

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

**Cultivating Community: A Comprehensive Examination of School Climate and Culture
at North East Middle School**

A Doctoral Capstone Project

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Department of Education

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Doctor of Education

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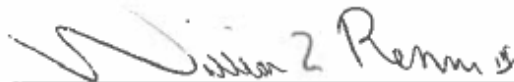
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Dedication

I dedicate my Doctoral Capstone Project work to everyone who has supported me throughout this ambitious and arduous journey. To my wife, Jordyn, you have spent the last twenty years supporting me to be the best partner, father, educator, and leader that I can be. Thank you for being my Excel wizard, my rock, my confidante, and my constant reminder of what truly matters. Your strength, patience, and unwavering belief in me have been the foundation of everything I have accomplished to this point. I love you.

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Abstract

This capstone research project explored stakeholder perceptions of school climate and culture at North East Middle School during the 2024–2025 academic year. A positive school climate is linked to stronger student engagement, achievement, and social-emotional growth. Using a mixed-methods design, the study collected data through surveys, structured interviews, walkthrough observations, and PBIS implementation results. Three research questions guided the analysis: Stakeholder perceptions of climate and culture, underlying factors contributing to current conditions, and strategies for improvement. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were coded thematically. Results indicated generally positive perceptions across students, staff, and families, particularly in areas of safety and relationships. However, concerns included inconsistent communication, uneven adult supervision in hallways and lunchrooms, and the need for stronger behavior expectations. PBIS data revealed early signs of progress, particularly through recognition systems and targeted reteaching of expectations. Overall, findings suggest that improving visibility of adults, refining behavior systems, and enhancing stakeholder engagement will help strengthen the overall climate and culture of the school.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The climate and culture of a learning environment play a critical role in shaping the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of students and educators. North East Middle School, situated within the North East School District in Erie County, Pennsylvania, is currently at a crossroads where cultivating a positive and productive school climate aligns directly with the district's overarching Vision 2028 initiative (Hartzell, 2024). As the newly-appointed leader of this institution, the researcher recognizes the pressing need to address the existing challenges that hinder the school's ability to foster an environment of safety, collaboration, and excellence. This chapter introduces the focus of this doctoral capstone project: *Understanding and improving the current school climate and culture at North East Middle School*.

Background

The importance of a positive school climate is well-documented in educational research. Effective learning environments promote student engagement, academic success, and emotional well-being. As Thapa et al. (2013) note, "school climate is defined as 'the quality and character of school life,' shaped by the shared experiences of students, teachers, and staff through relationships, values, norms, and attitudes" (p. 358). Conversely, schools with negative climates often face higher rates of disciplinary issues, disengagement, and turnover among staff and students. Research by Wang and Degol (2016) emphasizes that "positive school climates reduce achievement gaps by fostering equitable learning environments" (p. 63). The researcher's role as the principal of North East Middle School provides a unique vantage point to assess and address these issues comprehensively. Guided by the North East School District's belief in the mantra

“Maslow before Bloom” (Berger, 2020, para. 1), the researcher prioritizes meeting the basic social-emotional needs of all students and staff as the foundation for any academic success.

According to teacher survey data from February 2024 and anecdotal notes from conversations with students and families, the challenges facing North East Middle School include inconsistent perceptions of safety and belonging among stakeholders, disciplinary disparities, and a lack of cohesion by past administration in fostering a collaborative culture (Garland, 2024). Addressing these concerns aligns directly with the researcher’s professional responsibility to lead a school where every individual feels valued and supported.

Capstone Focus

The purpose of this capstone project is to explore and address the factors that influence the school climate and culture at North East Middle School. The researcher’s reflections, grounded in both personal experience and initial contextual observations, reveal a pressing need for targeted interventions that address disparities in student engagement, teacher morale, and collaborative practices. As research highlights, fostering a positive school climate requires intentional strategies to bridge these gaps. For instance, Grissom et al. (2013) emphasize that effective leadership, characterized by promoting collaboration and professional development, directly impacts teacher satisfaction and student outcomes (p. 444). Similarly, Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) emphasize that principals who model continuous learning and foster collaboration among staff create environments that support both teacher satisfaction and student success (p. 27). These evidence-based insights have been instrumental in shaping the focus of this research, highlighting the transformative potential of strategic, targeted approaches to culture building.

This capstone study is grounded in a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, observations, and document analysis. By engaging with the perspectives of students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members, the researcher aims to identify strengths, challenges, and actionable strategies for school improvement. Ultimately, this work seeks to align the school's practices and procedures with the district's vision, mission, and shared values in order to ensure a supportive and inclusive environment.

Research Questions

To guide this investigation, the following research questions have been formulated and refined to fit this contextual analysis:

1. What are the current perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the climate and culture at North East Middle School?
2. What are the underlying factors contributing to the existing climate and culture?
3. What potential strategies can be implemented to enhance the climate and culture based on the perceptions and underlying factors identified?

These questions are integral to uncovering the root causes of current challenges and seeking evidence-based strategies for sustainable school improvement.

Expected Outcomes

The desired outcomes of this capstone project include:

- A detailed understanding of stakeholder perceptions and experiences regarding school climate and culture.

- Identification of key factors that influence the current environment, including both strengths and areas for improvement.
- Development of targeted strategies and interventions to foster a more positive, equitable, and productive school climate.
- Enhanced alignment with the district's aforementioned Vision 2028 goals of creating a culture of caring citizens who respect themselves, others, and their community.

Initial actions include implementing the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b) to capture comprehensive data and then conducting stakeholder interviews to gain qualitative insights. These actions will provide a foundation for informed decision-making and targeted interventions.

Fiscal Implications

Improving school climate and culture inevitably involves financial considerations. Investments in professional development, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, incentives for positive behavior, and updated resources for both students and staff are anticipated. For instance, training sessions on trauma-informed practices and inclusive leadership may require additional funding. Similarly, the implementation of PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), restorative practices, and SEL curricula will necessitate the allocation of resources. However, the benefits of these investments are far-reaching and can be adapted to diverse educational contexts.

Districts with varying levels of resources can scale these initiatives to suit their budgets by leveraging grant opportunities, community partnerships, and state or federal funding

programs. For example, PBIS frameworks have been successfully implemented in schools across socioeconomic contexts by utilizing tiered approaches that match the resources available (McIntosh et al, 2018). Similarly, restorative practices and SEL programs can be customized to align with the unique cultural and demographic needs of different districts, promoting equity and inclusivity regardless of location (Osher & Kendziora, 2017).

Furthermore, the modular nature of these strategies makes them applicable across a range of educational environments, from urban to rural settings. Professional development on trauma-informed practices, for instance, addresses the universal challenges faced by students and staff, making it a valuable investment for any district. By sharing best practices and collaborating with other schools, districts can create networks of support that solidify the impact of these initiatives. Ultimately, the strategies outlined in this research project are not only evidence-based but also adaptable, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness in varied educational contexts.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the foundational aspects of this doctoral capstone research project, emphasizing the importance of understanding the current school climate and culture of North East Middle School. By exploring stakeholder perceptions, identifying underlying factors, and proposing actionable strategies for improvement, this research seeks to have a transformative impact on the school and community at large. The next chapter, the Literature Review, delves into the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence that support the importance of school climate and culture, providing a robust foundation for this inquiry.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Middle Schools represent a pivotal crossroads in the academic journey of students, shaping not only their educational outcomes but also their social and emotional trajectories. This period of development is profoundly influenced by the climate and culture of the schools in which students are immersed. Research has consistently underscored the critical role of school climate and culture in fostering environments where students and educators can thrive. For instances, studies have shown that positive school climates are associated with academic performance, higher levels of student engagement, and reduced behavioral issues (Wang & Degol, 2016). Similarly, research highlights that schools with strong, inclusive cultures promote equity, collaboration, and a sense of belonging, essential elements for student success during adolescence (Thapa et al., 2013).

The intersection of school climate, culture, and leadership further illuminates how these elements can be leveraged to address the unique challenges of middle school settings. Empirical evidence suggests that effective leadership, particularly in fostering social-emotional learning (SEL) and implementing frameworks like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), plays a vital role in creating environments that nurture both students and teachers (McIntosh et al., 2018). Furthermore, studies examining family-school partnerships and equity-driven reforms emphasize the importance of collaboration, student-centered approaches in building climates where all learners feel safe, valued, and empowered (Bryk et al., 2010).

This body of evidence forms the cornerstone of Chapter II, which aims to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical insights. By grounding this chapter in robust research, it not only establishes the importance of school climate and culture, but also highlights their

multifaceted impacts on academic achievement, student behavior, and educator engagement. Through this lens, Chapter II sets the stage for a deeper exploration of the dynamics shaping modern middle schools, serving as an essential foundation for understanding and addressing the critical issues discussed in the overall dissertation.

Defining School Climate and Culture

Definition of School Climate and Culture Within the Middle School Context

According to Thapa et. al. (2013), “School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (p. 357). This climate is not static; it reflects the ongoing interactions within the school community. In middle schools, where students undergo significant developmental changes, a positive climate plays a crucial role in fostering their growth. Mitchell et al. (2010) argue, “school climate is... the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between the students, teachers, and administrators” (p. 271).

From the perspective of Deal and Peterson (2016), school culture, however, delves deeper into the values, traditions, and rituals that define a school’s identity. These deeper, often unspoken, aspects of the school environment shape the long-term norms and behaviors that define how members of the school community interact and learn. Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) further explain the difference:

If culture is a school's personality, climate is its attitude. The biggest difference between the two is that an attitude is far easier to change than a personality. Need proof? Simply announce to the school that tomorrow is a snow day and you might notice a sudden change in climate as educators' and students' attitudes suddenly lift. The promise of a

snow day doesn't change the school's personality (i.e., culture), but the collective shift in attitude (i.e., climate) allows the school to reveal what it values. In this case, the school climate reveals that the culture values not being in school. Of course, changing a personality requires a more purposeful and sustained effort than does changing an attitude. (p. 15)

Although often used interchangeably, as much of the educational research in this section will show, school climate and culture serve different functions in shaping the overall school experience. School climate, according to Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) is based on perceptions and easy to change, focusing on the day-to-day atmosphere, while school culture encompasses the deeply ingrained practices that “take years to evolve” and is based on the values and beliefs present within leadership (p. 15). Together, they play complementary roles in creating an environment conducive to both learning and personal development; however, for the purposes of this paper, the primary focus will be on school *climate* as this study is predicated on assessing the current context of a middle school in hopes of soon improving said context.

Importance of Fostering a Positive and Productive Learning Environment

A positive school climate is essential to promoting student success in terms of engagement, achievement, and well-being. Bryk and Schneider (2003) note that when schools build strong relational networks, students feel safe and connected, raising both their commitment to learning and their achievement. The overall environment within a school can greatly impact how students interact with their peers and educators, influencing their desire to participate and succeed in their educational pursuits.

Research also suggests that an inclusive school climate can mitigate the adverse effects of social challenges and academic pressures, which are especially prevalent during middle school years. Konold et al. (2017) argue that “a positive school climate may enhance engagement by helping students feel more connected to school and less vulnerable to peer victimization and other social stressors” (p. 1290). This is crucial as middle school students face developmental changes that make them particularly vulnerable to these pressures, which can negatively impact their academic performance and social interactions if not properly addressed.

In addition, fostering a productive learning environment helps students develop key social-emotional skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and resilience. As Zins et al. (2004) emphasize, “the interrelated nature of academic achievement, social-emotional learning, and behavior supports the view that an emphasis on SEL can positively impact student success” (p. 7). A school climate that prioritizes mutual respect, inclusivity, and academic rigor leads to improved academic outcomes and reduced disciplinary issues, reinforcing the critical role of leadership in shaping these dynamics (Kraft et al., 2016).

Overview of the Role of School Leadership in Shaping School Climate and Culture

School leadership is pivotal in shaping the climate and culture of a school. Principals, in particular, serve as the key drivers of the school environment by setting the vision and values that influence daily operations. School leaders, particularly principals, play a central role in determining the culture of collaboration and respect within a school, which in turn impacts student learning and teacher retention. According to Kraft et al. (2016), “when teachers strongly agree that their administrator encourages and acknowledges staff, communicates a clear vision, and generally runs a school well, their turnover rate is more than half compared to teachers who

disagree” (p. 1412). By guiding the overall tone of the school, principals directly affect how both staff and students experience the school environment.

Effective principals not only cultivate a positive climate but also make strategic decisions related to school safety, discipline, and teacher support. Marzano et al. (2005) emphasize that a “safe and orderly environment” is a critical school-level factor directly linked to student achievement. The principal’s leadership in these areas significantly impacts school climate by promoting a stable and organized environment where academic and social growth can flourish.

Moreover, successful principals foster positive relationships between staff and students and ensure that inclusive and equitable practices are implemented school-wide. Grissom et al. (2013) highlight that principals who support and challenge their teachers improve teaching quality and, consequently, student learning. By building collaborative teams among teachers and encouraging professional development, principals create a culture of continuous improvement. This collaborative approach helps to establish a climate where teachers feel supported and students are more likely to engage positively with their learning environment, thus enhancing both academic and social-emotional development.

Leadership and School Climate

Critical Role of Principals in Establishing a Positive School Climate

Principals play an essential role in establishing and maintaining a positive school climate. As noted in the Wallace Foundation report, “Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 7). This finding underscores the important influence that principals have—not merely through policy, but also through presence, support, and the educational leadership they

provide. By shaping collaborative cultures, maintaining safety and expectations, and prioritizing professional development, principals create the conditions necessary for both student success and teacher retention.

The climate is not solely the result of administrative decisions; it also stems from how principals interact with staff, students, and parents. Marzano et al. (2005) emphasize the need for principal visibility. They argue “the proposed effect of visibility is twofold: First, it communicates the message that the principal is interested and engaged in the daily operations of the school; second, it provides opportunities for the principal to interact with teachers and students regarding substantive issues” (p. 61). Their research demonstrates that principals who engage in direct communication with students and staff are more likely to promote a climate of inclusivity and belonging. Therefore, principals must not only create policy but also be hands-on in their leadership approach. To illustrate, the principal exemplifies the responsibility of visibility when he/she attends school football, basketball, and baseball games as frequently as possible. This responsibility is also demonstrated when the principal makes daily visits to classrooms simply to ask teachers and students how things are going.

A key element in fostering a positive school climate is building relationships. Marzano et al. (2005) explain that:

A case can be made that effective professional relationships are central to the effective execution of many of the other responsibilities. In the context of our meta-analysis, the responsibility of Relationships refers to the extent to which the school leader demonstrates an awareness of the personal lives of teachers and staff. (p. 58)

When principals demonstrate empathy, fairness, and respect in their daily interactions, it sets the tone for the rest of the school, encouraging positive relationships across the board. This relational aspect of leadership is foundational to creating a safe and supportive climate where students and teachers can thrive concurrently.

Principal Actions that Impact School Climate

Principals impact school climate through key actions such as decision-making and instructional leadership. Ultimately, they influence climate through their strategic choices, especially when it comes to the physical environment. According to Maxwell (2016), “the quality of the school’s physical environment appears to be an important factor influencing social climate, which in turn can impact student attendance and academic achievement” (p. 213). These environmental decisions—ranging from cleanliness and maintenance to classroom organization—are largely under the principal’s purview. By ensuring a safe, welcoming, and well-maintained school setting, leaders promote not only physical security but also a climate of respect and trust essential for learning. These decisions influence everything from the learning environment to the professional growth opportunities available to teachers, which in turn affects the overall school climate. For example, a principal who invests in professional development creates a culture of continuous learning, benefiting both teachers and students.

One of the most significant actions a principal can take is fostering instructional leadership. For instance, He et al. (2024) determined that “principals’ instructional leadership is a significant predictor of teachers’ professional development” (p. 1). Instructional leadership involves working closely with teachers to ensure that classroom practices align with the school’s educational goals. When principals actively participate in these processes, they enhance both

teacher efficacy and student engagement, contributing to a more productive and positive learning environment.

Moreover, decision-making related to school discipline and safety is another critical aspect of how principals shape school climate. Maxwell (2016) indicates that school climate is enhanced when “students feel that their schools are clean, in good repair, and safe” (p. 209), which is often tied to principal decisions. By prioritizing student safety and equitable discipline, principals can ensure that students feel safe and respected, which is essential for maintaining a positive climate.

Instructional leadership goes beyond policy and decision-making; it also includes modeling desired behaviors that reflect the values of the school. As He et al. (2024) note, “Administrators’ instructional leadership has a significant impact on teachers’ teaching abilities. As teachers are primarily responsible for delivering instruction in the classroom, instructional leaders’ influence on enhancing the quality of teaching can affect student learning” (p. 6). When principals lead by example - demonstrating effective teaching strategies, engaging in reflective practice, and committing to growth - they help cultivate a culture where teachers feel motivated and empowered. This leadership approach strengthens the professional climate by reinforcing collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement.

Lastly, the role of the principal in communication and conflict resolution significantly affects school climate. Marzano et al. (2005) identify communication as a key leadership responsibility and note that effective leaders “are adept at handling conflict and promoting cohesion within the school community” (p. 50). Effective communication not only prevents misunderstandings but also builds trust among staff and students. Principals who excel in conflict

resolution and maintain transparency in their leadership further enhance the school climate by ensuring that all members of the school community feel heard and valued.

Evidence-Based Learning Strategies to Enhance Climate

Principals who implement evidence-based learning strategies can greatly enhance school climate. Hattie (2012) emphasizes that “visible learning” strategies, such as feedback and clear instructional goals, lead to significant improvements in student outcomes (p. 1). These strategies are data-driven and allow principals to identify the most effective teaching practices, creating an environment where learning is truly prioritized. Hattie’s research highlights that schools with leaders who use these evidence-based approaches are more likely to foster climates that promote high student engagement and achievement.

One key aspect of Hattie’s (2012) approach is the use of formative assessment and feedback to drive student learning. He notes, “When teaching and learning are “visible” – that is, when it is clear what teachers are teaching and what students are learning, student achievement increases” (p. 1), and when principals encourage teachers to provide meaningful feedback, it contributes to a culture of continuous improvement. This approach empowers both students and teachers by making the learning process more transparent, enhancing overall school climate by promoting clarity, accountability, and collaboration.

Hattie’s (2012) model also stresses the importance of setting high expectations for all students. Schools with clear, evidence-based strategies that are aligned with the school’s goals foster environments that value learning. “Teaching (students) to have high, challenging, appropriate expectations is among the most powerful influences in improving their achievement”

(p. 5). By promoting this strategy, principals directly contribute to a positive climate where students feel both challenged and supported.

How Principals Model Positive Learning Behaviors for Both Students and Teachers

Principals not only influence climate through decision-making but also through modeling positive learning behaviors, including shared leadership. Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) argue that “changing a school's culture requires shared or distributed leadership, which engages many stakeholders in major improvement roles, and instructional leadership, in which administrators take responsibility for shaping improvements at the classroom level” (p. 52). When principals engage in professional learning, reflect on their practices, build capacity within others in their organization, and demonstrate a commitment to growth, they set a powerful example for both teachers and students.

Effective principals model behaviors that encourage a culture of learning by actively participating in professional development and engaging with the latest educational research. Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) explain that “Neither organizational learning nor professional community can ensure without trust – between teachers and administrators, among teachers, and between teachers and parents” (p. 53). Building principals leading this charge not only benefits teachers, who feel supported in their own professional growth, but also students, who see their principal’s active engagement with learning as a signal that education is a lifelong process.

Furthermore, when principals demonstrate these positive learning behaviors, they help cultivate a climate of respect and motivation. Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) assert that principals who lead by example and show a commitment to personal and professional growth inspire similar behaviors in staff and students. By being visible in their learning and open to feedback,

principals encourage a culture of continuous improvement, where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities, thereby enhancing the overall school climate.

School Climate and Student Achievement

Impact of Positive Climate on Student Outcomes

A positive school climate is strongly correlated with student achievement. Lee and Smith (1993) found that school restructuring efforts which foster more personalized and communal school climates were associated with increased student learning gains (p. 164). They emphasize that when students feel safe, respected, and supported, they are more likely to engage in their learning, which in turn boosts academic outcomes. Wang and Degol (2016) also support this view, noting that positive school climates are associated with increased equity, noting that “schools that foster safe, supportive, and responsive environments promote both academic achievement and psychological well-being, which may be especially important for disadvantaged populations” (p. 323). The research suggests that a well-managed climate not only enhances student performance but also promotes equity.

Additionally, Wang and Degol (2016) highlight that “There is consistent evidence that school climate is associated with a wide range of academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional outcomes” (p. 323). This demonstrates that factors such as emotional well-being and social connectedness, which are nurtured by a positive climate, directly affect students’ ability to focus and perform well academically. Schools with inclusive and supportive climates tend to see improvements in standardized test scores and overall academic performance.

Moreover, Lee and Smith (1993) indicate that schools fostering strong teacher-student relationships have higher rates of academic success. They found that “Students in schools with

more personalized environments and stronger teacher-student relationships experienced higher gains in achievement” (p. 168). This underscores the importance of the principal’s role in shaping the climate, as they influence teacher behaviors and practices that are crucial for building these positive relationships.

Social-Emotional Learning as a Factor in Fostering Academic Success

Social-emotional learning (SEL) plays a critical role in fostering academic success, especially in schools with a positive climate. According to Osher et al. (2016), SEL promotes “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (p. 646), all of which support academic performance. When students develop these skills, they are better able to manage emotions, build healthy relationships, and stay engaged in academic tasks. Schools that embed SEL into their climate strategies create environments that nurture both emotional well-being and learning.

In addition, Osher et al. (2016) note that SEL enhances student engagement and connection. The authors explain that “learning is enhanced when students feel a sense of belonging and connection to school” (p. 648), which is central to maintaining student motivation and academic persistence. Schools that intentionally foster inclusive climates help ensure that students feel valued and are more likely to participate actively in their education.

Furthermore, integrating SEL into school climate initiatives helps reduce behavioral issues and strengthen focus on academics. Osher et al. (2016) report that effective SEL programs result in “reductions in conduct problems, emotional distress, and improved attitudes about self and others” (p. 646). These improvements lead to more supportive classrooms, where disruptions are minimized and students can concentrate on learning.

Engagement and Dropout Prevention

A positive school climate is crucial for reducing dropout rates and enhancing student engagement. Bridgeland et al. (2006) found that a majority of surveyed dropouts felt that their schools did not provide a supportive or motivating environment, which contributed to their decision to leave. Specifically, they note, “Nearly half (47 percent) said a major reason for dropping out was that classes were not interesting” (p. 4). These former students reported being bored and disengaged from high school. When schools cultivate engaging and supportive climates, students are more likely to stay connected to their academic journey and find interest in their coursework.

Additionally, the report emphasizes that strong relationships and support systems are vital to improving student engagement. Bridgeland et al. (2006) write, “Four out of five (81 percent) said that there should be more opportunities for real-world learning and more experiential learning” (p. 4). Creating an environment where students can connect classroom learning to practical applications enhances motivation and retention.

Moreover, the role of school leadership in fostering a positive climate cannot be overstated. While the report does not directly cite principals, it does highlight the importance of adults showing concern and involvement: “70 percent of students said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, and two-thirds would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them” (p. 4). This underscores the need for school leaders to set high expectations and actively cultivate an environment where students feel challenged, supported, and cared for.

Engaging At-Risk Students Through Improved School Climate

Engaging at-risk students remains one of the most pressing challenges for educators, and cultivating a positive school climate is a powerful lever in addressing this issue. Pendergast et al. (2018) found that:

Students who are at risk of disengaging from learning and schooling may experience lower levels of a sense of belonging at school (SOBAS). Furthermore, they are likely to be affected, both negatively and positively, by disparities in levels of SOBAS compared to students who are actively engaged and achieving in school. (p. 3)

This connection plays a crucial role in supporting students who might otherwise feel marginalized or overlooked. A climate that promotes belonging and emotional support helps at-risk students remain invested in their academic journey.

Additionally, a supportive environment provides students with essential stability and encouragement. As Pendergast et al. (2018) allude, a positive school climate may act as a protective factor for students experiencing adversity, buffering against disengagement and dropout, while also increasing the sense of belonging at school (SOBAS). When students feel that their school values them as individuals and is responsive to their needs, they are more likely to build trusting relationships with teachers and peers. This environment fosters academic persistence, especially among vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of targeted interventions in promoting success for at-risk students. According to Pendergast et al. (2018):

The inclusion of SOBAS as a characteristic of emotional engagement points to its importance in enabling engagement of learning for all young adolescent learners. As

increasing levels of investment and commitment to learning move from behavioral through to emotional and then cognitive, it is evident that SOBAS plays a key role in enabling engagement in learning. (p. 3)

These findings underscore the critical role that principals and educators play in developing and maintaining a school climate where all students—especially those facing challenges—feel empowered to thrive both socially and academically.

Teacher Turnover and School Climate

School climate plays a critical role in teacher job satisfaction and overall retention. Johnson et al. (2011) found that teachers are more likely to remain in schools where they experience supportive relationships with both colleagues and principals. Their study highlights that a positive school climate - characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, shared values, and effective leadership - directly contributes to teacher job satisfaction and reduces turnover rates. A positive school climate, characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, shared values, and effective leadership, directly contributes to job satisfaction, reducing turnover rates. Teachers who perceive the school as a collaborative and supportive environment are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their roles.

In addition to interpersonal support, organizational aspects of school climate—such as teacher involvement in decision making and professional growth opportunities—play a key role in teacher morale. Collie et al. (2012) highlight that “teachers are frequently asked to participate in decisions” as an important element of school climate that relates to reduced stress and greater job satisfaction (p. 1194). The ability to have input in decision making, along with consistent

leadership support, helps foster a school climate that encourages teacher retention and reduces burnout.

Moreover, a positive school climate not only impacts retention but is also linked to greater teacher effectiveness. Johnson et al. (2011) show that schools with better working conditions - especially supportive leadership and collegial relationships - demonstrate higher student achievement growth, indicating that teachers working in supportive environments tend to be more effective in their teaching. When teachers feel supported and valued, they are more motivated to invest in their professional development, which enhances their instructional practices and positively impacts student outcomes.

Influence of School Leadership on Teacher Morale

School leadership is one of the most important factors in shaping teacher morale. Grissom et al. (2013) found that principals spend time “informally coaching teachers to improve their instruction” and “developing the educational program” at their schools, activities that are positively associated with student achievement gains (p. 438; Table 3). Principals described walkthroughs as opportunities to “provide input and (redirection)” and emphasized the importance of being “visible throughout (their) building throughout the day” to “see what’s going on with the instruction” (pp. 438–439). Such instructional support and visibility foster a school environment where teachers receive feedback and recognition, which can help them remain motivated and engaged.

Furthermore, Day et al. (2007) highlight the critical importance of distributed leadership in promoting teacher morale. They summarize that principals who encourage shared leadership and decision-making create a sense of ownership among teachers, which positively impacts their

commitment to the school. By involving teachers in the decision-making process and valuing their input, school leaders can foster a collaborative climate that enhances teacher morale and reduces feelings of isolation.

In addition to shared leadership, principals who prioritize teacher professional development contribute to a positive climate. Grissom et al. (2013) allude that principals who provide ongoing opportunities for professional growth and learning create a climate of continuous improvement, which is key to maintaining high levels of teacher satisfaction. Specifically, Grissom et al. note that principals spend time “developing the educational program” and “planning or participating in teachers’ professional development,” activities linked to improvements in student achievement and school effectiveness (p. 438; Table 1). When principals actively support ongoing learning, teachers are better equipped to succeed, which can enhance their morale and contribute to improved outcomes for both teachers and students. When teachers feel that they are growing professionally and are given the tools to succeed, their morale improves, leading to better outcomes for both teachers and students.

Impact of Teacher Morale on Student Achievement

Teacher morale is not only important for job satisfaction and retention but also has a direct impact on student achievement. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016) found that “Time pressure predicted emotional stress very strongly” among teachers, while other stress factors were less directly related (p.1786-1793). Teachers’ belief in their own abilities - called self-efficacy - was lower when they experienced value conflicts, poor support from supervisors, or low student motivation. These factors together explained a significant part of teachers’ confidence in their teaching, which strongly influenced how engaged they felt in their work.

In addition, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) hypothesize that teacher morale is a key factor in fostering a collaborative school culture that supports student achievement. Schools with positive climates where teachers feel valued and supported tend to have higher levels of student engagement and academic performance. This is because teachers who are satisfied with their work are more likely to collaborate with their colleagues, share best practices, and create a cohesive learning environment that benefits all students.

Furthermore, teacher morale, closely linked with self-efficacy, influences instructional quality and student outcomes. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016) emphasize that “teachers with higher self-efficacy tend to be more engaged in teaching, which is associated with positive outcomes for students” (pp. 1786–1793). When teachers feel supported and motivated, they are more willing to adopt innovative teaching strategies and provide personalized support, fostering a school climate conducive to student achievement. Thus, maintaining high teacher morale is essential for both teacher well-being and student success.

School Climate and Equity

Discipline Disparities

School climate significantly affects disciplinary outcomes for minority students, especially black students, who often face disproportionately more severe disciplinary consequences/actions. Blake et al. (2011) emphasize that the school climate, including the relationships between students and staff and the school’s approach to discipline, plays a critical role in influencing disciplinary outcomes. In schools where the climate is hostile or lacks inclusivity, black students are more likely to receive punitive measures, which can affect their

long-term academic and social outcomes. Addressing the climate can help mitigate these disparities.

Moreover, disparities in discipline for black students are often linked to perceptions and biases that affect how behavioral issues are interpreted. Blake et al. (2011) point out that implicit biases among educators may lead to harsher discipline for black students, even for minor infractions. When school climates fail to foster equity and understanding, these biases can manifest in unequal disciplinary practices. A positive, inclusive school climate can help reduce the negative impact of these biases by promoting fair treatment of all students.

A school climate that prioritizes equity and inclusivity can significantly reduce disciplinary disparities. Blake et al. (2011) suggest that when schools actively work to create an environment where all students feel respected and supported, the rates of disproportionate discipline decrease. By fostering a climate where relationships, understanding, and support systems are emphasized, schools can create a more equitable approach to discipline and reduce the adverse effects on bias on minority students.

Restorative Practices

Implementing restorative practices in schools has proven effective in addressing racial and ethnic disparities in discipline. Gregory et al. (2016) explain that restorative practices “shift the focus from punishment to relationship-building, emphasizing repair and understanding rather than exclusion” (p. 326). In schools where restorative practices are part of the climate, all students, particularly minority students, are less likely to face suspensions or expulsions for minor infractions, as these practices promote dialogue and understanding.

Restorative practices also enhance school climate by fostering stronger relationships between students and staff. Gregory et al. (2016) note that “restorative approaches create opportunities for students to feel valued and understood, which in turn supports a more equitable and supportive school environment” (p. 328). When students feel they are respected and treated fairly, they are more likely to engage positively within the school community, reducing conflict and promoting a collaborative atmosphere.

Furthermore, by incorporating restorative practices, schools can address underlying issues contributing to behavior, rather than merely punishing students. Gregory et al. (2016) emphasize that restorative practices “help students learn from their mistakes and develop essential social-emotional skills, reducing repeat offenses and disciplinary disparities” (p. 335). This approach not only creates a more equitable school climate but also supports the development of essential skills that students need for success beyond school one day.

Trusting Relationships

Trusting student-teacher relationships are fundamental to fostering an equitable school climate. Wang and Degol (2016) highlight that “positive student–teacher relationships are associated with better academic engagement and fewer disciplinary problems” (p. 324). When students, especially from marginalized groups, feel connected and understood by their teachers, they are more likely to succeed academically and engage positively within their school environment.

Building these relationships is particularly important for minority students, who often face unique challenges in school environments. Blake et al. (2011) contend that teachers who actively seek to understand and connect with their students’ backgrounds and experiences are

more likely to create a climate where all students feel valued. By fostering empathy and understanding, teachers can build trust and help create a supportive and inclusive school climate that benefits all students.

Positive student–teacher relationships also contribute to reducing biases in disciplinary practices. Wang and Degol (2016) explain that “positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are consistently linked to reduced behavioral problems and better adjustment across diverse student populations” (p. 330). Thus, the quality of relationships in a school significantly influences the fairness and equity of its climate.

Cultivating Culture Through Positive Relationships

Building trusting relationships within a school community is fundamental to fostering equity and ensuring that every student feels valued. Casas (2017) argues that “relationships are the foundation of culture, and without trust, it’s impossible to create a culture where students and staff feel safe, respected, and motivated” (p. 23). When educators prioritize building authentic connections with students, particularly those from marginalized groups, they lay the groundwork for a school climate where all individuals feel supported and empowered to succeed.

Casas (2017) emphasizes the role of educators in cultivating a sense of belonging and inclusion, stating that “every student deserves a champion who believes in them, even when they don’t believe in themselves” (p. 45). This perspective highlights the importance of relational leadership in addressing disparities and creating opportunities for all students to thrive. By demonstrating genuine care and high expectations, educators can foster a climate of equity where students feel encouraged to rise above challenges and reach their fullest potential.

In addition, school leaders need to model equity and inclusivity in their daily interactions. Casas (2017) states, “Leaders must intentionally create an environment where every individual feels seen, heard, and valued” (p. 89). This requires leaders to listen actively to the voices of students and staff, and to act on their feedback to improve the school climate. By championing these values, principals and educators can create a culture that empowers all members of the school community to contribute meaningfully and achieve excellence.

