



# **CULTURE OF BELONGING AND WELL-BEING: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION**

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call Radically Reimagined Relationships—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of five indicators: Commitment to Equity and Justice; Agency and Trust; and Shared Purpose and Responsibility; Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity; and a Culture of Belonging and Well-being.

## WHY A CULTURE OF BELONGING AND WELL-BEING?

A wealth of research attests to the importance of prioritizing a sense of belonging and well-being in schools. A sense of belonging increases students' motivation and engagement in academics, improves students' grades and test scores, and decreases the likelihood of bullying, depression, and dropping out. We also know that it correlates positively with improved mental health, sleep, resilience, and happiness.<sup>1</sup>

Still, loneliness and alienation plague many young people. One measure of this, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, shows that 32% of all U.S. high school students report feeling persistently sad or helpless, 19% report having been bullied at school, and 17% say they have seriously considered attempting suicide. The CDC identifies school connectedness, which it defines as "the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals," as an important protective factor.<sup>2</sup>

A sense of belonging is particularly important during transitional moments, for example when students transition from elementary to middle school. During such times, peer support, feeling safe in school, feeling connected to school, and feeling connected to teachers are all important influencers of students' sense of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Creating a sense of community and belonging for all students means we must honor individual students' identities. Well-intentioned but unconsciously biased or overly simplistic approaches can actually cause belonging and achievement gaps to grow wider over time; these include celebrations of multiculturalism and diversity that don't recognize and root out systemic

1 See Roffey, S., Boyle, C., & Allen, K. A. (2019). School belonging—Why are our students longing to belong to school? *Educational and Child Psychology*, 36(2), 6-8; also Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30, 1-34.

2 Center for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health (2018). Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/index.htm>.

3 Lester, L., & Cross, D. (2015). The relationship between school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing over the transition from primary to secondary school. *Psychology of Well-being*, 5(1), 9.

inequities that students experience at school because of their race, family income, citizenship status, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other factors.<sup>4</sup> Often we send messages, unintended and otherwise, that students must change to fit conventional definitions of school, rather than changing the school environment to increase students' sense of belonging.

Schools we've visited that have a strong culture of belonging and well-being have worked intentionally and carefully to create a safe and welcoming environment for all students, staff, and families and to honor their diverse experiences and perspectives. These schools go beyond "parent involvement," which suggests an imbalanced, hierarchical relationship, to "family and community partnership," which suggests a more equal, bidirectional relationship.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

Advisories are one way that schools of all sizes can build a culture of belonging among staff and students, if advisories are done thoughtfully and not used merely for make-up assignments or administrative information and paperwork. At Vaux High School in Philadelphia, a district school that is part of the Big Picture Learning network, daily advisory runs 90 minutes or more for the school's 320 students. Big Picture Philadelphia's executive director David Bromley observes, "You get to know your students in a way different from anywhere else... Building community comes back to intentional use of time and what message you are sending to kids about how their time is used each day. Saying it's a priority and really making it a priority is key."

Across the country at Vancouver iTech Preparatory School, a district school serving 407 grade 6-12 students in WA, advisory is called "Advocacy" and it's scheduled every morning for 30 minutes Monday through Thursday. Advocacy is one way the school ensures that each student develops a close relationship with at least one staff member; one student says, "Everyone here knows each other. That means no one falls through the mesh, and the mesh is held up by the teachers."

In some schools, advisories are deliberately structured as multi-age mentor groups. At the Science and Math Institute in Tacoma, WA, a district school with an enrollment of 555, students are assigned to a multi-age mentor group they stay with throughout their four years of high school. Joni Hall,

4 See Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Matthews, J. S. (2018). Black and belonging at school: A case for interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunity structures. *Educational Psychologist*, 53(2), 97-113; also Celeste, L., Baysu, G., Phalet, K., Meeussen, L., & Kende, J. (2019). Can school diversity policies reduce belonging and achievement gaps between minority and majority youth? Multiculturalism, colorblindness, and assimilationism assessed. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

5 Cauldwell, J. (2019, December 3). Centering Equity: Authentic Family Engagement Is Bi-Directional: Engaging in Meaningful Family Partnerships [Blog series]. Retrieved from <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/centering-equity-authenticfamily-engagement-bi-directional-engaging-meaningful-family-partnerships/>.

SaMI's co-director, explains, "The mentor knows and cares about each child in the group... if there's a problem, the teacher will contact the mentor first, before administration. Mentors also help families navigate the system. They'll go meet with parents at homes, McDonalds, wherever they are comfortable. We spend a lot of time on culture and community and personal life. The kids call their mentor groups 'Samilies' (SaMI families)."

