

Cultivating Belonging in Schools for Staff and Community Partners

Written by a long-time youth development professional

Periodically, we reflect on what it means to cultivate [belonging](#) and a positive [climate](#).

I remember years ago stepping into a program director role for a community-based organization to build an integrated school-community partnership at a school that had undergone frequent turnover in leadership over the course of a decade and changes to the school's core curriculum. Staff and students frequently spoke of being disenchanted and disconnected. At the end of each school day, campus would empty as soon as the bell rang, reflecting the pervasive feeling that no one wanted to be there any longer than they had to.

With a role designed to be responsive to school and community needs (one of the reasons I fell in love with youth development years ago), we incorporated several activities for adults into our offerings, from monthly birthday celebrations designed to encourage authentic peer-to-peer relationships to community building games during professional development sessions to unite staff around their shared purpose. This was only possible, however, because administrators gave me the opportunity to share my strengths with staff as well as students, because they knew me, included me, supported me, valued me, and showed appreciation for who I was and how I could contribute to the community.

If you work in a school as a teacher, counselor, staff, or administrator, when you talk about [school climate](#), are you examining practices that impact the adults as well as the students? What are you doing to create a sense of belonging for the adults in your school, including community partners?

At a gathering of the [Highline Public Schools Community Partners](#) Roundtable, a quarterly meeting designed to support the school district's partner organizations, leaders from community partners shared what schools are doing to make them feel valued and included. Here are their ideas, grouped by theme:

We are known

- School staff members know our names and greet us
- They know about the services that we offer
- Schools rely on CBO's expertise and use us as a resource

We are included

- ...in parent nights, cultural nights, first day of school, field trips, and activity days
- ...in school professional development sessions for staff
- ...in graduation ceremonies
- ...in all staff meetings
- ...in planning that applies to our programming as early as August or the beginning of school year

We are supported

- They give us space to do programming in school and after school
- Timely reminders to partner about change of room/building usage when it impacts our program
- Administrative support when we need it
- PTSA reaches out to us regularly

We are valued

- Hosting Community Cafes and inviting partners
- Changing testing dates to accommodate students fasting during Ramadan, helped us as a cultural partner feel valued
- They refer families and students to our programs and help with recruitment

We are appreciated

- District recognition/appreciation
- Listening to our concerns
- Sharing what we do with the larger community

What is your role in cultivating a sense of belonging and positive climate in your program, school, or partnership?

What's one step you will take to work toward a more inclusive culture?