

## Introduction

A Hanover Research (Hanover) member district has prioritized reconfiguring district schools to provide the best education possible to students. As part of this effort, the district has completed a series of projects with Hanover to better understand best practices for school reconfiguration as well as to identify concrete steps for closing and reopening schools. As the next phase of their research, the member is now interested in exploring how to merge schools as they are planning to combine two middle schools in the 2025-2026 school year.

The member has partnered with Hanover on a research brief exploring how to merge schools with diverse climates and cultures. This report provides the district with information on research-based practices for successfully merging schools so that education partners at the new combined school have a shared identity, culture, and purpose.

## Recommendations

- **Align academic programs through active teacher engagement.** To align academic programs effectively, ensure that teachers' insights and expertise guide the integration of curriculum, teaching methods, programs, and culture from their previous settings. The district may also consider encouraging its education partners from both schools to collectively identify gaps in academic programming and develop strategies to better serve students from both communities.
- **Establish consistent teacher collaboration and student community building.** Districts should consider opportunities such as common planning time, professional learning communities, and critical friend groups to encourage teachers to share instructional strategies, address student-related matters, and develop connections. In student community-building, district leaders should consider a combination of in-class activities and extracurricular activities that foster a sense of belonging and trust among students.
- **Support teachers in fostering classroom spaces that have collective values, are rooted in social-emotional learning, and are safe, culturally responsive learning environments.** The practices outlined in Figures 1.6, 1.7, and 1.8 may serve as helpful resources to districts in supporting teachers across these areas as they work to build a sense of belonging among students. District

leaders may also consider soliciting feedback before, during, and after the merger to determine the most effective district- and school-level supports and resources for teachers in fostering a positive student climate.

## Key Findings

- **In merging schools, education partners should collaboratively establish core values for the new community, reflecting on existing values to create unified goals.** This includes aligning academics by setting a vision, choosing a curriculum, ensuring consistency across grades, and addressing pedagogical differences. It's also a chance to identify and address academic gaps, improving support for diverse students through new or expanded programs.
- **Shared ownership and collaboration are essential for teachers during a school merger, creating a sense of community and fostering a collective commitment to achieve school goals and support student success.** Schools and districts encourage shared ownership through open and transparent communication, collaborative decision-making, and professional learning. Through formal collaborative spaces (e.g., professional learning as well as informal avenues of relationship-building (e.g., celebrating accomplishments) teachers can share best practices and build connections that support a positive teacher climate and culture.
- **Elevating student voice and inviting students to create shared classroom and school values can foster a sense of belonging within the school community.** Districts, schools, and education partners can amplify student voice through a number of different formalized pathways including student surveys, student governments/councils, and democratic classroom practices. Furthermore, incorporating student perspectives into the creation of shared values and norms can empower students and enhance their engagement in the learning process.
- **Community building is essential for supporting students' sense of belonging and well-being following a school merger.** Intentional community-building activities, such as advisory classes, community-building circles, and organized partner work, are crucial in fostering positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging among students. Additionally, schools should prioritize creating shared physical spaces and activities that cater to community-

centered needs, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of these community-building efforts.

- **Social-emotional learning (SEL) and identity-safe teaching practices are critical for supporting students' well-being and sense of belonging following a school merger.** In the context of a school merger, implementing SEL practices, such as check-ins, group work, and reflective writing, contributes to a positive climate by developing individual competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness. Additionally, identity-safe teaching practices, where teachers affirm students' individual identities, backgrounds, and cultures, allow students to feel emotionally and psychologically safe within their learning environment.

## Staff Climate and Culture

The following section provides best practices for creating a positive staff climate, culture, and community following school mergers. The section focuses on developing core values, aligning academic programming and identities, and encouraging shared ownership through a range of mechanisms such as collaboration.

## Developing Shared Core Values

**Prior to coming together as one school, education partners from each school should work together to “shape core values for a joined school community.”**<sup>1</sup> This ensures that the newly formed school will have a strong foundation of shared beliefs that guide decision-making in the best interest of students, families, and communities. Figure 1.1 provides an outline of reflection questions crafted by Boston Public Schools for each school to consider individually, and collectively, in defining joint core values that adequately represent the existing identities of each community.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1.1: Core Values Reflection Questions**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What do we want for our students?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What do we believe all students should have?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What are the assets of our community?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What do we value?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	If our new combined school community gave students everything they needed to be successful, what would that look like?
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	What are our shared values, principles, and beliefs?

