



STAYINGPOWER

How Charter Leaders Build Schools Where Staff Come Back Year After Year

What two years of Spark staff survey data reveal about retention,
with early evidence on student achievement



PUBLISHED IN SY2026-27

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Data and Methods	4
Findings	5
1. Compensation matters, and it explains less than expected.	6
2. Stronger Spark results are associated with stronger student outcomes.	6
3. Attrition is predictable, and the signals appear in the fall.	6
4. Strong leadership supports retention through the other five domains.	7
5. Basic Needs and Individual Purpose have the strongest influences on satisfaction, feeling successful, and intent to return.	8
6. Staff responses vary more within a school than between schools, and averages can hide who is struggling.	9
Recommendations: The LISTEN Cycle	11
Learn: Stay curious through the discomfort.	12
Identify: Turn insights into clear priorities.	13
Share: Tell your staff what you heard and what comes next.	15
Take Action: Follow through, together.	16
Evaluate: Take a pulse on your progress.	18
Next Cycle: Acknowledge real change takes time.	19
Conclusion	20
Acknowledgements	21
Appendix A: Case Studies	22
Ascend Public Charter Schools	22
Growing Up Green Charter Schools	24
Hebrew Public	25
Impact Public Schools	26
Liberty STEAM	27
MESA South Brooklyn (MESA Charter High School)	28
Mission Achievement and Success (MAS) Schools	30
Santa Fe South Schools	31
Third Future Schools	32
Uncommon Schools	33
Washington Latin Public Charter Schools	35
Appendix B: What Organizations Did at Each Step of LISTEN	37

Introduction

Research has shown time and again that staff in schools who feel supported tend to stay, and when they stay, schools spend less replacing people and students learn more. The reverse is true as well. Dissatisfaction drives attrition, replacing a single teacher can cost a system up to \$25,000, and the churn falls hardest on schools serving students of color and students from low-income families, where it also lowers reading and math achievement across entire grade levels ([Learning Policy Institute, 2026](#); [Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff](#)).

The strain on K-12 staff is severe and well documented. [Gallup](#) reports that this group experiences the highest burnout of any U.S. industry, and teachers continue to report lower well-being than similar working adults ([RAND, 2026](#)).

A common misconception is that this strain is inevitable, and that pay is the only lever.

Leaders often point to compensation as the number one factor in satisfaction and retention. With teachers earning about 25 percent less than similarly educated workers, fair compensation belongs in any retention strategy ([Economic Policy Institute, 2026](#)). However, pay explains less than we might expect. How much staff members weigh compensation in their decision to stay or leave tells us little about how positively they experience the work. A recent six-year longitudinal study found the same: aside from pay, teachers pointed to colleagues, workload, and leaders as the factors shaping their decisions to stay ([Harvard EdCast, 2026](#)).

The factors that shape retention can be named, measured, and improved.

That idea is where Spark, the staff satisfaction survey at the center of this report, began. Spark organizes staff experience into six domains that research and field testing identified as the strongest influences on whether staff feel successful, feel satisfied, and intend to return, and it is timed so leaders see those signals in the fall, while there is still time to act. This report draws on two school years of Spark data linked to whether each person returned the following year, and on interviews with talent and network leaders who have used their Spark results to retain more of their people.

These signals are visible well before a resignation, which means leaders can act while there is still time to change the outcome.

This report is for the people who can act on those signals: network leaders, principals, and the talent and HR teams who support them. The Findings section describes what two years of data show and what it means for leaders. The Recommendations section describes how the leaders we

interviewed acted on findings like these, step by step, with examples from organizations of different sizes and stages.

Data and Methods

The Spark staff satisfaction survey, developed by Attuned Education Partners in 2023, in partnership with Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), measures six domains of staff experience: Leadership Efficacy, Basic Needs, Individual Purpose, Growth and Advancement, Relationships and Teamwork, and Belonging. It also measures three outcomes: whether staff feel successful in their role, whether they feel satisfied, and whether they intend to return next year.¹ The 45-question survey takes respondents under 15 minutes to complete and results are available to leaders immediately, disaggregated by school and subgroups, and benchmarked against peer organizations. Every participating organization receives a facilitated debrief with an expert Attuned practitioner.

This report analyzes Spark data from 44 charter organizations and 322 schools, with roughly 12,800 teachers and school staff responding in SY2025-26 and a matched cohort of over 12,700 SY2024-25 respondents whose return the following year could be determined. Where the report describes who returned and who left, it relies on one year of matched data: SY2024-25 respondents compared against SY2025-26 surveys.² To further understand how leaders used their results, we interviewed 12 talent and network leaders at 11 charter organizations; short examples appear in the Recommendations and full case studies can be found in Appendix A. This report also draws on a companion analysis conducted by CSGF that examined network-level associations between Spark results and academic achievement for a subset of participating organizations (23 organizations and 195 schools), linking teacher responses from the Fall and Spring SY2024-25 Spark administrations to the most recent state assessment data (SY2024-25), as SY2025-26 achievement data were not yet available in many states. For additional statistical details, please refer to footnotes.

1 The six domains were developed through a comprehensive review of the research on staff retention and satisfaction and field testing with K-12 organizations. A confirmatory factor analysis on the SY2025-26 instrument shows the items grouped into the intended domains (CFI 0.92, TLI 0.92, RMSEA 0.06), with domain reliabilities from 0.75 (Basic Needs) to 0.96 (Leadership Efficacy).

2 SY2024-25 respondents with known return status (N=12,715), one record per person; 84.2 percent returned across the sample. “Left” means the person did not appear in an SY2025-26 staff survey, which may include a small number of staff who stayed but did not respond. Attrition by positivity fifth: 24.9 percent in the least positive fifth versus 9.7 percent in the most positive. Odds of leaving rise 1.46 times per standard deviation of overall positivity. The observed retention analysis is for one year and describes associations, not causal effects.

AT A GLANCE

44

charter
organizations

322

schools

7,832

teachers

4,990

other
school staff

2,593

network or
central office

24,500

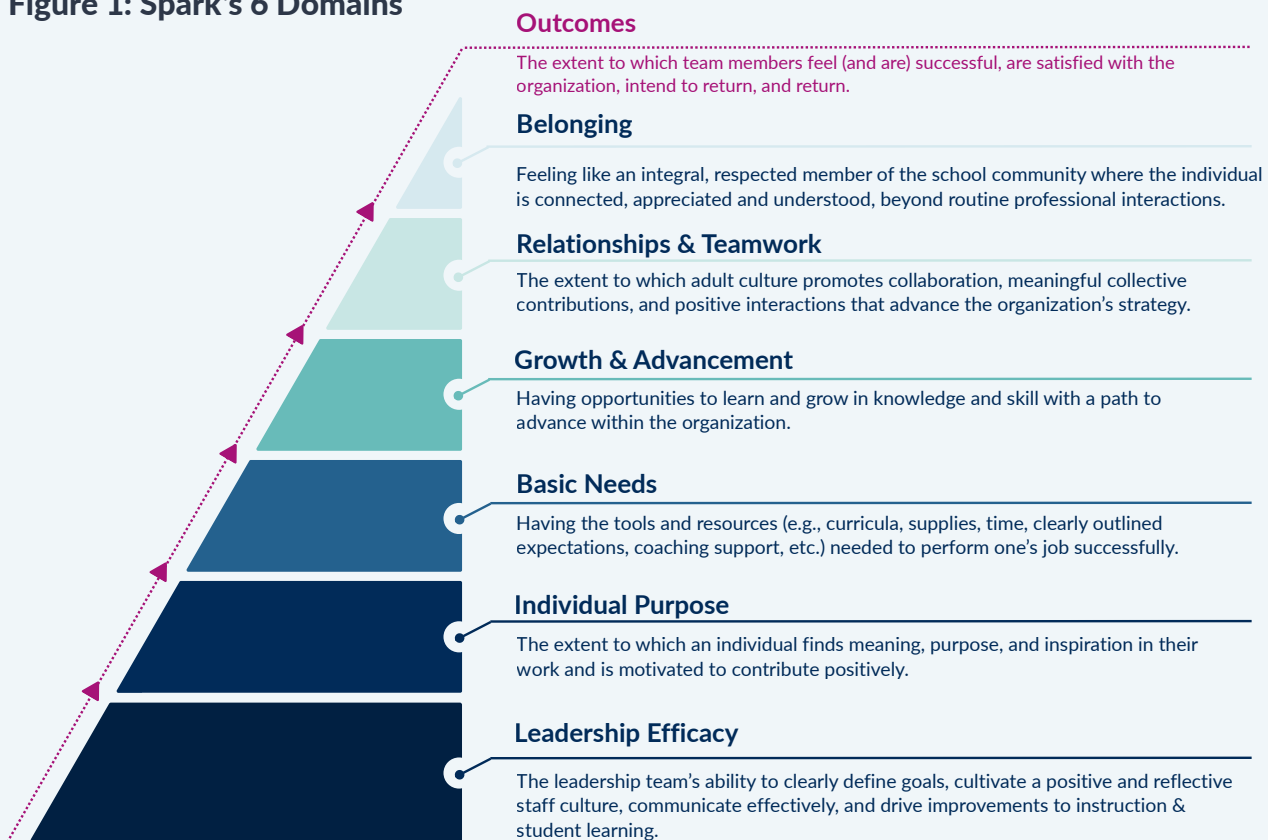
responses

Participation figures are for SY2025-26. Across SY2024-25 and SY2025-26 combined, Spark collected roughly 24,500 responses.

