

APRIL 2020

Illinois School Principal Climate Survey and Insight Report

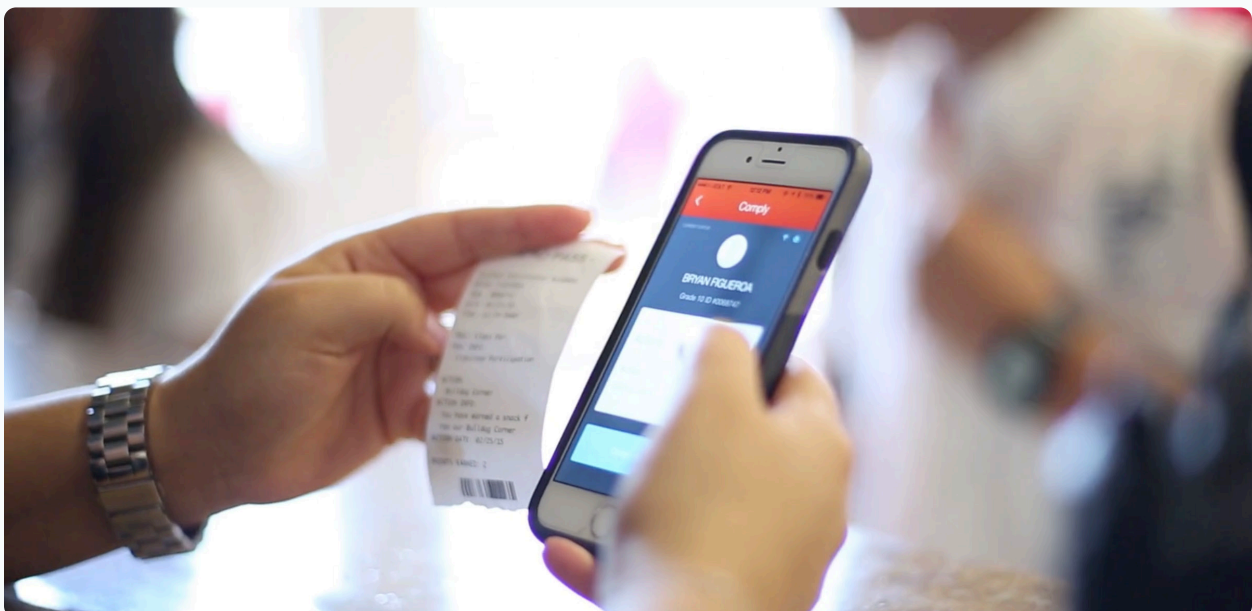
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
School Climate Background and Research	4
Authoritative Climate Model	5
Positive Behavior Support Systems	7
Survey Questions	8
Implementing Climate Initiatives	15
Challenges for Schools	17
Action Items	18

Executive Summary

A large sample of Illinois school principals completed a 10-item survey about school culture and climate initiatives in their schools. The findings indicate that only about 65% of school leaders in Illinois report implementing climate initiatives and are taking steps to improve climate, which poses a serious concern. Coupled with the fact that only about 20% to 30% of schools are addressing school climate systematically with an evidence-based framework and are approaching the work with a multi-year plan. Corresponding to the percentage of schools systematically approaching school climate work is the finding that only 51% of schools are measuring school climate with assessments. This points out the fact that for a fairly high percentage of schools they are not measuring the status of their climates and therefore will not understand the nature and extent of potential climate concerns. A somewhat large majority of school leaders understand the reciprocal nature of school climate and positive behavior support systems with nearly 80% of principals reporting they have clearly defined rules, expectations, reinforcements and corrective actions for students. However, there is a discontinuity as a fairly large percentage of staff of nearly 25% are not following through on these targets. Only about 43% of principals reported that they implement a token economy as part of their climate efforts. Associated with token economy systems is the notion of providing a high ratio of positive to negative interactions with students. Although quite a few schools lack data at 50%, only about 25% of principals report affirmatively that their staff achieves a 5 to 1 positive interaction ratio with students. With regards to parent engagement, less than 50% of principals reported they can efficiently inform parents of the positive behaviors of students. Finally, only about a quarter principals reported having a digital platform to support the implementation of school climate and positive behavior support systems.



School Climate Background and Research

Educational researchers and educators are increasingly recognizing the importance of school climate in efforts to improve student outcomes. There is growing interest in school climate reform because the evidence shows that school climate promotes safety, healthy relationships and highly engaged teaching and learning (Thapa, A., et al, 2012; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Cohen & Geier, 2010). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) and the Institute for Educational Sciences (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008) concludes that school climate reform is an important strategy that promotes healthy relationships, school connectedness, and a sound strategy for dropout prevention.

More specifically, there is extensive research that shows school climate as having a profound impact on a variety of student outcomes such as mental and psychiatric status, physical health, self-esteem/self-concept, substance abuse, chronic absenteeism, suspensions, reduced harassment and less aggression or violence (Kuperminic, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007; LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; LaRusso et al., 2008; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011; Kosciw & Elizabeth, 2006; Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang, 2010).

Additionally, the evidence suggests that positive school climate is critical to effective risk prevention (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006) and having a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993), and ameliorating the negative effects of socioeconomic status on academic success (Ortega, Sanchez, Ortega Rivera, & Viejo, 2011).

