

# 6 Steps to a Positive School Culture





# Introduction

**School culture can have a profound impact on student learning and academic achievement.**

A school with a struggling or negative culture may experience increases in behavior referrals and decreases in school attendance. This takes away valuable instructional time, leading to declines in student academic achievement.

To turn things around, school leaders and teachers may launch initiatives to track student behaviors on Excel spreadsheets or reward positive behaviors with incentives like school "dollars." Still, it doesn't add up without strategic, measurable goals for long-term change.

**It's not uncommon for culture to be the elephant in the room** that goes unaddressed in schools of all shapes and sizes. Even with the most dedicated teachers and school leaders, culture can be challenging to change.

One primary reason for this is that the right tools were simply unavailable.

**This playbook will walk you through the six key steps to transform your school culture into a consistently positive and measurable environment.**



## 6 Steps to a Positive School Culture

- 1 Collect and Analyze Your Data
- 2 Establish a Culture Leadership Team
- 3 Conduct a Culture Needs Assessment
- 4 Develop Your Positive Culture Plan
- 5 Establish an Always-On System to Monitor Culture
- 6 Use Data for Long-Term Success



# Step 1

## Collect and Analyze Your Data

Can you see behind the classroom door? To truly understand the state of your school culture (within a single school or the entire district), data needs to be at the center of all decision-making. It's likely that you already have mountains of data that will help you identify the core challenges your school leaders and teachers may face regarding behavior—whether in a tidy dataset or not.

So, let's talk about how to get started analyzing culture using data.

In this example, we'll use the data you already have to correlate your school culture and students' academic performance directly.

- First, collect all the behavioral data your school already has. This data could include positive rewards, scholar dollars, discipline referrals, time out of the classroom, suspensions, and any other metrics teachers may be tracking.
- Then, calculate and analyze the number of minutes your students are missing every year due to behavioral infractions:

$$\text{NUMBER OF INFRACTIONS} \times \text{MINUTES PER INFRACTION} = \text{TOTAL MINUTES OF INSTRUCTION MISSED}$$

At this step, you can see a direct correlation between the number of infractions and total missed minutes, contributing to how your school performs academically.

### Data is Essential

Looking at your school data this way makes it easy to see how student behavior can affect student performance. The good news is that you now have data that makes this problem tangible and manageable. With the right mindset, you'll be able to use it to establish clear goals to help you reinvigorate your school culture.

## CASE STUDY

# Reducing Student Suspensions

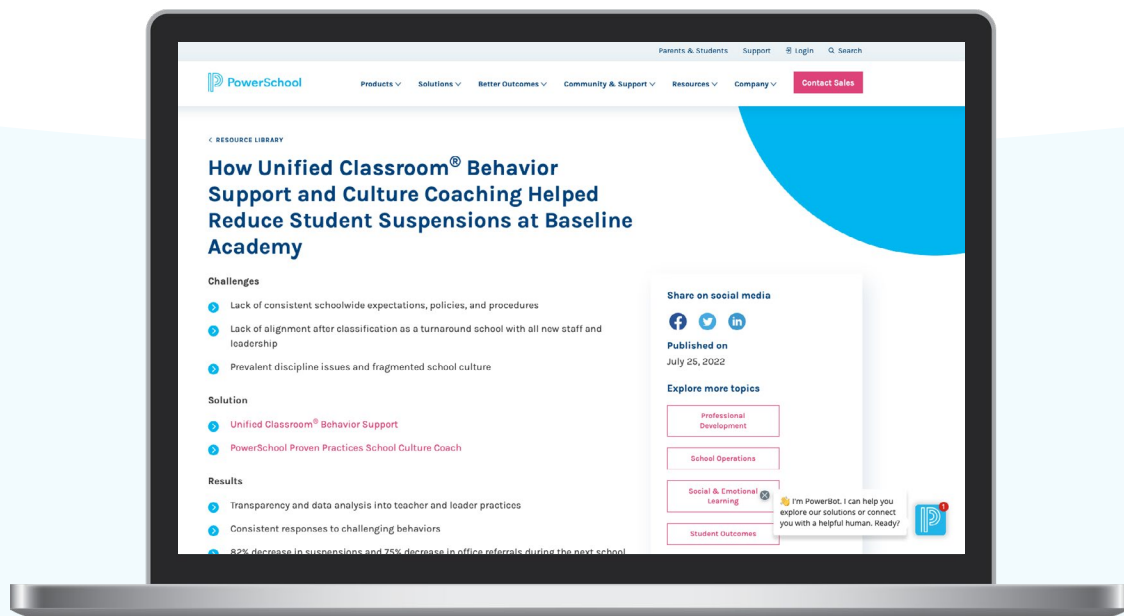


## Baseline Academy, Arkansas

When the Arkansas Department of Education established Baseline Academy as a turnaround school in 2015, it meant a new principal and all new staff. There were inconsistent school wide expectations, policies, and procedures—each teacher had their own rules and expectations. The lack of alignment led to discipline issues and negatively impacted school culture.

