

COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS: Skill-Building Restorative Discipline

Promising Practices from Washington State

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FIG EDUCATION LAB

NOVEMBER, 2024



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COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATIONS: Skill-Building Restorative Discipline

Restorative practices are an alternative to punitive forms of school discipline. They have the potential to improve school culture and counter the negative consequences of exclusionary discipline policies. However, it can be challenging to implement restorative practices well. Using a clearly defined model, like Collaborative Conversations, may enhance school success.



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](#).

Practice Overview

What is this Practice?

Collaborative Conversations use a [structured dialogue](#) process between an adult and a student to address disciplinary incidents. A type of restorative practice, Collaborative Conversations help students acknowledge the impact of their behavior and empower them to co-create a plan for moving forward.¹ Through the process, staff identify social-emotional skills, like frustration tolerance, at the root of the student's challenging behavior. Staff use the dialogue process to identify additional interventions, like counseling or tutoring, that can help students meet behavioral expectations.



WHAT ARE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?

Collaborative Conversations are a type of *restorative practice*. Also called restorative discipline, restorative practices are an alternative to punitive and exclusionary discipline.² Restorative practices in schools come from two traditions: Indigenous approaches to conflict resolution and criminal justice restorative models. Both approaches emphasize community and connectedness, rather than punishment and exclusion.³

Restorative practices in schools are varied, but all use structured dialogue to help students recognize the impact of their behavior and make amends for the harm they caused. The most common format is circles, a process where students talk together as a group about behavior incidents. Other types of restorative practices include mediation, restorative conferences, and restorative conversations.⁴



SCHOOL PRACTICE

- **Implementation Level:** School, district/network
- **Who Implements:** School leadership; Restorative Justice/discipline team
- **Practice Area:** Discipline & school culture
- **Student Outcomes:** Reduced suspensions, improved school climate, increased student social-emotional skills, and reduced disparities in discipline by race/ethnicity. Attendance, graduation rates, and academics may also improve over time.

How are Collaborative Conversations Innovative?

Collaborative Conversations are a novel approach to restorative practices. They combine the benefits of restorative practices' relationship-based approach with a skill-building, systematic model: [Collaborative Problem Solving](#) (CPS). CPS provides [a set](#) of processes, protocols, and survey instruments to guide implementation and help adults cultivate students' social-emotional skills.⁵ The combination of restorative practices and CPS establishes Collaborative Conversations as a structured, skill-building restorative practice, which makes it easier to implement and measure than many other restorative practices.⁶

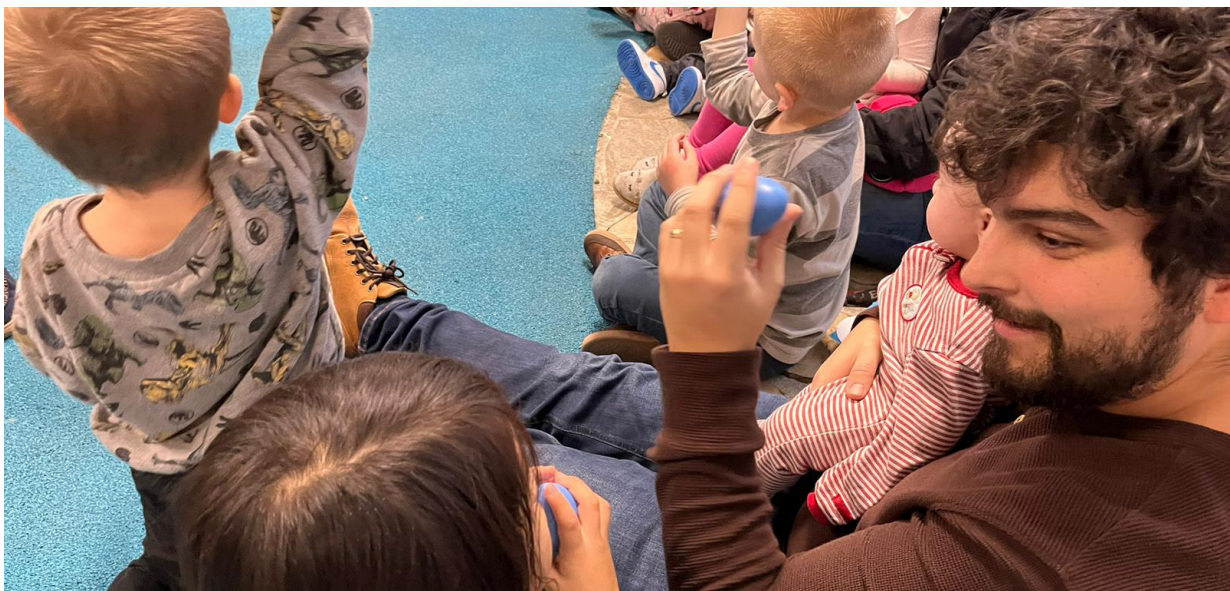
Students with disabilities and multilingual learners have reported challenges with participating in restorative practices that rely on circles and other group-based practices, as they say it can be difficult to follow the conversation or engage in group activities.⁷ One-on-one conversations between one adult and one student, focused on skill-building, may provide better support for students with disabilities and other learners. This is suggested by CPS's positive results among students with disabilities.⁸

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.

