



Building Belonging, Together

A companion document for the Community Conversation Toolkit Guide

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ROOTS OF
INCLUSION

Acknowledgment

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We are grateful for the collaborative spirit and shared vision that made this project possible. The commitment to fostering positive change and creating more inclusive, equitable, and connected communities enabled us to develop these resources to ensure that our schools and communities are welcoming places where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Introduction

Belonging refers to the sense of acceptance, connection, and inclusion individuals feel within a group or community. It is a very ordinary need that everyone shares. Belonging impacts various aspects of an individual's life, including their mental and emotional well-being, social connections, academic performance, and overall happiness. Individuals who feel supported and understood are more resilient and often can cope more effectively with challenging situations.

When schools and communities prioritize belonging, individuals experience a sense of value, respect, and inclusion, fostering collective strength within the school community. Belonging also acts as a protective element, guarding against feelings of isolation or 'othering.' Othering, a social concept, occurs when individuals or groups are perceived as fundamentally different from the dominant group, often along specific characteristics. Rooted in historical and cultural biases, othering leads to the marginalization or exclusion of these individuals or groups. To cultivate belonging in our schools and communities, it is imperative to examine the ways we exclude people and limit their meaningful participation to protect against othering and promote full inclusion in our schools and community.

Exploring Belonging for Students, Educators, and Families

Belonging plays a significant role in school communities, impacting the success of everyone involved. Research shows that students, educators, and families who feel a sense of belonging are more connected, feel like they matter, and trust that they can express their unique perspectives and contribute fully to their school community.

Acceptance, connection, and support are vital components of student belonging. When students feel accepted for who they are and educators plan for their diverse needs, it enhances students' overall well-being and educational experience. Students who feel welcomed and valued by their peers and by educators develop a stronger sense of belonging, which increases their motivation and positively impacts their academic performance and mental health.

Just like for students, belonging is crucial for educators. When educators feel a sense of belonging within their school community, it enhances their engagement, motivation, and commitment to their roles. Feeling valued, connected, and purposeful in their work impacts educators' overall well-being, increases their effectiveness in the classroom, and contributes to a supportive learning environment for students.

Belonging is essential for families and caregivers, too. A sense of belonging provides a foundation for meaningful school-family partnerships. When schools embrace families' diverse experiences, cultures, and identities, they enhance the school culture and strengthen the community overall. School policies and practices should reinforce the importance of family and caregiver connection and belonging.

The Belonging Community Conversation

The Belonging Community Conversation centers curiosity and provides a platform for genuine understanding. Gathering diverse perspectives on belonging from people in your school community allows you to more fully understand the social, structural, environmental, and cultural contexts that impact an individual's sense of inclusion or exclusion. By actively listening to and learning from each other, communities can identify what can be done to grow and improve belonging and create a school community where every person has the conditions they need to engage, learn, and thrive.

The Belonging Community Conversation Toolkit guides users to:

- Explore indicators of belonging
- Build a shared understanding of what belonging means to their community
- Examine ways to create a culture of belonging collaboratively
- Generate ideas for eliminating barriers to belonging in the school community



Belonging Indicators Author, Dr. Erik Carter, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, 2019

What is in This Toolkit?

This toolkit is a practical guide for families, educators, and community leaders who want to build a shared understanding of belonging and what is needed to improve relationships and address barriers to belonging in their schools. It describes the essential components of a Community Conversation and includes detailed planning tools and resources for both in-person and virtual events, including:

- Community Conversation Toolkit Guide
- Community Conversation Planning Tool
- Accessibility Checklist
- Language Access Resources
- Working Effectively with Interpreters
- System Mapping Tool
- Sample Invitation
- Event Protocol and Agenda
- Virtual Event Protocol and Agenda
- Sign-In Sheet and Group Agreements Table Tent
- Table Host Guidelines
- Community Conversation Slide Deck
- Harvest Tool
- Ticket Out the Door Evaluation Tool
- Reflection on the Community Conversation

Key Takeaways

Intentional work to improve belonging matters and helps everyone in your community feel better connected and empowered to lead change together. As you begin planning for your Belonging Community Conversation, remember:

- Every Community Conversation is an opportunity to grow connections and increase knowledge and understanding of your community.
- Lead with curiosity. Gathering people's perspectives instead of guessing at them helps you better understand what is needed.
- Every individual can help improve belonging for others and, while doing so, strengthen their own belonging, too.
- With belonging, even small steps matter as you work on more significant systemic issues.
- Bridges of connection and relationships are powerful tools to support a school community's equity and inclusion work.
- Relationships with your community help assess whether changes successfully move you closer to your goal of belonging.

Resources

Carter, E. W. (n.d.). Dimensions of belonging for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In J. L. Jones & K. L. Gallus (Eds.), *Belonging and resilience in individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Community and family engagement*. Springer.

Carter, E. W., & Biggs, E. E. (2021). *Creating communities of belonging for students with significant cognitive disabilities (Belonging Series)*. University of Minnesota, TIES Center.