Reflecting on our Practice: Ten Ways Schools Can Foster Belonging Among Students With and Without Disabilities

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Today's presentation is about fostering belonging for students with disabilities, and it's sponsored by the PROGRESS Center which is an OSEP-funded technical assistance center. That's the Office of Special Education Programs which is part of the U.S. Department of Education.

The focus of the center is on improving progress and outcomes for students with disabilities. And the center was developed in response to the Endrew F. Supreme Court decision, which states that an individualized education program must be reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress in light of their circumstances. So that the impetus for the work we do. And the focus of the center is really twofold: working toward an outcome of ensuring free appropriate public education and access for students with disabilities.

So we focus first on the development of high quality educational programming and then also on implementation of that programming for students with disabilities. And for students to benefit, we understand that these programs must be implement with a high degree of fidelity and in an appropriate environment. So that's the focus of today's webinar which is really on that notion of the school ecosystem and specifically how we can foster a sense of belonging among all students and particularly students with disabilities in the school setting.

Before we jump in, we wanted to get a little bit more information about our audience. What is your current role that's led to you join us today? Options are special educator, general educator, administrator or other.

We'll take a moment. I see a couple people adding today chat they've got some specialists related to risk providers as well. We're thrilled to see the range of folk here today.

So looks like we're actually settling on most of our participants are actually people who are fall in that other category. So about 25% are special educators, 20% administrators and then other 55% are in other roles related to risk providers, faculty, researchers, doctoral students and so forth. We do not have any general educators on unfortunately today but hopefully that is an audience we can continue to work to try to engage in this work. With that, I believe I will stop -- I think I've shared the -- I believe I just shared the results. But if that did not come through, I apologize.

Today, as I mentioned, we're very fortunate to have Dr. Erik Carter, who is the Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University to talk to us about his framework for fostering belonging with students with be disabilities so I'm happy to turn it to Dr. Carter and let him take it away. Thanks so much.

Erik Carter: Thank you, Rebecca. And I'm grateful to be with you and join you in this very important work of creating communities of belonging for all the students who are part of our schools. Thank you to the progress center for your ongoing investment in equipping schools to promote rigor and relevance and relationships for students with disabilities.

It seemed to me belonging is all the more likely to be experienced when we address all these three things together. My gratitude goes to you who are joining this webinar and teachers and school leaders and professionals and maybe some parents and service providers as well.
But those who are coming from all around the country who I know care deeply about the flourishing of students and striving to create classrooms and schools and broader communities where students with and without disabilities can live and learn together in community with each other.

That's been the focus of my work, the last 25 years has centered on promoting educational inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities, autism, with other developmental disabilities but I'm excited

to have this time where week reflect together on what it might look like to move in ways that enable more and more students with disabilities to experience that assurance of belonging in their schools, and among their peers. I know this isn't recipe work and not always that easy to do, but I hope you'll pardon the implied simplicity of my title, Ten Ways Schools Can Foster Belonging Among All Students. Let's get started.

I think we can begin by affirming some common ground we probably all would hold. All of us would probably assert that our schools should be places of belonging for every student. We want students to feel at home in our schools and classrooms, to be real true members of their schools.

We want them to feel valued and be accepted by their peers and by staff and teachers and others. Most of us strive to create the kinds of connections among students that we know lead to reciprocal relationships and hopefully friendships, lasting and enduring friendships that lead to people's flourishing. Every student should know they belong, wouldn't you agree? But what does it look like to make that a reality? You see, we're having this conversation today because belonging can still be so elusive for so many of our students, particularly those who have more extensive support needs, and it can't be assumed, and it's not always experienced. Often our efforts to foster relationships tend to take a back seat to our focus on academic, behavioral, and other kinds of outcomes.

And that means that many students find themselves on the periphery of social circles and of school life, maybe overlooked or ignored rather than invited and embraced. So what would it look like to move in ways that change that landscape? That's where I'm going to park the next 45 minutes.

My accent will be on fostering belonging among students with an array of disabilities including with more significant disabilities, but all students. You'll see the framework I share has relevance to the fostering and belonging for anyone in your school, whether or not they have a disability and whether or not their support needs are more extensive. So I want to set the stage for the conversation with a place I often begin in talks, and that's by sharing some of the historical context for our field of special education and also for the experiences of those with disabilities throughout really all corners of our society.

I know that some of you have been at this work a long time. You're special education directors, principals, and this is common knowledge for you but for those who are newer to the field, this might be insightful to think about how far we've come, but also to look backwards on where we've been and how our schools might fall within the stream of educational history. I think when we look backwards at history gives as you hint of where we might go next as well.

