

SUMMER 2026

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

**Belonging is Built in the Margins:
How Micro-Interactions
became Our Most
Powerful Tier 1
Intervention**

Timothy Montalvo



The Worthy Educator
theworthyeducator.com



Belonging is Built in the Margins: How Micro-Interactions became Our Most Powerful Tier 1 Intervention

Timothy Montalvo
Assistant Principal, Fox Lane Middle School
Visiting Adjunct Faculty, The College of Westchester
Adjunct Instructor, Iona University
Bedford, New York

It happened in the hallway between third and fourth period. A student lingered just outside a classroom door—backpack half-zipped, eyes fixed on the floor, pretending to retie a sneaker that didn't need adjusting. The bell had already rung. Students streamed past, teachers moved with purpose, the day marching forward as it always does. A teacher passing by slowed down, crouched slightly, and said quietly, "You don't have to go in alone. I'll walk with you." No clipboard. No referral. No behavior chart. Just thirty seconds of noticing.

That moment didn't appear in any data dashboard. It didn't show up in our attendance report, our behavior log, or our MTSS tracker. But it changed the rest of that student's day. And over time, moments like this changed how we understood Tier 1 support in our building.

In education, we spend enormous energy designing initiatives to build belonging. We create assemblies, advisory curricula, posters, slogans, and protocols. We train, retrain, and sometimes overtrain. All of this work is well-intentioned. Much of it is necessary. But somewhere along the way, we began to overlook where culture actually lives. Not in binders. Not in slide decks. Not even in programs. Culture is built in the margins of the day—in the moments between the moments—where adults have discretion, where choices are unscripted, and where students decide, often unconsciously, whether they are safe, seen, and valued.

For years, our building did what many schools do. When student engagement dipped, when behavior escalated, or when students struggled to regulate, we looked outward for solutions. We added programs. We layered initiatives. We asked teachers to do more, often without taking anything away. Belonging became something we tried to *implement* rather than something we tried to *protect*. And while none of these efforts were wrong, the cumulative effect was exhausting. Teachers felt like they were constantly chasing the next fix, and students experienced belonging as something episodic rather than embedded.



The irony is that the most powerful culture-building work was already happening all around us. It was happening when a teacher paused to greet a student by name at the door. When a counselor followed up on a casual hallway conversation. When a paraprofessional noticed a change in demeanor and checked in. When an administrator chose curiosity over correction. These moments were easy to miss precisely because they were ordinary. But they were also the moments students remembered.

The shift for us began not with a new initiative, but with a question: *What if Tier 1 support isn't primarily about what we add, but about what we notice, name, and protect?* That question required us to rethink how we defined intervention. Instead of viewing Tier 1 as a set of universal programs delivered to students, we began to see it as the daily, relational environment students move through—one shaped largely by micro-interactions between adults and students.

This reframing mattered. Micro-interactions are not about being “nice” or lowering expectations. They are about timing, tone, and trust. They happen in hallways, at classroom doors, during transitions, and in brief exchanges that rarely last more than a minute. A nod of acknowledgment. A quiet check-in. A shared joke. A moment of patience instead of urgency. These interactions signal to students whether school is a place where they belong—or a place they must endure.

Importantly, we did not respond to this realization by scripting language or mandating practices. We did not roll out a “micro-interaction framework” or require teachers to document moments of connection. Doing so would have undermined the very agency that made these interactions effective. Instead, we focused on creating the conditions for this work to flourish. We protected time for reflection in team meetings. We elevated stories from staff—not as exemplars to replicate, but as evidence of professional judgment in action. We asked teachers what they were noticing about students and what helped them feel connected to their work.



This was a leadership risk. It meant trusting educators to do what they already knew how to do, even when that work resisted easy measurement. It meant shifting from compliance-driven accountability to relational accountability. And it meant acknowledging that some of the most important outcomes—belonging, trust, emotional safety—do not lend themselves neatly to spreadsheets.

Still, the impact was tangible. As micro-interactions became a shared point of reflection, we began to see changes across the building. Students were more willing to take academic risks, particularly in reading and writing tasks that required vulnerability. Transitions became calmer, not because expectations changed, but because students felt less anonymous. Help-seeking behavior increased. Teachers reported fewer power struggles and more productive conversations with students who previously shut down.

These shifts mattered for literacy in particular. Reading and writing demand cognitive stamina, emotional regulation, and a willingness to be wrong in public. Students who feel unseen or unsafe rarely engage deeply with complex texts. But when students trust the adults around them, they are more likely to persist, to revise, and to participate. Belonging, we came to understand, is not a soft outcome. It is a prerequisite for learning.

None of this was easily quantifiable. We could point to trends—fewer referrals during certain times of day, improved engagement during independent work—but we could not isolate micro-interactions as a single causal variable. That discomfort was real. In a field increasingly driven by data, choosing to value work that resists precise measurement can feel professionally risky. But leadership is not only about what can be measured; it is also about what is worth standing behind. We had to decide whether we trusted our educators’ professional judgment enough to center it.

This work also reshaped how we thought about educator wellness and efficacy. Too often, wellness initiatives are positioned as something separate from the work itself—an add-on designed to help educators survive unsustainable systems. Focusing on micro-interactions did the opposite. It affirmed that the relational work teachers do is not extra; it is core. It reminded educators that their instincts matter, that their small decisions carry weight, and that they are not interchangeable parts in a system, but skilled professionals shaping daily experiences for students.



There were lessons learned along the way. We learned that protecting this work requires restraint. Every new initiative competes for attention, time, and emotional energy. Saying no—or not yet—became an act of advocacy for educators. We learned that modeling matters. When leaders engage in the same micro-interactions with staff—listening, acknowledging, following up—it reinforces the culture we hope to see with students. And we learned that belonging cannot be mandated, but it can be cultivated when leaders create space for it.

For schools interested in doing this work, the entry points are deceptively simple. Start by auditing the margins of the day. Pay attention to arrival, transitions, and dismissal. Ask students where they feel most seen—and where they don't. Collect stories from staff about moments that felt meaningful, not just moments that met a metric. Resist the urge to standardize what should remain human. And before adding something new, ask what might need protecting instead. The hallway moment that opened this piece lasted less than a minute. It required no funding, no training module, and no approval process. But it reflected a choice—one made thousands of times a day by educators across our building. When those choices are noticed, valued, and supported, they become more than isolated acts of kindness. They become the foundation of a Tier 1 system rooted in dignity, trust, and belonging.

The most powerful work in schools often happens when no one is watching. Our responsibility as leaders is to notice it, honor it, and ensure it has room to breathe.



Tim Montalvo is an assistant principal at [Fox Lane Middle School](#) in Bedford, New York, where his leadership focuses on instructional equity, belonging, literacy, MTSS, and responsive support for multilingual learners. With more than a decade of experience in adolescent education, teacher development, and school leadership, he works closely with educators to strengthen Tier 1 instruction, scaffold access to learning, and create school cultures where students feel connected and capable. He also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in education, psychology, and human services at [Iona University](#) and the [College of Westchester](#). Across his work, Montalvo bridges K–12 and higher education through practical, relationship-centered approaches that support students, educators, and adult learners.  

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.