

Building Belonging Early: How Middle School Mentors Strengthened School Culture

A Case Study at Pacific Middle School

Overview

Pacific Middle School, located within Highline Public Schools in the South King County region of Washington State, serves a richly diverse and vibrant student community. Highline is one of the most diverse school districts in Washington, with students representing a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and lived experiences. Across the district, more than 100 languages are spoken, reflecting a deeply global and interconnected community (Highline Public Schools, 2024; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2023).

This diversity is a significant strength. Students bring multilingual skills, cultural knowledge, resilience, and strong family and community connections, all of which are powerful assets for learning and leadership. Highline has intentionally prioritized building a culture of belonging, recognizing that when students feel seen and valued, they are more likely to engage, contribute, and thrive (Highline Public Schools, 2024).

At the same time, Pacific Middle School serves a community where many students navigate systemic barriers that impact educational access and outcomes. Across the district, a significant percentage of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and a large portion are multilingual learners (Highline Public Schools, 2024). Like many districts across the country, Highline continues to work to address longstanding inequities related to race, language, and socioeconomic status that influence student opportunities and outcomes (Highline Public Schools, 2021).

Academically, Highline Public Schools serve a population where overall proficiency rates are below state averages, reflecting both the complexity of the student population and broader systemic challenges (Public School Review, 2023). These conditions make the work of building engagement, belonging, and sustained student growth both more challenging, and more important.

In this context, Pacific Middle School represents a powerful example of what is possible when schools intentionally build on the strengths of their community while addressing barriers to student success.

In 2012, Pacific partnered with Ignite to implement a comprehensive, schoolwide approach to strengthening student leadership, belonging, and school culture. This work began with the Culture Advancement System, including staff professional development and the development of a shared school touchstone, a set of values and expectations designed to guide behavior and interactions.



More than a decade later, Ignite’s model remains embedded in the school, sustained not as a standalone program, but as a student-led system integrated into the daily life of the school. At Pacific, students are not only recipients of support — they are leaders, mentors, and active contributors to a culture that reflects the strengths of their community.

The Challenge: Middle School as a Critical Developmental Stage

The transition into middle school is widely recognized as one of the most critical and vulnerable periods in a student’s educational trajectory. Research indicates that early adolescence is marked by significant cognitive, social, and emotional changes, often accompanied by declines in motivation and academic engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

During this stage:

- Peer relationships become increasingly influential
- Students seek autonomy and identity development
- Traditional school structures often provide limited opportunities for meaningful responsibility

At the same time, students are navigating new academic expectations, larger school environments, and shifting social dynamics. These changes can contribute to increased disengagement, absenteeism, and behavioral challenges.

Research further demonstrates that students’ sense of belonging and connection to school is strongly associated with improved attendance, behavior, and academic outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).

The Ignite Approach: A Student-Led System

Ignite’s model at Pacific Middle School operates as a **multi-layered system**, integrating culture, mentoring, and leadership development into the fabric of the school.

Culture Advancement System

The partnership began in 2012 with the implementation of the Culture Advancement System, which included staff professional development and the creation of a shared school touchstone.

Over time, this touchstone has evolved from a staff-led framework into a **student-owned element of school culture**. Each year, student mentors introduce the touchstone to incoming students during transition experiences, reinforcing shared expectations from the outset.

This process ensures that culture is not static, but **actively reinforced through student leadership and peer interaction**.



Peer Mentoring and Transitions

Ignite intentionally focuses on the transition into middle school — a period strongly linked to long-term student outcomes.

Through structured **Spring Transition experiences**, trained student mentors:

- Facilitate small-group activities with incoming 5th grade students
- Build early peer connections
- Introduce school expectations and culture

While many schools offer transition programming, Ignite's approach is distinct in its **intentional design and student facilitation**. Mentors are trained to lead meaningful interactions, not just deliver information.

Research indicates that successful transitions into middle school are associated with improved academic performance, attendance, and social adjustment (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Early connection to peers and school culture serves as a protective factor against disengagement.

At Pacific, transitions are not a single event, but the beginning of an ongoing mentoring relationship that continues throughout the school year.

Leadership Pipeline and Student Agency

Pacific Middle School has developed a student leadership pipeline anchored by a class of **Executive Mentors**.

These students:

- Engage in leadership development using the Ignite Leadership Curriculum
- Facilitate monthly mentor trainings
- Lead assemblies and school-wide initiatives

Monthly mentor trainings are largely student-led, with Executive Mentors guiding their peers. This structure provides students with **meaningful roles and responsibility**, addressing a key developmental need during adolescence.

Middle school students often experience a loss of agency as they transition into more structured environments while navigating rapid developmental changes. Research suggests that providing adolescents with opportunities for autonomy, leadership, and contribution supports motivation, identity development, and prosocial behavior (Steinberg, 2014).

At Pacific, mentoring serves a dual purpose:

- Supporting incoming students during transition



- Providing older students with purpose, belonging, and leadership opportunities

This structure allows students to become **contributors to their school community**, rather than passive participants.

Outcomes: Evidence of Impact

Academic Growth

According to Washington State Report Card data, Pacific Middle School experienced significant gains in academic performance following Ignite implementation.

