

Celebrating Our *Diversity*

The Pandemic's Effect on School Climate and Culture



What do students think about Halsey? Opinions may vary. But there's one thing that staff and students can all agree on. The pandemic has had a big impact on how students think about themselves, their teachers, and their school.

"Even though we're moving forward by making masks optional, and we're in the building and not virtual anymore, the pandemic is still affecting us," said Halsey School Climate and Culture Coach Norma Cardona.



Halsey School Climate and Culture Coach
Norma Cardona

"The pandemic affected a lot of our students academically because it was very hard to stay motivated at home," Cardona said. "A lot of them fell behind in terms of attendance and grades. And now that they're back in the building, they have had to take Apex and after school classes. A lot of them are playing catch up."

Cardona, who's in her fourth year as the school's climate and culture coach, conducted a survey of students and staff at the beginning of this year. She wanted to find out how everyone was feeling about school after almost two years of remote instruction. The results showed three areas that needed to be addressed.

The first was **cultural awareness**. How do students feel about their peers and their teachers? The second was **emotional regulation**. Do students know how to keep calm even when they feel upset or angry? And the third was **student support and environment**. What do students think about their relationships with their teachers?

Cardona, who has a background in social work and a Master of Social Work, believes the connection students have with their teachers and classmates is key to being successful in school. But during the pandemic that connection was hard to maintain. "I think it's something that the kids were really missing and then now coming back it's almost like you have to learn how to re-socialize and build up from the ground up."



School Social Worker
Christopher Lopez

"Our goal with guidance, social workers and our supervisor is to come up with different activities and different interventions to try to work on strategies to address these issues," she said. Up until now, the pandemic has prevented Cardona and other support staff like School Social Worker Christopher Lopez, from organizing activities to help improve the school climate and culture. "The problem this year has been the pandemic. We weren't allowed to have speakers, get-togethers, or organize cultural events where we share different foods from different cultures," said Cardona. "Now that the mask mandate has been lifted maybe we can go forward with different activities."

This year Cardona has been providing teachers with topics, lesson plans, and classroom activities to address these three areas of concern and make up for what was lost during the pandemic. In one "Do Now" activity students were asked to give advice to a new student from another country about the school. In another lesson on controlling emotions, students had to describe situations that bring out the worst in them, and then come up with strategies that produce positive outcomes.

Cardona has also organized activities to help support cultural awareness among students and staff including the recent Black History Month door decorating contest and a Women's History Month poster display by the main office. She also runs a Saturday program where students learn social and emotional skills while updating hallway bulletin boards and beautifying the school.

"I think especially now with the pandemic and all the stress that we've been through for the last two years and even with school and whatever is going on at home, it's just kind of like an outlet for our students. It's also a way of improving the school culture." Cardona hopes all this will help improve how students view themselves and their school. **"A lot of our students are going through a lot at home in their own personal lives. I would like to see students maybe being a little bit more empathetic with one another, being a little bit more respectful, being a little bit more respectful with their teachers."**