What Isn't Working about Current Discipline Approaches?

Zero-tolerance discipline policies require specific responses to behavior infractions. These actions often exclude students from the school community by sending them to the office or suspending and expelling them. Popular in the 1980s and 1990s, zero-tolerance policies had a negative impact on students, especially Black students and students with disabilities, who were often disproportionately disciplined and suspended.⁹ Exclusionary discipline policies have been linked to disproportionate engagement with juvenile justice systems, increased drop-out rates, and reduced graduation rates.¹⁰



What is the Evidence?

What is the benefit?

Collaborative Conversations are a novel practice, as it draws on the traditions of both restorative practices and CPS to craft a discipline model that is non-punitive and supports student social-emotional skill development. Because there is no existing literature base for Collaborative Conversations, we describe the benefits of restorative practices and CPS.

Two systematic literature reviews and two randomized control trials present a cohesive picture of the potential benefits of restorative practices. Most restorative practices reduce suspensions, which makes sense given that they are an alternative to exclusionary discipline. Restorative practices also tend to have a positive effect on school climate (e.g., student-teacher relationships and belonging) and students' social-emotional development. Restorative practices can reduce behavior incidents and reduce discipline disparities by race and ethnicity. In some cases, they can even improve student grades and reduce drop-out rates.¹¹ However, outcomes are uneven. For example, some schools have experienced increased racial achievement gaps following the implementation of restorative practices.¹²

Implementation appears to be the reason schools see different outcomes. Typically, whole-school and intensive models produce better outcomes,¹³ but they require significant investment in staffing, training, and time.¹⁴ Because of the need to shift school culture and adult mindsets, it can take one to five years to start seeing positive results.¹⁵

[Collaborative Problem Solving](#) has benefits similar to those seen with restorative practices. It reduces the use of exclusionary discipline practices, reduces student behavioral incidents, and improves student social-emotional skills. Because it offers a systematic approach to alternative discipline, it also tends to reduce teacher stress. As with restorative practices, changing teacher mindsets and beliefs is an important part of successful implementation.¹⁶

What do schools need to be mindful of?

Collaborative Conversations, like all restorative practices, require considerable dedication, time, and resources. Intensive implementation — which includes community-building activities across school, consistent application, and integration into broader systems of support — can result in dramatic improvements.

Restorative practices often do not work as a disciplinary approach without an underlying commitment to belonging, equity, and positive relationships.¹⁷ Schools can develop a positive school culture through social-emotional curriculum, community-building advisory models, or community-building events.¹⁸

One criticism of restorative practices is that they can be poorly defined and not implemented systematically enough to be a true alternative to other disciplinary approaches.¹⁹ To avoid this, we recommend having the following in place:

- A team who conducts Collaborative Conversations
- [Protocols](#) to consistently guide the process
- [Clearly defined](#) responses to student behavior
- Integration into [other systems of support](#)
- Regular data analysis (e.g., monthly)



CASE STUDY

Collaborative Conversations in Action

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?”



Revising Their Approach

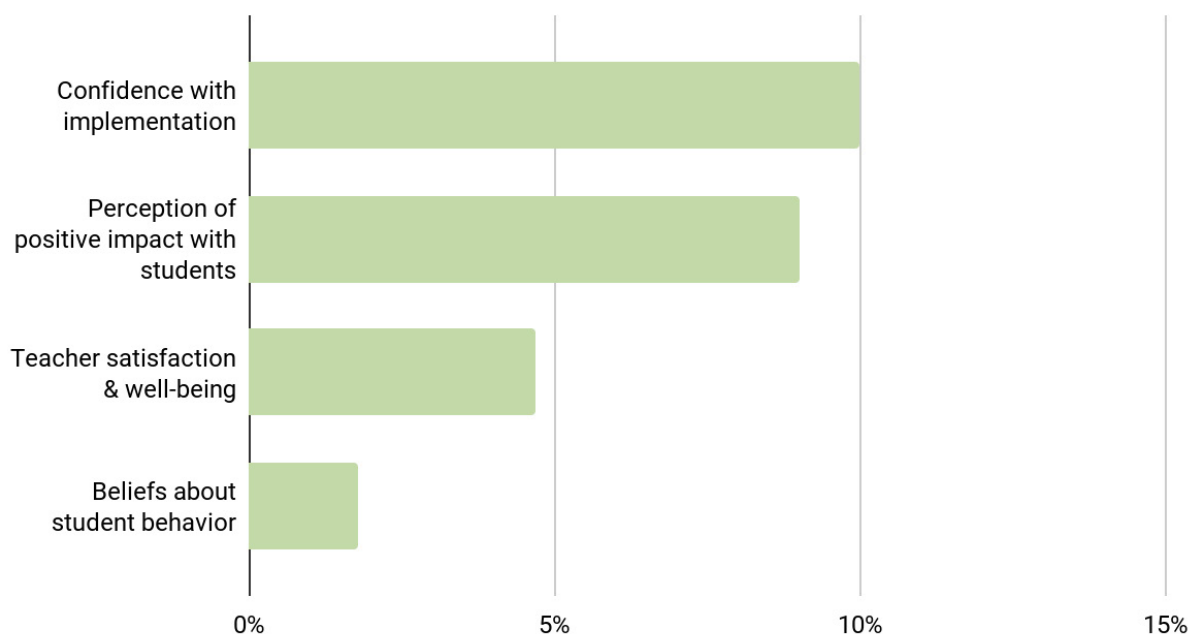
At the end of the 2022–23 school year, Lumen found that their approach to discipline was not working as well as they wanted. In focus groups, students said bullying was a problem, and teachers noted that frequent outbursts made teaching difficult. Over the summer, Lumen adjusted its approach. At the 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.²⁰ There was also a 9% increase in teacher/staff perception that they were having a positive impact on students (see figure 1 below).