Findings

Spark was designed to measure the parts of the staff experience that matter most for retention, in the order they matter. Leadership Efficacy sits at the base of the framework because it runs through the other five and is a foundational requirement for any improvement. Basic Needs and Individual Purpose are next because our extensive research and field testing identified them as the strongest influences on whether staff stay. Growth and Advancement, Relationships and Teamwork, and Belonging build on that base. The findings below do more than affirm the framework. They show how the domains behave together, which ones predict retention most strongly, and how early those signals surface, giving leaders a clearer sense of where their attention will make the most difference.

Figure 1: Spark's 6 Domains



1. Compensation matters, and it explains less than expected.

Compensation is the most common reason staff give for staying, named by half of respondents, and a top reason for leaving, named by a third.³ Yet across organizations, how much staff weigh pay in their decision to stay or leave has a modest relationship to how positively they experience the work. Pay matters, and it does not explain who stays. The six domains capture what pay cannot, and while only some leaders can meaningfully raise salaries due to state funding and other constraints, almost every leader can improve what the domains measure.

2. Stronger Spark results are associated with stronger student outcomes.

Results on Spark are positively associated with academic performance, particularly on relative performance metrics (how a school performs relative to its demographic peers and to geographically proximate schools).⁴ Organizations with stronger results on Spark's staff satisfaction domains tend to have better student performance than their peers. The relationship between Spark's staff satisfaction domains and an organization's year-over-year student achievement also is positive, though weaker.

This suggests that organizations with stronger staff culture tend to have stronger student outcomes. Staff members' overall satisfaction is the most consistent predictor of these relative student performance metrics and associations are generally stronger in Spring than in Fall. Connection with colleagues is the survey measure most associated with year-over-year academic improvement in both windows.

COMPENSATION

50%

say compensation is a top reason to stay

34%

say it's a top reason to leave



³ Multi-select stay/leave questions, SY2025-26, 33 organizations. Pooled across respondents, 50 percent name compensation a top reason to stay and 34 percent a top reason to leave. At the organization level, the share citing pay as a reason to leave explains about 13 percent of the variation in overall percent positive ($r=-0.36$).

⁴ Companion analysis by the Charter School Growth Fund linking Fall and Spring SY2024-25 teacher responses at 23 organizations (195 schools) to SY2024-25 state assessment data. Associations were estimated with bivariate regressions at the network level across nine Spark items and four academic metrics: Similar Schools Percentile, Absolute Proficiency Rank, School Growth Percentile, and a Neighborhood Schools metric. Overall satisfaction was significantly associated with the two relative-performance metrics in both windows; connection with colleagues was the only measure significantly associated with year-over-year growth in both windows.

3. Attrition is predictable, and the signals appear in the fall.

The more positively a staff member responds across the six domains, the likelier they are to be in the building the following fall. Staff who responded least positively overall were about 2.6 times as likely to leave as those who responded most positively.⁵ Staff with the lowest Basic Needs scores in the fall were 3.1 times more likely to be ambivalent or negative in the spring about returning the following year. This underscores the importance of identifying needs early – Spark helps leaders get the right data in the fall, while there is still time to change the outcome.

2.6x

staff who responded least positively left at about 2.6 times the rate of those who responded most positively

“We needed better data earlier, so leaders could actually do something with it while teachers were still deciding whether to stay.”

Lauren Vance

*Senior Director of Talent Strategy
Uncommon Schools*

4. Strong leadership supports retention through the other five domains.

Leadership Efficacy measures how staff perceive the leadership team’s ability to prioritize the right work, cultivate a positive and reflective culture, communicate well, and drive improvements to instruction. Spark places it at the base of the domain framework because it does two jobs at once.

The first job: it shapes how staff feel about the work on its own. Every Leadership Efficacy survey item is strongly tied to satisfaction and moderately tied to intent to return, and the item with the closest tie to both is how well leadership is prioritizing the right work.

The second job: it moves with every other domain. Leadership Efficacy is the most connected domain in the survey, and our reading of that pattern is that leadership’s influence on retention runs largely through the conditions it creates. It moves most closely with Relationships and Teamwork, Growth

⁵ SY2024-25 cohort, N=12,715, comparison of the least positive and most positive fifths (24.9% vs. 9.7% attrition).

and Advancement, and Belonging, and staff rarely experience one of those without leadership behind it.⁶

Put simply, the other five domains describe what staff need, and Leadership Efficacy describes how well leaders deliver it. Because staff weigh their daily experience of the work when deciding whether to stay, leadership development pays off most when it focuses on improving that experience.

The link between the domains and intent to return is also strongest for newer staff, so how new hires experience leadership in their first years carries outsized weight.⁷ National research confirms this: more effective principals retain more teachers largely by improving the day-to-day conditions of the work ([Johnson, Kraft, and Papay, 2012](#)), and teachers who report weak leadership leave at more than double the rate of those with strong, supportive leadership ([Learning Policy Institute, 2026](#)).

“These are all choices you get to make as a leader, and how you lead actually drives everything. You can’t move anything else if you can’t move leadership.”

Maryann Li
CEO
Ascend Public Charter Schools

5. Basic Needs and Individual Purpose have the strongest influences on satisfaction, feeling successful, and intent to return.

These two domains sit directly above Leadership Efficacy at the base of

6 Person-level correlations among domain scores, SY2025-26, all positive and significant; Leadership Efficacy with Relationships and Teamwork $r = 0.74$, with Growth and Advancement $r = 0.72$, with Belonging $r = 0.70$, and with Basic Needs $r = 0.67$. Within-year change, Fall 2025 to Spring 2026, is positively correlated across domains. Linear probability models SY2025-26 ($N=17,512$), each outcome on the six domains: Intent to return: $R^2 = 0.29$; Individual Purpose +15 percentage points per 1-point higher score. Satisfaction: $R^2 = 0.44$; Basic Needs +18. Because the domains are highly correlated, the models assign shared influence to the strongest predictors; Leadership Efficacy’s small independent coefficient reflects that its influence runs through the other domains.

7 Domain by moderator interactions on intent to return, SY2025-26, Benjamini-Hochberg corrected. Every domain interacts negatively with tenure: the climate-intent link is strongest for newer staff and attenuates as tenure grows.

Spark's hierarchy, and our analysis confirms they have the strongest influence on the three outcomes (satisfaction, feeling successful, and intent to return). This is also why Spark is meant to be read from the base of the hierarchy up.

Basic Needs measures whether staff have the tools, time, materials, clear expectations, and coaching support to do the job. Of all six domains, Basic Needs has the biggest effect on satisfaction: a one-point higher score on Spark's five-point scale means an 18-point higher chance of being satisfied. Within Basic Needs, workload sustainability is the lowest scoring item, the concern staff raise most often in comments, and, among the domain items, the one that most separates staff who returned from staff who left. Schools whose workload sustainability scores improved over the year tended to see intent to return data rise as well.

Individual Purpose measures whether staff find meaning and inspiration in their work. It is the highest-scoring domain in the sample and the strongest predictor of intent to return: a one-point higher score is associated with a 15-point higher probability of planning to return. Studies show that purpose runs high among educators, and it is fragile when working conditions undermine it. Protecting it means protecting the conditions that let staff feel effective with students, connecting daily work to student impact in ordinary conversations, and screening for mission fit as seriously as for skill when hiring ([Gallup, 2026](#)).

+15

staff who score one point higher on Individual Purpose are 15 percentage points more likely to plan to return

+18

staff who score one point higher on Basic Needs are 18 percentage points more likely to be satisfied

“You’re going to want to commit to your purpose if you feel like your purpose is valued.”

Anna Spoden
Founding Principal
MESA South Brooklyn

6. Staff responses vary more within a school than between schools, and averages can hide who is struggling.

About 84% of the variation in how staff experience their work is person-to-person within the same school; only about a sixth is explained by

which organization or school someone works in.⁸ A healthy building average can mask a struggling group, and which group that is varies by organization. Across the sample, newer staff are the most positive, but their intent to return is also the most responsive to how they experience their work.

“It may just be 10 people saying there is a major disconnect between leaders and teachers, but those are 10 people, and they may have large social capital within your organization.”

Emily Hurst
Chief Strategy & Talent Officer
Hebrew Public Charter Schools

Our disaggregation analysis also identified a gap among longer-tenured staff: Growth and Advancement is the lowest-scoring domain in the sample and scores declined the longer someone stays.⁹ We found that staff and leaders alike describe that growth and advancement isn’t singularly about promotions. They craved the chance to build mastery, take on new or different responsibilities, or widen their influence without leaving the classroom. Intentional disaggregation is critical to identifying gaps in staff experience

8 Only about a sixth of the variation is structural and of that, the specific school matters a bit more than which organization you’re in (10.1% vs. 5.8%). The other 84.1% is person-to-person inside the same school. Variance components from a multilevel (mixed-effects) model of person-level climate — the average of the six experience domains — for 7,456 staff in 33 organizations and 212 schools, Spring 2026. Percentages are each level’s share of total variance.

