

Developing Student Belonging, Resilience, and Engaged Learning in Middle Grades

Why is this Important?

As students enter early adolescence, their connection to school becomes more important than ever. It's here that they decide if school is valuable or is simply something they need to endure. They are deciding if school is a place where people care about them and they can share their voice or if it is an impersonal institution with unfair and inequitable practices. For the middle grades, students' connection to school influences their attendance, their behavior, and their course performance, which ultimately impacts whether they will enter high school on-track to graduation and post-secondary success.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing need to combat systematic racism have add stress and challenge into the lives of middle grade students, further increasing the need for school to be a supportive and nurturing experience.

While many states and districts are supporting schools in the development of school safety and learning plans as a result of COVID-19, this **Change Package and Action Community** are designed to support schools in developing the social-emotional supports to complement these plans. We see this as the essential "third leg of a stool" for students to stand on and meet success in the face of the challenge today.

What is our Approach?

Knowing that teachers and school leaders are also facing great personal stress, experiencing resource scarcity, and operating in a time of uncertainty, we designed this Change Package to focus on elements of social-emotional development that are most salient and most supportive to learning in our current context. Specifically, this Change Package suggests evidence-based and practical actions schools can do to promote your students' sense of belonging, resilience, and engaged learning. We have also organized these changes to follow the rhythms and needs of the moment and because of this we're releasing only the change for the start of the school year and Fall. As our context changes and we learn more from you, we'll release additional Change Packages to support your work in the Winter and Spring.

Each change identified in the Change Package will include information on the change, who is involved in it, which areas it impacts, and how you can measure that impact. Most importantly, for each change there will be a guide that provides a series of clear action steps linked to tools and examples that can help you implement the change. In each Change Idea Guide we'll also offer modifications or adaptations you can make based on whether your school will be meeting virtually or in-person this Fall.

How Do We Define Belonging, Resilience, and Engaged Learning?

Belonging: Sense of Belonging focuses on building a student's sense that they are part of caring and supportive school community that supports their emerging identity, that sees them as a person, and that helps meet their needs while providing opportunities to further develop who they want to be. Belonging is closely related to the idea of school connectedness, when students have adults who know and care about them, supportive peer groups, engagement in helping others, and a welcoming school climate. In short, students with a strong sense of belonging want to participate in school.

Resilience: Resilience centers on building a student's internal capacity to navigate school and life, especially when it is unpredictable, when challenges arise, and when setbacks occur. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressures of systemic racism this is especially important for our students as home, community, and school life are more unpredictable and challenging.

Engaged Learning: Engaged Learning is when students are actively participating in their learning and feel connected to their teachers, staff, and AmeriCorps members. Engaged learning can be found when students see adults caring for them as individuals, when schoolwork is meaningful, challenging, and culturally relevant, when students receive effective feedback, and when they have choice and voice in the work.

To Learn More about How to Read and Understand the content of the Change Package, review our [How to Guide](#).

Fall Change Package



Fall Central Question

In new and changing environments, how do we enable supportive relationships (student-teacher, student-student, teacher-family etc.) and school actions that attend to student sense of safety, physical and emotional well-being, and participation in school?



During the Fall, you'll focus the work on Belonging, Resilience, Engaged Learning in a way that prioritizes students' Emotional Health. By the end of Fall, if successful, we'd expect students to say:

- I am ok
- I like school-it is a good place to be
- I am able
- I am learning



How will we measure success in the Fall?

Within the Action Community we will have access to measurement tools that will help school teams track the impact of their efforts to increase student sense of belonging, resilience and engaged learning. These include short surveys that measure Engaged Learning and Belonging from [Co-Pilot Elevate at PERTs](#) as well as measures of Resilience from the [Holistic Student Assessment](#). Additionally, we'll work with schools to connect these measures to more traditional and modified for the pandemic on-track indicators, like attendance, behavior, and course performance. Finally, as you'll see in many of the Fall Change Ideas, there will be opportunities to collect additional data that can support your school's understanding of student success.




Key Structures & Actions before Identifying or Implementing Fall Changes



Key Structure	What It Is
Student-Adult Relationship Structure	<p>Ensure you have a structure that will enable every student to have a 1-1 supportive relationship with an adult, that can provide them with clear guidance on when and where school will be, how they can keep track of their assignments, what school resources are available and how to access them, and that both students and adults have time and space in the day to connect in this way.</p> <p>What if We Don't Have This? Use Change Idea 4F to Develop this Structure</p>
Data Review and Response Team Structure	<p>Ensure you have structures and allow for the capacity to gather, review, and respond to data around traditional and modified on-track measures, as well as other work that you will implement this Fall.</p> <p>What if We Don't Have This? Use Change Idea 7F, and also refer to Change Idea 2F</p>
Professional Development Structure	<p>Ensure you have prioritized space and capacity for teacher and staff professional development to design, implement, and review changes that you implement through the Action Community.</p>



	<p>What if We Don't Have This? Work with your Action Community partner to identify solutions. You may be able to use school stipends for this project towards professional development.</p>
Action Community Team Structure	<p>Ensure you have a structure that includes teachers, staff, students, and families that can engage in the work of the Action Community. This will be the primary team for implementing and reviewing changes and supporting teams that are implementing those changes.</p> <p>What if We Don't Have This? That's OK. You'll work with your Action Community partner to build this. Use Change Idea 10F to learn more.</p>



Key Action	What It Is
Meet with Action Community Partner	<p>Your Action Community partner will be your point person and support as you develop and implement the ideas in the Change Package. Before you start implementing changes, you'll want to connect with your partner to overview the work and set a plan of action. You can learn more by reviewing Change Idea 10F</p> <p>Who Will Help: Your Action Community partner</p>
Collect Baseline Data	<p>Before you implement data, your Action Community partner will work with you to set up a process for collecting baseline data. This will help ensure you know whether your changes are resulting in improvements for your students.</p> <p>Who Will Help: Your Action Community partner will work with you to set up and implement this process.</p>
Sign Action Community Agreement	<p>To ensure you will receive your school stipends for participating in the Action Community, you'll first want to sign your Action Community agreement, which will outline the expectations for members of the Action Community, as well as the benefits you'll receive for joining.</p> <p>Who Will Help: Your Action Community Partner will share this agreement with you and go over the details in one of your first conversations.</p>




Fall Changes

B	R	E	Timing	Structure	Change Idea	Context Guidance
			Beginning of School	Action Community Professional Development	<p>Change 1F: Build Routines: Using input from students, families, and staff, develop a small set of routines that 1) let students and staff know what to expect in each class., and in each day and 2) Promote connection, well-being, and joy.</p> <p>Evidence: Strong Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Routines are too complex or variable and fail to provide stability and predictability. (2) Routines are not student-centered, and feel compliance driven instead of supportive.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 1F Guide</p>

			Beginning of School	Action Community Data Review and Response Team	<p>Change 2F: Collect Data on Student COVID-19 Experiences: Gather data on student experiences and needs as a result of COVID-19. Operationalize your Data Review & Response Team(s) to compare responses with existing supports/resources. Identify where additional supports are needed.</p> <p>Evidence: Moderate Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Students respond with how they think they should answer instead of how they are; or, (2) students do not want to share information because they're not sure how data will be used. (3) Question framing or language could be triggering to students.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 2F Guide</p>
			Beginning of School	Action Community Professional Development	<p>Change 3F: Onboarding Students in a New Context: Develop a return to school onboarding experience that reframes COVID-19 as something the school community is experiencing together, ultimately building off ideas like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are all in this together • This is challenging, but we will find a way through • We will support each other <p>Evidence: Strong Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Experience is not coherent, or unevenly delivered, resulting in no shared narrative or common vision.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 3F Guide</p>

B	R	E	Timing	Structure	Change Idea	Context Guidance
			Beginning of School	Action Community Student-Adult Relationship Structure	<p>Change 4F: Establish 1 to 1 Relationships: Enact a plan and structures to provide all students with consistent, supportive, and frequent 1-1 contact and connections with an adult.</p> <p>Evidence: Strong Impact: High at the Individual Student Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Matches are made arbitrarily or without criteria, which lead to minimal impact.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 4F Guide</p>
			Early Fall	Action Community	<p>Change 5F: Modify and Expand Student Activities: Adapt and modify student activities so they can continue under your new context. Focus on activities that are important to student identity or supportive peer relationships. Wherever possible, have this be strongly student driven and involve them in figuring out needed modifications.</p> <p>Evidence: Moderate Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance and Behavior</p> <p>Risks: (1) Mindset that safety limits the number of student activities that can be modified, or (2) Mindset that there are more pressing needs, which lead to the effort being poorly implemented.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 5F Guide</p>

B	R	E	Timing	Structure	Change Idea	Context Guidance
			Early Fall	Action Community Professional Development	<p>Change 6F: Short Activities for Physical and Emotional Health: Implement a set of short but consistent activities which promote emotional and physical health</p> <p>Evidence: Moderate Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Choosing ineffective activities or aren't engaging for students. (2) Effective activities unevenly or not consistently implemented. (3) Mindset challenge from adults where this is seen as one too many things to implement.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 6F Guide</p>
			Early Fall	Action Community Data Review and Response Team	<p>Change 7F: Data Review & Response Team: Use a Data Review & Response Team to Track, Progress Monitor, and Respond to student on-track indicators and adapted measures due to COVID-19.</p> <p>Evidence: Strong Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Team lacks capacity or leadership support to regularly meet or act on developed interventions/supports. (2) Student needs overwhelm size of team, leading to a triage of supports that doesn't impact a significant number of students. (3) Lack of consistent data collection and tracking leading to incorrect or outdated decisions.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 7F Guide</p>

B	R	E	Timing	Structure	Change Idea	Context Guidance
			Mid-Fall	Action Community Professional Development	<p>Change 8F: Create Pro-Social Activities: Create opportunities for all student to be involved in Pro-Social Activities (e.g., helping others directly or indirectly).</p> <p>Evidence: Strong Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Staff mindsets that don't value the activities. (2) Students see opportunities as contrived (3) Lack of follow through that undermines morale for change.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 8F Guide</p>
			Mid-Fall	Action Community Professional Development	<p>Change 9F: Build a Sense of Belonging and Engagement: Employ Intentional Strategies to Build Belonging and Engagement at the Classroom Level</p> <p>Evidence: Moderate Impact: High at the Classroom Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Classroom teachers lack training or support. (2) Mindset challenges preventing implementation (3) Uneven implementation across classrooms resulting in students having varied experiences of belonging.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 9F Guide</p>
			Early Fall	Action Community Data Review and Response Team	<p>Change 10F: Action Community Team: Develop your Action Community Team and Engage in the Action Community Work.</p> <p>Evidence: Moderate Impact: High at the Whole School Level Outcomes: Attendance, Behavior, Course Performance</p> <p>Risks: (1) Decisions to adapt, adopt, or abandon changes are not based in enough data. (2) The team is not given enough authority to be viewed as a legitimate driver of school change (3) Supports to the school are only seen as "advisory," which limits motivation to implement work.</p>	 <p>Change works in both virtual and in-person contexts when using relevant guidance.</p> <p>Change 10F Guide</p>