

Belonging as a Core Condition for Learning

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Introduction

We've all gone into a room not knowing anyone and experiencing that feeling of unease, discomfort for some, and excitement and adrenaline for others. But one thing is for certain: once we connect with another person in that room, we feel more grounded, included, and ready to engage. The same is true for students and adults in schools. Belonging — the feeling of being accepted, valued, connected, and a contributor in a community — is a fundamental human need and a critical condition for learning and wellbeing in schools (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). For students and educators alike, belonging shapes whether individuals feel safe to engage, take risks, and persist through challenges (Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Purposefully creating a sense of belonging in schools serves to address some of the most pressing concerns in education today — chronic absenteeism, academic progress, engagement in schools, and mental health and isolation. Research has consistently elevated the benefits of fostering a sense of belonging and creating a stronger community in schools for students and educators. For instance, students who feel a sense of belonging within their school community demonstrate higher levels of engagement and motivation (Allen et al., 2018; Osterman, 2000) and academic achievement (Cai et al., 2022; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Students' sense of belonging is also associated with fewer behavioral and disciplinary reports (Korpershoek, et al., 2020) and an increase in school attendance (Smith et al., 2024). Similarly, educators who feel a sense of belonging within their schools report greater job satisfaction, collaboration, and retention (Kraft et al., 2016; Johnson, et al., 2012).

Given the robust effects that a sense of belonging has on educator and student outcomes, schools and districts should seek sustainable ways to support thriving learning communities. In other words, belonging is not a peripheral concept or a nice-to-have, but a foundational driver of both student success, adult wellbeing, and systems-level change. Although a sense of belonging is a personal and subjective experience, practitioners have implemented system-wide practices that researchers have found to be effective (Cook et. al., 2018; Walton & Cohen 2011; Durlak, et al., 2011). Many of the strategies serve as the foundation and/or base for creating safe and supportive classroom environments.

In this whitepaper, we identify some of the pressing challenges facing schools today to create a sense of belonging, what belonging looks like for students and adults, and concrete strategies that educators and leaders can take to promote belonging.

Understanding the Challenge

Belonging is an individualized experience and is context-dependent (Strayhorn, 2019). Meaning, students may differ in how they feel they belong in one class, space, or extra-curricular activity in school compared to others (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Even so, too many U.S. students — only about one half or fewer — report that they do not have a strong sense of belonging at school, and for many — especially in middle and high school — feelings of connectedness fall well below that level. For example, the following surveys report varying levels of belonging based on the definition and measure used:

Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data from a nationally representative sample of U.S. high school students found that about **61.5% reported feeling connected** to others at school in 2021, meaning roughly **38.5% did not feel that connection** — an indicator closely aligned with belonging (CDC, 2023).

More recent survey data from YouthTruth (2024–25) indicate even lower rates when disaggregated by grade span: only about **34% of elementary students, 45% of middle schoolers, and 42% of high schoolers** reported feeling a sense of belonging at school (YouthTruth, 2025).

Other national monitoring (e.g., CDC indicators referenced in EdWeek 2025) suggests that nearly **4 in 10 high school students** report not feeling close to people at school, reinforcing that a significant share of students lack strong school connectedness or belonging.

These findings highlight belonging as a nationwide concern tied to student success. Given its malleable nature, teachers and leaders can create conditions to foster belonging in their classrooms and schools.



Belonging Defined

A sense of belonging is essential for students since it directly shapes how they engage, behave, and learn in school (Walton & Cohen, 2007). When students feel accepted, valued, and connected to their peers and teachers, they are more likely to participate, take academic and social risks, and persist through challenges (Walton & Cohen, 2007). While the concept of belonging is a universal need, the experience of belonging itself is individual, context-dependent, and can fluctuate frequently. Thus, it is important to consider how students and adults develop a sense of belonging in schools.

For Students, by Developmental Level.

