The secret to every positive learning environment? Belonging.

When students feel that they belong in their school and classroom, commitment to learning goes up and behavioral disruptions subside. And when teachers embrace an SEL-infused approach to classroom management that helps every student feel valued, safe, and competent, belonging soars.

*We Belong* offers 50 targeted strategies to increase students’ sense of belonging and reinforce the habits that support classroom harmony and learning success. Authors and award-winning educators Laurie Barron and Patti Kinney explore the dynamic partnership of belonging and classroom management and share specific ways to

- Build authentic, positive relationships with students and among students
- Create spaces that feel physically and emotionally safe for all
- Teach and nurture social-emotional competence
- Boost student engagement and motivation
- Foster a sustaining sense of community

Covering a range of key topics—from behavioral expectations to conflict resolution to more effective collaboration—this practical guide for elementary and secondary teachers includes downloadable forms and templates to support strategy implementation. Use it to revisit your priorities and reshape your practices so that all students in your classroom can say of themselves and their peers, “We belong.”
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Throughout my many years as a middle-level teacher, I have come to understand that successful classroom management is rooted in building relationships with the students who walk through my door. Young adolescents are arguably the most difficult group of students to corral into some sort of organized chaos. For any teacher, fostering relationships and increasing belonging is critical but complex. What helps immensely when you’re faced with a formidable student determined to challenge your authority? An arsenal of thoughtful and practical strategies.

Over the years, I’ve encountered my share of memorable students. I’m thinking of H. T., who proudly entered my classroom not only swearing, “I don’t do math,” but also bragging, “It won’t matter anyway. I will be back in lockup soon.” I’m also thinking of D. T., the 14-year-old 6th grader whose reputation with local law enforcement preceded him. And then there’s B. G., who calls me every swear word (coupled with my name) that I’ve ever heard and even taught me a few new ones.

I would love to say these remarkable young people were unusual, but nothing with teaching is truly predictable or extraordinary. The middle and high school years are tumultuous for the easiest of pre-adolescents and adolescents, and they’re downright torture for some of the rest. But with the right tools, a teacher can find ways to make headway with every student. All of my experience has taught me that helping students fit in and feel connected is the key to their success and the success of a classroom.

The key for H. T.? I let him sit in front of the room, next to me. He loved being “in charge,” helping me, and having me nearby to help him. I discovered that he never ate lunch. So I kept cheese sticks, granola bars, and apple juice on hand for...
him to quietly grab when needed. This made a world of difference in his personality and behavior.

Reaching D. T. was harder, and I am sad to say that I never found the key to unlock his protective armor. How I wish that I’d had a resource like this book back then. I see in it a variety of new strategies I could have tried with him and many other students. Unfortunately, D. T. was unable to escape the school-to-prison pipeline, and 20 years later, I still feel responsible for not helping him find the sense of belonging that he needed—and that might have changed the trajectory of his life.

B. G. and I still have our ups and downs, but the two of us have found ways to help her cope with her struggles to fit in. The key for her? A network of peers who model appropriate classroom behaviors. This helped B. G. feel that she belonged. It also helped her manage her behaviors, which let other students view her as a contributing member of our classroom.

The point of these vignettes is that each child is different. Every one of them walks through your classroom door with a unique set of insecurities and baggage and their own “combination lock.” Deciphering that combination can be difficult. But if a teacher has a stock of strategies, the possibilities for unlocking good relationships and successful learning are endless. A book like *We Belong* can help you refine and organize practices you may have used in the past and teach you new strategies you can easily insert into any blank spots in tomorrow’s plans.

When I first met Patti Kinney through the National Middle School Association, we were both part of a listserv (yes, that is how old-school people did things) called “MiddleTalk.” Teachers posed questions about teaching adolescents and offered one another answers in long threads of discussion. Patti’s voice was one I followed and respected. Over the years, we have bumped into each other in many virtual settings, and I have been a fan of her writings and thoughts. Her book *Voices of Experience: Perspectives from Successful Middle Level Leaders* touched me with its honesty and insights into middle-level education. Patti introduced me to Laurie Barron, whose wisdom I have come to value. Her expertise informs the professional development opportunities she provides to teachers and school leaders everywhere. These two outstanding educators collaborated on *Middle
Foreword

School: A Place to Belong and Become, a book that has been the trusted guide for my classroom structure since it was published in 2018. The weaving of their individual experiences creates a readable, usable text. I’ve reached for it so often that the pages are already dog-eared and filled with notes.

I’ve repeatedly referred to middle school students because they have been the focus of my professional life. However, I’ve always felt that, if a strategy can work with this age group, it can work with any students! This book does a fantastic job of embracing a wide span of teachers and learners, offering ways to apply the suggested strategies to different grade levels and subject areas. For example, the section on Daily Agendas demonstrates three different ways to adapt the strategy. Any teacher would be able to use the examples in his or her own classroom with ease.

One of my favorite gems mined from this book is Strategy 42: “Help students make friends with failure.” Many of a teacher’s biggest behavior challenges are from students who feel “dumb”; because they believe that they are not ever going to be academically successful, they choose to act out instead of continuing to try. Strategy 42 outlines ways to find an inroad with those students, by getting them to understand that failure is a part of all of us and that it is a natural part of success and learning. I love the suggestions offered here to help students overcome their fears. Another favorite is Strategy 8: “Build belonging with relationship promises.” I love the list of promises and the suggestion to review it and repeat the promises to yourself monthly over the school year. I know that I need an occasional pick-me-up boost to remind myself of the importance of all those small things that help build and maintain good teacher–student relationships.

