## Social and Physical Environment

The **social environment** is defined as the quality of the relationships among staff and students in the school, the emotional well-being of students, as well as the attachments that students have with their families and members of the wider community. **Physical environments** include the buildings, grounds, play spaces, and equipment within and surrounding the school. This pillar of health promoting schools challenges educators and administrators to attend to all aspects of the learning environment in order to meet the emotional, physical and academic needs of a diverse population of children and youth.

Physical and Emotional Safety

Within a health-promoting school framework, safety for learning includes both physical safety and emotional/psychological safety. The creation of a safe environment involves both advance planning and ready responses in times of crisis. Strategies for proactive planning include:

**Physical Safety**

* Ensure that signs are posted, exits are identified and illuminated and halls are clear to facilitate ease of movement.
* Have emergency codes and procedures posted in hallways and in classrooms. Review these on a regular basis with school staff and students.
* Assign educational staff to monitor student movements at doors and hallways at times of arrival, departure or class transitions.
* Ensure that all school staff and students have a clear understanding regarding positive behaviour expectations in the classroom, halls and lunch areas, as well as during community or special events. These expectations should be reviewed at the outset of the school year, as well as before and after vacation breaks.
* Collect data from school staff and students on areas of concern related to physical safety. Use such data to identify problems and potential responses.

**Emotional Safety**

* Encourage staff to learn students’ names as soon as possible and to greet them by name each day.
* Ensure that students who are identified as at-risk or needing additional support have a staff member assigned to them who will take additional initiative and make a positive connection.
* Review behavioural expectations with students and practice specific behaviours, skills or routines to ensure positive participation in classroom and school activities.
* Ensure that educational and school staff model respectful behaviour towards their colleagues and students.
* Respond in a timely fashion to reports of harassment, name-calling or bullying, including instances of cyberbullying.
* Implement responsive strategies that support students who have experienced negative interactions and apply restorative processes to re-engage students who have initiated any form of harassment or bullying towards others.

School and Classroom Climate

Developing plans to positively impact school-wide and classroom climate requires designing actions that contribute to enhancing students’ engagement socially, academically and intellectually. Student engagement can be defined as “the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school (social engagement), participate in academic and non-academic activities (academic engagement), strive to meet the formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning (intellectual engagement)” (Willms, Friesen and Milton, 2009, p. 7).

Addressing student engagement involves understanding and responding to the **experiences and perspectives of students**. It is critical that educators and parents understand how students feel about school life (Are they frustrated, anxious, bored or depressed?); their own achievement (Are they excited about what they are learning? Are they learning at all?); and their relationships with others (Do they feel good about themselves? Do they feel cared about by others?). Gathering data through student perception surveys, focus groups and other means can promote better understanding both student and staff perspectives on the climate, culture and inclusivity of the school.

Use of Physical Spaces

Health promoting schools benefit from a commitment to the **universal design of**

**physical spaces**. With proactive planning measures in place, the needs of all students and staff are addressed in an atmosphere of full inclusion and acceptance of diversity. Physical spaces should be designed to ensure that all students and school staff:

* Feel welcome
* Can access facilities and maneuver within them
* Are able to fully participate and benefit from learning activities

When applying universal design principles to the development or renovation of physical spaces in schools, it is essential to consider the diversity of the school community at all stages of planning. The following steps outline ways to apply the principles of universal design to physical spaces:

Schools should review community standards to identify the most appropriate practices for the inclusive design of physical spaces.

* All staff members should be made aware of school policies for addressing accommodation requests by individuals for whom the design of a space does not automatically provide access.
* Tailor and deliver ongoing training and support to staff who manage the school’s physical spaces. Share institutional goals with respect to diversity and inclusion and practices for ensuring welcoming, accessible and inclusive experiences for everyone using the space.
* Include universal design measures in periodic evaluations of the space, evaluate the space with a diverse group of users, and make modifications based on feedback (Burgstahler, 2009).

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