

The School Culture Report

Uncovering the hidden link between student behavior, teacher morale, and school culture, according to data from 1,000+ K12 educators.



Executive Summary

LiveSchool is a platform used by thousands of educators to recognize and reward positive student behavior. Over the course of the COVID pandemic, we have observed major shifts in the challenges and priorities of our partner schools.

In countless conversations with principals, teachers, and school counselors, the term school culture comes up:

“We need to improve our school culture.”

Educators recognize school culture as a tangible, daily driver of student outcomes, both good and bad. So we executed a survey to better understand what it is, who it impacts, and why it's a priority.

This survey includes responses from 1,068 educators from 48 states, as well as Washington DC. Respondents are, among others, teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, principals, and deans.

Our survey revealed that improving school culture is the dominant priority for educators because it is closely connected to the greatest challenges they face: student behavior, staff morale, and learning outcomes.

Let's dive into the survey findings.

Key Findings

01. Student behavior is the top challenge facing teachers.

According to 68% of respondents, student behavior was the top-cited challenge facing schools.

02. Teachers label “disrespectful conduct” as the most common challenge; social-emotional skills are a close second.

Over 71% of teachers cited general disrespectful conduct as the top behavior challenge. Another 61% cited social-emotional skills.

03. The majority of respondents expect behavior referrals to increase this year.

57% of respondents expect behavior referrals to increase or significantly increase this year as in-person school operations fully resume.

04. Teacher morale is at an all-time low.

99% of teachers ranked teacher morale as low. Interestingly, only 72% of admins ranked teacher morale low, suggesting some disconnect between teacher and admin perspectives.

05. School culture is the top priority.

Administrators overwhelmingly view school culture as their number one priority for next school year, with 80% citing it. Despite their many classroom-level challenges, teachers also view school culture as the top priority next year, with 69% citing it.

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School culture encompasses the attitudes, expected behaviors, and values in a school community. Although students are central to school culture, every stakeholder – from parents and teachers to bus drivers and custodians – is part of a school's culture.



Culture drives the school's behavior and 'temperament.' It helps me to create a place where the students and teacher want to be and remain. When the culture is set in a way that each person who comes into the building feels welcome and that they belong, it helps drive the classroom management and discipline...which ensures that learning takes place and the operation of the day moves smoothly.

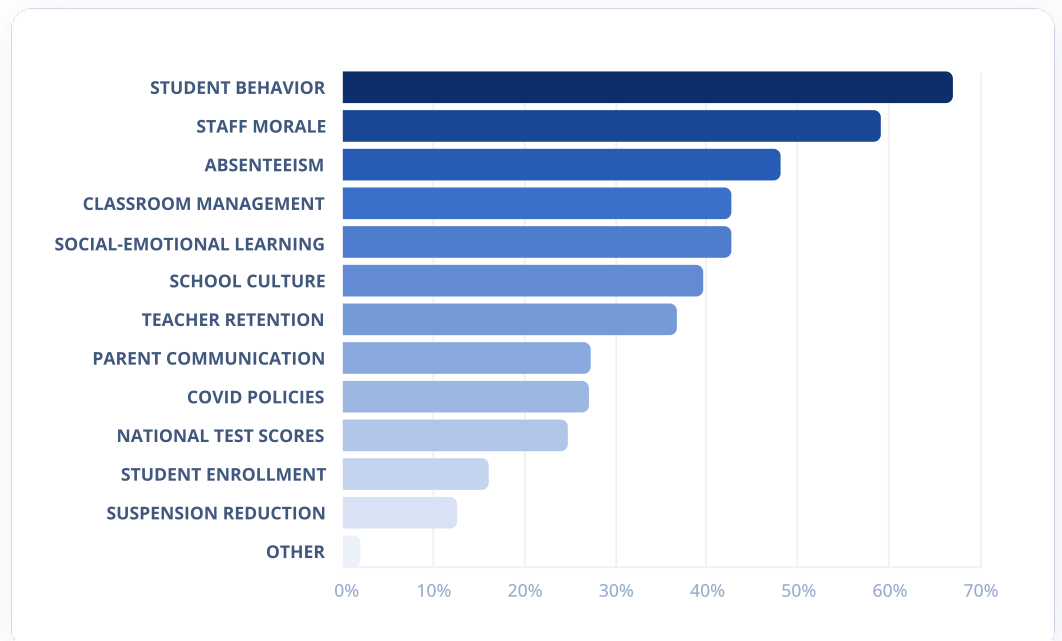
Dean of Students, Texas

71 percent of respondents identify school culture as their highest priority for next year.

Why Is School Culture Important?