Strategies for Building Trust Between Teachers and Marginalized Students

Establishing trust between teachers and marginalized students requires intentional strategies that promote equity and inclusivity. Bryk and Schneider (2003) further emphasize that trust is built when teachers consistently demonstrate respect, integrity, and competence. For marginalized students, who may feel disconnected from the broader school culture, it is essential that teachers work actively to create an inclusive environment where they feel seen and respected.

One effective strategy for building trust is engaging in culturally responsive teaching practices. Bryk and Schneider (2003) state that “Even when people disagree, individuals can feel valued if others respect their opinions” (p. 43). Not everyone in a given classroom will feel or think the same way; however, everyone’s opinions and beliefs matter. This mindset not only enhances students’ sense of belonging but also fosters a more equitable and inclusive environment where they feel valued.

Additionally, regular and open communication between teachers and students is essential for building trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) note that “Although conflicts frequently arise among competing individual interests within a school community, a commitment to the

education and welfare of children must remain the primary concern” (p. 44). This approach helps to break down barriers that may exist between teachers and their marginalized students, creating a school climate where all students feel supported and understood.

Middle School Restructuring and Achievement

School restructuring, particularly in middle schools, can significantly impact marginalized student groups and the overall school climate. Lee and Smith (1993) found that restructuring efforts that prioritize small learning communities and personalized support positively influence both student outcomes and school climate. For marginalized students, smaller learning environments provide more individualized attention, which contributes to a sense of belonging and support within the school community.

These restructuring efforts are particularly beneficial for students who come from difficult backgrounds, as they often face additional challenges in traditional school settings. Lee and Smith (1993) argue that “less differentiated instructional environments and more communal organizational structures foster greater student engagement and achievement” (p. 167). By fostering environments that are responsive to students’ unique needs, schools can create a more equitable climate that promotes success for all students.

Furthermore, restructuring middle schools to promote collaboration and inclusivity can help mitigate the academic achievement gap. Lee and Smith (1993) suggest that “schools with less rigid departmental structures and with heterogeneous grouping demonstrate less social-class stratification in achievement” (p. 168). This approach not only benefits individual students but also contributes to a school climate that values equity and inclusivity.

Impact of Equitable Leadership Practices on Student Achievement

Equitable leadership practices are crucial in promoting student achievement, particularly for marginalized students. Theoharis (2009) states that “principals who make equity a priority in their leadership create school climates where all students have the opportunity to succeed” (p. 56). When school leaders actively work to dismantle barriers for marginalized students, they foster environments that support academic achievement and student engagement.

Equitable leadership also involves advocating for policies and resources that address disparities. Theoharis (2009) highlights that “effective equity-minded leaders allocate resources to meet the specific needs of marginalized students, ensuring access to supports necessary for success” (p. 58). This commitment promotes an inclusive school culture where every student’s academic needs are recognized and met.

Finally, equitable leadership fosters collaboration among school stakeholders. Theoharis (2009) emphasizes that “leaders who prioritize equity build strong partnerships with teachers, families, and community members to create a unified support system for students” (p. 60). By engaging all stakeholders in equity efforts, principals cultivate a school climate that values inclusivity and advances academic outcomes, especially for marginalized students.

School Climate with Regard to PBIS and Student Behavior

Improving School Climate

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) play a significant role in improving school climate by fostering a structured, supportive environment. Närhi et al. (2017) state, “Earlier research shows that clear behavioral expectations, monitoring students’ adherence to them and behavior-specific praise are effective practices to reduce disruptive behavior” (p. 1186). This framework helps schools create an atmosphere where positive behaviors are

encouraged and rewarded, leading to a more respectful and collaborative school environment. PBIS is particularly effective in schools that struggle with disruptive behaviors, as it shifts the focus from punitive measures to positive reinforcement.

Furthermore, PBIS contributes to a supportive school climate by encouraging staff and students to work together toward shared behavioral goals. Närhi et al. (2017) highlight that “positive feedback for students who succeed in following the behavioral goals increases students’ engagement and connectedness to the school community” (p. 1187). This sense of connection fosters a climate where students feel valued and supported, which in turn reduces negative behaviors and enhances overall student engagement.

Additionally, implementing PBIS can improve relationships among students and staff, contributing to a more positive climate. According to Närhi et al. (2017), “classroom management refers to the actions teachers take to create environments supporting academic and social/emotional learning” and that “teachers’ systematic classroom management practices reduce problem behaviors in classrooms” (pp. 1186–1187). They further explain that “teachers were guided to give the praise in a simple and concrete manner, telling the students exactly what they had done right” (p. 1189). When students experience positive reinforcement from their teachers, they are more likely to develop trust and respect for their instructors, which is essential for a supportive school climate.

Discipline Practices’ Effects on School Climate

Discipline practices significantly shape school climate, especially when emphasizing positive and restorative approaches. Gregory et al. (2021) explain that “overreliance on exclusionary discipline fosters alienation and disengagement, whereas restorative and supportive

discipline practices cultivate trust and belonging among students” (p. 112). Schools using punitive measures often see declines in student connectedness and increases in behavioral challenges linked to a climate of fear.

In contrast, Gregory et al. (2021) report schools that implement restorative justice and social-emotional learning report “improvements in school climate, characterized by mutual respect, dialogue, and shared responsibility” (p. 115). These practices promote student accountability and empathy by encouraging reflection on the impact of their behavior, contributing to a culture of care and support.

Moreover, Gregory et al. (2021) highlight that Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that emphasize clear behavioral expectations and consistent reinforcement “reduce disruptive behaviors and enhance student engagement, fostering a constructive and respectful school environment” (p. 118). Focusing on positive reinforcement rather than punishment helps build a cohesive school community where students are motivated to meet behavioral standards, strengthening overall school climate.

Facility Design and School Climate

Influence of Facility Design on School Climate and Learning Outcomes

The design of school facilities significantly impacts school climate and student learning outcomes. Maxwell (2016) explains that:

School buildings are public places and therefore represent the communities where they are located. A well-designed and well maintained public building usually indicates that society values the activities that take place in the building and, by extension, the people who use the building. (p. 206)

Facilities that are clean, well maintained, and thoughtfully designed communicate value to students and staff, supporting a positive school climate that can enhance engagement and focus.

Facility design also affects the interactions among students, staff, and the broader school community. Maxwell (2016) emphasizes that “relationships amongst a school’s users (students, teachers, staff and parents) are a fundamental part of a school’s social environment (also referred to as the social climate)” and that “the activities, social interactions, and physical places are all part of the school as a micro-system” (pp. 206–207). Designing spaces to encourage collaboration and social interaction can strengthen relationships, fostering community and belonging which improve both emotional and academic experiences.

In addition, the physical environment influences teacher satisfaction and overall effectiveness. Maxwell (2016) notes that “teachers work in classrooms that may be properly equipped or lacking in appropriate resources and spaces, which can affect their motivation and productivity” (p. 214). Flexible teaching spaces and adequate resources enable educators to implement innovative strategies, positively impacting teaching quality and student outcomes. Thus, facility design plays a crucial role in shaping the overall climate and effectiveness of schools, especially middle schools.

How Modern, Flexible Learning Spaces Impact Student Behavior and Attitudes

Modern, flexible learning spaces have transformative effects on student behavior and attitudes. Barrett et al. (2015) found that “the design and quality of physical spaces directly influence cognitive function and learning outcomes” (p. 118) and that “the naturalness design principle accounts for around 50% of the impact on learning, with individuality and stimulation accounting for roughly a quarter each” (p. 119). Flexible spaces enable students to adapt their

learning environments to suit their needs, fostering a sense of ownership and control which positively affects their engagement and satisfaction.

These spaces also encourage collaboration and active learning. Barrett et al. (2015) highlight that “classrooms with multiple, well-defined learning zones and spaces that support group work enhance student participation and social interaction” (p. 125). Such environments promote teamwork and communication among students, essential components of a positive school climate that can reduce behavioral issues by fostering a sense of belonging and purpose.

Moreover, features such as natural lighting, ergonomic furniture, and well-controlled acoustics contribute to better concentration and reduced student stress levels. Barrett et al. (2015) note that “adequate daylighting, thermal comfort, and air quality are significant contributors to improved pupil learning progress” (p. 128). These physical environment factors create a school climate that supports both emotional well-being and academic achievement.

The Role of Physical Safety and School Structure in Creating a Positive Climate

Physical safety and structural integrity are foundational to a positive school climate. Coulton et al. (2021) state that “students who perceive their school environment as physically safe are more likely to engage academically and socially” (p. 112). A secure and well-maintained facility not only reduces risks of accidents and external threats but also communicates to students and staff that their well-being is a core priority.

The structure of the school further influences perceptions of safety. Coulton et al. (2021) explain that “clear signage, controlled access points, and well-monitored communal areas contribute to feelings of order and security among students” (p. 115). When students view their

school as a safe and organized space, anxiety diminishes, creating a climate more conducive to learning and positive behavior.

Additionally, the physical environment shapes how teachers and staff interact with their students. Coulton et al. (2021) emphasize that “educators who feel secure and supported in their environment are better able to build trusting relationships and foster a collaborative school climate” (p. 118). Such a safe learning environment benefits both students and staff, nurturing a school climate characterized by trust, respect, and cooperation.

The Impact of School Security Measures on Student Perceptions of Safety and Belonging

While security measures are essential, their implementation can significantly affect students’ perceptions of safety and belonging. Mowen and Freng (2019) report that “findings from multi-level models indicate that school security measures are, generally, related to decreased perceptions of safety by both parents and students” (p. 376). They further explain, “more school security measures in place at a school relate to lower student and parental perceptions of safety” (p. 382). Students in schools with heavy security may feel criminalized, which can harm their sense of belonging and engagement.

On the other hand, Mowen and Freng (2019) note that students in schools with more security measures do not perceive the presence or absence of gangs differently than students in schools with fewer security measures, suggesting that security measures may not influence all aspects of safety perception equally.

Additionally, the authors emphasize that “parents, as important stakeholders, represent a strong influence on school policy and they often advocate for increased security” but “our findings highlight that security measures do not necessarily guarantee that perceptions of safety

among parents improve” (p. 390). They conclude that “increased security might relate to decreased parental perceptions of safety” (p. 389). This approach not only affects perceptions of safety but also has implications for school climate by influencing trust and collaboration.

Family-School Partnerships and School Climate

The Role of School Leadership in Promoting Family Involvement to Enhance School Climate

School leadership plays a vital role in fostering family involvement, which is essential for cultivating a positive school climate. Epstein and Sanders (2021) emphasize that “effective principals actively invite and support families to participate in all aspects of the educational process, thereby strengthening the critical home-school connection” (p. 112). Such leadership approaches build inclusive communities that encourage collaboration and support student success.

Leadership practices that encourage family involvement include organizing regular family engagement events, maintaining open and respectful communication, and incorporating parents’ voices in school decision-making. Epstein and Sanders (2021) note that “when families feel genuinely included and their contributions are valued, they are more likely to engage in school activities, fostering a climate of shared responsibility and mutual respect” (p. 115). This involvement not only reinforces the importance of education but also deepens students’ sense of belonging within the school community.

Moreover, strong family-school partnerships directly influence student engagement and positive behavior. According to Epstein and Sanders (2021), “students whose families are involved in their education demonstrate higher attendance rates, exhibit more positive behaviors, and achieve better academic outcomes” (p. 118). By prioritizing family involvement, school

leaders create a supportive climate that nurtures holistic student development and bridges the home-school divide.

Fostering Family and Community Involvement

Building strong connections between schools and their communities is essential for creating a climate that supports student success. Castro et al. (2015) summarize that “parental involvement is a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon that positively relates to children’s academic achievement” (p. 34). The authors emphasize that “parental expectations, communication about school activities, and support for learning are among the most strongly linked aspects of involvement to academic outcomes” (p. 41). Such involvement helps students connect their education to their family and community contexts, fostering engagement and belonging.

Effective leadership plays a key role in mobilizing family and community involvement. Although the Castro et al. (2015) article focuses on parental behaviors, it highlights the importance of “parent participation as a catalyst for other relevant causes that promote academic achievement” (p. 34). This suggests that school leaders who promote and facilitate family engagement contribute to a culture of shared responsibility and support for student success.

Moreover, culturally responsive engagement is vital for effectively reaching diverse families. Castro et al. (2015) note that “parental involvement varies by ethnic group and context, and culturally tailored approaches are necessary to build trust and sustained cooperation” (p. 35). Recognizing and valuing family diversity strengthens relationships and promotes a collaborative school climate that benefits students, families, and educators alike.

Culturally Responsive Engagement Strategies

Culturally responsive engagement strategies are essential for building strong relationships with families from diverse backgrounds. Epstein and Sanders (2021) assert that “effective family engagement requires schools to honor and incorporate the cultural values and traditions of the families they serve” (p. 89). By tailoring outreach efforts to the cultural diversity of their communities, schools foster an inclusive climate where all families feel respected.

Effective strategies include providing communication in families’ native languages, organizing culturally meaningful events, and collaborating with community leaders. Epstein and Sanders (2021) emphasize that “when schools acknowledge and value cultural differences, families experience a greater sense of belonging and are more likely to participate in school activities” (p. 91). Such practices nurture a welcoming environment that supports family involvement regardless of cultural or linguistic background.

Additionally, culturally responsive engagement strengthens schools’ capacity to meet students’ unique needs. Epstein and Sanders (2021) highlight that “engaging diverse families provides critical perspectives that enhance schools’ abilities to design supports tailored to their students’ realities” (p. 93). This approach not only deepens family-school partnerships but also promotes a school climate grounded in equity and inclusion.

Comprehensive School Reforms

Systemic reform initiatives are critical for improving school climate, especially in middle schools where adolescent developmental needs require special attention. Osher and Kendziora (2017) explain that “effective school reform addresses academic instruction alongside social, emotional, and behavioral supports, creating learning environments where students can thrive”

(p. 31). Such comprehensive reforms recognize that students' academic success is deeply interconnected with their social and emotional well-being. These reforms emphasize the integration of curriculum, teaching practices, and behavior management to build a unified and supportive climate that nurtures all aspects of student development.

One approach shown to enhance school climate is the use of interdisciplinary teams and smaller learning communities. Osher and Kendziora (2017) note that "middle schools employing team-based teaching and small learning communities foster closer relationships between students and educators, resulting in improved engagement and a reduction in behavioral challenges" (p. 34). By creating more personalized and stable environments, these settings allow educators to better understand and respond to students' individual needs, which promotes stronger connections and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, systemic reforms commonly prioritize professional development for educators. The authors highlight that "training teachers in social-emotional learning and inclusive instructional strategies equips them to better support students' holistic development and promotes a positive school climate" (p. 36). Ongoing professional learning enables teachers to implement practices that foster equity and inclusivity, helping all students feel valued and supported. By equipping staff with these tools, reforms cultivate environments where both teachers and students succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as a Framework for Improving School Climate

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) offer a structured framework for improving school climate and promoting academic success. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) define MTSS as "a proactive, comprehensive framework that integrates academic and behavioral supports to

improve outcomes for all students” (p. 48). By addressing students’ academic as well as social-emotional and behavioral needs, MTSS helps schools establish a climate conducive to every student’s success.

One key element of MTSS is its focus on early identification and intervention. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) explain that “schools implementing MTSS use data-driven problem solving to identify and address student needs before challenges escalate, thereby preventing academic and behavioral difficulties” (p. 50). This proactive approach fosters a supportive school climate where students receive timely assistance, reducing stress and increasing engagement.

In addition to supporting individual students, MTSS promotes collaboration among educators. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) note that “MTSS structures facilitate teamwork and shared responsibility through data-informed decision making, which cultivates a cohesive and trusting school environment” (p. 53). This collective effort strengthens the school culture, benefiting students, staff, and families alike.

School Climate and Risk Behaviors

Risk Behavior Prevention

A positive school climate plays a crucial role in reducing risk behaviors among middle school students. Wang and Degol (2016) emphasize that “a school environment characterized by safety, support, and connectedness serves as a protective factor against risk behaviors such as substance use, violence, and absenteeism” (p. 330). In schools where students feel safe, respected, and connected to peers and teachers, they are less likely to engage in behaviors that jeopardize their academic and social development.

One key way school climate influences risk behaviors is by fostering a sense of belonging and community. Wang and Degol (2016) state that “students who perceive a strong sense of connectedness and belonging at school tend to display fewer problem behaviors and are more likely to adopt prosocial norms consistent with the school’s values” (p. 330). This connection not only discourages negative behaviors but also encourages positive social engagement aligned with the school’s mission.

Moreover, schools with positive climates often prioritize early interventions and prevention strategies, which help mitigate risk behaviors. Wang and Degol (2016) note that “social and emotional learning programs and positive peer relationships are promising proactive approaches to reduce problem behaviors before they escalate” (p. 330). By addressing these issues holistically and fostering a climate of trust and accountability, schools create an environment where students are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors.

Preventing Bullying and Promoting Prosocial Behavior Through Climate Interventions

Preventing bullying and promoting prosocial behavior are integral aspects of cultivating a positive school climate. Espelage and Holt (2018) state that “effective bullying prevention programs emphasize respect, inclusivity, and the emotional safety of students as foundational components” (p. 126). These programs aim to create environments where students feel valued and supported, reducing behaviors rooted in aggression and exclusion.

One effective approach to bullying prevention is implementing school-wide programming that fosters empathy and emotional intelligence. The authors explain that “restorative practices and peer support initiatives promote students’ abilities to manage conflicts

constructively and establish positive peer relationships” (p. 130). Such interventions not only decrease bullying incidents but also encourage prosocial behaviors that enhance school climate.

In addition to reducing bullying, climate interventions promote a culture of kindness and cooperation. Espelage and Holt (2018) emphasize that “schools nurturing prosocial behaviors such as altruism and teamwork foster an atmosphere where positive social interactions become normative” (p. 132). By recognizing and rewarding such behaviors, schools build climates that discourage negativity and motivate students to contribute positively to their community, creating safer and more inclusive environments.

Administrative Recognition of Prosocial Behaviors

Bollar (2020) emphasizes the pivotal role of school leadership in fostering a positive climate that mitigates risk behaviors among students. He asserts that “effective leaders set the tone for the entire school, influencing the behaviors and attitudes of both staff and students” (p. 45). By modeling respect, inclusivity, and proactive engagement, leaders can create an environment where negative behaviors are less likely to thrive.

Bollar (2020) also discusses the importance of consistent and clear communication in establishing behavioral expectations. He notes that “when students understand the standards and see them consistently upheld, they are more inclined to adhere to them” (p. 67). This clarity reduces ambiguity and helps prevent misunderstandings that could lead to misconduct.

Furthermore, Bollar (2020) highlights the significance of recognizing and celebrating positive behaviors: “Acknowledging students’ positive actions reinforces desired behaviors and contributes to a supportive school climate” (p. 89). Such recognition not only encourages

individual students but also sets a precedent for others, promoting a culture where prosocial behaviors are valued and emulated.

Leadership's Role in Ensuring Student Safety and Well-Being Through Climate Initiatives

School leadership plays a critical role in fostering student safety and well-being by shaping a positive and inclusive school climate. Thapa et al. (2013) state, “effective school leaders establish clear norms and expectations for safety and respect, creating climates where students feel both physically and emotionally secure” (p. 367). By prioritizing safety and inclusivity, leaders help students develop a strong sense of belonging essential for academic and social success.

A key responsibility of school leaders is to implement comprehensive policies addressing both physical security and emotional health. According to Thapa et al. (2013), “schools with proactive leadership are more likely to enact coordinated strategies to prevent bullying, violence, and support mental health, thereby reducing risk behaviors” (p. 368). This approach fosters a culture of trust and shared accountability beneficial to the whole school community.

Furthermore, leaders must ensure ongoing professional development focused on trauma-informed practices and equity-centered supports. Thapa et al. (2013) emphasize that “leadership commitment to staff training and resources equips educators to identify and respond effectively to students’ diverse needs, reinforcing a climate conducive to learning and well-being” (p. 371). Through these efforts, school leaders promote a cohesive environment where both students and staff thrive.

Effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning Programs in Reducing Student Risk Behaviors

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are highly effective in reducing student risk behaviors and promoting a positive school climate. Durlak et al. (2015) explain that “SEL programs provide students with the skills to manage emotions, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions, all of which contribute to reducing risk behaviors” (p. 405). By addressing underlying skills related to aggression, bullying, and substance use, SEL fosters safer and more supportive school environments.

The integration of SEL into school climate initiatives also enhances student engagement and academic outcomes. Durlak et al. (2015) found that “students participating in SEL programs demonstrated higher levels of academic achievement and lower levels of disruptive behaviors compared to their peers in non-SEL schools” (p. 408). This dual impact highlights the importance of SEL in supporting both emotional well-being and educational success.

Furthermore, SEL programs are particularly effective in promoting prosocial behaviors, which contribute to a healthier school climate. Durlak et al. (2015) highlight that “students who develop skills such as empathy and conflict resolution are more likely to engage in positive interactions with peers and less likely to exhibit risky or harmful behaviors” (p. 410). By embedding SEL into the fabric of school climate, educators and leaders foster cultures prioritizing safety and well-being, thereby reducing risk behaviors and supporting student success.

Summary

School climate serves as the foundation for academic, behavioral, and emotional success in middle schools. A supportive climate fosters a sense of safety, belonging, and engagement,

which are essential during the transitional middle school years. Research consistently underscores the impact of a positive climate on improving academic achievement, reducing risk behaviors, and promoting social-emotional well-being (Osher & Kendziora, 2017; Wang & Degol, 2016). From facility design and family-school partnerships to PBIS frameworks and comprehensive reforms, prioritizing a healthy school climate equips students and staff with the tools to thrive.

The pivotal role of school leadership, particularly that of principals, cannot be overstated in creating and sustaining positive school climates. Murphy and Louis (2018) assert that “effective principals shape environments where students feel valued, teachers feel supported, and learning thrives” (p. 203). Marzano et al. (2017) emphasize that by focusing on equity, safety, and collaboration, principals set the tone for climates that empower all stakeholders to succeed. Through strategic actions, modeling of positive behaviors, and fostering a shared vision, principals influence the culture and climate of their schools, ensuring inclusivity and support for all.

As we move forward, future research should explore innovative strategies and emerging challenges in advancing school climate and culture. Areas for investigation include integrating technology into climate initiatives, enhancing culturally responsive practices for diverse populations, and examining the long-term effects of social-emotional learning programs. Additionally, understanding how leadership development programs and systemic reforms influence school climate over time could yield actionable insights for educators and even policymakers. Such research will inform the next generation of practices to create even more inclusive and effective learning environments.

This chapter and its exploration of school climate research sets the stage for Chapter III: Methodology, which outlines the research design, tools, and processes used to investigate these dynamics further. By employing a robust methodological framework, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of how school climate initiatives are implemented and their measurable impacts on academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes in middle school. Through this lens, the next chapter will examine the strategies and approaches that contribute to creating and sustaining a positive climate conducive to success for all stakeholders at the North East Middle School.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

School climate and culture significantly impact student learning, staff morale, and overall school success. Research by Wang and Degol (2016), Osher and Kendziora (2017), and Grissom et al. (2013) affirmed the foundational role of climate in shaping both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for students, while reinforcing the importance of inclusive, supportive, and equitable environments. The literature review provided a direct justification for each research question and supported the design of the study. Research emphasized the importance of stakeholder perceptions, the influence of systemic factors, and the value of collaborative strategies in fostering positive school environments. Additionally, the literature underscored that strategic school leadership, evidence-based interventions, and intentional relationship-building practices contribute to sustainable improvements in school climate (Grissom et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2011). This connection between evidence and practice served as the backdrop for this study, which sought to examine stakeholder perceptions of climate and culture at North East Middle School to inform actionable strategies aligned with the district's Vision 2028 goals.

Further research affirmed these foundational studies' findings that a collectively positive school climate and strong cultural coherence contribute to enhanced student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness. Thapa et al. (2013) asserted that "a sustained, positive school climate is associated with fewer behavioral problems, increased academic achievement, and greater emotional well-being" (p. 361). Similarly, Wang and Degol (2016) emphasized that "a positive school climate fosters equitable learning environments that can reduce achievement gaps and improve student motivation" (p. 67). These findings support the design of this study, which

sought to explore school climate and culture holistically through multiple stakeholder perspectives in order to inform data-driven strategies for sustainable school improvement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of students, staff, and parents/guardians regarding the climate and culture at North East Middle School. Informed by the literature on school climate and culture (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016), this study used a mixed-methods research design that included surveys, structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to collect a comprehensive set of data. These tools supported the study by offering a triangulated and layered understanding of stakeholder perspectives, echoing findings from Osher and Kendziora (2017), who emphasized the importance of multi-source data in developing equitable learning environments.

This study was relevant to all stakeholders in the North East Middle School, including the researcher, who also served as the building principal. Understanding stakeholder perceptions was essential for the identification of both strengths and areas for growth within the current school climate. As the district embraces a vision centered on cultivating caring, respectful, and collaborative citizens, it became increasingly important to ensure that the experiences of students, staff, and families reflect those ideals. Persistent concerns regarding inconsistent disciplinary practices, gaps in student engagement, and perceived inequities – echoed both in staff feedback and survey data – underscored the need for targeted investigation and improvement. As the building leader, the researcher ultimately sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the building's climate and culture to inform meaningful, data-driven strategies that align with the district's Vision 2028 initiative (Hartzell, 2024).

Research Questions

Through the lens of practitioner research, this study sought to better understand how students, staff, and families perceive the current school climate, identify the factors contributing to those perceptions, and explore potential pathways to cultivate a more positive and inclusive school culture. Once again, these are the research questions that guided this study:

1. What were the (then) current perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the climate and culture at North East Middle School?

Understanding how these groups view the overall school climate was essential to assessing the health of the learning environment. This question focused on gathering honest and diverse feedback from those most directly impacted by school climate and culture. Student engagement, feelings of safety and belonging, teacher morale, and parent satisfaction were among the dimensions explored to form a holistic picture of the current state of the school.

2. What were the underlying factors contributing to the existing climate and culture at North East Middle School?

This question aimed to move beyond surface-level perceptions and explore the root causes influencing stakeholder experiences. Factors such as leadership practices, communication norms, disciplinary policies, teacher collaboration, and student behavior were analyzed to identify systemic contributors to the existing school environment. The responses provided a framework for understanding why the current climate and culture exist as they do.

3. What potential strategies could be implemented to enhance the climate and culture at North East Middle School based on the perceptions and underlying factors identified?

With the data collected from surveys, interviews, observations, and document review, this question sought to identify actionable recommendations for systemic improvement. By analyzing patterns in stakeholder responses and cross-referencing them with best practices in the literature, the study generated context-specific strategies for improvement. These included enhancing relational trust, refining disciplinary practices, increasing communication and collaboration, and aligning school initiatives with shared values and goals.

The North East Middle School community faced a number of socioeconomic challenges. Over half (55.5%) of all students classify as having experienced financial hardship, possibly limiting access to educational resources, technology, and extracurricular opportunities. These factors create a dynamic where educators must balance rigorous academic expectations with compassion and individualized support. Without targeted interventions, opportunity gaps negatively impact school climate and culture. According to Kraft et al. (2016):

Safe and orderly learning environments appear to be particularly salient for supporting student achievement. The large achievement gaps associated with measures of school safety in Chicago schools illustrate the value of environments where teachers and students are able to concentrate on teaching and learning. (p. 1416)

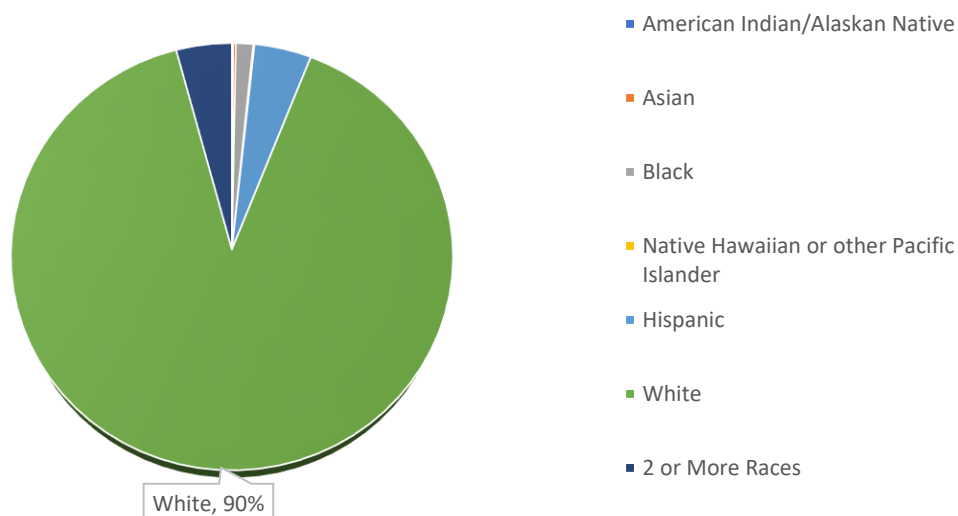
Understanding the nuances of stakeholder experiences within this environment is essential for developing targeted supports and sustainable improvements.

Setting and Participants

Setting

The research took place at North East Middle School in North East, Pennsylvania. The school serves students in grades six through eight (plus Autistic and Life Skills Support classrooms), with a total enrollment of 310 students. The North East Middle School is one of three schools within the North East School District (NESD), which is located along the shores of Lake Erie, just fifteen miles from Erie, Pennsylvania. North East School District lies within a rural, viticultural community with a population of approximately 10,600 people. The geographic size of the district is 43.69 square miles. The district serves 1,496 students in grades kindergarten through twelve across three schools – North East Elementary School, North East Middle School, and North East High School.

Figure 1 shows the racial diversity of students enrolled in the North East School District. District-wide, our student population is 89.8% White, 4.3% Hispanic, 4.2% are Two or More Races, 1.3% Black, 0.2% Asian, 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

Figure 1*North East School District Demographics***NESD Percent Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity**

Note. From “District Fast Facts” by Pennsylvania Department of Education (2025).

(<https://futurereadypa.org/District/FastFacts?id=081160056145249177206041190242094155111070203129>)

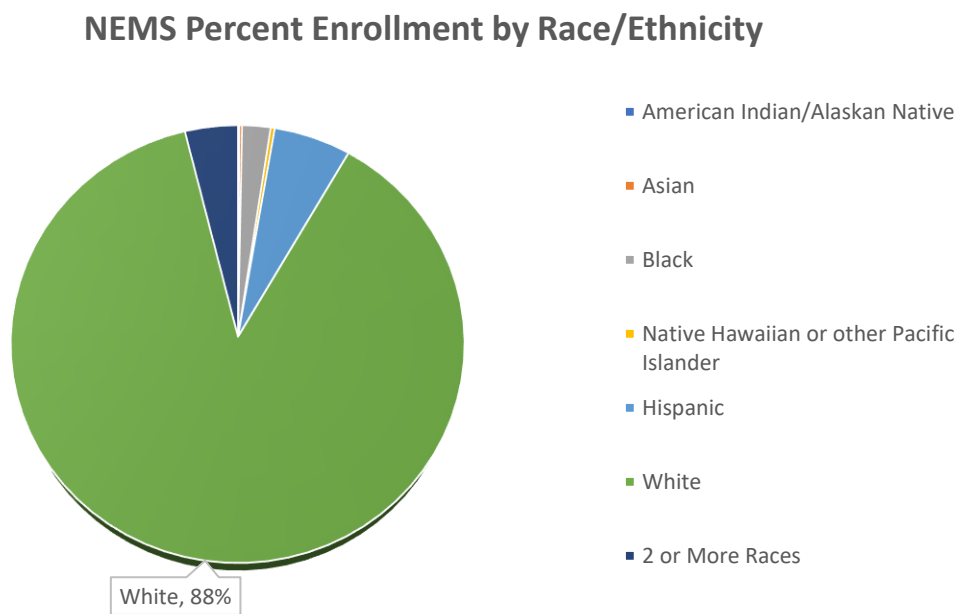
The gender breakdown across the North East School District is 54.8% male, 45.3% female. 55.5% of the population of students are deemed economically disadvantaged, 17.3% of the student body are identified as Special Education students, 1.7% of students are identified as homeless, 0.5% are military connected, and 0.3% are English Language Learners (ELL). In addition, 2.2% of North East students are identified as Gifted Students and 95 total students attend the Erie County Technical School to receive training in areas outside of a traditional educational setting (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-a).

Student Participation

Initial participation was offered to all North East Middle School students in grades six through eight, all North East Middle School faculty and staff members, and parents and guardians of all enrolled students. As seen in Figure 2, the student demographic population was as follows: 88% White (not Hispanic), 5.7% Hispanic, 3.9% Two or More Races, 2.1% Black or African American (not Hispanic), and 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Gender demographics reflected 44.8% female and 55.2% male students (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-a).

Figure 2

North East Middle School Demographics



Note. From “District Fast Facts” by Pennsylvania Department of Education (2025).

(<https://futurereadypa.org/District/FastFacts?id=081160056145249177206041190242094155111070203129>)

Consent

In total, 219 North East Middle School students completed the initial school climate survey. Informed consent procedures (Appendix F) were implemented in accordance with the ethical standards outlined by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and federal guidelines for research involving human subjects. Prior to data collection, all adult participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

For all student participants (all under 18), a formal parental/guardian consent process was conducted. Informed Participant Consent Forms (Appendix F) were distributed through Sapphire, the district's student information system. Only students with documented written consent from a parent or guardian were permitted to participate in this study. Student assent was also obtained to ensure minors understood the study and agreed to take part.

