

CREATING *welcoming, caring, respectful* and safe **LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

...a process guide for school leaders



The Alberta
Teachers' Association



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This resource was created with funding support from the [Government of Alberta](#).

This guide was informed by current research in conjunction with school leader focus groups across the province. Additional resources to support school and system leaders in their implementation of the [Education Act](#) are available at [Alberta Education](#) and [The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities](#).



Table of Contents

Starting with why...	
Introduction	1
The Guide	2
Design and format	
Ready	4
Guiding Questions	
Information and Examples	
Reflection	
Set	9
Guiding Questions	
Information and Examples	
Reflection	
Go	14
Guiding Questions	
Information and Examples	
Reflection	
Celebrate and Sustain	18
Guiding Questions	
Information and Examples	
Reflection	
End Notes	22
Appendices	23
1 – Action Plan	
2 – Ready Guiding Questions	
3 – Set Guiding Questions	
4 – Go Guiding Questions	
5 – Celebrate and Sustain Guiding Questions	
6 – Pyramid of Intervention	

Starting with why...

Riley and Sarah

Riley is in grade nine. His family struggles to make ends meet and they move frequently, often with little or no notice. No one in his family has completed high school. Riley's family is moving again, this time they know a few days in advance, giving just enough time for you to help the family identify a school in the new neighbourhood. You say your goodbyes and Riley is gone. A few days later Riley is back in your office. He says that he doesn't like the other school. He doesn't feel that he fits in and there are no other Aboriginal students. He wants to come back despite the fact it will take him over an hour and several bus transfers to reach the school.

What is it about your school that makes him feel like he fits in? What do you say to Riley?

Sarah is in grade five. Her attendance has been sporadic at best and now is getting worse. When Sarah is at school, she arrives late and is withdrawn. Attempts to contact her family by phone and letters mailed to the home have not been successful. One day Sarah arrives to school angry and lashes out at classmates on the playground, hurting another girl. At the end of the school day you decide to drive Sarah home as you hope this will give you an opportunity to touch base with her mom. Sarah doesn't want you to come to the door. You go anyway and discover her mother asleep on the couch. Sarah breaks down and tells you her story. Her mother has been drinking heavily for several months. Sarah is scared to leave her pre-school aged brother at home alone with her mom. When Sarah does come to school she says she feels 'dumb' because she has missed work and she feels she is teased by her classmates and doesn't have any friends. Sarah doesn't feel that she can talk to anyone at school about what is going on in her life.

How is this going on without anyone at the school being aware? How can you ensure every child has someone at school they trust? What might help you and other school staff to feel competent assisting students like Sarah and their families?



Introduction

What do students need in order to be successful in school and in life?

Research on school improvement, as well as brain research, shows a direct correlation between a positive school culture and academic achievement.¹ Evidence also shows that welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments result in increased attendance and reduced rates of bullying and early school leaving.²

“School climate is associated with positive child and youth development, effective risk-prevention and health-promotion efforts, student learning and academic achievement, increased student graduation rates, and teacher retention.”³

To improve outcomes for students, in addition to ensuring quality teaching and leadership, we must be intentional about creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe (physically, socially and emotionally) learning environments. This applies not only to students but also to staff, families and other partners who work and spend time in the learning environment. To make changes and implement new approaches and strategies, staff must feel a sense of belonging and connectedness and know that they are safe to practice, learn from their or others’ missteps, rethink and try again.

Being intentional about creating, enhancing and maintaining a positive learning environment where students and others feel cared for, respected, welcomed, and safe requires [a whole school or school-wide approach](#).⁴ Such an approach is not about adding to people’s already busy lives and workloads but rather it is about thinking and working differently - involving the whole school, utilizing or prioritizing resources differently, and including community partners. It is not

about simply choosing a program, booking a presentation or providing professional development for staff, although each of these may be elements of a school-wide approach. Information about a comprehensive, school-wide approach is available at [Joint Consortium for School Health](#) and [Alberta Health Services](#).

It is anticipated that Alberta’s [Education Act](#) will soon replace the School Act. It includes expectations for boards, trustees, schools, students and parents pertaining to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and foster a sense of belonging. These expectations include:

- * a proactive focus emphasizing the importance of being welcoming, caring, respectful and safe
- * responsibilities of students to contribute to a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment and to report and not tolerate bullying behaviour
- * responsibilities of parents to contribute to a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment
- * responsibilities of boards to provide students and staff with a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging
- * requirement that school boards must have a code of conduct for students that takes into account their age, maturity and individual circumstances and must ensure support is provided to both those impacted by inappropriate behavior and those engaging in inappropriate behaviour
- * a definition of bullying and recognition of [National Bullying Awareness Week](#).



The Guide

The change process in this guide is not prescriptive but rather fluid and ongoing where the doing is the learning.

This guide was designed to assist school leaders with learning about welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments and provide them with a process for engaging with school community members—students, families, staff and community partners—to work collectively toward creating, enhancing and maintaining such an environment.

The format was influenced by Michael Fullan’s (2010) “ready, fire, aim” process⁵ which suggests you don’t spend too much time developing a detailed plan but rather get into the work, get messy and learn as you go with stops along the way for reflection and adjusting. It was also informed by Stringer’s (2007) action research process, “look, think, act, look again.”⁶

The guide contains four sections (see page 3)

1. [Ready](#)
2. [Set](#)
3. [Go](#)
4. [Celebrate and Sustain](#)

Each section reflects a different stage in the change process and contains:

- * Guiding and reflection questions
- * Information and examples
- * Links to supporting tools and additional information.