So I'll use my own lifespan as a timeframe to talk about this. My kids tend to say I'm old, and of course I protest that, and then they remind me that I was born way back in the 1900s, and I have to relent at that point. So I was born in the early 1970s and that was a time when so many students with disabilities found themselves excluded from public education. Not just our schools, but so many other opportunities that existed throughout our communities. Before Public Law 94142, if we think about the circles on the screen as being members of a particular school or a type of community, maybe yours, we would say there were holes at that time and many students with disabilities were missing from so many communities that were important to be part of.

Of course, so many of advocacy efforts and laws were passed, school reform efforts were undertaken throughout the 70s and 80s, the times I was going to elementary school and middle school and high school. And as those new policies and practices were pursued, we found so often opportunities that emerged for students with disabilities particularly those who are developmental disabilities tended to be offered in a segregated context apart from any other student who didn't have a similar label. That's a strong word, but I think it's fitting for the prevailing models of schooling at the time. They were segregated. Special education schools, for example. Those students graduated so often then to specialized day programs or sheltered workshops or institutional living for adults with disabilities.

What it meant was that for many students maybe most students without disabilities, they were growing up and receiving their formative education in the absence of their peers with disabilities. And consider what that means for communities and civic groups and corporations and congregations those peers will eventually lead if they are growing up and learning in a context that doesn't include those with disabilities.

Over time, fortunately the landscape began to change even further. And as we look at the 80s and 90s, so much of the efforts then were towards ensuring students with disabilities were really integrated, or sometimes talked about "mainstreamed," within the ordinary aspects of their school and also community life. It was important progress, but when you looked closely, there was still a certain kind of separation that existed.

Different classes, down a rarely traveled hallway and looked at communities, large group homes tucked into untraveled parts of town, work enclaves that put people with disabilities near, but not really among, their peers without disabilities. And that preposition is important, near, but not really among, other people without disabilities. The distance between those two words and prepositions is much large and more substantial than we often think.

That takes us to now the present day and the historical progression where I think we often talk about our national emphasis as really ensuring that students with disabilities are part of the same ordinary activities as anyone else in their community. In the same classrooms, and clubs, same jobs or congregational activities and community groups as anyone else. That's been the theme of the last two decades of inclusion, and it's a movement of prepositions. It's moving from being apart from one another to being among one another to now being with one another. And that preposition really does make all the difference.

So you start to look at the screen and see very different portraits of schools, very different portraits of community reflected in the images. I share them for a number of reasons that I think are important to key in on. The first is that what you see on your screen isn't actually a historical portrait of where we've been. It actually reflects a present-day portrait of where we are right now. I don't know what cities or states you're in right now, but you can find examples ever schooling marked by each of these portraits side by side in almost any community.

The second thing I wanted to emphasize is I think these portraits prompt our reflection as we start to think about the schools we work in or schools that we lead or that we support through our

professional work. It causes us to ask ourselves which of these portraits resembles what we see in front of us. Is it a portrait of segregation or integration or inclusion, and why are we stuck where we are, and what's our necessary designation? The primary reason that I share these images is I think there's one more image that's missing, more enticing designation if you think about this as a journey we're trying to move through.

There's our goal perhaps we ought to have in mind. When you spend time talking to students with disabilities and you talk with their families about what matters most, I think what you start to discover is that people want to be more than just merely integrated. Maybe even more than simply included. They talk about wanting to experience belonging.

We all want to belong. And how might that the be depicted? Visually? Well, I think it means that we've come to see each other in our community in fundamentally different ways. Our vantage point and perspective changes, it's not that there are some people who are labeled and those that are the labelers or unlabeled, it's not the members and strangers and ins and outs, we start to see our school or community as filled with diverse students, absolutely, but each person as having equal and immeasurable worth.

That's one part of it. Belonging is about how we see one another but also about how we share our lives together. It's not merely about sharing space, which is so often what we mean when we talk about integration or even inclusion, though it shouldn't be, but we start to think about sharing our lives. We become intertwined, woven together with one another, and kids and adults remain involved in each other's lives after the school bell rings or after we clock out of work. All seven days of the week. It's moving from living parallel lives to actually living and learning in community together.

So I think there's a difference here in these portraits between inclusion and belonging, for example. We might talk about that as the difference between being present in a place and actually having a presence in that place. Or the difference between welcoming students' presence in all you do in your class and clubs or others and actually missing them when they're not there or aching in some way because of their absence. Belonging matters, and it's this designation where I want to park the rest of

my time. How might our schools become places marked by belonging or all of our students?
Particularly for students who so often have been excluded.

What's it mean to belong? And I think this is something we can all connect to, and I'd like you to find
your chat box right now and help me out with this. Because we know firsthand the joy of experiencing
belonging and we know viscerally what it feels like when it doesn't. But it keeps coming back to the
question of: how do we know we belong? So I'll ask you to fill in the blank.

