Section 3:
Positive School Climate

3. POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE ▬▬▬▬▬

What is a Positive School Climate?

"A way of thinking and acting that allows individuals to feel accepted, valued, and safe."

A positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, wanted, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust. A positive school climate affects everyone associated with the school: students, staff, parents, and the community. It is the belief system or culture that underlies the day-to-day operation of a school.

Collectively and individually, a positive school climate can have a major impact on the success of all students in the school. Research has consistently shown a link between positive school climate and other important measurements of school success, including:

- Academic achievement
- High morale
- Staff productivity
- Effective management

This research has also identified 11 key factors (eight specific and three general) that contribute to creating a positive school climate.

Specific Factors

- Continuous academic and social growth.
- Respect: students and staff have high self-esteem and are considerate of others.
- Trust: a sense that people can be counted on.
- High morale: students and staff feel good about being there.
- Cohesiveness: a sense of belonging.
- Opportunities for input: being able to contribute ideas and participate.
- Renewal: an openness to change and improvement.
- Caring: students and staff feel that others are concerned about them.

General Factors

- Program curriculum, activities, and policies.
- Process teaching and learning styles, problem-solving, and communication.
- Resources materials, and school facilities.

Purkey and Novak (1996) developed a framework for looking at how schools can become "invitational" by focusing on five elements — places, policies, programs, processes, and people.

Eleven key factors to creating a positive school climate: Taken from *Handbook for Conducting School Improvement Projects*, Copyright © 1987 by Phi Delta Kappan. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Writers and researchers continue to add other components to the list of key factors required for a positive school climate. The chart below summarizes these factors within three broad areas:

The Social/Emotional Environment	The Learning Environment	The Physical Environment
All students are accepted and welcomed.	High and appropriate expectations are in place for all students.	The school is perceived as inviting — a place students want to come to.
Positive behaviour is modeled by staff.	Learning is perceived as interesting, relevant, and important.	The school is well maintained and repaired as necessary.
All students and staff are treated with respect and dignity.	All students are expected to learn and grow based on their individual abilities and skill levels.	The school is accessible to all students including those with physical disabilities.
Individual differences in students and staff are respected.	Procedures are in place to address individual learning needs.	The school has an appropriate intercom, phone system, and emergency backup system.
Parents and community members are welcomed in the school.	School and classroom rules are developed with input from staff, parents, and students.	The physical systems of the school are in good working order, e.g., air, heat, lighting.
Parents are meaningfully involved in the school.	The school and classroom provide opportunities for a high degree of student involvement.	The school is equipped with a variety of detection systems and alarms.
Wellness is fostered in all students.	Teachers build a team atmosphere in the school and classroom.	The area around the school is well landscaped and maintained.
Responsibility is developed in all students.	Staff anticipates problems and deals with them before they escalate.	Graffiti removal procedures are in place.
All students feel accepted and welcomed.	Staff establishes structure and routine in the school and classroom.	School equipment is inspected on a regular basis, e.g., playground, gymnasium, lunchroom.
Differences in culture, race, religion, and ethnicity are recognized and appreciated.	Parents are kept informed of their children's program and progress.	Noise levels in the school are monitored and treated when necessary.
All students are actively involved in school activities.	Teachers and parents work collaboratively.	The school and classrooms are equipped with interesting bulletin boards and display cases.
The school has a vision and mission statement.	Teachers encourage a positive and optimistic approach to learning.	Appropriate signage is displayed in the school and on the playground.
The school has introduced measures to ensure it is safe and caring.	Teachers establish rapport with each student.	Specialty rooms/areas are available and well equipped, e.g., staff rooms, meeting rooms, first aid area, therapy rooms.
Staff has developed programs and initiatives to ensure all students feel they belong.	A proactive approach to discipline is used.	Classrooms are equipped with quality desks, shelving, storage area, and learning centres.
Emergency procedures are in place to ensure a safe and secure school.	Teachers use effective practices and current curriculum.	
	The principal is a strong educational leader, who involves the staff, parents, and students.	

Environmental or School Climate Surveys

Environmental or school climate surveys (scans or assessments) are often conducted to review the factors in the school or classroom that will have an influence on a student's overall functioning. These surveys can be conducted at the school or classroom level and can involve student, staff, parents, community members, and school administrators.

