Creating a School Culture and Climate for College and Career Success: A Perspective and Guidelines for NJ Schools

This set of **Successful School Guidelines** is drawn from the National School Climate Council Standards and related work in social-emotional and character development (SECD) and best practices. Schools should be inspiring, challenging, supportive, safe, healthy, engaging, respectful places, comprised of communities of learners, in which all individuals are supported and protected, and the specific needs of vulnerable populations are addressed. Part of being inspiring, challenging, etc. involves organizing and coordinating programs, activities, strategies, and curricula so that they are connected and well-articulated throughout all aspects of school life. It is important to create coherence among the many existing efforts in order to systematically and continuously promote children's social-emotional and character development. One part of being a responsible community of learners is to collect and use academic data, data about school culture and climate, and data about their students' social, emotional and character development. When schools work to develop the features described in these standards, their students are more likely to go on to success in life. These schools are also committed to steadily increasing the number of students who are college and career ready.

SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL GUIDELINES

Successful School Guideline #1 [Inspiring]
The school community has a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:

- Commit to working together to develop a shared vision and plan to create a safe and productive learning community that stands for and can articulate particular focal themes, values, priorities.
    - Do a "Visioning Exercise" with the School Safety Team or "Culture and Climate Team" and then with the faculty/staff and the rest of the school community to identify a vision of what the school should stand for.
- Develop and implement policies and practices to support above
    - Do a "Core Values" exercise to decide, as a total school community what core values are important to instill and model for everyone in the school and formally adopt and propagate those values throughout the entire community.
- Gather and use data from a school climate assessment of students, staff, parents, and community
    - Administer an assessment of school culture and climate with students, faculty, staff, parents, and community members as respondents. Review

the data from the assessment and identify strengths and opportunities for improvement from the data. Share this as trend data with the larger community and discuss those trends, brainstorming ideas for improvement.

- Develop and implement strategies for school climate improvement
    - Engage the Culture and Climate Team (SST) in action planning based on the assessment results and the ensuing discussions with various focus groups to identify specific actions to be taken to address opportunities for improvement.
- Use the findings to develop and implement goals and action-plans to achieve those goals
    - See above.
- Communicate results of assessments and improvement efforts to the wider school community
    - Create a method or protocol for sharing the trend data from the assessment as well as action planning ideas and steps for improvement.
- Build the capacity of the school improvement effort to engage all members of the school community
    - Determine who else should be included in the committee and how to best share the work of the committee in analyzing data and creating action plans.

Successful School Guideline #2 [Challenging]
The school community sets policies specifically **promoting (a) the development and sustainability of social, emotional, ethical, civic and intellectual skills, knowledge and dispositions and (b) a comprehensive system to address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage students who have become disengaged.**

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:

- Integrate standards for SECD into the classroom and the school environment in alignment with Core Content Standards.
    - Provide (design) a set of age appropriate SECD experiences that are articulated from grade level to grade level.
    - Crosswalk the Core Content Standards with the above-mentioned SECD learning experiences such that they are mutually supportive.
- Provide meaningful learning experiences that appropriately challenge all students regardless of prevailing cultures, circumstances, and languages,
    - Look at curricular offerings at each grade level to ensure that they are appropriately challenging for all students.
    - Be sure to account for differences in cultural bias, language barriers, and other differentiating factors in order to meet the needs of all students.
- Provide educational experiences that are personally challenging and relevant to each individual student.
    - Provide students with voice and choice by giving them a say in determining their own educational learning goals and program of studies.
    - Create multiple levels of courses (from special needs to honors and AP levels) in order to appropriately accommodate a wide range of student interests and needs.