Think about a place where you belong and fill in the blank, I know I belong when... How would you
finish that sentence? I'd like to see the chat box light up a bit with some of those answers. When
people are visibly happy because I'm there. I love that. When people welcome me. When I feel safe,
I'm accepted. I'm invited to places. I'm known. When people make eye contact and smile. When
people talk to me. When I'm missed. That's often the marker of belonging is when you're missed. I see
many other coming in.

Keep adding those because I think thinking about how we might experience belonging, provides a good
lens to think about how our students might experience that as well. Belonging is something that's easy
to affirm, a little harder to define. And so it raises the question: what does it mean to belong, how do
we know when we've arrived in that designation? That's the question that's cut across the scope of
work I've been involved with and I bet the work you're involved in. What are the things that tell us
students belong? That might give us guidance on what we might do differently to make sure that
becomes a reality for more students.

So research and practice provides a lot of valuable insights into what leads to belonging. I'm not here
to offer the definitive word on the subject, but to draw from a large collection of studies on classrooms
and lunchrooms, from scores of interviews we've done with students and families, from quite a
number of intervention evaluation and number of literature reviews we've been involved in over these
last two decades.

From that work, ten, I think, essential dimensions of belonging for students with disabilities seem to emerge as having salience for work as school leaders and teachers. Here's what we've heard and seen and learned through this work: To belong is to be present. It's to be invited. To be welcomed. To be known. To be accepted. To be supported. To be heard. To be befriended, needed, and loved.

And I think when each of these areas is addressed well, then schools are much more likely to be learning communities where students with disabilities thrive and come to be seen as indispensable members of that community.

Let me share in each of those areas what I think they mean and why they might matter. In a few cases I'll share snapshots of studies that speak to that's facets of belonging, but the point is to prompt you to reflect on the schools you're part of. So ask yourself as I walk through each of these ten areas, what are we doing well right now in our own school? We want to keep doing those things. And are there things you hear that we could be addressing better, or more of, or even entirely different. What might next steps be for us if this is a vision we want to see embodied in the life of our school? Because these are things that are not happening often in widespread ways and cannot automatically be assured.

So let's start with presence. Because I find belonging almost always begins with presence. It's built on this shared foundation of shared experiences and repeated encounters over time, to be present is just to be involved in all the ordinary activities within and beyond the classroom anyone else might be part of in your school.

It's about being part of the everyday fabric of everyday school life like anyone else, because it's hard to feel like you belong if you're rarely part of the activities and events that make up a community. From the outside, in some ways, looking in.

So students with and without disabilities should be participating together in the same classrooms and hallways and playgrounds and clubs to encounter one another as they learn and play and as they relate to one another. In other words, the presence of students with disabilities including those with more extensive support should be really a natural and expected part of everyday school.

So it prompts reflection, if we think about the fact that one in seven kids typically in our school has a disability in some way that impacts their learning or relationships, it starts to prompt us to think, what would a peek into our classrooms or courtyards or clubs say about the presence of students with disabilities in activities that make up our school? Are they on the peripheries of what we offer or at the center or are they somewhere else altogether? Obviously for some students the impact of that disability will be quite substantial and very apparent, for others less visible or only evident in certain areas. That's 15% of students, as one in seven is about 15% in most schools.

We do have some data that speaks to presence. Most of the school day for students is spent in a wide range of interesting academic, elective, related arts classes. We don't have data on whether those are classes are interesting, but let's hope they are. We do have data on whether students with disabilities are taking those classes alongside their peers. What we find that when we look at our national data, absence from general education classrooms still is more common than presence in those classrooms.

So on the screen you'll see the percentage of students with various disabilities who are placed nationally in, when you look national standpoint those receiving services under IDEA who are served in different settings, intellectual disability, blindness, multiple disabilities, autism, emotional behavioral disabilities, and then the last column, all disabilities.

So what you see on the screen is percentage of students in entirely separate schools or other settings outside of their local public school. In some categories that's a large percentage. I'll add to that the number of students who spend the majority of their day in typical schools outside of general education classrooms, mostly special education classrooms, resource or self-contained classrooms. You start to see for some disability categories that reflects more than half of all students who have limited presence in the same classes alongside their peers without disabilities.

The remaining two bars of yellow are the percentage of students who spend a mix of time in special and general education classrooms, 40 to 80% of their school day, and the last column is those who spend almost all their day, 80% or more, in general education classrooms.

