The California Center for School Climate
YOUTH ADVISORY TEAM

This is Part 2 of a two-part brief designed to capture the importance of student voice in understanding the complexity of student experiences in order to provide interventions and supports that are well matched to their needs.

This audio gallery is a product of the California Center for School Climate (CCSC), a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and trainings on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California.

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YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL SAFETY

A **Youth Advisory Team** (YAT) comprising six high school students from across the state ensures that youth voices are part of the California Center for School Climate. Team members provide CCSC staff with suggestions and feedback on technical assistance supports and participate in co-creating and reviewing resources for districts and schools in California.

In Fall 2022, California Center for School Climate (CCSC) staff conducted interviews with the YAT to capture the unique advantages and challenges that high school students encounter at this current moment. The reflections that emerged from these interviews can clarify how to best support students as learning environments continue to evolve over time. Part one of this two-part brief discusses how systems of support should address the need for student voice, diversity and inclusion, and guidance on the use of new technologies among all learners. Part two examines the role that school safety plays in students' classroom experiences in addition to the overall well-being of school communities.

Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

School safety has become an increasing concern for education leaders, especially as recent years have marked record highs for shootings, wildfires, and other emergencies on school campuses.[1] Conventional efforts to improve school safety have often prioritized measures such as hiring school resource officers and implementing zero-tolerance policies, though these solutions have proven ineffective at reducing violence on campuses.[2] In recent years, there has been a push for schools to develop comprehensive school safety

approaches that address community needs around physical safety, school climate, and student behavior to keep schools safe.[3] This approach prioritizes efforts that support physical and psychological safety, as opposed to exclusively focusing on crisis response and restrictive physical safety measures that can undermine learning environments.[4] Improved access to mental health supports is another vital piece to a comprehensive approach, especially timely during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated mental health challenges among young people.[5] Findings from a recent RAND survey of district leaders also indicate that the mental health of students, teachers, and principals are top concerns throughout the country.[6]

The California Center for School Climate (CCSC) offers a variety of professional learning opportunities and resources that encourage educators and leaders to implement research-based practices to foster safe and supportive learning environments. One essential to creating these environments is prioritizing student, staff, and family voice, agency, and co-creation. This brief was created to highlight the needs that CCSC Youth Advisory Team (YAT) members shared when discussing their experiences of safety in high schools throughout the state of California.

Being emotionally balanced with yourself as well and feeling okay—I think it's really important, because it affects your overall development, educationally. If you don't feel okay emotionally, you won't really put 100% into that test… it is really important to feel safe emotionally and physically.

Jubia, YAT member

A Relationship-Centered Approach

School safety needs have evolved over time while, for the most part, school strategies have remained stagnant. The overwhelming majority of school safety efforts operate from a deficit frame, describing learning environments and young people through a lens that emphasizes punitive discipline and policies of control.[7] School leaders should identify the individual, interpersonal, and structural elements that will build off of community members' strengths, aspirations, and needs. For some schools, creating this type of support system will require a paradigm shift in how to understand and achieve safety.[8] A few YAT members described how school staff tend to emphasize order, control, and hierarchies in their exchanges with students, which harms their ability to express themselves and build relationships at school. Students who face these types of traditional power dynamics may turn to other community-building strategies that help them feel safe and supported, though. Each YAT member discussed the importance of having extracurricular activities, which allow students to explore new interests, meet like-minded peers, and break away from academic pressures. Studies suggest that students involved in extracurriculars are more likely to feel connected and socially supported—by peers and adults.[9]

For Alexa, a sophomore from San Diego, groups such as Black Student Union and Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEcHA) are important opportunities to meet students who share racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Research has shown that these types of school-sponsored affinity groups can represent crucial spaces for psychological safety because they allow students of color to discuss shared experiences of identity-based discrimination.[10] YAT members also talked about the importance of having access to mental health support from peer mediation groups, school counselors, teachers, and even administrators. Amiya,

a junior from Sacramento, reflected that "You can't necessarily help another person unless you're helped first… there needs to be an environment coming from adults that promote what the student wants to promote to their friends. It's like a domino effect." Ultimately, strong relationships are at the center of safe and supportive learning environments.

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Consider while you listen . . .

Comprehensive school safety approaches prioritize efforts that support physical and psychological safety for all school community members. **How does your school or district address the interconnected domains of safety? Are safety efforts focused on responding to deficits and challenges or building upon strengths, aspirations, and needs in the community?**

Supporting students' mental health needs is critical to improving school safety. **What supports are currently available to students and staff? How does your school or district ensure that all community members have consistent access to well-being supports?**

YAT members discussed the importance of having extracurricular opportunities on campus, especially cultural or affinity groups that convene students of color. **What community-building opportunities currently exist for students and staff? How does your school or district have access to spaces where they can safely explore their identities and share experiences?**