District-Level Strategies to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging in School

Jean B. Grossman and Ximena A. Portilla

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that when students' social and emotional well-being are poor, their engagement with instruction is profoundly affected.[1] That revelation and the national mobilization for social justice sparked in 2020 have heightened public awareness that inequitable structures and policies—in school and out—have been harming the well-being of many of our nation's students even before the pandemic. Now more than ever, educators and families understand that in order to fully engage students in learning, schools need to be healing places where all students feel valued and a part of the community.

As described in the [introductory brief](#) to this series, the journey toward building an equitable, supportive educational system requires district-level action to occur at three, interdependent levels: (1) the [structural and policy level](#); (2) the [level of educators' well-being and capabilities](#); and (3) the level of specific strategies that strengthen students' social and emotional well-being, especially for those who feel disengaged. This brief is about strategies on that third level to provide students with supportive and inclusive school structures. In each area, the brief examines the research behind these practices, then provides concrete examples of practices being implemented in one of three districts that are taking a district-wide approach to improve educational equity. The district and student leaders interviewed for this brief are featured in Box 1.

"What we find is that the more young people are connected and have a sense of belonging in their schools, learning happens. Magic happens. This is just how it always should be. That young people get to see themselves. And their lived experiences are being a part of what it means to develop. The brain develops through connection, through empathy, through learning. We can get to academic progress if we show respect and appreciation for the way people show up in schools, while at the same time doing other pieces that are important around trauma and mental health. I hope more and more people come to the conclusion that this is what schooling should be—more than, this is how we use this to get to academic progress. Because, if it's the latter, it's going to swing into, 'let's try this other new thing.' And it won't be very human-centered or healing-centered. The aim for [Chicago Public Schools] is seeing youth as talented young people who deserve the best conditions and resources to thrive; the district and school teams have to put in place what's needed to help drive the success we dream of."

Maurice Swinney, Chicago Public Schools

> **BOX 1** **District and Student Leaders Consulted for This Brief**
>
> **Sacramento City Unified School District**
>
> - **Jacqueline Rodriguez**, Director I, Student Support Services
> - **Victoria Flores**, Director III, Student Support and Health Services
>
> **Metro Nashville Public Schools**
>
> - **Mary Crnobori**, Coordinator of Trauma-Informed Schools, Department of Student Support Services
> - **Angelie Quimbo**, 2021-2022 Student Board Member, senior at Hillwood High School
>
> **Chicago Public Schools**
>
> - **Maurice Swinney**, former Chief Equity Officer

Supportive and Inclusive School Structures

Building a system that makes more students feel like they belong—and building it equitably—entails increasing the use of supportive and inclusive practices. It means adopting procedures to solicit students' participation, improving school climate through support services for all, providing students with targeted forms of support when needed, replacing exclusionary practices with "restorative" ones, and nurturing trust between students and the adults in schools.

Providing Students with More Voice and Choice

> *"We walk alongside our youth. We trust that they know what they need, we listen to them, and we help them get what they said they need. That is a value that all of our staff hold."*
>
> *Jacqueline Rodriguez, Sacramento City Unified School District*

A 2016 Gallup survey of students in 3,000 schools found that while three-quarters of them were involved and enthusiastic about school in fifth grade, that proportion decreased with each year in school, to 34 percent by twelfth grade.[2] There are also large racial and ethnic differences in school connectedness: by middle school, 36 percent fewer African American students than White students say they feel connected to school, along with 21 percent fewer Hispanic students than White students.[3] Studies show that, especially for non-White students, lower levels of feeling connected and belonging are related to lower willingness to follow school rules, less engagement in school, and lower grades.[4]

Theory and research find that school belonging is not just about the quality of interactions with peers and teachers but is also influenced by school practices.[5] To improve students' sense of belonging, many districts have tried to increase the level of "voice and choice" students have at school. Decades of research by developmental psychologists show that giving students more "voice and choice" in school increases their sense of belonging, improves their opinion of themselves, and increases task engagement.[6] When students see their ideas realized, they gain a greater sense of control and ownership over their environment, which lessens the effects of stress and increases their sense of belonging.[7]