In today’s world, with limitless free information at our fingertips and countless “experts” begging us to try out their philosophies, selling a book is a tough task. Like many, I only want to spend my money on something that will be worthy of a hallowed spot on my small desktop bookshelf. We Belong is a book that will make it into that limited space. It’s a rich text, full of practical advice, encouragement, checklists, and strategies; I plan to fill it with sticky notes, margin comments, and highlights. I’ll reach for it again and again when I start a new school year and anytime I am feeling challenged by students in my class.

Writing a foreword feels a bit like writing an advertisement. But in reality, it is more of a book-club conversation between you and me. I want you to experience
the promise and excitement I felt when I finished this book. I know these insights and ideas can help rejuvenate your practices. I’m sure that this revitalization will help your students feel that they are part of a we—individually accepted members of a supported, valued community. Their sense of belonging, in turn, will help you with all the organizational, relational, and behavioral challenges of classroom management.

—Cossondra George

Veteran Middle School Teacher
Introduction:
Belonging and Classroom Management—A Dynamic Partnership

It begins before they enter the school building.

As soon as students board the bus or set foot on the school grounds, they start picking up signals about whether or not they fit in. These signals come from peers, teachers, other school staff members, or other students’ family members on the school grounds. Perceptions accumulate as students pass through the halls and other communal areas of the school (including bathrooms, locker rooms, the gym, the cafeteria) and into their classrooms. Impressions about the extent of their belongingness continue to pile up throughout the day, and these affect students’ comfort and enjoyment in school, as well as the ways in which they view themselves, one another, and their successes in and out of the classroom. Combined, these impressions influence students’ behavior and the ways they respond to their teachers and fellow classmates. This signal-gathering is repeated every school day.

From the moment their feet hit the school grounds to the moment they leave, students’ experiences of belonging (or not belonging) powerfully intertwine with the dynamics of their classrooms, affecting the overall school culture and each student’s learning experience. It’s time to acknowledge belonging as a major component of school life and a major consideration of classroom management.
What Belonging Is

Belonging is the perception one has of being accepted, valued, and included in a particular group or setting. To be socially connected is a fundamental human need—one that goes beyond just a need for social interaction. Every human needs to be part of a group in which connections are genuine, caring, and ongoing (DeWall, Deckman, Pond, & Bonser, 2011; Maslow, 1968; Osterman, 2000).

School belonging has been described as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). Schools offer multiple and unique social situations for young people to develop a sense of belonging—or, conversely, to have their sense of belonging thwarted. Thus, schools are critical settings for attending to the need to belong. Across grade levels, a sense of belonging in the school or classroom positively affects a variety of social, emotional, and academic variables. Its importance grows to particular intensity in the middle and high school grades (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

According to belonging theorists Baumeister and Leary (1995),

This is more than the need for social contact or for multiple acquaintances within the classroom or school. The need to belong is for ongoing, positive, comfortable bonds that are stable and that the student has reason to believe will continue. They don’t have to wonder every day if the good feeling they had yesterday will be dashed today. (p. 500)

Why Belonging in School Matters

Belonging may be a feeling, but it manifests in tangible ways. A growing body of research and theory related to school belonging (or school connectedness) concludes that belonging has a host of positive personal, social, and academic benefits (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2016; Juvonen, 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). A sense of belonging generally leads to increases in the following:

- Positive, prosocial classroom behavior
- Attendance rates
• Self-esteem
• Self-confidence
• Self-belief
• Optimism
• Positive peer relationships
• Classroom engagement
• Focus on academic tasks
• Academic achievement
• School satisfaction
• Positive attitudes toward school and learning
• Skills of self-management
• Resilience to deal with crises
• Buffer against effects of a negative home environment

Belonging is such a basic need that the lack of it can lead to “dire consequences” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and, consequently, difficult classroom management situations. Students who feel confused, isolated, rejected, demeaned, ignored, or excluded are at high risk for a variety of social, emotional, and academic difficulties (Anderman, 2002; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Leets & Wolf, 2005; Loukas et al., 2010; Osterman, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

When students do not feel a sense of belonging at school (or are not sure that they belong), they can experience the following:

• Anxiety
• Emotional distress
• Anger and frustration
• Erosion of self-worth
• Lack of self-confidence
• Loneliness
• Helplessness
• Powerlessness
• Incidence of risky behaviors
• Incidence of antisocial connections
• Behavior or conduct problems
• Behavioral and psychological stress
• Distraction from learning tasks
• Disconnection from the group and group activities
• Difficulties with self-management
• Declines in academic performance
• Alienation from learning activities
• Inability to resist undesirable impulses
• Inability to follow protocols
• Susceptibility to self-defeating behavior
• Social avoidance behaviors

How to Increase Belongingness

Here’s the good news: educators can help students gain and enjoy a sense of belonging in classrooms and schools. There is concrete evidence that intentional practices and plans to increase belonging do make a difference—not only boosting the sense of membership in the group but also promoting the other benefits of belonging we’ve described and leading to a more harmonious and positive classroom environment (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Blum & Libbey, 2004; U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009).

