

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

“The authors have done an amazing job of outlining the importance of building a sense of belonging for all stakeholders in education. The focus is on building positive relationships where everyone feels welcomed, invited, present, known, accepted, involved, heard, supported, befriended, needed, and loved. This is the core of what all educators need to invest their time and energy in. Once you create this sense of belonging, you can then tap into each student and educator’s true potential. The sky’s the limit once you make this happen.”

Dick Keeler

Principal at Central Valley Academy

“*Belonging in School* is a delightful primer on how schools can make students, staff, parents and guardians, and community members feel welcome. Students work for people they like in places they like. This book provides a pathway to create those conditions and ensure inclusivity, connectedness, and academic success for all.”

Zac Robbins

Superintendent
Marysville School District

“Yessss! (Or maybe—Finally!) A whole book devoted to building the kind of culture in schools that’s worth restoring. Every kid desires and deserves to belong. Teachers, listen up! Content knowledge matters less if you don’t know how to build community. The authors break down the dimensions of belonging in a way that engages educators and shows them how to create and hold space for every student.”

Shawn Bush

Director of Student Services
Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township

“Dr. Smith’s work with our districts has been nothing short of transformative. With a deep understanding of the critical importance of creating an inclusive, supportive school environment, Dr. Smith has guided our educators and administrators to rethink traditional disciplinary approaches. Instead of punitive measures, we now focus on restorative practices, conflict resolution, and social-emotional learning. The result has been a marked decrease in disciplinary incidents and a notable increase in student engagement and satisfaction.

Belonging in School takes us to the next level in our journey toward creating a more inclusive, supportive, and positive educational environment. The illustrated playbook is a comprehensive guide that offers practical, actionable strategies for fostering belonging not only among students but also among teachers and staff. This holistic approach recognizes that when educators and staff feel a sense of belonging, it naturally extends to students, creating a ripple effect of positivity and engagement throughout our schools.”

Summer Prather-Smith

Director of Engagement and School Climate
Santa Rita Union School District

BELONGING in SCHOOL

BELONGING in SCHOOL

An
Illustrated
Playbook



**DOMINIQUE SMITH • DOUGLAS FISHER • NANCY FREY
VINCENT POMPEI • RACHAEL STEWART**

ILLUSTRATED BY TARYL HANSEN

CORWIN

Fisher & Frey

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Visit the companion website at
resources.corwin.com/belongingplaybook
for downloadable resources.

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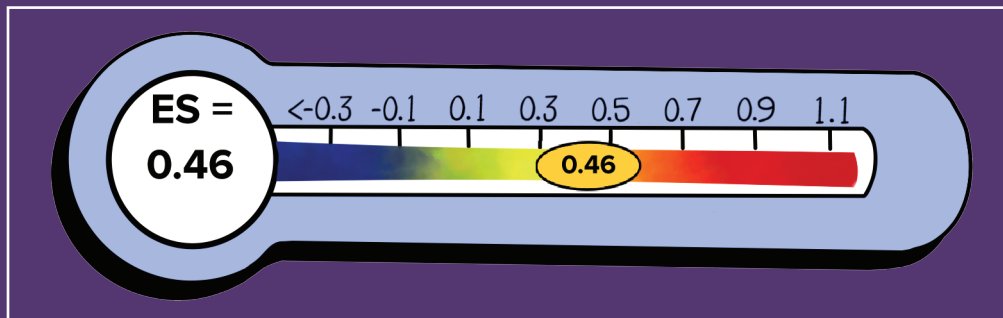
INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to have a sense of belonging? Belonging is a visceral feeling: You know when you feel it—and you *really* know when you don't. But what does belonging actually entail? "Belonging is the feeling that we're part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us—and to which we feel we have something to contribute."¹ Let's take that definition apart.

- *Feeling*: It's emotional and psychological, and we experience it.
- *Larger group*: It's about membership with other people.
- *Values*: There is a sense of worth or importance.
- *Respects*: There is admiration for the qualities each person has.
- *Cares*: There is concern and attention.
- *Something to contribute*: The group benefits from each person's contributions.

Students with a strong sense of belonging in a classroom perform better academically.² When students don't feel that they belong, their performance suffers. This is not just some fluffy mumble jumble: There is a strong research base that supports the need for schools to create systems that foster student belonging. In fact, several meta-analyses point to the fact that belonging keeps us learning. The effect size for belonging is 0.46, just above average of all the things that we do in school to ensure learning.³

Figure I.1 • Effect Size for Belonging



Belonging is a key factor that allows other influences to take hold. Belonging serves as a gatekeeper for all the other aspects of learning to take root. If students do not feel that they belong in a class, then it is unlikely that the amazing instruction being provided to them will significantly improve their learning. Instead, students with a low sense of belonging spend time questioning their status and membership in the group and fail to achieve at high levels. For them, the gate is closed, and they are on the outside of learning, looking in.

The impact of belonging also extends far beyond academics. Studies suggest that belonging also affects our health and well-being.⁴ Not only do students learn more when they feel that they belong, but they also experience positive health outcomes, including self-reports of wellness and reduced number of doctor visits.⁵

The reverse is also true, and a diminished sense of belonging can break along racial, ethnic, and ability lines. Black adolescent students are at higher risk for reporting a lack of belonging and school connectedness.⁶ Another study showed that there was a relationship between sense of belonging and suicide ideation and attempts for Black students, with the risk increasing by 35 percent when students did not feel that they belonged.⁷ Another study found that belonging at school reduced suicide ideation among Latino/x/e students.⁸ Similarly, a study of students with learning disabilities found that higher levels of school and family connectedness were linked to reduced emotional distress, suicide attempts, and involvement in violence.⁹

Importantly, students can have a stronger sense of belonging in one class or grade and a diminished sense of belonging in another class or grade. For all of us, belonging is malleable, and it changes based on the experiences we are currently having or have had in the past. Teachers and leaders can design environments and experiences to create situations in which belonging is fostered—and this is an essential commitment for educators to make. If we neglect the environment and fail to ensure that all students feel that they belong, our disregard diminishes our teaching and our students' learning.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We have organized this playbook to support the important conversations caring educators have about how classrooms and schools can ensure that every child feels a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school. Module 1 provides an overview of the eleven dimensions of belonging that follow in Modules 2–12. We suggest you begin with Module 1 to build foundational knowledge. After that, please dive into the modules in any order that aligns with your purposes. The dimensions of belonging inform one another, but they are in no way meant to suggest a hierarchy, chronological importance, or order of operations.

You'll find that every module features three evidence-based actions that teachers can apply to create the kinds of classrooms and schools that invest

in every student's sense of belonging. Some of the actions may resonate with you more than others. We have tried to balance actions that are useful at the elementary and secondary levels.

