

ACES Whitney Academy School Climate Improvement Plan

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ACES Whitney Academy School Climate Improvement Plan

Introduction

The vision of ACES Whitney Academy (Explore, C.R.E.A.T.E. and R.I.S.E.) is an innovative program in the community which engages students to achieve their highest individual potential to become independent, contributing members of society. To achieve this vision, we are committed to fostering a positive, inclusive, and supportive school climate where all members of our community feel safe, valued, and empowered to thrive. Whitney Academy Explore serves students in special education with a wide range of disabilities, grades 9-12. Whitney Academy C.R.E.A.T.E (Creating Relevant Educational and Transition Experiences) serves the same population, in grade “12+” currently ages 18-22, with a focus on building transition skills for readiness after age 22. Students are prepared for the appropriate post-secondary experience: day-supported option, supported employment, or competitive employment. Post-secondary education skills and preparation are also a focus for students interested in enrolling in higher learning. Whitney Academy R.I.S.E. (Reaching Independence [through] Specialized Education) is a program for students with Autism and/or Intellectual Disability that require more intensive behavioral support and a smaller staff-to-student ratio. The target grade levels for R.I.S.E. are grades 11 and 12, with a goal to systematically fade the need for such intensive support and for students to be able to function in the more naturalistic educational setting of an Academy C.R.E.A.T.E. classroom.

Our School Climate Improvement Plan serves as a framework for creating and sustaining such an environment through an ongoing cycle of planning, evaluation, action, and implementation. Grounded in the Connecticut School Climate Standards, the Connecticut School Climate Policy (5131.911) the Connecticut legislative expectations, and ongoing data collection and analysis on our school climate for staff, this plan reflects our dedication to building strong relationships, using restorative practices to strengthen community connections, and providing effective communication, guidance, and support to staff. We understand the connection that when the adults in the workplace are supported, well-trained, and experiencing a positive school climate, that the staff will be equipped to foster a positive school climate for students, including implementing social and emotional learning, behavior support strategies, specialized educational strategies, and using restorative practices to support students who may experience challenging behaviors.

The successful implementation of this plan relies on the leadership of the School Climate Coordinator at the district level and the School Climate Specialist at the school level. Their responsibilities include:

School Climate Coordinator (district-level)

- Provides leadership and support to each school in implementing the School Climate Improvement Plan.
- Collaborates with each School Climate Specialist to develop strategies for preventing, identifying, and responding to challenging behavior, including bullying and harassment.
- Ensures that strategies and expectations are communicated to the broader school community, including inclusion in the student handbook.
- Collects and maintains climate-related data, including climate survey results, discipline records, attendance, and the use of restorative practices.
- Meets at least twice per year with each School Climate Specialist to review progress, recommend revisions to the plan, and assist in completing climate surveys.

School Climate Specialist (school-level)

- Leads efforts to prevent, identify, and respond to challenging behavior, including handling reports of bullying and harassment.
- Implements evidence-based interventions, including restorative practices, to support a positive climate.
- Coordinates and leads the School Climate Committee, ensuring diverse representation from staff, students, families, and the broader school community.
- Oversees the day-to-day implementation of the School Climate Improvement Plan at the building level.
- Works closely with the School Climate Coordinator to analyze data and recommend updates to the plan.

Through this collaborative structure, our School Climate Improvement Plan not only meets state policy requirements but reflects our school's commitment to creating a culturally responsive, equitable, and restorative learning environment where all students feel safe, respected, and able to reach their full potential.

School Climate Committee

At each school, the School Climate Committee plays a critical role in supporting the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of the School Climate Improvement Plan. The committee is led by the School Climate Specialist and is responsible for ensuring that school climate efforts are informed by input from all members of the school community. The committee uses data from the school climate survey, along with other relevant information, to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to recommend strategies that foster a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all students, families, and staff.

The School Climate Committee's responsibilities include:

- Assisting in the development, scheduling, and administration of the school climate survey.
- Analyzing survey results and other data to assess school climate strengths and challenges.
- Collaborating with the School Climate Specialist to draft, propose, and revise the School Climate Improvement Plan.
- Advising on and supporting the implementation of evidence-based strategies and restorative practices to improve school climate.
- Ensuring that the school community receives regular updates about the school's climate efforts.