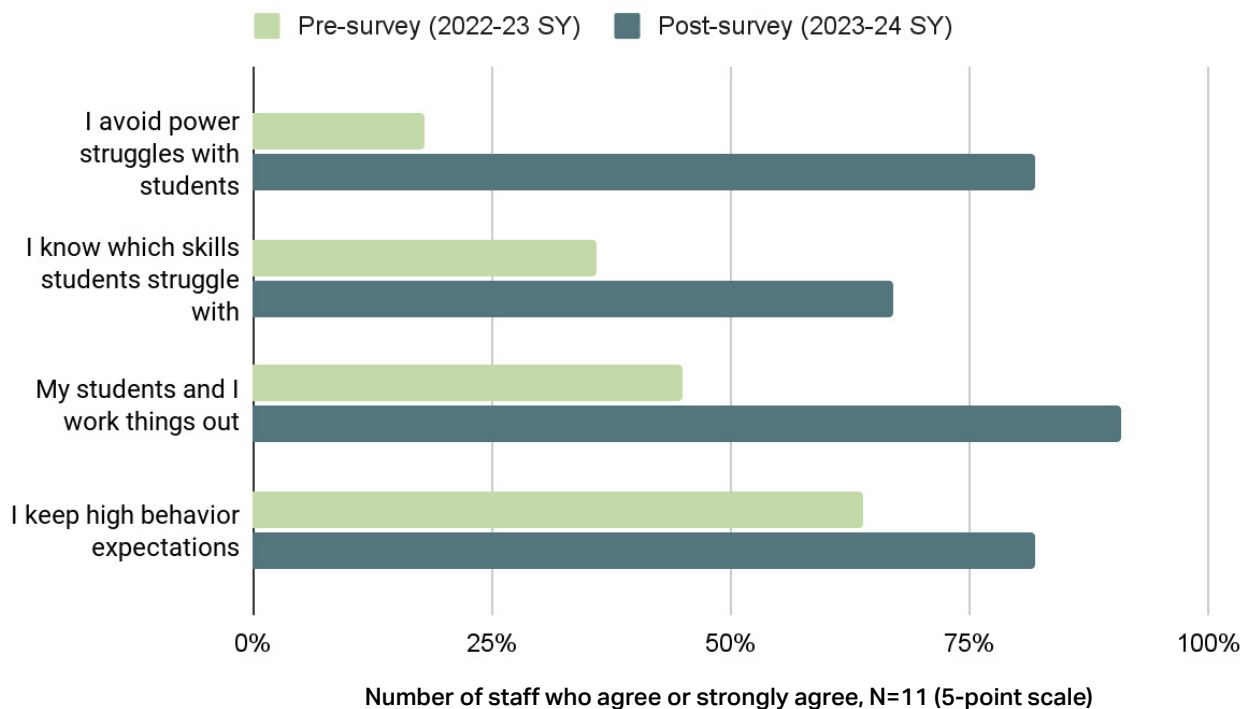
FIGURE 1: *Following improvements to the model, teachers and staff felt 10% more confident implementing Collaborative Conversations.*



Percent change in response means, fall 2023 to fall 2024, 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*



