

STUDENT WELL-BEING OPINION

## Stop Telling Students, 'You Belong!'

3 ways to make a sense of belonging real and valuable

By Greg Walton — November 09, 2021 ⌚ 5 min read



— Laura Lannes for Education Week

### Greg Walton

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When I began studying students' experience of belonging 20 years ago, people weren't talking so much about belonging. But now, we're constantly told we belong. A notepad on my desk

assures me, “You belong.” A button I was handed at a school meeting says the same. And the other day, I saw yet another sign, firmly planted in an elementary school garden: “You belong!”

Hooray! Kudos for us!

Make no mistake, belonging is important. My colleagues and I have developed strategies to support a sense of belonging for students and have shown their effects in experiment after experiment with control groups to identify causal relationships. Through this work, we’ve found that, in middle and high school, a lack of belonging causes worse attendance, lower grades, and disciplinary problems. In college, belonging concerns sap motivation and contribute to inequality in achievement—and life success.

Why then do I feel a pit in my stomach every time I hear, “You belong!”? It’s because that phrase doesn’t do the job. It might even make things worse. As we stumble through a pandemic, with all the worry, isolation, and grief it has caused, and as we try to rebuild our communities in schools, that’s the last thing we need.

I’m teaching a first-year seminar at Stanford University now, and my students are thrilled to be on campus. But they left new student orientation bruised and battered by the onslaught of “You belong!” One student said, “The constant reiteration of ‘you belong here’ made me doubt that it’s true since they felt the need to repeat it with such fervor and frequency.” Thou doth protest too much, dear Stanford.

In general, when students wonder whether they belong, they have excellent reasons. School transitions are always taxing: Friendships and ways of learning are disrupted. Questions of belonging also often fall along group lines. Students of color confront the legacy of racial segregation in American schooling and racist stereotypes that imply lesser intelligence. Low-income students hear their group described as “vulnerable” and experience a cultural mismatch in school settings organized for their wealthier peers. And girls and women encounter negative stereotypes in math and science. These are realities. They provoke students to ask again and again, “Is school really for me? Is this a place where people like me can truly belong, learn, and succeed?”



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Simply telling students, “You belong!” ignores their legitimate concerns. Worse yet, it shifts the onus to the student: We’ve assured you that you belong. If you still don’t think you belong, that’s *your* problem.

It’s especially touchy when the message seems targeted at just those students with the greatest reasons to question their belonging—the lone woman in an engineering class, the Black student surrounded by white peers, the low-income student among wealthier classmates. These are the students who need sensitive support, not glib reassurance.

How can we provide this support? It takes wisdom, planning, and hard work. Here are three lessons, all drawn from research.

First, we should talk about how difficult school transitions are. As a graduate student, I interviewed 7th graders about their experience coming to middle school. They worried they would forget their locker combination, that they might get lost. For African American students, these worries were laced with a growing awareness of racial stereotypes. Would people treat them fairly?

What can we do? We can make it obvious that worries about belonging are normal, that they are felt by everyone, albeit in their own way, and that the worries can wane with time. The teachers of both my 6- and 9-year-olds read Julie Danneberg’s *First Day Jitters* to their classes early this year. It tells the story of how even a teacher is anxious on the first of school. (One wonderful teacher even shared her own feelings of nervousness!)

Research finds that talking about belonging as a process, as improving even if never quite complete, can ease transitions to middle school, high school, and college, raising achievement and reducing inequalities over years. One way to do this is to host well-structured conversations: how belonging worries are normal, why they come up, and how students and teachers can work together to make things better.

Second, we should support students’ diverse identities and recognize them as sources of motivation and success. The fact is many students we serve have identities that cast them in pejorative terms, that pose them as weak or dumb or violent and therefore as undeserving of educational opportunities. So, it’s important to honor and support positive representations of

students' groups and identities. Well-done ethnic-studies courses can raise attendance and grades in high school. Tiffany Brannon at the University of California, Los Angeles, emphasizes a "[pride and prejudice](#)" approach to belonging—support the pride students feel in their groups and reduce the prejudice they face.

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Third, we should be explicit that school is about learning and growth, not identifying who's smart. The latter "fixed-mindset" message, even if implicit, is terrifying for students who face the stereotype that people like them aren't as smart as others. The "You belong!" chorus my students heard was especially harmful because it was interspersed with praise for a select few—like the one student who had invented a new form of gene coding.

When we welcome students to school, we should focus on the future, not the past—on the amazing things students can do learning and working together. When we evaluate students' work, we should praise their progress. When we give critical feedback, we should be explicit about our growth-oriented goals—"I'm giving you this feedback because I have high standards and I know you can meet them." That's telling students *why* you give them feedback—not just "I think you can do it."

The [Student Experience Research Network](#) offers more ideas.

If a close friend shared a difficulty in your relationship with you, you wouldn't say, "Don't worry. We're great!" No, you'd talk with them. You'd listen. You'd try your best to understand how they feel, knowing that however they feel is legitimate. Together, you'd chart a path of growth and you'd do your part to follow that path. So it is with students who question their belonging in school.

It's not our job to tell students how they feel. It *is* our job to create ways of thinking, cultures, and personal relationships that make school a place of genuine belonging for every child.

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