During Advisory and in other parts of the school day, staff members at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, work diligently with students and their families on college and career success. Sixty-two percent of Blackstone's 362 students are Latinx, 81% qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and many will be the first person in their family to attend college; consequently, Blackstone staff members invest a great deal of time in students' long-term well-being by counseling students, taking them on college visits, and helping them with FAFSA and other application paperwork. To gauge students' college and career readiness, the school requires portfolios each year that incorporate information about both in-school and out-of-school experiences including college visits, job shadowing, and internships.

Blackstone Academy also emphasizes a culture of belonging within the greater community: the school has formalized a commitment to community-based service learning as part of its curriculum and graduation requirements. Head of school Kyleen Carpenter explains, "Other schools have community service, but these kinds of projects within the core curriculum are unique. We're trying new assessment techniques. We're getting into longer relationships with community partners, which is great, and we're able to help students understand why this is a core part of the curriculum." Examples include refurbishing bicycles with Recycle a Bike; photojournalism projects with Progreso Latino that have been displayed in the Rhode Island State House; creating a skate park in Pawtucket; and advocacy around the DREAM Act, affordable housing, and Rhode Island's free in-state tuition program.

Finally, Blackstone Academy staff members engage parents and other family members as partners in students' learning, by inviting them to participate in portfolio presentations, offering programming (with child care provided) on important topics like immigration law, and celebrating with families when students receive college acceptances and job offers.

At Centreville Elementary, a district school in VA, the school staff reaches out to families in a different way. The staff does a "Welcome Walk" at the beginning of each school year before its 820 students return to school. Assistant principal Morgan Occhuizzo explains, "The teachers come in to work at 4 pm with school shirts on and school flags on their cars. Every teacher goes out with a specialist and we visit every students' home... many parents are out having block parties waiting for the teachers to arrive. This gives our teachers some perspective on where kids are coming from. After the Wel-



come Walk, parents are so excited because they have made that connection.” In the summer, Occhuzzo and other school leaders make an effort to keep the building open, with weekly library nights and regular barbecues.

In schools that prioritize a culture of belonging and well-being, we see a more holistic definition of success: above and beyond students’ academic success, these schools are asking whether staff members, parents, and other members of the school community are getting their needs met as well. At Windsor Elementary, a public school serving 392 students in Imperial, MO, principal Denise Funston told us that her ideal outcomes would include: “1. All of our students would answer a survey that they feel safe and loved at school. 2. All of our parents would be heavily involved at school. Also, if we could have kids reading and doing math on grade level, that would be great, too.” (It should be noted that state testing indicates Windsor is achieving Funston’s third outcome.)

Because the school prioritizes a culture of belonging and well-being, staff members know that their mandate is somewhat different than at many other schools. “I don’t care if you teach anything the first few weeks of school,” says Funston. “I want you to get to know your students and their families. Every successful child has at least one supportive adult, and we take that on as our goal.” At Windsor and other schools like it, emotional intelligence and skill in relationship-building are factors in hiring, induction, professional learning, evaluation, and leadership development. Creating a culture of belonging is the foundation for academics and everything else that the school must be and do, rather than a byproduct or an afterthought.

### QUICK TIPS

1. Institute daily advisories or some other protected time for small groups of students and staff members to meet. Be intentional about using this time to create community, rather than for other purposes.
2. Offer professional learning and resources for staff members serving as advisors. Remember that this may require different skills and strategies than teachers use in classroom instruction.
3. Remember that the adults in your school community—staff and families alike—benefit from a sense of belonging and well-being, too. Solicit their ideas and ask for regular feedback to gauge your progress.

## RESOURCES

Katrina Schwartz: [How schools can use life transitions to help students feel they belong](#). Article from RQED MindShift, May 2019.

Katrina Schwartz: [Taking small steps towards change at a big, traditional high school](#). Article from RQED MindShift, November 2016.

Mary Davenport: [Building a positive staff culture takes work](#). Article from Edutopia, May 2018.

Mindset Scholars Network: [Belonging](#).

For additional resources, please visit our [Resource Library](#).

## ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at [www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education](http://www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education).

© The Astra Foundation, 2020.

Text from this report may be used under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license.

On the cover: Students and staff at Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, MA. Photo courtesy of Codman Academy, one of the schools featured in Astra's *Radically Reimagined Relationships* report.

