

Student Belonging: 6 Proven Strategies Every Teacher Can Use

Research-backed tools to make every student feel they belong ·



Belonging is not a "nice-to-have." When students feel they belong, they engage more, persist longer, and achieve more — especially students from underrepresented groups (Walton & Cohen, 2011). These six strategies are grounded in evidence. None require extra prep or a new system. They require intention.

1

Give Wise Feedback

Signal high standards *and* belief in a student's ability to meet them. Add this to written feedback: "I'm giving you these comments because I have high standards, and I know you can meet them." This one sentence closes the belonging gap (Cohen, 2022).

Try it: Write it verbatim on the next draft you return. Watch what changes.

2

Social Belonging Intervention

Share stories from older students about initial doubts that faded over time. Normalize doubt as a temporary phase, not a personal verdict. When students hear that uncertainty is common and passes, anxiety drops (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Try it: Open a new unit by reading one real student story — anonymous, honest, hopeful.

3

Values Affirmation

Run a 10–15 minute exercise where students write freely about a personal value (family, creativity, fairness). This widens self-identity beyond academic results and buffers students from stereotype threat (Cohen, 2022).

Try it: Use it at the start of a high-stakes unit. Keep it low-stakes: no sharing required.

4

Reframe Transition Narratives

Provide honest accounts of navigating a new environment. Specific details — "I didn't know where to sit at lunch" — make early doubt recognizable and survivable. Students stop reading their confusion as a sign they don't belong (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

Try it: At the start of term, share one real moment when you felt unsure. Make doubt normal.

5

Engineer Identity-Safe Cues

Audit the environment: walls, texts, whose contributions get treated as knowledge. When students don't see their identities reflected, the implicit signal is: *this place isn't for you* (Cohen, 2022).

Try it: Walk through your classroom as a student. What identities are visible? Whose are missing?

6

Harness Peer Influence

Empower "social referents" — well-connected students — to model inclusive behavior. Peer-to-peer interactions shape belonging more than teacher actions alone. Social norms spread faster from peers than from adults (Paluck et al., 2016; Cohen, 2022).

Try it: Identify 2–3 connected students and brief them on what inclusive participation looks like.

BONUS: SMALL SHIFTS, BIG SIGNALS

- ◆ **Use Honorifics:** Offer dignity by using Mr./Ms. [Last Name] — especially in moments of correction.
- ◆ **Open Dialogue:** Say "I think" instead of "the fact is" to keep discussions open.
- ◆ **Start with Check-ins:** Two minutes to treat students as whole people, not just learners.
- ◆ **Internalize Wisdom:** Have students write advice for others to reinforce their own learning.
- ◆ **Nonverbal Cues:** Show genuine interest through eye contact and leaning in.
- ◆ **Ask More:** Aim for 90% questions like "Tell me more about why you think that."
- ◆ **Share Struggle Stories:** Be honest about the confusion that precedes success.

REFERENCES

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