For students with more significant support needs, you find even more of their day is spent not being present alongside their peers. It's fascinating, when you look at state by state variations in these data, for example, there are wide variations in placement from one state to the next. What I put on the screen is the percentage of students with intellectual disability who are often the least likely to be included, who are spending at least 40% of their day to 100% in general education classrooms. It ranges from 20% in one state all the way up to 80% in another state. And everywhere in between. It drives us to realize maybe it's not just a child's needs that's driving where students spend their school day, maybe there's an aspect of educator expectations or attitudes or capacities or other things that drive where students are and are not present.

For those of you thinking about the wide range of students with disabilities, there's the same variations when looking at students across disability categories, who are spending almost all of their day, 80 percent or more, included, but you still see variations. My point in all of this is that it should prompt us to reflect on what might be standing in the wave presentation in classes and clubs and cafeteria and other aspects, what might be barriers we need to break down. Is it barriers related to awareness or training or expectations or attitude? Do we think it's barriers or finances or resources or staffing models? Barriers of commitment or even values? Presence is important, it's the baseline for belonging, but I would argue it's just the starting point for it. It's not the designation, it's not enough. We have to press deeper.

So reflect in your own school or your district, are students involved in all of the same places and programs and activities as their peers? What might it look to respond to that differently if the answer is not very often? Well, the antidote to absence is often invitation, and invitations are powerful. To be invited, to be pursued, there's something really just powerful about being picked by someone else or wounding about not being picked.

So it's so encouraging for students to know that others want to be in their company, and even needed, which is a later dimension of belonging. So I think such an experience like that really sends a powerful message to kids with disabilities is that we want you here, we need your presence, it just wouldn't be

the same without you. And so we would hope, and we should work towards, having invitations that abound for students with disabilities in our schools. That might involve peers being asked by peers to sit together at lunch, to collaborate on a project, to join in games together at recess, come after school to a birthday party or even be part of a sleep over. Those invitations are an indication of belonging and yet those invitations are still rare for many students we serve in our schools.

Consider data from the national longitudinal transition study which took place in the United States a number of years ago. They found that half of all teenagers with autism had not been invited to any other social activity by another youth in the same 12 months. Same for one in four youth with intellectual disability and some of the other categories as well. The numbers are quite a bit less in elementary school but not substantially so. So we hope students are invited by peers but also that they are invited by teachers to join extracurricular clubs to attend field trips, to contribute on service projects, to take part in leadership roles or other school activities.

Belonging ends up beginning when those powerful invitations we talked about become everyday occurrences, not just from peers but from teachers and from others at the same school. So when we say everyone is welcome, we often think that is an invitation. But we have to mean that. I think we often have the language down everyone is welcome, we mean really everyone should be feel like they are part of this place or present in the what we do. But it's hard to mean that sometimes actually. There's a difference between announcing that you're welcoming, and actually inviting people to be part of what you offer. An invitation is very personal, and an announcement is not. An invitation says I'm thinking about you, I want you to be part of this club and part of this group.

The announcement always leaves open the possibility there's a footnote or an asterisk or some kind of qualifier, like the question mark in this graphic, that makes people wonder whether you really mean kids with disabilities or mean kids with significant support needs. We want our invitations to come without asterisks and want them to abound. So we might reflect on how we're doing in our schools and making sure those invitations are extravagant and extended to all the students who are part of our school.

Third, we learn belonging involves being welcomed, the way that students are greeted and treated by others. That says a lot about your place in the community, and it's to be received with warmth and friendliness and authentic delight, when people find pleasure in your presence. So we often find that people want to be welcoming, but they are uncertain about what to do or what to say or how to do that really well. We often see when kids or staff are hesitant or reluctant, they tend to avoid. That's our go-to posture when we're uncertain about what to say or do. That leads to people not feeling very welcomed.

There's also ways we often go about including students in general education classrooms that makes it feel difficult to be welcomed or feel welcomed. Think about when kids arrive or when they leave class or who they sit near or who they don't sit near in class. The data on your screen aren't the same as being welcomed but I think they -- we did an observational study of inclusive classrooms for 108 high school students with intellectual disability. And we observed for three class periods from the beginning of the class to the end of the class, what you see on the bottom of the screen, and we just tracked when the students arrived at class and when they leave, we tracked who they are sitting next to and whether they were anywhere near their peers. Students with disabilities, particularly those with extensive support needs, often arrived late to class, often left early from class, and they were only there for about 84% of class. When they were in the classroom, they were often sitting next to adults, not next to other kids. In fact, they were in proximity to other kids without disabilities only about 42% of the inclusive class. So it's hard to feel welcomed, to interact with other kids, if you're not sitting near them, or your coming early or arriving late.

It reminds me of a study from nearly 30 years ago by RF Schnorr called "Peter? He comes and goes…" The idea that some students are part-time members of generally education classrooms. Some come late, some leave early, some are there only for the middle. Some never arrive and some come and go as they do therapy and other things. We want to make sure that students feel welcomed in their classes and schools. And that comes when other people greet them and strike up conversations and sit with them at lunch and ask about their day, join them in shared activities or remember their birthday, or just notice when they are not there and follow up to find out why. Those are ordinary gestures that communicate that you're welcomed, that people have authentic delight in your presence.

The great thing about being welcomed is, when you feel welcomed, that elevates kids' enthusiasm for learning and solidifies their memory, and they want to come to school more. And when it's absent they feel uncomfortable or don't want to come at all. The sense of being welcomed is often communicated through those kinds of gestures, other gestures of peers and staff that I mentioned. It also means staff may need some guidance how to engage with students who communicate differently or acquire ongoing assistance or who behave in unfamiliar ways. We may need to provide guidance on how to talk about disability in respectful and relevant ways, or how to design our classrooms and instructional space with a broader range of students in mind. That might lead to more and more students feeling welcomed and actually being welcomed at all.

So the fourth aspect of belong involves being known. Kids love to hear their names. Don't they? Whether that's shouted across a room, uttered from the other end of the phone, called from across the cafeteria we all long to hear our names. We all want to go where everybody is glad we came. And I think the joy of being known is really part of belonging, being noticed and recognized being understood deeply and personally. So having relationships with people who understand you and affirm you is an important part of belonging.

And yet so many students with disabilities can sometimes feel like strangers in their own school. They spend their day in separate classrooms or on the periphery of school activities and what happens is the opportunities to develop relationships with other kids or staff just become more limited. So, whether students with disabilities are known as an important part of belonging but what we've found is, it's how students are known that matters just as much.

I think it's worth reflecting on the labels we often attach to our students. To categorize them, to diagnose them. We often define based on struggles rather than strengths. We define based on challenges rather than contributions. We define by deficit. That's how our diagnostic labels are often attached. But I think this has implications for how we think about belonging. When we only knew students in terms of their labels or kids only know them in terms of their disabilities, we sometimes flatten the portraits of how students are known. It's equally true, I'm sure you would all argue, that

students with disabilities also have incredible strengths and talents and personalities and interests and character that are exciting to get to know just like anyone else.

And so there's a different way to know students by their strengths and their passions and their positive qualities that remind us they're indispensable. So how can we come to think about students with disabilities first and foremost as having strengths and contributions and gifts to be received? What are the kinds of assessments we're using that reveal those things about our students as much as they reveal about the instructional and other needs they have as well?

I think the strengths-based stance is consistent with how so many families describe their daughters and sons and siblings with disabilities. So schools that are committed to belonging always seek to understand each student's interest and passions and skills and talents and as they come to know those and share those out with others, then others are better positioned to support and be friend and need those students well. It's a place to reflect and think about each of those goals. It's one thing to be included, it's another to be accepted. When we talk with families in our projects about the markers of inclusion for their children with disabilities, they often talk about their daughters and sons being, these are quotes we here, welcomed without condition, treated like family, embraced for all of who they are. Those ought to be the things we hear from families over and over. But they're not always what we hear from families over and over.

Attitudes towards disability and certainly changed dramatically but we're a long way from that assurance of acceptance. The same stereotypes or stigma that exist outside our schools exist in our schools and it's evidenced still in the stories families share with us and quotes they tell us about belonging and inclusion in their own schools that you see up on the screen. Schools are these rare communities where all kind of different kids come together from different backgrounds, so it's a chance for them to learn and play alongside each other and encounter kids who have characteristics or experiences or life circumstances that are just different from their own.

And so promoting acceptance within this diversity is really central to belonging. So I think this is where we have to think about how we shift attitudes of others. It's not always easy. But we know something

about how to change attitudes. We know there's a place for sharing accurate information or providing awareness and education training around disability. We can host activities for our students and staff or families that raise understanding and awareness.

We know there's power in what we model. And the stories we tell. We know when we hold high expectations and use affirming language and support shared activities that attitudes start to change. But I want to emphasize this goes back to one of the comments around social IEP goals, one of the primary ways to change studios is connecting students to inclusive experiences and fostering relationships. It gives kids a chance to meet one another, to learn about each other, to challenge their preconceived ideas about one another, real acceptance doesn't come from learn about someone with a disability or about someone with autism but from coming to know someone personally. That's when those preconceived ideas so often get overturned.

That takes us to the sixth dimension, which is support. We know that's critical. That our true capabilities aren't evident really in what we do on our own but rather by what we do when we're given the right opportunities and supports. So to be supported is about having the individualized supports student needs to be part of all those activities we offer.

