

BUILDING BELONGING

Harnessing the Power of Education
in a Time of Demographic Change



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	Executive Summary: Building Belonging in an Era of Demographic Change	01			
02	Introduction: The Context of Change	03			
	Shifting Youth Demographics in the U.S.	03			
03	The Importance of Belonging in Education	05			
	1. Psychological well-being	05			
	2. Academic success	05			
	3. Social Cohesion	05			
	4. Reducing prejudice and promoting inclusion	05			
	5. Belonging and othering	06			
	6. Identity development	06			
	7. Mental health support	06			
04	Challenges to Fostering Belonging in Schools	07			
	1. Outdated policies and practices	07			
	2. Narrow academic focus	07			
	3. Insufficient resources	07			
	4. The deficit lens on immigrant youth and English Language Learners	08			
	5. Lack of culturally responsive teaching practices	08			
05	The Role of Schools as Community Hubs	09			
	1. Bridging Diverse Groups	10			
	2. Fostering a Sense of Belonging and Identity	11			
	3. Case Studies: Schools as Exemplary Community Hubs	12			
06	Actionable Strategies for Building Belonging in Schools	13			
	1. Build trusting relationships	13			
	2. Ensure safety and inclusion	13			
	3. Make diversity visible	13			
	4. Set high expectations and deepen learning opportunities	13			
	5. Learn and grow	13			
	- Psychological well-being	14			
	- Reimagining the Curriculum	15			
	- Integrating Learning About Belonging	15			
	- Integrating Immigrant Students and ELLs	16			
07	Measuring Success and Reevaluating Educational Outcomes	17			
08	A Call to Action: Collective Responsibility and Commitment	18			
	1. Cultivate trusting relationships	2. Promote safety and inclusion	3. Celebrate diversity	4. Deepen learning by connecting to students' lives	18
	5. Commit to ongoing learning	6. Engaging the wider community	7. Create safe spaces for dialogue	8. Monitor and act	19
09	Conclusion: Envisioning a Cohesive Society Through Education	20			
10	About the Authors	20			
11	References	21			

Executive Summary: Building Belonging in an Era of Demographic Change

At a time of profound demographic shifts and ever-increasing diversity in classrooms, our education systems find themselves at a critical juncture. The Ecosystems for the Future of Learning report¹ envisioned a transformative approach to education that breaks down the barriers between schools and communities; this report extends that vision by focusing on the imperative of fostering belonging within these educational ecosystems. At a time when societal divisions appear more pronounced than ever, the role of schools as community hubs where students from all backgrounds can feel secure, accepted, and valued has never been more crucial.

This report delves into the challenges and opportunities presented by the United States' dynamic demographic landscape, highlighting the urgent need for educational practices that not only acknowledge but celebrate diversity as a cornerstone of a vibrant, inclusive society. It is underscored by the understanding that a sense of belonging is fundamental to individual and communal well-being, academic engagement, and the fostering of civic agency among the next generation.

Our research reveals that despite their potential as centers of learning and community hubs, many schools are ill-equipped to cultivate this sense of belonging. Their ability to bridge divides and foster a shared sense of identity is often hampered by outdated policies, a narrow focus on academic outcomes, and a lack of resources to support the integration of diverse experiences and perspectives. At the most basic level, the system often acknowledges immigrant youth solely through a deficit lens — merely as English Learners (ELs) or English Language Learners (ELLs) — not as students with assets and experiences worth sharing with the broader school community.

The consequence is a missed opportunity to build cohesive communities that are strengthened by their diversity and equipped to navigate the complexities of a globalized world. Drawing on our research and practical work in communities across the country, this report stresses that communities suffer when educational institutions do not address the needs of their diverse student bodies. Conversely, when schools successfully nurture a sense of belonging among students and their families, communities flourish.

To provide momentum for the transformation of schools to support the thriving of all students, this report points to a series of actionable strategies aimed at nurturing belonging.



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- 01** Supporting schools to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments that celebrate diversity and combat discrimination.

 - 02** Ensure that learning about building belonging across diverse communities is part of the education of all school faculty.

 - 03** Reimagining school curriculum to reflect the realities of a globalized world marked by migration with a particular focus on the humanities and STEM.

