

Background

The Views of Climate and Learning (VOCAL) survey is designed to provide schools with information on student perceptions of three dimensions of school climate: engagement, safety, and environment. The topics measured within each dimension are summarized below.

Engagement	Safety	Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent students feel adults/students value diversity, manage dynamics of differences, and avoid stereotypes. • The extent students feel there is a social connection and respect between staff/teachers and students, and between students and their peers. • The extent students feel engaged intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally in the classroom, and the extent that students or their parents are engaged in school life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent students feel a bond to the school, and the extent adults/students support the emotional needs of students. • The extent that students feel physically safe within the school environment. • The extent that students report different types of bullying behaviors occurring in the school and the extent that school/staff/students try to counteract bullying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent that students feel the instructional environment is collaborative, relevant, challenging, and supportive of learning. • The extent that students have access to support systems that effectively support their social, emotional, and mental health well-being. • The extent that discipline is fair, applied consistently and evenly, and a shared responsibility among staff, teachers, and students.

- The VOCAL survey is based on the conceptual framework of the [U.S. Department of Education’s School Climate Surveys](#).
- The survey helps the state to meet requirements included in the [Massachusetts Act Relative to Bullying](#).

Survey design, responses, scales, and reporting

- Students in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 were able to participate in the survey as part of the state MCAS administration in Spring 2023.
- Statewide, 78% of students in grade 4, 79% in grade 5, 79% in grade 8, and 57% in grade 10 participated in the 2023 survey. Participation rates among student groups closely reflected state enrollment rates, with a maximum of less than 2% lower participation rate, compared to enrollment, among English learners.
- DESE developed index scores for the three dimensions of climate (engagement, safety, and environment) along with an overall school climate index score (SCL). Index scores range from 1 to 99, but most scores fall between 35 and 75. Districts and schools also receive a bullying score; as with other index scores, a higher bullying score represents a more positive, safer environment for students. As of 2022, a participation score (engagement topic) and an instructional environment score (environment topic) was reported to educators. In addition, individual item percent responses are reported for each item; students responded, “Always true”, “mostly true”, “mostly untrue”, and “never true”. Aggregate index scores and item response data are provided for “All students” and for groups of students.
- Index scaled scores in 2023 can be compared across dimensions, student groups, grade levels, and schools. Districts and schools can now review their VOCAL data in a Power BI dashboard (they also can examine their data using a paginated report).
- Index scaled scores can be used to identify meaningful differences in student perceptions. As a guide, a difference of 3 points is a meaningful but small difference in student perceptions. In contrast, a difference of 8 points is considered a large disparity in student perceptions.

Student-Level Findings

- There was considerable variation among student scores. For example, in grade 4 most scores (68%) ranged between 41 and 77; similarly, there was large variability for grade 5 (68% of scores range between 35 to 73), grade 8 (26 to 59), and grade 10 (27 to 63).

- Students in grades 4 and 5 reported more positive school climates than students in grade 8 or grade 10 across all three dimensions and all three topics of school climate. Scores were generally much lower among 8th graders compared to their 4th and 5th grade peers. While the 10th grade scores were also generally much lower than elementary grade students, the gap was not quite as large as it was for students in the 8th grade.

Table 1. State: Average index scores among students by grade level

Survey Measure	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 8	Grade 10
Overall school climate (SCL)	59	54	43	45
Engagement	58	54	45	46
Participation	56	54	46	47
Safety	56	52	41	44
Bullying	54	50	40	43
Environment	60	54	44	48
Instructional	60	54	45	47