Given that this is a playbook, you'll notice several interactive features:

- An **Essential Question** frames each module and is intended to build schema.
- **Two Truths and a Lie** near the beginning of the module allows you to consider several statements and then determine which ones are supported by the research and which one captures a common misconception. We invite you to return to these after reading the module to see if your thinking has been validated or extended.
- A **Quick Start** follows each profiled action, allowing you an opportunity to reflect on the content presented and prioritize the actions you can begin, as well as resources you may need to do so.
- The **Case in Point** in each module offers a scenario and an opportunity to see educators working together to resolve a dilemma. We've also included a **What's Your Advice?** feature, which allows you to make recommendations based on what you have learned and experienced.
- **What's Next?** appears at the end of every module and invites you to reflect on your learning and take actions of your own: What will you start, stop, and continue? It allows you space to scale your level of understanding so that you can keep learning after finishing the module.

Again, this playbook is meant to engage *you*. Please mark it up and complete the various tasks. The narrative in each module provides current and tested research as well as informed recommendations for practice. Your willingness to engage in the exercises in this playbook demonstrates your commitment to your students. Happy reading.





OVERVIEW: DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING

Most of us have had an experience when we did not feel that we belonged. Maybe it was in school, but maybe it was in our personal life. When we had that feeling, most likely we did not perform well, and we may even have tried to escape from the situation. The same is true for our students. When they don't feel they belong, they may try to escape from or avoid situations that are uncomfortable. Or they may choose not to be present at all. If we really do care about their learning and we want to live up to our mission and vision of schools, then we need to implement practices that increase students' sense of belonging. To learn best, students need to feel all these dimensions.¹

For now, we'll ask that you consider each dimension, how you would define it, and what actions you might take to address it. In the modules that follow, we'll provide an essential question for each dimension, definitions and parameters, actions that can foster belonging for each dimension, and indicators of success. For now, familiarize yourself with the dimensions and activate your background knowledge.

Consider the following quote: "We all hope that students will feel truly 'at home' in their classrooms. We want them to feel valued and accepted by their peers and teachers. We strive to create connections among students that lead to reciprocal relationships."² If you share that vision, this playbook is for you.



Essential Question:

HOW CAN WE LAY A SUCCESSFUL FOUNDATION
TO BUILD STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING?



TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Two of these statements are true; one is false. Can you spot the lie?

1. A low sense of belonging is associated with physical health concerns, including decreased immune function, a decline in cardiovascular health, and higher levels of cortisol, a hormone associated with distress.
2. A student's sense of belonging in school extends far beyond their academic years and impacts their sense of wellness into adulthood.
3. A person who possesses identities that are valued by their community will have a permanent sense of belonging.

A sense of belonging is crucial for well-being, and it is rooted in our deepest needs as humans to connect with others. Consider the toll the isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic took on so many people—perhaps you too. Isolation and diminished belongingness are well-documented threats to the physical and mental well-being of people across the lifespan.³

The sense of belonging students experience in school can persist into adulthood. People with a higher sense of belonging are more likely to achieve at higher rates, setting into motion an increased likelihood of being able to reach their aspirations as adults.⁴ While it's by no means a guarantee, those who experience belongingness in school set a pattern for seeking belongingness as adults.⁵

The lie? A person's identities are not the golden ticket to belonging.⁶ Too often, a person's sense of belonging is contingent on performance, not on their value as a person.

As one example, think of the school athlete who has a bad game. Suddenly, their identity no longer affords them the sense of belonging they possessed days earlier.

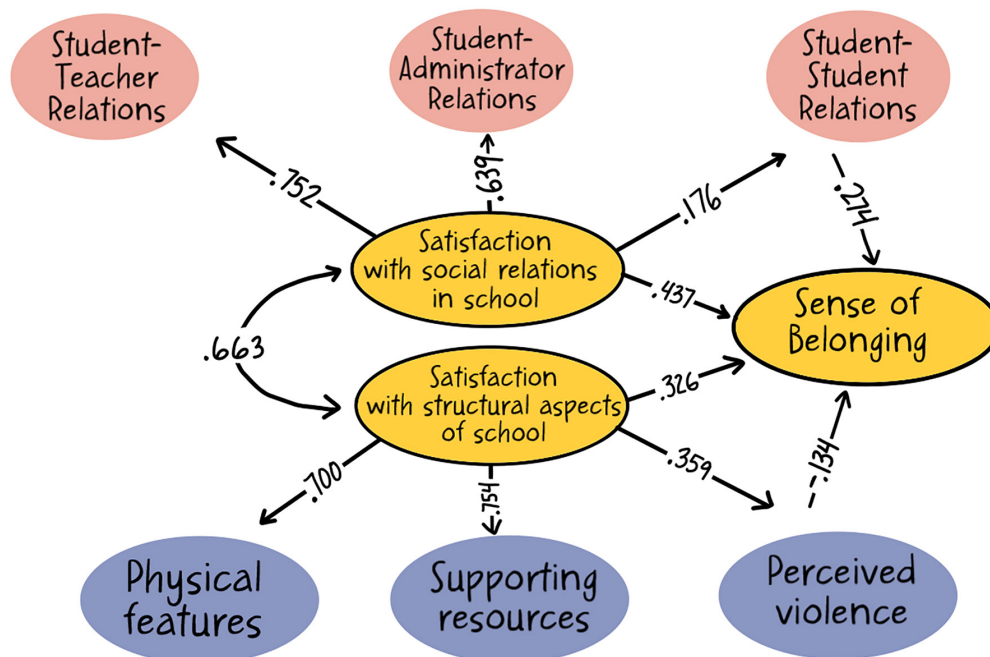
SCHOOL CONDITIONS THAT IMPACT BELONGING

There are literally thousands of articles about the value and impact of belonging in schools. As we noted in the introduction, the impact of a sense of belonging on academic achievement is strong. In other words, one of the influences on whether or not students learn is their belief that they belong in the classroom and school. Belongingness is more than mere affiliation. Belongingness is marked by relationships that are lasting and meaningful.⁷

One question concerns the conditions that influence students' sense of belonging. What are the various school factors that foster—or hamper—students' beliefs that they belong? One way to answer this question is to look at correlations between different factors and then test to see how powerful each of these is in explaining the outcome. The result shows paths of relationships between conditions, called a path analysis. In this kind of study, the relations are linear and additive, and the causal flow is in one direction. Note the direction of the arrows and where there are arrows to determine whether there is a relationship between two conditions.

This path analysis is from an investigation of students' sense of school belonging.⁸

Figure O.1 • Path Analysis of Student Sense of Belonging



Let's start in the middle. Note that students' satisfaction with the social relations in the school is correlated with their satisfaction with the structural aspects of the school. The correlation is 0.663, which is strong and suggests that these two concepts are related. As the image displays, each of these factors relates to an overall sense of belonging. The correlation between the social relations and belonging is 0.437 and the structural aspects and belonging is 0.326. Together, these correlations add up to 0.763, which implies that these two constructs explain a significant amount of the variance in students' sense of belonging. We'll focus on the structural aspects of school first. We'll turn our attention to social relations in the next section.