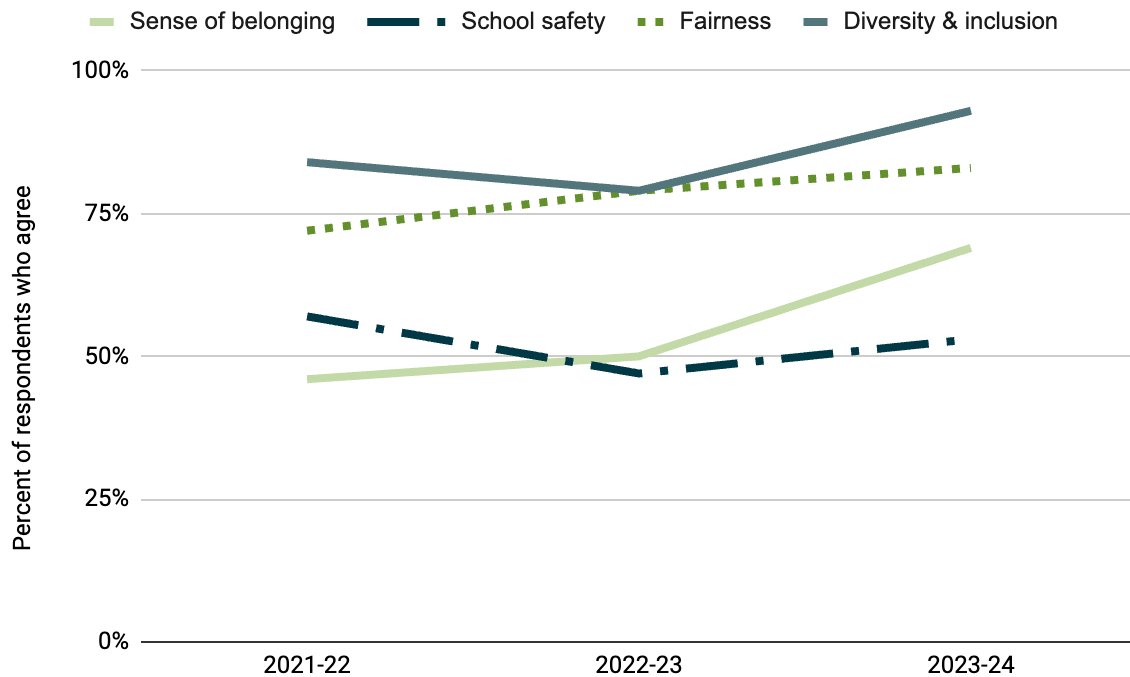
Classroom teachers in particular appreciated having a clearer system and an RJ team guiding the process. “Our students require a lot of scaffolds, a lot of support to access grade level content. It’s nice to have Collaborative Conversations sort of off our plate a bit so that we can actually focus on 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.²¹ This seems to be the case for Lumen, as seen in figure 3.²² 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.

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.”

How to Implement This Practice

This section provides step-by-step guidance for implementing Collaborative Conversations, along with accompanying resources to get started.



WHAT YOU NEED

SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

- An annual review of Collaborative Conversations for students and staff.
- [Hiring](#) staff and teachers who are supportive of Collaborative Conversations.
- Incorporating Collaborative Conversations into the [staff evaluation process](#).
- A system for collecting data that aligns with Collaborative Conversations. Lumen uses their [Supported School](#) app and then transfers data [to a table](#) for monthly analysis.

LEADERSHIP MOVES

- Cultivating a school culture that prioritizes building community and is inclusive and welcoming of all students.

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, & MINDSETS

- Cultural competency.
- An understanding of how personal bias can impact how adults interpret and react to student behavior.
- Knowledge of trauma and how it can impact student behavior.
- Ability to set boundaries with students so they have clear expectations.
- Communication skills like active listening and nonviolent communication.
- Empathy and respect for students; unconditional positive regard for all students.

MATERIALS

- [Training](#) materials for all staff.
- Protocols to guide [Collaborative Conversations](#) and [re-entry](#) into the community.
- Student [survey](#) to gather feedback about school discipline.
- [Clear language](#) for identifying disciplinary incidents and planning expected responses.

STAFFING

- Dedicated RJ team, totaling 1 to 1.5 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE). Team members can include counselors, social workers, paraeducators, special educators, or teachers with a part-time teaching load. Lumen High School has an RJ team with three staff members.



COST PER PUPIL

Restorative practices are typically more costly than traditional discipline. Our calculations put this initiative at **\$333 per pupil the first year and \$315 per pupil in subsequent years**. Our costs assume a secondary school with 400 students and a three-person RJ team. Use the [CostOut tool](#) for an estimate tailored to your school or see [this article](#) for an alternative estimate.

Start-up costs:

- \$5,000 for training materials, personnel, and time release to attend training
- \$3,000 in materials and stipends to set up systems and procedures

Cost assumptions for all years:

- \$1,000 training costs for staff in subsequent years
- 1.5 cumulative FTE for the three-person RJ team
- Facility space at the school for Collaborative Conversations to occur and for the RJ team to meet

Steps to Implement

The steps below explain how to implement Collaborative Conversations. They draw on literature and the experience of the case study school (Lumen High School). Schools should anticipate initial implementation to take approximately one year.²³

Preparing for Collaborative Conversations

STEP 1: Engage the Community

Any school can have a practice like Collaborative Conversations, including elementary schools. Schools start by engaging the school community. Leaders seek input from teachers, students, and families about the current disciplinary approach and what they want improved. Schools should pay particular attention to input from students, families, and staff who have insight into the experience of students with disabilities, students living in poverty, Latinx students, and Black students, as they tend to experience disproportionate suspensions and discipline referrals.²⁴

STEP 2: Create a Restorative Justice Team

Lumen High School transitioned from a single coordinator to a Restorative Justice (RJ) team in the 2023–24 school year. Like other schools, Lumen found that a team approach worked better.²⁵ We recommend two to four staff members and/or teachers who will be responsible for the Collaborative Conversation process. This RJ team will oversee quality control and data collection. They will also conduct the majority of Collaborative Conversations with students. Team members should be able to opt into the role. Restorative practices tend to work best when there is some autonomy for participants.²⁶

STEP 3: Prepare the RJ Team

RJ team members should receive intensive training in restorative practices and in the skills and knowledge needed for Collaborative Conversations. This includes training in how to guide conversations, active listening, and the targeted use of reassurance (see [Resources](#) for a full list). Training in [Collaborative Problem Solving](#) can help staff learn how to identify lagging social-emotional skills that may be contributing to challenging behavior.

