CULTIVATING CONNECTION:
How to Design and Implement School-Based Mentoring

Promising Practices from Washington State

Georgia Heyward
FIG EDUCATION LAB
NOVEMBER, 2024

Table of Contents

CULTIVATING CONNECTION: How to Design and Implement School-Based Mentoring

Schools across the country are struggling with declines in student and staff well-being, student attendance, and student behavior. Relationship-based interventions that are intentional and goal-oriented, like mentoring, can be a powerful vehicle for supporting both students and staff.

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?

In this guide, we describe a type of school-based mentoring we call *Mentor Center*. School-based adults form intentional mentor relationships with designated students for one or more years. The practice is based on research that mentoring can cultivate a protective and supportive relationship between a student and school adult.[1] This trusted adult helps the student navigate the demands of school.

THREE WAYS TO USE MENTORING:

1. To improve outcomes for a group of students who share a common challenge, like attendance
2. To improve student belonging and connection for students who have few touch-points in school
3. To improve advisory models by making student-advisor or homeroom relationships more intentional

The term *school-based mentoring* can mean a lot of different things. Some use it to describe informal, natural mentoring relationships that arise between school adults and students.[2] Others use it to mean a practice where community members, not school staff, play a mentoring role to students on a school campus. Because of the different things that mentoring can mean, we use the term *Mentor Center* to convey the idea of a centralized mentoring approach that uses school-based adults. With Mentor Center, school staff meet with mentees weekly or biweekly. During the meetings, mentors and mentees work on relationship-building and goal-oriented activities. They celebrate student successes and address issues as they arise. In this way, mentoring can help cultivate a student's sense of belonging while also addressing concrete issues, like attendance, that get in the way of student success.

MENTORING PROVIDES THREE LAYERS OF SUPPORT:

1. **Goal-oriented:** Schools select one or two annual goals for Mentor Center, like attendance or college and career readiness, which help organize mentoring activities for all students. Mentors can also collaborate with students on their own personal goals, like getting homework turned in on time.
2. **Relationship-building:** Known as developmental mentoring, this occurs throughout the mentoring process as mentors and mentees build a trusting relationship.
3. **Responsive:** Mentors check in regularly with mentees using open-ended prompts. This way they can identify and address student challenges as they arise.

SCHOOL PRACTICE: MENTOR CENTER

- **Implementation Level:** School
- **Who Implements:** School leadership
- **Practice Area:** Tier 2 or 3 intervention
- **Student Outcomes:** Improvements to well-being, belonging, and social skills. Other student outcomes vary depending on the focus of mentoring and can include attendance, behavior, grades, or college and career readiness.
- **Teacher/Staff Outcomes:** Increased satisfaction and well-being

How is it Innovative?

Mentoring that uses school staff as mentors is neither as wide-spread nor as well-studied as school-based mentoring models that use community volunteers. However, a program that uses school staff has numerous benefits. School-based mentors are typically more aware of school services, so they can connect students to these services for immediate academic or mental health support. In addition, school leadership can hold mentors accountable and shift the focus of mentoring as needed in response to student data.

What is the Evidence?

What is the benefit of student-staff mentoring?

Relationships between a student and school adult

Quality adult relationships have numerous benefits for young people. When students and staff have caring and supportive relationships, students are more likely to perceive school as a place where they belong.[3] Having a good adult relationship at school is linked to reduced stress and suicidality, fewer risk-taking behaviors like drug use, better grades, and greater satisfaction with life.[4] Adult relationships can even have a protective influence, reducing the expected impact of adverse childhood experiences.[5]

A quality teacher-student relationship has an impact on adults too.[6] It can help teachers experience feelings of competency, meaning, and care, all important factors in their well-being.[7]

School-based mentoring

Research on school-based mentoring finds modest but consistent gains in student grades, behavior, engagement, graduation rates, and life satisfaction.[8] In addition, students cultivate important competencies through mentoring, like communication and problem-solving, as mentors and mentees work through goals and ad-hoc needs.[9] School-based mentoring has the greatest impact when a strong relationship is paired with regular goal-setting and feedback.[10] Adequate planning and regular assessment also improve outcomes.[11]

Benefits for traditionally under-served populations

There tends to be gaps in well-being[12] and belonging[13] that fall along the lines of income, race/ethnicity, and service provision. Mentoring can be one way to close those gaps.[14] The students who benefit most from mentoring, such as low-income students, are also less likely to form a natural supportive relationship with an adult at school.[15] A practice like Mentor Center helps make sure all students have an adult at school they can confide in and get guidance from.

What do schools need to be mindful of?

Mentor matching

Schools that want to ensure mentoring's success for traditionally under-served students should consider how they match mentors and mentees. Matching by similar race/ethnicity is important to students,[16] and it can lead to longer lasting relationships between mentors and mentees.[17] Therefore, we recommend matching by race/ethnicity when possible. However, research has not found a clear correlation between matching by race/ethnicity and outcomes like academics, behavior, or student self-efficacy,[18] so this kind of matching may not be necessary for mentoring to be successful. Training in cultural competency and active listening can help mentors build quality relationships even when they share few common experiences.

Factors that influence student outcomes

Quality mentoring relationships lead to successful mentoring. In one randomized study, when students perceived the relationship to be high-quality, mentoring led to improved outcomes in grades and behavior.[19] Different students may respond to mentoring in different ways, however. Older students or those who have had negative experiences with the school system can take more time to build trust with their mentor.[20] Younger children often need a greater sense of connection with their mentors than teens do before investing in a mentoring relationship.[21] For some students, setting clear goals has an even greater impact on academic outcomes than perceived relationship quality.[22]

We provide guidance for collecting ongoing and end-of-year data so schools can assess whether their approach is working and where adjustments may be needed.

