

Survey: Is Your School An Emotionally Safe Place? *by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission.*

This survey lists a number of practices which characterize a school with an emotionally safe climate. This tool can help you evaluate your school's goals, policies and intentions, as well as the degree to which each exists in actual practice.

The list is deliberately idealistic and comprehensive. Studies suggest that each item is an important component of an emotionally safe school environment, and that emotional safety is built on a combination of all of the characteristics listed in this survey.

As schools strive to achieve the specific behaviors each item suggests, they will no doubt see improvements in the culture of the school, as well as in the performance, commitment, behavior and interactions that occur within its walls. Likewise, as schools increase the agreement with each of the items in this survey, they can expect a reduction of stress commonly associated with failure, rebelliousness, disruptiveness and passive student behavior.

Instructions

You may wish to use this survey to evaluate the degree to which your school is committed to each item in terms of its philosophy or vision, as well as the degree to which the behaviors described in each item regularly occur in actual practice. You can rate each item for an individual classroom, or according to your perception of the school environment as a whole.

Use the following scale to rate each item:

- 1- Strongly agree
- 2- Somewhat agree
- 3- Somewhat disagree
- 4- Strongly disagree

Need for Meaningful Outcomes (Positive Consequences), Structure, Boundaries (Limits) and Follow-Through

- We make a deliberate effort to anticipate what students and teachers (and parents) will need in various situations in order to prevent problems from occurring.
- We have and communicate boundaries and policies that clearly describe desirable and acceptable student behaviors.
- We have and communicate boundaries and policies that clearly describe desirable and acceptable staff behaviors.

- The school environment is reward oriented (as opposed to being punishment oriented): Rules and boundaries emphasize the positive consequences of cooperation and compliance.
- Our goal is to motivate through access to positive outcomes, rather than through avoidance or fear of negative outcomes.
- We attempt to motivate students with the promise of a positive outcome, rather than using statements that offer conditional approval or safety (avoidance of disapproval, punishment) for cooperation (threats).
- We attempt to follow through consistently, withholding (or withdrawing) positive outcomes until students follow through on what is required on their end.
- We are committed to avoiding warnings, threats, meaningless or delayed (negative) consequences.
- We make students and their parents aware, as soon as possible, of changes in behavior or performance that could affect grades, promotion or graduation.
- We communicate with parents on a regular basis about what their kids are doing well.

Need for Respect, Belonging and Dignity

- We attempt to avoid equating students' worth with their behavior or achievement.
- We attempt to avoid humiliation, shaming, sarcasm, ridicule or other forms of attack with regard to students' personality, achievement or behavior.
- We attempt to avoid depending on negative adult reactions (anger, punishment, disappointment) in order to motivate students (or control their behavior).
- We recognize that students have a need to experience meaningful positive outcomes, just as adults do.
- We treat our students with the same respect we want them to show us and one another.

- We recognize that our students have a need for dignity, purpose, success, impact (seeing outcomes of choices and behaviors), acceptance, belonging, attention, structure, power and fun, among other things.
- We encourage students to have and voice their own thoughts and opinions.
- We encourage students to speak up for their own instructional needs (for example, more help, additional information or resources, clarification, other learning needs).
- We encourage inquiry and debate, and attempt to avoid negatively reacting to students who challenge or disagree with adults (although we do ask students to present their positions respectfully).
- We attempt to adhere to the same standards of behavior (including language and tone of voice) that we expect or require from our students.
- We regard—and use—a student’s mistakes simply as opportunities for new learning.
- We avoid responding with impatience, anger or disappointment to a student who is having difficulty understanding or mastering a new concept or performing a new skill.
- We respect students’ affective needs and are committed to listening and supporting their feelings in positive ways.
- We work to eliminate prejudices toward students based on their racial or cultural background, physical appearance; academic, artistic or athletic competence; sexual orientation; family history; prior achievement or performance.
- We avoid gossiping about students or their families.
- We strive to stay aware of put-downs expressed by students or staff, especially those that involve the use of slurs or derogatory names or remarks.
- We respond immediately to put-downs, slurs and derogatory names or remarks (rather than ignoring or excusing them).