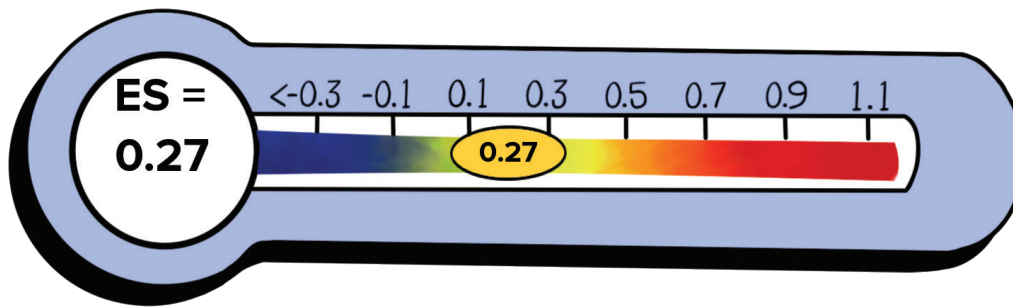
STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF THE SCHOOL



Three factors contribute to the overall satisfaction with the structural aspects of the school: the physical features, supporting resources, and perceptions of violence.

The *physical features* are an important factor. There is a strong correlation between physical features and satisfaction with the structural aspects, at 0.700. Physical features are the directly observable aspects of the building, which include lighting, noise, architecture, interior design, furniture, and other indoor and outdoor facilities.⁹ Some schools are cleaner than others; some have graffiti that's not quickly removed. Some schools have specialized environments (arts, physical education, and video production to name a few) and others do not. At the classroom level, the physical features include room arrangement, accessibility, seating, the use of wall space (such as bulletin boards and displays), and physical climate.

Figure O.2 • Effect Size for School Size



In addition, school size is one of the physical features that contributes to students' perceptions of the structure, with larger schools receiving less support. The effect size for school size on learning is 0.27, which is not a major influence but one that is contributing to the overall success of some students.

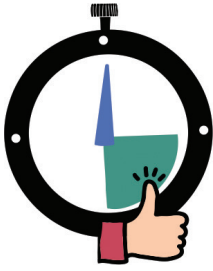
A second factor is *supporting resources*. The correlation between supporting resources and satisfaction with the structural aspects is also high: 0.754. This includes instructional materials, such as books and supplies. Do students have to share materials, or are there sufficient materials for students to complete learning tasks with their own supplies? Other supporting resources are for out-of-class activities, including field trips, musical instruments, or sports equipment. In schools where students recognize they have appropriate resources, satisfaction increases.

The third element in this path analysis is *perceived violence*. The correlation between perceived violence and satisfaction with the structural aspects is negative: -0.359 . When students *perceive* the school to be unsafe, their satisfaction is reduced, and it has a negative impact on their sense of belonging (-0.134). Safety is an important concern of students, and it includes knowing that their belongings are safe in their classrooms. All students need spaces they can call their own to store their personal materials and supplies.

Perceptions of violence are influenced by bullying and cyberbullying, which have been documented to compromise students' sense of belonging.¹⁰ The effect size of bullying is -0.32 , a negative impact on learning. Even witnesses to bullying suffer a reduced sense of belonging, especially when the bullying is not addressed by staff.¹¹ Further, students may perceive verbal, psychological, or physical violence from teachers to students, students to students, and between adults on campus. This factor includes not only personal experiences of violence, but also a general sense of safety on the campus.



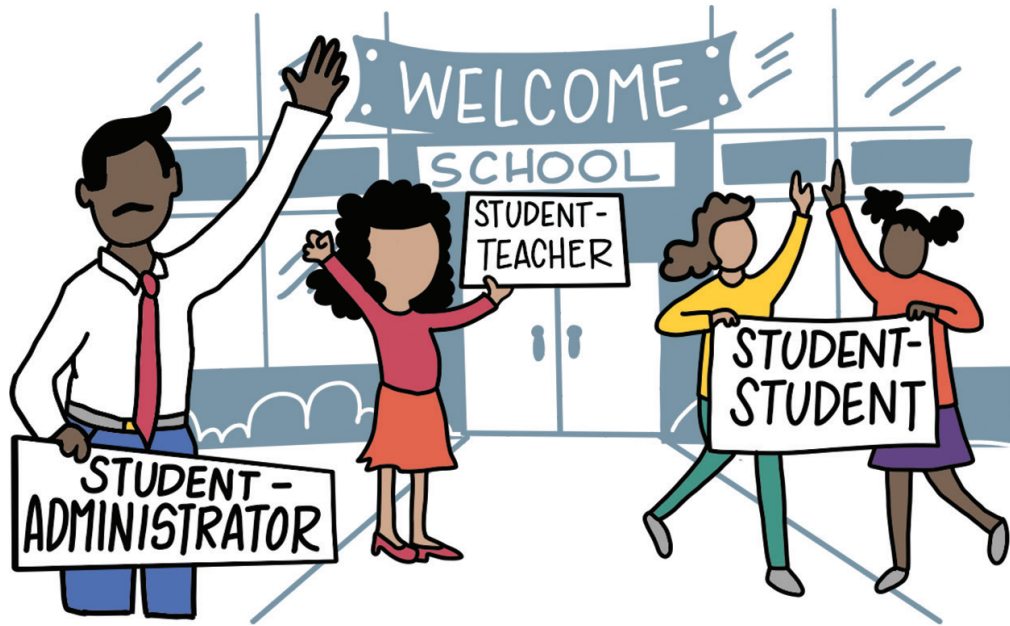
Prioritize a safe and secure school climate. We recognize that this first action step involves a wider web of professionals and community members; however, it is a crucial factor for promoting belonging. The conversations about school structures and accessibility can result in vital actions that the adults in the school can collaboratively enact. SchoolSafety.gov is an interagency effort to promote schools that are physically secure and emotionally and psychologically safe. Explore their offerings to support schools to enhance their programs and activities. Resources include those for supporting student mental wellness, stopping and preventing bullying, and improving school climate.¹²



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Inventory the supplies and materials your students use regularly in your classroom, and request new supplies as needed.				
Set up a weekly or daily classroom clean-up schedule with your students to maintain an orderly environment.				
Develop and implement a safety plan that includes actions the school can take to prevent bullying behavior and address bullying behavior.				

SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE SCHOOL



In the previous section, we examined the ways the structural aspects of a school contribute to students' sense of school belonging. In this section, let's turn our attention to the social relations in school and the role this component plays in school belonging.

Three factors contribute to students' satisfaction with the social relations in the school. The first is *student-teacher relations*. The correlation between student-teacher relations and overall satisfaction with the social relationships in school is 0.752—again very powerful. The effect size of student-teacher relationships is 0.62, indicating that this has an influence on students' learning. Students want teachers to be fair, to respect and honor them, and to care about them as individuals.