CASE STUDY

Using School-Based Mentoring for Attendance and Post-Secondary Success

In the fall of 2023, Lumen High School implemented a mentorship program to better support its student population of teen parents. The program launched with two initial goals: improve school attendance and support students in their semester-long internships.

Student attendance was an ongoing concern for Lumen leaders. Lumen students, in addition to being teen parents, face multiple, overlapping challenges. In the 2023–24 school year, 59% were unaccompanied minors, 16% were homeless, and 17% were involved in the juvenile justice system. Many students had to navigate employment, housing applications, and court systems, in addition to juggling school work and childcare. It's no surprise that demands like these would negatively impact attendance; no student met the district's reporting guidelines of fewer than two absences per month.[23] On average, the rate of student absences equated to 3.8 days per month during the 2022–23 school year.

Though Lumen students have unique needs, their experience with attendance was not unusual. Nationwide, chronic absenteeism skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic and numbers have yet to wane. The share of U.S. students who were absent for at least 10% of the school year rose from 15% in 2019 to 28% in 2022. In low-income communities, chronic absenteeism rose from 19% to 32%.[24]

At the same time that Lumen sought new ways to improve attendance, it was also scaling up a program that put qualified students into paid internships once a week. The internship program is part of the school's efforts to place students on a path toward post-secondary success. Lumen leaders hope that internships will prepare students for life after high school by giving them work experience in jobs with living wage potential. The experience can also help students try different career options and clarify the kind of post-secondary training they will need.

As the internship program ramped up, the school worried that their single internship coordinator would become overwhelmed by the daunting task of maintaining communication with all the students and internship sites on a regular basis. The school also believed that they would be able to improve the internship program faster by gathering input from multiple school staff — input informed by students' experiences.

Lumen Tries a New Set of Supports

To combat attendance challenges and support student internships, Lumen High School introduced Mentor Center in the 2023–24 school year. The program ensures that every enrolled student has an adult who meets with them on a regular basis. That mentor also becomes a person the student can reach out to concerning issues in or out of school that may affect their academic life. "They automatically have that person who they know, no matter what, they can go to," said Lumen's internship coordinator.

Lumen is alternatively structured for teen parent education, so orientation toward care is a requisite principle when the high school hires and onboards new staff. This eased the introduction of Mentor Center. To launch the initiative, all school staff — including teachers, the office manager, leadership, counselor, and the lunch coordinator — were assigned two to four mentees. Many of those assignments were based on pre-existing relationships between staff and students. To build and strengthen relationships, administrators set aside time during staff meetings for mentors to plan ways to connect with their mentees. This included making cards and planning check-in activities.

School leadership expected mentors to check in with their mentees at least once a week. To guide these conversations, the internship coordinator and principal often shared prompts and activities in a common spreadsheet. On weeks with no guided prompt, mentors had general check-ins with students. Mentors also pushed in on an ad hoc basis when the school's behavior support app, Supported School, flagged that mentees were experiencing disciplinary issues or were struggling academically. (Supported School is a free software available to Washington State schools and helps track student progress.)

The mentoring practice guarantees that every student at Lumen receives support, not just students who are proactive about asking for help or who are in clear need of guidance. "It's supposed to ensure that every single student is developing a relationship with somebody," said the school's counselor.

Staff also found that Mentor Center helped streamline communication. "If there is something going on at school, like a reminder that we need to give students, we can divide that labor that way, so it's like, 'Hey, just make sure you tell your three mentees that we're going shopping tomorrow and they need to wear warm clothes,'" said one staff member.

While Lumen staff always supported students, having designated mentees helped them clearly define who is responsible when a particular student needs help. The practice also helps build a more robust community between students and staff at Lumen. "It allows me to build a relationship with somebody that I would not normally have a relationship with," said the internship coordinator. "I think it is always helpful to know more students because it allows me to have conversations with them about what they want to do in their future."

Lessons Learned

One significant lesson learned through the pilot effort was the importance of consistency. In the first year, to build new relationships, Mentor Center assigned new mentees at the beginning of the second semester. However, staff felt it would have been more beneficial to retain their original mentees and continue building on the trust they had already established. In interviews, staff also noted the importance of having prompts they can ask students, clear expectations, and time set aside for mentoring activities.

Mixed results are to be expected during a pilot year, especially when so many factors – inside school and out – can impact the success of a new initiative. Lumen examined data and student and staff perceptions to better understand the success and potential of the Mentor Center program. These learnings are described below.

Stronger Relationships

As a school, Lumen already prioritized relationships before launching Mentor Center. However, Mentor Center may have helped solidify and reinforce this culture. Student perception of the student-teacher relationship improved from 66% in 2022–23 (prior to Mentor Center) to 81% in 2023–24 (during the pilot year of Mentor Center).[25]

There are many reasons why student perceptions change year-to-year, and we cannot know to what extent mentoring played a role in this increase. Nevertheless, student survey data aligned with what students said about mentoring in focus groups. Said one student about her mentor: "If I am having a bad day, I can just go talk to Sandra and Sandra will understand, Sandra will be there… She encourages me to be the best version of myself… [she] encourages me to go to class, be in class, and to be involved."

Staff also experienced the impact a mentoring relationship can have. One mentor said she kept in touch with one of her mentees after the student dropped out of school. After several months, the student re-enrolled in Lumen. When the student returned, she often visited her mentor. "She [the mentee] said that I was a big reason why she wanted to come back… At the beginning of the year, she was showing up every day, during passing periods or whatever, just to say hi."

