



Calming Spaces in Schools and Classrooms

Laura Buckner



Students face a range of stressors on a daily basis, from acute trauma and mental health crises to general distress stemming from interpersonal relationships, academic challenges, home contexts, or concern over world events. According to a 2022 report from the U.S. Department of Education, 80 percent of parents and 77 percent of teachers expressed concern for students' social, emotional, and mental health (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).



“Giving children the tools to understand how to recognize what’s going on with them, then how to respond—especially to be able to calm their bodies down—truly is healing. . . . It could be as simple as 15 minutes in a quiet area to get back to self-regulation. That’s a way to work with a child’s biology instead of working against the child’s biology.”

– Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, Former California Surgeon General, in a [2020 Edutopia Interview](#)

As the places where young people spend a significant amount of their lives, schools have an immense opportunity to attend to the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students on a regular basis. Doing so includes not only providing one-on-one counseling or mental health services that many students require but also creating “nurturing environments” that minimize the negative impacts of stress or other adverse experiences, promote emotional self-regulation, curb negative behaviors, and encourage positive help-seeking behaviors (Biglan et al., 2012). School staff should consider providing calming spaces as part of a comprehensive strategy to support the social, emotional, and mental wellness of all students.

“When I felt dysregulated in class, it was always because my head was going a million miles an hour and I would either overthink or really overreact to small things because I wasn’t in the right headspace.”

– Kieran Tingin, California Center for School Climate Young Adult Advisor

What Are School or Classroom Calming Spaces?

Calming spaces in schools and classrooms are just that—spaces that allow students who are feeling stressed or emotionally dysregulated to practice self-regulation and coping skills so that they can return to learning with minimal disruption to themselves or others. In these spaces, students address and manage their mental state in the moment to prevent further distress that may manifest as negative behaviors, inability to focus on learning, or more acute challenges.

Calming spaces fit into a vision for schools to operate as “centers of wellness”—that is, places where students’ full ranges of mental, social, and emotional needs are met so that they can learn and thrive (Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission [MHSOAC], 2020). They can be integrated as part of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) Tier 1 Universal Prevention or (in some cases, depending on design) Tier 2 Early Intervention (MHSOAC, 2020).

Calming spaces typically include elements of mindfulness, choice, and self-direction, all of which support student engagement and connection, which in turn have positive impacts on student behavior, learning, and feelings of well-being (Browning, 2020; Browning & Romer, 2020; Flook et al., 2010; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Lantieri, 2008; Perry, n.d.). Furthermore, a student’s ability to self-regulate and curb what otherwise might become disruptive behaviors can

have a positive impact on classroom and school climate (Browning & Romer, 2020). Calming spaces may also serve as prevention or very early intervention for more severe mental health issues by promoting overall well-being and reducing distress (Roeser et al., 2020).

Students of all ages—kindergarten through high school—may benefit from spending time in a calming space during their school day. Educators should consider the ages and developmental needs of their students to provide appropriate spaces and activities to support students’ abilities to learn and practice self-regulation skills.

Classroom Spaces

Often referred to as “Peace Corners” or “Calm Down Corners,” calming spaces in classrooms offer an area for a single student to briefly visit when they need to calm down. They often are introduced to a class through a few short lessons on recognizing emotions, identifying when one needs to take a break to self-regulate, and choosing among the available strategies or tools to reestablish “calm” and return to learning.

Schoolwide Spaces

Schoolwide calming spaces can be the size of a classroom and are available for any student to visit, sometimes during designated times. They often are created from unused offices or classrooms or are added to public areas with low foot traffic (e.g., a quiet corner of the library). Like classroom spaces, they offer in-the-moment opportunities for students to practice self-regulation and mindfulness so that they can return to class calm and ready to learn.

Schoolwide calming spaces are often created in collaboration with community partners and/or school-based health centers that have a shared interest in supporting students’ social, emotional, and mental health through early intervention and prevention. The spaces may act as referral centers for students to connect with more formal resources such as counseling or other resources offered by community-based organizations to address challenges related to mental health, such as food insecurity, interpersonal violence, or lack of housing. Additionally, many of these spaces also offer youth-centered programming such as peer mentoring, life skills classes, or mindfulness and meditation exercises or classes.

School District Highlight: Tahoe Truckee Unified School District Wellness Center Program

Tahoe Truckee Unified School District (TTUSD), located in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California, operates 11 schools and serves approximately 4,000 students in a 720 square mile area. In 2012, TTUSD opened two Wellness Centers in both of its comprehensive high schools and has since expanded to having additional Wellness Centers in its two middle schools and providing services in its continuation high school.

