

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS



# MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

The Cues and Conditions  
of Student Belonging

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**EQUAL**  
OPPORTUNITY  
SCHOOLS

PREPARED BY

Holly Karakos, Ph.D.

Sasha Rabkin, Ed.D.

Alejandro Torres, Ph.D.



# MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

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## The Cues and Conditions of Student Belonging



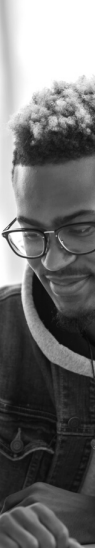
As education systems have increasingly focused on the social-emotional aspects of learning (SEL), students' sense of belonging has emerged as key to their positive, successful experiences in schools (Osterman, 2000). However, research has made clear that student belonging is inequitably experienced in the racialized contexts of schools (Gray, Hope, and Matthews, 2018). For nearly three years, EOS utilized traditional measures of belonging uncertainty aligned with those developed by Walton and Cohen (2007). While this measurement approach highlighted inequities in sense of belonging, we came to believe that the moment in time focus on student-reported belonging placed an undue burden on low-income and

students of color to identify with and "belong" in racialized school environments. In addition, we found that educators were likely to mistake acquiescence for belonging without attention to the enabling conditions or leading indicators of perceived belonging. That is, the assumption that students of color should feel like they belong in racist education environments was something we found to be problematic. To better understand students' experiences of belonging and provide actionable steps for schools to create belonging-rich spaces, we engaged in a year-long deep-dive into experiences of belonging for students of color.

Belonging is a lagging indicator connected and enhanced by a set of leading indicators that promote or create conditions for it to blossom. If we could move “upstream” we could begin to shift the burden of belonging to the system and away from a burden on the students. We began to refer to the difference here as “mirror measures” not “microscope measures” — those that hold up a mirror to the system and hold it accountable, not those that place students under a

microscope to further atomize or pathologize them. This is not new. A host of researchers (e.g., Gray and colleagues) demonstrate the need to think differently about SEL measures as a consequence of healthy systems – not as the cause. What emerges from our research is the Cues, Conditions, and Experiences of Belonging Diagnostic – a set of five leading indicators focused on the capacity of school systems to develop “belonging possible” environments.





## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED: Belonging Redefined

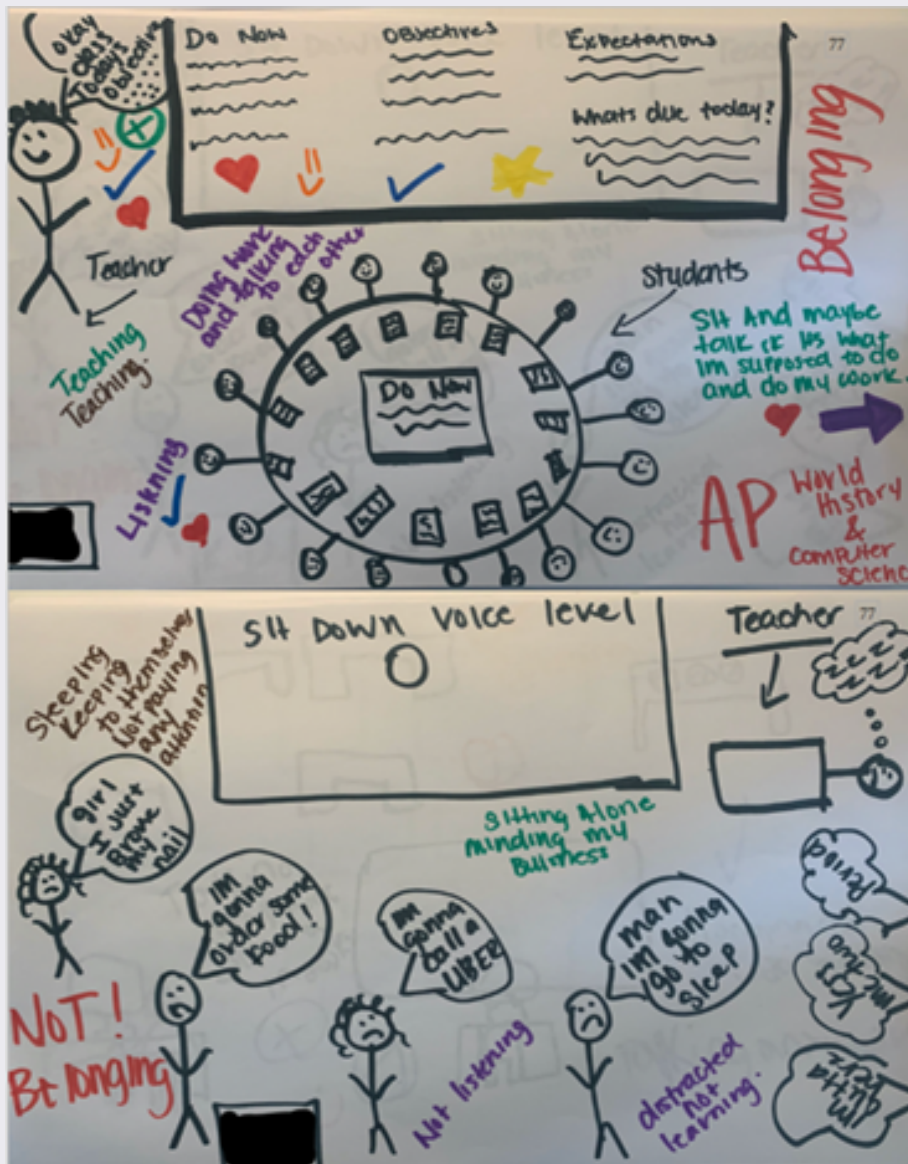
EOS collects data from students and schools through our proprietary Student and Staff survey instruments. Nearly 1.5 million students have taken our survey. In Fall 2018 and then again in Fall 2019, we piloted a set of survey questions designed to understand the conditions that led students of color enrolled in AP/IB classes to report a feeling of belonging. Through analysis of survey data from over 90,000 students of color enrolled in one or more AP/IB class and extensive focus groups with 114 students from diverse partner schools, we identified five leading indicators of belonging. Each indicator was significantly associated with reported belonging in AP/IB classes (our lagging indicator) and with academic outcomes, including AP/IB GPA.



## THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES

One way we gained a more in-depth look into students' experiences of belonging was through focus groups with students. Focus groups engaged students using multiple formats, including drawing, writing, and discussing. For example, students were able to help us see their classrooms from their perspectives by drawing classes where they most and least felt a sense of belonging. These drawings helped us see where students were experiencing the Five Cues and Conditions of Belonging, and how these cues differentiated classrooms where students did – and did not – experience belonging.

### STUDENTS' DRAWINGS OF THEIR CLASSROOMS USED SYMBOLS TO SHOW WHEN THE FIVE CUES/EXPERIENCES WERE – AND WERE NOT – PRESENT.



#### Key to Symbols



Culturally Relevant Curriculum



Valued as a Whole Person



Feedback for Growth



Part of a Community



Teacher Talks About Race



—In a Positive Way



Students Talks About Race



—In a Positive Way

In addition to highlighting these Five Cues and Experiences of Belonging, students also emphasized the importance of meaningful relationships with students and teachers. Whether through seating arrangements, group work, or ice-breaker-style games, students valued these structured opportunities and connected them with their academic success, including through getting and giving help in class. Similarly, opportunities to connect with teachers to form meaningful relationships also contributed to students' comfort in seeking and receiving help, asking questions, and understanding class material.

Our research is consistent with external work that describes one reason belonging is particularly important for

students of color. In the racialized contexts of schooling, students are often subject to negative stereotypes about their academic abilities, which draws attention away from school and leads to stressful experiences of racism (Gray, Hope, & Byrd, 2020). When academic contexts disavow these racist ideas – through things such as culturally relevant teaching and curriculum, authentic conversations about race, and meaningful relationships with teachers and peers – conditions are created for students of color to belong and more fully engage with the instructional content.

As a set of recommendations, we are confident that educators, intermediary organizations, and other school serving organizations can begin to focus specifically on these five indicators.





## MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

*Something matters only if it is used.*

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Often, education lacks a direct through line from problems, to research, to practice and implementation. We are a field with minimal Research and Development (R &D) that tends to leave the development of most ideas to researchers or policy makers. A core operating norm at EOS is the responsibility to ensure that measures can and do matter to the educational lives of Black and Brown young people and the educators who serve them. Our capacity to be both researchers and practitioners and our through line directly to schools and districts, along with significant analytics and data visualization capacity, provide us with a new and dynamic perspective. In addition to the development of these five leading indicators, we developed a host of actionable, real-time data visualizations to operationalize use of these measures by school and system leaders. Through Tableau dashboards and school-based reports, we are reframing our belonging data to highlight these cues and conditions for belonging. For example, we can highlight Black and Hispanic students' perspectives on culturally relevant curriculum in their AP/IB classes. These data provide guidance for specific ways educators can transform their practices to better facilitate student belonging.

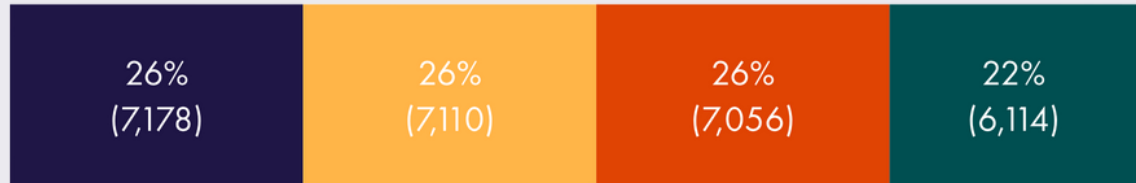
## BLACK AND HISPANIC STUDENTS' VIEWS OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM

*Perspectives of Black and Hispanic students currently enrolled in one or more AICE/AP/IB class*

I have had opportunities in class that helped me make connections and find things in common with students whose racial, ethnic, or social class background are different from mine



I have participated in activities or assignments that explicitly discuss things like race or gender



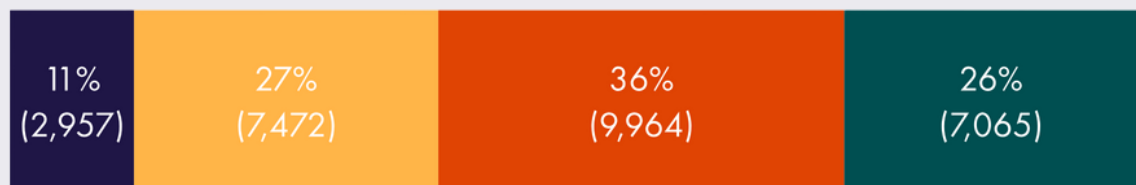
I have participated in activities or assignments that helped me express my values and personal identity



Readings, assignments, activities, and classroom decorations include role models, writers, and people who share my ethnic or racial background



The activities and assignments in class feel relevant to me



■ Not at all true of my class   ■ Somewhat true of my class   ■ Mostly true of my class   ■ Completely true of my class

Additionally, we continue to develop and improve measures of belonging that matter. We are currently piloting additional items to better measure meaningful relationships and to refine the ways we measure the Five Cues and Conditions of Belonging.



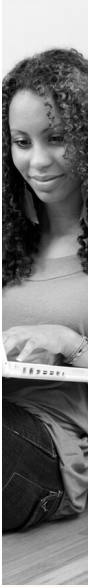


## MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

### *Six Guiding Principles In Promoting Racial Equity*

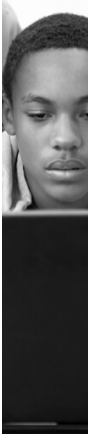
EOS has designed a set of guiding principles for the development and application of measures that matter to promote racial equity and equitable learning environments.





## BIAS TOWARDS ACTION

Collectively, education has spent more than 50 years tolerating insufficient progress in the development of educational environments that serve the humanity, talent, and genius of Black and Brown young people. Now is the time to adopt a bias toward action – not the rushed act without thinking approach that urgency sometimes elicits, but the unapologetic and clear-eyed action that injustice demands. As we seek to utilize measures to understand the experiences of Black and Brown students, we should do so with an eye towards the actions we can take to immediately alleviate the conditions that oppress and deny their humanity. These are actions we can take without further analysis or research.



## REAL TIME HOLISTIC DATA

Education is rife with post-mortem data. Any effort that uses the past as a predictor of the future is expecting a future very much like the past itself. As possible, intermediary organizations should look for ways to provide districts and schools with real-time data and insights about the conditions and health of the system. To the extent possible, these should be gathered within weeks or months, not years. Real-time data allows us to make pivots, continuously improve, and change our behaviors. We can engage with real-time data and expect to have an impact.



## MIRRORS NOT MICROSCOPES

As discussed above, it is essential that any effort to build and promote equitable learning environments has as its core function the holding up of a mirror to the system and developing accountability for the enabling conditions of racial equity and liberatory environments. This is not to say that there isn't a place for the assessment of students, but expecting student outcomes without previously expecting system conditions that enable student outcomes is doomed to fail.



## LEAD WITH RACE

Education has created a racialized, dehumanizing, and antagonistic environment for the majority of Black and Brown young people. We are over-reliant on assessments with proven racial bias, we lack structures to promote and produce teachers and leaders who look like the young people they teach, and we've criminalized behaviors cementing not only a school-to-prison pipeline but a school-to-school or class-to-class pipeline that ensures alienation and appropriate resistance. Leading with race means that we accept the fundamental flaw of the system and embrace analysis, action, and outcomes that embrace the essential factor of race in our education system. It does not mean eschewing other factors completely, but it does mean centering and fixating our efforts on the primordial nature of racialized and racist school environments.



## TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

Efforts to solve only for targeted groups or for everyone will not extricate us from this predicament. As Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute, John A. Powell\* and colleagues have shown, the most efficacious approach is to set universal goals – high quality, relevant and dynamic education for all – to determine who is furthest from this goal, and then develop interventions that solve for that group first. From these solutions, it is then possible to work back toward the center and reapply these targeted strategies to the whole. For educators and education systems, this means a specific set of efforts to solve – once and for all – the inequities of those furthest from educational justice.

\*According to [belonging.berkeley.edu](http://belonging.berkeley.edu), John A. Powell does not capitalize his name.



## DATA ONLY APPROACH VS. DATA & STUDENT VOICES APPROACH

No matter how much we may want it to be true, data and measurement will not drive out injustice. They are necessary but insufficient. What we need is a powerful and creative reimagining of education and the relationships, trust, and possibilities that animate it. Without trusting relationships, we cannot assume that young people will be served well. Educators and education systems should rapidly double down on the building of dynamic and creative spaces where young people see their identities reflected and where their humanity is front and center. In addition, adults should be trained or retrained to know and see their students with fresh eyes.

Finally, our conversations with students also helped us have a more nuanced understanding of how these cues and experiences shaped their sense of belonging. Their words help personalize themes we're discussing and highlight the urgency of transforming educational spaces to create environments where students of color can bring their full authentic selves and have their brilliance honored.



**“...It’s just really diverse in [my belonging class], there’s tons of people that look like me...or even look not White. Just having other people that look like you is helpful in making you feel like you’re supposed to be somewhere. And for our suggestions, kind of like how ...they were saying they don’t really change the curriculum, I feel like earlier on it was meant for White people, when AP classes were mainly for White people, and White people were the main ones taking them, they haven’t really adjusted the curriculum so it’s not really catered to everyone...” —Student of color from an EOS partner school**



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## CONTACT US

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**EQUAL**  
**OPPORTUNITY**  
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5601 Sixth Avenue South, Suite 258  
Seattle, WA 98108  
[reporting@eoschools.org](mailto:reporting@eoschools.org) | 206.547.1167