

Community and Connectedness

Experiences of School Climate, Engagement and Wellbeing for
Students with Disabilities

The importance of social-emotional development

- ▶ There is growing focus in the field of education on the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as not only a critical aspect of human growth, but a key outcome that supports learning and achievement (Lipscomb, S., Haimson, J., Liu, A. Y., Burghardt, J., Johnson, D. R., & Thurlow, M. L., 2017).
- ▶ This includes understanding how the environment at the school or classroom level supports the experiences of students and subsequent development of these important skills.
- ▶ We know that students with disabilities have unique needs and it's important for us to understand their experiences and how the environments they learn and develop in support their social-emotional growth.
- ▶ This enables us to advocate for them in the most effective way possible.
- ▶ Academic success can only happen in an environment that supports feelings of safety, self-esteem, and wellbeing.



A word cloud of educational and psychological terms. The largest words are 'school climate', 'engagement', 'self-determination', 'safety', 'social-emotional learning', and 'environment'. Other prominent words include 'academic support', 'self-awareness', 'psychological empowerment', 'relationships', 'school connectedness', 'wellness', 'equity', and 'community'. Smaller words include 'self-initiation', 'autonomy', 'self-advocacy', 'culture', 'self-regulation', 'self-management', 'self-esteem', 'self-direction', and 'self-control'. The words are arranged in a roughly triangular shape pointing to the right, with varying colors including dark blue, brown, orange, and purple.

environment
school climate
engagement
self-determination
safety
social-emotional learning
academic support
self-awareness
psychological empowerment
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wellness
equity
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self-initiation
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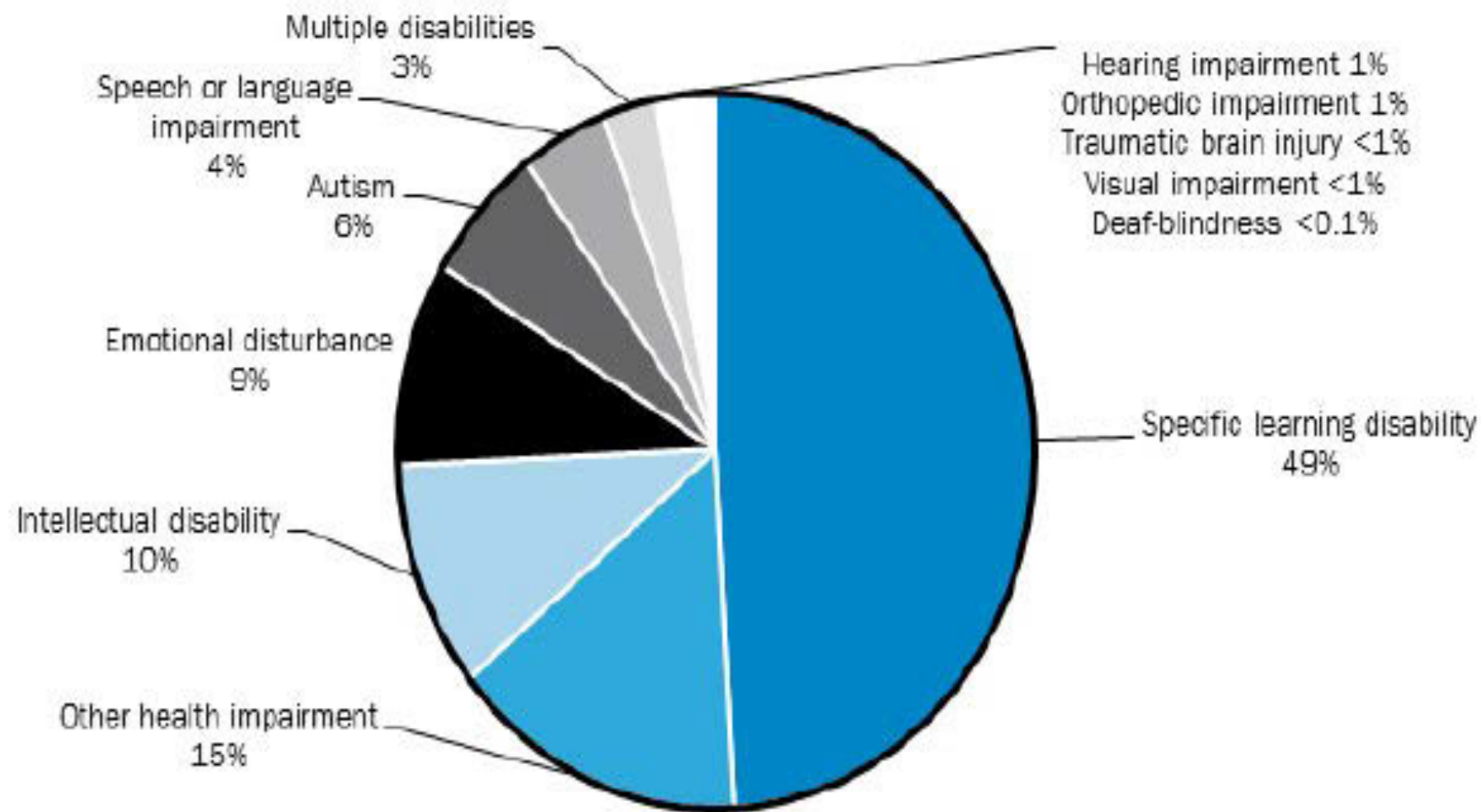
- ▶ There are many different terms and concepts used to describe social-emotional development. Core elements include **feelings of safety, relationships with peers, relationships with adults, feelings of belonging and community, empowerment, and self-esteem.**
- ▶ We need to consider the student's feelings and the outward signs of how these manifest daily experiences.