Mentoring goals: Attendance and internships

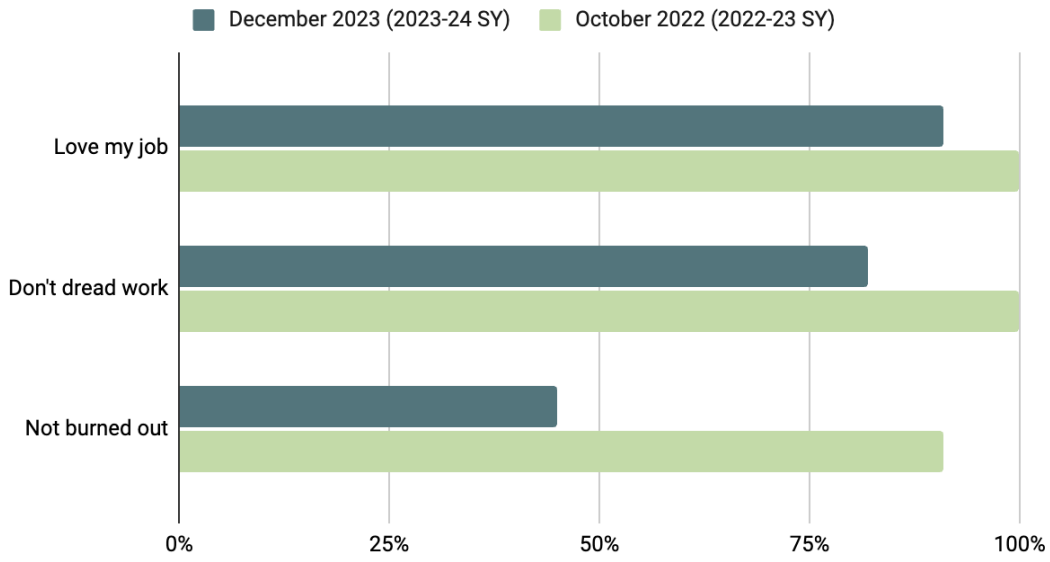
The school had no change in attendance before and after introducing Mentor Center. Attendance rates for the 2022–23 school year (before Mentor Center) and the 2023–24 school year (during the Mentor Center pilot) were the same – whether that was for all students enrolled at Lumen (51%) or just the students who enrolled at Lumen both years (54%).[26] However, staff engagement with the program was inconsistent in the second semester of the 2023–24 school year. School leadership hopes that by tightening expectations, they will see improvement in attendance rates in the future.

Mentoring did seem to support students in their internships. Lumen had four interns in the 2022–23 school year and 16 interns in 2023–24. Because of the school's small size, that number accounted for half of all enrolled students. Mentoring served as an early warning system for this large proportion of Lumen students. The internship coordinator described the effect: "[Mentoring] created a good extra resource… I've gotten some updates from the staff. And they can say, hey, this [issue] is kinda happening." The coordinator then followed up with the student and business partner, helping to address issues early.

Teacher well-being

Strong student-teacher relationships can reduce burn-out, which contributes to a teacher's overall sense of wellbeing.[27] Generally, Lumen teachers felt more satisfied in 2023-24 as compared to the previous school year. Mentoring may have contributed to that increase, although it was only one of a number of changes the school made that year.

FIGURE 1: ***Teacher burn-out declined between the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years***



Percent of teachers who agree or strongly agree, N=11 (5-point scale)

Though Mentor Center is only one year into practice, Lumen staff feel that it is already rooted in the school's culture. "I do think that it's meaningful to call out, like, 'Hey, this student belongs to this person,'" one teacher reported. "'Check in with him more than you might other students. Check that he's not falling through the cracks.'" The school plans to continue Mentor Center, making changes in response to the lesson learned from the pilot effort.

How to Implement This Practice

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

WHAT YOU NEED

SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES

- Hiring staff who demonstrate relational competencies
- A flexible school schedule that allows for mentoring during the school day
- A way of holding mentors accountable, such as using the staff evaluation process

LEADERSHIP MOVES

- Leaders who value student-teacher relationships and know that they take time to cultivate and develop
- Leaders who build a school culture that values belonging and inclusion

KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, & MINDSETS

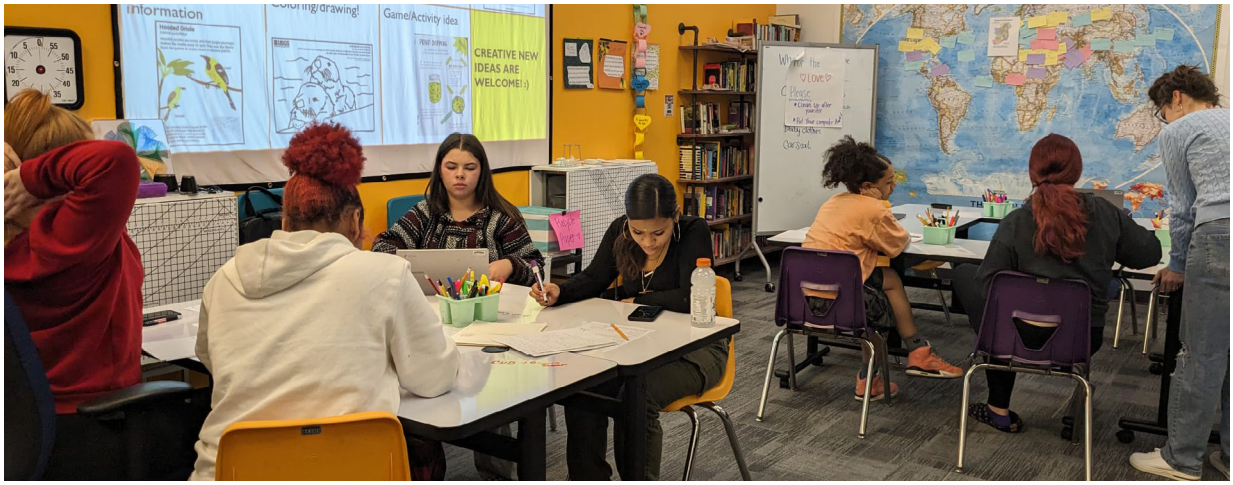
- Knowledge of school systems to connect students with appropriate services
- The ability to collaborate with other school staff
- Communication skills for building rapport with students
- Cultural competency

MATERIALS

- Protocols and prompts for mentoring sessions
- System for tracking mentor-mentee check-ins and discussions

STAFFING

- Mentor Center lead at a partial Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)
- At least three school-based adults willing to be mentors. This can be anyone at school, including teachers, counselors, support staff, coaches, or administrative staff.