Pre-K. A young child (ages 4–7) feels a sense of belonging when they are warmly greeted by name, have a consistent routine, and are comforted by a trusted adult when upset. For example, a Pre-K student joins a morning circle where everyone sings together and sees their family photo displayed in the classroom, reinforcing that they are an important part of the group.

Early Elementary. Early elementary students experience belonging when they feel included in classroom activities and friendships, and when their ideas are valued. For example, during center time, the teacher intentionally pairs students and encourages turn-taking so each child has a role, helping students feel welcome, capable, and connected to peers.

Upper Elementary. Upper elementary students demonstrate a sense of belonging when they feel safe expressing opinions and collaborating with others, even when there are differences. For example, during a group project, students use agreed-upon norms for listening and problem-solving, and a student feels confident contributing ideas because classmates and the teacher treat them with respect.

Classroom Teachers. Classroom teachers experience a sense of belonging when they feel known, supported, and trusted by both colleagues and school leadership. For example, teachers who participate in grade-level meetings where their ideas are actively invited and used in instructional decisions, receive feedback framed as coaching rather than compliance, and feel safe discussing challenges without fear of judgment. This teacher knows who to turn to for help, feels aligned with the school's purpose, and believes their work and voice matter within the broader school community (Johnson, et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2016).

Adults within the School Community. Across the school community, adults — including administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, and support staff — experience belonging when there is a shared culture of respect, inclusion, and collective responsibility. For example, staff members across roles who are welcomed into schoolwide conversations; professional learning that is collaborative and inclusive; and communication that is transparent and consistent. Adults feel comfortable raising concerns, celebrating successes, and supporting one another, creating a psychologically safe environment where collaboration thrives and everyone sees themselves as an essential part of the school's success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Families. A family experiences a sense of belonging when they feel welcomed, respected, and recognized as valued partners in their child's education. For example, a school creates multiple, accessible ways for families to engage by offering communication in home languages, inviting families to share their cultural traditions during classroom activities, and soliciting family input on school decisions. Families feel comfortable reaching out to teachers or staff with questions or concerns, trust that their perspectives are heard, and see their knowledge of their child reflected in classroom practices, reinforcing that they are an essential part of the school community, not just visitors to it (Epstein, 2011; Mapp, & Bergman, 2021).

School Leader. School leaders experience a sense of belonging when they feel trusted, supported, and valued as part of a collective leadership team, rather than isolated in their role. For example, principals who regularly participate in district leadership meetings where their perspectives are

solicited and acted upon, receive coaching rather than compliance-only oversight, and feel safe raising challenges without fear of blame (Leithwood, et al., 2020). Within the school, leaders model belonging by creating inclusive staff norms, engaging teachers in shared decision-making, and fostering a school culture where adults and students alike feel known, respected, and connected (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

District Leader. At the district level, belonging is reflected when leaders experience alignment, shared purpose, and mutual accountability across departments and schools. For example, district leaders who feel a strong sense of belonging when cross-functional teams collaborate around common goals — such as student wellbeing or leadership development — when their expertise is recognized beyond their department, and when leadership communication emphasizes collective success over siloed performance. This sense of belonging enables district leaders to model coherence, consistently support schools, and advance system-wide cultures that prioritize relationships, trust, and inclusive leadership practices (Fulan et al., 2018; Leithwood, et al., 2020).

