MISSOURI SW-PBS SUMMER INSTITUTE

THRIVING TOGETHER

BUILDING CONNECTIONS FOR TEACHER WELL-BEING AND STUDENT SUCCESS

The Science of Belonging: Creating Spaces where all Students can Thrive.

MO SW-PBS Summer Institute 2025

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Introductions

Jamie Grieshaber, MO SW-PBS Statewide Coach and District Facilitator

Nanci Johnson, MO SW-PBS State Director

Michelle Kruse, School Safety Specialist & Academy Program Coordinator, MSBA Center for Education Safety

Who else is in the room…That's Me!

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Outcomes:

- **Understand** the importance of **student belonging** for **academic, behavioral, and social success.**
- Learn how to **create environments** that foster a sense of belonging for all students.
- **Apply the concepts of belonging** districtwide, schoolwide, in the classroom and on building 1:1 relationships with students.

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Visual Prompt for Connecting Activities

Getting In the Room

Please stand up if…

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“I am because you are.”

— *Ubuntu* (African Philosophy)

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Creating Spaces of Belonging for Staff & Students
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3 Human Psychological Needs (Remember C-A-R)

Self-determination theory identifies 3 needs individuals must fulfill to behave with ***intrinsic motivation***:

- **Competence**
  - *Succeeding in what is to be done, belief in one's ability to succeed, and/or self-efficacy.*
- **Autonomy**
  - *Being in control of one's life, self-determination.*
- **Relatedness**
  - *Connecting with others, **belonging.***

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Although Maslow put the need to belong midway up his hierarchy of needs, research "over the past several decades suggests that belonging should be located closer to the base of the pyramid, as a need nearly as vital as food and shelter. What's more, that's not just true in infancy but ***throughout*** our lives." (Cohen, 2024)

- **Belonging**
  - "…the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes." (Allen, Kern, Rozek, McInerney, Slavich, 2021)

Belonging Continuum

Belonging ⟷ **Belonging Uncertainty**

- **Stereotype Threat** (internal state)
  - Degree of anxiety about how an individual thinks they are being perceived due to a ***stereotype***. (Cohen, 2022)
- **Fundamental Attribution Error** (FAE) (external threat)
  - Impulsive cognitive bias that leads us to see the behavior of others as emanating from some underlying essence - who the person is - rather than from the situation they are in. (Cohen, 2022)
- **Loneliness**
  - "…is the ***subjective feeling*** that you're lacking the social connections you need." (Murthy, 2020)
    - ***Intimate***, or emotional, loneliness is the longing for a close confidant or intimate partner.
    - ***Relational***, or social, loneliness is the yearning for quality friendships and social companionship and support.
    - ***Collective*** loneliness is the hunger for a network or community of people who share your sense of purpose or interests.
- **Isolation**
  - "…the objective physical state of being alone and out of touch with other people." (Murthy, 2020)
- **Solitude**
  - "… the state of peaceful aloneness or voluntary isolation."
  - "It is an opportunity for self-reflection and a chance to connect with ourselves without distraction or disturbance." (Murthy, 2020)
- **Situation Crafting**
  - "Shaping a situation, even in seemingly minor ways, in order to foster belonging." (Cohen, 2022)
- **Wise Interventions**
  - "Wise interventions are ideally the right small thing, just what is psychologically needed for a specific person in a specific time and place to set them on a better path."
  - "…are only tools for situation crafting… none of them is a one-off solution… in an environment with genuine opportunities they have cumulative effects. " (Cohen, 2022)
- **Wise Criticism**
  - Praising a students' potential (you can meet my high expectations) rather than their CURRENT performance. (Cohen, 2022)

LINK

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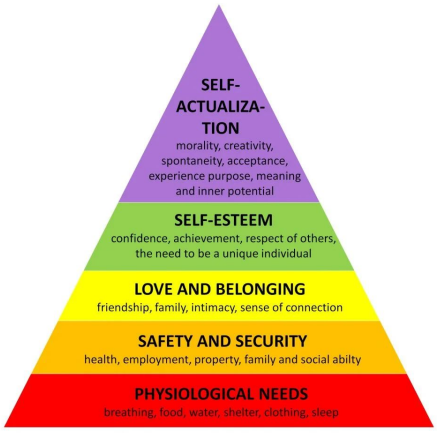
1.**Understand** the importance of **student belonging** for **academic, behavioral, and social success.**

"We are wired for connection." Murthy, 2020

Why focus on Belonging?