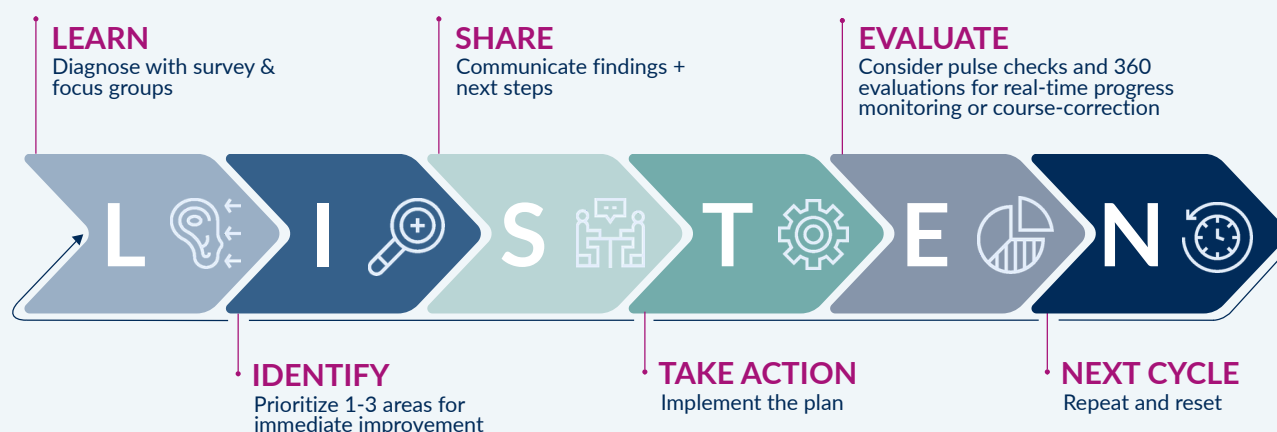
9 Linear probability models, SY2025-26. P-values Benjamini-Hochberg corrected across all tests.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The LISTEN Cycle

Across the organizations we interviewed, very few launched sweeping or costly initiatives, and most deliberately chose not to address every result. What made the difference was that staff could see their leaders engaging with their voice thoughtfully and with integrity. That consistency, more than any single action, is what builds the trust that Spark is designed to strengthen. Organizations that built this trust well engaged in a rhythm that followed the LISTEN Cycle: Learn, Identify, Share, Take Action, Evaluate, Next Cycle.

Figure 2: The LISTEN Framework



In this cycle, process and action depend on each other. Action without process falls flat because staff do not see their voice in what changes. Process without action falls flat because nothing changes.

Leaders who implement both well ask themselves: Am I focused on the right thing? And am I engaging staff in a meaningful way as I work on it?

Below, we share recommendations and illustrative examples within each step in the cycle. The organizations featured differ in size, region, and staff, and what one needs to improve is not what another will need. Full case studies can be found in Appendix A.

Learn:

Stay curious through the discomfort.

The Learn step is where leaders build a shared understanding of what the results say before anyone sets a priority or proposes a fix. It is also where some discomfort may live. Scores that surface gaps in belonging, leadership trust, or team cohesion often feel personal, especially for leaders who care deeply about their staff. Naming that discomfort up front is the first step toward a growth mindset. The temptation is either to minimize what you see or to jump straight to a fix, and both erode the trust the survey is meant to build. Many leaders who saw improvement deliberately paused between receiving results and responding to them, and most read the data alone before sharing broadly. Leaders may also find themselves returning to this step after “Share,” as additional details or context may emerge in those conversations to inform the priorities and action plan.

“It can feel vulnerable, embarrassing, or even depressing to read a low result. But conveying to your staff how grateful you are for that feedback is critical to the honesty that gets you to the most high-leverage feedback.”

Anna Spoden
Founding Principal
MESA South Brooklyn

Learn, in practice.

In each organization, leaders identified where they needed more understanding and went looking for additional details through a listening tour, a follow-up survey, focus groups, or a small first-read group.

At **Santa Fe South Schools**, coaches meet one-on-one with each principal before results are reviewed to prepare “heart and mind” with a short set of norms: start with students, treat feedback as a gift, keep a growth mindset, and focus on the why. At **MESA South Brooklyn**, founding principal Anna Spoden read every category on her own and took notes to internalize the findings, then shared the full results with her teacher leaders and a prioritized deck with the whole staff. At **Ascend**, the executive team read the scores alongside the comments, set aside the most sensational quotes in favor of the themes that ran through the whole staff experience, and shared

what they had heard with leaders in neutral language. **Uncommon Schools** combines headline Spark results with attrition data and leadership context in a school support matrix to see where support is needed, and gives regional superintendents two weeks with the results before school leaders see them. **Impact Public Schools** disaggregates every result by subgroup, such as tenure and role, and each of its four campuses separately, then adds listening sessions and executive office hours at each school to peel back the comments and scores. **Hebrew Public** ensures they review their results by tenure cohort, which surfaced a middle cohort dipping between high-scoring founding staff and high-scoring new hires. **Washington Latin** followed up their spring results with empathy interviews around identity and belonging before deciding next steps. **MAS Schools** invites staff to engage in a follow-up narrative survey during staff time to gather reactions and recommendations on improvement opportunities.

Pause and consider: What norms does your team use before opening and reading your results? Who needs time with the data before a larger group sees it? What three to five trends stand out in your results, and which one do you understand least?

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Identify: Turn insights into clear priorities.

The Identify step turns what you learned into a short list of priorities. We recommend leaders select two to four trends, whether strengths to build on, gaps to close, or group differences to understand, and turn each into a “How might we?” question that invites shared ownership and creative solutioning. From there, the team narrows to one to three initiatives for the organization and for each school. Foundational gaps in Basic Needs and Individual Purpose should be addressed first, supported or enabled by improvements in Leadership Efficacy, because the domains above rarely improve until these do. Narrowing your focus is important because unprioritized data creates overwhelm, for leaders and delays staff feeling like there is action being taken.

“There is a tendency to get lost in the weeds, or hyper-focused on one particular question. It would have been easy to be paralyzed.”

Peter Anderson
Head of Schools and CEO
Washington Latin Public Charter Schools

Identify, in practice.

The common thread within this step: leaders chose a small number of priorities they could easily name, and they were clear about what they were not taking on this cycle.

In its first Spark administration year, **Uncommon Schools** chose to prioritize Leadership Efficacy, since effective leadership creates the conditions for the outcomes that matter most in schools, and Individual Purpose, where scores were lower than leaders hoped, and put its energy into one lever: how school leaders were coached and developed to continuously strengthen their leadership skills and to foster an even greater sense of individual purpose among staff members. Workload sustainability, an item within Basic Needs, emerged as a trend across qualitative survey data and led Uncommon to conduct a workload audit before acting, so that its response could reach the specific sources of strain behind the concern. **Santa Fe South** principals are encouraged to keep their focus tight by selecting two priority areas and identifying several questions to track over each semester. **Third Future Schools** sets one focus domain for the network and asks each principal to own a domain at their own site. At **Liberty STEAM**, each principal is responsible for their three lowest-scoring domains, with a target of moving them to the Spark sample average, and works through an independent analysis worksheet with an executive coach to identify three 'big rocks' before drafting an action plan. **Ascend** diagnosed three core leadership gaps and made leadership its single priority. At **MESA South Brooklyn**, Anna Spoden reduced the number of data points her entire staff had to process to ten, chosen for leverage rather than volume, and tackled Leadership Efficacy at the school leadership level. **Growing Up Green** found two cross-cutting patterns and chose one response for each. As the organization had grown, instructional coaching systems had not kept pace, and leaders saw an opportunity to make them consistent across campuses. And while the network was promoting from within regularly, Growth and Advancement scores showed that staff were needing more communication about those pathways. **Washington Latin** narrowed its focus to instructional leadership, specifically leaders' presence in classrooms and their follow-up with teachers about their practice.

Pause and consider: Which two to four trends matter most in your results? What are the one to three things you will commit to this cycle? What are you deliberately setting aside?

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What are the one to three things you will commit to this cycle? What are you deliberately setting aside?

Share:

Tell your staff what you heard and what comes next.

The Share step is where leaders close the loop with staff. We recommend intentionally spending time with your staff to thank them for their voice, name the key strengths and growth areas, and describe which one to three priorities the organization will focus on next. Keep the message consistent so staff across schools hear the same thing, and equip principals to share school-specific results and priorities with their own teams. Speed matters: we recommend sharing the results and your next steps within 3-4 weeks of the survey closing, and before any extended school breaks. These next steps do not necessarily mean your next steps for the 1-3 initiatives; it could mean launching a listening tour to learn more or engaging the team to determine the initiatives. Saying nothing after a survey erodes trust quickly and often creates more harm in the relationship between leaders and staff. Sharing results with staff treats them as partners in improving the collective experience, and it tells them that the survey was worth their time.

“If they take the survey and they don’t ever get the results, then what good is the survey?”

Zach Craddock
Founder
Third Future Schools

Share, in practice.

Across these examples, no staff member had to wonder what happened to their survey response. Leaders treated sharing results as a moment to build trust, and paired every result they shared with what they planned to do about it.

Twice a year, every **Santa Fe South** school folds its Spark results into a “State of the School” presentation: what staff said, what the school is focusing on, and the plan going forward. **Third Future** opens the first PD day after every Spark administration with a review of the results next to academic data. **Growing Up Green** sends leaders curated excerpts in advance so discussion stays focused, and school leaders run the same debrief with their building teams before sharing with staff. **Uncommon Schools** produces an organization-wide summary for regional and senior school leaders, then has every principal and director of operations work through a co-leader

reflection template and deliver a “State of the School” update with their staff within a month of the survey; newer leaders prepare for that meeting with their regional superintendents first. Within three days of the survey closing, each **Liberty STEAM** principal emails staff a high-level summary, then runs through it with an executive coach, holds a focus group, and delivers a summary slide deck in small groups during planning periods to every employee, including facilities and central office staff, alongside student achievement and family survey results. At **Washington Latin**, the Chief of Schools reviews each school’s data with its principal in their weekly one-on-one, with guiding questions sent in advance, and principals then share high-level trends with illustrative quotes to their faculty. **Ascend** moves results through a deliberate sequence, from executive team to school leaders to a State of Schools Day to staff, and its message begins with ownership: here is what you said, here is what we have to own, here are the behaviors we are going to work on. At **MESA South Brooklyn**, the principal has staff sort the six domains from highest to lowest before revealing the actual order. Then, she asks small groups to write a three-sentence “story of MESA so far” from the data and posts those stories alongside yearlong commitments in a highly visible area for staff to reference all year.