The Case for Belonging and How to Start the Journey

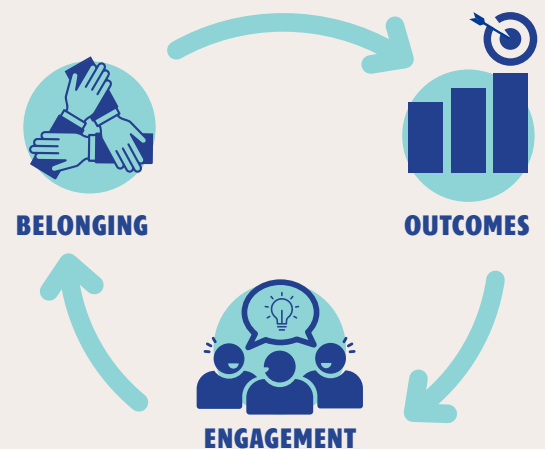
Belonging is a foundational factor related not only to academic outcomes, but health and wellness. When looking across studies, the effective size for belonging is 0.46 across outcomes that include student attendance, academics, discipline, social and personal development, and wellbeing (Allen et al., 2021). This effect size shows that, among the supports we provide in schools to ensure learning, belonging is just above average in terms of impact.

In his 2024 work *Belonging in School*, the first author of this paper and his colleagues build on research showing that when students **have a sense of belonging** (feel valued, respected, connected, and are contributing to their school community), they are more motivated and emotionally engaged. When students are more engaged because they feel they belong, their outcomes (e.g., learning, achievement, attendance, etc.) improve (see Figure 1, Fisher, et al., 2024; Fisher et al., 2025).

Conversely, when students do not feel they belong, they question their status and membership in the group — undermining their ability to learn. This also compromises the effectiveness of instruction, however excellent it may be.



Figure 1. Belonging Theory of Change



Strategies to Build a Shared Focus on Belonging

Fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom is not just an abstract ideal. There are powerful, research-backed strategies that directly affect student engagement, wellbeing, and academic success. By making belonging a priority, educators can enhance learning and nurture the confidence and resilience that students carry far beyond the classroom.

Support staff to create affirming learning environments and spaces for belonging. Staff need training and support to create conditions where students feel safe and included. For example, creating predictable routines and spaces where students can co-solve problems and co-regulate emotions. Research indicates that educators who create caring, respectful, and welcoming classrooms are more likely to decrease incidents of disruptive behavior and improve academic achievement and student engagement (Keifer & Pennington, 2017; Battistitch, et al., 1995).

Create opportunities to build relationships and connections in schools and classrooms. Each student and adult in the school community needs to feel included, valued, and like they belong. Thus, it's important that every student feels they have a trusted adult in this community. It's also important to create structures to check in on students and adults, as well as to create relationship-building strategies throughout the day. Strong teacher-student relationships improve attendance (Quinn, 2017).

Use teaching and learning strategies that embed students' lived experience and background. Students are more likely to feel a connection when classroom interactions and materials are linked to their own lives and backgrounds. Engaging content leads to meaningful learning by piquing students' interest and making lessons feel useful and relevant (Fisher et al., 2011). Educators building learning experiences that are relevant to students' home lives and communities are more likely to improve school belonging for students and enhance learning (Hammond, 2015; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).

Develop school leader capacity. Leaders also need support for their own wellbeing and for their efforts to create spaces where students, staff, and families feel welcome and that they belong. This also includes how they create systems (e.g., use data) and build relationships with the community and families.

Contributing through community-building activities. When students take on responsibilities related to classroom routines, teachers have more time to focus on fostering a cohesive learning environment. Meaningful classroom roles help establish relational trust because students recognize that their teachers believe in their capabilities (Demerath et al., 2022), which makes them more likely to take academic risks and engage deeply. And relational trust between students and teachers is an accelerator of learning (Sun, Zhang, & Forsyth, 2023). This type of engagement and community contribution builds classroom cohesion where teachers and students collaborate toward shared learning goals, leaving a profound effect on student success. and community contribution builds classroom cohesion in which teachers and students collaborate toward shared learning goals, and has a profound effect on student success.

Using these strategies, adults can begin to create systems of belonging for themselves, their colleagues, and their students. Throughout each of these strategies, belonging emerges when relationships are strong, voices are valued, differences are respected, and conflict is handled with care.



