

CEC's Policy on

Safe and Positive School Climate

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognizes the important impact a safe and positive school climate has on the personal development and academic achievement of all students.

Research has shown that schools implementing supportive and positive school climate strategies are more successful in creating environments conducive to learning. Recent incidents of school violence, including harassment directed at students with disabilities and/or gifts and talents, have drawn attention to the unacceptable cost of not assuring a safe and positive climate in our schools for all students. Furthermore, students with disabilities may be more at risk because they do not necessarily have the ability to understand and report what is happening to them.

Such incidents, as well as surveys of students and faculty regarding safety, document continuing and pervasive harassment and bullying experienced by students and reveal that these actions are more likely to be perpetrated on the basis of appearance and actual or perceived differences in ethnicity, race, language, abilities, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, or religion.

As student enrollment becomes increasingly diverse, schools are challenged to assure that all students feel valued and supported. Available research confirms that students feel safer and learn better when schools have clear policies prohibiting harassment and discrimination and when all members of the school community (students, parents, educators, administrators, and other school personnel) actively uphold the right of every student to a safe learning environment. Harassment can take many forms, including

cyber bullying and other technological/electronic methods. In addition, although overt acts easily come to the attention of schools, it is essential that covert acts are recognized and addressed. CEC believes that all members of the school community have a critical role to play in assuring that students have access to a safe and supportive school environment.

In light of legal mandates and professional standards that promote the use of evidence-based practices to increase positive academic and social-emotional behaviors among students, CEC believes that special educators must acquire and use a knowledge base of effective practices for promoting supportive school climates in ways that support human and civil rights and promote social justice for the diverse student populations in today's schools.

Discrimination or harassment directed at students or adults on the basis of ethnic and racial backgrounds, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious and spiritual values, and geographic location violates the human and/or civil rights of individuals who are the targets of such behavior.

To ensure the creation of safe learning environments that contribute to all students' cognitive, academic, social-emotional, and ethical development, it is the policy of the Council for Exceptional Children that:

- + All schools should have clear policies that prohibit harassment and discriminatory behaviors of any kind, including those related to racial and ethnic background,

language, age, abilities, family status, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious and spiritual values, and geographic location. Students and staff should be clearly informed of such policies and procedures, including data collection, reporting, sanctions, and indemnity to those reporting incidents. Educational efforts at the federal, provincial, state, and local levels should promote policies, guidelines, and universal interventions designed to reduce or prevent discrimination or harassment as well as to create a school climate that is conducive to respect and dignity for all individuals.

- + Because bullying and harassment create emotional wounds that amplify the hardships of exceptionality as well as jeopardize the emotional and mental well-being of students, all teachers, administrators, and other school support personnel with knowledge of harassment or bullying carry the responsibility to report these behaviors to relevant authorities and school personnel similar to the professional obligation to report child abuse.
- + In recognition that students' families, professionals, and staff may also be at risk of experiencing discrimination on the basis of factors including ethnic and racial background, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious and spiritual values, and geographic location; the school policies, activities, and interventions related to a positive school climate should address the needs and safety of adults as well as students.
- + School-based implementation of antidiscrimination policies must equally support and provide open access for the participation of students in activities and student-led groups designed to enhance a respectful, safe, and positive school climate and to promote respect for diversity in general or with respect to one or more diversity elements.
- + To support antidiscriminatory policies, schools should provide students, staff, and administrators with access to

a range of resources, including designated professionals with expertise in intercultural and diversity-related counseling and human relations.

- + School policies should promote practices and curricula that build a sense of community and understanding for and among all students in recognition of the positive relationship between school climate, learning environments, and educational outcomes for all individuals.
- + Professional development for educators and educational administrators should build schools' capacity to implement a diversity-rich curriculum as well as to respond effectively to instances of harassment, bullying, or intimidation. To this end, such activities should enhance educators' skills and strategies for effectively delivering culturally sensitive educational experiences within the context of current standards-based curricula. Similarly, professional development for administrators should include their leadership skills and strategies for developing and implementing antidiscrimination policies and for ensuring positive learning environments for all students. Schools should provide opportunities for parent education to complement professional development for educators.
- + Teacher and educational leadership preparation programs should prepare educators, administrators, and related services personnel to create safe learning environments and to intervene effectively in the event that harassment or discriminatory behaviors occur. This includes understanding the range of ways that schools can evaluate school climate comprehensively using evidence-based practices as well as how the findings can be used to build authentic learning communities that support positive youth development and academic achievement.

Reference: Council for Exceptional Children 2008 Policy Manual.

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To access CEC's Position on Safe and Positive School Climate, go to www.cec.sped.org > Policy & Advocacy > CEC Professional Policies. For further information, contact Deborah A. Ziegler, Associate Executive Director, Policy and Advocacy Services, Council for Exceptional Children, 703-264-9406 (Phone), 703-243-0410 (FAX), 800-224-6830 (Toll free), 866-915-5000 (TTY), debz@cec.sped.org.

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