

WHOLE-SCHOOL WELLBEING: How Education Leaders can Create a System Where Students and Teachers Thrive

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Foreword

One of the original promises of charter public schools was to share innovations and best practices with other schools so that the entire public education sector can be stronger. It is in this spirit of sharing and disseminating best practices that the Washington State Charter Schools Association funded a research project to better understand whole-school wellbeing for students and teachers.

Over the past five years, schools across the country have struggled with teacher retention, chronic absenteeism, learning loss, and student depression and anxiety. We wanted to help find solutions. Using funds from the federal Charter Schools Program, we commissioned research on two Washington state charter public schools as the focus of an intense two-year project.

The result is this report from Fig Education Lab and Datability Education Consulting, which highlights transformative practices that cultivate whole-school well-being. The strategies and insights outlined here reinforce what charter public schools have demonstrated for decades: when schools are empowered with the flexibility and freedom to innovate, they can deliver extraordinary results for students and families. Charter public schools operate at the intersection of creativity and accountability, where educators can design approaches tailored to the diverse needs of their communities, ensuring every child has access to a great education.

This report provides a roadmap for advancing promising practices that put students' and teachers' holistic wellbeing at the forefront. From nurturing student mental health to cultivating a supportive school culture, the case studies here are a testament to what is possible when educators are empowered to think and act differently. Charter public schools, with their inherent autonomy, are uniquely positioned to implement these kinds of solutions quickly and effectively. This flexibility enables them to serve as incubators of innovation and to inspire system-wide improvements that benefit all public school students.

However, to fully realize this potential, we need bold leadership from policymakers and community stakeholders. The path forward is clear: expand access to more high-quality public schools so more families can experience the transformative impact of an excellent public education. This means removing barriers to growth, ensuring equitable funding, and providing the support that all public school students—including charter public school students—need to thrive. When we champion policies that foster the growth of innovative schools, we are championing families, communities, and the future of our state.

The examples highlighted in this report are not just inspiring—they are a call to action. As we look ahead, let us draw on the lessons outlined here to build a public education system that prioritizes school wellbeing, student achievement, and teacher retention. Together, we can ensure that every family has access to schools that meet their needs and help their children flourish. Let this report serve as a reminder of what is possible when freedom and flexibility meet dedication and vision in education.

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Executive Summary

Wellbeing, or the experience of contentment and purpose, is foundational for student learning,¹ teacher satisfaction,² and mental and physical health.³ Nevertheless, there are many signs that schools are *not* places where students and teachers feel good. Across the country, schools grapple with low attendance rates.⁴ In 2023, 40% of adolescents reported feeling so hopeless or sad that they stopped their regular activities.⁵ Poor mental health is not experienced equally; it is disproportionately felt by students who are Black and Hispanic, live in immigrant households, or have disabilities.⁶ Teacher wellbeing is a concern too. A 2022 Gallup poll found that 44% of K-12 educators experienced burnout at work — higher than any other profession.⁷

When youth and teachers struggle to this extent, it is no wonder that students in the United States remain between four and five months behind pre-COVID achievement.⁸ These sobering facts should concern anyone who cares about school quality.

At a time when so many other schools are struggling, this report tells the story of two diverse public charter schools in Washington State that cultivated whole-school wellbeing: Catalyst Public Schools and Lumen High School. Drawing on their experiences, researchers developed a model that conceptualizes whole-school wellbeing as meeting student and teacher needs of **autonomy, competency, and connectedness**. This [broad framework](#) helps schools assess and reorient organizational choices, pedagogical techniques, and school practices.

Through profiles of the two schools, we show [how leaders](#) at Catalyst and Lumen created the conditions for students and teachers to thrive through creative staffing and budgeting, coherent structures, and a commitment to belonging and inclusion. Leaders' whole-school approach to wellbeing had positive results for both teachers and students. In 2023-24, Catalyst's whole-school approach helped the school retain 91% of teachers who identify as BIPOC and support students with disabilities in achieving similar growth rates in their NWEA MAP tests as students without disabilities. At Lumen, the school maintained a 100% teacher retention rate from the fall of 2020 to the fall of 2023. From 2022 to 2023, students increased their social awareness skills by 77%.

However, these schools did not act alone. They benefited from the support of state policy and regional organizations that helped them measure wellbeing, leverage their decision-making authority, and learn what worked in their own school setting.