All consent and assent materials clearly outlined the purpose of the study, described the data collection instruments (surveys, interviews, observations), and addressed the protection of participant privacy and data confidentiality. Participants had opportunities to ask questions and were reassured that identifying information would be removed or coded to maintain confidentiality.

Staff Participation

Additionally, all faculty and staff members employed at the North East Middle School during the 2024-2025 academic year were invited to participate in the study. Invitations were

extended via district email with a link to an electronic version of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's School Climate Survey. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their rights under IRB-approved consent protocols, including confidentiality and the ability to withdraw from the research at any time.

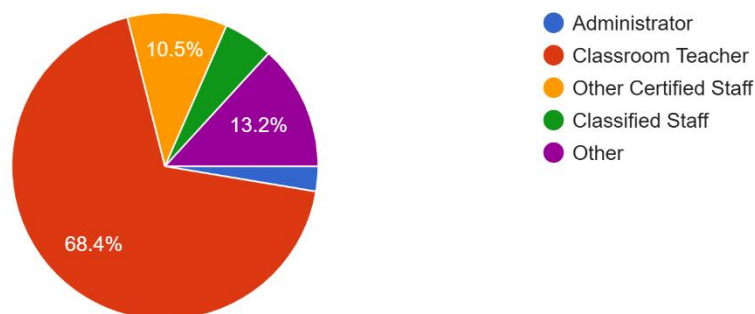
A total of 38 teachers and staff members completed the initial survey via Google Forms, offering diverse insights across grade levels, subject areas, and professional roles. The data collected from this group provided valuable context for understanding faculty perceptions of climate, culture, and leadership at the school.

To better understand the background and perspectives of those who participated, the following figures (Figures 3-6) summarize key demographic and perceptual data from the faculty and staff survey respondents:

Figure 3

Faculty and Staff Roles

What is your role in this school? (Choose one)
38 responses



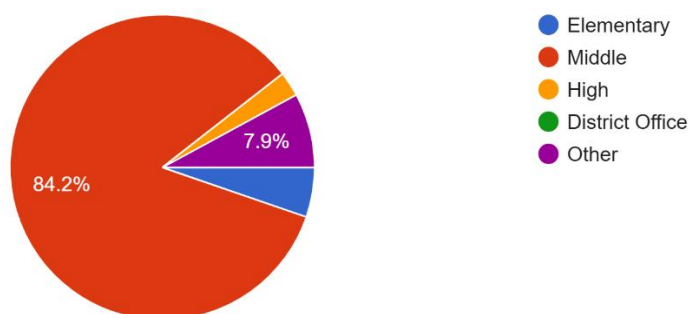
Note. Figure 3 illustrates that the majority of survey respondents (68.4%) were classroom teachers. The remaining participants included administrators, classified staff, other certified staff, and “other” to mean instructional aides, janitorial staff, etc.

Figure 4

Faculty and Staff Placement(s)

At what level do you work? (Check all that apply)

38 responses

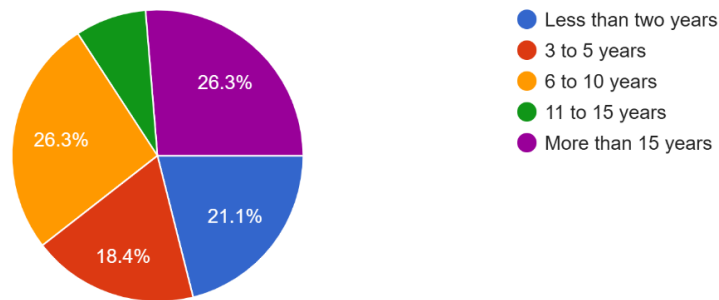


Note. Figure 4 illustrates that the majority of survey respondents (84.2%) work exclusively at North East Middle School; however, there were some respondents who work across buildings or departments, including the other two brick-and-mortar buildings – North East Elementary School and North East High School.

Figure 5*Faculty and Staff Experience in Education*

How many years have you worked, in any position, in education? (Choose one)

38 responses

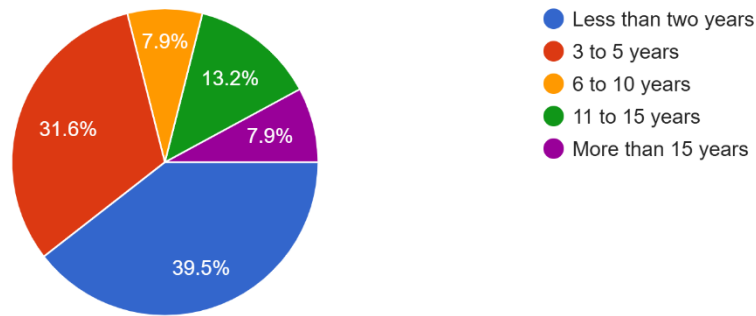


Note. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of educational experience across the North East Middle School faculty and staff. 26.3% of respondents have more than fifteen years of experience, 7.9% have eleven to fifteen years of experience, 26.3% have between six and ten years of experience, 18.4% have three to five years of experience, and 21.1% of all employed participants have been in an educational setting for less than two years.

Figure 6*Faculty and Staff Experience at North East Middle School*

How many years have you worked, in any position, in this school? (Choose one)

38 responses



Note. Figure 6 highlights one of the major reasons for this study – staff transiency. Among all participants, 39.5% have worked at the North East Middle School for less than two years. An additional 31.6% have between three and five years in the building. Only 7.9% of all participants have between six and ten years at the school, while 13.2% have eleven to fifteen years of experience in the building and only 7.9% have worked at the school for fifteen years or more.

These results collectively reflected a faculty and staff of varied experience levels that is generally supportive of the school's mission and leadership. While the findings highlighted numerous strengths within the staff culture, they also point to areas where continued dialogue and collaboration could further enhance the school environment. In addition to staff input, understanding the perspectives of parents and guardians was critical to developing a well-rounded view of the school's climate and culture. To capture a comprehensive understanding of additional stakeholder perspectives, the following section details the participation levels and

critical feedback provided by parents and families within the North East School District community.

Parent Participation

Parents and guardians of students enrolled at North East Middle School during the 2024-2025 school year were also invited to participate in the study. Invitations were distributed through the school district's communication system, Sapphire, and included a link to an electronic version of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's School Climate Survey for families. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their rights under IRB-approved consent protocols, including confidentiality and the option to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

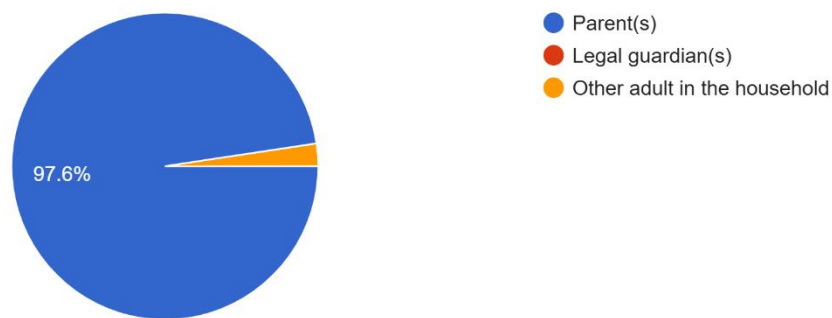
A total of 42 parents and guardians completed the survey via Google Forms. These participants represented a diverse range of family backgrounds and experiences within the school community. Their responses provided important insights into the family-school relationship, perceptions of school safety, communication practices, and the overall climate and culture of North East Middle School.

To further contextualize these perspectives, the following figures - Figures 7 and 8 - summarize two key data points – relationship and grade level of their student(s).

Figure 7*Adult Relationship to North East Middle School Student*

What is your relationship to the child you are reporting about? (Choose one)

42 responses

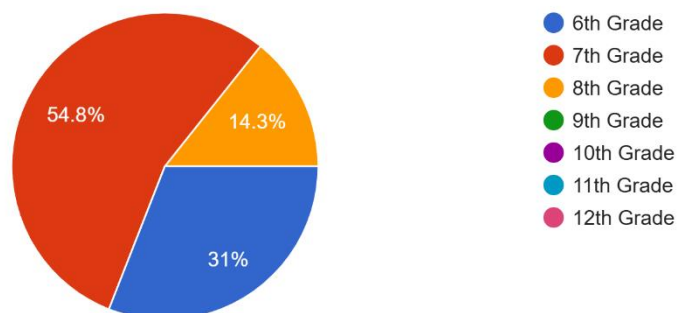


Note. Figure 7 shows that nearly all (97.6%) of participants were parents. No legal guardians completed this survey. One participant listed themselves as “Other adult in the household”.

Figure 8*Current Grade Level of Student Attributed to Respondent*

What grade is your child in this current school year?

42 responses



Note. Figure 8 shows the breakdown of parent participation by grade level. 31% of participants were parents/guardians of sixth graders, over half (54.8%) were parents/guardians of seventh graders, and 14.3% of all participants were parents/guardians of eighth graders. No parents of high school aged students enrolled in either autistic support or life skills support programming at North East Middle School elected to participate.

The perspectives shared by parents and guardians helped illuminate how families experience and interpret the climate and culture of the North East Middle School. Their input, alongside that of students and staff, provided a more comprehensive understanding of the current school environment. These collective insights directly informed the development and execution of the research plan, which is outlined in the following section.

Research Plan

Foundation in Literature

The research plan for this study was informed by a broad and compelling body of literature that underscores the critical role school climate and culture play in shaping the experiences and outcomes of all stakeholders. A positive school climate has been consistently linked to improved student engagement, academic achievement, emotional well-being, and lower rates of behavioral incidents (Thapa et al., 2013). These findings suggest that when students feel safe, supported, and connected to their school community, they more likely to attend regularly, participate actively in the learning process, and exhibit prosocial behaviors. Similarly, when staff members experience a collegial and respectful work environment, they are more likely to collaborate effectively, remain in the profession, and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement (Voight & Nation, 2016).

In addition to the well-documented academic and behavioral benefits, the literature also highlights the influence of systemic and environmental factors – such as leadership practices, equity and inclusion efforts, communication strategies, and stakeholder voice – on overall school climate. Effective school leaders are shown to play a key role in establishing shared norms and expectations, building trust, and fostering a sense of belonging among all members of the school community. This body of research provided a theoretical framework for this study and informed both the structure and focus of the research questions.

Importantly, the literature also supports the need for contextually grounded inquiry. While national trends provide important benchmarks, school climate is inherently local and influenced by the unique history, demographics, relationships, and culture of each school. Thus, to meaningfully improve the climate and culture at North East Middle School, it was essential to gather localized data directly from the students, staff, and families within the community.

Description of Research Plan

After gaining approval to conduct research at the North East School District, specifically the North East Middle School, the researcher began to distribute surveys to three critical stakeholder groups: Faculty/staff, students, and parents/guardians.

For staff, the email communication included a brief description of the survey, the district approval letter (Appendix B), the informed consent form (Appendix F), and the IRB approval letter (Appendix A). The staff survey consisted of 50 questions for participants to answer to gather staff perspective related to the (then) current school climate and culture. The survey included four questions to gather background on the participants. The survey included 43 Likert scale questions regarding school safety, culture, and their experiences. The survey concluded

with one optional open-ended “Additional Comments” question and two final questions asking the staff members to check their district name and school name to confirm accuracy.

For students, the communication occurred via Google Classroom and a subsequent email. This communication also included the district approval letter (Appendix B), the student assent form (Appendix G), and the IRB approval letter (Appendix A). The student survey consisted of 45 total questions for participants to answer to gain their perspectives related to their perceptions of (then) current school climate and culture. The survey only asked one demographic question regarding their current grade level. In addition, the survey included 41 Likert scale questions regarding school safety, culture, and their experiences. The survey concluded with one optional open-ended “Additional Comments” question and two final questions asking students to check their district name and school name to confirm accuracy.

Finally, for parents and guardians, the communication occurred via the Sapphire notification system which pushed out the researcher’s request for participation through a pinned post on the Sapphire parent portal, via email, a phone call, and a brief text message. Within the pinned post on Sapphire and the parent email that was sent out, there was a flyer containing separate Quick Response (QR) codes to each of the surveys – student, staff, and parent/guardian. The communication with parents once again included the district approval letter (Appendix B), the informed consent form (Appendix F), and the IRB approval letter (Appendix A). The survey consisted of nineteen total questions. There were only two demographic questions regarding the participants’ relation to the North East Middle School student and what that student’s current grade level was. There were then fourteen Likert scale questions regarding school safety, culture, and their experiences with the school. The survey concluded with one optional open-ended

“Additional Comments” question and two final questions asking parents/guardians to check their district name and school name to confirm accuracy.

Research Methods and Data Collection

Description of Research Design

The researcher designed and structured this study as an action research project using a mixed-methods design. Action research was chosen for its alignment with the researcher’s dual role as both a practitioner and investigator. As the building principal at North East Middle School, the researcher sought not only to understand current perceptions but to use the findings to inform ongoing improvement efforts in alignment with the district’s Vision 2028 strategic plan. Action research allows school leaders to investigate problems of practice in real time, develop contextualized solutions, and engage stakeholders in cycles of reflection and growth.

The mixed-methods model provided a comprehensive approach to data collection, integrating both quantitative and qualitative sources. Surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis were used to triangulate findings and provide a multidimensional view of the school’s climate and culture. This approach allowed for broad stakeholder engagement while also capturing in-depth narratives that could inform decision-making.

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative portion of the research included the administration of the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s School Climate Survey (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b), which was customized for students, faculty/staff, and parents/guardians. The surveys (Appendix C, Appendix D, and Appendix E, respectively) consisted of both Likert scale and multiple choice questions, covering domains such as safety, teaching and learning, relationships,

school leadership, and community engagement. The standardized format allowed for consistent data collection across groups, while additional questions added by the researcher provided more localized insights.

Qualitative Data Collection

To supplement the quantitative data, qualitative information was gathered through semi-structured interviews with a representative sample from all three stakeholder groups – students, staff, and parents/guardians (Appendix H, Appendix I, and Appendix J). These interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their survey responses and share personal experiences that illustrated the complexities of school culture. Observations conducted by school leaders provided additional insight into student-staff interactions, building routines, and the overall atmosphere of the school during regular instructional time and non-instructional settings such as lunch or hallway transitions.

Document Analysis

The final data source included a review of school-based documents such as disciplinary referrals, attendance records, academic performance trends, and data from the first year of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) implementation at the North East Middle School. These documents were analyzed to identify patterns and contextualize the perception data collected from surveys and interviews. For example, survey concerns about behavior were compared with actual office disciplinary referral rates, and feedback on student recognition was reviewed alongside PBIS Rewards data that showcased specific praise and feedback as students were awarded points for showing class, character, and/or integrity for actions in the classroom, hallways, and/or cafeteria.

Integration of Data Sources

Each of the four data sources – surveys, interviews, observations, and document review – was used to address the study’s three central research questions. The use of multiple data streams ensured that findings were cross-validated and reliable, while also allowing for the identification of both consensus and divergence among stakeholder groups. This integrative approach also supported the development of actionable strategies grounded in evidence and reflective of the lived experiences of those within the school.

Data Collection Timeline

The data collection process for this study followed a structured timeline aligned with the academic calendar and research goals. Planning and preparation began in June 2024 with the development of the survey instruments, interview protocols, and observation tools. During this phase, the researcher also obtained IRB approval and secured permission from the school district to proceed with the study.

Data collection occurred between October 2024 and April 2025. During this time, electronic surveys were administered to students, parents/guardians, and staff members via Google Forms. Additionally, interviews with randomly selected participants were conducted to gather qualitative data. Observations of school routines and student-staff interactions were conducted throughout the building, and relevant documents – including disciplinary records and attendance data – were compiled for analysis.

From December through June 2025, the data analysis phase began, including the coding of qualitative data and the statistical analysis of survey responses. This process led to the

identification of emerging themes and patterns. Findings were drafted between June and July 2025, with final results and recommendations shared in August 2025.

Fiscal Implications

The research study was conducted with minimal financial burden. The primary costs associated with data collection were related to incentivization. To encourage higher response rates and participation across all stakeholder groups, the researcher offered a small raffle incentive. One student, one parent/guardian, and one staff member were each randomly selected to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card, totaling \$75 in total incentives.

Other additional costs associated with data collection were related to printing hard copies of consent forms and surveys for participants without internet access, totaling approximately \$10. Observer training materials – including copies of observation checklists and brief instructional guides – incurred a cost of approximately \$25.

All other research activities, including data collection and analysis, were completed by the researcher using free or institutionally provided software (Google Forms, Google Docs, etc.) The total estimated cost of the study was \$110, which was covered personally by the researcher.

Validity

Ensuring the credibility, accuracy, and trustworthiness of the data collected was a central priority throughout the research process. Given the use of a mixed-methods, action research model, multiple forms of validity were considered to ensure the study's findings were both meaningful and applicable to the context of the North East Middle School. This section describes the types of validity emphasized in the study, the strategies used to enhance each form, and the triangulation utilized to reinforce the integrity of the data.

Types of Validity Considered

The study focused on three primary forms of validity: Construct validity, internal validity, and ecological validity. Locke (2012) defines construct validity as “validating (one’s) constructs based on their pattern of correlations with other variables assumed to be indicators of or theoretically related to the construct of interest” (p. 146). Therefore, construct validity refers to the extent to which a test or measurement accurately reflects the concept or construct it intends to measure. In addition, internal validity examines whether “the manner in which a study was designed, conducted, or analyzed allows trustworthy answers to the research questions in the study” (Andrade, 2018, p. 71). This method of validity examines the extent to which bias is present. If internal validity is compromised, then the entire study can become unreliable. Finally, “ecological validity examines whether the results of a study can be generalized to real-life settings... ecological validity specifically examines whether the findings of a study can be generalized to naturalistic situations, such as clinical practice in everyday life” (Andrade, 2018, p. 72). One key point of ecological validity is that this is ultimately a research-based judgement, not a computed statistic.

Construct validity was of particular importance due to the study’s reliance on survey instruments to assess perceptions on school climate and culture. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) School Climate Survey, which served as the core data instrument for students, parents, and staff, is a research-based tool designed to measure well-established dimensions of school climate such as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Utilizing a validated and publicly accessible instrument helped ensure that the constructs being measured accurately reflected the intended concepts.

Internal validity, often associated with trustworthiness of findings within the context of the study, was supported through consistent research protocols, careful implementation of data collection instruments, and alignment of the research design with the study's questions. This included piloting interview questions, following standardized administration procedures for the surveys, and adhering to IRB-approved ethical guidelines for all interactions with participants. Additionally, internal validity was supported through allowing participants to clarify or expand upon their statements during both the initial survey and follow-up interview process; these open-ended questions allowed participants to clarify or expand upon their statements to ensure accuracy in representation.

Ecological validity was also considered, especially given the action research nature of this study. This form of validity refers to the degree to which research findings reflect real-world conditions. Because this study was conducted within the school where the researcher serves as principal, special care was taken to ensure that findings were grounded in the lived experience of stakeholders. Data collection occurred during a regular academic year in naturalistic settings such as classrooms, hallways, and common areas. The inclusion of everyday school documents – such as discipline records and attendance reports – further strengthened the ecological relevance of the study's findings.

Methods to Increase Validity

To enhance construct and internal validity, multiple steps were taken throughout the planning and implementation phases of the research. First, the use of a state-developed survey instrument provided a strong foundation for reliability and content validity. While these surveys were standardized, they also allowed for limited customization, which enabled the researcher to

include questions relevant to the unique programs and goals of North East Middle School, such as the implementation of the Profile of a Graduate and Road to Gold initiatives.

For interviews, the researcher created a semi-structured interview protocol aligned to the study's three research questions. These interviews were reviewed by professional peers and the IRB before being conducted. The researcher also kept detailed field notes during and after the interviews to document tone, emphasis, and non-verbal cues that could inform the interpretation of responses. Participants were given opportunities to review their transcripts and clarify or revise any points – a process known as member checking, which increases the credibility of qualitative data.

In addition, ethical safeguards were employed to protect participant anonymity and reduce bias. The use of digital surveys through Google Forms with authentication settings helped ensure that responses were genuine and submitted only once per participant. Furthermore, participant incentives were provided equitably across stakeholder groups (students, staff, and parents/guardians) to encourage honest and voluntary participation, not skewed by coercion or pressure.

The researcher was also cognizant of the dual role as school principal and lead investigator. To mitigate any potential power dynamics or conflicts of interest, survey participation was confidential, and interviews were conducted in a manner that emphasized voluntary participation and personal privacy. This effort to separate the researcher's administrative role from the research process further supported the internal and ethical validity of the study.

Triangulation of Data

A major strength of this study was the use of data triangulation, a key feature of mixed-methods research that enhances validity by comparing multiple data sources to identify consistent patterns or discrepancies. Triangulation was accomplished by collecting data from four distinct methods: Surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Surveys were administered to students, staff, and parents/guardians, providing a broad quantitative overview of stakeholder perceptions. These were backed by follow-up semi-structured interviews with selected representatives from each group, allowing for deeper exploration into specific experiences and concerns raised in the surveys. The interview data helped explain “why” participants responded in certain ways, adding meaning and context to the numerical findings.

Observational data served as a third layer of validation, as the researcher and trained observers recorded interactions and behaviors in real-time across various school settings. This included lunch periods, hallway transitions, and unstructured time where climate and culture often manifest visibly. Observations were conducted using structured checklists to ensure consistency and limit observer bias.

Document analysis rounded out the data sources, including a review of discipline logs, attendance records, and overall student performance data. These documents provided a historical and procedural lens, offering additional evidence for validating patterns found in the surveys and interviews.

By comparing findings from across these sources, the researcher was able to identify areas of convergence and divergence. For example, if students reported feeling disconnected

from adults in the survey, and the sentiment also appeared in interview narratives and observation field notes, it strengthened the credibility of that conclusion. Similarly, if disciplinary data reflected a disproportionality that was also echoed in staff or parent concerns, the triangulation of evidence underscored the need for targeted intervention.

Together, these approaches to validity supported the development of a credible, trustworthy, and context-specific portrait of the school climate and culture of North East Middle School.

Summary

This chapter presented the full methodology used to conduct a comprehensive, mixed-methods action research study examining school climate and culture. The purpose of the study, its alignment with the district's goals, and the rationale for the research design were described in detail. The chapter included a thorough overview of the research setting and participant groups - students, staff, and parents - and outlined how data were collected through surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis.

To ensure the integrity of the study, multiple forms of validity were emphasized and reinforced through a range of methodological and ethical safeguards. The triangulation of data sources enabled a rich, multi-layered understanding of stakeholder perceptions and experiences, which strengthened the relevance and applicability of the findings.

The following chapter will present the results of the data analysis, organized around the study's three research questions. These findings will provide insight into both the strengths and challenges currently present at North East Middle School and offer guidance for data-driven improvements in climate and culture.

CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis and Results

In recent years, North East Middle School has faced growing concerns related to school climate and culture. Feedback from students, staff, and families has revealed a disconnect between stakeholders and the broader school environment, marked by inconsistent disciplinary practices, limited engagement opportunities, and varying perceptions of safety and belonging. These challenges have contributed to a sense of fragmentation within the school community and highlighted the need for renewed efforts to strengthen relationships, foster inclusivity, and rebuild trust.

In response to these concerns, this study sought to investigate stakeholder perceptions of the current climate and culture at North East Middle School. As outlined in Chapter III, a mixed-methods design was employed to capture a holistic view of the school environment using surveys, structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Grounded in the literature explored in Chapter II, the goal of this chapter is to present the findings of that data collection in a manner that highlights both the strengths and areas for growth as identified by the school community.

The results are organized around the three research questions that guided this inquiry:

1. What are the current perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the climate and culture at North East Middle School?
2. What are the underlying factors contributing to the existing climate and culture?

3. What potential strategies can be implemented to enhance the climate and culture based on the perceptions and underlying factors identified?

Through the analysis of stakeholder feedback and contextual evidence, this chapter seeks to provide a data-driven foundation for future school improvement planning, with a focus on fostering a more positive, connected, and equitable school climate.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the school climate and culture at North East Middle School. The researcher followed a systematic, multi-phased process to analyze data collected from surveys, structured interviews, classroom observations, and behavioral records related to PBIS implementation.

Quantitative Data Analysis

1. Data Preparation and Organization:

Survey data from students, staff, and parents/guardians were first compiled and organized. This involved checking for missing responses, invalid entries, and ensuring consistency across respondent groups. The researcher used software tools such as Google Forms and Google Sheets for data collection and exported datasets for further analysis.

2. Descriptive Statistics:

The initial analysis involved running descriptive statistics to summarize demographic characteristics and key survey variables. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to establish baseline patterns of perceptions across stakeholder groups.

3. Reliability and Validity Checks:

The researcher assessed the internal consistency of the data gained from student, staff, and parent/guardian surveys. Additionally, construct validity was supported by utilizing standardized, a research-based instrument such as the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey, which had already been tested for many years.

4. Triangulation with Behavioral Data:

Quantitative survey results were triangulated with school administrative data including office disciplinary referrals, attendance records, and PBIS Rewards data. This enabled the researcher to link perceptions with observable behaviors, enhancing the applicability of findings.

Qualitative Data Analysis

1. Transcription and Organization:

Semi-structured interviews conducted with students, staff, and parents were transcribed verbatim, and organized for coding. Field notes from classroom and school walkthroughs supplemented these transcripts.

2. Thematic Coding:

Using qualitative analysis, mostly manual review, the researcher employed thematic coding to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories related to school climate, culture, relationships, safety, and equity.

3. Integration with Quantitative Findings:

Qualitative themes were integrated with quantitative results to provide contextualized explanations for survey patterns and behavioral data. This mixed-methods integration

allowed for a more holistic understanding of stakeholder experiences and informed practical recommendations.

Results

Student Survey Summary

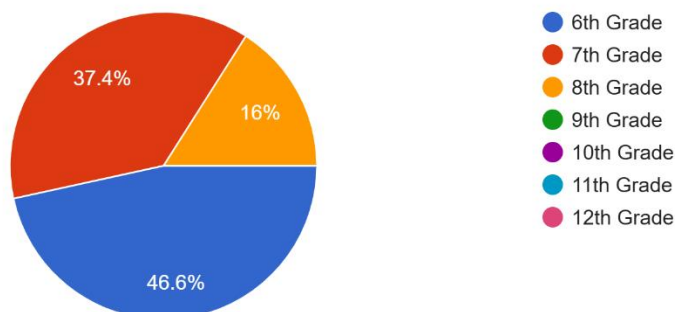
A modified version of the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey (Pennsylvania, n.d.) was administered to students in October 2024 as part of the initial data collection process. The instrument, created using Google Forms, consisted of 45 questions, the majority of which utilized a Likert-scale format to measure students' perceptions across various dimensions of school climate. A total of 219 students participated in this baseline administration, providing a robust initial dataset for analysis.

Survey Question 1 asked participants to indicate their current grade level. The grade level distribution was as follows: 102 sixth grade students, 82 seventh grade students, and 35 eighth grade students. Figure 9 displays the grade level breakdown of the initial data collection process.

Figure 9*Grade Level Breakdown of PA School Climate Survey*

What grade are you currently enrolled in this school year?

219 responses



Note. Figure 9 shows the breakdown of parent participation by grade level. 102 participants (or 46.6%) were sixth graders, 82 participants (or 37.4%) were seventh graders, and 35 participants (or 16%) were eighth graders. No high school aged students enrolled in either autistic support or life skills support programming at North East Middle School elected to participate.

To address the remaining research questions, the study continued to utilize a Likert-style survey format to capture students' perceptions related to school climate and culture. This approach allowed for the quantification of student attitudes, experiences, and observations across key areas such as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. By utilizing a consistent response scale, the data collected provided meaningful insight into patterns and trends within the student body, supporting a deeper analysis of how students perceive the overall climate and culture of the school.

Student Survey Section 1: Bullying and Its Implications on School Safety. The next set of survey items, specifically Questions 2 through 6, concentrated on the topic of bullying and its implications for school safety. These questions were designed to assess students' perceptions of how frequently bullying occurs within the school setting, the forms it may take, and whether it contributes to feelings of insecurity or discomfort during the school day. By examining student responses to these items, the survey aimed to capture both the prevalence of bullying behaviors and their broader impact on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the student body. Students were asked to respond using a Likert-style scale, indicating the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements related to bullying and safety concerns.

Table 1 presents a summary of the data collected from this section of the survey. The findings offer insight into how students experience and interpret the presence of bullying in their school environment, and whether they feel safe from peer aggression in various school settings. This information is critical in evaluating the overall climate of the school and identifying areas in which additional support, intervention, or preventive measures may be necessary to ensure that all students feel safe, valued, and protected.

Table 1

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 2 Through 6 (Bullying)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
2. Students at this school are often bullied.	9.6%	(21)	48.9%	(107)	28.8%	(63)	12.8%	(28)
3. Students at this school are often threatened.	17.8%	(39)	46.6%	(102)	29.2%	(64)	6.4%	(14)

4. Students at this school are often teased or picked on.	3.2%	(7)	24.7%	(54)	48.4%	(106)	23.7%	(52)
5. Students at this school are often bullied because of certain characteristics (ex: race, religion, or weight).	13.7%	(30)	28.3%	(62)	37.4%	(82)	20.5%	(45)
6. I sometimes stay home because I don't feel safe at school.	49.8%	(109)	37.0%	(81)	11.4%	(25)	1.8%	(4)

Survey Question 2 asked respondents to indicate whether students at the school are often bullied. Of the total responses, 9.6% (21 participants) strongly disagreed, while 48.9% (107 participants) disagreed. Meanwhile, 28.8% (63 participants) agreed with the statement, and 12.8% (28 participants) strongly agreed. This suggests that although a majority of students do not believe bullying is prevalent, a notable portion - over 40% - acknowledged its occurrence.

Survey Question 3 focused on whether students at the school are often threatened. Here, 17.8% (39 participants) strongly disagreed and 46.6% (102 participants) disagreed. Another 29.2% (64 participants) agreed with the statement, while 6.4% (14 participants) strongly agreed. This indicates that most students do not perceive threats as common, though nearly a third acknowledged some level of threat.

Survey Question 4 asked if students at the school are often teased or picked on. Only 3.2% (7 participants) strongly disagreed, and 24.7% (54 participants) disagreed. However, 48.4% (106 participants) agreed with the statement and 23.7% (52 participants) strongly agreed. These results show that a significant majority - over 70% - experience or witness their fellow students being teased or picked on.

Survey Question 5 inquired whether students are often bullied because of specific characteristics such as race, religion, or weight. Of the respondents, 13.7% (30 participants) strongly disagreed and 28.3% (62 participants) disagreed. Meanwhile, 37.4% (82 participants) agreed, and 20.5% (45 participants) strongly agreed. These results suggest that identity-based bullying may be an issue at North East Middle School.

Survey Question 6 asked students if they ever stay home from school because they do not feel safe. Nearly half - 49.8% (109 participants) - strongly disagreed with this statement, and 37.0% (81 participants) disagreed. Only 11.4% (25 participants) agreed, and 1.8% (4 participants) strongly agreed. These findings demonstrate the impact of both attendance and school safety.

Student Survey Section 2: Perceptions of School Safety. The subsequent section of the student survey was designed to assess students' perceptions of safety within various areas of the school environment. Specifically, students were asked to evaluate how safe they feel in three distinct contexts: (1) outside around the school grounds, (2) within the hallways and bathrooms, and (3) in their individual classrooms. These areas were intentionally selected to capture a comprehensive view of perceived safety across both supervised and less-supervised settings. Students responded to items using a Likert-style scale, indicating the degree to which they felt safe or unsafe in each location. Their responses provide valuable insight into the physical and emotional security experienced by students throughout the school day. Table 2 presents a summary of the data collected from this section, offering a clear depiction of trends in perceived safety across the three school settings. This information is critical for identifying potential areas of concern and for informing strategies aimed at improving the overall school climate and student well-being.

Table 2

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 7 Through 9 (Safety)

Survey Statement	Not Safe		Somewhat Safe		Mostly Safe		Very Safe	
7. Outside around the school.	4.1%	(9)	21.5%	(47)	44.3%	(97)	30.1%	(66)
8. In the hallways and bathrooms of the school.	3.2%	(7)	24.7%	(54)	36.1%	(79)	36.1%	(79)
9. In your classes.	1.8%	(4)	16.4%	(36)	25.6%	(56)	56.2%	(123)

Survey Question 7 asked students how safe they feel outside and around the school. A small percentage, 4.1% (9 participants), indicated that they do not feel safe in this area. Meanwhile, 21.5% (47 participants) felt only somewhat safe. The majority of students reported feeling either mostly safe at 44.3% (97 participants) or very safe at 30.1% (66 participants), indicating that over 74% of students generally feel secure in the outdoor areas around the school.

Survey Question 8 addressed students' sense of safety in the hallways and bathrooms of the school. Only 3.2% (7 participants) indicated that they do not feel safe in these locations, while 24.7% (54 participants) felt somewhat safe. A total of 36.1% (79 participants) reported feeling mostly safe, with another 36.1% (79 participants) stating that they feel very safe. These results reflect that over 70% of students perceive hallways and bathrooms as safe environments.

Survey Question 9 asked students to rate their sense of safety in their classrooms. The responses showed that only 1.8% (4 participants) felt unsafe and 16.4% (36 participants) felt somewhat safe. Meanwhile, 25.6% (56 participants) felt mostly safe, and the largest group -

56.2% (123 participants) - felt very safe in their classrooms. This data shows that over 80% of students felt mostly or very safe in their classroom environments.