STEP 4: Prepare Teachers and School Staff

Lack of clarity around the purpose of restorative practices is a common barrier to implementation.²⁷ Therefore, the first step for preparing teachers and staff should be a reflection on the school's disaggregated discipline data, which can help create a common understanding of the need for a restorative practice like Collaborative Conversations.

Collaborative Conversations center relationships and repair. This may conflict with staff views of discipline. Schools will benefit from giving staff opportunities to talk about how restorative practices are different from traditional discipline models. Administrators and members of the RJ team may also want to have regular, one-on-one check-ins with staff during the first year of implementation.

As a whole, staff should receive training in cultural competency and in the role that bias and prejudice can play in disciplining students. Training that helps teachers view students empathetically and with respect, rather than punitively, can by itself result in fewer suspensions.²⁸ Schools may also consider training on trauma, self-care, school safety, and setting boundaries.²⁹

STEP 5: Inform Students and Families

The school should clearly communicate what Collaborative Conversations are with students and families. Transparency can be an antidote to the opaque and disempowering process of traditional discipline models.

STEP 6: Establish a Dedicated Space

Schools that have implemented restorative practices often benefit from having a room where dialogue will happen.³⁰ Students can also use this space for downtime, and schools can use it for community-building activities. A school can consider having lamps, cozy furniture, and other decor to create a calming environment.

STEP 7: Create Protocols and Worksheets to Guide the Process

Schools will need to create protocols that guide adults through Collaborative Conversation activities. Protocols should include [Collaborative Conversation](#) and [re-entry](#) protocols.



STEP 8: Set Up Communication and Tracking Systems

Internal communication

Schools should define a way for teachers and staff to communicate with the RJ team when they need support with Collaborative Conversations. We recommend using existing communication channels where possible, such as phone lines between classrooms, Google Chat, or Slack. Lumen High School uses a WhatsApp channel.

Communication with families

Schools also need a process for communicating with caregivers, so they remain informed about Collaborative Conversations with their children. Schools should develop standard outreach language and identify who will contact families when a Collaborative Conversation has happened.

Tracking Collaborative Conversations

Schools will need a central repository for documenting Collaborative Conversations. This can be a shared drive that houses completed [protocols](#) and [re-entry plans](#). A simple tracking system, like a spreadsheet, provides a place for the RJ team to summarize the content of conversations and their follow-up. Tracking such as this will help the RJ team identify and monitor student responses so they can use the process to identify lagging social-emotional skills. It is also an important source of information to identify trends in student behavior and potentially needed supports, like counseling.

Tracking disciplinary incidents

Schools need a way to track disciplinary incidents that is consistent with Collaborative Conversations and other restorative practices. Lumen High School uses [Supported School](#), a free app available to districts in Washington State. This app also tracks interventions.

STEP 9: Cultivate a Restorative Culture

Because of the importance of community-building to restorative practices, schools should seek ways to create a caring community for students. Students need authentic opportunities to get to know one another. This might include lunchtime or afterschool clubs for students, school-wide games, and low-pressure opportunities for students to share and tell stories about their lives in advisory or homeroom. Staff also need opportunities for community building, such as circles for sharing about themselves or opportunities for games and group fun.



Having Collaborative Conversations

STEP 1: *Notify the Restorative Justice Team of an Issue*

Staff notify the RJ team when there has been an issue with a student; a break in the discipline code; harm done to another student, teacher, or school property; or need for conflict resolution.

Teachers and staff can elect to conduct their own Collaborative Conversations when this will not impact instruction or other immediate duties.

Three types of requests

At Lumen High School, staff request one of three different types of Collaborative Conversations: support request, just-in-time request, or emergency request.

LUMEN STAFF AND TEACHERS MAKE THREE TYPES OF COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATION REQUESTS:

Support: Staff or teachers make a support request when an issue is not an emergency and will be better addressed at a later time, as an immediate response might disrupt student learning. In these cases, the RJ team talks to the student at some point in the day to schedule a Collaborative Conversation.

Just-in-time: Staff or teachers make a just-in-time request when one or more students are disrupting learning. The RJ team member pulls the student aside in the classroom or takes them into the hall for a Collaborative Conversation.

Emergency: An emergency request conveys that there is a fight or someone is in danger. The RJ team member removes the student from the classroom. Tensions may be too high to immediately have a Collaborative Conversation. If that is the case, the RJ team member and student may go to the calm down room to check in and schedule a Collaborative Conversation for a later time.



STEP 2: Plan for a Collaborative Conversation

The RJ team member assigned to the Collaborative Conversation reviews previous Collaborative Conversations with the student, past behavior incidents, and recent interventions. The adult conducting the Collaborative Conversation plans for the conversation and considers where students may have lagging social-emotional skills that underlie their behavior. This can include skills in flexibility, frustration tolerance, and/or problem solving. The team member may consider involving an advisor or mentor in the Collaborative Conversation.

STEP 3: Have a Collaborative Conversation

Basic structure

A Collaborative Conversation is a structured conversation between a student and an adult. It follows three phases:

- 1.** The adult learns about and then expresses empathy with the student's concern.
- 2.** The adult shares their own concern with the student.
- 3.** Together, the student and adult brainstorm and co-create a plan to repair a ruptured relationship or address a disciplinary issue.