The [Appendices](#) contain sample planning templates and references.

Research supports gaining an understanding ([Ready](#)) prior to gathering data ([Set](#)) to ensure the right data is being collected. That being said, you may choose to work through the [Ready](#) and [Set](#) sections in the reverse order if that works best for you and/or for your context.

As you work through each section, you will need to consider:

- * Engagement with students, families, staff and community partners as this is key to successful and sustained changes in culture and environment.
- * Policy that supports moving the school from its current reality to the collective desired state (what you ultimately want the learning environment to look like, sound like and feel like). Policy can be the driver of practice – change may start as a result of new expectations.
- * Practices that are evidence-informed require time and support for implementation and mastery.
- * Communication needs to be ongoing to sustain continued engagement.

Creating and enhancing a positive learning environment where all students and their families, staff and community partners feel cared for, respected, safe and welcomed begins with a clearly stated philosophy which is then translated into practice. Practices (school and classroom) and policies need to be based on the understanding that a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment is paramount to effective teaching, meaningful learning and academic success.

Building welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments

...a fluid ongoing hands on process

Ready

Creating awareness and understanding
of welcoming, caring, respectful and
safe learning environments.

Set

Looking at and assessing your current
environment for strengths, areas for
improvement and readiness for change.

Go

Collectively creating a clear plan and
moving ahead.

Celebrate & Sustain

Keeping welcoming, caring, respectful
and safe environments top of mind and
sustaining momentum.



READY

Creating awareness and understanding of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments.

Guiding Questions

What does a learning environment where students, staff, families and community partners feel welcomed, safe, cared for and respected look like? Sound like? Feel like? What evidence-informed strategies support this work? Where am I, as a school leader, in my understanding of what is involved in creating such an environment and what my role is in it? What do I think are the understandings of staff, students, families, and community partners?

The preamble in Alberta's [Education Act](#) states "... students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self;" and Section 33 (1) (d) states that boards have a responsibility to "ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board and each staff member employed by the board is provided with a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging."

Creating the learning environment described in the [Education Act](#) requires intentionality and a whole school effort. It is neither automatic nor static but rather dynamic and ever-changing. The collective actions of students, staff, families, and community partners, as well as their attitudes and actions, will determine the degree to which a school community achieves this mandate. Investing time and energy proactively decreases the amount of time and energy school leaders and staff members will spend resolving conflicts and other behaviour issues.

What does a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment mean?

Research on learning and the physiology of the brain demonstrates the important role affect (feeling or emotion) plays in learning. We know that students who have a sense of physical, emotional, and psychological well-being learn better. The Education Act places the concept of student well-being at the center of learning. The descriptors welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe are meant to permeate school life and improve teaching and learning.

Caring describes a level of responsibility for another's well-being and success. Respect goes beyond tolerance and includes embracing and celebrating diversity. Safety refers to the emotional and psychological sense of belonging as well as to the physical sense of feeling protected.

In every school there is an ethos that emanates from, and influences, the way individuals relate to one another and pursue their goals. One aspect of school culture is the way students feel about their learning environment. A positive climate develops from an articulated shared purpose and a deliberate intention on the part of all staff to fulfill that shared purpose by engaging and collaborating with students, families and community partners.

Creating the environment or community described by Barth (2004) requires consideration be given to the school's demographics. It is important to ask yourself questions such as: How is our school welcoming and caring for students, family members, community partners, and staff who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ), newly migrated to Alberta, or Aboriginal? What about for students with cognitive, physical, social or emotional delays or disabilities and/or for their families? What about for families who struggle financially to make ends meet? As evidenced by these questions, it is critical to hear the voices of all school community members in determining the current level of respect, caring and safety in the learning environment.

Roland Barth refers to the necessity for schools to establish community and defines school community as "a place full of adults and youngsters who care about, look after, and root for one another, and who work together for the good of the whole, in times of need as well as in times of celebration. Every member of the community holds some responsibility for the welfare of every other and for the welfare of the community as a whole."

Learning by Heart (2004)



Elements of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment

A literature review conducted in conjunction with the development of this guide identified key elements of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. These elements are not distinct but rather overlap with each other. They include:

- * Relationships
- * Leadership
- * Evidence-informed practices

Relationships

Relationships are key in any community. Important relationships in schools are those between and among school leaders, staff, families, students, volunteers and community partners. Being in the same classroom, staff room, or building for six or so hours a day does not necessarily create a sense of belonging and community; this takes intention and effort. What efforts are you putting into building and nurturing healthy and respectful relationships with the members of your school community? Are you intentional about connecting with them in positive ways? Are intentional opportunities created for school community members to connect with each other in positive and purposeful ways?

Consider the following promising practices provided by school leaders across Alberta. As you read through these strategies think about which resonates with you and /or gives you pause and why.

Every morning in one Alberta high school, the principal and assistant principals each take an entrance – the front door, side door, and the door by the student parking lot – and engage with students as they come into the school. This practice provides the school leaders with an early indication of what kind of ‘mood’ students are in before the day begins. They also see who is always alone and what social groups are forming. This practice also conveys to students that their being at school is noticed and matters.