    - Consider offering an independent study option to allow students to pursue an area of personal interest that is educationally sound, but not able to be offered to the general student population.
- Provide educational experiences that foster mutual respect, caring, and psychological wellbeing.
    - Train teachers in the basics of Social Emotional Learning and provide them with the tools to provide a respectful and caring environment in their classrooms.
    - Integrate SEL into lessons in all subjects and all levels of instruction.
    - Encourage students to pursue the "most challenging program" based on their individual abilities and aspirations.
- Systematically address barriers to learning through programs such as R.T.I. and other learning supports.
    - Maintain a multi-tiered system of supports to assist students in overcoming barriers to learning through classroom supports as well as small-group and individualized interventions.
    - Within a full slate of educational offerings, place students in their "least restrictive" educational environment. (For some students, this may involve an out-of-district placement.)
- Encourage students to explore areas of personal interest and ability through curricular and extra-curricular programs.
    - Provide a full slate of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities to meet a wide range of student interests and needs.
    - Encourage students to explore a range of activities to help them discover what they might wish to pursue in further study or on a lifelong basis.
    - With the current interest on raising schools' profiles, be aware and respond to the need to maintain course offerings that would interest, engage, and challenge all groups of students in the school.
- Periodically assess efforts associated with this standard for full integration and effectiveness.
    - Engage in a regular and periodic curriculum review cycle which includes input from the faculty, students, and parents to ensure that course offerings and scheduling options are meeting the needs of the students.

Successful School Guideline #3 [Supportive]
The school community's practices are identified, prioritized and supported to (a) promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students, (b) enhance engagement in teaching, learning and school-wide activities; (c) address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage those who have become disengaged; and (d) develop and sustain an appropriate operational infrastructure and capacity building mechanisms for meeting this standard.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:
- Design engaging Instructional practices that focus on cognitive and behavioral learning as well as social, emotional, ethical and civic engagement.
    - Develop a classroom focus on integrating SECD skills in all subject areas in a developmentally appropriate manner.

    - Provide training to faculty and staff personnel on SEL as it pertains to regular classroom instruction.
    - Provide Service Learning opportunities to engage students in projects connected with the curriculum and the community that make a difference.
- Provide opportunities for students to share their perceptions and opinions with their peers as well as with positive adult role models.
    - Promote opportunities for "student-centered" learning where students have voice and choice as well as the opportunity to reflect on their learning.
    - Encourage faculty members to become "guides on the side" in facilitating this active learning by students.
- Provide an integrated system of interventions designed to promote healthy development and prevent negative problems. (RTI)
    - Differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a diverse range of student abilities.
- Provide early intervention programs and strategies that address negative problems
    - Empower staff members to engage in dialogue to assist individual students in need as well as groups of students with similar needs using a multi-tiered system of assistance.
- Provide a comprehensive system of learning supports that address a wide spectrum of student needs.
    - Engage higher levels of support as necessary to meet individual needs. These supports could come from inside and outside of the school.
- Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed
    - Serve as a "clearinghouse" of services to help families understand what is available and how to apply for those services.

Successful School Guideline #4 [Safe and Healthy]
The school community promotes health and wellness and creates an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:

- Engage the School Safety Team in promoting practices to improve the safety of the school environment and develop a positive school climate and culture.
    - Carry out an audit of where and when accidents occur; survey students and staff about where they feel most and least safe, and why, and use this information for intervention planning and action
- Engage the school nurse and health educators in designing and providing resources that encourage health and wellness.
    - Create an ongoing, multi-grade, developmental focus on what students eat, what the nutritional value is, what options they have; integrate this with lunch, biology, and parents

- Design and implement prevention efforts to address risky behaviors including all forms of violence, harassment, intimidation and bullying, unhealthy relationships, underage drinking, drug use, and destructive decision-making.
    - Do an audit of where and when HIB incidents take place, share with students, and solicit their ideas for prevention.; engage in parallel, student-centered strategies for data gathering and action planning for other problem behaviors.
- Survey students, their families, school staff and community stakeholders to discover what the school should do to further enhance a welcoming, supportive, healthy and safe environment.
    - With the leadership of the Culture and Climate Committee, Implement a systematic climate survey from grades 3 and higher that includes elements of engagement, morale, safety, support, belonging, and health, create a plan for data analysis, disaggregation, summary, feedback, and discussion, and involve those affected by issues in planning relevant actions
- Provide multiple opportunities for students and staff to engage in healthy behaviors, such as physical activity and healthy eating, on a daily basis.
    - Institute journals for recording eating and exercise and create incentives and recognition for improvement
- Monitor and evaluate the prevention and intervention strategies designed to support people feeling welcomed, supported and safe and use that data to improve relevant policies, practices, facilities, staff competencies, and accountability. – overlaps with the above
    - Create a Safety Patrol of students, with tasks appropriate for every grade level, to instruct and support health behavior among peers