New principal, Pamela Freeman, used Unified Classroom Behavior Support and PowerSchool’s Proven Practice Professional Development to support their PBIS implementation. With the guidance of Proven Practices School Culture Coaching, Baseline could build on their established Tier 1 behavior systems and incorporate consistent responses to challenging behaviors. They worked with their Proven Practices School Culture Coach to integrate Behavior Support data analysis into teacher and leader practices and saw impressive results.

[Read The Full Case Study](#)



## Step 2

### Establish a Culture Leadership Team and a Mission Statement

**Tackling school culture challenges alone can be difficult, but you don't have to do it all yourself!**

School culture can be fragile without the proper foundation. After you identify the areas that need improvement, pull together a **Culture Leadership Team**. Find motivated staff members who believe in the mission to turn your school's culture around. This team will help you lead the charge to motivate the rest of the staff and ensure the success of your positive school culture plan (Step 4).

Work with your Culture Leadership Team to develop mission and vision statements. These statements will act as the guiding principles for your school. The mission statement will help you prioritize your goals and identify the success measures you'll use to track your progress moving forward.



# Step 3

## Conduct a Culture Needs Assessment

**Once you've assembled your Culture Leadership Team, it's time to rally your teachers!**

Gaining teacher support is a vital part of building positive school culture. The best way to get everyone on the same page is to understand where and how your teachers actually need help.

Start with a survey. A culture survey will clearly show your staff's readiness to commit to creating a positive school culture. Additionally, a survey will allow your teachers to provide feedback at a convenient time.

### What Information Should You Gather In Your Fact-Finding Survey? Here Are a Few Ideas:

- The types of behavioral data teachers are currently tracking
- The tools or methods they are using to track that data
- The struggles they face in the classroom
- Their perspectives on the urgency of school culture transformation
- Their openness to changing the school culture



**Once you have this information, your entire school can be ready to work together to devise a plan to create a measurable, positive, and sustainable school culture.**



## Step 4

### Develop Your Positive Culture Plan

Once you've gathered your leadership team, heard from your teachers, and utilized all available data to understand the root of your school's behavioral and cultural challenges, the next step is to develop an action plan.

#### Where should you start?

With trackable and quantifiable goals.

Set quantifiable goals that allow you to measure progress at every step. Your Culture Leadership Team should pick out goals that align with trackable behaviors, so it's easy to pull together progress reports and regular check-ins.

#### Here Are Some Sample Goals To Get You Started:

- Improved positivity ratio (see sidebar)
- Increase in number of rewards given for positive behaviors
- Decrease in number of negative student behaviors
- Decrease in a specific type of infraction or referral

### Tracking Your School's Positivity Ratio

Negative behaviors tend to "stick" longer with students, and it takes a lot of positive reinforcement to get them back on track. Calculate a ratio of positive to corrective reinforcement to help ensure you are providing enough positive support. Be sure to post expectations in classrooms and throughout the school, so students understand which behaviors are positive and negative.

**An excellent starting goal would be three positive reinforcements for every one negative behavior to reduce the impact of the negative behavior on a student's mind and attitude.**

**HELPFUL HINT:** It's okay to start small! Some schools are most successful when they pick one success measure they want to track. Once you have your staff on board and know what works for your school, add more success measures you'd like to track.

Create a time-based plan that includes key milestones to reach your goals. Depending upon your goals, milestones could occur every day, week, month, quarter, or semester. Set goals often enough so it's clear if you need to re-evaluate your plan and there's time to collect sufficient data to gauge the degree of success achieved.

**For example, suppose your goal is to improve the positivity ratio by the end of the school year. In that case, you may set a milestone to increase the ratio by a factor of 1 at the end of each marking period.**

As in previous steps, developing a positive culture plan takes teamwork. Work together as a school or district to establish clear and shared language on managing positive and negative behaviors. This way, everyone from administrators and faculty to students and families will be on board to support an enhanced school culture.