Pause and consider: When staff last completed a survey, what did they hear back and how many weeks did it take? Are your school leaders and network leaders aligned in process and messaging? Do you have a process to prepare your school leaders for these conversations?

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When staff last completed a survey, what did they hear back and how many weeks did it take? Are your school leaders and network leaders aligned in process and messaging? Do you have a process to prepare your school leaders for these conversations?

Take Action: Follow through, with your staff.

The Take Action step is where priorities become progress. Taking action does not always mean launching something. For many of the challenges Spark surfaces, the first action is to learn more and to bring staff into solving the problem together. We recommend a simple plan that includes one to three initiatives, each with a realistic timeline, owner, and clear description of what progress should look like.

It also helps to know what kind of challenge you are facing. Spark results often surface adaptive challenges, where progress depends on people changing how they think, what they value, or how they work together, and there is no ready-made fix. Some are technical, where the problem is clear, a solution exists, and implementation is a matter of resources and follow-through rather than new thinking. Adaptive challenges require a different kind of leadership. Leaders must sit with complexity, ask harder questions, surface root causes, and bring staff into the process, because the change depends on people learning together rather than on a plan being executed well. This takes longer and involves more people than a technical fix, and it is where organizations most often get stuck.

Take action, in practice.

The common thread within this step: every action was a direct answer to something staff had said. Leaders did not reach for a generic retention program. They changed the schedule staff named, built the roles or structures staff asked for, made room for staff to shape solutions to adaptive challenges, and engaged in behavior changes to support priorities.

Ascend attributes some of its progress to its shift from tactics to leadership behavior changes: from school-by-school fixes to a shared framework that defines what it means to lead at Ascend, built and reinforced through a weekly, in-person leadership series for every senior leader from September to November and cascaded to principals during monthly professional development. **Washington Latin** launched a book study focused on supporting belonging. To address instructional leadership feedback, principals and their leadership teams now engage in instructional rounds during weekly leadership meetings and highlight what they see in weekly memos to faculty. **MAS Schools** adjusted the schedule in response to prep-time feedback. Where a constraint could not change, leadership ensured they explained the reasoning and when there were significant tradeoffs, staff received an opportunity to weigh in on a final decision. At **MESA South Brooklyn**, staff made commitments to collectively creating a strong school culture which were displayed in a high-traffic area, and the principal used staff's own words from the survey to frame the year's professional development. At the network level, MESA convened an advisory council of staff from both of its schools that carried ideas back to each building, so that solving challenges was shared across campuses. **Uncommon Schools** traced some workload concerns to leaves coverage, which the network addressed by piloting substitute teachers across all five regions, leading to a full substitute pool for long-term leaves. Additionally, with a focus on leadership efficacy and individual purpose, Uncommon supported principal managers to shift their coaching of principals toward storytelling, change management, and more inspirational whole-school moments. **Growing Up Green** made two very different moves from its two priorities: it created a Chief Academic Officer role to bring consistency to instructional coaching across campuses, and Human Resources launched a monthly newsletter profiling a staff member who had grown within the organization and the support they received along the way. **Third Future Schools** built a leadership pipeline that has moved 82 staff towards assistant principal, principal, and director roles, widened teacher-leader roles for growth within the classroom, and set aside funds for cross-site learning days. **Liberty STEAM** used the finding that staff aged 30 to 39 asked for more growth and advancement opportunities to make the case for expanding its Leader Fellow program. **Impact Public Schools** created Mentor-Teacher, Culture-Lead, and Team-Lead roles that add responsibility and compensation without leaving the classroom, and built a system for acknowledging staff methodically. **Santa Fe South's** schools adopted actions based on need: at one school, staff engaged in a book study on educator resilience, at another, a mentor program paired new staff with culture-rooted colleagues, and at a new school, leaders

rolled out a behavior playbook to support new staff. Across campuses, leaders published a leadership-readiness progression paired with individual “pathways conversations.”

Pause and consider: For each priority, who owns it and what process will be used to engage staff along the way? Can you trace each action back to trends from staff responses? Where the challenge is adaptive, have you brought staff into shaping the solution?

Evaluate: Take a pulse on your progress.

The Evaluate step is a mid-cycle check-in. In between Spark administrations, we recommend gathering light evidence of whether staff are feeling a difference in your focus areas: a short pulse survey of two to five questions, a conversation with the group most affected, or, where leadership behaviors are the driver, a targeted 360 process for key leaders. The purpose is to adjust while there is still time. Celebrate what is gaining traction, remove what is getting in the way, and refine the plan based on what you learn. Where a commitment cannot be kept or a constraint cannot change, say so and explain why. Staff will forgive a plan that shifts. They are far less forgiving of a plan that quietly disappears.

Evaluate, in practice.

Each of these network’s leaders engaged in continuous learning and kept listening: formally through pulse checks and follow-up surveys and informally through hallway conversations and standing agenda items, and they used what they heard to continue to inform and adjust their plans.

Santa Fe South principals monitor their two priority areas with monthly pulse checks on the specific questions they chose to track at the start of the semester. **Liberty STEAM** runs regular pulse checks between Spark administrations, and principals measure progress against their domain targets from December to May. **Third Future Schools** runs a four-question survey at every professional development day and monthly “micro-checks.” Founder Zach Craddock rereads each school’s results before a school visit and identifies what he will check in with staff on. **Hebrew Public** runs a mid-year pulse ahead of the spring hiring season, using it as an early-warning system, and follows up at individual schools with a five-minute open-ended survey that asks staff directly how to close the gaps the results revealed. In a subset of focus schools, **Uncommon Schools** launched bi-weekly pulse surveys and increased regional superintendent coaching and presence so the feedback loop stayed tight between fall and mid-year. At **MESA South Brooklyn**, the commitments staff wrote became a standing reference in every huddle and PD, and the network’s Advisory Council continued to bring staff from

Pause and consider:
For each priority, who owns it and what process will be used to engage staff along the way? Can you trace each action back to trends from staff responses? Where the challenge is adaptive, have you brought staff into shaping the solution?

both schools together to identify what was working. **Ascend** holds monthly executive reviews of a subset of focus schools and refined its twice-yearly leader evaluations so that leadership behaviors, not only outcomes, are what leaders are held accountable for.

Pause and consider: What did you commit to after your last survey administration and what can staff point to now? How will you check progress throughout the year? How will you communicate changes or adjustments?

Next Cycle: Acknowledge real change takes time.

The Next Cycle step closes one year and sets up the next. We recommend ending the cycle the way you began it, with staff: name the progress, highlight the bright spots, and close the loop one more time by telling staff what was learned and what changed because of their feedback. Then reflect as a leadership team on what should continue, what should evolve, and what should deepen next year, including what your leaders need to learn over the summer to support the next cycle. And while technical challenges can often be more quickly resolved, adaptive challenges take more time and more people. Organizations that kept their practices going from one year to the next often saw gains build on gains.

“Now that we are using the same survey consistently, our leaders are very aware of the questions that are being asked of their faculty, and I think they are always in the back of their minds.”

Peter Anderson
Head of Schools and CEO
Washington Latin Public Charter Schools

Next Cycle, in practice.

These leaders did not reset to zero each year. Many carried forward what they had learned and incorporated learnings and decisions into the story of the organization, which they shared with new and returning staff alike.

At **MESA South Brooklyn**, the year ended the way it began: staff reviewed

Pause and consider:
What did you commit to after your last survey administration and what can staff point to now? How will you check progress throughout the year? How will you communicate changes or adjustments?

the June data together and named what had changed for them. **Uncommon Schools** is adding slides to the presentations leaders use to preview and launch the Spark survey and for State of the School updates that narrate how the organization has responded to feedback over time, so staff who joined this year have this context and understand the importance of their feedback to the organization. **Ascend** trains new and newly promoted leaders with its leadership framework so the standard of responding to feedback does not fade with turnover. **Third Future Schools** carries the prior year's perceptions into the new year rather than starting fresh, presenting them to staff on the first day back. **Impact Public Schools** is carrying what it learned into opening its first middle school.

Pause and consider: What from this year's work should carry into next year, and what should change? How will staff who join in the fall learn what their colleagues said and what changed because of it? What does your leadership team need to learn before the next cycle begins?

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What from this year's work should carry into next year, and what should change? How will staff who join in the fall learn what their colleagues said and what changed because of it? What does your leadership team need to learn before the next cycle begins?

Conclusion

The organizations in this report faced similar conditions to others in the sector: tight budgets, a strained profession, and staff who weigh every spring whether to come back. What set them apart was how they used what their staff told them. They read their results closely, gathered additional details, chose a small number of priorities, told staff what they had heard, and enacted real change – following through in ways staff could see, then returned to the same practices the following year.

Spark gave these leaders a picture of their staff's experience across the six domains that most influence whether people stay, with the foundational ones – Leadership Efficacy, Basic Needs, and Individual Purpose – carrying the most weight. It gave them that picture in the fall, while there was still time to respond, and it gave them a shared language for talking about it with their staff. The data in this report confirm that those domains are predictive of who stays. The leaders in this report show what it looks like to meaningfully act on the data to positively impact retention.

We'd like to hear what this report surfaces for you.

