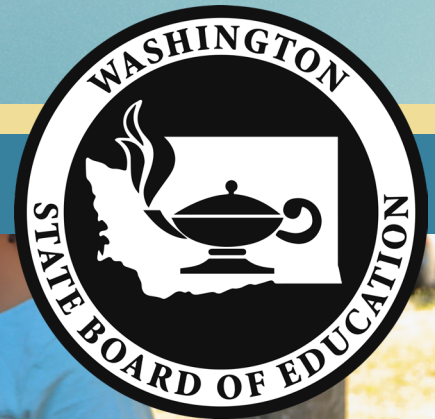


# Progress Report:

*Developing a statewide approach for assessing school climate*



2023



*Photo: students at a Double Dutch Divas event in Seattle*



This progress report provides an update on the State Board of Education’s work to develop a statewide implementation plan to support schools in measuring their school climate. This work was assigned to the Board via a budget proviso (502(4) of 2022 ESSB 5693) with a progress report due to the Governor and education committees by June 30, 2023.

## Background

School climate is broadly defined as the quality and character of school life, including the physical, social, and academic environments. School climate reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures within a school. It can be measured by examining patterns of students, parents, and school staff’s perceptions and experiences of school life. [A large body of evidence](#) connects a positive school climate to improvements in children’s learning and healthy development, as well as student engagement and teacher retention. Research shows that “a positive school climate improves academic achievement and reduces the negative effects of poverty on achievement, boosting grades, test scores, and student engagement” ([Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018, p. 1](#)). Given the connection between school climate and academic achievement, school climate is often thought of as the environmental conditions conducive for learning. A positive school climate is also an essential component supporting comprehensive school improvement processes.

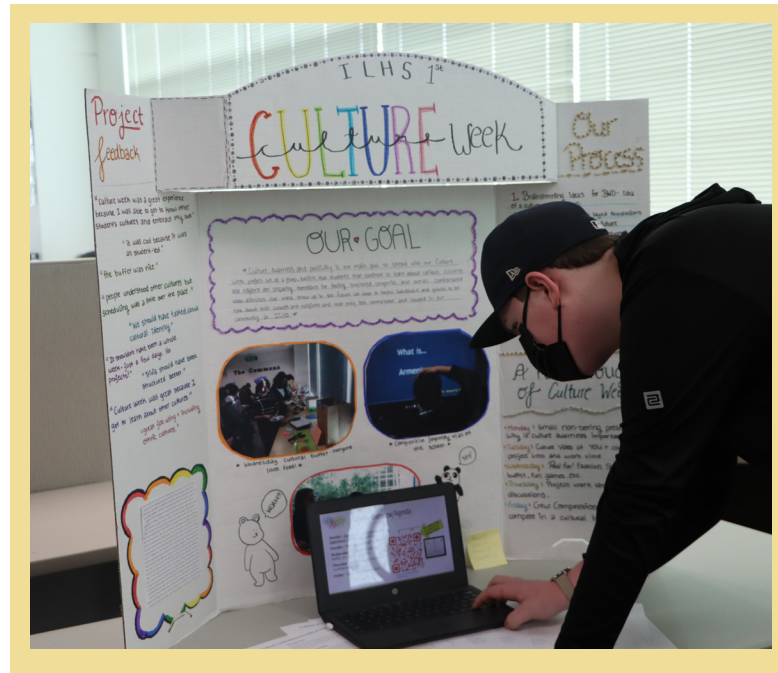


Photo: students at Innovation Lab High School, Bothell

Recognizing the importance of school climate, in 2016 Washington’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Accountability Systems Workgroup (ASW) heard presentations on and discussed the manner in which indicators of student engagement, educator engagement, school climate, and school safety could be measured with current and possible data collections for state and federal school accountability. The ASW put forth a recommendation to the ESSA Consolidated State Planning (CSP) team to adopt three measures of student engagement for school accountability. The CSP adopted the ASW recommendation after discussion and with the caveat that other measures (e.g., school climate and culture, access to effective, experienced, and appropriately credentialed educators, and disproportionate discipline) would be studied and considered for possible inclusion in school accountability.

In response to the ASW recommendation, SBE incorporated this initiative into its [2019 – 2023 Strategic Plan](#), highlighting the need to examine options for a statewide school climate survey and determine how additional school quality indicators addressing school climate could be reflected in the [Statewide Indicators of the Educational System Health](#) report and the [Washington School Improvement Framework \(WSIF\)](#). The Board submitted a 2019 budget request for resources to support this work, but the request was not funded. The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism drew additional attention to concerns about school climate and the impact of school climate on inequitable student outcomes, and SBE sought and received funding to support development of a

statewide survey through Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds (awarded by OSPI) and a budget proviso in the 2023 supplemental budget.