Interestingly, school culture was not ranked as the top challenge in most schools. In fact, it ranked sixth. Instead, educators pointed to student behavior, staff morale, absenteeism, classroom management, and social-emotional learning as the most pressing challenges.

Chart 01 ————— **Biggest Challenges Facing Schools**



What does this mean? Educators view school culture as a tool to impact the challenges they care most about. There is a recognition that by improving school culture, schools can positively impact a wide range of issues, from student behavior to social-emotional learning.

In the open text responses, we saw examples of how educators view the relationship between culture and other issues:



Without school culture, the rest of the learning won't happen. We need our school to get back to being a WEB school: Where Everybody Belongs. Right now, kids are at each others' throats because of racial tensions, bullying, political beliefs they are parroting from their parents, masking opinions, you name it. They have the emotional and social development of kids two years younger than them, but we are expecting them to perform academically and socially at a middle

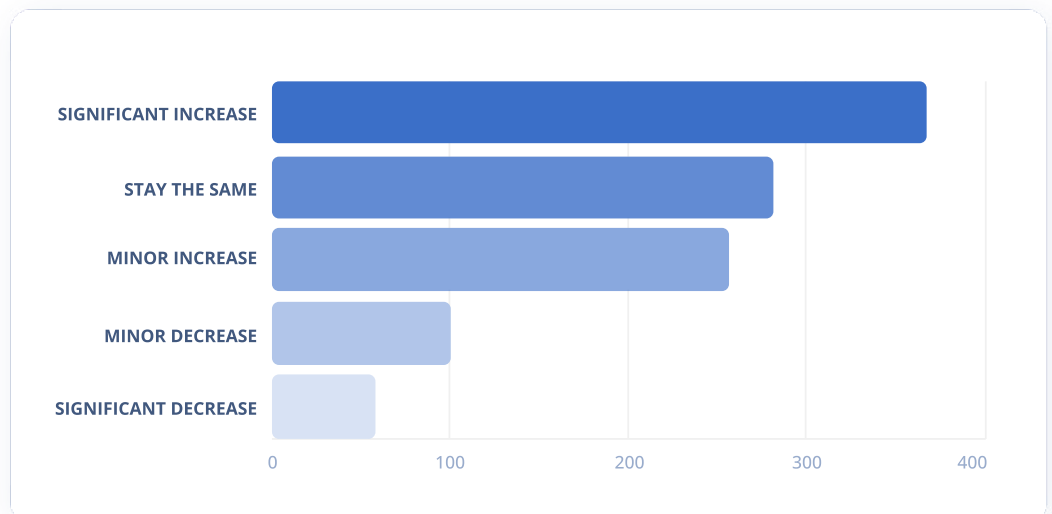
Public School Teacher, Washington

Let's take a closer look at the two biggest challenges schools are facing: behavior management and staff morale.

Behavior Management

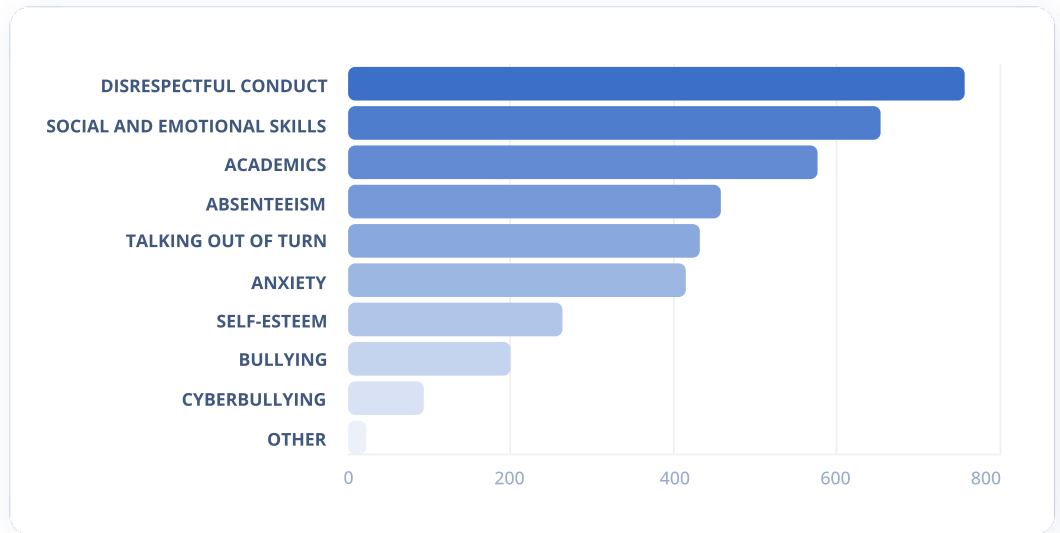
Talk to any educator and student behavior is likely to come up. The survey data aligns with the anecdotes. The average respondent believes that behavior referrals will significantly increase this year, suggesting a widespread belief that the issue is getting worse.