 - 04** Ensure that immigrant students and English language learners are fully integrated into the life of schools.

 - 05** Implementing teaching practices that recognize migration as a fundamental aspect of the human experience.
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Furthermore, the report calls for a reevaluation of how educational success is measured, advocating for metrics that account for the cultivation of belonging and community engagement. It invites educators, policymakers, and philanthropists to support these initiatives, recognizing that the task of building belonging in schools is not just the responsibility of individual teachers or administrators but a collective endeavor that requires community-wide commitment.

The report concludes by emphasizing that building a shared sense of belonging is essential to advance thriving for all students, and for sustaining a cohesive society in the face of demographic change. By focusing on education to bridge divides, the United States can lay the groundwork for a future characterized by greater understanding, acceptance, and unity across the population.

Introduction: The Context of Change

In an era marked by significant immigration flows and demographic shifts, the United States stands at a critical juncture. The landscape of U.S. classrooms is being reshaped by this demographic change, with an unparalleled level of diversity that brings both challenges and opportunities. According to the 2020 census, the youthⁱⁱ population overall is in notable decline, but an increasing number of immigrant-origin youth are providing vitality and growth for our country's younger demographic. Over 25% of the school-aged population now consists of immigrants or their children, highlighting a profound shift in the makeup of our educational communities

Shifting Youth Demographics in the U.S.

1. Decline in under-18 population

The 2020 census results revealed a decline in the youth population. The youth population could stagnate further, highlighting the essential role of immigrants in maintaining the vitality of the youth demographic.



2. 26% of the school-aged population are immigrants or the children of immigrants

According to the Migration Policy Center, “Second-generation immigrant children born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent accounted for 87 percent (15.4 million) of all children with immigrant parents.”ⁱⁱⁱ

3. Linguistic diversity

The number of people who spoke a language other than English at home nearly tripled from 1980 to 2019.



4. Nationwide decline in white youth population

Census data shows a nationwide trend of declining white population shares across many areas. The white population share in Nevada dropped from 65% in 2000 to 54% in 2010 and 46% in 2020.

This shift is not merely numerical; it represents a deeper transformation in the fabric of American society. With the racial and ethnic composition of communities evolving and linguistic diversity on the rise, our education system is confronted with the urgent need to adapt. The changing demographics underscore an emerging reality: Schools must transition from traditional learning environments designed to function for the “lucky few” to vibrant educational ecosystems that champion the concept of belonging.

Suzette Brooks Masters, a renowned voice in the realm of immigrant integration, observes that the growing diversity, a product of decades of immigration, is often met with increased cultural anxiety. This anxiety manifests in various forms—polarization, mistrust, xenophobia, and a retreat from civic engagement, all of which erode the sense of belonging that is crucial for a cohesive society.

This cultural anxiety can also violently erupt. After studying those arrested for storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, Robert Pape of the University of Chicago concluded that “The key characteristic uniting them is that they come from counties where the white share of the population is declining fastest.”

His findings speak to the need to promote a shared sense of belonging, encompassing people of different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic statuses. If we do not, further division will weaken our already fragile democracy.

Against this backdrop, schools emerge as pivotal arenas for cultivating belonging. As centers of learning and community engagement, they hold the unique potential to bridge divides and foster a sense of shared identity among students from diverse backgrounds. Decades of research support this vision, demonstrating that meaningful interactions across different group identities among youth can catalyze positive, enduring transformations. Communities thrive when schools nurture a shared sense of belonging among young people and their families.

However, this potential is often unrealized, with many schools ill-prepared to embrace their role in shaping a more inclusive future. Immigrant youth, in particular, are frequently overlooked or viewed through a deficit lens, reducing them to mere statistics or categories such as English Learners, rather than recognizing them as individuals with valuable experiences and perspectives to contribute.

As our society becomes increasingly diverse, understanding and addressing the complexities of belonging in the context of demographic change is essential. This briefing, informed by the latest research and insights from leading experts, explores the intricate relationship between belonging, immigration, and demographic evolution while underscoring the crucial function that educational institutions play in laying the groundwork for a future characterized by a deeper understanding, acceptance, and cohesion across the diverse tapestry of American society.

