



Educator Brief

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IMMIGRATION
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School Climate & Immigrant Students

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What is School Climate?

School climate is the collective experiences of students, educators, and families in a school context. It is made up of several important dimensions which include **interpersonal relationships**, physical and psychological **safety, teaching and learning practices**, the physical **space** conditions.¹

Why Does School Climate Matter?

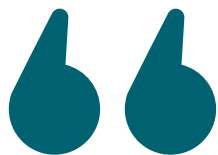
A healthy school climate enhances learning opportunities while negative climate can be a significant barrier to learning. The quality of the school climate and how students feel within it have been found to have implications for student aspirations, achievement, and healthy development.² Notably, school climates vary considerably from school to school and for different populations.³



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School climate has important implications for school **belonging**. Feeling respected, valued, liked, and cared about by adults and peers has been well established to be central for students' engagement and motivation in school⁴ and is also implicated in positive social emotional development.⁵ Students who report a stronger sense of belonging at school are also less likely to experience stress and report increased physical and emotional health.⁶ **Social exclusion** and **bullying** are the antithesis of social belonging and particularly worrisome as they have negative repercussions for socio-emotional functioning, motivation, and cognition.⁷ It negatively affects student learning by decreasing students' ability to focus attention, regulate emotions and behavior, or simply center on the task of learning.⁸ Thus, school assessing school climate has become a focus of many districts and schools.



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What Do We Know About School Climate & Immigrant Students?

There are reasons to be concerned about the school climates experienced by immigrant origin students. As negative political messaging and media representations have increased over recent years—towards Muslims post 9/11, Latinx/Hispanics with heightened focus on the Southern border, and Asians during the Covid pandemic—there is evidence that xenophobia and bullying is finding its way into schools for students of immigrant backgrounds.⁹ Most school climate measures fail to include measures that capture intersecting dimensions of immigrant student experiences (like generation, region of origin, religion, language spoken at home,). As such, immigrant origin students, are often either **hypervisible** (and targeted) or, in contrast, **invisible** (and unrecognized).

How to Improve School Climate for Immigrant Students

Begin by Assessing Your School Climate

- ☐ Learn about your school/s climate for ALL your students
- ☐ [Administer a school wide survey](#) from student's point of view
- ☐ Notice who is consistently left out in social interactions and who may be being targeted
- ☐ Notice which staff members are most trusted by students, and learn from them

Pay Attention to Bullying

- ☐ Take reports of discrimination and bullying seriously
- ☐ Do not ignore bullying that is targeted toward identity (like religion, ethnicity/ race, country of origin, language use, accent, family documentation, and so forth)
- ☐ Intervene quickly with restorative justice approaches
- ☐ Recognize that both students and staff can be bullies

Cultivate Strong Relationships

- ☐ Cultivate strong and personalized school relationships across all members of the school community
- ☐ Implement advisory groups in higher grades
- ☐ Establish school and class norms of inter-group respect and anti-bullying
- ☐ Embed anti-bullying lessons into the curriculum

Support Family Engagement

- ☐ Provide diverse opportunities for families to participate and to be engaged in the school
- ☐ Authentically ask and listen to families and use their input to inform decisions
- ☐ Work with community liaisons and leaders to build trust
- ☐ Reconsider assumptions staff or teachers may have about immigrant families and professional development around challenging and/ or changing these assumptions

Implement a Culturally Sustaining Educational Approach

- ☐ Recognize multilingualism as a strength
- ☐ Decorate halls and common spaces with a range of cultural backgrounds
- ☐ Understand multicultural education is more than just holidays and heroes; it must be embedded across the curriculum
- ☐ Thoughtfully select lessons and content with diverse representation in mind

Reflect ALL Your Students in the Curriculum

- ☐ Integrate a global perspective
- ☐ Include projects that allow students to delve into their own histories, languages and cultures
- ☐ Recognize student's cultural wealth and value student's funds of knowledge

Support Social Emotional Learning and a Whole Child Approach

- ☐ Recognize that many immigrant origin students (and their families) have undergone a variety of stresses and traumas prior to migration, during the voyage, and after; are likely going through the process of acculturation; and may also be contending with both xenophobia and racism
- ☐ As such, they may need extra-supports in their transition
- ☐ Provide [multi-tiered systems of support](#)¹⁰ with effective referral systems

Professional Development is Key

- ☐ Train teachers in culturally sustaining pedagogies with a [focus on immigration](#) as well as multilingual language development
- ☐ Provide professional development to ALL teacher to learn how to integrate language development throughout the curriculum

- ☐ Invest in educator PD around wellness, preparation programs for teachers around child and adolescent psychology
- ☐ Recruit and retain staff from the local immigrant community

Provide Appropriate Teaching & Learning Scaffolding¹¹

- ☐ Practice purposeful groupings
- ☐ Implement Universal Design for Learning strategies & differentiated instruction
- ☐ Provide extra supports for SLIFE students
- ☐ Thoughtfully incorporate holistic and continuous assessment
- ☐ Support translanguaging practices
- ☐ Include both language and content objectives for each lesson

Resources to Learn More

Visit:

- ☐ [Immigration Initiative at Harvard](#)
- ☐ [Re-Imagining Migration](#)



Endnotes

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4 Neel, C. G. O., & Fuligni, A. (2013). A longitudinal study of school belonging and academic motivation across high school. *Child Development*, 84(2), 678-692.

5 Osher, D., & Berg, J. (2017). School climate and social and emotional learning: The integration of two approaches. Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University.

6 Arslan, G. (2018). Understanding the association between school belonging and emotional health in adolescents. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 7(1), 21-41.

7 Baumeister, R. F., Brewer, L. E., Tice, D. M., & Twenge, J. M. (2007). Thwarting the need to belong: Understanding the interpersonal and inner effects of social exclusion. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 506-520.

8 Twenge, J. M., & Nuss, C. K. (2002). Effects of social exclusion on cognitive processes: anticipated aloneness reduces intelligent thought. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(4), 817-827.

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Suárez-Orozco, C. (2022). 6. Countering cascading xenophobia: Educational settings at the frontline. In *Education: A global compact for a time in crisis*. (pp. 118-138). Columbia University Press.

10 Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success*. Learning Policy Institute.

11 Bajaj, M., Walsh, D., Bartlett, L., & Martinez, G. (2023). *Humanizing education for Immigrant and refugee youth*. NYU.

12 Neel, C. G. O., & Fuligni, A. (2013). A longitudinal study of school belonging and academic motivation across high school. *Child Development*, 84(2), 678-692.

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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