Include time for community building during staff meetings. Perhaps have each person share a high point of their week or share something they are looking forward to in the coming weeks.

Build time into staff meetings to read and discuss an article, first in small groups and then as a whole group. This can be effective professional development and allow for deeper conversations.

Have staff review class lists and identify students they don’t know much or anything about. The compiled lists should identify which students are either not known or barely known by any one on staff. Individuals can then choose one or two students to regularly ‘check in’ with. Checking in can be as simple as, “Hi Joe, good to see you at school today”, or can involve sustained conversation or regular meetings. Ensuring each student’s presence is acknowledged makes a difference – it tells students that they matter and increases the likelihood they will feel they have a trusted adult they can go to if needed.

Encourage teachers to greet students by name at the door of the classroom. Model this practice by building the supervision schedule so school leaders are at school entrances in the morning and/or end of the day to greet students and family members by name when possible.

Classroom circles are an effective, evidence-informed practice to build and maintain relationships. Circles held on an ongoing basis throughout the year provide an opportunity for students and staff to get to know each other. They also create a venue for student voice and engagement. Circles can be an effective practice for teaching or with teams, clubs and other groups. See the [video](#) from Peel District School Board about using circles.

Cross-graded or family group activities build community and connectedness across school populations. Some junior and senior high schools across Alberta have moved to cross-graded homeroom periods where the focus is on relationship building.

Schedule time at school council or parent advisory meetings for parents, other caregivers and school staff to get to know each other. Talk with the school council chair about starting meetings with introductions and asking participants to share something they are proud of or are looking forward to in the community or school.

Send positive communications to families (e.g., phone calls, notes, emails, etc.).

Staff attendance at community events where students and their family members are present is another way to establish positive relationships. Ensure staff are aware of community events and encourage them to attend.

Build relationships with community partners by inviting them to school celebrations and other school activities.

Leadership

School leaders set the tone of the school. What you, as a school leader, model through your words and, more importantly, your actions influence what is said and done by others.

Whittaker suggests⁸ “When the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold. This is neither good nor bad; it is just the truth. Our impact is significant; our focus becomes the school’s focus.” (2003, p. 30)

Effective school leaders possess energy, enthusiasm and hopefulness (Fullan, 2001)⁹. This is very true when it comes to promoting a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. It is important to consider how you sustain your energy, enthusiasm and hopefulness. Affect—your expressed or observed emotional response—is contagious. Be aware that the social and emotional behaviours you display are working for you and not against you.

Successful leaders do the following to create or enhance positive learning environments:

- * Read cultural signs by watching, listening, and asking questions to determine the history and the current culture in the school. What is being valued and celebrated? What stories are being told being through the school artifacts, trophy case(s), rituals, traditions and ceremonies?
- * Read socio-cultural signs which means to look at the social climate of the school, in particular what are the relationships. Which students are spending time alone during unstructured time? Who sits together in the staff room and in staff meeting? What are the topics of their informal conversations? (Adapted from Peterson and Deal, 2009)¹⁰

It is necessary to know what is really valued and practiced through language, traditions, artifacts etc. before moving forward. It is also important to find out what is working well and what isn’t from a variety of perspectives before looking at what needs to stop, start and/or change. In their book [The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook](#), Peterson and Deal describe a number of strategies to get at the underlying values, beliefs and traditions.

To learn more about a school leader’s role in setting the tone, you may wish to read the article [How Leaders Influence the Culture of Schools](#).¹¹



Real change requires a school-wide approach that includes evidence-informed strategies, practices and policies.

Evidence-informed practices

Research has shown that no one program, presentation or workshop will improve the culture of a school. Real change requires a school-wide approach that includes evidence-informed strategies, practices and policies. A program, presentation or workshop may be a part of that approach if it aligns with the specific needs and characteristics of the school community. It is important to note that when people are implementing new practices there needs to be an environment where mistakes can be learned from, questions can be asked and everyone is accepted. Evidence-informed practices that contribute to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments may include some of the following:

Positive Behaviour Supports

A positive behaviour support approach focuses on maintaining the positive behaviour of most students. Some students, however, experience additional difficulties and require more targeted or intensive supports. Universal supports are those practices that help all students feel welcomed, respected, cared for and safe in order to develop to their potential. With an effective foundation in place, most schools will experience an increase in positive social behaviours among school-community members. However, just as in other subject areas, some students require additional support to develop social-emotional competencies. Targeted supports are aimed at the ten to fifteen per cent of the student population for whom the universal practices are not sufficient. These are usually small group supports like social skill instruction. Intensive or individualized supports are generally only required for one to five per cent of your student population and will vary depending on the individual circumstances and needs. Effective home-school-community partnerships are essential to provide coordinated, meaningful support to these individual students. Having a strong process to identify and respond to early warning signs of more complex learning needs is critical. Alberta Education offers information on [supporting positive behaviour in schools](#). Pyramid of Intervention image on [page 29](#) illustrates where other evidence-based practices fit into a Positive Behaviour Support approach.

Social Emotional Literacy

Social and emotional literacy provides students with opportunities to learn the knowledge and skills needed to build and maintain healthy relationships, resolve conflict, make responsible decisions and develop self-awareness and self-regulation. Intentionally teaching and practicing these skills, just as we teach literacy and numeracy, supports the majority of children and youth to manage their emotions, make wise decisions and work effectively with others. Research shows that when social emotional instruction is part of the school day, incidents of inappropriate behaviour drop by as much as 80%.¹²

For more information and resources, see [CASEL](#).