The [TTUSD Wellness Center Program](#) began as a grassroots effort in response to several student deaths by suicide and to increased concern for student mental health (TTUSD, n.d.). School staff, the district, and community-based social service agencies wanted to provide students with safe spaces to address their social and emotional needs before those needs escalate to a point of crisis. Additionally, they wanted to offer school staff and mental health service providers greater opportunities to identify and meet the needs of students who require more intensive interventions.

Students visiting a TTUSD Wellness Center are offered tea and snacks; comfortable chairs to relax in; information about community resources; and an array of activities that promote mindfulness, self-awareness, healthy relationships, and help-seeking behavior. There are times throughout the school day, including lunch and passing periods, when students can drop in as they would like. At other times, students may participate in nontherapeutic support groups to build social and emotional skills.

A student may also receive permission to leave class to visit a Wellness Center when they are too stressed, worried, or otherwise dysregulated to focus or participate in class activities.

In addition to providing Tier 1 Universal supports, Wellness Center Program staff, in partnership with school-based coordinated care teams, may refer students for Tier 2 supports that are outside of the scope of Wellness Center services. Oftentimes these referrals stem from initial visits to the Wellness Center in which a deeper need for support is identified or from frequent visits by a student whose needs are not being fully met through basic Wellness Center offerings. After making referrals, Wellness Center Program staff help students and families follow up with outside agencies to ensure they are successfully accessing services.

In the 2021/22 school year, the four TTUSD Wellness Centers served, on average, 73 students per day. In total, over 800 students received support through individual or group sessions, and 53 students were referred to outside mental health and community services.

In a year-end survey of students who had accessed the Wellness Centers, 96 percent of student respondents reported that the Wellness Centers had improved their sense of safety and well-being, and 90 percent indicated that they had learned new skills to improve their overall health and well-being.

While the statewide percentage of students in grades 7–12 reporting that they have considered suicide has consistently hovered around 16 percent, rates in TTUSD have dropped as low as 10 percent for grade 9 students in 2018 and 11 percent for grade 11 students in 2021 (CalSCHLS, 2022). As the Wellness Center Program continues to become more established, staff and partners hope to see consistent improvement in student well-being and mental health.

How Calming Spaces Align With Initiatives to Support Student Health, Wellness, and Development

The practice of providing students with calming spaces is aligned with several widely used frameworks that guide how schools and districts support student mental health and wellness. The following table details the specific recommendations from some of these frameworks that could be fulfilled with the use of calming spaces.

Table 1. Alignment Between Frameworks and Calming Spaces

Framework	Recommendations that align with calming spaces for students
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	The Tiered PBIS Framework 's universal, primary prevention practices include schoolwide "prioritization of appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral skills" and encourages schools to offer programs that support all students' development of those skills (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, n.d.).
Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)	The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) includes emotional health and safety and active engagement in learning in its tenets. This framework identifies social and emotional climate and prevention and early intervention to support students' mental, behavioral, social, and emotional health as important components for supporting the whole child.

Framework	Recommendations that align with calming spaces for students
Restorative Practices	The International Institute for Restorative Practices (n.d.) states that restorative practices aim to prevent relational problems and discusses the importance of self-awareness, accountability, and agency (taking responsibility for one’s emotions and behaviors).
Mindfulness Practices	In the Mindful Schools approach (Mindful Schools, n.d.), mindfulness practices are intended to help students “manage stress and develop inner-resilience.” The approach encourages schools to “create environments where every student feels safe, supported, and ready to learn.”
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)	The CASEL framework for social and emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.) encourages schools to help students develop “core competencies” of (among others) self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making.
Trauma-Informed Practices	The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments provides guidance for trauma-sensitive schools that recognizes the “interrelated nature of emotional . . . health and academic success and the need to view students holistically and build . . . skills in all areas” (Guarino & Chagnon, 2018). It also emphasizes the importance of providing students with “choice, control, and empowerment.”