The Importance of Belonging in Education

This is the most diverse generation in U.S. history. It spans racial and ethnic backgrounds, multiracial identities, generations of immigrants, and socioeconomic statuses, permeating every geographic region—from bustling cities to tranquil suburbs and rural expanses. In this context, the promotion of a sense of belonging among youth becomes crucial, as the world around them changes.

Belonging transcends the superficial layers captured by mere assimilation and integration. It involves a deeper emotional connection, acceptance, and feelings of civic agency within a community, where everyone's unique identity is valued and supported. This intricate tapestry of belonging, woven from emotional bonds, social inclusion, identity, safety, recognition, and cultural connections, lays the foundation for individuals to feel part of something greater than themselves. It's about creating spaces where diversity is not just accepted but celebrated as essential to our collective well-being and progress.

Research across various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and education, highlights several key reasons why fostering this sense of belonging is essential:

01 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Research consistently shows that a sense of belonging significantly contributes to the psychological well-being of young people. It can reduce loneliness and depression and increase self-esteem and resilience. During demographic changes, including shifts in the population's ethnic, racial, or age composition, young individuals may face identity challenges and social isolation. A strong sense of belonging can help mitigate these effects. (Suárez-Orozco, 2013)^{iv}

02 ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Studies in educational settings have found that students who feel a sense of belonging are more engaged, motivated, and likely to succeed academically. This is particularly important during demographic changes when educational institutions may experience shifts in student populations. Promoting belonging can help ensure that all students, including those from underrepresented or newly integrated groups, feel valued and supported in their academic pursuits. (Allen, Kern, Rozek, McInerney & Slavich, 2021)^v

03 SOCIAL COHESION

As demographics shift, fostering a sense of belonging among youth can play a pivotal role in maintaining social cohesion. Research indicates that when individuals feel connected to their community, they are more likely to participate in civic activities, develop social networks, and exhibit prosocial behaviors. This is vital for building inclusive communities that adapt to and thrive amidst demographic changes. (Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier, 2019)^{vi}

04 REDUCING PREJUDICE AND PROMOTING INCLUSION

Demographic changes can sometimes increase tensions and prejudice between different groups. Research in social psychology suggests that promoting a sense of belonging among all youth can reduce prejudice and discrimination. By fostering inclusive environments where diverse identities are acknowledged and valued, societies can encourage harmonious relations among different demographic groups. (Killen, Luken, & Graham, 2022)^{vii}

05 BELONGING AND OTHERING

Shifts in social and demographic landscapes can influence the formation of youth identities and group dynamics in positive and negative ways. It is essential to recognize the role othering and cultural essentialism can play in constructing belonging and identity, particularly when set amidst a backdrop of demographic changes within a community. (Gormally, 2020)^{viii}

06 IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Identity development is a key task in the developmental stages of adolescents and young adults. Demographic changes can complicate this process by challenging existing social norms and identities. Research highlights the importance of belonging as a supportive factor that helps youth navigate these challenges, allowing for healthier identity development and adjustment. (Pfeifer, Berkman, 2018)^{ix}

07 MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Finally, in the context of demographic shifts that might bring about uncertainty or conflict, ensuring that young people feel a sense of belonging can provide crucial mental health support. It can act as a buffer against stress and anxiety, which might be exacerbated during times of change. (Gopalan, et al., 2022)^x

The synthesis of these findings from diverse fields of research underscores the profound importance of promoting belonging among youth, especially in the context of demographic change. Promoting belonging among youth in times of demographic change is essential for their well-being, academic success, social cohesion, reduction of prejudice, healthy identity-development, and mental health support. This research highlights the necessity for deliberate policies and practices aimed at creating inclusive educational environments where every student feels valued and connected.

Challenges to Fostering Belonging in Schools

Creating a sense of belonging within the diverse tapestry of today's classrooms is fraught with challenges, many of which stem from systemic issues deeply embedded within our current educational systems. These challenges range from the entrenchment of outdated policies to a narrow academic focus and the pervasive application of a deficit lens toward immigrant youth and English language learners (ELLs).