Despite the uniqueness of their contexts, we believe the schools' experiences offer a roadmap that any school or district can follow. For this to happen, we recommend that education leaders, policy makers, and nonprofits [take three steps](#):

1. Help schools measure wellbeing
2. Support school leaders in using their decision-making authority
3. Learn how other schools promote wellbeing

Most schools want to cultivate an environment that promotes wellbeing. Support from district and network leaders, state agencies, and funders can make that possible.

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A Framework for Whole-School Wellbeing

School Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a feeling of contentment and sense of purpose, and it plays an important role in student learning and teacher success. Students who experience wellbeing are more engaged in school⁹ and do better academically.¹⁰ Teacher wellbeing is linked to higher retention,¹¹ lower rates of burnout,¹² and an improved ability to support both student learning¹³ and social-emotional development.¹⁴

Unfortunately, youth wellbeing has been on the decline for the past decade,¹⁵ manifesting as increased feelings of loneliness and anxiety. COVID-19 exacerbated these trends, especially among students with disabilities, students who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), and students living in immigrant households.¹⁶ Teacher satisfaction in the profession is at a 50-year low.¹⁷

WHAT IS WELLBEING?

Wellbeing is the sense that one “feels well.” Classically, wellbeing has been conceptualized in two ways:

- (1) Feeling contentment, free from stress and worry
- (2) Having a sense of purpose and meaning

We use both definitions of wellbeing because students and teachers report the importance of both experiences in school settings.¹⁸ While this report uses the term wellbeing, “[flourishing](#)” is often used to express a similar idea.

Schools can potentially play a role in supporting student and teacher wellbeing, while also promoting student engagement and teacher retention. This section of the report introduces a wellbeing framework that schools can adapt to their own unique community contexts. Our framework identifies **competency**, **autonomy**, and **connectedness** as essential for the experience of wellbeing in school settings.

Our Study

Researchers developed the wellbeing framework inductively following a multi-year evaluation of two public charter schools in Washington state: [Catalyst Public School](#) (Catalyst) and [Lumen High School](#) (Lumen). Researchers selected Catalyst and Lumen for their innovative practices and for the diversity of students they serve. Nearly 16% of Catalyst's K-8 students have a disability and 40% are BIPOC. Lumen only enrolls teen parents; 16% are homeless and 63% are BIPOC. The study began by asking school leaders to identify specific practices that they believed contributed to teacher success and student learning. Research took place over approximately two years and included 45 hours of interviews with leaders, teachers, staff, students, and community members. Surveys and secondary school data provided further insight into how the identified practices were affecting the school experience of students and teachers (the [appendix](#) has our full research methodology). In total, researchers identified and studied six promising practices.

PROMISING PRACTICES IN WASHINGTON STATE

Researchers identified six practices at Lumen and Catalyst that support student learning, teacher success, and whole-school wellbeing. Learn more about these practices [here](#).

- **Co-teaching** between a lead and apprentice teacher creates an educator pipeline and helps teachers implement small groups of students for individualized learning.
- **Relationship-building professional development** during the summer helps teachers build trusting relationships and an inclusive school culture.
- **School-based mentoring** cultivates a protective relationship between school adults and students while supporting students in meeting school-wide goals like attendance.
- **Skill-building restorative discipline** co-creates plans for addressing student behavior and cultivates social-emotional competencies such as problem-solving.
- **Social health** pairs wrap-around support services with one-on-one coaching. Schools connect students and families to needed resources while building lasting community relationships and resource navigation skills.
- **Station rotations** create small, flexible student groups during core content instruction. By using co-teaching across grade-level classrooms, station group instruction can target specific growth areas.

Wellbeing Framework: Autonomy, Competency, and Connectedness

In addition to studying their promising practices, school leaders wanted researchers to create a conceptual model that captured their whole-school approaches. As researchers reviewed survey and interview data, they identified signs of wellbeing across both schools. Teachers and staff at Lumen were 100% satisfied in their roles, and the school had no turnover in its first three years of operation. The school's teen parents described their school as a "place to comfortably do yourself" where "everyone's just welcoming." In the 2023-24 school year, Catalyst had a 91% retention rate for its BIPOC teachers. One Catalyst teacher talked about the sense of wellbeing he was creating for students: "I want them to know, it's gonna be okay... [school can be] peaceful and good."

