

BUILDING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Introduction

To support a member district in its efforts to create a positive school climate, Hanover Research (Hanover) presents this research brief describing key components of belonging as well as best practice strategies designed to increase community partners' sense of belonging through pedagogy, communication, and relationship building.

Recommendations

- **Support schools in implementing culturally relevant curricula and restorative disciplinary practices to foster students' sense of belonging.** Culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching practices help students of all backgrounds feel valued and accepted in school. Restorative disciplinary practices help students develop prosocial coping strategies while eliminating punitive disciplinary infractions that have historically disproportionately affected marginalized students. Hanover can support districts in this effort by creating resources for school leaders and practitioners in developing a more culturally relevant curricula and implementing restorative disciplinary practices.
- **Train school leaders in the use of data-to-action cycles to inform and drive intentional teacher-student relationship building practices for all district educators.** During data-to-action cycles, students regularly complete surveys regarding the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, while teachers reflect on this data to improve teaching practices and strengthen student relationships. Hanover can support districts in implementing data-to-action cycles and analyzing the results of these surveys to track progress over time.
- **Ensure teachers feel welcome in school and have opportunities to connect with other educators who share their identities.** If a district seeks to attract and retain teachers with diverse identities, it should ensure each school's climate and culture actively includes and celebrates all identities, cultures, and perspectives. Hanover can support member districts in surveying teachers to discern their views on current climate and culture across the district.

Key Findings

- **Public schools were historically designed to exclude students of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged students.** Conversely, schools were also designed to advantage white, upper-class students. Given that history, school culture may inadvertently signal to certain students that they do not belong. In order to instill a sense of belonging for all students, districts should put systems in place that actively and intentionally seek to include, support, and celebrate all members of the school community.
- **School districts are increasingly turning to fostering school belonging amongst students, teachers, and parents as a key strategy for improving community engagement and school climate.** Strategies focused on belonging and climate work in concert as when all education partners experience a sense of belonging, they feel accepted for who they are and connected to larger, collective school community.
- **The degree to which education partners feel a sense of belonging at district schools is affected by district policy and culture.** Specifically, districts can inadvertently undervalue students, teachers, and parents whose identities do not align with traditional mainstream American culture. When district policies and practices fail to recognize or include education partners' identities, those individuals or groups can be unintentionally alienated from the school community.
- **When students experience a sense of belonging at school, they also demonstrate improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes.** When students feel a greater sense of belonging, they are able to more fully express their identities and cope with stress. A greater sense of belonging supports emotional regulation readiness to learn, and overall performance.
- **Increasing parent belonging bolsters student belonging, while also improving students' academic outcomes.** When parents feel a sense of belonging, their children experience better academic and social emotional outcomes, and schools receive better ratings on measures of climate and culture.
- **Increasing teacher sense of belonging improves teacher retention.** Districts can help teachers feel a sense of belonging by celebrating their hard work, creating a supportive teaching climate, training school

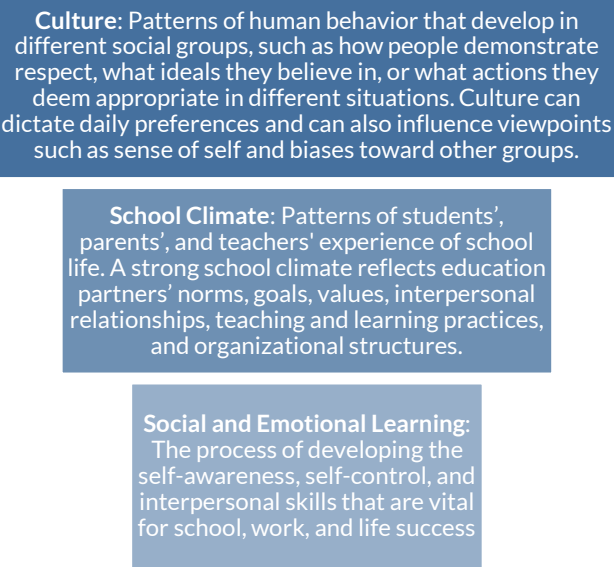
leaders to intentionally build relationships with teachers, and creating systems for teachers to give input on district initiatives.