Improving school climate is recognized as a critical component of COVID-19 recovery (for example, see “Gauging School Climate” in OSPI’s [Academic and Student Well-Being Recovery Plan: Planning Guide 2021](#)), with federal recovery funds available to support these efforts. In addition, recent legislation ([2021 SHB 1208](#)) allows school districts to use LAP funds to address non-academic and social-emotional needs of students resulting from and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Other recent legislation ([2020 ESHB 2816](#)) charged the Washington State School Directors’ Association with developing a model policy and procedure for nurturing a positive social and emotional school and classroom climate, which includes a continuous cycle of evaluation and improvement.



The SBE work builds on these resources to develop a statewide approach to assessing school climate that would help the state and local school districts understand where improvements are needed and identify best practices. Already, the majority of school districts administer some type of climate survey, but with considerable variability in terms of methodology (who is surveyed, how often, what grades are surveyed, and through what means), constructs (what topics are measured), and validity. This variation makes it impossible to make apples-to-apples comparisons in order to

understand how schools are doing in relation to one another. A more consistent approach across the state would enable a state-level understanding of issue areas and where to target supports. Statewide survey data would help school personnel and policymakers alike make data-informed decisions to improve school climate as part of the state’s COVID-19 recovery and beyond.

The SBE has not been alone in advocacy on this issue. The Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) has consistently highlighted the need for attention to school climate. For example, in their [2023 Annual Report](#) the committee recommended that “... the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) add a measure of school climate to the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF). A measurement instrument should be developed in partnership with the State Board of Education (SBE) and OSPI, which is not based on old institutional knowledge, but instead informed by perspectives of the community.”

## Progress to Date

### Phase 1 (ESSER Funded)

In February of 2022, the Washington State Board of Education (SBE) contracted with the Center for the Study of Health and Risk Behaviors (CSHRB) at the University of Washington to conduct a critical review of school climate assessments and provide the state with policy recommendations. This contract yielded a report presented to SBE in October of 2022 ([Assessing School Climate \(wa.gov\)](#)). This report reviewed school climate research, described existing efforts to assess school climate in Washington State as well as in other states, and made a series of recommendations for implementation based on existing research and perspectives collected via a survey and interviews with

key informants, who were mostly district administrators.

The report concluded that Washington State would benefit by implementing a school climate assessment for school districts. The report argued that research had conclusively demonstrated that properly measuring school climate can help to enhance learning and assist schools to meet the challenge of providing an equitable learning environment for students. The UW research team recommended that Washington State create a statewide assessment and incentivize or require districts to annually assess school climate for students in grades 3 to 12.

In addition, the UW research team recommended that participation, rather than specific school climate scores, be used as a School Quality and Student Success (SQSS) metric if the State sought to use the school climate as a part of the WSIF. This recommendation was based primarily on concerns raised by district administrators, who were the vast majority of stakeholders consulted. The report specified that next steps should include the creation of a school climate assessment tool to be informed by stakeholders.

## **Phase 2 (FY23 Budget Proviso)**

SBE and CSHRB entered into a second contract on March 15, 2023, to further develop an implementation plan for school climate assessment. The specific purpose of this contract was to engage with students, families and educators across Washington State to obtain their input on the desired content of a school climate assessment, to review publicly available and existing school climate assessment tools, and to draft a school climate survey as well as questions that could supplement existing surveys.



These tasks were to be assisted by the formation of a technical advisory committee (TAC) to provide guidance and review work products. This contract also specified that CSHRB was to develop and submit a phased implementation plan and budget to serve as a template for subsequent implementation of a school climate assessment program.

To inform the plan and draft tools, CSHRB completed the following activities:

- Established an eight-person Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) on February 15, 2023, to advise CSHRB in its efforts to engage with students, families, and educators about school climate assessment and in the creation of a school climate assessment tool. The TAC team consisted



of academic experts from the field of education, state administrators, educators, leaders from community-based organizations, and researchers in the field of school climate.

- Engaged (e.g., surveys, interviews, virtual focus groups, or focus groups) with grade 3 to 12 students, families, and educators to understand how they define a quality learning environment to frame the scope and focus of the assessment and inform item development. CSHRB made efforts to engage with those from different geographic regions, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual orientation, and economic status. CSHRB took care to invite diverse districts to provide feedback, including consideration of geographic representation and district size. In addition, CSHRB placed a priority on ensuring adequate representation of school districts that did not engage in any school climate assessments as well as those districts that were identified as heavily invested in school climate efforts. While further engagement is planned, to date the majority of the feedback was received from district and school staff.
- Reviewed publicly available items on existing surveys most commonly used in Washington and other states. The most common approach to assessing school climate is the use of a climate survey developed by, and specific to, individual school districts, accounting for nearly a third (30.6 percent) of all school districts. Nearly one-quarter of school districts (23.0 percent) reported using the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) Educational Effectiveness Survey, and 15.8 percent of school districts reported using Panorama’s product. Nearly one of every five school districts (19.9 percent) report not using any school climate assessment tool, and about 10 percent of school districts reported using some other assessment tool.