COST PER PUPIL

Our calculations put this initiative at **$841 per pupil** per year with stipends and **$541 without stipends**, or $25,230 and $16,230 total costs for 30 students. Our costs assume 10 mentors who each meet with 3 mentees once per week for 32 weeks. Use the CostOut tool for an estimate tailored to your school.

Our cost assumptions:

- 0.20 cumulative staff FTE to account for mentors' time to engage in mentoring, which may mean missing arrival, dismissal, and lunch duties
- 0.10 FTE for the Mentor Center lead
- $300 mentor stipend per mentee
- $10 per month per mentee for notecards, home visit travel, and other incidentals
- $1,000 for training materials and/or training personnel

Steps to Implement

The steps below explain how to implement Mentor Center. They are based on the experience of the case study school (Lumen High School) and literature on mentoring.

Preparing for Mentor Center

STEP 1: *Identify a Mentor Center Lead*

Schools will need a school-based adult who organizes Mentor Center activities and supports school mentors. Being the Mentor Center lead should be part of the person's paid duties, so it makes most sense for the lead to be a school counselor, social worker, special education teacher, or other person whose job duties already include social-emotional, mental health, and/or academic support duties.

STEP 2: *Set Intentions for Mentor Center*

Mentor Center Goals

School leadership, in coordination with other staff, will identify one or two key goals for mentoring each calendar year. These common goals apply to all mentees. Goals could pertain to attendance, behavior, academic engagement, belonging, or social-emotional skill development. They should align with the school's strategic goals and be based on school data.

For example, if the school has low attendance rates and is focused on attendance in their strategic planning process, then attendance is a good mentoring goal. The identification of the mentoring goal should be part of regular data routines where leadership, faculty, and staff review disaggregated data together. This way there is a common understanding of the needs and disparities that mentoring is designed to address.

Once the school has identified a target goal, staff should conduct a root cause analysis to gain insight into the underlying issues relevant to that goal. Unless a school looks honestly at why students may struggle with a goal area like attendance, mentoring may not get at the systemic factors that contribute to student challenges.

Types of mentoring: Developmental and goal-oriented

Mentoring tends to be most effective when it is both developmental and goal-oriented. Developmental, or relationship-building, mentoring happens through open-ended prompts, games, and other connecting activities. A school will need to determine whether developmental mentoring is a goal unto itself or whether it is a means for building a quality mentor-mentee relationship. This will depend on your broader goals for mentoring. For example, if your goal for mentoring is to promote student belonging or cultivate social-emotional skills, then developmental mentoring should be a big part of the mentoring relationship. The same will be true if the mentees attend school infrequently or do not have a trusting relationship with school. Goal-based mentoring will happen two ways: through the common mentoring goal selected by the school (e.g., attendance) and through additional, personal goals the mentor and mentee may select to work on (e.g., turning in homework.)

Selecting students

A small school like Lumen can extend mentoring to all students. Because of limited capacity and funds, however, most schools will need to select a subset of students. We recommend identifying students using a combination of school data and counselor/teacher recommendations.

Planning

Schools can consider involving the broader school community, including teachers, students, and families, in the planning process. This can help promote buy-in and surface potential barriers early in the process. Planning should include the development of a program theory of change. This is a visual representation of the process the school will use to achieve its mentoring goals. See appendix B for an example that your school can modify.

STEP 3: *Identify and Recruit Staff Mentors*

After informing school personnel about the initiative, the school should seek volunteers for their first round of mentors, so the initiative starts with those who are interested. Most school adults can conceivably be good mentors with training and support, but schools should have some form of vetting process. Larger schools should use a simple application, but most schools can use their knowledge of teachers and staff to determine suitability. Qualities to look for include communication skills and existing rapport with students.

Mentors can be classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, or administrative staff. Try to have at least three mentors a year so they can support and learn from one another. Mentors can receive a small stipend (e.g., $300 per mentee), as they are taking on extra responsibilities. If all school adults participate in mentoring, then a stipend may not be necessary because mentoring will be part of staff members' normal duties.

STEP 4: *Prepare Staff*

Establishing clear expectations is the most important step for preparing staff. A school should set expectations that align with its own context and mentoring goals. Key issues to consider and communicate to staff include the following:

- What are the common goals for all mentees (e.g., attendance)?
- How much emphasis will be placed on developmental mentoring? How much emphasis will be on goal-oriented mentoring?
- How frequently does mentoring happen? (e.g., once per week)
- How long are mentor meetings? (e.g., 10 to 15 minutes)
- Where and when does mentoring take place? (e.g., Thursdays at lunch time)
- What information do mentors record? (e.g., attendance and notes on issues that arise)
- What support will mentors receive? (e.g., check-in meetings with other mentors and the Mentor Center lead once a month)

In addition, staff should receive training for their role as a mentor. Schools should offer training in what mentoring is and in the qualities of good mentoring. Schools can consider training in communication modalities like active listening, motivational interviewing, or nonviolent communication; training in cultural competency; and training in trauma-informed care. Schools can use a community partner to offer the training, or they can develop it in-house with the school's counselor or social worker.

