

# School Climate: A Literature Review



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## Introduction

For hundreds of years educators have recognized the importance of school climate. Early educational reformers such as Perry (1908), Dewey (1916), and Durkheim (1961) recognized that the distinctive culture of a school affects the life and learning of its students<sup>1</sup>. However, it was not until the 1950's that educators and researchers began to study school climate and create assessment tools to help assist schools in achieving positive school climate<sup>2</sup>.

While Temescal Associates is focused on afterschool and summer programs, we believe that, in terms of school climate and character building, a whole school (including afterschool) approach is most effective. We also believe that the program climate within afterschool and summer programs is critical in supporting healthy youth development. Thus, there is much that we can learn from the educational literature on school climate by substituting the word "school" with "youth program". Our work in this area is being conducted as a partner agency in the *Expanded Learning 360/365* project, which is described at the end of this paper. This work is being conducted through the generous support of the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation.

This literature review will define *school climate*, the characteristics that define *positive school climate*, and the benefits. Also included is a discussion on how to create positive school climate and the assessment tools used to tackle a continuous improvement in schools.

## Defining School Climate

Although definitions of school climate may differ slightly, most definitions found in today's literature stem from Howard, Howell, and Brainard (1987) who defined a school's climate as its "atmosphere for learning."<sup>3</sup> Also included in their definition is the term *positive climate*. Howard, Howell, and Brainard (1987) simply describe a school with positive climate as "... a good place to be."

Today the most widely used definition was developed by The National School Climate Center (NSCC), originally founded in 1996 at Teachers College, Columbia University. The NSCC defines school climate as "the quality and character of school life."<sup>4</sup>

As one of the leading providers of school climate research, NSCC continues its definition by discussing the patterns that reflect a school's climate:

*School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.*

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<sup>1</sup> Source: School Climate Resource Summary, August 2012. Link:

<http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v3.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Source: The School Climate Challenge, Narrowing the Gap Between School Climate Research and School Climate Policy, Practice Guidelines and Teacher Education Policy Link:

<http://www.ecs.org/html/projects/partners/nclc/docs/school-climate-challenge-web.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> After conducting research, this appears to be definition that most resembles the one's used today.

Source: [http://www.nasponline.org/communications/spawareness/schclimate\\_ho.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/communications/spawareness/schclimate_ho.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> In nearly all literature used today to form best practices and assessment tools use some variation of this definition.

Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/>

## Characteristics of Positive School Climate

Within every school climate definition researched, each discussed the characteristics exhibited at schools with positive school climate. The NSCC explains that a “sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society.”<sup>5</sup>

More specifically, the NSCC believes there are four essential dimensions of focus when exploring positive school climate<sup>6</sup>:

1. Safety (e.g. rules and norms; physical safety; social-emotional safety);
2. Relationships (e.g. respect for diversity; school connectedness/engagement; social support; leadership);
3. Teaching and Learning (e.g. social, emotional, ethical and civic learning; support for academic learning; support for professional relationships);
4. Institutional Environment (e.g. physical surrounding)

In a paper composed for the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Alexandra Loukas lists the “multidimensional construct” of school climate that includes 3 dimensions: physical, social, and academic<sup>7</sup>.

Mirroring many of the characteristics outlined in NSCC’s four dimensions, Loukas outlines the following:

The physical dimension includes:

- Appearance of the school building and its classrooms;
- School size and ratio of students to teachers in the classroom;
- Order and organization of classrooms in the school;
- Availability of resources; and
- Safety and comfort.

The social dimension includes:

- Quality of interpersonal relationships between and among students, teachers, and staff;
- Equitable and fair treatment of students by teachers and staff;
- Degree of competition and social comparison between students; and
- Degree to which students, teachers, and staff contribute to decision-making at the school.

The academic dimension includes:

- Quality of instruction;
- Teacher expectations for student achievement; and
- Monitoring student progress and promptly reporting results to students and parents.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/>

<sup>6</sup> These 4 dimensions are the overarching grouping that define NSCC’s “12 Dimensions of School Climate Measurements” which will be discussed further below.

