

What Should You Know before Choosing A School Climate Survey for Your School or District?

There are many school climate surveys available today. Pre-packaged anti-bullying programs often come with surveys for students and parents, and the NJ DOE website lists a variety of resources, including surveys. Some of these surveys are available for free. Some of these surveys are well designed, but some are not; using a poorly designed survey will, at best, waste your time and fail to produce useful information and, at worst, can damage your anti-bullying efforts or produce evidence that your climate is worsening even if it is actually improving. Designing a school climate survey requires both expertise in survey techniques, and evidence-based knowledge of the impact of school climate on bullying behavior. Choosing the right survey can improve efficiency and effectiveness, allowing you to identify climate issues before HIB incidents occur, focusing your anti-bullying programming efforts and resources efficiently on areas that need attention, providing realistic goals and guiding your School Safety Team toward them, and producing data for your school ABR self-assessment.

Whether or not you choose to use the School Climate and Bullying Prevention Survey (SCBPS) available from Spectrum Diversity, LLC, this outline provides some information you should know before choosing a survey for your school.



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When Choosing A Survey for Your School, What Questions Should You Ask?

(See the next page for information about the answers you should look for)

1. How long has this survey been in use? Does it have a track record, showing:

- Successful identification of problem areas?
- The ability to produce evidence of yearly improvement if follow-up surveys are done in subsequent years?

2. Is the survey designed specifically with New Jersey schools, and New Jersey laws and regulations, in mind?

- Is the survey designed to facilitate compliance with the ABR?
- Is the survey designed to avoid the requirement for active parental consent in New Jersey?

3. Who designed the survey?

- Were the topics covered in the survey chosen by professional anti-bullying experts with evidence-based knowledge of research on school climate?
- Do these experts work directly in preK-Grade12 schools and have experience with actual school bullying, in addition to academic knowledge of the research on bullying?
- Was the survey designed by professional survey researchers with experience surveying youth, and a working knowledge of youth culture, including cyber culture?

4. Does the survey test knowledge, or does it measure attitudes, opinions, perceptions, & experiences?

5. How does the survey assess the prevalence of “bullying” in your school?

- Does the survey define “bullying” for students and then ask them whether they’ve been bullied or known anyone who was bullied?
- Or, does the survey ask students about specific behaviors, without using the word “bullying”?
- Does the survey distinguish between verbal, social, physical, and cyber behaviors, or does it ask global questions about “bullying” in general?

6. What response scales do the questions in the survey use?

- Are the response scales appropriate to the questions asked, and will they produce findings with direct application to your programming efforts?
- If your school climate improves, will these response scales be able to detect the improvement?
- Are the response scales appropriate for students of different ages?

7. Does the survey measure the specific aspects of school climate that have been found by research to be related to bullying? For example, does it measure:

- Students’ perceptions of what the problems are in school, & how serious these problems are
- Prevalence of bias-based language; prevalence of *quasi*-bullying behaviors
- Clarity of school rules and students’ perceptions of fairness of enforcement and discipline
- Social norms; students’ perceptions of their peers’ attitudes and responses to incidents
- Students’ trust of adults, and perceptions of whether adults take bullying seriously, intervene when incidents occur, and treat each other with respect
- Density of social support networks within the student body (having friends is a protective factor against bullying and other risks to mental and social health)
- Climate for various groups of students, based on characteristics enumerated in the NJ Law Against Discrimination and other relevant “distinguishing characteristics” as per the ABR

What Answers Should You Look For?

1. Length of survey track record. Look for a survey with a track record of at least a few years, so that the survey is fully “field-tested,” and the behavior of the measures in the survey, including their ability to produce useful data and effectively measure changes from year to year, is demonstrated. If the survey has a long history, ask if it has been recently updated so that it reflects contemporary issues faced by students and recent research on the aspects of school climate that are relevant to bullying.

2. Designed for New Jersey. New Jersey is unique for many reasons, including our diversity, our politics, our different regions, and our laws. This is not Texas, California, or Sweden; this is New Jersey. For example, national surveys use definitions of “bullying” that might be inconsistent with statutory NJ definitions, causing confusion and difficulty fitting data into NJ rubrics and forms. In New Jersey, both because of our diversity and because HIB is defined as behavior based on enumerated or other distinguishing “characteristics,” it is essential that assessments of school climate include appropriate assessments of the climate for diverse groups of students, e.g., students with disabilities. These issues of diversity are often overlooked by surveys of “school climate” which usually assess the general “positiveness” of school climate, thereby missing exactly the issues—biases—that define HIB in New Jersey. Also, New Jersey’s active parental consent law for student surveys is more restrictive than similar federal regulations. Active parental consent reduces response rates and biases findings because students with more negative experiences at school are less likely to participate in a survey if parental consent is required, so avoiding the active parental consent requirement will produce more accurate, useful findings. (Note: Responsibility for determining the need for active parental consent rests with the school district; no provider should guarantee that their survey does not require active parental consent.) Surveys are most useful if they are designed with New Jersey, including the ABR and NJ active parental consent requirements, in mind.

3. Expertise of survey designer. Survey design is a professional skill. The wording of questions, the order of the questions, the response options and the way they are formatted, can all influence the findings of your survey. A survey is not a set of questions that ask for the information you want; a survey is a tool that will elicit the information you need to know. You also want to be sure your survey was designed by someone who is familiar with the research on school climate and bullying, and has practical experience working with schools to address bullying, to ensure that the survey assesses aspects of school climate with practical and realistic implications for anti-bullying programming.