As part of their experience of feeling good, students and teachers talked about feeling respected, successful, and cared for. They had **opportunities for input** and their voice mattered. One teacher at Catalyst explained, "At first I was scared coming into [conversations] because I wasn't sure if my voice fit in. Then quickly I realized, no, my voice does matter here." A student at Lumen summed up the experience of many saying, "I can be myself. And not only that, everyone will hear you out." Students and teachers also had support to **feel successful**. Lumen students, many of whom had experienced interrupted schooling and repeated expulsions, talked about their newfound motivation to graduate and go to college. One teen dad said, "I feel like I've applied myself a little more here. I used to have really bad grades in everything and now I have pretty good grades." Catalyst has a co-teaching model that pairs a lead and apprentice teacher. Apprentice teachers often spoke to the way they felt supported in their roles. One lead teacher spoke about the intentionality in creating growth opportunities for his apprentice teacher saying, "[I am] just constantly pushing and probing to kind of see when they're ready to take on more challenge and what blocks they wanna learn and grow in." At both schools, members talked about the feeling of **belonging**. A second year Catalyst teacher said, "The relationships that I created last year are so deep that some of us are like family." Students at Lumen said they experienced both care and belonging: "The staff are always really caring and they can honestly tell if you are off... It's just the fact that they care so much about every one of us, [it] is like an amazing feeling."

Students and teachers were describing wellbeing as the experience of **autonomy** (having opportunities for input), **competency** (experiencing a sense of success), and **connectedness** (feeling belonging and care). These experiences align with research in schools from around the world¹⁹ and with Self-Determination Theory, which finds people experience wellbeing when they meet three core needs: autonomy, competency, and relatedness.²⁰ When people meet these needs, they experience wellbeing and have the motivation to engage, learn, and grow.²¹

WHOLE-SCHOOL WELLBEING: AUTONOMY, COMPETENCY, AND CONNECTION

Conditions for achieving school wellbeing among students and teachers:

Autonomy: Autonomy means that students and teachers feel that they have opportunities for input, choice, and self-expression within a framework of expectations.²² Their decisions make a difference, and that difference is felt. When students have opportunities for expression and input in the classroom, within limits, they are more motivated to learn.²³ A sense of autonomy is especially integral to teacher satisfaction and retention.²⁴

Competency: Students and teachers experience competency when they feel that they are good at what they do. This is only possible when they are able to grow through authentic, appropriately supported challenges. For students, this means classes are both rigorous and encouraging, with tutoring, counseling, and other support provided as needed. For teachers, this means guidance and support from administrators.²⁵

Connectedness: Connectedness refers to care within relationships and a sense of belonging with the broader community.²⁶ When students feel connection with teachers, they also feel valued and respected.²⁷ School environments that are controlling or chaotic do not support students' need for connection or, for that matter, agency and competency.²⁸ For teachers, connectedness with students and peers contributes to wellbeing and perceived competence.²⁹

Conceptualizing wellbeing as autonomy, competency, and connectedness offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to any school or community context. This allows school leaders to orient toward their members' unique needs and experiences of wellbeing. In the section that follows, we offer examples of how Catalyst and Lumen implemented their whole-school wellbeing approach, summarized from research on the schools' six promising practices.

WHOLE-SCHOOL WELLBEING IN PRACTICE: A Profile of Two Schools

The sense of wellbeing that teachers and students describe at Lumen and Catalyst is not accidental. The schools seek to meet the needs of autonomy, competency, and connectedness through a cohesive, whole-school approach that encompasses three strategic priorities: (1) creative staffing and budgeting to innovate on a tight budget, (2) structures to create a coherent and sustainable model, and (3) a commitment to belonging and inclusion.

School leaders allocate resources like money, time, and manpower toward the programs that best support their communities. Structures take the form of teacher evaluation systems, staff roles, data collection routines, and responsive supports that meet students' short- and long-term learning needs. Finally, leaders incorporate practices to promote belonging and inclusion. Both schools include students with disabilities in general education settings. Leaders also hire staff with life experiences similar to those of their students, such as former teen parents (in the case of Lumen) or teachers who share the same race/ethnicity as students (in the case of Catalyst).

The schools' approaches produced real results for staff and students. At Catalyst, the school retained 91% of teachers who identify as BIPOC and 88% of white teachers in 2023-24. Teacher wellbeing creates the foundation for student success at Catalyst. Over 50% of students meet their NWEA MAP growth goals in reading each year. Students with disabilities achieve at similar levels as their peers (e.g., 52% of students with disabilities meet growth goals in ELA while 54% of students without disabilities meet ELA growth goals). Research finds that Black and Latinx students do not always benefit as much from social-emotional learning interventions as their white peers.³⁰ Lumen's holistic approach, however, led to benefits for all students. Lumen students, nearly two-thirds of whom are BIPOC, reported a 40% increase in their sense of belonging and a 77% increase in social awareness skills between 2022 and 2023.³¹ Following changes to priorities and school practices, self-reported teacher burnout at Lumen declined from 55% in the 2022-23 school year to just 9% in 2023-24.³²

Wellbeing and academic success go hand-in-hand at **Catalyst**.

