# The Importance of Student Sense of Belonging

**Sense of belonging** refers to the extent to which **students feel personally accepted, included, and supported at school,** and includes school-based experiences, students' relationships with teachers and peers, and students' general feelings about school.[1, 2]

**Students with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to be engaged in school and to perform well academically.**[3, 4, 5, 6, 7]

## Factors related to students' sense of belonging in school include:

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| student academic motivation | student emotional stability | student personal characteristics* | parent support, peer support, teacher support | environmental and school safety[8] |

* Examples include motivation, personality, and social skills.

Culturally responsive practices include educator actions that **recognize, value, and incorporate students' lived experiences and cultures** into teaching, learning, and the school environment.[9, 10, 11] Strategies that prioritize building positive student–teacher relationships have shown to be strong predictors of student sense of belonging.[12]

Researchers have explored the types of culturally responsive practices that teachers could use to support student engagement in school. Although there is no current consensus regarding the practices most effective for increasing student engagement, **some promising strategies are provided here for teachers who would like to improve student sense of belonging by nurturing their relationships with students and students' connection to the school community.**

## 1 Maintain and communicate high expectations for students.

Research shows that communicating and modeling activities and interactions that promote the idea that all students are capable of personal and academic success and that they can be held to high expectations is related to improved academic performance, improved student engagement, and fewer behavioral problems.[13, 14, 15, 16, 17]

## 2 Commit to building a caring classroom and school community.

Research indicates that teachers who create caring, respectful, and welcoming environments are more likely to decrease incidents of disruptive behavior in school and improve academic achievement and student engagement (e.g., academic motivation and attendance).[18, 19, 20]

## 3 Seek and leverage knowledge of student backgrounds.

Research suggests that teachers who make learning experiences relevant to students' home lives and communities are more likely to improve school belonging for students and enhance student learning.[21, 22, 23]

## 4 Cultivate cross-cultural communication.

Research has shown that students who have teachers that encourage and value the communication styles of racially and ethnically diverse students are more likely to be motivated and willing to participate and engage in school.[24]

## 5 Promote and develop student agency over their school experiences.

Teachers can cultivate a "growth mindset" (that is, a belief that skills and intelligence grow with hard work and effort) with students and engage them in evaluating their own progress. Research indicates that these practices are related to higher achievement outcomes.[25, 26, 27, 28]

### For more information:

**Ask A REL Response** about systems and structures schools can use to support student belonging

**Blog post** on using culturally responsive practices to support equity in remote learning

**Video** on strengthening relationships with students from diverse backgrounds

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