Research confirms the critical role school environment plays in improving student learning. To ensure our schools meet our students’ needs, New Haven must prioritize healthy school climates and restorative school discipline.
This year, Educators 4 Excellence–Connecticut held more than 120 focus groups, school visits, and individual conversations with New Haven educators and stakeholders and surveyed over one hundred teachers across diverse content areas, grade levels, and teaching backgrounds. Our research and engagement led us to four research-based recommendations to improve school climate and discipline in New Haven Public Schools.

“We need to cultivate a culture of kindness and respect in all human interactions within a school community.”

Michael Kuspza, Middle School Science Teacher, L.W. Beecher Museum Magnet School
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

DISTRICT SYSTEMS

Challenge: Though the district has identified school climate as a priority, systems to support and improve school climate are not yet fully integrated into all district practices.

Solution: The district should foster healthy school climates and a proactive and supportive approach to school discipline.

NEW HAVEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS (NHPS) SHOULD:

Set a distinct vision for school climate in New Haven that prioritizes:

- Preventing the recurrence of misbehavior rather than punishing misbehavior.
- The rights of individual students.
- Respecting learning time by keeping students in class whenever possible.
- Developing respectful, trusting, and caring relationships between peers and adults.

Incorporate school climate and discipline into school and principal annual evaluations, including:

- Qualitative data from staff, students, and parents via the School Learning Environment Survey.
- Quantitative student disciplinary data, such as suspension and expulsion rates.

Provide additional in-school supports for schools to help them build strong school climates. This may include expanding the role of school climate specialists, which are required by Connecticut Public Act 11-232 beyond bullying prevention. In this expanded role, school climate specialists should:

- Identify broader climate needs in the school.
- Lead initiatives to improve school climate.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Challenge: Teachers are not fully equipped with the tools they need to effectively prevent and respond to student misbehavior.

Solution: The district should redesign its professional development and support system to make healthy school climate and restorative discipline a priority.

NHPS SHOULD:

Provide teachers with ongoing, differentiated, and collaborative training in the following areas:

- Promoting culturally responsive interactions with students in order to build strong peer-to-peer and adult-to-peer relationships in classrooms.
- Recognizing and reflecting on their own biases and how these biases may affect their students’ ability to access learning.
• Delivering culturally responsive instruction to ensure content is accessible to students and relatable to their everyday lives.

• Creating high quality classroom procedures and rules that help prevent misbehavior.

• Responding to misbehavior effectively, especially by de-escalating situations and repairing relationships using restorative practices.

**SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS**

**Challenge:** Unmet student needs create a cycle of student misbehavior and discipline removals, which leave students feeling unwelcome, isolated, and academically behind.

**Solution:** The district should invest in student empowerment programs, additional student supports, and opportunities to celebrate success in school discipline and climate.

**NHPS SHOULD:**

• Empower students to accept increased responsibility for community building at the school level, through programs like peer mentoring or peer mediation.

• Embed socio-emotional learning programs into the district’s academic curriculum.

• Develop a citywide school climate recognition program to celebrate students who have either contributed positively to the development of a positive school climate or have made significant progress behaviorally.

**SUPPORT FOR PARENTS**

**Challenge:** Insufficient collaboration and communication systems discourage positive school and home partnerships.

**Solution:** The district should develop systems to better facilitate communication between parents and teachers, and to promote deep parent engagement and welcoming school environments.

**NHPS SHOULD:**

• Require schools to provide multiple parent-teacher conference times, including both daytime and evening options.

• Create a unified database of family contact information to ensure easy access to updated contact information, and publish teacher contact information so that it is easily accessible to parents and guardians.

• Utilize existing structures like School Planning and Management Teams to engage parents in improving school-level culture and discipline practices.
“The current systems in place do not support and encourage educators and parents to work together efficiently and effectively. Students should not slip through the cracks, but be caught by the safety net that is provided by faculty, staff, administrators, and parents.”

Keeler Otero, Middle School Science Teacher, Christopher Columbus Family Academy
CONCLUSION

As teachers, we know the importance of a holistic education for our students. To ensure both the academic and behavioral needs of our students are met, our district must take proactive measures to create a healthy, welcoming, and engaging school climate and also identify alternative discipline structures to treat the root cause for student misbehavior.
For far too long, education policy has been created without a critical voice at the table—the voice of classroom teachers.

Educators 4 Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization, is changing this dynamic by placing the voices of teachers at the forefront of the conversations that shape our classrooms and careers.

E4E has a quickly growing national network of educators united by our Declaration of Teachers’ Principles and Beliefs. E4E members can learn about education policy and research, network with like-minded peers and policymakers, and take action by advocating for teacher-created policies that lift student achievement and the teaching profession.

Learn more at Educators4Excellence.org.
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