Over **50%** of students meet their NWEA MAP growth goals in reading each year

Following changes to school practices, **Lumen** students reported a

40% increase in their sense of belonging

77% increase in social awareness skills

In order to better understand the context of these promising results, the next two sections outline the whole-school approaches to wellbeing at each school.

When Leaders Listen: The Evolution of Lumen High School’s Approach to Wellbeing

Located in downtown Spokane, Washington, Lumen is a small school enrolling 30 to 60 teen parents each year. Lumen students, in addition to being parents, face multiple, overlapping challenges. Fifty-nine percent are unaccompanied minors. Many students must navigate employment, housing applications, and court systems, in addition to juggling school work and childcare.

As this profile demonstrates, Lumen’s whole-school model evolved to include clearer expectations for both students and staff. Based on interviews and surveys, this seems to have strengthened the sense of competency school members felt and deepened their experience of both connection and autonomy.

Lumen High School: 2023-24

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: SERVICE PROVISION	
Total enrollment	32
Students with disabilities	13%
Multilingual learners	3%
Low-income students	88%
Homeless students	16%
Unaccompanied minors*	59%
Foster youth*	2%
Juvenile justice involved*	17%

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: RACE/ETHNICITY	
American Indian or Alaska Native	13%
Asian	3%
Black or African American	3%
Hispanic or Latino	19%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	6%
Two or more races	19%
White	37%

Source: [Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#);

*Data from the school

By the 2022-23 school year, Lumen had already invested heavily in teacher, staff, and student wellbeing. For teachers and staff, this includes weekly community events to cultivate **connection** with one another. Leaders hire staff with relational dispositions like perspective-taking, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. These qualities are further developed through training and teacher evaluations. Staff are thus prepared for relationship-focused initiatives like restorative discipline. At its inception, the school infused opportunities for meaningful connection for students, especially with the broader community. Students have access to a range of wrap-around supports on site, including an early learning center and health resources for themselves and their children. One-on-one coaching accompanies these resources, helping students build social support, social capital, and community knowledge.

Both teachers and students have opportunities for **autonomy**. In interviews, staff say they have access to leadership and feel supported in their roles. At the end of every year, academic teachers assess how the year went and propose changes to leadership regarding instructional practice, curriculum, and scheduling. Students have opportunities for meaningful input, formal and informal: a student council advises leadership, and annual surveys give all students the opportunity to weigh in on school processes. The school supports student academic **competency** through a co-teaching model, which provides them with access to one-on-one and small-group academic support. They also have weekly parenting classes so they can feel successful as young parents.

Despite some early successes, Lumen leaders saw that their model needed refinement. At the end of the 2022-23 school year, attendance remained low and some students of color said they did not feel heard at school. Although staff were largely very satisfied, more than half were experiencing burnout. Some talked about the need for greater role clarity and consistency in expectations, while others were frustrated with the behavior management system in place. The small school had successfully prioritized relationships and autonomy, but students and staff wanted more structure so they could feel successful.

Leaders listened, and they worked hard through the summer of 2023 to tighten existing processes and put new ones in place. The school instituted a formal mentor model so all students had an adult who checked in weekly and called when they were absent from school. Leaders redefined staff roles to form a new Restorative Justice team that oversees discipline. To address student concerns about inclusion, leaders hired community partners who share students' ethnicities to offer student parenting classes and teacher anti-bias training.

Lumen implemented new tools and procedures so they could better measure their progress. The school adopted a free app, [Supported School](#), that helped staff communicate with one another about disciplinary incidents and track intervention data. They found a survey, [Flourishing Life](#), that helped them measure the social-emotional competencies they cared about. All staff started looking at data on attendance, behavior, grades, and social-emotional skills on a regular basis so they could see what supports were working for students and assign interventions as needed.

