

How School Leaders Can Boost Students' Sense of Belonging

A focus on identity safety can help administrators make sure that all students feel welcome and ready to learn in every class.

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After two difficult school years, the return to classes this fall will be fraught with emotions for both students and staff. School leaders are uniquely positioned to bring the school community together in an identity safe environment where the staff value and accept students, and students experience an increased sense of belonging and a greater liking for school. Educators can positively impact achievement and help students heal from trauma and difficulties they may have faced during the pandemic.

School leaders can be the architects of an identity safe culture that meets student needs and ensures that instructional practices, support services, and policies are equitable and fair. Leaders can foster belonging in many ways: supporting culturally responsive teaching, attending to multilingual learners and students with special needs, and equipping schools with gender-neutral bathrooms while allowing transgender students to use bathrooms that match their affirmed gender.

Here are some strategies from the new book I coauthored, [Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools: A Guide for Educational Leaders](#).

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Fostering Respect, Inclusion, and Acceptance

To set the stage, launch the school year by articulating and modeling norms of respect and empathy as you welcome staff and families and greet students:

- Introduce the concept of identity safety, and show students that who they are and what they think matters.
- Invite students to formulate schoolwide norms for respect, acceptance, and inclusion.
- Give students opportunities to share feelings and experiences from the summer and the pandemic.
- Make academic and behavioral expectations clear, explaining their purpose.
- Share about yourself and show that you care.
- Get to know students, correctly pronounce their names, and use preferred pronouns.

- Teach students about the growth mindset and how we all make mistakes and can learn from them.

Promoting Identity Safe Partnerships and Schoolwide Activities

Leaders can draw students, parents and caregivers, and the larger community together into authentic partnerships, contributing to identity safety for everyone. Empower parents/caregivers to meet their children's academic and social and emotional needs, and give them a voice in school decisions. Plan schoolwide activities (e.g., science and math fairs, poetry slams, career days, and multicultural celebrations) in identity safe ways that validate a variety of backgrounds without stereotyping anyone. Invite the broader community to participate in the school, and involve the school in the community through local events, service projects, food banks, etc.

Equalizing Schoolwide Discipline Practices

As a leader, you have a wide-angle view of how students are feeling and being treated. One high school, where the staff prided themselves on high achievement, discovered from a climate survey that bullying was far more prevalent than they had previously believed. In another example, when students were invited to anonymously report their experiences, a middle school student wrote, "Once, at school, a fellow POC (person of color) friend of mine was accused of selling drugs (which he was not doing). Our group of friends was all races, but I was the only Black one in the group. The administration brought me into the office and had the police there to question me for having 'ties to an alleged gang.' None of this was true."

Such discriminatory discipline policies reflect what researchers have long documented: [Black and Latino](#) students are regularly suspended and expelled more frequently than White students. When staff members pay attention, they can take steps to stop these patterns, many of which materialize unconsciously. By engaging in a dialogue about implicit biases, staff can build awareness of previously unwitting behaviors that cause them to treat some students differently or disproportionately punish students of color. Schools can't become identity safe unless the staff recognizes and addresses disparities and leaders have the power and the responsibility to confront these issues.

Unfair practices, including bullying and harassing students of color, LGBTQIA+, and others perceived as different, have lasting harmful impacts on students' lives. Research-based [conflict-resolution](#) and [restorative practices](#), especially when initiated in elementary school and continued through high school graduation, can make a huge difference in reducing disciplinary incidents and bullying.

Unifying Staff Through Professional Learning and Dialogue

In collaborative learning teams, everyone contributes and shares. Attention to staff wellness with opportunities that allow staff to express feelings about the pandemic and their lives and also share lighthearted moments together serves as a model for interacting with students. A resilient staff who attend to their own healing will help students heal.

Empathy and compassion grow when a faculty hears directly from students about their experiences. As curriculum director, I brought a panel of LGBTQIA+ high school students to address teachers from their former elementary school. One girl, who identified as a lesbian, personally thanked her fifth-grade

teacher for commenting that having a gay or straight identity was normal. At the time, those simple words validated the girl's questions about her emerging sexual orientation. These sessions led to meaningful discussions that helped identify safety strategies.

We all hope that in the 2021–22 school year we'll leave the pandemic behind us. Although the upcoming year still holds much uncertainty and many challenges, there are also many opportunities for leaders to move their school communities forward toward healing with identity safe practices, acceptance, and belonging.