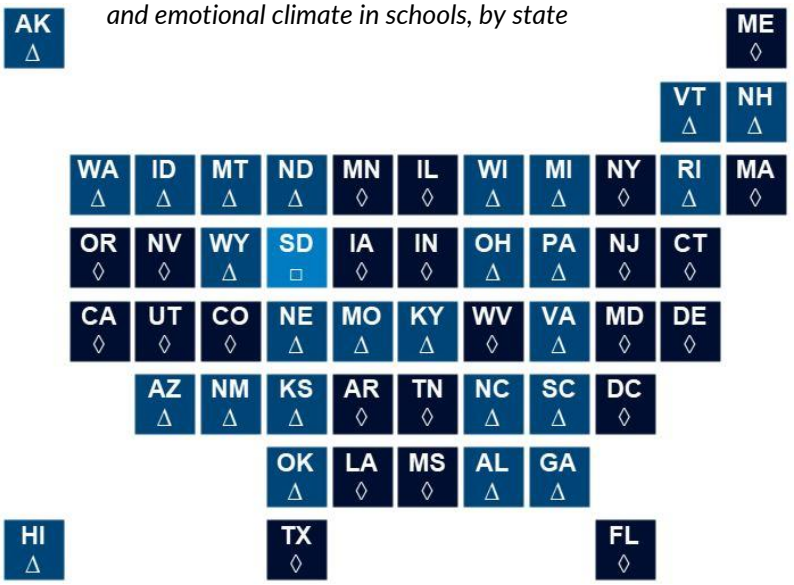
Social and Emotional Climate

The **Social and Emotional Climate (SE)** of schools provides the support and structures for students to feel safe and build relationships that enable them to learn. This analysis explores how state policy helps schools provide the social, emotional, and behavioral supports and other aspects of the learning environment that help cultivate high-quality relationships, promote equity, establish a sense of physical and emotional safety, and enhance student engagement in learning.

Figure 1. Nearly all states cover at least some topics related to social and emotional climate in schools.
Comprehensiveness of policies promoting the social and emotional climate in schools, by state



*This map shows states that have [◊] **comprehensive** (24), [Δ] **moderate** (26), and [□] **low** (1) coverage of social and emotional climate topics in statutes and regulations governing education.*

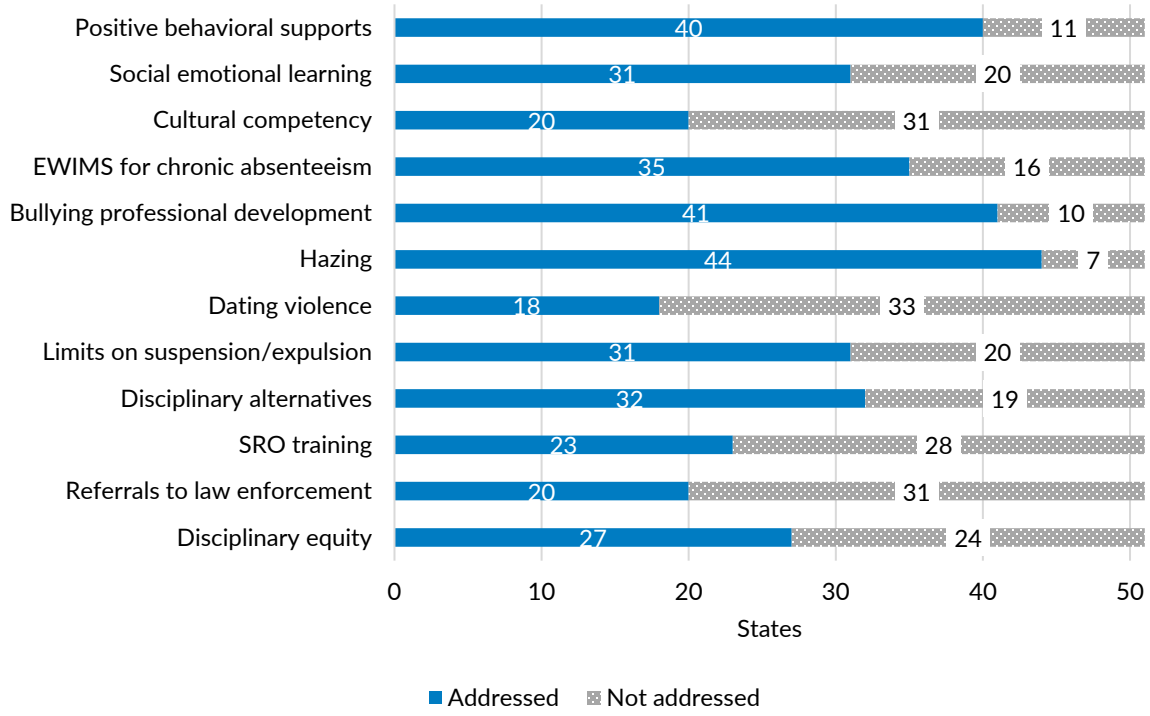
How is social and emotional climate addressed in state law?