The school's revised approach was accompanied by positive changes for both teachers and students. Reported teacher burnout declined from 55% in the fall of 2022 to just 9% in the fall of 2023. By the 2023-24 school year, 100% of staff said they were satisfied with their jobs.³³ Student perception of school culture and their own competencies also improved.³⁴ Between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years, students' reports of belonging improved 38%, and their belief that the school was inclusive increased 40%. During the same time period, social awareness skills and growth mindset improved by over twenty percentage points each.³⁵ Attendance and GPA did not change between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. However, school leaders believe that improvements in the indicators above suggest that they are on the right track, and they are hopeful that recent changes will result in further improvement.

From Remote Beginnings to Academic Success: How Catalyst Public Schools Built a School Community that Thrives

Catalyst Public Schools is a K-8 public charter school serving a diverse student body in Bremerton, Washington. In what follows, we highlight the successes of Catalyst through a whole-school wellbeing framework of connectedness, competency, and autonomy.

Catalyst opened in the fall of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Catalyst begins every year by building **connections** between staff, teachers, and leaders. New teachers attend one week of summer professional development to form relationships within their new cohort and to learn the mission and values of the school. These relationships become the foundation for the support teachers give and receive from one another throughout the year. This emphasis on relationship-building has helped Catalyst maintain teacher retention rates at 81%, above the average for charter schools during COVID-19.³⁶

Catalyst promotes **competency** through a rigorous learning environment. The structure and flexibility of their high-quality curriculum, [EL Education](#), give students a strong foundation for individualizing instruction. In every classroom, Catalyst uses a co-teaching model. Co-teaching teams are composed of a lead teacher responsible for lesson planning and a small group instructor (SGI) who works with groups of students needing additional, targeted support. With two teachers in every classroom, Catalyst’s students all have the opportunity to be seen, appreciated, and challenged. The co-teaching model has helped Catalyst students with disabilities achieve scores in math and reading that are on par with results among those without disabilities.

Catalyst Public Schools, 2023-24

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: SERVICE PROVISION	
Total enrollment	485
Students with disabilities	16%
Multilingual learners	3%
Low-income students	47%

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

STUDENT ENROLLMENT: RACE/ETHNICITY	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.2%
Asian	4%
Black or African American	8%
Hispanic or Latino	16%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.2%
Two or more races	11%
White	60%

Students at Catalyst are expected to develop **autonomy** over their own learning. In early elementary school, students engage in station rotations requiring them to work independently for portions of their math and reading instruction. While teachers at one station use explicit instruction with small homogeneous groups, students in other groups continue to build and practice their skills by working independently on computers, completing worksheets, or engaging in play-based learning. The independence students learn in early elementary builds throughout their years as they are expected to complete more complex assignments independently and in small groups. Each of Catalyst's first four cohorts of students have continued to exceed national grade-level math and reading achievement on NWEA MAP assessments as they progress through Catalyst's program.

Catalyst's school leaders designed a school based on high-quality practices implemented in schools across the country. This was possible, in part, because of the autonomy afforded to them as a charter school by their authorizer, the Washington State Charter School Commission. The Commission also collaborated with Catalyst to ensure that the school's accountability measures align with their school model, making it possible for Catalyst to focus on students' needs for agency and connectedness, along with competency. Catalyst received support from other organizations, including the [True Measure Collaborative](#), to implement their model effectively for all learners. The evidence of Catalyst's positive impact for Bremerton students made it possible for the school to expand to a high school campus in 2024-25.

Creating Support for Whole-School Wellbeing

Catalyst and Lumen were able to design and implement a model consistent with whole-school wellbeing because they knew how to leverage their decision-making authority to creatively allocate funds and staff. They also instituted structures to sustain and evaluate their initiatives, and they committed to belonging and inclusion. Through these actions, they were able to create an environment that met the needs of autonomy, connectedness, and competency. Teachers reported satisfaction and students experienced school success.

However, the schools did not act alone. They benefited from the support of policy, state-developed tools, and regional organizations. For schools like Lumen and Catalyst to exist, they need a system that incubates and nurtures a whole-school approach. This happens with support from district and network leaders, policymakers, and funders.

We recommend three actions that state and district leaders, nonprofits, and foundations can take to support schools in creating environments where students and teachers thrive: help schools measure wellbeing, support school leaders in using their decision-making authority, and learn how other schools promote wellbeing.

1. Help schools measure wellbeing

State and district leaders can support the cultivation of whole-school wellbeing by including wellbeing indicators in accountability and information systems and by ensuring schools have appropriate instruments for measurement.

Schools can use commercially available surveys, like those from Panorama, to measure both [student](#) and [teacher](#) wellbeing. Schools can also measure wellbeing with existing climate surveys by focusing on indicators of student and teacher satisfaction, connectedness, and academic self-efficacy.