Leveraging Harmony for Belonging

Belonging occurs when adults focus on three interrelated pillars: relationship with self, with others, and with communities. Adults can do this by weaving the belonging strategies across lessons, routines, and adult practices. Together, these pillars describe how Harmony promotes belonging in schools, out-of-school time organizations, and homes — through routines and skill building (intrapersonal and interpersonal) that are woven into academic content to create a shared sense of responsibility, allowing belonging to take root and endure. By embedding these pillars into daily instruction and adult practice, the Harmony Curriculum creates welcoming environments where students feel connected, engaged, and ready to learn.

Self (Emotional Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Growth Mindset)

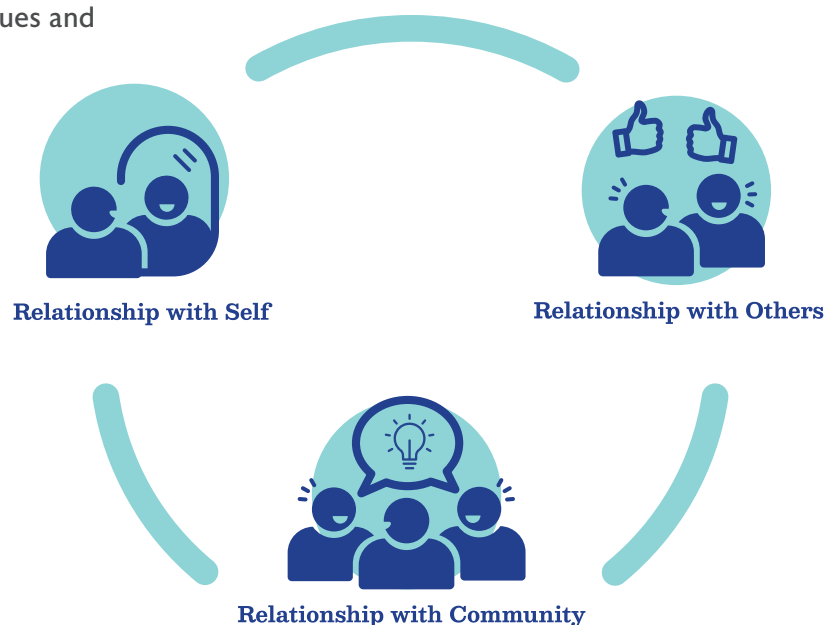
Belonging begins with students understanding and valuing who they are as individuals. Harmony supports students in recognizing their emotions, strengths, and needs, and in developing strategies to manage feelings, behaviors, and goals. When students feel emotionally safe and confident in themselves, they are more able to engage authentically with others. This can be seen in activities that focus on emotion identification, self-regulation strategies, reflection, the recognition of personal strengths (e.g., Unit 1: Being My Best Self), and setting personal and group goals (e.g., Harmony Personal and Class Goals).

Other (Relationships, Empathy, and Communication)

Harmony emphasizes learning how to connect with and understand others. Students practice empathy, perspective-taking, respectful communication, and conflict resolution so that differences do not become barriers to belonging. This pillar ensures students feel seen, heard, and respected in their interactions with peers and adults. Activities built into the Harmony Curriculum support understanding others' perspectives (Unit 2: Valuing Each Other), active listening and respectful dialogue (Unit 3: Communicating with Each Other), and collaborative work, problem-solving, and conflict resolution (Unit 4: Learning from Each Other).

