

# BACK-TO-SCHOOL

# BLUEPRINT

PLANNING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE AFTER COVID-19

## REBUILDING COMMUNITY

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After months away from school, students and teachers will return eager for connection. Despite students' and educators' desire to return to familiar routines, this school year is likely to look different from those in the past. By strengthening a sense of community, educators can create an atmosphere that equips both children and adults to do their best work.

The following action guide provides strategies for teachers and school leaders seeking to build community, an essential component to a positive school climate. It includes lessons focused on assessing school climate, building a positive school culture, affirming student identity, amplifying student voice, and developing meaningful family partnerships. Each lesson features embedded resources, including videos and articles to support further learning. Please note that all content included in embedded links comes directly from the organization that produced the resource.

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# INTRODUCTION

# CREATE A WELCOMING COMMUNITY

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Welcoming schools affirm student and staff identity, proactively engage families, cultivate social-emotional development, create a positive work culture for staff, and help all students build a sense of belonging.



## KEY ELEMENTS OF A WELCOMING SCHOOL

The 2020-2021 school year will look different from years past. Students and teachers will likely need to follow some physical distancing measures. Students may participate in a combination of online and in-class learning. These unfamiliar routines may induce anxiety among students, staff, and families. Therefore, it is critical that teachers and school leaders work together to create a positive, welcoming environment for every member of the school community.

### **Positive Climate.**

In a welcoming school climate, there are strong relationships among both students and staff. Students have opportunities to build social-emotional skills, and they have voice to participate in their school. All staff and students respect cultural, linguistic, and gender

diversity. The school actively prevents and responds to bullying, creating a safe environment for both students and staff.

### **Physical Environment.**

In a welcoming school, students and families find signs posted in their home language. Student artwork decorates hallways and classroom walls. Books on display represent the diversity of the school community. Classrooms are neat and inviting.

### **Family Engagement.**

Educators in welcoming schools engage in frequent, two-way communication with families. They view families as partners in their children's education, reaching out frequently and placing positive calls home. They have reliable interpretation plans to ensure that non-English speaking families can fully participate.

## **A SENSE OF BELONGING**

Welcoming schools foster a sense of belonging for all stakeholders, including students, educators, and families.



### **For Students**

In a welcoming school, students do not need to change any part of themselves to feel that they belong. This means that the student's culture, gender identity, and interests are celebrated and respected. School is a place where students build authentic, positive relationships with both peers and adults.

### **For Families**

Schools welcome families through their communication and their actions. Communication should reflect the gender, family composition, and linguistic diversity in the school community. For example, letters should be sent in students' home languages and addressed "Dear families" rather than "Dear parents." Signs welcoming families at schools should be posted in multiple languages. Schools can engage families as active partners in supporting students' learning by participating in ongoing two-way communication and actively involving families in community-building activities. Strategies and examples are provided later in this guide.





### For Educators

A positive staff culture is a critical ingredient to a supportive school climate. In order to create a positive staff culture, administrators must affirm educators' identities, prioritize educator self-care, make time for collaboration, and model collegial behavior. This includes taking time to recognize staff for their contributions.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE & SCHOOL COMMUNITY

School climate "refers to the quality and character of school life" (National School Climate Center). It includes a sense of physical, social, and emotional safety. Research shows the school climate has an impact on student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates.

There are many components of school climate: safety, physical wellness, social-emotional wellbeing, emotional resilience, civic engagement, academic environment, disciplinary practices, and others. This guide focuses specifically on building a sense of community, which is an important part of a positive school climate. Additional guidance on school climate can be found in the Going Deeper section of this guide.

# UNDERSTAND THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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## ASSESSING SCHOOL CLIMATE

School climate surveys allow educators to understand student, family, and staff perceptions of and experiences within the school community. Equipped with this knowledge, educators can take action to improve the student, staff, and family experience. As noted previously, school climate includes a range of domains that include, but go beyond, a sense of community. However, school climate surveys are an important tool to assess the strengths and needs of the school community. This section outlines steps for educators and administrators seeking to measure school climate, from selecting a tool to acting upon data findings.



### 1. COMMUNICATE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

It is important that educators, students, and families all understand what data is being collected and for what purpose. Engage stakeholders early and provide opportunities for input. This includes finding out family and community members' priorities for data use and questions about the data collection process. It also includes sharing data with stakeholders to gather their ideas on what the school can do to improve climate.



## 2. SELECT A MEASUREMENT TOOL

Schools across Massachusetts use a range of tools to monitor school climate. Though specific tools vary in the domains of school climate that they are designed to measure, most incorporate the following elements:

- School safety
- Teaching and learning
- Relationships
- Physical environment

At the state level, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) administers the Views of Climate and Learning (VOCAL) Survey as part of annual MCAS testing. It focuses on three key dimensions: engagement, safety, and environment. Many districts use additional tools to monitor climate at regular intervals, assess grade levels and domains not covered in the VOCAL survey, and collect information from families, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff.

When selecting a school climate tool, educators should assess the tools' alignment to the school's goals. To the extent possible, the tool should not duplicate data that is already collected. An effective tool is vetted for bias and focuses on easily understandable and actionable data. The linked resource from the [Council of Chief State School Officers \(CCSSO\)](#) offers comprehensive guidance on selecting an appropriate tool.

## 3. ANALYZE DATA

All data should be disaggregated by respondent race/ethnicity, gender, English learner status, and disability status to understand varying perspectives and experiences in the school community. Data should be presented in a way where educators, administrators, and others using the data can easily understand what it is saying. Consider crafting a series of questions to prompt discussion on the data.