Successful School Guideline #5 [Engaged]
The school community develops meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:
- Provide opportunities for students to exercise voice and choice and to explore individual interests and needs and take a meaningful role in developing personal learning goals.
    - Promote student-centered learning in the school, where the students themselves have an opportunity to create their own learning experiences within the context of the curriculum.
    - Provide students with the opportunity to have a say in school issues and implement those ideas while learning the protocols necessary to work within a complex organizational system.
    - Provide students with the opportunity to lead traditional parent conferences.
- Design practices to remove barriers to learning and reengage students who have become disengaged.
    - Provide alternative educational programs for disaffected students.
    - Create a variable system of supports and practices to transition students back into the school. These may include part-day schedules, special accommodations, and responsible adult contact, among other supports.

- Provide multiple opportunities for students to have leadership roles that enhance their commitment to school and to the development of themselves and others.
    - Recognize that there are different kinds of leadership in the school population. This includes "social leaders" who can have a tremendous impact on their peers, but who may not represent the "ideal student' who usually gets the benefit of leadership opportunities (Student Council, Peer Leaders, etc.)
- Promote Student Government that involves more than just elected leaders and maintains an active and ongoing role in solving school-wide problems
    - Promote a system where student government representatives regularly communicate information about school issues to their constituents and the whole student body, (This is often done through Social Studies or English classes so that every student can be reached.)
- Create opportunities for students to engage in moral action through academic service learning projects and civic engagement.
    - Make sure Service Learning opportunities are connected to the curriculum and strike a balance between Learning and Service.
    - Provide students with the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on their service learning projects that are personally relevant to them.
- Assure that every student has opportunities to make a strong connection to a caring and responsible adult. (Mentors/Advisory)
    - Encourage faculty members to work with students as mentors on independent study projects, service learning projects, and the like.
    - Consider an advisory program where all adults work with small, multi-graded groups of students.

Successful School Guideline #6 [Respectful]
The school community is a place where relationships among and between staff and students are mutually respectful, supportive, ethical and civil.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:
- Develop mutually respectful, supportive, ethical and civil relationships among and between staff and students
    - Provide opportunities for students and staff to dialogue on a regular basis about classroom experiences. Solicit student input when classroom norms are developed. Encourage ongoing, open communication from all students.
    - School administration openly promotes staff members' to be role models of respectful, supportive, ethical, and civil relationships in all interactions, and ensures that every student has at least one adult in school with whom she or he may have honest dialogue.
- Work to build social norms in the school that support responsible and positive peer relationships; there is an articulate positive code of student conduct
    - Provide opportunities for all students to have input on development or modification of core ethical values.
- Align discipline procedures and practices with the goals of supporting students in their learning and being respectful of all individuals. (Code of Conduct based on Core Values)