Feeling	Experience
Empowerment	Making choices about activities
Connectedness	Communicating with friends
Belonging	Participation in activities and events

“What Gets Measured Gets Done”

- ▶ In response to this increased focus on student social-emotional learning as an educational outcome, more schools, districts, and state departments of education are seeking ways to measure and monitor students’ perceptions and experiences (Jones & Shindler 2016).
- ▶ The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to include measures of School Quality such as student engagement and school climate in their accountability plans (ESEA section 1111(c)(4)(B)(v), 2016).
- ▶ It is challenging to measure constructs such student engagement and school climate because they are related and overlapping.
- ▶ It is challenging to measure students’ experiences because it relies on self-report. Behaviors and activities are observable but feelings, perspectives, and opinions are internal.

Figure ES1. Percentages of youth ages 13 to 21 in special education in 2012, by disability group



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, IDEA Data Center.

Challenges in measuring the experiences of students with disabilities

- ▶ Huge diversity is present in the population of students with disabilities. There are unique experiences and needs among students in different disability categories.
- ▶ Common methods of assessment are surveys (both student and parent) and observations. Both have limitations.
- ▶ Most surveys have not been designed with the needs of students with disabilities in mind or in ways that are physically accessible.
- ▶ Most surveys do not include questions about constructs specific to students with disabilities and their experiences.
- ▶ Other student demographics such as race, socio-economic status, and gender identity have been considered.