Need for Autonomy (Power and Control)

- We accept the importance of students' learning decision-making and self-management skills.
- We encourage kids to set goals and evaluate options in order to take responsibility for solving their own problems, rather than "rescuing" them or telling them what they should do.
- We allow students to self-manage with regard to materials and resources.
- We encourage students to self-manage their personal needs within clearly stated boundaries (ex: drinking water or using the restrooms as needed).
- We allow and encourage students to have input in and make decisions about their learning (topics, presentation, media, sequence, assignments, need for additional practice, readiness for the next skill or topic, etc.).
- We allow and encourage students to have input in and make decisions about how, where and with whom they work.
- We hold students accountable for their behavioral choices without blaming, shaming, attacking or punishing (ex: withholding positive outcome, privileges, credit for work due).
- Students are encouraged to initiate and take risks regarding their own learning.
- We allow and encourage students to create, design, request or renegotiate projects and assignments to make them personally meaningful and relevant.

Need for Recognition, Attention and Emotional Safety

- We attempt to recognize positive behavior with statements that emphasize a positive outcome or meaningful benefit to the students, rather than using statements that emphasize students' worth ("goodness"), our happiness or pleasure, or students' ability to please us.
- We attempt to reinforce positive behavior by allowing positive outcomes to occur, continue or become available, contingent, for example, on work completion or non-disruptive behavior.

- We attempt to meet students' needs for attention in positive, constructive and proactive ways in order to diminish the tendency for them to act out to get these needs met.
- We strive to stay aware of changes in patterns in students' behavior and to maintain a sense of how students are doing (that is, not just focusing on their academic performance).
- We support students in crisis and provide them with appropriate outlets.
- Our students know that if they need to talk, we are willing to listen (or set a time when we can listen, or refer them to someone who can listen).
- We respect students' needs for confidentiality to the degree that doing so will not put that student or anyone else in danger.
- We strive to maintain awareness of how students treat one another.
- We immediately respond to incidents we witness that involve any form of bullying, harassment or threat to a student's safety.

Need for Options as a Learner (Individuality)

- We attempt to determine what interests and motivates our students and use this information in our planning and instruction.
- We attempt to identify various aspects of our students' individual learning needs (such as learning styles, modality preferences, dominance profiles, temperament or personality profiles), and use this information in our planning and instruction.
- We attempt to identify various types of intelligences (linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal) and use this information to capitalize and build on students' strengths.
- We provide resources and activities to accommodate a variety of intelligences in each class.
- We attempt to accommodate a variety of modality strengths (visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic preferences) in our directions and activities.

- We attempt to accommodate a variety of learning style and preferences in our instruction and assignments.
- We recognize and attempt to accommodate the needs of tactile and kinesthetic learners (as well as high visual, verbal and auditory learners).
- We acknowledge and appreciate the fact that some students may pay attention without sitting up straight and making continual eye contact.
- We make sure kids have ample opportunities to move during the day.
- We teach children ways to self-regulate (maintain appropriate alertness for the particular class or activity) without disrupting others.
- We attempt to accommodate a variety of learning preferences by offering choices, particularly during independent work time (ex: seating or location in room, affiliation, music or sound, intake, etc.).

We offer a variety of assessment tools to allow students to demonstrate mastery in ways besides paper-and-pencil tests.

Need for Success (Academic, Social, Intrapersonal)

- We assess student ability before beginning instruction or assigning tasks.
- We attempt to accept students exactly the way they come to us, build on what they know, and encourage growth from wherever they start.
- We attempt to provide opportunities for success for each child in the school, even if he or she is far behind curricular expectations.
- We attempt to match instruction and assignments to individual student needs according to their current skill or mastery levels or prior experience.
- We have adopted the belief that the primary purpose of evaluating a student's work is to determine what type of instruction or resources that particular student needs next.
- We invite and consider student input when assigning placement, follow-up work or grades.

- If a student fails to master a concept or skill, we see our role as that of improving understanding, rather than simply evaluating his/her performance before moving on to the next concept.
- We encourage students to use our feedback to improve their work and resubmit (for a higher grade, for example, or until they get it right).
- We attempt to build interpersonal skills such as communication skills, respect, tolerance, compassion, resistance to teasing and peer pressure, and other positive social behaviors.
- We attempt to build intrapersonal (character) skills such as persistence, responsibility, honesty, integrity, as well as confidence, the ability to stick up for oneself, problem-solving skills and resistance to failure, defeatism or victim thinking.

Note areas of greatest strengths:

Note areas most in need of improvements:

Excerpted and adapted from *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.
Buy the book at: <http://janebluestein.com/2012/book-creating-emotionally-safe-schools/>.

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