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Op-Ed: Working Together to Improve School Climate for New Jersey Educators and Students

It is no secret that today's educators and students face unprecedented challenges both in the classroom and in life. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is hard at work identifying solutions to elevate the experiences of practicing educators and our current students, allowing us to foster a more positive school climate. While New Jersey is proudly home to some of the highest-performing schools in the nation, we understand that the work to uplift our school communities is never done. The NJDOE remains committed to better understanding and addressing the present needs of our students and teachers so that we may provide the support they need to thrive.

The NJDOE collects data to help assess the effectiveness of our schools, as well as other factors and conditions that foster students' abilities to focus and grow in the classroom. According to data from the Student Safety Data System, there was an observed increase during the 2022-2023 school year in reported incidents of violence, vandalism, substance offenses, and harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) incidents. This was the highest observed level since reporting began, according to a recent report from the [Anti-Bullying Task Force](#) (ABTF). The rise in HIB reports may reflect increased awareness and reporting, which is beneficial in the sense that reporting allows victims and aggressors to ask for and receive support. At the same time, it is important to further examine the root cause of increases in problematic behaviors.

If students are experiencing or worrying about negative interactions with peers, and staff are spending time addressing them, the academic recovery of students might be stalled. In fact, these types of challenges may contribute to increased absenteeism for both staff and students.

It's important to establish that bullying incidents never occur in a vacuum; while they may be driven by individual students or groups, they reflect conditions in the school community and broader environment. It's also important to broaden the lens beyond bullying and focus on a broader range of negative behaviors that may not rise to the level of the formal bullying definition but are still harmful and disruptive to learning and are directly related to overall school climate. The [School Climate Transformation Project](#) at Rutgers University analyzed data from nearly 250 schools that used the new and validated New Jersey School Climate Improvement (NJ SCI) Survey during the 2022-2023 school year. They found that students in grades 3-12, staff, and parents/caregivers had the worst perceptions of negative student interpersonal behaviors, compared to all other areas of school climate.

Yet there is tremendous hope and possibility for improvement, given the availability of innovative resources and supportive networks focused on improving the conditions for learning in schools. To provide the best learning environments possible for all students, schools must understand the current challenges from the point of view of all members of the community. Administering a validated school climate survey with students, staff, and families is essential to establish baseline strengths and areas of need in a school during this uniquely challenging time, and to develop measurable goals and adopt research-based strategies to build on and complement existing efforts to build a positive school climate. The [NJ SCI Survey and Platform](#) provides easy access to high-quality school climate data and

strategic planning tools. They are available at no cost to public New Jersey school districts through a partnership between the NJDOE and the Graduate School for Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University.

Positive school climate is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes for the academic, physical, and social and emotional well-being of students, as well as staff. Data collected statewide using the NJ SCI Survey also identified overall areas of strength, on average, for the sample of schools that used the instrument last year. The areas that stood out as strengths in New Jersey are foundational to the development of a healthy and inclusive school climate. Specifically, students and parents had the most favorable perceptions on topics related to their sense of physical safety. Strong and supportive staff-student relationships were one of the top strengths according to students, staff, and parents and caregivers. Safety and connections between students and adults at school are essential components of a healthy school climate, and a strong foundation to build on in efforts to improve school climate for all members of the community.

Together we can improve conditions in New Jersey schools by inviting students, staff, and families to share their perspectives on what is working well and what needs to be improved with urgency to meet present challenges. Collecting and analyzing school climate data will help our schools get back on track, and the NJ SCI Survey and Platform are resources that the NJDOE is proud to provide for years to come, as schools continuously work to improve and sustain their many areas of strength. School and district leaders are encouraged to visit www.NJSchoolClimate.org to obtain access to the NJ SCI resource.



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