School Climate Defined

The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate in the following manner:

“School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures... A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment.”

The National School Climate Center has identified 13 specific dimensions of school climate that can be conceptualized as falling into 3 broad categories: Safety, Relationships and teaching and learning. Feeling safe in school is critical in the promotion of student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007) and we know from Maslow (1947) that safety is a basic human need.

However, there is a great deal of research that shows in schools “without supportive norms, structures, and relationships, the students are more likely to experience violence, peer-victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions, and often accompanied by high levels of absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement.” (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010). One key element of the safety domain is having clearly defined and enforced rules and norms. Studies show the importance of school rules and perceived fairness in regard to dealing with students’ behavior and schools in which rules are effectively enforced have better behavioral performance in all areas and less disciplinary issues (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005).

The process of teaching and learning is effectively built around positive relationships. The patterns of interactions, values and norms form the foundation for relationships in schools and bear directly upon school climate. Use of supportive teaching practices such as: encouragement and constructive feedback; varied opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills; support for risk-taking and independent thinking; and an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and questioning; academic challenge; and individual attention will create a supportive teaching and learning environment (National Center for School Climate, 2019).

School climate is viewed so essential for quality education that state and federal educational agencies are putting forth grant opportunities to support these transformative and effective reform efforts (i.e., Safe and Supportive Schools grant program).

Authoritative School Climate Model

An associated framework for conceptualizing school climate is the Authoritative School Climate (ASC) model and it is an important approach to building positive school climate and the associated positive student outcomes (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Konold & Cornell, 2015a). The two central components of an authoritative school climate are high structure (or high expectations) and student support.

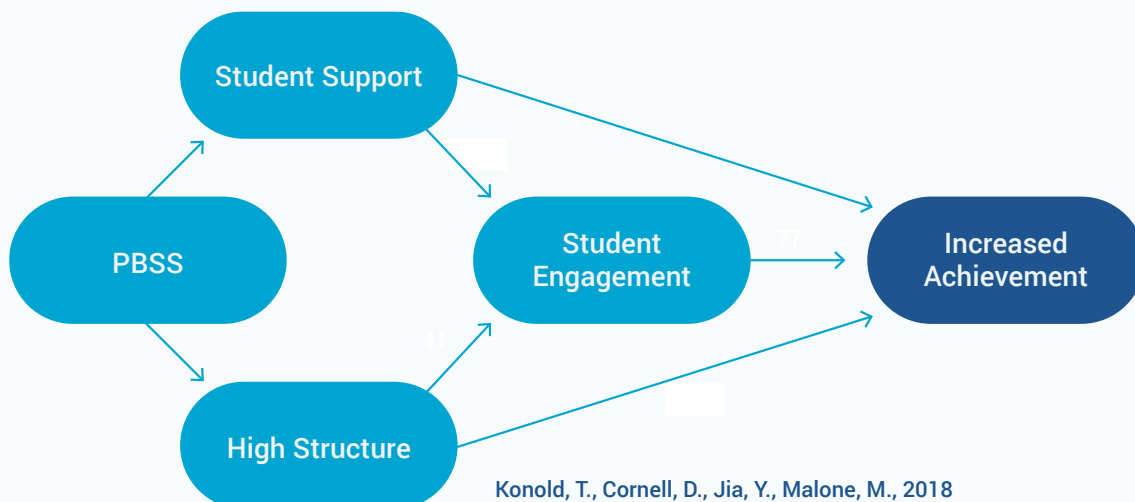
In authoritative schools, high structure is defined as having clear and high expectations for discipline and academic work ethic. Staff have high academic expectations for their students to work hard and learn at high levels. Students also experience school rules that are clear, strict and equitable for all students. Staff will engage students in deep conversations around academic and behavioral goals and they have a chance to explain when accused of doing something wrong. The behavioral expectations in an authoritative school must be distinguished and are different from “zero tolerance” models where students are punished harshly.

Authoritative school climates have lower suspension rates than other schools (Catizone, Cornell, & Konold, 2018; Gregory et al., 2010; Huang & Cornell, 2018) and also supports the potential to help schools reduce disproportionate suspension rates for students of color (Huang & Cornell, 2018). A review of the literature shows that authoritative school climates achieve lower suspension rates independently of other student and demographic variables so the positive impacts are experienced by students in all racial/ethnic groups (Konold, T., Cornell, D., Jia, Y., & Malone, M., 2017).

Support for students is essential for creating positive relationships and is characterized both by adult respect for students and students trusting the adults and being willing to seek help. Johnson's (2009) review of 25 studies concluded that "schools with less violence tend to have students who are aware of school rules and believe they are fair" and "have positive relationships with their teachers" (p. 451). The overall evidence supports the use of supportive authoritative school practices and is associated with improved academic outcomes. Pellerin (2005) found supportive authoritative practices in schools produced less truancy and reduced dropout rates. Schools with supportive authoritative school climates had higher levels of student engagement (Gill et al., 2004) and reading achievement (Lee, 2012).