During this process, the adult guides the student to consider whether the plan is satisfactory, doable, and realistic. The adult also pays attention to the skills the student is struggling with so that they can provide coaching around these lagging skills or provide recommendations for additional support.

Teachers and staff-led Collaborative Conversations

In addition to requesting a Collaborative Conversation from the RJ Team, teachers can also choose to lead Collaborative Conversations themselves. When this happens at Lumen, there is no pre-planning, and the staff person uses a condensed version of the Collaborative Conversation protocol to identify and empathize with the student's concern, share their own concerns, and ask for student ideas for moving forward. This type of Collaborative Conversation can take five to ten minutes. The staff person then notifies the RJ team so they can track the Conversation.



Part of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

Lumen High School, like other schools, uses Collaborative Conversation [within a multi-tiered system of support \(MTSS\)](#). All of the Collaborative Conversations described thus far are tier 2 supports. A Collaborative Conversation is elevated to a tier 3 intervention when Collaborative Conversations have been used for the same issue three times previously with the same student. A tier 3 Collaborative Conversation includes the student, parent/guardian, and principal. The tier 3 Collaborative Conversation results in a behavior contract, which students must agree to create in order to rejoin daily learning at Lumen. If a student damages school property, the student and school negotiate a repayment contract using community service hours.

STEP 4: Follow Up on Collaborative Conversations

Following the Collaborative Conversation, the RJ team member conducts a series of check-ins with individuals involved in the disciplinary incident. They conduct a debrief meeting with the student to see how their re-entry plan is progressing and how the student is feeling post-conversation. When appropriate, the RJ team member checks in with other students involved in the incident and lets them know of the result. Finally, the RJ team should communicate with family members.

Continuous Improvement

STEP 1: Review and Collect Data on Outcomes and Implementation

During the school year, the RJ team regularly reviews data to understand the effect the practice is having. This can include a monthly review of behavior incidents and school responses, plus a less frequent review of school culture data (e.g., in the fall and spring). The team should disaggregate data to see if the initiative is helping to reduce disproportionality by student service provision, race/ethnicity, and gender. Lumen's [simple data table](#) helps their RJ team look at these factors monthly, quarterly, and annually.

Staff and student perceptions are also important sources of data. Several times per year, the RJ team should collect staff opinions about the Collaborative Conversation process. At the end of the year, the RJ team can consider making a presentation to the school community about successes and continued growth areas. In addition, the RJ team can consider collecting feedback from students or families. Lumen [gathers feedback](#) from its students annually.

STEP 2: Revise Approach and Procedures

With frequent data collection and review, schools can continue to improve implementation and increase their chances of long-term success. A restorative practice like Collaborative Conversation can take years to really take hold. Schools may determine that staff, students, or families will benefit from additional training, coaching, or information sessions. A lack of systems and processes is a key barrier to deep and sustained implementation. Thus, a school may need to revise protocols, revisit roles and responsibilities, or develop better systems for tracking and communication.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

STAKEHOLDER	ACTIVITIES	TIME REQUIRED
Administrator	Lead community input sessions before implementing Collaborative Conversations	Two to four 30-minute, virtual sessions
	Participate in training on restorative practices	Varies
	Meet with the restorative justice (RJ) team to review results and provide support	3 one-hour meetings with the RJ team per term
Restorative Justice Team	Lead implementation of Collaborative Conversations and continue to provide training and support for staff and students/families	Implementation takes approximately one year
	Conduct Collaborative Conversations with students	<p>10-15 minutes to conduct Conversations for lower severity incidents</p> <p>Intensive Conversations can take up to an hour:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–15 minutes to plan • 10–20 minutes for the conversation • 30 minutes for follow-up with students and staff; data entry
Teachers & Staff	Participate in training	Varies
	Notify the RJ team of issues or incidents requiring Collaborative Conversation	2–10 minutes per Collaborative Conversation
	When appropriate, conduct a Collaborative Conversation with a student or plan for a Collaborative Conversation	<p>5-10 minutes to conduct Conversations in a classroom, for non-serious incidents</p> <p>20 minutes to plan Conversations for serious incidents</p>
Students	Engage in Collaborative Conversations	5–20 minutes

Potential Barriers

BARRIER	SOLUTION
<p>Decreasing interest because school members are not seeing improvements in behavior or other outcomes of interest</p>	<p>Restorative practices can take one to five years to evidence changes in behavior, attendance, or grades. This can lead to a lack of support for the initiative.³¹ To address decreasing interest, we recommend the following actions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspensions and school culture typically improve most quickly. Look at these indicators first to inspire the school community to stay the course. If these outcomes are not improving, it should be a sign that your approach needs adjustment. • Restorative practices are perceived to work best when they are integrated into the school's overall philosophy and culture.³² This might mean instituting school-wide training, community-building activities, and/or embedding restorative principles in daily classroom activities. • If a review of data suggests that the initiative is successful, then there is simply a perception problem. A school can benefit from having meetings with staff and students to get at the heart of their reticence. • Consistent and fair application of Collaborative Conversation may improve buy-in. Make sure clear processes are in place and that they are being followed by the RJ team and other teachers/staff.
<p>The intervention is costly; school is not able to sustain costs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan ahead for the costs of implementation. • Outside consultants are often thought of as a best practice,³³ but they can be costly. Empower the RJ team to lead training and community-building activities. • Consider scaling back the initiative to what is manageable and sustainable. Identify which aspects of Collaborative Conversations add the most value and lean into those components.
<p>Not enough time during the school day to have Collaborative Conversations with students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing and course schedules can be barriers to holding Collaborative Conversations. Identify which times work best for your school. This may mean holding Collaborative Conversations before or after school, during lunch, and/or during dismissal. • Members of the RJ team can help cover teachers or other staff who need to do Collaborative Conversations.
<p>Students refuse to participate in Collaborative Conversations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A school should identify what will happen in the case of a student refusing a Collaborative Conversation.³⁴ This could be an in-school suspension or having the Collaborative Conversation at a later date. • The consequence for not participating should be clearly communicated to students in a student handbook. • Regularly review the benefits of Collaborative Conversations with students.

