Students who feel connected to their school community often have better performance and motivation than those who are disconnected. Successful enrollment professionals know that cultivating this sense of belonging is tantamount to building trust and loyalty. They carefully craft mission statements to convey the importance of belonging and what it means from the school’s perspective. But what about the students’ perspectives? What does belonging mean to them and how can schools help them feel included?

To find out, we went directly to the source and asked students in kindergarten through 12th grade for their thoughts. Here’s what they had to say...
Belonging means something that belongs to me. My school can help me by letting me have playdates with students that look like me.”
-Alyssa, Grade 1 (Public School)

Belonging means treating others the way you want to be treated. Belonging feels calming and fair to you and to others. My school helps me feel included by having us follow the Golden Rule. My friends and my teachers also make me feel included at school because they are kind, and they help me when I need help.”
-Catarina, Grade 3 (Independent School)

Belonging...I think belonging means knowing a place and the people in it inside out, and yet at every turn, there is still something to discover. There’s something that you keep coming back to, again and again, and you’ll never be bored. In terms of inclusion, it’s not really an issue with the school, per se, it’s my personality. I’m very introverted and I’m pretty set on only creating friendships that I think will last forever, or at least won’t fall apart right away.”
-Tessa, Grade 8 (Independent School)

Belonging means friendship—meeting different people and learning about our differences together. My school helps me feel included by separating me into groups with people I don’t know or don’t know very well.”
-Evan, Grade 5 (Independent School)

Belonging means to be wanted and accepted. My school can help me feel included by teaching me more about other people and cultures in history and not from the white perspective.”
-Tyler, Grade 9 (Public School)

Belonging at my school means having great friends and loving all my teachers. The community members here help me learn and grow by teaching me, helping me when I need help, and cleaning up the community so we can have a clean and healthy school. Being here at school makes me feel safe and happy!”
-Miranda, Grade 3 (Independent School)

“Belonging means that I’m supported and respected by my teachers, as well as my classmates.”  -Carey, Grade 9 (Public School)
To me, belonging means to be excited to be part of your school community and your desire to give back to that community. My school can help me to feel included by building a respectful student body where everyone feels comfortable and confident.”

-Liam, Grade 9 (Independent School)

To me, belonging means feeling a sense of inclusiveness where you are welcomed by others and can show your true identity without the fear of judgement. My school can help me feel included by being open to difficult and new conversations. As well as celebrating different cultures and ethnic groups.”

-Faith, Grade 11 (Independent School)

I knew I belonged at my school when Ms. Rao said hi to me in the hallway by name when I was a freshman.”

-Olivia, Grade 11 (Independent School)

Belonging is when teachers take the time to really get to know their students. Students will trust their teachers and will feel comfortable asking for help.”

-Hagan, Grade 7 (Public School)

My house parent has been there for me in many ways, small ways like making a cup of tea when I need it but also big ways like living far away from home helping me acclimate.”

-Natasha, Grade 12 (Independent School)

When I first started questioning my gender identity, I was just getting ready to enter high school, where I felt like I would be able to start with a clean slate. While nothing’s ever perfect, being in an accepting environment with such a diverse group of people made me feel like I found my place with the community. To other LGBTQ+ students who feel lost in school environments, please remember that even if you’re not sure of where your place is at school or in the world yet, you still and always will belong.”

-Kamden, Grade 10 (Independent School)

I have always struggled with trying to belong. I’ve always been very different from my peers. Even at a young age, I never felt like I had a group I could belong to. I’ve learned that self-acceptance and staying true to yourself helps you to know where you belong, for only those with whom you truly belong will accept you for who you are. Until you accept yourself, you will allow others to change you to fit into their molds, which will leave you with a false sense of belonging because you know deep down this is not who you are. Those who accept themselves and stay true to themselves know where they belong because they know who they are. Once I learned this I was able to make friends with people who like being around me and accept me.”

-Jack, Grade 12 (Independent School)
Ask 100 students to define “belonging,” and you’ll likely hear 100 different responses. Where they find their sense of belonging is as unique as they are: in a class, with a church, at home, in a group chat, in an online community, while hanging out playing video games with their closest friends, and more.

So, how can you ensure that your students truly feel that they belong at your school? Our team at The Social Institute spoke with school leaders and students across the country and discovered that the answer lies in supporting students’ social and emotional learning, with a focus on resilience, emotional well-being, community routines, and rituals.

Questions to Consider:

- What tweaks can you make to your schedule, advisory conversations, and meetings that could further the student experience and lessen the anxiety and stress that students are facing?

- How can you create space for students to have open conversations or provide open, confidential conversations where students can reflect on their feelings, especially in the new environment brought about by the impact of COVID-19?

- What can you do to support students from both an academic and social-emotional standpoint, including opportunities for formal and informal engagement?

- What traditions both old and new — virtual or in-person — can build community and support healthy, high-achieving students?

We use these insights to help fuel our gamified SEL curriculum lessons, and you can use them to revise your processes and practices to create a culture of belonging.

Laura Tierney is the founder of The Social Institute, which partners with schools nationwide to empower students, parents, and educators to navigate social-emotional health, social media, and technology positively through comprehensive, gamified lessons that meet students on their level.