

Policy actions for creating a system where students and teachers thrive



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Wellbeing, or the experience of contentment and purpose, is foundational for student [learning](#), teacher [retention](#), and mental and physical [health](#). Nevertheless, there are many signs that schools are not places where students and teachers feel good. Across the country, [schools grapple](#) with low attendance [rates](#). In 2023, 40% of adolescents [reported](#) feeling so hopeless or sad that they stopped their regular activities. Poor mental health is not experienced equally; it is disproportionately felt by students who are Black and Hispanic, live in immigrant households, or have disabilities. Teacher wellbeing is a concern too. A 2022 [Gallup poll](#) found that 44% of K-12 educators experienced burnout at work — higher than any other profession. When youth and teachers struggle to this extent, it is no wonder that students in the United States remain between four and five months behind pre-COVID [achievement](#). These sobering facts should concern anyone who cares about school quality.

Following two years of research at [Catalyst Public School](#) (Catalyst) and [Lumen High School](#) (Lumen), researchers Georgia Heyward and Sivan Tuchman identified a [whole-school approach](#) to wellbeing that helped students and teachers thrive. Researchers found that leaders at Catalyst and Lumen created the conditions for students and teachers to experience wellbeing through creative staffing and budgeting, coherent structures, and a commitment to belonging and inclusion. However, these schools did not act alone. They benefited from the support of policy, state-developed tools, and regional organizations.

For schools like Lumen and Catalyst to exist, they need a system that incubates and nurtures a whole-school approach. We recommend three actions that state and district leaders, nonprofits, and foundations can take to support schools in creating environments where students and teachers thrive:

1. Help schools measure wellbeing
2. Support school leaders in using their decision-making authority
3. Learn how other schools promote wellbeing

Most schools want to cultivate an environment that promotes wellbeing. Support from district and network leaders, state agencies, and funders can make that possible. The following pages provide more information about the supportive conditions system leaders can offer.

1. Help schools measure wellbeing

State and district leaders can support the cultivation of whole-school wellbeing by including wellbeing indicators in accountability and information systems and by ensuring schools have appropriate instruments for measurement.

Schools can use commercially available surveys, like Panorama, to measure both [student](#) and [teacher](#) wellbeing. Schools can also measure wellbeing with existing climate surveys by focusing on indicators of student and teacher satisfaction, connectedness, academic self-efficacy, and social-emotional competency.

State accountability systems set the bar for success and clarify gaps in outcomes between student groups. Accountability systems can do the same with wellbeing. The reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required a [School Quality or Student Success \(SQ/SS\)](#) indicator. SQ/SS indicators have the potential to demonstrate how schools are doing with regard to wellbeing; however, the SQ/SS is not used for this purpose in most states. School climate measures can provide a snapshot of wellbeing, but [only twelve states](#) and Washington D.C. currently include them in their state accountability system. [Rhode Island](#) is the only state using an indicator of teacher wellbeing: teacher absenteeism.

Ideally, wellbeing measures celebrate school success and identify when students, families, or teachers are not experiencing wellbeing, so schools can respond with support. [District-level](#) information systems and [authorizer frameworks](#) are natural places to include wellbeing indicators to do just that. Lumen High School serves teen parents, many of whom have experienced disrupted schooling. Because changes in test scores can take time, the school uses leading indicators like social-emotional competencies and wellbeing to show student progress. Lumen's authorizer, Spokane Public Schools, has helped the school use these indicators to publicly communicate the success they are having with their teen-parent students.

States, localities, and funders can support schools in measuring wellbeing by helping schools track data. Washington State created the app [Supported Schools](#) and made it available for free to all schools in the state. This multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) app helped the schools in our study track discipline and intervention data so they could support student competency and create more connecting school environments. The Washington State Board of Education is also developing a [state-wide school climate survey](#), setting the stage to include social-emotional metrics in their state report card.



