

CASE STUDY

Building Staff Relationships with a Strong Summer Launch

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For more information about implementing summer professional development, see this guide in [our series Promising Practices from Washington State](#).



CASE STUDY SCHOOL

This guide describes a practice being implemented at Catalyst Public Schools (Catalyst). Catalyst is located in Bremerton, Washington and serves students in kindergarten to high school. The public charter school opened in September 2020. In 2023–24, Catalyst enrolled 485 students, 47% of whom were classified as low-income, and 16% of whom received special education services. For additional information, see [appendix A](#).

Each summer before the school year begins, Catalyst Public Schools carries out its annual Summer Launch initiative.

Summer Launch’s professional development takes place over a three-week period, with only new school staff in attendance the first week. They are then joined by returning staff for the remaining two weeks. Throughout Summer Launch, teachers engage in activities to get to know one another, plan for the school year in their respective grade-level groups, and engage in conversations around creating an equitable and welcoming learning environment for students.



THREE WEEKS IS IMPOSSIBLE! OR IS IT?

Staff contracts or collective bargaining agreements may pose barriers to devoting two to three weeks to professional development — the length of time necessary for staff members to develop deep bonds, strengthen teaching practices, and align around school logistics. When adequate time is not available for summer professional development, there are still ways to provide staff with opportunities to build relationships:

- Map out professional development times throughout the school year that can be used to engage teachers in sessions focused on relationship-building.
- Have staff sign up to be paired together for scheduled lunches during the school year.
- Encourage teachers with common prep periods to co-work together in one classroom.
- Find or create videos or self-paced activities that encourage staff to reflect on their relationships with other staff members.
- Reduce the amount of time spent relaying logistical information during the summer. Identify as much content as possible that can be communicated asynchronously (e.g., via videos, emails, documents, online curricula).
- During the year, use instructional coaches to help teachers develop their teaching practices through observation, student data analysis, reflection, and lesson planning, thus freeing up time for relationship-building and professional development.

Starting the Day with Sunrise

During Summer Launch, each day begins with “Sunrise,” a session at which all staff members gather in the school’s cafeteria to engage in team-building activities. On the first day when all teachers are together, Tatiana, one of Catalyst’s school leaders and founders, leads the group in a warm-up activity. She instructs teachers to form a circle and pass around two inflatable balls. While the teachers must remain silent, they make use of eye contact to indicate the next recipient. The activity is carried out through non-verbal communication and helps teachers feel more relaxed around their new and returning colleagues.



But Sunrise at Catalyst is not just about games or icebreakers. Teachers often do meditative breathing exercises together, set their intentions for the day, and reflect on how various experiences can inform their relationships with students. Starting each day of professional development (and each meeting during the school year) in this way helps set the tone for the day. Through three weeks of these activities, the staff has the chance to engage with one another in authentic ways that help them grow as individuals and strengthen their connections as a group, while brand new staff members find a sense of camaraderie before the school year begins.

“Honestly, I think my first week with the new staff was very beneficial. It made coming to work the next week with everyone so much easier because I did have some familiar faces to greet me that day,” said a new teacher at Catalyst. “I really liked how socially and emotionally focused that first week was.”

Gaining Empathy Through Hard Conversations

An important goal of Summer Launch is understanding how to navigate a classroom of students with diverse backgrounds. Discussion prompts help spur conversations between teachers to develop their understanding of different student and staff backgrounds and lived experiences.

Staff members are paired and given [a photograph](#) meant to elicit discussion between the two staff members. Most of the photographs depict historical evidence of a racial inequality or privilege. The pairs reflect on each photo, then take five minutes to discuss what thoughts and feelings the photo evokes before trading photos with another pair of staff members and repeating the process.

After each pairing has had a chance to look over several photos, the entire staff reconvenes to discuss the experience as a whole. Staff members share memories and experiences brought up by the images. For example, one white teacher shares that some of their Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students and fellow staff members may have had different experiences with schools and other institutions than she has had.

In the process of helping all staff members understand students, they also create moments in which staff can better understand one another. “It’s the expectations around the mission and the type of culture and community we want to make – holding each other accountable and making sure that we’re having these open conversations,” said a Catalyst teacher. “Then having time to implement those things as we start getting ready and we start getting our classroom set.”



Learning Through Planning

During afternoon sessions, teachers engage in topics related to instructional practices and planning. Every grade level at Catalyst has two classes — each has a lead teacher and a small group instructor aligned on content, content, rigorous academic standards, and behavioral expectations. To achieve this alignment, grade-level teams use their Summer Launch afternoons to discuss and plan everything from literacy instruction to procedures for lunch time.

The mornings' relationship-building and school culture activities provide teachers with shared language and practices to use when they are navigating the afternoons' collaborative work. For instance, one teacher asked everyone to pause during a debate about classroom norms and said, "I think we need to stop and make sure we're speaking in Discourse II." Teachers were then able to reorient their conversation in line with shared Catalyst's values and keep the discussion constructive and judgment free. (Learn more about Discourse I and II below.)

SETTING EXPECTATIONS FOR LANGUAGE

Catalyst uses the concepts of [Discourse I and II](#) to set staff expectations for how they engage with each other. **Discourse I** is a way of thinking and talking that replicates existing systems, including those that are unequal and rooted in the power of some. **Discourse II** is thinking and working toward a more equal society — aware of and responsive to the ways in which it disadvantages individuals. New teachers can benefit from a full introduction and frequent practice in using Discourse II just as returning teachers also benefit from continued work to build and strengthen these essential habits.

