

Element 2: Buy-in

Building buy-in for change is critical to moving beyond the status quo. Under this component, Safe School Certification guides schools to ensure that all members of the community—but especially school staff—feel that they have a role to play in creating a safer, more supportive school climate and that they have the tools and skills needed to effect such change. When school communities intentionally prioritize having a safe school and pay attention to the folks that are hardest to reach, schools are more successful at creating and sustaining initiatives to improve school climates.

Buy-in do's

- **Empower staff to make decisions and give feedback and provide them with the tools to do so.** Ensure that leadership teams include voices not only from administrative staff, but also include representatives from teaching and support staff. When staff feel that all decisions are made from the top, without reflecting their voice, they are less likely to buy in to the decisions that are made.
- **Show commitment for the chosen strategy.** Many staff, especially those who have worked in schools for a long time, may perceive new initiatives as temporary and may be less likely to buy in if they think the initiative will not last.
- **Leverage both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.** Provide incentives for staff who engage in the process and illustrate how improving school climate and safety will improve teaching conditions and help staff reach achievement goals.
- **Check on buy-in over time.** Create ways for folks to become and stay involved, and to continue feeling welcomed, heard, and affirmed.
- **Provide tailored training and support where needed.** Focus on staff who are having difficulty seeing their role in creating a more supportive school climate.

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.



Buy-in misdirections

- **Don't assume that staff have bought in, even if they are attending meetings or trainings.** Check in regularly to see how staff are applying initiatives in their day-to-day work.
- **Don't let detractors stop work toward a more positive school climate.** Not all staff need to buy in for an initiative to be successful. In general, we've found that at least 80 percent buy-in is the threshold for initiatives to work.
- **Don't let a small number of staff members speak for all their colleagues.** While only some staff will be represented on the leadership team, it is important to engage all staff in the process and understand their level of buy-in over time.
- **Don't respond to a lack of buy-in with punitive measures.** Instead, explore reasons why staff might not have bought in to the school's climate improvement efforts and address these underlying concerns.

Buy-in 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 within the buy-in component, schools can better identify what restraints on school safety occur when not everyone is engaged in the process. Questions to ask when assessing and promoting buy-in include:

- How has the school community been supported by the larger school system? How might policies, programs, budget cuts, or previous failed initiatives have impacted school staff and their trust in the system?
- What does a "safe school climate" mean to your school's community? What should safety look like, how should it be achieved, and for whom is safety a priority?
- Who is interested in creating a safe school climate? How can those staff align with others who are not yet as interested, particularly by understanding their hesitations?
- How have staff who experience racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other "-isms" been included in the school community—both historically and currently? How have previous initiatives accounted for these systemic inequities? How aligned do staff see current initiatives with the realities the broad school community faces? What can the school do to be more inclusive and affirming to those experiencing injustice?
- How does the school lift up the voices, lives, and experiences of those staff who have been historically marginalized?

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

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