So how do we do this? What factors must we consider and what actions must we take to shape our classrooms into places that generate a sense of comfortable membership for all students? The work begins with familiarizing ourselves with the critical school and classroom conditions that contribute to a sense of belonging (Juvonen, 2006; Libbey, 2004, 2007; Resnick et al., 1997; U.S. CDC, 2009; Wingspread, 2004):

• **A safe environment that communicates an authentic sense of caring, trust, and inclusion among all members.** Here, students see evidence that others care about them personally and receive respectful treatment from adults and peers. They are free from experiences of being demeaned, embarrassed, or excluded.

• **Clearly communicated, consistently observed, and equitably enforced behavioral and academic expectations.** Students receive help
in developing skills of self-regulation and management, emotional control, and coping, as well as assistance identifying their own inner resources. They are taught both the social skills needed for satisfying school connections and schoolwork and the academic skills needed to navigate school successfully. They learn to set, manage, and accomplish goals.

- **Access to autonomous experiences and successful engagement in relevant, personalized learning endeavors.** Students are able to take part in planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own schoolwork, and they are offered choices and given opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, and feedback. They also learn to work with others to complete tasks, create things, make decisions, solve problems, and manage crises.

Many of these factors encompass the social-emotional learning “core competencies” of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (see CASEL, 2020a). By working with students to build these skills, teachers can advance a host of social-emotional practices that contribute to a more positive classroom environment.

**Classroom Management—and the Difference It Makes**

*Classroom management* can be defined as the strategies and attitudes through which a teacher organizes and operates the classroom environment in order to provide the best possible setting for academic and social-emotional learning. The term describes the whole of how the class functions, the relationships and interactions within the classroom, how everyone works together, and how students learn. Classroom management is a top concern for many teachers, and there's no wonder why: it's a thread that runs through everything that happens once the bell rings and knits it all into a unified whole. The classroom climate teachers create is the vessel that holds the seeds of belonging and provides the space and inputs belonging needs to flourish.

Classroom management and belonging are a dynamic duo. They go hand in hand, nurturing and fueling each other. It's a relationship that's lively, full of adjustment and progress. And it's genuinely difficult to for one to thrive without the other.
On the one hand, the elements of classroom management directly affect the sense of belonging (or not belonging) for every individual in the group. These elements include such factors and practices as

- Classroom setting, schedule, organization, and protocols
- Expectations for the ways people treat one another
- Teaching and practicing appropriate behavior
- Development of student self-regulation
- Communication and relationships within the classroom
- Appropriateness and implementation of consequences; responses to problems and issues
- Ways students participate in and contribute to classroom life
- Learning plans and instructional practices

On the other hand, and simultaneously, the extent to which students feel they belong (or doubt they belong) influences these same elements of classroom management. When students learn and practice skills of belonging (and of helping others to belong), many aspects of classroom management work more smoothly. For example:

- Students who see themselves as fully equal and accepted members of the group have less need to be defiant or disruptive.
- The more students get signals that they belong, the less energy they will expend trying to belong or suffering anxiety about not belonging.
- The more students belong, the more their energies are freed to focus on learning tasks.
- The more often students have the communal experience of working together harmoniously for a shared goal—and accomplishing that goal together—the more likely they are to get along with one another.
- The more they feel respected and valued as students, the more their talents shine.
- The more students feel included, the less self-doubt impedes their productivity.
- In the presence of teachers and peers who believe every student can meet expectations, they have more self-belief and confidence as students—and they work harder and care more about academic skills.
• The more students participate in something they care about, the more positive and cooperative their behavior becomes in general.
• The more students feel trusted, the more likely they are to be agreeable and cooperative.

As part of its efforts to address health risks and behaviors, the CDC (U.S. CDC, 2009) identified school connectedness as a promising factor in protecting against factors that can adversely affect health, behavior, and education outcomes for children and adolescents. One of the CDC’s six key strategies to increase school connectedness is “effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment” (2009, p. 9). Other studies support the claim that effective, positive classroom management is critical in any efforts to increase belonging and form a positive classroom group (Allen & Bowles, 2012; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2010; Wingspread, 2004).

So what are the “effective classroom management and teaching methods” that foster a positive learning environment? What does such management look like in practice? It may be a picture that differs from what you think of when you hear the words “classroom management.” Think beyond protocols and procedures that make operations run smoothly or ensure that the teacher has control and that students follow the codes of conduct. Think of a far broader definition of management—a mix of organization and consistency with the best of social-emotional learning practices (see Battistich & Horn, 1997; Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; McNeely et al., 2002; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; U.S. CDC, 2009). It includes the following:

• The prioritization of emotional, social, and physical safety
• Consistent protocols and routines
• Clear guidelines
• Good organization and planning
• An emphasis on positive, respectful, and supportive relationships
• Demonstration (by adults) of trust and belief in students
• The practice of mutual respect
• Student-centered and democratic procedures and learning experiences
• A discipline climate that is not harsh or punitive
• Fair, consistent consequences
• Consistent attitudes toward and treatment of all students
• Trustworthy teachers
• A high value on learning
• Effective, relevant, and engaging instructional practices
• A hearty dose of fun and laughter

If a classroom lacks the attributes of safe, effective, organized, caring, democratic management, students’ individual sense of belonging will be thwarted or seriously harmed. If students feel unequal or unworthy, if classroom life is chaotic and unpredictable, if learning activities are poorly planned and protocols unclear, if expectations or consequences are inconsistent, if students feel little involvement in or responsibility for their own learning—it will be hard for students to feel they belong.

