

Fostering Student Connections Be here. Be you. Belong.



One of the most important life experiences is feeling like **you belong where you are, how you are**. Human connection is essential for healthy development. In May 2023, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new Surgeon General Advisory, stressing the reality of “loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection” being public health crises. Dr. Murthy explained “loneliness is like hunger...a signal we’re lacking something for survival” (New Leaders, 2024).

School connectedness is a strong protective factor for children’s mental health and directly impacts student engagement and learning (Leever, 2023). For this reason, medical experts and researchers have recommended increasing connectedness as an effective preventative strategy that can deter young people from engaging in risky behaviors and decrease loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Nat Lib of Medicine, 2018). Dr. Maithreyi Gopalan, a Professor of Education and Public Affairs at Penn State University, compiled research that showed the positive correlation between a ‘belonging intervention’ and student performance, perseverance, and mental health. The components of the intervention were as follows:

- ✓ The acknowledgment that challenges are expected, especially during times of transition, and that most students experience similar feelings in these situations.
- ✓ Communication that belonging is a process that tends to increase over time.
- ✓ Use of student examples of challenges and resolutions, often written in letters to future students (Gopalan, 2023).

Another important concept is that social connection is based less on how many friends a child has and more on the quality of their relationships. Taking time to discuss and practice what the qualities of a good friend look like will help students build positive social skills. Parents and educators can help children think differently about perceived negative interactions with others and the power of a growth mindset (Leever, 2023).

As parents and educators, we see fragile yet powerful interactions amongst kids that have the potential of unveiling vulnerabilities and strengthening resiliency. Brené Brown explains that a sense of belonging isn’t just about fitting in. When students genuinely belong, they feel seen, heard, and valued in a place, without ridicule, as their ever-changing, unique selves. It starts with self-discovery and acceptance and grows into confidence and celebration of self-worth. As mentors, we can create opportunities for every student to feel safe, respected, and important. We can model how we treat others

that appear different or unfamiliar to us, celebrating the weirdness and goodness in all of us. We all bring something to the table and it's to our benefit that our offerings aren't the same.

As the school year kicks off, educators have shared the intentionality behind connection-building moments in their classrooms. Below are some examples of routines and activities that emulate the value of relationships while learning.

Daily Dedication

Henry Seton incorporates brief but powerful daily dedications; 30-60 second presentations delivered by a student or teacher, about anyone real or fictional that's provided inspiration. Seton explains these moments plant seeds for deeper relationship building while fostering an environment of humility that allows students to honor their own diverse identities and important people in their lives. Students could also print visuals of their dedication and post them around the classroom.

Student Sunlight

At times, students struggle with social skills and making friends. Make an intentional effort to laugh with and provide praise to students AROUND their classmates. This helps students see others through your eyes and encourages them to look for the goodness in everyone.

Empty Desk

Leave an empty desk in your classroom so when a new student joins your room, it sends the message that the class was waiting for them. It also signals to your current students that their class could grow and change. Making a 'welcome sign' or having students sign a card to leave on the desk is a special touch. Students can sense when adults feel inconvenienced rather than genuinely excited that they are a part of their classroom family.

Belonging Design

Provide opportunities for students to celebrate their roots as you strengthen your class family tree. Dedicate a large portion of your walls to student artifacts, such as self-portraits, 'I AM' poems, class projects, photographs, etc., showcasing your students' strengths and identity. Students' cultures, interests, and backgrounds should be mirrored when they walk into a learning space. Don't forget about the visuals that serve as constant reminders of resiliency, a growth mindset, and restorative practices.

Dialogue Journals

Have students write to an adult in your building every week and then write back. Topics can vary and be chosen by your students. Although this can be time consuming, students feel heard and important, looking forward to this meaningful exchange.

Family Norms

Create the non-negotiables in your classroom. What's important to your students and how do these values look, sound, and feel in a classroom? Create powerful visuals and refer to these agreed-upon norms regularly that increase ownership and student agency. Making a plan for how students circle back when norms are challenged is also important.

Boring Together

Take off the pressure of sharing a "fun" fact about themselves, ask students to come up with a boring fact instead. For example, "I ate cereal for breakfast" or "My alarm goes off at

6:50 every morning.” Students begin to notice commonalities amongst themselves and this activity often leads into other conversations.

Fake Summer/Winter Break

Not every student has an epic family vacation to tell about after returning from a break so tap less into the comparison trap and more into students’ imagination and ask them to come up with the most outlandish, made-up adventures. Students can read and vote on the wildest one.

Daily Check-in

It takes one adult champion that checks in and gives support to make all the difference to a student. Show interest in your students as people, not just learners. Try and engage with each student, every class. Use those popcicle sticks to help you keep track of who you’ve checked in on. Take 1-2 minutes to ask how the soccer game went this weekend or when they get to visit their Grandparent next. Again, students feel connected when their grades and behavior aren’t the only topics of conversation. Come up with a method in your building that ensures every student has a connected adult.

If you have other suggestions that have worked well in your classroom or home, please share them with me and I’ll share them with our SCIP community. Happy connecting!

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