The second contribution to students' satisfaction with social relations is *student-administrator relations*. The correlation between student-administrator relations and overall satisfaction with the social relationships in school is 0.639—again very powerful, but a bit of a surprise. There is ample research about student-teacher relationships, but more limited evidence about the role that school leaders play in creating a sense of belonging. These data reinforce the idea that leaders are primarily responsible for creating and maintaining the climate of the school, which has an effect size of 0.49. It also indicates that the leaders' social interactions with the students influenced the students' satisfaction with the social relations in their school.

Interestingly, there is evidence that school leaders are more influential than teachers on students' school engagement,¹³ which includes participation in school-related activities, achievement of high grades, amount of time spent on homework, and rate of homework completion—as well as delinquency, truancy, or misbehavior. Importantly, teachers have a stronger influence on student

engagement in learning, which has been defined as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education.”¹⁴

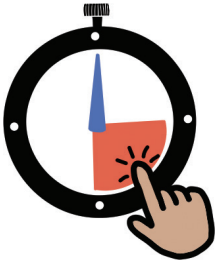
The correlation between *student-student relations* and overall satisfaction with the social relationships in school is 0.176, which is relatively low. However, this factor also has a direct relationship to belonging, independent of the overall satisfaction students feel with social relationships, with a correlation of 0.274. It seems that when it comes to belonging, students rely more on the adults in the school to establish the conditions for social relations. When the social relations between students and teachers and students and administrators are accounted for, the role of peers is reduced. It’s also important to note that friendship has an effect size of 0.38, meaning that having friends facilitates learning.

TAKE ACTION



Prioritize student-teacher relationships. The fact that you are reading this playbook says a lot about how valuable positive student-teacher relationships are to you. However, although you probably invest a lot of time at the beginning of the school year for getting-to-know-you activities, it is crucial to understand that relationships require steady, consistent, and long-term investment. Devote the same kind of energy you put into academic planning by augmenting it with relationship planning. Have at least one activity every week that is expressly designed to build relationships with your class.

Involve families in your efforts from the beginning. Families and guardians are the keepers of the child’s history, and they know what works and what doesn’t. Develop relationships with students’ families/guardians so they understand they are a part of a team. Regular communication is incredibly valuable. If you’re an elementary teacher, you might send out a weekly newsletter. As a secondary teacher, you might use a classroom blog or a weekly automated message service to inform families of what their young person is learning about. These communications don’t need to be long and involved. A few sentences each week can help you become a presence in the lives of families, even though you may rarely share the same physical space.



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Make a point of laughing with students, smiling, and taking pleasure in their company.				
Make time for regular one-to-one communication with each student.				
Make sure your positive communications with families about the student outnumber negative ones.				

KNOWING IF STUDENTS FEEL THEY BELONG



There are several extensive surveys to determine the level of belonging that students feel in their school. However, most educators are not investigating belonging as a researcher. Thankfully, there are tools that teachers can use more quickly. These tools have strong psychometric properties, which also allows educators to avoid making decisions based on faulty information.¹⁵ For example, the following five questions used on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) provide a quick way that teachers can gauge the level of belonging perceived by their students:¹⁶

- I like being in school.
- I feel safe when I am at school.
- I feel like I belong at this school.
- Teachers at my school are fair to me.
- I am proud to go to this school.

The survey asks students to respond to each statement with a number: (4) agree a lot, (3) agree a little, (2) disagree a little, or (1) disagree a lot.

The Center for Whole-Child Education at Arizona State University offers two free tools and guidance for setting up a Google Form so that schools can track students' well-being weekly or monthly. The questionnaire for grades 3–5 consists of six questions (e.g., “I’ve been feeling cared about by others”), while the version for grades 6–12 has twelve items (e.g., “I’ve been feeling heard by others”). Educators can use their Well-Being Index to create individual and class

reports and to visualize data so that adults can respond. In their study of the instrument, secondary students remarked that the use of the tool could prompt peers to engage in self-reflection “without a lot of pressure.”¹⁷ An advantage of regularly using simple surveys like the TIMSS scale or the Well-Being Index is that it provides educators with ways to regularly gauge and respond to the contexts that influence well-being.



TAKE ACTION

Understand belonging data in context. Data collection on sense of belonging is a snapshot in time, and it is influenced by other variables, such as friendships and events that occur in students’ personal lives. The power of such data lies in repeated measures so that you can identify trends and patterns. For instance, are there certain times of the school year when a sense of belonging tends to wax or wane?

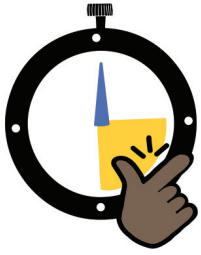
Normalize belongingness. A sense of belonging doesn’t remain fixed and static. Like other human emotions, we all experience varying degrees of belongingness. It is important for students to understand that when a person doesn’t feel like they belong, it doesn’t mean there is something wrong with *them*. Rather, it may be the situation and conditions that need to be crafted. Emphasize that talking about feeling like you don’t belong is a healthy response that can spark help.

Make predictions about your students’ perceptions of belonging. Choose a student whom you know well. Predict how that student would respond to each of the questions using the TIMSS scale (Table O.1). Then predict how the average student in your grade or department would respond. Finally, predict how the average student in your school would respond. This gives you the opportunity to consider the perspective of a variety of students.

Table O.1 • The TMSS Scale

Item	Response from a student you know well: (4) agree a lot, (3) agree a little, (2) disagree a little, or (1) disagree a lot	Response from the average student in your grade or department: (4) agree a lot, (3) agree a little, (2) disagree a little, or (1) disagree a lot	Response from the average student in your school: (4) agree a lot, (3) agree a little, (2) disagree a little, or (1) disagree a lot	Reflections on the data
I like being in school.				
I feel safe when I am at school.				
I feel like I belong at this school.				
Teachers at my school are fair to me.				
I am proud to go to this school.				

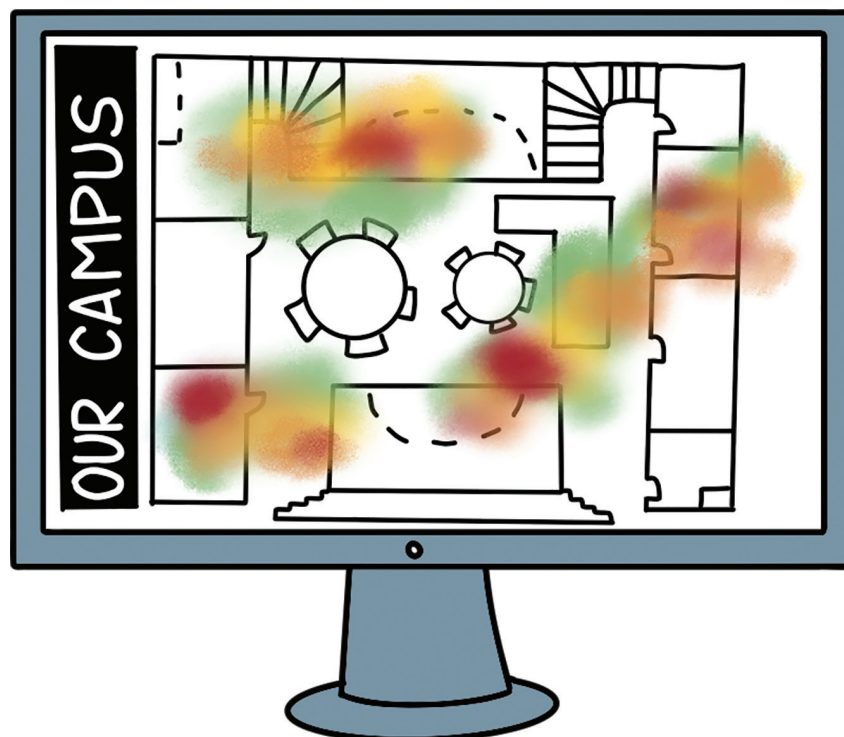
Our perceptions about how a student feels may be different from the actual perception of the student. For example, a quiet student who often smiles when you look at them could be dealing with significant challenges with bullying or in their home life.