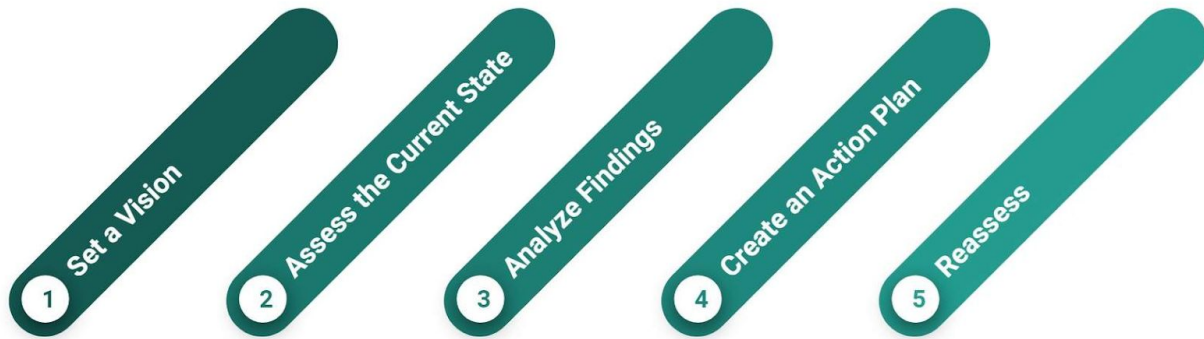
## 4. ACT ON FINDINGS

The purpose of collecting school climate data is to inform action. By analyzing data, the team will understand strengths and needs related to school climate. Educators can begin with the following steps.

**Build upon things that are working well.** If data shows that teacher-student relationships are particularly strong in grade 3, interview staff and students to learn more about what's working. Share these strategies with all staff to benefit the entire community.

**Develop action plans for areas of need.** Identify evidence-based practices to address areas of need. For example, if school connectedness emerges as an area of need, the team should take time to research this domain and identify strategies to improve. This [guide from the American](#)

[Institutes for Research](#) provides an overview of several research-based strategies that address multiple school climate domains. When implementing a new practice, it is important to regularly reconvene the team to assess whether the strategy is working. The chart below provides an overview of a data collection and action planning cycle. These steps are detailed in the bullet points below.



- 1. Set a Vision** — The climate measure selected should align with the school's overarching goals. Engage the community to set a vision for school climate. This will serve as a North Star to guide the measurement selection, analysis, and action planning process.
- 2. Assess the Current State** — Identify a measurement tool that aligns with the school climate vision. Ensure the tool has been vetted for bias. Administer the instrument to students, families, staff, and other stakeholders.
- 3. Analyze Findings** — Disaggregate results by race/ethnicity, gender, language, and disability. Look for trends in aggregate and subgroup data. Involve stakeholders in analyzing the data, and make sure it is presented in a way that is easily understandable to those viewing the findings. Provide opportunities for families and community members to review findings and provide input.
- 4. Create an Action Plan** — Gather a group of stakeholders to create an action plan based on findings. The action plan should include opportunities to build upon strengths and improve areas of weakness.
- 5. Reassess** — Identify regular intervals to assess progress against the action plan. This may include large-scale data collection, such as twice yearly school climate survey administration. It may also include small-scale data collection, such as exit slips at the end of the school day to gather students' perspectives. Small-scale data is a helpful way for educators to gather quick information to determine if efforts are on the right track.

This [linked guide from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) provides activities that schools can use to plan, collect, analyze, and act on school climate data.

# **FOCUS ON STAFF CULTURE: ACTIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS**

# CREATE A POSITIVE STAFF CULTURE

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*“After more than 30 years as a school leader, I have come to believe that **trust is the most important factor** in building a collaborative and positive school culture. Trusting teachers communicates that you value them and believe in them. Teachers who are trusted take risks and collaborate with their colleagues.”*

— Jane Mодоono, High School Principal



## Staff Culture Matters

Research shows that schools with positive staff culture produce better results for students. Relational trust is critical to staff wellbeing, educator retention, and a positive school climate. With intentional planning and action, school leaders and teachers can build a trusting and collaborative staff culture.

## SPEND 1:1 TIME WITH EVERY TEACHER

School leaders can build relational trust by devoting time to 1:1 meetings with every teacher outside the context of the educator evaluation process. These meetings can be held in-person or virtually. During 1:1 meetings, school leaders should discuss each teacher's professional goals and identify ways to support teachers in reaching their goals. These meetings also provide the opportunity for teachers and school leaders to learn about one another's personal lives and interests outside of school. By checking in with teachers about their personal and professional lives, administrators show staff that they care.

## BUILD STAFF COMMUNITY

Identify opportunities for staff to gather outside of school to build relationships and community. When physical distancing measures relax, consider hosting a potluck or attending a community event together. While distancing measures are in place, invite staff to participate in a virtual lunch break or coffee meeting, offered at a few different times to avoid scheduling conflicts. In groups of 10 or fewer, encourage staff to connect socially, rather than feeling that all staff conversations are "all work, all the time."

In addition to community-building activities, encourage staff to support one another during the school day. Staff connections are important for educator self-care. This includes using the "Tap-In/Tap-Out" strategy described in [this video from Edutopia](#). Please reference the Rennie Center's [Helping Students Heal from Trauma](#) action guide for additional educator self-care strategies.