Positive Mental Health

Similar to physical health, it is essential to take care of our mental health. Mental health is not the absence of mental illness. According to the World Health Organization, mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with normal stresses of life and is able to make a contribution to the community. Promoting positive mental health in the school environment fosters resiliency and personal well-being. Schools create this environment by valuing each student and creating a sense of belonging and community. For more information on promoting positive mental health in schools see [Mental Health Matters](#).

Restorative Practices

A restorative approach focuses on the importance of relationships and teaches responsibility and accountability as well as conflict resolution skills. When issues occur, the focus is on repairing the harm as opposed to punishment. It represents a shift from social control to social engagement.¹³ This approach goes beyond simply managing students and their interactions to also include considering the impact of staff interactions, policy decisions, teaching strategies, and professional development. Information on using restorative practices in school can be found at: [The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities](#); [Engage](#); and, [Transforming Conflict: National Centre for Restorative Approaches in Youth Settings](#).

Mentoring

Mentoring can take many forms and be formal or informal. In fact, depending on how it is organized, mentoring may be part of your universal foundation. Peer mentoring, where older students work with younger ones, can be an effective way of building relationships across the school community. Buddy reading is an example of an informal peer mentoring relationship. A high school student mentoring an elementary or junior high student is another example. Many high schools offer [Career and Technology Studies](#) courses on mentoring. Formal mentoring relationships, which is more of a targeted or specialized support, are usually linked to organizations like [Big Brothers Big Sisters](#). More information and resources on mentoring children and youth can be found at [Alberta Mentoring Partnership](#) and [The Society for Safe and Caring Schools](#).

Mentoring opportunities are also important for staff, particularly those new to the school. Pairing teachers new to the profession or to the school with more experienced teachers can be a critical piece of creating a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment.

Similarly, it is important that school leaders have colleagues and mentors with whom they talk, explore ideas and work. The [Alberta Teachers' Association](#) offers resources on staff mentoring, including teachers new to the profession, school leaders, and peer-to-peer.

Reflection

Is my understanding of the key elements of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment thorough enough to move forward? If not, where am I feeling gaps? Which of the suggested resources could help me to gain a more solid understanding?

How am I modeling the importance of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment where everyone feels they belong?

How can I support other staff members to enhance their understanding of the evidence-informed practices explored in this section? What agencies or partners in our community might be able to assist us in learning more?

Who are my mentors that give me hope and energy? Which of them could I invite to support me in this work?

SET

Looking at and assessing the current environment for strengths, areas for improvement and readiness for change.

Guiding Questions

What am I currently doing that contributes to a culture of belonging and connectedness in your school?

How is the school's vision statement supporting a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment?

How are the school policies supporting a positive learning environment and aligning with the expectations outlined in Section 33 of the Education Act?

In what ways are the practices being lived out in the school reflective of the vision and policies?

How ready are the school community members to engage in this important work?

As you work through this section, you will gather information about your school's vision, policies and practices and determine readiness for change.

All members of the school community—students, families, community partners and staff—need to see creating or enhancing a positive school culture as a shared responsibility and worthwhile work – it's all hands in!

What stories, data and other information can be used to create that sense of importance or, as Michael Fullan says, urgency?

Sharing meaningful data such as attendance information, the number of office referrals, and academic achievement information can help to make a case for change.

Stories can often be more compelling than statistics in supporting people to see the need to change. Consider what stories may help engage your school community members in seeing the need for change. Perhaps your stories are about students who have been successful despite challenging circumstances. They might be about challenges you, as a leader, are facing – this might include, for example, stories about: limitations you feel to support staff and families in the ways that you think matter; the volume and reasons students are being sent to the office; your observations of how staff are interacting with each other; or, concerns raised to you by families or community partners.

Assessing your school's current reality is a critical first step in developing a learning environment where all students, staff, families and community partners feel a sense of belonging, that their diversity is respected and they are safe. To get a complete picture of your school's current reality requires that all school community members have opportunities to contribute their perspectives in the information gathering process.

Prior to gathering information and data, it is important to let everyone know up front that the feedback and insights they provide will be considered along with everyone else's. They need to understand that not every suggestion or comment will be acted upon.



*Simon Sinek, in one of his **TED** talks, explores the importance of starting with why.*

Vision

Begin assessing your current reality by reviewing your school's vision (sometimes called statement of core purpose or mission statement). A relevant vision statement is one that includes input from all community members. When making decisions (yes, all decisions), it is critical that they are measured against and reflect your school's vision statement.

Questions to consider as you review the vision statement include:

Who was involved in creating it?

When was the last time it was reviewed and confirmed or changed?

Does it honour all members in the school community?

Does it reflect the collective beliefs of your school community?

Are all school community members aware of the vision statement?

How, and how often, is it communicated to or discussed with school members?

Is it evidenced in the behaviours and practices of all school community members?

School Policies

Policies need to reflect the vision statement.

As you review your policies, be sure to consider those focused on student conduct, discipline, and general school operations.

In your review, consider:

Are they aligned with the Education Act and school board policies?

Are they flexible enough to take into account individual student and staff differences?

Are they effective – are they giving you the desired results?

Is the language proactive or punitive?

Do school community members understand the overall intent of your policies?