The composition of the School Climate Committee ensures that diverse perspectives are represented. Membership includes:

- The School Climate Specialist (committee lead) - Juliellen Rodriguez, Principal
- A teacher, selected by the exclusive bargaining representative for certified employees - Eric Carson, special education teacher
- A representative group of students, chosen to reflect the school's demographics (as developmentally appropriate) - Angel A., Braydon C.
- Families of students enrolled at the school - Jeanine Chiappetta

- At least two additional members of the school community, selected by the School Climate Specialist - Jennifer Chester, special education teacher; Rachel Cabral, special education teacher; Ebony Latimer, Individual Aide; Dana Burton, Teacher Assistant Driver; Nicole Diaz, Board Certified Behavior Analyst; Chris Holland, Behavior Technician; Jill Ditota, speech therapist; Brian Aufiero, school social worker

This broad representation ensures that the committee’s work reflects the voices, needs, and experiences of the entire school community. Together, the School Climate Specialist and School Climate Committee work to promote equity, foster positive relationships, and ensure that the school climate is continually improving to support academic, social, and emotional success for all students.

Data for and Evaluation of School Climate

The School Climate Improvement Plan should be informed by a holistic review of data that reflects both the overall climate of the school and individual student behavior. Key data sources include the school climate survey, which gathers input from students, families, and staff about safety, relationships, and the learning environment, administered in October 2025. Data from a follow-up survey, previous school survey data ranging from 2023-2025, as well as anecdotal data reviewed within the school climate-team half-way workshop sessions, have also informed this plan.

Whitney Academy will also regularly review discipline data (including reports of bullying, harassment, and other challenging behaviors), student and staff attendance trends, and academic performance data to identify patterns that may indicate climate concerns. In addition, restorative practices data—such as the use and outcomes of restorative responses—provides insight into how effectively the school is building a culture of community, accountability, and repair and will be analyzed.

This data will be shared transparently with the school community to ensure that students, families, and staff have opportunities to review, understand, and respond. The School Climate Committee will lead this process, sharing key data points and plan updates through regular updates, family forums, school websites, and climate committee meetings. Opportunities for families and students to offer feedback—through focus groups, listening sessions, or surveys—will ensure that the School Climate Improvement Plan reflects the authentic experiences and needs of the entire school community. By making data review and climate improvement a shared responsibility, Whitney Academy will foster stronger relationships and build trusting, inclusive partnerships that strengthen school culture overall.

School Climate Improvement Plan Goals and Action Steps

To support the ongoing development and monitoring of the School Climate Improvement Plan, the School Climate Committee will use a structured School Climate Action Planning Table to document each identified climate goal and track progress over time. For each goal, the committee will outline the data sources that support the need for this focus area, the intended outcomes, and how the goal aligns with the Connecticut School Climate Standards. Each goal will be broken into specific action steps, with clear identification of whether each step involves professional learning, the creation of a procedure or protocol, or the development of new resources. The table will also indicate the person responsible for implementation, and ongoing progress and monitoring notes. This tool allows the School Climate Committee to set multiple goals if needed, ensuring that climate improvement efforts are comprehensive, data-driven, and responsive to the evolving needs of the school community. By embedding this table into the climate improvement process, schools can foster transparency, accountability, and collaboration while maintaining a clear focus on equity, restorative practices, and positive school culture.

Goal 1: ACES School Climate Specialists will work collaboratively to develop agency-wide practices, protocols and documentation

- Evidence/Data:**
- Feedback from School Climate Specialists and committees about present practices, protocols, and documentation for addressing and documenting challenging behaviors.
 - Feedback on variability in how schools and programs currently define and respond to challenging behaviors, resulting in inconsistent student, family, and staff experiences across ACES schools and programs.
 - New statutory requirements under Connecticut school climate legislation requiring clear procedures, documentation, and reporting related to challenging behaviors.
 - Lack of universal, agency-wide system collecting, analyzing, and using challenging behavior data to inform agency-wide improvement efforts.

- Intended Outcomes:**
- ACES will have clear, consistent, and agency-wide practices for defining, reporting, investigating, and responding to challenging behaviors, including guidelines for aligning agency-wide practices with needs of specific schools/programs
 - ACES will implement standardized challenging behavior forms within a universal digital data system, resulting in consistent documentation, improved data accuracy, and increased capacity to monitor trends and ensure equitable and timely responses across all schools and programs.
 - Schools will share a common language and understanding of challenging behaviors and appropriate tiered responses based on individualized students’ needs.
 - Students, families, and staff will experience greater clarity, transparency, and consistency in how challenging behaviors are addressed across ACES schools and programs.
 - ACES will strengthen its capacity to monitor compliance, measure impact, and adjust supports based on data and stakeholder feedback.

