

Element 4: Policy and policy enforcement

Although many schools see policy as the backbone to creating safe and supportive schools, developing policy that is fair and equitable can be difficult. Many schools overly focus on policies rather than addressing root causes of issues. This is particularly true when it comes to discipline and behavioral concerns. Safe School Certification (SSC) guides schools to consider their full array of policies and whether they are being implemented consistently, as well as their impact on students. In particular, SSC asks schools to reflect on policies focused on bullying and violence, ensure that reports are acted upon consistently, and create a culture in which students and other community members feel comfortable making reports. For schools participating in ISC-DC, the Certification Advisory Board (CAB) observed that school leaders often felt most comfortable framing their school culture and climate improvement efforts around policy and policy enforcement. However, these leaders often struggled to explore why they were relying on policy rather than the deeper engagement often required to create safe schools. For example, having a discipline policy seems much more natural and obvious for some schools than having a policy on family engagement. Schools that are able to reflect on their policies and discuss how and why they were created are better able to alter their approaches to align with what we know works to create safe and more supportive environments.

Policy do's

- **Create a landscape of all policies in the school.** Include formal policies (e.g., those written in the student handbook) as well as informal or unspoken rules. Focus not only on policies that apply to students, but also on faculty/staff policies that may affect how staff members interact with students. Separate what is required by state or district policy—and that all schools must have—from what has instead been created and implemented by your school. For those policies that are local to your school, have an open, honest conversation about why they were put in place, whether they have been effective at achieving their purpose, and whether they've led to any unintended outcomes.

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.



- **Discuss your policies with the school community (students, staff, and families) and get their feedback and thoughts.** Assess whether policies are (or are perceived to be) enforced equally by different staff or with different students. School leaders may not know or understand how students perceive certain policies, or that policies may lead to undesirable outcomes.
- **Revisit, reflect, and change policies that don't work or are ineffective.** Be honest about the process and focus on identifying which problem(s) the policy is trying to solve and what the goals are.
- **Think about safety in a broad way.** Often, perceived misbehavior can be a manifestation of underlying trauma. Many policies focus on addressing the reaction—often by removing or excluding students—rather than the underlying issues. These actions can retraumatize students, making the situation worse, not better.

Policy misdirections

- **Don't use policies as a solution for climate issues.** School leaders are often just trying to establish and maintain control with policies. Instead, use policy to create conditions for learning in which all students feel safe to learn.
- **Don't be afraid to be innovative and go beyond the status quo.** Just because a policy has been around forever does not mean it is effective at achieving its goal. Use data and make policies that reflect your school's current needs.
- **Don't forget the need to build buy-in.** Staff or families who are used to a different approach to policy may be resistant to change at first. Involve the community in reviewing policies and get their feedback on what they want enforcement to look like.

Policy equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. Many people may think that policy enforcement is the antithesis to social justice, especially when policies are too often disparately applied to historically marginalized groups. Yet effective policy is key to creating any kind of equity. When policy is both developed and implemented with an equity lens, it can create the foundation to ensure that all students have the conditions they need to learn. Questions to ask yourself when developing and enforcing policy include the following:

- What policies truly support the creation of a school climate that is safe for everyone? What policies exacerbate power dynamics by making something easier for people in power while disadvantaging others?
- How are policies and their enforcement replicating the injustices that students and families may be experiencing outside of school?
- Are policies useful and effective at creating a safe school environment? Are these policies unnecessarily targeting some groups over others? Are policies going too far in addressing fairly benign behaviors?
- Who is enforcing policies? Are certain groups, such as men of color, being used more often to provide enforcement? How does this perpetuate perceptions of these groups?
- How has data informed the policies in your school? Do the data reveal any disparities in the application of certain policies for some groups of students over others? What do the data say about the effectiveness of policies?

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