Who was involved in creating them?

The [Alberta School Boards Association](#) has information on policy development specific to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe schools. You may find it helpful to familiar yourself with this information prior to reviewing your school policies, processes and procedures or aligning them with your desired state in the Go section.

Living Our Vision and Policies

The value of a vision statement and policies is how they are lived out or put into practice on a daily basis.

The following are tools to support you in assessing the school culture and practices:

The **Walk Around: A School Leader's Observation Guide** is an observation guide for school leaders. This tool gathers information about the school's physical appearance, social climate, success in learning and home-school-community relations.

The **Walk Around: Teacher Companion Tool** is a self-reflection tool for teachers. This companion tool can be used to gather the perspectives of teachers on the school's physical appearance, social climate, success in learning and home-school-community relations. It can be adapted to gather the perspectives of other school community members, such as support staff, families, students and other community partners.

Walkthrough processes, which are commonly used in some Alberta schools, can be used to focus on elements of a positive learning environment. Check to see if your school board offers information and guidelines on this practice. The [Alberta Teachers' Association](#) provides information about using walkthrough processes.

TELL them FROM me is a student engagement survey which provides data on elements of positive learning environments. If your school board does not subscribe to this survey, more information is available through [The Learning Bar](#).

Invite a trusted colleague or 'critical friend' to visit your school and provide feedback. This process can provide a fresh perspective about the school culture and practice.

Solicit informal feedback from visitors to your school (e.g., postal carrier, bus driver, photocopier technician). Visitors such as these can provide valuable information about the school's feel or tone—take a few moments to ask questions about what they notice.

Encourage and support teachers to invite a colleague of their choice to make observations and provide feedback on what they see, hear and feel in their classrooms. The inviting teacher may identify specific things that s/he would like the colleague to provide feedback on.

School Climate Surveys can provide valuable data. Samples surveys for students, families and staff are available at [The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities](#) and [Ontario Ministry of Education](#).

Go on a 'field trip' around the school with groups of parents or other family members, students, staff and/or community partners. Ask participants what they notice – for example, what story or stories are being told through the bulletin boards, condition of the bathrooms or locker rooms, trophy cases, pictures on the walls, etc. This information gathering activity could be done as part of a school council, parent advisory meeting, student leadership class, or staff meeting. Participants should be encouraged to comment on the positives they see as well as sharing their concerns.

Additional strategies to determine the values, beliefs and traditions that may be underlying a school culture or tone are explored in Peterson and Deal's book [The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook](#) (2009) .

Regardless of the tools used to gather information, it is important to close the feedback loop and report back on the findings. Begin by celebrating all the things that are positive and working well. Students can be kept in the feedback loop through an assembly or grade grouping visits. Families can be informed through regular meetings, the school newsletter, or as part of another event or a special family evening.

Regardless of the tools used to gather information, it is important to close the feedback loop and report back on the findings.



Readiness for change

Individual members are often in different places when it comes to change and the change process. It is critical to involve school community members from the beginning. As the process unfolds, you will become more aware of who is ready, who is reluctant and who is somewhere in between. Determining levels of readiness for change is important in figuring out how you will involve people in the process. Regardless of where people are at, the likelihood of buy-in increases when each person feels that they are heard and part of the process. Change requires conversation and dialogue – and lots of it!

Things to consider when thinking about the change process:¹⁴

- ☐ Evidence of how teachers, school leaders, and community partners see the need to enhance the learning environment.
- ☐ Direct involvement of students, school staff, community, and others.
- ☐ Availability of continuing professional development and support to put the changes in place.
- ☐ Commitment to modify current policies, processes and practice.
- ☐ Incentives to make changes.
- ☐ Critical mass of staff and community partners involved and ready to move forward.
- ☐ An experimental attitude among school staff and community partners.
- ☐ Willingness for continual and ongoing critique and refinement.
- ☐ Visible support from school leaders.
- ☐ Shared scenarios of what it will look like throughout the process.
- ☐ Potential for quick visible results.
- ☐ Viewed as part of an integrative, whole school or school-wide approach.

Resistance

You also need to think about how you will involve those who you consider as ‘resistors’. These individuals often have different insights that ‘champions’ may not. Asking them to identify what their concerns and fears are can give you an idea of what others may be feeling but not expressing. Asking what they need in order to feel more comfortable making some changes or shifts in their practice can be empowering. To ready yourself to engage in these conversations, consider why people may be resistant to change.

Questions to consider when faced with resistance:¹⁵

- ☐ Do people see the need for the change?
- ☐ Do people have enough information about the change?
- ☐ Has a clear case for the change been made?
- ☐ Has there been clear ongoing communication about the change.
- ☐ Do people feel the change is worthwhile? (Do they value it)?
- ☐ Are people afraid they may fail as a result of the change?
- ☐ Is the change aligned with school practices and culture?
- ☐ Have people had adequate opportunities to be involved in the planning and discussions?
- ☐ Is there clear leadership for the change?
- ☐ Are there adequate resources (human, financial, technical) to support the change?
- ☐ Do people have change fatigue (do they believe it is “just one more fad”)?

If you decide changes are necessary after assessing your current reality, it is important to carefully consider your school community’s readiness for change.

Relationships

Relationships and open dialogue are key to helping everyone move forward and feel comfortable with impending changes in practice.