Konold, et. al's., 2018 study of the relationships between authoritative school climate (structure and support), academic achievement and student engagement points toward the positive impact of school climate interventions as a means of increasing student engagement which then produces greater learning and achievement. Schools with a more authoritative school climate had higher levels of student engagement, with both direct and indirect effects on academic achievement. The authoritative school climate model accounted for 65% of the variance in student engagement and 77% of the variance in academic achievement. These findings provide strong evidence for understanding that a positive school climate leads students' to be more engaged in school and results in higher academic performance.

Authoritative Climate Model (ACM) Multilevel multitrait-multimethod model



Positive Behavior Support Systems

The central components of authoritative school climate models can be operationalized through Positive Behavior Support Systems (PBSS) or Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) and bear directly upon school climate. These frameworks include components such as a common approach to discipline, a clear set of positive expectations & behaviors, procedures for teaching expected behaviors, a continuum of procedures for encouraging expected behaviors, a continuum of procedures for discouraging inappropriate behaviors. Additionally, increasing student support through a higher ratio of positive to negative teacher-student interactions.

In 2019 EAB research group published a [report](#) of a survey based on a large sample of school administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers and related service professionals asking them about their concerns about student behavior. The report cited that the vast majority of all educators perceive student misbehavior to be on the rise, but teachers report disruptions among a higher percentage of students than administrators. To address these behavioral challenges 100% of districts surveyed reported using PBIS but only 57% of teachers reported actually using PBIS practices frequently in their work. Similarly, 93% of the districts surveyed reported implementing SEL curriculum, but only 25% of the teachers reported using an SEL curriculum in their classrooms. Clearly there is a large implementation gap and a disconnect between district initiatives and implementing PBIS practices in the classroom.

The EAB report also found that the majority of districts do not have a clearly communicated protocol for managing student behavioral disruptions and schools are not consistently following the protocols that may exist. Again, an implementation gap is evident between school administrators and teachers for how to manage disruptive classroom behavior. Finally, another interesting finding of EAB survey was that most teachers report being unprepared and unsupported by school leaders in managing behavioral issues in the classroom. There was reported great variability in the training in evidence-based approaches among administrators and teachers.



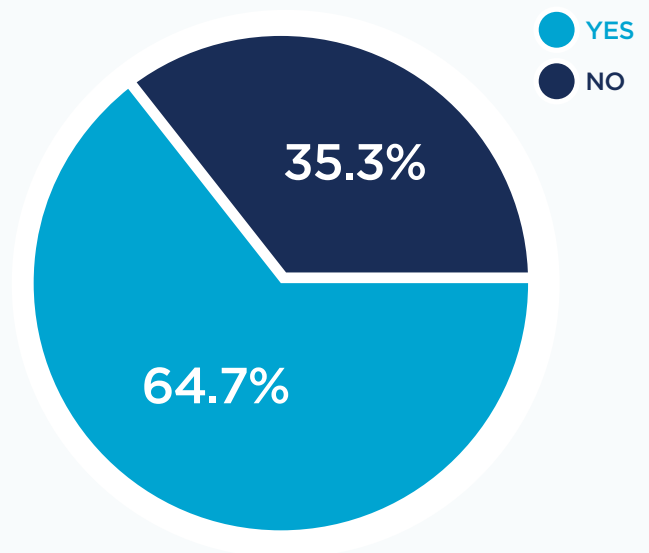
Survey Results

School principals from Illinois schools were surveyed in February of 2020 to gather their perspectives around school culture and climate initiatives in their schools and districts. A large sample of principals responded to the survey as the results for each question are reported below.

Question 1:

Are you currently implementing a school culture and climate initiative?

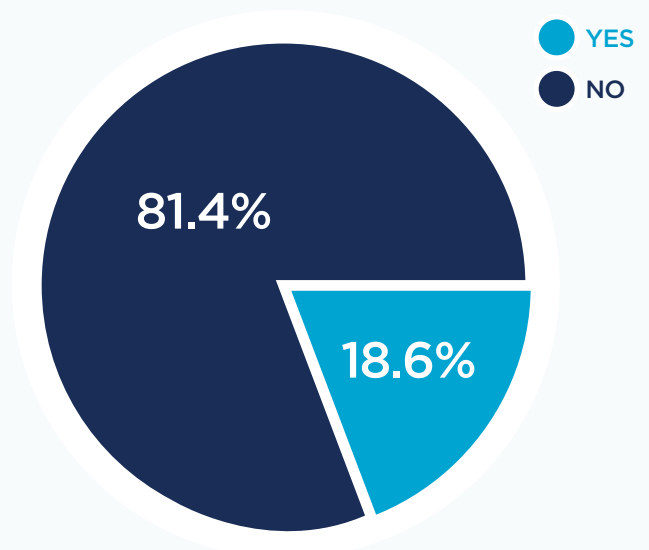
About two-thirds of school principals report they are currently implementing a visible and tangible climate initiative. Given the high impact that evidence-based climate initiatives can have on improving a variety of student outcomes, this is of considerable concern that as many as one-third of principals are not specifically addressing school climate should consider such actions in the coming school year.



Question 2:

Are you using a specific school culture and climate framework to guide your work (i.e., National School Climate Dimensions)?

