

CASE STUDY

Collaborative Conversations in Action

Authors: Georgia Heyward & Isaac Parrish

NOVEMBER, 2024

For more information about implementing Collaborative Conversations, see [this guide](#) in our series *Promising Practices from Washington State*.



CASE STUDY SCHOOL

The practice described in this guide is based on the experience of Lumen High School (Lumen). Lumen is located in Spokane, Washington and serves teen parents in 9th to 12th grade. The public charter school opened in September 2020. In the 2023–24 school year, 32 students were enrolled; 88% of students were low-income, 16% were homeless, and 59% were unaccompanied minors. For a detailed school profile, see [appendix A](#).

At Lumen High School, students take responsibility for their own behavior with the guidance of trusted adults. This approach helps students recognize their role and responsibility within conflicts and pushes them to work together as a community.

The leaders who opened Lumen in 2020 wanted a form of discipline that was not punitive. The school serves a population of teen parents, many of whom had challenging school experiences before coming to Lumen (see [appendix A](#) for a detailed school profile). According to leaders, this includes students who had been suspended and expelled from previous schools. Leaders did not want to signal to students that once again they were not welcome at school.

“Our mission is the whole student,” said Lumen’s principal. “We have students here who are like, ‘I’m not here for my high school diploma. I’m here for the relationships. I’m here for the resources.’” This meant the school had to find a discipline model that would center relationships.

“When you have a population with such high trauma as ours, there’s going to be behavioral challenges,” said one of three members of the school’s Restorative Justice (RJ) team, the group that oversees school discipline. Student behavioral challenges commonly include the use of profanity, bullying in school and on social media, phone use in the classroom, incomplete classwork, and skipping class or arriving late to school. The school needed an approach that was not punitive but that was also effective, so students would feel safe and motivated to learn.

The answer was Collaborative Conversations — one-on-one conversations that help students identify the source of their actions, take responsibility, and build a plan toward improved behavior. In a Collaborative Conversation, a trusted adult asks a series of questions to support students in recognizing their responsibility and making a plan to address their behavior. These questions include: “Do you have enough courage to make changes? Is there anyone you need to make amends to? What is a goal for yourself after this experience? What kind of support do you need?”

FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATION PROCESS:

- 1. Structured dialogue that empowers students:** Collaborative Conversations use [a structured protocol](#) to guide a one-on-one conversation between a student and an adult. The adult helps the student recognize the impact of their behavior. The student and adult then co-create a solution to address the behavior and, if needed, [repair the harm](#) that has been caused to the school community.
- 2. Support for students' social-emotional growth:** Adults identify social-emotional skills at the root of the students' behavior and support students in cultivating those skills through the Collaborative Conversation process or through additional interventions.
- 3. Integrated into school systems:** Collaborative Conversation is an [integrated part](#) of the school's support structure and response to discipline. Staff conducting Collaborative Conversations may identify other issues that are influencing student behavior, such as a death in the family or difficulty following course content. They then connect students to counseling or tutoring resources.
- 4. Regular data collection and analysis:** Data routines help a school surface trends and disproportionality in disciplinary responses. For example, Lumen High School uses the [Supported School](#) App to record incidents in real time. Staff then export data from Supported School into [incident trackers](#) where it is analyzed monthly.



Revising Their Approach

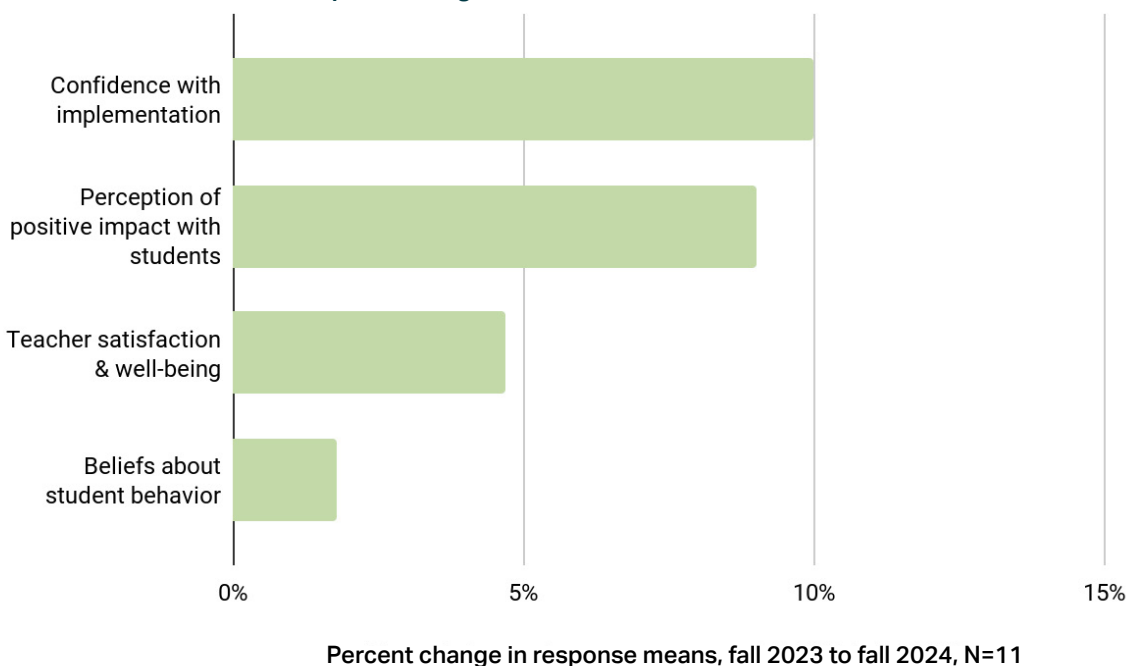
At the end of the 2022–23 school year, Lumen found that their approach to discipline was not working as well as they wanted. In focus groups, students said bullying was a problem, and teachers noted that frequent outbursts made teaching difficult. Over the summer, Lumen adjusted its approach. At the start of the 2023–24 school year, the school created a Restorative Justice team to replace a single coordinator, developed new protocols, and communicated clearer behavior expectations to students. The RJ team took the lead on conducting Collaborative Conversations, though teachers continued to do them when it would not disrupt teaching.

