

# American Orthopsychiatric Association

## Safe and Humane Schools: Places of Community

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### Introduction

Students' engagement in school communities can have profound effects on their future success and well-being. Sense of community in schools may come from students, parents, and staff feeling welcome, having an influence, and sharing emotional connections. Whitlock (2006) found associations between students' sense of school connectedness and increased involvement in meaningful roles at school, academic engagement, and school safety. These outcomes have important implications for addressing problems such as alienation, disengagement, and dropout. Although a growing body of research shows that school climate predicts healthy youth development and school success, there is a glaring disconnect between these findings and common practice (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

### Purpose/Problem Statement

Studies focusing on sense of community indicate a lack of connectedness in many schools. A study of 103 schools from 27 states found that 43% of respondents did not feel they were an important part of their high school community (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). In general, African Americans, students from lower socioeconomic status, and students with lower grades felt less engaged. Research also demonstrates that students' background characteristics such as single-parent households, parents' education level, and ethnic minority status have important effects on perceptions of school climate (Fan, Williams, & Corkin, 2011). The inclusion of these vulnerable populations has important social justice implications.

Sense of community in schools is positively related to a number of critical educational outcomes across grade levels, including motivation and academic achievement (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009; Whitlock, 2006). A meta-analysis of over 700 positive youth development and social emotional learning studies revealed that these community-building programs improved students' achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points (Payton et al., 2008). Although some argue that such interventions take time away from core academic material, they improve learning environment and therefore increase students' performance.

School climate is also strongly related to social skills and behavior (Payton et al., 2008; Wang & Dishion, 2012). Proactive approaches such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) have increased student engagement by decreasing disruptions (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). Similarly, research shows that a respectful psychosocial climate facilitates norms and behaviors that are incompatible with aggressive behavior such as bullying (Low & Van Ryzin, 2014). Belonging to a school community is also a protective factor against other risky behaviors, including violence, sex, and drug abuse (Catalano et al., 2004).

In addition to academic and behavioral outcomes, sense of community in schools is strongly associated with mental health and self-esteem. In early adolescence, school communities are one of the strongest predictors of psychological well-being. Shochet and colleagues (2008) found that school connectedness accounted for 49% of the variance in depressive symptoms among adolescents—a stronger predictor than even parental attachment. A positive school climate, promoted by social-emotional learning programs, has been shown to improve attitudes about self and others and reduce emotional distress (Payton et al., 2008).

Sense of community is strengthened when learning is connected to students' lives. As described by Dean and Jolly (2012), the literature on student engagement lacks an emphasis on the psychosocial aspects of learning, especially “opting out” of learning opportunities. Some students choose to reject opportunities that may challenge their social identities. A positive school climate decreases disengagement, and it has been found to mitigate the negative impact of poverty and socioeconomic status on academic success (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009). Sense of community also has a profound impact on children with disabilities: research suggests that students with special needs benefit from a positive school climate when they feel included and respected by other students (Higgins-D'Alessandro & Sakwarawich, 2011).

### **Policy/Position Statement**

Ortho acknowledges that children's health and well-being is linked to engagement in school and the many experiences that shape not only academic, but also behavioral and psychological outcomes. Teachers can support school connectedness by providing students choices in learning activities and school policies, relating curricula to students' personal interests and goals, and developing trusting relationships with students (Boberiene, 2013). Innovative approaches around the country have created powerful school cultures that demand active engagement from students and families. Such environments increase students' belonging as well as their motivation to succeed academically.

Education reform policies should shift from a focus on controlling students' problem behavior to fostering motivation and engaged learning. Biglan and colleagues (2012) suggest a comprehensive approach to promoting nurturing environments for youth: a) reducing risk factors that harm development, b) creating conditions for prosocial behavior and self-regulation, c) establishing monitoring that discourages problem behaviors, and d) enhancing “psychological flexibility.” Ortho encourages interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers regarding strategies to reduce risk factors, promote prosocial behavior, and manage positive school environments that support diverse groups. Topics may include:

- innovative approaches to creating engaging school climates
- connecting learning to student identity (preventing “opting out”)
- bullying and violence prevention and intervention
- inclusion of vulnerable populations and alternatives to exclusionary discipline

Ortho supports comprehensive reforms that provide students with environments that are conducive to meaningful engagement in school communities. Research shows that educators can improve school connectedness and substantially increase the likelihood of student success and well-being.

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