## AFFIRM TEACHERS' IDENTITY

In schools with a positive staff culture, teachers bring their authentic selves to work each day. This includes expressing their identity in interactions with colleagues, families, and students. School leaders can create the conditions for authenticity by affirming all forms of teacher identity and working to build a culturally competent school community.

In creating an environment that encourages authenticity, it is important for administrators to recognize educators' intersectional identities. Administrators must understand the impact of overlapping forms of discrimination on educators' (and students') ability to bring their full selves to school. The concept of intersectionality "describes the social, economic, and political ways in which identity-based systems of oppression connect, overlap, and influence one another" (Swift Education Center). For example, a Black LGBTQ+ educator faces oppression related to race/ethnicity and sexual identity. A Latina educator with a disability faces oppression related to race, gender, and disability. Educators and administrators can begin by taking time to understand their own multiple identities in order to respect the multiple identities of others. The following strategies support administrators in creating an atmosphere that encourages authenticity.

### 1. FOCUS ON BUILDING YOUR OWN AND YOUR TEAM'S SELF-AWARENESS.

This includes providing opportunities for all educators and administrators to explore their own cultural lens and biases. Confronting these biases requires a sustained effort and will not take place in a single professional development session. The [Social Identity Wheel](#) is a helpful activity to promote staff reflection. Staff can also listen to this [CASEL webinar](#) to get started.

### 2. ENCOURAGE EDUCATORS TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

This includes creating space for staff to express their identity through their clothing choices, the way they wear their hair, the way they decorate the classroom, and the music or literature they use in the classroom. Teachers feel most comfortable being their authentic selves when they have school leaders who model authenticity in their own actions.

### 3. PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THAT IS RELEVANT TO TEACHER IDENTITY.

Teachers of color possess unique strengths and also face unique challenges, typically working among a majority-white staff. Teachers of color are a diverse group, representing a range of ethnicities, sexual identities, religions, abilities, and cultures. School leaders can support all educators, and particularly educators of color, by encouraging their attendance at relevant conferences, professional development, and networking events specifically designed for those who share their multiple identities.

#### 4. PRIORITIZE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE.

As noted in the Education Trust report, *If You Listen, We Will Stay*, "Part of the school's culture is set by staff intentionally using professional development sessions to have uncomfortable conversations about race, social justice, and navigating bias." School leaders do not need to be experts in diversity, equity, and inclusion to support these conversations. By staying engaged and participating authentically, leaders create space for others to share their experiences. When these conversations take place in schools with high levels of relational trust, the impact is transformative. Staff can use this time to engage in [racial storytelling](#), which is a key step towards developing racial literacy.

### CHALLENGE ADULT BIAS

The principal and other administrators play an important role in creating an environment where discrimination is not tolerated. Administrators should speak up when they hear staff speaking negatively about students, families, or colleagues. Staff should learn [strategies for engaging their colleagues in constructive conversations](#) when they encounter bias. This helps educators build and maintain a healthy community.

### RECOGNIZE AND CELEBRATE STAFF

Every staff member, including administrators, educators, paraprofessionals, custodial staff, and cafeteria staff, needs to feel seen and valued in the school community. Be deliberate about recognizing teachers' and staff members' contributions to the school.

#### **Acknowledge All Staff.**

Take time to let staff know what you value about them. Encourage staff to share what they value about their colleagues. Positive affirmations improve individuals' self-concept, strengthen relationships, and improve team culture (Robbins, 2019). Try the "Collective Cards" strategy described in [this Edutopia article on staff culture](#).

#### **Provide Positive Classroom Observation.**

Teachers who receive positive feedback are more effective in the classroom and remain at their schools longer than those who do not receive this feedback (Hodges, 2017). Classroom observations are one way to recognize teachers' great work. During classroom visits, administrators and instructional coaches should take notes on effective practices and share this feedback with teachers.

#### **Provide Public Recognition.**

Exemplary work deserves to be recognized. Take time at staff meeting or in the teacher's classroom to publicly recognize great work. Be specific with your praise, and ensure that you highlight examples from multiple staff members rather than returning to the same individuals again and again.

# SUPPORT STAFF COLLABORATION

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Educator collaboration contributes to student learning, school improvement, and a sense of community. This section focuses on actions administrators can take to build stronger connections across classrooms.

## 1. BUILD COLLABORATION INTO THE SCHOOL SCHEDULE

Collaboration should be an explicit priority in the design of an effective school schedule, regardless of whether school is taking place in-person or online. This includes time for teacher collaboration within the school day. It also includes time for the entire school community to come together on a regular basis. The [article from the Center for American Progress](#) explores how several schools altered school schedules to prioritize collaboration.



## 2. PRACTICE SHARED LEADERSHIP

Shared leadership—integrating educators into school decision-making processes— is associated with improved teacher-administrator relationships and student achievement. By sharing decisions with educators, administrators tap into the strengths of the entire school staff. Shared leadership is most effective when all decision-makers have a collective vision for the school's success and team members share accountability for achieving this vision. As described in [this case study](#), Revere Public Schools offers a model for districts seeking to decentralize decision-making practices. This [Rennie Center report](#), produced in conjunction with Edvestors' School on the Move Prize, describes how teaming structures and shared leadership support effective teacher collaboration.

## 3. MODEL POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

The principal and other administrators serve as role models for both staff and students. Administrators must model the collaborative behavior that they want to see from teachers. This includes making staff relationships a priority and providing opportunities for teacher leadership in school decisions. It also includes modeling vulnerability by admitting when you do not know the best course of action, and asking teachers to provide input.