The RJ team began collecting and regularly analyzing data using [Supported School](#), a free app aligned with Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Data has helped the RJ team identify and tailor their responses to individual students. “At our [RJ Team] meetings,” said one member, “we can pull up the history and see, who is having the most problems right now? Who are we talking to the most? Is there something that we can preemptively do? Can we go to them and figure out what is going on? Is there a larger issue?”

Staff believe that clarifying procedures in the 2023–24 school year improved student perceptions about school discipline. “I think there was a feeling [last year], and many of the students expressed this, that anything goes here. ‘We can basically do anything and there isn’t going to be a consequence,’” said one staff member. “And so this year, I think they’ve seen that we are following through, and we never want to create an exclusionary environment.”

Not only student perception improved. In fall 2023, teachers and staff felt 10% more confident implementing Collaborative Conversations than the previous year.¹ There was also a 9% increase in teacher/staff perception that they were having a positive impact on students (see figure 1 below).

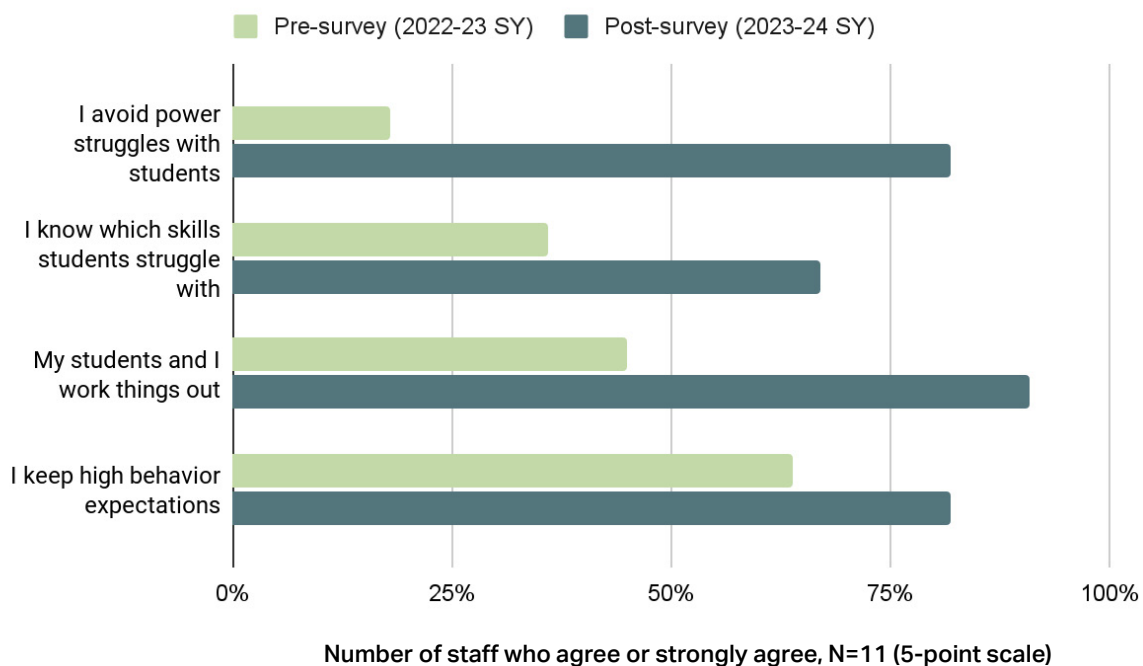
FIGURE 1: Following improvements to the model, teachers and staff felt 10% more confident implementing Collaborative Conversations.