Defining Belonging

School districts are increasingly turning to fostering belonging amongst students, teachers, and parents as a key strategy to improving community engagement and school climate.¹ Seminal education researchers Carol Goodenow and Kathleen Grady define school belonging as, “The extent to which [children, parents, and teachers] feel individually welcomed, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment.”² When education partners experience a sense of belonging, they feel accepted for who they are and connected to the school community.³

To improve school belonging, districts need to welcome and value education all partners’ cultures and identities, foster social and emotional competencies, and improve overall school climate. These competencies are defined in Figure 1.1.

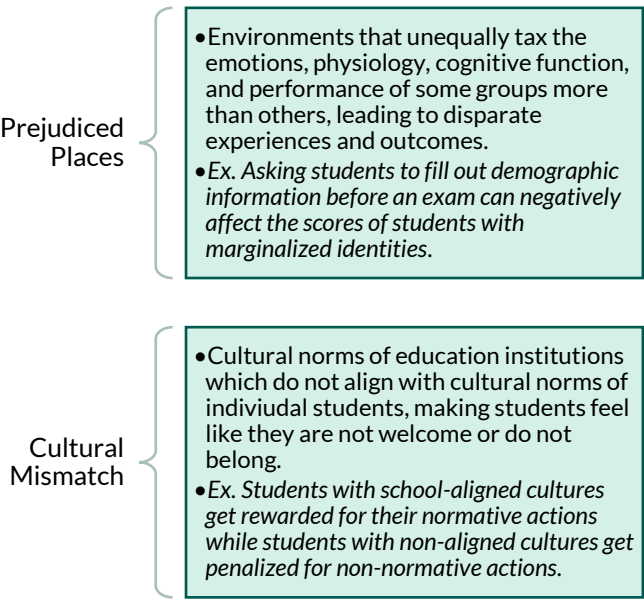
Figure 1.1: Belonging Definitions and Competencies



Sources: *School Psychology Review* (Larson), Committee for Children, National School Climate Center⁴

The degree to which education partners feel a sense of belonging at school is affected by district policy and culture. Two subtle yet powerful forces that can decrease a district-wide sense of belonging are “prejudiced places” and “cultural mismatch” as defined in Figure 1.2:⁵

Figure 1.2: Systems-Level Belonging



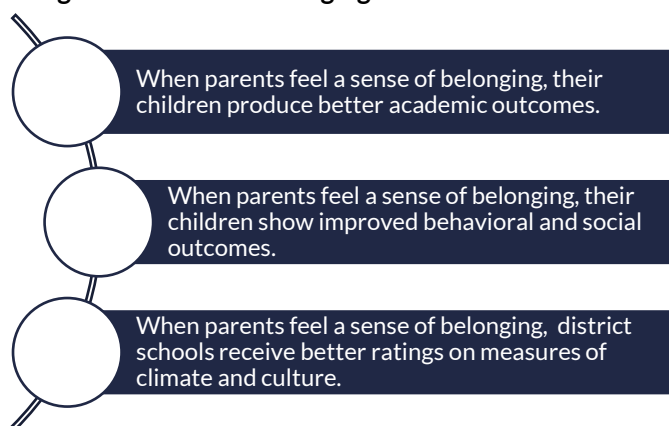
Source: Student Experience Research Network⁶

When students experience a sense of belonging at district schools, they also demonstrate improved social, emotional, and academic outcomes.⁷ The inverse of this is also true. When students experience social, emotional, or academic challenges, they can perceive that they do not belong and disengage from school. These findings show that district initiatives that support students’ academic, social, and emotional success and district initiatives that support students’ sense of belonging are mutually beneficial.⁸

In terms of their emotional health, when students feel a sense of belonging, they are better able to express their identities and cope with stress.⁹ These coping mechanisms help students take on academic challenges. The positive effects of experiencing belonging can positively impact students’ long-term well-being.¹⁰

District initiatives that increase parent belonging have a positive ripple effect on student academic outcomes. When parents feel engaged in their child’s school community, students benefit.¹¹ Figure 1.3 outlines how parent belonging improves student belonging, along with other factors.

