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Leading the Energized School

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[Table of Contents](#)

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Focusing on the 19 Behaviors Most Essential to a Positive School Culture

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Research shows that developing a positive school culture can support students' success and resilience in school. According to the National School Climate Council, "Empirical research has ... shown that when school members feel safe, valued, cared for, engaged and respected, learning measurably increases, and staff satisfaction and retention are enhanced."

Positive climates do not just happen, of course. They arise from the practices and rituals implemented and encouraged within a school.

Positive behavior reinforcement, also called [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports](#) (PBIS), is a very effective tool in creating a positive school climate. With PBIS, students learn appropriate behavior in the same way they learn how to read—through instruction, practice, feedback, and encouragement. Educators often have questions, however, regarding what behaviors they should monitor. These are two common questions:

Given how much teachers have on their plates, is all positive student behavior worthy of teacher reinforcement and data collection, or are some behaviors more conducive to achieving a positive school climate?

Is there an objective methodology for determining when a school has achieved, or is close to achieving, success?

To answer these questions, here are two practical ways to focus on the behaviors that have the greatest effect in creating a safe, supportive learning environment.

Track the Positivity Ratio

Is there an objective methodology for determining when a school has achieved, or is close to achieving, success?

Although the definition of school climate focuses primarily on emotional experience, which can be difficult to measure on a day-to-day basis, educators *can* track the occurrence of behaviors that contribute to a positive climate. Further, by comparing the rate of occurrence of those positive behaviors to undesired actions, educators can reveal a clear picture of the state of the school climate.

Barbara L. Fredrickson's research (2013) supports the concept that a ratio of three positive emotions for every negative emotion typically serves as the tipping point between an individual flourishing or languishing. Applying this ratio to the monitoring of behaviors that generate or demonstrate the existence of a positive climate enables educators to monitor students' emotional experience. A 3:1 ratio of positive to negative behaviors translates into 75 percent positive behaviors.

It is worth noting that this 3:1 ratio should not be taken as an absolute, particularly for monitoring an entire school. Given that some emotional experiences will be beyond educators' control (e.g., events occurring outside of school), some students may exhibit positivity ratios below the 3:1 ratio, if only temporarily. Therefore, educators should aim for an actionable range of 65 to 85 percent positive behaviors.

Track and Reinforce the Most Essential Positive Behaviors

Is all positive student behavior worthy of teacher reinforcement and data collection, or are some behaviors more conducive to achieving a positive school climate?

Although all positive behaviors are desirable, some behaviors are more essential to successfully establishing the target positivity ratio than others. Researchers examined more than 152 million student behavior instances—both positive and negative—collected over seven years by educators in 645 schools that use a behavior management system called [Kickboard](#). Data scientists then sought to identify statistical patterns in the relationships between certain behaviors and the positivity scores in those schools.

Through cluster analysis, a core set of positive behaviors was identified that were common in these schools. That list was then reviewed by culture thought leaders and researchers to determine which behaviors were most closely associated with a positivity ratio of between 65 and 85 percent. That analysis revealed 19 behaviors most likely to contribute to a positive school culture. These behaviors are listed in a compendium called the [Positive School Culture Inventory](#) (PSCI).

Table: 19 Behaviors Listed in the Positive School Culture Inventory

Showing pride in school	Collaboration	Organization
Taking pride in one's work	Cooperation	Being prepared

Love of learning	Helping others	Using time wisely
Perseverance/resilience	Caring	Making good choices
Self-reliance	Kindness	Active listening
Leadership	Using appropriate communication	Making an insightful comment
Going above and beyond		

It is important to note that these behaviors, which are listed in no particular order, may have more than one name or description. For example, one school might use the term *perseverance* while another uses the word *resilience*. Similarly, one school may describe a behavior as *being helpful* while another uses the descriptor *helps classmates*. Although the terms or descriptors may change, these positive behaviors have been shown to have the greatest effect in helping schools move toward the target positivity range.

Creating a More Positive School Culture

The behavior of students affects schools as learning environments. Positive behavior management practices, such as those implemented in PBIS, can produce a variety of benefits, from a reduction in problem behaviors to increased student engagement to improved academic performance. With the PSCI, schools can now focus on the most essential behaviors to measurably improve school culture outcomes. Further, using the positivity ratio as a measuring stick, they can objectively evaluate the progress of their school culture efforts and act on that data to ensure teachers and students are focusing on the positive.

References

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