- English Language Arts proficiency increased from **21% to 48% within two years**
- Performance continued to grow, reaching **65% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic**
- Achievement has remained **above pre-implementation levels** in subsequent years

These trends reflect not only initial improvement, but **sustained academic growth over time**.

Attendance

Attendance trends at Pacific Middle School reflect the broader impact of a relationship-centered, student-led system.

Within two years of implementing Ignite and the Culture Advancement System:

- The percentage of students with **fewer than two absences per month increased by 6.5 percentage points**

This improvement is driven by multiple layers of influence:

- **Incoming 6th grade students** develop early connection through mentoring
- **Student mentors** demonstrate increased accountability and model positive behaviors
- Peer relationships reinforce expectations across grade levels
- Building A Culture Advancement system of shared beliefs, staff compact
- Schoolwide Touchstone Created.

This creates a ripple effect that extends beyond individual participants to the broader school culture.

Notably, in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, when chronic absenteeism increased nationally, Pacific Middle School demonstrated **greater stability in attendance**, suggesting that strong relational systems can support resilience during periods of disruption.

Behavior and School Climate



Exclusionary discipline data at Pacific Middle School demonstrates a sustained decline in behavioral incidents over time.

According to Washington State Report Card data, the percentage of students receiving exclusionary discipline (including suspension, emergency removal, or expulsion) decreased from **13.3% in 2018–19 to 4.1% in 2024–25**, representing a substantial reduction over time.

This decline has been observed across student groups, including both male and female students, suggesting broad-based improvements in school climate.

Notably, this downward trend continued following the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which many schools experienced increased behavioral challenges and reliance on exclusionary discipline practices.

Research indicates that reductions in exclusionary discipline are closely associated with improvements in school climate, relational trust, and student belonging (Cohen et al., 2009). When students feel connected to peers and adults, they are more likely to engage positively in the school environment and less likely to require disciplinary intervention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).

At Pacific Middle School, Ignite’s model contributes to these conditions by:

- Establishing shared expectations through the school touchstone
- Providing students with meaningful leadership roles
- Strengthening peer accountability through mentoring relationships

By engaging students as active contributors to the school community, Pacific reinforces a culture where expectations are shared and upheld collectively.

Implications: Culture as the Foundation for Sustained Improvement

While Pacific Middle School has demonstrated meaningful improvements across multiple indicators, it is important to recognize that these outcomes are not the result of a single initiative.

Sustained school improvement reflects the collective efforts of educators, administrators, students, and the broader school community. Over time, Pacific has implemented multiple strategies and supports that contribute to student success.

However, research consistently highlights the critical role of **school culture** as a foundational element in sustaining improvement.

School culture — including shared norms, relationships, and expectations — has been identified as a key driver of student outcomes, influencing engagement, behavior, and academic performance (Bryk



et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2009). Schools characterized by strong relational trust and a sense of belonging are more likely to experience sustained improvement over time.

At Pacific Middle School, Ignite has contributed to establishing and reinforcing this foundation.

Beginning with the Culture Advancement System, the school developed a shared framework for behavior and expectations. Through ongoing peer mentoring and leadership structures, this culture is continuously reinforced by students themselves.

By engaging students before they enter the school — particularly through structured transition experiences — Pacific proactively builds connection and belonging at a critical developmental moment. Research indicates that early school experiences significantly influence long-term engagement and academic trajectories (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

This emphasis on culture creates conditions in which other initiatives can be more effective. When students feel connected and valued, they are more likely to attend regularly, engage in learning, and respond positively to instruction (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).

In this way, Ignite is not positioned as the sole driver of outcomes, but as a **foundational system that supports and sustains broader school improvement efforts**.

Conclusion: A Sustainable, Student-Led Model

Pacific Middle School demonstrates the potential of a sustained, student-led approach to school improvement.

In a Title I, diverse school context, the implementation of Ignite’s model has been associated with:

- Increased academic performance
- Improved attendance
- Reduced exclusionary discipline
- Strengthened school culture
- Sustained impact over more than a decade

By embedding leadership, mentoring, and shared culture into daily practice, Pacific has created a system where students are not only learners, but **active contributors to their school community**.

This approach offers a scalable model for schools seeking to strengthen belonging, engagement, and long-term outcomes through **relationships and student leadership**.



References

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *School connectedness: Increasing protective factors among youth*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). School climate: Research, policy, practice, and teacher education. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 180–213.

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as developmental contexts during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(1), 225–241.

Highline Public Schools. (2024). *District fast facts*.
<https://www.highlineschools.org/about/district-information/fast-facts>

Highline Public Schools. (2024). *Strategic plan annual report 2023–2024*.
<https://www.highlineschools.org>

Highline Public Schools. (2021). *Policy 0010: Equity, race, and identity*.
<https://www.highlineschools.org>

Institute for Educational Leadership. (2023). *Network spotlight: Highline Public Schools*.
<https://iel.org>

Public School Review. (2023). *Highline School District profile*. <https://www.publicschoolreview.com>

Steinberg, L. (2014). *Age of opportunity: Lessons from the new science of adolescence*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (n.d.). *Washington State Report Card: Pacific Middle School*. Retrieved from <https://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>