Although Maslow put the need to belong midway up his hierarchy of needs, research "over the past several decades suggests that **belonging** should be located closer to the base of the pyramid, **as a need nearly as vital as food and shelter**. What's more, that's not just true in infancy but ***throughout*** our lives." (Cohen, 2024)



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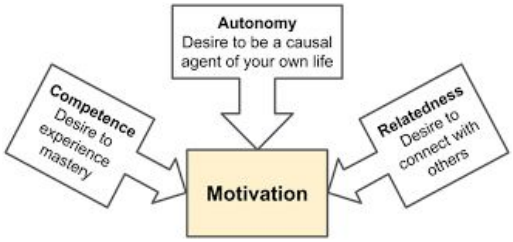
3 Basic Psychological Needs

Self-determination theory identifies 3 needs individuals must fulfill to behave with ***intrinsic motivation***:

1. **Competence**
   - *Succeeding in what is to be done, belief in one's ability to succeed, and/or self-efficacy.*
2. **Autonomy**
   - *Being in control of one's life, self-determination.*
3. **Relatedness**
   - *Connecting with others,* ***belonging.***



(Ryan & Deci, 2000)

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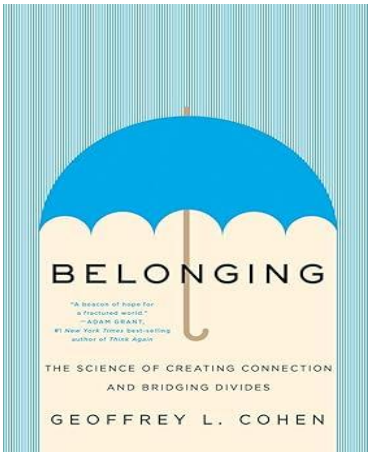
Defining Belonging…and a few key terms…

- Belonging & *Belonging Uncertainty*
- Stereotype Threat & FAE
- Loneliness
- Isolation
- Solitude
- Situation Crafting
- Wise Interventions
- Wise Criticism



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Belonging: Feeling accepted by a group, having meaningful relationships, and contributing to a shared purpose, such as being part of a team or community.

This becomes **critical in adolescence**, as it supports:

- **Mental Health & Well-Being**,
- **Enhances learning** (supportive learning environments are where we take risks, thrive, etc),
- **Increases motivation and engagement** (see how efforts matter),
- **Supports key life skills** (Communication, empathy, conflict resolution, and teamwork), and ultimately,
- Helps students with **identity formation**.
- Helps create a **safer and more supportive environment** in your school and community.

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Belonging Uncertainty: Belonging uncertainty refers to the feeling of doubt or insecurity about whether one is accepted and truly belongs in a particular social environment or group, often leading to concerns about social relationships and fit.

When we feel uncertain, it can:

- **Undermine Academic Performance** (interpret minor setbacks as signs we don't belong)
- **Increase Emotional Stress** (esp in marginalized groups)
- **Affects Persistence and Retention**
- **May become a "Self-Fulfilling Prophecy"** (withdraw, limit opportunities for connection and further isolate).
- Lead to feelings of exclusion and increase likelihood of violence for those already on the pathway.

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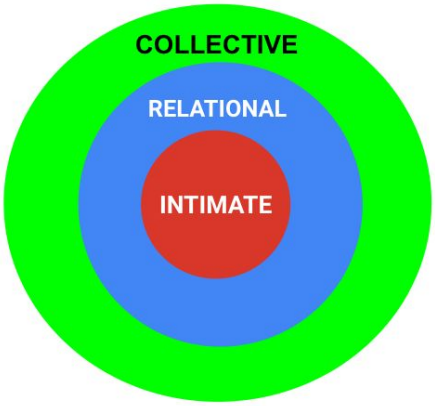
Loneliness: "...is the ***subjective feeling*** that you're lacking the social connections you need."

- Intersects with Belonging Uncertainty (feed into one another),
- Is often hidden; invisible,
- Impacts Social/Emotional Development,
- Disrupts Learning & Motivation

Intentional **Relationship Building** Opportunities and **normalizing conversations** about loneliness and well-being are **KEY**.



(Murthy, 2020)

Belonging Continuum

Belonging — Belonging Uncertainty

Stereotype Threat (internal state)
Fundamental Attribution Error (external threat)

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Safety isn't the absence of a threat but the presence of connection.

How do we *know* when others belong?

"Culture eats strategy for lunch."

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2. Learn how to **create environments** that foster a sense of belonging for all students.

"Students who report a strong sense of belonging tend to be more motivated to learn, perform better academically, have better rates of attendance, engage in less misconduct and have higher self-esteem and better mental health."

