

IMPROVING ACADEMICS WITH
A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE



Safe and
Supportive Schools

LESSONS LEARNED

Preface

The Coordinated School Health and Safety Programs unit (CSHSP) at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has a long history of being bold in the belief that when it comes to student success, social, emotional, and physical health do matter. For more than a decade, we have been putting a data collection system in place, taking and providing opportunities for professional development, and offering guidance and support to Michigan districts who were willing to risk making changes in the way they do business.

In the following Lessons Learned, there is essential information that will assist any district, school, or individual who wants to improve the climate and culture for the success of students. To quote President John F. Kennedy, "There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction."

I am proud of our MDE staff and all of the great people at our 22 schools. We all were teachers and learners in this process. We built strong relationships that proved to be the foundation of our success.

Deputy Superintendent Kyle Guerrant

This document contains four specific areas of focus: Embrace Change, Be a Bold Leader, Collect and Use Data, and Professional Development is Worth the Investment. These are a culmination of consistent learnings and priorities illuminated through the work with the 22 grant funded S3 schools. Each area is listed in order of significance and with additional guidelines included to provide more tips to keep in mind. Should more information be needed, please contact Kim Kovalchick at kovalchickk@michigan.gov.



Picture of S3 staff and students



Picture of S3 staff and students



Picture of S3 staff and students

Introduction

The Michigan Department of Education was one of 11 State Education Agencies to receive the Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant issued by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010. Of the 11 agencies, MDE received the largest grant award to provide programming over a four-year period for high schools with predominantly underserved adolescent populations who were below their requirements for "Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)." This grant allowed MDE to work with 22 high schools and their stakeholders (staff, students, and families) to address the conditions for learning and improve the culture and climate in their buildings.

MDE provided the 22 S3 schools with evidence-based programming and services in seven key initiatives, including:



School Mental Health-Eliminating Barriers for Learning



Parent Engagement



Student Engagement



Bully-Free Schools (BFS): Circle of Support



Restorative Justice



Silent Crisis - Creating Safe Choices for Sexual Minority Youth (SMY)



Michigan Model for Health™

By the end of the grant, the most notable outcomes included:

- Increase in graduation rates for 65% of the S3 schools.^(a)
- Improvement in school safety scores for 65% of the S3 schools.^(b)
- Reduction in bullying on school grounds for 52% of the S3 schools.^(c)
- 30% of the S3 schools received Reward ⁽¹⁾ status as opposed to 12% of the non-S3 2010 Priority ⁽²⁾ schools.^(a)
- 70% of the S3 2010 Priority ⁽²⁾ schools moved off the Priority List as opposed to 37% of the non-S3 2010 Priority schools.^(a)
- Among Persistently Low Achieving (PLA) schools in the 2010 cohort, S3 schools that utilized alternatives to suspension (Restorative Justice or Bully-Free Schools: Circle of Support) had significantly higher four-year graduation rates (from 2010/11 to 2013/14) than non-S3 schools.^(d)

¹ Reward Schools are those that did not receive a red overall scorecard status and have achieved one or more of the following distinctions:

- 1) top 5% of schools on the Top-to-Bottom list
- 2) top 5% of schools making the greatest gains in achievement (improvement metric) or
- 3) "Beating the Odds" by outperforming the school's predicted ranking and/or similar schools.

Beating the Odds schools are those that are overcoming traditional barriers to student achievement and are outperforming schools with similar risk factors and demographic makeup.

² Priority schools (formerly known as Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools) are Michigan public schools identified in the bottom 5% of the statewide Top-to-Bottom School Rankings.

^a MDE, School Reform Office

^b MDE, Coordinated School Health and Safety Program Unit, Michigan Safe and Supportive Schools (MiPS3) Report

^c MDE, Coordinated School Health and Safety Program Unit, Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY)

^d MDE, Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) and Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Evaluation Reports

Embrace Change

A safe and supportive school climate requires a systems change approach. A systems change approach includes training and technical support over a sustained period of time and builds capacity within the school community and district. It also increases the likelihood that the school climate initiative can be maintained even when funding ceases or champions move on. Once a positive school climate and culture is developed and maintained, it is highly likely that schools/districts will experience an increase in academic success and a decrease in suspensions and expulsions.

For effective systems change, it is essential to:

- Have building/district administrators, school board members, as well as building leaders, support and guide the systems change approach.
- Analyze school data to determine areas of need (data collection survey tools are available at www.michigan.gov/shs).
- Once the needs are identified, schools can explore and implement evidenced-based programming to address those needs while assessing the effectiveness of the programming and provide robust and ongoing professional development around those areas of need.
- Include climate and culture strategies or goals into the school improvement plan. Ideally, either combine the School Improvement Team (SIT) with the Coordinated School Health (CSH) team or have some members of the CSH team consistently attend SIT meetings.
- Celebrate early successes and press on with the patience and determination needed for a sustainable, healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment. Remind one another that sustainable systems change takes time.

The S3 schools that experienced the greatest success utilized a CHS team approach (www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/cshp/) in their system change efforts. This approach:

- Is a successful method for accomplishing school/district-wide environmental change.
- Empowers schools to educate the whole child, including social emotional supports and academics.
- Allows schools to engage students, families and community stakeholders to partner with and support schools in their efforts.
- Enables schools to identify duplication of services and to streamline those services. As a result, many schools using this framework are able to benefit from a greater number of services utilized in a more productive and cost-efficient way.