Leadership should also organize training in the goal area for Mentor Center. For example, if the goal is attendance, a school should offer a short session on why students might disengage from school and what the research says about successful interventions. Mentors should also review their school's data on the goal area disaggregated by race/ethnicity, grade level, and service provision. This will help mentors understand the systemic factors that may be contributing to student achievement in the goal area.

STEP 5: *Match Students and Mentors*

Schools should be intentional about how they match mentors and mentees. Matching mentors and mentees by race/ethnicity and lived experience can help build trust within pairings, but that is not essential if it isn't feasible. Schools can look for other ways to use matching to help build relationships between mentors and mentees. For example, potential mentors can identify mentees whom they already know or with whom they have common touch-points during the school day. A homeroom teacher or a classroom paraprofessional could make a good mentor because they already know the student and can easily set aside time during the week to meet. Trusting relationships between a mentor and mentee can take time to develop, so we recommend keeping the same mentor-mentee pair for at least one year unless the student or adult requests a new pairing.

STEP 6: *Prepare Students and Families*

Once you have identified students who might benefit from mentoring, the school will need to communicate with families and students about the program. Schools can consider meeting with families via teleconferencing. This communication should include program goals, how their child was selected, and what is expected of each mentee in terms of time and effort. Similarly, there should be transparency for students. Some schools may want to have a celebratory launch with all mentors and mentees. Other schools may want to have a meeting with the student, mentor, and a family member to talk to the student about the process.

STEP 7: *Set Up Communication and Accountability Systems*

Mentoring should be integrated into the broader set of supports in school. When launching the initiative, the Mentor Center lead and mentors should meet with multi-tiered system of support teams (MTSS teams), discipline teams, and/or support staff. During this initial meeting, they can communicate the initiative's goals, process, and mentor-mentee matches.

Schools should identify ways that mentors and other support staff will communicate with one another during the school year. At Lumen High School, mentoring became integrated into their school's system of supports through the Supported School app.

Mentors will also need a system to track meetings with mentees. An effective system can be as simple as a shared document where the mentor lead includes prompts for the week, and the mentor takes brief notes from each meeting.

STEP 8: *Make Time for Mentor Center*

A school that wants to have a mentoring program must make sure time is built into both mentors' and mentees' schedules. This might mean releasing mentors from lunch time and dismissal duties, releasing them from having a homeroom, or giving them an extra prep period each week. Mentors should have opportunities to meet about once a month for training, support, and check-ins with one another.

Mentor responsibilities should roughly fit within the school day. Training and monthly meetings can be part of regular professional development and staff meetings. Mentoring should happen during times that don't interfere with student learning and recreational time or with teacher planning periods. Homeroom/morning meeting, dismissal/drop-off, lunch, or homework periods are all good times for mentors to have weekly 15-minute meetings.

Launch Mentor Center

STEP 1: *Mentors Check In with Students*

Meeting consistency

There is not good research on how often mentors should check in with students, as programs range from having weekly to monthly check-ins. Frequent mentoring meetings are typically shorter, while less frequent meetings are typically longer. In a school context, we recommend frequent, short mentoring sessions. At Lumen, mentors checked in one to three times per week for meetings that lasted between five and fifteen minutes.

A flexible protocol guides the mentoring process. It has a central activity and a standard check-in/check-out procedure. The central activity is a prompt or activity, typically set by the Mentor Center lead.

Developmental mentoring

Mentors can start the check-in by asking mentees how they feel about their day, which helps build the relationship and offers just-in-time emotional and academic support. It is important to include opportunities for students to share successes and bright points.

Relationship-based activities can be games, open prompts driven by student interest, or short modules from the school's social-emotional learning curriculum. Mentors should lean more heavily into relationship-building activities early in the year as mentees may need time to build trust and familiarity with their mentors before they feel comfortable sharing about personal and goal-oriented topics. For example, students may need to feel a sense of trust with their mentor before talking about the underlying reasons for their frequent absences. Power imbalance and a lack of shared lived experience can also be barriers to connection, although these can be overcome through open communication and consistent meetings, as well as training in cultural competency.

Goal-oriented mentoring

Goal-oriented prompts and activities should be organized by the Mentor Center lead. Lumen High School used a shared spreadsheet to communicate each week's prompt to mentors. In addition to the goals set by the Mentor Center lead, mentors can use a process like WOOP to identify additional student goals.

STEP 2: *The Mentor Center Lead Supports Mentors and Mentees*

The lead provides structure to mentor-mentee check-ins with suggested prompts and activities. Biweekly, the lead reviews the Mentor Center tracker to ensure meetings are occurring. The lead also reviews notes for bright spots they can celebrate and mentoring challenges that they can workshop during monthly meetings. These monthly meetings are also a time for mentor training and support.

STEP 3: *Integrate Mentoring into School Systems and Processes*

As mentoring launches, the school should seek ways to integrate it into school systems and processes. For example, at Lumen High School, the staff evaluation process supports mentoring by looking for teacher communication skills, their ability to support belonging, and their commitment to equity. When necessary, leaders support staff in developing growth areas. Because relationship-building is a key part of their school culture, they also look for these qualities during the hiring process.

Mentors should utilize support processes at school when they encounter issues that are beyond their expertise. For example, students may express mental health concerns or identify challenges with family housing. Mentors will need knowledge of school resources so they know who to contact in cases such as these. At Lumen, mentors connect directly to relevant staff. At a larger school, mentors can inform the Mentor Center lead, who then helps facilitate additional support.

Schools should also make sure that mentoring is embedded in school supports. At Lumen, staff flag mentors when there has been a behavior incident or when a student is struggling with a class. Mentors then follow up with their mentee during regular check-ins. Sometimes, mentors are asked to participate in family meetings, go on home visits, or participate in discipline conversations. This way mentoring is another thread in the fabric of student supports.