Student Survey Section 3: Perceptions of Peers. The third section of the survey focused on eliciting student perceptions of their peer group and the overall student-to-student dynamic within the school environment. Specifically, students were presented with a series of statements related to the behaviors, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships among their classmates. Using a Likert-style response format, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. This format ranged from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," allowing for a nuanced understanding of students' perceptions. The items in this section were designed to gauge key aspects of school climate as it pertains to peer interaction, such as empathy, mutual respect, social inclusion, and the presence of negative behaviors like exclusion or peer conflict. This data, depicted in Table 3, provided valuable insight into how students perceive the culture among their peers, which is a critical dimension of the overall school climate.

Table 3

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 10 Through 25 (Perceptions of Students)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
10. Don't really care about each other.	21.0%	(46)	44.7%	(98)	29.2%	(64)	5.0%	(11)
11. Like to put others down.	24.7%	(54)	37.9%	(83)	28.3%	(62)	9.1%	(20)
12. Don't get along together well.	9.1%	(20)	40.6%	(89)	43.8%	(96)	6.4%	(14)
13. Just look out for themselves.	9.6%	(21)	38.4%	(84)	40.2%	(88)	11.9%	(26)

14. Treat each other with respect.	8.7%	(19)	28.3%	(62)	42.5%	(93)	20.5%	(45)
15. Stop and think before doing anything when they get angry.	19.2%	(42)	35.6%	(78)	32.9%	(72)	12.3%	(27)
16. Do their share of the work when we have group projects.	9.1%	(20)	26.0%	(57)	47.9%	(105)	16.9%	(37)
17. Give up when they can't solve a problem easily.	14.6%	(32)	44.7%	(98)	28.3%	(62)	12.3%	(27)
18. Get into arguments when they disagree with people.	9.6%	(21)	28.8%	(63)	40.6%	(89)	21.0%	(46)
19. Do their best, even when their school work is difficult.	5.0%	(11)	27.9%	(61)	46.6%	(102)	20.5%	(45)
20. Think it's OK to fight if someone insults them.	27.9%	(61)	37.4%	(82)	23.7%	(52)	11.0%	(24)
21. Do all their homework.	15.1%	(33)	35.2%	(77)	33.8%	(74)	16.0%	(35)
22. Say mean things to other students when they think the other students deserve it.	21.9%	(48)	29.7%	(65)	33.3%	(73)	15.1%	(33)
23. Try to work out their disagreements with other students by talking to them.	12.8%	(28)	33.8%	(74)	41.1%	(90)	12.3%	(27)
24. Think it's OK to cheat if other students are cheating.	35.2%	(77)	40.2%	(88)	18.7%	(41)	5.9%	(13)
25. Try to do a good job on school work even when it is not interesting.	5.5%	(12)	27.9%	(61)	47.5%	(104)	19.2%	(42)

Survey Question 10 asked students whether they believe students at the school care about each other. A majority of respondents expressed skepticism, with 21.0% (46 participants) strongly disagreeing and 44.7% (98 participants) disagreeing. Meanwhile, 29.2% (64 participants) agreed, and only 5.0% (11 participants) strongly agreed. These results suggest that most students perceive a general lack of empathy among their peers.

Survey Question 11 explored whether students like to put others down. A total of 24.7% (54 participants) strongly disagreed and 37.9% (83 participants) disagreed. However, 28.3% (62 participants) agreed and 9.1% (20 participants) strongly agreed, indicating that while a majority reject this behavior, over a third acknowledge that it happens within the school day.

Survey Question 12 asked whether students get along well. Only 9.1% (20 participants) strongly disagreed and 40.6% (89 participants) disagreed, while a larger proportion—43.8% (96 participants)—agreed and 6.4% (14 participants) strongly agreed. These responses suggest that many students observe positive peer relationships, though a sizable minority see otherwise.

Survey Question 13 asked students if they believe others just look out for themselves. A total of 9.6% (21 participants) strongly disagreed and 38.4% (84 participants) disagreed. Meanwhile, 40.2% (88 participants) agreed and 11.9% (26 participants) strongly agreed. Nearly 52% of students acknowledged self-centered behavior among their peers.

Survey Question 14 assessed whether students treat each other with respect. Responses were more positive, with 8.7% (19 participants) strongly disagreeing and 28.3% (62 participants) disagreeing. A majority agreed - 42.5% (93 participants) - and 20.5% (45 participants) strongly agreed, indicating that over 60% of students perceive a respectful school climate as it relates to peer interactions.

Survey Question 15 asked if students stop and think before doing anything when they get angry. Results were mixed: 19.2% (42 participants) strongly disagreed and 35.6% (78 participants) disagreed, while 32.9% (72 participants) agreed and 12.3% (27 participants) strongly agreed. These findings suggest that impulsivity may be a concern in emotionally charged moments.

Survey Question 16 focused on whether students do their share of the work in group projects. A combined 64.6% of students agreed or strongly agreed - 47.9% (105 participants) and 16.9% (37 participants), respectively - while 26.0% (57 participants) disagreed and 9.1% (20 participants) strongly disagreed. This suggests that most students perceive fairness in collaborative tasks.

Survey Question 17 addressed whether students give up easily when facing challenges. A total of 14.6% (32 participants) strongly disagreed and 44.7% (98 participants) disagreed. Meanwhile, 28.3% (62 participants) agreed and 12.3% (27 participants) strongly agreed, indicating that nearly 60% of students report perseverance in the face of difficulty.

Survey Question 18 explored whether students get into arguments when they disagree. While 9.6% (21 participants) strongly disagreed and 28.8% (63 participants) disagreed, 40.6% (89 participants) agreed and 21.0% (46 participants) strongly agreed. These results indicate that interpersonal conflict remains relatively common within the middle school context.

Survey Question 19 asked if students try their best, even when schoolwork is difficult. Only 5.0% (11 participants) strongly disagreed and 27.9% (61 participants) disagreed. A significant 46.6% (102 participants) agreed and 20.5% (45 participants) strongly agreed, showing that nearly 67% of students maintain strong academic effort despite challenges.

Survey Question 20 addressed whether students think it is acceptable to fight if insulted. A majority of students—27.9% (61 participants) strongly disagreed and 37.4% (82 participants) disagreed, and thus rejected violence. However, 23.7% (52 participants) agreed and 11.0% (24 participants) strongly agreed, showing a notable minority condoning retaliation.

Survey Question 21 asked whether students do all of their homework. Just over half of respondents said they do: 33.8% (74 participants) agreed and 16.0% (35 participants) strongly agreed. On the other hand, 35.2% (77 participants) disagreed and 15.1% (33 participants) strongly disagreed, indicating inconsistency in homework completion.

Survey Question 22 focused on whether students say mean things when they think others deserve it. A total of 21.9% (48 participants) strongly disagreed and 29.7% (65 participants) disagreed. Meanwhile, 33.3% (73 participants) agreed and 15.1% (33 participants) strongly agreed, suggesting that nearly half of the respondents believe such behavior is justified under certain conditions.

Survey Question 23 asked if students try to resolve disagreements by talking. Results were encouraging: 41.1% (90 participants) agreed and 12.3% (27 participants) strongly agreed. Still, 33.8% (74 participants) disagreed and 12.8% (28 participants) strongly disagreed, revealing that while many practice positive communication, others may struggle to do so.

Survey Question 24 asked whether students believe it is acceptable to cheat if others are doing it. A strong majority - 35.2% (77 participants) strongly disagreed and 40.2% (88 participants) disagreed - rejected this idea. Only 18.7% (41 participants) agreed and 5.9% (13 participants) strongly agreed, indicating that academic integrity is generally upheld.

Survey Question 25 explored whether students try to do a good job on schoolwork even when it is not interesting to them personally. Just 5.5% (12 participants) strongly disagreed and 27.9% (61 participants) disagreed. On the other hand, 47.5% (104 participants) agreed and 19.2% (42 participants) strongly agreed, showing that two-thirds of students stay committed regardless of interest level.

Student Survey Section 4: Perceptions of Instructional Practices and Teacher

Support. The fourth section of the student climate survey was designed to evaluate students' perceptions of instructional practices and teacher support within the classroom setting. Specifically, the questions focused on how frequently students experience meaningful instructional strategies, opportunities for engagement, and academic support from their teachers. These items are critical in assessing the degree to which students feel their learning is personalized, encouraged, and reinforced both during and outside of class time. Students were asked to respond to a series of Likert-style statements, indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with various descriptions of teacher behavior and instructional design. The aim was to capture student voice on the academic climate, including relationships with teachers and the perceived relevance and rigor of assigned work.

Table 4 summarizes student responses to these survey items, offering insight into several key areas: the ability of teachers to make academic content applicable to real life, the encouragement of student voice in classroom discussions, perceived care from teachers, the support provided following excused absences, and the usefulness of assigned homework. The distribution of responses highlights student perspectives on both the affective and instructional dimensions of their classroom experience.

Table 4

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 26 Through 30 (Perceptions of Teachers)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
26. Often connect what I am learning to life outside the classroom.	11.4%	(25)	27.9%	(61)	47.9%	(105)	12.8%	(28)
27. Encourage students to share their ideas about things we are studying in class.	4.6%	(10)	13.7%	(30)	58.0%	(127)	23.7%	(52)
28. Really care about me.	6.8%	(15)	17.8%	(39)	47.9%	(105)	27.4%	(60)
29. Help me make up work after an excused absence.	6.8%	(15)	18.7%	(41)	56.2%	(123)	18.3%	(40)
30. Often assign homework that helps me learn.	13.7%	(30)	19.2%	(42)	49.8%	(109)	17.4%	(38)

Survey Question 26 asked students whether their teachers often connect what they are learning in class to life outside the classroom. A total of 47.9% (105 participants) agreed with the statement, while 12.8% (28 participants) strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 27.9% (61 participants) disagreed and 11.4% (25 participants) strongly disagreed. While the majority see relevance in their lessons, nearly 40% feel that instruction could be more applicable to real life.

Survey Question 27 asked students if their teachers encourage them to share their ideas about classroom topics. This received strong positive responses, with 58.0% (127 participants) agreeing and 23.7% (52 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 13.7% (30 participants) disagreed and 4.6% (10 participants) strongly disagreed. These results show that over 80% of students feel their voices and contributions are welcomed in class discussions.

Survey Question 28 focused on whether students feel their teachers really care about them. A majority of students—47.9% (105 participants)—agreed and 27.4% (60 participants) strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 17.8% (39 participants) disagreed and 6.8% (15 participants) strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that roughly three out of every four students feel genuinely supported by their teachers.

Survey Question 29 asked if teachers help students make up work after an excused absence. A strong majority responded positively, with 56.2% (123 participants) agreeing and 18.3% (40 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 18.7% (41 participants) disagreed and 6.8% (15 participants) strongly disagreed, indicating that most students feel academically supported when they miss class.

Survey Question 30 asked students whether their teachers assign homework that helps them learn. A combined 67.2% responded favorably - 49.8% (109 participants) agreed and 17.4% (38 participants) strongly agreed. However, 19.2% (42 participants) disagreed and 13.7% (30 participants) strongly disagreed, suggesting that while most students find homework beneficial, a notable portion still see room for improvement.

Student Survey Section 5: Perceptions of Staff Availability. The next section of the student survey aimed to explore students' perceptions of staff support and the overall fairness and responsiveness of the school environment. This portion included items that focused on the availability and willingness of adults to offer academic help, the equitable application of school rules, access to counseling and postsecondary planning, and students' general sense of satisfaction with their school experience. Each statement was rated using a four-point Likert scale, allowing students to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement.

Table 5 displays the distribution of responses related to these aspects of school support. The data indicate that while a majority of students agree that they can access extra help outside of class and that adults are generally willing to assist them, a significant portion also feel that adults are often too busy to provide additional support. Notably, student opinions were more divided when asked whether rules are applied equally and whether counselors have helped them plan for life beyond high school. Additionally, the statement “I wish I went to a different school” received the lowest levels of agreement, suggesting that most students are generally content with their school experience. This section of the survey provides valuable insight into how students perceive adult availability, fairness, and postsecondary readiness support within the school climate.

Table 5

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 31 Through 36 (Equity and Inclusivity)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
31. Adults in this school are often too busy to give students extra help.	13.7%	(30)	56.6%	(124)	22.8%	(50)	6.8%	(15)
32. Adults in this school apply the same rules to all students equally.	16.0%	(35)	30.1%	(66)	38.8%	(85)	15.1%	(33)
33. I wish I went to a different school.	31.1%	(68)	41.1%	(90)	16.4%	(36)	11.4%	(25)
34. I can get extra help at school outside of my regular classes.	4.1%	(9)	23.3%	(51)	56.6%	(124)	16.0%	(35)
35. A counselor at this school has helped me plan for life after high school.	19.6%	(43)	41.1%	(90)	30.6%	(67)	8.7%	(19)

36. Adults in this school are usually willing to take the time to give students extra help.	5.5%	(12)	16.9%	(37)	59.4%	(130)	18.3%	(40)
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Survey Question 31 asked whether students believe that adults in the school are often too busy to give extra help. A majority of students disagreed - 56.6% (124 participants) - and 13.7% (30 participants) strongly disagreed. However, 22.8% (50 participants) agreed and 6.8% (15 participants) strongly agreed. These responses suggest that while most students feel adults make time for extra help, about one in four perceive some level of inaccessibility.

Survey Question 32 explored whether students feel adults in the school apply rules equally to all students. Responses were mixed: 38.8% (85 participants) agreed and 15.1% (33 participants) strongly agreed. On the other hand, 30.1% (66 participants) disagreed and 16.0% (35 participants) strongly disagreed. This indicates that nearly half of students believe there is inconsistency in how rules are enforced.

Survey Question 33 asked students if they wish they went to a different school. A clear majority disagreed - 41.1% (90 participants) and 31.1% (68 participants) strongly disagreed. Only 16.4% (36 participants) agreed and 11.4% (25 participants) strongly agreed. These findings show that most students are content with their current school experience.

Survey Question 34 asked if students feel they can get extra academic help outside of regular class time. This question received strong agreement, with 56.6% (124 participants) agreeing and 16.0% (35 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 23.3% (51 participants) disagreed and 4.1% (9 participants) strongly disagreed. The data suggest that support systems for academic assistance are accessible to most students.

Survey Question 35 asked whether a school counselor has helped students plan for life after high school. Responses were mixed to negative, with 41.1% (90 participants) disagreeing and 19.6% (43 participants) strongly disagreeing. Meanwhile, 30.6% (67 participants) agreed and 8.7% (19 participants) strongly agreed. These results show that a majority of students have not received personalized postsecondary planning support from a counselor. Admittedly, this has not been a primary focus of middle school programming within the North East School District.

Survey Question 36 asked if adults in the school are usually willing to take time to give students extra help. A majority of respondents - 59.4% (130 participants) - agreed and 18.3% (40 participants) strongly agreed. Only 16.9% (37 participants) disagreed and 5.5% (12 participants) strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that students generally view school staff as approachable and helpful.

Student Survey Section 6: Teacher Responsiveness and Fairness. This section of the survey was designed to assess students' perceptions of how attentive and fair their teachers are in responding to their academic needs. Students were asked to consider whether their teachers notice when they are struggling, provide support to improve work after poor performance, and treat all students with equal fairness. These items were intended to gauge the responsiveness of educators to individual student needs and the extent to which a sense of equity is maintained in classroom interactions. Student responses were recorded using a Likert-style scale, offering a detailed picture of how learners experience support and fairness within their academic environments.

Table 6 summarizes the results from this section. A majority of students agreed that their teachers notice when they have difficulty learning and are willing to help them improve their performance on assignments. However, a more divided response emerged regarding perceptions

of fairness, with over 40% of students expressing some level of agreement that certain students receive preferential treatment. These findings offer important insight into both the academic responsiveness of teachers and students' perceptions of equitable treatment within the classroom.

Table 6

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 37 Through 39 (Perceptions of Teachers' Practices)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
37. Notices if I have trouble learning something.	8.2%	(18)	25.1%	(55)	55.7%	(122)	11.0%	(24)
38. Will help me improve my work if I do poorly on an assignment.	9.1%	(20)	22.8%	(50)	54.3%	(119)	13.7%	(30)
39. Treat some students better than others.	11.9%	(26)	29.2%	(64)	31.1%	(68)	27.9%	(61)

Survey Question 37 asked students whether their teacher notices when they have trouble learning something. A majority of students - 55.7% (122 participants) - agreed with the statement, and 11.0% (24 participants) strongly agreed. However, 25.1% (55 participants) disagreed, and 8.2% (18 participants) strongly disagreed. These results suggest that while many students feel their learning needs are recognized, a notable portion may feel that their struggles sometimes go unnoticed.

Survey Question 38 asked students whether their teacher will help them improve their work if they do poorly on an assignment. Responses were largely positive: 54.3% (119 participants) agreed and 13.7% (30 participants) strongly agreed. Meanwhile, 22.8% (50

participants) disagreed and 9.1% (20 participants) strongly disagreed. These responses suggest that most students feel supported in improving their academic performance.

Survey Question 39 asked whether students believe their teacher treats some students better than others. Opinions were divided: 31.1% (68 participants) agreed and 27.9% (61 participants) strongly agreed, while 29.2% (64 participants) disagreed and 11.9% (26 participants) strongly disagreed. These results show that nearly 60% of students perceive at least some level of favoritism in the classroom.

Student Survey Section 7: Student Engagement and Classroom Experience. The final segment of the student survey focused on engagement and the overall student experience in the classroom. Students were asked to evaluate whether the content covered in class was interesting and challenging, whether the class stimulated critical thinking, and whether they generally felt bored during instruction. These items were designed to assess both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of student engagement – key factors in overall academic success and school satisfaction. Again, responses were collected using a four-point Likert scale to capture the intensity of student perceptions.

Table 7 presents the findings from this engagement-focused section. The data suggest that a strong majority of students find the topics they are studying to be both interesting and challenging, and more than three-quarters agree that their classes make them think critically. Despite these positive indicators, a notable 66% of students also reported some level of agreement with the statement that they are "usually bored in (this) class," signaling a complex relationship between cognitive challenge and emotional engagement. This suggests that while academic rigor may be present, there may be opportunities to enhance instructional practices to better capture and sustain student interest.

Table 7

Student Responses to PA Climate Questions 40 Through 42 (Perceptions of Classes)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
40. The topics we are studying are interesting and challenging.	9.1%	(20)	23.7%	(52)	54.8%	(120)	12.3%	(27)
41. This class really makes me think.	4.1%	(9)	20.5%	(45)	59.4%	(130)	16.0%	(35)
42. I am usually bored in this class.	4.6%	(10)	29.2%	(64)	34.7%	(76)	31.5%	(69)

Survey Question 40 asked students whether they find the topics they are studying interesting and challenging. A majority of respondents - 54.8% (120 participants) - agreed and 12.3% (27 participants) strongly agreed. In contrast, 23.7% (52 participants) disagreed and 9.1% (20 participants) strongly disagreed. These findings suggest that while most students find the curriculum engaging, about one-third do not.

Survey Question 41 focused on whether their classes make students think critically. The majority of students - 59.4% (130 participants) - agreed and 16.0% (35 participants) strongly agreed. Only 20.5% (45 participants) disagreed and 4.1% (9 participants) strongly disagreed. These results suggest that most students feel their classes stimulate their thinking and cognitive engagement.

Survey Question 42 asked students if they are usually bored in their classes. Responses were mixed, with 34.7% (76 participants) agreeing and 31.5% (69 participants) strongly agreeing. However, 29.2% (64 participants) disagreed and 4.6% (10 participants) strongly

disagreed. This indicates that over two-thirds of students experience boredom in class, despite earlier responses suggesting intellectual challenge and engagement.

Student Survey Results

Overall, the student survey results reveal a complex picture of school climate, highlighting both strengths and areas for growth. While many students feel physically safe and supported by their teachers, concerns about peer conflict, favoritism, and inconsistent rule enforcement remain. Most students reported trying their best academically and found their classes intellectually stimulating, yet a significant number still expressed feelings of boredom and disengagement. Relationships with teachers were largely positive, with students acknowledging that adults were willing to help and cared about their well-being. To gain a more complete understanding of the school environment, the following section shifts focus to the perspectives of parents and guardians, who offer valuable insights into communication, academic support, and overall student experiences.

Parent/Guardian Survey Summary

In addition to gathering feedback from students and staff, this study incorporated a modified version of the Parent/Guardian Pennsylvania School Climate Survey (Pennsylvania, n.d.) to capture the perceptions of families regarding the overall environment, safety, communication, and support within the school. Parental insight plays a critical role in shaping a well-rounded understanding of school climate, as families often provide unique observations about their child's experiences and the school's engagement with the community. The modified survey consisted of both original and adapted items designed to align with the specific focus areas of this study, including bullying, instructional quality, and relationships with school staff.

The following section presents an analysis of parent and guardian responses, highlighting patterns and trends that reflect their confidence in the school’s culture, climate, and commitment to student well-being. Tables referenced throughout this section summarize key findings and serve as a foundation for triangulating data across stakeholder groups.

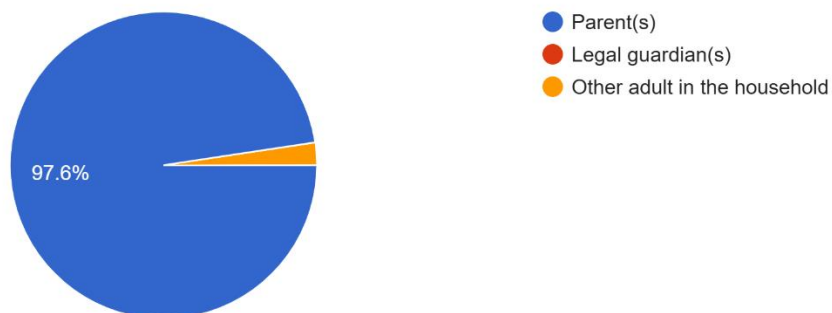
The survey was administered to parents and guardians in October 2024 as part of the initial data collection process. The instrument, created using Google Forms, consisted of sixteen questions, the majority of which utilized a Likert-scale format to measure students’ perceptions across various dimensions of school climate. A total of 42 parents/guardians participated in this baseline administration.

Survey Question 1 asked participants to indicate their relationship to the child they are reporting about. As seen in Figure 10, the vast majority (97.6%) were parents of students, whereas one individual completed the survey as “Other adult in the household”.

Figure 10

Relationship to Student(s)

What is your relationship to the child you are reporting about? (Choose one)
42 responses



Note. Figure 10 shows that 41 of the 42 respondents were parents of current North East Middle School students. Only one respondent classified themselves as “Other adult in the household”. Finally, there were no legal guardians who participated in the survey.

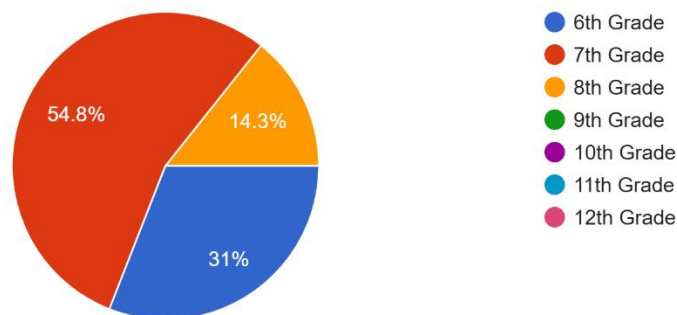
Parent/Guardian Survey Question 2 asked respondents to identify the grade level(s) in which their child or children were currently enrolled. This question was included to help contextualize responses based on the age and developmental stage of the students, as perceptions of school climate may vary depending on grade level. Understanding the distribution of responses across grades also allows for more targeted analysis when comparing stakeholder feedback. The data collected from this item - as seen in Figure 11 - served as a foundational demographic indicator for interpreting trends throughout the remainder of the survey.

Figure 11

Current Grade Levels of Respondents' Children

What grade is your child in this current school year?

42 responses



Note. Figure 11 shows that over half (54.8%) of all respondents were from parents of current 7th Grade students. Additionally, 31% of responses came from parents of current 6th Grade students

while the final 14.3% of all responses came from parents of current 8th Grade students. There were no responses from parents of students in the Life Skills or Autistic Support classrooms.

To address the remaining research questions, the study continued with a Likert-style survey format to capture parent and guardian perceptions related to school climate and culture. This method enabled the quantification of family viewpoints across several core domains, including student safety, communication, staff relationships, academic support, and the broader school environment. Using a consistent rating scale allowed for a structured analysis of how families experience and interpret the school's practices and priorities. The resulting data offered valuable insight into patterns and perceptions within the parent/guardian community, enhancing the overall understanding of school climate through the lens of family engagement and trust. Table 8 summarizes the results from Questions three through sixteen of the Parent/Guardian Climate Survey, detailing the distribution of responses across each of the core climate indicators.

Table 8

Results of Parent/Guardian Climate Survey (Questions 3-16)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
3. My child's school is a supportive and inviting place for students.	4.8%	(2)	9.5%	(4)	66.7%	(28)	19.0%	(8)
4. My child is safe at school.	2.4%	(1)	7.1%	(3)	57.1%	(24)	33.3%	(14)
5. I feel welcome at this school.	4.8%	(2)	9.5%	(4)	50.0%	(21)	35.7%	(15)
6. I am satisfied with communication with my child's teacher(s).	9.5%	(4)	23.8%	(10)	50.0%	(21)	16.7%	(7)

7. My child is getting a good education at this school.	2.4%	(1)	7.1%	(3)	69.0%	(29)	21.4%	(9)
8. My child is treated fairly at this school.	9.5%	(4)	9.5%	(4)	52.4%	(22)	28.6%	(12)
9. My child likes his/her teachers.	2.4%	(1)	14.3%	(6)	57.1%	(24)	26.2%	(11)
10. At this school there are good supports for all children, including children with learning problems.	2.4%	(1)	19.0%	(8)	64.3%	(27)	14.3%	(6)
11. This is a supportive and inviting place for parents/guardians.	2.4%	(1)	19.0%	(8)	61.9%	(26)	16.7%	(7)
12. Adults at this school respect cultural diversity.	2.4%	(1)	11.9%	(5)	73.8%	(31)	11.9%	(5)
13. Adults at this school have high expectations for all children.	2.4%	(1)	11.9%	(5)	69.0%	(29)	16.7%	(7)
14. Teachers at my child's school are interested in what I have to say.	4.8%	(2)	16.7%	(7)	64.3%	(27)	14.3%	(6)
15. I feel like I am actively involved in my child's education.	4.8%	(2)	9.5%	(4)	47.6%	(20)	38.1%	(16)
16. I would recommend my child's school to others.	11.9%	(5)	7.1%	(3)	61.9%	(26)	19.0%	(8)

Survey Question 3 asked parents/guardians if the school is a supportive and inviting place for students. Most respondents agreed (66.7%, 28 participants) or strongly agreed (19.0%, 8 participants), while a smaller number disagreed (9.5%, 4 participants) or strongly disagreed

(4.8%, 2 participants). These results suggest a broadly positive perception of the school environment for students.

Survey Question 4 focused on student safety. A strong majority of parents/guardians felt their child is safe at school, with 57.1% (24 participants) agreeing and 33.3% (14 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 9.5% (4 participants) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement.

Survey Question 5 asked if parents/guardians feel welcome at the school. Responses were very favorable, with 50.0% (21 participants) agreeing and 35.7% (15 participants) strongly agreeing. A small number disagreed (9.5%, 4 participants) or strongly disagreed (4.8%, 2 participants).

Survey Question 6 asked if parents are satisfied with communication from their child's teachers. While half (50.0%, 21 participants) agreed, only 16.7% (7 participants) strongly agreed. However, nearly one-third expressed disagreement - 23.8% (10 participants) disagreed and 9.5% (4 participants) strongly disagreed - highlighting room for improvement in teacher-parent communication.

Survey Question 7 addressed whether parents believe their child is receiving a good education. A large majority - 69.0% (29 participants) agreed and 21.4% (9 participants) strongly agreed - supported this statement, with only 9.5% (4 participants) in total expressing disagreement.

Survey Question 8 asked if parents believe their child is treated fairly at school. Over half of respondents agreed (52.4%, 22 participants), and 28.6% (12 participants) strongly agreed. However, 19.0% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, suggesting this is an area that may benefit from further attention.

Survey Question 9 focused on whether parents believe their child likes their teachers. The majority agreed (57.1%, 24 participants) or strongly agreed (26.2%, 11 participants), with only 16.7% indicating disagreement.

Survey Question 10 asked about support for all children, including those with learning problems. A combined 78.6% of respondents agreed (64.3%, 27 participants) or strongly agreed (14.3%, 6 participants), while only 21.4% expressed some level of disagreement.

Survey Question 11 addressed whether the school is a supportive and inviting place for families. Over three-quarters of respondents answered positively, with 61.9% (26 participants) agreeing and 16.7% (7 participants) strongly agreeing.

Survey Question 12 asked if adults at the school respect cultural diversity. Responses were strongly positive - 73.8% (31 participants) agreed and 11.9% (5 participants) strongly agreed - while only 14.3% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement.

Survey Question 13 focused on whether adults at the school hold high expectations for all students. Most parents agreed (69.0%, 29 participants) or strongly agreed (16.7%, 7 participants), while 14.3% indicated disagreement.

Survey Question 14 asked if teachers are interested in what parents have to say. A total of 78.6% responded favorably, with 64.3% (27 participants) agreeing and 14.3% (6 participants) strongly agreeing, while only 21.5% expressed any level of disagreement.

Survey Question 15 asked if parents feel actively involved in their child's education. While 47.6% (20 participants) agreed and 38.1% (16 participants) strongly agreed, 14.3% expressed disagreement or strong disagreement. These results show that most parents feel included, but there is room for deeper engagement.

Survey Question 16 asked whether parents would recommend the school to others. A majority—61.9% (26 participants) agreed and 19.0% (8 participants) strongly agreed—but 19.0% (8 participants) also disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating slightly more mixed perceptions on school reputation.

Parent/Guardian Survey Results

Overall, the parent/guardian survey responses reflect a largely positive view of the school environment, with high levels of agreement regarding student safety, teacher support, and the quality of education provided. Most families feel welcomed by the school and believe their children are treated fairly and supported, including those with learning challenges.

Communication with teachers and active involvement in their child’s education were noted as areas with room for improvement, though many parents still felt heard and valued. While the majority would recommend the school to others, a small yet meaningful portion expressed mixed feelings, suggesting the need for ongoing engagement and transparency. To provide a more complete picture of the school climate, the next section presents the perspectives of staff members, whose insights shed light on internal operations, professional culture, and perceptions of leadership.

Faculty/Staff Survey Summary

Finally, in addition to collecting feedback from students and families, this study also utilized a modified version of the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey for Faculty and Staff (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.-b) to gather insights from school employees regarding the internal culture, professional environment, and instructional practices within the building. Faculty and staff play a central role in shaping school climate, as their daily

interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and district leadership significantly influence the overall tone and effectiveness of the school community. The survey instrument was tailored to address areas most relevant to this study - such as safety, collegial trust, instructional support, and staff-student relationships - while maintaining alignment with statewide climate standards. The following section presents an analysis of faculty and staff responses, highlighting key trends that offer a deeper understanding of the school's organizational health and internal perceptions of leadership, equity, and support. These findings, illustrated in the accompanying tables, provide critical context for triangulating perceptions across all stakeholder groups and identifying consistent themes or potential discrepancies.

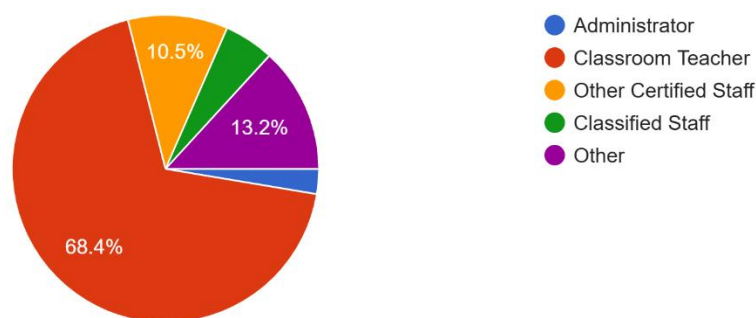
The staff survey was administered in October 2024 using Google Forms and included 47 total questions, primarily utilizing a Likert-scale format to assess perceptions across multiple dimensions of school climate. A total of 38 faculty and staff members participated in this baseline data collection effort.

Survey Question 1 asked participants to indicate their role within the school. As shown in Figure 12, the majority of respondents (68.4%) identified as teachers, while the remaining participants included classified staff, other certified staff, administrators, and those who classify as "other". This distribution provides a representative cross-section of school personnel and ensures that the data reflects a broad range of perspectives across instructional and non-instructional roles.

Figure 12*Role of Staff Respondents*

What is your role in this school? (Choose one)

38 responses



Note. Figure 12 shows that over two-thirds (68.4%) of all respondents were teachers.

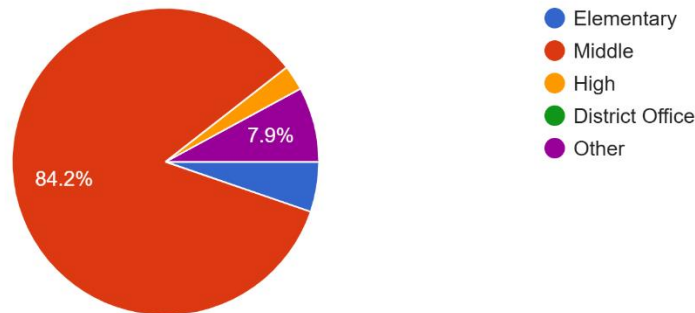
Additionally, 10.5% of responses came from other certified staff, 13.2% classified as “other,” and 5.3% were considered classified staff, and 2.6% of respondents classified as an administrator.

