



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MICHAEL RIZZO

Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services

110 Myrtle Avenue
Westport, Connecticut 06880
Telephone: (203)341-1250
Fax: (203) 341-1295
mrizzo@westportps.org

To: Thomas Scarice, Superintendent of Schools
From: Dr. Kim Kassay, Dr. Anna Mahon, Mike Rizzo
Date: November 20, 2025
Subject: Secondary School Climate and Culture Survey 2025

Building on the districtwide climate survey overview shared with the Board in October, this follow-up memo provides a focused summary of the climate priorities and improvement plans at the middle and high school levels. Coleytown Middle School, Bedford Middle School, and Staples High School each engaged in a thoughtful review of their school-specific results, examining both quantitative data and open-ended feedback to identify strengths, areas for growth, and targeted action steps. The following sections outline how each secondary school is responding to key themes such as student engagement, consistency in expectations, social-emotional learning, and inclusive community practices, and how they are translating survey insights into aligned, strategic work to strengthen school climate in the 2025–2026 school year.

Executive summary: Middle Schools

During the 2024–2025 school year, Coleytown Middle School and Bedford Middle School worked in close alignment to strengthen school climate through initiatives focused on social-emotional learning, inclusivity, and community connection. Both schools implemented the Universal DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) Curriculum across all grade levels, ensuring that every student received structured lessons in mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. This consistent SEL approach helped students develop stronger coping strategies, increase self-awareness, and improve peer relationships.

Both CMS and BMS also earned the Anti-Defamation League’s “No Place for Hate” designation, affirming their commitment to anti-bias education and belonging. Student-led inclusion campaigns, advisory-based lessons on identity and allyship, and leadership projects empowered students to take an active role in shaping a more respectful and inclusive school culture. Staff members at both schools also participate in anti-bias training with Paul Forbes.

Equally important, both schools strengthened their family-school partnerships through parent coffees, newsletters, and community learning opportunities tied to SEL and inclusion themes. These events helped families reinforce social-emotional learning at home and built transparency between school and community.

Faculty and staff at both schools engaged in professional learning designed to enhance adult communication and relational capacity. While BMS focused on *Difficult Conversations* to improve communication with students, families, and colleagues, CMS prepared to expand that work through professional development aimed at building consistent expectations, restorative responses, and emotionally attuned instruction.

Together, CMS and BMS demonstrated a cohesive and strategic approach to building positive emotional climates prioritizing relationships, social and emotional learning, and inclusivity as essential elements of student success.

Looking ahead to the 2025–2026 school year, CMS and BMS will continue to advance a unified vision for emotionally safe, inclusive, and connected school communities. Their shared priorities will center on consistency, restorative practices, and deepening classroom application of social-emotional learning.

Both schools will sustain and expand their DBT-based skill instruction, embedding mindfulness, emotional regulation, and relationship-building strategies into daily classroom practice. Teachers will receive professional development on how to integrate these skills into academic lessons and student interactions, ensuring that emotional learning remains part of the instructional fabric.

To further support community and accountability, both schools will continue implementing and refining restorative practices, promoting dialogue, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving when conflicts arise. This will reinforce respectful communication and help students and staff navigate challenges constructively.

A key shared focus will be classroom consistency. Both CMS and BMS will emphasize predictable expectations, proactive classroom management, and meaningful feedback to students. Through aligned professional learning, including executive functioning supports, staff will work toward a cohesive climate where all students experience clarity, fairness, and emotional safety across learning environments.

Finally, both schools will maintain strong family engagement through continued parent events and communication initiatives, ensuring that families remain partners in reinforcing SEL, digital wellness, and inclusion.

Executive summary: Staples High School

Following an analysis of the 2025 Hanover Climate Survey, the Staples High School climate committee, including teachers, students, and administrators, identified both areas of strength and opportunities for continued improvement. The survey reinforced much of what defines Staples: meaningful student–teacher relationships, high expectations for learning, a deeply rooted

commitment to students, and a strong sense of belonging throughout the community. At the same time, it pointed to ways in which the school can enhance communication, strengthen connections, and increase the meaningfulness of student and staff experiences.

In response, Staples has developed three focused goals for the 2025–2026 school year. These goals reflect the voices of all stakeholder groups and represent the school’s ongoing effort to cultivate a thriving, supportive, and engaging environment for students and staff alike.

The first goal centers on strengthening teacher perception through praiseworthy and meaningful feedback. To achieve this, the school will place a renewed emphasis on affirmation, gratitude, and growth-oriented communication. Professional development during the year will focus on effective feedback practices and growth-mindset strategies, with time set aside during faculty and department meetings for teachers to reflect on their approaches and share models with one another. Teachers will be encouraged to increase positive outreach to families and to incorporate classroom routines that highlight student effort and learning processes. The school will also recognize teachers who model strong communication practices, reinforcing a culture that values thoughtful, supportive feedback. These efforts are expected to improve student perception of teacher support and increase positive communication between school and home.

The second goal aims to strengthen students’ understanding of how their academic work connects to real-world and career experiences. Departments will examine their existing units to identify and expand opportunities to highlight authentic applications of the skills students are learning. Some departments already embed these connections, such as science through NGSS, and these models will help guide others. Throughout the year, faculty learning will emphasize the authentic learning process, including collaboration, revision, and persistence, so students see these as parallel to professional environments. The school will also draw on the existing Internship Program to reinforce the connection between academic preparation and future pathways. Through this work, the school expects to see increased student engagement and clearer recognition of how classroom experiences translate to real-world contexts.

The third goal focuses on enhancing the overall student experience, particularly for underclassmen, by increasing students’ sense of enjoyment and connection to school. To support this goal, Student Council leaders from the ninth and tenth grades, along with grade-level administrators and advisors, will collaborate to design experiences that reflect student interests and build class identity. This work is already underway through an SEL-inspired spring Wreckerfest event, and the team will continue gathering student input through surveys and focus groups to guide future activities. Plans include developing a yearlong calendar featuring one major event per quarter for each grade level, ensuring that all students have consistent opportunities to participate in meaningful, community-building activities. The committee is also exploring the revival of the morning TV station as a platform that can unify the school community, highlight student achievements, and strengthen the connection between extracurricular life and the broader school day.

Together, these initiatives are intended to deepen students' pride in attending Staples and reinforce the already positive climate reflected in survey responses.

The 2025–2026 School Improvement Plan reflects Staples High School’s commitment to building a “culture of trust” through intentional, reflective practice. By emphasizing affirmation, real-world relevance, and meaningful student connection, the school seeks to ensure that teachers feel valued, students experience a strong sense of purpose and belonging, and learning remains engaging and relevant. Dr. Thomas looks forward to sharing additional detail with the Board of Education and discussing how these goals will guide the work of the coming year.