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The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership:

A University-School District Collaboration for Improving School Climate

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As a society, we ask schools to carry a heavy load to meet our present and future needs. We want schools to graduate students who are academically prepared and equipped with skills to be successful citizens and productive members of the workforce. We ask schools to address behavioral issues and mental health problems, to minimize absences and prevent dropout, to counteract substance use and reduce mistreatment and bullying, and to fully prepare all students regardless of family circumstance or community characteristics.

Given these demands, schools may find it difficult to be successful if they are operating in a reactive stance. Specifically, the time, personnel, and resources required to *intervene* across a wide variety of problem areas can be substantial and may quickly exceed what is feasible. A *prevention* focus, which aims to provide a solid foundation of success and quickly resolve small problems, may be a better solution. The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership is one example of an initiative designed to advance prevention practices in schools, with the goal of helping schools achieve the important objectives of education in our society. Specifically, the partnership aims to improve school climate, which has been defined as “the quality and character of school life” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009, p. 182) and is considered to be a foundation of successful education.

## **The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership**

The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership is a collaboration between the Safe and Welcoming Schools project (SWS) in the College of Education at the University of Georgia (UGA), and the Clarke County School District, both located in Athens, Georgia. SWS was established in 2012, but builds upon years of youth development research and work with schools,



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students, and families. A goal of SWS is to translate research to practice to create safe and welcoming learning environments for all students. Other SWS initiatives, aside from the partnership, include working with youth serving organizations such as 4-H, hosting an annual conference and other trainings for educators, and conducting school climate research.

Clarke County School District serves a diverse population of over 13,000 students in 21 schools in an urban/suburban community about 60 miles east of Atlanta. Within the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, SWS staff works intensively with four Clarke County schools (two elementary, two middle), with approximately 20 hours per week of the director's time spent on the partnership.

Three key principles lay the foundation for the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership. The work of the partnership should be (1) based on mutual trust and respect, (2) responsive to the needs of the community, and (3) grounded in research and theory. The work of the partnership should be based on mutual trust and respect.

Within the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, SWS staff collaborate with principals, assistant principals, teacher leaders, counselors, and other school- and district-level staff to measure school climate and develop a plan of action that is responsive to the needs of the school. The goal is not to provide a "one size fits all" set of proscribed actions, but to collaboratively assess needs and determine an evidence-based course of action. This work must necessarily be built on positive relationships, mutual trust, and a shared sense of purpose. Establishing this foundation takes time. The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership with Clarke County School District began in January, 2014, with preliminary meetings, but momentum accelerated in the 2014-15 school year, as SWS staff had the chance to become more embedded in each school. A theme of the partnership is that all partners, whether from the



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university or the school district, have something to gain by the collaboration. That is, all partners have expertise to share as well as something to learn from each other.

The work of the partnership should be responsive to the needs of the community.

An important aspect of fostering goodwill among partners is demonstrating the usefulness of the work done together. For work to be useful, it must be responsive to the needs of the community. To this end, the Safe and Welcoming Schools partnership takes steps to capture the perspectives of diverse stakeholders within the school community (e.g., students, parents, and adults at school) using quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative (e.g., interviews) methods. This information is supplemented with existing data (e.g., discipline reports) to evaluate the climate of the school, identify strengths, and prioritize areas of growth. An important aspect of the information-gathering process is condensing and synthesizing the data into something interpretable. School data can be sliced and diced in an almost limitless number of ways, and it takes discernment to identify important takeaways given an overwhelming amount of information.

In the end, an individualized plan of action is collaboratively developed for each school based on what has been learned. For example, one school determined that a priority area is increasing parental engagement, while another choose to focus on building capacity around trauma-sensitive practices. Within these selected focus areas, evidence-based resources inform next steps. The work of the partnership should be grounded in theory and research evidence.

Insights from the fields of education, psychology, social work, and behavioral health, among others, can guide practice for improving school climate. A goal of the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership is to translate these theory- and research-based insights to practice, improving the learning environment for all students.



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It is beyond the scope of this article to describe all of the ways in which the Safe and Welcoming Schools partnership is grounded in theory and research evidence. Instead, this paper highlights three areas of scholarship—the ecological model, a tiered approach, and authoritative school discipline—and illustrates how they have informed the work of the partnership.

**The ecological model.** The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) describes the interrelation between risk and protective factors across multiple levels of influence (personal characteristics, family characteristics, school and peer characteristics, community and societal characteristics). At each level, individuals will possess a mix of risk and protective factors, with risk factors making problem behavior more likely and protective factors making problem behavior less likely.

The ecological model helps demonstrate the interconnected nature of problem behaviors. For example, imagine a student who is impulsive and prone to risk taking, who comes from an unstable family environment, who feels disconnected from school and associates with friends who don't value education. This student is probably more likely to neglect schoolwork, to skip class, and to try drugs and alcohol, among other problem behaviors. School leaders can use knowledge of risk and protective factors to better understand students and improve school climate (Raczynski & Horne, 2015). Within the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, one way schools have used the ecological perspective is to adopt early warning systems that flag students who begin to exhibit a pattern of low level issues, such as a few absences and a few discipline referrals in the span of a month or two. A supportive team works with the student to understand what is driving the behavior and implement solutions.

**A tiered approach.** The ecological model makes it clear that not all students will have the same needs. Instead, a tiered approach to prevention and intervention is needed. A tiered approach is grounded in Gordon's (1987) prevention framework and embodied by programs such



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as Response to Intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Within the context of the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, we use a tiered perspective to connect students to the level of support that they need. All students need a foundation of a positive school climate. Some students, who appear to be at risk for future problems, need extra support, such as mentoring or group counseling. A small number of students need more intensive support, such as individual counseling or assistance from a social worker. At each level, the aim is to provide evidence-based preventive interventions, such as social and emotional learning (SEL) programming (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Authoritative school discipline. Authoritative school discipline theory (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010) posits that positive relationships within schools will contribute to school safety. Specifically, relationships should be characterized by support and structure. Support involves offering care and warmth, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing needed resources. Structure involves setting high expectations, communicating them clearly, and enforcing rules fairly and consistently. Within the Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, schools reflect on how they provide structure and support for students across all levels of need (i.e., the tiered approach). By documenting the school's current practices, policies, and activities that help to provide support and structure, schools can identify areas of strength and pinpoint gaps. For example, one school determined that they needed a more formal orientation process for new students that provided basic information about the school (structure) and helped connect them to the social environment via a "buddy system" (support).



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## Conclusions and Next Steps

Given the critical role of schools in nurturing children and shaping our society's future, creating safe and welcoming school environments is a high priority. School climate appears to be among the most important modifiable factors to improve educational outcomes.

The Safe and Welcoming Schools Partnership, a collaboration between a university and a school district, attempts to improve school climate through evidence-based approaches that take into account the distinct needs of each school. Because the partnership is a relatively new initiative, it is not yet possible to assess the long-term impacts of the collaboration. However, preliminary indicators, such as reductions in discipline incidents, are promising. If these early successes are sustained, the partnership may yield important insights on how schools and universities can work together to create school environments where all students can thrive.

## About the Author



Katherine Raczynski, Ph.D. is the founding director of the Safe and Welcoming Schools project in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. She has worked directly with schools, students, and families to improve school climate and prevent mistreatment for nearly 15 years. Through *Safe and Welcoming Schools*, she consults with schools, districts, and youth-serving organizations, such as 4-H, to help create positive learning environments. She also organizes an annual conference on school climate. An active researcher, she regularly presents at scholarly conferences and publishes academic work. Her work emphasizes the importance of early prevention of problems and actively promoting positive outcomes.



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