

Element 1: Leadership

Leadership in a school must extend beyond the school's administration. In an effective school, decision making is not concentrated within a single leader; instead, it is spread across the school's community, and every community member has a role to play. Under this element, Safe School Certification guides schools to form leadership teams (both a Core Leadership Team, or CLT, and a Student Leadership Team, or SLT) that are fully representative of the school by engaging representatives from each of several groups: students, teachers/school staff, school leadership, community members, and parents. The Certification Advisory Board (or CAB, see box at right) observed that, in forming these teams, schools create a shared leadership approach that can support the creation of safe schools. And by building a team that doesn't rely on any single person, the work can last regardless of turnover.

Leadership do's

- **Be intentional about your team's composition.** Ensure that your team reflects the diversity of your schools' community, both by role and by demographics. Check in with your community to ensure that they feel the leadership team represents them.
- **Have meetings at times that work for everyone.** Prioritize the schedules of external community members and parents whose schedules are less likely to align with those of school-based staff.
- **Have food/beverages at meetings and provide child care if needed.** Depending on the demographics of your school, language interpretation may also be necessary.
- **Provide transparency about the challenges your school might be facing.** Lean into conversations around inequality, violence, or other challenges within the school's culture. These discussions are ultimately the purpose of the team: to be honest and find answers together.
- **Think about the school's history with leadership.** Ask critical questions, such as: Who (what stakeholders) did the leaders represent? What worked? What can we, as current school leadership, improve on?
- **Build buy-in for doing the work.** Make your motivations for engaging in this work clear and empower the team

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.



with the ability to make change to build a stronger school.

Leadership misdirections

- **Don't rely on easy or conventional choices when picking leadership team members.** Look further than student governments, PTA/Os, teachers' unions, etc. Instead, choose members that might not already serve in leadership roles but nevertheless offer critical connections to different parts of the community.
- **Don't assume that a leadership title means that school leaders have all the answers.** Often, the strongest leaders acknowledge the critical role of other voices in decision making. A representative group will have broader perspectives and therefore offer more ideas for solutions than an individual or a small school staff team.
- **Don't let any individual dominate the meeting.** Ensure that all voices are heard and that decision making is reflective of the diversity in the room.

Leadership equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. By applying an equity lens to the formation and operation of a school climate leadership team, schools can better ensure that decisions directly address existing inequities. Applying an equity lens starts with the formation of the team and ensuring that a diverse array of voices are present within leadership; it continues through the operation of team meetings. Questions to ask when selecting individuals to serve and when conducting team meetings include:

- How are decisions generally made at your school? Are decisions made primarily by the school administration or are leadership roles more shared?
- Who is on your leadership team? Is the team representative of your school community? What voices are missing?
- How has your school or your leadership team changed over time? Has the leadership team evolved as community demographics have changed? Who has gained power? Who has lost power?
- How have potential and current team members been supported to be leaders in their lifetimes? What systems of injustice may have limited opportunities for leadership? How do these systems affect individuals' willingness and ability to contribute to decision making?
- How are meetings set up so that each person feels affirmed and heard? Are there alternative methods of seeking feedback that acknowledge historical power imbalances? (For example, school staff may feel unable to criticize school leadership if they are present during a meeting.)
- How can the leadership team create trust not only within the team itself, but also within the broader community? What needs to be prioritized for strong relationship building?

Examples of how schools that participated in the Improving School Climate in DC project approached the leadership element can be found at:

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