Standard	Action Steps	Action Type	Person Responsible	Progress	Monitoring Notes
Standard 1 ▾	Define challenging behaviors, including examples and continuum of responses, and other terms necessary for alignment	Resource ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee	In Progress ▾	
Standard 3 ▾	Identify, analyze, and share current practices used at schools/programs to determine what should be used agency wide.	Procedure/Protocol ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee	In Progress ▾	
Standard 1 ▾	Create agency-wide challenging behavior forms including reporting, investigation, and response forms	Resource ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee	In Progress ▾	
Standard 1 ▾	Determine digital platform used for challenging forms and data collection, including access to appropriate stakeholders.	Resource ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee, ACES Tech Services	In Progress ▾	
Standard 2 ▾	Developing response protocols for challenging	Procedure/Protocol ▾	ACES School Climate	Not Started ▾	

	behaviors and tiered responses (including response flow chart).		Specialist Sub-Committee		
Standard 1 ▾	Seek feedback from a variety of stakeholders at various stages of creation/implementation.	Professional Learning ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee, Stakeholders	Not Started ▾	
Standard 1 ▾	Identify agency-wide training related to addressing challenging behaviors and tiered response for all stakeholders.	Professional Learning ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee	Not Started ▾	
Standard 4 ▾	Create protocols for data collection analysis.	Professional Learning ▾	ACES School Climate Specialist Sub-Committee, PDSI	Not Started ▾	

Goal 2: ACES Whitney Academy will establish clear structures, procedures, and expectations that enable the consistent measurement, monitoring, and improvement of school climate for all stakeholders.					
Evidence/Data: October 2025 PBIS School Survey Data; Staff survey data 2023 - 2025; Anecdotal data on lived experiences of staff in various roles, reviewed amongst the school climate team.					
Intended Outcome: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive training programs and support will ensure staff are well-informed and confident in their roles. Collaborative practices will connect classes, fostering teamwork and shared learning across the school. Implementation of Restorative Practices will guide a positive school climate. Clear, consistent guidelines support effective staff management and create a positive work environment. Sustainable structures and systems will be established to maintain long-term success and stability. Increased staff-buy in and compliance with expectations and procedures, resulting in a safer, more supportive, and more consistent experience for all stakeholders. Decisions will be data-driven with multiple opportunities to include stakeholders in decisions. 					
Standard	Action Steps	Action Type	Person Responsible	Progress	Monitoring Notes

Standard 2 ▾	<p>Create Clear Guidelines & Rubric for Schoolwide Expectations to Build a Positive School Climate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Creation of a Schoolwide Expectation Rubric for all staff based on the ACES Employee Handbook, job descriptions, employee contracts, and program mission and vision to clarify employee understanding of:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ expected workplace behaviors for all staff◦ expectations and structures for daily classroom schedule, classroom team meetings, positive functioning classroom and school climate attitudes and actions◦ expected responsibilities for each role◦ spectrum of support and discipline measures based on employee needs or actions◦ Draft to be completed by April 2026 to be submitted to union leaders and Human Capital and Development for feedback	Resource ▾	Administration and School Climate Team	Not Started ▾	
Standard 3 ▾	<p>Improve Training & Onboarding Procedures for All Roles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create certified staff guide for procedures and practices (developed by administration and certified staff Professional Learning Community) by May 2026• Design schedule and content for support staff Professional Learning Community by February 2026• Design schedule and content for initial support staff onboarding and training by February 2026• Create and pilot support staff mentorship program by March 2026	Procedure/Protocol ▾	Administration and School Climate Team	In Progress ▾	<p>Dec. 2025: Draft for certified staff guide has been created</p> <p>Dec. 2025: Professional Development leaders for Support Staff PLC have been identified (Lisa B., Carrie D.)</p> <p>Dec. 2025: Draft content and</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize staff feedback to refine initial onboarding and training practices for support staff to create final product by May 2026 Utilize staff feedback to refine content for yearly professional development sessions to create a yearly plan that can be updated as needed with specifics by August 2026 				schedule for Individual Aide and Teacher Assistant/Driver trainings have been created
Standard 4 ▾	Strengthen Schoolwide Communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create communication flowchart to clarify when and how specific information will be shared with staff (school updates, staffing updates, assignment changes, referral information) by May 2026 Include data collection and analysis on effectiveness of current communication channels staff communication preferences and needs within the climate surveys and focus groups (see below) by August 2026 Administration to explore and implement “Close the Loop” practices by May 2026 (<i>Follow up on feedback, communicate what actions were taken, and show how input led to meaningful changes</i>) Complete flowchart and implement new learning based on data analysis by August 2026 Train all staff in effective communication practices that align with Restorative Practices, regularly incorporate and model communicating effectively using these Restorative strategies 	Procedure/Protocol ▾	Administration and School Climate Team	In Progress ▾	<p>Dec. 2025: Current communication channels admin to staff: weekly update email, anonymous suggestion box, building meetings, regular emails, flyers, hallway board</p> <p>Dec. 2025: Staff received initial training in Restorative Practices in August 2025 and Assistant Principal Dobbs has designed a focused professional development learning plan, including staff and student feedback channels, to continue growth</p>
Standard 3 ▾	Develop and Implement Structures for Analyzing School Climate Data:	Procedure/Protocol ▾	Administration and School Climate Team	In Progress ▾	Dec. 2025: Team will draw upon the PBIS survey and previously administered