Figure 1.3: Parent Belonging and Student Outcomes



Source: The Center for American Progress¹²

District initiatives that improve teacher belonging bolster teacher retention. Districts can help teachers feel a sense of belonging by celebrating their hard work, creating a supportive teaching climate, training school leadership to form relationships with teachers, and inviting educators to give input in district initiatives.¹³ Districts can also increase teachers' sense of belonging by providing them with opportunities to connect and collaborate.¹⁴ If districts seek to attract and retain teachers with diverse identities and backgrounds, they should ensure teachers feel welcome in district schools and have opportunities to connect with other teachers who share their identities.¹⁵

Instilling Belonging

To ensure district schools are spaces where all education partners belong, districts should intentionally transform district schools into more inclusive institutions. Public schools were historically designed to exclude students of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. They were also designed to advantage white, upper-class students.¹⁶ District school culture may inadvertently signal to some students they do not belong.¹⁷ In order to instill a sense of belonging, districts should put new systems in place that actively include, support, and celebrate all members of the community. Initiatives should reinforce community partners' values, alert education partners about potential bias, and explicitly blame education partners' challenges that stem from bias on systematic failures instead of personal failures.¹⁸

"History is alive and well in the classroom... By taking a color-blind approach, we become blind to the impacts of this context on diverse groups of people who have had profoundly different experiences in American society" -Claude Steele, Stanford University¹⁹

The following section outlines how districts can improve education partners' sense of belonging through pedagogy, communication, and relationship building.

District Pedagogy

To foster a sense of belonging for students, districts should help each school to implement culturally relevant curricula and teaching practices.²⁰ As students and teachers have their own unique cultures, misunderstandings can take place if teachers misinterpret student actions or students do not understand teacher norms. These misunderstandings can make students with cultures different from traditional mainstream American culture feel alienated. Culturally responsive teaching practices give teachers the tools to form positive relationships with students and include students' culture in daily learning.²¹ Figure 2.1 outlines competencies district leaders should learn before creating initiatives to increase belonging. District leaders can also use these competencies to assess school leader and teacher cultural competency at district schools, as well as for selecting professional development focus areas on this topic.

Figure 2.1 Eight Competencies for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Reflect on One's Cultural Lens. Culturally responsive educators routinely reflect on their own life experiences and memberships in various identity groups and ask themselves how these factors influence their beliefs and actions.

Recognize and Redress Bias in the System. Culturally responsive educators understand the difference between bias at the personal level and bias at the institutional or systemic level. They seek to deepen their understanding of how identity markers influence the educational opportunities that students receive.

Draw on Students' Culture to Share Curriculum and Instruction. Culturally responsive teachers use cultural scaffolding by providing links between new academic concepts and students' background knowledge that comes from their families, communities, and lived experiences.

Bring Real-World Issues into the Classroom. Culturally responsive teachers address the "so what" factor of instruction by helping students see how knowledge and skills they learn in school are valuable to their lives, families, and communities.

Model High Expectations for All Students. Culturally responsive teachers are vigilant in maintaining their belief that all students can meet high expectations if given proper support and scaffolds, regardless of their identity or past performance.

Promote Respect for Students' Differences. Culturally responsive teachers foster learning environments that are respectful, inclusive, and affirming.

