

HOW TO BUILD BELONGING

Make schools that are mental-health friendly the standard for Gen Z

With data and insights from
***Mental Health & Gen Z:
What Educators Need to Know***

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The mental-health crisis among young people has reached epidemic proportions. The American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children’s Hospital Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry recently declared this crisis a national emergency. Widely available data confirm high rates of depression, anxiety, violence, and suicide among young people.

The national conversation about mental health is right in shifting away from the individual and the psychological—that is, what can one person be doing differently to improve their own mental health—and beginning to reframe the issue as a collective concern: What can schools and other organizations be doing to better support the mental health of young people?

Springtide’s research makes it clear: **Schools that create connection, foster alignment between tools and expectations, and help young people discover a sense of purpose are highly likely to succeed at promoting the mental health and flourishing of young people.** This article previews just a small sample of our data and insights related to the first category—connection—but there’s more to be found about all three in the full report.

What is connection?

Connection describes the depth, number, and type of relationships a person has. Young people can be connected to one another, their families, friends, non-family adults, and even larger communities or groups. Schools are natural hubs of potential belonging, in both the large community of a whole school and the individual subcommunities that make it up. In this way, young people have the opportunity to forge relationships that can meet a variety of needs: numerous acquaintances with a few close connections, friendships or mentorships based on shared interests, and an overall sense of being connected to a whole “body” of other students, faculty, and staff. Because connection is not just about *gathering*, all these types of relationships are important within the school context.


Why does connection matter for mental health?

Young people who have more, and more significant, connections are less likely to suffer from mental illness. To say it another way, young people are more likely to report mental wellness and flourishing if they have relationships with friends, family members, and others. Sociologists sometimes refer to this sense of connection as social integration. The social sciences have demonstrated, in the words of sociologist Allan V. Horwitz, that “people with more frequent contacts with family, friends, and neighbors and who are involved with voluntary organizations such as churches, civic organizations, and clubs report better mental health than those who are more isolated.”


“Young people who have more, and more significant, connections are less likely to suffer from mental illness.”



While we don't underestimate the critical role of administrators and other educational leaders, the touchpoint that teachers have in the lives of students cannot be overstated when it comes to connection. Still, *any* trusted adult at school can make a difference:



28% of people who say they do have at least one trusted adult at school also say they feel like they belong at school and people know who they are.

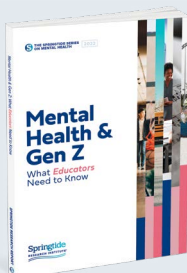


Only 15% of those who say they **do not** have at least one trusted adult say they feel like they belong at school and people know who they are.

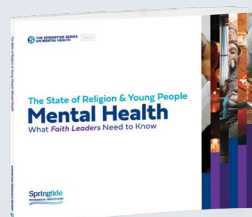
Even without scientific studies, many people understand the importance of social connections for mental health. Natalia, a 22-year-old young woman interviewed for this report, captured what many of her peers indicated in both surveys and interviews about the importance of deep connection: “Community gives you the sense of not being so alone [even] in times that it apparently looks alone, like [when] there’s no one around or my parents aren’t here. In that aspect, [my community] reminds me that I belong somewhere with these people who understand me and have seen me grow up.” She describes how feeling that she *belongs* to a group or community, even when she is alone, yields a positive experience of support for her.

Create a culture that is mental-health friendly for Gen Z...from the ground up.

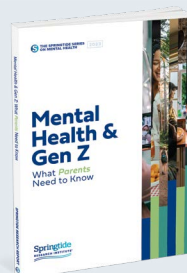
Young people need schools, homes, workplaces, and religious settings focused on encouraging mental health, not just responding to mental illness or crisis. Through our ongoing research on mental health, we'll show you how.



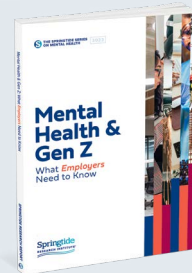
Educators



Faith Leaders



Parents



Employers



Springtide has long had an interest in how Gen Z experiences belonging. Our data show that 62% of young people with *no trusted adults* agree with the statement “I feel completely alone,” and only 9% of young people with five or more trusted adults in their lives agree with the same statement. In other words, trusted adults are a critical piece for helping young people experience belonging.

Facilitating connection for young people in schools is one of the first steps to becoming an organization that is mental-health friendly. How can educational leaders foster connections that help young people feel they belong?