Sustainability

The school should take the following considerations into account to ensure the practice's long-term sustainability.

Funding

To reduce costs, schools can leverage community partnerships for training and coaching, as Lumen does. Schools can also consider reallocating existing funds. One school used Title I funds to hire a full-time restorative justice coordinator.³⁵

Coherence

A whole-school model integrates restorative practices across the school. This includes community-building activities among students and staff, unconditional positive regard for all students, and a commitment to inclusivity. Whole-school models tend to be more successful, which can lead to more buy-in and sustained commitment to Collaborative Conversations.

Lumen integrates Collaborative Conversations into their staff [hiring](#) and [evaluation](#) processes. They make sure potential staff understand the process and have an orientation toward relationship-building. By embedding Collaborative Conversations within the semi-annual [staff evaluation process](#), the school emphasizes the importance of Collaborative Conversations and builds in structures for providing feedback to staff.

During Lumen's annual culture camp, the school talks to students about the Collaborative Conversation process and how this approach to discipline is aligned with school values of belonging, social justice, and empowerment. Through efforts like this, the school embeds Collaborative Conversations within the school culture.

Buy-In

Strong relationships among staff create the conditions for restorative practices to thrive.³⁶ A school should identify ways to improve school culture through community-building events and activities.

The school will need to engage in a strong professional development program for staff, administrators, and the RJ team to accomplish the necessary buy-in for long-term success. The school should also conduct information sessions or training for families. Mock Collaborative Conversations and community circles can help the school community experience the Collaborative Conversation process.³⁷

Research suggests that empowering students and teachers supports buy-in and successful implementation.³⁸ To that end, the RJ team can consider having an advisory committee made up of school community members.

Adaptations

Different schooling contexts may benefit from adaptations. What follows are two ways that schools can adapt Collaborative Conversations.

Collaborative Conversations with more than one student

Collaborative Conversations, as implemented by Lumen High School, typically use the process with one adult, who guides the conversation, and one student. Some restorative practices, like circling or mediation models, include all students involved in the incident. Schools can consider conducting Collaborative Conversations with more than one student.

The process would be similar:

1. The adult expresses empathy with each student's concern.
2. The adult shares their own concern with both students.
3. Together, the students and adults brainstorm a solution to repair a ruptured relationship and/or engage in new behavior.

Collaborative Conversations work best when parties have had time to calm down following an incident. That will especially be the case in a Collaborative Conversation with two students on different sides of a conflict.

Collaborative Conversations for non-disciplinary events

The structure of Collaborative Conversation can be used for issues that do not relate to discipline or challenging behavior. For example, teachers can use Collaborative Conversations to understand why a student is not doing their classwork and to co-create a plan for turning in work.

How to Monitor Success

Use your theory of change to identify the outcomes you want to measure (see [appendix B](#)). It is important to look at short- and long-term outcomes as well as implementation effectiveness.

Outcomes

Below we provide a number of potential outcomes you can use to monitor the practice's success. Select **one to three** outcomes suitable for your school and your stage of implementation. For example, Collaborative Conversations will first have an impact on short-term outcomes like suspensions, belonging, student-teacher relationships, social-emotional skill development, and teacher stress. Over time, Collaborative Conversations may also result in improved behavior, attendance, graduation rates, and grades/test scores.

POTENTIAL OUTCOME	MEASUREMENT TOOL
Belonging, student-teacher relationships, and other indicators of school culture	Relevant questions on a school climate survey, (e.g., state-wide school climate survey, Panorama , Kelvin , or Flourishing Life)
Student social-emotional competencies: problem-solving, self-regulation, and executive functioning	Social-emotional survey (e.g., Self-management and Social awareness subscales of Flourishing Life or MESH)
Teacher stress; teacher well-being	Teacher well-being survey (e.g., Satisfaction with Life Scale or Panorama Teacher Well-Being Survey)
Behavioral incidents	Student information system (e.g., PowerSchool) that tracks discipline incidents. Ideally this is supplemented with a school-created system aligned with restorative practices.
Suspensions, attendance, and graduation rates	Student information system (e.g., PowerSchool, Class Dojo)
Academics: Assessment data, reading levels, and GPA	Student information system
Differences in discipline rates, attendance, and academics by race/ethnicity and service area (e.g., students with IEPs or students receiving ESL services)	Measurement tools identified above

Implementation

Monitor implementation throughout the year and at the end of the school year using indicators of success. This will help you make sense of outcomes and adjust processes for the next year.

