

INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Inclusive and supportive school cultures are environments that **welcome students and families from all backgrounds** and provide opportunity and access for **meaningful participation** in the school community.

An inclusive and supportive school culture appears when **students, families, and staff feel safe and that they genuinely belong**. That sense of belonging is not an accident. It is the result of daily decisions about how a school communicates, celebrates, solves problems, and shares responsibility for every student. While leaders set the tone, **strengthening this condition belongs to everyone in the building**. In a series of focus groups, Metro Nashville Public Schools teachers and school leaders shared that thriving schools build welcoming environments where everyone feels **physically and emotionally safe**, where families are **respected and included**, where student belonging is **actively monitored**, and where celebration is **visible and equitable** across cultures. In these schools, adults see behavior as a signal of unmet needs rather than a rule to enforce. Responding to those needs requires supports like social-emotional learning woven through the school day rather than delivered as a standalone program, and dedicated staff like school counselors, social workers, and MTSS teams who can connect students to the right help. It also takes a culture that treats student wellbeing as everyone's responsibility, not the job of a few specialists.

Inclusion is also active work, and **examples of adults removing barriers and creating opportunities for engagement can be found across the district**: an educator preparing translated documents in each family's home language before back-to-school night, a coach quietly filling transportation and paperwork gaps so newcomer students could join the soccer team, and a principal's coffee cart giving a student with autism an authentic way to practice social connection.

"It's always a selling point for educators if they know their boundaries and mental health are supported. I wanted to go to a school where I knew my principal and colleagues were supportive."
- MNPS educator



Educator perspective:

What does this condition look like in practice?

- Students feel **emotionally safe** and comfortable being themselves
- Students **trust adults in the building** and are comfortable asking for help
- Social-emotional learning is **integrated throughout the school day**, rather than delivered in isolation
- Students have **equitable access to opportunities** such as clubs and after-school programming
- Schools have **consistent and authentic communication** with families to share information and gather feedback and input — and include individualized supports like translation services
- The school environment conveys **student pride and belonging** through both special events and daily interactions
- Students **feel seen and heard**, with cultural celebrations and recognition equitably valued across cultures



How do other Thriving Schools conditions intersect with Inclusive and Supportive School Cultures?

Belonging and social-emotional wellbeing are woven through the other conditions of a thriving school. An inclusive culture strengthens **Ambitious Instruction**, because students take academic risks when they feel safe and known. It makes **Engaging and Relevant Educational Experiences** possible, because students engage most deeply in communities where they feel they belong. **Effective School Leadership** builds and protects this culture through intentional relationship-building, trusting feedback loops, and intentional opportunities for meaningful involvement for students, families, staff, and community partners.

How do outside-of-school factors play a role?

Schools do not create a sense of belonging alone. Factors beyond the school building, including language and cultural barriers, transportation, family work schedules, and prior experiences with schools all shape how included students and families feel and how readily they are able to participate in the school community. At the same time, schools **can extend what they're able to do on their own** by partnering with trusted community organizations and faith communities, or by leveraging district supports like translation services and family engagement experts. When these partners show up as consistent collaborators, schools gain relationships and resources that **make inclusion sustainable**.

"We have so many people in place to make sure there are meaningful relationships within the classroom, because we know when that's in place, the possibility for really strong engagement and learning is higher."
- MNPS educator

Measurement and evaluation:

How do schools know what's working?

- **School culture and climate survey data** shows feedback from students, teachers, and staff on feelings of safety, belonging, and whether the culture of inclusion extends into classroom practice in ways that benefit all students.
- **Teacher retention data** can be an indicator that a school has an inclusive and supportive school culture that teachers feel personally invested in and excited to stay in.
- **Enrollment and attendance trends** can demonstrate a school's culture is inviting and welcoming students and families into the building and providing the necessary supports to remove barriers to attendance or engagement.
- **Behavior data** can be read as a signal of unmet needs rather than simply rule-breaking, and can help schools identify when early interventions and preventative supports are appropriate and necessary.
- **Student engagement signals** such as participation in activities, clubs, and programming show whether students have meaningful ways into the school community.
- **Family engagement indicators** such as event turnout, feedback, and participation specifically among non-English-speaking families show whether schools are cultivating a culture of belonging and access.

Explore other Thriving Schools Conditions:

[CULTURE OF COLLABORATION](#) | [RESOURCE ALIGNMENT](#) | [EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP](#)
[AMBITION INSTRUCTION](#) | [ENGAGING AND RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES](#) | [THRIVING SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK](#)