When students feel they belong, they participate more and behave better. When students are free to grow as persons—to learn, to find their strengths, and to invest in positive relationships and academic interests—things just run more smoothly in the classroom. When your classroom workings are intentionally well organized and well planned, and your classroom culture is caring, civil, and uplifting, everyone feels and gives value to everyone else. Cooperation is practiced and respected, and students’ sense of belonging thrives. The partnership of effective, positive classroom management and a focus on the skills of belonging result in social, emotional, and academic learning at their best.

How to Combine Belonging and Classroom Management in Practice

Good, positive management will always be beneficial, but on its own it’s not enough to make the kind of headway on belonging that students need for an optimal school experience. To do that, teachers and schools must take the following deliberate actions:

1. Use classroom management practices that establish a comfortable, inviting, respectful setting where everyone is seen as equal and valued.
2. Integrate intentional instructional strategies across content areas to foster the emotional, social, and academic skills that promote belonging.
3. Ensure that all students have multiple, varied chances to participate in classroom and school events and activities, express their own voices, and make choices in their learning activities.
4. Adhere to high standards for academics and behavior, with caring and appropriate support to help every student succeed and reach the standards. This expectation increases academic belonging by helping students to see themselves and peers as having equal and powerful abilities to learn and grow as students.

5. Work with colleagues and students’ families to foster a school environment that embodies an authentic sense of caring and trust among the school community.

6. Consistently model beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that promote belonging, equity, and competence for all students.

What’s in This Book and How to Use It

Each chapter offers strategies, advice, dos and don’ts, and specific activities to help you create a well-managed classroom that increases student belonging. Each of the 50 strategies is grounded in two things: the conditions that advance belonging and secure, consistent management that supports optimal learning for all students.

In Chapter 1, we offer some advice and practices to get yourself and your classroom ready for a successful school year. Some strategies in this chapter are intended to deepen your understanding of belonging and help you reflect on how your attitudes, practices, and beliefs affect belonging and classroom management. Other strategies guide you to make plans that will set all your students on the path to belonging in the early days and weeks of school.

Chapters 2 through 7 focus on the fundamental aspects of classroom culture and learning, detailing strategies that will help you teach, practice, and expand the skills of relationship building; create a safe, enriching, and consistent environment; foster critical social and emotional skills; create academic learning experiences that will increase all students’ mastery and competence; and help students work, grow, and learn more successfully in groups.

All the strategies in this book are designed to promote optimal classroom management and belongingness. Choose the strategies from each chapter that fit your classroom, your needs, and the needs of your students. Also bear in mind that all these categories of strategies need consistent attention throughout the
year; none are as just for the beginning of the school year. Many of the strategies can be repeated—with new content or other adaptations—several times throughout the year.

_We Belong_ is designed primarily for teachers and students in upper elementary, middle, and high school, but most of the concepts and practices are readily adaptable to lower grade levels. It is intended for teachers at all levels of experience. The strategies we describe can be useful in preservice experiences, help a new teacher get off to a great start with effective belonging-centered management, and prompt seasoned teachers to rethink and fine-tune their management to enhance belonging. Some strategies do ask you to draw upon previous teaching experience. If you’ve had none, save those for later, when you have a few weeks under your belt, or ask for input from colleagues.

Further, the strategies in this book (and the philosophy behind them) work in a variety of educational settings, including homeschooling environments, counseling sessions, athletic team training, student councils and other clubs, and even the principal’s office. They are also useful for teacher training, team collaboration, grade-level or department improvement efforts, or professional development plans. Whatever your status as an educator, we hope you’ll choose the strategies that speak to your needs, in the order that best helps you and most benefits your students.

This icon indicates a downloadable tool. You are invited to download a free PDF of the book's collection of 18 tools (reflection activities, surveys, templates, and so on; see page viii) at [http://www.ascd.org/we-belong-122002](http://www.ascd.org/we-belong-122002).

**How to Fit This Work into Everything Else You’re Doing**

The approach to classroom management we advocate is about adjusting what you already think, believe, plan, and say, in ways that increase your students’ sense of belonging and improve the climate for learning. Any effort and time you invest in increasing connection for students will have a profound effect on their overall social, emotional, and academic well-being and on how your classroom feels and functions. Time spent on belonging skills will drastically cut the time you spend on behavior management and pay off in the increased academic engagement of your students.
Throughout our many years of working with students of all grade levels (between the two of us, we have taught kindergartners through seniors), one theme has surfaced repeatedly: students have a profound need and desire to find places where they feel they belong and where they can discover who they are and who they want to become. This realization culminated in our writing of *Middle School: A Place to Belong and Become* (Barron & Kinney, 2018), but our passion for the importance of belonging did not end with that book’s publication. Our research revealed striking connections between classroom management styles and the levels of belonging (or not belonging) students experience, and we were compelled to explore this connection further.