If you want to talk through your own retention data, or what listening looks like at your organization, reach out to learn@attunedpartners.com.

Acknowledgements

This report was produced by Attuned Education Partners in partnership with the Charter School Growth Fund. We are grateful for CSGF's support and thought partnership.

Our deepest thanks go to the leaders who made time to share their work and candor with us: Lauren Vance at Uncommon Schools; Maryann Li at Ascend Public Charter Schools; Meg Wheeler and Carson Aldridge at Santa Fe South Schools; Amy Kiyota at Impact Public Schools; Zach Craddock at Third Future Schools; JoAnn Mitchell at MAS Charter Schools; Emily Hurst at Hebrew Public; Anna Spoden at MESA South Brooklyn; Peter Anderson and Diana Smith at Washington Latin; Dr. Trevor Ivey at Liberty STEAM; and Steven Viola at Growing Up Green. Their examples are the heart of this report.

Above all, we are grateful to the tens of thousands of teachers, leaders, and school staff who completed their organizations' Spark surveys over the past two years. Every finding here begins with what they told their leaders about what makes them stay.

Appendix A: Case Studies

Retention windows differ by organization and reflect the periods each organization self-reported.

Ascend Public Charter Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
17 Schools in Brooklyn, NY	K-12	~5,000 students	92% Black or Latino 82% economically disadvantaged	+4pp average increase in retention from SY2022-23 to SY2025-26

Context	CEO Maryann Li describes Ascend as an organization in transformation. She joined six years ago as Chief Operating Officer to help rebuild after a significant leadership change, served two years as president, and became CEO in 2025. In her view, more organizations are in transformation than acknowledge it, and the condition brings openness rather than limitation. The network has scaled to 17 schools and 5,000 students – and the work of the past few years has been reshaping what culture and leadership look like and rebuilding the trust staff place in leadership. Spark has been part of that work since Ascend’s earliest years with the survey, and Li approaches its results the way she approaches academic results, as a neutral reading of how far the organization has come toward what it is capable of. “Isn’t it better to know than not know?” she asks. “I think always yes.”
Learn & Identify	Ascend’s approach to its results matured each year, and Li attributes the difference to taking greater ownership each time. In the first couple of years, the team looked for the lowest domains and tried to move them, which produced a bump in retention but treated each number in isolation. The turning point came when leaders started reading everything together. They learned that the numbers alone could mislead: a high Individual Purpose score can sit beside deep dissatisfaction, since staff can love the mission and still struggle to do the job. When the team read its Basic Needs comments closely, many described several challenges with communication, expectations and commitments coming from leadership. The team also learned to separate outlier comments from representative ones. The consistent theme was that the quality of communication, planning, and leadership was producing disorganization and burnout for staff who wanted to do the job well. That takeaway was less sensational and harder to own, because it named a baseline leadership expectation. Ascend made leadership its single priority.

Share & Take Action	Leaders built their own telling of the data rather than relying on the summary alone, pairing Spark results with employee relations escalations, retention, academic performance, and other data points so that no one would pursue one outcome at the expense of another. They walked the executive team through it first, then all senior network leaders, then all school staff, and printed data packets so each school could tell its own story. The framing was neutral and started with ownership. When the team named management challenges, it explained that leaders without the tools to lead will default to “get the job done,” and that staff feel the pressure without the support. Ascend then defined what it means to be a leader there, with shared language for behaviors like leading with integrity, and trained every leader into it over several days. The same leadership behaviors anchored every plan that followed, which forced the reflection that turns words on a page into practice. The data also fed the organization’s employee value proposition and a five-year scope of changes, including leadership and staff training.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	Ascend’s Leadership Efficacy score increased significantly and the effects showed up in ways the team had not explicitly targeted. Employee relations complaints dropped roughly tenfold. A new rising leader process filled 85% of leadership positions through internal promotion, and one newly promoted leader who took over midyear led one of the strongest academic turnarounds in the network. Executive team decisions got easier because leaders assessed situations through the same lens. The shared footing on leadership also let Ascend hold a network-wide conversation about staff professionalism for the first time, a topic that family and student feedback had raised and that the organization had previously been unable to take on. Intent to return reached its highest point and, for the first time in Li’s memory, matched actual retention. Li is clear that the work is unfinished: leadership remains the target domain for the next survey, new and promoted leaders are trained into the same framework, and each cycle refines what the organization is training toward.

Growing Up Green Charter Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
Queens, NY	K-8	1,500 students	23% Multi-Lingual Learners 77% economically disadvantaged 45% of students are Hispanic	Average retention rate increase from SY2022-23 to SY2024-25: 3.5pp

Context	Growing Up Green had gathered staff feedback informally for years, but sustaining a survey and acting on it year over year was difficult without dedicated capacity. As a small network in a period of growth, it needed two things at once: consistent, scalable systems across schools, and a way to retain strong, experienced teachers amid a national shortage. As Chief Operating Officer Steven Viola shared about Spark, “Having experts look at our results, surface patterns, and do some of the heavy lifting before we even sat down was incredibly valuable.”
Learn & Identify	Network leaders reviewed trends first, looking for cross-cutting patterns that affected multiple campuses. Quantitative and qualitative results pointed to the need for stronger and more consistent instructional leadership; as the organization had grown, instructional coaching systems had not kept pace, and leaders saw an opportunity to make them consistent across campuses. And while the network was promoting from within regularly, Growth and Advancement scores were low compared to peers, which leaders used to identify how to better communicate pathways.
Share & Take Action	Network and school leaders received curated data excerpts in advance to focus discussion without overwhelming it. School leaders then ran the same debrief with their building leadership teams, developed action plans, and shared them with staff. Growing Up Green created a Chief Academic Officer position to standardize instructional coaching systems and expectations and to manage principals. And Human Resources launched a monthly newsletter that profiles a staff member who has grown within the organization and names the support and opportunities they had along the way, so those profiled feel recognized and readers see what advancement can look like.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	“As a result of post-Spark actions,” Viola reports, “instructional leadership scores are higher and consistent across campuses, we’ve seen an increase in Basic Needs and Belonging scores, and importantly, staff retention is up.”

Hebrew Public

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
Managed and affiliate campuses across Philadelphia, Staten Island and Brooklyn	PreK-8	~2,000 students	74% Economically Disadvantaged; 16% MLL; 22% SWD; 52% Black; 13% Hispanic/Latino; 27% white, etc.	2.5pp increase from SY2024-25 to SY2026-2027, with one school experiencing an 8pp increase in this time span

Context	Hebrew Public is a network of Hebrew-language public charter schools operating a managed and affiliate model that Emily Hurst, who has worked with the network for a decade, describes as unusually complex. The network had cycled through various surveys, finding others limiting, and Hurst wanted a single external tool all schools could use so they were, in her words, "singing from the same song page" while sitting inside a larger comparative dataset.
Learn & Identify	Hebrew Public administers Spark during staff development time, which protects completion rates and signals that staff voice matters, particularly in an environment of widespread survey fatigue. The network reads results by tenure cohort, and doing so surfaced what Hurst called a "eureka" pattern: founding staff scored high, one-to-two-year hires scored high, and a middle cohort dipped in between, a possible disillusionment among people who can strongly shape a school's culture. Backed by a federal Teacher and School Leader grant, the network also built custom questions around SRGE, its performance-based compensation model, and learned that staff sentiment hinged on specific, concrete indicators rather than on the program itself.
Share & Take Action	Hurst's team deliberately builds in time for the senior leadership team and school leaders to digest results before turning them around, so that staff reliably see the main takeaways. The network runs a mid-year pulse of its ten most important questions ahead of the spring hiring season, using it as an early-warning system, and follows up at individual schools with short open-ended surveys that ask staff directly how to close the gaps the data revealed. Because results vary considerably by head of school, each campus works through its own data rather than focusing on the network averages.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	Hebrew Public saw modest year-over-year gains in Relationships and Teamwork, Leadership Efficacy, and intent to return. Hurst highlighted one school where a leader had focused intensely on coaching every teacher and saw the corresponding survey item improve, which she describes as affirming that the strategy had an effect. Looking ahead, the team plans to overlay retention and attrition data on prior survey responses to learn what actually predicted who stayed, including a look at desirable retention by school, and to investigate what is happening with the middle tenured cohort.

IMPACT Public Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
4 Schools in Washington State	Elementary, soon expanding to Middle	1,800+ students	81% Black or Latino Students (including two or more races) 80% economically disadvantaged	+5pp from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25

Context	CEO Amy Kiyota came up through nearly every role at Impact before leading it, and she frames retention as a theory of action: the longer a teacher stays, the more deeply they understand the model and the more effective they become, so the organization's job is to make staying worthwhile. Impact's survey history shaped what it needed. In its earliest days the network ran its own Google survey, then moved to a more robust commercial tool that proved unusable in practice. As Kiyota describes it, "there were 600 questions; what are we actually doing about this data after we get it?" Analysis took so long that results arrived after the moment to act had passed.
Learn & Identify	Impact adopted Spark for speed and simplicity, so the team could identify a small number of priorities and respond while feedback was still fresh. Just as important, Impact resists reading its results as a single average. The network disaggregates results, with an emphasis on individual purpose and belonging by subgroups such as tenure and role, on the understanding that the same mission can feel energizing to a veteran teacher and distant to a new hire or a member of the operations staff. Each of its four schools is read separately as well, since every campus carries its own culture.
Share & Take Action	Impact invests directly in the conditions that let mission-driven staff stay. Its teaching-fellow program covers the cost of certification in exchange for three years of service, lowering the financial barrier for people drawn to the work. The network also built multiple teacher-leadership roles, including mentor-teacher, culture lead, and team lead, that let staff take on responsibility, gain exposure, and earn additional compensation without leaving the classroom. As Kiyota puts it, people can "eat at the buffet," sampling roles or specializing in one, which widens what a career at Impact can look like.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	In a within-year measure, Impact posted the largest gain of any system in the study on the share of staff who felt successful in their roles. Impact also saw a strong gain in the Individual Purpose domain and intent to return outcome. Kiyota identifies the network's leadership reflection habit as critical, and fast turnaround on the data is what makes that habit possible at both the network and school level. Looking ahead, Impact continues to identify how to represent and incorporate staff experience insights in their organizational priorities, including in opening its first middle school and building succession plans against what Kiyota calls the "massive ripple effect" of a departing principal.

