

# Belonging at School: *The Student Experience*

JULY 2025



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*"They're not just teaching to teach us.  
They want to help us in real life."*



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FROM THE DESK  
OF THE CEO

## Friends,

At The Mind Trust, we believe that the voices of students are among the most powerful tools we have to reimagine what's possible in public education. That's why I'm proud to share *Belonging at School: The Student Experience*, a report that prioritizes what students themselves say helps them feel connected, respected, and supported at school.

This report captures the reflections of a small but diverse group of students from four charter and innovation schools in Indianapolis. Through candid conversations, they offered thoughtful perspectives on what it looks and feels like to be seen, heard, and valued in a school community. While this was a micro-study by design, the experiences students shared speak volumes about the conditions that help them thrive.

These students didn't deliver recommendations or policy proposals. Instead, they gave us something more personal—and perhaps more powerful. They shared how it feels when a teacher truly believes in them, when school culture reflects who they are, and when they're both challenged and supported to reach their full potential. As adults committed to building excellent schools, we have a responsibility to listen to these experiences and ensure they inform our decisions.

Thank you to Purdue Polytechnic High School, Rooted School Indianapolis, Adelante Schools, and BELIEVE Circle City High School for opening your doors and welcoming us into your communities. And most of all, thank you to the students who participated with honesty, vulnerability, and wisdom. Your voices will continue to shape how we work, how we lead, and how we create learning environments where all students feel they belong.



With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'B' and 'B' followed by horizontal strokes, representing Brandon Brown.

Brandon Brown  
CEO, The Mind Trust



Rooted School Indianapolis

## Research Design

**THIS REPORT IS BASED ON A QUALITATIVE** micro-study, which is a small-scale research project focused on gathering in-depth insights from a specific group of participants. In this case, the study explored how students experience belonging in school. Focus groups were conducted with students attending four charter and innovation schools across Indianapolis. Each group included approximately 6–8 students and lasted about 30 minutes. The sessions took place in person, in a quiet and welcoming space at each school to encourage open and honest conversation.

To ensure accuracy, all focus groups were audio-recorded with student consent and later transcribed word-for-word. The facilitator also took handwritten

notes to capture additional context and nuances in student responses.

The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative research method used to identify meaningful patterns across participant responses. Through a careful, step-by-step process, the researcher reviewed each transcript, assigned codes to key ideas, and then grouped those ideas into broader themes.

This approach allowed us to gather student perspectives on what makes them feel seen, heard, and valued in school. The insights shared by students offer a deeper understanding of how school environments can foster connection and respect, which are essential elements of a supportive learning experience.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to the four schools that made this report possible: Purdue Polytechnic High School, Rooted School Indianapolis, Adelante Schools, and BELIEVE Circle City High School. Thank you for welcoming us into your spaces, for trusting us to engage with your students, and for the thoughtful coordination and collaboration that brought this study to life. We are especially grateful to the educators and school leaders who helped facilitate logistics, created time in the school day, and supported an environment where students felt safe to share their experiences. Most importantly, we thank the students who spoke with honesty, vulnerability, and wisdom. Your voices are the heart of this report, and your insights will help shape the path forward for many others.



## Introduction

***BELONGING AT SCHOOL: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE***, produced by The Mind Trust, explores how students experience belonging in their schools, and how those experiences shape their perceptions of school, their connection to learning, and whether they feel their needs are truly being met. This research was guided by a simple, yet urgent question: *What does it look and feel like when students feel supported, respected, and included at school?*

The study highlights the perspectives of students attending four charter and innovation schools in Indianapolis: Purdue Polytechnic High School, Rooted School Indianapolis, Adelante Schools, and BELIEVE Circle City High School. Spanning grades K–12, these schools represent a variety of academic models and approaches. While each is striving to build a school culture that is both high-achieving and inclusive, their efforts are still evolving. What unites them is a shared commitment to doing school differently, with a focus on innovation, continuous growth, and learning directly from the voices of the students they serve.

Rather than focusing solely on metrics or test scores, this report centers the voices of students themselves. Their stories reveal what makes school feel welcoming, challenging, and affirming, along with what still needs to improve to better support their growth.

The following pages share what we heard, organized into key themes that reflect the most consistent and compelling insights from students. Our hope is that these findings spark meaningful dialogue and action across the education community to create schools where every student feels a strong sense of connection, purpose, and possibility.

*“They’re trying to prepare you from the time you start here to the time you leave ... so you’re set—you’re making money, you can provide for your family.”*



# Teachers: The Heart of Our School Experience



**ACROSS EVERY FOCUS GROUP CONDUCTED FOR THIS STUDY**, one theme surfaced again and again: teachers shape the student experience more than any other factor. Whether students shared moments of affirmation or frustration, their stories consistently revealed that the relationships they have with their teachers define how they feel about school as a whole. When teachers are seen as caring, relatable, and genuinely invested in students' success, school becomes a place where students feel motivated, respected, and emotionally safe.