    - Review discipline procedures and records to determine if actions are being applied equally amongst all students, paying particular attention to all racial, ethnic, religious, and "ability" groups. The review of procedures should also answer the question whether or not all groups have equal access to reporting of incidents.
- Encourage students and staff to model culturally responsive and ethical behavior based on accepted core values.
    - Identify various cultures, ethnicities, or religions, represented in the school community (students and staff). Invite members of these groups to share their customs and beliefs in various forums, such as a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic lunch for students and staff (or breakfast or dinner to include parents).
- Help students and staff build the capacity to identify, understand, and respect the unique beliefs, values, customs, languages, and traditions of all members of the school community
    - In concert with reviewing school climate assessment data, the SST identifies the groups of students and staff who are under-represented, have minority status, or less "power" or perceived "power" (these may be based on racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, disability, or other group memberships) and engages in discussion about the experiences of these groups in the school setting. Specific questions might include: 1) Do members of these groups have friendships/relationships with members of other groups; 2) Are members of these groups targeted disproportionately by teasing or bullying behavior? 3) Are members of these groups largely ignored? 4) Do students from all groups have at least one adult with whom they can speak with in a trusting way? Etc. The purpose of these discussions is to further understand experiences of all members of the school, especially experiences that may not emerge through school climate survey data. Collection of these data may require additional methods such as interview, focus groups, review of student records, etc.
- Develop curriculum and instruction practices to promote curiosity about, inquiry into, and celebration of diverse cultures.
    - Link discussions in Social Studies classes on experiences of various cultures to actual students attending school. Pair students of different cultures to work on classroom projects together focusing on learning about the partner's culture and then share in the whole class.
- Handle behavioral issues with dignity, providing a learning opportunity for students as well as an opportunity for reconciliation when appropriate.
    - Address discipline from a skill-building standpoint where needed skills are identified and then taught, reinforced, and practiced in a positive way.

Successful School Guideline #7 [Communities of Learners]
An effective operational infrastructure is in place for weaving school and community resources together into a larger community of learners who take responsibility for ongoing planning, implementation, and evaluation of school climate improvement efforts.

Suggested Actions that address the Guideline:

- Provide leadership and staff with continuous professional development in order to develop and sustain practices related to school improvement efforts. (PLCs)
    - Determine and provide leadership and staff with a set of brief, common, and accessible reading materials that will establish a common language and serve as the basis for planning ongoing PD. Examples include the Laminated SECD and School Climate Resource Cards from www.nprinc.com.
- Engage school staff in collaboratively setting and meeting ongoing learning goals
    - Arrange for PLC or other Common Planning Time meetings to have ongoing goals related to social-emotional and character development and/or school culture and climate
- Provide opportunities and support for all students to participate in and contribute to the well-being of their classmates and the positive culture and climate of the school
    - Set up school problem solving subgroups in conjunction with existing staff committees (HIB, discipline, safety, morale, substance abuse prevention, school health and wellness promotion) and/or as parallel efforts that have ongoing communication with staff committees. Ensure students on these committees have their own ongoing PD via videos, readings, etc.
- Involve students in peer and cross-aged learning groups in areas of their interest
    - Encourage lunchtime and after school groups of mixed-aged students meeting around common interests, such as robotics, performing, crafts, service, environmental concerns, gardening; involve all adults in a supervisory role, including security, custodial, secretarial and paraprofessional staff
- Give teachers and staff members a voice in school-based decision-making. (Distributed leadership)
    - In all committees, PLC's, and related groups, give many members explicit roles, including having learning buddies with whom to share and discuss new learning and ongoing questions.
- Increase home and school connections;
    - Create a newsletter or online blog site to share ongoing informal learning accomplishments of staff and students with parents and guardians;
    - Create a forum for family members to express areas in which they would like their own "PD" and arrange to create a mutual self-help group format to foster sustainable support among families in the community
- Engage the wider community to respond to and, where feasible, prevent crises;
    - Create and communicate clear crisis response procedures
- Increase community involvement and support (e.g., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers and community resources to enhance the educational program).
    - Have a member of the SCC Team serve the role of volunteer coordinator, to have a single point of contact between potential volunteers and the school, both to organize and manage offers of help from the community so that they do not jumble the schoolhouse, and to make requests of the community for needed volunteer resources.
- Celebrate milestones and accomplishments as staff, students, and community work to achieve meaningful school climate improvement.

- Create bulletin boards or announcement boards inside and/or outside of schools that mention any birthdays or other significant milestones (with appropriate permission to do so);
- Develop a procedure for individuals to self-nominate/self-explain efforts to improve the school culture and climate, as well as nominate others, and then publicize these monthly via a bulletin or announcement board inside and/or outside of school and/or via existing newsletters or web postings
- Recognize learning accomplishments, such as completing a unit of PD, participating in a book discussion, attending and sharing information from significant conferences