

How Environmental Stressors Shape School Climate*

Schools serving students who experience poverty, violence, trauma, family instability, discrimination, housing insecurity, and other adverse conditions often face significant barriers to learning and teaching. These barriers affect not only the students directly exposed to such stressors, but also their peers, school staff, families, and the overall quality of school life.

Too often, learning, behavior, and emotional problems are viewed primarily as individual deficits or disorders. Such a perspective can obscure the powerful influence of environmental conditions on development, behavior, and school functioning. An environmental stress framework provides a lens for understanding how stress associated with adverse life circumstances is transmitted through family, developmental, social, and institutional processes, ultimately influencing classroom experiences and school-wide climate.

From this perspective, many difficulties observed in schools are not simply problems residing within individual students; they are also shaped by the contexts in which students live and learn. This resource explores a framework for understanding how adverse environmental conditions influence student behavior, relationships, classroom functioning, and school climate. The framework highlights why comprehensive approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching are essential for reducing the impact of environmental stressors, improving student outcomes, and fostering positive school climates.

School Climate and Environmental Stress

A school's climate emerges from the ongoing transactions among students, families, school staff, and others who participate in school life. It reflects the influence of values, beliefs, norms, practices, traditions, and relationships that constitute the school's culture. School and classroom climates range from hostile and alienating to welcoming, supportive, and engaging, and they often fluctuate over time.

A school climate is both:

- An outcome of what occurs within classrooms, schools, families, and communities.
- A mediating influence that affects student learning, behavior, well-being, and staff effectiveness.

Thus, a school climate is not simply a backdrop for educational activity. It both shapes and is shaped by the experiences, transactions, and performance of those involved in school life. When environmental stressors adversely affect students, families, and staff, they can influence the quality of relationships, perceptions of safety, engagement in learning, and everyday functioning throughout the school. At the same time, a positive school climate can help buffer the effects of adversity by fostering supportive relationships, belonging, trust, and connectedness.

From this perspective, school climate serves both as an indicator of how well a school is functioning and as a powerful factor influencing student success and staff well-being.

About an Environmental Stress Framework

Drawing on the stress and school climate literatures, an environmental stress framework provides a way to understand how adverse environmental conditions shape a school climate. The framework conceptualizes how stress generated by poverty, violence, instability, discrimination, and other adverse conditions are transmitted through developmental, family, social, and institutional processes, ultimately influencing classroom experiences and school-wide outcomes (CDC, 2026; Cohen et al., 2009; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tapa et al., 2013). From this perspective, stress is an expected outcome when individuals encounter persistent barriers to learning and teaching.

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The framework illustrates how environmental conditions generate stress that is transmitted through interconnected processes affecting student development, relationships, classroom functioning, and school operations. Although the factors are presented sequentially, the process is not linear or one-directional. Outcomes at the classroom and school levels can further intensify stress, relationship difficulties, and barriers to learning and teaching, creating reinforcing cycles over time. Thus, environmental stressors and school climate influence one another in dynamic and reciprocal ways.

The framework focuses on the following interconnected concerns:

1. Structural Conditions – Examples:

- Poverty
- Exposure to violence (home and community)
- Neighborhood instability
- Limited access to basic resources

These conditions create chronic stress environments that shape developmental experiences long before students enter classrooms.

2. Family System Disruption – Examples:

- Financial strain and parental stress
- Inconsistent routines and supervision
- Reduced emotional availability
- Increased exposure to conflict

Environmental stressors often disrupt family functioning and reduce the capacity of caregivers to provide consistent support. Such disruptions can adversely affect social, emotional, and academic development and coping.

3. Student Psychological Responses – Examples:

- Trauma-related symptoms (such as hypervigilance, anxiety)
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Reduced sense of safety and trust
- Low academic self-efficacy
- Shortened future orientation (“survival-focused” thinking)

Students frequently adapt to stressful environments in ways that may promote short-term survival but interfere with learning and healthy development. In such instances, the responses can be viewed as understandable reactions to adverse circumstances.

4. Behavioral Expression – Examples:

- Aggression or irritability
- Withdrawal or disengagement
- Difficulty concentrating
- Impulsivity
- Resistance to perceived control

Stress-related internal processes often manifest in observable behaviors. While not all behavior problems are primarily stress-related, understanding the role of environmental stressors helps ensure that behavior is interpreted within context rather than viewed solely as misconduct or individual pathology. Such understanding can help shift intervention efforts from punishment toward support, prevention, and re-engagement.

5. Social Mediation Processes – Examples:

- Increased peer conflict and mistrust
- Strained student–teacher relationships
- Negative attitudes toward authority
- Reduced classroom cohesion
- Social isolation and disconnection

Stress influences relationships and social functioning throughout the school environment. The dynamics affect the quality of transactions that support learning, belonging, and engagement and contribute to changes in the social fabric of classrooms and schools.

6. Classroom Ecology – Examples:

- Increased disruptions and time spent on behavior management
- Reduced instructional time
- Heightened emotional tension
- Decreased perceptions of safety and support

As stress-related behaviors and relationship difficulties accumulate, classroom conditions may shift in ways that affect everyone. With deteriorating classroom conditions, even students who have not been directly exposed to significant adversity may experience negative effects on learning, well-being, and engagement. While environmental stressors increase risk, individual outcomes vary depending on protective factors such as family, school, and community support.