The data collected should be used to begin a dialogue among the school's stakeholders for the purpose of moving towards meaningful change.

Formal: Formal assessments can be conducted using a tool that measures a number of climate components. Examples of school climate tools include:

- The School Climate Survey (School Development Program, Yale).
- The NASSP School Climate Survey (National Association of Secondary School Principals).

Informal: Informal assessments are usually conducted using checklists administered by school staff members. A sample environmental checklist is included at the end of this section.

The Process for Developing a Positive School Climate

It is important to know what a school with a positive school climate looks like, but it is equally important to examine the process that can make it happen. This process can be incorporated into a school's annual plan for improvement. The planning process will generally follow the 10 steps outlined in Section 2. The following "close-up" of a process used at Landmark Collegiate will illustrate how a school can plan for a positive school climate. Landmark Collegiate is located in the Hanover School Division No. 15 (30 kilometres southeast of Winnipeg) and serves approximately 230 students in Grades 7–Senior 4.

A Closer Look at Developing a Positive School Climate — Landmark School

Close Up

The principal of a school is responsible for initiating the planning process and for searching for opportunities to bring about change in the school. It is part of the leadership role to foster collaboration and gain the commitment of staff, parents, and students in supporting new initiatives. In the case of Landmark Collegiate, developing a planning process was not easy. The principal used sensitivity, patience, and commitment to bring the faculty and parents together to develop a meaningful planning process.

Once the commitment was obtained, the process of developing a shared vision was initiated. Individual staff members were asked to submit their most central beliefs related to education. The beliefs were collated and other staff members added their input. A summary was prepared listing the most widely held beliefs. This list was shared with parents, who also added their strongly held beliefs. Student beliefs were also compiled from a survey, and the two lists were compared to identify those beliefs held in common.

Based on the common beliefs, individual staff and parents were asked to write a mission statement and submit it. Staff and parents provided feedback, and a mission statement committee worked out a three-part statement of beliefs, commitment, and mission. The final statement that the stakeholders agreed upon is included below.

"Our school community shares the belief in the value of every person and the importance of a rich and complete educational experience of the highest quality.

We are committed to work as a team to ensure a safe and respectful, nurturing, and invigorating environment where learning is a shared responsibility.

Our mission is to develop persons who are ready to participate fully in society with confidence and a sense of self-worth, with independent thinking and interpersonal skills, and with an appreciation for athletics and the arts."

Once the mission statement was completed, the planning team began to examine data sources. The team relied on two main sources: existing school data and opinion surveys. The existing data sources included:

- attendance and late records
- suspensions/behavioural referrals
- honour roll/failures
- provincial examination results
- Canadian Test of Basic Skills test results — Grade 7
- Differential Aptitude Test test results — Senior 1

In addition, a survey was conducted of staff, parents, and students using an instrument developed by the Peel Board of Education (Toronto, Ontario). The survey requested opinions regarding various features of the school which led to the development of several lists of concerns and needs for students, parents, and staff members.

Based on the analysis of existing data and the survey summaries, a list of priorities for school planning for improvement was developed. The following priorities were established:

- respect, safety, security, positive learning environment
- communication
- school/parent partnership
- rich and varied school program — curricular and co-curricular
- full involvement of students in the life of the school
- high academic standards
- recognition of students and staff

The priorities led to the development of school objectives. For the past five years, the school has adopted four key objectives for each year. Several of the key goals have been continued over the five years of planning. The objectives for the year 2000–2001 are included below:

- Creating an Invitational School with a Positive Learning Environment and Strong School Pride
- Encouraging the Pursuit of Excellence and Improvement for All
- Enhancing Student Creativity Throughout the School Program
- Integration of Technology

For each goal established for the school, an action plan is developed. Parents and staff cooperate to develop 10–15 specific actions (manageable, attainable, and measurable) to meet each objective. For the goal Creating an Invitational School with a Positive Learning Environment and Strong School Pride, the following action plan was established for 2000–2001.