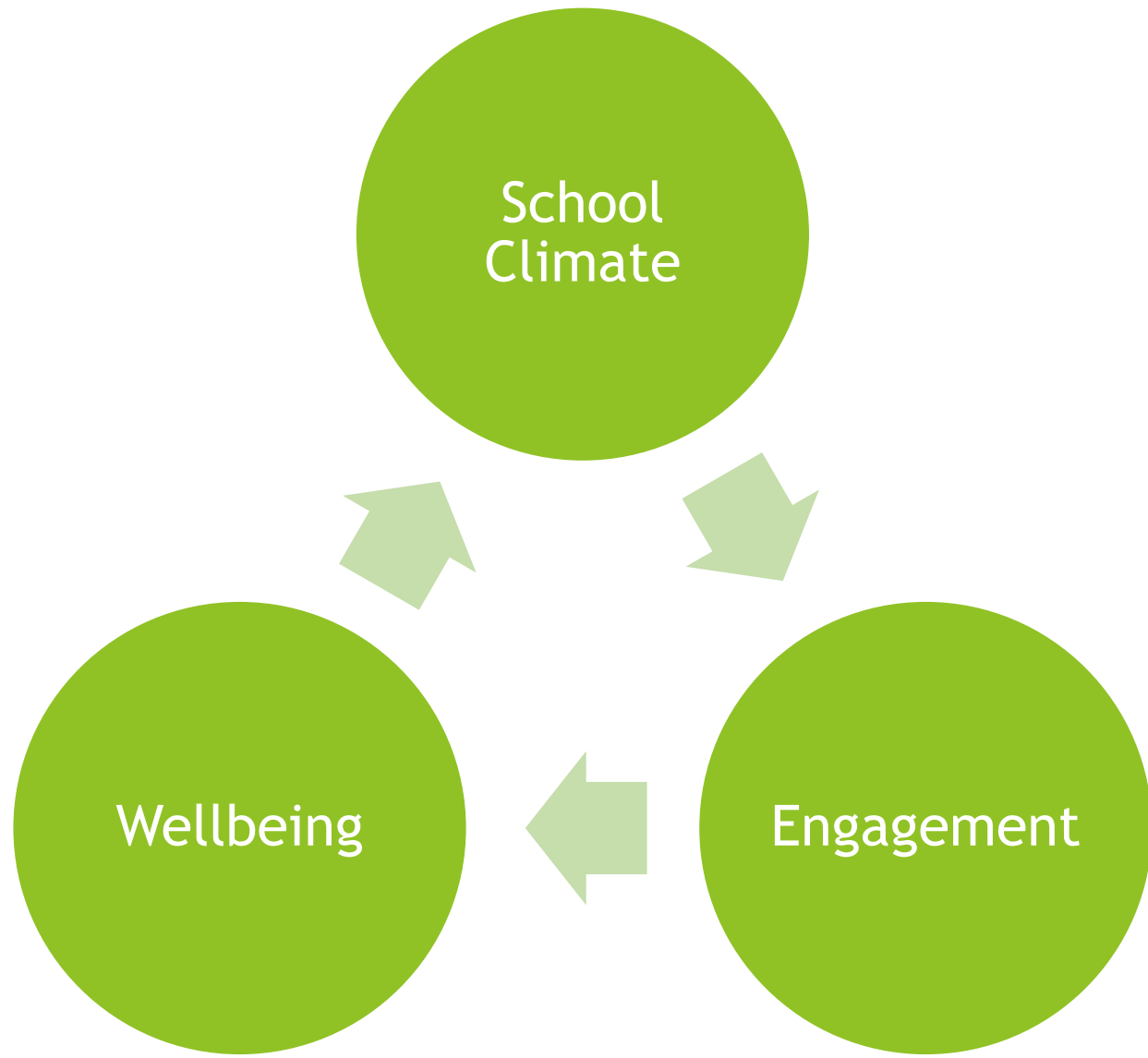
But it's still important to measure student experiences and social-emotional outcomes

- ▶ Helps us to **breakdown the different elements that support a student's wellbeing** and identify places that need attention. This includes the individual, classroom and school levels.
- ▶ Helps us take a larger and **more holistic view** of the student's environment.
- ▶ Affords the opportunity to **assess potential risks and implement protections.**
- ▶ Affords the opportunity to **design/select appropriate curricula and interventions.**
- ▶ This is an important outcome for all students and especially for students who may show slow academic progress.
- ▶ Help support their ability to realize their full potential.

As a group, students with disabilities are more vulnerable to adverse outcomes.

- ▶ **Youth with an IEP are more likely than their peers to live in low-income households and receive federal food benefits, but not welfare benefits** Specifically, 58 percent of youth with an IEP live in low-income households, compared with 46 percent of youth without an IEP.
- ▶ **Youth with an IEP are at least five times more likely than their peers to have difficulty communicating and understanding others.** Parents indicate that 29 percent of youth with an IEP have trouble communicating through any means, including sign language, manual communication, lip reading, cued speech, oral speech, and a communication board or book, compared with 4 percent of youth without an IEP. In addition, 44 percent have trouble understanding others, versus just 8 percent of their peers.
- ▶ **Youth with an IEP are less likely than their peers to engage in several activities that demonstrate their autonomy.** For example, 56 percent of youth with an IEP report choosing with their friends the activities they want to do at least most of the time, compared with 66 percent of youth without an IEP.