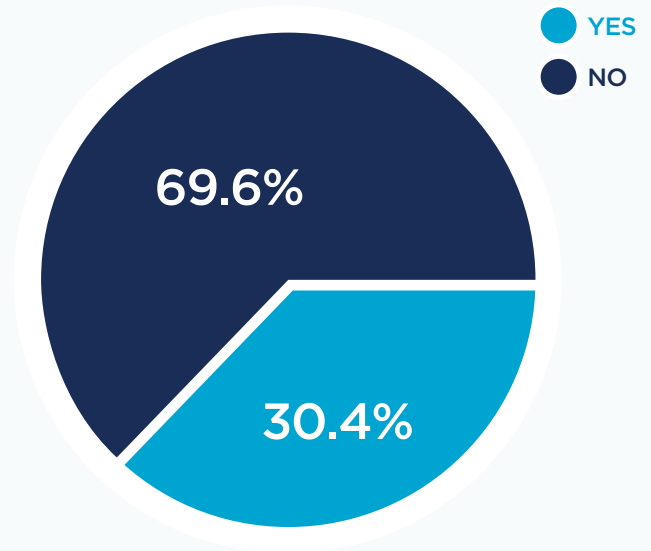
About 80% of school principals report that they are not using a specific framework or model to guide their school climate work. This represents a large percentage of schools that may not be approaching this work from the most efficient and effective perspective. It is hoped that principals will be motivated to use evidence-based frameworks to achieve the best outcomes for students. The authoritative climate model described in this report is a solid example of a very implementable approach that will yield significant improvements.



Question 3:

Do you have a well-defined multi-year plan to address school culture and climate improvements?

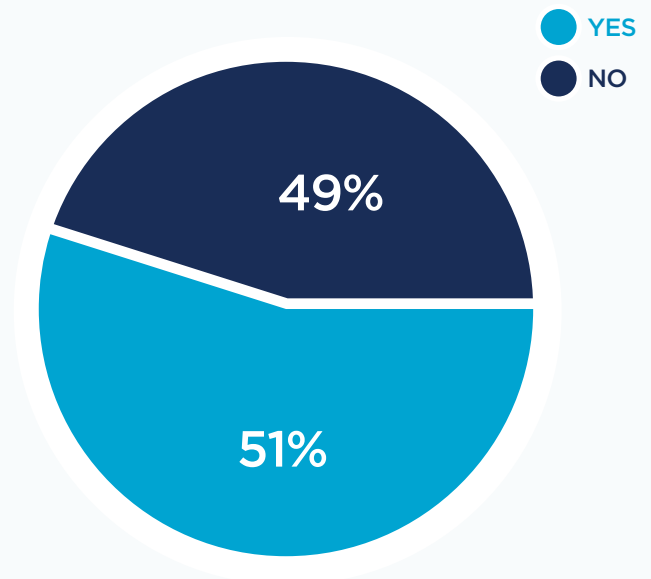
These results somewhat mirror the results of question 2 with a similar percentage of principals using a climate framework and have a multi-year plan. Sixty to 70% of principals do not employ a planful approach to addressing school climate, either short-term or long-term. This represents a generalized concern as climate is a complex construct that requires significant planning to effectively address.



Question 4:

Are you systematically measuring school climate and culture and using these data to make decisions?

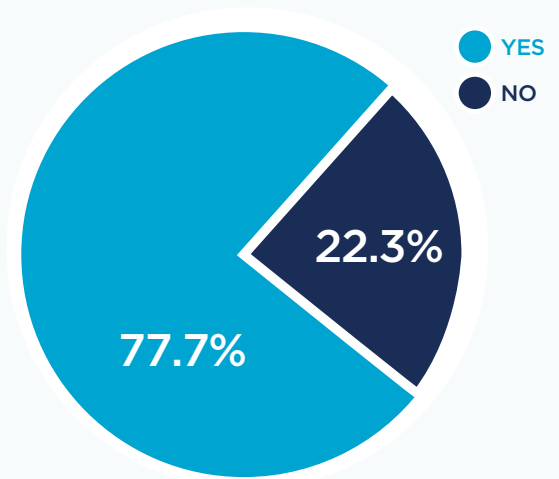
If principals are using a systematic framework they would very likely be engaged in school climate assessment as part of the efforts. Just over 50% of school principals reported that they are assessing their school climates. This result is consistent with the findings that a low percentage of principals are using a systematic framework to support their climate change initiatives. Assessment is essential to any change process as the data provided establishes baselines, areas of need, areas of strength upon which to build and provides a method of measuring continuous improvement. The fact that nearly 50% of schools are not assessing their climate is a concern as principals will not know and understand areas of need and areas to celebrate. Assessment of school climate should include measures of perceptions from students, staff and parents.



Question 5:

Positive behavior support systems are foundational to positive school climates. Do you have clearly defined rules, expectations, reinforcements and corrective actions for students?