Students described their most impactful teachers as those who built strong, humanizing relationships. These educators earned trust by being consistent, checking in on students' well-being, and treating them as individuals, not just learners. When teachers made the effort to understand their students beyond academics, students felt more open to seeking help, staying engaged, and pushing themselves to succeed. For many, this looked like small acts: a check-in after a few missed days, a kind email, or the freedom to be themselves in the classroom. Some described how newer teachers brought creativity and fresh approaches into the classroom, often making learning more engaging and relevant.

Students also reflected on the importance of having teachers and administrators who reflect their racial and cultural identities. For some, seeing adults in the building who looked like them was affirming and made them feel more seen and understood. Representation mattered to help foster deeper trust and understanding between students and adults.

A student's experience with their teacher shapes how they judge the fairness, safety, and emotional climate of their schools. For high school students especially, the best teachers were those who made learning feel relevant to life beyond graduation, offering not only content but mentorship.

Ultimately, students described great teaching not simply as effective instruction, but as relationship-centered leadership. Their words make it clear: when teachers show up as humans first and reflect the diversity of the students they serve, they create school communities where students can truly thrive.

## WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

*"They could tell when I don't seem like myself ... they'll pull me aside and ask, 'Hey, everything ok?' They actually make the effort to try."*

*"Some teachers emailed me when I was sick for three days just to check on me. They didn't have to do that."*

*"It doesn't feel like an 'I'm the adult, you listen to me' relationship. It's mutual respect. They let you be you."*

*"At PPHS, teachers just let you be you ... like, I'm able to go up to teachers sometimes and be like, 'Hey girl!'"*

*"They're not just teaching to teach us. They want to help us in real life."*

*"They're strict here but lenient at the same time. There's a balance. They understand we're human, and they make us realize they're human too!"*



## Respect Needs Rules

**IN EVERY FOCUS GROUP**, students made it clear: structure and accountability matter. While much attention is often given to personalized learning and academic support, students also emphasized the importance of clear behavioral expectations and consistent follow-through when those expectations aren't met. Their desire for order wasn't rooted in strictness for its own sake, but in fairness, safety, and mutual respect. As one student put it, what they wanted was simple: "Order in the court." —*Rooted School Indianapolis Student*

Across grade levels, students shared how strong school culture depends on rules that are clear, consistently applied, and rooted in respect. They described restorative practices as helpful in some schools, especially when those practices allowed students to reflect, repair harm, and move forward. However, inconsistency in behavior expectations, particularly when certain students were perceived to receive more leniency, left others feeling frustrated and confused. At BELIEVE Circle City High School, students praised a model that allows them to earn greater freedoms based on academic performance and behavior. This "gradual release of freedom" helped students feel trusted and motivated, while still reinforcing the importance of meeting expectations. They appreciated knowing exactly what was required of them and being recognized when they rose to the occasion.

Ultimately, students are asking for a balance: a school culture that supports them as individuals while also ensuring everyone is held to shared expectations. In their view, structure is not the opposite of support—it's a reflection of it.

### WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

*"You get a lot of freedom here, but you also have to keep your grades and behavior in check to move up."*

*"I just want order in the court! We need clear rules and someone to actually follow through."*

*"Even in high school, we still need to be taught what the expectations are. Don't just assume we know."*

*"I like it when they explain what you did wrong and give you a chance to talk about it."*



## Push Us to Be Great

**WHEN IT COMES TO ACADEMICS**, students were clear and consistent: they want to be challenged. Across focus groups, students emphasized their desire for high expectations and rigorous coursework that prepares them for future success. They spoke positively about being able to set academic goals and track their progress, and they appreciated when schools created structures—like SAT prep, dual enrollment, or honors pathways—that affirmed their potential and ambition.

Students consistently expressed that being challenged academically communicates respect and belief in their potential. Even when they didn't fully believe in themselves, they wanted adults to hold them to high standards and push them toward growth. On the contrary, students said they could easily recognize when expectations were low—and they interpreted those moments as a lack of care, effort, or concern for their futures. When teachers didn't challenge them, it sent a message that they weren't worth the effort.

*"When teachers challenge you, it shows they care."*

Academic rigor, however, wasn't just about harder coursework—it was about how students were supported in reaching those high expectations. Students appreciated when schools offered individualized academic support, often through advisory time, tutoring, or regular grade check-ins. Tools like Canvas were mentioned as helpful ways to track assignments and stay on pace. They also valued when teachers adjusted classroom dynamics

to keep learning engaging and focused, especially when lessons were creative or hands-on. In several schools, students pointed out that newer teachers often felt more energetic, responsive, and willing to try new approaches that helped them stay motivated.