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with ACES PDSI and ACES colleagues to develop a climate survey for staff that will be distributed 2x/yearly (January, May) starting May 2026 (in addition to ACES-wide survey in October)• Work with ACES PDSI and ACES colleagues to develop a series of 3 focus group sessions to be held in November, March, and May to collect additional data from each group of employees (support staff and certified staff)• Work with ACES Human Capital and Development to establish a quarterly schedule for staff attendance data collection and analysis• Work with ACES PDSI and ACES colleagues to refine the climate team's skills in data analysis in regard to the survey data, focus group data, and attendance data• Share school climate data during corresponding school building meetings				<p>admin-created surveys as a draft to create the standardized survey</p> <p>Dec. 2025: Climate survey data was shared with staff at a previous building meeting this year.</p> <p>Families will receive a summary of the data in January 2026</p>
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Appendix

Connecticut Legislation

The development and implementation of this School Climate Improvement Plan is grounded in the requirements set forth in Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-222h. This statute mandates that all schools in Connecticut establish and maintain a School Climate Improvement Plan designed to promote a positive and safe school climate, prevent and respond to challenging behaviors, and foster environments where all students feel valued, respected, and connected to their school community.

The School Climate Improvement Plan template used by our school aligns directly with the Connecticut School Climate Policy, which was developed to support compliance with C.G.S. Sec. 10-222h and the broader requirements established by Public Act 23-167. Each element of the plan—including the identification of climate goals, data sources, intended outcomes, climate standards alignment, action steps, and monitoring processes—reflects state expectations for building equitable, restorative, and culturally responsive school

climates. This ensures that our school is not only meeting state requirements, but also embedding best practices that reflect the voices, needs, and experiences of our diverse school community. Below is a list of highlighted points from this legislation:

- C.G.S. Sec. 10-222hh requires each school to develop a school climate improvement plan, based on the results of the school climate survey, school climate committee recommendations, protocols and supports outlined in the law, and other relevant data.
- The school climate specialist, in collaboration with the school climate coordinator, is required to develop this plan and update it as necessary.
- The plan must be submitted to the school climate coordinator on or before December 31 each year and must be made available to the school community upon approval.
- Under the law, the plan is to be used in the prevention of, identification of and response to “challenging behavior”.
- C.G.S. Sec. 10-222hh(b) outlines that the plans must include protocols and supports to enhance classroom safety and address challenging behavior, and, must, at a minimum, include the components detailed below.
 - Contact information for an administrator to be notified when incidents of challenging behavior result in student discipline or removal of a student from the classroom.
 - The process by which this designated administrator will assess the facts, severity and intentionality of an incident of challenging behavior.
 - The designated location that students may be sent when removed from class for disciplinary reasons pursuant to C.G.S. Sec. 10-233b. In addition, protocols and supports must include the supports each student may receive in this location, including, among other things, interventions from trained school employees, therapeutic resources and mental health supports.
 - The ways to “address challenging behavior, enhance resiliency, increase the use of de-escalation strategies and improve social and emotional skills.”
 - Safeguards to ensure that supports, services or interventions are in compliance with the special education laws, including the IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and a student’s IEP or Section 504 Plan.
 - A requirement that the Superintendent submit, at least annually, a report to the local or regional board of education concerning the number of tiered response incidents that occurred in the prior year.
 - A prohibition on discrimination or retaliation against individuals who report or investigate tiered response incidents.