1. OUTDATED POLICIES AND PRACTICES

A significant barrier to fostering a sense of belonging in schools stems from obsolete educational policies and practices. For instance, commonly collected demographic data in schools often overlooks information about immigrant populations. Instead, immigrant youth, 87% of whom are people of color, are categorized using data on race and ethnicity. The term "English Learners" is frequently used as a catch-all label for immigrant youth, yet it fails to account for those who are already proficient in English. This lack of disaggregated data can result in misunderstanding of academic and social climates for certain groups, while also obscuring trends among immigrant-origin youth, the fastest-growing demographic in US schools. Additionally, the enforcement of English-only policies in classrooms and on school campuses does not align with current understanding of language acquisition.

Furthermore, the way students are grouped and tracked in many schools hinders opportunities for interaction across diverse backgrounds. This is particularly problematic, as research indicates that diversity without meaningful social contact can exacerbate prejudice and tension. Conversely, cross-ethnic exposure has positive impacts that can last a lifetime ^{xi, xii}

These policies, often remnants of a less diverse past, lack the flexibility needed to build belonging among the diversity of backgrounds of today's student population.

2. NARROW ACADEMIC FOCUS

A focus on academics that prioritizes standardized testing and conventional metrics of success over the holistic development of students can limit opportunities for learning about and engagement with differences that build belonging. Such an approach marginalizes the importance of cultural inclusivity, social-emotional learning, and civic engagement - elements crucial for fostering a sense of belonging. It also fails to acknowledge the rich diversity of intelligence and talents within a multicultural student body. It sidelines essential skills like critical thinking, creativity, perspective-taking, and cross-cultural communication, which are indispensable in a globalized society.

3. INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES

Compounding the challenge of outdated policies and an academic-centric model is the issue of insufficient resources. Schools, especially those serving underprivileged communities, often face a scarcity of financial, human, and material resources. This scarcity hinders the implementation of programs that promote belonging, such as culturally relevant curriculum materials, bilingual education support, and professional development in cultural competence for educators. The lack of resources creates an environment that struggles to meet the diverse needs of its students, exacerbating feelings of exclusion and alienation among minority and immigrant students.

4. THE DEFICIT LENS ON IMMIGRANT YOUTH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

One of the most pervasive challenges is the application of a deficit lens to immigrant youth and ELLs. This perspective focuses on the perceived limitations of these students, such as language proficiency, rather than recognizing their strengths, experiences, and potential contributions. Viewing students through this lens not only undermines their self-esteem and academic engagement, but also perpetuates stereotypes and biases that can lead to marginalization. Immigrant students and ELLs bring valuable cultural knowledge, diverse perspectives, and multilingual skills to the educational environment. When schools fail to acknowledge and leverage these assets, they not only diminish the sense of belonging for these students, but also deprive the entire student body of a richer, more inclusive learning experience.

5. LACK OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

The deficit lens often results in lowered expectations for immigrant students and ELLs, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that limits their academic and future prospects. It also negatively impacts both what and how immigrant-origin youth are taught. The lack of culturally responsive teaching and adequate support structures within schools further exacerbates the isolation and disconnection felt by these students.

Numerous challenges obstruct the path to fostering belonging in educational settings, from entrenched systemic issues to the application of a deficit lens toward certain student populations. Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the educational ecosystem to reform and reimagine practices, ensuring every student can experience a genuine sense of belonging within their learning community.

The Role of Schools as Community Hubs

Schools hold unparalleled potential to serve as vital community hubs. More than mere venues for academic learning, they are the spaces in which parents, community members, and young people together advance a vision of thriving for individual learners and of the shared future of the community. By embracing their role as intergenerational community hubs, schools can significantly contribute to building inclusive communities that adapt to and thrive amidst demographic changes.

In exploring the role of schools as community hubs, it's essential to consider the insights of political scientist Ryan Enos on social geography and its impact on responses to diversity. Enos' research highlights how the spatial distribution of populations and the physical segregation of communities by race, ethnicity, or economic status can exacerbate tensions and reduce empathy between different groups, fostering "us versus them" mentalities. His findings suggest that such divisions contribute to polarized perceptions of diversity, affecting social cohesion and attitudes toward migration. However, Enos also points to the potential for positive change, indicating that increased contact between diverse groups, facilitated by intentional integration and exposure to diversity, can lead to more inclusive attitudes and a greater willingness to embrace diversity.