(Cohen, 2022)

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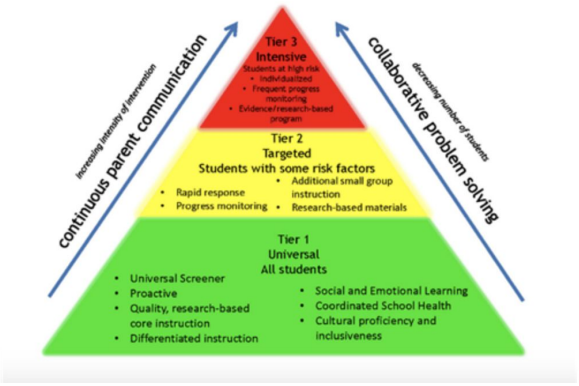

Prevention IS Belonging!

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Systems & Practices

Schoolwide Essential Components

- *Common Philosophy & Purpose*
- *Leadership Teaming*
- *Clarifying Expected Behaviors*
- *Teaching Expected Behaviors*
- *Encouraging Expected Behaviors*
- *Discouraging Unexpected Behaviors*
- *Data Based Decision Making*
- *Professional Learning*

Effective Teaching and Learning Practices (ETLPs)

- *Classroom Rules and Expectations*
- *Routines and Procedures*
- *Encouraging Expected Behaviors*
- *Discouraging Unexpected Behaviors*
- *Active Supervision*
- *Opportunities to Respond*
- *Sequencing Choices and Activities*
- *Task Difficulty*

Let's Look at some Missouri Data

School connectedness, defined as students' belief that adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as persons, has been **linked to positive educational, behavioral, and health outcomes in adolescence and into adulthood.**

Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System

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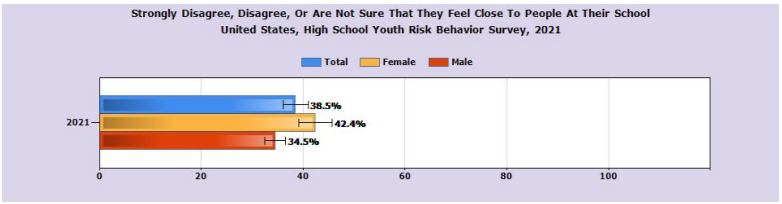
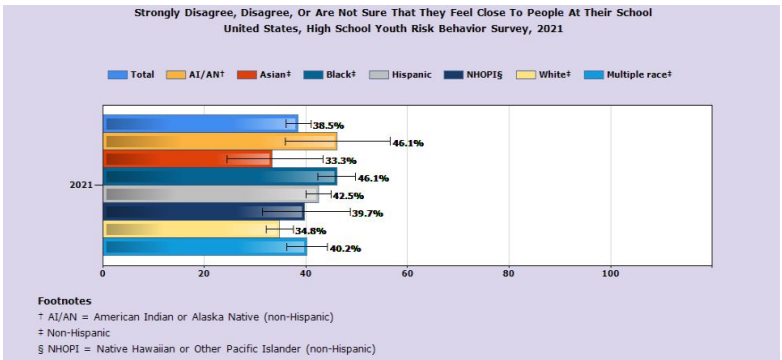
YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR Surveillance SURVEY
(YRBSS)

HIGH SCHOOL
2021
CDC





Feel Close to People at School

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[YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR Surveillance SURVEY](#) (YRBSS)

HIGH SCHOOL
2021
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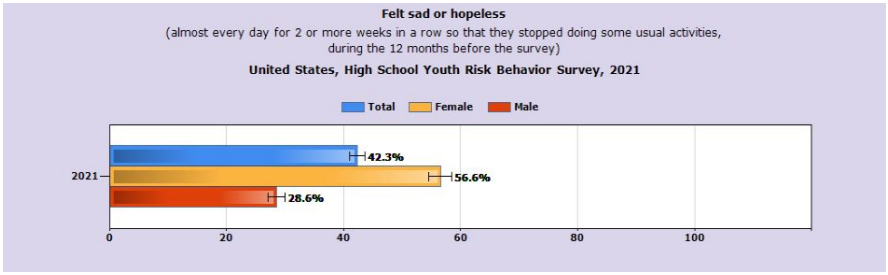

