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Belonging and our collective will

*Why we must make our schools welcoming spaces – the third in a series of editorials
by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly on equity, inclusion, and diversity*

We all know the power of a warm welcome, how a smile from a colleague can make your day or an honest “how are you?” and a listening ear can make you feel connected and cared for. This power of welcome transcends age; our youngest Wisconsinites need these experiences of affirmation, too, because welcoming spaces are integral to feelings of connectedness and belonging, and connectedness and belonging is integral to their safety, even their survival.

The sad reality is that safety and survival are a struggle for too many of our children, and we have the data to show it. We know students of color who experience racism also experience more mental health challenges and feel less connected to their school community.¹ We know LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience abuse in the home² and harassment at school,³ and significantly more likely to consider and attempt suicide.⁴ We know that having at least one accepting adult in their lives can significantly reduce the risk of LGBTQ+ youth attempting suicide,⁵ and that respecting transgender and nonbinary youth’s pronouns also reduces suicide attempts.⁶ We know that youth at the intersection of these identities experience more mental health challenges and report higher rates of considering and attempting suicide.⁷ And we know that the higher the number of supportive staff members at a school or family members at home, the safer LGBTQ+ students feel and the greater sense of belonging they report.^{8,9} Affirmation matters, and fostering a sense of belonging saves lives.

(more)

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/su/su7103a4.htm?s_cid=su7103a4_w

² <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>

³ <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>

⁵ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/accepting-adults-reduce-suicide-attempts-among-lgbtq-youth/>

⁶ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=SupportingTransgenderNonbinaryYouth>

⁷ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2021/?section=SuicideMentalHealth>

⁸ https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/sites/default/files/FAP_Family%20Acceptance_JCAPN.pdf

⁹ <https://www.glsen.org/research/2019-national-school-climate-survey>

This is why our schools must be welcoming spaces; to be clear, so many of them are and we need to celebrate that. Many Wisconsin educators are doing incredible work to affirm and welcome students through social emotional learning, through choosing resources that reflect the diverse identities of their students, through working with special services staff and integrating mental health supports into their curriculum. It's hard and necessary work, and we know our current climate is making it harder and even more necessary. The way we – as leaders, as community members, as adults – talk about race, or about respecting pronouns, or about including books in libraries that address racism or those with LGBTQ+ characters, have an impact. When the adults in charge - those who make policy, or run for office, or serve on boards - speak negatively and encourage harassment of students with disabilities, or of students because of their gender, immigration status, race, sexuality or gender identity, it makes life harder for students. These are children! And when adults sit passively without calling out these harmful behaviors, they are no different than the bystander who does nothing or says nothing when someone is being bullied or harmed. We are indirectly and directly telling these children, these precious humans, that they are not welcome. And that hurts our students of color. It hurts our LGBTQ+ students. It hurts all our students. And it hurts our state.

This is a moment of reckoning. Our students need affirmation and to be connected to their schools and their communities – in our classrooms and in our state. I believe we have the collective will to support them the way they need to be supported: with welcome and with belonging. They must hear that they are valuable members of our state and our communities, and that we want them to do more than survive; we want them to thrive. It's up to us to make that possible.

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NOTE: This guest editorial [is available online here on the DPI's website](#). This is the third in a three-part series of op-eds by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly. For the first part, [visit the DPI's website here](#). For the second part, [visit the DPI's website here](#). A headshot for publication of Dr. Underly is available [here on the DPI's website](#).