(Lipscomb et al, 2017)



School
Climate

Wellbeing

Engagement

School Climate

- ▶ *School climate is defined as shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).*

Figure 1. A model of the distinct and overlapping elements of school climate and social and emotional competence with illustrative components



(Osher & Berg, 2017)

- ▶ “A positive school climate creates the conditions for SEL; **the social and emotional competence of each member of the school community, both individually and collectively, affects school climate.**” (Osher & Berg, 2017)
- ▶ “**School climate is a significant predictor** of rates of dropout, absenteeism and truancy, suspension, drug use, and violent and aggressive behavior” (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014).
- ▶ “Optimal developmental trajectories occur as more core psychological dispositions (positive beliefs about self and others, emotional competence, engaged living) are enhanced. The rationale for fostering these dispositions is their **primary effects emerge via the daily transactions a youth has with the adults, family, and peers in her immediate social ecosystem**” (You, Furlong, Felix & O’Malley, 2015).

“..the quality of the climate appears to be the single most predictive factor in any schools capacity to promote student achievement” (Jones & Shindler, 2016).

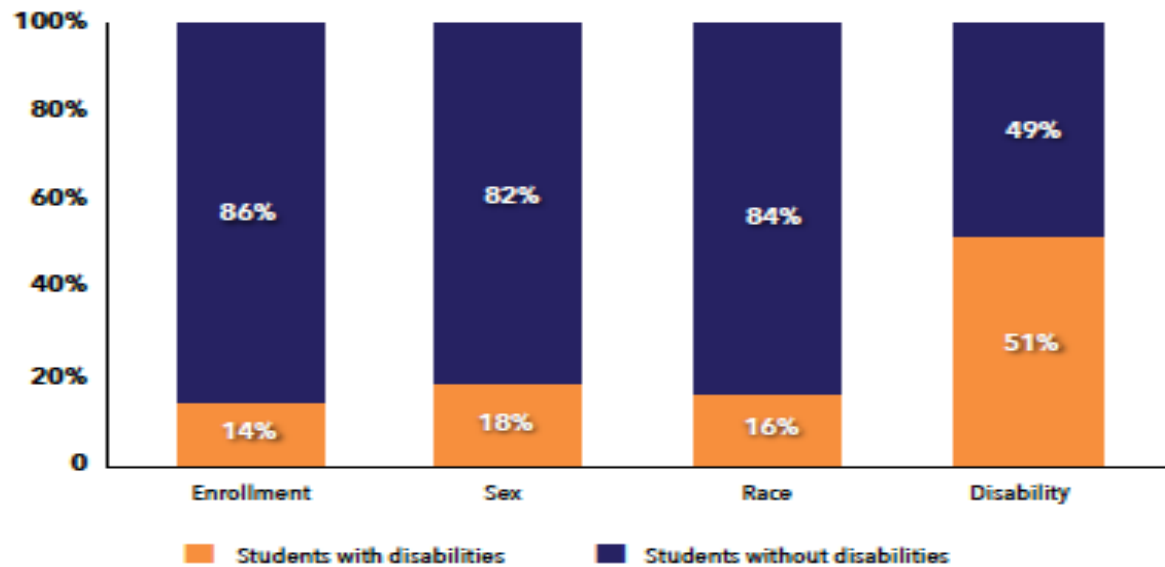
Psychology of Success	Psychology of Failure
Internal Locus of Control	External Locus of Control
Belonging and Acceptance	Alienation and Worthlessness
Growth Orientation	Helpless Orientation

School Climate - Safety

- ▶ **Several types of bullying experiences are more common for youth with an IEP than their peers.** Bullying here refers to several types of negative experiences that include teasing, being the subject of rumors, being attacked, being told to do things to be friends with someone, being threatened over the Internet or by other electronic methods, or having possessions stolen. For example, 37 percent of youth with an IEP report being teased or called names at school during the school year, compared with 28 percent of those without an IEP. More than one-quarter (27 percent) of youth with an IEP report students making up rumors about them and 14 percent report being physically attacked or in fights.

(Lipscomb et al, 2017)

FIGURE 7: Percentage distribution of students reported as harassed or bullied, by disability



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2015-16.