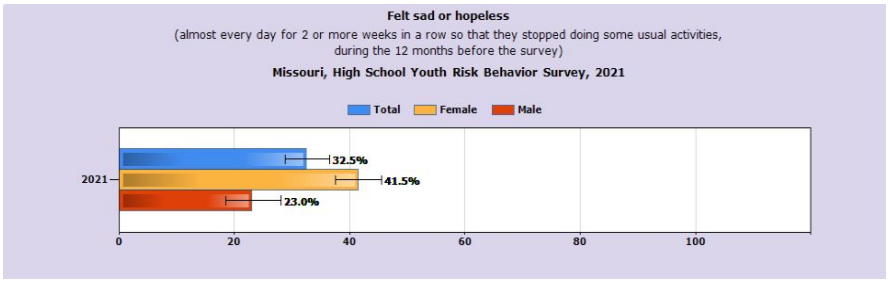

Felt Sad or Hopeless

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[YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR Surveillance SURVEY](#) (YRBSS)

HIGH SCHOOL
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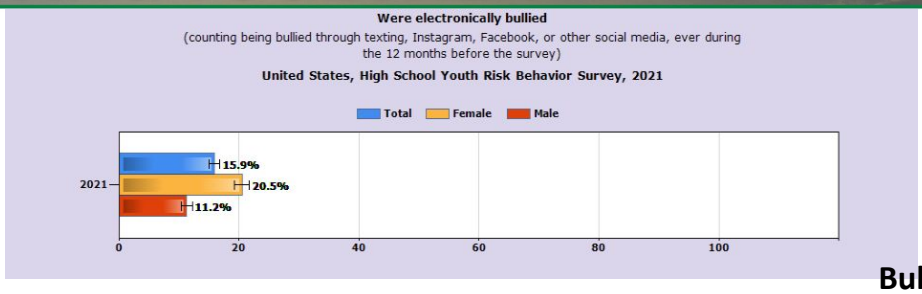

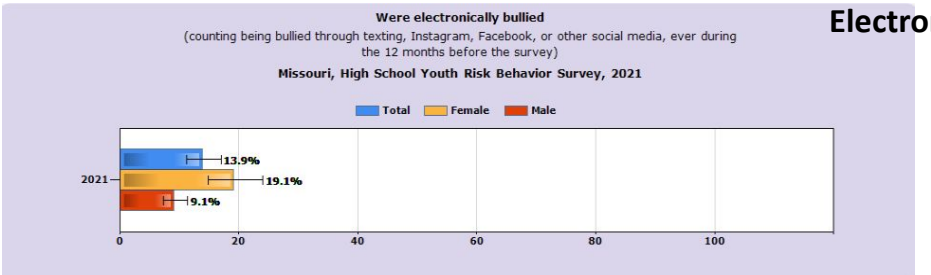

Bullied Electronically

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HIGH SCHOOL
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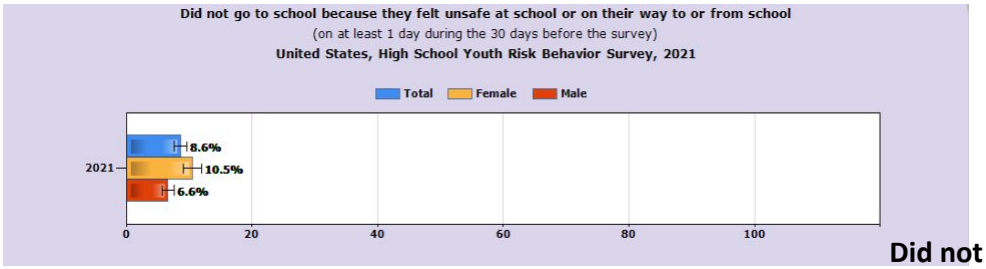

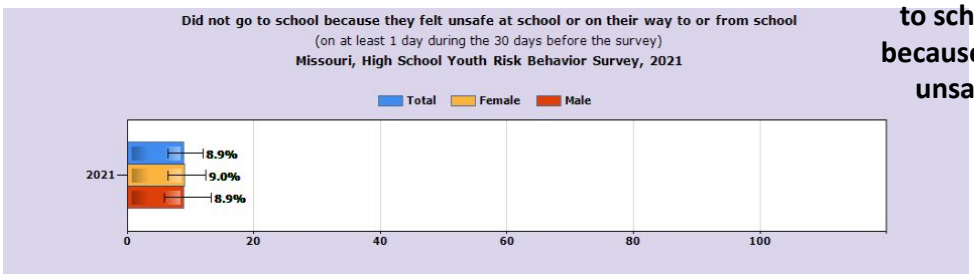

Did not got to school because felt unsafe

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YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR Surveillance SURVEY (YRBSS)