Chart 02 — Office Referral Predictions



We asked respondents to identify the most common behavior challenges. Disrespectful behavior and social and emotional skills are the top-cited behavior challenges. Academics, absenteeism, talking out of turn, and anxiety were cited by over one-third of respondents as top behavior challenges.

Chart 03 — Biggest Behavior Challenges



Our school culture is trying to adopt a ‘together as one’ environment... My goal is to continue reminding everyone that being together is a long-term focus that promotes kindness and respect in daily interactions.

Dean of Students, Texas

Staff Morale



It's widely recognized that staff morale has suffered significantly under the stress and uncertainty caused by the COVID pandemic. Our survey confirmed this, with 99% of teachers ranking their morale as low. 75% of administrators ranked their morale as low.

This drop in teacher morale has significant implications.

By some estimates, over **50% of teachers** now plan to leave the profession.



It is absolutely imperative that it changes so that we can help our students be successful. The only way for this to happen is for the relationship between community and school to be restored to what it once was in years past. For accountability for student success be an equal share between parent and school. We are pushing a massive boulder up a hill now and every day. No one is helping us.

Assistant Principal, Tennessee

We also asked our respondents to answer what is causing this shift in morale in an open text field. The most common terms included workload, admin support, student behavior, and COVID.

Why School Culture Matters

Given the diverse set of challenges schools are facing, it's logical that educators are searching for root causes and sustainable solutions. Educators believe school culture is the top priority as they seek to alleviate multiple challenges in their communities. Next, we explore two of the most popular initiatives for improving school culture. As one teacher explained: "We need our school to get back to being a WEB school: Where Everybody Belongs."

03

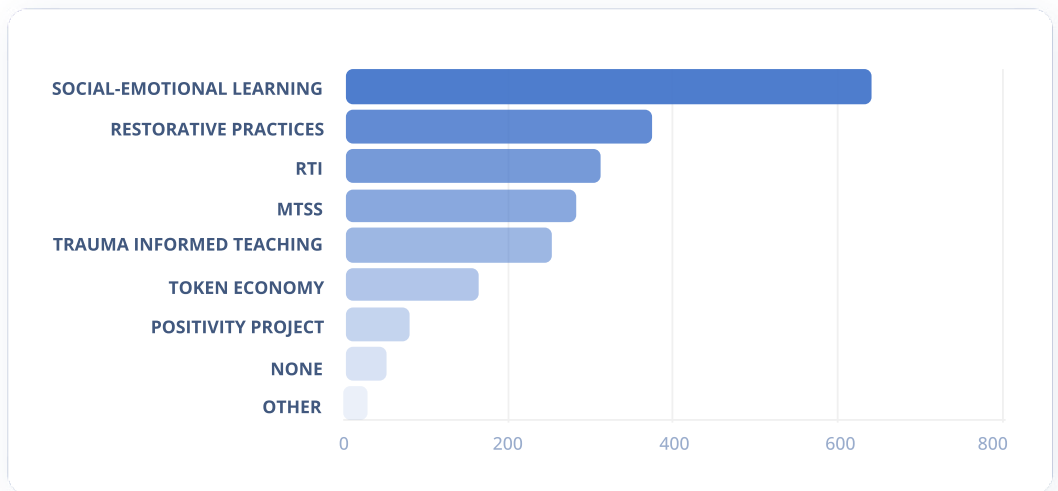
Approaches to School Culture

Changing school culture isn't about treating the individual problems, but investing in larger structural and community change. It's about creating a positive vision for students and staff, with frequent feedback, reflection, and celebration.



In today's landscape, PBIS and SEL reign supreme. Each is a systematic, culture-shifting approach to changing how students view their role in the broader school community, with the ultimate goal of improving school-wide outcomes. Over **81% of respondents** cited using PBIS and/or Social-Emotional Learning in their schools.