# **SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES: ACTIONS FOR EDUCATORS**



# CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

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**Inclusivity** is essential to upholding a sense of community and advancing educational equity. In an inclusive environment, students' and educators' multiple identities, particularly historically marginalized identities, are welcomed and valued. Though all stakeholders are responsible for creating an inclusive environment, teachers and administrators play a special role in the way they teach and care for students with diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

As schools prepare to reopen after the pandemic, it is critical to recognize the deep impact of COVID-19 on marginalized families and communities. Students of color and those from low-income families have been disproportionately affected by the physical, economic, and financial toll of COVID-19. Children with disabilities have faced unprecedented disruption to daily routines and, in many cases, increased health risks. As schools prepare to return to classroom learning, educators must prioritize an inclusive environment with the needs of the most marginalized students in mind.

An environment that affirms and embraces diversity is not built overnight. It takes a willingness to get to know families and different cultures, learn and apply new languages, hire staff that look

like their students, examine resources and accessibility, and instill an expectation of inclusivity within and beyond the school's walls.

This section provides strategies that help educators get started with building an inclusive school community. It includes a focus on welcoming physical spaces and purposeful language use.

## PHYSICAL SPACES

A physical environment that **welcomes, engages, and accommodates all learners** contributes to a sense of inclusivity. A summary of these strategies is provided below.

1. The **school lobby** should represent students' cultures and home languages with signage and decorations that represent students' backgrounds.
2. **Classroom walls** should include student artwork, decorations representing students' cultures, and a visual daily schedule for students learning English.
3. The **classroom layout** should be free from clutter and arranged so that students with disabilities and those with mobility challenges can easily move throughout the space. Desks should be arranged in a way that promotes collaboration.
4. **Bookshelves and library displays** should showcase literature that represents all forms of student identity.

## GUIDANCE FOR THE SOCIALLY DISTANT CLASSROOM

If social distancing measures continue when students return to school, it is important to arrange the physical space in a way that promotes community. This includes:

- **Seating Arrangements.** Even if children are sitting 6 feet apart, students can build community with a classroom structure that promotes discussion. Sitting in a circle, or groups of smaller circles, promotes collaboration.
- **Floor Markers.** Students build community and learn better when they collaborate with peers. By using floor markers spaced 6 feet apart, teachers can use discussion and collaboration protocols without risking student safety. It is important to recognize that many discussion protocols that educators already use can be adapted in the era of social distancing. For example, students can use floor markers for the Back-to-Back and Face-to-Face protocol, Chalk Talk, and several others described in [this guide](#).

## LANGUAGE USE

Many students come from different cultural, linguistic, and family backgrounds than those of their teachers. Fully 90% of Massachusetts educators identify as White, and they work with an increasingly diverse student population—many students speak multiple languages and share different values than those of the dominant White culture. In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, students come from many different types of families. This includes children raised by LGBTQ+ parents, extended family members, grandparents, foster parents, and other loved ones. Because of this, inclusive and purposeful language use is paramount in creating an environment that welcomes and affirms the identities of all students.

## Language Use Strategies

The list below explores key language use strategies.

- **Label classroom objects** in students' native language.
- **Learn important words and phrases** in students' native language.
- **Learn how to correctly pronounce every student's name** and model the correct pronunciation for students, staff, and visitors to your classroom.
- **Use language that is inclusive of diverse family structures.** This includes asking students to share about their "families" rather than their "mom and dad." More information is included in the Meaningful Family Partnerships section.
- **Use positive and inclusive language** when speaking about students and families.

## GETTING STARTED

When students return to school after having spent several months immersed in their home environment, educators can make students feel welcome by recognizing and respecting the variety in students' experiences. Start with the physical space and focus on appropriate language use in student and staff interactions.

# BUILD A SENSE OF BELONGING

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This section shares strategies that build on a foundation of inclusivity to promote a sense of belonging for all students.

**Building community** takes work. All members of the school community must collaborate to:

- Develop a shared sense of purpose.
- Establish norms for respectful disagreement and discourse.
- Redefine participation as new community members join.
- Instill a sense of belonging, upheld through individual and collective action and built through trusting relationships, encouragement, and affirmation.

**Relationships are vital** to fostering a sense of belonging. A school community includes many different types of relationships: student-to-teacher, peer-to-peer, teacher-to-family, school leader-to-teacher, and so on. Educators can use the following strategies to strengthen these various connections and create opportunities for meaningful interaction.

## 1. CLASSROOM GREETINGS

Greeting students by name when they enter the classroom is a simple yet impactful way to build community. By making eye contact and saying each students' name, educators

help every student feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. According to a 2018 study, positive greetings at the classroom door lead to "significant improvements in academic engaged time and reductions in disruptive behavior" (Cook et. al., 2018).

## 2. MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Mentorship programs provide opportunities for students to interact with peers and adults, strengthen academic skills, and form positive relationships. Though most research focuses on face-to-face mentorship opportunities, these strategies can easily be adapted to an online environment if schools need to incorporate hybrid learning during the 2020-2021 school year. Teachers can produce guidance to connect students via Zoom, Google Hangouts, or other technology offered by the school. Some students may prefer to express themselves in writing using a text messaging app or email to connect with a mentor.

### ADULT MENTORS

Mentorship strengthens feelings of trust and connection for both students and their adult mentors. Through a mentorship program, adults can serve as a trusted resource when students face challenges. They can also encourage students to pursue postsecondary and personal goals that students may not have thought were possible. Students of color see greatness within their own identities when they have role models who share their background and culture.