This understanding of social geography's influence on community dynamics is particularly relevant to the function of schools as community hubs. Enos' commuter train experiment, in which a temporary, artificially created increase in ethnic diversity on Boston commuter trains led to heightened concerns about immigration among local commuters, underscores the challenges and opportunities schools face in navigating demographic changes. Schools, by bringing together diverse student populations, have the unique potential to break down the physical and psychological barriers that segregate communities, fostering environments where stereotypes and prejudices are challenged, and diversity is celebrated. By acting as microcosms of broader society, schools can play a pivotal role in shaping more cohesive and tolerant communities, ready to harness the benefits of diversity.



BRIDGING DIVERSE GROUPS

The function of schools as community hubs extends beyond the confines of traditional education to encompass the broader goal of community engagement and cohesion. In this capacity, schools become the common ground where students, families, and community members of diverse backgrounds converge, interact, and learn from one another. This interaction not only enriches the educational experience but also strengthens the social fabric of the community.



STUDENTS AS GREETERS

Sandy Mendoza, a dedicated public-school educator in Florida, has revolutionized her school's atmosphere through the creation of the International Cafe—a dynamic hub celebrating linguistic diversity and fostering connections among students from varied backgrounds. Inspired by a Re-Imagining Migration presentation, Mendoza sought to showcase the school's diversity. She envisioned a remarkable opportunity for English learners to greet their peers in multiple languages, recognizing that many of her students shy away from the spotlight. Her goal was to illuminate those students who may not typically engage in such events, ensuring they feel acknowledged, embraced, and valued. By empowering students to craft welcoming signs in their native languages and serve as greeters, Mendoza not only promoted inclusivity but also instilled pride in their cultural heritage.

Drawing from her own journey as a first-generation Mexican American, Mendoza's initiative has empowered students to view themselves as leaders, fostering a profound sense of belonging and community within the school. Her approach vividly illustrates the transformative potential of empathy and innovation in creating an environment where every student feels esteemed and capable of leadership roles.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY

The role of schools in cultivating a sense of belonging and shaping identity is particularly crucial during times of demographic change. As students navigate the complexities of their social identities within the school environment, the inclusive practices of schools as community hubs can provide the necessary support and affirmation, helping them see themselves as civic actors within the larger community. By promoting an environment where every student feels valued, understood, and part of the larger narrative of the community and the country, schools can significantly impact students' identity development and their sense of belonging to the broader community.



CIVIC POETRY

In Louisville, Kentucky, Donna Neary, an exceptional high school social studies teacher, embarked with her students on a journey to explore their personal stories within the broader narrative of American identity through the Emma Lazarus Project. This initiative, in collaboration with The American Jewish Historical Society, Facing History and Ourselves, and Re-imagining Migration, introduced her class of English Language Learners, immigrants, and refugees to the landmark poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus, famously associated with the Statue of Liberty.

Neary's commitment led her students to engage deeply with primary sources to grasp the poem's context and its relevance today, emphasizing how migration stories can foster values like freedom, perspective-taking, and empathy.

As the project advanced, Neary witnessed a transformative shift in her students' viewpoints. The Statue of Liberty became more than a symbol; it turned into a beacon of personal inspiration. Their participation in The American Jewish Historical Society's National Poetry Contest allowed them to express their unique experiences through poetry, echoing the strength, hope, and resilience found in Lazarus' verses. Their contributions, spanning from Somalia to Cuba and Rwanda to Honduras, highlighted the enduring spirit of humanity, overcoming obstacles to unite in a compelling testament to hope and shared aspirations.

CASE STUDIES: SCHOOLS AS EXEMPLARY COMMUNITY HUBS

Across the United States, schools have implemented programs and initiatives that emphasize cultural inclusivity, community engagement, and the celebration of diversity, fostering a welcoming environment conducive to building a shared sense of identity and belonging.



PIECES OF ME

Sarah Said's initiative, "Pieces of Me," in a school just outside of Chicago, underscores the pivotal role schools play as community hubs, fostering inclusion, equity, and understanding. By transforming the school culture to celebrate diversity through year-round activities, starting with reading the children's book "The Name Jar" by Yangsook Choi, Said's project ignited discussions on identity, heritage, and belonging among students, families, and staff. The weekly "Culture Crew" sessions and the creation of family boards and personalized name jars by families and students highlighted the school's function as a central gathering place for sharing and learning about diverse cultures.