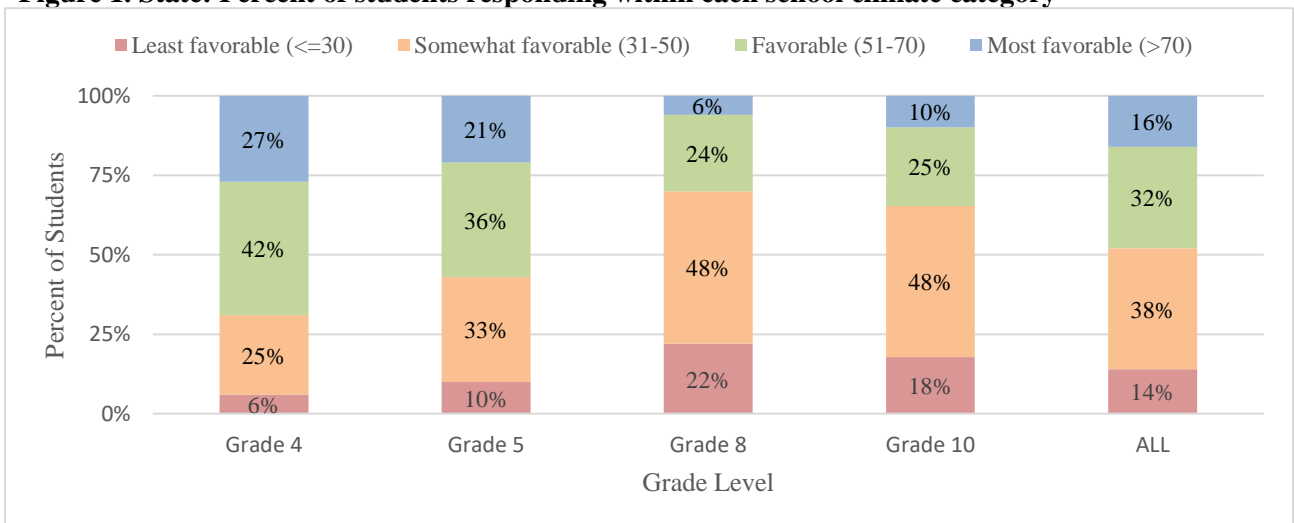
- Differences in index scores represent differences in student response patterns. Table 2 shows the most highly rated items among students. For example, 96% of the State’s 4th grade respondents reported it was always true or mostly true that their teachers care about them as a person.

Table 2. State: Items with the highest favorable response rates (Always True or Mostly True)

Grade	Engagement	Safety	Environment
4th	My teachers care about me as a person. (96%)	If I tell my teacher my classmate is being bullied, my teacher will help that person. (94%)	My teachers are proud of me when I work hard in school. (97%)
5th	My teachers care about me as a person. (94%)	Teachers support (help) students who come to class upset. (91%)	My teachers are proud of me when I work hard in school. (94%)
8th	Adults working at this school treat all students respectfully, regardless of a student’s race, culture, family income, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. (89%)	If I tell a teacher or other adult that someone is being bullied, the teacher/adult will do something to help. (85%)	My teachers believe that all students can do well in their learning. (91%)
10th	Students are open to having friends who come from different backgrounds (for example, friends from different races, cultures, family incomes, or religions, or friends of a different sex, or sexual orientation). (93%)	If I tell a teacher or other adult that someone is being bullied, the teacher/adult will do something to help. (89%)	My teachers set high expectations for my work. (88%)

- Index scores below 30 are classified as *least favorable*, 31 to 50 as *somewhat favorable*, 51 to 70 as *favorable*, and over 70 *most favorable*. Figure 1 displays these classification rates by grade level.

Figure 1. State: Percent of students responding within each school climate category



- Students across all student groups reported more favorable school climate in the earlier grades (4th and 5th) when compared to student groups in the later grades (8th and 10th). About 20% of all students in grades 8 and 10 had school climate index scores in the least favorable range; this compared to less than 10% of all students in grades 4 and 5.
- When considering student groups in terms of race and ethnicity, Asian students tended to have the most favorable views of school climate across each grade. The difference between Asian students' responses and their peers' in other groups were more pronounced in each subsequent grade level. The aforementioned pattern of lower scores in grades 8 and 10 compared to grades 4 and 5 was least pronounced among Asian students compared to other student race and ethnicity groups. The differences between other student racial groups were narrower in each subsequent grade level, being the widest in the 4th grade.

Table 3. State: Average student Overall School Climate index scores, by grade level and race/ethnicity

Grade 4					
All students	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Other*	White
59	60	56	58	58	60
Grade 5					
All students	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Other*	White
54	57	51	53	53	55
Grade 8					
All students	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Other*	White
43	47	41	42	41	43
Grade 10					
All students	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Other*	White
45	50	44	45	43	45

*"Other" includes Multi-Race (non-Hispanic), Native American, and Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander students

- Although there were a relatively small number of Non-binary (NB) student participants identified in grades 4 (N = 27), 5 (N = 32), 8 (N = 132) and 10 (N = 191), NB students' scores were generally lower compared to students who were identified as female or male across grade levels, however, the averages for these groups are higher than last year. With a 60% increase in participants identified as NB, the difference between NB and female group average scores shrank by 5 index score points in grade 4, 1 in grade 5, 5 in grade 8, and 3 in grade 10.
- Mixed patterns among averages are observed with other student groups. Students in families with lower incomes generally responded in a way to indicate a slightly less favorable climate, while the opposite was true among students with disabilities and English learners. However, these differences were generally very small on average.

Table 4. State: Average student Overall School Climate index scores, by grade level and student groups

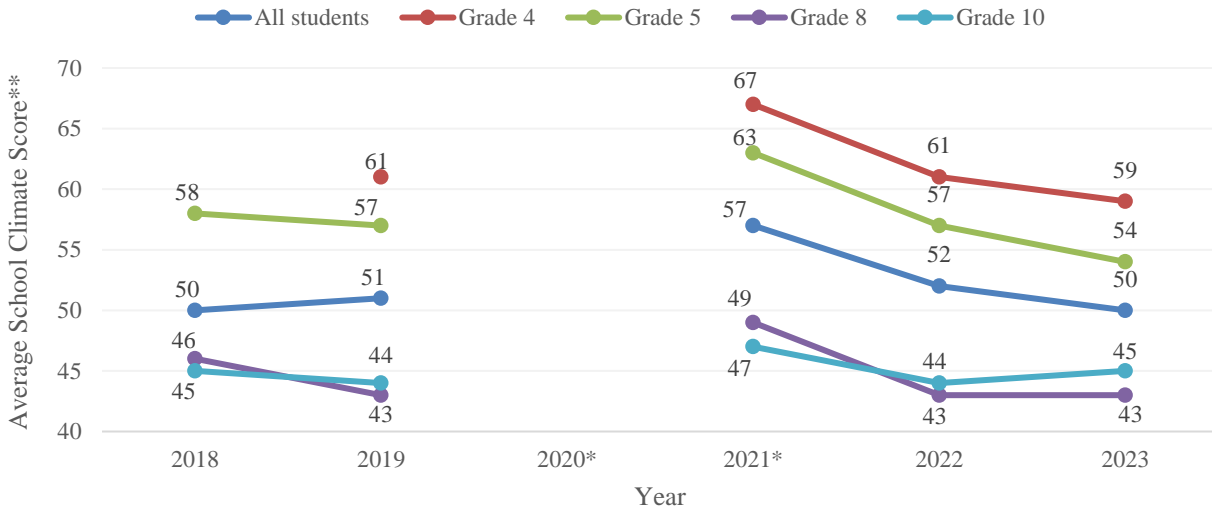
Grade 4									
Female	Male	NB	Low-Income	Not-Low Income	SWD	Not-SWD	EL	Not-EL	
60	58	56	58	60	59	59	59	59	
Grade 5									
Female	Male	NB	Low-Income	Not-Low Income	SWD	Not-SWD	EL	Not-EL	
54	54	48	53	55	56	54	56	54	
Grade 8									
Female	Male	NB	Low-Income	Not-Low Income	SWD	Not-SWD	EL	Not-EL	
42	43	38	42	44	43	43	45	42	
Grade 10									
Female	Male	NB	Low-Income	Not-Low Income	SWD	Not-SWD	EL	Not-EL	
44	47	36	44	46	46	45	49	45	

*NB: Not-Binary; SWD: Student with disabilities; EL: English learner.

Trend in Students' School Climate Views

- Except for 2021, Massachusetts' average school climate score has remained relatively stable over the last five years in the four grades. Figure 2 displays the year-to-year trends in total average school climate scores with notes about interpretation.

Figure 2. State: Year-to-year average Overall School Climate index scores by grade level



*The VOCAL survey was not administered to grade 4 students in 2018, or to any students in 2020 (due to the pandemic). 2021 data should be viewed with caution as many students had either just returned to in-person learning or were transitioning to in-person learning at the time of the survey administration.

**Y-axis displays a portion of the entire VOCAL scale (1-99). Distance between averages may appear magnified.

School-Level Findings

- Among schools that had enough responses to receive reports, the average overall school climate index ranged from 31 to 77, consistent with the considerable variation in student report of climate within and between schools. Schools serving grade 5 showed the most variation; average scores ranged from 30 to 80. Schools serving grade 8 exhibited the least variation; average scores ranged from 31 to 66.
- School averages of overall index scores were divided into four classifications from least favorable to most favorable. In the younger grades, a large majority of schools fall into the *favorable* school climate category. In the upper grades, most schools' average score falls within the *somewhat favorable* category.

Figure 3. State: Percent of schools with averages within school climate categories by grade level served