Continuous Improvement

STEP 1: *Gather Information and Evaluate Progress*

During the school year, the mentor lead should be reviewing data, like mentor-mentee meeting attendance, in the Mentor Center tracker. During the year, the mentor lead can also administer a short survey with mentees or have check-ins with parents to assess how mentoring is working. At any point, a school can survey mentors and mentees to assess the quality of mentoring relationships.

If a mentoring relationship is not working for a student or staff person during the year, the mentor lead should find out why, so they can appropriately support mentees and mentors. Students may need a different pairing, or staff may need additional support and training. While mentor-mentee relationships can take time to develop, they should be reassigned if mentors or students request a change.

STEP 2: *Revise Mentor Goals and Procedures*

The end of the school year is a time to reflect on data and make changes. Mentors and leadership should use disaggregated school data to evaluate the initiative. Mentoring on its own is unlikely to impact a complex goal like attendance, but schools can see whether the goal improved over the year and discuss the extent to which they believe mentoring was a factor. Social-emotional competencies, belonging, and teacher well-being typically improve with mentoring. (See Outcomes for sample measures.) The mentoring team should also reflect on the mentor qualities, mindsets, and knowledge that made for sustained and successful mentoring. Using what they have learned, the team can consider adjustments for the upcoming year, including mentor training and/or rematching. After the first year, we recommend identifying opportunities for distributed leadership, particularly if the school plans to expand Mentor Center.

Key Roles and Responsibilities

STAKEHOLDER	ACTIVITIES	TIME REQUIRED
Administrator	• Sets annual goals and reviews data on Mentor Center goals • Supports the Mentor Center lead and ensures continued resources	20 hours per year
Mentor Center Lead	• Works with the school counselor and other staff to identify mentees based on Mentor Center goals • Devises prompts, collects and reviews data, and supports mentors	12 hours per month [108]
Mentor	• Works with two to four mentees per year • Checks in with the mentee weekly or biweekly during lunch, homeroom/ advisory, or arrival/ dismissal • Reaches out to school personnel to connect students to resources and additional support	15-45 minutes per week [24]
	Training and coaching	5 hours the first year; 2 hours in subsequent years
	Meeting with other mentors	1 hour per month
Student/Family	• Agrees to mentoring • Engages in short check-ins • Provides feedback about the process	15 minutes per week

Potential Barriers

BARRIER	SOLUTION
Teachers/staff don't want to participate	• Start Mentor Center as a volunteer activity. • Talk about Mentor Center across the school. Align it with your school's strategic goals and values. • Make sure expectations for mentors are reasonable and manageable. • Compensate mentors. • Set aside time for mentoring activities. For example, offer staff a break from arrival and dismissal duties to allow time for mentoring. • Offer extra training if the staff member is a mentor of a student with challenging behaviors.
Students/ families don't want to participate	• Communicate the benefits of mentoring using student- and family-friendly language. • Make sure students and families get something they want from mentoring. Ask how the process can be beneficial for families and make sure their goals are also addressed. Mentoring can include personalized goals that mentees identify in addition to goals from the school. • Mentoring can feel stigmatizing for students. This can be addressed by making mentoring feel special. Students can have lunch once a month with their mentor or receive a gift card at the end of the year. • Make sure expectations for students are reasonable and manageable.
Mentoring relationships are not satisfying for students or staff	• Spend time developing the relationship. Include open check-ins and fun activities. • Collect anonymous feedback from staff, students, and/or families to learn what happened in the mentoring relationship and what wasn't working. • Consider adjusting training or how you match mentors and mentees. • Mentoring may not work for some. Leverage other interventions for those students.

Sustainability

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

Funding

The biggest cost of a mentoring program will be the Mentor Center lead and time release for school staff to perform mentoring duties. A school can likely cover these costs through budget reallocation or by using funds from federal programs like Title 1.

Buy-In

Securing buy-in at every level is essential to mentoring's long-term success. These moves are important:

- Identify a Mentor Center lead who already has good relationships with staff, students, and families.
- Start with volunteer mentors who have strong relationship skills.
- Start small and build on success.
- Make sure mentors can reasonably add this work to their weekly schedule.
- Celebrate successes.

Coherence

Mentor Center should align with other school priorities. To ensure this coherence, the following moves are important:

- Connect Mentor Center with MTSS teams, advisory, and/or other school initiatives.
- Identify and clearly communicate how Mentor Center aligns with school and district goals and/or school values.

Adaptations

Different schooling contexts may benefit from adaptations. What follows are three ways that schools can adapt Mentor Center.

School with few available staff

Some schools may want to implement mentoring but have few school staff whom they feel have suitable qualities or sufficient time. In this circumstance, schools can use mentors who are community or parent volunteers. The national organization MENTOR helps match out-of-school adults to students.

Involving the broader school community can be a way to increase the number of potential mentors, as Lumen High School did. Anyone in a school can be a mentor, including secretaries, janitorial staff, or lunch staff. Schools can also consider using mentoring to augment an existing advisory or homeroom structure. In this case, a portion of advisees receive additional one-on-one attention as mentees.

Student-centered mentoring

Our guide describes a mentoring practice that starts with school-identified needs and then focuses student selection and mentoring activities around that goal. However, some schools may want to develop a mentoring program that centers vulnerable groups of students rather than a specific outcome. If a school looks at disaggregated data and finds one group of students struggling across multiple outcomes, the school may want to set up a mentoring program to focus on those students. These might be newcomers (newly immigrated students) or students in a specific grade, like 9th grade.

In this approach, the school starts with a root cause analysis to gain insight into why this group of students may be struggling at school. The school should also engage families and community groups with expertise to understand student needs, reasons for past school failures, and community assets. An honest reflection on past experiences will help schools understand systemic factors and biases that could be contributing to student challenges.