Mentors can include both educators and community partners in order to create a broader, more diverse pool of adults interacting with and supporting students. Massachusetts Mentoring Partnership maintains a directory of Massachusetts-based mentoring programs. They also offer guidance on quality mentoring. [In this video](#), students and educators share the benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees.

### PEER MENTORS

Peer mentoring programs allow children to share their feelings, thoughts, and concerns with their peers—strengthening student relationships across the school community. These programs also help students build skills like compassion, empathy, and listening, supporting their long-term success. This [guide from Education Northwest](#) shares the components of an effective peer mentoring program.

## 3. ADVISORY PERIODS

Advisory periods, where students meet with a staff member and a group of peers, are "a way to strengthen relationships and help students weather the challenges that may keep them from succeeding academically, including a lack of routines, social isolation, and out-of-school issues that can bleed into the school day" (Education Week). When implemented effectively, advisory periods have significant positive impacts on student engagement, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

If schools transition to hybrid or online learning during the upcoming school year, it is particularly important to develop or maintain advisory classes. Even in an online format, these classes provide opportunities for students to connect with peers, share their

experiences, learn strategies to organize assignments in a virtual environment, and learn strategies to reduce stress. In younger grades, where students may be less likely to maintain contact with peers outside of school, this structure offers an important source of connection.

## THE CASE FOR ADVISORY PROGRAMS

Successful advisory programs require a significant time investment. When programs are implemented well, this investment pays off by strengthening a sense of community among middle and upper grade students. Read more from AMLE about [\*The Challenge of Advisory and Why it's Worth the Effort\*](#).

## EFFECTIVE ADVISORY STRUCTURES

With intentional planning, educators can maximize the community- and skill-building impact of advisory programs. By using this time to teach social-emotional skills, such as teamwork and communication, educators can prepare students for postsecondary experiences where these skills will be critical to their success. Read [\*Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School\*](#) from Greater Good Magazine.

## GOAL SETTING AND REFLECTION

Advisory periods create an opportunity for students to develop their own goals and monitor their progress towards achieving these goals. This process empowers students to own their learning and advocate for their needs. Read the article from Edutopia on [\*Making Advisory More Effective\*](#).

## 4. RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

School discipline, and disciplinary actions, often strain relationships among students, teachers, and families. Advancing beyond punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices, which disproportionately impact students of color, requires a dedicated effort, a commitment to changing school culture, and the implementation of restorative practices as a way to repair and strengthen relationships.

### OVERVIEW OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

**Restorative practices** ask communities to make sense of who experienced harm, how the harm affected people and relationships, and how stakeholders can seek a community response to the harm as opposed to fueling further polarization of those involved. These processes enhance participants' sense of belonging and confidence in their own abilities to reach mutual understanding.

### Develop a Collective Understanding of Justice

As described by Maisha Winn in *Justice on Both Sides* (2018), communities shifting towards restorative practices must understand that:

- **Language Matters:** In order to progress towards healing and build community, educators must speak to and about all students and families with respect.

- **Justice Matters:** All students and families deserve justice in the form of access to a high-quality education.
- **History Matters:** Understanding the past allows educators to understand what is happening now. Take time to learn the history of the school and the broader community context. This includes taking time for educators to explore and understand their own identities.
- **Race Matters:** Educators must consider the role of racism and racist ideas that impact students as learners.

By establishing this interwoven and complex set of understandings, educators can begin to shift away from punitive discipline to pursue healing and restoration.

## Establish Staff Roles

When shifting towards restorative practices, all staff must be willing to be vulnerable and learn new strategies to address challenges. In order for this shift to succeed, all staff members must have a role in the culture change. [This guide](#) from the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership shares strategies for involving staff in the shift towards restorative practices.

## Implement Dialogue Circles

Classroom dialogue circles allow students and staff to engage with hard topics and repair community harm. These circles help students understand each other and acclimate to the discussion-based nature of restorative practices.

The beginning of the school year is likely to feel unfamiliar for many students. Teachers can use dialogue circles to invite students to share how they are feeling about new routines, physical distancing, and wearing masks to school. This helps students to recognize that they are not alone in any anxiety they feel with the "new normal" at school. Check-in circles, described in [this Edutopia article](#), are a great place for educators to begin when getting started with restorative practices.

The transition towards restorative practices is a long-term initiative, requiring a sustained commitment from staff. When all stakeholders work together, this paradigm shift leads to both individual and community benefits.

# AFFIRM STUDENT IDENTITY

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Students, staff, and families benefit when they can bring their whole selves to the school community. Educators can encourage student authenticity by providing opportunities for children to explore the interconnected components of their identities including race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The following strategies help educators and administrators create an affirming school environment.

## CONNECT ACADEMIC LEARNING TO STUDENT IDENTITIES

Students learn better, and feel more connected to school, when classroom materials are relevant to their lives. Educators can strengthen instruction by learning about students interests, [providing relatable materials](#), and incorporating real-life experiences into academic instruction.

## PROVIDE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM

Review curriculum to ensure that students see and learn about those who share their culture and identity. This includes diverse characters and authors. It also includes accurate representations of culture, gender identity, and different abilities. Use the [NYU Metro Center's Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard](#) to assess your current curriculum, identify modifications to improve existing curriculum, or select a new curriculum.

## ESTABLISH STUDENT-RUN AFFINITY SPACES

As described in this [Teaching Tolerance article](#), affinity groups “allow students who share an identity—usually a marginalized identity—to gather, talk in a safe space about issues related to that identity, and transfer that discussion into action that makes for a more equitable experience at school.” Affinity groups should not serve to “otherize” those who belong to them. Instead, these groups should serve as supplements to in-class curriculum and conversations that foster inclusion and celebrate diversity. If learning takes place online at any point in the 2020-21 school year, the group advisor should coach students on transitioning meetings to Zoom or another online platform.

## CELEBRATE AND INCORPORATE LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Language is deeply connected to personal and collective identity. Educators can foster a sense of security by celebrating the diversity of students' home languages and incorporating native languages in classroom labels, activities, and home communication. See the *Create an Inclusive Environment* section for more.

## AFFIRM STUDENTS' GENDER IDENTITY

Be sure to use the correct pronouns for transgender and non-binary students. In addition to offering gender neutral bathrooms, allow all students to use the restroom that aligns with their affirmed gender. Avoid gender binary practices, such as lining students up by gender. Allow all students to wear clothing and hairstyles to express their gender identity. The [Welcoming Schools website](#) provides additional strategies for affirming students' gender identity.



## DEVELOP TARGETED PROGRAMMING FOR MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

Particular student groups face unique obstacles in school and the broader community in response to their intersectional identities. For example, LGBTQ+ students of color face both racism and homophobia. Black/African American boys face the highest rates of school discipline and community arrest. As a result of these unique obstacles, some schools have created programs targeted to the needs of particular student groups. Oakland's Manhood Development Program, [profiled in this video](#), is one example.

# AMPLIFY STUDENT VOICE



## WHAT IS STUDENT VOICE?

School community is strengthened when students play an active role in shaping their learning environment. Student voice refers to students' participation and decision-making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experiences.

Student voice exists on a continuum. At the most basic level, educators collect student feedback to inform their teaching. In schools further along this continuum, educators partner with students to identify district-, school-, and classroom-level improvements. Student voice is further strengthened when educators and students share accountability for implementing and monitoring improvements.

## WHY DOES STUDENT VOICE MATTER?

In addition to academic benefits, student voice strengthens the school community. By having a voice in school decisions, students strengthen their leadership, collaboration, and critical thinking skills, all of which are critical to success in the workplace and higher education. Student voice is also an important strategy to advance educational equity. As noted in the [Rennie Center's 2019 Condition of Education Report](#), "To advance equity, the exercise of voice must itself be open to diverse perspectives, so that rather than hearing and responding to one voice, leaders hear from a multitude of students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups. An equitable conversation values the authentic cultures and experiences of historically marginalized students instead of asking them to articulate how they might fit into the existing, mainstream system." This section describes strategies to amplify student voice.

## IN THE CLASSROOM

Though many educators recognize the importance of student voice and ownership, most have not received explicit training on how to alter traditional power dynamics to create space for

student voice and ownership. The strategies below help educators to get started. Additional strategies are included in the *Going Deeper* section of this guide.

### **DEVELOP RULES AND NORMS TOGETHER**

All students can have a voice in the classroom by co-constructing class rules and norms with their peers and teachers. Before engaging in a discussion where students suggest norms, provide students time to write their thoughts or discuss their opinions with a peer. Ask students about their hopes for the classroom environment, including what a joyful and welcoming classroom looks like to them.



### **OFFER STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES**

Rather than offering traditional family-teacher conferences, in which adults meet without the student present, provide students with the opportunity to facilitate conferences. In addition to building leadership and communication skills, these conferences build "students' sense of responsibility and accountability for their own learning" (EL Education). This [EL Education video](#) provides an example of a student-led conference. More information, including sample agendas, is available on the [EL Education website](#).

### **IMPLEMENT ACTION CIVICS**

Children are deeply affected by community issues but rarely have a voice in change efforts. Students gain a sense of agency when given the opportunity to solve community problems. Action Civics provides one opportunity for youth to contribute to positive community change. In addition to empowering students, Action Civics allows youth to develop an understanding of how government works and the importance of civic engagement. The [Action Civics Collaborative offers a toolbox](#) for educators looking to get started.

## **AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL**

In addition to having a voice in their classrooms, students benefit when they partner with adults to influence schoolwide decisions. As noted in the [Rennie Center's 2019 Condition of Education Report](#), "When schools take intentional measures to create a climate where student voice is valued and build pathways for students to exercise voice in school-level decisions and functions, they become ideal settings for students to apply skills that they have developed in the classroom." The strategies below provide guidance for educators and administrators on involving students in schoolwide decisions.

### **SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY ANALYSIS**

As stated previously, school climate surveys are a powerful tool to understand student perceptions and experiences. This data is even more impactful when students serve as "creators or even co-researchers who analyze data and provide recommendations to improve school climate and practices" (Center for American Progress).

Administrators can work with educators to incorporate real, de-identified school climate data into math instruction in the upper elementary, middle, and high school grades. By teaching students to analyze and make sense of data, educators elevate youth voice while also focusing on the Standards for Mathematical Practice. After making sense of the data, students should have opportunities to collaboratively recommend school climate improvement strategies to be shared with educators and administrators.

### **FORMALIZED DECISION-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES**

Students add an important perspective to decisions about curriculum, scheduling, hiring, and other topics. By engaging students in these decisions, educators and administrators help students build leadership skills while also ensuring that decisions are attentive to student priorities. It is important to engage a range of students with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives in order to fully harness the power of student voice. [This guide from the Center for American Progress](#) provides guidance on involving students in school decisions.