This book gives voice to that research and to what the two of us have seen and experienced in our own practice: that all students need a profusion of concrete belonging-focused experiences and skills. And they need them in the context of an inviting, comfortable, and well-managed environment where everyone is treated as equal, capable, and valuable.

When you try belonging-centered classroom management, you’ll reap benefits well worth the time you spend with these strategies. You’ll give your students the gift of increased social-emotional competence and the gift of a highly functional and positive learning environment—one in which they know with absolute certainty that every student is wanted and valued here. Every student can succeed here, within this community. And every student shares the same powerful conviction: *We belong.*
1

Belonging Thrives When Teachers Believe and Prepare

When I don’t belong, I feel invisible and completely alone.

a 10th grader

This chapter includes information, self-reflection prompts, and active strategies to help you get ready to develop a climate and classroom management plan where belonging can thrive. We also include some tips for designing a first-day plan to kick off your belonging practices the right way.

Ahh! The days of vacation break—those long weeks of summer or between school terms. You try to forget about the planning, the students’ needs, the bureaucracy, the schedules, and the issues. Most teachers look forward to these times, even when the break is filled with the bustle (and sometimes pressures) of family activities, travel, graduate studies, professional development, or short-term jobs. But not too far into the “break,” most teachers start thinking about the coming year, which includes thinking about classroom management and relationships with students. One teacher we know ends the year by making a list of “Things I Vow to Do Differently Next Year.” On and off all summer, she gathers ideas for ways to start the year on a better foot, management-wise, and keep it consistent throughout the year.

An Education Week survey about the sense of belonging at school (Blad, 2017) collected responses from 528 educators. Over 80 percent of the respondents reported the personal belief that it is important for students to feel they
belong in the classroom—and over 40 percent of respondents said it was very challenging for them to find strategies to help students fit in. Our own experience as educators and our contacts with educators throughout the country has led us to a similar conclusion: Teachers believe that belonging is important for student academic success and overall well-being, yet they’re not always sure how to help this happen.

Belief in the importance of belonging, alone, is not enough. If your classroom is to have successful belonging-centered management at its core, you must be prepared before students show up—with strategies that will work to promote both belonging and good classroom management. This begins with your understanding of belonging and how it is nourished (or impaired)—which in turn requires exploring the elements of management that are affected by students’ levels of belongingness.

**Strategy 1: Reflect on Belonging**

The first step in engaging with the topic of belonging and its connection to classroom management is this: Consider what belonging means to you. Your perspective on belonging is influenced by your own experiences and from situations you’ve witnessed (or heard about secondhand) that involved others—such as your own children, your students, or your colleagues. Your history with belonging helps form your attitudes about it and guides the approaches you are compelled to use in addressing it for your students.

Here are some prompts to get you started:

1. Describe or define belonging as you understand it, based on your own experiences.
2. List a few places or situations where you feel or have felt a sense of belonging.
3. How can you “tell” you belong in those places or situations? Dig into those feelings of belongingness and describe them.
4. List a few places or situations in which you feel or have felt a lack of belonging.
5. Think back to your student days. What factors contributed to your sense of belonging (or not belonging) at school or in a classroom?
6. List some signs you look for or have seen that suggest students in your classroom don’t feel a sense of belonging.
7. Describe what and how you feel when you see a student (or perhaps a child of your own) struggle with belonging.
8. Describe your past experiences—successes and failures—with helping students feel they belong.
9. Describe the ways in which your own background, culture, and life experiences are similar to those of your students.
10. Describe the ways in which your own background, culture, and life experiences are different from those of your students.

As the icon at the list’s start indicates, this reflection activity is included in the downloadable toolset at http://www.ascd.org/we-belong-122002. As or after you respond to these prompts, think about the implications your answers might have for your teaching and classroom management. You might also complete and discuss this activity with colleagues in a grade level, team, department, or staff meeting.

**Strategy 2: Boost Your Belonging IQ**

Are you ready to deepen your belonging understandings and insights? Here are some questions to guide you through a reflective second reading of this book’s Introduction. You may flip (or click) back through the text, highlighting and making notes on the page, or you can download a copy of these questions as a worksheet.

1. Review the opening text of the Introduction—the three paragraphs beginning on page 1. Highlight (or record) the words, phrases, or ideas that stand out to you. Make notes about why these grabbed you.
2. Highlight the definitions of belonging and school belonging in the “What Belonging Is” section, beginning on page 2. Read them aloud. Then, in this same section, highlight the final two sentences of the Baumeister and Leary quote. Read these sentences out loud. What stands out to you? What experiences from your own practice do they call to mind?
3. Review the list of the research-verified benefits of belonging in the section “Why Belonging in School Matters,” beginning on page 3. Highlight
any benefits you have personally witnessed. What other characteristics or benefits of belonging you have seen?

4. On pages 3–4, review the bulleted list of what students can experience when they do not feel a sense of belonging in school. Highlight consequences you have personally witnessed. What other consequences of “not belonging” have you seen?

5. In the “How to Increase Belongingness” section (beginning on p. 4), put a checkmark by factors you already attend to. Circle or highlight factors that challenge you, that you haven’t thought much about, that you would like to learn more about, or that you would like to increase your abilities to provide.