Source: Boston Public Schools<sup>3</sup>

## Aligning Academic Programs

**When merging two schools, districts should support teachers in navigating and aligning two sets of curriculum and academic programming.**<sup>4</sup> Developing trust, providing transparency, and directly involving educators in the process are integral steps in the merger's sustained success.<sup>5</sup> District leaders, school administrators, and educators from both schools should come together to define an academic vision, district-approved curriculum, and alignment of learning across grade levels that reflect the existing academic identity of each school.<sup>6</sup> The inter-school communication between teachers should happen early and often throughout the consolidation process.<sup>7</sup> Without intentional, district-facilitated transparency and communication between the schools regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and vision, educators can feel that the process diminishes their individual and school-wide academic identities and approaches.<sup>8</sup>



### *Spotlight: Merging Curriculums between Two New York City Schools*

In 2020, two Brooklyn Schools, Arts and Letters (A&L) and P.S. 305, merged to become Arts and Letters 305 United. In a case study examining the process, the teachers from each school expressed the importance of cross-school communication in the merging process, particularly where curriculum is concerned.<sup>9</sup>

Staff at A&L used “teacher-created curricula and units of study,” while “P.S. 305 used curricula that were provided by New York State or DOE.”<sup>10</sup> The units of study used at A&L “spoke to the progressive learning style that was core to the vision of the school.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, “P.S. 305 staff used a more structured, less interdisciplinary curriculum that lent itself to established city and state resources and assessments.”<sup>12</sup>

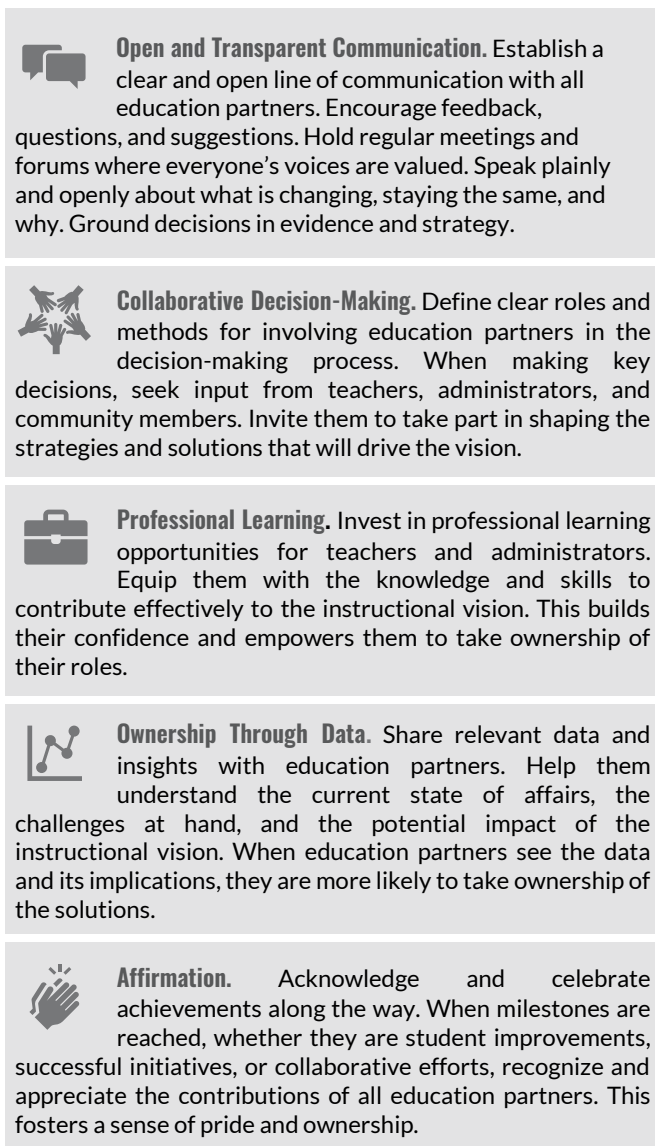
While implementing a student-centered curriculum acted as a unifying goal and allowed staff to see the benefits of each other's pedagogical approaches, many teachers expressed the desire for more direct and intentional conversations on merging teaching styles and curriculums, as well as greater input into the merging process as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

