



## The Mathematics of Mattering



*Leigh Reagan Alley EdD for xSELERatED*

There is a difference between being somewhere and feeling that your presence counts there. Most of us know that difference immediately. We know it in our bodies. We know it in our breath. We know it in whether we brace or soften when we walk into a room. Some places ask us to perform. Some places ask us to comply. Some places ask us to contribute without ever really seeing us. And some places do something else. They make room for our full humanity. They remember our names. They notice when we are off. They listen when we speak. They respond as though what we bring has weight. Those are places where we matter.

In education, we talk often about culture, climate, belonging, morale, engagement, retention, and well-being. Underneath many of those conversations is a simpler human question:

***Do I matter here?***

**Not just, am I included?**

**Not just, am I useful?**

**Not just, am I doing enough?**

**But:**

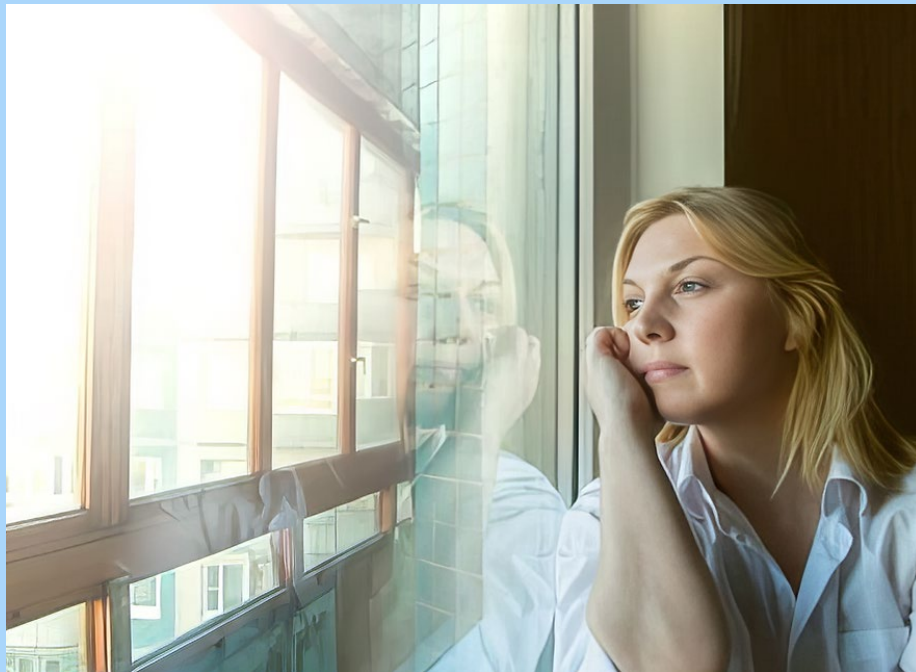
*Do I matter here?*

*Would my absence be noticed?*

*Can I be a whole person here, or only a productive one?*

**Students carry those questions.**

*Educators carry them, too.*



**And the answers people receive rarely come from a poster, a mission statement, or a strategic plan. They come from daily experience. They come from tone, response, attention, and what happens when someone is learning, struggling, contributing, failing, growing, or simply trying to make it through the day.**

**That is why places where we matter do not happen by accident. They are built.**

### ***Mattering Is More Than Being Let In***

**Being included matters. Access matters. Representation matters. But inclusion alone is not the whole story. A person can be in the room and still feel invisible. A person can be welcomed and still feel unknown. A person can be needed for what they do and still feel no one has made space for who they are.**

**Mattering goes deeper. Mattering means my presence changes something here. It means I am not interchangeable. It means this place does not simply make room for my labor. It makes room for my humanity. That is part of why belonging matters so much.**

**Belonging is not a soft extra. It is not decorative. It is not something we get to after the “real work” is done. It is part of the real work. When belonging is present, people stop spending so much energy wondering whether they are safe, whether they are too much, whether they need to shrink, whether they can tell the truth. They can begin to learn. They can begin to contribute. They can begin to risk showing up more fully.**



### ***We Learn Whether We Matter in Relationship***

**No one learns their worth in isolation. We learn it through repeated experiences.**

- **In the colleague who says, “I’m glad you’re here,” and means it.**
- **In the leader who listens carefully enough that we do not feel rushed past.**
- **In the teacher who notices the student who has already decided not to be noticed.**
- **In the team that makes room for honesty without turning vulnerability into liability.**
- **In the community that does not reduce people to output, image, or usefulness.**

**And we learn the opposite that way too. We learn not to matter when people speak over us.**

**When our labor is expected but our presence is overlooked. When only the visible work gets valued. When struggle is treated as weakness. When people are tolerated but not really known.**

When systems keep taking and taking without offering people enough evidence that who they are still counts.

Schools are not just places where learning happens. They are places where people are constantly learning something about themselves. Students are learning whether their questions are welcome.

Educators are learning whether their care is sustainable. Leaders are learning whether they are allowed to be both strong and human. Families are learning whether partnership is real or only performative. Every environment teaches.