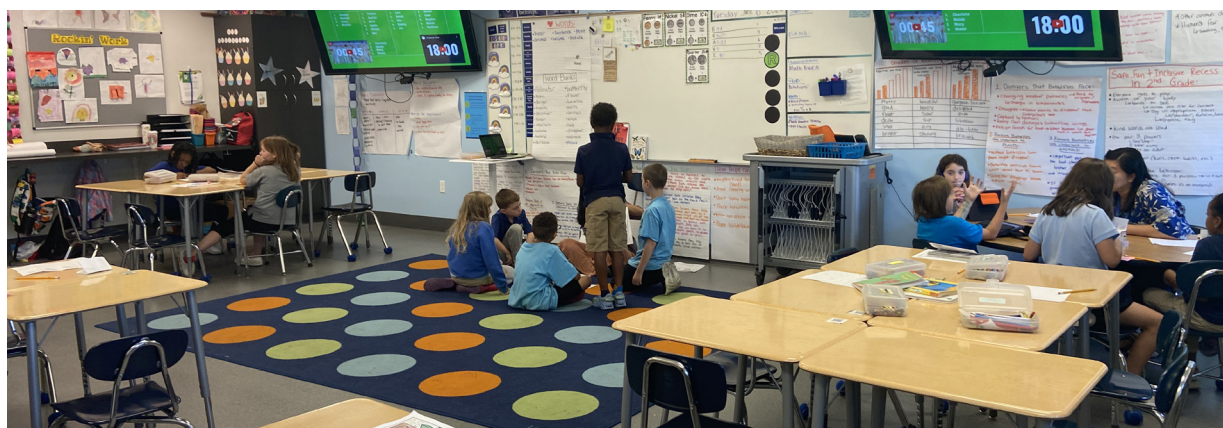
2. Support school leaders in using their decision-making authority

The two schools in our study, Lumen and Catalyst, were effective laboratories for incubating promising practices for student and teacher wellbeing. Their success was possible because they had both decision-making authority and support to leverage it effectively.

As defined by their governing charter, the two schools have curricular, instructional, hiring, and budgetary autonomy. They have the freedom to marshal resources in support of student and teacher needs for autonomy, competency, and connectedness. Any type of public school can have the degree of decision-making authority that Catalyst and Lumen used to allocate funds, hire good-fit staff, and implement new programs and instructional models. Many states have policies that allow schools [to apply](#) for greater decision-making authority. [Autonomous schools](#) have school-level authority over their budget and curriculum, alongside higher levels of accountability. Because of the small size of their districts, rural schools can have significant freedom to allocate resources in a way that serves their school community. Even within a typical district school, veteran principals [can learn](#) to take advantage of the decision-making authority available to them. We encourage states to offer opportunities for school leaders to have and learn about the decision-making authority available to them.

Schools with greater autonomy over school-level decisions can produce stronger [student learning](#) and [school climate](#) outcomes than typical district schools. Without support, however, leaders can easily be overwhelmed by the decisions available to them or lack the skills to allocate resources effectively. Whether school-level decision-making authority is used to pilot and test promising practices, as Lumen and Catalyst did, scale promising practices like those described here, or bolster existing initiatives, school leaders need support to translate freedom into whole-school wellbeing and student learning. Districts, states, and intermediary organizations have an important role to play in providing opportunities for decision-making authority and then helping leaders understand and [effectively use](#) the autonomy available to them.

The school leaders in our study came into their positions already equipped with skills to leverage decision-making authority; they had previously directed charter schools or nonprofits. However, leaders were further supported in optimizing their autonomy through coaching from the state-wide incubator, [Washington State Charter Schools Association](#) (WA Charters) and training from the [True Measure Collaborative](#), an organization that helps schools create inclusive environments.



3. Learn how other schools promote wellbeing

Catalyst and Lumen have transformed their schools into sites that catalyze wellbeing. This is not often seen in the United States, although it is somewhat common in [Europe](#), [Canada](#), and [Asia](#). To know how to do the same in the U.S., we need better insight into what works, how, and for whom. This study demonstrates the valuable lessons that can be learned by taking the time to listen deeply to leaders, staff, and students. In listening to learn, researchers collected evidence of wellbeing practices that [can be replicated](#) in other school environments.

System leaders, policymakers, and funders can plan and fund opportunities to uncover school-level innovation through [research-practice partnerships](#) (RPPs), [network improvement communities](#) (NICs), design-based implementation research, and other rigorous, practitioner-focused research efforts. Approaches like these place researchers and practitioners in close collaboration with one another, putting researchers in contact with innovative practices and, importantly, giving them insight into the black box of implementation. Often, evidence-based practices [fail in implementation](#); sustained research-practitioner partnerships like the one described here helped researchers understand the conditions and behavior changes necessary for successful implementation. Close partnerships of this kind can also support practitioners in building data capacity and in identifying appropriate measures of success.

Practitioner, researcher, and policymaker [partnerships](#) that use approaches like [collaborative policymaking](#) can further drive systems change. Catalyst has worked with WA Charters, the Washington State Charter School Commission, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to provide input on charter autonomy. Catalyst's partnership with policymakers has given the school a voice in safeguarding existing policy that allows charter schools to innovate and meet student needs. School leaders are also working toward expanding those autonomies, ensuring that schools can continue to make decisions that benefit students and communities. Lumen has provided feedback to OSPI about how to better align reporting guidelines with attendance best practices and restorative justice models.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This report 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 Schools. The evaluation started with a single question: "What is working in your school?" Researchers Georgia Heyward and Sivan Tuchman then 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

For more information about whole-school wellbeing and our research approach, see [this report](#).