<sup>7</sup> Source: [https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership\\_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n1a4.pdf](https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n1a4.pdf)

Rather than focus on dimensions, the Yale Child Study Center conducted their own study and concluded a list of 15 components that make up a healthy, supportive school climate<sup>8</sup>:

- Achievement motivation: Students at the school believe they can learn and are willing to learn.
- Collaborative decision-making: Parents, students, and staff are actively involved in the decisions affecting the school.
- Equity and fairness: Students are treated equally regardless of ethnicity, gender, and disability.
- General school climate: There is a positive quality of all interactions and feelings of trust and respect within the school community.
- Order and discipline: Students display appropriate behavior in the school setting.
- Parent involvement: Parents participate frequently in school activities.
- School-community relations: The community is supportive and involved in the life of the school.
- Dedication to student learning: Teachers actively motivate students to learn.
- Staff expectations: Staff expects that students will succeed in school and in life.
- Leadership: The principal effectively guides the direction of the school, including creating a positive climate.
- School building: The physical appearance of the school building reflects respect for the school and community.
- Sharing of resources: All students have equal opportunity to participate in school activities, materials, and equipment.
- Caring and sensitivity: The principal shows consideration for the students, parents, and school staff.
- Student interpersonal relations: There is a high level of caring, respect, and trust among students in the school.
- Student-teacher relations: There is a high level of caring, respect and trust between students and teachers in the school.

The Canadian Government, through their own research, identified 11 key factors – eight specific and three general – that contribute to creating positive school climate<sup>9</sup>. The specific factors discuss the school community's emotions while the general factors consider overall things schools should do. The 11 Key factors are as follows:

Specific Factors include:

1. Growth: Continuous academic and social growth.
2. Respect: students and staff have high self-esteem and are considerate of others.
3. Trust: a sense that people can be counted on.
4. High morale: students and staff feel good about being there.
5. Cohesiveness: a sense of belonging.
6. Opportunities for input: being able to contribute ideas and participate.
7. Renewal: an openness to change and improvement.
8. Caring: students and staff feel that others are concerned about them.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: Haynes, N. M., Emmons, C., & Ben-Avie, M. (1997). School climate as a factor in student adjustment and achievement. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 8, 321–329.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/specedu/beh/pdf/3.pdf>

## General Factors

1. Program curriculum, activities, and policies.
2. Process teaching and learning styles, problem-solving, and communication.
3. Resource materials, and school facilities.

## Why School Climate Matters

Since the beginning of educational studies, research has shown that school climate strongly influences student's emotional and academic success. Simply put, "when school members feel safe, valued, cared for, respected, and engaged, learning increases<sup>10</sup>." When schools provide students with what they need to succeed and expose students to positive experiences, good things happen.

Here are just some of the outcomes associated with positive school climate:<sup>11</sup>

- Positively affect middle school students' self-esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990)
- Mitigate the negative effects of self-criticism (Kuperminic, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001)
- Lower frequency of students' substance abuse and psychiatric problems (Kasen, Johnson, & Cohen, 1990; LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Ruus et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2006). More specifically, lower levels of drug use as well as less self-reports of psychiatric problems among high school students (LaRusso et al., 2008).
- Decrease in student absenteeism in middle school and high school (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reid, 1982; Rumberger, 1987; Sommer, 1985)
- Lower rates of student suspension in high school (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982; Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011).

Research on school climate continues to show the benefits attributed to a *happy* school. Here are some of the recent studies that have come out:

### Study: Positive School Climate Helps Deter Drug Use

Excerpt from News Story: *"The team measured school climate based off five factors, drawn from previous studies on school climate: whether students respect each other, teachers respect students and students respect teachers; whether students think teachers handle problems well; and whether school rules are clear. Positive school climate deters drug use."*

### The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools

Excerpt from Study: *"We asked students about several resources that may help to promote a safer climate and more positive school experiences for students: student clubs that address issues for LGBT students (such as Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs), school personnel who are supportive of LGBT students, LGBT-inclusive curricular materials, and school policies for addressing incidents of harassment and assault."* (pg. 46)

<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/schoolclimate.asp>

<sup>11</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/sc-brief-v3.pdf> (all taken from this source)

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)'s School Climate and Dropout Prevention  
Excerpt from Study: *"The proven practices of dropout prevention are most effective when all are employed collectively throughout the school and district wide, at all grade levels... This comprehensive approach impacts all students, both those identified at risk, and those one might not identify as such."*

Here are some organizations that promotes the importance of a positive school climate:

#### Whole Child Initiative

Launched in 2007, ASCD's Whole Child Initiative is an effort to change the conversation about education from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long term development and success of children. School climate is just one of the components of a "whole child approach to education and community engagement"

#### Child Trends

For over 30 years, Child Trends has been a nonpartisan research center dedicated to "improves the lives and prospects of children and youth by conducting high-quality research and sharing the resulting knowledge with practitioners and policymakers." As a leading provider of school climate research, Child Trends is at the forefront of discovering the power of positive school climate.