The question is:

*What are our spaces teaching people about their worth?*



### ***We Do Not Become Whole in Places That Ask Us to Disappear***

There are places that extract from us. And there are places that help us come more fully alive. There are places where people become guarded, careful, efficient, and tired. And there are places where people become more honest, more grounded, more open, more able to imagine something better. The difference is not perfection. It is not the absence of conflict or hard conversations. Some of the places where we matter most are the ones where truth can actually be spoken. The difference is whether people can remain human there.

Places where we matter do not require constant performance. They do not reward image over honesty. They do not demand that people cut off the tender, unfinished, complicated parts of themselves in order to belong. They make room for reality. For growth. For repair. For need. For uncertainty. For changing your mind. For being good at your work and still being a person who makes mistakes. As the saying goes, “Heroes often fail . . .”

That kind of space, a space that doesn't want performance, matters more than we sometimes realize. Because when people are held well, they do not just function better. They become more available to learning, to relationship, to courage, to contribution, and to one another.

### ***The Classroom Can Become Such a Place***

So can a team. So can a school. A place where people matter is usually built in small, repeatable ways long before anyone names it in big language.

It is built when someone is greeted like their arrival matters. When correction comes without humiliation. When a quiet contribution is acknowledged. When a student's question is treated as meaningful rather than inconvenient. When a colleague's exhaustion is noticed instead of normalized. When curiosity is stronger than assumption. When harm can be named and repair is possible. When expectations and dignity are held together.

This is not sentimental work. It is disciplined work. It is relational work. It is cultural work. It is leadership work. For me, it is ministry work. Creating the conditions is my calling. Places where people matter are stronger places to learn. Stronger places to teach. Stronger places to lead. Stronger places to stay.



### ***What If We Became More Intentional About Building Mattering?***

What if one of the questions we asked more often in schools was not only, “Are people performing?” but also, “Are people feeling seen?”

What if we asked:

- *Who is being reminded that they matter here?*
- *Who is unsure?*
- *Who has been surviving so quietly that no one notices what it is costing them?*
- *Who has started to confuse invisibility with professionalism?*
- *Who has stopped expecting to be known?*

Those are not side questions. They get at the heart of culture. Students do not disengage only because they lack motivation. Adults do not burn out only because the work is hard. Often, people begin to wither in places where they no longer feel visible, valued, or held. This is why micro-moves matter.

The teacher who pauses and kneels beside a student instead of calling them out across the room. The leader who names quiet leadership in public. The colleague who follows up after the meeting. The school that creates structures where people have voice, not just duties. The adult who communicates, in word or tone or posture, “You still belong here.”

Mattering is often communicated before it is ever spoken. It lives in how we welcome. How we respond. How we remember. How we notice. How we repair. How we make room.

### ***The Places That Hold Us Well Also Strengthen Us***

Most of us can remember at least one place where we mattered. A classroom. A mentor’s office. A team. A kitchen table. A friendship. A school community. A season in which someone saw us clearly enough to remind us who we were. We remember those places because they gave us more than comfort. They gave us courage. They made it easier to tell the truth. They made it easier to try again. They widened what felt possible. They softened the loneliness that so often attaches itself to meaningful work. They reminded us that we were not too much, not too late, not invisible. They did not erase difficulty. They made it more possible to carry difficulty without losing ourselves inside it.

That matters right now. Because many people in schools are carrying more than anyone can see at first glance. Pressure. Fatigue. Responsibility. Uncertainty. Grief. Care. Hope. People can carry a great deal when they know they are not carrying it in a place that has forgotten their humanity.



### ***May Our Schools Become Places Where People Know They Matter***

May our classrooms be places where students do not have to perform worthiness in order to receive care. May our schools be places where educators are valued not only for what they produce, but for who they are. May our teams be places where people can bring both competence and complexity. May our leadership be the kind that notices who is fading at the edges and treats attention as an act of care. May we build communities where dignity comes before judgment, where belonging is practiced, and where people do not have to disappear in order to succeed. Because we were never meant to do this work as though our humanity were incidental.

We were made for places where our presence is received as gift. Places where our questions are welcome. Places where our stories are not interruptions. Places where our becoming is supported. Places where we matter. And perhaps part of the work before us now is not only to find those places when we can, but to help build them with intention, in the daily life of our schools, for one another.

### ***A Simple Formula***

If I had to reduce the mathematics of mattering to something simple, it might be this:

**Attention + Dignity + Care + Consistency = Mattering**

***Attention says, I see you.***

***Dignity says, I will treat your humanity with honor.***

***Care says, Your well-being is not irrelevant to this space.***

***Consistency says, You do not have to earn this from me anew every day.***

And maybe that is the work. It may be the only work. To keep adding what helps people come alive. To keep subtracting what makes people disappear. To keep multiplying moments of belonging. To keep dividing the weight so no one carries it alone.

***This is the mathematics of mattering.***



***Your xSEleratED April Bonus Resource!***

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### A Simple Reflection Worksheet

Use this worksheet to reflect on whether a classroom, team, school, or community feels like a place where people matter.

You can complete it for:

- your classroom
- your staff team
- your school
- a leadership space
- your own relationships with students or colleagues

### The Formula

Attention + Dignity + Care + Consistency = Mattering

### Definitions

**Attention**  
People feel seen, noticed, and remembered.

**Dignity**  
People are treated with respect, especially in hard moments.

**Care**  
People's well-being matters here.