

Element 8: Programs and practices

The process for choosing programs and practices should be rooted in the school's overall goals for a safe school climate, as well as the needs of the community. Program selection should follow the other elements of the Safe School Certification framework to ensure that the program fits the school's needs and has buy-in from students, staff, families, and the community.

Program and practices do's

- **Align program and practice decisions to needs identified in data and solutions identified by staff, students, families, and communities.** Choose programs and practices which evidence suggests can significantly improve targeted issues.
- **Ensure programs and practices align to school values, context, and community.** No program or practice will work for all schools. Consider whether identified programs and practices are consistent with your school's approaches and whether they are feasible to implement as designed. Making adaptations to programs can often jeopardize their effectiveness.
- **Discontinue programs and practices that are not working or not aligned to current needs.** Regularly evaluate ongoing programs to assess whether they are achieving their goals and are consistent with the school's current needs, and are not duplicative of other programs.

Program and practices misdirections

- **Don't assume a program or practice will work for your school.** Critically consider the available evidence, including whether the program has been evaluated in contexts similar to your school. Be wary of programs without evaluation evidence; some could even be harmful for your students.
- **Don't implement programs or practices without an evaluation plan.** Develop a plan to track progress toward your goals and change course if outcomes are not achieved.

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.



- **Don't continue programs or practices without considering current needs.** Just because a program has been useful in the past does not mean it fits the current needs of the school community.
- **Don't invest in programs or practices just because they are popular or available.** Ensure that programs are responding to specific needs in your school.

Program and practices equity reflection questions

Applying an equity lens requires considering power, identity, and justice when making decisions, creating systems, or prioritizing issues. If programs are not grounded in an equity lens, they can reinforce systemic inequities and biases. Some programs may work well for some groups of students but cause harm to others. Schools should critically assess the potential impact of programs. Questions to ask when considering programs include:

- How do selected programs and practices address the root cause(s) of issues impacting your school's community?
- How might selected programs and practices reinforce or perpetuate implicit biases about certain groups of students?
- What metrics do we need to evaluate and understand the real impact of our programs and practices? How can we remain committed and dedicated to our goals of a safe school climate, while being flexible in our approach?
- In what ways have we included students, staff, families, and community members in the decisions around programs and practices? What local community groups are we collaborating with to provide training, programming, tools, skills development, etc.? How can we utilize more local resources and feedback from our school community to improve our programs and practices?

Examples of how schools that participated in the Improving School Climate in DC project approached the Programs and Practices Element can be found at:

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