Invite the community into the school: School/Community Barbecue in September, Winter Concert in December, Drama/Musical in March/April, School Showcase Evening in April, Senior 4 Dinner Theatre in May, Grade 7 Orientation in June, Awards Celebration in June, Graduation Banquet in June.
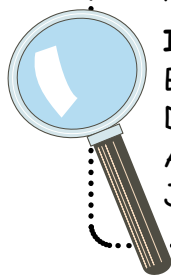
Be an active part of the community: Member of the Chamber of Commerce, community clean-a-thon, volunteerism, participate in charitable events in the community.

Work with the community: School and community coaches will work as a team to implement the school's program through coach's clinics, team meetings, and coach's handbooks.

Communicate school plan, program, policies, and achievements with the school community: For example, use up-to-date and informative school website, regularly updated parent/student handbook, school newsletter, school sign, or community newsletters. Staff will make an effort to establish contact with all parents early in the year and will keep regular contact as needed, including interim and anecdotal reporting.

Improve the attractiveness of the school to make it a more inviting place to learn and to visit: Install and maintain planters with cedars at both entrances, continue the painting program, and replace worn fixtures such as the gym curtain; encourage students to help keep classrooms, hallways, multipurpose room, and school grounds free of garbage; encourage students to contribute their artistic talents to brighten up the hallways.

Maintain and enhance a positive school climate: Post mission statement and Bill of Rights and Responsibilities; expand the peer counselling program to include school climate/positive lifestyles issues such as drug and alcohol awareness; restructure student government to include all students and to give them meaningful leadership roles in the school; recognize good citizenship with Kudos program and non-academic awards; have an effective school-wide program for limiting bullying and harassment, encouraging students to get involved in reporting harassment or seeking mediation and conciliation themselves; train staff in WEVAS, non-violent crisis intervention, CPR, and first aid; sensitize staff to students at risk.

Reaching Out to Students in the school: Promote authentic involvement in every aspect of the school; reinforce student participation and involvement through recognition; including banners, posters, pictures, honour board, website, and awards; develop a process of consultation of students; develop a "Welcome Here" event for the new Grade 7 students; purposely develop school events which include everyone; establish a noon hour program with meaningful activities.

Evaluation: The pulse of the school will quicken and participation and involvement at all levels will increase noticeably. The school community will be more visible and active. A follow-up survey will provide hard data for comparison with benchmark scores from the original surveys.

Benefits to the School

Landmark Collegiate has benefited in a number of general and specific ways. First of all, the school has implemented a process of school improvement that has brought about change. Secondly, the school stakeholders have collaborated to make the changes happen. Thirdly, the overall school climate has improved significantly. In addition to these general improvements, the school has initiated a number of specific changes including:

- Award-/grant-winning school website with student showcase
- Donation of flowers and planters from the community
- Tripling of graduation awards sponsored by the community
- Student honour board (Kudos program; congratulating and recognizing students for their efforts)
- Winter carnival organized by students
- Revamped awards program, non-academic awards, improvement honour roll
- Huge increase in attendance at parent evenings
- School-community barbecue
- Student showcase evening (recognizing the accomplishment of students)
- Peer counselling program — drug and alcohol awareness
- Coaching handbook and fair play clinics
- School-wide, consistent anti-harassment program
- Teachers embracing technology across the curriculum
- Lions-Quest school-wide conflict resolution program
- Interim reporting, enhanced program for students at risk

For additional information on the development of a positive school climate at Landmark Collegiate, please contact the principal at Landmark Collegiate in Landmark, Manitoba, or visit their website at: http://landmark.hanoversd.mb.ca/docs/action_plan/Objective1.htm

Close-up of Erika

Erika is a Grade 5 student who has been very disruptive within the classroom and other school environments. Erika is a student who would require Category 2 interventions, i.e., students needing redirection and positive discipline practices.

This close-up will examine the three elements of a positive school environment:

- The social/emotional environment
- The learning environment
- The physical environment

The areas for further inquiry pose questions that can lead the reader to possibilities for changing the environment and addressing issues in a positive way.

Close Up

Erika's Classroom Space

As we enter the classroom, we notice the desks have been placed in rows with the teacher's desk at the front of the room. Erika's desk is located to the right of the teacher's desk and is separate from the other students. Around her desk on the floor are her math and social studies textbooks. A closer inspection of her desk shows her binders have papers scattered all over the place. Her notes are not always in the correct binder and often are torn and crammed in the desk.