HARASSMENT OR BULLYING REPORTS BY DISABILITY

As used in this report, the term “students with disabilities,” in regards to harassment or bullying, includes both students with disabilities (IDEA) and Section 504-only students.⁹ **Figure 7** illustrates the percentage distribution of students reported as harassed or bullied, by disability. Students with disabilities were harassed or bullied based on sex, race, and disability at rates higher than their representation in the total school enrollment. Students with disabilities comprised 14 percent of the total student enrollment, but were 18 percent of students harassed or bullied on the basis of sex, 16 percent of the students harassed or bullied on the basis of race, and 51 percent of the students harassed or bullied on the basis of disability.

In comparison, students without disabilities represented 86 percent of the total student enrollment, but were 82 percent of students harassed or bullied on the basis of sex, 84 percent on the basis of race, and 49 percent of the students harassed or bullied on the basis of disability.¹⁰ The basis of disability includes disabilities under IDEA, disabilities under section 504, perceived disabilities, and any other disabilities.

US DOE School Climate Student Survey Questions

- ▶ Adults working in this school treat all students respectfully.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ I feel safe at this school.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ Students at this school are teased or picked on about their physical or mental disability

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ At this school, students work on listening to others to understand what they are trying to say.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ School rules are applied equally to all students.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ My teachers make it clear to me when I have misbehaved in class.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Some ways we focus on school climate at Cotting

- ▶ Focus on the diversity of our population.
- ▶ Make sure the environment is accessible in all ways.
- ▶ Create opportunities for inclusion.
- ▶ Be responsive to student and family needs.
- ▶ Use resources and expertise to remove barriers.

Student Engagement

- ▶ Student Engagement can be thought of as having three components:
 - ▶ **Behaviorally**, students have sustained participation in learning, attend class, complete work, participate positively in school activities. They have a willingness to persist even when tasks are difficult.
 - ▶ **Emotionally**, students show interest in, enjoyment of, or anxiety about schoolwork, teachers, peers, or school in general. They feel interested in learning, connected to the work they are doing, and have a positive attitude.
 - ▶ **Cognitively**, students are actively focused on learning, they have strategies to address problems and challenges, expend effort to complete work, and work to acquire new skills.

(Chapman, 2003, Allensworth et al., 2018)

Student Engagement

- ▶ "Teachers have tremendous power to influence student engagement and learning. Importantly, teachers' power resides in how they set up learning experiences for their students and the kinds of interactions students and teachers have together in the classroom."
- ▶ Four student learning mindsets are particularly important:
 - ▶ I belong in this learning community.
 - ▶ I can succeed at this.
 - ▶ My ability and competence grow with my effort.
 - ▶ This work has value for me.

(Allensworth et al, 2018)

Student Engagement - Participation and Academic Support

- ▶ Children with developmental disabilities are at greater risk for chronic absenteeism.
 - ▶ Certain disabilities, such as intellectual disability, have a disproportionately greater incidence of absenteeism.
 - ▶ The more disabilities a student has, the more likely it is they will have high absenteeism (Black & Zablotsky, 2018).
- ▶ **About half of youth with an IEP struggle academically in various ways, compared with one-third of their peers.** 54 percent of youth with an IEP find class work hard to learn, compared with 38 percent of youth without an IEP (Lipscomb et al, 2017).

Student Engagement - Social and Extracurricular Experiences

- ▶ **Nearly two-thirds of youth with an IEP participate in school extracurricular activities, but more than three-quarters of their peers do.** Specifically, 64 percent of youth with an IEP report participating in a school sport or club during the past year, compared with 81 percent of youth without an IEP.
- ▶ **Youth with an IEP participate in extracurricular activities organized outside of school at lower rates than do youth without an IEP.** More than half of youth with an IEP (55 percent) report having participated in a sport or club organized outside of school in the past year, compared with two-thirds of their peers (68 percent).
- ▶ **Half of youth with an IEP get together with friends weekly, compared with two-thirds of youth without an IEP.** (52 versus 66 percent).