Survey Question 2 asked participants to indicate the grade level(s) in which they work. As shown in Figure 13, the majority of respondents reported working at the middle school level, with additional representation from staff working in elementary, high school, or district-wide roles. Several respondents indicated they serve across multiple levels, reflecting the presence of shared services and specialized support staff. This distribution ensures that the survey captures a comprehensive view of the school climate from individuals working across different educational stages, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how staff experiences may vary by setting.

Figure 13*Building Level of Staff Respondents*

At what level do you work? (Check all that apply)

38 responses



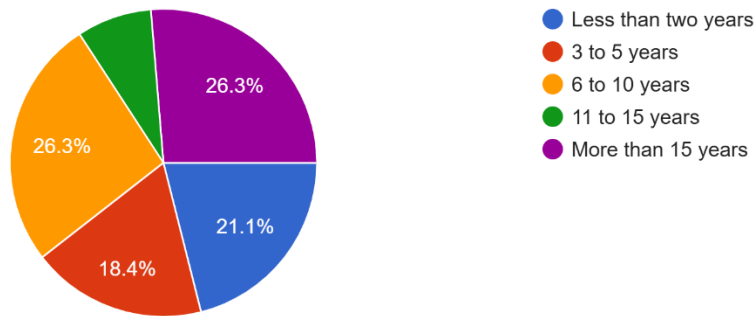
Note. Figure 13 shows that the 32 of the 38 respondents (84.2%) work exclusively at North East Middle School. Additionally, 7.9% of respondents listed “Other” as their level, indicating that they work outside of grade level contexts. Two respondents (5.3%) also work at North East Elementary School, while one respondent (2.6%) indicated that they also work at North East High School.

Survey Question 3 asked participants how many years they have worked in any position within the field of education. As shown in Figure 14, the responses were fairly evenly distributed, with the largest groups being those with more than 15 years of experience (28.3%) and those with 6 to 10 years (28.3%). Additionally, 21.1% reported having less than two years, 18.4% had 3 to 5 years, and 3.9% indicated 11 to 15 years of experience. This range reflects a diverse mix of veteran educators and newer professionals, offering a well-rounded perspective on school climate from staff at various stages in their careers.

Figure 14*Overall Experience of Staff Respondents*

How many years have you worked, in any position, in education? (Choose one)

38 responses



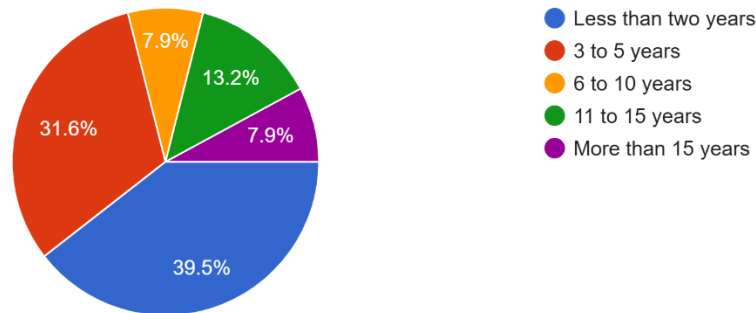
Note. Figure 14 shows a very even breakdown of experience among the staff. There was an equal split between those with fifteen or more years of experience and those with only six to ten (each 26.3%). Moreover, over one-fifth of participants indicated less than two years of experience.

Survey Question 4 asked participants how many years they have worked in any position specifically at North East Middle School. As shown in Figure 15, the largest group of respondents - 39.5% - reported working at the school for less than two years, followed by 31.6% who have worked there for 3 to 5 years. Additionally, 13.2% indicated they have worked at the school for 11 to 15 years, while smaller groups reported 6 to 10 years (7.9%) and more than 15 years (7.9%). This distribution suggests that while there is a solid base of experienced staff, a significant portion of the faculty and staff are relatively new to the building, bringing fresh perspectives and possibly still adjusting to the school's culture and systems.

Figure 15*Contextual Experience of Staff Respondents*

How many years have you worked, in any position, in this school? (Choose one)

38 responses



Note. Figure 15 highlights that over 70% of all respondents have five years of experience (or less) within the building. Only 7.9%, or three total participants, have been working in this building for fifteen or more years.

Staff Survey Section 1: Perceptions of School Safety. The following section of the faculty and staff survey focuses on perceptions of school safety, inclusivity, and the broader environmental factors that influence the teaching and learning experience. These items were designed to measure how staff view the school’s physical and emotional climate, including how welcoming the environment is, how effectively the school supports parents and families, and whether issues such as community violence or identity-based bullying impact students. Staff responses to these questions offer valuable insight into both internal and external factors that shape the overall school climate. By examining these perspectives, school leaders can better understand how faculty and staff experience the day-to-day culture of the building and identify areas that may require targeted support or intervention. Table 9 and the summaries that follow

present key findings from Survey Questions 5 through 10, highlighting strengths in safety and community engagement while also addressing areas of concern.

Table 9

Results of Staff Climate Survey (Questions 5-10)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
5. This school is badly affected by crime and violence in the community.	28.9%	(11)	57.9%	(22)	13.2%	(5)	0.0%	(0)
6. This school provides positive experiences for parents.	0.0%	(0)	18.4%	(7)	68.4%	(26)	13.2%	(5)
7. This school provides a welcoming environment.	0.0%	(0)	5.3%	(2)	60.5%	(23)	34.2%	(13)
8. Students at this school are often threatened.	10.5%	(4)	73.7%	(28)	13.2%	(5)	2.6%	(1)
9. Students at this school are often bullied because of certain characteristics (for example, their race, religion, weight, or sexual orientation)	5.3%	(2)	44.7%	(17)	36.8%	(14)	13.2%	(5)
10. This school provides a safe environment for teaching and learning.	0.0%	(0)	5.3%	(2)	47.4%	(18)	47.4%	(18)

Survey Question 5 asked staff if the school is badly affected by crime and violence in the surrounding community. A large majority - 57.9% (22 participants) - disagreed and 28.9% (11 participants) strongly disagreed, while only 13.2% (5 participants) agreed and no one strongly

agreed. These results suggest that most staff do not perceive community violence as having a significant negative impact on the school.

Survey Question 6 focused on whether the school provides positive experiences for parents. Responses were overwhelmingly favorable, with 68.4% (26 participants) agreeing and 13.2% (5 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 18.4% (7 participants) disagreed, and no respondents strongly disagreed. These results highlight strong staff confidence in the school's efforts to engage and support families.

Survey Question 7 asked whether the school provides a welcoming environment. Nearly all staff responded positively, with 60.5% (23 participants) agreeing and 34.2% (13 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 5.3% (2 participants) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. This reflects a strong perception of inclusivity and hospitality within the school.

Survey Question 8 asked if students at the school are often threatened. A large majority - 73.7% (28 participants)—disagreed, and 10.5% (4 participants) strongly disagreed. Only 13.2% (5 participants) agreed and 2.6% (1 participant) strongly agreed. These results suggest that most staff do not see student threats as a widespread issue within the school environment.

Survey Question 9 inquired whether students are often bullied due to certain characteristics (e.g., race, religion, weight, or sexual orientation). A majority of staff disagreed (44.7%, 17 participants) or strongly disagreed (5.3%, 2 participants), while 36.8% (14 participants) agreed and 13.2% (5 participants) strongly agreed. These mixed responses suggest that while many staff do not observe such bullying, a significant portion still perceive it as an area of concern.

Survey Question 10 asked if the school provides a safe environment for teaching and learning. Responses were extremely positive, with 47.4% (18 participants) agreeing and another 47.4% (18 participants) strongly agreeing. Only 5.3% (2 participants) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. These results reflect a strong sense of physical and psychological safety among staff within the school.

Staff Survey Section 2: Perceptions of Contextual School Safety. This section of the faculty and staff survey aimed to assess how safe employees feel in various physical locations throughout the school campus. A positive perception of physical safety is essential not only for effective teaching and learning but also for fostering a climate of trust, well-being, and stability among staff. These questions asked respondents to reflect on how secure they feel outside the building, in communal areas like hallways and bathrooms, and in their individual workspaces. The responses offer valuable insight into the consistency of safety perceptions across different areas of the school and help identify any environments that may need additional support or supervision. Table 10 and the subsequent summaries highlight faculty and staff responses to Survey Questions 11 through 13.

Table 10

Results of Staff Climate Survey (Questions 11-13)

Survey Statement	Not Safe		Somewhat Safe		Mostly Safe		Very Safe	
11. Outside around the school?	2.6%	(1)	2.6%	(1)	23.7%	(9)	71.1%	(27)
12. In the hallways and bathrooms of the school?	0.0%	(0)	2.6%	(1)	31.6%	(12)	65.8%	(25)
13. In your classroom or work area?	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	26.3%	(10)	73.7%	(28)

Survey Question 11 asked staff how safe they feel outside around the school building. The vast majority - 71.1% (27 participants) - reported feeling very safe, and an additional 23.7% (9 participants) felt mostly safe. Only one respondent each (2.6%) indicated feeling somewhat safe or not safe, suggesting that most staff feel confident in the safety and supervision provided in outdoor areas of the school campus.

Survey Question 12 focused on how safe staff feel in the hallways and bathrooms of the school. A total of 65.8% (25 participants) reported feeling very safe, while 31.6% (12 participants) said they feel mostly safe. Only one respondent (2.6%) selected somewhat safe, and none reported feeling not safe, reflecting a strong perception of safety in shared indoor spaces.

Survey Question 13 asked staff how safe they feel in their own classroom or work area. This question received the highest level of confidence, with 73.7% (28 participants) reporting they feel very safe and 26.3% (10 participants) stating they feel mostly safe. No respondents reported feeling somewhat safe or not safe, indicating that personal workspaces are perceived as secure, supportive environments for teaching and learning.

Staff Survey Section 3: Perceptions of Student Behavior and Peer Culture. Section Three of the faculty and staff survey focused on staff perceptions of student behavior, peer interactions, and academic habits. These items were designed to gather insight into how school employees view student relationships, respect, responsibility, and self-management within the school environment. Understanding how staff perceive student conduct is essential for identifying behavioral trends, informing intervention strategies, and reinforcing expectations that contribute to a positive school climate. The questions in this section asked respondents to reflect on how students interact with one another, how they handle academic and emotional challenges, and the extent to which they demonstrate resilience, collaboration, and ethical behavior. Table 11

and the following summaries of Survey Questions 14 through 29 present key trends and patterns related to student culture as observed by the adults who work with them daily.

Table 11

Results of Staff Climate Survey (Questions 14-29)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
14. Don't really care about each other.	10.5%	(4)	78.9%	(30)	7.9%	(3)	2.6%	(1)
15. Like to put others down.	7.9%	(3)	57.9%	(22)	28.9%	(11)	5.3%	(2)
16. Don't get along together well.	5.3%	(2)	78.9%	(30)	10.5%	(4)	5.3%	(2)
17. Just look out for themselves.	10.5%	(4)	68.4%	(26)	18.4%	(7)	2.6%	(1)
18. Treat each other with respect.	5.3%	(2)	31.6%	(12)	57.9%	(22)	5.3%	(2)
19. Stop and think before doing anything when they get angry.	5.3%	(2)	60.5%	(23)	34.2%	(13)	0.0%	(0)
20. Do their share of the work when doing group projects.	2.6%	(1)	47.4%	(18)	50.0%	(19)	0.0%	(0)
21. Give up when they can't solve a problem easily.	0.0%	(0)	23.7%	(9)	55.3%	(21)	21.1%	(8)
22. Get into arguments when they disagree with people.	0.0%	(0)	21.1%	(8)	68.4%	(26)	10.5%	(4)
23. Do their best, even when their school work is difficult.	2.6%	(1)	52.6%	(20)	44.7%	(17)	0.0%	(0)
24. Think it's OK to fight if someone insults them.	10.5%	(4)	47.4%	(18)	42.1%	(16)	0.0%	(0)
25. Do all their homework.	7.9%	(3)	71.1%	(27)	21.1%	(8)	0.0%	(0)

26. Say mean things to other students when they think the other students deserve it.	2.6%	(1)	21.1%	(8)	65.8%	(25)	10.5%	(4)
27. Try to work out their disagreements with other students by talking to them.	10.5%	(4)	39.5%	(15)	50.0%	(19)	0.0%	(0)
28. Think it's OK to cheat if other students are cheating.	0.0%	(0)	60.5%	(23)	34.2%	(13)	5.3%	(2)
29. Try to do a good job on school work even when it is not interesting.	0.0%	(0)	47.4%	(18)	52.6%	(20)	0.0%	(0)

Survey Question 14 asked whether staff believe students at the school don't really care about each other. A strong majority - 78.9% (30 respondents) - disagreed, and 10.5% (4) strongly disagreed. Only 7.9% (3) agreed and 2.6% (1) strongly agreed, suggesting that most staff feel students generally care about one another.

Survey Question 15 focused on whether students like to put others down. The majority of staff disagreed - 57.9% (22) - or strongly disagreed - 7.9% (3). However, 28.9% (11) agreed, and 5.3% (2) strongly agreed, indicating some concern that negative peer behavior may be present among a subset of the student body.

Survey Question 16 asked if students don't get along well with one another. A large majority of staff disagreed (78.9%, 30) or strongly disagreed (5.3%, 2), while 10.5% (4) agreed and 5.3% (2) strongly agreed. These results suggest that most staff believe students generally maintain positive peer relationships.

Survey Question 17 addressed whether students just look out for themselves. Most staff disagreed (68.4%, 26) or strongly disagreed (10.5%, 4), though 18.4% (7) agreed and 2.6% (1) strongly agreed. The data indicates a general perception of cooperation among students, though not universally.

Survey Question 18 asked whether students treat each other with respect. A majority of staff agreed (57.9%, 22), while 31.6% (12) disagreed. Only 5.3% (2) strongly disagreed or strongly agreed, respectively, showing that while most staff observe respectful behavior, nearly one-third see room for improvement.

Survey Question 19 focused on whether students stop and think before acting when angry. Most staff disagreed (60.5%, 23) or strongly disagreed (5.3%, 2), while 34.2% (13) agreed. No respondents strongly agreed. These responses suggest impulsive reactions may still be a challenge for many middle school students.

Survey Question 20 asked if students do their share of work during group projects. Half of respondents agreed (50.0%, 19), while 47.4% (18) disagreed and 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed. No one strongly agreed. These results reflect mixed perceptions regarding collaboration and fairness in group work.

Survey Question 21 explored whether students give up easily when solving problems. While 55.3% (21) agreed and 21.1% (8) strongly agreed, 23.7% (9) disagreed. No one strongly disagreed, suggesting that perseverance remains a growth area for students.

Survey Question 22 asked if students argue when they disagree. Most staff—68.4% (26) - agreed, and 10.5% (4) strongly agreed. Only 21.1% (8) disagreed, indicating that verbal conflict is frequently observed when students experience disagreements.

Survey Question 23 focused on whether students put forth their best effort when schoolwork is difficult. While 44.7% (17) agreed and 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed, over half (52.6%, 20 disagree; 2.6%, 1 strongly disagree) expressed concerns about student persistence. This suggests that many staff feel students struggle to maintain effort in challenging academic tasks.

Survey Question 24 asked if students believe it's okay to fight if someone insults them. While 42.1% (16) agreed, 47.4% (18) disagreed and 10.5% (4) strongly disagreed. No respondents strongly agreed. These mixed results highlight the need for continued emphasis on nonviolent conflict resolution.

Survey Question 25 inquired whether students complete all their homework. A large majority - 71.1% (27) - disagreed, and 7.9% (3) strongly disagreed. Only 21.1% (8) agreed. No one strongly agreed, revealing a widespread concern about homework completion.

Survey Question 26 asked if students say mean things to others when they think it's deserved. While 65.8% (25) agreed and 10.5% (4) strongly agreed, 21.1% (8) disagreed and 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed. This suggests that many staff perceive retaliatory unkindness as common behavior among students.

Survey Question 27 explored whether students try to resolve disagreements through conversation. Half (50.0%, 19) agreed, while 39.5% (15) disagreed and 10.5% (4) strongly disagreed. No respondents strongly agreed. These results reflect moderate optimism, with a notable portion of staff uncertain about students' conflict resolution strategies.

Survey Question 28 asked whether students think it's acceptable to cheat if others are cheating. Most respondents disagreed (60.5%, 23), while 34.2% (13) agreed and 5.3% (2)

strongly agreed. No one strongly disagreed. These findings suggest most students are perceived to uphold academic honesty, but peer influence may be a factor for some.

Survey Question 29 asked whether students try to do a good job even when schoolwork isn't interesting. A majority - 52.6% (20) - agreed, and 47.4% (18) disagreed. No respondents selected the extreme ends of the scale, suggesting split perceptions on student motivation when engagement is low.

Staff Survey Section 4: Instructional Practices and Beliefs About Student Learning.

Section Four of the faculty and staff survey examined educator practices and beliefs related to instruction, academic support, and student potential. These items were designed to assess how staff members engage students in learning, provide meaningful feedback, and accommodate individual needs. In addition, the survey explored staff perceptions of their ability to prepare students for future success and their belief in all students' capacity to meet academic challenges. Understanding these perspectives is critical to evaluating the strength of instructional practices and the expectations set for learners within the school. The responses to Survey Questions 30 through 36, also depicted in Table 12, highlight a deeply student-centered culture, with strong commitments to care, inclusivity, and high standards, while also identifying areas where beliefs about student capability may vary.

Table 12*Results of Staff Climate Survey (Questions 30-36)*

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
30. Encourage students to share their ideas about things we are studying in class.	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	46.7%	(14)	53.3%	(16)
31. Prepare all students for success in the next grade, in college, or in a job.	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	56.7%	(17)	43.3%	(13)
32. Really care about my students.	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	15.6%	(5)	84.4%	(27)
33. Help my students make up work after an excused absence.	0.0%	(0)	3.3%	(1)	63.3%	(19)	33.3%	(10)
34. Give my students feedback on class assignments that helps improve their work.	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	43.3%	(13)	56.7%	(17)
35. Provide accommodations to students who need them.	0.0%	(0)	0.0%	(0)	30.0%	(9)	70.0%	(21)
36. Believe all students can do challenging school work.	0.0%	(0)	12.5%	(4)	37.5%	(12)	50.0%	(16)

Survey Question 30 asked whether staff encourage students to share their ideas about the topics being studied in class. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 46.7% (14 respondents) agreeing and 53.3% (16 respondents) strongly agreeing. No participants disagreed or strongly disagreed, indicating that all respondents promote student voice and engagement during instruction.

Survey Question 31 focused on whether staff believe they prepare all students for success in the next grade, in college, or in a job. All respondents answered favorably, with 56.7% (17) agreeing and 43.3% (13) strongly agreeing. These results reflect high confidence in staff members' role in promoting long-term academic and career readiness.

Survey Question 32 asked whether staff really care about their students. The vast majority—84.4% (27)—strongly agreed with this statement, and an additional 15.6% (5) agreed. No respondents selected disagree or strongly disagree, signaling an exceptionally strong sense of personal investment in student well-being.

Survey Question 33 addressed whether staff help students make up work after an excused absence. Most participants—63.3% (19)—agreed, and 33.3% (10) strongly agreed. Only one respondent (3.3%) disagreed, showing that nearly all staff support students in catching up on missed work.

Survey Question 34 asked whether staff give students feedback on assignments that helps them improve. All responses were positive, with 43.3% (13) agreeing and 56.7% (17) strongly agreeing. This indicates that meaningful, growth-oriented feedback is a consistent instructional practice.

Survey Question 35 focused on providing accommodations to students who need them. A strong majority—70.0% (21)—strongly agreed, and 30.0% (9) agreed. No respondents indicated disagreement, suggesting a school-wide commitment to supporting diverse learner needs.

Survey Question 36 asked whether staff believe all students are capable of doing challenging schoolwork. Half of respondents—50.0% (16)—strongly agreed, and 37.5% (12) agreed. A small number—12.5% (4)—disagreed, while none strongly disagreed. These results

suggest that most staff hold high expectations for student achievement, though a small portion may have reservations about universal academic rigor.

Staff Survey Section 5: Leadership, School Climate, and Academic Expectations.

The final section of the faculty and staff survey explored perceptions related to school leadership, overall climate, and academic rigor. These questions were designed to assess the extent to which staff feel supported by administration, involved in decision-making, and confident in the school's direction and instructional standards. The items also examined staff attitudes toward student behavior, communication with families, and the encouragement of advanced academic opportunities. Collectively, this section provides valuable insight into how the professional culture of the school influences both staff morale and student success. Table 13 and the responses to Survey Questions 37 through 47 reveal strong confidence in leadership, a generally positive school climate, and widespread belief in the school's academic mission, while also highlighting some areas where perceptions of equity, rigor, and involvement could be further strengthened.

Table 13

Results of Staff Climate Survey (Questions 37-47)

Survey Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
37. The principal asks students about their ideas.	2.6%	(1)	5.3%	(2)	65.8%	(25)	26.3%	(10)
38. Students and parents receive effective communication about academic progress.	5.3%	(2)	18.4%	(7)	52.6%	(20)	23.7%	(9)

39. When students break rules, they are treated fairly.	5.3%	(2)	15.8%	(6)	55.3%	(21)	23.7%	(9)
40. I am happy working at this school.	2.6%	(1)	0.0%	(0)	36.8%	(14)	60.5%	(23)
41. This school is making steady progress implementing rigorous academic standards.	2.6%	(1)	0.0%	(0)	57.9%	(22)	39.5%	(15)
42. When students in this school already know the material that is being taught, they are given more advanced assignments.	0.0%	(0)	28.9%	(11)	57.9%	(22)	13.2%	(5)
43. School staff members have a lot of informal opportunities to influence what happens here.	5.3%	(2)	13.2%	(5)	65.8%	(25)	15.8%	(6)
44. School staff members are supported by administration.	0.0%	(0)	7.9%	(3)	42.1%	(16)	50.0%	(19)
45. In this school, staff members have a "can do" attitude.	0.0%	(0)	23.7%	(9)	52.6%	(20)	23.7%	(9)
46. Students in this school are encouraged to take advanced classes, such as honors, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB), or classes that lead to professional certification.	13.2%	(5)	21.1%	(8)	50.0%	(19)	15.8%	(6)
47. This school provides positive experiences for students.	0.0%	(0)	2.6%	(1)	55.3%	(21)	42.1%	(16)

Survey Question 37 asked whether the principal asks students about their ideas. Most staff responded positively, with 65.8% (25 respondents) agreeing and 26.3% (10 respondents) strongly agreeing. Only 5.3% (2) disagreed and 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed, suggesting that staff generally perceive school leadership as student-focused and open to student voice.

Survey Question 38 focused on whether students and parents receive effective communication about academic progress. A total of 52.6% (20) agreed and 23.7% (9) strongly agreed. However, 18.4% (7) disagreed and 5.3% (2) strongly disagreed, indicating room for improvement in strengthening communication efforts between school and home.

Survey Question 39 asked if students are treated fairly when they break school rules. Most staff agreed (55.3%, 21) or strongly agreed (23.7%, 9), while 15.8% (6) disagreed and 5.3% (2) strongly disagreed. These responses suggest that while most staff view disciplinary practices as fair, some perceive inconsistency in enforcement.

Survey Question 40 asked if staff are happy working at the school. The majority responded favorably, with 60.5% (23) strongly agreeing and 36.8% (14) agreeing. Only 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed. These results reflect high overall morale and job satisfaction among faculty and staff.

Survey Question 41 focused on whether the school is making steady progress in implementing rigorous academic standards. A combined 96.1% of respondents answered positively - 57.9% (22) agreed and 39.5% (15) strongly agreed - while only 2.6% (1) strongly disagreed, reflecting widespread confidence in the school's academic direction.

Survey Question 42 asked whether students who already know the material are given more advanced assignments. A majority - 57.9% (22) - agreed, and 13.2% (5) strongly agreed,

while 28.9% (11) disagreed. No one strongly disagreed. This suggests that most staff believe enrichment is occurring, but a significant portion may feel differentiation could be strengthened.

Survey Question 43 focused on whether staff have informal opportunities to influence what happens in the school. Most respondents agreed (65.8%, 25) or strongly agreed (15.8%, 6), though 13.2% (5) disagreed and 5.3% (2) strongly disagreed. These results suggest that most staff feel empowered to contribute to school decisions, though not all share that perspective.

Survey Question 44 asked whether staff feel supported by administration. A combined 92.1% answered positively - 50.0% (19) strongly agreed and 42.1% (16) agreed. Only 7.9% (3) disagreed, indicating strong administrative support as perceived by staff.

Survey Question 45 asked whether staff members have a “can do” attitude. The majority of respondents agreed (52.6%, 20) or strongly agreed (23.7%, 9), while 23.7% (9) disagreed. No one strongly disagreed. This suggests that while a majority feel a spirit of optimism exists, some see a need to strengthen collective efficacy.

Survey Question 46 focused on whether students are encouraged to take advanced courses such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or other certification programs. While 50.0% (19) agreed and 15.8% (6) strongly agreed, a sizable portion—21.1% (8) disagreed and 13.2% (5) strongly disagreed. These results reflect moderate support for academic rigor, but also signal that increased access or emphasis may be needed.

Survey Question 47 asked whether the school provides positive experiences for students. The vast majority responded favorably—55.3% (21) agreed and 42.1% (16) strongly agreed. Only 2.6% (1) disagreed, and none strongly disagreed, indicating that staff overwhelmingly believe the school fosters a positive environment for students.

Staff Survey Results

The results of the faculty and staff survey present a comprehensive and balanced picture of school climate, instructional practice, leadership, and student behavior as perceived by employees across various roles and experience levels. Staff overwhelmingly reported feeling safe within the school environment, particularly in their classrooms and workspaces, and expressed strong satisfaction with their ability to support student learning through meaningful instruction, accommodations, and feedback. There was broad agreement that the school fosters positive relationships, high expectations, and a supportive culture - both among staff and for students.

Responses reflected high levels of morale and professional pride, with most staff indicating they enjoy working at the school and feel supported by administration. At the same time, areas for growth emerged, including consistency in discipline practices, communication with families, and equity in the application of school rules. Some staff expressed uncertainty regarding how often students are challenged academically, particularly those who master content early, and about how widely advanced academic opportunities are promoted.

Overall, the data reflect a committed, student-centered staff who believe in the school's mission, feel empowered to contribute, and strive to meet the diverse needs of learners. These insights will serve as a valuable foundation for identifying strengths to celebrate and opportunities to enhance both student and staff experiences across the building.

Student Structured Interviews

To deepen the analysis of student perceptions of school climate and culture, a series of structured follow-up interviews were conducted between May and June of 2025. These interviews served as a qualitative extension of the Pennsylvania Department of Education's

School Climate Survey, which was administered in October 2024. While the original survey gathered broad, quantitative data from 219 student respondents, this follow-up effort focused on more detailed, open-ended reflections.

A total of 26 students participated in the interviews, selected randomly from the original participant pool. The goal was to include 10 representatives from each grade level (6th, 7th, and 8th), but four of the randomly generated students chose not to participate, resulting in slightly uneven representation across grades. The questions in the interview protocol were designed to align with the major themes of the PDE School Climate Survey, including perceptions of physical and emotional safety, peer relationships, student voice, teaching and learning practices, and cultural inclusivity.

The responses collected during these structured interviews offer a rich, narrative-based understanding of students' lived experiences at North East Middle School and complement the broader trends identified in the quantitative data. What follows is a summary of each interview question, along with representative responses and recurring themes.

Interview Question 1: Can you describe a specific instance where you felt unsafe at school?

What actions did you or others take in response?

Most students reported that they have never felt unsafe at school. However, several responses indicated that situations involving fights, verbal threats, or unsupervised areas like bathrooms made students feel uncomfortable. A few students expressed that they either ignored the situation or alerted an adult.

Responses included:

- “I have never felt unsafe at school.”

- “The only time I feel unsafe is when there is a fight in the hallway.”
- “I felt unsafe when someone threatened to harm the entire school.”
- “Sometimes the bathrooms feel unsafe because there’s no teacher nearby.”

Interview Question 2: What kinds of characteristics (e.g., race, religion, weight) do you think lead to bullying at your school, and how frequently do you witness this happening?

A majority of students indicated that weight is the most common characteristic that leads to bullying. Some mentioned appearance and differences in personality. While some students see bullying frequently, others view it as rare or mostly happening under the guise of jokes.

Responses included:

- “Weight can lead to bullying.”
- “I think the most common things that lead to bullying are weight, clothing, and appearance.”
- “People don’t really bully others here, but if it happens, it’s mostly joking.”
- “People joke too much and don’t realize they’re hurting someone else.”
- “People sometimes are teased for the way they speak.”

Interview Question 3: Can you provide examples of how students at your school either support each other or fail to support each other in learning or social situations?

Students overwhelmingly shared positive experiences, especially in the context of sports and friendships. Many highlighted emotional support from peers and group work during classes or events.

Responses included:

- “If there is a game or meet, the team supports each other.”
- “People work really well together in gym class and cheer each other on.”
- “My friends supported me when I was feeling down.”
- “We help each other out during assignments.”
- “Everyone in my friend group comes to each other’s games and claps when someone scores.”

Interview Question 4: How do you think students can be encouraged to treat each other with more respect and consideration?

A common suggestion among students was offering rewards or recognition for respectful behavior. Some proposed PBIS points or shoutouts on our intercom system or morning announcements. Others believed that modeling and talking about respect more openly could help.

Responses included:

- “We could give rewards to people who are nice and respectful.”
- “More PBIS points for students doing good things.”
- “Teachers should openly recognize people who are kind.”
- “People will do [respectful things] if there are rewards.”

Interview Question 5: In what ways do your teachers connect what you are learning to life outside the classroom? Can you share a specific example?

Students pointed to career-related assignments, real-life projects, and personal stories from teachers as helpful connections. While multiple teachers were mentioned by name, one teacher - Mr. Scutella (Grade 8 Mathematics) - was frequently mentioned for his ability to relate school to students' futures.

Responses included:

- “Future-focused talks with Mr. Scutella.”
- “We did a budget project that helped with real-life math.”
- “My math teacher made us research jobs in real life.”
- “We watch CNN10 in class to stay informed about the world around us.”
- “Miss Kosslow helped me when I was stressed about something outside of school and helped me focus on my learning rather than the [issues] outside of school.”

Interview Question 6: How do your teachers encourage you to share your ideas, and how does this impact your learning experience?

Students felt comfortable sharing ideas when teachers actively listened or used creative approaches like humor or class discussions. Feeling heard contributed positively to their learning.

Responses included:

- “Bellringer fill-outs help us reflect and share.”
- “My teachers always listen and make me feel like my ideas matter.”

- “[Teachers] tell us not to be afraid to speak up.”
- “[Our teachers] joke around, so we feel relaxed sharing [information].”
- “My teachers give time in class for us to share our thoughts.”

Interview Question 7: How do you see cultural diversity represented in your school’s activities and curriculum? Can you provide specific examples?

Student responses were mixed. Some felt that cultural diversity was present in classrooms and extracurricular activities, while others indicated that they had not observed much cultural representation. A few students expressed a desire to see more intentional celebration of different cultures.

Responses included:

- “We have lots of different people in different classes and sports, but we don’t have much diversity here.”
- “I think we treat everyone as they would want to be treated.”
- “I don’t really see any cultural diversity at all.”
- “Honestly, I don’t see [diversity] here.”
- “We have different types of people in our classes and sports, but we don’t really talk about it.”

Interview Question 8: Do you feel that the school provides equal opportunities for all students? If not, what specific areas need improvement?

Most students responded positively, stating that the school generally provides equal opportunities. However, some commented on the way classes are grouped or suggested that certain students receive more attention than others.

Responses included:

- “Yes, our school provides equal opportunities for all students.”
- “I feel the school gives equal opportunities for all students.”
- “I think our daily classes could be arranged better.”
- “Classes could be put together better. We often have class with the same kids all day.”
- “Everyone is treated the same, mostly.”

Interview Question 9: How are conflicts typically resolved among students? Can you describe a recent situation and how it was handled?

Students described a variety of responses to conflicts, including intervention by teachers, verbal resolutions, and, in some cases, fights. While some noted that adults handled situations well, others indicated that issues were sometimes ignored or resolved through peer mediation.

Responses included:

- “A teacher would step in. I can't think of a recent situation.”
- “The consequences after something happens are usually a referral or detention.”
- “Fighting or arguing usually lead to suspensions.”
- “It is usually an argument, but it gets solved [by the students].”

- “I have never really paid attention to students who act like this. I’m here to learn.”

Interview Question 10: What are the most common rules or behavioral expectations that students struggle with, and why do you think that is?

Responses focused heavily on rules related to talking, phone use, and general respect. Students explained that these rules are challenging because they either feel overly strict or are inconsistently enforced.

Responses included:

- “Not talking or moving in class. It’s hard to sit still!”
- “Swearing or using cell phones [are the most common rules students break].”
- “Treat others the way you want to be treated. Some kids don’t do that.”
- “Talking back and swearing because they think it makes them look cool.”
- “Being mature - some students act like they're in elementary school.”

Interview Question 11: When you need extra help with schoolwork, what resources or support systems are most effective for you? Are there any barriers to accessing this help?