How to Create Belonging

Young people’s experiences of belonging must be cultivated by trusted adults. And belonging deepens through an identifiable process. In 2020, Springtide released a report titled *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation*, which demonstrated a pattern in the stories of young people as they moved from initial joining to experiences of belonging. Three distinct feelings kept surfacing as they talked: feeling noticed, being named, and feeling known. This pattern also surfaced in the interviews we conducted for this report. We refer to this pattern of moving from *noticed* to *named* to *known* as the **Belongingness Process**.

Young people initially enter relationships, groups, and organizations because of certain commonalities—shared interests, values, beliefs, practices, vocations, or professions. But they stay in those relationships when they feel like they belong.

Schools appear ripe with potential for connections—connections among peers and with teachers, mentors, coaches, and more. However, most students aren’t connected in ways that matter for mental well-being. Only 20% of students tell us they feel they belong at their school and feel people know who they are. Almost two-thirds (63%) say they don’t even *sometimes* feel like they belong or feel known. So, while a sense of connection in schools is often possible, it doesn’t always happen.



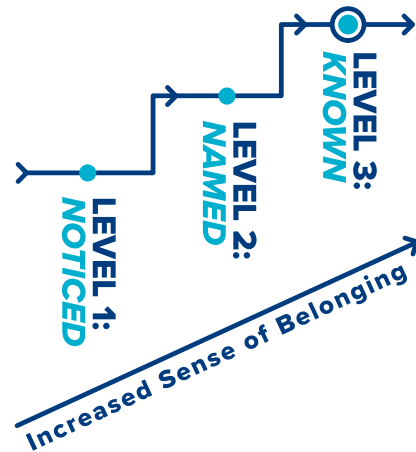
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The Belongingness Process

Springtide’s Belongingness Process identifies three steps or building blocks for creating belonging for young people. And this experience of belonging—of deep and varied connections within a community—is critical for their mental health at school. For each step, trusted adults can take obvious actions. Schools often do well with these critical building blocks, but there are opportunities to dig deeper into each of these dimensions as well, to increase belonging in educational settings.



LEVEL 1: (I am) Noticed

The perception of being noticed by another—being seen or acknowledged, even in the most straightforward ways—is the initial step toward a sense of belonging. It is here that young people describe the power of being invited into relationship and having others become interested in them. Consider this comment from a young person we interviewed when conducting our initial research for *Belonging*: “The dominant experience of young people when it comes to interacting with adults is of being dismissed. I just don’t expect them to pay attention to me.” The simple act of seeing generates an initial sense of belongingness for a young person, which creates a foundation for deeper relationships.

We asked young people to tell us whether they experience being *noticed* at school. The majority of young people do feel they are acknowledged by adults or peers on a daily basis while at school.



71% Adults **acknowledge my presence at my school.**



78% At my school, **at least one person says hello to me every day.**

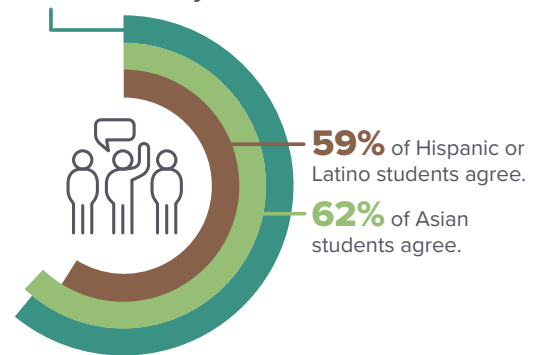
LEVEL 1:
NOTICED

While most students agree that they don't feel they need to hide who they are at school (63%) or confirm that they don't feel anonymous or invisible at school (61%), the margins for those who don't agree are significant. This opportunity to “notice” students at a deeper level, to see the students who are marginalized and make a special effort to connect with them, is critical for building a community of belonging.

63% of students agree with the statement “*I don't feel I need to hide who I am at my school.*”



61% of students agree with the statement “*I do not feel anonymous or invisible at my school.*”



Tide-Turning Tip

Help facilitate peer-to-peer connections. When it comes to conversations about mental health, young people naturally turn to one another. Therefore, the more peer connections they have, the better. You can facilitate these connections by providing opportunities for students to build community. And you can help young people *help one another* not only with more connections but with more skills.

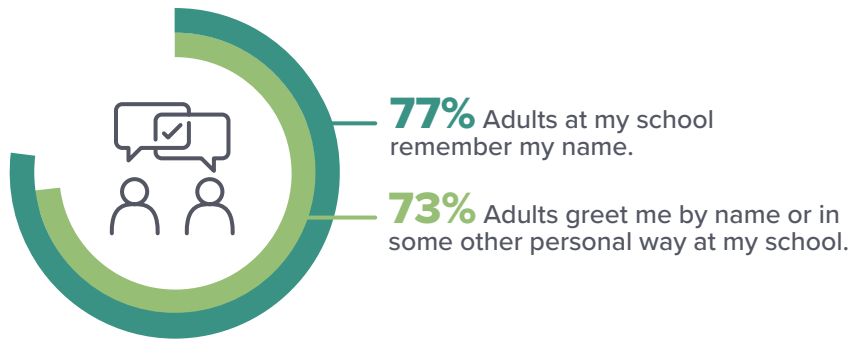
Consider extending mental-health first-aid and awareness training to students so they can be better equipped to help their friends and, importantly, so they know when to bring a concern to a trusted adult. **Sports teams, dorm communities, music groups, book clubs—all these types of communities can be strengthened with more opportunities to connect *outside* the primary activity** (that is, by hosting retreats or dining nights together), and with more opportunities to learn how to care for one another well.


 A graphic consisting of a blue line that starts from the left, goes up, then right, then down, ending in a blue dot. To the right of this line, the text "LEVEL 2: NAMED" is written vertically in blue, with "LEVEL 2:" on the top line and "NAMED" on the bottom line.

LEVEL 2: (I am) Named

The use of a person's name or correct pronoun triggers an immediate connection. It demonstrates a commitment to their participation in the classroom or school; it builds on *noticing* and makes a young person feel a deeper sense of being connected. Psychologists and linguists confirm that naming someone elevates them in importance and status. In many ways, our name forms and shapes our identity, and using someone's name confirms that you are in a relationship with them.

We asked young people whether they experience being *named* at school. Schools are doing well helping young people, in general, experience being named. About three out of four students say that adults at their school remember their name and greet them by it (or another personal way) at school.



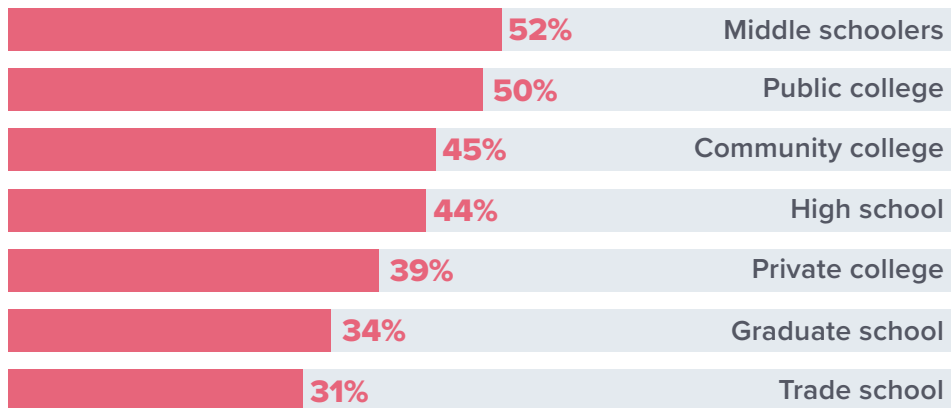
Tide-Turning Tip

Use students' preferred names and make a point of pronouncing them correctly from day one. Educators know the importance of learning their students' names, which is often a priority in those first few weeks of a new class. We'd like to encourage you to learn your students' names before they step foot in your classroom. Make a point of asking all students their preferred name and personal pronouns as a part of school registration, and make sure these names are on all school rosters so that from the first day of school all students can be literally named. Likewise, before

But to be named extends beyond identifying someone correctly. Naming someone also refers to the relational aspect mentioned above. Educators can strengthen the good work they are already doing in this area. Only about half (56%) of young people agree with the statement “Adults at my school miss me when I have not been in school for some reason.” When we look at young people who feel otherwise—young people who *disagree* that adults at their school miss their presence when they are absent—it’s middle schoolers and public college students who are most likely to feel anonymous.

Young people who *disagree* or *strongly disagree* with the statement below:

“Adults at my school miss me when I have not been in school for some reason.”



Because our samples of each population are small, they are indicative—though not conclusive—about which students might feel they are “unnamed” in the context of school.

taking attendance, be sure you know how to pronounce each student’s name correctly. Properly greeting each student starts that very basic connection of saying that you care. If teaching a large lecture where learning everyone’s name isn’t possible, consider ways to help students learn *one another’s* names early on in the semester with opening questions that prompt conversation between and among different students.


