Putting Out the Welcome Mat for ALL Students

Public schools are for all children—how can we be more inclusive? **By Jonathan Zur**

Students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to show up for school, do their homework, participate in classroom discussions, and succeed academically and socially. That fact is not only proven by a wide body of research, it's also common sense: if you don't fear being bullied while

quality of your work and look out for your colleagues and students.

A sense of belonging, therefore, is a critical and foundational step in creating academic success. The challenge – and, I believe, responsibility – for educators is to figure out how to create that inclusive experience for each of their students in order to ensure that schools are equitable for all.

PERSONAL HISTORIES

An important first step in building a sense of belonging for your students is to reflect on your own experience when you were in their shoes. Consider these questions, for example:

- What is your very first memory of being a student?

- What is a single significant memory you have as a student?

It is helpful to think deeply about these prompts. Who was there? How did you feel? What did you see? Why do you think you remember these particular moments from your schooling?

My colleagues at the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities and I ask these questions in workshops all year long. Some of the answers we've heard have been funny, others have been sad, and a good number have been profound.

What is telling to me is that not one of the thousands of responses I have heard to these questions has been about the day a person learned a particular math or English lesson. They haven't been about learning a scientific formula or the date of

a specific historical event either. Instead, across the board, they have been about the range of people's feelings: accomplishment, fear, excitement, belonging, conflict, shame and more.

People have talked about feeling left out on the playground; they've shared moments when a teacher encouraged them to consider college for the first time; they recall exactly how they felt while being disciplined.

If educators' first and most profound memories from schooling all have to do with belonging (or the lack of belonging), it's worth thinking about how our students would respond to these prompts. Would their responses be positive or negative? And would the responses be consistent across various demographics, such as race, gender, socio-economic status or religion?

FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF BELONGING

Just Communities Central Coast (the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities' sister office in Santa Barbara, California) has developed a Sense of Belonging framework that has been extremely helpful for students, educators and administrators. It identifies five key characteristics that are incorporated into belonging. Consider how each characteristic plays out in individual classrooms and across entire schools:

- **I am safe.** In this case, consider safety in the broadest possible sense. How do students know that they are physically safe? What are educators and ▸▸▸

at school, if you feel a connection to a teacher, school staff member or classmate, and if you see yourself reflected in the content being taught, you are going to care more and perform better. The same is also true for the adults in a school: if you feel connected, respected, and valued at your workplace, you are more likely to care deeply about the

administrators doing to support the emotional safety of students?

- **I am valued.** In what ways do teachers show students that they care? Is it demonstrating interest in their hobbies or activities? Noticing when they're absent or when their behavior seems different? Communicating about positive behavior with families?

- **I have some power.** Do students have some degree of choice? How are they included in decision-making in classrooms and school leadership? In what ways can they be guided to use their power to create a more inclusive, respectful school climate?

- **I know I am learning.** Do students have opportunities to assess their own learning? How do educators make sure to tailor content to student interests and identities? Can they share feedback about their learning with their educators and peers?

- **I can make mistakes and not lose my dignity.** Is the classroom a place where students can try out new ideas? How do teachers model mistakes as learning moments rather than experiences of shame?

It has been especially interesting to ask educators and students from the same school to respond to these statements. In many cases, there are parallels between what educators say they are doing to promote a sense of belonging and what students feel is helpful. But not

always. On some occasions educators expressed that they were doing a lot more than students thought the school staff was doing. That disconnect provided an opportunity for educators to reassess the steps they were taking, and to develop strategies with students instead of for them.

If you don't fear being bullied while at school, if you feel a connection to a teacher, school staff member or classmate, and if you see yourself reflected in the content being taught, you are going to care more and perform better.

PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

The sense of belonging framework provides important direction, but what does it look like in action? Fortunately, we've had the opportunity to work with talented, passionate and inspiring educators who bring these ideas into practice in their classrooms and school settings.

One Virginia educator who teaches middle school science starts each school year with a large beaker drawn on poster paper displayed in front of the classroom. On the first day of class, she invites students to share the behaviors they think create a positive group environment, and writes those words on the inside of the beaker. They then brainstorm behaviors that hurt group dynamics and she writes them outside of the beaker. Students are asked to sign the sheet if they commit to honoring the behaviors on the inside and avoiding the behaviors on the outside. The beaker is then laminated and displayed in the classroom throughout the year. Periodically, students are invited to check in about their progress and they decide together how to make adjustments if behaviors are slipping to the outside of the beaker.

There's also the example of a high school teacher who takes the first week of each school year to build an inclusive classroom community with her students. They participate in team-building activities, discuss their preferred learning styles, consider the talents they could bring to group projects, and figure out how they want the classroom to be set up. These conversations and relationships set the tone for the entire school year. This teacher notes that when she first implemented this process, many of her colleagues shared skepticism that it was worthwhile to spend so much instructional time focused on group dynamics. What she has found is that this early investment of time to build a classroom community has resulted in better behavior, lessons more tailored to student interests, fewer disruptions during the school year, and greater productivity during group assignments.

An elementary school educator with whom we work uses index cards throughout the year in a creative and meaningful way. Each day, he stands in the doorway, welcomes each student by name, and hands them an index card. Students are told that they can write anything they want, or nothing at all, on the card. At the end of the day, the teacher collects the cards and reviews them as he plans for the next day. Students have written feedback like, "I didn't understand

the math example" or "I was bullied during lunch," and he can immediately respond the next day. Because of this daily practice, students know they are safe, they are valued, they have power, they can assess their learning, and they can make mistakes and not lose their dignity.

TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Individual actions by educators to create a sense of belonging are valuable and important, but they are not enough. Ultimately, work must also take place at the institutional and structural level to truly create equitable and inclusive schools. That means critically analyzing and updating school policies, practices and traditions to ensure that they serve all students and families.

Ask yourself, whose history is being taught in the curriculum? What authors are included in literature offerings? What students are being recommended for honors and advanced classes? Is discipline being administered fairly and consistently across races and genders? How might school traditions (such as

back-to-school night, winter concerts and prom) potentially exclude some students and families? These questions, and others like them, should be central in leadership conversations at schools that are deeply committed to serving all students.

One elementary school principal participated in our professional development and, upon his return to school, began to speak up about something that had long concerned him in his building: the fact that the racial makeup of the "gifted and talented" classes looked markedly different from the students who lived in the school zone. As he started to explore this disparity more closely, he learned that a significant factor in enrollment in gifted and talented programs was teacher recommendation. However, there was no singular rubric to guide educators in determining which students to recommend. So, this principal took two actions: first, as an individual action to support belonging, he began recommending students who he

knew to be qualified for the gifted program and who also added diversity. Second, at a structural level, he worked with the district to institute a more equitable framework to guide teachers to make objective recommendations rather than ones that were perhaps informed by conscious or unconscious biases.

AN IMPERATIVE FOR EVERY CHILD

Ultimately, the work of fostering a sense of belonging and building equitable schools cannot be an add-on that educators and administrators get to when they have time. The core mission of schools must be to ensure that all students have their needs met and can be in a position to be academically and socially successful. That requires a commitment from all stakeholders at all levels.

A nonprofit called Initiatives of Change asked the question a few years ago that serves as a compelling call to action: "What if every child were my child?" With that mindset, educators can move through the stages that the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities sets out in our work: reflect on your own experiences, build empathy and understanding to cultivate a sense of belonging for all students, and advocate for structural and institutional changes.

Will it require shifts in mindset and behavior? Absolutely. But the results will be well worth the effort when all students at all schools achieve success through inclusion.●

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