Student Representatives on School Boards

A traditional way to give students "voice" is through student governance units, both within schools and at the district level. As of 2020, 31 of 49 states allow students on local school boards.[8] While there is relatively little research on the effects of representation on students, a recent systematic review of this literature found that while the effect is largest on the students who fill these positions, representation does have a moderate effect on the school body as a whole.[9] In particular, 29 studies showed improvements in school engagement (that is, better student attitudes toward the school, a greater sense of student ownership over the school, greater student enjoyment at school, or greater student happiness or fun at school). The review also finds that the more students who are involved in the decision-making process (for example, being representatives, or participating in advisory councils), the broader the effect on belonging.

Student representation may have these effects because student board representatives can serve as a bridge between the student body and the adults on the school board, elevating student perspectives and bringing forth discussions important to students.[10] For example, during the 2020-2021 school year, the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) student school board representative was active in policy development and worked with the district to rewrite the absenteeism policy to excuse mental health absences; previously, the policy only excused absences based on physical health. To expand students' ability to contribute to district policies, beginning in the 2021-2022 school year Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) added two high school student members to its school board. To ensure that their voices are effective, the student board members receive orientation training and are assisted by the MNPS central office staff and a board member mentor.

> *"I feel fulfilled knowing that I helped amplify the needs of my peers. Student voice and input should be put at a forefront in environments that claim to put their interests first."*
> *Angelie Quimbo, student board member, Metro Nashville Public Schools*

Youth-Led Advocacy and Resources Using Media and Virtual Platforms

Two innovative techniques to gather the perspectives of a broader selection of students are to use virtual platforms and to form official student advisory bodies. For example, to tackle the question of how to raise mental health awareness among students, SCUSD organized a youth focus group to inform its training sessions on mental health awareness and made a student-developed video that was shared with its student body and school board. SCUSD has since further developed a youth media team that produces content for fellow students in other areas. For example, the team developed content to address chronic absenteeism and encourage fellow students to return to campus.

"The youth felt really empowered [through this engagement] and really articulated what they needed for their own mental health and what they were missing. They featured the video at a community event that school board members attended to recognize the youth."

Jacqueline Rodriguez, Sacramento City Unified School District

In an innovative example of a "for students, by students" effort, SCUSD launched a free, student-developed app to help young people connect with mental health resources offered by the district and other providers in the community—a timely strategy, given the increase in mental health needs during the pandemic.[11] Using the Grace (Giving Resources and Care Everyday) app, students can find help anonymously for food, clothing, housing, mental health, and LGBTQ+ support.[12] This app is the product of a student-led collaboration between SCUSD students and college student programmers who together designed its features and functionalities to maximize student interest and use.

SCUSD also has a year-round student advisory council program that introduces students to policy advocacy, applied social research, democratic governance, and grassroots organizing. Council delegates develop policy initiatives, meet with district staff members, and report to the SCUSD Board of Education. They work to ensure that all student voices are represented.[13] They also use their platform and newsletters to promote to the rest of the student body public service announcements such as the content mentioned above dealing with mental health awareness and chronic absenteeism.

In 2020, MNPS launched a virtual platform where it can hear from a broad range of students. For example, when the district was evaluating its alternative learning centers (ALCs; alternative school settings available when students have been expelled from their regular schools), it partnered with the ALC schools to host a series of virtual sessions enabling ALC students to discuss with educators and students (1) issues present in MNPS schools and ideas to mitigate them so there is an emphasis on prevention rather than exclusion; (2) the students' experience in ALCs and ways this intervention model can be improved; and (3) what students need when they transition back into general education at their local schools. These student insights were shared with the district transition coordinator assigned to their reentry into MNPS local schools, to ensure that those students had the necessary support when they returned and to prevent future issues for students that could result in ALC placements.