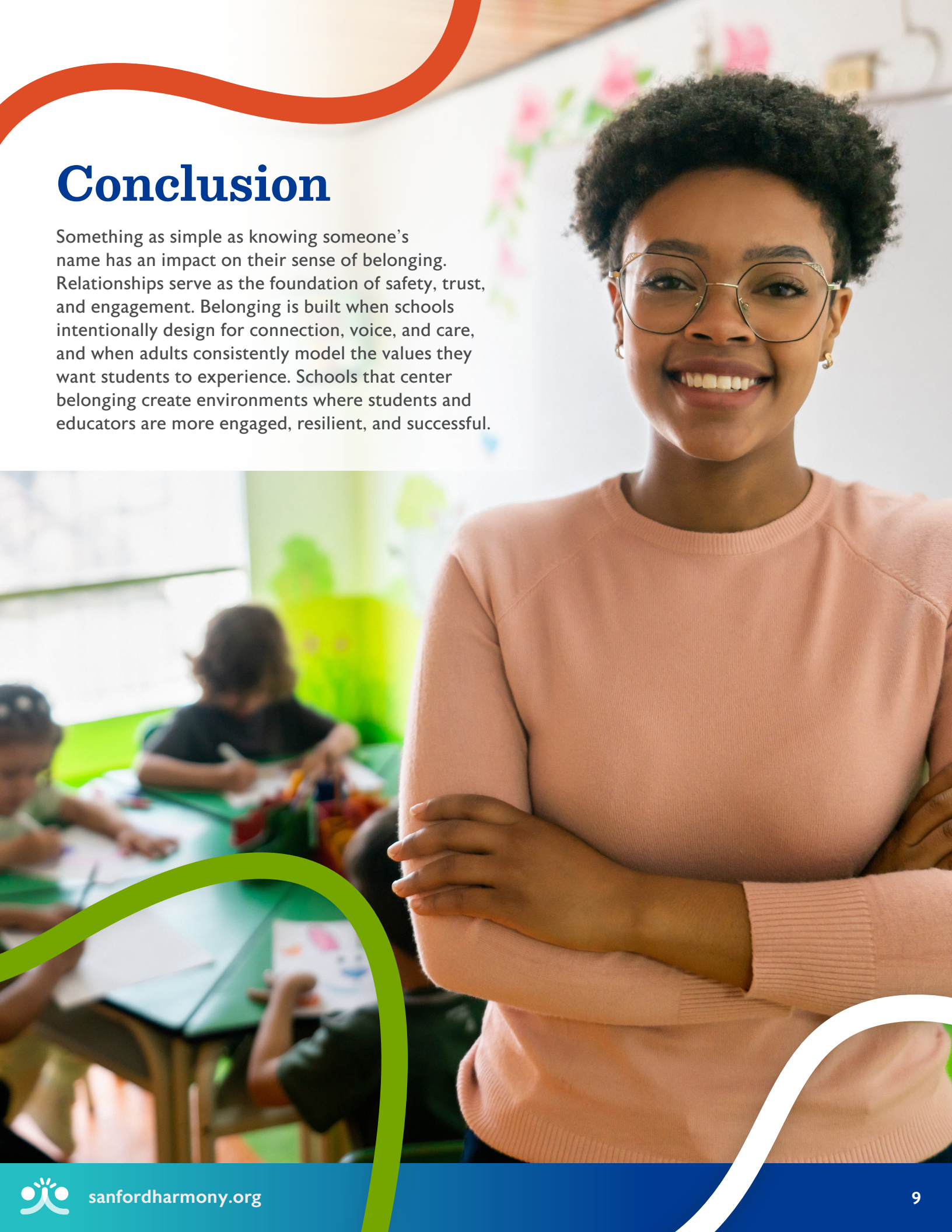
Community (Shared Norms and Collective Responsibility)

Belonging is sustained when students feel they are part of a larger, welcoming community with shared values and expectations. Harmony helps classrooms and schools establish norms rooted in respect, fairness, and care, and teaches students that they contribute to the wellbeing of the group. Community-level belonging reinforces that everyone matters and has a role. Community is built through co-created norms, welcoming classroom routines, repairing harm, and shared responsibility for a positive climate with the curriculum (e.g., through Harmony's Meet Up and Class Goals).



Conclusion

Something as simple as knowing someone's name has an impact on their sense of belonging. Relationships serve as the foundation of safety, trust, and engagement. Belonging is built when schools intentionally design for connection, voice, and care, and when adults consistently model the values they want students to experience. Schools that center belonging create environments where students and educators are more engaged, resilient, and successful.



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