Chart 04 — Behavior Management Approaches

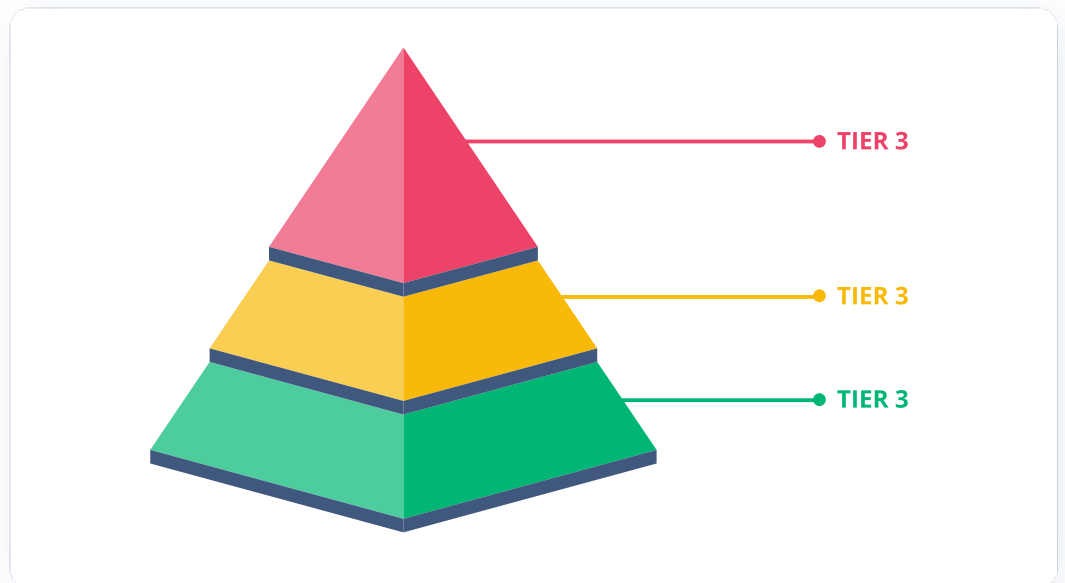


PBIS

PBIS is a proactive, positive, and school-wide approach to behavior. PBIS uses a tiered system of supports to differentiate the level of support that students receive based on need. PBIS includes a set of school-wide behavior expectations, a universal system for recognizing and rewarding positive student behavior, and the use of data to prioritize resources.

When implemented with fidelity, PBIS impacts both individual student behavior and overall school culture. A PBIS system provides a common language for cultural expectations, which in turn supports more effective communication between students and staff. The rewards systems used to recognize students provide ample opportunities for positive interactions

PBIS Pyramid



Schools often personalize their PBIS system to the pillars of their school culture. This can include incorporating mascots, historical figures, sports teams, and more. These cultural touchpoints further connect the PBIS system to the school's culture.

Given the extensive research into the efficacy of PBIS, the framework is a natural choice for schools looking to improve their underlying culture in order to address diverse challenges like student behavior, attendance, and teacher morale.

SEL

Social and emotional learning is the intentional teaching of skills for emotional awareness, self-regulation, and healthy social relationships. SEL is a powerful tool for rebuilding the skills that were lost during online learning.

The cultural impact of SEL teaching can be profound. School culture is heavily influenced by the relationships between students and staff. SEL, like PBIS, can be used to develop common language across the school building for what's expected and celebrated within a school community. As one administrator explains:



We have focused greatly on SEL for students and staff. It is part of every day, where in the past it was random at best. Our goals are to instill in the students that they don't have to be perfect, but they need to try their best and show what they know; take school seriously, and be at school regularly. We built a program that the students love and look forward to daily.

Charter School Admin, Arizona

SEL can be used to infuse positivity into daily interactions, which is fundamental to momentum with school culture improvement. The teaching of self-awareness and self-regulation can decrease negative interpersonal interactions between students and staff. Over time, these improvements can compound into significant gains in school culture.

SEL is likely to see continued adoption as schools grapple with the post-COVID challenges facing students and staff. One area to watch is how SEL continues to evolve from an instructional program to a daily practice that is integrated into the cultural life of schools.

Additional Resources

We also included an open text field asking what other resources schools need for culture change. The most common responses included funding for support and behavior incentives, as well as staffing and clear guidelines around behavior and conduct.

Aligning these various resources and approaches requires a clear culture management system, from people to vision to timeline. That's what we'll cover in this last section.

Step 01 ————— **Commit to Culture as Leaders**

Our survey data showed a clear trend: according to respondents, Principals are the most common leaders of cultural change. Now is the time for Principals and leadership teams to fully embrace their role in defining and fostering school culture. Leadership teams should develop their own compass for the values that guide their work.

We believe that core commitments should include: seeking to understand the true motivations of students and staff, building up your community by casting a positive vision of the future, using systems thinking to design change, maintaining openness and humility in the face of feedback, and focusing on building capacity within your teachers and staff.

Above all, leaders should commit to cultural improvement as a journey of continuous improvement, not a one-time fix.