## Measuring School Climate

The characteristics outlined above also help measure a school's climate. By understanding the characteristics of what constitutes *positive school climate* schools are able to measure their current climate and then implement best practices to improve it.

On a basic level, there are two approaches to assessing climate: indirect and direct measures. Indirect measures include existing information such as student attendance, frequency of discipline, and documentation of the physical school grounds. On the other hand, direct measures involve information gathered from other sources such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The information obtained through the direct measures taken from various stakeholders (students, teachers, support staff, administrators, parents, and community) will provide the most insight.

However, schools should use caution when using a survey. According to Edgar Schein, one of the foremost organizational psychology experts, a survey will not reveal people's underlying assumptions and beliefs which have a profound effect on the school climate—and those are what you need to understand in order to effect real change. After all, one of the most important aspects of school climate is recognizing the *feelings* of the school.

With that said, the most vastly used way of measuring social climate is through well-researched surveys and third-party assessments. Some surveys are quick and designed for immediate feedback while others incorporate all data sources and months of interviews. The NSCC developed the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI)<sup>12</sup> to gather "immediate feedback on how students, parents, school personnel and even community members perceive the school's particular climate for learning." Considered to be

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<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/csci.php>

one of the top school climate surveys in the field, the CSCI is used in two ways: as a needs assessment and as a pre-post measure. The information provided in the survey is then used to aid schools in their five-stage improvement process.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the CSCI, the NSCC has created the School Climate Implementation Road Map<sup>14</sup>. The Road Map is another resource designed to support school leadership and community. Developed by assessing research and best practices from a number of related fields (i.e. school reform, character education, social emotional learning, service learning, community schools, risk prevention, and health/mental health promotion), it is organized in 5 stages: (i) preparation and planning; (ii) evaluation; (iii) understanding the evaluation findings, engagement and action planning; (iv) implementing the action plan; and (v) re-evaluation and beginning the cycle anew. Using this assessment tool, schools receive practical suggestions and learning activities needed to improve their school's climate.

Although materials created by the NSCC are the most widely used and discussed, there is an endless amount of school climate assessments and tools. Each assessment tool is geared towards assisting the school community in creating a positive experience for students. An important assessment tool is one created and supported by the government. The US Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students<sup>15,16</sup> funded the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSE), which provides training, measurement, and implementation programs. Through the NCSSE<sup>17</sup>, educators can identify school needs, set goals, and track progress. Depending on a school's needs, the NCSSE is there to help<sup>18</sup>.

Here is a list of some of the assessment tools readily available for schools and other resources for schools wishing to assess their school climate:

1. NSCC's [Review of Climate Review Surveys](#)
2. California State University, Los Angeles - Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC)'s [Assessment Instrument](#)
3. University of Colorado, Boulder's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence - [Safe Communities – Safe School Surveys](#)
4. SixSecond's Education Vital Signs [School Climate Assessment](#)
5. NCSSE's [School Climate Survey Compendia](#)

## **Best Practices to Improving and Maintaining a Positive School Climate**

As detailed above, a positive school climate can benefit students in numerous ways. However, to keep a constant feeling of positivity at school is an on-going process. Thankfully, experts in the field have developed numerous different guidelines on how to improve school climate within the context of national, large-scale reform, or on a smaller scale at the individual school or district level.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/process.php>

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/roadmap.php>

<sup>15</sup> For more information: [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/om/fs\\_po/oese/safehealth.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/om/fs_po/oese/safehealth.html)

<sup>16</sup> In October 2010, California became one of 11 states selected to receive a Safe and Supportive Schools. Source: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/safesupportive.asp>

<sup>17</sup> Source: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement>

<sup>18</sup>



Other guidelines focus on improvement from a personnel standpoint. For example, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) has developed their own “Key Work of School Boards framework<sup>19</sup>” which focuses on eight interrelated action areas for school boards to work on - Vision, Standards, Assessment, Accountability, Alignment, Climate, Collaboration and Community Engagement, and Continuous Improvement. Their framework is geared to assisting school boards in “consider[ing], adopt[ing] and adapt[ing] quality school climate policies, practices, accountability and capacity for student achievement and success.”

The NSBA also endorsed the “School Climate Guide for District Policymakers and Education Leaders” written by the Center for School and Emotional Education<sup>20</sup>, which includes the seven conditions about the key behaviors of school boards and superintendents that influence district climate and higher student achievement.