- Develop draft core survey and additional measures. CSHRB chose to modify existing school climate surveys based on feedback received during their listening effort to better meet the needs of Washington students. After reviewing instruments currently in use in Washington as well as those used elsewhere, CSHRB chose to utilize the Delaware School Climate Survey as the starting point for elementary age students (grades 3 to 5) and the US Education Department School Climate Survey (EDSCLS) as the starting point for students in grades 6 to 12. The CSHRB report noted that the Delaware survey, owing to its shorter length and emphasis on the importance of relationships, fit well with developmental considerations

of an elementary student population and resonated most closely with what CSHRB heard from students, families, and educators. CSHRB chose the EDSCLS for the middle school and high school student template because it was thoroughly researched, it included the domains most frequently mentioned by families and educators as the most important components of a healthy school climate, and it falls entirely within the public domain. To fill holes identified by educators in surveys and interviews, CSHRB combined these publicly available instruments with additional items from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey and the Washington State COVID-19 Student Survey. Finally, CSHRB selected social and emotional learning (SEL) items from existing measures that relied heavily on the Collaborative for Academic and Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework. CSHRB selected SEL items from the publicly available 18-item CORE Districts SEL Survey for elementary students and from the publicly available 36-item Social

and Emotional Health Survey for middle and high school students.

- Developed and recommended a phased implementation plan and budget that includes pilot assessments and a timeline and strategy for statewide implementation. The attached report from CSHRB includes their plan for implementing an annual, non-identifiable (anonymous), school climate survey. CSHRB recommends a two-year effort to get the program fully implemented. Year 1 focuses on building the necessary infrastructure and piloting the survey at a cost of approximately \$530K, and Year 2 consists of full implementation at a cost of approximately \$370K. The report also provides a three-year budget to include a second administration of the survey at a cost of approximately \$380K. This third year would also permit the first production of trend reports that track changes in the survey results year to year. The budget estimates do not include the cost for recommended state agency staff (OSPI) nor does it include local district costs for administration of the survey.

### **More planned to refine the budget and proposal**

In addition to the work already completed, CSHRB has plans for further engagement with grade 3 to 12 students, families, and educators in the Fall of 2023 to get feedback on the implementation plan. CSHRB will complete its final report and implementation plan by December 2023.

## **Student, Family, and Community**

SBE supplemented some of the student, family, and community engagement work of CSHRB through community conversations led by CCER (South King County), The ZoNE (NE Spokane), Skagit Foundation for Academic Endeavors (Skagit Valley), and Elevate (Walla Walla). These conversations highlighted students' and families' desire to be a part of the process for determining what a survey should include, as well as how the survey should be utilized.

Parents expressed concern over being asked to react to survey items that had already been created without their input. They raised questions about who was at the table from the outset in defining terms and determining the constructs. There is a need for transparency around not just what decisions are, but who is making the decisions because families want to know that anyone involved has their best interest in mind. Students and families would like to be brought along for the entire process. Students and parents shared a desire to explore all facets of safety including physical, mental, and emotional.

There is particular interest in capital improvements to buildings for safety and comfort, exploration of bus safety, particularly for districts that rely on city buses and the safety concerns that come along with students being exposed to issues that can arise on a public bus without direct oversight by the bus driver for the student's well-being, and cultivating relationships between staff and students and staff and guardians. Students and parents discussed that an important aspect



*Photo: Arielle Matthews at La Conner MS, HS*



of school climate is how welcome and comfortable they feel in the building. They would like to see schools measure how well they are doing at incorporating families and inviting in members of the community. Survey data on family and community engagement would help identify best practices to help create spaces where students and families feel a sense of belonging.

While students and parents discussed similar domains to those CSHRB explored, they also expressed a need for accountability connected to the survey. There is discomfort with the idea of data being collected without meaningful changes based on what is collected. Students and families recognize that follow up is a local issue, but they would like to see the surveys be a tool they can use to continue to highlight the needs of students.

Students and community partners would like survey results to be transparent and shared publicly so that they can advocate for change. In addition, students and community partners wish to be included in the process of determining how the data is used at the building and district level to inform improvement.

## Next Steps

As noted above, the current contract with CSHRB includes an additional opportunity for feedback from students, families, and educators in the Fall of 2023. However, based on feedback received by the SBE through our community engagement efforts, more time and focused work may be required to ensure the tools being developed are responsive to the needs of those served by our education system. In the coming months, SBE will continue to work with community organizations as well as our partners at EOGOAC and OSPI to determine how best to proceed on this work moving forward. Specific next steps include:

- SBE Staff are reaching out to arrange a presentation and discussion of the report with the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) at a time to be determined.
- CSHRB will conduct an additional round of feedback opportunities in Fall 2023.
- CSHRB will finalize the report and implementation plan by December 2023.

The research regarding the importance of school climate is clear. As we embark on this work in Washington, we are looking at the experiences of other states and want to ensure we create a system that maintains as the priority the importance of improving the student experience to support student learning and growth. As the EOGOAC notes, "When done in a culturally competent way, measuring school climate can lift up student voice in order to address the needs of every student." Including school climate in the accountability system should highlight, support, and reward those schools that are implementing the tool in a way that supports this goal.



*Photo: Students in Rogers HS, Puyallup*