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A Crisis of Student Belonging

American youth face an acute crisis of belonging that jeopardizes their educational experiences, mental health, and future success. This crisis directly impacts our nation's prospects.

Public schools have the essential duty of fostering a sense of belonging among all students. Research establishes many effective, evidence-based practices for schools to improve student belonging. Policymakers and education leaders, therefore, must prioritize school belonging by emphasizing strategic attention, making substantial investments, and incorporating belonging metrics in school quality assessments.

Defining Student Belonging and School Connectedness

Belonging is a fundamental human need, pivotal in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships in adolescence and adulthood.ⁱ

Within educational settings, student belonging translates to experiencing supportive, accepting, and respectful relationships with both teachers and peers where students feel valued and safe.ⁱⁱ

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines school connectedness as the belief students hold that adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. This definition underscores the importance of personal recognition and emotional support in fostering a sense of belonging. There is a profound relationship between belonging and connectedness; the former is rooted in the perception of being an integral part of the school community, while the latter emphasizes the specific roles of adults and peers in nurturing this sense of inclusion. Together, belonging and connectedness create a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of student engagement and well-being in educational environments.ⁱⁱⁱ





The Importance of Belonging in Schools

Belonging in schools is highly predictive of positive educational and personal outcomes, including academic success, attendance, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment.^{iv} It is also predictive of students' motivation, social well-being, classroom behavior,^v academic self-efficacy, happiness, psychological functioning, self-esteem, and identity development.^{vi} The long-term impact of school connectedness is profound: students who feel connected to their school show lower levels of drug abuse, mental health issues, and violent behavior or victimization in adulthood.^{vii}

The Current Crisis in School Belonging

At this moment, alarming data show that we are getting climate and belonging wrong. Recent data indicate that close to 40% of US high school students do not feel connected to school.^{viii} This sense of alienation is particularly acute among students facing racism, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities.^{ix} Evidence points to curricular and school structures that fail to engage many students^x as a primary reason students reject *schooling* that devalues them, as opposed to rejecting school.^{xi}

Concurrently, a worrying rise in anxiety, depression, and hospitalization for suicidal thoughts among adolescents has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Alarming, in 2021, one in ten American high school students attempted suicide. The rate was more than twice as high for LGBTQ+ students.^{xii} This level of alienation and despair demands immediate and comprehensive action.

Chronic absenteeism is another indicator of the student belonging crisis.^{xiii} In over half of US high schools, 30% or more students were chronically absent in the 2021–22 academic year.^{xiv} This absenteeism is a precursor to a range of short-term and long-term consequences across academic, economic, social, and health outcomes that include escalated school violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, and bullying, as well as detrimental health and social outcomes in adulthood.^{xv} Addressing the widespread disengagement is crucial and calls for enhancing students' sense of belonging in schools.

The Broader Context of the Belonging Crisis

Supportive teachers are a vital component of student belonging, outweighing even peer and parent support.^{xvi} A decline in student belonging is often linked to students' perceptions of inadequate support or unfair treatment by teachers.^{xvii} **The wellness of the adults in school buildings, however, is also at crisis levels.** Low educator morale is contributing to significant turnover among teachers, further exacerbating the crisis for students.^{xviii} Hence, there is a pressing need to bolster educator well-being by equipping them with the necessary resources and guidance to foster a sense of belonging among students.



What Does the Research Say?

Belonging is a lifelong need, varying within each developmental stage. Young children rely heavily on teacher support to develop social skills essential for life. As they grow, especially in middle and high school, students need to express their individuality and pursue interests to foster a sense of belonging.^{xxix} Moreover, **awareness of social stigmas and stereotypes intensifies during adolescence, impacting students' sense of belonging.**^{xx} As such, schools provide students with the most significant opportunities for civic engagement, which shapes their understanding of belonging in the broader community.

However, research shows that despite students' developmental need for increased autonomy, middle and high schools often impose more restrictions, potentially hindering students' healthy development.^{xxi}

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What Should Schools Do?

Schools play a pivotal role in fostering student belonging, and research-backed strategies are available to help schools improve belonging.

Structures and Opportunities for Connectedness and Relationship Building:

The organization of school resources, including time and personnel, significantly impacts student belonging. A sense of connectedness, where students believe they are cared for by adults and peers in school, is crucial. Teachers and counselors play important roles in improving belonging but are often stretched beyond the recommended caseloads.^{xxii} For students of color, a positive racial school climate is particularly important in promoting belonging.^{xxiii} Small-group structures like advisories where students can form strong relationships with adults are beneficial.^{xxiv} However, segregating students, especially those from socially stigmatized groups (students with disabilities, English learners, students of color), undermines their sense of belonging.^{xxv}

Curriculum and Teaching Practices: Classroom content and routines are instrumental in shaping belonging.^{xxvi} Effective teaching, characterized by positive student-teacher relationships, high expectations, and respectful routines, significantly contributes to belonging.^{xxvii} Accordingly, this should be a focus of professional development. Existing frameworks (e.g., Danielson's Framework for Teaching and CLASS rubric) can help teachers build the skills they need to create productive relationships with their students.

Furthermore, curricula that reflect students' diverse identities promote engagement and achievement.^{xxviii} Ethnic studies, particularly for secondary students, have been shown to increase academic outcomes and belonging when the courses center the perspectives of minoritized populations and include scholarship by and about minoritized populations to convey rigorous academic content.^{xxix}



Structured programs that teach children relationship skills and how to manage their emotions can also help. Programs that affirm adolescents' identities and make direct connections to their aspirations beyond school improve attendance and school connectedness.^{xxx}

Measurement: The most direct way to measure student belonging is to ask students. Robust research demonstrates that school climate surveys are valid and reliable and strongly predictive of school effectiveness and student outcomes. Indeed, students' self-reporting of social well-being and work habits are very strongly predictive of with graduating high school on time and going to college.^{xxxix} In addition to asking students, staff, and caregivers about their lived experience of school, policymakers should examine additional data to understand the aspects of school that affect belonging. These include measures of school safety and discipline, attendance, chronic absence, access to learning opportunities, and measures of engagement, including participation in extracurriculars. While it is important to look at a variety of measures in assessing student belonging, it also is essential to engage students and their caregivers in processing the data and deciding on actions to improve belonging.

Conclusion

Belonging in American schools is a multifaceted challenge with profound implications for the mental health, academic achievement, and future success of students. This crisis, marked by increasing alienation, anxiety, and absenteeism among students, particularly those facing social stigmatization, demands a strategic and comprehensive response from educators, policymakers, and community leaders alike.

The research is clear that belonging is not a static concept but an evolving need that varies with each developmental stage. Schools, therefore, must adapt their approaches to effectively meet these changing needs. This involves not only fostering strong relationships between teachers and students but also ensuring that curricula and school environments reflect and respect the diverse identities of all students. The importance of school connectedness cannot be overstated. The roles of adult support, positive peer interactions, and a commitment to education within a conducive school environment are critical.

As we move forward, it is crucial to measure and monitor interventions using reliable tools like school climate surveys while also considering broader data on school safety, discipline, and student engagement. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the school climate and identify the most effective strategies to improve belonging, students, staff, and caregivers must participate in this process.

The path to enhancing belonging in schools is not simple or straightforward. It requires a sustained effort that involves changing students' subjective experiences in school, employing psychologically sound tactics, and initiating processes that reinforce positive outcomes. By embracing these challenges and committing to continuous improvement, we can create educational environments where every student feels valued, understood, and connected. Such environments not only address the current crisis but also pave the way for a more inclusive, supportive, and successful future for all students.



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