Liberty STEAM

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
Sumter County, SC; 3 campuses; rural SC along the i-95 corridor	K-6, adding a grade each year	1,100 students from 5 counties and 17 zip codes	70% students of color 73% economically disadvantaged	12pp increase from SY2023-24 to SY2025-26

Context	Dr. Trevor Ivey co-founded Liberty STEAM eight years ago, with a mission to make the school a vehicle for economic mobility. Its model exposes students as early as kindergarten to four career clusters that lead to middle-class jobs and beyond in the region. Liberty has tracked staff satisfaction since its first year, longer than most public schools, and staff and family satisfaction count toward the state's accountability rating. The organization runs regular pulse checks and, for several years, paid for a non-Spark third party survey twice a year. That survey produced a badge for the website and little the team could act on. Overall staff satisfaction is part of Liberty's strategic compensation model, so leaders have a direct stake in the number and in the culture around it: for years the organization has trained staff to own their feedback, to put their name on it, and to close every concern with a proposed solution.
Learn & Identify	When Liberty administered Spark at its usual mid-year point, the debrief with Attuned surfaced that staff at one school felt the organization did not talk about progress enough, which surprised senior leaders because they had deliberately placed goals posters across the building. The gap between what leaders believed they were communicating and what staff experienced became a network-wide conversation. Liberty also found that staff aged 30 to 39 asked for more growth and advancement opportunities, which Ivey used to make the case for expanding Liberty's Leader Fellow program. Each principal is responsible for their three lowest-scoring domains, with a target of moving them to the Spark sample average.
Share & Take Action	Within 3 days of the survey closing, each principal emails staff a high-level summary. The principal then works through an independent analysis worksheet with an executive coach, identifies three "big rocks," drafts an action plan, and rehearses the pitch. The school then holds a focus group, and following the focus group, the principal delivers a summary slide deck in small groups during planning periods to every employee, including facilities and central office staff, alongside student achievement and family survey results.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	From December 2025 to May 2026, every domain rose, with the largest gains in Relationships and Teamwork, Leadership Efficacy, and feeling successful. Every campus met its domain targets except one principal in one domain. Ivey says principals took real ownership of the results, and were able to present those results to the board. In the spring, Liberty ran a lighter cycle without the focus group and plans to return to the full process in December.

MESA South Brooklyn (MESA Charter High School)

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
Brooklyn, NY; 2 schools (MESA Bushwick and MESA South Brooklyn, opened August 2025)	9th & 10th Grades	~250 students	14% students with IEPs 17% ELLs 64% economically disadvantaged ~16+ different languages spoken	Retention changes at the MESA Charter High School network were minimal from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25; MESA South Brooklyn opened in August 2025

Context	Anna Spoden opened MESA South Brooklyn in August 2025 as its founding principal after a planning year at MESA Bushwick. She had spent earlier years in spaces where staff morale was low enough that culture work had to come before any instructional work could take hold, and that history shaped the school she built. Community is the first of MESA South Brooklyn's three published priorities, ahead of literacy and career-connected learning, and Spoden names it in hiring interviews so candidates understand what working there asks of them. Her reasoning is practical: when adults feel unsupported, students feel it first, and the students who feel it most are often the ones who need the most patience.
Learn & Identify	For every Spark administration, Spoden reads every category alone and takes notes before showing anyone else the results. For their first administration in October 2025, Spoden took the full data to a small group of experienced teachers she treated as teacher leaders, opening by telling them why they were in the room: they were the storytellers of this data. She celebrated high achievements, and explored ten data points out of the full dashboard to explore with the whole staff, chosen for leverage rather than volume, including the lowest scoring item — workload sustainability. Leadership Efficacy was shared but analyzed in detail only with her assistant principal and director of operations. In her words, if she was asking staff to take collective ownership of the rest, it needed to be clear that this one was hers.

Share & Take Action	In January, staff sorted the six domains on paper slips from strongest to weakest before Spoden revealed the actual order, which surprised most of them. Small mixed-role groups then worked through printouts of standout strengths, growth areas, and quotes, and each group wrote a three-sentence "story of MESA so far" from the data. Those stories, along with the commitments that came out of the discussion, were posted in the PD room and referenced in staff huddles and professional development for the rest of the year. The clearest theme was siloing, and the most concrete commitment was lunch together in the Teacher Center. Teacher leaders took on the work of noticing colleagues who had drifted and drawing them back in, a practice the school calls tending the fire. Spoden made the why behind existing rituals more explicit, including a twice-monthly recognition circle called Pride Light and regular gratitude circles, and she used staff's own language from the survey to frame the year's PD, including a three-part series on scaffolding and differentiation. Staff were reminded often that they were founders of the community, different staff members led huddle and PD sessions so that colleagues heard from one another rather than only from her, and people were given room to take an idea and run with it. At the network level, MESA convened an Advisory Council of staff from both schools that worked with the data and carried ideas back to each building.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	When the school administered Spark in May 2026, Belonging had risen from 74 to 95 percent positive, Leadership Efficacy from 84 to 94, and the workload sustainability item from 14 to 62 percent. The next year brings a harder test: the school is adding a grade and eleven new hires, eight of them first-year teachers, and she expects workload scores to dip as experienced co-teachers absorb the load. She plans to hold September one-on-ones with every new staff member and is already thinking about how to keep the founders' sense of purpose alive once the school no longer feels new.

Mission Achievement and Success (MAS) Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
New Mexico (2 locations)	K-12 and K-8	2,200+ students	90% Black or Latino 96% Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)	+15.7pp from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25

Context	MAS is a founder-led system with a strong academic record. JoAnn Mitchell has led the school for fifteen years and she treats culture as an explicit organizational goal rather than a byproduct. As she describes it, culture is "how people behave every day," which makes it something leaders can shape deliberately. MAS adopted Spark through a CSGF grant and used it to get a clear read on where staff perceptions actually stood.
Learn & Identify	MAS followed-up on their Spark domain results with a survey seeking narrative responses, that was deliberately not anonymous, and completed during scheduled staff time. The team used a "reverse question" technique, asking what was still missing even on items that scored well. Mitchell found this surfaced additional conditions they could improve. What emerged was that much of what staff experienced as an unreasonable workload was really a gap in understanding, and prep time surfaced as the most pressing concrete issue.
Share & Take Action	MAS modified the schedule in response to the prep-time feedback. Where a constraint could not be changed, leaders explained the reasoning behind it rather than letting staff identify the decision as arbitrary. The team responded to survey feedback individually, which was labor-intensive but demonstrated that responses were being read and taken seriously. As leaders explained decisions, implemented requested changes, and invited staff into tradeoffs discussions, the perception of "us against them" began to soften. In addition to this, MAS has invested heavily in hiring and onboarding so that new staff are brought into an established culture rather than left to set their own.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	MAS is tracking staff retention data alongside perception data, and has seen retention improve as the communication practices have taken hold. In the year-over-year comparison, MAS posted strong gains with Relationships and Teamwork up as much as 19 points, Leadership Efficacy up as much as 17, and satisfaction improving by double digits.

Santa Fe South Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
12 schools and growing in Oklahoma City, OK	Pre-K through Secondary	~5,200 students	99.4% Black or Latino 94% economically disadvantaged	+2.55pp from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25

Context	As Santa Fe South grew toward a dozen campuses, its read on staff morale remained informal, resting on relationships rather than any systematic measure. Staff had grown used to an annual "top workplace" survey whose results never came back to them, and the disengagement showed up in the data itself. Human Resources Director Carson Aldridge, a former school leader, recalls seeing comments like "I don't know why we have to do these surveys, because no one even reads them." Executive Director of Elementary Meg Wheeler, who had used a similar instrument as a principal at another network, saw Spark as part of the infrastructure a growing system needs.
Learn & Identify	Santa Fe South built a deliberate rhythm around the data. Results are broken down by site, and principals work through them in weekly Thursday leadership meetings using a shared protocol, naming strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats before selecting two priority areas and a few key questions to track over the semester. Before any of that, coaches meet one-on-one with each principal to prepare "heart and mind," grounding in a short set of norms: start with students, treat feedback as a gift, keep a growth mindset, and focus on the why, so that results are treated as information to act on rather than as a verdict.
Share & Take Action	Principals build action plans with their leadership teams and monitor progress with monthly pulse checks on the questions they identified they want to track. Twice a year, each school folds its Spark results into a "State of the School" presentation, sharing what staff said, the areas the school is focusing on, and the plan going forward. Individual campuses matched actions to their own signals: a middle school with the lowest scores ran a book study on educator resilience; an elementary campus spread across four buildings started a mentor program pairing new staff with culture-rooted colleagues; and a new founding school facing behavior challenges built a comprehensive behavior playbook. In response to feedback about advancement, the system published a leadership-readiness progression from teacher to teacher-leader to instructional coach, paired with individual "pathways conversations."
Evaluate & Next Cycle	Aldridge points to the State of the School as the change with the clearest effect on subsequent survey results. From one fall to the next, Santa Fe South rose across nearly every domain, with Leadership Efficacy up about 23 points, Relationships and Teamwork up 18, Belonging up 12, and intent to return up 15. Leaders credit transparency above any single program.

