

Belonging In Schools

A 2025 report by UCL shows that students in English secondary schools have some of the lowest school engagement rates around the world. Rates have continued to decline, post pandemic. Research has shown that 40% of students do not feel a sense of belonging at school while 15-year-olds in the UK report some of the lowest levels of life satisfaction across the OECD countries¹ (Ingram et al, 2023).

“A pupil’s emotional engagement refers their enjoyment of school, their **relationships with their peers and teachers** and the extent to which they **feel safe** and that they **belong** in school.” UCL

Belonging is a critical component of mentally healthy, successful schools. School belonging can be clearly defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, respected, and supported within the school environment.

A student's sense of belonging is significantly influenced by positive relationships with teachers and peers, as well as their overall feelings about the school environment. Students who feel a strong sense of connection and belonging to their school environment are more likely to be engaged and motivated, take ownership of their learning (Stefano, 2010), and contribute to improving behaviour, due to reduced feelings of isolation, which can lead to disengagement (Cheng et al. 2024).

The innate human drive to belong, deeply rooted in our evolutionary history as social creatures who historically relied on group cohesion for survival, has profound implications for well-being and learning. Schools, as central environments for children and adolescents where they spend a substantial portion of their formative years, bear a crucial role to cultivate this essential sense of connection

Fostering a genuine and sustainable sense of belonging requires a systemic and intentional whole-school approach that actively involves all stakeholders within the school community. A whole-school approach that is firmly focused on trust, caring, and deep organisational learning can drive the commitment to innovate and make progress in serving the needs of all children and young people.

Research highlights the critical role of school leaders in intentionally shaping the learning and teaching environment to foster a culture of belonging, as well as all members of the school community to bring those intentions to life.



Building Blocks of Belonging



John Bowlby highlighted the innate human drive to form lasting and meaningful interpersonal relationships, noting that the inability to fulfil this fundamental need can lead to feelings of loneliness and mental distress. The above building blocks, are highlighted in research and practice, as the key components to fostering a sense of belonging in school climates for students.

Research has firmly established a strong correlation between **positive interactions with teachers and students'** overall sense of connection to the school. Strategies that prioritise the development of these positive relationships have proven to be strong predictors of a student's feeling of belonging.

Peer relationships also play an indispensable role in shaping a student's sense of belonging. Positive social interactions and supportive networks of peers significantly enhance feelings of acceptance and connection to the school. Fostering positive peer dynamics and proactively addressing instances of bullying are essential for creating a school environment where all students feel socially connected and secure.

An inclusive curriculum that actively reflects the diverse backgrounds and lived experiences of the entire student body is essential for fostering a strong sense of belonging. Educators should strive to incorporate texts, historical narratives, and cultural practices from a variety of perspectives, ensuring that all students see themselves reflected in what they learn. **Inclusive pedagogies** such as varied communication, active learning and giving students agency also support feelings of belonging.

Building Blocks of Belonging

The overall **school climate and the sense of safety** it provides are fundamental to cultivating belonging. A positive school climate, characterised by fairness, respect, and inclusivity, significantly influences pupils' perceptions of whether they belong. It is essential to ensure both the physical and emotional safety of the school environment to foster this sense of connection. Students must feel that the school is a safe and trusted space for them to thrive. Ensuring the school environment and classrooms promote psychological safety can foster a strong sense of belonging.

Parental support and involvement extend beyond the home and profoundly impact a student's connection to their school. Research indicates that parental support, combined with care, compassion, and encouragement towards pupils' schooling, enhances their sense of connectedness to the school. Actively engaging families in school activities and decision-making processes is vital in building a strong sense of belonging for students.

Participation in enrichment / extracurricular activities and opportunities emerges as a key factor in enhancing school belonging. These activities provide students with valuable opportunities to explore their interests, develop new skills, and form friendships with peers outside of the traditional classroom setting. Involvement in activities that contribute to the school community reinforces positive mental health outcomes and fosters a greater sense of connection.

Actionable strategies

In the classroom:

- Implementing classroom greetings and welcoming routines helps to ensure that every student feels seen and acknowledged from the moment they enter the space.
- Creating regular opportunities for students to share their experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives with their classmates and teachers helps to build understanding and connection.
- Encourage teaching and learning pedagogies that promote collaboration.
- Opportunities for peer mentoring can strengthen social bonds within the classroom.
- Providing opportunities for student agency and choice in learning tasks can increase their engagement and sense of ownership over their education.

School wide:

- Physically inviting and inclusive classroom environment that reflects the identities and interests of the students.
- Providing high-quality professional development for educators focused on cultural competency, implicit bias, and inclusive teaching strategies.
- Organising inclusive school-wide events and activities that celebrate the diversity of the student body can promote understanding and connection among different groups.
- Clear expectations for behaviour, the implementation of restorative practices, and proactive strategies to address bullying are essential.
- Promoting student voice and providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles
- Actively engaging families and the broader community in school life.



For more information or for support in developing your culture to enable students mental health and wellbeing to thrive - contact us or visit the website.)