Strategies to consider when addressing resistance include:¹⁶

- ☐ Building stronger relationships among all staff members.
- ☐ Communicating the negatives and positives of the proposed changes.
- ☐ Gathering data to understand the basis of people's resistance.
- ☐ Developing plans to address peoples' concerns and needs.
- ☐ Creating a shared vision of the 'desired state.'
- ☐ Holding high expectations for each other.



Reflection

What are the critical learnings from assessing the current reality of our school?

How ready do I think people are to move forward with this work and how do I know? What evidence is my perception based on?

What will I do to support the readiness of those I see as resisters or reluctant?

How can a shared leadership model help to move things forward? Who needs to be part of this model?

Collectively creating a clear plan and moving ahead.

Guiding Questions

What is our desired state?
 Who are the ‘champions’ in the school community?
 What is working well that we can build on?
 What do we need to change? What do we need to enhance?
 What can we stop doing?
 How will we work together to do this?
 How will we share our plan with the school community members?

Begin with the vision

Now that you have the picture of your school’s current reality, you can begin to work with your school community towards creating a vision of your school’s desired state.

Use information provided in the [Ready](#) section as well as that which you collected in the [Set](#) section to determine what is your ultimate learning environment. As you engage this process, look at your school’s vision statement. Does it reflect your desired state? If not, why not? As mentioned earlier, the vision needs to guide all decisions, including decisions made as you develop and implement your action plan. Questions like “What is important to us at this school?” or “What is it that we want for our students?” can be used to get the conversation started.

As always remember whenever you are gathering feedback that it is critical for staff, students, parents, and community partners to have ongoing opportunities for input in determining the desired state. Engaging in these conversations will build a critical mass—a majority of staff and other partners who are on board—which is essential for successful implementation of your action plan to create change.

In addition to creating a critical mass, engaging school community members in conversation and providing opportunities for their input will support you in identifying who are your champions. The purpose of developing a team of champions is twofold:

1. they will assist you to move this work forward and
2. they will be instrumental in building consensus among school community members (particularly those who are hesitant or resistant) so that everyone understands the importance and value of creating a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment.

Consider carefully the following qualities and characteristics as you put together the team of champions:

- * Leadership abilities and the respect of colleagues. There is also merit in involving one or two that may be resistant.
- * Skills in effective communication, team building and collaborative problem solving.
- * Diverse positioning in the learning community (student, parent, staff, community partner, etc.).

Don’t worry if you don’t have 100% consensus, once you have a critical mass it’s time to move ahead. Sometimes reluctant members need to see progress and positive results before they will jump on board.

Identify priority areas for change

Begin by celebrating what the feedback gathered to assess your current reality showed was working well.

Celebrating these practices acknowledges the important work that is already contributing to a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. Build on what is working well to collectively identify areas requiring improvement.

Concentrate on a few big ideas that can be broken down into measurable goals – think big, start small. Consider:

- * What areas of improvement will make the biggest impact? Start here.
- * When considering ‘new’ approaches or practices think about how they will fit with what is already working well.

Plan for change

Create a simple action plan, which includes both realistic short, medium and long term actions. Follow Leadbeater's advice in the textbox below and don't invest too much time and energy coming up with an elaborate plan – the learning is in the doing and it is more effective to get started and adjust as you go! Getting right into the doing produces results, which can be celebrated and helps to sustain momentum. As you build your simple plan, define tasks, timelines and people responsible (staff don't have to do it all – neither do your champions).

- * Who else could support the plan?
- * How might community partners be involved or more involved?
- * For each identified priority or action, consider what is needed for successful implementation?
- * What will be accepted as evidence?
- * What might be the opportunities and challenges?
- * How will ongoing coaching, mentorship and professional development be built in?
- * What supports will school community members need (individually and collectively)?
- * How can the expertise among the staff be utilized?
- * How will connecting with staff in other schools be supported?
- * As you develop your action plan, remember that staff must be able to talk openly and honestly about what they will stop doing in order to free up time and energy to live out the plan and the priorities identified within it. Sometimes it's necessary to phase out 'good work' to create space for 'great work'.

Additional considerations when building your plan include:

- * Use plain language (and translate where necessary) so that it will be understood easily by all school community members – don't fill it with jargon and specialized terminology.
- * Ensure it aligns with school board policies.
- * Review your school guidelines and procedures – are they supporting the plan or do they need to be revised?

[Appendix 1](#) provides examples of templates that may support you in building your collective action plan.

Charlie Leadbeater (2008) uses a swimming analogy to talk about changing practice. Some of the insights he shared are:

- * *You actually have to get into the water to learn to swim. You don't read books on it first or hire swimming strategists.*
- * *Try something, reflect on it, learn, adjust and try it again – this is not something you do sitting at a desk!*
- * *It helps to get in the shallow end first, perhaps use water wings, have a swimming coach and watch others who are already swimming.*
- * *You cannot innovate, learn or change on the side of the pool – you have to get wet!*

Build in pauses

Once your action plan is built, it is important to think about where you will take pauses along the way. Time for pausing needs to be intentional and not left to chance. This time creates opportunities to reflect and adjust on an as-needed basis. Be conscious of the implementation dip – change in practice takes some time to see positive results.

Communicate and implement the plan

Prior to implementing the plan, it is important that you inform school community members. Communicate the plan at every opportunity, remembering if you ask for peoples' thoughts, you need to act on them and inform them that you are doing so.