- **Laws in 40 states address school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) or other multi-tiered approaches to promoting positive outcomes for all students.** Thirty-one states encourage or require the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) or character education.
- **All states require the adoption of anti-bullying policies, and 44 prohibit hazing in K-12 schools.** Forty-one states also encourage or require districts to train staff on bullying prevention. Fewer states require staff training on cultural competency (20 states), though this represents an emerging policy area.
- **Thirty-five states address using early warning systems for chronic absenteeism, but only twenty-nine states follow up with supportive student and family interventions.** These responses are in place of more traditional policy responses, which often treated student truancy as a criminal offense and culminated in justice system involvement. These approaches allow for schools and families to identify and address issues that underpin student absenteeism.
- **Eighteen states encourage or require districts to adopt dating violence policies.** With growing movements to address sexual harassment, these policies as separate from bullying prevention policies are particularly notable.
- **Laws in 31 states limit the use of suspension or expulsion under certain conditions (e.g., student age), and 32 states encourage alternatives to school removal.** Slightly more than half of states require monitoring for discipline disproportionality based on race or special education status (27 states).
- **Twenty states require districts to set clear guidelines for referring students to law enforcement, and 23 states encourage specialized training for school resource officers (SROs).** Schools that have SROs tend to have higher rates of student arrest; ensuring SROs are clear on their role can help reduce unnecessary student removals.[1]

How comprehensively do states cover social and emotional climate?

- Twenty-four states have comprehensive coverage of social and emotional climate provisions (range: 70 percent to 100 percent), and 26 states have moderate coverage (range: 35 percent to 65 percent). Only one state (South Dakota) has more limited coverage (30 percent) of the social and emotional climate topics.

Figure 2. Number of States Covering Selected Social and Emotional Climate Topics



Child Trends, in partnership with The Institute of Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago and EMT Associates, Inc., examined the extent to which 11 healthy schools domains are addressed in state policy. These domains include the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model: Health Education; Physical Education and Physical Activity; Nutrition Environment and Services; Health Services; Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services; Social and Emotional Climate; Physical Environment; Employee Wellness; Family Engagement; and Community Involvement. An additional domain, the WSCC References domain, addresses the extent to which state laws include explicit references to the WSCC model or similar language, such as the Center for Disease Control and Preventions' Coordinated School Health model.

This sub-brief provides an overview of how state policies cover the Social and Emotional Climate domain. Sub-briefs covering the other domains as well as the compiled report can be found on the Child Trends website. Definitions of each of the 20 topics are provided in the Appendix of the compiled report. Data from all topics are available through the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) State Policy Database on School Health.

[1] Theriot, M. T. (2009). School resource officers and the criminalization of student behavior. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *37*(3), 280-287.