"A big part of that was the sharing of students' thoughts of what they need. We've found that this is more meaningful than anything else. Adults can sit together all day long and tell each other what impacts kids. But when [adults] hear students' voices, the words of the students—that makes the hugest impact."

Mary Crnobori, Metro Nashville Public Schools

Partnerships with Community-Based Organizations

One challenge districts can face in providing students with more voice and choice is having enough people to work with students and gather their perspectives. To address this challenge, MNPS has begun placing an even greater emphasis on strategies to integrate student voices at every level. In 2021, the MNPS Department of Student Services' internal student voice working group teamed up

with Alignment Nashville (a nonprofit organization trying to address systemic barriers to equitable outcomes for MNPS students) and other organizations involved with young people (such as The Oasis Center, Ed Trust of Tennessee, the Office of the Mayor, YMCA, and the Nashville Public Library) to address this challenge, creating an Alignment Team for Student Voice and Engagement.[14] Together, the Alignment Team is aiming to establish a consistent framework that amplifies student leadership and incorporates students' voices throughout the district in a sustainable manner, develop a timeline of planned student-engagement actions, formalize a process for engaging diverse students in a continual way, and develop tools to help teachers and school staff members solicit and respond to students' voices.[15] The Alignment Team is a good example of how districts can make partnerships with community-based organizations to help both meet their joint goals.[16]

Multitiered Systems of Support

Many districts are adding an array of services and programs to schools to improve many dimensions of students' well-being and sense of belonging. To organize their policies and delivery of services, a growing number of districts and schools are turning to a multitiered systems of support (MTSS) framework.[17]

An MTSS framework offers a way for schools to integrate evidence-based models and interventions, with the goal of meeting students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs and effectively intervening with additional forms of support when problems occur in any of these domains.[18] What characterizes this evidence-based framework is: (1) the provision of universal "tier 1" support services to all students, to prevent problems from occurring; (2) the presence of school-based teams who use data to identify students in need of more targeted and intense forms of support, commonly referred to as "tiers 2 and 3"; and (3) the use of data to monitor fidelity to the model for all three tiers and to assess their effectiveness.[19] All three districts interviewed for this brief deploy services in their schools in at least one area using an MTSS approach.

Universal Forms of Support
A broad range of school-wide structures, practices, and services related to school climate, mental health, and social and emotional learning can constitute the first tier of support. They are offered to all students as a way of averting potential problems, and are intended to improve their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. They include practices such as the use of culturally responsive curricula; instruction to strengthen students' social and emotional competencies (for example, their ability to better manage their emotions, understand others, and make responsible decisions); daily community-building meetings to improve relationships between students and staff members; after-school and mentoring programs to meet students' social needs better; family-engagement strategies; behavioral expectations for students and teachers, established with student involvement; a school-wide recognition system for appropriate behavior; project-based and service learning; and a variety of efforts to improve school climate. Earlier briefs in this series highlighted some of these efforts; two recent reports also provide comprehensive discussions of these types of universal, tier 1 practices.[20]

Targeted Forms of Support

More intensive forms of support are reserved for students who, according to data, are not responding to universal, tier 1 forms of support. For example, SCUSD has school-based support centers in almost half of its 76 schools and hopes to expand them to all its schools. SCUSD student support center staff members reach out to offer services to students who are struggling socially, emotionally, behaviorally, or academically. A Student Support and Health Services coordinator works with the school's staff to identify students in need of additional support. Once those students are identified, social workers, family advocates, interns, and community partners work directly with them and their families to address issues that are of concern to them and connect them to other resources for additional support. To maximize the trust and comfort students and families have with support center staff members, those staff members stay in the same school to the extent possible.