A safe and supportive learning environment flourishes when leaders, teachers, and other staff focus and work collaboratively to meet each student's academic and emotional needs. The development of trusting and positive relationships throughout the school and district is central to engaging parents, families, and the larger community in the process.

Saginaw High School exemplified embracing change by including specific members on their CSH team. These members, who met on a weekly basis with the principal, included: the school improvement team chair, the climate and culture leader, a teacher's union representative, the school counselor, social worker, and a youth advisory team representative. This team directed the progress toward their school climate and academic goals.

Be a Bold Leader

Through the work with the S3 schools, it was evident that the school climate is determined and affected by the building administrator. The administrator and a small group of champions play a crucial role in developing systemic, shared leadership capacities. This leadership is the catalyst for the creation of a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment with intentional focus on engaging students in their school community.

Effective Leaders:

- Influence positive relationships in the classrooms and school-wide.
- Develop genuine relationships and partnerships within the district, with students and their families, and with the broader community to create a safe and supportive learning environment.
- Ask critical questions of themselves and others that result in assessing and critiquing the climate and culture in their schools.
- Employ evidenced-based practices to improve their school community.
- Evaluate their discipline practices for disparities and inequities and develop their schools' discipline system to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to feel safe and supported and engaged in their learning.
- Invest in ongoing professional development for teachers and other staff on revised discipline systems (Restorative Justice and Bully-Free Schools: Circle of Support), and other evidenced-based positive climate and culture practices.
- Use needs assessments, student and staff perception survey data, discipline data, and program evaluation data, to institute best practices and sustain improvements in student achievement and positive school climate.
- Strive to recruit and retain high quality staff, make relationships a priority, and establish norms of personal regard and mutual respect throughout the school community.

Lee High School's principal and Climate and Culture team's impassioned commitment to the school-community partnership intentionally elevated the school from Priority to Reward status.

Collect and Use Data

Data review can demonstrate whether interventions are successful or not in improving school climate. Data should include demographics, school processes, student achievement, and student and staff perceptions on school climate. This is vital to improving both school climate and academic performance. The S3 schools became proficient at collecting and analyzing data to determine areas of need and/or to gauge areas that had improved. Using data became motivating as progress was being made.

Using data:

- Enables the leaders and teams to make necessary adjustments and/or changes immediately or as needed. If the data indicate that a longstanding or favorite program is ineffective, leaders and teams must have the courage to eliminate it.
- Allows for common understanding and buy-in for all stakeholders. It provides a shared understanding of the vision, goals, and interpretation of the data and the action needed to achieve climate improvement and academic success.
- Galvanizes key stakeholders. Presenting data to staff, parents, administration, School Board members and the community connects academic achievement to a safe and supportive school environment, which is key to generate buy-in for school climate initiatives.

Ongoing and frequent review and analysis of data is crucial for improvement in culture and climate. The Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY) is a free student perception survey on health risk behaviors used to collect building-level health and safety data that can assess need and progress.

The Fitzgerald High School leadership team had the foresight to design a rubric for school climate data collection, data review, and action steps, and embedded the data process into their school improvement plan. They achieved Reward status two years in a row. Fitzgerald demonstrated that commitment to school climate and culture results in improved climate and student achievement.

Due to multiple and competing pressures on schools to improve their achievement outcomes, opportunities for professional development can be scarce, rote and only academic in nature. Here are some tips learned through work with the S3 schools that helped improve the conditions for learning in their schools and create a safe and supportive learning environment for their students.

High quality professional development should:

- Provide support for and engagement in teaching, learning, ensuring equity, positive youth development, and cultural proficiency.
- Be based on district and building school improvement plan goals.
- Involve all staff, including non-teaching staff.
- Be the result of a collaborative process between the administrator(s) and the staff, with input from students and families.
- Be engaging, relevant to the school population, evidence-based, and held regularly throughout the school year. Staff need to have multiple and ongoing opportunities to learn and grow together, understanding that long-term change takes time.
- Be assessed regularly and evaluated for evidence of implementation.
- Include follow up to make sure learning has transferred and is being put to use.

Training on school climate and culture needs to be a priority.

- School staff establish the tone of the climate in the schools. Students, parents, and community stakeholders follow their lead.
- Everyone in the school community needs to understand the essentials of positive school climate in order to build authentic relationships.
- Developing and maintaining positive relationships is pivotal for all youth in the schools to achieve academic and social proficiency.
- Consider consulting with a school climate content expert when designing and scheduling professional development to improve school climate and culture. School leaders assume staff already know how to cultivate positive school climate, but in many cases they do not.
- Embed school climate and culture goals in the school improvement plan to increase commitment and sustainability.

Marion Jr./Sr. High School's leadership team made a commitment to bi-monthly professional development over the course of two and a half years with a school climate expert. Trainings for staff were centered on improving relationships with students and their families. The professional development was data driven and needs-based. It was adjusted as a result of continual surveillance of critical incidents as well as staff, parent, and student focus groups.

In conclusion, in addition to the positive outcomes and improvement in the schools, many wonderful experiences and lessons learned were gained through the S3 grant work. It became evident that the majority of the efforts could be replicated in all Michigan schools. The information provided is offered to assist school climate champions in their determinations to enhance the learning environment for all the stakeholders in a school, thus impacting student academic success.