HIGH SCHOOL
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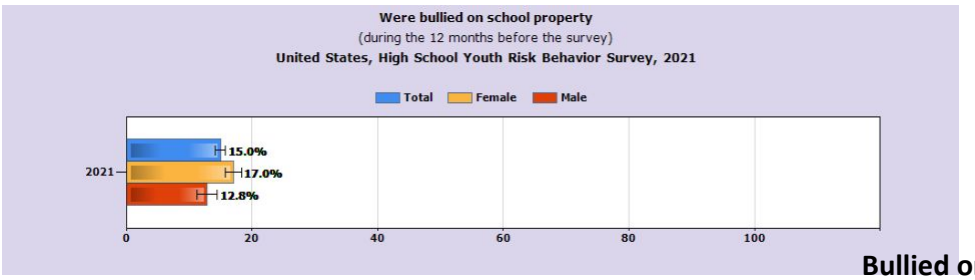

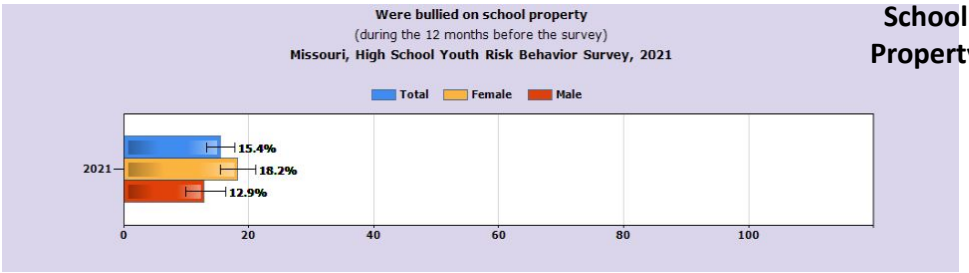

Bullied on School Property

What does this data tell us?

- Belonging is both **objective and subjective**
  - A Feeling and a Practice
- Can be **quantified and measured**, but also **perceptual**
  - Psychological component exists
  - If members feel they belong, than belonging exists
- **Marginalized groups experience higher rates of not belonging**
- Belonging is realized fully when included groups have more than a voice, they have **influence and ability to (re)shape** organizations

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Data To Drive Planning for Belonging

School Climate Survey

A formal measure with strong evidence of reliability and validity for measuring perceptions of school climate

Feedback & Input Survey

Offers your school-wide community a place to share their direct **feedback** with decision-makers.

Both gather the **voices** of:

- Elementary Student
- Secondary Student (Extended version)
- Secondary Student (Brief version)
- School Personnel
- Family

https://belonging.berkeley.edu/democracy-belonging-forum/papers/on-belonging

What **data** do you pay attention to that **indicates belonging and psychological safety for students**?

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Let's Explore **Situation Crafting**

"A sense of belonging isn't just a by-product of success but *a condition* for it."

(Cohen, 2022)

Situation Crafting

(Creating Safe environments)

"Shaping a situation, even in seemingly minor ways, in order to foster belonging."

(Cohen, 2022)

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Situation Crafting for **Student** Belonging

Explicit invitations – the i**ntentionally planned for, concrete, well defined strategy or interventions** that you are implementing with, or for group members to create opportunities for belonging to be experienced.

Implicit invitations – implied, subtle signals that are sent without careful consideration or planning that can forge either belonging and connection or disconnection. Bias can be a determinate of the impacts of implicit interventions.

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Situation Crafting for **Student** Belonging: Explicit Invitations

- **Structure environments** so that **real connections happen** regardless of race, gender, age, creed, or class
  - *Family Groups, Peer-to-Peer Mentors, Adult-to-Student Mentor*
- **Wise Criticism** - providing **feedback that is both instructive and affirms** to the student that you believe in their potential. *"I believe you are capable and I care enough to help you improve." Motivates, Fosters Growth Mindset and fail forward mentality.*
- **Policies and Practices** - Are your district and school **policies fostering "othering" or "belonging**?"
  - *Discipline policies, honor rolls, rewards for fundraising efforts, family events, Cultural events,etc.*
- **Clarifying and teaching** procedures, routines, and behavior expectations
  - *Reduces anxiety, levels playing field, builds trust in the predictability and consistency*
- **Encouraging and Discouraging** with consistency and equity across all student groups
  - *Affirms respect, promotes psychological safety, strengthens community norms.*

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Situation Crafting for **Student** Belonging: Implicit Invitations