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Find out whether your school collects student-belonging data through climate surveys or other instruments.				
Talk about belonging with your students in the context of academic learning, such as making connections to fictional characters or historical figures.				
Don't forget families! Survey them to find out what they want and need.				

CASE IN POINT: HEAT MAP FOR BULLYING



Azura High School's wellness committee is a student-driven effort of the Associated Student Body. Members include learners in student government groups and adult advisers. The creation of the wellness committee was inspired by the work of Not in Our Schools (NIOS), a national organization committed to eliminating hate crimes and bullying in schools.

To identify and understand concerns about student belonging, the wellness committee decided to use a heat map process developed by NIOS. They surveyed students at each grade level, asking them to indicate on a digital map of the layout of the school any spots in the school where they had witnessed, participated in, or been the victim of verbal or physical harassment in the current school year. Each such spot was marked by students with a digital X. Responses were anonymous but reported by grade levels.

The student group viewed the results of the survey and developed a heat map of the "hot spots" where events like this were most likely to occur. The wellness committee was surprised to learn that certain hallways and stairwells were identified more often. The orchestra room was singled out, which some members had not expected. Participating students also identified the cafeteria as a hot spot.

What's Your Advice?

- What recommendations would you make to the wellness committee about taking actions on their findings?
- Who are key stakeholders they should involve?
- What proactive actions would you recommend they take, beyond increased surveillance and adult presence?

WHAT'S NEXT

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can we lay a successful foundation to build students' sense of belonging?

THINK ABOUT

- How do school structural conditions impact belonging?
- How do social relations impact belonging?
- How can you gauge and track school belonging with your own students?

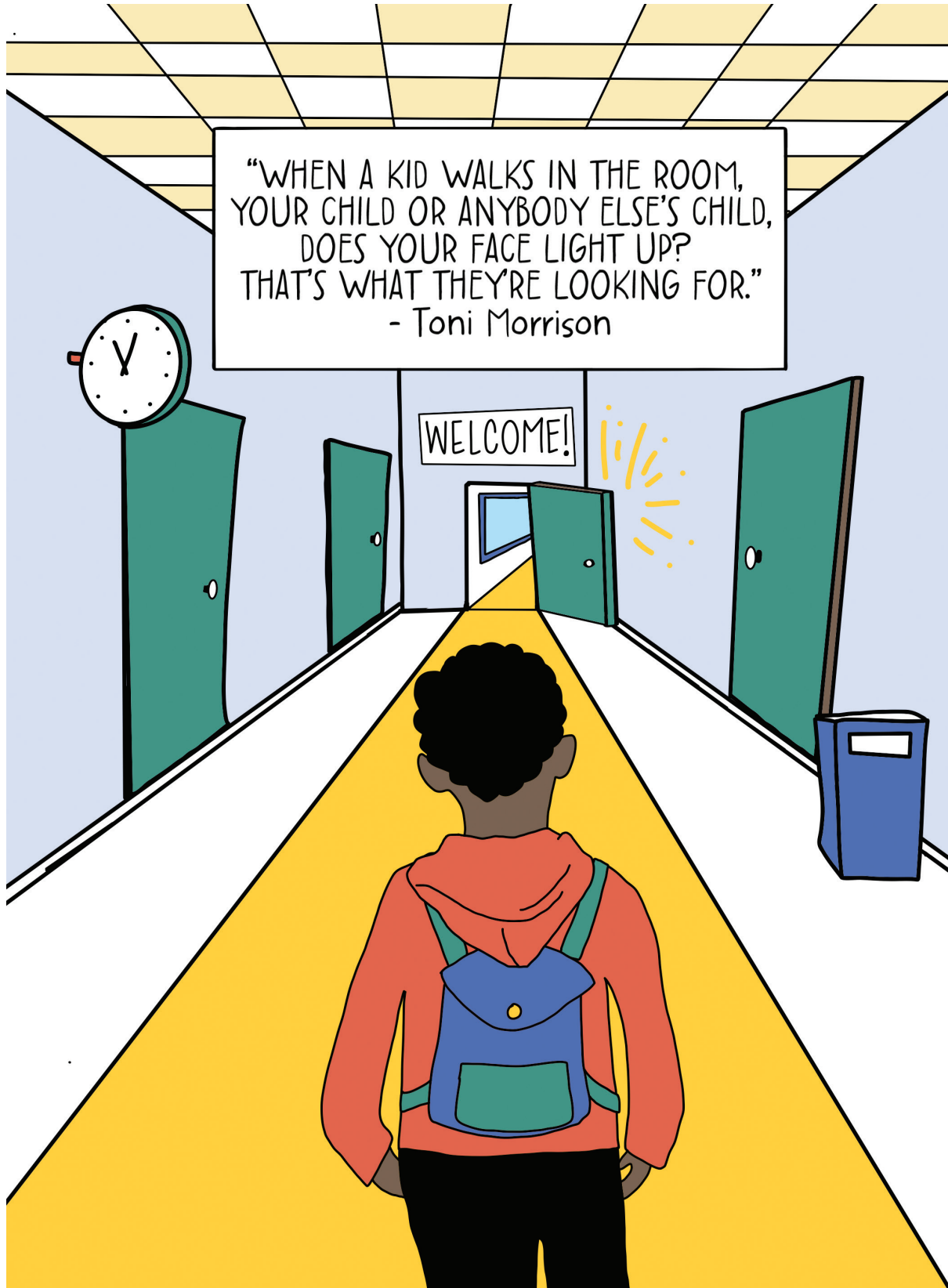
START – STOP – KEEP

Based on what you learned in this module, answer the questions that follow.

Start: What practice(s) would you like to start doing?

Stop: What practice(s) would you like to stop doing?

Keep: What practice(s) would you like to keep doing?





Classrooms and schools have a feel to them, which is known as the climate of the organization. And the climate contributes to student learning. Interestingly, the effect size for the classroom climate is 0.26, meaning that it exerts a small but positive influence on learning. However, the school climate is more powerful, with an effect size of 0.49. This may be because students and staff experience the whole organization, including hallways, lunchrooms, and other locations.