Practical Considerations

Components of Calming Spaces

When designing a calming space, educators should consider the ages and developmental needs of students, as well as the physical space, to determine an appropriate setup and activities. A calming space should include at least some of the following components, which can be adapted for any age or space:

- » soft seating, such as bean bag chairs, cushions, or couches
- » worksheets or posters that help students identify and reflect on how they are feeling, such as a “What are your emotions telling you?” worksheet (The Growlery Counseling & Therapy, n.d.) or other low- or no-cost options that can be found with an internet search for “calm down corner printables”
- » lamps or other sources of light that are calming and provide a sense of separation from the standard classroom or school hallway

- » options for students to choose from to calm their nervous system, such as writing prompts, coloring pages, play dough, fidget spinners or other tactile items, headphones and a music player, or instructions for breathing exercises or (if space allows) for physical activity, such as yoga poses
- » timers for students to keep track of how long they are spending in the space; just 5 minutes of calm time may be adequate for a student to self-regulate enough to return to class
- » sign-in sheet (helpful for gauging use and seeing if any students are returning frequently – which may indicate they need additional support)

Any adult who engages with students in a calming space should be knowledgeable in trauma-informed practices, mental health screening, and basic youth development. It is also important that students’ use of a calming space always be voluntary; a teacher or school staff may suggest that students visit or use the mindfulness strategies offered in a calming space, but doing so should not be associated with punishment.

Students may also appreciate opportunities to self-regulate without physically removing themselves from the learning setting, which may draw unwanted attention and judgment from their peers. Allowing students to take a “calm break” at their desks to draw, read, or engage in breathing exercises is an option that educators may consider offering.

Incorporating Youth Voice

To the extent practical, students should be involved in creating calming spaces. There are many reasons for involving students. First, cocreating spaces with students can provide important insights for adults about the challenges young people are facing and their needs for support. Second, engaging youths in the creation process will likely increase their use of the calming spaces, as the spaces are attuned to the needs and preferences of those they aim to serve. Finally, seeing young people as valued experts (and encouraging them to see themselves as such) can have a positive impact on students’ experiences at school, which can increase their self-esteem and overall engagement (Equity Accelerator, 2022).

Hart’s Ladder of Participation may be a helpful framework for considering how best to include students in the cocreation of a calming space. It organizes participation in terms of rungs on a ladder, from the lowest levels, which are nonparticipation activities often disguised as authentic or meaningful, to the highest levels, in which students take the lead and share decision-making with adults (Hart, 1992). Although not every activity can or should include students as the primary decision-makers, most efforts to serve students will be significantly improved by including more youths’ voices throughout planning and implementation.

When inviting students to participate in the cocreation of a calming space, consider which students stand to benefit the most from such a space. Look beyond student leadership groups or enthusiastic volunteers to solicit input from students who struggle with their social and emotional skills, as they may be the most in need of a space where they can feel comfortable developing those skills. Take inventory of the already-existing services available for students, and try to ensure that a calming space is designed to meet the needs of students who do not already benefit from other, similar services.

Some ideas for cocreating a calming space with students include

- » asking students what helps them stay calm when they are feeling stressed, upset, or unable to focus;
- » discussing the purpose of a calming space so that students and educators have a shared understanding of students’ needs and how calming spaces can meet those needs; and
- » starting small by implementing a few of the elements described above and then asking students what they liked or did not like about them and what could be added.

Funding Opportunities

There are several opportunities for obtaining the necessary resources to set up a calming space. Educators, school staff, or community partners could consider the following, depending on the size of the space and the resources it will provide:

- » For classroom spaces, educators could set up a [Donors Choose](#) project or search on local [Buy Nothing](#) groups.
- » For systemwide calming spaces that align with MTSS Tier 1 interventions, it may be appropriate to use funds from Title 1, Local Control Funding Formulas, and the California Mental Health Services Act (MHSOAC, 2020).
- » In highly collaborative partnerships with community-based organizations or other local agencies, funding responsibilities may be shared (MHSOAC, 2020). In some cases, collaborative partnerships may be able to secure additional funds from grants or other innovative sources.

“Implementing healthy emotional habits should be more encouraged in school and not just ‘breathe and drink water,’ so I’m happy to see newer systems are being put in place. . . . I never had calming spaces growing up. . . . I would just let all of my emotions out when I left the classroom to go to the bathroom.”

– Sarah Nava, California Center for School Climate Young Adult Advisor

School or classroom calming spaces contribute to nurturing environments where students can learn and thrive. While they should not be considered as a replacement for much-needed professional mental health services in schools, calming spaces can support students’ wellness and development by offering a first step for students to address their mental and emotional health and to practice self-regulation in the moment. Students can use calming spaces to de-escalate in the ways that feel best to them so that they are able to return to class feeling calm and ready to learn.

Additional Resources: Calm Space Examples

Read about [Yosemite \(California\) Middle School’s “Bear Cave”](#)—a hub for the school’s social and emotional support services (Morano, 2022).

See examples of [classroom peace corners in Fall-Hamilton Elementary School](#) in Nashville, Tennessee (Edutopia, 2018).

Download a PowerPoint presentation introducing [classroom “chill out corners”](#) (California School-Based Health Alliance, n.d.).