- **Cultural Representation -** signage represents all cultures and languages within your community
  - *Affirms identity and visibility, strengthens home-school connection, etc.*
- **Warm, friendly interactions *EVERY DAY*** with ***EVERY STUDENT***
  - *Communicates "you matter", builds trust, reduces isolation*
- **Welcoming invitations to participate for all family and student groups -** regardless of race, gender, age, creed, or class
  - *Breaks down barriers, promotes diverse perspective and dialogue*
- **Academic and Environmental Accommodations** - ensure that every student has what they need to be able to learn and behave without embarrassment or humiliation
  - *Creates equitable supports, reduces anxiety and shame, models culture of care and respect*
- **Unveil the Invisible** - Open two-way communication to learn about the implicit biases, misconceptions, and perceptions that influence whether everyone feels like they belong and are respected
  - *Raises awareness of hidden barriers, empowers marginalized voices, supports collaborative problem-solving*

Consider the **Explicit & Implicit** components you plan within your schools and classrooms to cultivate opportunities for belonging.

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Wise Interventions

(Creating Psychological Safety)

"Wise interventions are ideally the right small thing, just what is **psychologically needed** for a specific person in a specific time and place to set them on a better path."

"...are only **tools for situation crafting**… none of them is a one-off solution… in an environment with genuine opportunities they have cumulative effects. "

(Cohen, 2022)

Wise Criticism

(Specific form of Feedback)

Praising a **students' potential** (you can meet my high expectations) rather than their CURRENT performance.

(Cohen, 2022)

"Wise criticism increases student's motivation to improve their work, building trust in teachers while making students feel they're being seen, respected, and appreciated. It does so by **reframing criticism as an affirmation rather than a threat**."

(Cohen, 2022)

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Key Difference:

Aspect	Wise Intervention	Wise Criticism
Function	Changes how people interpret a situation	Delivers feedback in a motivating, respectful way
Form	Brief psychological exercise or message	Framing of specific critical feedback
Focus	Beliefs about the self or world	Performance feedback
Context	Broad (academic, social, behavioral)	Typically academic or skill-based feedback

Wise Intervention Vs Wise Criticism

In essence:

- **Wise interventions** are about **changing the narrative**.
- **Wise criticism** is about **framing feedback** to preserve **motivation and belonging**.

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What about MS/HS?

Dimension	Elementary Focus	Teen Focus
Belonging	Teacher connection, consistency	Peer relationships, identity safety
Motivation	External rewards, structure	Autonomy, purpose, relevance
Engagement	Play, novelty, praise	Choice, challenge, personal meaning
Support Style	Nurturing and directive	Respectful, collaborative, affirming

Supporting **teens** vs. **elementary-aged children** in fostering **belonging, motivation, and engagement** requires adjusting strategies to reflect their **developmental stages**, **social needs**, and **cognitive capacities**.

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Does Motivation in MS/HS Students look different?

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

To Motivate Teens, Ask Them "Who's Your Future Self?"

LINK

THE RESEARCH IS IN

The Science of Student Motivation

LINK

Teens and the "Belonging effect"

- The **two most powerful protective factors** for every form of adolescent risk behavior (emotional distress, drug abuse, violence, and suicidality) are:
  - **How strong a sense of belonging they have at school and…at home.**
- Situations in MS/HS create situations that threaten belonging - not intentionally, but out of mistaken focus on a student's **character rather than context.** (Think practices and policies).
- Access to youth sports and extracurricular activities.

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Wise Interventions for Teens

- **Talk with teens, *not at them***.
  - Solicit their interests; show you appreciate what is important to them
- Engage them in activities that give opportunities to bring out their best selves, with **democratic -style guidance**
  - Volunteer groups around important topics - drugs, promiscuity, etc.
    - Preventing Violence and Building Safe School Communities A Guide for Creating Student-Led Clubs
- **Promote identity as "work in progress"** vs "finished product"
  - Values-affirmation
- Guide them to **connect these values to behaviors**
  - When they embody them, they are more inclined to adopt prosocial behaviors

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What does it look like to have **belief** in students potential, and how do we then embody that **belief** in day-to-day encounters?

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Something Cohen offers us to think about…

If the education system spent fewer resources trying to measure ability through its various testing regimens and more resources trying to ***cultivate ability by crafting better situations***, our schools would be much more effective and equitable.

(Cohen, 2022)

3. **Apply the concepts of belonging** districtwide, schoolwide, in the classroom and on building 1:1 relationships with students.

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"We can't *make* students behave (or learn), but we can *create supportive and inclusive environments that increases the likelihood* they will behave (or learn).

