P., Laing, L., & Veugelers, P. (2013). Illicit and prescription drug problems among urban Aboriginal adults in Canada: The role of traditional culture in protection and resilience. *Social Science & Medicine*, 88, 1-9.
- ^{vi} Taylor, C., Meyer, E. J., Peter, T., Ristock, J., Short, D., & Campbell, C. (2016). Gaps between beliefs, perceptions, and practices: The every teacher project on LGBTQ-inclusive education in Canadian schools. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 13(1-2), 112-140.
- ^{vii} Taylor, C., Peter, T., McMinn, T. L., Elliott, T., Beldom, S., Ferry, A., Gross, Z., Paquin, S., & Schachter, K. (2011). *Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools*. Toronto, ON: EGALE Canada Human Rights Trust.
- ^{viii} Lerner, J.V, Bowers, E. P., Minor, K., Lewin-Bizan, S., Boyd, M. J., & Mueller, M. K. (2013). Positive youth development: Processes, philosophies, and programs (pp. 365-392). In I. Weiner, R. Lerner, M. Easterbrooks, & J. Ministry (Eds.). *Handbook of Psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- ^{ix} Gottfredson, D. C., Gerstenblith, S. A., Soulé, D. A., Womer, S. C., Lu, S. (2004). Do after school programs reduce delinquency? *Prevention Science*, 5(4), 253-266.
- ^x Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Giga, N. M., Villenas, C., & Danischewsk, D. J. (2016). *The 2015 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN.
- ^{xi} Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., & Barkicwicz, M. J. (2010). *The 2009 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN.
- ^{xii} Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Palmer, N. A., & Boesen, M. A. (2014). *The 2013 national school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN.
- ^{xiii} Ontario Ministry of Education (2013). *Culturally responsive pedagogy: Towards equity and inclusivity in Ontario schools*. Retrieved from: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_ResponsivePedagogy.pdf