

# Thriving in School Case Study: Fostering Wellbeing and Engagement for Multilingual Learners

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FIG EDUCATION LAB

## Overview

Fig Education Lab's Thriving in School Framework helps educational organizations drive systemic change by identifying how policies, programs, and strategies—inside and outside the classroom—support student and staff wellbeing and success.

For teachers, wellbeing and motivated engagement occur within an [environment](#) that meets their needs for [autonomy](#); [competency](#); and [relatedness](#) with peers, supervisors, and students. Similarly, students thrive in a school that helps them feel successful, gives them the opportunity to exercise voice and choice, and offers connecting relationships with peers and teachers. Adolescents also [perform better](#) and are [more satisfied](#) in schools that they see as having present and future value.



### WHY WELLBEING?

Wellbeing refers to a person's sense of satisfaction, contentment, and purpose or meaning. We start with wellbeing because it is a common goal that students, families, staff, and leadership can share.

Teachers who experience school wellbeing are more likely to [remain](#) at their school and are better at [guiding student learning](#). A school environment that prioritizes student wellbeing [promotes](#) motivated engagement and academic success.

A school that promotes wellbeing supports students and teachers holistically, as it is linked to both positive [mental](#) and [physical](#) health.

## Case Study District: A Growing Population of Multilingual Learners

The case study district serves over 21,000 students in a southeast city. In recent years, the number of newly immigrated students from Latin America has grown rapidly, surpassing a fifth of the total student population in the 2024-25 school year. As the district's student population has become more linguistically diverse, disparities in academic outcomes have increased. Across all subjects, even in math, multilingual learners (MLs) lagged behind their non-linguistically diverse peers in 2024-25. Against a district-wide graduation rate of 80%, MLs graduated at a rate 40 percentage points lower than the overall student body. This was the lowest on-time graduation rate of any student subgroup.

In their most recent strategic plan, the district set goals to improve student thriving, as measured through graduation rates, attendance, and sense of belonging. District leaders recognized that achieving these goals would require a deeper understanding of what students experience in school.

The Multilingual Learner Success Department commissioned Fig to better understand how well high schools were supporting students in achieving the prerequisites for graduation and academic success: the extent to which students felt connected, supported, and empowered.

In the spring of 2025, Fig piloted the Thriving Student Survey in one high school that enrolled a large proportion of multilingual learners. Excited by the results, the district administered the survey in nine of its ten high schools the following school year, reaching nearly 1,200 students in total.

The survey included questions on life and school wellbeing and student motivation. The survey also asked students how well their needs for wellbeing and motivation were being met. Specifically, we asked about peer and staff connection, school value, autonomy support, and competency support. The survey included open-response questions to capture students' perspectives in their own words.

After analyzing the data, Fig presented findings to the Multilingual Learner Success Department. With their input and partnership, Fig developed next steps and recommendations for the district. Results were shared with district leadership and all secondary principals and assistant principals. Finally, Fig developed school-specific reports for each building leader.

## What We Found: Schools Offer Promising Examples of Promoting Student Wellbeing

The surveys revealed clear differences in student experience across schools, highlighting both areas of strength and meaningful opportunities for improvement.

### **Peer and staff connection were important for especially important students.**

Encouragement and feedback from adults, as well as strong peer relationships, helped them feel good in school. Students like this one appreciated it when their teachers showed care: “The teachers are very supportive and understanding.” Three of the high schools stood out for having statistically higher averages of student connection, after controlling for student and school factors. Still, many students districtwide reported wanting more opportunities to build relationships with both peers and adults, offering recommendations like this one: “Let students speak when they are working in class with a friend.”

**Voice and choice were opportunities for growth.** Students expressed the desire to feel heard, respected, and able to influence their learning environments. Students said they liked it when teachers listened to them – this was a frequent recommendation for how their schools could better support them.

District-wide, students identified extracurricular activities such as sports, ROTC, and music as places where they felt a sense of belonging. While they requested broader access to clubs and activities, students also said they wanted greater choice and agency during the regular school day. Capturing this sentiment, one student noted, “My school could help students feel more connected to what they do in school by embracing their interests.”

The three schools that scored highest in student and teacher connection also excelled in fostering autonomy.



**Students stressed the importance of meaningful learning connected to their futures.**

Across schools and student groups, motivation was higher when school felt relevant and valuable. Perceived value of school was significantly higher at two of the district's high schools, after controlling for student and school characteristics, suggesting that students in these environments saw clearer connections between coursework and their aspirations.

In open-response items, students frequently requested that their school prepare them for the next stage in life. Representative of this theme, one student said that their school could support them better by "Help[ing] students feel prepared for college and the workforce."

While students generally felt they could be successful in their schools, they said they wanted classes to have more structure and be taught in ways that better promoted their comprehension. As one student said, they hoped their teachers could offer, "more explanations... and not too much shouting." **Multilingual learners, in particular, valued opportunities to build English proficiency**, and said this was not happening as much as they would like.

Finally, Latine and Spanish-speaking students reported higher levels of motivation, satisfaction, and perceived school value in school than their peers. While this represents a significant strength, it also raises important questions given persistent gaps in academic outcomes. This disconnect suggests that student motivation may not be fully supported by existing school practices. It may also point to out-of-school factors influencing outcomes, underscoring the importance of understanding students' broader contexts.

Overall, survey findings pointed to three essential conditions for student wellbeing: connected relationships, voice and choice, and meaningful learning—conditions that are especially critical for supporting multilingual learners and sustaining their engagement over time.

## Using the Results: Celebrating and Replicating What's Working

The case study district is using the findings to identify what is working well and where targeted improvement is needed. One school has been identified as an example for how others can also promote a sense of connection and student voice.

A district advisory council focused on multilingual learners is engaged in a design process to identify three initiatives that can be implemented, and then brought to scale if results are promising.

Survey results solidified the district's commitment to promoting more peer-to-peer dialogue within instruction, especially in classrooms serving a high proportion of MLs.



## Conclusion

When students thrive, they are engaged and satisfied. Thriving students are motivated to learn and are better positioned for success in school and life. This case study demonstrates the value of moving beyond traditional climate measures to examine the psychological drivers that underpin student engagement, particularly for multilingual learners whose strengths and motivations are often overlooked.

Learning what schools are already doing well provides an opportunity to celebrate successes and replicate promising practices across a district. By grounding improvement efforts in what promotes student wellbeing and engaged motivation, the school district is taking an important step toward creating learning environments where all students can belong, grow, and succeed.

### THRIVING IN SCHOOL FRAMEWORK

Fig starts with a self-report survey to identify assets and growth areas. While it resembles a school climate survey, the survey stands apart because everything we measure is linked to downstream outcomes such as student engagement, retention, and life well-being. Our data identifies statistically significant gaps so schools know exactly where to focus their efforts.

Schools can use the data as leading indicators of student performance or to celebrate successes. Fig Education Lab (Fig) helps schools identify scalable promising practices from within their systems and guides teams in using results to close gaps. For more information, see [www.figeducation.org/thrivingschool.com](http://www.figeducation.org/thrivingschool.com).