Students identified teachers, friends, and hands-on learning as their most valuable support systems. A few students noted that certain teachers were less willing to help or that after-school options were limited.

Responses included:

- “I can ask my teacher, my friend, or my parents.”
- “Teachers, but some say no when I ask for help.”
- “Homework help helps a lot, and there’s not a lot of barriers.”

- “Hands-on learning works best for me.”
- “I usually don’t need extra help since it comes easy to me.”

Interview Question 12: How has a school counselor or teacher helped you plan for your future, and what additional support do you think would be beneficial?

Many students mentioned individual teachers who had helped them explore career paths or encouraged them to pursue personal goals. Once again, Mr. Scutella (Grade 8 Mathematics) was frequently referenced as someone who offered specific guidance related to students’ futures.

Responses included:

- “Mr. Scutella has helped me with running, and I want to do that in high school.”
- “Mr. Scutella has set me on a route in life that I want to travel.”
- “A teacher helped me when I was struggling with mental health and encouraged me to think about the future.”
- “[Teachers] help by telling me what I’m good at and how I can use it to my advantage.”
- “Mr. Scutella and the budget project helped me understand real-life costs and challenges.”

Interview Question 13: How involved are you in extracurricular activities, and how do these activities impact your experience at school?

Students who were involved in extracurricular activities, especially sports, reported that these experiences positively impacted their time at school. Others shared that they were not involved due to lack of interest, time, or opportunities.

Responses included:

- “I am heavily involved in sports. I play something year-round.”
- “I’m pretty involved, and it makes school more fun.”
- “Very involved - it negatively affects me because I’m tired, but I like it.”
- “I’m not involved with anything. That way I can focus more on school.”
- “Soccer and cross country make school more fun for me.”

Interview Question 14: What additional extracurricular activities or clubs would you like to see offered at your school?

Students expressed a wide range of interests, suggesting a desire for both athletic and non-athletic clubs. Some students were content with what was already offered, while others wanted more variety.

Responses included:

- “Flag football or 7v7.”
- “Maybe a Hot Wheels car club.”
- “Snowboarding in the winter and maybe a golf team.”
- “Clubs for gaming or creative writing would be cool.”

Interview Question 15: How does the physical environment of your classroom (e.g., cleanliness, organization, displays) affect your ability to learn and feel comfortable?

Many students said the physical environment does not impact them much, while others noted that neatness and motivational messages helped create a positive atmosphere.

Responses included:

- “It doesn’t affect me, really.”
- “As long as the teachers are nice, I don’t care what it looks like.”
- “The little messages in the classroom help encourage me.”
- “It doesn’t impact me at all, but you can tell who is organized and who isn’t.”
- “If it’s too messy, it’s hard to focus.”

Interview Question 16: In what ways do you think the classroom environment could be improved to better support learning and well-being?

Students suggested small changes such as more supplies, cleaner spaces, and more welcoming decorations. Others felt that their classrooms were already fine.

Responses included:

- “Free pencils every class before it starts.”
- “I think they are just fine.”
- “Just a little friendlier environment in some cases. Some teachers could be friendlier.”
- “It can’t really be improved, it’s already good.”

Interview Question 17: How effective do you find the homework assigned by your teachers in helping you understand the material? Can you give an example of particularly helpful or unhelpful homework?

Student opinions on homework varied significantly. Some found it effective and aligned with classroom learning, while others viewed it as stressful, repetitive, or unhelpful. A few students expressed that homework added unnecessary pressure without deepening understanding.

Responses included:

- “I think that the homework is very effective. After school homework help also helps.”
- “When teachers use it, it connects with what we learn.”
- “It doesn’t - it just makes school more stressful.”
- “Not very effective because it just makes me not want to go to school.”
- “I feel like it adds more stress to me, but it does help a little.”

Interview Question 18: How do your teachers respond when you do poorly on an assignment, and how does this affect your motivation and learning?

Students described a wide range of teacher responses, from supportive feedback to indifference. Supportive teachers were often noted for helping students improve or asking what went wrong. In contrast, some students felt discouraged when their struggles weren’t acknowledged or addressed.

Responses included:

- “They tell me I can do better. Sometimes this is motivational, other times it feels like they put me down.”
- “They give me a bad grade, and this makes me try harder.”
- “They just say ‘do better.’”
- “Some ask what is going on, and some don’t care.”
- “They say what I could have done better and why it’s important.”
- “My math teachers usually offer test corrections. I wish all teachers did that.”

***Interview Question 19: How do your teachers make learning engaging and enjoyable for you?
Can you provide an example?***

Many students shared positive experiences with teachers who used humor, real-life connections, games, and hands-on projects. When teachers showed passion or made learning personal, students were more motivated and involved.

Responses included:

- “They make jokes and connect [learning] to real life.”
- “By doing fun projects like the budget simulation.”
- “Some teachers make it fun, and others just make us take down a bunch of notes.”
- “We play review games that help me remember [important information].”
- “When we talk about real-world things, I’m more into that type of learning.”

Interview Question 20: What is one change you think the school could make to improve the overall student experience?

Students suggested a variety of changes ranging from social-emotional supports to more student activities and greater teacher consistency. Common themes included better food options, more clubs, improved discipline procedures, and increased student voice.

Responses included:

- “Have more clubs for people who don’t do sports.”
- “Teachers should all follow and enforce the rules the same way.”
- “More field trips and hands-on learning.”
- “Give students more of a say in what happens at school.”

- “Better food and more lunch options.”

Student Structured Interviews Summary

The structured student interviews provided a deeper, more personal lens into how learners at North East Middle School experience school climate, instruction, and peer dynamics. While survey data from the broader student population revealed general trends, these one-on-one responses highlighted specific themes - particularly around safety, inclusivity, peer support, and the influence of teachers on motivation and engagement. Students offered both praise and constructive criticism, sharing how specific staff members helped shape their future goals, how PBIS and better student recognition could ultimately promote respectful behavior, and how certain rules or support systems could be improved for fairness and effectiveness.

Student responses appeared to reflect some of the patterns noted in the October quantitative survey results, especially in areas such as physical safety, school belonging, and engagement opportunities both in and out of the classroom. Their feedback may point to the potential significance of adult-student relationships and the value of offering supports that are perceived as meaningful and responsive.

To gain a more comprehensive view of the school’s climate and culture, structured interviews were also conducted with parents and guardians. Their insights provide a valuable external perspective on communication practices, school involvement, and the extent to which they believe their children are safe, supported, and academically challenged. What follows is a summary of those conversations.

Parent/Guardian Structured Interviews

To complement student perspectives, structured interviews were conducted with a select group of parents and guardians whose children are enrolled at North East Middle School. These interviews occurred between March and April 2025 and were designed to provide deeper insight into the experiences of families and their interactions with the school. All 42 original respondents were invited to participate, but only total of ten (10) parents and guardians opted to do so, responding to a range of open-ended questions focused on school climate, communication, academic expectations, student safety, and inclusivity.

These interviews were aligned with key indicators from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's School Climate Survey, originally administered in October 2024, and served to enhance the district's understanding of how family engagement, perceptions of fairness, and academic supports influence overall school culture. This section presents a narrative summary of parent/guardian responses organized by question, supported by representative quotes and emerging themes.

Interview Question 1: Can you share specific examples of how the school creates a supportive and inviting environment for your child?

Many parents mentioned positive interactions with staff, often referencing specific teachers and support personnel who were described as creating welcoming and respectful environments. Some parents also referenced extracurricular opportunities and efforts to support student well-being as factors that may contribute to a sense of safety and engagement at school.

Responses included:

- “Mrs. Benson (Librarian and Gifted Coordinator) is absolutely the best person for the role of leading the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) students.”
- “The student assistance program helps children without pulling them from school.”
- “Most teachers know my child by name, and the nurse creates a respectful environment.”
- “There are many different clubs, sports, and activities for the kids to be involved in.”
- “My child is eager to always go to school. Something has to be said to that.”

Interview Question 2: What changes or improvements would you suggest to make the school even more supportive and inviting for students?

Suggestions focused on improving parent-teacher communication, offering more mental health support, reducing teacher burnout, and creating more systems for students to safely voice concerns. Parents appreciated current support but saw room for growth in responsiveness and inclusivity.

Responses included:

- “More opportunities for parent/teacher conferences during the year.”
- “If teachers could follow 504 plans without having to be reminded, it would help a lot.”
- “Create an anonymous platform where students can report their concerns or problems.”
- “Teacher burnout is obvious to the students, especially when teachers are subbing every day.”
- “I think the school could do a better job of including kids that aren't part of a clique.”

Interview Question 3: Are there any particular incidents or patterns that have made you concerned about your child's safety at school?

Responses varied from strong confidence in current safety measures to concerns about bullying, aggression, and consistency in addressing behavioral incidents. Some parents also expressed unease about identification procedures and communication around threats.

Responses included:

- “No, I appreciate the new Raptor identification program that makes ID checks a requirement.”
- “Bullying still occurs regardless of the measures in place.”
- “I feel bullying could be handled better. There are a few kids who get targeted regularly.”
- “District-wide I feel parents are often not notified in a timely manner when issues arise.”
- “Kids these days seem to take on aggressive adult-level problems that schools aren't prepared for.”

Interview Question 4: What additional measures do you think the school could implement to enhance safety for all students?

Many parents requested increased mental health services, more visible supervision, or the use of security technologies. Others suggested communication enhancements and consistent enforcement of safety policies.

Responses included:

- “I’d like to see metal detectors. I trust the staff, but things can happen.”
- “Increase access to mental health services for kids who need them.”

- “Maybe check in with kids individually more frequently to see how they’re doing.”
- “Providing improved safety guidelines to staff would go a long way.”
- “I don’t have any safety concerns or suggested improvements right now.”

Interview Question 5: How does the school make you feel welcome when you visit or interact with the staff?

The majority of respondents described office staff as kind and welcoming. However, a few parents felt the school culture could be more openly inclusive of families during regular school hours.

Responses included:

- “Mrs. Seth (Attendance Secretary) is amazing—I love seeing her when I walk in.”
- “Office staff is very personable and kind.”
- “It is welcoming to see the teachers and staff around the building.”
- “I do not feel that the school is welcoming of parents—unless it’s an after-school event.”
- “The office staff who talk are great, but sometimes I feel ignored when checking in.”

Interview Question 6: What could the school do to improve the welcoming atmosphere for parents and guardians?

Suggestions included having more visible leadership, providing casual engagement opportunities, and promoting family-involvement activities during school hours.

Responses included:

- “Maybe make a more welcoming front lobby entrance. It is a very awkward area.”
- “Create more activities with parent/guardian participation.”

- “Have some sort of easy communication access to the principal or staff.”
- “Encourage more teacher and staff attendance at student events.”
- “Greet parents as they come in and then get back to your work and have them wait. But always say ‘hello’ and smile so we know our children are with people that want to be there.”

Interview Question 7: How effective is the communication between you and your child’s teachers, and can you provide examples of what works well or what could be improved?

Communication effectiveness varied by teacher. Some parents described prompt and thoughtful replies, while others felt left out entirely. The inconsistency of communication was a frequent concern, especially for parents of students with higher needs or multiple teachers.

Responses included:

- “This completely depends on the teacher. Some are fantastic, others we never hear from.”
- “I noticed my son was slacking and no one contacted me until it was too late.”
- “I have had no communication with my child’s teachers since they started sixth grade.”
- “Communication between my child and teacher is poor. I don’t know what’s going on.”
- “I don’t feel I get much communication from the school unless there’s a problem.”

Interview Question 8: In what ways do you prefer to receive communication from your child’s school and teachers?

There was strong consensus that digital communication is best. Email, apps, and text messages were frequently preferred due to accessibility and convenience.

Responses included:

- “Email is best because I can check it anytime.”
- “Email, app or text is preferred.”
- “The apps such as ClassDojo and Remind have been great.”
- “Phone calls are okay, but I’d rather get a text.”
- “Sapphire (Student Information System/Learning Management System) is too difficult to use - something simpler would help.”

Interview Question 9: What aspects of the education your child receives do you find most effective, and are there areas where you feel improvements are needed?

Parents praised real-life applications and interactive teaching styles. Teachers who engaged students through projects and cross-curricular learning received positive mentions. Areas for growth included differentiated instruction and increased access to enrichment.

Responses included:

- “The hands-on, real-life approach makes learning stick.”
- “You can ask any child and they’ll tell you they remember things from Mr. Scutella’s class because it’s real-world learning.”
- “My child learns best when taught using multiple modalities.”
- “I like [PBIS]; it encourages students to do well.”
- “Google Classroom access helps us stay in the loop as parents.”

Interview Question 10: How does the school support your child's learning and academic progress at home?

Some parents felt well-informed and equipped to support learning through online tools, while others struggled to understand expectations or access needed resources.

Responses included:

- “My child brings home their Chromebook and can complete homework easily.”
- “Ability to access Google Classroom and IXLs from home has helped.”
- “This is challenging. Sapphire helps, but not everyone can use it well.”
- “I don’t feel like there really is much support unless we reach out first.”
- “I can’t think of an example of how the school supports learning at home.”

Interview Question 11: Can you share an instance where you felt your child was either fairly or unfairly treated at school?

Responses were mixed. Some parents noted consistent and respectful treatment, while others described issues related to discipline, IEP/GIEP accommodations, and perceived inequity in how students are handled.

Responses included:

- “Many teachers are using rubrics and deducting points without any notes as to why points are being taken. That is not helpful or fair to students who are trying to do better.”
- “Blanket discipline is an issue - punishing everyone isn’t fair.”
- “My child has a GIEP and sometimes expectations aren’t properly adjusted to match his learning disability.”

- “No concerns—my child feels heard and respected.”
- “Some teachers have given consequences that match the behavior. That’s fair.”

Interview Question 12: What steps do you think the school should take to ensure fair treatment for all students?

Parents called for personalized discipline approaches, greater staff awareness of individual needs, and communication with families before applying consequences.

Responses included:

- “Don’t label these kids! Just because a student is loud doesn’t mean they’re bad.”
- “Remove blanket discipline and do root cause analysis.”
- “Treat each child as an individual and take time to learn their situation.”
- “Stricter punishments and greater expectations. We have lowered standards to meet more needs but, in the process, have taken more students down with it. Allowing poor behavior shows acceptance, it becomes cool and the new norm.”
- “Teachers have a lot on their plate, but equity is still important.”

Interview Question 13: How effectively does the school support children with learning disabilities, and can you share specific examples?

Some parents described successful accommodations and supportive teachers, while others noted a lack of visibility into services. A few had no direct experience but appreciated knowing programs were in place.

Responses included:

- “My son has used the learning support classroom often and it has been a huge help.”

- “In earlier years this is done well—but it’s harder as kids get older.”
- “Considering my son has a 504 plan, it’s important that teachers follow it - and they usually do.”
- “If IEPs are handled as well as GIEPs, then the district is doing a great job.”
- “I am glad to see that students in the Life Skills program are now being extended the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.”

Interview Question 14: What additional resources or programs do you think would help children with learning disabilities succeed?

Responses included staffing, parent education, and the need to address behavioral and academic needs holistically. Some parents asked for more inclusive strategies and greater empathy from staff.

Responses included:

- “Learning disabilities tend to come with behavior concerns—address both.”
- “More information for parents on how to help would be great.”
- “Actually being able to accommodate students the way their plans say.”
- “Have the staff apply the same expectations consistently.”
- “Communication between home and school is key.”

Interview Question 15: How does the school demonstrate respect for cultural diversity, and can you provide specific examples?

While some noted inclusive curriculum or representation, many admitted that cultural diversity wasn't especially visible or emphasized at the school, often citing the region's limited racial/ethnic diversity.

Responses included:

- "Through education of historical events and figures, the school promotes some awareness."
- "North East isn't exactly diverse, but the school tries."
- "I haven't heard of anything negative, but I'm not sure what's offered."
- "I don't see an issue, but I also don't see much celebration of diversity either."
- "My child has never had a complaint, so it must be okay."

Interview Question 16: What additional efforts could the school make to enhance cultural diversity and inclusion?

Parents recommended deliberate programming like Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) lessons, multicultural events, and greater exposure to different cultures. Others felt treating everyone fairly should remain the focus.

Responses included:

- "Discuss current events and DEI."
- "Multicultural book studies or assemblies would be great."
- "Make everyone feel loved - that's all that matters."

- “Personally, I like just treating everyone fairly and respectfully.”
- “It’s fine as-is, but extra efforts never hurt.”

Interview Question 17: How do the school’s high expectations manifest in your child’s educational experience, and how do they impact your child’s motivation and performance?

Parents largely agreed that academic expectations start at home and are reinforced by school. Some felt expectations varied by teacher, with more consistency needed.

Responses included:

- “I have high expectations for my son, and the school supports them.”
- “My child understands what’s expected and wants to do well.”
- “I’m not sure that makes a huge impact - expectations aren’t always clear.”
- “I think expectations start at home and the school just adds to it.”
- “Kids with higher needs or gifts should be challenged more.”

Interview Question 18: What suggestions do you have for maintaining or raising academic expectations for all students?

Ideas ranged from improving parent visibility on progress to teacher collaboration and consistent enforcement of high standards.

Responses included:

- “Teacher meetings with each other! If they feel supported, kids will too.”
- “The reward-based system [PBIS] works well - keep that up.”
- “We need to teach parents how to use tools like Sapphire.”
- “Keep reinforcing expectations - it makes a difference.”

- “I’m not sure how to improve upon this without overburdening teachers.”

Interview Question 19: In what ways do you feel actively involved in your child’s education, and what barriers, if any, prevent greater involvement?

Most parents reported checking online portals, communicating with their child, and volunteering when possible. Time, work commitments, and lack of invitations were cited as barriers.

Responses included:

- “We’re constantly checking in with our kids to stay informed.”
- “I love volunteering for activities - it keeps me connected to the school and community.”
- “Work is a huge barrier – I wish more events were in the evening.”
- “Sapphire helps a lot, but not everyone can use it.”
- “We are very active in checking progress and attending conferences.”

Interview Question 20: What additional opportunities or resources would help you become more involved in your child’s education?

Parents asked for more communication, clearer access to progress updates, and increased outreach from teachers. A few felt they were already as involved as possible.

Responses included:

- “When a negative comment is added to a report card, please notify me before I see it on my own. I can’t fix what I don’t know about.”
- “Updates as to how my child is doing before the quarter ends.”
- “Increased teacher communication - just more transparency.”

- “I don’t think there is anything more that would help right now.”
- “It would be great if teachers could get things graded and returned faster. My child cannot improve without timely feedback.”

Parent/Guardian Structured Interviews Summary

The responses gathered from parents and guardians offer a multifaceted view of the school climate from the lens of families. While many participants expressed gratitude for supportive teachers, welcoming staff, and accessible extracurricular opportunities, others shared concerns about inconsistent communication, discipline practices, and the need for greater cultural inclusivity. Across all twenty questions, a consistent theme emerged: Families deeply value transparency, equity, and meaningful partnerships with school personnel. Their insights underscore the critical role of home-school collaboration in shaping a positive and productive educational experience.

To complement these perspectives, the next section will explore structured interview responses from school staff. These voices, ranging from classroom teachers to support personnel, offer a valuable internal viewpoint on the systems, challenges, and practices that influence the school climate and culture. Their feedback will help triangulate the data and deepen the overall understanding of the learning environment at North East Middle School.

Staff Structured Interviews

To gain a deeper understanding of school climate and culture from an internal perspective, eighteen structured interview questions were distributed to teaching and support staff at North East Middle School between February and March 2025. These questions were designed to align with themes from the original PA School Climate Survey, including safety, relationships, academic expectations, equity, and professional support. The staff responses provided rich qualitative data about the daily lived experiences of educators and their observations of student needs, systemic challenges, and cultural shifts within the building. Their reflections offer crucial insight for triangulating findings from students and families and for informing leadership decisions aimed at sustained school improvement. Ultimately, 22 of the 38 original respondents elected to participate in the structured interview portion of this study.

Interview Question 1: How has crime and violence in the community affected the school environment and your teaching experience?

Most staff reported minimal direct impact from community violence within the school walls. However, several acknowledged that the trauma students experience outside school affects their behavior, engagement, and emotional regulation inside the building.

Responses included:

- “Crime/violence in the community has affected the classroom by increasing student anxiety.”
- “When I worked in [a neighboring school district], this was especially prevalent. Here, it’s less frequent but still present in students’ home lives.”

- “There have been two separate instances of police involvement with students’ families just this year that have impacted class dynamics.”
- “Community influences trickle into the school through student behavior and emotional responses.”

Interview Question 2: What specific measures do you think the school could take to improve safety both inside and outside the school building?

Staff generally felt that the school is doing well in this regard but noted areas for improvement, such as clearer procedures, better enforcement of rules, and enhanced visibility of leadership.

Responses included:

- “Transparent rules make a world of difference. Hold students accountable in real time.”
- “Improve communication from high school to middle school for shared safety info.”
- “Review morning supervision outside the school.”
- “We’re doing well with what we have, but more mental health support would help.”

Interview Question 3: In what ways does the school create positive experiences for parents, and how could these efforts be improved?

Teachers shared appreciation for efforts like open houses, family nights, and extracurricular events. Several staff noted that these could be enhanced with more regular events and parent workshops.

Responses included:

- “Parent communication through newsletters and email blasts keeps families in the loop.”

- “The addition of unified bocce has been a great connector between families of special needs students and the school.”
- “We should offer more casual workshops or events during the year.”

Interview Question 4: How do you perceive the impact of parental involvement on student performance and school climate?

Staff strongly believe that parental involvement positively correlates with student success. They noted that students with supportive home environments often perform better academically and behaviorally.

Responses included:

- “Positive parental involvement is one of the most powerful tools we have.”
- “When parents check homework and communicate regularly, their kids thrive.”
- “The parents who are least involved are often the ones who blame the school.”

Interview Question 5: Can you describe specific practices or initiatives that make the school environment welcoming for staff, students, and visitors?

Staff mentioned greeting practices, hallway supervision, and student-led events as strong contributors to a welcoming environment.

Responses included:

- “The first person you see in the office sets the tone. Our front office staff are wonderful.”
- “Athletics and extracurriculars provide entry points for everyone to feel included.”
- “We’ve built strong team identities in each grade level. This helps families know we may have different styles, but we are a unified front in each grade level wing.”

Interview Question 6: What additional steps could be taken to enhance the welcoming nature of the school environment?

Suggestions centered around increasing visibility and support for new staff, providing more mid-year check-ins, and celebrating diverse identities.

Responses included:

- “Support new teachers more regularly—pair them with a consistent mentor.”
- “Consider a mid-year open house to spotlight student work.”
- “We do a nice job welcoming staff, but student representation in school decisions could be stronger.”

Interview Question 7: What kinds of bullying or threats do students face most frequently, and how effectively are these incidents addressed?

Bullying was often described as subtle—manifesting as exclusion, gossip, or online comments. Staff generally agreed that the school takes bullying seriously, but that it’s a persistent issue.

Responses included:

- “More threats seem to come from social media and emotional manipulation than physical aggression.”
- “Exclusion is the number one tactic used in middle school.”
- “Students are scared to speak up, even when we have anonymous options.”

Interview Question 8: How can the school better support students who are victims of bullying or threats?

Staff recommended increasing emotional supports, improving follow-up procedures, and engaging bystanders in prevention.

Responses included:

- “Follow-up is key. Victims need to know they’re being heard.”
- “Train students to intervene safely - peer influence matters.”
- “Sometimes it’s ‘he said/she said’ and that complicates responses from administration and teachers alike.”

Interview Question 9: Can you share examples of how students either support each other or fail to get along?

Teachers noted both positive and negative patterns, with many referencing peer mentoring, classroom collaboration, and social cliques.

Responses included:

- “Verbal praise during sports and class is common.”
- “Students love helping each other when given structured tasks.”
- “Cliques can be brutal in 7th and 8th grade - it creates unnecessary divisions.”

Interview Question 10: How do you think student relationships impact the overall school climate and learning environment?

There was strong consensus that positive peer interactions directly influence academic and emotional success.

Responses included:

- “When students get along, everything flows better - from classroom transitions to group projects.”
- “Peer relationships affect whether a student even wants to come to school.”
- “When students get along with each other, and feel heard, the overall climate is great. When a few students are loudly negative and disruptive, climate feels more negative. Once majority learn to ignore the minority, climate will improve again.”

Interview Question 11: How does the administration support staff members in their roles, and what improvements could be made?

Staff described administrative support as generally strong, though some expressed a desire for clearer expectations or more consistency across teams.

Responses included:

- “The administrative team is available and responsive to our needs.”
- “Support varies by department. Some feel very heard, others less so.”
- “We would benefit from more clarity on what’s expected for discipline referrals.”

Interview Question 12: Can you provide examples of informal opportunities for staff to influence school decisions?

Team meetings and department planning time were commonly mentioned, with varied opinions on their effectiveness.

Responses included:

- “Weekly team planning is great. It allows us to brainstorm real solutions.”
- “The informal moments - like chatting with administration at lunch - build trust.”
- “We need to move from suggestion boxes to actual changes.”

Interview Question 13: How do you encourage students to share their ideas, and what impact does this have on their engagement and learning outcomes?

Staff described using reflection activities, discussions, and classroom routines that center student voice.

Responses included:

- “Bellringers and journal entries give students a voice within the classroom. How do we do this building-wide?”
- “Our students love when their ideas are used in projects or bulletin boards.”
- “When kids feel heard, they show up more.”

Interview Question 14: What strategies do you use to prepare students for success in the next grade, college, or a job?

Teachers shared efforts like soft-skill development, goal setting, and progressive rigor as key components of long-term student success.

Responses included:

- “I build goal-setting into every unit.”
- “Life skills and self-advocacy matter more than content sometimes. This is a huge focus for me.”

- “We talk about future jobs and what real success looks like as they venture into adulthood.”

Interview Question 15: How does the school ensure that rigorous academic standards are being implemented?

Benchmarking, pacing guides, and data analysis were common tools staff mentioned, though student motivation was cited as a major challenge.

Responses included:

- “We use PSSA and IXL data to track gaps.”
- “The standards are there, but student effort is harder to guarantee.”
- “We’re legally compliant, but some kids don’t take it seriously.”

Interview Question 16: What additional resources or support would help staff meet these academic standards?

Requests included more planning time, targeted instructional tools, and administrative consistency in academic priorities.

Responses included:

- “More collaborative time with my Professional Learning Community (PLC) would make a huge difference.”
- “Make the PSSA feel more meaningful.”
- “One-on-one aides and targeted pullouts would help struggling students.”

Interview Question 17: What aspects of working at this school make you happy, and what aspects are most challenging?

Community, team collaboration, and student relationships were top sources of joy. Challenges included burnout, staffing shortages, and student apathy.

Responses included:

- “I love the people here - students and staff alike.”
- “Being fully staffed is a major factor in daily happiness.”
- “The challenge is the emotional load - we carry a lot of invisible stress.”

Interview Question 18: How does the school promote a 'can do' attitude among staff members?

Positive behavior initiatives, leadership presence, and public recognition were seen as key contributors to staff morale.

Responses included:

- “PBIS, shout-outs, and prizes keep things upbeat.”
- “Small things like snacks in the lounge or handwritten notes help.”
- “When leaders believe in us, we believe in ourselves.”

Staff Structured Interviews Summary

Staff responses in this section reflect both pride in the school community and a desire for continuous improvement. While most feel supported and optimistic, they also recognize the strain that comes with balancing academic rigor, emotional care, and systemic responsibilities.

Their feedback highlights the need for ongoing collaboration, clarity in expectations, and enhanced communication at all levels of the organization.

To better understand how the school's behavioral expectations and positive reinforcement systems are perceived and applied in daily practice, the next section will examine North East Middle School Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) data from the 2024-2025 school year. This includes analysis of student recognition trends, behavioral referrals, and the perceived effectiveness of Tier I supports. By aligning this data with the qualitative findings shared by staff, students, and families, the school can better assess the current state of PBIS implementation and its role in fostering a safe, respectful, and inclusive school environment.

PBIS Data Analysis

The 2024–2025 academic year marked the inaugural implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at North East Middle School. Grounded in evidence-based practices, PBIS is a proactive and data-informed framework designed to foster positive student behavior, improve school climate, and create consistent, equitable discipline systems. The initiative at NEMS was launched as a multi-tiered system of support, with Tier I focusing on universal strategies to teach, model, and reinforce behavioral expectations school-wide.

Planning for implementation began during the fourth quarter of the 2023–2024 school year, with the formation of a PBIS team, staff and student surveys, and initial resource development. Over the summer months, significant preparation took place, including stocking the school store, developing common area lesson plans, creating visual signage, and onboarding all staff and students into the PBIS Rewards system. The soft rollout began at the start of the

2024–2025 school year, emphasizing teacher training, student login support, and a building-wide launch event by the end of the first week of school.

NEMS adopted the core behavioral expectations of Show Class, Show Character, and Show Integrity, with these themes embedded into posters, lesson plans, and reinforcement strategies. Expectations were explicitly taught across key settings - classrooms, hallways, and the cafeteria - through structured lessons and review opportunities. Acknowledgement systems included positive behavior points via PBIS Rewards, student and staff shoutouts, quarterly incentive events (e.g., Fall Fest, Reindeer Games, March Madness, and the Spring Spectacular), and the identification of VIP students each quarter. VIPs were selected based on having zero behavioral infractions during a quarter, earning all A and B grades, and having *positive* attendance (not necessarily perfect, but all absences being excused due to medical purposes only).

This section analyzes the data collected throughout the first year of PBIS implementation, including trends in point distribution, referral patterns, teacher participation, and the effectiveness of acknowledgment systems. By examining both quantitative and qualitative feedback, this analysis aims to evaluate the initial impact of PBIS on school climate, behavioral consistency, and student engagement, setting the foundation for future improvements and deeper tiered interventions.

Total Office Disciplinary Referrals (ODRs) by Disciplinary Action

Notably, the data shows a positive overall trend in reducing more severe disciplinary actions. While the number of warnings increased from 162 to 216 - indicating earlier intervention and proactive redirection - the more serious consequences all decreased:

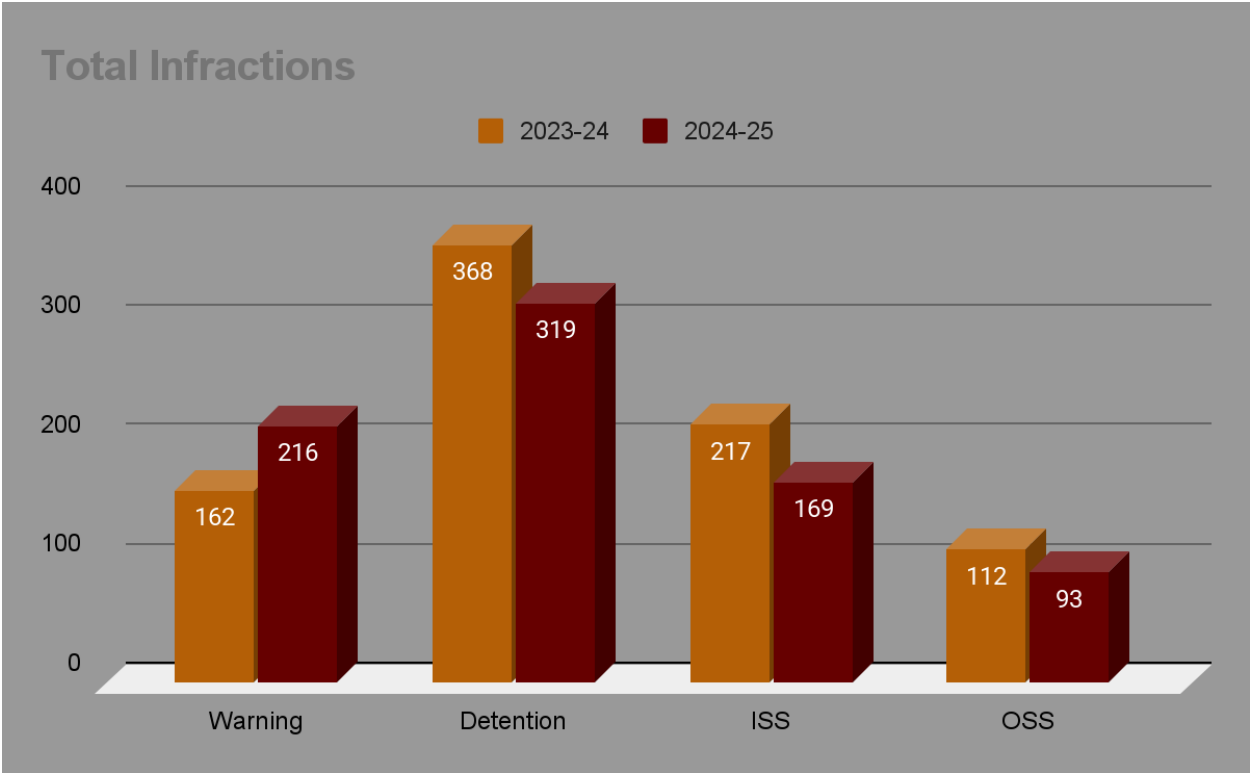
- Detentions dropped from 368 to 319 (a 13% decrease),
- In-School Suspensions (ISS) decreased from 217 to 169 (a 22% decrease),
- Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS) fell from 112 to 93 (a 17% decrease).

These reductions suggest that the school's behavioral systems, including the first full year of PBIS implementation, have contributed to better student self-regulation and fewer escalated disciplinary incidents. The increase in warnings may indicate that staff are addressing behaviors at earlier stages, reinforcing expectations before more punitive measures are necessary.