**Merging schools can also serve as an opportunity to address gaps in academic programming and develop strategies to better support students from both communities.**<sup>14</sup> This process can involve expanding academic and enrichment programs that one school already provides or implementing opportunities neither currently offers.<sup>15</sup> However, to do so successfully may require targeted hiring, restructuring, or professional development.<sup>16</sup> For example, if one school has a special education model in which students with special needs learn alongside their peers, general education teachers from the second school that does not offer this model may require additional professional development and support to ensure a smooth transition.<sup>17</sup>

## Encouraging Shared Ownership

Shared teacher ownership is crucial for any major change, including school consolidation. Shared teacher ownership encourages teachers to engage in a collective commitment to achieve school goals and support the academic success and wellbeing of students.<sup>18</sup> Districts and schools should develop a comprehensive strategy for promoting shared teacher ownership that involves transparent communication, shared decision-making, individualized professional learning, data-driven insights, and acknowledgment of achievements (See Figure 1.2).<sup>19</sup> Thoughtful implementation of these strategies may be especially critical in sustaining teacher commitment and buy-in to the vision of the newly merged school.

Figure 1.2: Strategies for Developing Shared Ownership

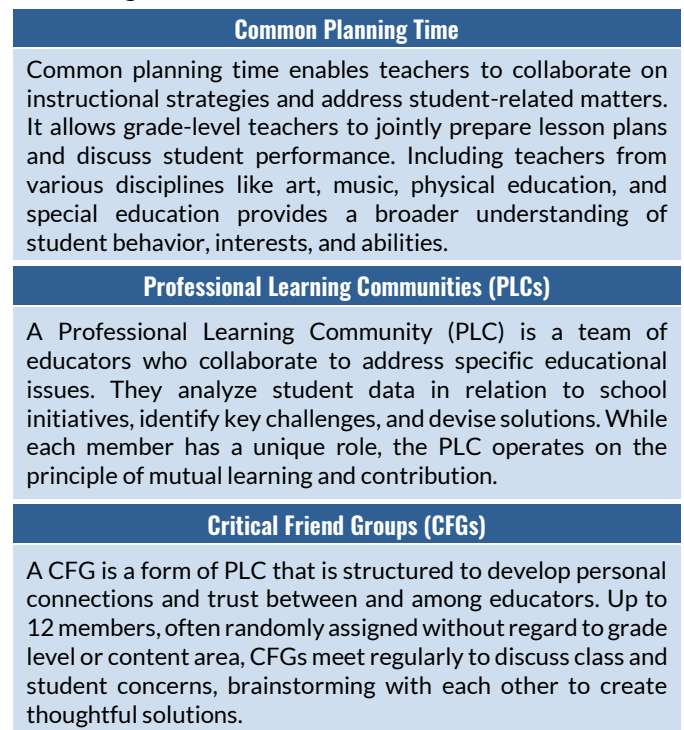


Source: Leading Educators<sup>20</sup>

## Collaboration

Collaboration is a key component of developing shared ownership, as well as facilitating the school consolidation process.<sup>21</sup> Teacher collaboration can create space for sharing best practices, creating a positive learning environment, and building a sense of community.<sup>22</sup> The benefits associated with collaboration may be particularly valuable to teachers coming together from different schools. Figure 1.3, on the following page, provides potential collaboration structures for school mergers. However, districts and schools should not limit collaborative efforts to these models. Collaboration may also include in-classroom collaboration efforts (e.g., parallel teaching, team teaching) and informal avenues of trust and relationship-building (e.g., establishing traditions, celebrating accomplishments, recognizing individual contributions).<sup>23</sup>

Figure 1.3: Teacher Collaboration Models



Source: American University School of Education<sup>24</sup>

## Student Climate and Culture

While the following aspects of building or improving a positive student climate and culture are not unique to the process of school mergers, they remain relevant to supporting students across all learning environments, including those experiencing large-scale change such as a merger.

## Community-Building

In supporting students' sense of belonging, schools should prioritize intentional community-building

activities that actively support student relationships with peers.<sup>25</sup> Not only are peer relationships integral to maintaining a sense of belonging, but they can also “reduce student stress, support mental health, strengthen communication skills, and mitigate negative family and community factors.”<sup>26</sup> Districts and schools might consider practices that build trust and connection such as [community-building circles](#), [advisory classes](#), and organized partner work (e.g., [turn to your partner](#), [partner clocks](#)).<sup>27</sup> In addition, schools may consider setting up shared physical spaces that fulfill specific community-centered needs (e.g., whole-group meeting spots, displays for student work, cool-down/conflict-resolution areas).<sup>28</sup> Figure 1.4 provides a sample of practices for schools to consider in building community among students in the classroom.

**Figure 1.4: Community-Building Activities**

→ **Whiteboard Question**

By posting a question in a visible place for students to answer upon entering class, this strategy transforms the whiteboard into a dynamic student space for engagement, starting with lighter topics and progressing to deeper questions as comfort grows, allowing students to build on each other's responses and even contribute their own questions, fostering a sense of ownership and community.

→ **Walk and Talk**

Teachers invite students to connect with two peers and answer questions geared toward social connection before engaging with curricular content. The first person a student connects with should be someone whom they feel comfortable with and speak to often, and the second person should be someone with whom they rarely interact. Over time, students form larger groups, indicating successful relationship building.

→ **Tiered Mini Interviews**

At the start of the year or after breaks, structuring a relationship-building activity like tiered mini-interviews helps students assess their familiarity with peers through a worksheet and encourages them to introduce themselves to less-known classmates, fostering new connections in a structured yet personal way.

→ **Digital Quizzes**

Digital quizzes, comprising questions related to each student, serve as an engaging activity to start a class after a break or before a review, fostering familiarity among students and allowing the teacher to assess their knowledge of each student, with the added excitement of real-time scoring through online quiz platforms.

→ **Community Building Circles**

Regular class meetings, often in a circle, help foster belonging and trust, introduce academic content, and can be adapted for various educational levels and occasions, with consistent scheduling enhancing their effectiveness through continuous relationship and skill development.

→ **Advisory Classes**

Advisory is a practice implemented in schools to foster meaningful relationships between teachers and students, providing a dedicated time for social and emotional learning. It varies in frequency and structure across schools, but at its core, it aims to increase students' sense of belonging, improve relationships, and prepare students for life outside of school by teaching non-traditional academic or social-emotional skills, often with room for innovation and flexibility in its curriculum.

→ **Organized Partner Work**

- The 'clock partners' method facilitates student collaboration by pairing them with various peers through a clock drawing, enriching learning with diverse viewpoints and fostering respectful communication, while also incorporating teacher-assigned partnerships for strategic collaboration.
- The "Turn to Your Partner" procedure promotes students' learning by facilitating discussions between pairs, enhancing their communication and idea-sharing skills, and fostering a respectful, collaborative classroom environment.

Source: Multiple<sup>29</sup>

**While in-class community-building is critical, less-structured, non-academic social activities remain important in building connection and belonging.** Creating groups or clubs that reflect student interests, providing peer mentorship opportunities, and organizing events such as “school dances, concerts, theater performances, sports games, school trips,” all serve as mechanisms for the development and maintenance of community for students.<sup>30</sup> In addition, schools can provide students with agency and a sense of ownership in developing new ideas for community-building events.<sup>31</sup>



See Greater Good in Education's [36 Questions to Help Kids Make Friends](#) for a facilitation guide for a scaffolded, in-school friendship-building activity where “pairs of students take turns asking and answering sets of questions, helping them to form a new friendship.”<sup>32</sup>

## Student Voice

**Encouraging and elevating student voice contributes to a climate that makes more students feel like they belong.**<sup>33</sup>

The district should provide pathways to amplify student voice consistently throughout the merging process and beyond to ensure it adequately addresses student concerns and needs.<sup>34</sup> This will create a foundation for students to feel empowered, engaged, and included within their changing school environment.<sup>35</sup> Figure 1.5 provides strategies for elevating student voice during the merger. These strategies include student surveys, student perspectives on governing bodies, student-led conferences, democratic classroom practices, youth participatory action research, and personalized learning.



**Figure 1.5: Strategies for Elevating Student Voice**

<p><b>Student Surveys</b></p> <p>Surveys are a versatile tool for gathering diverse student perspectives on various aspects of their educational experience, with their impact on policy and student experience varying based on their design, purpose, and the use of results, while also necessitating attention to data reliability and student privacy considerations.</p>	<p><b>Student Perspective on Governing Bodies</b></p> <p>Incorporating students into decision-making bodies at various educational levels can enhance engagement, provide unique insights, and improve performance, while also aiding in the development of culturally relevant educational practices and materials by highlighting student interests and values.</p>
<p><b>Student Governments or Councils</b></p> <p>Student governments, comprising elected or appointed representatives including roles like president and secretary, typically manage activities such as homecoming and fundraising, while lacking authority in administrative decisions, and serve as a liaison between students and administrators, with efforts to ensure diverse representation to reflect the entire student body's interests.</p>	<p><b>Student Journalism</b></p> <p>Student journalism offers a dynamic platform for students to engage in information gathering, interviewing, and reporting on various issues, utilizing diverse media such as blogs, social media, and traditional newspapers, while also developing valuable writing and reporting skills that prepare them for future careers, although the level of editorial freedom varies significantly across schools.</p>
<p><b>Student-Led Conferences</b></p> <p>Student-led conferences involve students in discussions about their academic progress and challenges, enabling them to present a portfolio of their work and collaborate with teachers and parents to address challenges, with the nature of participation varying by age and development level.</p>	<p><b>Democratic Classroom Practices</b></p> <p>Democratic classroom practices involve students in shaping their learning environment, with teachers facilitating group discussions for decision-making on classroom rules, norms, and curriculum, and students providing periodic feedback, fostering collaboration skills, and ensuring the learning environment meets everyone's needs.</p>
<p><b>Youth Participatory Action Research</b></p> <p>The youth participatory action research approach empowers students to conduct systematic research on pressing issues in their schools or communities and develop solutions, with guidance from teachers or counselors, fostering key learning outcomes and often involving collaboration with community groups, making it particularly suitable for</p>	<p><b>Personalized Learning</b></p> <p>Personalized learning, which tailors the educational experience to individual students' needs, skills, and interests, empowers students by giving them more control over the content, pace, and method of their learning, potentially transforming elementary and secondary education by allowing for more flexible approaches to earning course credit based</p>

middle and high school on demonstrated mastery or competency.

Source: Center for American Progress<sup>36</sup>

See CAP's [Elevating Student Voice in Education](#) report for case studies of districts implementing the student voice strategies provided above.<sup>37</sup>

## Shared Classroom and School Values

In the classroom, teachers can facilitate the co-creation of shared agreements that define the collective values, norms, and rules that impact students' day-to-day instructional experiences.<sup>38</sup> Creating a sense of community, classroom shared agreements “reflect students' shared understanding of how they wish to be treated and will treat one another, and connect to the school's vision and schoolwide norms.”<sup>39</sup> Figure 1.6 provides guidance on helping students define these shared values and norms, and how they should be exercised in practice.

**Figure 1.6: Defining and Exercising Shared Student Values**

**Initiate the collaborative process by asking reflective questions.** Consider questions such as: How do you know that a class is successful? How do you want to feel when you walk into a class? How should people be treated in class?

**Define and select class values.** Introduce the concept of values with examples like grit, growth mindset, and respect. Collaboratively choose class values, aiming for a diverse yet concise list that reflects the collective vision. Ensure that class values mirror and align with broader school values.

**Display class values.** Create a prominent display of the agreed-upon values where all students can see, reinforcing their importance and presence in the classroom.

**Daily engagement with values.** Encourage students to select and focus on a class value each day, including reflection on how they embodied this value, to foster personal growth and improve the class environment.

**Celebrate value demonstration.** Implement a daily shout-out routine to recognize and celebrate students who exemplify class values, enhancing motivation and acknowledging progress.

**Use values for restorative practices.** Employ class values as a basis for addressing and correcting problematic behaviors through private conversations and reflective tasks, focusing on growth rather than punishment.

**Foster a democratic learning environment.** Allow the practice of collaborative class values to transform teaching and the student experience, enabling students to actively shape their learning community based on chosen values.

Source: Multiple<sup>40</sup>

## Social-Emotional Learning

**Social-emotional learning (SEL) is integral to the creation and maintenance of a healthy school and student climate.** SEL is an evidence-based process that contributes to a positive student climate by providing students with in-class opportunities to “apply...knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”<sup>41</sup> Figure 1.7 provides an outline of core SEL competencies, as well as classroom-level practices for teachers to employ. These competencies (e.g., relationship skills, social and self-awareness, etc.) and practices (e.g., student check-ins, group work, reflective writing) may be particularly useful for students coming together from different schools in building relationships and creating a safe, healthy learning environment.

