



Mental Health & Safety

Climate Connection is a publication
of the NYS Center for School Safety.

May is National Mental Health Month.



June is National Safety Month.

Mental health and school safety are intertwined. Supporting mental health promotes school safety, and school safety impacts mental health. A sense of belonging in school--defined as feeling accepted, valued, and supported--is crucial for student well-being, academic engagement, and social-emotional growth. A strong sense of belonging can improve mental health, reduce stress, decrease the likelihood of risky or dangerous behaviors, and increase resilience. Additionally, students can be the best source of information and can alert schools to planned harm when they have a trusted adult they believe will listen. In 2008, the US Secret Service/US Department of Education reported that often students have prior knowledge of potential school-based violence, and the information students learn may prevent a targeted attack. Students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to take threats or signs of potential violence seriously and share the information with school staff.



Schools can foster a sense of belonging in the following ways:

- **Create a welcoming and inclusive school climate:** establish clear expectations for respectful interactions, promote diversity and inclusion, and ensure all students feel safe and valued.
- **Build positive relationships:** encourage staff to get to know the students, create opportunities for peer interaction, and foster a sense of community within the building.
- **Provide opportunities for student voice and leadership:** involve students in decision-making processes, encourage clubs and organizations, and give students opportunities to lead
- **Celebrate student accomplishments:** acknowledge and celebrate student successes, both academic and non-academic, to reinforce a positive school climate

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- **Promote a growth mindset:** help students believe that their abilities can be developed through effort and practice, and encourage them to embrace challenges.
- **Engage families and the larger community:** create [opportunities for families](#) and community members to connect with the school and support student success. For some ideas on family engagement strategies, check out our [March/April 2025](#) and [April 2023](#) issues of the NYS CFSS [Climate Connection](#).

To learn more about how to build a school culture that promotes a sense of belonging in both students and staff, check out the [ASCD](#) resources below by clicking on them.

Dimensions of Belonging Matrix

FIGURE 1. Dimensions of Belonging in Schools

Factor	Summary	Indicators for Students	Indicators for Staff
Welcomed	The way we are greeted each time we meet signals importance and fosters belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greeting students Showing enthusiasm for students' return to class each day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greeting colleagues Asking authentic questions Engaging in authentic conversations
Invited	The way people are invited signals their value and fosters a sense of belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking peers to play Peers extending invitations to others for extracurricular events and clubs Modeling inviting behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inviting colleagues to meetings and professional learning events Extending invitations to colleagues for other professional opportunities (advising, club sponsorship, etc.)
Present	Who is in attendance and fully present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong student attendance rates Participating in class activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong staff attendance rates Participating in team meetings and learning activities
Known	The depth to which we know others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pronouncing peers' names correctly Strong teacher-student relationships Focusing on peers' strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing biased and stereotyped language Emotional intelligence and positive dialogue with colleagues
Accepted	Ways we are recognized and celebrated as a member of the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive body language and non-verbal messages from teachers and peers Symbols of respect for all student groups Culturally sustaining instructional materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive body language and non-verbal messages toward colleagues Inclusive beliefs and actions about students, staff, and the community
Involved	We participate in the tasks and workflow of the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating opportunities for collaborative learning Using academic language in discussions with peers Students setting goals for their learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborating with colleagues in team meetings Contributing to tasks required to operate the school (e.g., while and present during passing periods)
Heard	Actively listening to others communicates a message that they are valued and that they have ideas worth considering.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active listening (and teachers talking less) Teachers soliciting feedback from students Student choice and decision making in how they demonstrate understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff involvement in decisions Distributed leadership Leaders engaged in dialogue, not monologue
Supported	Recognition of our uniqueness and systems to aid our participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong instructional scaffolds in place Sophisticated tiers of support Making and demonstrating, not just telling information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional learning is practical and responsive to staff needs and interests Peer coaching and feedback Restorative conversations
Befriended	Being friendly and encouraging and facilitating friendships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structured opportunities for students to interact with a wide range of peers Integrated peer relationship development in the curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social opportunities for staff to interact Collegial and friendly interactions in hallways, restrooms, and classrooms
Needed	We know that our contributions are valued because others rely on us for consequential work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping each other Peer tutoring Collaborating with peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer coaching Peer-to-peer conversations Sharing resources and ideas
Loved	There are many types of love, and some people are cynical about loving their students and colleagues. When it comes to school, we're talking about agape, or the selfless, unconditional love that conveys compassion and empathy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showing patience, effort, and unity Providing comfort Building meaningful relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making statements of empathy Giving words of grace and forgiveness

Source: Adapted from Carter, E. W. (2020). Dimensions of belonging for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In J. L. Jones & K. L. Gallas (Eds.), *Belonging and resilience in individuals with developmental disabilities* (pp. 13–33). Springer Nature.

Belonging in Schools Video

