

Assessing the Sexual Climate in a School

Why is that in some schools, everyone 'knows' that teacher is having sex with a student and no one takes action, yet in another school a suggestive comment is met with a strong response to change the behavior? Because among the many ways those schools differ are huge variations in their "sexual climate."

Scholars of education study school culture and school climate with school culture defined as the actual policies, procedures, rules and regulations that have been formally established while school climate refers to how it actually 'feels' to be in a school. This is a difficult concept for most people who have spent time in few schools, but those who spend time in multiple schools know the differences can be vast. Generally, scholars describe a healthy school climate as having 4 components:

- A physical environment that is welcoming and conducive to learning
 - A social environment that promotes communication and interaction
 - An affective environment that promotes a sense of belonging and self-esteem for all;
- and
- An academic environment that promotes learning and self-fulfillment

My work as an educator and a professional dedicated to promoting sexual health and safety has led me to defining a new component: sexual climate. Consider the following questions to assess the sexual climate in your child's school.

1. Is the school's physical environment welcoming and conducive to learning?

If using the restroom or moving between classes leaves a child breathless with anxiety, the school climate is out of balance. Graffiti of any kind, and certainly sexually suggestive graffiti must be removed immediately.

2. What are the school's policies and track record around bullying and sexual harassment?

Formal policies mean little unless administered and implemented by committed people with both skills and emotional intelligence. If you attend a school event and hear an administrator making jokes at the expense of staff or otherwise insulting them, take that as a warning signal that this environment tolerates bullying. If the staff work in an environment that disrespects or humiliates them, they may be less likely to respond to a child being disrespected or humiliated.

The school district should be offering in-service training for all faculty and staff periodically to ensure that they are aware of the policy and their responsibility to carry it out. Some schools also offer workshops for students; if taught by a sensitive teacher who understands how very important this is, such a workshop can be a great learning experience. If, however, the school assigns teaching the workshop to the wise-cracking guy

¹ Information on school climate adapted from: Tableman, Betty; Herron, Adrienne. 2004. *School Climate and Learning. Best Practice Briefs Number 31, University-Community Partnerships @ Michigan State University*

who smirks as he says "I wish someone would sexually harass me a little bit" we are wise to assume that the climate in this school only allows for lip service to policies related to sexual harassment.

3. What is the school's policy and track record regarding teacher-student contact?

- Are student allowed to address faculty and staff by first names?
- Are there clear rules for both actual and virtual out of school contact between student and faculty/staff?

A healthy sexual climate encourages interaction between students and faculty with age-appropriate boundaries. Use of first names between teachers and students requires careful consideration. In most schools it implies an artificial familiarity inconsistent with the roles.

Clear formal rules on out of school interaction between staff and students should exist and be enforced. This includes both actual interaction and virtual interaction like E-mail, texting, and connecting on social networking sites. This is particularly important since sexual climate can erode gradually and the impersonal nature of virtual communication makes it easier to slip across boundaries.

4. Are administrators consistently visible on campus?

While administrators are responsible for everything from budgets to bathrooms, they MUST get out of their office, walk the halls and make periodic, friendly, and unannounced visits to classrooms.

5. What is the policy on dress code and how is it enforced?

Butt cleavage, breast cleavage, midriffs and suggestive slogans on clothing are not conducive to learning. It is perfectly natural for kids to push boundaries and show up to school wearing something that bends -- if not actually breaks -- the rules. School staff should react firmly and without embarrassing or humiliating the student.

6. How are sexuality related issues handled in the classroom?

To be sexually safe and healthy, we expect that academically appropriate language about sexual issues will be used in context in art, literature, health, biology, social studies or other classes. Sexual issues permeate the arts and it is disingenuous to pretend they don't. Sexual violence is a theme in many historical events and sexual discrimination permeates history. Can the teachers discuss this in context? Is open discussion encouraged?

Establishing and maintaining a healthy sexual climate is one component of promoting the sexual health and safety of all students. Join us on June 4 and help make this happen in our community!

Dr. Janet Rosenzweig is a sex educator who has been working in child sexual abuse treatment and prevention for more than three decades. Believing that accurate information and open communication with parents is the foundation to sexual health and safety, she wrote The Sex-Wise Parent (Skyhorse, 2012) to encourage parents to identify their own values about sexuality and offer resources to help develop comfort and skills to share them with their children. Find more information at www.SexWiseParent.com