Overall, the 2024–2025 data reflects meaningful progress toward a more proactive, positive, and preventative approach to school discipline. Figure 16 highlights the differences year over year.

Figure 16

Action Summary (2023-24 vs. 2024-25)



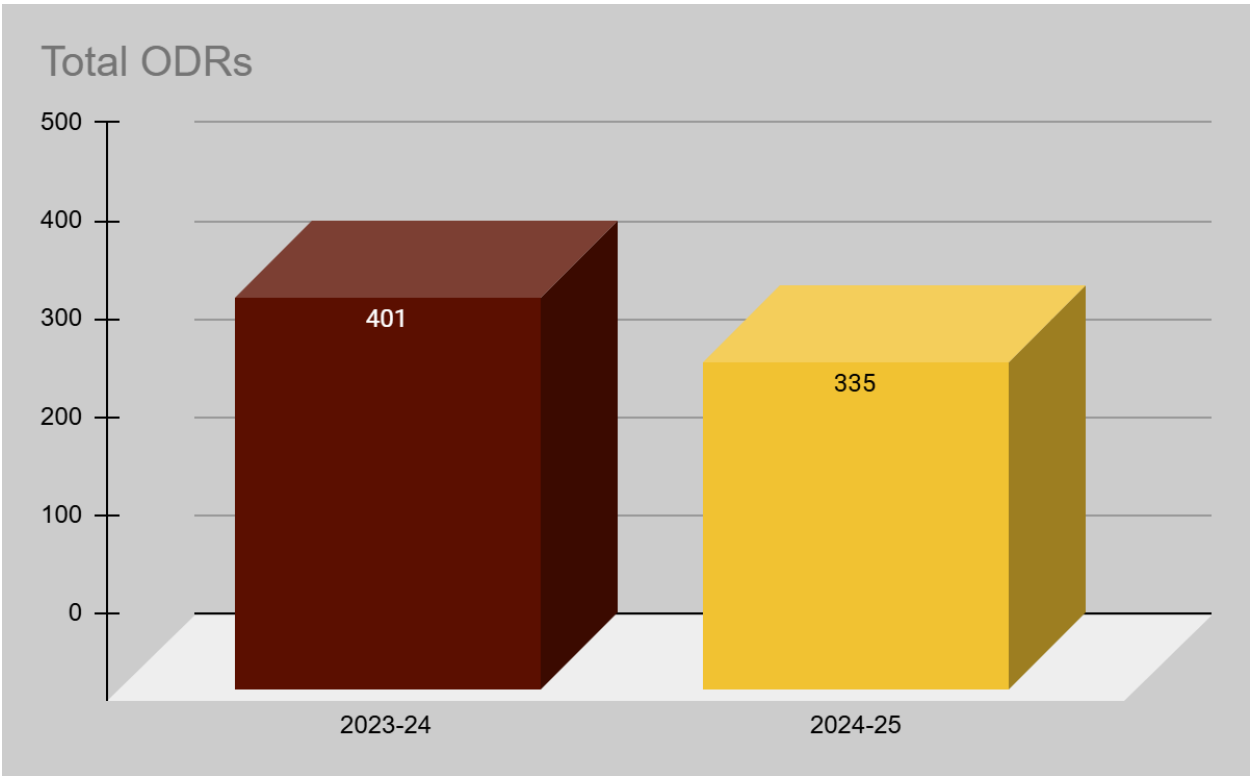
Note. Warnings went up significantly, while detentions, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspension numbers all decreased in the first year of PBIS implementation at NEMS.

Total Behavior Infractions

The total number of Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs) at North East Middle School declined from 401 in the 2023–2024 school year to 335 in 2024–2025, marking a 16.5% reduction following the first year of PBIS implementation. This decrease, as depicted in Figure 17, suggests early progress in reinforcing positive behavior and addressing minor infractions before they escalate. While continued work is needed to sustain and deepen these gains, the year-over-year improvement reflects a positive shift in school climate and behavior management practices.

Figure 17

Total Office Disciplinary Referrals



Note. A 16.5% decrease in total ODRs occurred after the first year of PBIS implementation, indicating progress in reducing behavioral incidents.

Grade Level ODR Distribution

Figure 18 illustrates the percentage of total behavioral infractions by grade level during the 2024-2025 school year at North East Middle School. The highest percentage of infractions occurred in Grade 7, accounting for 44.8% of all incidents. This was followed by Grade 8 with 32.2%, and Grade 6 with the lowest at 23.0%.

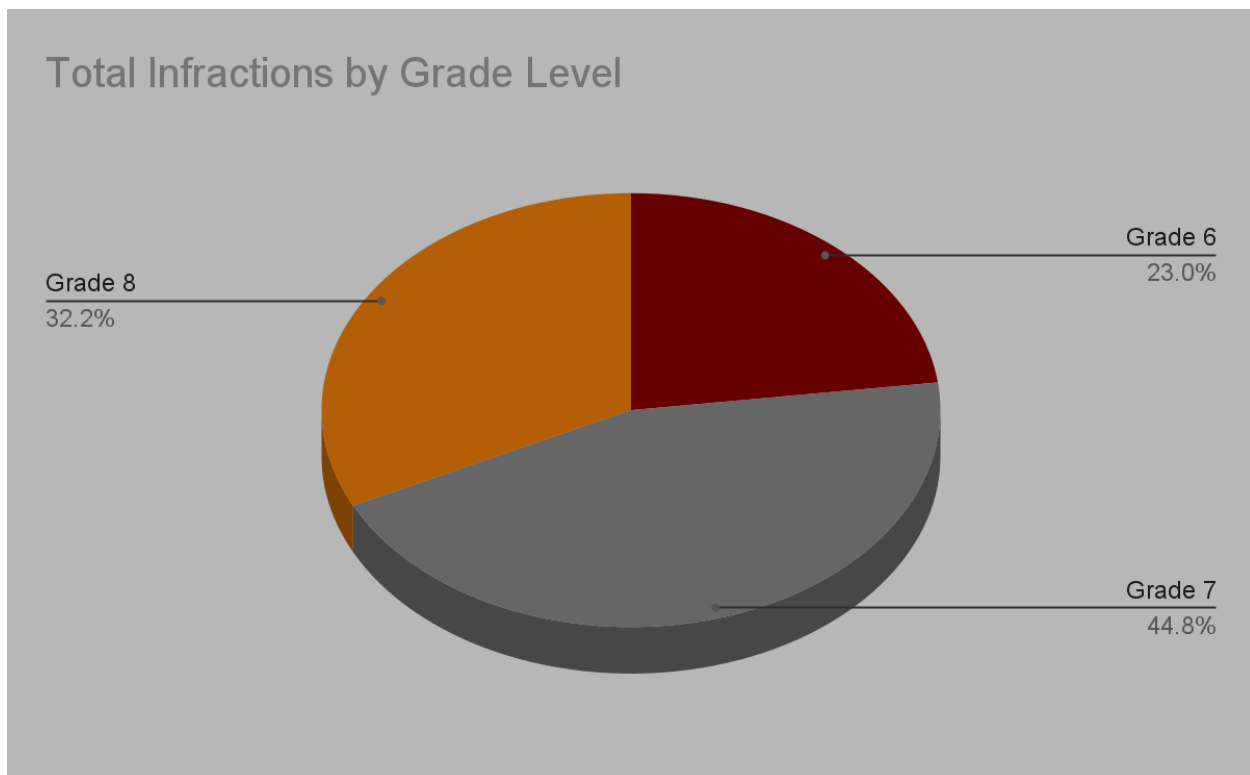
The data suggests that middle school students in their second year (Grade 7) may require additional support in self-regulation, transitions, and adherence to behavioral expectations. While

some developmental and social challenges are expected during this stage, the significant difference between Grade 7 and the other two grade levels highlights a potential need for targeted interventions, reteaching of expectations, and perhaps tiered behavioral supports specific to this age group.

The relatively lower percentage in Grade 6 is encouraging, particularly given that these students are in their first year of transition to middle school. It may reflect successful onboarding practices, clearly communicated routines, and strong early relationships with staff. Grade 8, while not the highest, still represents nearly a third of infractions and should not be overlooked in ongoing PBIS planning.

Figure 18

Infractions by Grade Level (%)



Note. Grade 7 students accounted for the highest share of infractions (44.8%), followed by Grade 8 (32.2%) and Grade 6 (23.0%), indicating a need for additional support and reteaching of expectations, particularly for the 7th grade cohort.

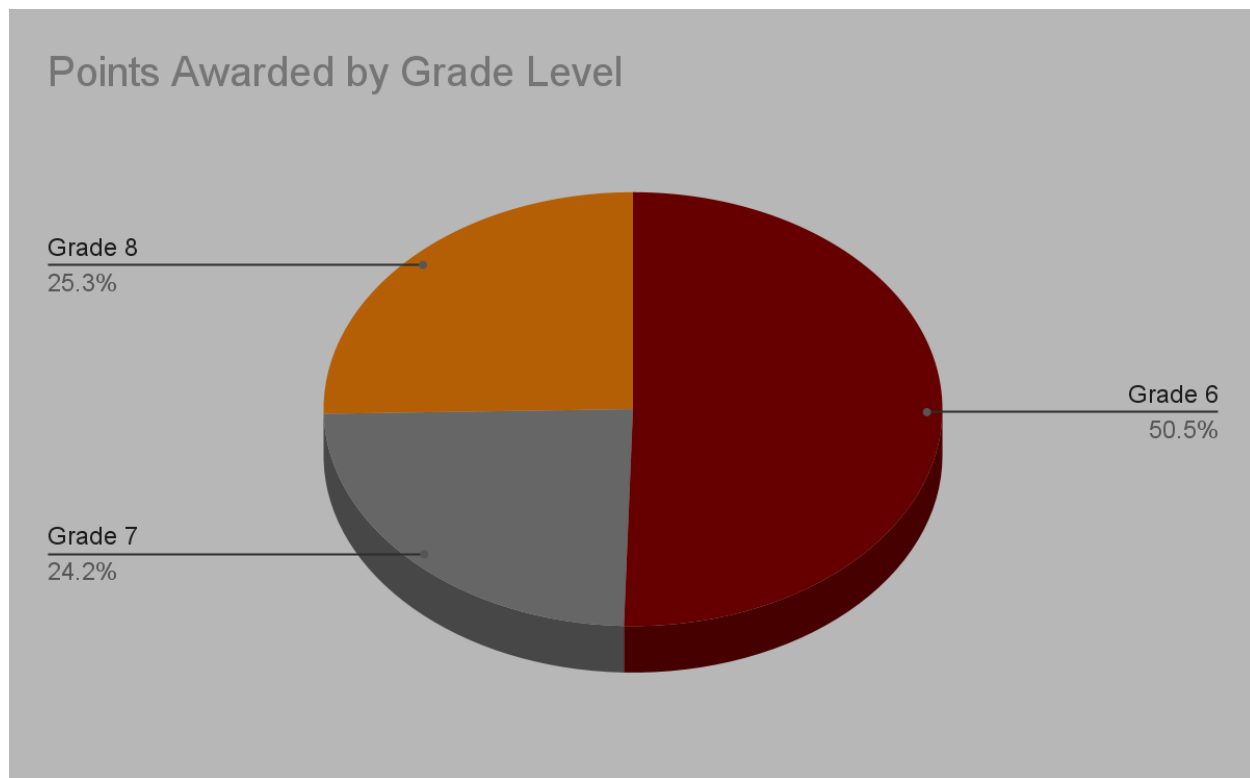
Grade Level Points Distribution

Figure 19 represents the distribution of PBIS points awarded by grade level during the 2024–2025 school year at North East Middle School. Grade 6 earned the majority of points, accounting for 50.5% of the total awarded. In contrast, Grade 7 received 24.2% and Grade 8 earned 25.3%.

This significant disparity suggests that Grade 6 students were more consistently recognized for positive behavior, effort, and engagement. Several factors may have contributed to this outcome, including higher levels of staff reinforcement, earlier PBIS exposure, and stronger adherence to expectations by both students and staff. The structured support during the sixth-grade transition into middle school may have also played a role in fostering this behavior.

The relatively lower percentages in Grades 7 and 8, despite comparable or higher enrollment, point to a potential lack of consistency in point distribution or staff engagement with upper-grade cohorts. This misalignment between behavior recognition and student need is particularly noteworthy when compared to infraction data, which showed Grade 7 had the highest number of behavioral incidents. It may indicate a missed opportunity to proactively reinforce expected behaviors among students who would benefit most.

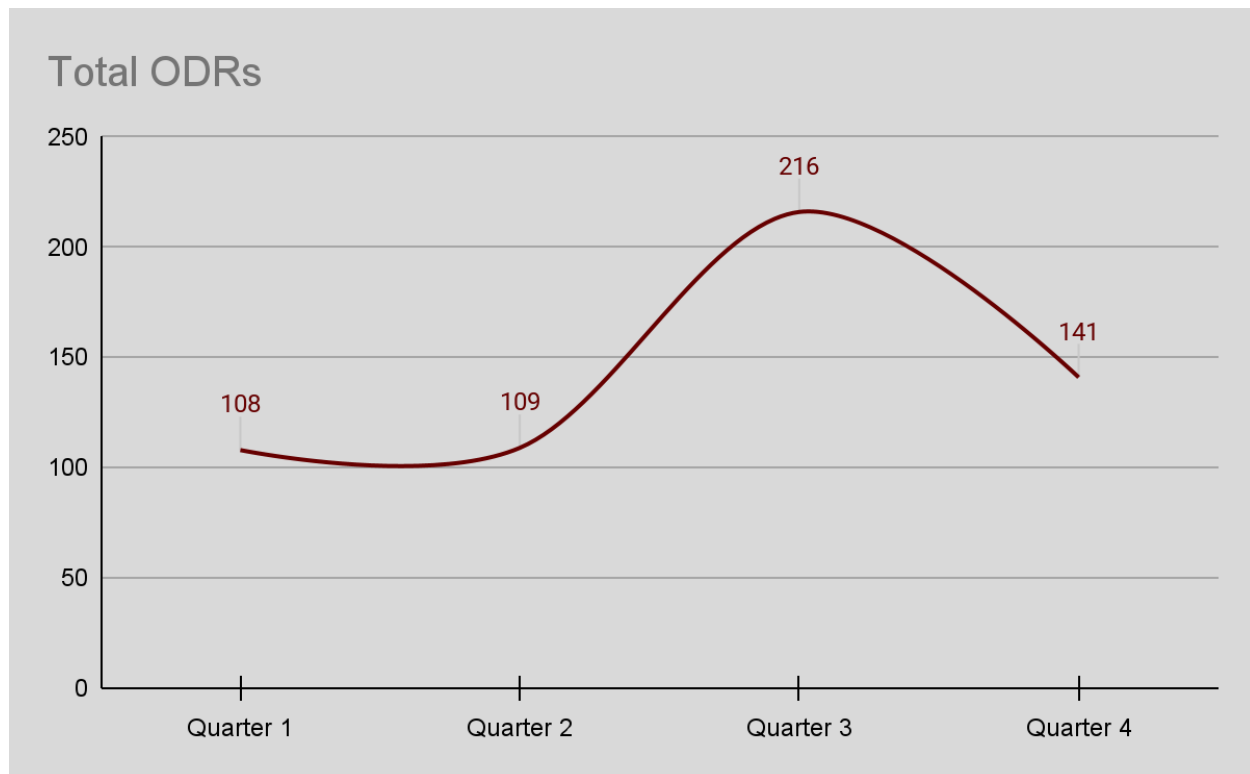
To improve equity and effectiveness, it is recommended that PBIS implementation in upper grades be strengthened through more frequent reinforcement, targeted recognition strategies, and ongoing staff coaching to ensure all students are acknowledged consistently.

Figure 19

Note. Grade 6 received over half of all PBIS points awarded, while Grades 7 and 8 earned significantly fewer, suggesting a need for increased consistency in reinforcement practices across all grade levels.

ODR Quarterly Breakdown

ODR data across the year revealed a predictable seasonal pattern. As Figure 20 highlights, referrals were lowest in Quarters 1 (108) and 2 (109), spiked sharply in Quarter 3 (216), and declined to 141 in Quarter 4. The Quarter 3 peak may reflect mid-year fatigue or seasonal shifts in student behavior, emphasizing the need for re-teaching expectations and boosting reinforcement systems after winter break. The decrease in Quarter 4 suggests that these efforts - paired with spring incentives - may have helped course-correct before year's end.

Figure 20*Total ODRs by Quarter*

Note: ODRs peaked in the third quarter and declined in the fourth, indicating a seasonal pattern and potential impact of re-teaching behavioral expectations.

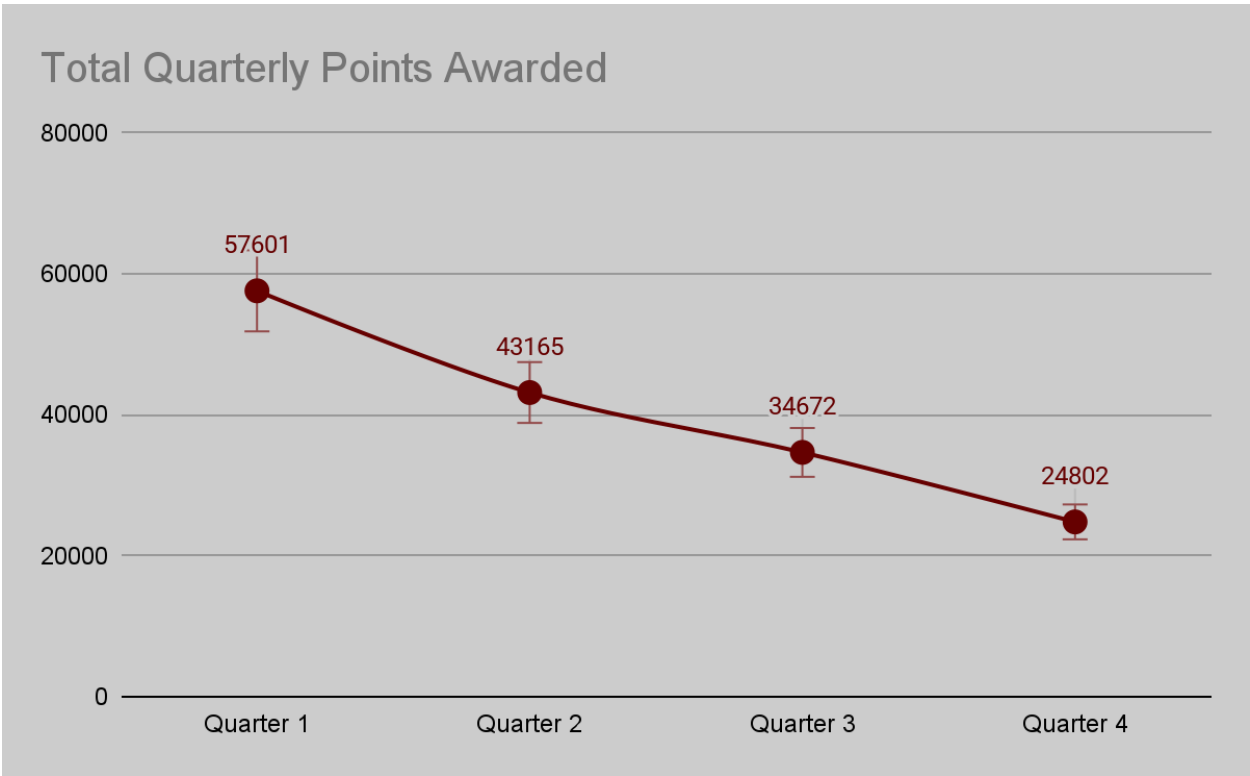
Total Quarterly Points Awarded

As seen in Figure 21, there was a steady and notable decline in PBIS Rewards points awarded over the course of the school year, from 57,601 in Quarter 1 to just 24,802 in Quarter 4. This drop-off raises concerns about the sustainability of teacher participation and reinforcement consistency. While enthusiasm was likely highest during initial rollout, the data suggests that ongoing staff support, mid-year retraining, and system recalibration may be necessary to

maintain fidelity and effectiveness. It also underscores the importance of leadership modeling and accountability structures to keep momentum going.

Figure 21

Total PBIS Points Awarded by Quarter



Note. A steady decline in points awarded was observed throughout the school year, suggesting decreased reinforcement fidelity over time.

Attendance Summary (2023-24 vs. 2024-25)

A year-over-year comparison of building attendance at North East Middle School revealed a slight but meaningful improvement following the first year of PBIS implementation. In 2023–2024, the overall building attendance rate was 93.10%, which increased to 93.43% in

2024–2025. This incremental rise corresponds with a decrease in the average daily absence percentage from 6.90% to 6.57%.

Notably, Grade 6 attendance improved from 93.59% to 94.17%, and Grade 7 from 92.60% to 93.13%, suggesting a potential positive impact of consistent behavioral expectations and increased student engagement early in the middle school experience, both of which connect directly to the PBIS initiative at NEMS. Grade 8 attendance remained relatively stable. While modest, these gains align with other school climate data indicating strengthened student connection and improved behavioral outcomes. Figures 22 and 23 showcase the marginal improvements in building level attendance year-over-year.

Figure 22

2023-2024 Attendance Summary

North East School District					
Building Attendance Percentages - 2023-2024					
Date Range: 08/28/2023 through 06/07/2024					
Absence Counting Method: Entire day absence for any absence amount					
North East Middle School (023)					
Grade Level Totals	Membership		Avg/Day Absences	Absence %	Attendance %
	Membership				
Grade 6 Totals:	19818	110.10	1270.0	6.41%	93.59%
Grade 7 Totals:	16884	93.80	1249.0	7.40%	92.60%
Grade 8 Totals:	21856	121.42	1576.0	7.21%	92.79%
Grade 9 Totals:	540	3.00	16.0	2.96%	97.04%
Grade 10 Totals:	360	2.00	2.0	0.56%	99.44%
Grade 11 Totals:	180	1.00	4.0	2.22%	97.78%
Grade 12 Totals:	15	1.00	0.0	0.00%	100.00%
North East Middle School Totals:	59653	332.32	4117.0	6.90%	93.10%

Note. The overall attendance rate was 93.10%, with Grade 6 students having the highest attendance among the middle school cohort.

Figure 23

2024-2025 Attendance Summary

North East School District					
Building Attendance Percentages - 2024-2025					
Date Range: 08/27/2024 through 06/06/2025					
Absence Counting Method: Entire day absence for any absence amount					
North East Middle School (023)					
Grade Level Totals	Membership				
	Membership	Avg/Day	Absences	Absence %	Attendance %
Grade 6 Totals:	19521	110.29	1138.0	5.83%	94.17%
Grade 7 Totals:	19190	108.42	1319.0	6.87%	93.13%
Grade 8 Totals:	16274	91.94	1182.0	7.26%	92.74%
Grade 9 Totals:	563	3.18	41.0	7.28%	92.72%
Grade 10 Totals:	531	3.00	13.0	2.45%	97.55%
Grade 11 Totals:	95	1.30	12.0	12.63%	87.37%
Grade 12 Totals:	177	1.00	0.0	0.00%	100.00%
North East Middle School Totals:	56351	319.13	3705.0	6.57%	93.43%

Note. The overall attendance rate improved to 93.43%, with reduced daily absence percentages across most grade levels, particularly in Grade 6 and Grade 7.

PBIS Conclusions

The data from the first year of PBIS implementation at North East Middle School demonstrates promising initial outcomes. Behavioral infractions and Office Discipline Referrals showed measurable declines, and structured incentive systems helped foster engagement across all grade levels. However, the decreasing distribution of PBIS points over time and notable

discrepancies in point allocation by grade level suggest that consistency in staff participation and reinforcement fidelity will be critical areas of focus moving forward.

The next section will analyze findings from structured school climate observation checklists. These observations offer a real-time, qualitative lens into how expectations, culture, and engagement manifest in classrooms and common areas—providing valuable insight into how the PBIS framework has been internalized across the building.

Observation Checklist Analysis

The final piece of anecdotal data for this study came from building-level observations by the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and our district's school resource officers. These structured walkthroughs were conducted across all grade levels and common areas at North East Middle School during the 2024–2025 school year. The purpose of these observations was to document real-time indicators of school climate, student engagement, behavioral consistency, and staff-student interactions. Aligned with the broader goals of PBIS implementation and school culture reform, each checklist focused on five core categories: supervision and visibility, student behavior, staff reinforcement, adherence to posted expectations, and overall classroom tone.

Observers used a standardized checklist tool (Appendix K) developed by the district to ensure consistency in data collection and rating. While these observations were not intended to serve as formal evaluations of instruction or discipline, they provided valuable insight into the fidelity of PBIS implementation, the visibility of behavioral expectations, and the overall responsiveness of the school environment. This section synthesizes the observational data collected over the year, highlighting recurring trends and areas for continued improvement.

Figures 24-27 highlight a few snapshots from throughout the second semester wherein our school resource officers completed the standardized checklist tool on paper. The researcher transposed those entries here:

Figure 24*Walkthrough #1 – Hallway (Morning Arrival)*

Observer: School Resource Officer

Location: 6th Grade Hallway

Time: 7:55 AM

Date: February 6, 2025

- Student–Adult Interactions: 4 – Teachers were present and engaged, offering friendly greetings. Students responded respectfully.
- Peer Interactions: 4 – Students were calm, kind to one another, and waiting patiently outside rooms.
- Volume Level: 3 – Quiet with low-level conversation; appropriate for the setting.
- Adherence to School Rules and Responsibilities: 4 – Backpacks were stowed properly in lockers, students looked to be going where they were supposed to, no one lingering in the hallway or restrooms and followed hallway procedures.

Note. This was a strong representation of morning expectations. Students appeared comfortable, respectful, and ready to begin the day. Adult presence was strong and positive.

Figure 25*Walkthrough #2 – Hallway (Class Transition)*

Observer: School Resource Officer

Location: 8th Grade Hallway

Time: 10:48 AM

Date: March 19, 2025

- Student–Adult Interactions: 2 – Limited interactions observed; most teachers stayed inside classrooms.
- Peer Interactions: 2 – Pushing, side comments, and one verbal disagreement noted.
- Volume Level: 2 – Loud and echoed through the hallway; required multiple redirections.
- Adherence to School Rules and Responsibilities: 2 – Several students out of area, lingering without passes.

Note. This transition period lacked adult presence and engagement. Students took advantage of unmonitored spaces. Recommend reteaching expectations and encouraging active hallway supervision.

Figure 26*Walkthrough #3 – Cafeteria (6th Grade Lunch)*

Observer: School Resource Officer

Location: Cafeteria

Time: 11:23 AM

Date: April 3, 2025

- Student–Adult Interactions: 4 – Lunch staff and duty teachers were actively engaging with students using positive language.
- Peer Interactions: 4 – Students sat in friendly groups; laughter and conversation were constructive.
- Volume Level: 3 – Moderate talking, but under control. Staff provided reminders as needed.
- Adherence to School Rules and Responsibilities: 4 – Students cleaned up their spaces, remained seated, and followed all expectations.

Note. This was a well-managed lunch period. Students showed strong social-emotional skills, and adults were proactive in their monitoring. This cafeteria environment felt safe and welcoming.

Figure 27*Walkthrough #4 – Cafeteria (8th Grade Lunch)*

Observer: School Resource Officer

Location: Cafeteria

Time: 12:54 PM

Date: May 1, 2025

- Student–Adult Interactions: 2 – Minimal engagement from staff; students mostly self-regulated.
- Peer Interactions: 2 – Several loud disputes over seating; a few students appeared isolated.
- Volume Level: 2 – Excessive noise made it difficult to hear announcements.
- Adherence to School Rules and Responsibilities: 2 – Students moved between tables frequently, some stood without purpose, and cleanup was incomplete.

Note. This lunch period was noisy and unstructured. Staff were present but not interactive, which contributed to low student accountability. A refresher on lunch expectations is recommended, along with increased adult proximity.

The four walkthroughs conducted by the School Resource Officers revealed stark contrasts in climate across times of day and grade levels. Morning arrival in the 6th-grade hallway and 6th-grade lunch showcased highly positive environments, with strong student-adult engagement, respectful peer interactions, and adherence to school expectations. Conversely, both 8th-grade walkthroughs - during a class transition and lunch - highlighted challenges including

limited adult visibility, elevated noise levels, peer conflicts, and inconsistent rule-following. These observations reinforce the importance of proactive supervision, reteaching expectations, and fostering stronger adult-student relationships in unstructured settings.

Additional Anecdotal Data

For the remainder of this section, the observational data shifts from the structured culture rubric used during walkthroughs to focus more directly on professional practice. Specifically, the following insights are drawn from Domain 2 of the Danielson Framework for Teaching, as implemented within Pennsylvania's Educator Effectiveness Tool (PA-ETEP). This framework offers a research-based lens to evaluate the classroom environment, with a particular emphasis on fostering student engagement, mutual respect, and high expectations.

While all components of Domain 2 are essential, this segment centers on Component 2b: Culture for Learning, which captures the degree to which teachers convey the importance of learning, build classroom pride, and promote high levels of student effort. The anecdotal observations below were gathered across multiple classrooms and grade levels throughout the school year and offer powerful snapshots of the evolving instructional culture at North East Middle School.

Component 2b: Culture for Learning Anecdotal Evidence

- “Most students raised their hands when the teacher asked questions. It was observed that a student shouted out an off topic comment; the teacher responded, ‘J., please keep thoughts to yourself.’”
- “Students were rewarded from candy bin when they complied with 30 second expectation to gather materials.”

- “Teacher reminded students of classroom routines, including their do now activity. Students took out their binders and had papers that were already filled out from a prior class.”
- “The teacher reminded students (subtly) to raise their hands to get his attention. The classroom timer was also playing soft jazz music to calm them. The instructor walked around during the start of class to observe students as they journaled. He checked in with students as they finished.”
- “It was noted that students were respectful to each other and the teacher. The learning target was posted on the board.”
- “‘Very good job’ and ‘That’s exactly right’ were responses used to students. Great use of positive feedback/praise.”
- “Thank you for the walkthrough. It was great to see your demeanor and ability to calm the students so quickly because of it. You have this innate quality in the way you speak to the students that is so respectful that carries through to the students. It is obvious you have these students well versed in group/partner work as there was not one issue getting into groups, the location of the groups or during group work time. Wonderful job!”
- “Students were quiet and respectful during the presentations; however, some put their heads on the desk during the speakers. Utilize proximity to reinforce expectations.”
- “Students are joking around quite a bit with the teacher. While this is good rapport, it needs to lead to positive outcomes/results.”
- “Students were well behaved, they raised their hands to ask questions, they were on task.”

- “CNN10 appears to be the bell ringer; students are well behaved during this video and are completing their notes pages while watching the 10-minute video.”

Anecdotal evidence gathered throughout classroom walkthroughs and observations at North East Middle School during the 2024–2025 school year reflects a school-wide culture increasingly aligned with high expectations, mutual respect, and academic engagement. In many classrooms, students consistently demonstrated appropriate behavior, raised their hands to participate, and responded positively to established routines. Teachers employed a variety of strategies to reinforce a positive learning climate, including the use of praise, proximity, group collaboration, and structured bellringer activities to build routine and rapport.

Classroom norms were clearly established in most settings, with students responding well to subtle redirections and time-based expectations. Observers frequently noted that students were calm, respectful, and engaged - whether journaling, participating in group discussions, or transitioning into learning tasks. In several cases, teacher-student rapport fostered a relaxed yet productive environment, although a few moments suggested the need for maintaining instructional focus within that rapport. Overall, the observed classrooms reflected an instructional culture where students are encouraged to value learning and where teachers are intentional about fostering respectful, achievement-oriented spaces.

The findings gathered through these classroom observations - alongside student, staff, and parent interviews, survey data, and PBIS implementation outcomes - serve as a foundation to revisit and reflect on the study’s three core research questions. The next section will explore how the evidence aligns with each question, offering insight into the relationships between school climate, behavioral expectations, and stakeholder perceptions at North East Middle School.

Discussion

Research Question 1

What are the current perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the climate and culture at North East Middle School?

Data collected through surveys, structured interviews, and observational tools reflect an evolving yet largely positive perception of the climate and culture at North East Middle School (NEMS). Across all stakeholder groups - students, staff, and parents/guardians - a recurring theme of improvement and emerging consistency was evident. Most students reported feeling physically safe, supported by teachers, and increasingly proud of their school community. While isolated concerns related to peer conflict and unsupervised areas like bathrooms were shared, these were outliers within an otherwise positive trend.

Staff members demonstrated a strong sense of collective responsibility. Through both survey responses and interviews, they indicated high levels of collegiality, mutual respect, and increased buy-in for initiatives such as PBIS. Staff climate surveys showed that over 70% of respondents rated the school as a safe and orderly environment, with strong leadership visibility and a shared vision for improvement.

Parent/guardian feedback was similarly optimistic. Over 80% reported feeling welcomed during visits to the building, and many cited positive interactions with front office staff and teachers. However, some respondents did express concern about inconsistent communication or uneven enforcement of behavioral expectations. Nevertheless, the majority of families felt confident in their children's safety and the school's investment in student success.

This shared optimism was supported by anecdotal and observational evidence, particularly classroom walkthroughs and Danielson-aligned observations (Component 2b: Culture for Learning). Students were regularly observed following routines, supporting peers, engaging in academic discussions, and responding to praise. As PBIS structures gained traction, classroom and common area behaviors reflected a growing respect for established norms and expectations.