# DEVELOP MEANINGFUL FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

*My advice is that we see our families and community members as co-creators and co-producers of the excellent schools and learning opportunities that we want for all of our students.*

— Dr. Karen Mapp

## 1. APPLY AN ASSET LENS

Effective family engagement begins with educator self-awareness. In order to build authentic family relationships, educators must recognize the strengths, knowledge, and skills that families bring to their child's education. [In this video](#), Dr. Karen Mapp describes the importance of viewing families through an asset lens.

## 2. START THE YEAR OFF STRONG

Teacher actions in the first weeks of school provide an important signal to families of what to expect throughout the year. Ask families about their child's strengths, interests, fears, hopes, and dreams. Proactively offer parents opportunities to get involved in their child's education at school and at home. Call home to share positive news about the child's day.



Given the tumultuous nature of the 2019-20 school year, families will likely have questions and concerns about the year ahead. Proactively communicate all safety precautions and let families know when and how they will hear from you if remote learning needs to resume at any time during the school year. Ask families how the school can support them if hybrid or remote learning takes place. By gathering this information at the beginning of the school year, educators can prepare for a smooth transition in the event of a COVID-19 spike.

## 3. USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Children come from many different types of families. Students' primary caregivers may include married or unmarried partners, LGBTQ+ parents, heterosexual parents, extended family members, foster parents, close friends, grandparents, and older siblings. Caregivers may be biologically related, adoptive, or have no biological or legal relationship. It is important that teachers and administrators use inclusive language when communicating. This includes addressing letters "Dear families" and asking caregivers about their preferred

pronouns at the beginning of the school year. When families visit the school, they should see visual evidence of the school's respect for diverse family structures. In younger grades, this could include a [Love Makes a Family Display](#) on the classroom wall.

#### 4. BRING FAMILIES TOGETHER



Find opportunities to bring families together both in-person and virtually. This may include hosting an author's breakfast or family affinity event. If schools transition to hybrid learning, this may include virtual coffee chats with the teacher or principal. Staff, students, and families can also get together outside of school by participating in community events such as an LGBTQ+ Pride Parade or service day. Ensure that bilingual staff or interpreters are present to allow full participation by non-English speaking families.

#### 5. PROMOTE TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Individual families have different communication preferences. These may include face-to-face communication, emails, phone calls, written notes, video conferences, and text messages. In addition to teacher-initiated communication, educators should encourage families to reach out to share information, discuss concerns, ask questions, or provide ideas to improve the classroom. At the beginning of the school year, ask parents about their communication preferences. Ensure that your school has a reliable translation plan so that non-English speaking families can access the full range of communication options. Consider using tools such as TalkingPoints, which offers a combination of online and human translation, to engage in ongoing conversations with non-English speaking families.

## 6. ENGAGE FAMILIES OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

There are important steps that educators can take to make school a welcoming place for family members who do not speak English. By taking the time to learn about students' home cultures and reaching out in culturally appropriate ways, educators can engage families as meaningful partners in their child's education. It is important to recognize that the role of the school differs across cultures and impacts the ways in which families engage with their child's teacher.

Engagement is strengthened when families and teachers develop personal, trusting relationships. Educators should ensure that all communication and school signage is offered in students' home languages. When families visit the school, bilingual staff should greet parents in their native language. In schools where families speak a large number of home languages, a multilingual front office staff may not be feasible. In this case, ensure front office staff have easy access to phone interpretation services to communicate with all families. Educators should encourage families to read to children in their native language and should offer native language library books that students can borrow. It is important to share with families that reading and sharing stories in their native language will also help improve students' language skills in English.

[This webinar from \*Teaching Tolerance\*](#) shares best practices for engaging families of English learners.

## 7. CREATE A RANGE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Students' caretakers have differing expectations on what school engagement looks like depending on their identity, culture, and personal experiences with school. Educators can welcome all families by providing a multitude of ways for them to get involved. This can include volunteering in the classroom, attending a parent workshop, building a school garden, or participating in a family potluck. It can also include checking in with their child about the school day and discussing questions, concerns, and successes with the teacher.

Educators can strengthen relationships with families by hosting meetings during evening hours and at community locations such as churches, libraries, or community centers for families who are uncomfortable attending events at the school or have trouble getting to the school. Families should be encouraged to communicate in the way that is most comfortable to them. This includes sending texts, emails, or voice notes via a family-school communication app.

**TAKE ACTION**



# ACTION STEPS

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This section includes a **checklist** for educators and school leaders seeking to build community.



## FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

### To Do Now:

- ❑ **Schedule 1:1 meetings with every teacher** during the first few months of school. Ask teachers about their goals and the ways you can support them.
- ❑ Share with staff the **importance of learning students' names** before the school year and pronouncing names correctly. Model the correct pronunciation of all student names.
- ❑ **Begin developing an inclusive physical space** by focusing on the school lobby and hallways. Include signage in every student's home language. Display flags and artwork that represent students' diverse cultures. Label objects in students' native languages.
- ❑ **Host an event to bring families together.** If this is not feasible due to social distancing guidelines, consider hosting a series of informal "coffee chats" via videoconference.
- ❑ **Schedule a time for staff to connect outside of school.** This could include a virtual lunch hour or a staff barbecue if social distancing guidelines permit.
- ❑ **Encourage staff to support each other** during the school day. Start by creating a group text thread or email chain where teachers can contact one another for classroom coverage if they need to take a break.

