

Thriving in School Case Study: School Staff Lead Improvement

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FIG EDUCATION LAB

Background

Fig Education Lab's Thriving in School Framework helps education 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. 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 also [promotes](#) motivated engagement and academic success. When schools promote a culture of wellbeing, they lay the groundwork for students and teachers to experience better [mental](#) and [physical](#) health.

Case Study School: A Tuition-Free Independent School

The case study school is a tuition-free, religious school serving students from a neighborhood with limited access to high-quality options. The K-8 school relies entirely on fundraising and maintains close ties with regional churches and foundations. As articulated by leadership and staff, the school's culture is characterized by strong relationships, shared purpose, and a collective willingness to "do whatever it takes."

The school's founder and leader wanted to identify how the school could improve the working experience for its entire staff—teachers, non-instructional staff, and the leadership team. At the mission-driven school, staff often work long hours dedicated to student learning and wrap-around support. A recent expansion adding elementary grades had been positively received by the community but introduced new complexities. Acknowledging how important the school's staff are to its core values of care and excellence, the leader wanted to know how school policies, systems, and structures impacted staff daily wellbeing.

In the spring of 2024, Fig Education Lab conducted a comprehensive audit. We started by creating a school-specific definition of wellbeing, based on school materials and two conversations with the leadership team. We then modified the [Thriving in School surveys](#) and administered them to middle school students and all K-8 staff. We also conducted focus groups with staff and students. Surveys for school adults were repeated at the end of the 2024-25 school year. Leadership decided to focus on staff experience, so those are the findings presented below.

What We Found: A Caring Community with Opportunities for Improvement

Focus group participants and responses to open-ended survey questions described the school as welcoming and deeply supportive. One staff member said, "The environment is so calm and loving—there is a level of respect from the kids that I have never experienced in another school." Many staff talked about how their competency was trusted while still being given the support they needed. As one staff member summed up: "Many people check up on me and give me tasks and responsibilities that require a lot of trust and confidence in my abilities."

Nearly every school adult said they felt their work was meaningful. “There is a strong, unifying sense of understanding of the main mission. This is extremely bonding,” said one staff member. Relationships between adults and students were also quite strong, with 97% of staff reporting that they enjoyed their relationships with students.

In 2024, staff articulated a desire for greater consistency and structure, particularly in how discipline and attendance policies were communicated. Teachers also wanted clearer progression of curricular topics across grades. Staff expressed that it can be difficult to ask for help in a culture where everyone pitches in and suggested clearer role expectations. A common theme across this feedback was the desire for better communication. As one staff member noted, “[I want] improved communication—both with content and communicated in a timely fashion.”

The survey in 2025 surfaced additional tensions. Genuine staff connection was identified as a common growth area: “[This school] has several staff events throughout the year (socials, potlucks, etc.). While this is a very good attempt, I feel connectedness and belonging are two different things... [The school] is good at connecting the staff, but belonging is a growth opportunity.” The survey also surfaced statistically significant differences in how staff felt supported by their supervisor and in perceived competency between elementary and middle school teachers.

Using the Results: Staff-Led Improvement

During both rounds of analysis, Fig first reviewed results with the leadership team, and then presented findings to the entire staff.

In 2024, the hour-long staff meeting started with a celebration of everything school adults were doing to create a warm and welcoming school climate. By taking time to reflect on strengths, leaders saw the presentation as a way to affirm everyone’s efforts. Staff also asked questions to better understand identified growth areas.



Following that meeting, the leadership team assigned the school counselor to lead next steps. She formed a staff-led Wellbeing Committee composed of teachers and non-instructional staff across the elementary and middle schools. The group decided to focus on three areas of wellbeing: physical and mental health; workplace culture and professional development; and social connection. Staff made recommendations for afterschool yoga and Zumba classes, which the leadership team adopted. The committee also worked to organize a joint field day to create better connections between the elementary and middle school staff. And for every all-staff meeting, committee members created short warm-ups to help staff get to know each other better. Lastly, the committee identified summer reading about educating students who have experienced trauma, with the goal of bringing staff together to connect around the students they serve.

Results from the June 2025 survey were presented to staff the following school year during a professional development in-service day. Because some of the data spoke to tensions articulated in other settings, leadership decided to use the results as a way to address those issues head-on. During the two-hour meeting, staff formed groups to discuss the results and co-design recommendations. This work is ongoing.

Conclusion

This case study demonstrates how a research-based, community-centered approach can deepen a school's understanding of strengths and areas for growth. Leadership was guided by the belief that when schools invest in adult wellbeing, they strengthen the conditions for student success. Fig's Thriving in School process created a tailored profile of what wellbeing means for this community and empowered them to design and implement initiatives to improve the staff and teacher experience.

THRIVING IN SCHOOL FRAMEWORK

Fig Education Lab (Fig) starts with a self-report survey to identify school assets and growth areas. While it looks like a climate survey, the Thriving in School surveys stand apart because everything we measure is associated with downstream outcomes like engagement, motivation, retention, and wellbeing. We identify statistically significant gaps so schools know exactly where to focus their efforts.

Schools can use the data as leading indicators of teacher retention or student performance. The data can help schools celebrate successes and build community around what they are doing well. 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.