> *"Our [Student Support and Health Services] staff develop and implement a school-based, coordinated mental health system. Schools can have great supports, but benefit from having an internal, designated staff person who can coordinate these supports. That is one thing that our staff are very skilled in. We need our community-based providers, our commercial private insurance providers—we need all of that to provide more intensive support. But it's our school-based mental health that creates a coordinated system. When I visit schools without them, or that are just starting to develop a coordinated system, you can see how services are so siloed or they are just absent."*
>
> *Jacqueline Rodriguez, Sacramento City Unified School District*

Similarly, at Chicago Public Schools, over 300 schools have some type of multidisciplinary behavioral health team providing targeted, student-level support services. When a student has been referred for additional services, this team comes together to talk about the student as a whole child—to look at the student's behavior, attendance, and grades, and to try to understand what the root cause is for the referral, considering the potential impact of trauma or chronic stress. And when the district does engage community partners to provide care for students, it tries to include those providers on schools' behavioral health teams, because it wants to make sure that there is continuity of care, communication, and collaboration between schools and service providers.

> *"Every child deserves a teacher that is crazy about them and wants them to be successful. I think we can mitigate a lot of the things we're trying to solve for in a culturally responsive environment if we do that work. And in cases when it's not a straightforward solution, the specialized support from the behavioral health teams is very important."*
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> *Maurice Swinney, Chicago Public Schools*

Restorative Approaches

The school-level structure most associated with racial disparities and negative effects on school belonging is the practice of exclusionary discipline, often in the form of suspensions and expulsions. Indeed, suspensions alone explain for 20 percent of the Black-White academic achievement gap.[21] Recent research also shows that exclusionary policies are not only harmful to the student's academic achievement but ineffective at decreasing future behavioral infractions.[22] Because of their

ineffectiveness and the substantial and persistent racial disparities in discipline practices, schools are seeking alternatives.[23] Specifically, some districts are trying to move away from exclusionary practices by revising inequitable disciplinary policies.[24] An alternative approach some districts are trying—either within a multitiered system of support framework or on its own—is to incorporate more "restorative" practices: nonpunitive, relationship-centered practices aimed at avoiding harmful behavior by strengthening relationships, deescalating situations, and then repairing relationships if harm is done.[25]

While there is a lot of discussion about restorative practices in the education field, there has been relatively little rigorous research on their impact.[26] However two recent randomized controlled trials of restorative justice approaches suggest they may be a promising approach, as do several quasi-experimental studies.[27] The evidence from these studies suggests that restorative approaches decrease the number of and racial disparities in disciplinary actions and instances of misbehavior. They also improve school climate. The evidence of their effects on bullying and absenteeism is more mixed, but the practices often lessen these issues.[28]

The research also highlights that restorative approaches are challenging to implement, requiring staff training, staff understanding and commitment, and more time and resources than exclusionary policies.[29] The subsections that follow first describe some of the restorative approaches one district is implementing, then discuss the training districts featured in this brief are doing to undergird the implementation of restorative approaches.

Restorative Centers

In 2021, MNPS began expanding its "advocacy center" model to all of its 72 elementary schools. These advocacy centers are dedicated, safe spaces staffed by a caring adult who is a coach trained in healing-centered practices and in recognizing when behaviors may be the result of stress or trauma. The coach helps children when they have social conflicts, lose control of their emotions in the classroom, or otherwise need extra assistance. When a student enters the advocacy center, that student is greeted by a room that physically looks different from a classroom; advocacy centers have soft furniture, calming colors, and panels covering the fluorescent lights. The student chooses a strategy that may focus on breathing, movement, grounding, or mindfulness, while the coach tries to make a positive connection with the student. Activities can include yoga, breathing exercises, reading, or listening to calming music. The connection with the coach helps students reflect on behavior and alternative responses to conflict in the future; the dedicated time allows students to ask questions and interact with a coach who listens, validates their feelings, and helps build social and emotional skills they can use throughout the day. Students typically stay in the advocacy center for 15 to 20 minutes.

The goal of the center is to provide supportive interventions to students right when they need it, so they can return to classrooms with tools to manage their emotions and behavior, ready to learn. Importantly, it is not a place children go because they are in trouble. The center is promoted throughout the school and open to all, so children know it is available to them. Children can choose to go or can be referred to the center by a teacher. Children can also refuse to visit the center; it is not mandatory.

"It's very much promoted as a space available for everyone: 'This is a positive, supportive space. It's not because you are in trouble—but we recognize that you are going through a struggle and want to help.' A child can self-refer to the advocacy center. The element of student voice and choice is huge."

Mary Crnobori, Metro Nashville Public Schools

"Restorative peace centers" are a parallel structure for middle and high school students in MNPS, similar to the advocacy centers but with strategies tailored for adolescents. In these calming spaces, staff members assist students, guiding them to "recover [from strong feelings] and return to an internal state conducive to learning."[30] They have a strong focus on community building, and an emphasis on nonpunitive conflict-resolution approaches, such as restorative circles where students who have disagreements with other students or with staff members can repair their relationships.[31] When there has been conflict, the peace center coach will help students reflect on their actions and come up with potential solutions, and then help the students through "restorative accountability actions." The purpose of a restorative accountability action is to restore a relationship or repair harm caused as a result of something that happened during emotional or behavioral conflict. It is used as a form of discipline, in an effort to use discipline to teach, not punish. The restorative accountability action is chosen and completed by a student and supervising staff member working together, with information from others involved in the situation taken into account as appropriate or needed. Restorative accountability actions may include communication (for example, conflict resolution or reflection) or an act of reparation, restitution, or restriction. Examples include restorative conversations or conferences, community service projects, and other logical consequences.

However, the primary emphasis of the peace center is on providing students with human connection and guidance with self-regulation strategies; accountability is a secondary emphasis, and the center limits its focus on restorative accountability actions to no more than one for every three visits, to ensure that students get the assistance they need. The goal is to have peace centers in all middle and high schools by the 2022-2023 academic school year.

"Every time a student comes to an advocacy center or peace center, they are going to get connection from a caring adult, supportive practice through a menu of calming skills, and reentry support when they go back to the classroom. If needed, there could be an accountability action. An accountability action is not punitive.... This is student voice-and-choice driven, not imposed on the student. It's more like, 'Okay, what happened? Let's reflect through it. I can see you are hurting, but maybe harm was caused to somebody else. How do you think you should repair that?' And then the student comes up with ways to fix whatever went awry. And the advocacy or peace center coach will help them through that restorative accountability action."

Mary Crnobori, Metro Nashville Public Schools

Professional Development in Strengths-Based, Healing-Centered Approaches

The evidence shows that when done well, restorative practices can improve behavior and reduce disciplinary disparities.[32] However, they can be challenging to adopt. First, because this approach requires staff members to implement different practices consistently, both training and ongoing reinforcement are needed. Second, for staff members to truly adopt these practices, they need to come to value strong, healthy relationships over control and compliance. Resistance to abandoning existing models of control and discipline—for example, by having school resource officers present or by engaging in controlling conversations that devalue students' opinions or perspectives—undermine the restorative setting.[33] Changing staff attitudes takes time and ongoing dialogue. Districts wanting to incorporate more restorative and healing practices need to invest in significant professional development in "strengths-based" practices—practices that focus on students' strengths (including their personal strengths and social and community networks), lived experiences, and desires, not on their deficits or weaknesses as perceived by others. The subsections that follow highlight two different approaches to training staff members in order to help schools become more "strengths-based" and "healing-centered."[34]

District-wide Training

Beginning in 2016, MNPS enacted a district-wide initiative to focus on equity and shifting adults' mindsets; the initiative includes a commitment to "strengths-based, growth-minded, empowering, compassionate, and healing-centered engagement with all stakeholders."[35] Since then, MNPS has trained more than 15,000 MNPS faculty and staff members, as well as over 5,000 MNPS students, parents, and community members. The district currently requires all of its approximately 10,000 teachers and staff members to complete annual training in healthy brain development, the effects of childhood adversity, and trauma-informed and healing-centered practices (practices that recognize how stress and trauma affect behavior and learning, acknowledge trauma as a possible root cause, take account of how trauma is experienced collectively, and promote collective healing and well-being through a strengths-based, culturally relevant approach).[36] With common training, language, and understanding throughout the district, MNPS has expanded to now emphasize work with specific stakeholders, focused on staff wellness and elevating students' voices.