6. Review the section titled “Classroom Management—and the Difference It Makes” (beginning on page 5). Carefully reread the final two paragraphs. In your own words, briefly summarize the partnership between classroom management and belonging.

7. In that same section, highlight concepts or messages about classroom management that excite you. Which do you find most compelling?

8. In the section, “How to Combine Belonging and Management in Practice” (beginning on p. 8), highlight the topic sentence or key idea in the opening paragraph.

9. In that same section, reread each of the six actions for increasing belonging. Pause after each one and ask yourself, “Can I commit to doing this consistently and better than I have already been doing?” Jot down one idea or goal for action next to each of the six actions.

10. What one sentence, phrase, or idea from the Introduction was the most powerful or memorable to you? Write it down. Continue to refer to it as you make your way through the book.

**Strategy 3: Celebrate Successful Belonging Practices**

Most likely, many techniques and activities that you currently use do help students feel they belong. You just might not have been aware that these were belonging-promoting practices.

For example, when Patti was a teacher, she often started the day with five to seven minutes of no-pressure sharing time. She might relate something that happened to her the night before or ask the students a question such as “What’s happened in your life since I saw you yesterday?” It definitely added a family feeling
to the classroom, and she found it especially heartwarming when a fairly shy student would volunteer a story.

Figure 1.1’s brainstorming guide can prompt you to review what you’re doing now and consider the scope of your practice and categories your actions might fall into. What are some of your current practices that further belonging in your classroom? List them by category or download a copy of the brainstorming guide and record them in the space provided. Celebrate your belonging practices and find ways to strengthen and expand them.

**FIGURE 1.1**

**Brainstorming Guide: What You Already Do to Help Students Belong**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors you model</th>
<th>Ways you relate to students</th>
<th>Expectations you communicate to students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities that intentionally teach emotional skills</td>
<td>Activities that intentionally teach social skills</td>
<td>Activities that boost students’ confidence in themselves as learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities that help students see one another’s strengths and value</td>
<td>Activities that give students opportunity to express their opinions</td>
<td>Activities that give students opportunity to make choices about their own learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategy 4: Examine Management Practices That Affect Belonging

A major premise of this book is the way a teacher manages a classroom strongly affects whether or not students feel that they belong. Management protocols or procedures, even those that seem minor, can either bolster or sabotage progress toward belongingness.

So now that you’re thinking about belonging, it’s a good time to do a checkup on your own classroom management practices and set some goals for increasing belongingness. Use the procedure mapped out in Figure 1.2.

FIGURE 1.2
Reflection: Does Your Classroom Management Enhance Belonging?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part I. Examine your classroom management in light of the need for students to belong.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. List 8 of your management practices or strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Think about classroom setting, schedule, organization, classroom protocols and procedures, relationships with students, expectations and consequences, problem resolution, your responses to misbehavior, style of instruction, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Go back and thoughtfully examine each one you listed with a focus on belonging. Ask, “Does this help students belong?” Write YES! or Keep! or write NO! or Improve! (for cases where your approach could impede belonging or set it back). Remember: All students are different, and just because something makes one student feel as if he belongs, it may not make someone else feel as if she belongs. For example, recognizing a student accomplishment may make one student feel proud and another student feel embarrassed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part II. Identify areas for improvement. Start planning new or changed practices and record this information in the chart space provided or in a similar format.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Identify four items from your list that have a NO! label. For each one, set a goal to work toward right away. Name the category for the goal (relationships, consequences, communication, protocols, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Write each goal in specific terms of what you will do that is a new or changed practice. It should be a goal that can be measured. (Ask yourself, “How will I know when this goal has been met?”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Set a date for checking up on yourself. Once school is in session, mark goals you are meeting. For others, make a plan of next steps, practices, or adjustments for making better progress. Consider doing this strategy in collaboration with a colleague.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Checkup Date</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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</table>
Strategy 5: Include Families in School Belonging

When students see that their family and community are welcomed, comfortable, and involved in the school and classroom, their own sense of belonging takes a leap. When you are welcoming to students’ families and invite their input, you build a relationship that will serve as a major support for your students’ well-being and school success and a foundation for positive and effective classroom management.

The first step in forging family and community connections is to open the lines of communication. Think about how and when you will communicate with families, how and when they can contact you, and how to help them be comfortable with these communications. A one-size-fits-all communication plan probably won’t cut it—especially if your student body is culturally and socioeconomically diverse. Email may work for some, phone calls for others, and face-to-face may be your best option with a few. Establish which communication methods each family prefers, the best times to reach them, and any translation that might be needed so you can begin effective communication right away. Here are some approaches we recommend.

Letter Exchange—From Teacher to Family

Start the process of family and community belonging before school begins or within the first few days of school. Write a letter that you mail or email to the family of every student—yes, even if you teach middle and high schoolers. In your personalized letter,

- Identify yourself. “Hello! I’m <<your name>>, soon to be <<student’s name>>’s <<grade level or subject>> teacher.”
- Welcome the student and the family to the school and express how pleased you are to have that student in your class.
- Share your passion for the work you do. Offer a taste of what will happen in the first few weeks (something the students will study, or learn, or be able to do) and some of your goals for the year.
- Invite the family to contact you with any questions or comments; ask them to let you know the best time and way for you to contact them. Provide a variety of ways for them to contact you, including (at your discretion) by email, text, phone, and sending in or dropping off a note at the school.
Keep your letter upbeat and warm, with an obvious spirit of inclusion. Your letter should be error-free (have a friend or colleague proofread it for you); written in clear, easy-to-understand language; and translated into the family’s language, if needed (a guidance counselor or teachers a student has had before can be helpful in sharing language requirements guidance if you are writing before the school year starts). It can be beneficial to draft your letter and then put it aside for a day before rereading it. As you write and as you read, ask yourself, “Will this set the belonging tone for this student’s family and community?”