Step 02 ————— **Create a Map of the Terrain**

Before attempting new initiatives, leaders should seek to create a realistic accounting of current assets, initiatives, and opportunities. First and foremost, leaders should focus on assets like:

- Are there local businesses, sports teams, or artists that are committed to our school's success? Does your school have a unique connection to historical figures or local events?
- Are there unique individuals on our team that know how to energize students and staff? Look beyond leadership to your teachers, office staff, bus drivers, cafeteria, and cleaning staff.
- Does our school have students or staff with a gift for music, dance, visual arts, or spoken word? Who are creative and active on social media?
- Are there local businesses, sports teams, or artists that are committed to your school's success? Does your school have a unique

Leadership teams should also take stock of the current initiatives in place for communicating school values, celebrating student success, motivating staff, and managing classroom behavior. Finally, leadership teams should holistically evaluate and prioritize the opportunities in school culture, including an honest look at the problems that students and staff are experiencing.

Step 03 ————— Pick the Destination

Leadership teams must create a clear vision for where they want to take their school culture. While it is tempting to think about a vision only in terms of student outcomes, we encourage thinking about the vision for your school community. After all, student outcomes depend on a healthy school culture that can retain staff, energize parents, and create a positive learning environment that's bigger than what happens in the classroom. Imagine a generation of students who pass through your doors gathering to discuss your school: **what would you want them to say about the environment they experienced?**

Step 04 ————— Plan the Journey

Leadership teams must identify concrete systems that can be implemented to begin pushing daily culture towards their vision. The sustainability of these systems is paramount: each successful practice that becomes established in your school serves as a jumping-off point for further connection and growth.



Our survey revealed that over **81 percent of respondents** cited using PBIS and/or Social-Emotional Learning in their schools. In concrete terms, each of these frameworks becomes a part of daily school life through an aligned cultural system:

Culture System	Rewards Store	Rewards StoreHouse Points
School-level	Common definitions of school values and expectations	
Classroom-level	Students are recognized with points for exemplifying cultural values	
What is it?	Students spend their points on tangibles, edibles, privileges, and experiences.with points for exemplifying cultural values	Students and staff are grouped across ages and cliques to compete in friendly competition.with points for exemplifying cultural values
Core Alignment	PBIS	SEL
Target Outcomes	Improved behavior Reduced discipline	Improved relationships Increased student well-being
	Learn More	Learn More

Each cultural system relies on the principle of connecting the school's values and expectations to real-world experiences and rewards that align with students' intrinsic interests. In our survey, we found that 55% of teachers believe that the budget for student motivation and school culture initiatives is underfunded. Leadership teams must allocate time and resources for the unique celebrations, experiences, and opportunities that engage students in school culture.

Step 05 —————> Continuous Navigation

School culture is an ongoing commitment. The work is never “done.” As leadership teams gather qualitative and quantitative data from students and staff, plans will need to be continually updated.

Leadership teams must adopt cadences for school culture that allow regular review and course correction. Annual reviews should review school vision, values, and budgets. At natural phase shifts in their school culture rhythm (for instance, after the big holiday celebrations), leadership teams should run a “retrospective” to review qualitative and quantitative indicators of student and staff engagement, identify successes, and determine what to do differently in the next cycle.

When making changes, leadership teams should seek to provide regular communication to their staff about what's working – and what isn't. There are two important benefits of being transparent with staff about leadership observations and the “why” behind changes. First, this style of communication maintains staff buy-in as you make inevitable course corrections. Second, it honors one of the core commitments of cultural improvement: building capacity within your staff.

Sharing your observations and decision-making logic encourages staff to become their own cultural leaders at the grade team and class level.

Conclusion

Our survey of over 1,000 educators revealed critical trends facing schools in the post-COVID landscape: student behavior is a dominant concern, teacher morale is an acute risk, and administrators believe that school culture is the single most important priority for their communities.

Transformational student outcomes will remain elusive without a radical reprioritization of the underlying conditions in which learning occurs. But there is reason for optimism: schools and their communities possess real assets with which to reinvest in school culture. If successful, schools will find a thriving culture to be a renewable resource to power subsequent success.

The time is now for leaders at all levels to adopt a core commitment to cultural improvement.

LiveSchool believes positive student behavior comes from the right school culture. **Do you?**

[Learn More](#)

Appendix Respondent Profile

There were **1067** responses total. **56.2%** of respondents are LiveSchool customers

72% of respondents have instructional-level titles, and 13 percent have admin-level titles

76% Of respondents worked in Public School districts

Respondents represented **48 states**, as well as Washington DC

Grade levels served by respondents' schools varied, however, the **primary concentration was middle school**, followed by elementary then high school