IMPLEMENTATION INDICATORS	MEASUREMENT TOOL
Proportional severity of disciplinary action; no differences by race/ethnicity or service category	Student information system
Fidelity of implementation	Spreadsheet for tracking Collaborative Conversations; RJ team notes
Student satisfaction with the process	Student input form
Staff beliefs concerning student behavior and discipline	Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) subscale "Adherence to Philosophy"
Staff self-efficacy in implementing Collaborative Conversations	Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) subscale "Perception of Competence"
Staff perception of positive impact with students	Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) subscale "Perception of Positive Impact"

Resources

Protocols and Worksheets

- [Collaborative Conversation protocol](#)
- [Re-entry plans](#)
- [Types of incidents](#) that are recorded at Lumen High School in the [Supported School](#) App
- [Multi-tiered system of disciplinary interventions](#) and Collaborative Conversations

Training

- [Cultural competency](#) in restorative practices
- [National Center for Restorative Justice](#)
- [Building Restorative Communities](#)
- [Collaborative Problem Solving](#) training
- [Active Listening](#)
- Nonviolent Communication [materials](#) and [training](#)

Staff Hiring and Accountability

- [Pre-screening](#) and [interview](#) questions
- [Staff growth rubric](#)

Continuous Improvement

- Student [input form](#)
- Sample [incident tracker](#). Data are pulled from the school's [Supported School](#) app into a separate table for analysis during the RJ team's monthly meetings.

Additional Resources:

- [Think:Kids](#) for Collaborative Problem Solving
- [School-Wide Restorative Practices: Step by Step](#)
- [Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools: A Guide for Educators](#)

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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	92%	88%
Homeless	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

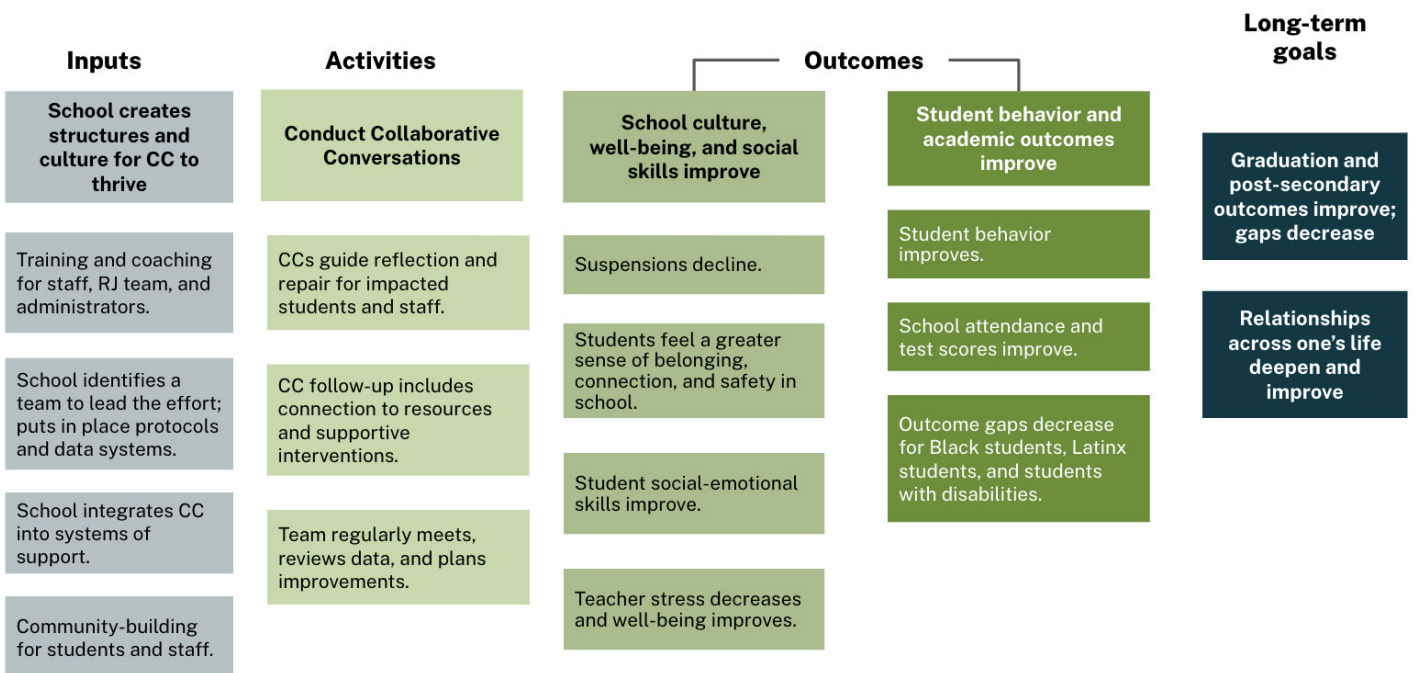
Internship Coordinator: 1

On-site community organizations: 5

APPENDIX B: Theory of Change

This general theory of change should be adapted to suit each school’s specific goals and context.

Collaborative Conversations (CC)



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.

Author

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.

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.