This engagement not only allowed students to honor their own cultures but also fostered an appreciation for the diversity of their peers, reinforcing the school's role in building bridges between different cultural backgrounds. The "Pieces of Me" Festival became a focal point for the entire school community, showcasing student art, performances, and family traditions, and inviting family members to share their own stories, thus deepening the communal bond. The overwhelmingly positive survey feedback post-project reflects a strengthened connection to personal and shared heritage among students.

Said's leadership exemplifies how schools can serve as powerful agents of change, creating a sense of belonging, enhancing empathy and communication skills, and preparing students to thrive in a diverse world. This project highlights why initiatives like "Pieces of Me" are essential in schools—they not only educate but also unite communities, demonstrating the school's vital role as a community hub where every member can learn from each other and grow together.

In these exemplary schools, strategies such as community-based learning projects, multicultural festivals, and parent engagement initiatives serve as bridges between the school and the wider community. Such activities not only enhance the educational experience but also solidify the school's role as a central hub for community life, where diversity is celebrated, and every member feels a sense of belonging.

The transformation of schools into community hubs represents a forward-thinking approach to education that aligns with the demographic realities of the 21st century. By fostering environments that bridge diverse groups and cultivate a strong sense of belonging and identity, schools can significantly contribute to building cohesive, inclusive communities. The success stories of schools functioning as community hubs underscore the potential of educational institutions to play a leading role in navigating societal changes and shaping the future of our communities.

Actionable Strategies for Building Belonging in Schools

As the U.S continues to evolve demographically, the quest for belonging remains a central challenge and opportunity. By understanding the multifaceted nature of belonging and actively working to promote inclusion across all sectors of society, especially within schools, the nation can navigate these changes to build stronger, more cohesive communities.

Creating a positive school climate, fostering supportive relationships among students and staff, implementing culturally relevant curricula, adopting inclusive pedagogies, and engaging with the broader community are strategies for promoting belonging. Below, Re-Imagining Migration's Adam Strom and Project Zero's Veronica Boix Mansilla offer five steps, practices, and mindsets essential for building belonging in schools.

01 BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

It's crucial to see students as individuals beyond their academic identities and understand their personal histories, including their communities and migration stories. Encouraging students to share their experiences fosters mutual understanding.

02 ENSURE SAFETY AND INCLUSION

It is vital to recognize and address the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the school environment. This involves being aware of how immigrants and newcomers are perceived and intervening against discriminatory practices.

03 MAKE DIVERSITY VISIBLE

Celebrating the variety of languages, identities, cultures, and family practices enriches the school community. Incorporating diversity into school rituals and ensuring that messages of inclusion are prominently displayed supports this goal.

04 SET HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND DEEPEN LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Leveraging the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom enhances learning. Teaching about migration as a fundamental aspect of human experience and encouraging critical thinking about civic issues related to migration can deepen students' understanding of the world.

05 LEARN AND GROW

Educators must be prepared to meet the social and emotional needs of all students, which requires ongoing learning and adaptation to effectively support diverse student populations.^{xiii}

TACTICS FOR ADVANCING BELONGING

Drilling it down to a more concrete level, there are a wide variety of proven, research-backed and actionable strategies that can transform educational environments into inclusive, welcoming spaces for all students. This section outlines a comprehensive approach, encompassing recommendations for creating inclusive environments, guidelines for faculty education, curriculum reimagining, and strategies for the integration of immigrant students and English language learners (ELLs). The Reimagining Migration website is rich with resources, tools, and lessons to help build belonging in times of demographic change.



A. SCHOOL SYSTEMS OVERALL

● ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES

It's crucial to see students as individuals beyond their academic identities and understand their personal histories, including their communities and migration stories. Encouraging students to share their experiences fosters mutual understanding.

● CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Offer ongoing training for all staff members, focusing on cultural competency, anti-bias education, and strategies for creating inclusive classrooms.

● STUDENT-LED INITIATIVES

Encourage and support student-led initiatives that promote inclusivity, such as clubs, forums, and projects that celebrate diverse cultures and foster a sense of belonging.

● COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Strengthen ties with local communities by hosting multicultural events and inviting community leaders to share their experiences and perspectives, enriching the school's cultural tapestry.