These seven conditions are:

1. Shared leadership
2. Continuous improvement and shared decision making
3. Ability to create and sustain initiatives
4. Supportive workplace for staff
5. Staff development
6. Support for school sites through data and information
7. Community involvement

Similarly, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) created 5 top strategies to enhance school climate<sup>21</sup>. By focusing on strengthening relationships and fostering self-regulation and autonomy, the principals are able to develop an effective school climate.<sup>22</sup>

1. Build relationships: Take time to build relationships with students and families and make time for students and other school personnel to build relationships with one another.
2. Minimize and manage conflicts: A positive school climate is one in which conflicts occur infrequently and students treat one another with respect.
3. Prevent bullying and victimization: A positive school climate is one where bullying is taken seriously and addressed effectively.
4. Support adults: Teachers and families frequently need the same kinds of support to foster positive adult climates in the school.
5. Promote autonomy: Autonomy-building practices also contribute in important ways to the school’s climate.

Other experts have focused on more general strategies for the school community leaders to focus on to improve the school’s climate. Dr. Vicki Zakrzewski, Education Director of the Greater Good Science

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<sup>19</sup> Source: <http://www.nsba.org/services/school-board-leadership-services/key-work-school-boards>

<sup>20</sup> This district guide includes a list of measurement tools at <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/policy/district-guide-csee.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> The National Association of Elementary School Principals also created their own best practices. For more information: [https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership\\_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n1a4.pdf](https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n1a4.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Included in their guide are specific examples to how to implement each strategy. For a complete outline of each strategy please visit: [http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=Positive\\_School\\_Climate](http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=Positive_School_Climate)

Center at the University of California, Berkeley, based her research on identifying the three main strategies used by school leaders to improve social climate<sup>23</sup>:

1. Assess the current climate: You have to know where you're starting from in order to know where to go.
2. Create a shared vision—but start with personal visions: Research suggests that bringing everyone together to create a shared vision of the kind of climate they want increases the likelihood that the vision will actually be carried out.
3. Work together to carry out the shared vision—and make it fun: Creating a positive school climate is an ongoing process that never really ends, but it's a joyful one.

The most used is the NSCC's five-stage school climate improvement process. Combined with the information received through the CSCI and the Road Map, the NSCC has defined five stages<sup>24</sup> to assist the school in understanding and mastering the "tasks and challenges" involved with school climate. They also created the National School Climate Standards.<sup>25</sup>

Meant to complement national standards for Content, Leadership, and Professional Development and the Parent Teacher Association's National Standards for Family School Partnerships Standards, the standards are used by the nation's top organizations. The Standards present a vision and framework for a positive and sustainable school climate and is comprised of five standards and sets of indicators and sub-indicators:

1. Developing a shared vision and plan for promoting, enhancing and sustaining a positive school climate.
2. Developing policies that promote social, emotional ethical, civic and intellectual learning as well as systems that address barriers to learning.
3. Implementing practices that promote the learning and positive social, emotional, ethical and civic development of students and student engagement as well as addressing barriers to learning.
4. Creating an environment where all members are welcomed, supported, and feel safe in school: socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically.
5. Developing meaningful and engaging practices, activities and norms that promote social and civic responsibilities and a commitment to social justice.

## Concluding Thoughts

In the past couple of years, school climate has taken center stage of the Obama administration's education reform. Noting that school climate directly affects students, the government has created funding opportunities to improve school climate nationwide. As echoed above, efforts to improve school climate must be an integral part of school improvement plans in order to have a positive and sustainable effect. However, step one is understanding what constitutes a healthy, supportive school climate. Hopefully, the above information will prove value in this effort.

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<sup>23</sup> Source: [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_to\\_create\\_a\\_positive\\_school\\_climate](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_create_a_positive_school_climate)

<sup>24</sup> These are the five stages organize the Road Map.

Source: [http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/stages\\_tasks\\_challenges.php](http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/stages_tasks_challenges.php) and additional research that supports it: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/ResearchSupport-FiveStages.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Source: <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/school-climate-standards.pdf>

## Resource Section

### Policy and Implementation Resources:

1. The Changing Needs and Challenges for Policymakers and Recommendations (Throughout Paper)
2. School Climate Practice Briefs by NSCC, Summarize effective practices that support implementation and sustainability efforts.

