

RESEARCH TITLE

School Climate and Student Well-Being: A Comprehensive Review of the Pathways Linking Positive Environments to Academic Success

Areen Khalid Mahmoud Jabarin¹

¹ Faculty of Graduate Studies, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine.

Email: areen.jabarin@gmail.com

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Abstract

The climate of a school is a critical factor that extends beyond the physical environment, influencing the holistic development of students. A positive school climate is consistently linked to enhanced student well-being, which in turn serves as a foundational support for academic success. This comprehensive review examines the complex pathways through which a positive school environment fosters student well-being and ultimately leads to improved academic outcomes. By synthesizing recent peer-reviewed literature from the last five years (2020-2025), this article explores the multidimensional nature of school climate, including its affective, safety, and interpersonal components. Key findings indicate that a favorable school climate, characterized by strong teacher-student relationships, a sense of safety and belonging, and supportive peer interactions, is related to negative mental health symptoms and absence. Furthermore, the evidence demonstrates a direct and significant correlation between a positive school climate, heightened student well-being, and superior academic performance. The review also discusses the role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in amplifying these positive effects. The implications of these findings are significant for educators, administrators, and policymakers, underscoring the importance of fostering a development school climate as a primary strategy for promoting both student well-being and academic excellence.

Key Words: school climate, student well-being, academic success, sense of belonging, teacher-student relationships, school safety, social-emotional learning.

المناخ المدرسي والرفاه النفسي للطلبة: مراجعة شاملة لمسارات ارتباط البيئات الإيجابية بالنجاح الأكاديمي

المستخلص

يُعدّ مناخ المدرسة عاملاً محوريًا يتجاوز حدود البيئة المادية ليؤثّر في التطوّر الشامل للطلبة. وقد ارتبط المناخ المدرسي الإيجابي بشكل مستمر بتحسين الرفاه النفسي للطلبة، مما يشكّل بدوره قاعدة أساسية تدعم النجاح الأكاديمي. تتناول هذه المراجعة الشاملة المسارات المعقّدة التي من خلالها يعزّز المناخ المدرسي الإيجابي رفاه الطلبة، ومن ثم يؤدي إلى تحسين مخرجاتهم الأكاديمية. ومن خلال تحليل الأدبيات المحكمة المنشورة خلال السنوات الخمس الأخيرة (2020-2025)، يستكشف هذا المقال الطبيعة متعددة الأبعاد للمناخ المدرسي، بما في ذلك الجوانب الوجدانية، والأمن، والعلاقات البينشخصية. وتشير النتائج الرئيسية إلى أن وجود مناخ مدرسي داعم—يتميّز بعلاقات قوية بين المعلم والطالب، وشعور بالأمان والانتماء، وتفاعلات إيجابية بين الأقران—يرتبط بانخفاض الأعراض المرتبطة بالصحة النفسية وانخفاض معدلات الغياب. كما تُظهر الأدلة وجود علاقة مباشرة وذات دلالة بين المناخ المدرسي الإيجابي وارتفاع مستويات رفاه الطلبة وتحسّن أدائهم الأكاديمي. وتناقش المراجعة أيضًا دور التعلّم الاجتماعي العاطفي (SEL) في تعزيز هذه الآثار الإيجابية. وتُبرز هذه النتائج أهمية العمل على ترسيخ مناخ مدرسي مُحفّز للنمو كاستراتيجية رئيسة لتعزيز رفاه الطلبة والتميّز الأكاديمي على حدّ سواء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المناخ المدرسي، رفاه الطلبة، النجاح الأكاديمي، الشعور بالانتماء، العلاقات بين المعلم والطالب، السلامة المدرسية، التعلّم الاجتماعي العاطفي.

1. Introduction

In the pursuit of educational excellence, the focus has often been placed on curriculum, instructional methods, and standardized testing. However, a growing body of evidence underscores the importance of the school environment itself as a powerful determinant of student success. The concept of school climate, defined as the quality and character of school life, includes the norms, values, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures that shape the experiences of students and staff (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020). It is the atmosphere of a school that can either foster growth, engagement, and well-being or create barriers to learning and development.