 LEVEL 3:
KNOWN

LEVEL 3: (I am) Known

Belongingness reaches a new level when a person feels known. **This depth of belongingness, this sense of feeling *known*, builds on being noticed and named but adds the all-important dimension of unreserved acceptance.** Freed from the fear of rejection, young people feel safe having open, honest conversations. They are more likely to share hopes, anxieties, challenges, and joys alike. In essence, they experience trust within that relationship. This kind of acceptance has immeasurable significance as an antidote for loneliness, isolation, and stress. Accepting young people without judgment is an essential condition for deep belongingness.

We asked young people whether they experience being *known* at school. Once again, the data capturing student perspectives in general show that schools are doing a good job encouraging safety and not being judgmental, thus creating an environment of belonging. Nearly 70% of students surveyed agreed that they feel safe with most adults at their schools and that those adults are openly supportive as well as curious without being judgmental.

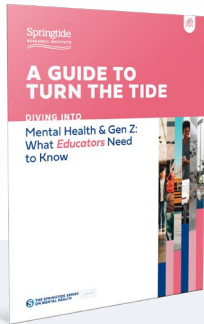
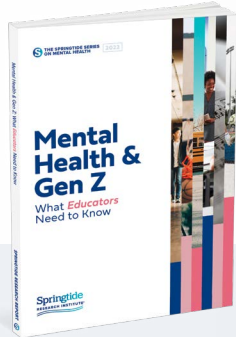
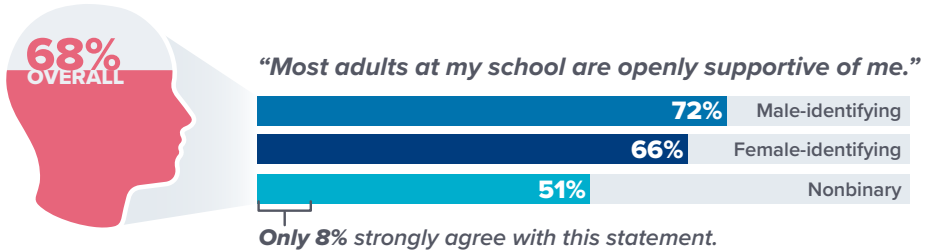
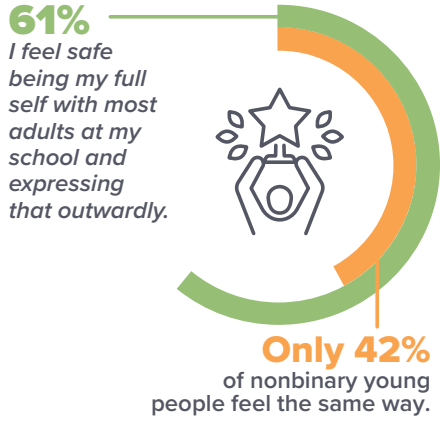
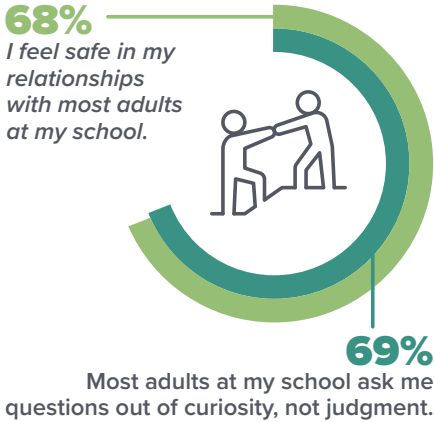
Importantly, just as we see with nonbinary young people in the statistic on the next page, this *general* sense of safety within relationships at school does not always translate to the possibility of real depth or trust. As noted in our key findings on page 18, only 18% of students tell us they “feel safe enough to talk about what really matters to me” at school. For Black or African American students, this figure drops to 11%.

Tide-Turning Tip

Look for outliers. Consider students who are likely to *not* feel they are a part of your school community—transfer students, students who do not have resources to participate in extracurricular activities, students whose families cannot easily access communications provided by the school because of language barriers or technological gaps, students with external interests not recognized by the school, and so on. **Assess what you do to help these students, and what you don’t do.** How might you help them? To help generate some ideas, Springtide has created a free 6-week email series, *The Belongingness Challenge*, that sends a weekly prompt to help you integrate practices of belonging into your everyday work with young people.

If you are interested, learn more and sign up here.





This guide is an excerpt from Springtide Research Institute’s latest report, Mental Health & Gen Z: What Educators Need to Know. You can find the full report, as well as the corresponding discussion guide and conversation starter, Diving into Mental Health & Gen Z – What Educators Need to Know, at our Springtide website.

Get FREE shipping on this report and guide using promo code EDUCATORS.



OUR MISSION

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13 to 25), Springtide Research Institute is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.