Voluntary mentoring

In this guide, we describe mentoring as a targeted intervention for an identified group of students. Some schools may want to provide mentoring on a voluntary basis for any student. A voluntary mentoring program should identify those students who don't appear to have close bonds with adults at school and prioritize their participation.

How to Monitor Success

Use your theory of change to identify the outcomes you want to measure. (See appendix B for a sample theory of change that you can adjust based on your school's goals.) It is important to look at short- and long-term outcomes, as well as implementation effectiveness.

Outcomes

Mentoring should result in improved well-being and belonging for students and teachers. Other outcomes will depend on your school's mentoring goals for the year. The table below provides several common mentoring outcomes and related measures as examples. Select just **one to three** that work for your school.

POTENTIAL OUTCOME	MEASUREMENT TOOL
Student connectedness and well-being	• Items related to student-teacher relationships or belonging in a state-wide or existing school culture survey; stand-alone survey like Inclusion of Others in the Self) • Well-being survey (e.g., Panorama Student Well-Being Survey or EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being)
Student social-emotional competencies	Social-emotional survey (e.g., Self-Management and Social Awareness subscales of MESH or Flourishing Life)
Teacher satisfaction and well-being	• Items related to teacher satisfaction in a school culture survey • Teacher well-being survey (e.g., Satisfaction with Life Scale)
Attendance	School attendance data for mentored and non-mentored students, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, service provision, and poverty
Academics	• Academic mindsets or habit survey (e.g., Self-Efficacy and Growth Mindset subscales of MESH) • School GPA or assessment results

Implementation Indicators

Monitor implementation indicators throughout the year and at the end of the school year. This will help you make sense of outcomes and adjust processes for the next year. Below we offer a number of options for measuring implementation. Select **only one or two** that best suit your context.

IMPLEMENTATION INDICATORS	MEASUREMENT TOOL
Mentor-mentee contact points and activities	• Mentor Center tracker (e.g., Google Sheets) • Youth Mentoring Survey for mentees
Strength of mentor-mentee relationship	Youth Strength of Relationship & Mentor Strength of Relationship. Surveys for both mentors and mentees are available here.
Satisfaction with the mentor-mentee relationship	Network of Relationships Inventory for mentors and mentees Social Support and Rejection Scale for mentees

Resources

General Protocols and Record Keeping

- General Mentor Protocol
- Experience Corp Mentor Toolkit has sample prompts and activities
- Mentor Center Tracker

Developmental Mentoring

- Your school's social-emotional learning curriculum or a dedicated mentoring curriculum like VitalVoices
- Open-ended check-ins that are part of your Mentor Protocol

Goal-Oriented Mentoring

- Goal-setting with K12 students
- Goal-setting: Your Guide to Helping Mentees Realize Their Potential

Training

- Mentor training
- Active listening
- Nonviolent communication materials and training
- Cultural awareness toolkit for teachers; cultural competency training modules
- Trauma-informed care toolkit, materials, and training
- Motivational interviewing information and training

Staff Hiring and Accountability

- Pre-screening and interview questions
- Staff growth rubric

General Resources

- National Mentoring Resource Center
- Youth Mentoring Action Network
- MENTOR

Endnotes

1. Mtika, P., & Payne, F. (2014). Student-adult mentoring relationships: experiences from a Scottish school-based programme. *Educational Research*, *56*(4), 436–452. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2014.965571

2. Kraft, M. A., Bolves, A., & Hurd, N. M. (2021). *School-based mentoring relationships and human capital formation* (EdWorkingPaper: 21-441). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/96bs-6m26

3. García-Moya, I., Brooks, F. M., & Spencer, N. H. (2018). School-level factors associated with teacher connectedness: a multilevel analysis of the structural and relational school determinants of young people's health. *Journal of Public Health (Oxford, England)*, *40*(2), 366–374. https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdx089

4. McNeely, C., & Falci, C. (2004). School connectedness and the transition into and out of health-risk behavior among adolescents: A comparison of social belonging and teacher support. *The Journal of School Health*, *74*(7), 284–292. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08285.x

5. Goetschius, L. G., McLoyd, V. C., Hein, T. C., Mitchell, C., Hyde, L. W., & Monk, C. S. (2023). School connectedness as a protective factor against childhood exposure to violence and social deprivation: A longitudinal study of adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. *Development and Psychopathology*, *35*(3), 1219–1234. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579421001140

   Konishi, C., Hymel, S., Zumbo, B. D., & Li, Z. (2010). Do school bullying and student–teacher relationships matter for academic achievement? A multilevel analysis. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, *25*(1), 19–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579421001140

   McQuillin, S. D., & McDaniel, H. L. (2021). Pilot randomized trial of brief school-based mentoring for middle school students with elevated disruptive behavior. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, *1483*(1), 127–141. https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14334

6. Ferguson, S. (2018). Ask not what your mentor can do for you...: The role of reciprocal exchange in maintaining student—teacher mentorships. *Sociological Forum*, *33*(1), 211–233. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/socf.12406

7. Hascher, T., & Waber, J. (2021). Teacher well-being: A systematic review of the research literature from the year 2000–2019. *Educational Research Review*, *34*, 100411-. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2021.100411

8. Klaw, E. L., Rhodes, J. E., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (2002). Natural mentors in the lives of African American adolescent mothers: Tracking relationships over time. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *32*(3), 223–232. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022551721565

   Schenk, L., Sentse, M., Lenkens, M., Nagelhout, G., Engbersen, G., Severiens, S. (2019). An examination of the role of mentees' social skills and relationship quality in a school-based mentoring program. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *65*, 149-159. https://doi.org/10.1002%2Fajcp.12397

   Wood, S., & Mayo-Wilson, E. (2012). School-based mentoring for adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *22*(3), 257–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731511430836

9. McQuillin & McDaniel (2021), note 4.

10. Lyons, M. D., McQuillin, S. D., & Henderson, L. J. (2019). Finding the sweet spot: Investigating the effects of relationship closeness and instrumental activities in school-based mentoring. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *63*(1–2), 88–98. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12283

11. Luo, L., & Stoeger, H. (2023). Unlocking the transformative power of mentoring for youth development in communities, schools, and talent domains. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *51*(8), 3067–3082. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.23082

12. Opportunity gaps in the social-emotional development, well-being, and mental health experienced by young children. (2023). In *Closing the Opportunity Gap for Young Children*. National Academies Press.

13. Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Byrd, C. M. (2020). Why Black adolescents are vulnerable at school and how schools can provide opportunities to belong to fix it. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *7*(1), 3–9.

14. Will, M. (2023). Every student needs a mentor. How schools can make that happen. *EducationWeek*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/every-student-needs-a-mentor-how-schools-can-make-that-happen/2023/02

15. Kraft et al. (2021), note 2

16. Blake-Beard, S., Bayne, M. L., Crosby, F. J., & Muller, C. B. (2011). Matching by race and gender in mentoring relationships: Keeping our eyes on the prize. *Journal of Social Issues*, *67*(3), 622–643. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01717.x

17. Raposa, E. B., Ben-Eliyahu, A., Olsho, L. E. W., & Rhodes, J. (2019). Birds of a feather: Is matching based on shared interests and characteristics associated with longer youth mentoring relationships? *Journal of Community Psychology*, *47*(2), 385–397. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22127

18. Blake-Beard et al. (2011), note 14

    Gaddis, S. M. (2012). What's in a Relationship? An examination of social capital, race and class in mentoring relationships. *Social Forces*, *90*(4), 1237–1269. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sos003

    Rhodes, J. E., Reddy, R., Grossman, J. B., & Maxine Lee, J. (2002). Volunteer mentoring relationships with minority youth: An analysis of same- versus cross-race matches. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *32*(10), 2114–2133. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2002.tb02066.x

19. Lyons et al. (2019), note 10.

20. Younginer, S. T., & Elledge, L. C. (2021). Mentor personality and attachment as correlates of youth mentoring relationship quality within a school-based mentoring intervention: The moderating role of negative interactions. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *49*(7), 2569–2589. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22654

21. Schenk et al. (2019), note 8

22. Lyons et al. (2019), note 10

23. In Washington State, an absence is defined as missing half a day or more of school, excused or unexcused.

24. Malkus, N. (2024). Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic. *American Enterprise Institute*. Retrieved from https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/

25. The school 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.

26. Our analysis used attendance records shared by school staff. Sixty students were included in the analysis of all students enrolled at Lumen; 19 students were enrolled both school years.

27. Lumen administered the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) 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 well-being.

APPENDIX A:
Profile of Lumen High School

Location: Spokane, Washington
Founded: 2020
Level: High school with onsite daycare/preschool
Type: School for teen parents

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

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

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

Source: *Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction school report card*

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

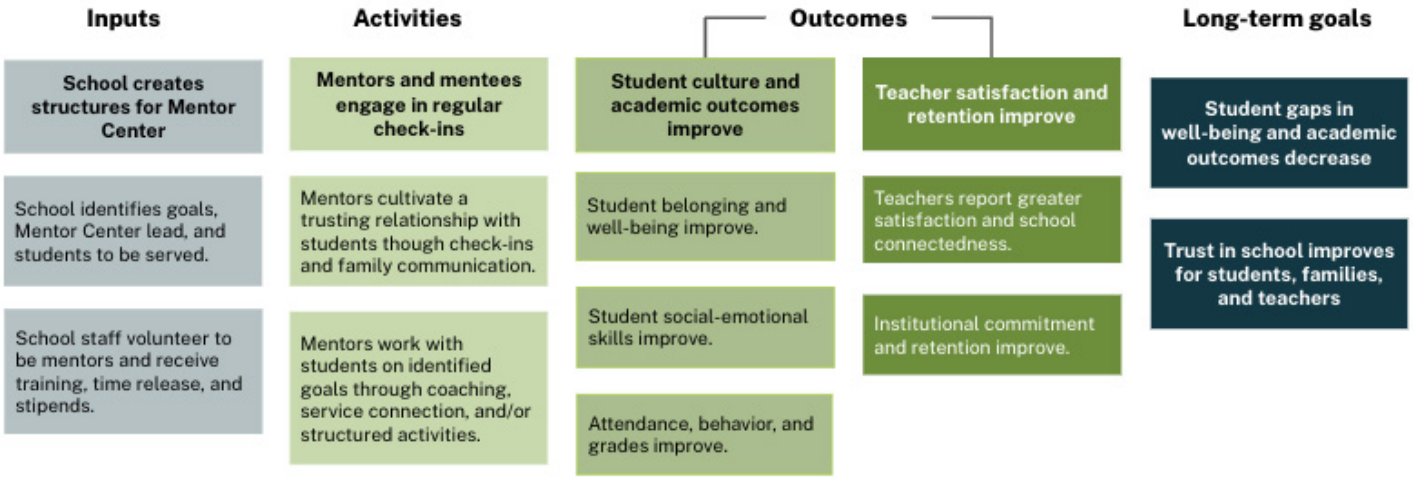
Source: *School attendance files and transcripts*
Notes: **Average student GPA was 1.48 prior to attending Lumen. Grading policies changed in the 2023-24 school year. †Regular attenders are defined as students who attend at least 65% of the time.*

STAFFING PROFILE

Administrators: 2
Teachers: 4
Push-in and small group academic support staff: 2
Social Worker: 1
School Counselor: 1
Internship Coordinator: 1
On-site community organizations: 5

APPENDIX B:
Mentor Center Theory of Change

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



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.

fig Education Lab

Datability Education Consulting

WASHINGTON STATE CHARTER SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION