MISS PORTER’S SCHOOL:
Building Belonging
How to Elevate Equity & Inclusion in Your School Community
by Emily Cretella

Photo courtesy of Miss Porter’s School.
In so many ways, a school’s community is ephemeral. Leadership changes, new faculty members join, and new students enroll and then graduate. The people responsible for embodying the mission evolve, bringing with them their own perspectives, beliefs, and values—and as they change, so does a school’s story and sense of place.

What is it, then, that actually creates a school’s community? How can an institution continuously work to uphold its longstanding philosophies while embracing the unique and varied individuals that make its campus so special?

Miss Porter’s School, a grade 9-12 girls boarding school in Farmington, Conn., believes building an equitable, inclusive, and just institution requires cultivating belonging: the sense that every person, in their own identity, is seen, affirmed, and valued within a school’s community.

"Belonging is not saying, ‘You come here and become us.’ It’s saying, ‘You come here and we become new,’” said Susan Martell Jenkin, the school’s Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer. “It’s work that never ends. Every year we have a new set of students that enriches our community, challenges our assumptions, and makes us new again.”

At Miss Porter’s School, this work is not an initiative—it is an evolving call to action that began in 1843 when Sarah Porter founded the school to create access to transformational education for young women. At the time brave and radical, this vision has not always been accessible to all women, and the institution of today is committed to both confronting the past and boldly working toward a more inclusive present and future.

“Schools may think this is risky, hard work. But as a leader, there’s enormous emotional relief when you let go of the fear and begin working toward the right thing,” said Head of School Dr. Katherine G. Windsor. "We want to land on the right side of history. As independent schools, we have to not only do what’s right this week or this month. We have to do what’s right for the next person who sits in our seats."

Today, equity and inclusion work permeates all areas of learning and life on Porter’s campus, and it’s a bold case study for all independent schools who may struggle with how to not only elevate and articulate equity and inclusion work but also hold themselves unapologetically accountable for taking action and moving forward.

This is the deep work that independent schools must grapple with in order to help heal the very real fissures both in our education systems and within our society. But where do you begin?

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HERE ARE EIGHT ACTION STEPS THAT CAN HELP YOU BUILD BELONGING IN YOUR INSTITUTION:

#1. Break it down
One of the first steps toward cultivating belonging on your campus is understanding what true belonging entails. Building an equitable, inclusive community is a cumulative process that requires consistent work and dedication.

“Many independent schools focus on diversity, which is making sure diverse numbers are present. Next, schools move to inclusion, which is making sure those numbers are part of the conversation. But that’s still making others part of us,” said Martell Jenkin. “Then, schools move on to equity, which looks at which voices are missing and what structures need to be changed. And finally, belonging works through all of those measures to ensure that every person in their identity is seen, affirmed, valued, and belongs in the institution.”

This, she said, is about more than community building. “If you don’t affirm identity and lived experience in your community, that doesn’t acknowledge how certain groups have not been granted access to or a voice at the table. You need community and belonging to go hand-in-hand,” said Martell Jenkin.

#2. Look deep
This work often requires confronting uncomfortable truths. “We had to look at the ways in which we had traditionally built community and interrogate how we’ve done that,” said Liz Schmitt, Chief Enrollment and Student Affairs Officer.

“What we have historically done as a primarily white institution—which is true for most independent and boarding schools—has perpetuated the dominant culture in our community-building efforts,” Schmitt continued. “By shifting to a focus on belonging, we’re calling that out and saying that we have to work harder and better to create the conditions that allow all of our students to feel they belong and know that they are seen, heard, and affirmed.”

#3. Listen
Once you start those real conversations, it’s time to invite others to join them. Surfacing and centering student voices, and leaning on the expertise of individuals doing equity and inclusion work both inside and outside of your institution, will help ensure you’re not missing diverse perspectives.

“When you center student voices, you have to keep up. What they’re demanding is so much farther ahead than where we are, and it’s our obligation to work harder to catch up,” said Martell Jenkin. “Our students know that when they’re asked for their opinions, something will come of it. Their brutal honesty allows us to see under the hood and fix things.”

#4. Take a stand
Conversation must lead to articulating your convictions. You must be clear and upfront about what you believe, what you expect from your community, and what actions you are committed to taking.

“The reason people don’t do this work is that they’re fearful,” said Windsor. “I’m often fearful too. But I’m not going to be willfully ignorant about the ways in which students don’t experience belonging. I’m doing the work, or I’m not. And I choose to do the work.”

The entire Porter’s team has made this a priority. What was once a subtle part of their school’s culture now takes center stage on their website and in all school communications, as bold statements and clear promises to their current and future families on what belonging, equity, and inclusion mean in their community.

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Susan Martell Jenkin, Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer, Miss Porter’s School
"We want to make sure we’re giving voice to our different communities by working with them on language and representation," said Diane R. Johnson, Chief Communications and Public Health Officer. "Our goal is to tell the Miss Porter’s School story, speak to historical challenges, and demonstrate where we’re going and who we want to be."

#5. Do the work
Making a statement, however, is not enough. Schools also need to demonstrate how they are putting words into action. Miss Porter’s School does so by showcasing students engaging with equity and inclusion work and by providing a multifaceted professional development program for adults in the community. This includes individual learning and research, group dialogues, notable speakers, and intensive workshops.

"We want to empower our students to be lifelong learners by modeling lifelong learning ourselves, and by including conversations about identity, equity, and justice in an explicit way. It’s not just a moral imperative but an obligation and responsibility to our students," said Amanda Friedman, Dean of Equity and Community Life.

"We know we are purposefully and thoughtfully Miss Porter’s School. Within that, we’re going to take a stance on issues and have a firm identity," said Sarah Quinn, Director of Admission. "That’s a relief for families. They know who we are."

#6. Create space
Beyond doing the work as an institution, it’s important to make space for others to pursue their own growth. Miss Porter’s School has Student Alliances that are open to the entire community. These aim to educate others on topics of diversity and foster an empathetic environment through collaborative learning, discussion, and respectful dissent.

The school’s Affinity groups are spaces created around a shared common identity, where individuals who identify as members of the group can speak to their experiences from the "I" perspective. In addition, white anti-racist education groups help white adults and students navigate their own racial identity and affirm their commitment to anti-racist work.

#7. Accept feedback
Often, both institutions and individuals struggle with the fear of making a mistake. Miss Porter’s School, however, encourages schools to directly address missteps as they occur, rather than retreat from them.

"We’re meant to review and reflect on what happened in the past in order to inform a future that we want to be different," said Friedman. "Sometimes there’s an urgency around protecting or upholding an image of an institution and a fear that if mistakes are laid bare, you somehow betray the institution’s memory. But you can both acknowledge past challenges and maintain its successes while doing the work to move forward."

The Office of Equity and Inclusion at Porter’s acknowledges this in its Statement of Purpose:

"The mission of Miss Porter’s School demands constant examination of the dynamics of inequality in the world and in our school. In order to achieve institutional excellence, each member of the community must interrogate their privilege, biases, and complicity in oppressive structures. ... The obligations of our mission statement call us to reflect, implement positive change, and create a truly equitable, inclusive, and just school community."
#8. Never rest
As Porter’s long history depicts, this work must be ongoing. Building belonging and community through equity and inclusion is not a self-improvement initiative. As schools reflect on their beliefs, actions, and privilege, they must continue to implement change.

“What happens when we say we are imperfect? It’s affirming that we’re human and that we’re moving beyond our mistakes. When we don’t name it and try to go around it, that’s what hurts,” said Martell Jenkin. “If we’re not centering the kids and we’re worried about other factors, it takes away from the students. Let’s reframe and center our students.”

This work has not only been beneficial for their community but also for their school’s growth—reflected in increased donations, enrollment, and retention. Windsor hopes that this will help encourage other schools to embrace equity and inclusion work with bolder tenacity.

“We believe in a rising tide. This isn’t just good for our school. It’s good for all of our schools,” Windsor said. “Doing this work is good for admission, development, our industry—and most importantly, our students. Just start with the kids, and work from there. It’s worth it.”

The owner of CursiveContent.com, Emily Cretella is a strategic storyteller and content marketer who helps schools tell powerful stories that attract dream families, increase inquiries and enrollment, strengthen communities, and grow school influence.