State accountability systems set the bar for success and clarify gaps in outcomes between student groups. Accountability systems can do the same with wellbeing. The reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required a [School Quality or Student Success](#) (SQ/SS) indicator. SQ/SS indicators have the potential to demonstrate how schools are doing with regard to wellbeing, but it is not used this way in most states. School climate indicators can measure student, teacher, and family wellbeing; however, [only twelve states](#) and Washington D.C. currently include it in their state accountability system. [Rhode Island](#) is the only state using an indicator of teacher wellbeing: teacher absenteeism.

Ideally, wellbeing measures celebrate school successes or identify when students, families, or teachers are not experiencing wellbeing, so schools can respond with support. [District-level](#) information systems and [authorizer frameworks](#) are natural places to include wellbeing indicators like school climate. For example, Lumen's authorizer, Spokane Public Schools, works closely with the school to help them use leading indicators like social-emotional competencies to communicate the success they have with their teen-parent students.

States, localities, and funders can support schools in measuring wellbeing by helping schools track data. Washington State created the app [Supported Schools](#) and made it available for free to all schools in the state. This multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) app helped the schools in our study track discipline and intervention data so they could support student competency and create more connecting school environments.

2. Support school leaders in using their decision-making authority

The two public charter schools in our study, Lumen and Catalyst, were effective laboratories for incubating promising practices for student and teacher wellbeing. Their success was possible because they had both decision-making authority and support to leverage it effectively.

Any type of public school can have the degree of decision-making authority that Catalyst and Lumen had to allocate funds, hire good-fit staff, and implement new programs and instructional models. Many states have policies that allow schools [to apply](#) for greater decision-making authority. [Autonomous schools](#) have school-level authority over their budget and curriculum, alongside higher levels of accountability. Because of the small size of their districts, rural schools can have significant freedom to allocate resources in a way that serves their school community. Even within a typical district school, veteran principals [can learn](#) to take advantage of the decision-making authority available to them.

Schools with greater autonomy over school-level decisions can produce stronger [student learning](#) and [school climate](#) outcomes than typical district schools. Without support, however, leaders can easily be overwhelmed by the decisions available to them or lack the skills to allocate resources effectively. Whether school-level decision-making authority is used to pilot and test promising practices, as Lumen and Catalyst did, scale promising practices like those described here, or bolster existing initiatives, school leaders need support to translate freedom into whole-school wellbeing and student learning. Districts, states, and intermediary organizations have an important role to play in providing opportunities for decision-making authority and then helping leaders understand and [effectively use](#) the autonomy available to them.

3. Learn how other schools promote wellbeing

Catalyst and Lumen have transformed their schools into sites that catalyze wellbeing. This is not often seen in the United States, although it is somewhat common in [Europe](#), [Canada](#), and [Asia](#). To know how to do the same in the U.S., we need better insight into what works, how, and for whom.

System leaders, policymakers, and funders can plan and fund opportunities to uncover school-level innovation through [research-practice partnerships](#) (RPPs), [network improvement communities](#) (NICs), [design-based implementation research](#), and other rigorous, practitioner-focused research efforts. Approaches like these place researchers and practitioners in close collaboration with one another, putting researchers in contact with innovative practices and, importantly, giving them insight into the black box of implementation. Often, evidence-based practices [fail in implementation](#); sustained research-practitioner partnerships like the one described here helped researchers understand the conditions and behavior changes necessary for successful implementation. Close partnerships of this kind can also support practitioners in building data capacity and in identifying appropriate measures of success.

Practitioner, researcher, and policymaker [partnerships](#) that use approaches like [collaborative policymaking](#) can further drive systems change. For example, Catalyst Public Schools has worked with WA Charters, the Washington State Charter School Commission, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to provide input on charter autonomy. Catalyst's partnership with policymakers has given the school a voice in safeguarding existing policy that allows charter schools to innovate and meet student needs. School leaders are also working toward expanding those autonomies, ensuring that schools can continue to make decisions that benefit students and communities.



The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) and [OECD](#) consider schools to be essential for promoting wellbeing. We encourage district and state leaders, nonprofits, and foundations to help schools become places that create the conditions for students and teachers to experience agency, competency, and connectedness, thus promoting whole-school wellbeing. System leaders can do this by helping schools measure wellbeing, supporting schools in using their autonomy, and learning how other schools promote wellbeing successfully.