7. School-Level Outcomes – Over time, these processes contribute to:

- Teacher stress, burnout, and turnover
- Reduced staff morale
- Lower academic engagement and achievement
- Widening disparities in outcomes
- Overall deterioration of a school climate

The framework highlights that stress is transmitted not only among students but also among educators and other school personnel working under challenging conditions.

Key Insights from the Perspective of Environmental Stressors

1. *Student Behavior Must be Understood in Context* – Many behaviors that interfere with learning and teaching are understandable responses to environmental stressors and adverse life circumstances. While such behaviors may require intervention, effective responses begin with understanding the conditions and experiences that shape behavior rather than simply assigning blame or focusing solely on individual deficits.
2. *Environmental Stress has Widespread Effects* – The impact of environmental stressors extends far beyond individual students. Stress can influence:
 - Individual students, teachers, and other staff
 - Peer relationships and student-teacher interactions
 - Classroom functioning and learning conditions
 - School-wide climate and culture
 - Family engagement and school-community relationships

As a result, interventions focused solely on individual students are unlikely to address the broader effects of environmental stress throughout the school community.

3. *School Climate Can Serve as a Protective Factor*. Because environmental stressors affect students through multiple pathways, supportive school environments that foster safety, belonging, trust, and positive relationships can help reduce the impact of adversity and promote resilience.
4. *Current Approaches Often Emphasize Individual Coping More than Environmental Change* – Many efforts focus on helping students and staff cope with stress, but devote less attention to the environmental conditions that generate stress and barriers to learning and teaching. Lasting improvement requires not only supporting individuals, but also creating more supportive school, community, and societal conditions.

Common Misconceptions

Many people presume that:

- Student behavior problems primarily reflect individual deficits or disorders.
- The most effective way to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems is to focus on "fixing" individual students.
- Improving school climate depends mainly on changing the behavior of students who are having difficulties.
- The effects of poverty, violence, trauma, and other adverse conditions are largely beyond the scope of school improvement efforts.
- Schools alone can solve problems rooted in poverty, violence, discrimination, and other social inequities.

A Broader Perspective

An environmental stress framework suggests that:

- Many learning, behavior, and emotional difficulties are influenced by environmental conditions and experiences.
- Interventions should address both individual needs and the environmental factors creating barriers to learning and teaching.
- School climate improves when schools strengthen relationships, increase supports, reduce barriers, and create positive conditions for learning and teaching.
- Schools can play a powerful buffering role, but lasting change also requires family, community, and societal efforts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Many difficulties observed in schools are more accurately understood as reactions to environmental conditions than as evidence of individual deficiency. When barriers to learning and teaching arise from multiple and interacting stressors, effective intervention involves more than focusing on individual students. It requires improving environmental conditions that contribute to problems and strengthening conditions that support learning, development, well-being, and engagement.

A growing recognition of the effects of poverty, trauma, violence, instability, and other environmental stressors has led schools to adopt a variety of supportive practices, such as trauma-informed approaches, restorative interventions, social-emotional learning, efforts to reduce exclusionary discipline, and expanded strategies for welcoming and engaging students and families. While such initiatives can be valuable, they are often developed and implemented separately from one another.

If environmental stressors influence school climate through multiple interconnected pathways, isolated interventions are unlikely to produce substantial and lasting change. What is needed is a comprehensive approach that systematically addresses barriers to learning and teaching throughout the school while promoting positive development and well-being.

Expanding the Policy Framework for School Improvement

In this respect, our Center has emphasized the need to expand the school improvement policy framework and transform current student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and

equitable system of student/learning supports. Too often, school improvement efforts focus primarily on two components: instruction and governance/management. While both are essential, neither provides an approach that directly addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students. A comprehensive school improvement policy framework incorporates a third major component that provides a cohesive and equitable approach for addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

Turning Policy into Practice

In our work, the third component is operationalized as a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system involves a full continuum of interventions across which student/learning supports are organized into six domains. It pursues school practices that promote positive development, prevent problems, identify problems early after onset, personalizes instruction, and provide special and specialized assistance. The system is enabled by school-community collaborations that blend resources to address problems of mutual concern and help create feelings of belonging and sense of community. The practices are implemented strategically using a sequential and hierarchical approach, starting with making environmental changes.

For detailed discussion of and guides to transforming current student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system, see

>*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/briefguide.pdf>

>*Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Starting the Process*
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemchangesteps.pdf>

Concluding Comments

An environmental stress framework highlights how adverse environmental conditions affect school functioning through interconnected developmental, relational, classroom, and institutional processes. The implications are clear: improving school climate requires more than changing individual behavior. It requires comprehensive efforts to reduce barriers to learning and teaching while strengthening the conditions that foster safety, belonging, engagement, support, and opportunity.

Although schools cannot eliminate many of the stressors that students and families experience, they can play a powerful protective role by embedding these efforts within a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Such a system not only addresses individual needs but also creates the conditions necessary for all students, staff, and families to thrive. In this way, schools are better positioned to enhance well-being, promote equity, and reduce long-standing disparities in educational opportunity and outcomes.

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