# Action Guide for Educators: Belonging

As we learned in *The Opportunity Makers*, trajectory-changing schools create an emotional climate for learning that activates students' ability to excel. This guide helps educators build a full understanding of each individual student to meet their needs and support their long-term growth. It is designed for school-based teams, including teachers, school leaders, and other instructional staff.

## The Case for Belonging

Belonging—the experience of being accepted and respected—is a pre-requisite for learning.[1] Belonging takes more than just warm relationships. It is created by intentional policies, practices, and systems that respect students' identities, recognize their agency, and affirm their ability to succeed.[2] Trajectory-changing schools foster belonging in three interrelated ways:

- **Individual Knowledge**: Every student is known well as an individual and a learner. This explicit expectation is modeled by teachers and leaders and reinforced by school structures.
- **Individual Needs**: Educators work together to identify needs and provide personal support. Individual student needs are discussed collectively and acted on consistently.
- **Individual Growth**: Educators focus on incremental growth for every student over time. They set long-term learning goals, use individual student data to tailor support, and celebrate progress.

Belonging is not separate from rigorous academics; care and challenge go hand in hand.[3] The whole institution must work to understand the experiences of individual young people—not just because it's right, but because it's the best way to build on students' gifts and boost their learning.

## Where to Start

Rather than launching one-off initiatives, school leaders must start an ongoing improvement cycle that leads to sustained change. This guide is built on the four-part improvement cycle we saw in trajectory-changing schools:

1. **Assess the student's experience of belonging.** Schools should work to understand how students experience belonging at school. We suggest collecting student input with student surveys and focus groups. From there, schools can identify areas for growth**.**
2. **Choose a focus area.** Individual knowledge, needs, and growth all build on each other. Schools should start by developing individual knowledge of students if that's not already in place. From there, schools can use that knowledge to better support needs and boost growth.
3. **Pick a catalyzing practice.** Each section suggests several practices that reinforce the focus areas, along with tools adapted from trajectory-changing schools. We recommend adopting one or two practices at a time and using them consistently to build new habits.
4. **Measure progress and adapt.** Schools should start small, monitor their progress, and adapt as they go. They can lean into practices that work and drop the ones that don't. As one focus area is woven into the fabric of the school, leaders can pick another and start the cycle over again.

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[1] Immordino-Yang, M. H., Darling-Hammond, L., & Krone, C. R. (2019). *Nurturing Nature: How Brain Development Is Inherently Social and Emotional, and What This Means for Education*. Educational Psychologist, 54(3), 185–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1633924

[2] Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Structures for belonging: A synthesis of research on belonging and a framework for student success*. Student Experience Network. Retrieved from https://studentexperiencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Structures-for-Belonging.pdf

[3] Hammond, Z. L. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain*. Corwin Press.

Below we offer a process to follow and practical tools to use. **It's meant to be a springboard, not a checklist.** Educators should choose what's relevant to their school community and adapt as needed.

# Assess the Student's Experience of Belonging

We recommend collecting direct input from young people to understand the starting state for belonging. Schools should refer to any existing sources of student input (for example, existing student surveys) and can choose one or more of the following approaches to deepen their understanding of belonging.

## Conduct student surveys.

In *The Opportunity Makers,* young people at all schools tended to report that they trusted their teachers, but students at trajectory-changing schools were more likely to feel supported by their school. It is important that schools investigate belonging at both the teacher and school levels. To begin, schools can ask the four student survey items used in *The Opportunity Makers.*

- I feel supported by my school;
- People at my school care about me;
- When I feel like giving up, my teacher asks me to keep trying; and
- My teachers make me feel like I belong.

For a more comprehensive assessment, schools can consider TNTP's Insight Survey, which collects student and caregiver input on additional dimensions of belonging.

## Conduct student focus groups.

To dig deeper into trends, schools can run student focus groups and spend time in class with students. Focus groups allow leaders to ask more specific questions and students to share opinions and examples. For example, surveys can tell you that students feel supported by their school; focus groups can tell you why.

Focus groups do not need to include every student or cover every topic. Instead, schools can interview smaller, representative groups of students and focus on trends raised in the student surveys.

### Resource:
Student Experience Focus Group Protocol (TNTP)
For more guidance, see this Facilitator's Guide from the Student Experience Research Network.

## Reflect on current school practices for belonging.

All schools should have already taken TNTP's Baseline Assessment. Now, use the assessment data and student input to reflect on how existing school policies and practices enhance or detract from belonging. Note the strengths and gaps in individual knowledge, needs, and growth. We suggest these reflection questions:

- **Individual knowledge:** What shifts in practice will break down siloes of information about students across the school?
- **Individual needs:** How do our structures for collecting and sharing knowledge of student characteristics and academic needs reinforce collective action?
- **Individual growth:** How is the focus on growth over time reinforced (or reduced) with our cycle's progress monitoring?

Use this reflection to select an initial focus for belonging. When in doubt, invest first in individual knowledge and build to the other areas.

## Communicate priorities for belonging.

Schools should set an explicit goal to build belonging and an emotional climate for learning. Communicate the priorities for belonging to school staff, students, families, and community members. Name areas of strength and growth based on students' input and assessment of current practices.

# Focus on Individual Knowledge

We recommend that schools start by building holistic knowledge of students if that's not already in place.