Ideas for sharing the plan include:

- * Talk about it at student assemblies and/or in grade or smaller groupings – this allows for more interaction.
- * Post in the staff room. Refer to it often!
- * Post where parents and families gather.
- * Share it through newsletters, celebrations of learning, meet the teacher or staff evenings, student-led or parent/teacher conferences, open houses, and other events where families and community members are present.

Once you have shared the plan with school members, it's time to move forward and implement it.

Simple Communication Plan

Who are my audiences? How will I share the information about the plan with them.

Audience 1

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Audience 2

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Audience 3

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Audience 4

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Method of sharing: _____

Who will share: _____

When: _____

Reflection

What in the action plan makes you most excited?

What challenges do you anticipate and what are some possible mitigation strategies?

What supports might the champions need along the way as they work with you to move this work forward?

What supports might you need?

CELEBRATE AND SUSTAIN

Keeping welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environments top of mind and sustaining momentum.

Guiding Questions

How will this work remain top of mind?

What processes are in place for new staff and student orientation?

What needs to be in place to continue and maintain a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment?

What ongoing communication processes will be used to ensure all school community members are informed and updated?

As with all important work, maintaining welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environments will only happen when time and attention are given on an on-going basis. To keep it top of mind, devote time at each staff meeting to some aspect of a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment. Always start by celebrating what is working well from the action plan or by sharing a success story. This gives people the energy to work on what is not working well or still needs improvement! It is the same strength-based philosophy that is critical in your (and your colleagues') work with students. Other ideas to include at staff meetings that build understanding and commitment are:

- * Read and discuss a related article.
- * Share a children's book.
- * Collaboratively solve an issue or concern that has arisen.

Evaluate and share results on an ongoing basis throughout implementation of the action plan. Is it moving you closer to your desired state? How do you know? School leaders who are in classrooms and the halls can make note of what they see and hear. Such observations are an important aspect of measuring change, and can be collected and shared as indicators or evidence of success. What are you and others noticing?

- * Perhaps no students are sitting alone in the lunch room,
- * Students' artwork is not defaced when on display,
- * Families feel comfortable visiting classrooms, etc.

Collect stories and encourage students, families, community partners and staff to collect and share their stories. Keep records of the positive comments you hear.

From time to time, you may wish to re-assess using the tools identified in the [Set](#) section and revise your plan as needed. It is important to not over-assess – survey fatigue does not contribute to a positive learning environment nor is it the best use of school community members' time and energy.

Review policies periodically. Your school board may have regular review requirements – it is good practice to review your vision statement, policies and student code of conduct at the beginning of each year so everyone is aware, particularly any new staff, students, families and community partners. Agreement that this is what the collective still believes should ground conversations and decisions about policy, programming and practice – this may be particularly helpful in difficult conversations.

Susan Scott, in her book, [Fierce Conversations](#), says that people are willing to invest their time, energy and expertise in support of others, ideals, and goals in which they believe. Give them something real in which to believe. (p. 8)¹⁷



“... people are willing to invest their time, energy and expertise in support of others, ideals, and goals in which they believe.”

In addition to regular reviews and confirmations, a process need to be place for when new staff, students and families join the school community to bring them up to speed on what is happening and what is expected. Regular and on-going conversations will help this process. Connecting new staff with a mentor and also having student mentors connect with new students contributes to feeling welcomed, cared for, respected and safe.

You may encounter some on-going resistance, but continue conversations with people about their experiences, apprehension, fears, and beliefs. Find small successes to celebrate and keep people engaged in the process.

Just as students need to feel safe in taking risks and making mistakes, so do adults. Capacity building involves opportunities to practice, which takes time and persistence. The environment needs to be one where staff and other adults can take risks, learn from mis-steps and be supported to try again. Ongoing and responsive professional learning opportunities are an important aspect of enhancing capacity.

Connecting with other schools is another important element in enhancing capacity and maintaining a focus on welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. While allowing time for staff to share their experiences and ideas with each other, it is also very powerful for staff to have the opportunity to learn from and with those who are moving in a similar direction at other schools. Seeing strategies and practices at work in other environments can provide new ideas and re-inspire staff.

Creating communities of practice with like-minded schools can help sustain the work and continue to inspire staff. According to Wenger (2008), “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” It relies on the collective experience and knowledge of those directly involved in the work and provides authentic professional development. The key to successful communities of practice is that each person chooses to be a part of it – in other words, mandating participation will not get the results you desire. [EB Wegner Trayner](#) offers information on communities of practice.

Celebrating and Sustaining Plan

How will I celebrate and sustain information about the plan with education partners?

Students and Families

Celebrate:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

Sustain:

Who will coordinate:: _____

When: _____

Staff

Celebrate:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

Sustain:

Who will coordinate:: _____

When: _____

Community

Celebrate:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

Sustain:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

Other schools

Celebrate:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

Sustain:

Who will coordinate: _____

When: _____

What is sustaining the staff as we enact our plan towards our desired state?

How am I keeping up my energy, enthusiasm and hope?

Who can I connect with to encourage and sustain me in this work?

