

Element 3: Data and data-based decision making

Data are critical for creating a safe school environment and inform all other components of the Safe School Certification framework. Under the data component, Safe School Certification guides schools to collect and use multiple forms of data, including school climate survey data and administrative data, and to employ more informal data collection from the school's community. By both collecting data and using those data to inform decision making, schools can work to identify particular areas of focus and improve the way everyone experiences the school. Leaders can make their schools stronger by asking important questions; examining data by social identities, grades, and backgrounds; and making decisions based on those data.

Too often, however, data have been used as weapons against schools, school staff, and administrators, resulting in schools becoming more resistant to sharing data—particularly those that show areas in need of attention—with the broader community. Data are also only one piece of a bigger puzzle; they alone do not and cannot tell the full story of a school. When only data are shared and individuals lack the fuller context, they can present a picture that is not consistent with the school's reality. Alternatively, when data are not shared, individuals often make assumptions based on their own observations or experiences, rather than the collective experience of the school's community. It is important to not only collect data, but to share and contextualize data to tell the current story of your school, as well as the anticipated changes.

Data do's

- **Use data collection tools that are *valid* and *reliable*.** Valid and reliable tools measure what they are supposed to measure and measure the same thing over time.
- **Explore how perspectives differ by identities.** Surveys should include measures of students' sexual

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.



orientation, race, gender identity, and other identities. Care should be taken to ensure students' privacy when asking about identity.

- **Analyze your data.** Consider looking at similarities and differences over time, compared to other schools, and between groups.
- **Share data with the full school community.** Contextualize the data and generate ideas around areas that need attention.
- **Use the data to drive conversation about next steps.** Explore areas in which the data may disagree with your understanding or perspective of the school environment. Personalize the data and think about how this information can support your understanding of your school community.
- **Explore what the data say about current interventions and how they are working.** Consider the data's alignment with your school's needs and whether they were selected based on previous data.

Data misdirections

- **Don't assume that you know what the data say or what they mean.** Fully analyze and personalize the data before drawing conclusions.
- **Don't choose interventions without considering the data.** Often, data can illuminate hidden issues.
- **Don't stop collecting data.** The composition of a school community changes every year. Obtain new data each year so that decisions can evolve with the needs of your school.

Data equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. Collecting and analyzing data, disaggregating those data to explore differences between groups, and allowing the data to lead the way represent steps toward social justice progress. Data can provide a fuller picture of a school and support information that may be known or provide additional information. To allow data to create pathways for equity, they must be analyzed with a critical lens, shared widely, and contextualized. Questions to ask when collecting and analyzing data include:

- What do the data mean? How do they relate to the ways in which leadership understands the needs of the school? How do the data challenge or reinforce assumptions?
- What do the data say about inequities in the school? What do they suggest about systemic injustice within and beyond the school? How can the school first prioritize those who are most impacted by inequities, so that it can then support the entire school community?
- When sharing data with families, students, community, and staff, how can data illuminate the school's reality and support the school in prioritizing those who are most challenged?
- What other questions do the data raise? How do other forms of data—such as focus groups, one-on-one conversations, or school town halls—inform or clarify survey data?

Examples of how schools that participated in the Improving School Climate in DC project approached the data and data-based decision making element can be found at: https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SafeSchoolCertificationAppendix_ChildTrends_October2020.pdf