Recent research has consistently demonstrated that a positive school climate is not only a desirable feature but a fundamental condition for both student well-being and academic achievement (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025). Students who perceive their school environment as safe, supportive, and engaging are more likely to flourish emotionally, socially, and academically. This review synthesizes findings from recent, peer-reviewed studies to provide a comprehensive overview of the pathways connecting a positive school climate to student well-being and subsequent academic success. The study explores the multidimensional construct of school climate, examines its direct impact on various facets of student well-being, and finally, traces the link between enhanced well-being and improved academic outcomes. By understanding these connections, educational stakeholders can implement targeted interventions more effectively to create environments where every student has the opportunity to flourish.

2. The Multidimensional Construct of School Climate

School climate is a complicated construct, not restricted to a single element. It is the merging of various dimensions that collectively define the learning environment. Drawing from recent literature, a comprehensive model of school climate includes several key domains. Delgado-Galindo et al. (2025) identify four critical dimensions: the affective, safety, interpersonal relationships, and knowledge of rules dimensions. Similarly, Daily, Smith, et al. (2020) conceptualize school climate through five elements: interpersonal connections, school safety, academic equity, school satisfaction, and school connection. Synthesizing these frameworks, we can understand school climate as surrounding the following core components:

- Safety:** This dimension refers to the physical and psychological security students feel at school. It includes freedom from violence, bullying, and annoyance, as well as a sense of emotional security and mutual respect among all members of the school community (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025; Long et al., 2020).
- Interpersonal Relationships:** The quality of relationships among all stakeholders is a foundation of school climate. This includes the relationship between teachers and students, the nature of peer interactions, and the collaborative spirit among school staff (Wang, 2023; Long et al., 2020).
- Teaching and Learning (Affective & Instructional Environment):** This dimension relates to the social and emotional nature of the instructional environment. It involves high but achievable academic expectations, teacher support for learning, and a focus on mastery and student engagement rather than only performance (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025; Daily, Mann, et al., 2020).
- Sense of Belonging and Connection:** This component involves the degree to which students feel they are a valued and respected part of the school community. A strong sense of belonging is essential for students' overall development and is fostered through active

participation and supportive relationships (Bora & Altun, 2025).

These dimensions are not independent but are deeply connected, collectively shaping students' perceptions and experiences of their school environment. A meta-analysis by Erdem and Kaya (2024) confirmed that both school-level and classroom-level climates are significant correlates of academic achievement, with the school climate demonstrating a stronger relationship.

3. Pathways from School Climate to Student Well-Being

A positive school climate directly encourages student well-being through several interconnected pathways. Well-being, in this context, is a holistic concept encompassing mental, emotional, and social health.

3.1. Enhancing Mental Health through Safety and Support

A fundamental pathway through which school climate affects well-being is by ensuring students feel safe. Research consistently shows that a safe and supportive environment is a powerful buffer against mental health challenges. A longitudinal study by Daily, Mann, et al. (2020) found that positive student perceptions of school climate were associated with improved student outcomes. When students feel safe, they are less likely to experience anxiety, depression, and other internalizing symptoms. Franco et al. (2022) found that a positive school climate was associated with lower mental health symptoms, with specific dimensions having distinct effects. For instance, positive student-student relationships were negatively related to depressive symptoms, while supportive student-teacher relationships were negatively linked to aggression. Conversely, a perceived school climate of intense exam pressure has been associated with worse mental health outcomes (Long et al., 2020).

3.2. The Critical Role of Interpersonal Relationships

The quality of relationships within a school is essential to student well-being. Positive teacher-student relationships, characterized by trust, respect, and emotional support, are a basis of a healthy school climate. Wang (2023) notes that students who experience such relationships are more likely to exhibit delicate engagement, motivation, and a genuine enthusiasm for learning. These relationships contribute to increased self-esteem and overall satisfaction with the school experience. Teachers who show concern for students' needs and passions, and who treat them with empathy and understanding, build a strong psychological connection that is crucial for academic success (Wang, 2023).

Similarly, supportive peer relationships are vital. The school environment is a primary context for adolescent social development. While peer victimization is a significant risk factor for poor mental health, positive peer interactions and a sense of community among students can promote well-being (Long et al., 2020). A climate that fosters collaboration over competition and encourages prosocial behavior can help students build the supportive social networks they need to succeed.

3.3. Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Closely linked to interpersonal relationships is the concept of sense of school belonging (SoSB), which is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. Bora and Altun (2025) describe belonging as a fundamental human need and a powerful motivator. Their research, based on teacher perspectives, found that students' sense of belonging improves when they actively participate in school life, and when teachers, parents, and school leaders all contribute to a supportive and engaging environment. A strong sense of belonging is essential for emotional well-being and overall development, serving as a protective factor against negative outcomes.