Part of the climate effect is how welcomed people feel within a given environment. When we feel welcomed, we are more likely to be relaxed and less concerned about whether people are questioning our presence. When we feel unwelcomed, our attention shifts to escaping the environment or figuring out how to survive the situation. Often, this feeling of welcomed relates to our identities.

There is a relationship between identity and belonging, but they are not the same thing. Identity is who we are. It's the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. And those stories are influenced by the interactions we have with other people. We are complex beings, and there are many dimensions to our identities. Some aspects include

- **Family Identity:** Parent, guardian, sibling, twin, nephew, grandparent, cousin, guardian, caregiver, chosen family, and other caring adults who help care for the student
- **Skills Identity:** Athlete, mathematician, artist, leader, listener, person with (dis)ability, or problem solver are just a few
- **Cultural Identity:** Nationality, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious beliefs, social class, geographic region, etc.
- **Social Identity:** Peer group, team, clique, gang, club, memberships, occupation, and other affiliations

We carry our identities into every environment, but we may feel a need to hide aspects of our identities, often to fit in, or due to safety concerns. In doing so, we feel less welcome because we aren't comfortable being ourselves. In

those cases, we may have a fleeting sense of belonging, but it's likely that we continue to question our membership and value in the group. Making people feel welcomed in our classrooms and other school environments means that we recognize their many identities.

Essential Question:

HOW DOES THE ENVIRONMENT AND VARIOUS SITUATIONS CONVEY A CONSISTENT MESSAGE OF WELCOMING?

Indicators: Teachers described these indicators of a welcoming classroom and school environment. Use these indicators to assess your own environment.

Table 1.1 • What Being Welcomed Looks, Sounds, and Feels Like

What Does It Look Like?	What Does It Sound Like?	What Does It Feel Like?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing genuine excitement • Arranging the physical environment to be clean and inviting • Knowing every student's name and greeting students • Ensuring that all students receive a welcome in a personal way • Sharing smiles, high-fives, hugs, etc. • Using materials and resources that reflect students' identities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greeting students personally • Pronouncing names correctly • Drawing students into conversation • Asking authentic questions • Noticing when students are absent and asking why • Showing enthusiasm for students' return or late arrival: "Welcome back! We missed your smile!" (or some other specific quality or trait) • Using inclusive and affirming language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic • Safe • Warm • Comfortable • Intentional • Genuine • Inclusive • Like home



TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

Two of these statements are true; one is false. Can you spot the lie?

1. Families/caregivers who perceive a welcoming school environment have a heightened sense of responsibility to be involved, and they are more supportive of positive school behavior outside of school.
2. Greeting students at the door is a nice way to welcome them, but it doesn't impact learning.
3. The respectful and accurate use of students' names by teachers is associated with higher levels of student motivation, satisfaction, and engagement.

When we welcome students into the school and classroom, we are really extending a welcome to their entire family and caregivers. In fact, families/caregivers who don't feel welcomed in the school are less likely to participate in school functions, and they tend to make fewer supportive statements about the value of education and the school.¹ The school's ability to welcome families/caregivers requires knowing and understanding the community that it serves, which may not be the community that some of the educators live in or come from.

Notably, the people students live with vary widely and include grandparents, single-parent homes, LGBTQIA+ parents, blended families, and foster families. Additionally, the languages, cultures, ethnicities, and races of the people the school serves should be reflected throughout the building. For example, families/caregivers who communicate using different languages feel more welcome when translation services are proactive and readily available. Taking these factors into consideration conveys respect for the community.

The message of respect also extends to the students we serve, and it begins with acknowledgment. Make a point during the first week of school of using the names students go by, and use them often. Ask for help if you need guidance on pronunciation. Please don't give students a nickname or tell them their name is "too hard." Students identify their teachers' accurate and respectful use of their names as an affordance for building positive relationships. The accurate use of students' names boosts motivation, engagement, and school satisfaction.²

The lie, in this case, is that greetings at the door are nice but not impactful. Not only does this practice welcome students the moment they arrive at your door, but also it gives you visibility outside of your classroom to welcome other students passing by. There is good evidence that regular use of this practice increases student engagement and decreases disruptive behavior.³ That's welcome news for us all!

GREETINGS



As simple as this may sound, we all like to be greeted when we enter a new environment. It's part of the social contract that humans have: We expect to be acknowledged. Greetings serve a basic communication function and increase the likelihood that the interaction will be positive. In fact, when students are greeted personally by their teacher before class, they engage in academic instruction and display on-task behavior more quickly than when they do not receive the same attention from their teacher.⁴ Greeting students also fosters a safe and supportive environment for students from different cultures, who may face discrimination outside of school.⁵ Greetings are especially important for transgender and gender-expansive students, because the recognition of their chosen name and pronouns is a key element in expressing support and acceptance of who they are.⁶

In one study of ten middle school classrooms, engagement increased by 20 percentage points and problematic behavior decreased by 9 percentage points when teachers started class by welcoming students at the door.⁷ The intervention was simple. When greeting students at your door, include these steps:

- Say the student's name.
- Make eye contact and match it with a friendly facial expression. Note that in some cultures, eye contact can be considered disrespectful. When we truly know our students, and are culturally responsive, we will know which nonverbal messages work best for them.
- Use a friendly nonverbal greeting, such as a handshake, high-five, fist-bump, wave, or thumbs-up. Again, knowing our students and who appreciates physical contact is important.
- Give a few words of encouragement.

TAKE ACTION



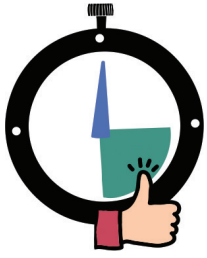
Know names. Names are a significant part of our identity. Learn students' names, say them correctly, and use them often (and not as a correction for problematic behavior). If a name is unfamiliar for you, let the student know and ask them for help. Also, don't make up a nickname because you have a hard time pronouncing their name correctly. Keep practicing until you get it right.

Use context to support memory functions. Ask your students to write a short explanation of where their name came from or the meaning of one of their names (first, middle, last, chosen) so they can share it with the class. Model first: What is the story of your name? Encourage students to ask family/caregivers or use the internet to learn the historical meaning or origins of their name/s.

Monitor your nonverbal messages. When we're busy or stressed, our nonverbal behaviors don't always match our verbal behaviors. Students note the nonverbal behaviors, so they may still not feel welcomed if your nonverbal messages aren't friendly. Smile and make eye contact with each of them as they enter.

Avoid asking, "How are you?" Unless you have time to process the response, avoid using "How are you?" as a greeting. We have all learned that we're supposed to answer "fine" or "good," even when we might not be. Use other statements to greet students (e.g., "I'm happy you're here today!") and reserve "how are you" for times when you want to explore students' emotions.

