



5-MINUTE CHATS WITH STUDENTS

Understanding school climate from the student perspective

(adapted from CASEL's [5-Minute Chat with Principal Resource](#))

One of the best ways to understand how to improve learning and create a safe, engaging, and welcoming environment for students is simply to ask them.

Students need strong social connections with their educators and with each other more than ever. Easy to initiate, 5-minute chats serve as a friendly approach for educational leaders to begin the process of connecting and listening with their school community.

The primary purpose of the chat is to hear about student's experience and perspective so that you can know them as an individual, be responsive to their needs, learn from them for the benefit of the school, and build relational trust. If you feel the impulse to share your own story, pause and consider whether your sharing will advance this purpose or if it risks distracting from it.

This approach also models a way of showing care and empathy that other staff can imitate. After you have met with students individually, share in assemblies or larger student and staff meetings what you learned and why the experience was valuable to you, and suggest staff take a similar approach with the students and families they are caring for this year.

Meet with as many students as is feasible. If you are a school administrator, consider selecting a representative sample of students from multiple grade levels and demographic backgrounds. Consider dividing the list of students you select among several leadership team members. You might consider selecting students in the following ways to ensure you are reaching a diverse population of students:

- 1) Randomly selecting students from your rosters.
- 2) Reaching out to some students who are considered no risk, low risk, moderate risk, and high risk on the WCSD Early Warning Risk Index.
- 3) Selecting students who are not typically selected for leadership opportunities as well as more "traditional" leaders. For example, think about selecting students who might not raise their hands in class often or those who might exhibit academic and behavioral challenges.
- 4) How do you know you have interviewed "enough" students? Usually once you begin to hear the same themes over and over again without much new information. But, keep in mind that every connection you make with a student also has value beyond what information they provide, so select as many students as you can reasonably interview.

Initiate – Announce to students through an assembly, morning announcement, or class presentation that you are reaching out to as many students as you can in order to better understand what students are thinking about school, and how school can be more supportive of their needs. Then determine how you will reach out to students and when. Are you going to do the interview while you walk to school? While they wait for the bus? At lunch? During advisory? When you invite students to participate, be specific about how you plan to use the information (e.g. will you share it at a staff meeting?) and make sure students are okay with that plan. If this is a relationship you are working to build, say something like:

Hi, my name is _____ and I'm the [principal/counselor/assistant principal] at [school name]. I'm working on connecting with as many students as I can these next few weeks to get a better sense of how students are feeling about school, and how our school can support students better. I'd like to share some of the feedback we get with teachers so they can learn from students. We won't share your name, of course. Do you have a couple of minutes to talk while we [walk down the hall, have lunch, walk out to your car, etc.]



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Open – Start with a question that invites students to share as much or as little as they are comfortable sharing. Be more specific than “how are you?” –often we are socialized to answer that question with little thought or detail.

- What are you doing for fun right now?
- How are you feeling about school right now?
- How are you feeling about other students at school?
- What do you want school to be like this year?

Personalize – Let the student know that knowing about them as a person is your first priority by bringing it up on the front end of your conversation.

- What has changed for you since last school year?
- What are you most stressed about right now?
- How are you feeling about your friends right now?
- How are you feeling about your teachers right now?

Invite Feedback – Show students that you value their perspective and are open to making changes based on their input. You can ask about specific policy or practice decisions staff are currently weighing, or you can ask more generally about their experiences with school this year.

One way to identify aspects of school to ask students about is to examine the results of your Student Climate Survey reports, available in BIG or on the [School Climate website](#). This helps acknowledge feedback students have already provided, and provides a starting place to determine what students want to see improved at their school. For example, you might say to the student:

Almost a third of our students last year said it was hard to talk to teachers at this school (Student Climate Survey-Adult Support). What could your teacher(s) do to help make it easier to talk to them?

More general questions might include:

- What do you or other students need right now to help you in school?
- Are there any teachers or staff doing a good job making students feel happy and wanting to learn?
- What ideas do you have on how school can be better?

Close – End on an optimistic, forward-thinking note. Always thank the student for their time.

- What was the best part of school for you today?
- What is something that has made you happy lately?



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Topic Adaptations – This method works well for many topics you might want to explore with students. Some example topics and possible questions are provided below. ChatGPT is also a great resource for drafting student-friendly questions for any grade level on topics students care most about. An example prompt might be “write a 5-minute interview protocol to interview students in 4th grade to better understand why recess behavior has been increasing lately.”

Instructional Engagement

- Our student climate survey results say that only about 50% of students think school is interesting.
 - Why do you think so many of our students do not think school is interesting?
 - What is the most interesting class or teacher you have ever had? What did they do that made the class so engaging?
 - What makes classes not very interesting or boring?
 - What are some of the little ways that teachers make school fun or make learning worth knowing about?

Chronic Absenteeism

- We see that 35% of our 9th graders are missing a lot of school. We call this chronic absenteeism. We really want to see more students come to school consistently so they do not fall behind.
 - Can you share why you might miss school sometimes?
 - What are some of the reasons you think students might stay home from school?
 - What aspects of school might make students want to come to school?
 - What aspects of school might make students not want to come to school?
 - How do you feel friends influence your decision to come to school?
 - How do you feel teachers influence your decision to come to school? Are there certain classes students always try to attend or sometimes try to avoid?
 - Sometimes students miss school because they are sick. What can we do to make sure we keep the school healthy, but also help students return to school more quickly after they're no longer contagious.
 - We see absenteeism really increase among our 12th grade population. Why do you think attendance gets worse in 12th grade?
 - What makes you excited to come to school? What do you most look forward to doing or who do you most look forward to seeing?
 - When students miss school, it's important to help them catch up. What do teachers do that is helpful to help you catch up after you have missed school? What do teachers do that is not so helpful to catch up on what you missed?

Academic Performance

- We see that a lot of our 9th graders are not passing Algebra. We are really interested in helping students pass this important class the first time.
 - Tell me about your Algebra class. What was the teaching like for you? What was the classroom experience like?
 - What happened when students did not understand the material?
 - How comfortable do you think students are reaching out for extra help if they need it? Why do you think some students might not do this?



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- What is hard about Algebra? What makes Algebra difficult to understand?
- How did Algebra in 9th grade compare to other math classes you might have taken

Behavior

- **We notice that behavior issues are happening a lot during recess time.**
 - How are students getting along at recess right now?
 - Why do you think behavior issues are happening during recess? What is causing some of the issues?
 - What are teachers doing during recess?
 - What do you think of our playground? What about our playground might be helping behavior or making behavior worse?
 - If you were principal for a day, what would you do to help behavior improve during recess time?

iReady

- What do you like about iReady?
- What do you not like about iReady?
- How do students react when the teacher says it is time for iReady?
- What do you find challenging about iReady, if anything?
- Do the iReady lessons you are assigned match the lessons you're doing in class with your teacher?
- What happens if you do not complete your lessons or meet your time requirements?
- Do you like completing the lessons in one subject (ELA or Math) more than the other, if so, why?
- Can you tell us about your experience taking the iReady diagnostic exams?
- What were some of the things, if any, you liked about the diagnostic exams?
- What are some of the challenges you have with the diagnostic exam?
- Can you tell us about how you and your teachers talk about your data?
- What have you found most helpful about iReady?

If you have a topic you want to delve into at your school, but want more help interviewing students, creating focus group protocols, or writing interview questions, please reach out to the Office of Accountability and we would be glad to assist!

Contact Laura Davidson, Director of Research and Evaluation, ldavidson@washoeschools.net