

HB 646: The Safe and Successful Students Act The Importance of Positive School Climates

In addition to reducing the reliance of schools on zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary forms of discipline such as suspension and expulsion in response to offenses that do not present a major threat to the safety of a school, HB 646 promotes wherever possible the use of restorative practices and other measures designed to promote positive school climates. Recent research is very clear that this approach creates safer schools in which students can succeed in a variety of measurable ways:

Restorative practices and positive school climates create safer schools and reduce the frequency of serious disciplinary incidents.

Middle and high schools that implement restorative practices show dramatic decrease in the number of behavior incidents such as physical altercations and classroom disruptions, and a corresponding decrease in out-of-school suspensions, within two years. Anecdotally, staff reported that “fostered a greater development of community, inclusion and empathy in our schools” and similar observations in schools surveyed¹.

Positive school climates reduce student risk behaviors.

A study of Virginia schools found that students were much less likely to engage in risk behaviors in schools with positive climates – defined as a having low incidence of bullying or peer aggression, student attitudes that discourage aggressive behavior, and a high willingness of students to seek help from teachers. Students in schools with more positive climates were less likely to smoke tobacco or marijuana, drink alcohol, bring a weapon to school, physically fight at school, miss school, experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness, or contemplate suicide².

Schools with positive climates see higher standardized test scores and academic achievement.

A study involving a large suburban Texas school district demonstrated that schools ranked “exemplary” by the state based on test scores also scored significantly higher than schools only ranked “acceptable” in every measure related to positive school climate. Organizational health variables studied included, among others, goal focus, morale, and communication.³ A different national study found that K-3 students in schools with positive academic and disciplinary climates showed significantly higher gains in mathematics achievement than students in schools with weaker climates⁴.

¹Lewis, Sharon, ed. (2009). *Improving School Climate: Findings from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices*. International Institute for Restorative Practices.

²Klein, J., Cornell, D., & Konold, T. (2012). Relationships between bullying, school climate, and student risk behaviors. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(3), 154–169.

³MacNeil, A. J., Prater, D. L., & Busch, S. (2009). The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12(1), 73–84.

⁴Bodovski, K., Nahum-Shani, I., & Walsh, R. (2013). School Climate and Students' Early Mathematics Learning: Another Search for Contextual Effects. *American Journal of Education*, 119(2), 209–234.