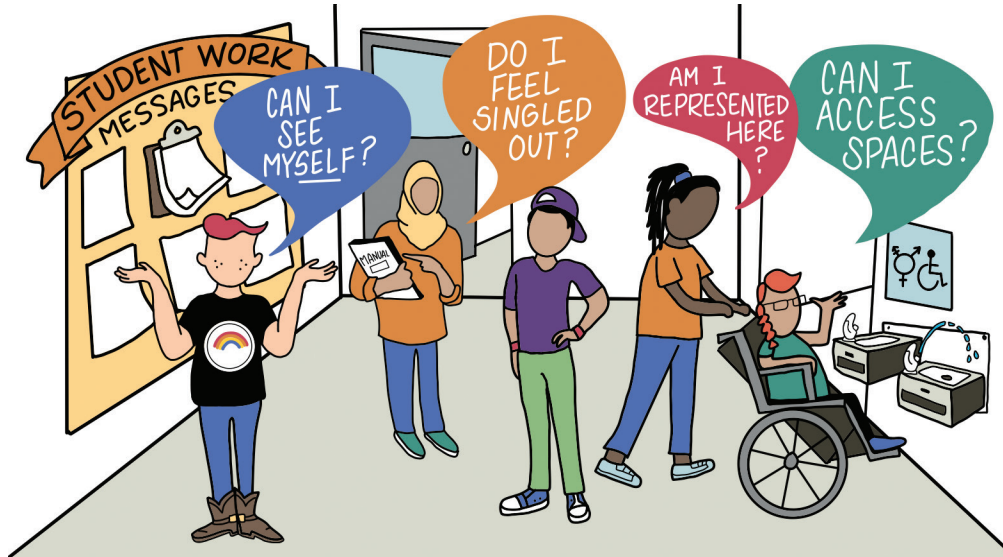
Commit to hallways. Although it takes time away from other tasks, being present in the hallway regularly and greeting students is an investment in the smooth operation of the classroom. Work with your hallway colleagues so that you can take turns being in the hall at different times of the day. This ensures that the responsibility is shared and that teachers can count on times each day to take care of quick tasks. Make greeting students in the hall a habit rather than a random occurrence.



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Learn the names of every student in your class(es).				
Establish a greeting routine.				
Develop a daily rotating schedule with colleagues in your immediate area so that some teachers are present during each passing period.				

REPRESENTATION AS A TOOL FOR WELCOMING



Have you ever entered a room when there was a meeting, and you were not supposed to be there? Once you realized the error, you probably felt embarrassed and quickly turned on your heel to head the other way. Now imagine that as a lingering feeling some students experience every day, throughout the day. As humans, when we enter a new environment, we immediately take in the cues that let us know whether we belong. We look for visual signs that we are in the right place. We all need a sense of place to ground our daily selves.

The public spaces of the school should convey consistent messaging about the welcoming nature of the school. It seems obvious that welcome signs should be prominently displayed. But look closely to find signs that might otherwise counter this message. Those that say “No Students Allowed” or “Staff Only” undermine a message of welcome. It should be sufficient that confidential and private use areas are locked.

The walls of our classrooms also teach, and they can provide messages of welcome. Classrooms should spotlight people who have contributed to the subjects we teach, including those who may be less well known. They should also have ample room to display student-generated work that is representative of their identities. Too often, classrooms are filled to the brim with commercial products that limit the identities of the students within, and as a result, “children are muffled when what is displayed does not accurately reflect who they are in terms of gender, culture, and ethnicity.”⁸ Classrooms shouldn’t look like a home design catalog filled with the latest trends. Such environments often reflect the aesthetic tastes of the teacher, with little space left for the learners within.

The physical space of the school and classroom extend to its accessibility. Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, public buildings have become more accessible through things like Braille signage, ramps, and emergency systems that pair audible and visual alarms. However, it is easy to overlook the clutter that makes it difficult for someone who uses a wheelchair to navigate the classroom. People with larger bodies may struggle to find a chair that will accommodate their size because of armrests or because the classroom is filled with desks with attached seats. Keep in mind that it may not be a student who needs this accommodation; a family member/caregiver of a student or a colleague of yours may need it.

The way the information, policies, and expectations are written in a school's student handbook can also undermine a message of welcome. For example, dress code policies can target specific groups of students, such as banning certain hairstyles or hijabs, or by claiming that something is a "distraction" to other students. While dress codes should be in place to ensure health and safety, they should not be used to dictate appearance or communicate to the entire school community that certain people don't really belong. More school districts are simplifying their dress codes by stating gender-neutral requirements that don't single out groups (e.g., students are required to wear shirts, dresses, pants, and shoes that cover undergarments). As a classroom teacher, you may not be able to change unwelcoming language in your school's student handbook on your own, but you can bring it to the attention of your colleagues and administrators.



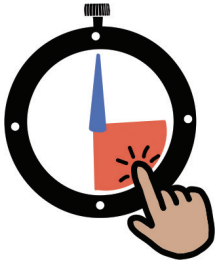
TAKE ACTION

Remove unwelcoming messages. Look for signage that counters welcoming messages in your classroom or school. Replace exclusionary messages that ban certain groups from specific locations, and develop signage that is respectful.

Take a visual inventory of hallways and classrooms. Identify positive messages about students, their families/caregivers, and the community. Each school should inspire a sense of place and respond to the ages of the students. The students in every school deserve to be educated in a place that reflects themselves and the world at large.

Clean up. Spaces that are messy and disorganized send a message to students that someone does not care enough. Take some time to organize and clean the classroom and leave specific instructions for janitors and maintenance staff about what needs to be done.

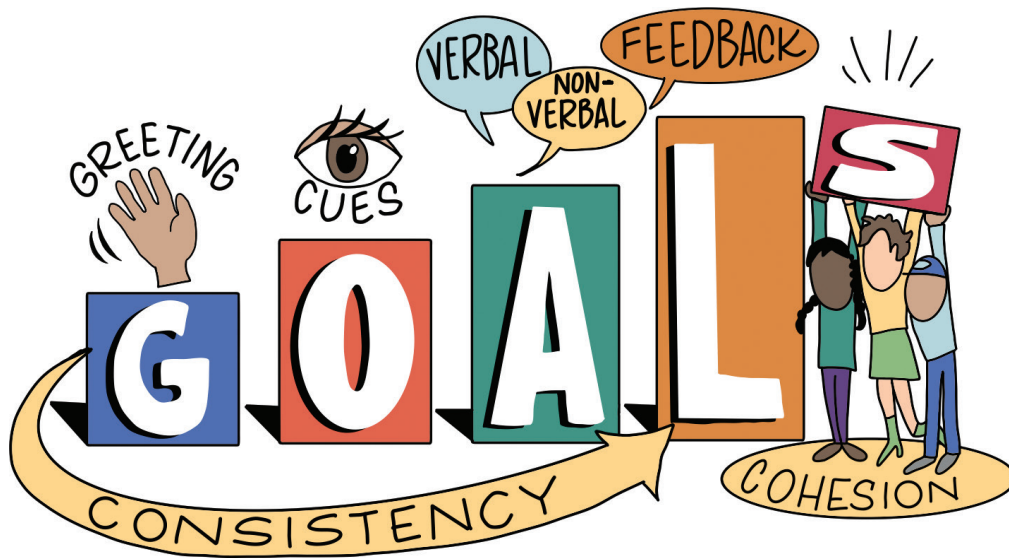
Analyze your school's current dress code policy. Are there rules that single out groups, such as the length of some students' hair? Are these associated with disciplinary actions (e.g., detention) or shaming techniques (e.g., dress code violation t-shirts)? If so, start the conversation about how these policies might be revised to promote a welcoming learning environment.