Explore [examples of how “Peace Rooms” are used in high schools](#) and how students can be included in their creation (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020).

References

- Biglan, A., Flay, B. R., Embry, D. D., & Sandler, I. N. (2012). The critical role of nurturing environments for promoting human well-being. *American Psychologist*, 67(4), 257–271. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026796>
- Browning, A. (2020). *Mindfulness in education: An approach to cultivating self-awareness that can bolster kids' learning*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd. https://selcenter.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/04/SEL-Center-Mindfulness-Brief_508.pdf
- Browning, A., & Romer, N. (2020). *Mindfulness-based practices for schools*. WestEd. <https://ca-safe-supportive-schools.wested.org/resource/mindfulness-based-practices-for-schools/>
- California School-Based Health Alliance. (n.d.). *How do you handle emotions/feelings in class?* [PowerPoint slides]. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZHMKWGLo-oUmLp3WQDHKmlAwRMz_QGLH/view?pli=1
- CalSCHLS. (2022). *Secondary student dashboard*. <https://calschls.org/reports-data/public-dashboards/secondary-student/>
- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports. (n.d.). *What is PBIS?* <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/what-is-pbis>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *The whole school, whole community, whole child (WSCC) model*. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/wscs/model.htm>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). *What is the CASEL framework?* <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2020). *Guide to schoolwide SEL. Tool: Create a high school peace room*. https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/2020.11.10_High-School-Peace-Rooms_FINAL.pdf
- Edutopia. (2018, February 5). *Creating a dedicated space for reflection* [Video]. <https://www.edutopia.org/video/creating-dedicated-space-reflection>
- Equity Accelerator. (2022). *Elevating student voice, agency, and co-creation*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Student-Voice-and-Leadership-Brief.pdf>
- The Growlery Counseling & Therapy. (n.d.). *What are your emotions telling you?* <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BdMQ9O-YvCLRdgA6CwWRj6X3C1Ew1h-Q/view>
- Flook, L., Smalley, S. L., Kitil, M. J., Galla, B. M., Kaiser-Greenland, S., Locke, J., Ishijima, E., & Kasari, C. (2010). Effects of mindful awareness practices on executive functions in elementary school children. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 26(1), 70–95.
- Guarino, K., & Chagnon, E. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive schools training package*. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/building-trauma-sensitive-schools>
- Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. UNICEF International Child Development Centre. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf
- International Institute for Restorative Practices. (n.d.). *What is restorative practices?* <https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/what-is-restorative-practices>
- Jones, S., & Kahn, K. (2017). *The evidence base for how we learn: Supporting students' social, emotional, and academic development* [Research brief]. The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development.
- Lantieri, L. (2008). Nurturing inner calm in children. *Encounter*, 21(3), 32–37. <https://resilienceorg.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/nurturing-inner-calm-in-children.pdf>
- Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission. (2020). *Every young heart and mind: Schools as centers of wellness*. https://mhsoac.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/schools_as_centers_of_wellness_final-2.pdf
- Mindful Schools. (n.d.). *The Mindful Schools approach*. <https://www.mindfulschools.org/>

Morano, J. (2022, June 29). *This California school opened a safe space for students 12 years ago. Now the idea is spreading.* The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/this-california-school-opened-a-safe-space-for-students-12-years-ago-now-the-idea-is-spreading/>

National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *School pulse panel (2021-22)*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/schoolsurvey/spp/>

Perry, B. (n.d.). *The three Rs: Reaching the learning brain* [Infographic]. Beacon House. <https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Three-Rs.pdf>

Roeser, R. W., Galla, B. M., & Baelen, R. N. (2020). *Mindfulness in schools: Evidence on the impacts of school-based mindfulness programs on student outcomes in P-12 educational settings*. Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University. <https://www.prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/PSU-Mindfulness-Brief-0223.pdf>

Tahoe Truckee Unified School District. (n.d.). *Wellness center program*. <https://www.ttusd.org/Page/1760#:~:text=The%20TTUSD%20Wellness%20Program%20is,spectrum%20of%20mental%20health%20services>

Acknowledgments

This brief was developed by the California Center for School Climate (CCSC), funded by the California Department of Education. We would like to thank Kim Bradley, TTUSD Wellness Manager, for sharing information about the TTUSD Wellness Center Program. We would also like to thank Hilva Chan at the California Department of Education, Kenwyn Derby and Jenny Betz of WestEd, and the CCSC Young Adult Advisors, Kieran Tingin and Sarah Nava, for their essential feedback on this brief. © 2022 WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Buckner, L. (2022). *Calming spaces in schools and classrooms*. California Center for School Climate at WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org).