



Belonging: The Intersection of Welcome, Safety, and Connection



Walter McKenzie for xSEleratED

Mr. Ochenko taped a large white paper web on his classroom wall. On the first day of school, he held a ball of blue yarn, tossed it to a shy student, and started a kind circle of connection. It flew straight to Elsa in the back row. She caught it with wide, nervous eyes.

He asked Elsa to name her favorite hobby. Wrapping the string around her finger, she whispered that she loved drawing comic books. After a quiet pause, she decided to toss the ball across the room to Leo. After catching the ball of yarn, Leo shared that he missed his old dog, Sampson, all summer. He tossed the ball to Siri, and as each student shared and threw the ball to someone else, the web of blue yarn grew wider and more impressive. As more hands held the string, no one sat alone in the room anymore.

Once the ball went to every single student, Mr. Ochenko let the visual statement sink in that they are all linked. "If one person pulls at it, we all feel it." Some students smiled and others nodded. They felt safe in this new school year learning space. They were part of something bigger. A team. They belonged.



Research on student belonging indicates that students who feel they belong in their learning spaces show increased academic engagement, better social-emotional outcomes, and greater resilience in the face of challenges. Goodenow and Grady's foundational work on Psychological Sense of School Membership established that belonging is a critical component of educational success.



Welcome is the intentional creation of spaces where every individual feels their presence matters and their contributions are anticipated with excitement. True welcome acknowledges that each person brings unique gifts, perspectives, and experiences that enrich our collective learning.



Safety is both physical and emotional security. It's the assurance that vulnerability will be met with compassion, that mistakes are stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks, and that every member of our community can take the risks necessary for authentic growth.



Connection is that ball of string that weaves individual stories into a tapestry of shared purpose. It's built through genuine curiosity about one another, seeing beyond roles and titles, creating opportunities for meaningful interaction that adds to our experience as humans and as learners.

Belonging looks differently over the span of a child's growth and development. In elementary school, belonging is based in teacher-student attachment, which directly drives early self-regulation. By middle school, it is driven more by peer acceptance, though overall school belonging typically drops during these transition years, making intentional inclusion critical. And a strong sense of belonging in high school serves as a powerful protective buffer against societal trends of chronic absenteeism, substance abuse, and even dropping out.

Shifting from compliance to connection starts with our own personal journey, unlearning assumptions about compliance and punishment that we learned as children ourselves. We must examine our own need for control, redefine the source of authority in our relationships, and make the shift to view misbehavior as communication of a need rather than an offensive act of defiance. This has been characterized as practicing radical empathy, vulnerability, and shared power.

First, unpack what triggers our responses to control:

- Examine our ego, separating student behavior from perceiving it as personal disrespect or defiance.
- Release our need for control and learn to tolerate productive noise, movement, and decentralized classroom energy.
- Identify and address our fears by recognizing if our need for conformity stems from anxiety about appearances and administrative judgment.

Then, cultivate self-awareness and empathy:

- Practice reflection so that our internal biases don't color certain student expressions as "bad."
- Build regulation by making it a habit to stay calm during student dysregulation, instead of escalating the misbehavior.
- Value student voice by validating their input and encouraging diverse communication styles over rote compliance.

Finally, reframe perception of the climate of our classroom:

- Shift to curiosity, asking, "What is this behavior telling me?" instead of "How do I punish this?"
- Share power by moving away from rewarding teacher-pleasing behavior, co-creating norms and expectations with students.
- Embrace conflict by modeling that misunderstandings and disagreements are normal parts of learning, not moral failures.



Jill McPherson models these skills as a proponent of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a speaking and listening paradigm created by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960s. It supports us in connecting honestly, avoiding blame, and resolving conflicts in our personal lives and in our roles as educators. Instead of judging or shaming, NVC focuses on four simple steps:

Observation: State the plain facts of what you see or hear. Do not add judgment, labels, or blame. Act like a video camera recording only what happened

Feeling: Share your emotional reaction to the event. Use words like hurt, sad, or glad instead of thoughts that blame others.

Need: Connect your feeling to a universal human need. Examples include safety, respect, or connection. NVC teaches that anger or conflict comes from unmet needs.

Request: Ask for a specific, positive action. Make it a clear request rather than a demanding order.

Using this method, we can:

1. **Build Empathy:** Listen deeply to what others feel and need without getting defensive,
2. **Foster Cooperation:** Create solutions where everyone's needs are met peacefully, and
3. **Stop Arguments:** Shift focus away from who is right or wrong and focus on shared human values.

Jill explains, "When we pause, take a deep breath, and get compassionately curious, we become empathetic. Conflict only happens at the level of strategy - what we do to meet our needs. But when we look beneath the strategy and connect at the level of need, that's where real problem-solving happens."

