Ensuring a Safe and Positive Climate in School and Community Settings for Children and Youth With Disabilities

As advocates for children and youth with exceptionalities, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) recognizes the influence a safe and positive school and community climate has on meeting the promises made in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. As professionals committed to upholding the dignity and worth of all individuals, we believe this extends to include all families, children, and youth, regardless of ethnic and racial backgrounds, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic or immigration status, and religious and spiritual values. We contend that all members of a community, including the families, teachers, and staff members who work there, should feel safe, welcomed, and supported in a setting free from bullying, discrimination, harassment, aggression, violence, and abuse. This is essential to offering educational equity for all children and youth, as well as providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Members of CEC recognize that an essential first step to building safe and positive school and community settings is the recognition and elimination of any inherent biases school leaders, teachers, and other school personnel may hold regarding individual students' race, culture, and other characteristics. To make this a reality, members of the school and community setting must acquire a wide knowledge base of effective practices that support human and civil rights and promote social justice for the diverse student populations in today's schools.

For children and youth with disabilities, who come from all backgrounds, recognizing and embracing their unique characteristics is essential to providing safe and positive school and community settings. Assessments, teaching practices, and disciplinary responses must be free of bias to ensure all children and youth learn in settings that support their social, emotional, and academic success.

As a professional organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth with exceptionalities, members of CEC advocate for investing in policies and practices that build a community. This includes a focus on providing adequate mental health services for children and youth, as well as for the professionals who support their academic growth and social-emotional learning. Therefore, we reject any policy that would emphasize reactionary practices, such as increased surveillance and weapons among school staff members, as a way to control behaviors.

Addressing School Safety through Planning, Policy, and Practice

Providing safe school and community settings for children and youth with disabilities requires strategic planning and the development of comprehensive school safety plans. Designing such plans requires a multidisciplinary perspective to ensure they are data driven, culturally competent, and evidence-based. School and community members must collaborate in the design and identification of the resources necessary to promote the physical safety of students and staff, while maintaining the rights and dignity of all children and youth. This entails providing adequate mental and physical health professionals, including school nurses, counselors, and social workers. Federal and state policies must uphold the value of such plans and make available the funding necessary to support their implementation.

As an organization, members of CEC recognize that for all individuals to feel safe, comprehensive safety plans and policies must emphasize proactive approaches to reducing unwanted behavior. We have long advocated the implementation of tiered intervention models, including Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), as an evidence-based practice to support explicit instruction in social emotional learning and creating school-wide positive expectations. To do so effectively, school leaders and teachers must employ multiple measures of school climate, such as climate survey responses and rates of student suspension or chronic absenteeism. Data should reflect every level (within a classroom, within a school, across a district, and statewide) to monitor school safety, to ensure certain groups are not disproportionately represented, and to prevent unwanted behavior through an emphasis on proactive supports and targeted interventions.

Ensuring Adequate Preparation and Active Participation

All members of the school community must be adequately prepared to implement culturally competent, proactive approaches to ensuring a safe environment. This includes consideration of the social-emotional learning of children and youth and preparation to implement trauma-informed teaching strategies, de-escalation techniques, conflict resolution and peer mediation, and practices of restorative justice. These practices should be reflected in the systematic preparation and evaluation of administrators, teachers, and other school personnel.

Now more than ever, learning extends beyond the school walls. Therefore, school members must be prepared to actively uphold the right of every student to a safe learning environment both in person and in virtual environments. All members of the community must be vigilant regarding the many ways in which bullying and aggression can occur, including cyberbullying and cyber aggression. School leaders, teachers, and other school personnel should receive adequate preparation to take an active role in ensuring the online safety of all students, especially those most vulnerable.

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 CEC that:

- 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.

- School and community setting 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.

- School and community setting practices should embrace positive approaches to reducing unwanted behavior, while also embracing culturally-relevant and sustaining instructional practices.

- Ensuring all children and youth feel included means limiting the reliance on school exclusionary practices, such as suspension and expulsion. Examination of underlying patterns of disproportionality by race/ethnicity, disability, and other individual characteristics should take place at all levels: within schools, across a district and state, and nationally.

- Creating inclusive and safe school and community settings also limits reliance on time-outs, restraint, and seclusion as a means for controlling unwanted behavior. As described in the **CEC Position Statement on Time-Out, Restraint, and Seclusion**, these crisis management practices do little to encourage the development of new prosocial behaviors, and therefore should only be used in extreme cases.

- Professional learning opportunities for administrators in school and community settings should affirm their leadership skills for developing research-based, trauma-informed, proactive, and supportive school climate strategies, while also ensuring preparedness for implementing anti-bullying, harassment, and discrimination policies and for ensuring positive learning environments for all children and youth.

- Similarly, professional learning opportunities for educators, related service providers, and instructional staff members should build a schools' capacity to implement research-based, trauma-informed, proactive, and supportive school climate strategies. This includes preparedness for implementing anti-bullying, harassment, and discrimination policies and for ensuring positive learning environments for all children and youth.

- School and community settings should seek opportunities to provide families and community members with information about trauma-informed, proactive, and supportive school climate strategies to advance anti-bullying, harassment, and discrimination policies and ensure positive learning and community environments for all children and youth.

- All schools and community settings should have clear policies that prohibit bullying, harassment, and discriminatory behaviors of any kind, including those related to ethnic and racial background, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic and immigration status, religious and spiritual values, and geographic location. Students and staff members should be clearly informed of such policies and procedures, including having clear and shared definitions and data collection, reporting, sanctions, and indemnity to those reporting incidents.

- Bullying and harassment create emotional wounds that amplify the hardships of exceptionality as well as jeopardize the emotional and mental well-being of students; therefore, teachers, administrators, and other school support personnel with knowledge of harassment or bullying should 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 families, professionals, and staff may also be at risk of experiencing discrimination on the basis of factors including ethnic and racial backgrounds, language, age, abilities, family status, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious and spiritual values, and geographic location, school policies, activities, and interventions related to a positive school climate should address the needs and safety of adults within the school and community, as well as students.

- School-based implementation of anti-discrimination 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 anti-discriminatory policies, school and community settings should provide all members with access to a range of resources, including mental health professionals with expertise in intercultural and diversity-related counseling and human-relations.

- Programs that prepare teachers, administrators, and related services personnel must include explicit training in how to create and sustain safe and inclusive learning environments. This includes preparation in the range of ways schools can evaluate school climate comprehensively based on credible research and how to use data on school and classroom climate and discipline to build learning communities that support positive child and youth development and academic achievement.