Element 5: Student engagement

Students are the focal center of any school. They have an active stake in decisions made to address school climate, and are themselves key to creating a safe and supportive school climate. Under this component, Safe School Certification guides schools to actively engage students in the decision making around school climate and to provide ample opportunities for students to engage and connect to the school community. Even if students feel that their school is safe and supportive, it does not mean that students have been actively engaged in the process. When a student is truly engaged, they actively participate in their school community and actively work to make the school safe.

Student engagement do's

- **Provide ample opportunities for participation.** Establish clubs and activities that allow students with various interests and identities to find their community within the school.

- **Respect students' opinions, ideas, and needs.** Students are the experts of their own experiences. Ensure that any concerns raised by students receive follow-up to show that you've heard and value their input.

- **Use a wide variety of techniques to engage students and gather feedback.** Some students may feel uncomfortable publicly voicing their concerns or making suggestions. Provide opportunities through surveys, focus groups, forums, and/or townhalls to ensure all students have an opportunity to have their voices heard.

- **Plan conversations and meetings so all students can attend.** Avoid scheduling opportunities that require some students to consistently miss out. For example, some students may need to work or care for siblings after school.

- **Ensure that student leadership is reflective of the community**. Make sure that all students—not just those considered popular by their peers or successful by their teachers—have leadership opportunities.

About This Series

From 2016 to 2020, a group of public schools and public charter schools in Washington, DC participated in the "Improving School Climate in DC" project (ISC-DC). ISC-DC was supported by a grant from the National Institutes of Justice (NIJ) under the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, and aimed to evaluate whether supporting schools through a research-based framework (Safe School Certification; SSC) could improve students' perceptions of school climate and reduce incidents of violence. SSC is not a structured program; rather, the framework consists of eight key elements that underscore a data-based decision-making and program implementation process: leadership, data, buy-in, policy and policy enforcement, student engagement, parent and community engagement, training, and programs. As part of the process, key stakeholders and experts formed an independent Certification Advisory Board (CAB) to assess schools' progress in achieving key milestones for each component, provide feedback, and provide opportunities to obtain grant funding. The CAB had a birds-eye view of what schools were doing and how they found innovative ways to achieve each element, and of the common struggles and pitfalls that schools faced. The CAB also focused on ensuring that schools' efforts were grounded within an equity lens to ensure that all students would benefit. This educator tipsheet is based on the CAB's review of workbooks schools submitted through the process of completing Safe School Certification. It should be noted that these briefs do not necessarily reflect the findings of the more rigorous implementation study conducted by Child Trends, but rather reflect our learning through our review of workbooks.

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- **Allow for failures.** Just as adults are often not used to letting young people participate in decision making, neither are young people used to having that opportunity. Create space for errors, confusion, and doubt and be ready to continue trying.

Student engagement misdirections

- **Don't make decisions that affect students without including their voice.** Seek feedback on proposed changes to better understand how they might affect students' experiences at the school.

- **Don't assume students are engaged just because your school offers a variety of activities.** Take stock of who is participating at school and who is disengaged.

- **Don't engage students without listening.** Truly engaging students in decision making is not just about giving them a platform. Follow up with students and provide justification for decisions made.

Student engagement equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. Actively engaging students can create a school culture that is fully inclusive and supportive of all students. If students see that they are being heard, cared for, listened to, and understood—and that all parts of their identities are supported by the school—they will be much more likely to provide that same energy to each other and the larger community. Applying an equity lens to student engagement means being aware of how adults might make decisions based on their assumptions of student needs, which may not reflect how some or all students feel. An equity lens also asks that we be aware of how racism, sexism, classism, etc. show up in students' lives and can impact how they feel supported by the school. Questions to ask yourself when engaging students include:

- How are students' voices, opinions, and ideas supported at your school? Have student ideas translated into changes? How many student ideas has your school implemented?

- How do staff check and challenge their privilege when interacting with students? What language is used? Is it accessible?

- What assumptions do staff make about students? How can staff become more aware of these assumptions and how they affect their interactions with students?

- What does student partnership look like at your school? How can school staff learn from the way students keep themselves and each other safe?

Examples of how schools that participated in the Improving School Climate in DC project approached the Student Engagement Element can be found at:

https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SafeSchoolCertificationAppendix_ChildTrends_October2020.pdf