Discourse I deals with. . . .	Discourse II deals with. . . .
Singular truths	Multiple stories
"The change process"	The desired circumstances
Improving what exists	Changing something significant
Techniques, methods, and content	Learning and school relationships
Symptoms	Causes
The way things are	What could be
Blaming others for not meeting our standards	Questioning whether our standards are hindrances
Discipline and control	Alienation and resistance
Competency	Relevance
The familiar	The uncomfortable
Answers and solutions	Dilemmas and mysteries
Information transfer	Knowledge creation
Ability and merit	Privilege and oppression
Dropouts	Pushouts
Reproduction	Transformation
The work of adults	The learning and experience of students
World-class standards	Re-creating our society
Limited time and ability	Getting started anyway

"The ability to really spend time with my kindergarten team and my co-teacher – getting to know each other, talking about our goals and expectations of each other, getting the opportunity to sit down and answer and ask questions of each other, and talking about the curriculum and plan – that piece I feel like, in itself, is creating a much better environment," said one of Catalyst's kindergarten teachers.

Ending the Day with Fun

Planning sessions at Summer Launch are capped off with recreational activities to give staff another opportunity to enjoy one another as people. The kickball game at Catalyst has become a staff favorite, with teachers happily playing or cheering and watching. As one staff member described the kickball game, “It didn’t matter what team you were on, you were still like, ‘Yeah, you got it,’ and you’re rooting for each other... No negativity.”

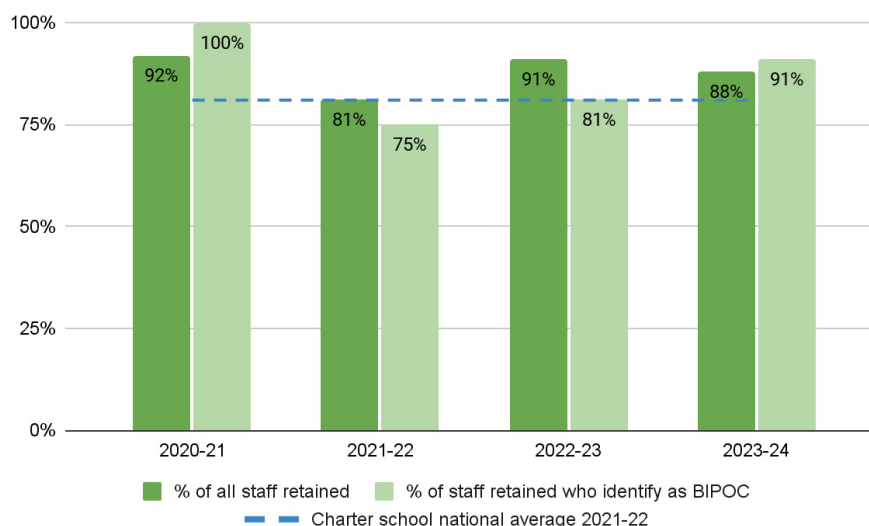
The games offer colleagues a chance to get to know each other in a more relaxed setting, outside of academic prep and planning. Staff members find themselves more relaxed in an exuberant atmosphere. One staff member explained: “Those are the parts that bring me in when it’s not the pressure of, ‘Oh, do you have the correct answer?’ or ‘Do you know what you’re talking about?’ It’s when we’re just being us and we’re being human and we’re being comfortable in ourselves.”

The connections built and developed through these shared experiences can make it easier for staff members to trust and support one another during stressful points in the year. Catalyst believes that these strong relationships help staff members work together to meet students’ academic and social-emotional needs with consistency and care.

Early Effects

Catalyst’s focus on building staff relationships has helped them exceed retention expectations, even during the pandemic and “Great Resignation.” Catalyst launched in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and initially saw staff retention rates similar to other U.S. schools. Charter school teacher retention nationally was 81% in 2021–22,¹⁴ which matches Catalyst’s lowest retention rate. On average, Washington State schools had an 89% retention rate in the 2022–23 school year,¹⁵ while Catalyst attained a 91% retention rate. There is no data on charter school retention that year, but it is typically lower than that of other public schools. It is also notable that Catalyst has consistently improved its retention of staff who identify as BIPOC since the school’s second and third years. Intentionality around racial equity and social justice has likely helped contribute to Catalyst achieving an even higher retention rate for staff who identify as BIPOC in their fourth year (figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Percent of Catalyst staff returning each school year since opening in August 2020



APPENDIX A:

Profile of Catalyst Public School

Location: Bremerton, Washington

Founded: 2020

Level: K-8 (will include high school as of fall 2024)

Teachers: 29

ENROLLMENT	2022-23	2023-24
Number enrolled	439	485
Students with disabilities	15.7%	15.5%
Multilingual learners	0%	0%
Foster youth	0%	0%
Low-income students	49.2%	47.0%
Homeless students	0%	0%

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

RACE/ ETHNICITY	2022-23	2023-24
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.9%	0.2%
Asian	3.6%	3.9%
Black or African American	8.7%	8%
Hispanic or Latino	15.0%	16.5%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.2%
Two or more races	12.1%	11.3%
White	59.2%	59.8%

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

ACADEMIC PROFILE	2021-22	2022-23
Attendance	71.1%	73.0%
Percent meeting ELA standards	57.7%	48.8%
Percent meeting math standards	49.2%	45.1%

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

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: Skill-Building Restorative Discipline
- Co-Teaching for All: Using Two Educators in a Classroom
- Cultivating Connection: How to Design and Implement School-Based Mentoring
- Social Health: A New Model for Wrap-Around School Services
- Station Rotation: Grouping Students for Individualized Learning
- Summer Professional Development: Creating a Foundation of Teacher Relationships

We also produced [a summary report](#) identifying how schools and systems can create learning environments that promote whole-school wellbeing. See that report for a full description of the research methodology.

Author

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