Collaborate with Families and the Local Community. Culturally responsive educators assume that parents are interested in being involved in their children's education and remove barriers to family engagement. They see themselves as members of the community and collaborate with local agencies and organizations to arrange resources for families in need.

Communicate in Linguistically and Culturally Responsive Ways. Culturally responsive teachers seek to understand how culture influences communication, both in verbal ways and nonverbal ways.

Source: New America, Learning for Justice²²

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To help students feel welcome in district schools, districts should adopt restorative disciplinary policies.²³ Historically, students of color and socioeconomically disadvantaged students have been disproportionately affected by exclusionary disciplinary policies that rely heavily on suspending and expelling students. Restorative approaches focus on relationships, repair, and growth to help students develop healthy problem-solving strategies. Restorative disciplinary policies have been shown to improve student social-emotional outcomes as well as their academic outcomes.²⁴ When implementing restorative approaches, districts should train teachers in responding empathetically to student behaviors.²⁵ Figure 2.2 outlines pro-social behavior interventions from previous Hanover reports.

Figure 2.2 Pro-Social Behavior Interventions

INTERVENTION	DESCRIPTION	HANOVER RESOURCE(S)
Restorative Justice	Model for fostering student involvement and investment in the school community that holds students accountable for their actions and creates a foundation to repair harm and restore.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Best Practices in Restorative Practices
Positive Behavior Intervention System	A tiered system of support so all students receive the social emotions interventions they need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ PBIS Professional Development and Data Monitoring ▪ Implementing PBIS School Wide
Trauma-Informed Teaching	Daily classroom interventions teachers can use to support students who have experienced trauma.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Best Practices for Trauma-Informed Instruction ▪ Building Trauma-Sensitive Environments
OTHER HANOVER RESOURCES		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implementing SEL and Restorative Justice ▪ Program-Planning Guide: Social Emotional Learning ▪ Best Practices for Modeling and Self-Monitoring Positive Behaviors ▪ Strategies to Support Equitable School Discipline 		

Source: Hanover Research²⁶

Districts can use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) to organize and support both pedagogical and restorative practices.²⁷ MTSS frameworks help districts provide targeted support to students who are highly disengaged

from district schools; create systems to identify and help smaller groups of students who are at risk for disengaging from the community; and implement data-driven programs to help all students feel a sense of belonging at school.²⁸



Spotlight: Oakland School District

The Oakland School District (Oakland), the deputy chief of equity created the African American Male Initiative (AMMA) to increase belonging and equity amongst black male students. As part of AMMA, Oakland collaborated with education researchers and local community organizations to evaluate district needs, implement changes, and measure effectiveness. AMMA initiatives included:

- A policy audit that replaced zero-tolerance discipline with restorative justice practices
- A curricula audit, which replaced Eurocentric curricula with eight new, Common-Core aligned, culturally relevant courses specifically targeted to black young men
- A restructured school day that provides comprehensive academic mentoring led by black, male instructors

AMMA also collaborates with district leadership to provide professional development for teachers and engages parents to support their child's college readiness.

Source: Student Experience Research Network²⁹

District Communications

The following section outlines how districts can use communication strategies to engage students, parents, and teachers so that they feel a stronger sense of belonging. This section also outlines how to integrate education partners' voices in district initiatives to show education partners that their voices matter.

General Communication Policies

Districts should make student communications supportive when the nature of messages have the potential to alienate students. Students from marginalized communities are more susceptible to feeling a decreased sense of belonging if they receive negative messages during sensitive moments in their education, such as transitions or academic challenges. If students internalize a negative perception, such as the notion that academic difficulty is due to personal inadequacy, they may continue holding that belief throughout their schooling. Instead, school districts can positively frame support. For example, instead of putting students on academic probation, schools can invite students into a program for academic support, explicitly acknowledging that all students face academic challenges, and that multiple factors such as family responsibilities or health issues can contribute to students falling behind in school.³⁰