Students with a high sense of belonging feel safer, more connected, and more valued, which directly contributes to their psychological health (Bora & Altun, 2025).

4. From Well-Being to Academic Success

The positive effects of a school climate promoting academic success create a solid foundation for student well-being. Students who are emotionally and psychologically healthy are better equipped to learn and achieve.

4.1. Improving Attendance and Engagement

One of the most direct links between school climate and academic performance is through student attendance. Students who feel unsafe, disconnected, or unhappy at school are more likely to be absent. A study by Daily, Smith, et al. (2020) involving over 14,000 middle and high school students found that a positive school climate and high satisfaction with school significantly reduced absenteeism. Since students with chronic absences tend to struggle academically, improving the school environment is a potent strategy for keeping students in the classroom and engaged in learning. When students feel a strong sense of belonging and are engaged by positive relationships with teachers and peers, their motivation to attend school and participate actively in their education increases (Wang, 2023).

4.2. Boosting Academic Performance

The positive impact of a school climate, enhanced well-being, and increased engagement leads to improved academic performance. A study by Daily, Mann, et al. (2020) provided strong evidence for this pathway, demonstrating that students with higher perceptions of a positive school climate exhibited sustained or improved academic achievement over time. Notably, this effect was observed across the performance spectrum: a positive climate helped high-achieving students maintain their performance while also strengthening the academic standing of lower-achieving students, thereby helping to reduce the achievement gap.

A recent meta-analysis by Erdem and Kaya (2024) further solidifies this link. Their analysis of dozens of studies confirmed that both school and classroom climates are significant correlates of academic achievement, with the overall school climate having a medium effect size. This indicates that the collective environment of the school has a powerful influence on student learning and success.

5. The Role of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Interventions aimed at improving school climate are often linked to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. SEL is the process through which individuals acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. Research shows that SEL and school climate are mutually reinforcing. A positive school climate provides the supportive context necessary for effective SEL, and SEL, in turn, helps students develop the competencies that contribute to a more positive climate. Evidence from hundreds of studies indicates a consistent, reliable effect of SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, with students participating in SEL programs demonstrating improved academic performance.

6. Discussion and Implications

The evidence presented in this review presents a clear and compelling case: a positive school climate is not an optional extra but an essential component of an effective education system. The pathways are clear: a safe, supportive, and engaging school environment fosters student

well-being by enhancing mental health, promoting positive relationships, and introducing a sense of belonging. This foundation of well-being, in turn, leads to better attendance, greater engagement, and ultimately, higher academic achievement. The findings from recent large-scale studies and meta-analyses provide robust support for these connections (Daily, Mann, et al., 2020; Erdem & Kaya, 2024).

The implications for practice are profound. School leaders and policymakers should prioritize creating a positive school climate as a core strategy for school improvement. This requires a shift from a narrow focus on academic sides to a more holistic approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of students' social, emotional, and academic lives. Key areas for intervention include:

- Investing in Teacher Development: Providing teachers with training in classroom management, relationship-building skills, and emotional intelligence can empower them to create more supportive learning environments (Wang, 2023).
- Promoting a Culture of Safety and Respect: Implementing comprehensive anti-bullying programs and clear, consistently enforced rules can ensure all students feel physically and emotionally safe (Delgado-Galindo et al., 2025).
- Fostering a Sense of Belonging: Creating opportunities for active student participation, offering extracurricular activities, and ensuring that all students feel seen and valued can strengthen their connection to the school community (Bora & Altun, 2025).
- Integrating SEL: Implementing evidence-based SEL programs can equip students with the skills they need to navigate social and emotional challenges, thereby contributing to a more positive climate for all.

Future research should continue to explore these relationships, particularly by examining the effectiveness of various school climate interventions across diverse student populations and school contexts.

7. Conclusion

The link between school climate, student well-being, and academic success is undeniable and supported by recent, high-quality research. A positive school environment is the soil in which students can grow, not just as learners, but as healthy, well-rounded individuals. By intentionally and systematically creating a climate of safety, support, and belonging, schools can unlock the full potential of every student, paving the way for a future where academic success and personal well-being are achieved.

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