Figure 1.7: SEL Practices and Competencies


Practices	Competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start the day with a student check-in.</li> <li>Create opportunities for partner and group work.</li> <li>Nurture a culture of kindness.</li> <li>Build social-emotional vocabulary.</li> <li>Include reflective writing.</li> <li>Incorporate a calm-down corner.</li> <li>Allow time for talking.</li> <li>Teach mindfulness.</li> <li>Encourage expression through art.</li> <li>Teach kids to work toward a common goal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-Awareness</li> <li>Self-Management</li> <li>Responsible Decision-Making</li> <li>Relationship Skills</li> <li>Social Awareness</li> </ul>

Source: Multiple<sup>42</sup>

## Identity Safe Learning

**Creating a positive and accepting student climate within merged schools requires the affirmation of students’ individual identities, backgrounds, and cultures.**<sup>43</sup> Identity-safe learning environments allow students to feel emotionally and psychologically safe, as teachers foster “[appreciation] and [understanding] of students’ experiences, assets, and backgrounds...in ways that counteract societal stereotypes.”<sup>44</sup> This approach involves elevating diversity as a resource for learning, meaning that teachers implement culturally responsive pedagogy that celebrates students’ identity-based differences and integrates them into the learning process.<sup>45</sup> Figure 1.8, on the following page, provides an outline of culturally responsive pedagogical practices for teachers to consider in supporting students’ sense of belonging within the school community. These practices may be particularly relevant in the school consolidation process if the merging student populations possess different demographic makeups.<sup>46</sup>

Figure 1.8: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy



**Educators can be culturally responsive and learn about their students’ backgrounds** through home visits, conversations with parents and students, community walks, journaling, and community meetings.



**Educators can create learning experiences that enable young people to explore their own identities** through self-exploration and pursuit of community issues from a social justice perspective. For example, in a Grade 9 ethnic studies course at Social Justice Humanitas Academy near Los Angeles, students engage in projects that help them learn concepts and skills through an analysis of their multifaceted identities.



**Educators can provide opportunities for student voice and agency.** For example, reality pedagogy allows students to take ownership of their learning by co-teaching each other and building from their cultural and home life contexts by sharing relevant artifacts.



**Educators can ensure that students have rich learning experiences using culturally responsive content and materials** that reflect and respect the legitimacy and accomplishments of different cultures; empower students to value all cultures; incorporate cultural information into the heart of the curriculum, instead of simply adding it on at the margins; and relate new information to student's life experiences.



**Educators can build bridges between students' experiences and school content.** For example, the use of rap songs to illustrate symbolic meanings in literature can help a culturally responsive teacher carry student insights into the study of more formal canonic texts.

Source: Learning Policy Institute<sup>47</sup>

## Caveat

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## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Figure text taken verbatim from: Ibid.

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<sup>9</sup> “Intentional and Inclusive School Mergers,” Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>42</sup> Figure text taken verbatim from: [1] “10 Tips for Teachers to Practice Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom.” Mental Health America. <https://www.mhanational.org/blog/10-tips-for-classroom-social-emotional-learning> [2] “The Importance of Social Emotional Learning for All Students Across All Grades.” NEA. [https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Social%20and%20Emotional%20Learning%20Response\\_Bkgdr%20v3.pdf](https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/Social%20and%20Emotional%20Learning%20Response_Bkgdr%20v3.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> [1] “The Importance of Student Sense of Belonging.” Institute of Education Sciences. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/midwest/pdf/RELMW-6-2-3-4-StudBelong-508.pdf> [2] “Student Sense of Belonging in Schools: Predictive Factors.” Oregon Department of Education. [3] “‘I Hate It Here’: How Minoritized Youth Perceive School and Social Belonging in Contested Racial Climates of Public Schools | NYU Steinhardt.” <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/i-hate-it-here-how-minoritized-youth-perceive-school-and-social-belonging-contested> [4] Darling-Hammond, L. and J. DePaoli. “Why School Climate Matters and What Can Be Done to Improve It.” [https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2020/05/Darling-Hammond-DePaoli\\_May-2020-Standard.pdf](https://nasbe.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/2020/05/Darling-Hammond-DePaoli_May-2020-Standard.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Hernández, L. and L. Darling-Hammond. “Creating Identity-Safe Schools and Classrooms.” Learning Policy Institute, 2022. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/wce-identity-safe-schools-classrooms>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Intentional and Inclusive School Mergers,” Op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Figure text taken verbatim with modifications from: Hernández and Darling-Hammond, Op. cit.