



# City Springs Elementary/Middle School

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*A case study of school staff prioritizing strong relationships and a safe environment to promote student success*

In 2024, the Fund for Educational Excellence conducted research with Baltimore City Public Schools' students, parents and caregivers, and school leaders about the facets of student belonging and connection in a school community. On March 25, 2025, we released a comprehensive report, [SEEN & HEARD: How Student Belonging Shapes School Communities and Student Success](#), based on our analysis, findings, and recommendations.

**This case study is the first in a series of three that we will release over the next few months.** Our objective with this series is to spotlight schools that have built a strong climate and culture where their students feel seen, valued and empowered to succeed. By showcasing these schools and their practices, we hope to inspire other schools to adopt what works from their peers and share their own best practices.

In our recent report, four key themes and aligned recommendations feature, including the critical importance of student-staff relationships and student safety. Every relationship in a school contributes to a sense of belonging, but the participants in our research talked the most about the importance of staff-student relationships. Beyond staff knowing their names and

faces, students want the adults in their school building to get to know them, to give them space to be their authentic selves, and to listen to their ideas and concerns. They want more opportunities to connect with school staff both individually and in small groups. They also need to feel – and be – safe at school, both physically and emotionally as a pre-condition for learning.

The staff at City Springs Elementary/Middle hold a deep commitment to knowing the students in their care and to creating an environment that feels safe for everyone in the building. Below, we highlight several promising practices the school has implemented to ensure that every student is set up to succeed academically and socio-emotionally.



## Introducing City Springs

Established in 1966, in large part to educate young residents of the Perkins Homes,<sup>i</sup> City Springs Elementary was an integral part of its East Baltimore neighborhood. In 2000, the school began adding middle grades. In 2005, City Springs converted to a neighborhood charter school operated by the Baltimore Curriculum Project. The school gained a new school leader in 2006: Dr. Rhonda Richetta, who shows her school spirit by proudly wearing the school color, purple, in some way every day.

In 2019, the city of Baltimore demolished the Perkins Homes as part of a plan to re-develop the area with new modern mixed income housing units, the first of which opened in 2024. Perkins Homes residents were temporarily relocated during the demolition and construction, which had a major impact on enrollment at City Springs. In 2019, the school served 742 students, but enrollment dropped more than one-third to 416 by the 2023-24 school year. With the opening of the new Perkins Square development, and the infusion of new and resettled former residents, the school and district anticipate that enrollment will rebound. There are plans in place for a new building for City Springs Elementary/Middle to open by 2027.

In the 2024-25 school year, City Springs enrolled 483 students. Eighty-six percent (86%) of students are African-American or Black; 7% are Hispanic. Multilingual learners comprise 10% of the student body, and 91% meet federal Title I eligibility requirements. The school has seen steady gains in both math and English proficiency year over year.

Led by Dr. Rhonda Richetta for the past 19 years, City Springs employs 62 staff members, 35 of whom are classroom teachers.

Each year, the Maryland State Department of Education conducts a student survey in all the state's public schools. Among Baltimore City Public Schools in 2024, City Springs sits in the top quartile of schools for both elementary and middle grades for positive student responses to questions about staff-student relationships.

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<sup>i</sup> Perkins Homes was a public housing community originally built to accommodate World War II veterans who worked in Baltimore's docks and factories.

## STUDENT-STAFF RELATIONSHIP MAPPING

Every Friday is an early release day for students at City Springs. They leave the school building at 12:45, while staff use the afternoon for collaborative planning and professional learning. Early in the 2024-25 school year, school leaders decided to try out a practice they learned about at a leadership retreat at the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta at the end of the previous academic year. One Friday afternoon, they put the names of every student up on the walls around the library. Then, all staff members at the school—including teachers, paraprofessionals, coaches, student support staff, administrative staff, and school leaders—did a gallery walk and placed stickers on the names of the students they felt they had a strong relationship with. Afterward, the whole group noted which students had a lot of stickers and which students did not have any at all. Each staff member chose a student who did not have any stickers by their name and was charged to develop a plan to build a relationship with that student over the course of the school year.