Back-to-school practices that foster a sense of belonging make the focus on connection over compliance by shifting focus from quiet control to authentic engagement:

Respond with Curiosity

- Inquire rather than react by asking what happened or how to help instead of immediately issuing penalties.
- Look for root causes behind disruptive behavior, such as unmet sensory, emotional, or academic needs.
- Praise student voice and active participation rather than rewarding passive silence and strict stillness.

Design for Intrinsic Motivation

- Avoid heavy reliance on external reward charts or punitive incentive systems that drive mere teacher-pleasing.
- Encouraging autonomy by offering meaningful choices in how students learn and show their work.
- Connect lessons to real-world student interests and personal experiences.

Practice Relational and Welcoming Routines

- Stand at the entrance to greet every student by name with a smile or a personal acknowledgment.
- Approach students with genuine curiosity, leaving behind any preconceived notions from past years.
- Use icebreakers or "Bio Bags" where kids share personal artifacts that represent who they are.

Demonstrate Environment and Identity Affirmation

- Audit bulletin boards and walls to ensure diverse cultures, histories, and languages are visibly reflected.
- Dedicate immediate physical space in the room for student-made work and self-portraits.
- Notice and praise unique personal gifts and strengths rather than focusing solely on compliance.

Share Ownership for Norms and Expectations

- Involve students directly in setting classroom expectations and community guidelines to build trust.
- Cultivate collaborative goals so students understand they are vital parts of a collective team.
- Provide regular opportunities for student feedback and agency in daily routines.

Tim Montalvo, assistant principal at Fox Lane Middle School in Bedford, New York, shares how even small, deliberate exchanges with students called micro-interactions make a difference in the lives and learning journeys of our students. In his upcoming book, “Belonging Before Behavior: A Tier 1 Framework for Belonging, Clarity, Access, and Coherence in Middle Schools” (The Worthy Educator Press, September 2026), he describes these micro-interactions as “small, often fleeting exchanges between adults and students that communicate belonging, trust, expectations, and dignity. A greeting at the door. A correction delivered privately instead of publicly. A teacher circling back after noticing frustration. A name pronounced correctly. A promise to check in that is actually kept. A pause before responding to a student who is already bracing for conflict.”

Through these experiences, Montalvo explains, students build stories about school and about themselves:

“I am welcome here”

“I am always in trouble”

“This adult notices when I try”

“I should keep my head down”

“Mistakes are recoverable,” or

“Mistakes make me visible in the wrong way.”



He goes on to make the case that, “Individually, these moments may seem minor. Over time, they accumulate. And in middle school, where students are especially attentive to fairness, peer perception, and adult credibility, accumulation matters.”

As the school year begins, invite your students to share of themselves before you dive into the year ahead:

Hands-On & Craft Activities

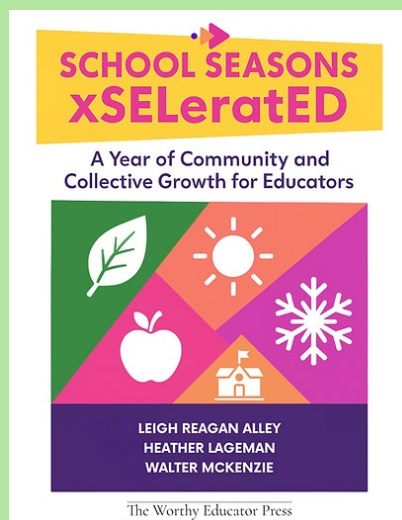
- **Autobiography Bag:** Students bring a small paper bag filled with three items representing their hobbies.
- **Putting Pieces Together:** Each student decorates a blank puzzle piece, then the class links them into a giant bulletin board display.
- **Paper Name Tents:** Students fold cardstock, write their preferred name, and sketch personal icons.

Interactive & Movement Icebreakers

- **Snowball Fight:** Students write a fun fact on scrap paper, crumple it up, toss it gently across the room, pick up a random "snowball," and read it aloud to find the author.
- **Find Someone Who... Bingo:** A human bingo grid gets students walking around to match classmates to unique traits.
- **Beach Ball Toss:** A lightweight beach ball with written prompts gets tossed in a circle; students answer the question under their right thumb.

Next Gen Approaches

- **Phone Screen Apps:** Students design a blank phone template by drawing or typing favorite "apps" that symbolize their personal interests.
- **Digital Slide Deck:** Students fill out a single interactive slide with photos, favorite music, and goals to compile into a class e-book.
- **Classroom Portal:** A safe, secure online place where students can ask, share and extend their sense of belonging beyond the in-person learning space.



In School Seasons xSEleratED (The Worthy Educator Press, October 2025), Heather Lageman shares six kinds of reflection prompts that help us to more mindfully cultivate belonging in our classrooms.

