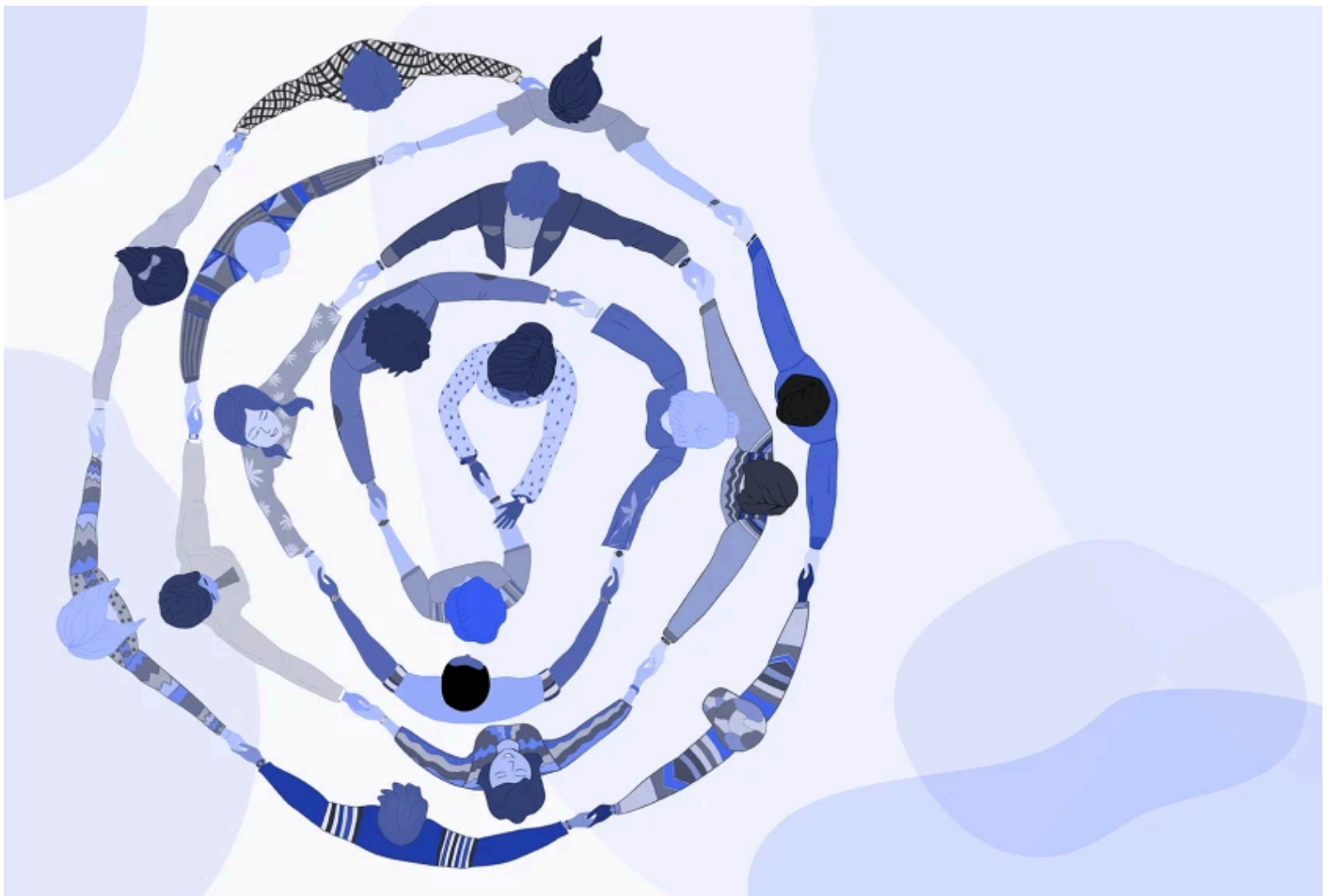


EQUITY & DIVERSITY

What Works to Help Students of Color Feel Like They Belong at School



By [Ileana Najarro](#) — September 27, 2024 ⌚ 5 min read



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Students who feel connected to school are more likely to attend and succeed academically, and less likely to misbehave and suffer from poor mental health.

But students of color are less likely than their white peers to report that they feel that they belong at school and feel close to others there.

That means schools should be deliberate about offering opportunities for students of color to affirm their racial identities rather than ignore them at school, and share their experiences with students from other populations to build bridges.

Those are among the recommendations from researchers who have looked into fostering a sense of belonging for immigrant students and students of color, who discussed their research recently at a Capitol Hill briefing for lawmakers.

The researchers, brought together to discuss their expertise by the bipartisan group First Focus on Children, recommend that schools invest in ethnic studies courses, address race-based harassment so there's no question it's not tolerated, and develop formal connections between schools and local community organizations where immigrant students in particular tend to feel most welcome.

This research focused on racial equity in school belonging builds on existing research about the benefits of feeling connected to school and the components of that connectedness recognized by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—adults at school who care about students as people, supportive peer groups, opportunities to engage in activities that students find meaningful, and students feeling welcome at school for who they are.

“What this research is saying is, this is a very important issue to confront and not just ignore, as we often do, because if I don't feel welcome for my racial identity, I can't really feel welcome in school,” said Robert Balfanz, director of the Everyone Graduates Center at the John Hopkins School of Education, who has worked with schools on connectedness strategies through an initiative called the GRAD Partnership.

Balfanz did not participate in the research on racial equity in school belonging.

Immigrant students' sense of belonging requires partnerships

For the past 30 years, research into belonging in schools has focused on students' academic achievement, engagement, and confidence in their own abilities.

But Sophia Rodriguez, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at New York University, felt this understanding of belonging was unfair to students who were new to the country. They brought different cultures and languages, but the traditional understanding

of belonging at school valued assimilation without recognizing those cultural and linguistic differences as assets, she said.

Though immigrant students can represent a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, Rodriguez found in research that schools and these students' peers were treating immigrant students as if they were part of a racial minority.

In an ongoing, five-year research project, Rodriguez has begun to explicitly ask questions about race and racism, and how to build a race-conscious perspective on social belonging.

Through surveys of more than 3,400 students in the mid-Atlantic region so far, she found that Latino youth report lower levels of belonging than their white peers. These students said teachers did not explicitly address microaggressions and racial harassment either through schoolwide dialogues or disciplinary consequences for those who made Latino and immigrant students feel unwelcome.

The places where these students did feel comfortable discussing such experiences—and that affirmed their cultures and identities—were outside of school. They were local community centers and organizations that led after-school, off-campus activities, Rodriguez found.

“When we’re thinking systematically—how can we build in conversations around race consciousness, or race and racism—I see that a lot in after-school programs and in community-based centers and programs where kids are able to talk about these sorts of things, but not as much in the school,” she said.

It’s why she advises school districts to make formal connections with these local organizations. The connection can be something as simple as creating space and time for students engaged in these off-campus activities to lead presentations at school about their experiences.

Ethnic studies help students see themselves in academics

Another strategy schools can implement to cultivate a sense of belonging that takes students’ racial identities into account is investing in ethnic studies courses.

Ethnic studies as a discipline has been about helping students of color and their communities see themselves represented in an academic context, said Emily Penner, an associate professor in the school of education at the University of California, Irvine.

Penner has studied these kinds of courses for over a decade. She has found that, at the K-12 level, they help students develop a positive view of their racial and ethnic identity, get to know themselves and their community better, and form a sense of belonging at school.

This all yields concrete benefits.

Penner followed students in the San Francisco schools who had a grade point average close to 2.0 in 8th grade and were automatically enrolled in a then-new ethnic studies course. Later on, these students were 16 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than students with similar GPAs in 8th grade whose counselors didn't automatically enroll them in the ethnic studies class.

Now, Penner is working on a study looking at how districts scale up their ethnic studies programs, including by turning these courses into graduation requirements.

In her past and current research, students have shared that the relationships they build in ethnic studies classes are different from the relationships they build in other classes, especially with their teachers. Students have also said these courses help them learn from their peers, and they say they benefit from learning about others' lives.

Balfanz at John Hopkins said such efforts to create shared experiences can work against a tendency to create divisions among the student body, including those based on race. That's because relationships based on those shared experiences, such as an ethnic studies class, take hold across groups of students from different backgrounds.

Ileana Najarro

Staff Writer, Education Week

Ileana Najarro is a reporter for Education Week covering race and opportunity in schools across the country.

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