- ❑ **Model authenticity.** Share your identities with staff and take time to encourage educators to express their identities in the way they dress and decorate their classrooms.
- ❑ **Create space for conversations about race and identity.** Begin by asking all staff to view [CASEL’s webinar on Adult SEL and Cultural Competence](#) and taking time to discuss as a team. Follow this with ongoing conversations about race, bias, and identity during staff meetings and professional development. Consider offering teachers the opportunity to facilitate these conversations.
- ❑ **Model inclusivity** by using asset-based language when discussing students and families. Have conversations with staff if you hear them speaking negatively about any member of the school community.
- ❑ Spend time during staff meetings **acknowledging the value** that every staff member brings to the school community. Reserve time for staff to share what they appreciate about their colleagues.
- ❑ When observing classrooms, take notes on what teachers are doing well. Share this **positive feedback** after every observation.
- ❑ **Use inclusive language** in all school communications. This includes addressing all letters to “families” rather than “parents.”

#### To Do Later:

The following long-term and more resource-intensive actions will support the school's efforts to build a strong sense of community.

- ❑ **Create a school climate improvement plan.** This includes collecting climate data, analyzing findings, and identifying climate improvement strategies to act on findings. If you don’t have an existing school climate assessment, gather a group of stakeholders to research options and select an appropriate measurement tool. Once data is available, engage students in analyzing findings and recommending action steps.
- ❑ **Identify professional development opportunities** that are relevant to teachers’ identities. This may include conferences for teachers of color and LGBTQ+ teachers.
- ❑ Develop a **shared leadership model**. Review the [Rennie Center’s Making Space report](#) for an overview of effective practices.
- ❑ Rearrange the school schedule to **support ongoing staff collaboration**.
- ❑ **Build an advisory structure** into the school schedule. Work with staff to use this time effectively.
- ❑ Develop a policy and allocate necessary resources to ensure that all field trips, extra-curricular activities, and events are **accessible to students** with disabilities.
- ❑ Actively **recruit staff members who represent students’ cultures**. Work on building an environment that encourages staff of color to stay. Read the Education Trust report [If You Listen, We Will Stay](#) for guidance on building a school culture that supports staff of color.
- ❑ **Develop a mentorship program**. This could include adult-student mentors, peer mentors, or both. Engage community partners to expand your pool of mentors.
- ❑ **Provide staff training on restorative practices**. Support teachers in getting started with check-in circles in the classroom. If any educators have previous experience with restorative practices, provide opportunities for them to coach their colleagues as they get started.

- ❑ Use a **culturally responsive curriculum review tool** when selecting or identifying necessary modifications to instructional materials.
- ❑ **Shift to a student-led conference structure.** Train educators on how to empower students to facilitate meetings.
- ❑ **Develop an action civics program.** In Massachusetts, all students are required to complete a student-led civics project in Grade 8 and in high school. The [Democratic Knowledge Project](#) provides resources for educators looking to get started. Start by reviewing this example of [Youth Participatory Action Research](#) from Frontier Regional School District.
- ❑ **Identify a formal role for student representatives** in school decision-making bodies. Ensure that student representatives have full voting power.

## FOR TEACHERS

- ❑ **Greet every student by name** when they enter the classroom.
- ❑ Decorate your classroom in a way that **affirms students' identities**. This includes decorating walls with artwork that represents students' cultures. It also includes displaying literature that represents diverse cultures, family structures, and abilities.
- ❑ Collaborate with students to **develop classroom rules and norms** at the beginning of the school year.
- ❑ **Support your colleagues** during the school day. Start a text thread with other teachers to cover one another's classrooms when you or a colleague need a break.
- ❑ **Provide a visual schedule** in your classroom. Include images to preview the day ahead for English learners.
- ❑ **Arrange classroom furniture** in a way that promotes discussion. Ensure that furniture is spaced in a way that allows students with mobility issues to freely move around the physical space.
- ❑ **Use inclusive language.** This includes asking students to share information about their "families" rather than their "parents."
- ❑ **Ask students about their interests and experiences.** Use this knowledge to incorporate real-life experiences in your teaching.
- ❑ **Survey families** at the beginning of the school year about their communication preferences and preferred pronouns. Ask them to share information about their child's strengths, interests, fears, and hopes for the school year.
- ❑ **Call, text, or write to families** to share positive information from the child's school day. Contact families more often to share positive news than negative news.
- ❑ Encourage non-English speaking and bilingual families to **read to children in their native language**.
- ❑ **Invite families into the classroom.** This can include hosting an author's breakfast or inviting families to volunteer by reading to students. Ensure that opportunities to participate are accessible to non-English speaking families.
- ❑ Get started with **restorative practices** by hosting classroom check-in circles.
- ❑ Partner with students to establish a **student-run affinity group**. Provide tech support if students need to move group meetings to a virtual format during the 2020-21 school year.

# GOING DEEPER

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This section includes additional resources focused on building community.

## SCHOOL CLIMATE

1. [School Climate Improvement Toolkit](#), WestEd
2. [Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments
3. [Student Voice Tip Sheet](#), SoundOut

## STAFF CULTURE

4. [Finding Time for Collaboration and Using it Well](#), Inclusive Schools Network
5. [What Makes a Good School Culture?](#), Harvard Graduate School of Education

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

6. [A Supportive Classroom Environment](#), CASEL
7. [SEL Assessment Guide](#), CASEL
8. [Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning](#), Dena Simmons, ASCD
9. [Social Awareness Toolkit](#), Transforming Education

## RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

10. [Building Community With Restorative Circles](#), Edutopia
11. [Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators](#), Schott Foundation
12. [School Culture: Designing for Equity](#), Next Generation Learning Challenges