



# PATHWAY TO INCLUSION: A Spokane School District and Whitman Elementary School Story



## BACKGROUND

Whitman Elementary and Spokane Public Schools joined as an IPTN Demonstration Site District in 2024. Their work focuses on schoolwide inclusion, highlighting Soft Landing, the Workshop Model, and Buddy Rooms as core strategies—all aimed at ensuring every student has access, support, and a sense of belonging. Whitman Elementary serves 364 students with 21% receiving special education services, 15% identified as multilingual learners, and 14% qualifying for McKinney-Vento supports. As a Title I building with 86% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, Whitman provides robust academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports through a comprehensive MTSS framework and intentional collaboration among staff.



## MISSION & VISION

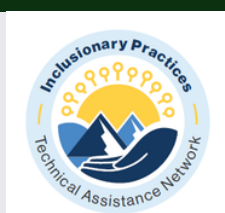
Spokane Public Schools' mission-- **"Excellence for Everyone through Equity"**—guides Whitman Elementary's inclusive approach. The school's vision is rooted in building a culture of high expectations, family, and courage, summarized in the motto: **"We are Family. Be Bold. Be Courageous. Be a Wildcat. Dream It... Believe It... Achieve It."** Whitman's community embraces the belief that all students can succeed when systems, relationships, and instruction are intentionally designed to promote belonging, consistency, and academic success.



## DISTRICT MOVES

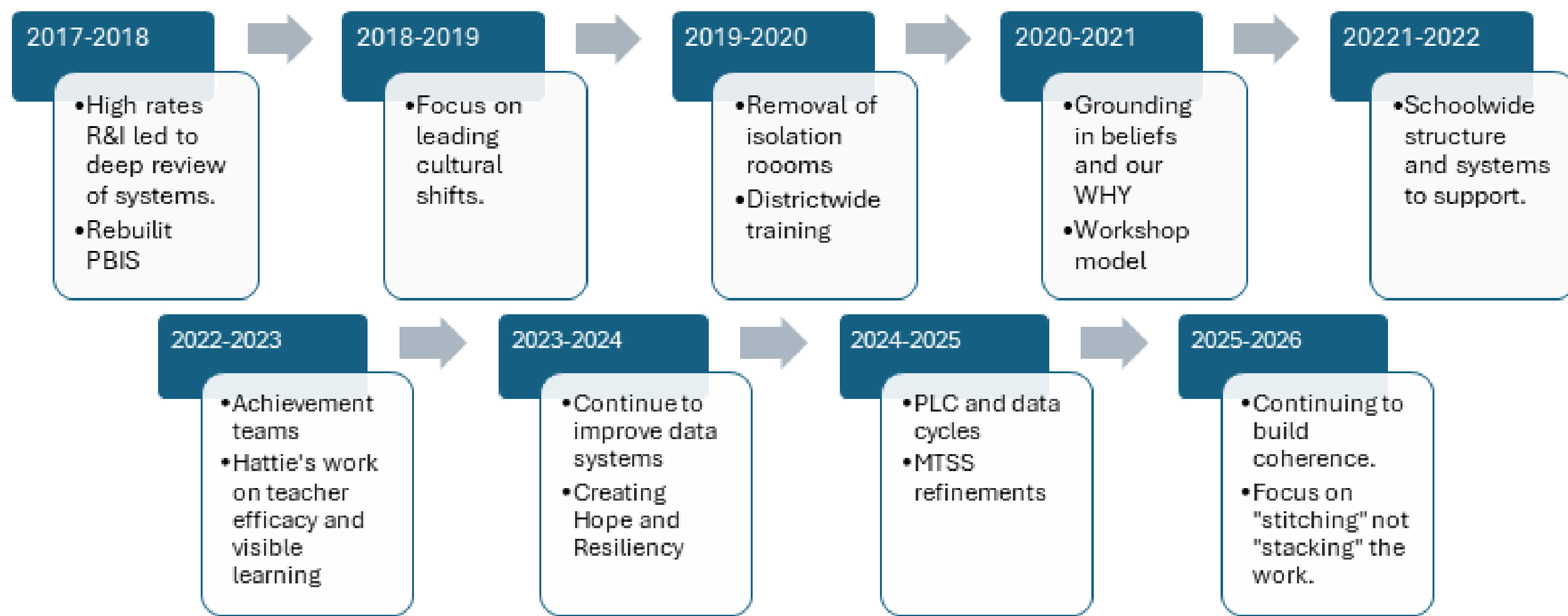
Spokane Public Schools' efforts to reduce restraint and eliminate isolation reflect a multi-year commitment to student safety, equity, and trauma-informed practice. After serious incidents and community concern in 2018–2019, the district partnered with OSPI, Disability Rights Washington, and community advocates to strengthen policies, improve reporting, and align procedures with best practice. SPS also expanded staff training in de-escalation, CPI, Life Space Crisis Intervention, and effective FBA/BIP implementation to build systemwide capacity.

Alongside staff training, SPS restructured programs by reducing class sizes, increasing paraeducator support, removing isolation rooms, and creating more supportive break spaces. In 2020, a Department of Justice investigation found the district had improperly used restraint and isolation with students with disabilities, leading to a settlement and major improvements in policy, reporting, and accountability. Through these combined efforts, SPS eliminated isolation by April 2023 and continues to reduce restraint, reflecting a sustained shift toward safer, more supportive schools.



# WHITMAN'S TIMELINE OF INTENTIONAL MOVES

Whitman's journey has focused on reimagining inclusion by aligning behavior and academic systems, redesigning structures, and empowering staff collaboration.



## HIGHLIGHTED INCLUSIVE PRACTICE 1: SOFT LANDING

A soft-landing establishes a welcoming start to the school day to foster belonging and connection. As students and families enter their school, they are greeted by staff. From the moment they walk in the door, they are welcomed and invited. This is one of many ways Whitman is creating a culture of belonging. As students enter their classrooms, they are greeted by their teachers. The first activity of the day is a neutralizing activity. This promotes positive teacher student relationships and regulation at the start of each day.

Examples of neutralizing activities include: Center tubs (K-2), Spill the tea (3-5), Games (3-5), coloring/art (K-2). Neutralizing activities are a low demand and engaging activity allowing students to have a soft landing for the critical start of the school day. Soft landing incorporates 5 key elements:

1. Warm Greeting
2. Mood Meter Check-In
3. Neutralizing Activity
4. Morning Message
5. Mindful Minute or Peaceful Pause

## HIGHLIGHTED INCLUSIVE PRACTICE 2: WORKSHOP MODEL

Focuses on instructional systems that accelerate growth through targeted support

Features:

- Small-group instruction and strategic intervention
- Clear learning intentions and success criteria
- Teacher clarity and reflection on learning outcomes
- Regular feedback and celebration of progress

## HIGHLIGHTED INCLUSIVE PRACTICE 3: BUDDY ROOMS

Builds a collaborative culture and sense of family across classrooms.

Provides spaces where students can practice regulation and connection through:

- Makerspaces for soft skill development
- Peer partnerships for learning and emotional support
- Structured opportunities to foster empathy and belonging

## NEXT STEPS

Whitman Elementary continues to strengthen inclusive systems by expanding professional learning around trauma-informed practices, deepening co-teaching and collaboration through MTSS, and maintaining alignment between behavioral and academic supports. The school's next phase centers on sustaining student growth, closing achievement gaps, and ensuring equitable access to learning for every child through data-driven, relationship-centered practices.

SPOKANE PUBLIC SCHOOLS | HOME