Letter Exchange—Home to Teacher

In your letter to parents or guardians (or via a follow-up email or text), give them an “assignment”: to write you a letter telling you about their child. Suggest something along the lines of “Tell me about your child in a million words or less.”

When Laurie’s daughter Emma was a junior in high school, she brought home “parent homework” from her precalculus teacher on the first day of school. Laurie was asked to share things about Emma, such as problems she may experience; her strengths and weaknesses; past school experiences; and Laurie’s expectations of the class, the teacher, and her daughter. Laurie found that she spent way more time than she initially thought she would on this “homework.” She enjoyed sharing about Emma and found herself really pleased that the teacher had given her this opportunity. There were no “points” given to Emma for Laurie’s completion or lack thereof, which made it feel like a safe assignment. The teacher also followed up with Laurie individually and addressed many of the things Laurie had shared, which made Laurie feel instantly more connected and more open to communicating with the teacher (something we sometimes lose as our children get older).

If you have a large number of students, “a million words or less” about each one might seem daunting. If so, you might ask parents for a short note, an email, or a single text to tell you something they’d like you to know about their child’s strengths, interests, or needs. Tailor the assignment to your particular class and age group. Encourage families who speak a language other than English to write you in the language they’re most comfortable using. Any challenge of translating these communications will be well worth the message that your classroom—their classroom, too—is a place where all students (and their families) are accepted and belong. A gentle reminder: Be careful not to unintentionally embarrass or single out students whose family does not participate in a home-to-teacher letter exchange.
Strategy 6: Cultivate Belonging from Day 1

We remember a time when beginning teachers were cautioned, “Don’t smile until Christmas.” The underlying message—to be strict and never too friendly—was seemingly based on the old adage “If you give kids an inch, they’ll take a mile.” Implied here was that once your students were trained to conform to expectations, just maybe, by the holiday break, you could loosen up enough to be your smiling and occasionally joke-cracking human self around them.

Neither one of us took well to this advice. From the beginning, it felt more natural to let all of our students know that our classrooms—their classrooms—were places where students could feel safe, respected, and cared for. To be clear: friendly doesn’t mean lax, and collaboration doesn’t mean chaos. Our classrooms were structured without being confining, organized without being rigid; we set high expectations without using fear as a motivator.

The first day of school is your first step on the road to a classroom where students can feel they belong. It’s your first chance to express to students what your class will be like—what will happen, what they can expect, what’s valued, how they’ll be treated, what you believe and feel about students, and what relationships in the classroom might be like. All of these messages—when positive, hopeful, and respectful—can contribute to smoother classroom management and a space where belonging thrives.

Here’s a goal for Day 1: no matter what grade level or how many classes you teach, every student will leave your classroom feeling and least starting to believe the following:

- I’m going to be safe here.
- We’re going to be serious about learning, treating one another well, and getting along. Everyone here matters equally.
- Learning is going to be active and creative. We’re going to work together as well as on our own.
- I can be academically successful here.
- We’re going to be heard. My ideas, interests, and experiences matter.
- I’m going to belong here.
- I want to come back.
Day 1 Checklist

How does one achieve this lofty goal? By making sure the first day or first class includes events that concretely demonstrate the truth or possibility of each of these statements.

The checklist in Figure 1.3 includes specific, observable actions and experiences—involving aspects of climate, relationships, and engagement—that will nurture belonging and spark students’ overall interest in meaningful participation. You can provide the experiences chosen from the checklist through a variety of activities, lessons, or minilessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE 1.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1 Checklist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My Day 1 Goals

- Greet each student at the door.
- Show that I know their names or am making an effort to do so.
- Demonstrate that I value everyone and that I’m glad each one of them is in my classroom.
- Show that I am excited about my job.
- Share something about myself.
- Learn something about each student—and help them learn things about one another.
- Establish one routine.
- Have students solve a problem in pairs or small groups.
- Have students create or produce a piece of artwork together.
- Have students do something academic that is active, relevant, and meaningful—and in which they can experience success.
- Provide student choice in some aspect of learning.
- Express and share the understanding that school, and our classroom, is a safe place.
- Ensure my students have a memorable ending to the class or day.

Day 1 Plan

The template in Figure 1.4 can help you rough out a plan for a first day of school that emphasizes a spirit of enthusiasm, learning, and belonging. You might address some or all of your chosen outcomes from the checklist within a single lesson or activity or pursue them in one main activity plus some other brief
Strategy 7: Take Care of Yourself

Teaching is a demanding, high-expectation profession. If you’re like most teachers we know, you tend to think about your students first: ways to connect with them, plan lessons they will find engaging and effective, and meet their needs no matter what those needs are. You’ve also probably experienced the downside of this commitment—the kind of tiredness and burnout that can lead you to be less patient, speak more sharply than you mean to, or just feel somewhat out of control. In the midst of taking on so much and trying to do it all well, teachers often do an insufficient job of attending to their own needs. Raise your hand if you don’t always eat right, exercise enough, get sufficient sleep, spend quality time with families and friends, or do all the things you really enjoy, which help you relax, refresh, and reenergize.

