

School Climate Data Inquiry Tool

Purpose: This tool is designed to support educators in using data to address questions related to school climate inequities. Specifically, the tool guides educators in providing context for school climate, identifying the right questions to ask about school climate challenges, aligning data sources, and expanding possible data sources to more deeply understand problems of practice.

Background: School climate refers to the qualities of a school’s environment experienced by students, staff, families, and other partners. It encompasses relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Center, 2021). A positive and equitable school climate supports high expectations, safe and healthy environments, and caring relationships. Further, the climate and culture of a school facilitate the conditions for learning and teaching (Hashmi, Cerna, & Stern, 2022). Part of sustaining a positive and equitable school climate includes reviewing and monitoring school climate data.

Section A. School Climate Domains

There are many components of school climate. In considering what data are related to school climate, it is helpful to know some of the key domains of school climate. Knowing these domains can be helpful when asking questions about school climate inequities. Table 1 lists school climate domains and associated subdomains.

Table 1. School Climate Domains and Subdomains

School Climate Domains	Subdomains
Belonging and Connections	
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring relationships between adults and students • Collegial and productive relationships among staff • Positive relationships among students
School connectedness and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations • School connectedness • Academic motivation • Preventative-oriented supports for attendance

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement supports for students
Engaging educational partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared vision in the school community School communication to family members and staff Family involvement activities Engagement of educational partners (e.g., staff, families, community partners)
Student agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive and meaningful opportunities for student participation Student voice, choice, and participation in decision-making
Safety and Wellness	
School safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional, psychological, and physical safety of students and staff Strategies to reduce violence and victimization Prevention supports to address substance use at schools Strategies to reduce bullying and harassment Emergency readiness planning
Mental health and wellness supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Life satisfaction and optimism Social and emotional learning supports Access to mental health wellness supports for students and staff Awareness of mental health issues Non-stigmatizing attitudes of mental health
Environment	
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fair and respectful treatment between students and staff Cultural and linguistic practices Mutual respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion Inclusive learning environments and experiences
Instructional environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports for learning Instructional relevance Teachers' support for students Supports for social emotional learning
Physical environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School facilities and upkeep

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to clean water • Ambient lighting and noise • Temperature and air quality*
Behavioral supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive discipline practices • Clear and consistent routines • Rule clarity and fairness • Practices that support positive behavioral interventions

Note: This table is adapted from the *School Climate Improvement Toolkit* (Caskey et al., 2016).

Section B. Asking the Right Questions

Data can be used to answer questions. By translating problems of practice into specific questions, educators can use data to find the answers. Data-informed answers can help educators more effectively gain new understanding, explore current practices, identify root causes of inequities, and measure progress.

Asking the right questions can help frame your school climate inquiry of the overarching question: *What school climate challenge do you want to investigate?* Below are guiding questions that can be answered by relevant data to help translate school climate problems of practice into actionable inquiry. As you review the guiding questions consider the multiple school climate domains in Table 1.

Why We Ask Questions

- Seek new understanding
- Explore current school climate practices
- Identify root causes of inequities
- Measure progress

What school climate challenge do you want to investigate?

1. What question do you have about your school climate challenge? What do you want to know?
2. Why does this school climate challenge exist?
3. What question do you have about specific groups and their school climate experiences? How are these experiences contributing to inequities? (Consider multiple school climate domains.)
4. What question do you have about school climate patterns over time? What school climate inequities do you notice?

5. What assumptions are you making about the cause of the school climate-related issue? How do you know your assumptions are true? (The assumptions may very well be true but exploring multiple sources of data [triangulating data] may help to get closer to the root causes.)
6. What data do you have to support your claim?
7. What data do you need to have to be able to answer your school climate question?
8. What school data would help support your question?

Record your school climate challenge in Table 2.

Table 2. Record Your School Climate Challenge

What is your school climate question?	How does the question improve your understanding of your school climate challenge?	What data will answer your question?

Section C. Identifying Data Sources

What data will answer your questions about your school climate challenge? Do you have different sources of data? Quantitative data can answer questions about what, how many, and how often events or patterns are observed. Qualitative data can answer school climate questions about why and how. Identifying multiple sources of data to answer your school climate question can be beneficial to help you learn about positive school climate progress and how inequities can be addressed. Using qualitative and quantitative data in concert can also answer multidimensional questions.

Existing Data

It is important to always start with the data that you currently have available. There are many sources of existing data that may need to be explored further. Documenting existing data helps catalog what data are available, how to access them, and how often they are collected. Below are guiding questions to help you explore existing data sources.

1. What data do you currently have access to that might help you address your school climate challenge?
2. What data exists that you don't have access to that will help you address your school climate challenge?
3. Are these data mostly quantitative or qualitative? Do you have a mix of both?
4. Are these data regularly collected?

Use Table 3 to catalog the data sources that you have available to address your school climate challenge.

Table 3. Log Your Existing Data Sources

Existing data sources	Who has access to the data?	How often are the data collected?	Is this quantitative or qualitative data?	Additional notes

Additional Data

After you explore existing data, you may identify some additional data needs that could support your school climate challenge inquiry. These data might help you better understand the challenge given your context, especially by providing information about how and why. Collecting these data need not be complicated or time consuming—often, simply having direct conversations (in the form of focus groups) about findings with students, families, or teachers will yield rich insight.

Below are guiding questions to help you explore additional sources of data.

1. What additional data would you like to see collected to help answer your school climate question?
2. What additional types of data would elicit information about your school climate question?
3. Do you need data for specific groups to help answer questions related to school climate inequities?
4. Have you included direct testimonies from students, staff, families, and other partners?

In Table 4, catalog additional data that you will need to collect or access to address your school climate challenge.

Table 4. Log Your Additional Data Sources

Additional data sources	Who will collect the data?	How will the data be collected?	Is this quantitative or qualitative data?	Additional notes

Section D. Next Steps

Exploring school climate domains, asking the right questions, and identifying data sources are only the first steps in the school climate data inquiry process. Data and inquiry are the most effective when integrated into a continuous improvement system. The questions you develop can be connected to concrete goals, tying analysis and practice firmly together. Continuously evaluating progress toward goals allows you to iterate and modify school climate policies more finely and communicate changes more effectively to school partners, including students, families, and educators.

Consider these next steps as you move forward in addressing your school climate challenge:

1. Identify additional data that are most critical to address your school climate challenge.
2. Identify who needs to be involved in the decision to collect these data.
3. Develop a plan that involves key partners in the collection of these data.
4. Develop a plan for ongoing inquiry cycles to address your school climate challenges. Iterate and modify your plan as you determine what is working and what could be improved.

References

Caskey, N., Cerna, R., Hanson, T., Polik, J., & Van Houten, L. (2016). *School climate improvement toolkit*. [A resource from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd.] WestEd.

Hashmi, S., Cerna, R., & Stern, A. (2022). *School climate essentials: A call to action*. WestEd.
<https://www.wested.org/resources/school-climate-essentials-brief/>

National School Climate Center. (2021). *What is school climate?* <https://schoolclimate.org/about/our-approach/what-is-school-climate/>