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Analyze the walls of your classroom for welcoming messages.				
Rearrange furniture as necessary for accessibility, collaboration, and community building.				
Conduct a visual inventory of the school with your team (e.g., community spaces, art/bulletin boards, signage, hallways).				

SITUATION CRAFTING



There is power in the situation itself. According to social psychologists, people's thoughts, actions, and emotions are influenced substantially by the social setting.⁹ Situation crafting comes from the belonging research, and it takes the stance that rather than try to change people, we change the situations they're in. "Situation-crafting is all about molding situations in a way that helps people feel like they belong, and thus helps them to bring out their collective best."¹⁰ In other words, it includes the intentional actions and plans we put in place to ensure that students feel welcomed.

Think of it this way—the aim is not to change students, but rather to change environments (situations) so that a deeper sense of student belonging is the outcome. It requires that we work so that situations are deliberately constructed to ensure that students consistently receive the three core messages of belonging:¹¹

1. You are seen.
2. You have potential.
3. You are not alone.

For instance, being intentional about greeting students at the door is a form of situation crafting. Attending to the visual cues in a school to have messages that convey welcome is another example of situation crafting. Thus, each aspect of the situation (classroom or school) can be crafted to support students' belonging—or not.

Situation crafting can have powerful long-term effects. In one study, first-year college students met with graduating students who shared their stories of difficulties they faced three years earlier, pairing the stories with these messages: *It gets better, and you aren't alone in feeling the struggle. If you feel at times like you should quit and go home, that's a normal feeling and it will pass.* The researchers followed those first-year students for the next three years and found that all the participants, but especially students of color, benefited. They had higher grade-point averages and had fewer medical visits. These results indicated that this brief intervention had a “buffering effect against adversity.”¹² This example shows what it looks like to successfully craft a situation that helps students understand their current situation in a different light.

An important aspect of situation crafting is recognizing that groups need to have goals that cannot be achieved individually. In fact, classroom cohesion is an accelerator of learning, with an effect size of 0.72. Classroom cohesion is the sense that the teacher and their students are working in harmony to achieve shared goals for learning. These goals, which are crafted such that students need each other to be successful, can include both academic and social aspects, such as these:

- We can support our peers when they feel frustrated as they learn new things.
- We can develop and explain the relationship between energy levels and the placement of the elements on the Periodic Table to our families/caregivers.

When students believe that these group goals apply to them, they begin to see the situation as supportive and welcoming. Situation crafting takes time, and one comment or action is unlikely to significantly alter students' thinking. But like water dripping on a rock, consistent implementation can create lasting change.

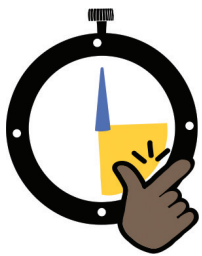
TAKE ACTION



Make strategic comments. A “just right” comment made at just the right time can alter students’ perception of the situation. These comments should demonstrate confidence in the learner and leave them with something to think about. For example, you might say, “You are braver than you believe,” “You can do hard things,” or “How did you challenge yourself today?”

Tell stories. When you notice that a situation is particularly trying for a student, ask them if they want to hear a story. Stories help us make sense of situations yet keep us feeling safe because they are about others. You can tell a story from your personal life or another that helps the student think differently about the situation.

Provide empathetic feedback. Some students interpret teacher feedback as evidence that the teacher does not like them. As a result, they may feel that they aren’t welcomed and don’t belong. To help students begin to accept feedback more willingly, teachers can craft their remarks to include a statement of care about the student (which conveys, “You are seen”), along with an appreciation of their efforts (which conveys, “You have potential”). Students also experience feedback more positively when we add empathy, such as including “we” statements (which convey, “You are not alone”). Examples of “we” statements include “We can review two more examples to see how others did it” or “We can reread the section and see what we think.”



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow!	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Identify stressful situations your class faces and do some situation crafting.				
Develop a group goal with your students to promote cohesion.				
Integrate empathetic feedback into conversations with students.				

CASE IN POINT: MAKING THE PARKING LOT MORE WELCOMING



Right after Jeremiah Travers became the new principal at Palms Elementary School, he noticed that the drop-off and pick-up area was chaotic. It took a long time for people to get through the line, there was a lot of honking, and angry words were often exchanged. People were not following the rules and instead were entering the lot from both the exit lane as well as the entry lane. Sometimes people lingered, getting out of their cars to talk with someone else. Other times, students were dropped off across the street and darted between cars on their way through the parking lot into school.

Mr. Travers asked staff members about this, and they told him that one of the worst parts of their day was arrival. “Second only to dismissal, if you ask me,” said one staff member. One teacher told Mr. Travers, “I stopped going to greet families/caregivers because it was so stressful for me to see what was happening.” Another said, “I don’t go to the drop-off area anymore because I don’t want to contribute to the problem by having families/caregivers talk with me and not move along.”

After some thought, Mr. Travers decided to contact the local police department for assistance. He explained that it was dangerous, and they were lucky someone had not been hurt. The police department sent two officers to staff the area. The officers had no specialized training in supporting schools but were used to crowd control. They were very strict about the rules and blew their whistle at people, pointed their radios at others, and wrote tickets to some. As a result, one of the parents commented, “We really don’t feel welcome here. I’m looking for a new school because it’s so bad. I’m treated like a criminal, and I’m just trying to get my kid to school on time.”

What’s Your Advice?

Mr. Travers could use some advice about situation crafting.

- What recommendations do you have for this team to create a welcoming—yet organized—drop-off and pick-up area?
- What role could teachers, parents, and other staff members play in this situation?

WHAT'S NEXT

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does the environment and various situations convey a consistent message of welcoming?

THINK ABOUT

- Are students greeted each day?
- Do students, families/caregivers, and the community feel represented throughout the school?
- What transitioning situations do students experience that cause them anxiety about their belonging?

START – STOP – KEEP

Based on what you learned in this module, answer the questions that follow.

Start: What practice(s) would you like to start doing?

Stop: What practice(s) would you like to stop doing?

Keep: What practice(s) would you like to keep doing?



"NOTHING ANNOYS PEOPLE
SO MUCH AS NOT
RECEIVING INVITATIONS."
- Oscar Wilde
The Importance of Being Earnest