Make clear, deliberate choices that contribute to your own emotional and physical health—so that you can both be at your best and model attention to
well-being for your students. Before you get into your first few whirlwind weeks of school, take a pause (and a deep breath) to sketch out some plans for self-care. Schedule the positive practices or habits you’ll attend to during the school day and outside school.

Here are some ideas we’ve collected from colleagues and used ourselves.

**During the school day . . .**

- Don’t forget to breathe! Sometimes all it takes is to stop what you’re doing or saying, pause, and take a nice, deep breath and slowly release it (a good technique to teach your students, too).
- Eat some protein—nuts, cheese, or a granola bar.
- Drink a glass of water.
- Squeeze a stress ball.
- Read a thank-you note. (It’s good to keep a file of positive notes to pull out in times of need.)
- Read a positive quote. (Again, keep a folder of quotes that you like.)
- Get a little exercise! Walk quickly up and down the hall. Hop from side to side for 60 seconds. Treat your room like an obstacle course and walk around it 10 times.
- If you have a short break, go outside for a few minutes. Yes, you can walk, but fresh air and sunshine have independent benefits.
- Reach out to students’ parents with a call or email or send a postcard with some positive news. (This can really work wonders on a difficult day.)
- Listen to some favorite music between classes. Sing along!
- Close your eyes for a few minutes. (Set an alarm in case you fall asleep!)

**Outside school . . .**

- **Move.** Run, walk, ski, dance, bike, hike, paddle, golf, do yoga, lift weights, do CrossFit—do whatever you enjoy that gets you moving. Do it with your family and friends, adding the benefit of healthy, quality time with those you love.
- **Relax.** Read a fun book, schedule in “do-nothing” time, watch a favorite TV show, take a hot bath or long shower, chat with a best friend, go for a scenic drive, go to bed earlier than usual, listen to music, get a massage, spend time alone, meditate.
• **Pursue a hobby.** Read, play an instrument, bake, cook, sew, knit, build, craft, garden, paint, upcycle, take photos, join a podcast or a book club.

• **Volunteer.** Offer your services at an animal shelter, a soup kitchen or food pantry, a national park or local hospital, a library or museum, or the American Red Cross. Visit a nursing home and talk to or play music for residents. Sign on to a Habitat for Humanity project.

We love sharing this quote by author L. R. Knost: “Taking care of yourself doesn’t mean me first, it means me too” (2017). Build into your schedule some things that make you feel good, refresh your spirit, and keep you going. Yes, it will take some time, but don’t feel guilty about taking that time. Your mental health depends on it. Your students will thank you, your family will thank you, and your body will thank you, as well.
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We belong

We belong

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Laurie is a National Board–certified teacher and has been honored as a Teacher of the Year and STAR Teacher. She was 2012 Georgia Principal of the Year and 2013 MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year. As a superintendent, Laurie has been recognized as 2020 Northwest Montana Regional Superintendent of the Year and 2019 Empowered Superintendent of the Year (Montana Educational Technologists Association). She received the 2018 G. V. Erickson Award, which is given to a member of the School Administrators of Montana who has made the greatest contribution to the betterment of education in the state. She is co-author of the books *What Parents Need to Know About Common Core and Other College- and Career-Ready Standards* and *Middle School: A Place to Belong and Become* and has authored numerous articles on education. She is also a speaker who provides motivation and professional learning to teachers and administrators throughout the United States.

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Patti Kinney speaks, presents, and consults on middle-level education issues at the national and international levels. She began her career as an elementary music specialist and has taught 5th and 6th grades in an elementary school and 6th and 7th grades in a middle school setting. She has been involved in district staff development work and has taught a variety of instructional and management skills classes for adults. During a one-year sabbatical, she also taught in the education department of Southern Oregon University. As an assistant principal and later principal of Talent Middle School, Patti was involved in the process of transforming a grades 7–8 junior high school into a grades 6–8 middle school. In 2000, the school was recognized as one of “100 highly successful middle schools” in a national research study sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

Patti is a past president of the Association for Middle Level Education and of the Oregon Middle Level Association. In 1996, she was Oregon Assistant Principal of the Year; in 2003, she was both Oregon Principal of the Year and the MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year. From 2007 to 2014, she lived in Reston, Virginia, and served as Associate Director of Middle Level Services for the NASSP. She is the author of Fostering Student Accountability Through Student-Led Conferences and co-author of Voices of Experience: Perspectives from Successful Middle Level Leaders; The What, Why, and How of Student-Led Conferences; What Parents Need to Know About Common Core and Other College- and Career-Ready Standards; and Middle School: A Place to Belong and Become. She has also published numerous education articles, including regular pieces in NASSP’s Principal Leadership.

Patti recently married Dan Bolton (whom she has known since 1st grade) and relocated from southern Oregon to Cottage Grove, Oregon, where she grew up. Patti may be reached at kinneypatti@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter: @pckinney.
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