¹ We administered the [Collaborative Problem Solving \(CPS\)](#) survey in October 2022 and December 2023. All but one student-facing staff or teacher took the survey both years (N = 11).

Following improvements to Collaborative Conversations, teachers reported that they can better navigate conflict with students, are more likely to avoid power struggles, and are better able to hold students to high behavior expectations (figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Following improvements to the model, teachers and staff felt more confident working through conflict with their students



Classroom teachers in particular appreciated having a clearer system and an RJ team guiding the process. “Our students require a lot of scaffolds, a lot of support to access grade level content. It’s nice to have Collaborative Conversations sort of off our plate a bit so that we can actually focus on the work that we’re doing in terms of learning,” said a Lumen teacher. “There’s so much less micromanaging [than last year] and there’s a clear process for handing things off to someone.”

Lessons Learned

Student belonging and sense of support

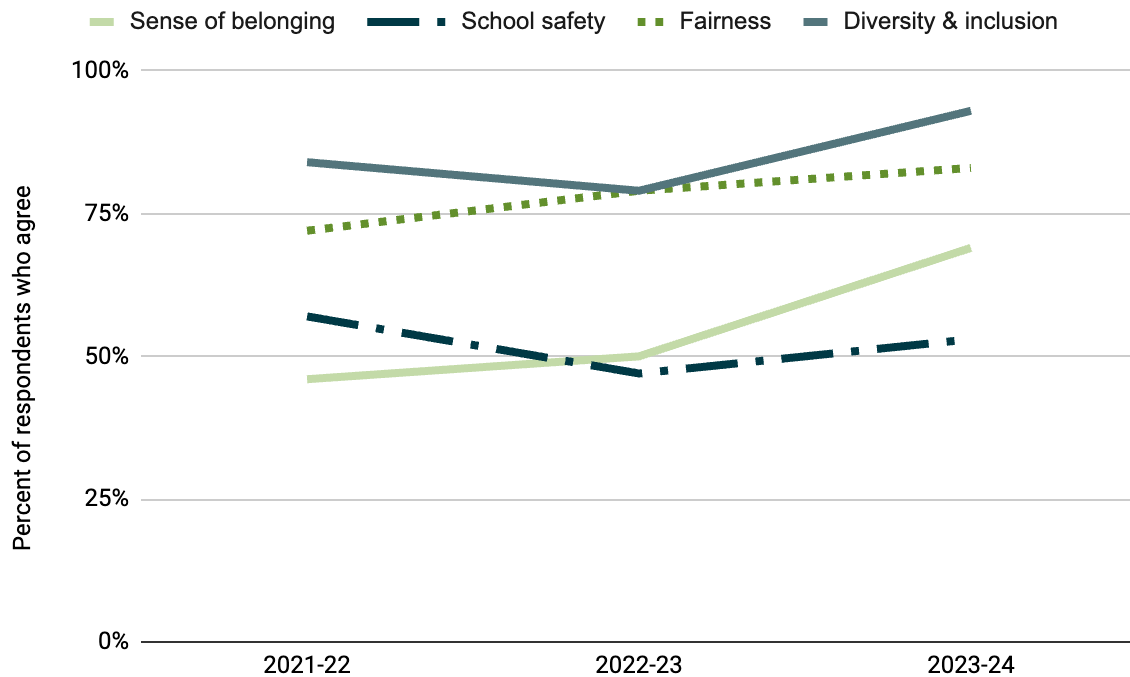
One of the earliest indicators of success for a restorative practices model is an improved sense of belonging.² This seems to be the case for Lumen, as seen in figure 3.³ As the school improved implementation of Collaborative Conversations in the 2023-24 school year, student perceptions of belonging, fairness, and diversity and equity all improved. The school implemented a number of changes in the 2023–24 school year, including a new mentor model, so restorative practices are likely only one contributor to these positive trends.

2 Acosta, J. D., Augustine, C. H., & Chinman, J. E. (2019, April 17). *What two new studies reveal about restorative justice in middle school and how it can be done better* [Blog post]. Rand blog.

Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenbur, S., Hurley, N., Petrosino, A. (2019). *Restorative Justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review*. WestEd.

3 Students were administered the [Kelvin](#) survey in November to December of 2022 and again in 2023. The school experiences high turnover and absence rates. However, the student demographics did not differ in any significant way over those two years (see [appendix A](#)), so we believe a comparison is possible.

FIGURE 3: Student perception of school culture generally improved from the 2021–22 school year to the 2023–24 school year.