Third Future Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
26 schools across multiple states including CO, LA and TX	Varies by region and school from PreK-8	Varies by region and school	80% Black or Hispanic 84% economically disadvantaged	+9pp from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25

Context	Third Future has run its own culture surveys every December and May since the network was founded in 2017, tied to leader evaluations. However, the limitation they faced was that the network could only compare itself to its own past. Founder Zach Craddock wanted to know how Third Future stacked up against comparable systems, which is what brought the network to Spark and its peer benchmarking.
Learn & Identify	Craddock makes the staff data a fixture of the network's calendar rather than an annual event. Every professional development day opens with the Spark results presented alongside academic data, so staff experience is discussed as openly as student outcomes. He consistently covers a few areas each time, including discipline, because in his words "nothing will ruin climate and culture faster than discipline," and instructional feedback, because he wants to know whether teachers believe the feedback they receive is making them better. The network sets a focus domain at the top while asking each principal to own a domain at their own site. When results surfaced growth and advancement as a gap, Craddock also probed why staff might resist feedback meant to help them grow, asking whether it was unclear, misaligned, ambiguous, or simply not shared.
Share & Take Action	Third Future built advancement into its operating structure. A formal leadership pipeline moved 82 staff from teacher-leader roles toward assistant principal, principal, and director positions over a multi-month development process, and the network widened its teacher-leader roles so that staff could grow without leaving the classroom. Craddock also sets aside funds specifically for cross-site learning days, where staff learn from one another and build relationships across schools that would not otherwise form.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	Third Future posted some of the largest year-over-year gains in the study, rising in some domains while most systems declined, with Leadership Efficacy and Relationships and Teamwork each up roughly 14 to 15 points and intent to return up as much as 18. Craddock carries the prior year's perceptions into the new year rather than starting fresh, on the logic that successes and challenges carry over. Looking ahead, the network continues to face the question of how to keep a leadership pipeline selective and well supported while adding schools quickly.

Uncommon Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
53 Schools across the Northeast (Boston, Camden, New York City, Newark, Rochester)	PreK-12	20,000+ students	93% Black or Latino 83% economically disadvantaged	+9.5pp increase in retention from SY23-24 to SY24-25

Context	Uncommon’s previous mid-year instrument had done useful work for years, but it focused heavily on leader feedback and not enough on staff experience. The Talent Strategy team, led by Senior Director Lauren Vance, built its own early-experience survey and found it was measuring too many things at once. Uncommon helped co-develop the Spark survey with CSGF and Attuned to solve for the lack of internal survey operational capacity and to measure early, shared indicators of engagement and satisfaction across schools that accurately predict and inform teacher retention.
Learn & Identify	When Uncommon started administering Spark, the central team processed the results by domain alongside its school data. Two priorities surfaced: Leadership Efficacy and Individual Purpose. The first Spark administration also produced an insight that shaped everything after it: with more than 50 schools holding identical expectations of staff, the data showed that leaders, not the expectations themselves, were driving how staff experienced the work. Where Leadership Efficacy was high, satisfaction and intent to return were high; where it was lower, those domains dipped in a closely aligned way. To find where concerns were concentrating, the team built a school support matrix combining headline Spark data (overall satisfaction and intent to return) with teacher attrition data and leadership context such as which schools had first-year leaders. That composite view identified a small set of "culture focused schools" needing differentiated support. Separately, the qualitative analysis flagged teacher workload sustainability as a significant concern. The team pushed further into the open-ended comments alongside exit-survey data to understand what was driving it, and traced the strain to various causes, including coverage of long-term leaves.

Share & Take Action	Uncommon piloted the use of substitute teachers for the first time across all five of its regions, enabling leaders to request substitutes to cover long-term leaves. Over the past year, this became a full launch of substitute teacher partnerships and policies in all five regions, a direct result of two consecutive years of Spark data pointing at the same challenge. The team also built a survey review structure so results reached every staff member. Vance's team produced an organization-wide summary for regional superintendents and senior school leaders, then set the expectation that every school leader pair act on their own school's data. Principals and directors of operations used a co-leader reflection powerpoint presentation to work through their results by domain and by comment analysis, then prepared a "state of the school" update, delivered to staff within a month of the survey. The update narrates organization-wide and regional trends alongside the school's own results and the actions leaders are taking in response. Culture focus schools received more. Regional superintendents who managed them started a biweekly pulse survey for staff and rehearsed key "peak moments" with school leaders before they led them: renewal conversations, mid-year review conversations, and the meeting in which leaders shared their school's Spark results back with staff. For that last one, superintendents planned the State of the School update alongside the leader and practiced the delivery with them. To sustain Leadership Efficacy over time, Uncommon also built these skills into its leadership pipeline. Its fellowship programs for future principals and directors of operations, along with the professional development it provides to first- and second-year teachers and leaders, train the technical skills of school leadership alongside the harder ones: leading change, communicating it well, and narrating the why behind expectations. Lauren Vance connects that last skill directly to Individual Purpose. When teachers can see how the expectations held of them shape student outcomes, purpose rises with it.
Evaluate & Next Cycle	In early 2026, Lauren Vance shared, "So far this year, in every region, we're seeing fewer mid-year exits than we did at this same point last year. There are a lot of factors, but it tells me that having earlier insight into staff experience is helping us respond in ways that make it more likely people stay through the year." This fall, Uncommon plans to add one or two required slides to every school's state of the school update that zoom out and narrate how the organization has responded to staff feedback over time, especially on workload sustainability, so staff (particularly new staff) can connect their concerns about leaves coverage to the substitute partnerships now in place. The team is also spending multiple days on site in middle schools studying how teachers actually spend their time, looking for both quick wins and longer-term system changes.

Washington Latin Public Charter Schools

Location(s)	Grade Levels	Enrollment	Student Demographics	Retention Data
Washington DC	2 middle schools, 2 high schools, classical	1,300+ students	73% ELA and 52% math proficiency on PARCC in SY2025; highest ELA proficiency for economically disadvantaged middle schoolers in D.C.	7.3pp increase from SY2023-24 to SY2024-25

Context	Washington Latin grew from a single campus into a four-school LEA, and with that growth, the informal check-ins between the executive director and staff were no longer enough to measure morale. Leaders wanted a consistent instrument and a principle to go with it: action is as important as listening. Longtime former principal Diana Smith frames the stakes in the school's classical terms: when adults have a voice in their own governance, students learn from the value of a shared commitment to the common good.
Learn & Identify	The senior leadership team met first with Attuned, whom Peter Anderson, Head of Schools and CEO, credits with keeping them out of the weeds. "There is a tendency to get lost in the weeds, or hyper-focus on one particular question. It would have been easy to be paralyzed." The results validated concerns that had been "in the ether" and gave leaders numbers to bring to school leaders. In one administration, Washington Latin saw a gap in satisfaction between school-based faculty and LEA employees. Additionally, concerns around identity and belonging surfaced, supported by open-ended comments, and the leaders conducted empathy interviews to understand root causes. The team then narrowed to instructional leadership within Leadership Efficacy, specifically leaders' presence in classrooms and their follow-up with teachers about their practice.
Share & Take Action	Results were shared deliberately: the Chief of Schools reviewed each school's data with its principal in their weekly one-on-one, with the data and guiding questions sent in advance. Principals and the Chief of Schools then met with each school's leadership team to analyze, reflect, and decide on next steps, and principals shared high-level trends with illustrative quotes to their faculty, naming strengths and areas for growth, including their lowest scores, and how they planned to address them. On instructional leadership, principals and their teams began instructional rounds during weekly leadership meetings and highlighted what they saw in weekly memos to faculty. On identity and belonging, the school brought in support to observe classes at both campuses and met with teacher focus groups, then launched a pilot with fifth-grade teachers built on a shared book study, four-week cycles of recorded observations and coaching, and debriefs with leaders, coaches, and teachers. The school also launched a Community Advisory Council.

**Evaluate &
Next Cycle**

More than 70 percent of teachers in the pilot said they would like to continue the work and that it benefited their practice. Anderson describes the larger shift as ongoing: “Now that we are using the same survey consistently, our leaders are very aware of the questions that are being asked of their faculty, and I think they are always in the back of their minds.” When leaders discuss how to prioritize adult development, they now see how it connects to staff satisfaction and retention. Washington Latin found success in going deeper on their results with empathy, being fully transparent about their lowest scores, shortening the time between survey and staff communication, ideally before the December break, and sharpening next steps to one to three actions.

Appendix B:

What Organizations Did at Each Step of LISTEN

The organizations in this report differ in size, region, grade span, and stage of growth. What they share is a rhythm. Each read their results carefully, chose a small number of priorities, told staff what they heard, followed through where staff could see it, checked progress mid-year, and carried the work into the next year.

The table below collects their actions by step so you can find the part of the cycle you are working on right now. Full context for each organization appears in Appendix A.

Two things to notice as you read. Most of these actions are not expensive, and most are not domain-specific. The moves that built trust were about process discipline rather than a particular survey result. Where an action was driven by a specific Spark domain, we have tagged it. Some organizations appear multiple times in the table below to reflect multiple actions that surfaced in our interviews.