4. Does the survey test knowledge, or does it measure attitudes, opinions, perceptions, & experiences? A survey is not a test. If your survey is asking students to identify correct facts about bullying, or to tell you what they think someone “should” do when they see bullying, it is not a survey. Your students’ answers to these questions only reveal how well they can tell you what you want to hear, lack programming implications, and waste the unique potential of an anonymous survey. Also, a “survey” that resembles a test can cause resentment and disengagement among students and staff members. A survey should measure attitudes, opinions, perceptions (e.g., of school climate) and experiences (e.g., of being targeted by peers). Your survey findings should paint a picture of your school from the point of view of your students. If there are “right” or “wrong” answers to questions on the survey, then think carefully about what you want to measure, and whether the answers to those questions will give you useful information.

5. Assessing the Prevalence of “bullying.” Although it is important that all questions in a survey be carefully designed, in reviewing many school climate surveys, I have found that questions assessing the prevalence of bullying are the most likely to be poorly written.

For example, some surveys define the word “bullying,” and then ask students if they’ve been bullied and/or how often they’ve seen others be bullied. This might seem like a simple, straightforward way to assess bullying prevalence, but remember that a well designed survey question does not ask for the information you want; instead, it elicits the information you need. What’s wrong with asking the question this way, and why should you avoid surveys that ask about prevalence this way?

Lack of accuracy and interpretability. The word “bullying” has complicated and varying meanings for different people, and the lay meaning of the word is different from the statutory meaning of “HIB” in New

Jersey. The word already has a meaning, and is emotionally charged, for students; to ask students to replace that meaning with a definition given within the survey itself and then use that definition to answer subsequent questions is poor survey technique. Students will read the question with their own definition of “bullying” in mind and, as that concept differs among students, different students will, effectively, be answering different questions; as a result, findings based on that question are not interpretable.

Inability to demonstrate yearly improvement. As you educate your students about bullying, they will probably develop greater awareness of bullying, and a broader definition of bullying. If, in subsequent years, you continue to use a survey that asks students if they’ve been “bullied” and/or how often they’ve seen others be “bullied,” your findings will probably show that the prevalence of bullying has gone *up* in your school! You do not want this; if your school climate has improved, and your students have become more aware of bullying, you want to use a survey that will show that school climate has improved and bullying has decreased, not a survey that will produce evidence to the contrary.

Potentially damaging findings. Finally, if you use a survey that asks students if they’ve been “bullied,” and 15% of your students say “yes” (a typical finding if the question is worded this way), then what are the implications of the fact that you now have data that purport to show that 15% of your students are being bullied, in a state in which school personnel are required to report and investigate incidents of HIB? If 15% of your students are “bullied,” have you conducted that number of investigations?

To avoid these problems, the survey questions assessing the prevalence of “bullying” should: 1) instead of using the word “bullying,” describe specific behaviors (e.g., calling someone a specific derogatory name, or punching someone) when asking students if they have witnessed or been targeted by the behavior, 2) ask separately about behaviors that underlie different types of bullying, e.g., verbal, physical, social, or cyber; knowing that a student has been “bullied,” without knowing what kind of “bullying” has taken place has no practical implications for anti-bullying programming, but knowing, for example, that the prevalence of “exclusive clubs” is higher among girls in fourth grade than in any other grade does provide you with information that you can use to target specific trouble areas, thereby using your limited resources most efficiently.

6. Response scales. Make sure the response scales (the answers students are given to choose from) are appropriate to the questions on the survey. I have seen questions that ask about the prevalence of behaviors followed by 5- or 7-point Likert agree-disagree scales; this is poor design (e.g., “bullying is common at my school” agree...disagree). A measure of prevalence should have responses that reflect frequency or proportion, e.g., “once a day,” “once a week,” etc. or “all students,” “most students,” etc. An opinion question may be followed by an agree-disagree scale. Response scales should also be appropriate to the age of the students; elementary school students need fewer response choices than high school students, but the choices should be specific enough for you to be able to detect changes in school climate from year to year. Also, beware of “false objectivity;” just because you can add up a series of scores and come up with an “average” or an “index” does not mean you have useful information; often, students’ answers to individual questions will be more useful than composite scores. Composite scores are only useful if the indices have been developed through a procedure like factor analysis, and then statistically “normed” for the population you are surveying (in this case, New Jersey students). Simply summing or averaging students’ answers to a series of related questions does not produce a meaningful result; beware of *false objectivity*.

7. Measures of school climate. If the survey purports to be a survey of school climate with relevance to bullying prevention, then make sure the survey includes questions about school climate that have been shown to be related to bullying, or that are reasonably expected to be related to bullying. If you also want to know whether students feel that their school has enough extra-curricular activities, whether they like the cafeteria food, and whether they think their peers are intelligent, that’s fine, but if you have limited time to allow students to do the survey, you might want a survey that is more focused on evidence-based climate correlates of bullying behavior. The items listed on the second page of this handout are some of the aspects of school climate that are relevant to bullying, and would give you information with practical, programmatic implications.

***The bottom line in bullying prevention is the STUDENTS’ experience of school climate.
Student surveys can measure school climate only if they are done properly.***