Chicago Public Schools is also working to provide comprehensive and foundational training to all adults in the system that teaches staff members to understand the prevalence and impact of trauma, recognize when students' challenging behavior may be the result of trauma, understand how trauma affects learning, and create an environment that buffers against the negative effects of trauma. By training all staff members, Chicago Public Schools aims to make it possible for all adults in schools to approach students with the same level of understanding, knowledge, and respect. Additional ways that Chicago Public Schools is supporting its staff members in healing-centered practices are discussed in a previous brief in this series.[37]

Targeted Staff Training

SCUSD, on the other hand, is building its district-wide capabilities through intensive training of the staff in its Student Support and Health Services department. Through a partnership with

Flourish Agenda (a partner agency founded by Shawn Ginwright, the pioneer of healing-centered engagement work), these staff members have spent the last two years training to become certified healing-centered practitioners. The Flourish Agenda healing-centered approach has five principles "(CARMA): Culture (the values and norms that connect us to a shared identity), Agency (the individual and collective power to act, create, and change personal conditions and external systems), Relationships (the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others), Meaning (the profound discovery of who we are, why we are, and what purpose we were born to serve), Aspiration (the capacity to imagine, set, and accomplish goals for personal and collective livelihood and advancement; the exploration of possibilities for our lives and the process of accomplishing goals for personal and collective livelihood)."[38] SCUSD district leaders spoke of the power of this intensive certification training program in helping their staff members align their beliefs about and practices with students with the department and district's vision for equity.

These certified healing-centered staff members are now working across district departments, initiatives, and schools to begin infusing these principles into student services and into the staff members' work with young people. For example, the coordinators who work in school student support centers will be training other adults in the school in how to take a strengths-based, healing-centered approach to working with students and families.

> *"Our Department [of Student Support and Health Services], as well as our district, has declared equity as a guiding principle. The [educational] system is inequitable by design, so we need to focus on how to dismantle the inequitable systems that exist, to remove barriers to learning and thriving for all students. Thus, we are on a journey in how we support our staff. We need to make sure that what we bring in supports and aligns with our vision and mission. We [in our department] are often looked at as the experts, but we realized that we also need to build up our own expertise and it's hard work. It pulls on our emotions, as we reflect on our own biases and triggers. If we continue to do professional development training that centers [existing] structures or systems, then we are just perpetuating [inequities]. That is a really intentional, difficult process, and it's time-consuming, but it is well worth it."*
>
> *Victoria Flores, Sacramento City Unified School District*

Conclusion

Students can flourish in school when they feel a strong sense of belonging. But all too often, a school's policies and practices lead many students to feel marginalized in school. Educational equity can only be achieved if all students share a strong sense of belonging. To create that sense, a school system needs to remedy the policies that are marginalizing some students; provide students with voice and choice to help them shape their school experience; provide students with extra social and emotional support when their lives gets tough; and build the capabilities of adults in the schools to have strong, affirming relationships with students.

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34 For additional discussions of this term, see Portilla (2022).

35 Mary Crnobori, "Integrating Trauma-Informed (TI) Approaches and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Journey of Three Districts," presentation made at a virtual roundtable hosted by the National Comprehensive Center (October 13, 2021).

36 Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of "trauma-informed," the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration says that a trauma-informed system: "(1) realizes the wide-spread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; (2) recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; (3) responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and (4) seeks to actively resist re-traumatization." See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884 (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

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