Students with disabilities often need additional support. In the form of academic assistance and certain classes, or social supports during non-instructional times, behavioral supports across the school day, emotional supports as a form of care. And for some students that support will be modest and episodic and others it will be substantial and it's ongoing. It's the provision of that individualized support that becomes this tangible demonstration of the school's commitment to their educational, communicates a desire for their presence and the absence of support is what's so often leads to exclusion or limits meaningful participation. So, we have to see that individualized support as being our core commitment, not an optional endeavor.

And so this is the place for asking questions for doing good, person-centered planning that's individualized and contextualized to figure out what supports a particular student will need to be part of the things that are important to them in their school. It also means we have to build the capacity of

our staff to support students well in classes, programs, and clubs and field trips. And also to think about how we engage peers as natural supports to their classmates who might need extra help. I want to emphasize here that caution is sometimes warranted when thinking about support. When we think about belonging, so often we think best supports are those that are provided by adults or professionals.

We're prone, so often, to surround students with paraprofessionals or special education staff or related services providers, sometimes to the near exclusion of peers. I think that's where we have to be really careful. If you walk into most schools now, you'll find there are often more paraprofessionals than there are certified special education teachers. That's the green line on the graphic now that you see that's increasingly going up and up as the number of certified special education teaches is staying similar.

There's a risk we run sometimes when we rely heavily on adult supports. It's when we inadvertently crowd out peers and overlook other kinds of more natural sources of support. One of the things that my research team has really focused on is evaluating three very practical ways of involving peers in supporting students with disabilities, in inclusive classrooms, but also in cafeterias or community activities. These are really just peer-mediated approaches that go by different names depending on the setting.

The thing is in our research, almost every single study we've conducted we've found noticeable advantages when students with disabilities received support from same age peers without disabilities versus working exclusively from paraprofessionals or adults. So the question, is how are we engaging our peers and other students in these kinds of ways as well? And so we don't want IEPs that say a student should be close to their teacher, as you see on the Q&A box, but ones that actually think about how teachers and paraprofessionals can be are facilitators to shared work and social relationships with other kids in their classrooms.

That takes to us to seven. It's to be heard. Everyone wants to feel listened to and understood and respected. I saw this in the answers you put in the chat box a moment ago. Something about knowing

that your voice is valued, that's empowering. But also helps you feel more connected to one another. So to be heard is really to have your perspective sought out and listened to. And respected. And amplifying the voices of students with disabilities ends up promoting their self-determination, enhancing self-worth and contributing to their sense of belonging. I think there's a sense, when students feel heard at their school by adults and peers, it reminds them they are important and their voice matters, that they have ideas to contribute, that they have a seat at the table.

That's important because I think so often, we don't think about seeking out the perspectives of students with disabilities, particularly those with more extensive support needs. But we know best practices say kids with disabilities should have a say in all aspects of their lives and learning. How might we equip students to be more self-determining, to make their own choices? To know their strengths and needs, to advocate for their needs to set their own goals and communicate those goals and needs to others effectively, that's part of equipping our students to be self-determining, and it's something that happens at school, but also is something that we want to advocate for at home.

I put on the screen, and they will be in the handout, a free guide that you can share with families about how they might promote those kinds of skills that enable students to have their voices heard to maybe choices and decisions to set goals and advocate for their needs. It's completely free and might be something you share with families as they think about what they might do at home as well.

Eighth is to be befriended. Because belonging is so rooted in relationships, it's about having people in our lives who know us and like us and miss us and love us that is at the heart of our well-being. That's true for students with disabilities, too. They also have the same desire for friendship and other supported relationships. Absolutely. It's grounded in this core belief we thrive most in community. We want to make sure every student has someone in their life who says I choose you to as a friend.

So friendships contribute so heavily to our well-being and give us meaning and help us navigate challenges, bring us joy. It's just not good to be alone. And I think that when you think about the other seven dimensions of belonging, those can also, I think, often be addressed kind of at arm's length. You can do them in the absence of close relationships, you can accept someone. You can welcome

someone.   Friendships take belonging much deeper, and it's those friendships that are so often elusive. We talk about the sort of circles of relationship for our students, we think about the people in our own lives, for example, who we would name who are important to us. Family members, for example. Friends and close companions and acquaintances and professionals and paid supports in our lives.

All of us on this call have lots of names we would put up on these different circles in those circles of family and friends and neighbors and teammates and classmates and people paid to be part of our lives, our bosses, auto mechanics, doctors. We also want names to abound for students with disabilities. But to abound in all of those different circles. And yet when we look at some of our students, we see lots of students who have names in that circle of family members, or in that circle of paid staff and supports, but very few names that show up in the circles of friends and close companions or club and teammates.

This isn't just anecdotal, the data bears this out. That same national study I mentioned earlier shows the percentage of students who never or rarely receive phone calls from friends, or who never got together with friends outside of school in the last 12 months. The numbers are high for some, for many students with disabilities. So we want to make sure we're intentional about fostering friendships, that those become part of what we work towards alongside academic and behavioral outcomes. We want to make sure that when we think about any student in our midst, there are a lot of peers we can name who she can eat or walk with or cry with, play with or pray with or shop with or catch a movie with, or just hang out with and watch the Super Bowl with. I know I ended all those with prepositions which is frowned upon, but you get the point. I just think that relationships have to be a marker, a key marker, of any experience that we label as inclusive, or we call inclusion.

It's not inclusive education if there's no one in that class who knows her name. And it's not really a learning community if some students are always on the outside of that learning. So how do you introduce relationships into the picture? It's not recipe work, as we said before, but there's sort of a formula to it. It's not perfect. But we know most friendships among kids, even among adults, happen through shared activities, around common interests with sufficient support over time. That's kind of a

recipe, when kids spend together and share activity time together in shared activities around common interests, and do that over the time, it turns out they have start picking one another as friends.

So we want to make sure as teachers we are making sure every student is receiving the invitations and support they need to be part of all the activities we offer in school. We want to deepen our commitment to inclusive activities, exponentially expand the opportunities that students with and without disabilities have to meet one another and discover their shared interests and friendships. And then we want to find out what the student's interests and hobbies and passions are and try to facilitate introductions to other kids who have that in common, and the more we can use peer-mediated support models that invite and equip and assist peers to provide some of that support, that also helps.

I think this also has implications how we think about programming related to people with disabilities. If our main models are separate or segregated, then the opportunity to be chosen as a friend becomes more limited, and just as important, the opportunity for other peers to encounter all of the qualities of students with disabilities, that also becomes limited, too.

That leads to the ninth dimension of belong, which is to be needed. And the richest form of communities are marked by a real reciprocity. We see every student as having skills and talents and strengths that can benefit others and benefit the larger community. So between the make sure every student is valued by others and considered an indispensable member of the community. We know that every student in our midst has immeasurable worth and know that not every student feels valued. And it's not uncommon for some students with disabilities to feel less needed than others, particularly students with developmental disabilities who are often seen as ones who need support or assistance from others, rarely do we acknowledge them as students whose presence and contributions enrich and enliven the learning community. We want to find ways to connect students with disabilities to valued roles in their school and community.

Because when we do that, the ways they are viewed by others starts to change. How do we connect them to volunteering, to taking on leadership responsibilities, giving them opportunity to help others in need, to participate in high status activities, to assist on important projects in the classroom, to have

a role on a team or contribute in any number of ways? It's that shift from being just a recipient to a contributor that so often brings a sense of significance and importance. You nailed this in the chat 40 minutes ago: when others come to need you, your absence is missed. When you're missed, that's when you can be absolutely certain that you belong.

Well, the tenth dimension is one that we don't talk a lot about. And it's the area of just being loved. People go to incredible lengths for those that we love. We make allowances, go the extra mile, we sacrifice our interests, we avoid doing just what's expedient or minimal and work for people's good. It's that love for one another that compels us to invite and welcome and know and support and care for and befriend kids with and without disabilities. When people talk about the communities that matter most to them including schools, they talk about the love they encounter there.

Where love abounds, that's where we found belonging is much more likely to be experienced. We don't talk a lot about love in the professional literature, it's not an evidence-based practice as far as I've read. We don't see it in our policies and practices, we don't touch on in trainings. I don't think that should mean it's irrelevant. It's central to belonging. If healing for wounded people with disabilities begins with three messages: You are valuable, you're as valuable as any other person and you're loved by those around you.

So we want to make sure kids with disabilities that yearn to be part of a school community where they can love and be loved and we wanted our communities to be places that are marked by that. So that's the portrait of belonging that emerges from the vantage point of students with disabilities, what we hear from families and schools and others who have been part of the project. That's the ten ways that we should be thinking about in our own schools.

Are students with disabilities personally invited? Are they present in all of what we do in the life of our school? Are they experiencing a warm welcome whenever they arrive? Are they well known by their peers and their teachers? Are they accepted without condition, without caveat? Provided the support they need to participate fully and meaningfully, asked to share their perspectives, to have a voice? Are they developing relationships with other kids throughout their school? Do we see them as needed and

absolutely indispensable to the thriving of the community and loved deeply and unconditionally. What are we doing well in these areas so all our students experience these things and somewhat could we be doing better or more of or differently?