The way in which districts communicate with parents can spark increased engagement and feelings of belonging within the school community.³¹ For example, parents are

more likely to feel connected to district schools if district communications are personalized.³² Districts can form a community engagement team made up of parents, district leaders, and school staff to ensure sustainable and effective communication with families long-term.³³ The community engagement team should survey parents to discern their communication preferences to ensure they are reaching parents of diverse identities.³⁴ Communications should be offered in parent-friendly and home languages to remove barriers to understanding and inclusion. District communication with parents should also expressly inform parents of the benefit of helping their children feel a sense of belonging at school so that parents can reinforce district initiatives.³⁵

Districts should help parents feel a sense of belonging by creating school events focused on relationship building. School districts are prone to focusing parent events solely on fundraising which can alienate parents. Those that create regularly occurring events dedicated to intentionally developing connections between parents as well as helping parents feel connected to district schools see an increase in parent engagement.³⁶



Spotlight: Laurene Edmonson Elementary School (Edmonson)

Edmonson holds two family events a year focused on highlighting school initiatives for parents. The events build community, help parents learn what is happening in school, and teach parents strategies for supporting their kids at home. At one such event, parents participated in student Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) activities. At a different event, teachers taught parents math games they could play at home with their kids. Most events involve a shared meal and unstructured time to have conversations.

Edmonson also plans events around parent voice and preferences. For example, at one event Edmonson surveyed parents on topics they would like to learn more about and subsequently offered two 30-minute parent workshops on how to set limits and understanding trauma. Edmonson sends parents personalized event invitations in multiple languages, seeks parent feedback, provides parents with emergency resources, and completes home visits.

Source: Hechinger Report³⁷

Districts should regularly survey teachers' needs, preferences, and challenges in order to provide them with the support all educators need to be active members of the school community. While district leaders often know when teachers are experiencing challenges, they can be unaware of the nuanced nature of daily teacher trials. District aloofness can make teachers feel alienated from the school community. When districts regularly assess teacher experience and then work with teachers to provide specific supports, it helps teachers feel valued and a sense of belonging in the school community.³⁸

Student Voice

Districts should invite students to be active members of committees and school boards to show students that the district cares about their point of view. Recent research demonstrates that providing students with agency and the opportunity to express their viewpoints increases students' feelings of belonging. While students actively serving on school boards or in other leadership roles benefit the most, all students can be bolstered by seeing their perspectives represented and expressed by other students. Thirty one states, including California, allow students on school boards.³⁹



Spotlight: Sacramento City Unified School District

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.



Spotlight: Metro Nashville Public Schools

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.

Source: *Solutions for Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being*⁴⁰

Districts that are not able to invite students to serve on school boards can also engage them through online platforms and student advisory programs. Districts that do not have the capacity to support large-scale student voice efforts can partner with community organizations for support. Examples include government offices, libraries, and local non-for-profits.⁴¹



Spotlight: Sacramento City Unified School District

SCUSD 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. They also use their platform and newsletters for public service announcements to students.

SCUSD also offers an app that connects students with mental health resources offered by the district and others in the community. Grace (Giving Resources and Care Everyday) connects students anonymously with food, clothing, housing, mental health, and LGBTQ+ support. 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.



Spotlight: Metro Nashville Public Schools

In 2020, MNPS launched a virtual platform in order to 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:

- Issues present in MNPS schools and ideas to mitigate them to emphasize prevention rather than exclusion.
- The students' experience in ALCs and ways this intervention model can be improved.
- 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

Source: *Solutions for Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being*⁴²

District Relationship Building

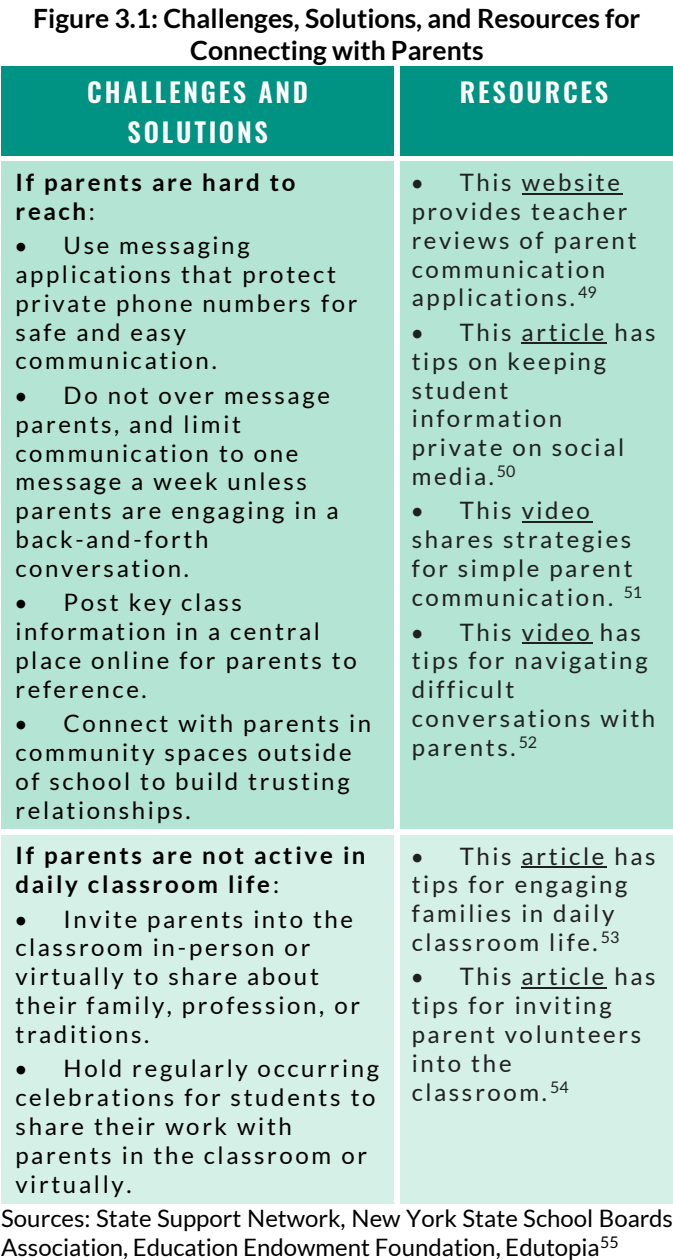
For students, teachers, and parents at district schools to feel a sense of belonging, they should feel connected with one another (student-student, parent-parent...) and across groups (student-teacher, teacher-parent).⁴³ All education partners should have meaningful relationships with members of the community.⁴⁴

Districts should train school leaders in the use of data-to-action cycles to inform and drive intentional teacher-student relationship building practices for all district educators. . During data to action cycles, students take online questionnaires where they reflect on "how much their teacher cares about them and their ideas, how much growth-oriented feedback they receive, and how meaningful they find their schoolwork." Then, student responses are constructively shared with teacher teams, who work together to interpret results by student demographic groups and adapt teacher practices. Repeating this process regularly throughout the year helps teachers track trends, identify areas of growth, and improve practice.⁴⁵

Districts can also put systems in place to ensure students have a positive relationship with at least one adult in district schools. District can assist district schools in collecting observational and survey data about student-teacher relationships and then connecting students with other helpful adults in the school building.⁴⁶ Districts can also provide district schools with student surveys that evaluate if students feel they have positive, supportive relationships at school.⁴⁷

To institutionalize parent-teacher relationship building practices, districts should provide teachers with

strategies for connecting with parents.⁴⁸ Figure 3.1 provides parent engagement tips and resources districts can share with school leaders and teachers.



Discussion Guide: Reflecting on Identity

In order to instill a district-wide sense of belonging, district leaders should ensure district policies and practices take education partners’ unique identities into account.

Individual Reflection on Identity and District Policy

Directions: Use the space below each question to write down your answers regarding integrating district partners’ identities into district policy and practice. Record examples of specific policies or practices when possible.
Does current district policy and practice take education partners’ culture and identity into account? Examples:
When improving or implementing new policies, does the district take education partners’ culture and identity into account? Examples:
Do district policies and programs support the diverse needs of education partners? If so, how? Examples:

Sources: *Solutions for Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being*, Student Experience Research Network⁵⁶

Group Reflection on Identity and District Policy and Practice

Directions: Discuss answers to the above questions. Then record areas of strength and growth for integrating education partners’ identity in district policies.	
Areas of Strength	Areas of Growth

Discussion Guide: Reflecting on Voice

In order to instill a district-wide sense of belonging, district leaders should integrate education partners’ voices into district policies and practices.

Individual Reflection on Identity and District Policies

Directions: Use the space below each question to write down your answers regarding integrating district partners’ voices into district policies. Record examples of specific policies when possible.
Does the district regularly involve education partners when creating or improving district policies? Examples:
Does the district regularly survey the diverse needs of education partners? Examples:
Does the district have systems to measure the quality of relationships between education partners? Between education partners and the district? Examples:

Sources: *Solutions for Educational Equity Through Social and Emotional Well-Being*, Student Experience Research Network⁵⁷

Group Reflection on Identity and District Policies

Directions: Discuss answers to the above questions. Then record areas of strength and growth for integrating education partners’ preferences and voice in district policies.	
Areas of Strength	Areas of Growth

Caveat

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Endnotes

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⁴⁸ "Seven Ways Your District Can Engage Parents," Op. cit. [2] "Improving Your Parent-Outreach Strategy." Edutopia, 2017. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/improving-your-parent-outreach-strategy> [2] Jacques, C. and A. Villegas. "Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement." State Support Network, 2018. [2] Fultz, A. "Improving Parent Engagement at the High School Level." Edutopia, 2022. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/improving-parent-engagement-high-school-level> [2] van Poortvliet, M., N. Axford, and J. Lloyd. *Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning. Guidance Report. Education Endowment Foundation*, Education Endowment Foundation, 2018. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=homework&ff1=audParents&ff2=dytySince_2013&id=ED612191

⁴⁹ "Apps and Websites for Improving Parent-Teacher Communication." Common Sense Education. <https://www.common Sense.org/education/top-picks/apps-and-websites-for-improving-parent-teacher-communication>

⁵⁰ "Protecting Student Privacy on Social Media." Edutopia, 2017. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/protecting-student-privacy-social-media>

⁵¹ 9 Ways to Communicate with Parents for Teachers. 2021. Vestal's 21st Century Classroom. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aHJkRXgbcE>

⁵² Dealing With Difficult Parents *For Teachers* How to Approach Parent/Teacher Conferences & Calls  . 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_HulwXNoA

⁵³ DitchThatTxbk. "25 Tips for Connecting Families With the Classroom." Ditch That Textbook, 2021. <https://ditchthattextbook.com/25-tips-for-connecting-families-with-the-classroom/>

⁵⁴ "Tips for Welcoming Parent Volunteers Into Your Classroom." Education World. https://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice094.shtml

⁵⁵ "Figure content adapted and verbatim from Seven Ways Your District Can Engage Parents," Op. cit. [2] "Improving Your Parent-Outreach Strategy," Op. cit. [2] Jacques and Villegas, Op. cit. [2] Fultz, Op. cit. [2] van Poortvliet, Axford, and Lloyd, Op. cit.

⁵⁶ Figure content adapted from Grossman and Portilla, Op. cit. [2] Stroman, “Shifting Culture,” Op. cit.
⁵⁷ Figure content adapted from Grossman and Portilla, Op. cit. [2] Stroman, “Shifting Culture,” Op. cit.