Reflect using these prompts at whatever pace feels right, whether that means picking one a week or journaling through all six categories in one sitting:

Understanding Belonging

What does it feel like when I belong? Think of a time when you felt truly welcomed and valued in a group. What specific actions, words, or environmental factors contributed to that feeling? How did belonging show up in your body, your energy, your willingness to take risks?

How do I show others they matter? Consider your daily interactions with colleagues and students. What are the small and large ways you communicate value and worth? What might you be doing unconsciously that either builds or diminishes others' sense of belonging?

Expanding Our Awareness

When I look around my school community, whose voices are most heard? Whose perspectives might be missing from our conversations about belonging?

What assumptions do I make about who “fits” in our school culture? How might these assumptions create barriers to belonging for some community members?

How does my own cultural background and identity influence what “welcome” looks like to me? How might others define welcome differently?

Deepening Our Practice

What is one specific way I can make my teaching practice more inclusive this week? This month?

How do I respond when someone shares something personal or vulnerable? What does my body language, tone, and follow-up communicate about whether their sharing is valued?

What stories do I tell myself about students or colleagues before I truly know them? How might these stories prevent authentic relationship building?

Creating Sustainable Change

What systems or practices in our school might unintentionally exclude or marginalize certain groups? How can I advocate for more inclusive approaches?

How do I maintain my commitment to belonging when I'm stressed, overwhelmed, or frustrated? What supports do I need to show up consistently for others?

What would change in my classroom/school if every person truly felt they belonged? What would that look like, sound like, feel like?

Personal Growth

What parts of my own identity do I bring fully to my work? What parts do I hide or minimize? How does this impact my ability to create belonging for others?

When have I felt like an outsider or experienced exclusion? How can this experience inform my approach to creating inclusive spaces?

What is one fear I have about deepening belonging in my school community? What support would help me move through this fear?

Ongoing Commitment

How will I know if our belonging efforts are making a difference? What will I look for, listen for, and feel for as evidence of progress?

What is one relationship I want to invest in more deeply this school year? What specific steps will I take to nurture this connection?

How do I want to be remembered by my students and colleagues? What legacy of belonging do I want to leave?

See more creative approaches to making the shift to a belonging-centered learning space like the “We Belong Here” Doorway Project and the Rituals of Welcome Toolkit in the month of August chapter of this year-long companion to social-emotional learning principals in the life of a classroom.

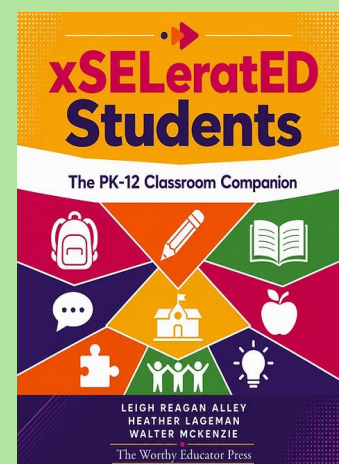


In the new student companion to the xSEleratED Schools Framework (The Worthy Educator Press, August 2025), Heather expands her focus on back to school belonging with activities like My Name, My Story, Mattering Moments, and strategies for engaging family and community, all part of the broader xSEleratED series.

In this newest addition to the now three-part series, Students xSEleratED (The Worthy Educator Press, August 2026), Heather points out to teachers, “The belonging work you’ve done this month creates the foundation for everything else we’ll learn together. Because here’s the truth: you can’t learn at your best when you’re worried about fitting in. You can’t take risks when you don’t feel safe. You can’t be creative when you’re trying to be invisible.

But when you do feel like you belong? That’s when the magic happens. That’s when you can ask the questions you’re really wondering about. That’s when you can share the ideas that feel risky. That’s when you can be exactly who you are and learn exactly what you need to learn.”

Thank you, Heather! And thank you to educators everywhere doing this important work. In one sense, we respond to the shifts in society as we move towards a more open future where everyone can be their authentic selves. On the other hand, we are creating that future before it arrives by the ways we mindfully help our students to belong and build their future by acknowledging that learning and growing are no longer one-size-fits-all.



Your xSEleratED August Bonus Resource!

BONUS RESOURCE



Belonging: The Intersection of Welcome, Safety, and Connection

Classroom & Staff Room Walkthrough: "Do Our Spaces Reflect Welcome?"

Purpose: To critically examine our physical environments through the lens of belonging and make intentional changes that communicate welcome to all.

Time: 60-75 minutes

Materials:

- "Welcome Lens" observation sheets
- Clipboards or tablets
- Sticky notes

Process:

1. Frame the Experience (10 minutes)
 - Discuss how physical spaces communicate messages about who belongs, whose voices matter, and what kind of learning is valued.
 - Introduce the "Welcome Lens"—a way of observing spaces through the eyes of someone entering for the first time.

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