Erika asks the teacher to go to the washroom when three students are at the desk getting extra assistance on a math question. Erika leaves the room to go to the washroom but knocks the desks of three students and pushes the students' textbooks off the desk just before she leaves the room. The teacher calls to her but Erika continues on her way out of the room. When she returns, the teacher waits until she is seated and back at her math task. The teacher finishes helping the three students and goes to quietly talk to Erika about her earlier behaviour. Erika knocks her notebook off her desk and puts her head down. The teacher continues to talk to Erika, but she remains seated with her head down. The teacher returns to her desk and begins to mark some papers. Erika remains with her head down until the bell rings to end the class.
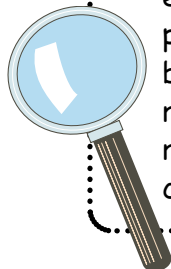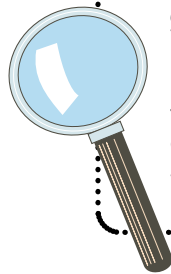
Areas for further inquiry:

1. What organizational responses can be effectively utilized with Erika?

   • work space

   • desk organization

   • organizers and storage containers

   • notebook arrangements

2. What procedures need to be in place for Erika to take a washroom break without disruption?

   • Establish and review a definite routine for a washroom break.

   • Provide positive feedback upon a non-disruptive return to her desk.

3. How can the teacher manage small-group instruction when Erika is causing difficulties?

   • Have Erika help another student who is having difficulty.

   • Provide space in classroom for small-group instruction.

   • Arrange for Erika to work in a small group (with two other students).

   • Pre-teach Erika the skills needed for small-group activities.

Erika's social/emotional supports

Erika's teacher is aware of the social/emotional needs of her students. At the beginning of the year, she had established the classroom as a safe and respectful place for all students. She provided opportunities for class discussions, role-playing, and activities that focused on individual differences. As the year has progressed, Erika's behaviour has become increasingly disruptive and the teacher has been doing fewer class discussions and role-playing activities. The other students have begun to resent Erika's behaviour for taking away all of the 'fun' activities. The teacher has concentrated on having more structured activities within her lesson plans. The teacher plans the less-structured activities for when Erika goes to see the guidance counsellor once per cycle to work on her social skills.

At recess, Erika spends most of her time by herself. At times she tries to join in with the other students to play basketball or soccer but, when she does so, the other students complain to the supervisor that Erika is causing problems.

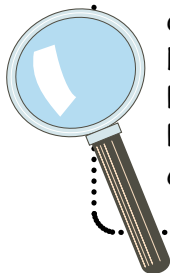### Areas for further inquiry:

1. What can be done to include Erika in unstructured classroom activities?

   - Use the counselor to help out during less-structured activities.
   - Provide a 'buddy' for Erika.

2. What procedures can be used for including Erika in break and intramural activities.

   - Involve Erika in running the canteen during the break period.
   - Find structured activities for Erika at noon hour.
   - Involve Erika as a helper during intramurals.

3. How can the teacher establish a climate where all students feel accepted?

   - Work with the counsellor to deliver a program such as Second Step or Lions-Quest.
   - Review with all students the importance of empathy and acceptance.

Erika's learning program

Erika is a capable student but, because of her discipline problems, she has missed much of the material that is being taught. At times, she doesn't complete her assignments; when she does, she loses the assignment or completes it very quickly. Erika's major areas of difficulty are writing assignments and problem solving.

Erika likes to work on the computer and is actively involved in physical education classes. She tries out for all the sports teams but is never included because of her poor sportsmanship. Erika still goes out to watch the games by herself.

Erika's parents are very concerned about her behaviour and attend all meetings. They report that Erika has very few difficulties at home. She has no siblings. They do have difficulty with Erika whenever they try to help her with her homework. The school and home tried to use a communication book but Erika would never bring it home. The communication book was to inform Erika's parents of what work she needed to complete and how she behaved during the day.

Areas for further inquiry:

1. What techniques could be used to motivate Erika to complete her assignments?

   • Consider positive consequences or motivators.

   • Involve Erika in choosing her rewards.

   • Give Erika rewards for handing in assignments and for properly completing work.

   • Consider alternatives to written assignments.

   • Utilize assignment scaffolding.

2. How can home school communication be improved?

   • Focus on positives in communication book.

   • Make contact by phone or through email.

3. What possibilities exist for involving Erika in extra-curricular activities?

   • Arrange for Erika to assist the coach of a team.

   • Arrange for Erika to assist in the gymnasium.

In the above example, the teacher should consider positive ways of responding to Erika's behavioural needs. The questions are provided to illustrate the thinking process required in developing a positive program for Erika. By making changes to the social/emotional, learning, and physical environment, it is possible to meet Erika's needs through a positive school climate.

Positive School Climate for Special Populations

"The number one indicator of success for a child is a good relationship with a caring adult."

Sometimes it becomes necessary for the school staff to take steps to ensure the classroom accepts all students, including those with behavioural challenges. At times it is difficult for a student who is perceived as being different to fit into a classroom group and to be accepted. The development of friendships can be very difficult.

The Circle of Courage
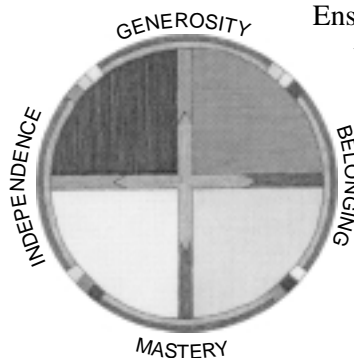
Ensuring that all cultures are respected is a way of making students feel they belong. The Circle of Courage (developed by Dr. Martin Brokenleg) uses the Aboriginal concept of the importance of valuing individuals.

Using the Circle of Courage, the teacher could explain that the four bases for self-esteem are:

• A sense of **belonging** nurtured in a cultural milieu found in the acceptance, attention, and affection of others.

• A sense of **mastery** develops as one masters the environment. Success brings innate satisfaction and a sense of efficacy.

Circle of Courage graphic: Used with permission from Reclaiming Youth, P.O. Box 57, Lennox, SD: Artist, George Blue Bird.

- A sense of **independence** is shown by the ability to control one's behaviour and gain the respect of others.

- A sense of **generosity** is developed as opportunities are provided to give to others and to help others.

> Brendtro, L., M. Brokenleg, and S. VanBockern. *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future*, 1990.

The teacher and students could ensure that the symbol is displayed throughout the school and that students discuss ways in which each of the four key areas of esteem can be developed within the classroom.

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1. Purkey, W.W., and J.M. Novak. *Inviting School Success*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1996.

   William Purkey is well known for his work on invitational education and making schools into inviting places. Invitational education provides a framework for making school a more satisfying, exciting, and enriching experience for everyone. It centres on four guiding principles: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality. Schools can become invitational by focusing on five elements: places, policies, programs, processes, and people. Additional information on invitational schools is available from:

   The Invitational Education website: http://www.invitationaleducation.net

2. Howard, E., B. Howell, and E. Brainerd. *Handbook for Conducting School Climate Improvement Project*, 1987.

3. Comer, Dr. James P. *The School Development Program*, 1996.

   Dr. James Comer is known for his work on the School Development Program. His program on developing a positive school climate has been recognized with several awards. The program focuses on developing a positive school climate by empowering stakeholders. The mission statement of the School Development Program is committed to the total development of all children by creating learning environments that support children's physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical development. For additional information on the School Development Program and development process, please see the School Development Program Newsline, Spring 1996.

   The School Development Program website: http://pandora.med.yale.edu/comer/welcome.html

4. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. "Realizing a Positive School Climate," Vol. 56, No.1 *Educational Leadership*, Sept. 1998.

> It is clear that a positive school and classroom climate can have a major effect on the achievement and behaviour of students. It is not always an easy task to create a school or classroom that focuses on a positive learning environment conducive to learning. Making it happen will require the community, school teachers, parents, and students working together, a commitment from all stakeholders, and a major shift in thinking.

Section 3 Support Materials

- An Environmental Checklist

AN ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST

Consideration of the amount of stimuli in the physical environment is essential to any discussion regarding an appropriate intervention plan for a child with attention problems. Although the list found below pertains to a classroom setting, the principles remain the same when applied to any physical setting. Read the statements/questions, think about your work setting, and place a check mark next to those describing an environmental condition that you are willing to change.

❏ Consider the amount of stimuli in the room. Are there decorations/displays on the walls? ...hanging from the ceiling? ...on the closets?

❏ Are the shelves in my room open and cluttered? If they are covered, are they covered by material with a "busy" design or plain material of a soft colour? Do I have a storage area that is removed from the classroom enabling me to remove equipment and reduce stimuli?

❏ Do my children work in groups? Do the desks face each other? Are there any desks that are by themselves in a protected area of the room?

❏ Consider the colour of the walls, cupboards, desks, shelves, etc. Is the colour soothing? Are there many colours?

❏ Do I decorate my bulletin boards with many brightly coloured figures?

❏ Where do I sit students with attention problems?

❏ Where are the major traffic areas in my room? Do I have any children sitting near one of these areas (pencil sharpener, door, bathroom, sink, teacher's desk, etc.)? Are traffic areas clearly defined?

❏ Are the areas within the classroom clearly defined?

❏ Have I created an area that is private, secluded and free of stimulus where children are free to go to work, think, calm down, etc.?

❏ What is the noise level in my room? Is there continual background noise? Do I allow quiet talking? Do I play music during the day? What kind of music?

❏ Are there many interruptions during the school day? Is the intercom used continually throughout the day?

❏ What kind of lighting is in my room? Do the lights cause a glare? Do they hum? Do they flicker?

❏ Is there something that causes a disturbing sound in my room, i.e., the heater, pipes, slamming door, etc.

❏ Do I use furniture to provide boundaries that delineate work/play areas?

❏ Do I label areas/materials with pictures at the eye level of the children?

❏ Do I have a daily schedule clearly visible in my room?

❏ Have I posted our classroom rules? Are they stated positively?

❏ Do my children have a way to store their belongings neatly and in an organized fashion?

❏ In my building, do children often have to go from room to room during the day?

❏ How do children prepare to go to recess? How do they return to the classroom from recess?

❏ What are the procedures for going to lunch in my building? How do they return to the classroom from the lunchroom?

❏ Are materials safe and well maintained in my school?

❏ Do people continually walk in and out of my room throughout the day.

❏ Does my school has many assemblies, field trips, and special events that interrupt our daily schedule?

❏ How many changes does the child experience each day, i.e., moving from class to class, recess, lunch, etc.?

❏ Is the child expected to move through the halls alone?...with classmates?

❏ If time-out is used, does the child have to go to another room for time-out?

❏ Are there several people (other teachers, paraprofessionals, the secretary, the custodian, etc.) who agree to provide a respite when the child is having a "bad day?" Does the child get sent from one adult to another several times a day?

❏ What are the conditions is the lunch room? Are there large numbers of children in the room simultaneously? Is "kid music" playing? Does the child have to stand in line for a long time before getting his or her food? Is there a "no talk" rule? Is there a time limit for eating?

❏ When the child has to pass in the halls, what are the conditions? Are there many other children present? Is there a time limit? Does the child clearly know the way? Is the child supervised?

❏ How long is the school day? Does the child have a longer-than-usual day four days per week and a shorter-than-usual day one day per week?

❏ Is the school a year-round school? If so, how long does it take the child to adjust to a new session?

❏ Is the playground well supervised? Does the child play alone most of the time?... with younger students?....not play?

❏ How are field trips handled? Is adequate supervision provided for the child?

❏ Is the child in the right classroom?...with the teacher that best suits his or her special needs?...working at his or her developmental level rather than chronological level?

❏ Is the child's classroom near a room that is noisy or chaotic (shop, band, P.E., etc.)?

❏ When being disciplined, does the child have to sit idly for long periods of time?

❏ Does the child have to ride a school bus for a long period of time in order to get to school? Is the bus crowded?...noisy?...Is discipline maintained effectively during the transport? Does the child have a seat belt if his or her behaviour indicates that one is needed?