Summary of Research Question 1

Across all data sources, stakeholder perceptions reflect a climate that is becoming increasingly safe, structured, and student-centered. Teachers feel supported in maintaining expectations, students feel proud and respected, and families perceive positive momentum. These perceptions affirm that NEMS is on a trajectory of cultural growth - one driven by consistency, relational trust, and collective accountability.

Research Question 2

What are the underlying factors contributing to the existing climate and culture?

Analysis of qualitative and quantitative data suggests that relationships, expectations, and visibility are key drivers of the current climate at NEMS. Stakeholders repeatedly cited the strength of student-teacher relationships as a core factor contributing to a positive school culture. Teachers who took the time to build rapport, offer emotional support, or connect lessons to real life were more likely to foster engagement and cooperation. This trend was reinforced in both student interviews and observations linked to Domain 2 of the Danielson Framework, where students were seen responding positively to structured environments and routines.

In addition to relationships, the successful rollout of PBIS during the 2024–2025 school year significantly shaped the building’s cultural framework. Initiatives such as the Merch Perch (school store), quarterly incentive events, point-based reward systems, and PBIS VIP recognition helped normalize behavior expectations while also celebrating student achievement. Data from the PBIS Rewards platform illustrated that students responded well to the visibility of reinforcement systems, particularly when these systems were used consistently by staff.

However, interviews and surveys revealed several underlying challenges. Perceived inconsistencies in discipline enforcement, the need for reteaching expectations mid-year, and uneven levels of staff participation in PBIS (especially early on) were noted. Students and parents expressed frustration when they felt that consequences were not applied equitably or when certain students appeared to “get away with things.” Likewise, some teachers noted the tension between maintaining strong relationships and holding students accountable—particularly in moments of repeated behavior infractions.

Summary of Research Question 2

The underlying factors that shape the climate at NEMS include consistent adult visibility, meaningful student-teacher relationships, and clearly communicated expectations. PBIS served as a foundational tool in promoting positive behavior and accountability, but its success hinged on fidelity of implementation. Where trust, visibility, and high expectations intersected, culture thrived. Where inconsistency, limited communication, or ambiguity existed, culture was weakened. The school must continue addressing these root causes to ensure lasting climate improvement.

Research Question 3

What potential strategies can be implemented to enhance the climate and culture based on the perceptions and underlying factors identified?

Triangulating data across surveys, interviews, PBIS analytics, and observational tools yields several actionable strategies for enhancing the climate and culture at NEMS.

Strengthen Communication and Feedback Loops. While many families reported satisfaction with communication, others desired more proactive updates, particularly concerning behavior and academic performance. Streamlining tools like Remind, ClassDojo, and parent emails - alongside improved Sapphire use - can ensure families feel better informed and included.

Expand Stakeholder Involvement in PBIS. As PBIS transitions from its first full year into sustained implementation, efforts should focus on maintaining high staff buy-in and expanding student voice. Student-led PBIS committees, co-created reward systems, and grade-level expectation reviews could improve buy-in and refine accountability.

Ensure Equitable Enforcement of Expectations. Interview and survey data revealed concerns about perceived inconsistent discipline. A continued focus on fair and transparent processes - including clearer referral protocols, peer mediation programs, and ongoing teacher training in restorative practices - can help address this issue.

Celebrate Success and Foster Belonging. Students and parents alike responded positively to school spirit events, quarterly celebrations, and classroom recognitions. Sustaining and expanding these opportunities - while ensuring they remain inclusive and accessible - will support a climate where students feel valued and connected.

Invest in Professional Learning and Reflection. Embedding Danielson-based self-reflection (particularly in Domain 2b) into professional development allows staff to assess and grow their cultural impact. Sharing best practices from effective classrooms—such as those observed in walkthroughs—can build collective efficacy.

Summary of Research Question 3

The data underscores the importance of consistency, communication, and celebration in enhancing school climate. Strategies rooted in transparency, equity, and student-centered engagement are essential to maintaining momentum and deepening cultural transformation. By focusing on these priorities, North East Middle School can continue cultivating an environment where all students and stakeholders feel seen, supported, and inspired to grow.

Summary

Chapter IV presented a comprehensive analysis of the climate and culture at North East Middle School through a mixed-methods approach that included student, parent/guardian, and staff survey data; structured interviews; observation walkthroughs; and behavioral and participation data linked to the first-year implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The results offered triangulated insight into stakeholder perceptions, underlying influences, and emerging strategies for school improvement.

Overall, stakeholder perceptions of the school's climate and culture were generally positive, with students, staff, and families acknowledging recent improvements in consistency, safety, and student engagement. The implementation of PBIS served as a significant driver of cultural change, reinforcing behavioral expectations and celebrating student success through structured recognition systems and schoolwide events. Classroom observations and walkthroughs

supported these findings, revealing strong teacher-student relationships, clear behavioral expectations, and increasingly positive peer interactions.

Nonetheless, the data also illuminated challenges, particularly around communication consistency, equitable discipline practices, and the continued need for relationship-building among all stakeholder groups. Stakeholders expressed a desire for more inclusive opportunities, more frequent updates on student progress and behavior, and a stronger sense of connection across grade levels and between home and school.

Findings from the Danielson Framework walkthroughs reinforced the importance of cultivating a culture for learning, where respect, engagement, and clear routines support academic and social-emotional growth. Staff and administrators were viewed positively across stakeholder groups, and their influence on school climate was evident throughout the study.

Chapter V will interpret these findings in greater detail and offer actionable recommendations for sustaining and strengthening the school climate and culture at North East Middle School, including strategies for enhancing stakeholder communication, deepening PBIS fidelity, and fostering a more inclusive, equitable learning environment.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

School climate and culture remain central to student success and stakeholder engagement. At North East Middle School (NEMS), efforts to assess and improve climate have become increasingly intentional, particularly with the rollout of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) during the 2024–2025 school year. This study sought to examine perceptions of climate and culture from students, staff, and parents/guardians; identify the underlying factors shaping those perceptions; and offer data-informed strategies for schoolwide improvement.

Chapter V provides an extensive reflection on the key findings, situating them within current educational research and practical considerations. It also addresses limitations inherent in the study and offers detailed recommendations for ongoing school improvement. Finally, it outlines future research directions that can build on this foundational work to enhance understanding and practice related to school climate and culture in middle school settings.

Conclusions

Positive Climate with Areas for Growth

Stakeholders across all groups consistently described a school climate marked by strong interpersonal relationships, a shared sense of safety, and emerging consistency in behavioral expectations. Students expressed feeling increasingly supported by their teachers and staff, fostering a growing pride in their school community. This sense of belonging is foundational, as research consistently links student connectedness with positive academic and social outcomes. For instance, Wang and Degol (2016) emphasize that “students who feel safe, supported, and connected to their peers and teachers are more likely to engage actively in learning and exhibit

prosocial behaviors” (p. 330). Similarly, staff members reported high morale and collegiality, underscoring the value of a collaborative professional culture in sustaining positive climates (Grissom et al., 2013). Families, too, felt predominantly welcomed and generally confident in the safety and support provided to their children, which is critical given the influential role of family engagement on student success (Epstein & Sanders, 2021).

Despite these encouraging perceptions, the study uncovered concerns that warrant continued attention. Inconsistent communication emerged as a recurring theme, with families seeking clearer, more timely updates about student progress and behavioral expectations. This aligns with findings from other districts indicating that communication gaps can undermine family trust and engagement (Castro et al., 2015; Epstein & Sanders, 2021). Furthermore, uneven enforcement of discipline policies led some stakeholders to perceive inequities, which can erode trust and foster disengagement (Blake et al., 2011). Finally, opportunities to deepen family engagement - particularly through culturally responsive outreach - present a critical area for growth. These findings suggest that while foundational elements of a positive climate exist at North East Middle School, sustained and focused efforts are essential to address gaps and promote greater consistency and equity.

The complexity of school climate is such that even positive environments must be viewed as dynamic systems subject to ongoing challenges. This underscores the importance of continuous dialogue, feedback loops, and adaptive leadership practices to respond to emerging needs and sustain continued momentum toward excellence.

Role of Leadership and Visibility

Leadership emerged as a central driver in shaping the school climate. The consistent presence and visibility of principals and administrators were repeatedly cited by stakeholders as a factor that cultivated trust, accountability, and a shared vision for improvement. This reflects findings from Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), who assert that “principal visibility communicates genuine interest and engagement, providing opportunities to interact substantively with teachers and students” (p. 61). At North East Middle School, principals’ active involvement in classrooms, hallways, and extracurricular events fostered a sense of connectedness and responsiveness that grounded the school community.

Moreover, leadership practices that modeled relational trust, fairness, and empathy were instrumental in establishing a culture conducive to collaboration and mutual respect. Bryk and Schneider (2003) observe that “social trust among school professionals and parents is a key resource that supports school improvement” (p. 40). By emphasizing relational leadership, school leaders at North East Middle School created an environment where staff felt supported and empowered, which research links to reduced teacher turnover and improved student outcomes (Kraft et al., 2016).

However, leadership challenges remain, particularly regarding sustaining visibility during non-instructional periods and ensuring consistent communication of expectations. Strengthening leadership capacity through professional development and distributed leadership models can provide avenues for addressing these challenges and embedding a culture of continuous improvement.

Effectiveness of PBIS Implementation

The first year of PBIS implementation at North East Middle School demonstrated promising initial outcomes. Quantitative data revealed measurable declines in behavioral infractions, including significant reductions in both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. These findings echo national research indicating that PBIS frameworks are effective in promoting positive behavior and reducing exclusionary discipline (Närhi et al., 2017). Particularly notable was the increased recognition of students through structured incentive systems, which research suggests fosters motivation and reinforces behavioral expectations (McIntosh et al., 2018).

The data also highlighted disparities in point distribution by grade level, with younger students receiving more consistent positive reinforcement. This finding points to a critical area for enhancement - ensuring fidelity and equity of implementation across all grade levels. Sustained staff training, coaching, and inclusion of student leadership in PBIS can help maintain momentum and inclusivity, ensuring that all students benefit equally from the system.

Qualitative observations supported these trends, with classroom walkthroughs and staff interviews illustrating increased adherence to behavioral norms, improved adult supervision, and growing student engagement. These multifaceted data sources affirm the role of PBIS not only as a behavior management tool but as a catalyst for cultural change within the school.

Importance of Relationships and Equity

Central to fostering a positive school climate are strong, trusting relationships among students, staff, and families. The study underscored that student–teacher relationships serve as a foundation for engagement, behavior regulation, and perceptions of fairness. Wang and Degol

(2016) highlight that “positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are consistently linked to reduced behavioral problems and better adjustment across diverse student populations” (p. 330). Moreover, culturally responsive practices and family partnerships emerged as vital components for addressing disparities and building an inclusive, equitable climate.

The data revealed that fostering empathy, understanding, and respect across diverse student groups strengthens the social fabric of the school. This relational emphasis aligns with the work of Casas (2017), who asserts that “relationships are the foundation of culture, and without trust, it’s impossible to create a culture where students and staff feel safe, respected, and motivated” (p. 23). Prioritizing equity through culturally responsive engagement and inclusive discipline practices can mitigate bias and promote fairness, critical for narrowing achievement and behavioral gaps.

Equity and Support for Diverse Learners

While not the most prominent concern, issues of equity and inclusivity within classroom practices emerged as an important area for growth. Some staff and parents expressed worries about favoritism or inconsistent treatment of students, signaling the need for ongoing efforts to foster fairness and inclusivity in daily instructional and behavioral interactions. As Wang and Degol (2016) note, “positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are consistently linked to reduced behavioral problems and better adjustment across diverse student populations” (p. 330), underscoring the importance of equitable, respectful treatment. In addition, there were some concerns over the implementation of special education documentation such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans. Although perceptions of support for students with special needs were generally positive, feedback revealed challenges in fully

meeting the diverse learning and behavioral needs of these students. Parents and staff called for enhanced resources, clearer communication, and more consistent implementation of individualized education plans to ensure all learners receive the support necessary to thrive. Addressing these areas is vital for cultivating a truly inclusive school climate where every student feels valued and supported.

Data Triangulation

One of the study's major strengths was the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data from multiple stakeholder groups. Surveys provided broad, generalizable insights into perceptions of climate and culture, while interviews offered depth, capturing nuanced experiences and contextual factors. Classroom observations and behavioral data grounded these perceptions in concrete practices and outcomes.

This mixed-methods, multi-source approach enhanced the reliability of findings by confirming patterns across data types and revealing areas of convergence and divergence. For example, students' reported feelings of safety and engagement were corroborated by observations of adult visibility and positive peer interactions. Similarly, concerns about inconsistent discipline enforcement were echoed in both staff interviews and office referral data. This triangulated evidence provided a more comprehensive and actionable understanding of school climate, informing targeted improvement strategies.

Recommended Areas for Growth

To summarize, the primary areas for cultural growth at North East Middle School are as follows:

1. Enhance Communication: Develop consistent, transparent communication channels among staff, students, and families using multiple accessible platforms such as email, apps, and in-person meetings. Training staff in culturally responsive communication can deepen family engagement.
2. Strengthen PBIS Fidelity: Invest in ongoing staff professional development, coaching, and student leadership opportunities to maintain equitable and consistent implementation of PBIS across all grade levels.
3. Promote Equity and Inclusion: Implement culturally responsive family engagement strategies and inclusive discipline policies to address disparities and foster a welcoming climate for all students.
4. Sustain Leadership Visibility: Encourage principals and administrators to maintain frequent, authentic presence in classrooms, common areas, and at community events to build trust and model positive behaviors.
5. Leverage Data: Continue triangulating perceptual data with behavioral and academic outcomes to identify strengths and areas of need, guiding targeted interventions and resource allocation.

Limitations

Sample Size

While this study produced valuable insights into the perceptions of school climate at North East Middle School, several limitations must be acknowledged to accurately contextualize the findings. First, the sample size, though adequate for descriptive analysis, limits the overall generalizability of the results to wider populations. The response rates across stakeholder groups varied: 219 students, 38 staff members, and 42 parents completed the survey instruments.

Although these numbers provide a useful cross-section of opinions, they may not fully capture the diversity of experiences or views present within the entire school community. For instance, parents who are more engaged or connected to the school may be overrepresented, while those who are less involved - perhaps due to language barriers, work schedules, or prior negative experiences - may not have participated. Similarly, staff members who feel particularly invested in climate-related initiatives may be more likely to respond, potentially skewing the data toward a more favorable view of school culture.

Self-Reported Data and Validity Concerns

Andrade (2018) distinguishes between types of validity that are critical in understanding this limitation. While internal validity ensures that a study's design permits meaningful interpretation of relationships between variables, ecological validity refers to the extent to which findings can be generalized to real-life settings beyond the specific sample studied. As Andrade notes, "ecological validity... depends on a broader, more diverse sample" (p. 499). In the context of this research, broader participation, especially from underrepresented or marginalized voices, would have strengthened the ecological validity and ensured that conclusions drawn from the

data more accurately reflected the full school community. Future studies should prioritize intentional strategies to increase participation rates, such as targeted outreach to specific subgroups, translated materials, and multiple modalities for survey access (e.g., paper, digital, in-person sessions). Doing so will not only enhance representativeness but also contribute to a more inclusive and authentic portrait of school climate.

Secondly, the study relied primarily on perceptual data. While these perspectives are critical for understanding the lived experiences of students, staff, and parents, relying solely on self-report surveys and follow-up interviews can limit the depth and reliability of findings. To strengthen future evaluations of school climate, perceptual data from individual students and parents should be triangulated with specific quantitative behavioral and academic indicators - such as their own attendance rates, office discipline referrals, course failures, and GPA trends. This would provide a more holistic and actionable understanding of climate and reliability of the anecdotal responses. Similarly, if students report feeling unsafe in certain areas of the building, comparing that perception with actual incident data from those zones could either validate concerns or reveal misinterpretations. Moreover, while many teachers and parents may report satisfaction with school culture, elevated levels of absenteeism or declining academic performance could signal underlying issues not captured through surveys alone. Bryk et al. (2010) emphasized this multidimensional approach by asserting that “effective school improvement strategies combine hard data with perceptual insight” (p. 54). In the context of North East Middle School, this type of triangulation could have included individualized analysis of discipline data, benchmark academic trends, and building attendance dashboards. Integrating these metrics with survey findings would allow for more accurate diagnosis of problem areas and more targeted intervention planning. Additionally, it would provide school leadership with a

clearer picture of whether reported perceptions are reflected in observable behaviors and outcomes. This is an essential step for designing responsive and equitable improvement efforts.

Time Constraints

A third limitation lies in the timing of the data collection. Much of the survey data for this study was gathered during the spring semester, a period commonly marked by a unique set of challenges and environmental pressures within the school setting. Spring is often characterized by end-of-year fatigue, looming standardized testing, final assessments, and transitional stress for both students and staff. These factors can significantly shape stakeholder perceptions, potentially skewing responses toward frustration, exhaustion, or disillusionment that may not be as prevalent during other times of the academic year. For instance, students nearing the conclusion of the school year might report higher levels of stress, disengagement, or dissatisfaction, not necessarily due to sustained issues with school climate, but rather because of cumulative academic pressures or social anxieties about the approaching summer or next school year.

Similarly, teachers and staff may feel emotionally drained during this period, especially after enduring months of instructional demands, behavior management, and additional responsibilities associated with spring activities (state testing coordination, send-off preparations, and curriculum pacing). As a result, their survey responses may reflect temporary burnout rather than consistent perceptions of school culture. This situational influence can obscure a more balanced or comprehensive understanding of climate dynamics.

To mitigate these seasonal distortions, future research should consider implementing a two-point data collection approach: One baseline administration in the fall, when stakeholders are typically more rested and optimistic, and another follow-up in the spring. This longitudinal

model would allow for comparison of climate perceptions across the school year, providing a richer understanding of when and how certain climate dimensions fluctuate. Thapa et al. (2013) support this approach, noting that “school climate is not a fixed condition but an evolving construct that responds to internal and external pressures throughout the academic cycle” (p. 360). Accounting for these temporal variables will lead to more nuanced insights and better-informed interventions tailored to the rhythms of the school year.

Demographics

Additionally, while the study examines climate as a whole, it does not disaggregate data by subgroup (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, special education). Future efforts should consider how different populations within the school experience climate differently. Gregory et al. (2016) noted that “restorative practices and equity-focused interventions often reveal important discrepancies between subgroups” (p. 326). While the scope of this action research project did not include demographic breakdowns, they could be important to future research.

PBIS Implementation Stage

A notable limitation of this study is that data were collected during the inaugural year of full Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) implementation at North East Middle School. As Närhi et al. (2017) explain, “the variability of implementation fidelity is common during the early phases of PBIS adoption, affecting consistency in staff practices and student experiences” (p. 1193). Staff members inevitably had differing levels of familiarity and buy-in with PBIS expectations, reward systems, and intervention protocols, potentially influencing student perceptions and, therefore, survey responses. This inconsistency may have introduced bias into the data, complicating firm conclusions about PBIS’s impact on school climate. Future

research should assess climate perceptions once PBIS implementation is more mature and staff training is more standardized across all grade levels.

Observation Bias

Another limitation involves potential observation bias during climate walkthroughs. These walkthroughs were primarily conducted by school administrators and the school resource officers, whose presence may have unintentionally altered student and staff behavior. As Marzano et al. (2005) note, “the visibility of school leaders communicates interest and expectations, which can temporarily influence behaviors during observations” (p. 61). Consequently, data from these observations may not fully capture typical school climate conditions, particularly regarding student interactions, hallway behavior, and behavioral adherence. Incorporating peer observers or external evaluators in future walkthroughs could mitigate this bias and yield a more authentic representation of school climate.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study underscores the complexity and evolving nature of school climate and culture, particularly within middle school settings. To deepen contextual understanding, future research should employ longitudinal designs that capture climate trajectories over multiple years, examining how interventions like PBIS sustain or shift school culture over time. Annual studies tracking climate evolution, especially as new staff join and programs adapt, would provide valuable insights into mechanisms of change and durability.

Exploring student perceptions in greater depth is also essential. While student interviews provided valuable insights, future studies could incorporate journaling, focus groups, or digital

response platforms to collect more frequent and nuanced feedback on climate experiences. These methods will better capture the true realities of students and inform responsive interventions.

Continued analysis is critical to understand how students with overlapping identities - such as race, gender, disability, and language proficiency - experience school climate differently. Such research can guide the development of equity-centered practices that address diverse needs and promote inclusivity. Extending this, investigations into equity in school recognition systems should analyze demographic and behavioral data to ensure reward programs are fair and inclusive, mitigating disparities that may undermine positive climate efforts.

In addition, the integration of new and innovative technologies offers promising avenues for advancing school climate research and practice. Digital engagement platforms, social media, student information systems, notification apps, and virtual learning environments warrant study to understand their impact on student connection, climate responsiveness, and overall school dynamics in today's educational landscape. Further research on communication effectiveness is needed to identify which platforms most successfully engage families and correlate with participation and satisfaction.

Moreover, further inquiry into leadership development and systemic reforms will provide actionable knowledge about sustaining positive climates. Examining the long-term effects of distributed leadership models, policy shifts, and capacity-building initiatives can inform strategies to cultivate inclusive, collaborative school cultures. Measuring PBIS implementation fidelity alongside staff beliefs about its effectiveness will clarify factors influencing program success and sustainability.

Finally, expanding multi-source data collection - including physiological and behavioral metrics alongside perceptual data - can enrich understanding of how school climate influences well-being and achievement. Employing the aforementioned qualitative methods - journaling, focus groups, and digital response tools - will allow more frequent and detailed student feedback, supporting the design of targeted, culturally responsive strategies that foster thriving, equitable school communities.

These research extensions collectively will strengthen both short-term implementation efforts and long-term cultural transformation, empowering educators and policymakers to create inclusive, supportive learning environments where all students can flourish.

Summary

This study revealed that school climate and culture at North East Middle School are viewed positively overall, particularly in areas related to relationships, structure, and recognition systems. Through structured data collection across multiple sources - including surveys, interviews, observations, and PBIS metrics - it became evident that consistency, communication, and visibility are key drivers of success.

The implementation of PBIS provided structure and accountability, helping reduce major infractions while increasing proactive engagement. Still, disparities across grade levels in both infractions and recognition emphasized the need for fidelity and equity in implementation. Stakeholders voiced optimism and investment in improving the school's culture and offered valuable suggestions that have already informed building-level decisions.

Moving forward, North East Middle School will focus on refining its climate practices through stakeholder feedback, improved communication, and a stronger PBIS framework. These

findings offer not only a blueprint for future internal development but also contribute meaningfully to broader conversations on middle-level school climate reform.

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APPENDECIES

Appendix A

IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board
250 University Avenue
California, PA 15419
instreviewboard@pennwest.edu
Melissa Sovak, Ph.D.

Dear Corey,

Please consider this email as official notification that your proposal titled **"Cultivating Community: A Comprehensive Examination of School Climate and Culture at North East Middle School"** (Proposal #PW24-030) has been approved by the Pennsylvania Western University Institutional Review Board as submitted.

The effective date of approval is 09/27/2024 and the expiration date is 09/26/2025. These dates must appear on the consent form.

Please note that Federal Policy requires that you notify the IRB promptly regarding any of the following:

- (1) Any additions or changes in procedures you might wish for your study (additions or changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented)
- (2) Any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects
- (3) Any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in (2).
- (4) To continue your research beyond the approval expiration date of 08/15/2025, you must file additional information to be considered for continuing review. Please contact instreviewboard@calu.edu

Please notify the Board when data collection is complete.

Regards,

Melissa Sovak, PhD.

Appendix B

District Approval Letter



July 19, 2024

Mr. Corey Garland
 1903 Freeport Road
 North East, PA 16428

Dear Mr. Garland:

I am pleased to write a letter in support of your doctoral capstone project entitled, "Cultivating Community: A Comprehensive Examination of School Climate and Culture at North East Middle School." The proposed research has significant value as it aligns directly with the North East School District's "Vision 2028" goal of fostering communication, community outreach, partnerships, and providing exceptional school facilities.

I have reviewed the project proposal and understand the following related to participation:

- Surveys will be administered to students, teachers, and staff to gather quantitative data on their perceptions of school climate and culture.
- Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders to delve deeper into their experiences and perspectives regarding the school's climate and culture; this will provide qualitative data.
- Observations will be conducted by trained observers in order to assess the overall atmosphere and interactions within the school environment (qualitative and quantitative data).
- Administration will review disciplinary records, academic performance data, and other relevant documentation to gather additional quantitative insights into the school's climate and culture.
- Participation will be voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time.
- Data collected will be kept confidential and kept secure via electronic files.
- Potential risks are minimal and would simply include employer/employee relations, risk of loss of confidentiality, and inconvenience to participants, all of which will be mitigated by the voluntary nature of this study.

Please accept this letter as my formal consent and support of the district's participation in the proposed research project.

Sincerely,

 Dr. Michele S. Hartzell
 Superintendent

"The Mission of the North East School District is to Nurture and Empower Lifelong Learning and responsible citizenship."
 "The Vision of the North East School District is to be an exemplary educational community by developing knowledge and skills to positively influence a changing world."

Appendix C

Student Climate Survey

North East Middle School (NEMS) Student Climate Survey

Please complete the following form with accuracy and fidelity.

** Indicates required question*

1. Email *

2. I have reviewed the following Assent Form to Participate in this Online Survey. *

[Ten and Over Assent Form](#)

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes

3. What grade are you currently enrolled in this school year? *

 Dropdown

Mark only one oval.

☐ 6th Grade

☐ 7th Grade

☐ 8th Grade

☐ 9th Grade

☐ 10th Grade

☐ 11th Grade

☐ 12th Grade

How much do you agree with the following statements about your school:

Appendix D

Faculty/Staff Climate Survey

North East Middle School (NEMS) Staff Climate Survey

Please complete the following form with accuracy and fidelity.

** Indicates required question*

1. Email *

2. I have reviewed the informed consent document here and agree to continue with the survey. *
[Informed Consent for Online Survey](#)

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes

3. What is your role in this school? (Choose one) *

 Dropdown

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Classroom Teacher
- ☐ Other Certified Staff
- ☐ Classified Staff
- ☐ Other

Appendix E

Parent/Guardian Climate Survey

North East Middle School (NEMS) Parent/Guardian Climate Survey

Please complete the following form with accuracy and fidelity.

** Indicates required question*

1. Email *

2. I have reviewed the informed consent document here and agree to continue with the survey. *
[Informed Consent for Online Survey](#)

Check all that apply.

☐ Yes

3. What is your relationship to the child you are reporting about? (Choose one) *  Dropdown

Mark only one oval.

☐ Parent(s)

☐ Legal guardian(s)

☐ Other adult in the household

Appendix F

Informed Participant Consent Form

PennWest University

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: "Cultivating Community: A Comprehensive Examination of School Climate and Culture at North East Middle School"

Principal Investigator: Mr. Corey Garland, North East Middle School Principal
Co-Investigator(s):

KEY INFORMATION

You are being asked by Mr. Corey Garland to participate in a research study, taking part in the study is voluntary, and you may stop at any time.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the current perceptions, underlying factors, and potential strategies for enhancing the climate and culture of the North East Middle School.

In this study, you will be presented with/asked to provide objective feedback based on your experience(s) with our school, via both surveys and potentially in a one-on-one interview with the building principal. It will take you about 20-30 minutes (minimally) to complete the study.

The potential risks during the study are minimal and would simply include adverse effect on employer/employee and/or parent/school relations, risk of loss of confidentiality, and inconvenience to participants.

There are no direct benefits to participants from the research; however, participants can gain a voice and become empowered through this study. In addition, you (or your children) will hopefully benefit from the improved school environment that will happen as a result of the work put in during this time. There could also be a sense of personal satisfaction knowing that they are helping their school improve. Your perspectives will help researchers better understand how this research relates to their profession.

The online study is completely anonymous; you will not be asked to give any information that could identify you (e.g., name). The survey is NOT linked to IP addresses. Any information provided to obtain extra credit will NOT be connected to your responses to the survey. Individual responses will not be presented, just the aggregated data.

Remember, taking part in this study is voluntary. If, while taking the survey, you feel uncomfortable or no longer want to participate, you may stop at any time. To stop taking the survey, you may simply close your browser and notify the researcher via email: cgarland@nesdl.org that you are no longer interested in participating in this survey. If you decide to stop participating in this study, there are absolutely no consequences whatsoever.

There is no identifiable information collected from you during this study; all other information from this study will be confidential within local, state, and federal laws. The PennWest University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the research records. The study's results may be shared in aggregate form at a meeting or journal, but your personal information will not be revealed. Records from this study will be kept by Mr. Corey Garland for at least three (3) years after the study is complete.

Non-identifiable information collected as a part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

If you have questions about the research or a research-related injury, you can contact Mr. Garland at cgarland@nesdl.org. If you have a question about your rights as a research participant that you need to

Online Consent
 Rev 2/2023

Appendix G

Assent to Participate in Research Study Form



PennWest University
ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Title of Study: "Cultivating Community: A Comprehensive Examination of School Climate and Culture at North East Middle School"

Researcher's Name: Mr. Corey Garland, NEMS Principal

You are being asked to be in a research study, you are volunteering to take part, and you may stop at any time.

The research study looks at the current perceptions, underlying factors, and potential strategies for enhancing the climate and culture of the North East Middle School.

Your part in this study will be to provide objective feedback based on your experience(s) with our school, via both surveys and potentially in a one-on-one interview with the building principal; regardless of your perspective, nothing bad will happen to you during the study.

The study will take about 20-30 minutes for you to do. Your parent/guardian has been told about the study and knows you are being asked to take part, but it is up to you to decide if you want to do the study.

Your answers will only be seen by the researcher (Mr. Garland) and will not be shown to your teachers or parents.

You understand that you are volunteering to take part in the study and that you do not have to be in this study unless you want to. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to, and you can stop being in the study whenever you want. If you choose not to answer a question or to stop taking part in the study, it is okay, and no one will be upset with you. If you want to stop taking part in the study, you just need to tell Mr. Garland that you want to stop. If you do not want to be in the study or if you want to quit the study once you have started, no one will be mad or upset at you.

If you have any questions about the study, you may ask now or at any time during the study. After the study, if anything about what you did worries or upsets you, you should talk to your parent/guardian about it.

By clicking the box marked "Yes," I agree to be in this study, have had all my questions about the study answered, and know I can stop at any time.

Appendix H

Student Structured Interview Questions

Student Climate Questions (Follow-Up)

Thank you for your participation in my research study. These are the final follow-up questions I have for you regarding several topics that link back to our climate and culture. Please be thorough and professional in your responses, as I am hoping to utilize key statements in my final dissertation.

Thank you all! Once this round is completed, I will be pulling a random winner for the \$25 gift card.

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

Bullying and Safety

2. Can you describe a specific instance where you felt unsafe at school? What actions did you or others take in response? *

3. What kinds of characteristics (e.g., race, religion, weight) do you think lead to bullying at your school, and how frequently do you witness this happening? *

Student Interactions

Appendix I

Staff Structured Interview Questions

Staff Climate Questions (Follow-Up)

Thank you for your participation in my research study. These are the final follow-up questions I have for you regarding several topics that link back to our climate and culture. Please be thorough and professional in your responses, as I am hoping to utilize key statements in my final dissertation.

Thank you all! Once this round is completed, I will be pulling a random winner for the \$50 gift card.

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

Crime and Safety

2. Can you provide examples of how crime and violence in the community have affected the school environment and your teaching experience? *

3. What specific measures do you think the school could take to improve safety both inside and outside the school building? *

Parental Involvement

Appendix J

Parent/Guardian Structured Interview Questions

Parent/Guardian Climate Questions (Follow-Up)

Thank you for your participation in my research study. These are the final follow-up questions I have for you regarding several topics that link back to our climate and culture. Please be thorough and professional in your responses, as I am hoping to utilize key statements in my final dissertation.

Thank you all! Once this round is completed, I will be pulling a random winner for the \$25 gift card.

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

Supportive and Inviting Environment

2. Can you share specific examples of how the school creates a supportive and inviting environment for your child? *

3. What changes or improvements would you suggest to make the school even more supportive and inviting for students? *

Safety

Appendix K

School Climate/Culture Observation Rubric

School Culture Observation Rubric for Educational Leaders

Criteria	4 - Exemplary	3 - Proficient	2 - Developing	1 - Needs Improvement
Student-Adult Interactions	Consistently respectful, positive, and supportive; adults actively engage with students fostering trust and rapport	Generally respectful and positive; adults interact appropriately and respond to student needs	Occasionally respectful; some missed opportunities for positive engagement or support	Interactions often disrespectful or disengaged; lack of adult presence or support noticeable
Peer Interactions	Students exhibit positive, inclusive, and respectful behavior; conflicts managed constructively	Mostly positive and respectful interactions; occasional minor conflicts handled appropriately	Mixed peer interactions with some disrespect or exclusion; conflicts sometimes escalate	Frequent disrespect, exclusion, or bullying observed; conflicts unmanaged or ignored
Volume Level	Volume consistently appropriate to environment; noise supports focus and safety	Volume generally appropriate with minor fluctuations; seldom disruptive	Volume often inconsistent; occasional disruption to learning or safety	Noise levels frequently disruptive; environment not conducive to learning or safety
Adherence to School Roles and Procedures	All individuals clearly understand and follow roles and procedures; smooth operation observed	Most individuals aware and following roles and procedures; minor lapses noted	Some confusion or inconsistency regarding roles and procedures; occasional disruption	Roles and procedures frequently ignored or misunderstood; operational disruptions common

Location: _____ Time: _____

Anecdotal Notes:
