Customer Case Study

How Council Bluffs Community Schools Made Teacher Wellbeing Part of Their Teacher Attendance and Retention Strategy

Fall 2025

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Overview

For the 2024-25 school year, Council Bluffs Community Schools (CBCS) partnered with Lozier Foundation and Alpaca to pilot a partnership to understand teacher wellbeing and the relationship of staff wellbeing to teacher retention, staff absenteeism, and changes in student outcomes.

Each month of the 2024-25 school year, Council Bluffs Community Schools has gathered extensive educator sentiment data through Alpaca Pulse wellbeing check-ins, which they combine with a monthly recognition program to celebrate a few staff members of each of their elementary schools year year.

Wellbeing results were tracked school by school, and were regularly combined with the district's principal coaching strategies, led by Mark Schuldt, Chief of Elementary Schools.

Combined with absenteeism records across the same time period, this report reveals powerful insights into how teacher wellbeing trends correlate with staff attendance and school culture.

Participating Schools

All Council Bluffs Community Schools elementary buildings, plus their new early childhood building, participated in the Alpaca teacher wellbeing program for this school year. These include the following:

Anne Nelson Early Learning Center

Bloomer Elementary School

Carter Lake Elementary School

College View Elementary School

Edison Elementary School

Franklin Elementary School

Hoover Elementary School

Lewis and Clark Elementary School

Longfellow Elementary School

Roosevelt Elementary School

Rue Elementary School

Council Bluffs School Leadership Strategy

Council Bluffs Community Schools has a commitment to fostering excellence in their school leaders, and follows the Wallace Foundation's guidance on effective principals. In his role as principal supervisor, Mark Schuldt focuses on the four research-based strategies Wallace outlines in their paper, **How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research.**

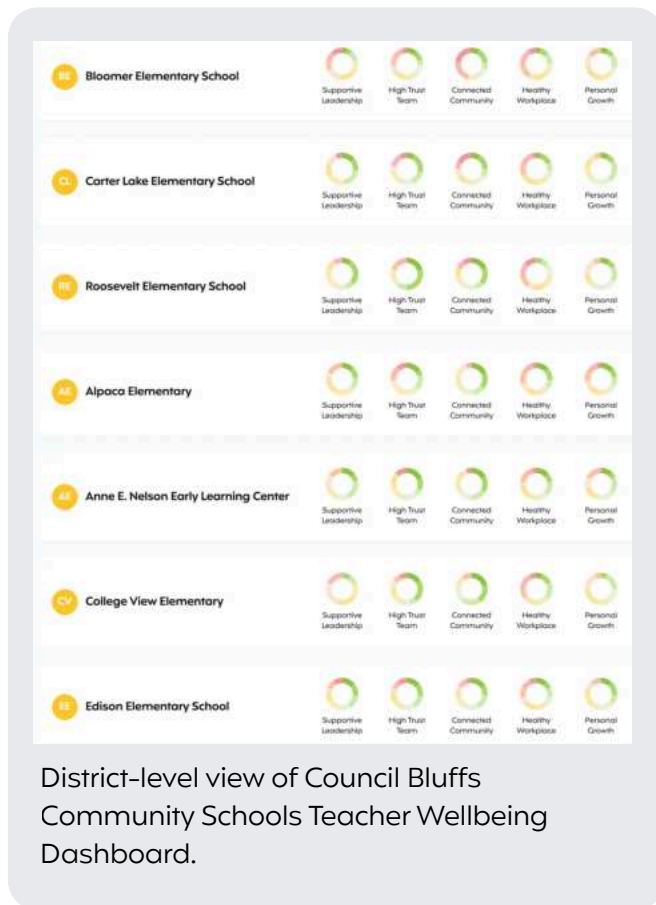The four key behaviors of principals that Schuldt seeks to reinforce are:

- Focusing their work with teachers on instruction. This covers a range of activities, from coaching and evaluation to smart use of data to inform improvements. Some activities often considered important in principal work with teachers may, in fact, not be helpful. These include classroom walkthroughs, depending on how a principal uses them.
- Building a productive school climate
- Forging collaboration and professional learning among teachers and others
- Managing personnel and resources well.

In the course of his leadership practice, Schuldt has a goal to visit each building he supervises, every week, in order to connect personally with the principal and review their data, needs, and growth as a leader. One component of those visits is a review of recent teacher wellbeing data from Alpaca. Says Shuldt:

> **"We pull up their Alpaca data as one of our clear datapoints. We look at the words teachers are saying, what they say they need, and the comments they're sharing through the anonymous survey. From there, we can match up strategies to address what's in the data to Wallace's four behaviors. It's a coaching tool we're using every week."**

Each school has their own dashboard, showing only their school's teacher wellbeing data. In addition, Shuldt has a "district view" of the data, allowing him a birds' eye view of all of the schools in his supervision.

Alpaca Dashboards: District and School Leader View

District-level view of Council Bluffs Community Schools Teacher Wellbeing Dashboard.

Single school view (available to that school leader and district supervisor)

Goals of the Pilot Program: What Council Bluffs Wanted to Learn

After a one-semester pilot with three schools in early 2024, Council Bluffs Community Schools saw value in collecting teacher wellbeing data in this way, but wanted to better understand how teacher sentiment aligned to three key measures as a district.

With support from the Lozier Foundation, the district built a one year pillot to assess teacher wellbeing using Alpaca, and reviewing that data side by side with the district's data on three measures, to learn the following:

1. **Teacher Absenteeism:** Would schools with a higher percentage of positive teacher sentiment see lower absentee rates among teachers?

2. **Teacher Retention:** Is there a relationship between positivity of school culture and teacher retention rates?

3. **Changes in Student Outcomes:** Do schools with higher positivity rates among teachers and staff show stronger gains in improvements to student outcomes via state testing scores?
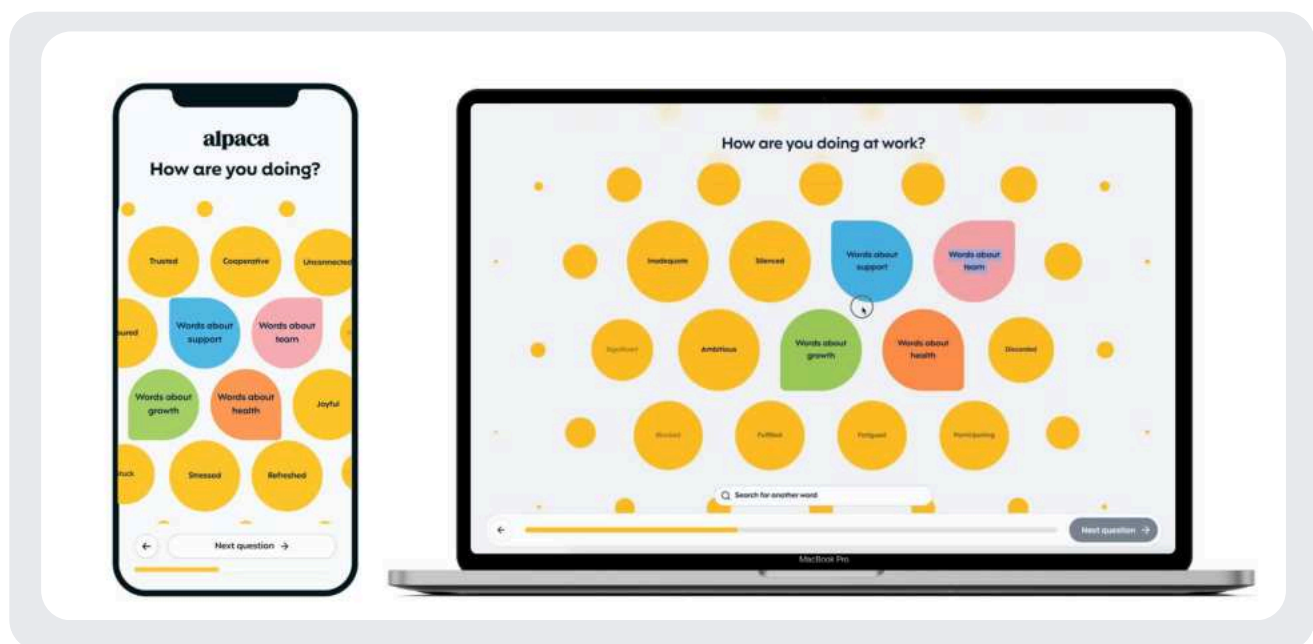
Framework for Data Collection and Analysis

In the pilot year for this program, Alpaca conducted data collection and analysis through a unique survey and dashboard experience built specifically for schools and districts. Here is how our data was collected, shaped, and analyzed for this analysis.

Data Collection: Alpaca's Wellbeing Check-In

Alpaca's teacher wellbeing check-in is a unique format for surveying educators, built specifically for the education sector. The data collection mechanism is unique in the following ways:

- **Brevity:** the Alpaca check-in typically takes participants 1-3 minutes to complete, owing to its user interface and mobile-first nature.
- **High participation:** Most participating schools have educators complete the survey at the beginning of a staff meeting, in order to ensure high participation, which is possible because of its brevity.
- **Anonymity:** Each school has a unique survey link used to administer the survey, but the survey does not collect personal data or require an application download, making it truly anonymous at the individual level.
- **Semantic scale surveying:** Rather than using 1-5 likert scales to assess satisfaction at work, Alpaca built a framework that instead asks educators to choose the words they'd use to describe two things: 1. their experience at work; and 2. what they feel would provide them the greatest level of support.

Data Shaping: Alpaca's Sentiment Framework

Alpaca built a sentiment framework that analyzes commonly contributed words about educators' work experience. Each word, collected in our 2023-24 pilot asking teachers to describe their experience at work, in an open-ended format, was analyzed for positivity as well as for alignment to four research-backed drivers of educator wellbeing:

1. **Leadership Support**
2. **Team Trust**
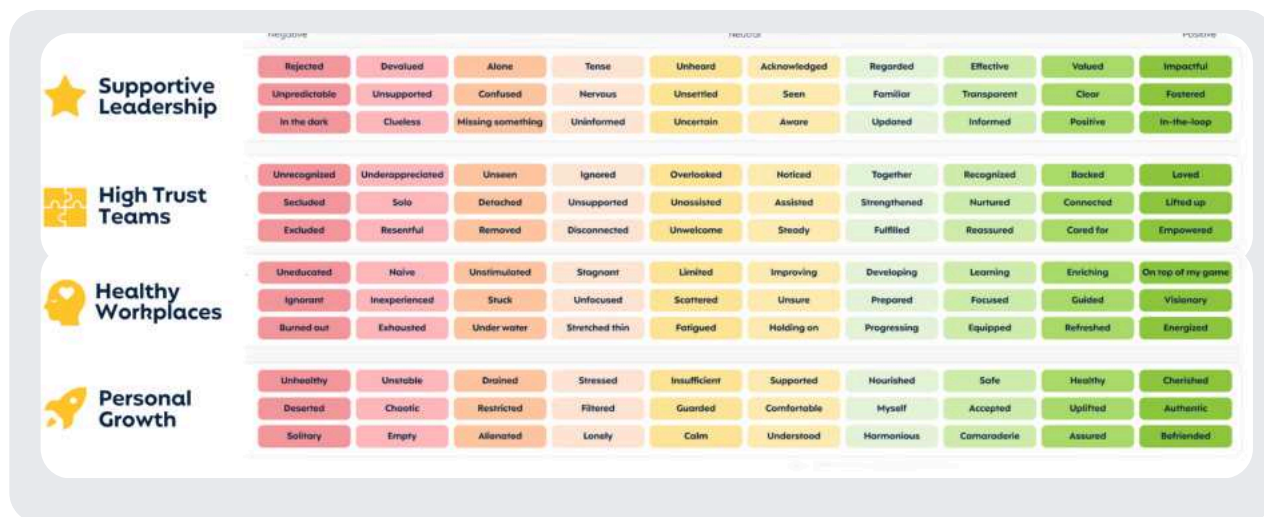3. **Personal Growth**
4. **Workplace Health**

For the 2024-25 survey, Alpaca selected a framework of 150 words that include an equal number of positive and negative words, and aligned them to drivers of teacher wellbeing.

The sentiments in Alpaca's survey are the words and phrases teachers use to talk about how they feel at work. Most of these words are "feeling words," expressing emotion (such as "loved" or "lonely"); some of the words indicate physical states (such as "exhausted" or "energized"); and some of the words indicate actions (such as "clued in" or "in the dark").

Sentiments are the building blocks of the Alpaca framework. In our pilot year:

- Each sentiment was contributed by an educator describing their experience at work in our first three years of conducting surveys with educators.
- Sentiments were selected for inclusion in the Alpaca Pulse framework based on their alignment to Alpaca's research-backed drivers of educator wellbeing.

Here is a visual representation of our Pulse framework:

Data Analysis: Alpaca's Dashboard & Analysis

One of Alpaca's key value propositions to partners is that our dashboards and analysis are simple, straightforward, and focus on displaying the actual words teachers are using to describe work right now.

As such, our dashboard includes the following components:

- **What Your Team is Saying:** Alpaca provides multiple views of the words teachers are using to describe work, coded for level of sentiment (positive, neutral, or negative)
- **What Your Team Needs Right Now:** The dashboard shows leaders for the given timeframe the top needs that the team has expressed would be helpful supports for them at work.
- **Where to Focus and Where to Celebrate:** Alpaca shows the alignment of positive and negative sentiment to key wellbeing drivers, offering leaders opportunities to "find the bright spots" while also understanding where to focus.
- **What Your Team Wants to Share:** The dashboard displays the full text of comments from educators.

A snapshot of several dashboard visualizations can be found here:

2024-25 Program Participation at Council Bluffs Community Schools

In the 2024-25 school year, Council Bluffs Community Schools collected teacher wellbeing data in alignment from September through May, on a monthly cadence. The district paired data collection with Alpaca's teacher recognition program, rewarding 5 staff members each month with a personalized "care package" as part of the overall program. The recognition program was not a direct reward/compensation for participating in the survey — the two activities were operated separately.

In 2024-25, Council Bluffs Community Schools collected more than **3,270 anonymous survey sessions** across the district, producing more than **18,300 data points** from **350+ educators** in the district about the words they use to describe work, the needs they see as most prevalent, and the comments they shared.

Participation was welcomed across every role in the building, including both certified and classified staff designations. As such, our absenteeism and retention data also covers both certified and classified staff.

Key Findings: Teacher Sentiment and Wellbeing

The following outlines our key findings with regard to teacher sentiment and wellbeing overall, as well as its relationship to absenteeism and attendance for educators in each building.
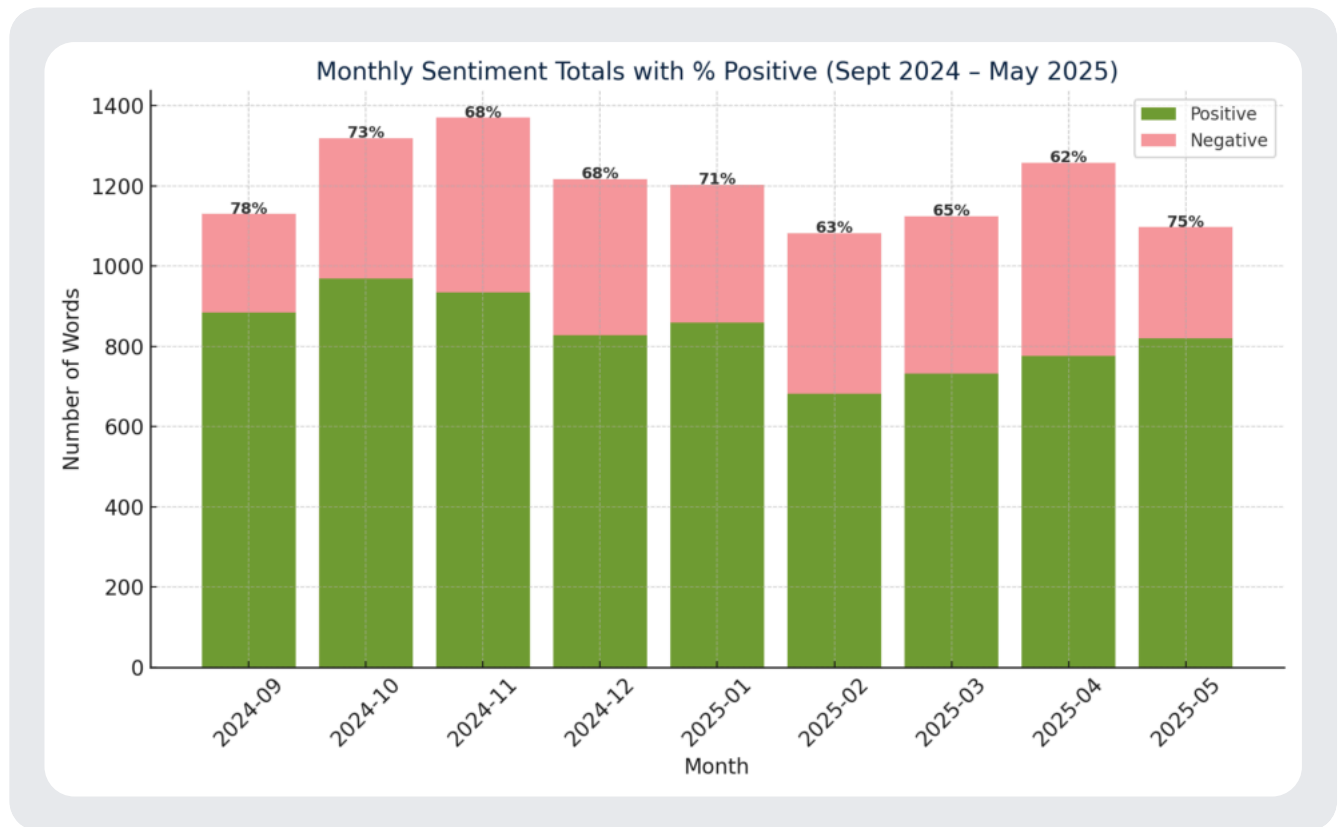

Top Sentiment

Across all buildings, and across the full year, the top 15 words for Council Bluffs Community School Districts included:

FATIGUED
DRAINED
SUPPORTED
EXHAUSTED
IMPROVING
STRESSED
STRETCHED THIN
COMFORTABLE
TRUSTED

Sentiment Over Time

Educator sentiment was categorized into six tiers and then grouped into two categories for clarity:

- **Positive Sentiment:** Strongly Positive, Positive, Neutral to Positive
- **Negative Sentiment:** Negative, Strongly Negative, Highly Negative

The chart here tracks the total number of wellbeing words recorded each month from August 2024 through March 2025. Each bar is labeled with the percentage of responses that were positive.

Key Takeaways:

We see strong morale in August, October, and again in May — not surprising given how those months align with fresh starts or finish lines.
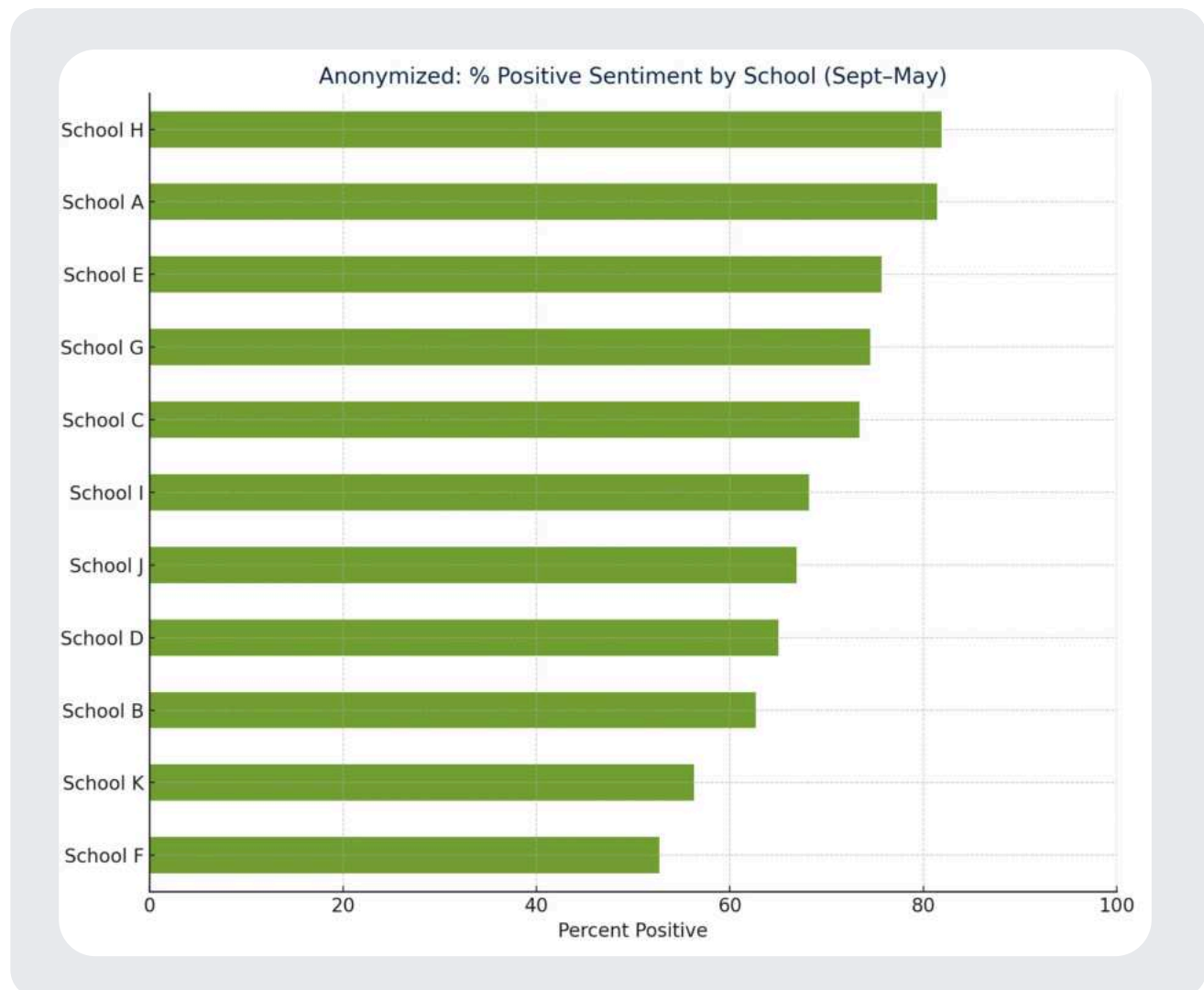
But February really stands out. It's a sharp drop in positivity and a clear spike in negative sentiment — a signal that that's a tough month across the district.

- Positivity peaked in **August, October, and May**, reflecting strong morale at key transition points.
- **February** showed the sharpest drop in % positivity and a spike in negative sentiment.

Sentiment by School

We compared the sentiment distribution by school, showing the proportion of positive and negative words used in each building.

We noticed some clear bright spots here — schools where teachers consistently use language that reflects appreciation, growth, and support. These are your culture carriers — buildings that are doing something right. They may be good models to learn from or showcase internally.

Anonymized: % Positive Sentiment by School (Sept–May)

School	Percent Positive
School H	~82
School A	~81
School E	~76
School G	~75
School C	~74
School I	~68
School J	~67
School D	~65
School B	~63
School K	~56
School F	~52

We also noticed in the data that there are buildings with overall lower positivity sentiment than others, throughout the year. These areas of wellbeing could align to opportunities to coach on Wallace Foundation's key behaviors with school leadership.

Sentiment Trends by School + Month

Now we zoom out to look at positivity **by school and by month**. The darker greens show high positivity; redder areas indicate morale concerns.

This heatmap helps the district spot patterns — like which schools consistently maintain positivity, and where seasonal dips occur. This can be useful for timing your leadership check-ins and staff supports, as well as opportunities for celebration, morale boosts, and district-wide efforts to build community.

Anonymized: Educator Sentiment by School × Month (Sept–May)

School	2024-09	2024-10	2024-11	2024-12	2025-01	2025-02	2025-03	2025-04	2025-05
School H	87.7	96.9	66.7		86.0	85.0		75.9	77.0
School A	85.7	73.1	75.2	81.6	85.9	90.2	78.4	78.5	83.7
School E	77.0	78.5	79.7	73.9	73.5	68.9	71.8	73.7	81.5
School C	88.4	88.9	70.9	79.7	69.9		55.5	76.7	66.2
School G	81.6	65.6	78.3	76.1	73.9	67.5	81.6	62.3	81.2
School I	72.6	75.2	69.5	67.3	65.6	63.4	79.7	53.5	64.4
School J	74.2	78.1	65.2	58.6	80.0	50.0	61.5	77.9	55.1
School B	85.9		63.5		70.9		63.9	44.7	65.6
School D	63.5	69.6	65.4	60.0	71.6	63.5	65.1	59.3	
School K	84.0	74.1	56.1	59.5	32.4	44.4	48.6	36.1	98.8
School F	73.0	48.1	52.6	50.0	60.5	39.2	53.1	32.5	44.8

As is evident here, some schools maintain consistent morale, while others show significant dips in winter or pre-break periods.

Linking Sentiment and Absenteeism

To understand how wellbeing impacts attendance, we merged the sentiment data with district-reported absences per FTE, month-by-month. We combined the sentiment data with monthly absenteeism rates.

Monthly absenteeism rate is measured by the total number of staff absence days across both certified and classified staff, stated in ratio to the total number of FTE in the building, across both designations. For instance, if a building has 50 staff members and has 55 absent days in a single month, the ratio is is 55:50 or 1.1.

For Council Bluffs School District, the average ratio of Absent Days to FTE is 1.25 absences per month.

The complete table can be shown here:

FTE	9/1/2024	10/1/2024	11/1/2024	12/1/2024	1/1/2025	2/1/2025	3/1/2025	4/1/2025	5/1/2025
51.70	1.547	2.244	1.644	1.122	0.870	1.122	0.561	1.257	1.354
41.83	1.267	1.698	1.219	1.195	0.622	1.578	0.765	1.387	1.387
62.19	1.238	1.479	1.544	1.351	0.884	1.865	1.126	1.158	0.917
38.58	1.037	1.633	1.607	1.400	1.192	1.270	0.518	0.855	1.115
49.31	1.318	1.622	1.217	0.892	1.115	0.852	0.730	0.913	0.913
44.96	0.578	0.823	0.934	0.623	0.912	0.689	0.489	0.867	1.068
45.51	0.703	1.274	1.077	1.099	0.813	1.296	0.857	0.791	0.791
32.11	0.965	0.872	0.779	0.592	0.467	1.183	0.716	0.965	1.152
46.73	0.963	0.920	1.070	0.621	0.813	0.877	0.621	1.841	1.413
60.32	1.227	1.757	1.707	1.939	1.459	1.525	1.293	2.420	2.553
52.95	1.662	2.474	1.530	1.265	1.039	0.793	0.718	1.775	2.304
526.19	1.161	1.568	1.338	1.140	0.952	1.205	0.791	1.340	1.399

Council Bluffs Community School District Absentee Rates for FTE Staff (Certified and Classified).

Now, comparing the absenteeism data with the teacher wellbeing data in each school, and in each month, we see a clear relationship.

While overall trends show only a modest correlation between educator sentiment and absenteeism, several schools in Council Bluffs stood out as clear examples where strong positive culture aligned with consistent staff presence. These "bright spots" tell a compelling story about the potential impact of school culture on educator engagement and reliability.

Bright Spots for Educator Attendance and Positivity

🚀 School G

School G consistently demonstrated some of the highest levels of positive educator sentiment across the district, paired with absenteeism well below the district average of 1.25 absences per FTE.

- In September 2024, School G kicked off the year with 81.6% positive sentiment and only 0.70 absences per FTE, suggesting a strong onboarding, early-year culture, and staff motivation.
- By March 2025, positivity remained high at 81.6%, with absences still low at 0.86 per FTE, even as spring fatigue often begins to show.
- In May 2025, School G finished strong, with 81.2% positivity and 0.79 absences per FTE — showing a full-year trend of wellbeing and engagement.

🌱 School E

School E also showed strong performance in late spring, a time when many schools face burnout and rising absenteeism.

- In May 2025, teachers at School E expressed 81.5% positive sentiment, with absenteeism down to 0.91 per FTE, indicating that the school was able to sustain energy and support through the end of the year.

💡 School I

School I had multiple months where strong sentiment aligned with presence:

- In March 2025, teachers expressed 79.7% positivity, while absenteeism dropped to an impressive 0.62 per FTE — one of the lowest in the district.
- In October 2024, sentiment was still strong at 75.2%, with absenteeism at 0.92 per FTE, indicating early-year momentum carried forward.

What This Tells Us

These examples illustrate that when educators feel seen, supported, and valued, they show up — both emotionally and physically. While other factors like illness, family obligations, and systemic stressors influence attendance, the alignment between wellbeing and presence at schools like the three in this example presents a powerful case for investing in school culture.

his data underscores a clear insight: **teacher wellbeing impacts teacher attendance**.

Monitoring trends in sentiment provides early signals of when and where to invest in culture-building and educator support.

Finding Focus Points

This data also helps us identify priority schools for focus, as well as priority months for focus. We identified school-month combinations where:

- % Positivity Rate was **below 65%**
- Absences per FTE were **above the district average of 1.25**

School	Month	Percent Positive	AbsencesPerFTE
School B	February, 2024	47.10%	1.625
School B	April, 2024	57.60%	1.277
School B	November, 2024	63.50%	1.644
School B	April, 2025	44.70%	1.257
School I	April, 2025	53.50%	1.841
School I	May, 2025	64.40%	1.413
School J	February, 2025	64.70%	1.691
School J	December, 2024	58.60%	1.939
School J	February, 2025	50%	1.525
School J	March, 2025	61.50%	1.293
School J	May, 2025	55.10%	2.553
School K	November, 2024	56.10%	1.53
School K	December, 2024	59.50%	1.265
School K	April, 2025	36.10%	1.775