B. INTEGRATING LEARNING ABOUT BELONGING

For faculty to effectively nurture belonging among diverse student populations, they must be equipped with the right tools and knowledge:

● PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Design professional development programs that focus on the pedagogy of belonging, equipping teachers with the skills to foster inclusive classroom environments.

● INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Encourage an interdisciplinary approach to teaching about belonging, incorporating insights from psychology, sociology, and cultural studies into teacher training programs.

● PEER LEARNING

Facilitate peer learning opportunities among faculty, allowing educators to share best practices and successful strategies for promoting belonging within their classrooms.

C. REIMAGINING THE CURRICULUM

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in reflecting and respecting the diverse realities of the global community:

● INCLUSIVE CONTENT

Ensure that the curriculum across all subjects includes diverse perspectives, especially in the humanities and STEM, highlighting the contributions of various cultures to global knowledge.

● MIGRATION STUDIES

Integrate the study of migration as a fundamental aspect of the human experience, exploring its impacts on societies, economies, and cultures through history and into the present day.

● CRITICAL THINKING

Foster critical thinking and empathy by including case studies, narratives, and projects that challenge students to consider multiple perspectives and understand the complexity of global issues.

D. INTEGRATING IMMIGRANT STUDENTS AND ELLS

To fully integrate immigrant students and ELLs into the school community, schools must adopt targeted strategies:

● ASSET-BASED PRACTICES

Adopt asset-based mindsets that recognize the whole child, not simply their fluency in language. This begins by understanding that language fluency does not equate intelligence, intellect, or desire to succeed. Prioritize time to develop teacher-student relationships in order to identify the knowledge, perspectives, and skills that every student brings to the school community.

● LANGUAGE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Develop robust language support programs that not only aid in English language learning but also celebrate and maintain students' native languages as valuable cultural assets.

● RICH AND CHALLENGING CURRICULUM

Provide grade-level curriculum with appropriate scaffolds. Language support should not replace engaging curriculum and academic rigor.

● CULTURAL LIAISONS

Employ cultural liaisons or coordinators who can bridge the gap between immigrant families and the school, facilitating communication and understanding.

● INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Adopt classroom practices that are inclusive of ELLs, such as differentiated instruction and the use of bilingual resources, ensuring these students can fully participate in the learning process.

● PEER MENTORSHIP

Implement peer mentorship programs that pair immigrant students and ELLs with longer-tenured students, fostering connections and providing a support network within the school community.

By embracing these actionable strategies, schools can make significant strides in nurturing an environment where every student, regardless of their background, feels a profound sense of belonging. These recommendations, guidelines, and strategies collectively forge a path toward educational settings that not only celebrate diversity but also actively work to dismantle discrimination and integrate all students into a cohesive, inclusive community.

Measuring Success and Reevaluating Educational Outcomes

A shift toward focusing on belonging as a critical dimension of student success forces a paradigm shift toward incorporating broader metrics that encapsulate more than academic achievements. There is hope for a shift of seismic proportions on the horizon: As indicated by the recent partnership crafted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the assessment giant ETS, the topic of more holistic metrics of student thriving is gaining traction among those who shape the industry. A collaborative and system-wide shift to a more comprehensive approach to measuring success will be critical to shaping a supportive and inclusive educational environment.

The inclusion of belonging as a key indicator in educational success metrics is underscored by its significant impact on students' overall well-being, academic motivation, and sense of community. To effectively gauge this sense of belonging within the educational ecosystem, the implementation of the "Belonging Barometer" stands out as an innovative tool. This instrument, designed to measure the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, and supported within their school community, offers invaluable insights into the effectiveness of schools in fostering an inclusive environment.

Methods to assess belonging and community engagement extend to analyzing students' participation in school and community-based activities, which serve as tangible indicators of their engagement levels. Surveys, interviews, and direct observations can complement the Belonging Barometer, providing a multidimensional view of students' experiences and their sense of integration into the school community.

By broadening the scope of educational success to include these critical dimensions, schools can align their goals more closely with the needs of a diverse student body, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive in a supportive and engaging learning environment. This shift not only enriches the educational experience, but also prepares students to contribute positively to a diverse and interconnected world.