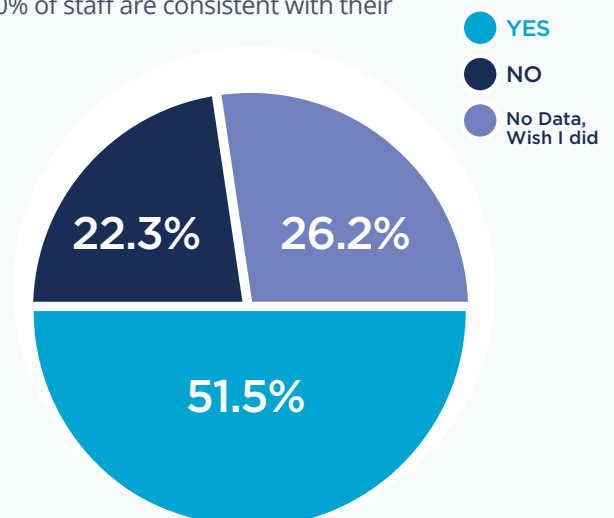
Only 78% of school principals report they are implementing components of positive behavior support systems, sometimes known as PBIS, within the context of their climate work. Many researchers believe that all schools should be implementing PBIS approaches which provides much clarity for students and staff (Cook, 2019). PBIS creates positive personal development and a positive and effective learning environments wherein students thrive (Bradshaw, 2013; Sawka-Miller & Miller, 2007). As noted in the background introduction, schools that are not focused on the tenets of positive behavior support systems will be characterized as: “without supportive norms, structures, and relationships, students are more likely to experience violence, peer-victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions, and is often accompanied by high levels of absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement” (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010), which by definition would be a negative school climate and culture. As described in detail above, the specific framework that supports improved school climate is the Authoritative School Climate (ASC) model and it is an important approach to building positive school climate and the associated positive student outcomes. The two central characteristics of an authoritative school climate are high structure (or high expectations) and student support (or relationships).



Question 6:

Does staff consistently respond to student behavior according to the defined rules, expectations, reinforcements and corrective actions?

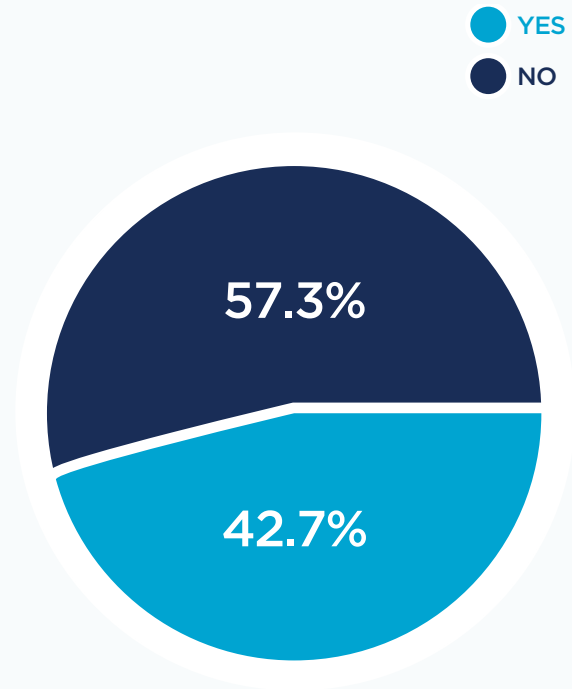
It is very interesting that school principals report that only about 50% of staff are consistent with their application of school rules, expectations, reinforcements and corrective actions. Principals reported that nearly a quarter of staff members are inconsistent in their expectations and responses with students which is a serious potential concern, while 26% reported that they simply lack information to render a judgement. There is large discontinuity between question 5 and question 6; principals have established clearly defined rules and expectations but a fairly large percentage of staff are not following through. This poses a serious concern for improving school climate and managing student behavior.



Question 7:

Do you utilize a “token economy” or similar point system to reinforce positive behaviors and build a positive school climate?

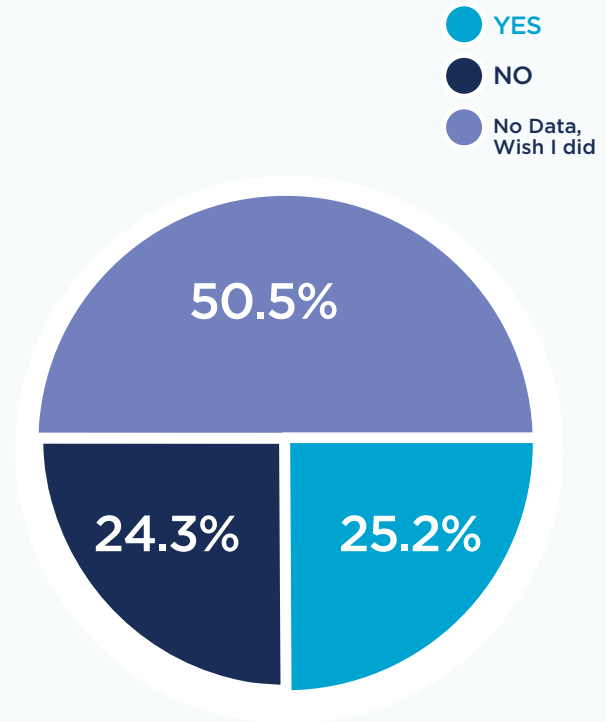
Slightly more than 40% school principals report implementing a token economy as part of their school culture and climate work. Token economies are reinforcement strategies that can be paired with academic and behavior expectations at the tier one level and for tier 2 and 3 interventions. The token economy system is a widely researched and an applied intervention used to change behavior (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). Token economies provide an option for teachers to promote skill acquisition of appropriate classroom and social behaviors. However, there has been an increase in educators eschewing the use of tangible reinforcement systems (i.e., token economies) despite the strong research evidence supporting its strong efficacy. Praise and a token economy system are two strategies identified as effective for responding to appropriate behavior (Simonsen et al., 2008). Researchers have shown token reinforcement systems have produced positive results across participant age level, participant disability type, and educational setting and researchers have also shown token reinforcement systems were effective across both academic/on-task behaviors (Glascott, T., & Belfiore, P., 2019). It is important for all schools to have a token economy system that aligns with their climate initiatives.



