

BUILDING BELONGING: LESSONS FROM 16 SCHOOLS



About this research

1

Who we are

Ipsos, in partnership with TONIC, Professor Kathryn Riley and the Anna Freud Centre, were appointed by the Department for Education to deliver this research.

2

Why it matters

Belonging is foundational. When pupils feel they belong, they attend more, engage more deeply, and achieve better outcomes.

3

What this is

Practical guidance for school leaders interested in building belonging in their school community.

How we conducted the research

1

Who took part?

Eight primary and eight secondary mainstream schools across England – selected for their commitment to belonging and high or improving attainment and attendance.

2

What we did?

In each school we interviewed leaders, staff, pupils and parent governors and observed school life firsthand.

3

Want to know more?

Everything in this PowerPoint is drawn from the full research report, **which can be found [here](#)**.

What we heard



If I belong, then I really have that motivation and confidence telling me that I can do it and that I got this.

Pupil, Primary school



We know that children who feel safe and secure and feel a sense of belonging do thrive, you know, not just academically, but emotionally.

Staff, Primary school



A sense of belonging means that pupils want to be at school and feel part of the community, which in turn drives attendance and then attainment.

**Parent Governor,
Secondary school**

Six types of belonging practice

- Across the case study schools, we identified six overarching types of belonging practice, which are presented on the next slide.
- These are described further in the full report with concrete examples of school practices, including where these intersect with practices to support attainment and attendance (see pages 50-75).
- While these case studies were carried out in mainstream schools, the insights they offer have relevance for all school settings.



Six types of belonging practices

01 - Relational practices: Building trust and connection between staff, pupils and families.

02 - Pupil voice and agency: Giving pupils real influence and visible responsibility.

03 - Celebrating diversity and challenging discrimination: Ensuring every pupil sees themselves reflected and respected in school life.

04 - Cultivating a strong school identity: Creating a shared culture that everyone belongs to.

05 - Individualised approaches: Meeting every pupil's specific needs with a whole-person approach.

06 - Belonging beyond the school gates: Connecting pupils to their communities and their futures.

Want to explore all six practice types in depth? See the report section on *Belonging practices* (pages 50-68)

Seven recommendations for embedding belonging

- Drawing on learnings from the 16 schools, we identified seven practical recommendations for school leaders and staff.
- These aren't a checklist – but guidance to build from, in the order and pace that works for your school and your community.



Seven recommendations for embedding belonging





The more questions you ask, the more you understand the complexity of every school population, the more you will seek to serve them more effectively.

Senior Leader, Secondary school

Recommendation 1. Start with context

- There is no single way to build belonging
- Successful schools begin by deeply understanding their community
- A school's context shapes which practices are needed, which are available, and how quickly they take hold
- Schools can learn from each other, but every belonging journey has its own distinctive path

Want to know more about how context shapes belonging? See the *Contextual factors* section of the full report (pages 46-49)

Context matters: What could shape belonging in your school



Geography: Rural schools report building on close-knit relationships and high staff stability, while urban schools benefit from access to a range of community partners. Effective approaches need to respond to differing strengths.



School size: Large schools benefit from clear structures – like house systems, tutor groups, or a 'school within a school' model – to create smaller, close-knit communities where every pupil feels known.

Context matters: What could shape belonging in your school



Demographics: Pupils bring a wealth of linguistic, cultural and life experiences to school. Building a sense of belonging means drawing on these assets and tailoring approaches to reflect your demographics.



School identity: School identity may be shaped through subject specialisms, admission policies, faith or community priorities – and care needs to be taken to ensure that identity is inclusive of all pupils and staff.

Recommendation 2. Begin small and be patient

- Building belonging is both deliberate and organic – it takes years of consistent work
- Embedding a few practices well is more effective than spreading effort thinly
- Hold to a small number of clear principles and let every decision align with them
- Shared language matters. A common vocabulary – shared phrases, values and sayings used consistently by everyone – helps belonging grow



Don't rush it because it's not something you can just attach to the rest of your systems. It has got to be part of every system you've got.

Senior Leader, Secondary school

Small relational starting points

1

Greet by name – Meet pupils at the gate and classroom door every morning. It signals they are seen and expected.

2

Know your pupils – Their interests, their patterns, what they're like on a difficult day.

3

Celebrate diverse achievements – Not just academic ones. Every pupil should be able to feel successful.

Want to know more about how senior leaders embed belonging? See the report section on the *Role of senior leadership* (pages 34-37)



*They're much more than
a behaviour team.
They're actually a
support system.*

Pupil, Secondary school

Recommendation 3. Make it everyone's responsibility

- Belonging cannot be delegated to a pastoral team or single initiative
- Every adult and young person in the building is a belonging practitioner – regardless of role
- Non-teaching staff matter hugely – pupils name emotional literacy support assistants, librarians and receptionists as key belonging figures

Seven facilitators, one goal

Belonging is embedded through seven interconnected facilitators – from senior leadership to parents. Each plays a distinct part, and none works in isolation.

01



School culture, ethos & values:

The operating system within which all other practices sit, with a clearly defined set of core principles enacted daily.

03



All staff: Every adult in the building is a belonging practitioner. Greet pupils by name, know their difficult days, and remember staff consistency carries the culture.

Belonging is
built together

02



Senior leadership: Every decision about people, structures and systems is a belonging act.

04



Pupils: Active creators of belonging, not just recipients. Named roles (peer mentors, buddies) give pupils a visible stake in their school.

Seven facilitators, one goal

05



Space & resources: Displays, quiet spaces and lessening financial barriers (uniform, food, equipment) all tell pupils they are valued.

06



Community & alumni: Extending belonging beyond the school gates by connecting with alumni who return as coaches, speakers and volunteers, and by building active local partnerships.

Belonging is
built together

07



Parents: Parent school belonging supports child belonging. Home visits, gate handovers and consistent, warm contact strengthen the bond between family and school.

Want to know more about the seven roles? See the report section on *Embedding belonging* (pages 32-45)

Recommendation 4. Prioritise staff wellbeing

You cannot give what you do not have – investing in staff belonging is the foundation for everything else.

- Staff belonging comes first – it is a precondition for pupil belonging
- Pupils observe staff relationships and replicate them
- The personal cost of deep relational work must be acknowledged and managed



Want to know more about staff belonging? See the report section on the *Role of all staff* (pages 37-39)



The head is great at
keeping us okay, being
mindful of workload,
talking to each other. It's
not just the children's
wellbeing, it's ours.
Staff, Primary school

What staff belonging looks like in practice

1

Recognise and value

Thank you cards and regular spotlighting of staff achievements signal that staff are seen and appreciated.

2

Invest in development

CPD is a belonging practice – how staff feel valued and invested in shapes their own sense of belonging to the school.

3

Recruit for values

Shared commitment to school ethos is a primary hiring criterion – not an afterthought.



It's not just about capturing that student voice.

You've got to do something with it.

**Senior Leader,
Secondary school**

Recommendation 5. Create genuine agency

When pupils see their voice leading to tangible change, it transforms their relationship with school.

- Agency is not just about being heard – it's about having the power to make a real difference
- Schools that do this most effectively give pupils genuine ownership, not just consultation
- Transparency is essential – pupils need to see what changed and why

How schools can create genuine agency

1

Formal voice mechanisms

School councils, student commissioners, QR feedback codes.

2

Named leadership roles

Pupil prefects, house captains, wellbeing ambassadors – roles that give pupils formal ownership and visible responsibility.

3

Everyday agency

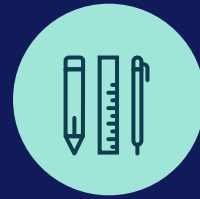
Pupils taking the register, performing classroom jobs, watering plants, running clubs – opportunities for small daily responsibilities.

When pupils spoke, schools listened

Across our case study schools, pupil voice led to real, tangible change.



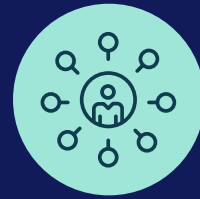
Lunchtime clubs started by pupils



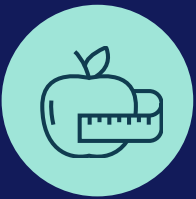
Timetabling adjusted around exams



Uniform criteria changes



A culture day introduced



Lunch schedule changed to shorten queue times



'They're working on making a quiet outdoor space because that's what students asked for.' – *Pupil, Secondary school*

Want to know more about pupil voice? See the report section on *Pupil voice and agency* (pages 57-60)

Recommendation 6. Protect and sustain

- Belonging practices need protection from competing pressures
- This requires leadership courage to maintain focus on belonging even when external accountability measures seem to pull in different directions
- This focus is justifiable – leaders, staff, parents and pupils all describe belonging, attendance and attainment as mutually reinforcing – not in competition with one another
- To sustain the work, build structures – frameworks, policies, monitoring systems – that reinforce belonging practices beyond individual champions



***The culture is impossible to fake. Children immediately sense whether adults genuinely believe in the stated values or are merely performing them.
Senior Leader, Primary school***

Building structures that last



External frameworks: Accreditations like UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools and School of Sanctuary provide shared language, accountability and connection to a wider network – and outlast individual leaders.



Embed it in governance: Governors should be an active part of belonging infrastructure – recruited to reflect the community, with existing ties to the school, and holding the school accountable for sustaining belonging.

Want to know more about how schools sustain belonging culture? See the report section on *School culture, ethos and values* (pages 32-34)

Recommendation 7. Measure what matters

While there is no one way of measuring belonging, there are a range of tools and approaches that can be used to help schools take stock.

- **Direct measures**

Dedicated survey tools, #BeeWell, bespoke school surveys

- **Proxy measures**

Attendance, exclusions, wellbeing surveys, family engagement, staff retention

Looking beyond the numbers

Some schools also use qualitative or informal measures, such as:

- Pupil engagement in extra-curricular activity
- Informal observations and conversations with pupils
- Staff choosing to send their own children to the school
- Levels of pupil and family participation in surveys and other feedback opportunities



Want to know more about how schools measure belonging? See the report section on *How schools measure belonging* (pages 80-84)

THANK YOU

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