Conclusion & Recommendations

Wellbeing and attendance are connected — and predictable. From this data, we know that over time, schools and districts can act ahead of time — especially in winter — to support schools where culture is slipping, where absenteeism may become a greater concern. And more importantly, schools and districts have bright spots to learn from.
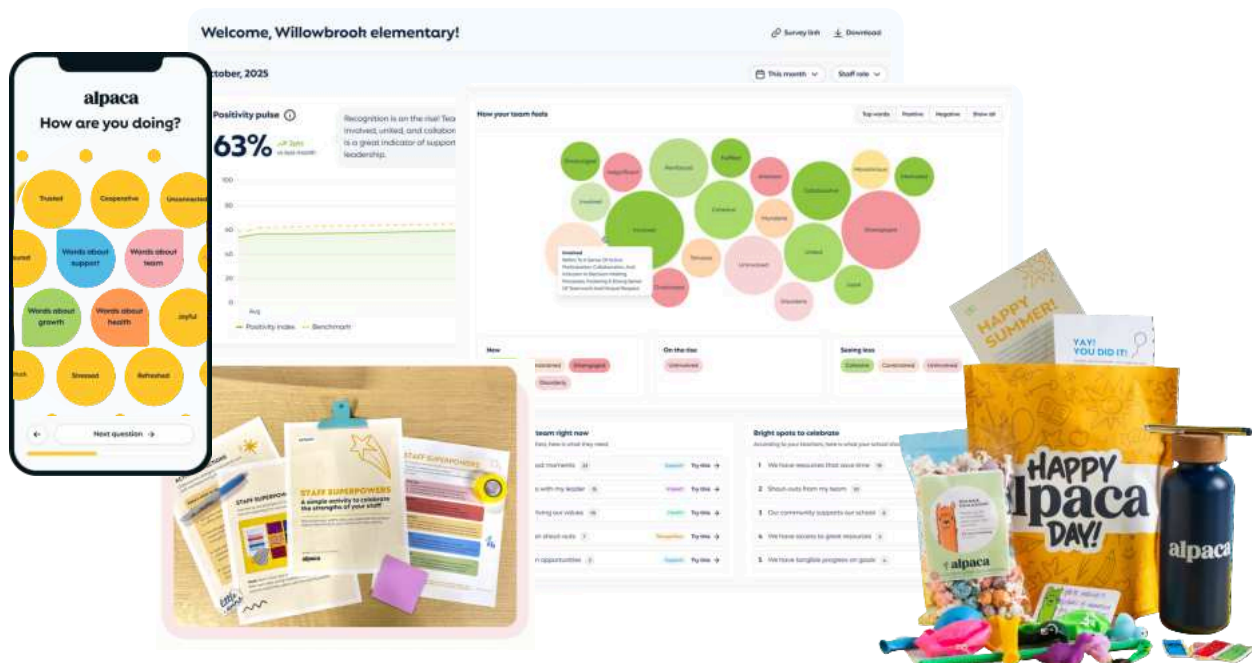
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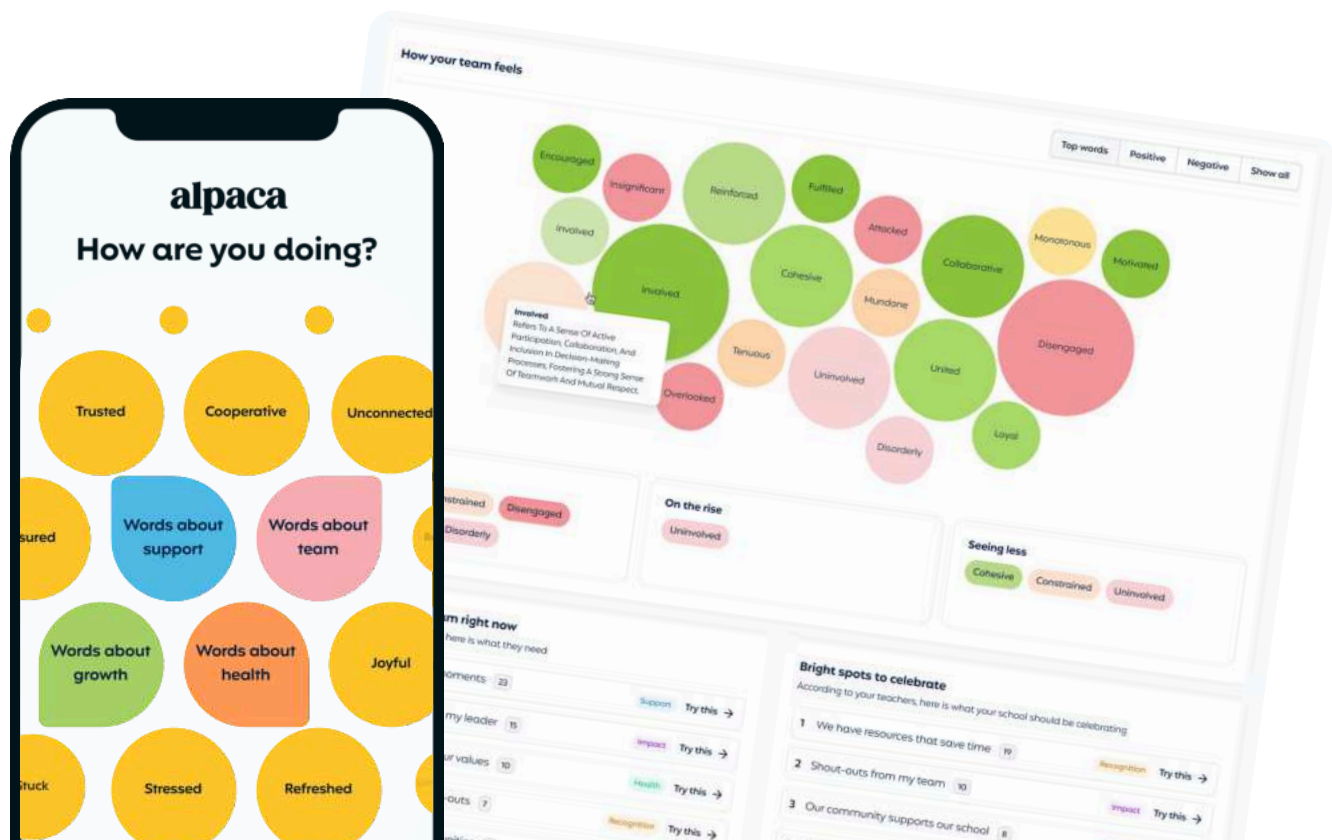
For Council Bluffs Community Schools,

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Turn Insights Into Action in Your District with Alpaca

Council Bluffs used Alpaca to connect teacher wellbeing with attendance and retention—unlocking powerful, actionable insights for leaders.

Want to see how it could work in your district?

→ **Book A Demo** and let's explore together.

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