Question 8:

Does your staff consistently achieve at least a 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative student interactions?

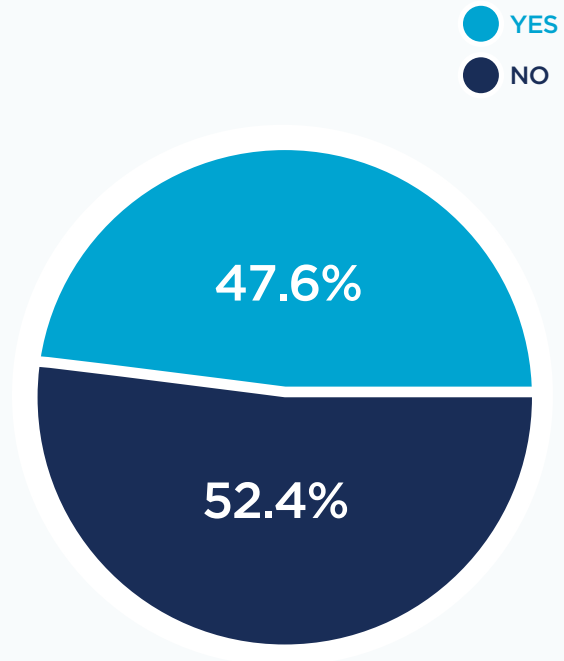
It is well established that positive relationships in the classroom are central to student learning. Building and maintaining a positive relationship requires ongoing positive interactions with students. The 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions between teachers and students facilitates students' feelings of connectedness and an overall positive classroom experience. Teachers must engage in specific positive interactions with students (e.g., general compliments, behavior specific praise statements, demonstrating empathy when a student is upset, asking questions to inquire how a student is doing) at least five times for every one negative interaction (e.g., reprimand, complaint, disapproving statement, or punitive interaction; Flora, 2000). When students feel connected and more positive they are more likely to feel engaged and motivated to achieve academically. Increases in academic engagement will result in decreased classroom disruption as a result of the more positive classroom climate (Ottinger, S., Cook, C. & Haggerty, K. (2015). Research has shown the positive impact of the 5-to-1 ratio to improve student classroom engagement and behavior of students (Cook et al., 2017). The survey results indicate that principals are reporting affirmatively that only about 25% teachers are maintaining the important 5-1 ratio. The actual number could well be higher but over 50% of principals simply do not have data to track the ratio and another 24% report that teachers do not have positively focused classrooms. This practice is critical to improving school climate so this area is one in need of improvement so schools should investigate methods to monitor and track the positivity ratio.



Question 9:

Does your school have an efficient method of engaging and informing parents with the positive behaviors and performance of students?

Teacher communication to parents about student conduct (both positive and negative) will improve student conduct and engagement in the classroom improves significantly. Studies show there is a decline in the number of student referrals to the principal's office when parents are regularly informed (Shirvani, H., 2007). Only about 50% of principals report they have an efficient method of engaging and informing parents of the positive behaviors of students. Schools typically are accurate and efficient in reporting behavioral concerns to parents in efforts to reduce the maladaptive behaviors and less so for positive behaviors. From a climate perspective, it is very important for schools to regularly and systematically report the positive behaviors and performances of students to parents. Based on this survey about 50% of teachers may not be regularly reporting positive behaviors of students; this is a concern and should be addressed as part of climate work and general best practice.



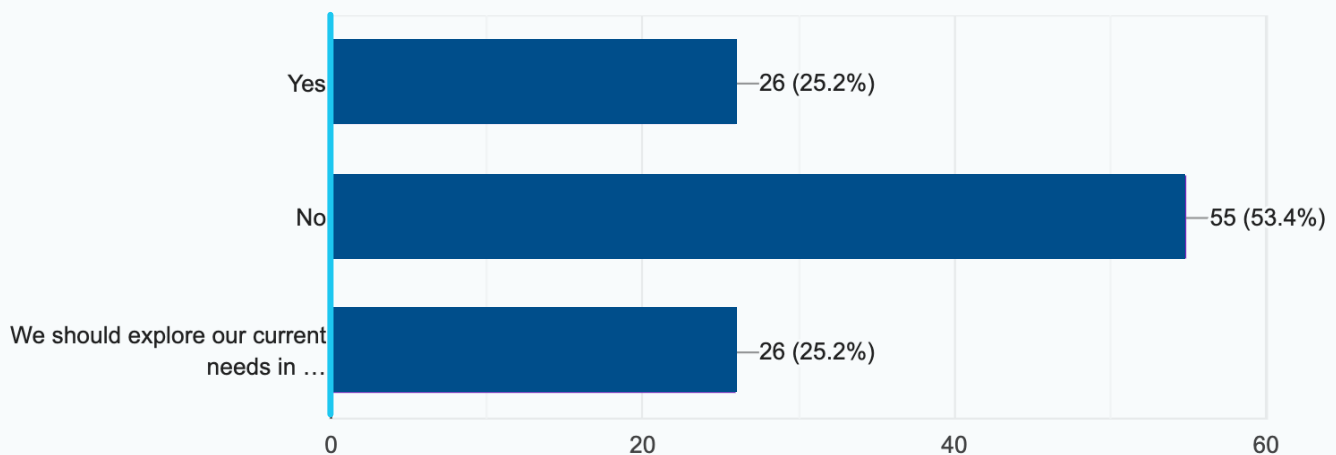
Question 10:

Are you using a digital platform to more efficiently implement positive behavior support systems to improve school climate?