Learn: Stay curious through the discomfort.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Prepare leaders before they see results. At Santa Fe South Schools, coaches meet one-on-one with each principal before results are reviewed to set norms: start with students, treat feedback as a gift, keep a growth mindset, focus on the why.	Any domain	Both
Disaggregate deliberately. Impact Public Schools reads every result by subgroup such as tenure and role, and reads each of its four campuses separately.	Any domain	School
Read by tenure cohort. Hebrew Public reviews results by tenure cohort, which surfaced a middle cohort dipping between high-scoring founding staff and high-scoring new hires.	Any domain	Network
Run a follow-up narrative survey. MAS Schools invites staff to complete a narrative survey during staff time to gather reactions and improvement opportunities.	Any domain	Network
Add listening sessions and office hours. Impact Public Schools adds listening sessions and executive office hours at each school to peel back the comments and scores.	Any domain	Both

Read scores and comments side by side. Ascend's executive team set aside the most sensational quotes in favor of themes that ran through the whole staff experience, then shared what they heard with leaders in neutral language.	Any domain	Both
Build a school support matrix. Uncommon Schools reviews Spark results alongside several other talent data points including teacher attrition data, teacher vacancies and leadership context to see where support is needed. Regional superintendents get two weeks with results before school leaders.	Belonging	School
Look for cross-campus patterns. Growing Up Green network leaders reviewed trends first, looking for patterns that affected multiple campuses, before school leaders worked through their own building's results.	Any domain	Both
Read alone before reading together. At MESA South Brooklyn, the founding principal read every category on her own and took notes, then shared full results with teacher leaders and a prioritized deck with the whole staff.	Any domain	Both
Follow the data with empathy interviews. Washington Latin followed spring results flagging identity and belonging with empathy interviews to understand root causes before deciding anything.	Any domain	Network

Identify: Turn insights into clear priorities.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Set one network domain, one site domain. Third Future Schools sets one focus domain for the network and asks each principal to own a domain at their own site.	Any domain	Both
Narrow to a specific behavior. Washington Latin narrowed its focus to instructional leadership, specifically leaders' presence in classrooms and their follow-up with teachers about practice.	Leadership Efficacy	Both
Choose two domains and one lever. In its first Spark year, Uncommon Schools prioritized Leadership Efficacy and Individual Purpose, and put its energy into one lever: how regional superintendents coached principals.	Leadership Efficacy, Individual Purpose	Network
Make one thing the priority. Ascend diagnosed three core leadership gaps and made leadership its single priority.	Leadership Efficacy	Network
Find cross-cutting patterns and answer each once. Growing Up Green identified two patterns: instructional coaching systems that had not kept pace with growth, and staff who needed clearer communication about internal promotion pathways.	Basic Needs, Growth and Advancement	Network

Audit before acting on a surprising signal. When workload sustainability emerged in year two, Uncommon ran a workload audit and traced the strain to various causes including coverage of long-term leaves.	Basic Needs	Network
Pick two areas and a few questions to track. Santa Fe South principals select two priority areas and identify several specific questions to track over each semester.	Any domain	School
Identify three “big rocks” with an Executive Coach. Each Liberty STEAM principal works through an independent analysis worksheet with an executive coach, identifies three big rocks (priorities), and drafts an action plan before sharing anything beyond a first summary. Each principal is responsible for their three lowest-scoring domains, with a target of moving them to the Spark sample average.	Any domain	School
Cut the data down to what staff can hold. At MESA South Brooklyn, the principal reduced the data points her whole staff had to process to ten, chosen for leverage rather than volume, and tackled Leadership Efficacy at the leadership team level.	Leadership Efficacy	School

Share: Tell your staff what you heard and what comes next.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Share the results at PD. Third Future Schools reviews Spark results next to academic data at the first professional development day after every administration.	Any domain	Both
Curate excerpts, then cascade the same debrief. Growing Up Green sends leaders curated excerpts in advance so discussion stays focused, and school leaders run the same debrief with their building teams.	Any domain	Both
Standardize the share and prepare for it. Uncommon Schools expects every principal and director of operations to complete a co-leader reflection template and deliver a state-of-the-school update within a month. Newer leaders prepare with their regional superintendent first.	Any domain	Both
Debrief data in the weekly one-on-one. At Washington Latin, the Chief of Schools reviews each school with its principal in their weekly one-on-one, with guiding questions sent in advance. Principals then share high-level trends and illustrative quotes with faculty.	Any domain	Both
Move results through a deliberate sequence. Ascend goes from executive team, to school leaders, to a State of Schools Day, to staff. The message begins with ownership: here is what you said, here is what we have to own, here are the behaviors we will work on.	Any domain	Network

Fold results into a recurring State of the School. Twice a year, every Santa Fe South school presents what staff said, what the school is focusing on, and the plan going forward.	Any domain	School
Let staff predict the results first. At MESA South Brooklyn, staff sort the six domains from highest to lowest before the actual order is revealed.	Any domain	School
Have staff write the story of the data. MESA small groups write a three-sentence story of our school so far from the results. The stories are posted alongside yearlong commitments in a visible area for reference all year.	Any domain	School

Take Action: Follow through, with your staff.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Change the schedule. MAS Schools adjusted the schedule in response to prep-time feedback. Where a constraint could not change, leaders explained the reasoning, and staff weighed in on significant tradeoffs.	Basic Needs	Both
Add responsibility and pay without leaving the classroom. Impact Public Schools created mentor-teacher, culture-lead, and team-lead roles that carry added responsibility and compensation.	Growth and Advancement	Both
Acknowledge staff methodically. Impact built a system for recognizing staff rather than leaving it to chance.	Belonging	Both
Publish a readiness progression and talk about it individually. Across Santa Fe South campuses, leaders published a leadership-readiness progression paired with individual pathways conversations.	Growth and Advancement	Both
Define what it means to lead here. Ascend shifted from school-by-school fixes to a shared leadership framework, built through a weekly in-person leadership series for senior leaders from September to November and cascaded to principals in monthly PD.	Leadership Efficacy	Network
Build a substitute pool. After tracing some workload concerns to leaves coverage, Uncommon Schools piloted substitute teachers across all five regions and built a full pool for long-term leaves.	Basic Needs	Network
Shift what coaching is about. Uncommon supported principal managers to move their coaching toward storytelling, change management, and more inspirational whole-school moments.	Leadership Efficacy, Individual Purpose	Network

Create a role to fix a systems gap. Growing Up Green created a Chief Academic Officer role to bring consistency to instructional coaching across campuses.	Basic Needs	Network
Make internal growth visible every month. Growing Up Green's HR team launched a monthly newsletter profiling a staff member who grew within the organization and the support they received.	Growth and Advancement	Network
Build a leadership pipeline. Third Future Schools has moved 82 staff toward assistant principal, principal, and director roles, widened teacher-leader roles for growth inside the classroom, and set aside funds for cross-site learning days. Liberty STEAM's founder used the finding that staff aged 30 to 39 wanted more growth opportunities to make the case for expanding the Leader Fellow program.	Growth and Advancement	Network
Convene a staff advisory council. MESA created a council of staff from both of its schools that carried ideas back to each building, so solving challenges was shared across campuses.	Relationships and Teamwork	Network
Schedule instructional rounds. Washington Latin leadership teams conduct instructional rounds during weekly leadership meetings and highlight what they see in weekly memos to faculty.	Leadership Efficacy	School
Let each school choose its own response. Santa Fe South schools adopted different actions based on need: a book study on educator resilience at one school, a mentor program pairing new staff with culture-rooted colleagues at another, and a behavior playbook at a new school.	Basic Needs, Relationships and Teamwork	School
Frame PD in staff's own words. At MESA South Brooklyn, the principal used staff's survey language to frame the year's professional development, and staff commitments to school culture were displayed in a high-traffic area.	Belonging, Individual Purpose	School

Evaluate: Take a pulse on your progress.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Check in at every PD day. Third Future Schools runs a four-question survey at every professional development day plus monthly micro-checks.	Any domain	Both
Pulse ahead of hiring season. Hebrew Public runs a mid-year pulse before spring hiring as an early-warning system, and follows up at individual schools with a five-minute open-ended survey asking staff how to close the gaps.	Any domain	Both

Tighten the loop where concern is highest. In schools identified for extra support, Uncommon Schools launched bi-weekly pulse surveys and increased regional superintendent presence.	Any domain	Both
Keep commitments in front of staff. At MESA South Brooklyn, staff commitments became a standing reference in every huddle and PD session, and the Advisory Council kept identifying what was working.	Any domain	Both
Reread the results before a school visit. Third Future's founder rereads each school's results before visiting and identifies what he will check in with staff about.	Any domain	Network
Hold leaders accountable for behaviors. Ascend holds monthly executive reviews of flagged schools and refined its twice-yearly leader evaluations so leadership behaviors, not only outcomes, are what leaders are measured on.	Leadership Efficacy	Network
Create a pulse check. Santa Fe South principals run monthly pulse checks on the priority questions they identified at the start of the semester.	Any domain	School

Next Cycle: Acknowledge real change takes time.

Action	Domain Focus	Level
Carry last year's perceptions into this year. Third Future Schools presents the prior year's results to staff on the first day back rather than starting fresh.	Any domain	Both
Narrate the response over time. Uncommon Schools is adding slides to every state-of-the-school update that describe how the organization has responded to feedback across years, so newer staff have that context.	Any domain	Network
Take the learning into what comes next. Impact Public Schools is carrying what it learned into the opening of its first middle school.	Any domain	Network
Train the standard into new leaders. Ascend trains new and newly promoted leaders in its leadership framework so the standard does not fade with turnover.	Leadership Efficacy	Network
End the year the way you started it. At MESA South Brooklyn, staff reviewed the June data together and named what had changed for them.	Any domain	School