### Other Resources:

1. Videos by Experts on “What is School Climate?”
2. Video on “Building a Positive School Climate”

### For Further Research:

1. Bullying Prevention: Creating a Positive School Climate and Developing Social Competence
2. Positive School Climate created by the Canadian Government

### Experts in the Field:

1. [Dr. William Preble](#) – Founder of Main Street Academix, an innovative educational research and consulting firm specializing in School Climate research and improvement
2. [Dr Vicki Zakrzewski](#) - is the education director of the Greater Good Science Center.
3. [Dr Jane Bluestein](#) - specializes in programs and resources geared to provide practical and meaningful information

## About Temescal Associates and the Authors

Temescal Associates is a private consulting firm and will serve as the primary consultant for this project. Temescal is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who are serious about improving the lives of young people. We serve our clients by offering gifted and highly experienced consultants who excel at eliciting the internal knowledge and wisdom of those they work with while introducing new knowledge and strategies that can transform the day-to-day practices that lead to improved youth outcomes. For more information, please visit our website at [www.temescalassociates.com](http://www.temescalassociates.com).

**Rozel Cruz** is Project and Office Management Consultant at Temescal Associates. She has a long history in working with non-profits. She joined Temescal Associates in 2010 and currently serves as a consultant focusing on Project and Office Management.

**Sam Piha** is the Founder and Co-Director of Temescal Associates. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 10 years of classroom teaching, and later work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2001, Sam developed and managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. When California began its unprecedented expansion of state-funded afterschool programs, Sam help shape the growing afterschool movement in California. He chaired and served on several key state committees and joined with others to build a state-wide system of support for new programs, align state afterschool policies with youth development principles, and successfully support the launch of the state's After School Safety and Education for Teens, a large state-wide high school afterschool initiative.

Sam has served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a Masters Degree in Social Welfare, and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

**Samantha Walters** is Research Consultant at Temescal Associates. While getting her B.A. in Sociology from the University of Arizona, Samantha started working as a Social Media Strategist for a nonprofit organization. This experience led her to create her own Social Media Consulting firm and pursue a Master's degree in Social Entrepreneurship and Change from Pepperdine University.

## About the Expanded Learning 360/365 Project: Skills for Success in School, Work, and Life

*Expanded Learning: 360/365* is a collaborative project of the California School-Age Consortium (CaSAC), the Partnership for Children and Youth (PCY), ASAPconnect, and Temescal Associates/Learning in Afterschool & Summer (LIAS).

This project is based on two strongly held beliefs:

1. In order for children to grow into healthy and productive citizens, they must learn and practice a wide variety of inter-related skills - social-emotional, character as well as academic – hence the term “360”, and
2. Children learn in a variety of settings and year-round. This includes formal settings, such as school, and informal settings, such as afterschool, extracurricular, and summer youth programs - hence the reference to “365”.

This project is dedicated to promoting the development of critical skills beyond academics that research has identified as essential to young people’s success in school, work, and life.

### Background

In the last decade, research on learning and the brain, and the impact of social-emotional and character skills, has expanded our understanding of learning. Currently, we are witnessing a significant pivot from a narrow focus on academic performance measured by standardized reading and math test scores to a broader perspective of young people’s development that includes and promotes social-emotional and character skills. This shift is reflected by the new Common Core State Standards, the CORE Waiver’s focus on social-emotional accountability, and Expanded Learning Quality Standards being developed in many states.

### How Expanded Learning 360/365 Will Support Learning

In order to see this change successfully executed, Expanded Learning 360/365 will help policymakers, district and school leaders and expanded learning providers better identify and integrate social-emotional and character skills into their work with young people. We will accomplish this by:

- Clearly defining the role that expanded learning plays in social-emotional and character skill development,
- Promoting that school and expanded learning leaders work together to integrate teaching strategies around these skills across the school day and into expanded learning time,
- Working with policymakers and district leaders to integrate these ideas into the policies that guide and govern schools and expanded learning programs, and
- Identifying and developing trainings and curriculum for school and expanded learning staff that include best practices for supporting these skills in their young people.

Toward these ends, Expanded Learning 360/365 will partner with researchers and practitioners to provide advice on the development of policy and educational materials, the use of effective curricula, and training content and approaches for schools and expanded learning programs.

### How to Access Resources from the Expanded Learning 360/365 Project

The resources and tools developed through this project will be available on our website: [www.expandedlearning360-365.com](http://www.expandedlearning360-365.com). Please note that this website is currently under construction. Please check back in the near future.