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31. Lumen administered the [Kelvin](#) survey in November to December of 2022 and again in late fall of 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.
32. Lumen administered the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS-AIMs) survey in October 2022 and December 2023. All but one student-facing staff (N = 11) took the survey both years. We used the teacher burnout subscale to track teacher wellbeing.
33. See note 32
34. See note 31
35. Between 2022-23 and 2023-24, student perception of their social awareness skills increased from 43% to 76% and their growth mindset increased from 53% to 76%.
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APPENDIX:

Research Design and Methodology

We conducted a participatory, mixed methods evaluation with two public charter schools in Washington State: Catalyst Public Schools and Lumen High School. Our study was guided by three broad research questions: (1) What do school leaders believe drives success at their schools? (2) How are those practices implemented? (3) What outcomes are associated with those practices? We worked with school leaders to identify three promising practices at each school. This was an iterative process; at Lumen High School, we dropped two early promising practices due to insufficient data and changes in school priorities. For each practice, we created a theory of change that guided data collection.

TABLE 1: School Profiles

CATALYST PUBLIC SCHOOLS: 2022-23		STUDENT ENROLLMENT: RACE/ETHNICITY	
Teachers and student support staff	29	Teachers and student support staff	9
Attendance	73%	Attendance	51%
Percent meeting ELA standards	49%	GPA for all students	1.17
Percent meeting math standards	45%	GPA for regular attenders	2.53

Sources: [Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#) (Catalyst) and school attendance files and transcripts (Lumen)

Notes: Average student GPA was 1.48 prior to attending Lumen. Regular attenders are defined as students who attend at least 65% of the time.

The study team primarily consisted of Dr. Sivan Tuchman and Georgia Heyward. Dr. Tuchman led research at Catalyst Public Schools and Ms. Heyward led research at Lumen High School. The two collaborated on analysis and reporting. In addition, Amanda Stanley, Sharrie Merritte, and Teressa Cole helped with background research and data analysis.

Data Sources

School Site Visits

The study team visited the two schools, Catalyst Public Schools and Lumen High School, four times each. They visited schools between August and December in 2022 and 2023 and in May 2023 and 2024. During the site visits, the study team observed classrooms, staff meetings, professional development, and student activities.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Catalyst Public Schools

The team conducted interviews with a set of lead and apprentice teachers during each of the four visits to Catalyst. The same six lead teachers and three apprentice teachers were interviewed at each visit. At the beginning of the second year of data collection, two new lead teachers and two new apprentice teachers were added to the study to account for educators who had left. In total, researchers conducted 17 hours of interviews with 27 lead teachers, 21 apprentice teachers, and 2 school leaders. Each teacher interview was about 30 minutes. At least one school leader was also interviewed during each visit for a total of five interviews of 30 to 60 minutes each.

TABLE 2. *Number and type of people interviewed at Catalyst Public Schools*

	SCHOOL LEADERS	LEAD TEACHERS	APPRENTICE TEACHERS (SGIS)
August 2022	1	6	8
May 2023	2	6	5
August 2023	1	8	5
May 2024	1	7	3

Lumen High School

The study team conducted interviews and focus groups with teachers, staff, leaders, students, and community partners between fall 2022 and spring 2024. Researchers interviewed all 11 student-facing teachers and staff members at least twice. In total, researchers conducted 28 hours of interviews and focus groups with 35 individuals. Each interview or focus group ranged from 30 to 90 minutes each.

TABLE 3: *Number and type of people interviewed at Lumen High School*

	ADMINISTRATORS	STAFF	TEACHERS	STUDENTS	COMMUNITY MEMBERS
October 2022	3	4	–	–	1
May 2023	3	3	3	12	3
December 2023	2	5	4	–	6
May 2024	2	3	–	1	–

School Documents

The study team reviewed school documents related to the six promising practices. These documents included:

- Student support team planning notes
- Staff meeting presentations
- Restorative Justice team notes and internal planning documents
- Mentoring document that tracks mentor meetings
- Student needs survey and survey results
- Staff hiring questions
- Staff evaluation frameworks

Secondary Data

The study team collected enrollment, demographic, and attendance data from the [Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\)](#). We also used the following school-level data:

- Discipline data from Powerschool, 2022-23 school year
- GPA and credit accumulation from school transcripts: 2022-23 to 2023-24 school years
- Attendance data: 2022-23 to 2023-24 school years
- NWEA MAP assessment data: 2020-21 to 2023-24 school years
- Staff hiring and retention data: 2020-21 to 2023-24 school years

Surveys

At Lumen, we used data from six student or staff surveys. Some data were used to report outcomes and some were used formatively to give feedback to school leadership.