Student behavior

Restorative practices typically take time to reduce behavioral incidents. It is also common for students and staff to perceive that restorative practices are “not working,” even when they are, because of the shift in the way the school addresses behavior. Even after adjusting the policy, students continued to have concerns about the school’s approach to discipline. Students noted continued use of profanity and threatening language, which they believed created an unsafe environment. “I was dealing with people that were bullying and harassing me, and they really didn’t get much of a discipline,” said one Lumen student in May 2024. Because Lumen implemented a new system for tracking disciplinary incidents in 2023–24, we were not able to compare the number or severity of incidents year-over-year.

However, staff believe students are starting to think more about the impact of their behaviors. “Often the student behaved in a way that they realized like ‘Oh, that wasn’t helpful. That was harmful. It disrupted others’ learning. It was harmful to me,’” said one staff member at the end of the 2023–24 school year. “It just gives them space in a supportive way to be able to reflect and to think about the repercussions of what just happened. And so often that in itself is a huge skill.”

Despite improvements to the structure of Collaborative Conversations, Lumen staff pointed to additional growth areas, such as needing more consistent follow-up after Collaborative Conversations and more attention to identifying lagging social-emotional skills. These are areas the RJ team plans to improve in the upcoming school year. “I think that [skill building] could be a good learning objective for next year,” said an RJ team member. “Actually focusing a little bit more and helping them reflect on what the skill deficits are and how to build those, that would be really empowering for the students.”

APPENDIX A:

Profile of Lumen High School

Location: Spokane, Washington

Founded: 2020

Level: High school with onsite daycare/preschool

Type: School for teen parents

ENROLLMENT	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
Number enrolled	36	32
Students with disabilities	28%	12.5%
Multilingual learners	0%	3%
Unaccompanied minors*	50%	59%
Foster youth*	8%	2.3%
Juvenile justice involved*	No data	17%
Low-income students	92%	88%
Homeless students	36%	16%

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [school report card](#); *school social worker for data on unaccompanied minors, foster youth, and juvenile justice involved youth

STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
American Indian or Alaska Native	6%	13%
Asian	0%	3%
Black or African American	6%	3%
Hispanic or Latino	14%	19%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%	6%
Two or more races	22%	19%
White	53%	37%

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [school report card](#)

ACADEMIC PROFILE	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
Attendance	50.85%	51.01%
GPA for all students*	1.49	1.17
GPA for regular attenders†	2.89	2.53

Source: School attendance files and transcripts

Notes: *Average student GPA was 1.48 prior to attending Lumen. Grading policies changed in the 2023-24 school year.

†Regular attenders are defined as students who attend at least 65% of the time.

STAFFING PROFILE

Administrators: 2

Teachers: 4

Push-in and small group academic support staff: 2

Social Worker: 1

School Counselor: 1

Internship Coordinator: 1

On-site community organizations: 5

About the Project

Project Description

This guide is part of a two-year participatory evaluation that concluded in May 2024. We worked with Washington State public charter schools Lumen High School and Catalyst Public School. The evaluation started with a single question: “What is working in your school?” Researchers Georgia Heyward and Sivan Tuchman worked closely with school leaders to identify promising practices and create research plans to study implementation and outcomes. The result is [six guides](#) for each of the practices identified:

- Collaborative Conversations: A Skill-Building Restorative Practice
- Co-Teaching for All: Using Two Educators in a Classroom to Individualize Learning
- Cultivating Connection: How to Design and Implement School-Based Mentoring
- Social Health: A New Model for Wrap-Around School Services
- Station Rotation: Grouping Students for Individualized Learning
- Summer Professional Development: Creating a Foundation of Teacher Relationships

We also produced a [summary report](#) identifying how schools and systems can create learning environments that promote whole-school well-being. See that report for a full description of the research methodology.

Authors

Georgia Heyward is the founder of Fig Education Lab, a nonprofit that conducts collaborative research, evaluation, and program design. Georgia is a former teacher and administrator, with experience spanning 1st through 12th grade in dual language schools. Prior to founding Fig Education, she was a researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education and Edunomics Lab. She has a Master’s in Education Policy from the University of Washington. Isaac Parrish is a former journalist; he was a writer and editor for The Central Virginian and the Orange County Review.

Funder

This research project was funded through the Washington State Charter Schools Association (WA Charters), using federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) grant funds. These funds were awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, award number U282A190002, “Washington’s Innovation and Excellence CSP Award.”

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the administrators, educators, and students who contributed valuable perspectives to this research. This report would not have been possible without their candor and thoughtfulness. In addition, a team of writers, editors, designers, and research assistants contributed to this report. Isaac Parrish wrote each case study and Kelley Prosser edited each guide. Teresa Cole and Amanda Stanley assisted with data analysis and background research, and Jacqueline Sanz designed the reports. Special thanks to Mark Isero, our practitioner reviewer, and Dr. David Naff, our researcher reviewer.