## Catalyzing Practice 1: Map existing relationships with students.

Every student should be known well by at least one adult. To assess existing relationships with students, write all student names on chart paper and ask staff members to put a check mark next to students with whom they have a genuine relationship. Note which students have no advocates, and brainstorm ways to reach them.

### Resource:

Relationship Mapping Protocol (TNTP)

## Catalyzing Practice 2: Set up structures that reinforce relationships.

Relationships are built in a million micro-moments: greeting students when they enter, listening in class, talking to them in the hallways or recess. In conversations, listen for family background, heritage/culture, linguistic assets, unique talents and interests, academic and personal challenges, preferred learning activities, emotional well-being, career aspirations, and academic history.

But relationships shouldn't be left to chance. Schools should set shared practices to reach every single student and document what is learned so the collective knowledge builds over time. This doesn't have to be complicated or overly time-intensive. What's important is to systematize opportunities for connection, provide accountability, and create shared knowledge of students. For example:

- Teachers conduct at least one non-academic check-in with a student each month;
- Teachers give caregivers a "good news" phone call once a quarter; or
- Schedules include windows for informal interaction, such as advisory periods.

- Resource: Questions for Non-Academic Student Check-Ins (TNTP)
- For more ideas, see Structures for Belonging from the Student Experience Research Network.

# Focus on Individual Needs

## Catalyzing Practice 1: Create comprehensive student profiles.

Knowledge about each student should be centrally documented so that the information builds from year to year. Student profiles can include academic data, language data, strengths and areas of growth, interests, individualized plans that help contextualize data (e.g., Individual Education Plans, Language Plans, Behavior Plans), and familial and cultural context. Teachers can use the profiles to have regular conversations about shifts in personal or academic factors and document next steps for support. They can share the profiles with incoming teachers, so the knowledge builds from year to year.

**Resource:**
[Creating Comprehensive Student Profiles](#) (TNTP)

## Catalyzing Practice 2: Use cross-functional teams to meet individual needs.

Meeting individual needs is everybody's job. Create regular opportunities for all staff across a grade level— including general, multilingual, arts, and special education teachers, as well as specialists, counselors, and principals—to discuss student needs and figure out how best to support individual students. Teams should identify students in need of additional support, analyze their academic and socio-emotional needs, assess support plans, and allocate responsibilities. Questions for collaborative discussion could include:

- Who needs us the most this week?
- How will this approach affirm (or challenge) the student academically/emotionally?
- What does the student say about this?

For example, New Heights Academy Charter uses grade-level meetings to facilitate weekly collaboration among teachers from different subjects and specialists who are all working with the same students.

**Resource:**
[Grade-Level Planning Meeting Guide,](#) adapted from New Heights Academy Charter

# Focus on Individual Growth

## Catalyzing Practice 1: Choose and use a long-term growth metric.

Each student should have a challenging yet reasonable goal that puts them on track for reaching grade level over time. Some students won't catch up in a single year—and that's OK. Instead, trajectory-changing schools break down the big goal into small chunks and constantly celebrate progress with students, teachers, and caregivers. This focus on growth affirms students' capacity to succeed. Young people believe in their capacity to meet their goals because everyone around them believes it too.

### Assess school context.

The growth metric should align with the school's long-term goal for students, respond to the community's needs, and serve as a powerful tool for motivation and accountability. Use historical data to determine where students have displayed excellence or encountered challenges.

- Example: Educators at Van Buskirk Elementary believe that literacy is the door to building critical thinking skills and accessing grade-level content in any subject. They focus on every student reading on or above grade level by middle school.

### Pick a metric.

Choose a metric that aligns with the overall goal and resonates with the school community. This could be quarterly or state testing or something specific to the school, like progress on a reading program. The metric should reinforce the school-wide focus rather than operate as a compliance metric for the sake of reporting.

- Examples: (1) Students will achieve 1.25 years growth in reading as determined by our readiness assessment; or (2) students will score "proficient" on weekly math formative assessments.

**Set individual student goals.** Using the metric you've chosen, teachers should work with students and families to set long-term growth goals for each individual student, along with clear benchmarks for progress. These goals should be challenging yet attainable.

**Example:**
Reading goals for bilingual students could include biliteracy trajectories (the developmental paths they follow in acquiring literacy skills in two languages).

**Resource:**
Summative Assessment Data Reflection Guide, adapted from CE Rose PK–8

# Catalyzing Practice 2: Use shared student data to tailor support.
Data tracking doesn't have to be complicated. What matters is that data is available centrally, used consistently, and provides academic and support data for each individual student.

Schools can use the tools they already have on hand or are comfortable using. JC Kelly Elementary uses a data room. Trousdale County Elementary used a password-protected spreadsheet. In both methods, educators can identify patterns, make data-informed decisions about instruction, and capture next steps.

The data tracking guide outlines how to track each student's performance and interventions throughout their school career, and how to use the data to drive conversations on student support and growth.

**Resource:**
 Use of Shared Student Data Guide, adapted from Trousdale County Elementary

## About TNTP
As a leading education nonprofit, TNTP works side by side with educators, system leaders, and communities across 39 states and more than 6,000 districts nationwide to reach ambitious goals for student success. Our vision pushes beyond school walls, catalyzing cross-sector collaboration to create pathways for young people to achieve academic, economic, and social mobility. Read more at tntp.org/makers-connect