A Call to Action: Collective Responsibility and Commitment

This report serves as a clarion call to educators, policymakers, and philanthropists alike, emphasizing the urgent need to champion initiatives that foster belonging within our educational institutions. The responsibility to cultivate an environment where every student feels an intrinsic sense of belonging—a foundation for their academic, social, and emotional well-being—does not rest on the shoulders of educators alone. It demands a community-wide effort, a collective commitment to transforming educational practices to embrace and celebrate the rich tapestry of diversity brought forth by demographic changes. In rallying together to support these initiatives, we not only enhance the educational experience for all students but also lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Regardless of what institution we are in, whether it's a school, a museum, a library, or an afterschool program, adults in the learning ecosystems that surround young people today must all make a commitment to fostering inclusion along the key principles outlined in this report:

01 CULTIVATE TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Begin by seeing each student as an individual with a unique story. Encourage sharing within the classroom to build mutual understanding and respect. This effort lays the groundwork for a community where every voice is heard and valued.

02 PROMOTE SAFETY AND INCLUSION

Actively work to identify and dismantle dynamics of exclusion within our schools. This involves being vigilant against discrimination and creating policies that ensure every student feels safe and included, regardless of their background.

03 CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

Make a concerted effort to highlight and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of our students. This can be achieved through curriculum choices, school events, and daily interactions that affirm the richness of our school community's varied identities.

04 DEEPEN LEARNING BY CONNECTING TO STUDENTS' LIVES

Utilize the diverse experiences and knowledge students bring to their education. Integrate teachings on migration, cultural diversity, and civic engagement to foster a deeper understanding of the world and our place within it.

05 COMMIT TO ONGOING LEARNING

Recognize that meeting the needs of a diverse student body is a continuous process. Engage in professional development focused on cultural competency, anti-bias education, and inclusive teaching practices.

06 ENGAGING THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Involve parents and community members in sharing their cultures, traditions, and stories. This enriches students' learning experiences and reinforces the value of diversity beyond school walls.

07 CREATE SAFE SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

Establish forums where students can discuss diversity, inclusion, and belonging openly. These spaces should be moderated to ensure constructive and respectful dialogue. One model worth adapting is the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) model, which brings LGBTQ+ students together with allies.

08 MONITOR AND ACT

Regularly assess the school climate and promptly address any bullying or discrimination issues. Creating a safe environment is essential for fostering belonging and positive intergroup relations.



Conclusion: Envisioning a Cohesive Society Through Education

In summary, this report underscores the pivotal role of education in fostering a sense of belonging amidst the challenges and opportunities presented by our rapidly changing demographic landscape. Through a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of belonging, the barriers to its cultivation in schools, and actionable strategies for nurturing inclusive educational environments, we have charted a path forward.

As we conclude, we reiterate the call for a united approach to educational change—an approach that transcends traditional academic metrics to embrace the broader dimensions of belonging and community engagement. Change begins with you, whether you are in a classroom or a central office, a foundation, or a government office. Join us in this collective endeavor so that we can build strong, resilient communities committed to democracy and a future marked by a deeper understanding and acceptance, where every student, irrespective of their background, feels valued, supported, and connected. Together, we can transform our educational institutions into beacons of belonging.

About the Authors



ADAM STROM

Adam Strom is the Executive Director of Re-Imagining Migration, an organization dedicated to enhancing the education and well-being of immigrant-origin youth and promoting inclusive communities. With a background in content development at Facing History and Ourselves, Adam's work has reached millions of students worldwide, focusing on identity, immigration, and prejudice.



MEISHA LAMB-BELL

Meisha Lamb-Bell serves as the Program Director at Re-Imagining Migration, where she leverages her experience as a Questbridge scholar and educator to foster equitable education and inclusive environments. Her career spans roles in public finance and teaching, with a focus on joy, community building, and equity in education.



FERNANDE RAINE

Fernande Raine is the founder of The History Co:Lab, an initiative aimed at reinvigorating history and humanities education to strengthen democracy. With a PhD from Yale, Fernande's career includes strategic consulting at McKinsey and impactful work with Ashoka. The Co:Lab, in partnership with the Smithsonian, leads a network of over 200 museums and produces the youth podcast UnTextbooked, promoting youth voice and intergenerational dialogue in education.

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