School-administered surveys

- Kelvin Survey: Lumen administered the [Kelvin](#) survey in the fall of 2021, 2022, and 2023 as part of a grant requirement. Neither the school nor the study team had access to the survey, so we do not know how many students took it each year.
- Flourishing Life: Lumen administered the [Flourishing Life](#) survey in the 2023-24 school year to a total of 34 students. It was administered during roughly three time periods: October, February, and May. Some students took the survey at slightly different times (e.g., November) due to absences or enrollment patterns. We used two time periods to descriptively report student progress across the Flourishing Life domains during the 2023-24 school year. Only 15 students had two survey time points that were four or more months apart. Thus, we only included those 15 students in our analysis.

Researcher-administered surveys

- CPS-AIM: Ms. Heyward administered the [Collaborative Problem Solving \(CPS-AIM\)](#) survey in October 2022 and December 2023 to school staff, teachers, and administrators. We only included data from the 11 staff who completed the survey at both time points.
- RHI: Ms. Heyward administered paper versions of the Relational Health Index (RHI) for both [adults](#) and [students](#) in March 2023; 11 staff/teachers completed the adult survey, and 7 students completed the student survey. As the survey was only administered once, we reported results internally to school administrators and staff.
- MESH: Ms. Heyward created a paper version of the Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits ([MESH](#)) survey. Teachers administered the survey to 18 students in March 2023. Because the survey was only administered once, we reported results internally to school administrators and staff.

Data Analysis

We used a concurrent triangulation design to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data. We collected qualitative and quantitative data concurrently and then compared results to find areas of agreement and disagreement. Triangulating our interview, school documents, and quantitative data helped us ensure our findings were credible and transferable. To contextualize our findings and identify areas for further exploration, we presented preliminary findings to school leaders and staff.

Interviews and documents

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout the study. We transcribed all interviews and used both inductive and deductive processes to identify themes. Following each of the four site visits, we reported findings from interviews and surveys to school leaders. We reviewed all our data again in the summer of 2024.

Surveys

Because of the small sample size at Lumen and Catalyst, we descriptively analyzed survey data, looking for changes in the frequency with which students and staff agreed or strongly agreed to survey items. At Lumen, we were not able to secure student-level data for the Kelvin survey, so we reported the aggregated results we received from the school. The school experiences high turnover and absence rates. However, student demographics did not differ in any significant way over those two years, so we believe a year-over-year comparison is possible. For all other student and staff surveys at Lumen, we only reported results for respondents who completed both pre- and post-surveys.

Student achievement: Catalyst

All students at Catalyst take NWEA MAP assessments in reading and math in the fall and spring. Data was analyzed as the percent of students meeting their growth score (growth scores are created for each student based on their fall score and typical growth for students with similar scores) and average scaled scores for each grade level.

Attendance, GPA, and credit accumulation: Lumen

We included 60 students in our analysis of attendance records from the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. We also analyzed attendance for the 19 students who were enrolled at least 30 days during both the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. We defined average attendance rate as the sum of days present divided by the sum of days enrolled.

We also analyzed Lumen-provided school transcripts for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years. We were interested in seeing if there were changes in GPA and credit accumulation before and after students attended Lumen and over time while enrolled at Lumen. When transcripts had duplicated information, we used data from the most recent transcript. We conducted a comparison of students who had any amount of credit accumulation at both a non-Lumen school and Lumen to determine if students were showing improvement while at Lumen. We analyzed credits earned, credits attempted, and GPA for 42 students who enrolled for any amount of time during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. For these 42 students, we identified GPA and credits earned prior to Lumen and after enrolling in Lumen. We separately analyzed data for 22 students who attended at least two of four semesters during the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years. We only calculated January and June semester data. Any data for the mid-semester dates were included in the end-of-semester totals.

About the Project

Project Description

This report 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 Schools. 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: Skill-Building Restorative Discipline
- Co-Teaching for All: Using Two Educators in a Classroom
- 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

This report is a response to the schools’ desire to communicate their whole-school approaches. We reviewed research data to inductively identify the wellbeing framework described herein.

Author

Georgia Heyward is the founder of Fig Education Lab, a nonprofit that conducts collaborative research, evaluation, and program design projects. Sivan Tuchman has a PhD in Education Policy and is the founder of Datability Education Consulting. Michael Dylan Rogers has a PhD in history from Cambridge University and teaches at Willamette University.

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