(Lipscomb et al, 2017)

Student Engagement - Social Connectedness to Peers

- ▶ **Youth with an IEP are less likely than their peers to communicate with friends at least daily through text messages and social media.** In particular, 54 percent of youth with an IEP indicate texting their friends at least daily, compared with 67 percent of youth without an IEP. In addition, 43 percent use social media for communicating with their friends daily, compared with 50 percent of their peers. The frequency of these electronic communications is another indicator of social connectedness, particularly because they are the most common means of communication that youth report.
- ▶ **Youth with an IEP appear less engaged in school and with friends than youth without an IEP, across most demographic groups.** Differences in engagement exist within most groups defined by household income, race and ethnicity, gender, age, and functional abilities

(Lipscomb et al, 2017)

US DOE Student Survey - Engagement

- ▶ I feel like I belong.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ My teachers understand my problems.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ I regularly attend school-sponsored events, such as school dances, sporting events, student performances, or other school activities.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ At this school, students have lots of changes to help decide things like class activities and rules.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ The things I'm learning in school are important to me.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

- ▶ My teachers praise me when I work hard in school.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Some ways we focus on student engagement at Cotting

- ▶ Having access to a variety of peers including “someone like me”
- ▶ Opportunities to have a model and be a model
- ▶ Providing a variety of experiences (academic, social, community)
- ▶ Consistency with academic, behavioral, and social supports
- ▶ Therapeutically managing barriers
- ▶ Safety to take risks

Wellbeing

- ▶ "Personal and social capability assists students to become successful learners, helping to improve their academic learning and enhancing their motivation to reach their full potential. Personal and social capability supports students in becoming creative and confident individuals with a sense of self-worth, self-awareness, and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical wellbeing with a sense of hope and optimism about their lives and the future. On a social level it helps students form and maintain healthy relationships and prepares them for their potential life roles as family, community, and workforce members."
- ▶ Wellbeing has been researched as equated with happiness and as equated with realized human potential that results in positive functioning in life.

2016)

(Skrzypiec, Askell-Williams, Slee, & Rudzinski

Self-Determination

- ▶ *Self-determination is defined as being the primary agent who makes decisions and causes things to happen in one's life (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).*
- ▶ Self-determination skills have been linked to many positive outcomes for students with disabilities including access to the curriculum, academic achievement, positive transition-related outcomes, and higher quality of life (Chou et al., 2017).
- ▶ Social skills proficiency is correlated with overall levels of self-determination (Chou et al., 2017).
- ▶ Self-determination and decision making skills cannot be properly developed without the opportunities for utilize them in context (Cavendish, 2017).

Arc Self-Determination Scale (Adolescent Version)

Autonomy

- ▶ I make my own meals or snacks.

no sometimes most of the time every time

- ▶ I make friends with other kids my age.

no sometimes most of the time every time

- ▶ I choose my clothes and the personal items I use every day.

no sometimes most of the time every time

Arc Self-Determination Scale (Adolescent Version)

Psychological Empowerment

- ▶ I tell people when they have hurt my feelings....or
I am afraid to tell people when they have hurt my feelings.
- ▶ I am able to work with others....or
I cannot work well with others.
- ▶ I can make my own decisions...or
Other people make decisions for me.
- ▶ Trying hard at school doesn't do me much good...or
Trying hard at school will help me get a good job.

Arc Self-Determination Scale (Adolescent Version)

Self-Realization

- ▶ I do not feel ashamed of any of my emotions.

agree disagree

- ▶ I am afraid of doing things wrong.

agree disagree

- ▶ Other people like me.

agree disagree

- ▶ I feel I cannot do many things.

agree disagree

Some ways we focus on self-determination at Cotting

- ▶ Opportunities to make choices (academic and social)
- ▶ Encouraging active participation in the IEP and transition planning process
- ▶ Provide tools to understanding their strengths and abilities and ways to address challenges
- ▶ Encourage self-advocacy



A word cloud of educational and psychological terms. The largest words are 'environment', 'school climate', and 'engagement'. Other prominent words include 'self-determination', 'safety', and 'social-emotional learning'. Smaller words include 'academic support', 'psychological empowerment', 'self-initiation', 'self-awareness', 'autonomy', 'school connectedness', 'self-advocacy', 'wellness', 'relationships', 'culture', 'equity', 'community', 'self-regulation', 'self-management', 'self-esteem', 'self-direction', and 'self-control'. The words are arranged in a cluster, with some overlapping. The background features a white space with a thin horizontal line at the top left and a large, abstract green geometric shape on the right side.

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