Now that you have a Positive Culture Plan, the next steps to reach your goals are clear.



# Step 5

## Establish an Always-On System to Monitor Culture

Now that you've created a clear action plan with data-driven goals and milestones, it's time to figure out how you will collect, track, and report on the data points that make up your plan.

Managing behavior data would be nearly impossible in real time if you tried to track it using paper or Excel spreadsheets. Fortunately, the right tools will help you track and analyze your behavioral data in real-time! Your chosen system should assemble clear, visually appealing insights and immediately actionable dashboards.

### Here's What You Should Look For In A Behavior Tracking System:



#### Easy Data Tracking

Instead of spending time filling out referral forms, find a system that allows for easy data tracking. Look for a system that offers the flexibility to input behaviors on a mobile device or tablet so teachers, staff, and leadership can track behaviors on the go.



#### Behavior Input Settings

Find a system with a one-click behavior tracking function or similar easy-input behavior settings. The goal is not to increase the burden on your teachers but to make classroom management easier.



#### Real-Time Data

Tracking real-time data is critical. Why? It may sound cliché, but data is power. Real-time data allows teachers and administrators to see student behaviors as they occur. This availability helps teachers and administrators work together to quickly and easily identify where to intervene and how to best prepare for each student every day.



#### Reward Systems

Reward systems are an easy way to create a positive environment within your school. Look for a system with built-in reward mechanisms—like student paychecks, leaderboards, or school dollars—to help you create positive change in student behavior.

# Step 6

## Use Data for Long-Term Success

**Now that you have a system that provides real-time, actionable insights, you will be prepared to monitor your school's progress toward your goals continuously.**

You may be wondering about what to do after reaching goals and milestones. At this point, another staff survey is a great idea. With the help of the Culture Leadership Team, work with staff and teachers to evaluate what aspects of the plan worked well, what can be improved, how to maintain the success achieved, and what new milestones and success measures the school wants to track next.

With a focus on real-time behavioral data, you should begin to see fewer disruptions in the classroom, fewer disciplinary incidents, and a consistently improving school culture. Plus, student achievement will likely be an added benefit.

Effective teaching and learning can thrive in well-managed classrooms—an environment where students feel safe, connected, and engaged, thanks to positive student-teacher interactions.



# Teacher & Staff Success Tips

Teachers play a crucial role in ensuring your implemented system will work. Here are a few helpful tips for leading a successful implementation.

- **Set up regular talks** with administrators and teachers about the data they use to make decisions. You can even add this focus to your Professional Learning Communities.
- Get your staff on board with your Positive Culture Plan by discussing specific expectations for sharing and inputting the data into the system. **Many schools find it practical to input behavioral data throughout the day.** In doing so, teachers and staff are always aware of ongoing positive and negative behaviors, so they can intervene early and prevent more significant problems later.
- Create transparency between administrators and staff by **using the data you gather to create a straightforward "state of the school culture."** Your teachers will appreciate being in the loop.



# Quick Facts

**Over 40% of students will have experienced a mental health problem, such as anxiety or depression, by the time they reach seventh grade, and 46% of students have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience.<sup>1</sup>**

PBIS implementation has been shown to improve overall health. The most significant impacts are a shared commitment to student success, an increased sense of warmth for staff, positive relationships with colleagues, and improved school leader ability to advocate for necessary resources at the district level to support staff and students.<sup>2</sup>

Other outcomes of PBIS implementation—including reducing disruptive behaviors, building social and emotional skills, and improving teacher self-efficacy—are significantly related to improved job satisfaction and reduced emotional exhaustion and stress for educators.<sup>2</sup>

Education systems implementing multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) frameworks, like PBIS, are positioned to respond more effectively to the increasing needs of students and educators impacted by trauma and stress.<sup>2</sup>

Research has shown that a positive school climate directly relates to high or improved attendance, test scores, promotion, and graduation rates.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Barrett, S., Eber, L., Perales, K., & Pohlman, K., (2019) ISF Fact Sheet Series, retrieved from Pacific Southwest (HHS Region 9) Mental Health Training and Technology Center Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, S., Yanek, K., Raulerson, C., Flammini, A., & Scheel, N. (March, 2021). Building a Culture of Staff Wellness Through Multi-Tiered System of Supports. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

<sup>3</sup> "School Climate Improvement | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)." National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, [safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement](https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement).



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