School Climate Standards

1. The school district community has a shared vision and plan for promoting and sustaining a positive school climate that focuses on prevention, identification, and response to all challenging behavior.
2. The school district community adopts policies that promote:
 - a. a sound school environment that develops and sustains academic, social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual skills; and
 - b. a restorative school environment focused on overcoming barriers to teaching and learning by building and supporting meaningful school-wide relationships, and intentionally re-engaging any disengaged students, educators, and families of students in the school community.
3. The school community’s practices are identified, prioritized, and supported to:
 - a. promote learning and the positive academic, social, emotional, ethical, and civic development of students;
 - b. enhance engagement in teaching, learning, and school-wide activities;

- c. address barriers to teaching and learning; and d. develop and sustain a restorative infrastructure that builds capacity, accountability, and sustainability.
- 4. The school community creates a school environment where everyone is safe, welcomed, supported, and included in all school-based activities.
- 5. The school community creates a restorative system that cultivates a sense of belonging through norms and activities that promote social and civic responsibility, and a dedication to cultural responsiveness, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

School Climate Glossary (per policy):

The following definitions related to creating a positive school climate and the write of the school climate improvement plan are taken directly from the Connecticut School Climate Policy (5131.911)

School climate	means the quality and character of the school life, with a particular focus on the quality of the relationships within the school community, and which is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and that reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices and organizational structures within the school community
Positive Sustained School Climate	is the foundation for learning and positive youth development and includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, culturally, racially, intellectually, and physically safe. b. People who treat one another with dignity and are engaged, respected and solve problems restoratively. c. A school community that works collaboratively together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. d. Adults who model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning; and e. A school community that contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.
Social Emotional Learning	means the process through which children and adults achieve emotional intelligence through the competencies of self-awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.
Emotional intelligence	means the ability to (A) perceive, recognize, and understand emotions in oneself or others, (B) use emotions to facilitate cognitive activities, including, but not limited to, reasoning, problem solving and interpersonal communication, (C) understand and identify emotions, and (D) manage emotions in oneself and others.
Bullying	means unwanted and aggressive behavior among children in grades kindergarten to twelve, inclusive, that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.
School Environment	means a school-sponsored or school-related activity, function or program, whether on or off school grounds, including at a school bus stop or on a school bus or other vehicle owned, leased or used by a local or regional board of education, and may include other activities, functions or programs that occur outside of a school sponsored or school-related activity, function or program if bullying at or during such other activities, functions or programs negatively impacts the school environment.
Cyberbullying	means any act of bullying through the use of the Internet, interactive and digital technologies, cellular mobile telephone or other mobile electronic

	devices or any other electronic communication.
Teen dating violence	means any act of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, including stalking, harassing and threatening, that occurs between two students who are currently in or who have recently been in a dating relationship.
Mobile electronic device	means any hand-held or other portable electronic equipment capable of providing data communication between two or more individuals, including, but not limited to, a text messaging device, a paging device, a personal digital assistant, a laptop computer, equipment that is capable of playing a video game or a digital video disk or equipment on which digital images are taken or transmitted.
Electronic communication	means any transfer of signs, signals, writing, images, sounds, data or intelligence of any nature transmitted in whole or in part by a wire, radio, electromagnetic, photoelectronic or photo-optical system.
School climate improvement plan	means a building-specific plan developed by the school climate committee, in collaboration with the school climate specialist, using school climate survey data and any other relevant information, through a process that engages all members of the school community and involves such members in a series of overlapping systemic improvements, school-wide instructional practices and relational practices that prevent, identify and respond to challenging behavior, including, but not limited to alleged bullying and harassment in the school environment.
Restorative Practices	means evidence and research-based system-level practices that focus on (A) building high-quality, constructive relationships among the school community, (B) holding each student accountable for any challenging behavior, and (C) ensuring each such student has a role in repairing relationships and reintegrating into the school community.
School climate survey	means a research-based, validated and developmentally appropriate survey administered to students, school employees and families of students, in the predominant languages of the members of the school community, that measures and identifies school climate needs and tracks progress through a school climate improvement plan.
Connecticut school climate policy	means the school climate policy developed, updated and approved by an association in the state that represents boards of education and adopted by the Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Advisory Collaborative, established pursuant to section 10-222q of the general statutes, as amended by this act, that provides a framework for an effective and democratically informed school climate improvement process that serves to implement Connecticut school climate standards, and includes a continuous cycle of (A) planning and preparation, (B) evaluation, (C) action planning, and (D) implementation
School employee	means (A) a teacher, substitute teacher, administrator, school superintendent, school counselor, school psychologist, social worker, school nurse, physician, paraeducator or coach employed by a local or regional board of education, or (B) any other individual who, in the performance of his or her duties, has regular contact with students and who provides services to or on behalf of students enrolled in a public school, pursuant to a contract with a local or regional board of education.
School community	means any individuals, groups, businesses, public institutions and nonprofit organizations that are invested in the welfare and vitality of a public school system and the community in which it is located, including, but not limited to, students and their families, members of the local or regional board of education, volunteers at a school and school employees.