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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Belonging in School*.

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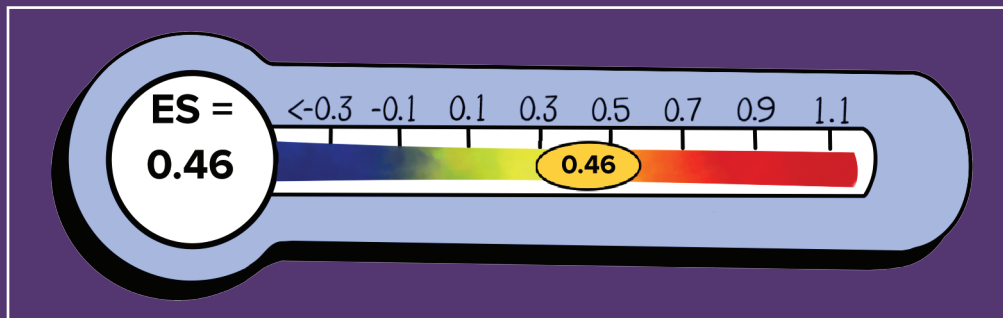
# INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to have a sense of belonging? Belonging is a visceral feeling: You know when you feel it—and you *really* know when you don't. But what does belonging actually entail? “Belonging is the feeling that we’re part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us—and to which we feel we have something to contribute.”<sup>1</sup> Let’s take that definition apart.

- *Feeling*: It’s emotional and psychological, and we experience it.
- *Larger group*: It’s about membership with other people.
- *Values*: There is a sense of worth or importance.
- *Respects*: There is admiration for the qualities each person has.
- *Cares*: There is concern and attention.
- *Something to contribute*: The group benefits from each person’s contributions.

Students with a strong sense of belonging in a classroom perform better academically.<sup>2</sup> When students don’t feel that they belong, their performance suffers. This is not just some fluffy mumble jumble: There is a strong research base that supports the need for schools to create systems that foster student belonging. In fact, several meta-analyses point to the fact that belonging keeps us learning. The effect size for belonging is 0.46, just above average of all the things that we do in school to ensure learning.<sup>3</sup>

Figure I.1 • Effect Size for Belonging



Belonging is a key factor that allows other influences to take hold. Belonging serves as a gatekeeper for all the other aspects of learning to take root. If students do not feel that they belong in a class, then it is unlikely that the amazing instruction being provided to them will significantly improve their learning. Instead, students with a low sense of belonging spend time questioning their status and membership in the group and fail to achieve at high levels. For them, the gate is closed, and they are on the outside of learning, looking in.

The impact of belonging also extends far beyond academics. Studies suggest that belonging also affects our health and well-being.<sup>4</sup> Not only do students learn more when they feel that they belong, but they also experience positive health outcomes, including self-reports of wellness and reduced number of doctor visits.<sup>5</sup>

The reverse is also true, and a diminished sense of belonging can break along racial, ethnic, and ability lines. Black adolescent students are at higher risk for reporting a lack of belonging and school connectedness.<sup>6</sup> Another study showed that there was a relationship between sense of belonging and suicide ideation and attempts for Black students, with the risk increasing by 35 percent when students did not feel that they belonged.<sup>7</sup> Another study found that belonging at school reduced suicide ideation among Latino/x/e students.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, a study of students with learning disabilities found that higher levels of school and family connectedness were linked to reduced emotional distress, suicide attempts, and involvement in violence.<sup>9</sup>

Importantly, students can have a stronger sense of belonging in one class or grade and a diminished sense of belonging in another class or grade. For all of us, belonging is malleable, and it changes based on the experiences we are currently having or have had in the past. Teachers and leaders can design environments and experiences to create situations in which belonging is fostered—and this is an essential commitment for educators to make. If we neglect the environment and fail to ensure that all students feel that they belong, our disregard diminishes our teaching and our students' learning.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We have organized this playbook to support the important conversations caring educators have about how classrooms and schools can ensure that every child feels a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school. Module 1 provides an overview of the eleven dimensions of belonging that follow in Modules 2–12. We suggest you begin with Module 1 to build foundational knowledge. After that, please dive into the modules in any order that aligns with your purposes. The dimensions of belonging inform one another, but they are in no way meant to suggest a hierarchy, chronological importance, or order of operations.

You'll find that every module features three evidence-based actions that teachers can apply to create the kinds of classrooms and schools that invest

in every student's sense of belonging. Some of the actions may resonate with you more than others. We have tried to balance actions that are useful at the elementary and secondary levels.

Given that this is a playbook, you'll notice several interactive features:

- An **Essential Question** frames each module and is intended to build schema.
- **Two Truths and a Lie** near the beginning of the module allows you to consider several statements and then determine which ones are supported by the research and which one captures a common misconception. We invite you to return to these after reading the module to see if your thinking has been validated or extended.
- A **Quick Start** follows each profiled action, allowing you an opportunity to reflect on the content presented and prioritize the actions you can begin, as well as resources you may need to do so.
- The **Case in Point** in each module offers a scenario and an opportunity to see educators working together to resolve a dilemma. We've also included a **What's Your Advice?** feature, which allows you to make recommendations based on what you have learned and experienced.
- **What's Next?** appears at the end of every module and invites you to reflect on your learning and take actions of your own: What will you start, stop, and continue? It allows you space to scale your level of understanding so that you can keep learning after finishing the module.

Again, this playbook is meant to engage you. Please mark it up and complete the various tasks. The narrative in each module provides current and tested research as well as informed recommendations for practice. Your willingness to engage in the exercises in this playbook demonstrates your commitment to your students. Happy reading. ©