School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning

The Integration of Two Approaches

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School climate and social emotional learning (SEL) have often been treated separately by researchers and practitioners, even though both are necessary to build healthy schools and they benefit each other.

The Issue

Developing strong social and emotional skills helps students handle stress and show empathy, supports their academic achievement, and can help them avoid problems with substance abuse or crime. School climate includes the cultures, norms, practices, and organizational characteristics of schools, and how those factors impact student development. This brief describes how school climate and SEL can and should be integrated in future research and practice for healthy schools, allowing the two previously separate concepts to work hand-in-hand.

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Key Findings

- Supportive relationships, engagement, safety, cultural competence and responsiveness, and academic challenge and high expectations create positive school climates that can help build social and emotional competence.
- The relationship between positive school climate and SEL is interactive and co-influential, it occurs in all settings and student-teacher-staff interactions, and influences students and teachers directly and indirectly.
- Rigorous evaluations of school climate and SEL approaches have provided some direct evidence that one can improve the other.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need to ensure that teachers, administrators, other school staff, families, community members, youth, and policymakers have the best tools and knowledge at their disposal to create positive school climates and focus specifically on developing the social and emotional competencies of children and adults. An integrated research approach will not only allow for a stronger educational foundation, but one where both students and educators feel respected and supported, where inequities are reduced, where safe spaces are created for marginalized youth, and where every member of the school community is able to thrive.

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