(Dr. Tim Lewis)

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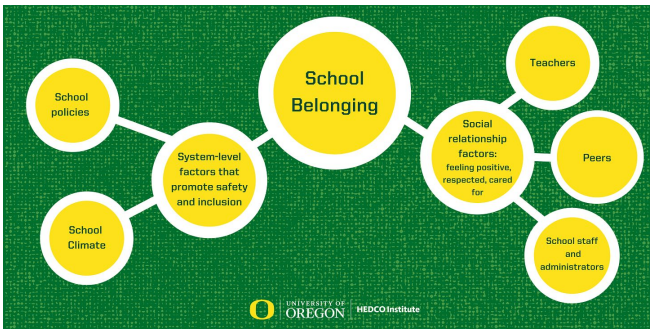
Belonging in School Systems

1. **Districtwide**
2. **Schoolwide**
3. **Classroom**
4. **1:1 Student Relationships**



Each level supports and reinforces the others.

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30 Sec Belonging (Implicit)	Whole Group/Classroom (Explicit)	Small Group/Targeted (Explicit)	Schoolwide / Districtwide (Explicit)
• Favorite Things/5 senses • Threshold Greeting • Share your Screen Saver • Perspective Getting # - Listening well (antidote to FAE) • 2x10	• Classroom Jigsaw# • Values Affirmations# • Belonging Uncertainty Testimonials# • Situation Crafting# • Wise Criticism* • Raise your light if….	• Mentoring/Shared Experiences# • ROOTS Curriculum#	• DW or SW Expectations • Norming Anti-bullying • Restorative Practices • Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) • Nominating Staff/Student showing core values • ***House Den's**

Examples from the Belonging text

Creating Spaces of Belonging for Staff & Students HO

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Districtwide Practices

- Embed belonging in **mission & values**
- Create **policies that support success for all**
- Ensure **representation** in curriculum and leadership
- Fund programs that **support underrepresented students**

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District Strategies in Action

- Conduct **audit of Implementation** (Current State)
- **Family/Community engagement** & **voice**
- Collect & analyze **student sense-of-belonging data**
- Consider **Professional Development needs**

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SCHOOLWIDE STRATEGIES

- School **traditions and events**
- **Welcoming** physical spaces (signage, murals, shared languages)
- Advisory programs, homerooms, student-led groups that build **relationships**
- **Student voice** opportunities (e.g., councils, surveys)

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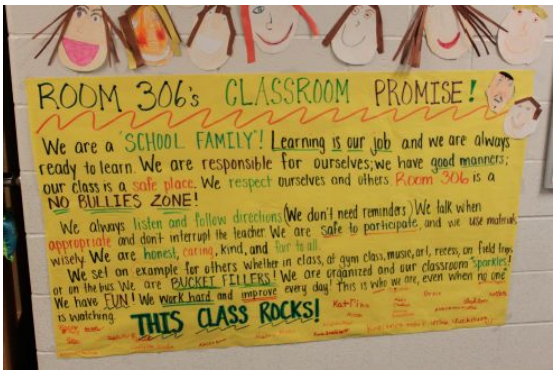
CLASSROOM STRATEGIES (Whole Group/Small Group)

- Rigorous, Standards-Based Curriculum with connection points for all learners
- **Norms** that promote respect, collaboration, and voice (Values-Affirmation, Psychological Safety)
- **Situation Crafting** > Getting to Know Students
  a. Classroom Jigsaw,
  b. Belonging Uncertainty Testimonials
  c. Regular **community circles or check-ins**
- **Differentiated & Scaffolded instruction** to meet all learners needs (Wise Criticism)
- What else???



High-Impact Teaching Moves

Mentoring Mindset **High Standards & High Supports**

- **Transparency** - "***Wise Criticism"***
  - High Expectation & Belief in Capacity
  - Scaffolded Support for Growth
  - Timely & Repeated statements of organizational mentoring mindset
- **Questioning** - Joint Problem Solving (Getting the voice)
  - The Coaching Habit & The Advice Trap
  - Questioning with "**Up Take"** (Math - "focusing questions")
- **Stress Response** - "stress can be enhancing" beliefs
- **Purpose Getting** - connecting the task to a beyond-self purpose
- **Belonging** - C-A-R (Belonging) can lead to Status & Respect

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BUILDING 1:1 CONNECTIONS

The Power of 1:1 Relationships

- Students are more likely to **engage if they feel known**
- **Trust and connection** boost resilience and motivation
- Especially important for historically **marginalized students**

30 Sec Belonging (Implicit)

- Favorite Things/5 senses
- Threshold Greeting
- Share your Screen Saver
- Perspective Getting # - Listening well (antidote to FAE)
- 2x10

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Belonging across Advanced Tiers

Being intentional with belonging (situation crafting, wise interventions, etc) becomes even more important as we intensify and individualize supports to avoid isolation and belonging uncertainty.