These are not needs that are specific to kids with disabilities, but universal needs, not special needs. And I wonder how we might move differently in our schools when we start to view these as key practices and postures. I hope you're seeing each of this journey, I guess, as you might say of belonging as one worth pursuing in your school. As one worth reflecting on in your school. Because there's a lot of action to take, to move us further along in this journey. And I hope this gives you an at least a snapshot of things you might do in your own communities to make them more a common experience for students in your schools.

So let me close my portion of the talk by thanking you for the work you're doing in each of your schools to transform the lives of kids with disabilities in their learning, but also in their social relationships, and for your commitment to becoming a school marked by inclusion and belonging for everyone. I think this is at the core of what we're called to do, why we got into this field, the work in a matters most and I love knowing that there are allies and partners and advocates in this work as well.

So thank you, and I'll turn it back over to you, Rebecca.

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Thank you, Dr. Carter. At this point we would love to open up to questions. And we have had several good ones come through the Q&A. So I will start with the first one. Which is that, in my experience in middle and high school, students don't want to be served in front of peers. How do you serve general education when kids don't want to or refuse the service?

Erik Carter: I'm not quite sure what they are referring to in terms of services necessarily, but what you often think about -- there's a promising place for some of our peer-mediated approaches to engage peers sometimes in thinking about ways some of the kinds of services or supports that we're hoping, we know students will need to be part of the class can be delivered. For example, rather than having the paraprofessional be the direct support to the student with disabilities many of the models I've

advocated and put links to pull that paraprofessional back as a facilitator to support the student through their work with shared experiences with other peers. Rather than writing that paraprofessional into the IEP as a one to one to the student, it's making sure that paraprofessional is in that classroom and supporting all students with a particular eye to making sure the student with disabilities is getting the direct services they need as well.

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Thank you. Another question is, I am curious about students with disabilities who attend a school that exclusively serves students with disabilities. I would imagine that they generally feel a sense of belonging. I would also think they struggle with their need to belong if they attend a college that does not explicitly serve their population. Is there any research on this?

Erik Carter: That's interesting. I don't know of research that focuses particularly on special education schools in particular. I wouldn't doubt students can feel a great sense of belonging in lots of kinds of communities. We find also that students talk about deep sense of belonging when they are in groups that also include other individuals who have similar labels. I think the way we want to expand that perspective is that when we have exclusively those kinds of models of support, that inadvertently means lots of other kids in those communities those students will graduate into and hopefully work and live and worship and that's when students miss the opportunity to belong in relationship with kids with disabilities. So I don't know a lot about -- I don't know there's research particularly on how various settings necessarily contribute to or detract from belonging, but it does limit the opportunities when we think about who the student belongs to, what group do they have that opportunity to belong to.

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Another question that came in through the participants is, how do you suggest we move away from the overuse of paraeducators in our schools?

Erik Carter: I think this is a real challenge because paraeducators are so often requested by families and general educators as a direct source of one-to-one support. I don't advocate for less paraprofessionals in our schools, I advocate for a different way of thinking about how those professionals are involved in supporting learning, that we're not thinking of them as the exclusive or

primary source of support. I think for schools it means one, we have to sort of give permission to paraprofessionals to let them know that if you are facilitating independence and connections to kids, that doesn't mean you're not doing your job, if you're able to fade back that support, in fact it might be the very marker you're doing that work well, and means we need to provide training to general education teachers and others about different models of support, peer support arrangements, for example, in general education classrooms. Peer network interventions that take place outside the classroom that bring peers in as primary supports to students which don't eliminate the need for paraprofessionals by shift them back to this more background facilitator role. I think a lot of folks haven't thought about that or aren't aware of some of the resources to train on that. One of the slides just before the final slide, in the handouts, you see there's a list of national organizations that provide great free resources on how to establish peer-mediated supports in local schools. We'll make sure you have access to that.

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Thank you. We're going to wrap up with a final question, which is, what's one recommendation you would provide to a school getting started on improving belonging?

Erik Carter: I'll not obey the question and give two pieces of that. One is, I think that when we actively reflect on how we're doing in each of the ten areas, that in and of itself ends up being a catalyst for starting to think differently about our practices and collaborations and postures. I think that is probably one key piece, simply to pause long enough to say, how are we doing in this area of belonging? And the second half is to also make sure that relationships are something we think about and work towards and collect data on in the same way we focus on academic rigor. To me, rigor and relationships go together, they're not competing interests, and so I think the more we're intentional about focusing on them and actually trying to measure progress in those areas, that starts to help us see all kind of areas that we can move forward.

Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Dr. Carter. We are just past 4:30, so we will take this time to thank our participants for the great questions and participation and again for Dr. Carter for this wonderful session we've had today.

There's information here on the slides about ways to continue to stay connected to the progress center. And again, this presentation will be posted to our website shortly. Thanks to everyone for your participation today. We really appreciate the interest and your time. Have a good afternoon.