

## Observing the SAfETy of our schools



Last year, the Report Card for America's Infrastructure gave schools a D. The reasons for this near failing grade centered on the lack of investment in either maintaining older buildings or building new schools to accommodate increasing student enrollment. This is particularly troubling given the past decade's focus on increased accountability of schools for their students' achievement.

There is a growing body of research attempting to explore what effect the built environment of the school has on student achievement, school safety, and student wellbeing. One such study provided training to independent observers who used a validated tool called the School Assessment for Environmental Typology, or SAfETy for short, to examine the physical environment. Observers coded key features of the school environment that served as indicators of disorder such as graffiti, vandalism, and trash. But they also coded indicators of order such as evidence of school pride or signage that instructs students on how to behave. The data were entered into a handheld device that allowed observers to also use apps to measure the noise across the school campus or the width of hallways and stairwells. Importantly, the data was provided back to the schools to help principals make changes to improve their school climate.

The U.S. Department of Education has emphasized the school environment as one of three pillars of school climate. School climate is defined as the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between members of the school community and set the definition of acceptable behavior. A novel aspect of this project was to understand to what extent observations of the school environment aligned with students' and teachers' perceptions of the school. The study found that observers' reports of graffiti and trash were associated with students and teachers reports of physical comfort, the availability of supportive services (i.e., programs to help with problems), bullying, and connectedness to school. Interestingly, there was a stronger association between observers' and teachers' reports than student reports. Associations were also found

between observations of graffiti and vandalism and trash and standardized test scores, truancy, and school attendance.

The team continues to refine the measure and test it in different settings. For example, the findings reported in this study were based on 58 high schools, but a new study is underway to explore whether these same trends are observed in middle schools. Furthermore, the team is also creating another version of the SAfETy to be completed by principals so they can assess their own schools, and better understand key features of the built environment of their schools that may be influencing student and staff behaviors and perceptions. Together, these findings provide insight into how to make schools safer, and more supportive learning environments. In an era of increased attention to school violence, where a majority of solutions focus on increased use of school security personnel and devices, the findings of this study offer a more holistic focus on the school environment.

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## **Publication**

[The School Assessment for Environmental Typology \(SAfETy\): An Observational Measure of the School Environment.](#)

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