Fifty-three percent of school principals report they are not using a digital platform to support the implementation of positive behavior support systems and social emotional learning. A digital platform that is designed to support the authoritative climate model and positive behavior supports can greatly enhance consistency and equity; which are critical aspects of effective positive behavior support systems.

- Provide key data elements to drive decision-making
- Monitor overall fidelity of implementation
- Help staff monitor the ratio of positive to negative interactions with students
- Implement a robust token economy
- Help staff respond appropriately and consistently to student behavior
- Help staff follow through on positive and negative consequences
- Enhance parental involvement
- Help students clearly understand the expectations

The low rate of platform adoption at only 25% for the authoritative climate model suggests that even greater improvements in student behavior and overall school climate could be realized if schools would implement such systems. It is somewhat surprising that only 25% of schools are interested in gathering information on possible platforms to support climate initiatives when such a system could have such meaningful impact.



Implementing Climate Initiatives

How do schools implement an Authoritative School Climate model? Although Cohen and Ellis' (2011) book entitled *School Climate: Building Safe, Supportive and Engaging Classrooms & Schools* describes a very useful and detailed roadmap for climate initiatives, from a practical perspective this can be achieved by implementing essential aspects of positive behavior support systems or in some places known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). From a school-wide perspective the essential components would include:

1. Common purpose & approach to discipline
2. Clear set of positive expectations & behaviors
3. Procedures for teaching expected behavior (SEL competency work)
4. Continuum of procedures for encouraging expected behavior
5. Continuum of procedures for discouraging inappropriate behavior
6. Procedures for on-going monitoring & evaluation

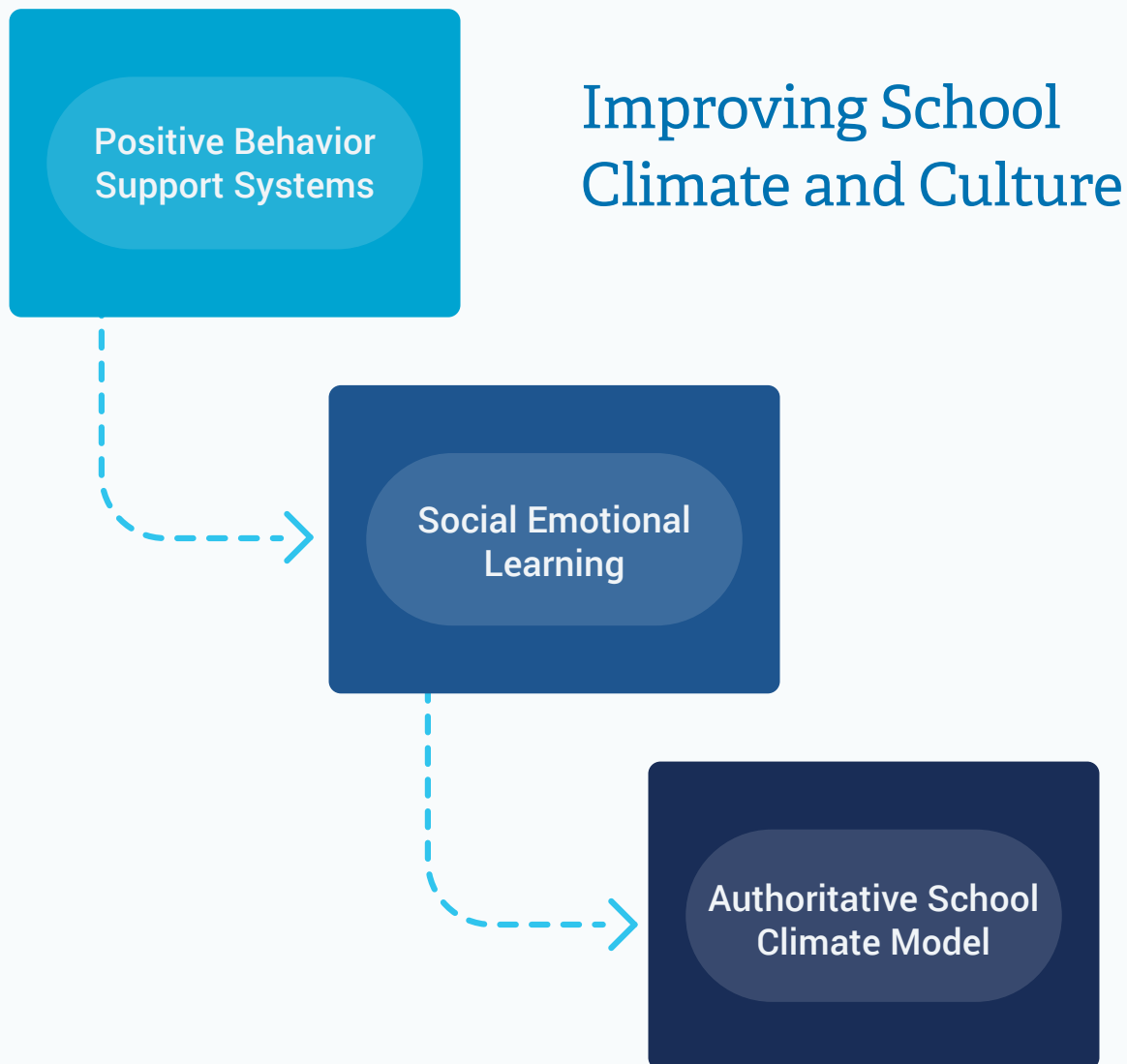
In the classroom components would include:

1. Classroom-wide positive expectations taught & encouraged
2. Teaching classroom routines & cues taught & encouraged
3. Ratio of 5 positive to 1 negative adult-student interaction
4. Active supervision
5. Active and reflective listening
6. Redirections for minor, infrequent behavior errors
7. Frequent precorrections for chronic errors
8. Effective academic instruction & curriculum

Implementing positive behavioral supports provides teachers a systematic framework for providing an increased ratio of positive to negative interactions with students for academic tasks and behavioral performance, differential reinforcement of competing positive behaviors and increased individual attention.

These rules, norms and consistent corrective responses can reduce these incidents of negative interactions with students and they will have a greater sense of social and emotional safety from with this reduction of incidents (Kelm, et. al., 2014). Additionally, these approaches can support students with anxiety, depression and trauma by improving the clarity and predictability of the social environment, discouraging problem behaviors that can threaten student safety, allowing instruction to take place and teaching effective responses to perceived environmental threats (McIntosh, et. al., 2013).

The overall approach to improving school climate is summarized below.



The Challenges For Schools

Schools have approached the implementation of positive behavioral support systems in a variety of ways but a high percentage of educators' report that efforts are inconsistent and fidelity is lacking. These inconsistencies lead to less robust outcomes for students.

1. **Too many initiatives:** Dr. Douglas Reeves (2018, personal communication) refers to "initiative fatigue" when districts and schools simply try to do too many things at one time and the system breaks down on many levels. View school climate initiatives as superordinate that will subsume and drive other initiatives. For example, the overall climate initiative would include building out your multi-tiered behavioral options to support the authoritative climate model.
2. **Consistency:** As we noted earlier, there are large implementation gaps and differences in the perceptions of administrators and teachers in the actual implementation of climate, PBSS and SEL initiatives. Consistency in implementation is achieved through clearly defined goals and expectations supported with accountability systems. When implementing an authoritative climate model everyone must be on the same page with respect to rules, norms, rewards and consequences to achieve equity for all students. To solve the consistency problem schools and districts should invest in a software platform designed to support the precepts of authoritative climate models.
3. **Delivering evidence-based best practices:** While educational leaders can find a variety of written roadmaps to implementing an authoritative climate model, schools should seek out a software platform that was designed to help teachers deliver best practices easily and efficiently. For example, teachers need an efficient mechanism for rewarding students for positive behavior and an effective software platform can make this essential component part of the ongoing daily procedures. This is related to consistency but a quality software platform will provide teachers and school leaders a guiding hand in putting these practices to work.
4. **Using data to measure progress:** With any initiative, using data to establish your baseline and to measure progress is essential. Most schools have data systems for a variety of data points (e.g., academic tests, attendance, referrals) but lack software data systems to support the measurement of essential authoritative climate models. The data that needs to be tracked include: token economy point systems, number of positive to negative teacher-student interactions, degree of positive reinforcement provided to students, assigning students to interventions, and parent engagement/communication.

Action Items

1	Assess your school climate using quality survey instruments
2	Identify key areas of overall climate needs based on the data and known climate frameworks
3	Design a multi-year plan with continuous progress monitoring and communications with all stakeholders
4	Analyze your student behavioral data to identify trends and areas of need
5	Systematically implement positive behavioral support systems (PBSS) and the associated authoritative school climate (ASC) model
6	Adopt a digital platform to implement PBSS and ASC in a consistent manner across all schools
7	Assess the status of students' social emotional learning (SEL) competencies and identify areas of need
8	Adopt an evidence-based SEL competency training program and provide adequate professional development
9	Seek help from experts in the field as necessary

[Hero by SchoolMint](#) is a software platform that is designed to support the improvement of your school climate, particularly from the authoritative climate model perspective and positive behavior support systems. Hero allows schools to deliver on the promise of high structure and student support by putting into place consistent rules, norms and expectations coupled with consistent corrective responses to behavior. Therefore, students will experience a highly predictable and equitable environment. With the help of Hero, students will also experience increased levels of support from their teachers and an increase in positive interactions, which will result in greater student engagement and academic success.

Dr. Christopher Balow from SchoolMint will provide your school a free 1-hour video conference to help you get started.

Contact Dr. Balow at: chris.balow@schoolmint.com or 651-210-5732

A background image of a smiling man with glasses, wearing a suit and tie, is visible behind the text. The image is in a dark blue color scheme.

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