End Notes

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Appendices

Appendix

- 1 – Action Plan
- 2 – Ready Guiding Questions
- 3 – Set Guiding Questions
- 4 – Go Guiding Questions
- 5 – Celebrate and Sustain Guiding Questions
- 6 – Pyramid of Intervention

Action Plan

Action	Detail	
What have we done so far that has worked?	Activity(ies):	
How can we improve?	Target/goal:	
What can we do to make this happen?	Activity(ies)	
Who will be involved?	Person	Responsibility:
What is needed to support the people involved?	Resources:	
When do we hope to achieve our target/goal?	Timeline:	
How will we know we were successful?	Measure(s)	

READY

Guiding Questions - What strategies, procedures and/or processes will I use to address these questions?

What does a learning environment where students, staff, families and community partners feel welcomed, safe, cared for and respected look like? Sound like? Feel like?

Evidence of success:

What evidence-informed strategies support this work?

Evidence of success:

Where am I, as a school leader, in my understanding of what is involved in creating such an environment and what my role is in it?

Evidence of success:

What do I think are the understandings of staff, students, families, and community partners?

Evidence of success:

Looking at and assessing the current environment for strengths, areas for improvement and readiness for change.

SET

Guiding Questions - What strategies, procedures and/or processes will I use to address these questions?

What am I current doing that contributes to a culture of belonging and connectedness in your school?

Evidence of success:

How is the school's vision statement supporting a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment?

Evidence of success:

How are the school policies supporting a positive learning environment and aligning with the expectations outlined in Section 33 of the Education Act?

Evidence of success:

In what ways are the practices being lived out in the school reflective of the vision and policies?

Evidence of success:

How ready are the school community members to engage in this important work?

Evidence of success:

GO

Guiding Questions - What strategies, procedures and/or processes will I use to address these questions?

What is our desired state?

Evidence of success:

Who are the 'champions' in the school community?

Evidence of success:

What is working well that we can build on?

Evidence of success:

What do we need to change? What do we need to enhance?
What can we stop doing?

Evidence of success:

How will we work together to do this?

Evidence of success:

How will we share our plan with the school community members?

Evidence of success:

Keeping welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environments top of mind and sustaining momentum.

CELEBRATE AND SUSTAIN

Guiding Questions - What strategies, procedures and/or processes will I use to address these questions?

How will this work remain top of mind?

Evidence of success:

What processes are in place for new staff and student orientation?

Evidence of success:

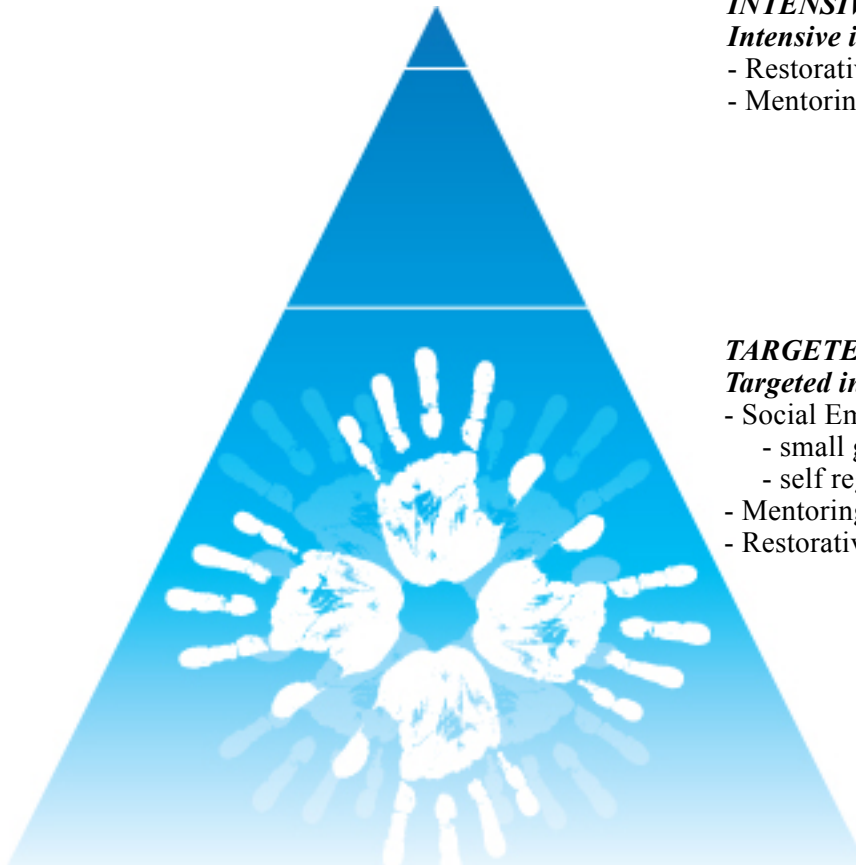
What needs to be in place to continue and maintain a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment?

Evidence of success:

What ongoing communication processes will be used to ensure all school community members are informed and updated?

Evidence of success:

PYRAMID OF INTERVENTION



INTENSIVE 1-5%

Intensive intervention and assessment

- Restorative Practices (conferences)
- Mentoring i.e. Big Brother or Big Sister

TARGETED 10-15%

Targeted intervention and progress monitoring

- Social Emotional Literacy
 - small group work
 - self regulation strategies
- Mentoring i.e. in-school/lunch time
- Restorative Practices (mini conferences)

UNIVERSAL 80-90%

Effective core instruction and universal screening

- Social Emotional Literacy
- Positive Mental Health
- Informal Mentoring i.e. buddy system
- Restorative Practices (principles, circles)