## REGULAR EXAMINATION OF STUDENT DATA

At City Springs, as in many other schools, grade level teams meet weekly to look at student data. However, at City Springs, they look at every student's data on a rotating basis and develop and record action steps to take for each content area—English language arts, math, science, and history—based on what the data says about their needs. One middle school coach who had recently started working at City Springs after a previous stint in Baltimore County Public Schools noted that she likes this approach, because every student is getting some attention. In her last job, when her team members looked at student data, they were typically focused on the same five students every week who were in trouble frequently or really struggling with learning the material. “When you do it that way, you miss the higher performing students who may need a push or the kids in the middle who get missed entirely and just fall through the cracks,” she said.

## FREQUENT, INTENTIONAL POSITIVE FEEDBACK

At City Springs, teachers schoolwide are expected and coached to give three pieces of positive feedback to a student for every piece of critical feedback. This practice, which starts in the early grades and continues through middle school, regularly recognizes students' effort, persistence, and strong work, reinforcing a culture of belonging and motivation.

Positive reinforcement doesn't start or stop at the classroom door. Each morning, the school-wide Fly High Eagles Broadcast gives staff the chance to publicly celebrate students for their leadership, learning, and progress. As one staff member shared, the bond between staff and youth strengthens when “teachers have the opportunity to brag on [their] students.”



## INTENTIONAL CLASS CONSTRUCTION

In the middle grades, the City Springs approach to class construction is very intentional and draws on deep knowledge of each and every student. Teachers, coaches, and administrators begin the process of class construction for the following school year in February. Rather than defaulting to alphabetical sorting or tracking by ability level, they consider each student's academic needs, alongside considerations of friend groups and which students work well together on collaborative assignments. Staff invest considerable time in making sure students are placed in classroom environments where they will thrive both intellectually and socially.





## RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND A SAFE SPACE FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF

Beyond the intentional effort to build strong relationships between students and staff, City Springs also does an exceptional job of creating an environment where students feel safe. And when we talk about safety, we're not just talking about protection from physical harm or bullying. At City Springs, safety also means creating a space where students and staff can show up fully and authentically as themselves.

City Springs prioritizes equity and healing for its students. The school's director of equity and antiracism, Mr. Patterson, teaches 8th grade social studies while also supporting staff through professional development and one-on-one coaching. His role was born out of the school's desire to center antiracist practices following the national racial justice uprisings in the wake of George Floyd's murder.

In parallel, the school also added a director of restorative practices, Mr. Wade, who leads a team focused on holding restorative circles, training peer mediators, and helping students resolve conflicts productively. City Springs was an early adopter of restorative practices, introducing the program in 2007 and making adjustments and improvements in the ensuing years. Teachers and other school staff hold restorative circles regularly both inside classrooms and in small-group pullouts. School staff even log behavior, intervention, and consequence (BiC) data using a Google Form and use this system to look for trends in interventions that work to decrease negative behaviors and guide professional support. School leaders believe that teachers who use restorative circles as a regular part of their classroom practice tend to experience fewer in-class behavioral issues, and they're now collecting data to explore that connection.

Together, these two roles reflect a deep commitment to creating a school environment where healing, identity, justice and true emotional safety are part of the daily culture.

## HOW THEY KNOW IT'S WORKING: CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

It's important for every school community to make efforts to improve engagement and belonging for students and families, but it's just as important to ask whether those efforts are working.

City Springs staff members monitor alumni's high school experiences to assess how well the school's programming is preparing students for what's next. This includes tracking ninth-grade transcripts, GPA trends, school stability (e.g., whether alumni seek transfers or stay enrolled in their initial high school placement), and even graduation rates.

Staff members also visit local high schools like Cristo Rey, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Baltimore City College, and Western High School to check in on former students and learn from them what's working well for them in their high school settings. That feedback loop helps City Springs staff to adjust their practices in real time.

One of the clearest signs that the school's culture is working is the high level of alumni engagement. City Springs graduates routinely come back to visit, volunteer, or even work at the school. Several current staff members are former students.

There's a wall right outside the front office that celebrates their journeys: from Division I athletes to social media influencers to local business owners. During our visit, a young man, former student—now towering at around 6'4"—returned to the building, greeted like family. You can only imagine the kind of connection that was built during his formative years walking these same hallways.

Much of this long-term connection is made possible by City Springs' unusually high teacher retention rate. Many educators have been at the school for over a decade, which allows students to maintain relationships with trusted adults as they grow. As Dr. Richetta shared, "Even when they're in 8th grade, they still have a relationship with their Kindergarten teacher."