The "First Responder" Helping Students Navigate Roadblocks

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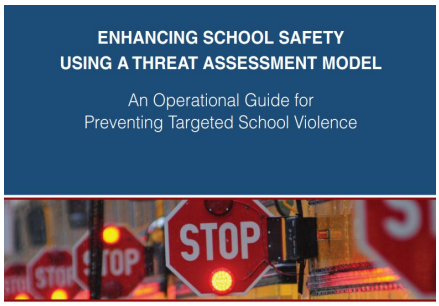
U.S. Secret Service: Preventing Targeted School Violence



U.S. Department of Homeland Security
United States Secret Service

U.S. Secret Service:

A crucial component of preventing targeted violence at schools relies on developing positive school climates **built on a culture of safety, respect, trust, and social and emotional support:**

- Help students feel connected to school, classmates and teachers.
  - Encourage teachers and staff to build positive, trusting relationships with students
    - Listen and take interest in what students say.
- Break down "codes of silence."
  - Identify students who lack solid connections with adults/other students.
- Encourage connections with classmates:
  - Ask students to identify classmates they'd like to be partnered with for projects, then assign students not named to be partners with outgoing, friendly classmates.
  - Preventing Violence and Building Safe School Communities A Guide for Creating Student-Led Clubs

While teachers and staff can foster relationships and connectedness among the student body, **students themselves have a role to play** in sustaining safe school climates. They should be actively engaged in their schools, encouraged to reach out to classmates who might be lonely or isolated, and empowered to intervene safely when they witness gossiping, teasing, and bullying.

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Cohen offers, “Expect more, give more, get more”. The best classrooms contain a symphony of elements that reinforce the message and create the reality, “**You belong**”.

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Bringing it all together…

Level	Key Strategies/Examples
District	Implementation Audits & Belonging Policies
School	Peer mentoring, student leadership opportunities, Dens, SW Norms & Expectations
Classroom	Community circles, situation crafting, relationship first routines, explicit invitations
1:1	Person check-ins, mentoring, implicit invitations

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Consider…

Where can you ***amplify*** belonging within your role?

What is ***one strategy*** you'll try in the next month?

How will you ***know*** it's making a difference?

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Educate - *"To draw out"*...it isn't always about "pouring in" our expert knowledge; rather, "drawing out" the hidden potential.

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Thank you for attending our session!

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Recommendations for Schools & Education Departments

* For more information on these recommendations, **read page 60 of the Surgeon General's advisory**.

1. Develop a strategic plan for school connectedness and social skills. Include evidence-based practices, such as the implementation of peer-led programs and partnerships with key community organizations.
2. Build social connection into health curricula. Include up-to-date, age-appropriate information on the consequences of social connection on physical and mental health, key risk and protective factors, and strategies for increasing social connection.
3. Implement socially based educational techniques. For example, cooperative learning projects can improve educational outcomes and peer relations.
4. Create a supportive school environment that fosters belonging. This can be through equitable classroom management, mentoring, or peer support groups that allow students to lean on one another and learn from each other's experiences.

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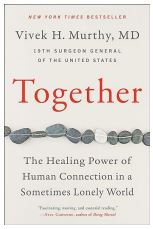
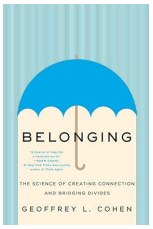
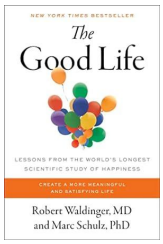
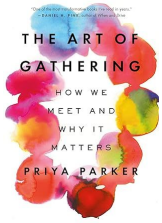
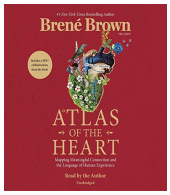
Resources Utilized:

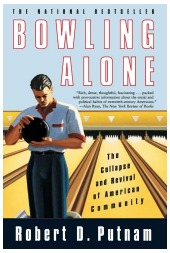


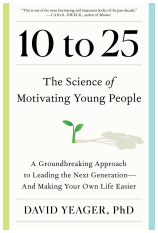












- A Crisis of Belonging > Harvard Ed PodCast w/ Geoffrey Cohen
- Creating a Sense of Belonging in a Divided America > Time Magazine
- Our Epidemic of Loneliness & Isolation > U.S. Surgeon General
  - Advisory PDF Summary: Key Take-Aways
  - U.S. Surgeon General's 5 for 5 Commitment

U.S. Surgeon General (3/6)

- National Strategy to Advance Social Connection
- Protecting Youth Mental Health
- Workplace Well Being

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