Still, many students, particularly in middle school, shared that academic support seemed to decrease as they advanced in grade level. Those who had been in the same school since elementary described a shift in how they were treated and supported. As one student at Adelante reflected, "It's weird. It's like we're either too childish or we're acting too 'grown'. Sometimes I don't know where we fit in. We still need help. We still need to be supported." Others echoed this, saying they felt more seen and supported in earlier grades, but increasingly on their own as they got older.

To students, rigorous academics are not about pressure, they're about being believed in. They want teachers who challenge them, support them, and create classrooms that reflect their capacity to grow and succeed.

### WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

*"They track your growth. My principal even came up to me to tell me he was proud of me."*

*"Sometimes, I am done with the work before class even starts. Give me something harder with the extra credit."*

***"Give us harder stuff. Really challenge us."***

*"There's one class where I just need a little more pushing in that class... I'm just not confident in myself [in that class] right now."*

***"They don't just let you slip through the cracks ... they hold you up until you can walk on your own."***

***"As we've gotten older, we get less support [from teachers]."***

*"It's weird. It's like we're either too childish or we're acting too 'grown'. Sometimes I don't know where we fit in. We still need help. We still need to be supported."*

***"I like reading ... they make us read chapters everyday. We've read like twelve chapters already."***

*"If you need extra help, they'll let you go to a teacher during advisory or stay after for events just to make sure you get your grade in."*

***"Canvas is helpful because you know what you're missing, even if you're not at school that day."***

***"In most of my classes we have grade check-ins every two weeks."***





## Strong School Culture Builds Connection

**FOR STUDENTS, SCHOOL CULTURE** is not just about rules and routines—it’s about recognition, identity, and belonging. Importantly, students also described culture as something more expansive than racial or ethnic identity. Elementary students, in particular, shared that they felt a sense of school culture—a shared experience of community and pride that contributed to their belonging. These moments helped students feel not only recognized as individuals but also connected to something greater than themselves: a collective identity as part of a school community that celebrates difference and unity at the same time.

As one student put it, what matters most is creating an environment where “everyone feels like people, not just races.” In these reflections, it becomes clear that cultural programming isn’t a bonus—it’s a foundation for belonging.

Across focus groups, students spoke passionately about the role that cultural programming plays in helping them feel seen and celebrated. From elementary through high school, they described how both formal and informal efforts to honor cultural identity made their schools feel more welcoming and inclusive.

***“We have flags all around our school to show the countries students are from. I like that.”***

Students highlighted events like Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month, and cultural parades as moments where their backgrounds were affirmed and uplifted. These celebrations—whether through



music, food, performances, or visuals—allowed students to express who they are and to learn about one another in ways that built mutual respect. They were especially appreciative of opportunities to share parts of their home cultures, such as traditional foods or dances, with their peers.

### WHAT WE HEARD

***“They did something for Hispanic Heritage Month where we learned a Mexican dance. I really liked that.”***

*“I feel like we get to express ourselves in our own way and in our own culture here.”*

***“There was an event where people brought their own food from their culture ... it let us express ourselves freely.”***

*“We did a parade and a fashion show to represent Black History and how we became who we are today with fashion and hip hop as examples.”*

***“We’re celebrating the school’s birthday today. That makes everybody included.”***

*“I feel like we get to express ourselves in our own way and in our own culture here.”*

***“Everyone feels like people, not just races.”***



## Support the Whole Me

**STUDENTS ACROSS ALL GRADE LEVELS** shared that schools that care for their whole selves, not just their academic performance, are the places where they feel most seen, supported, and motivated. Emotional, social, and physical well-being were just as important to students as grades or test scores, and they consistently named programs, systems, and small moments that made them feel validated beyond the classroom.

Access to emotional support systems stood out as a powerful anchor. Students praised the availability of reset rooms, village circles, and dedicated spaces to decompress, reflect, and process emotions. These supports were described not just as helpful, but essential. Students shared that when they're overwhelmed or upset, having a place to go, and an adult who listens without judgment, makes a real difference. At BELIEVE Circle City High School, students spoke about the village system as central to their sense of belonging. The structure, organized by grade and gender, provided consistent peer connection and a space to talk about everything from personal challenges to current events.

Basic needs and extracurriculars also emerged as central to student well-being. Food quality, for instance, had a direct impact on students' ability to focus and engage. When meals weren't enjoyable, students simply skipped them. Sports and extracurricular programming, particularly for male high school students, were named as critical outlets for expression, motivation, and identity. However, many expressed frustration with athletic infrastructure, inconsistent practice locations, and limited transportation—especially in comparison to better-resourced schools. The lack of access wasn't just logistical; students saw it as a gap in school pride and investment in their potential.

Overall, students made one thing abundantly clear: support that extends beyond academics—whether it's adjusting schedules for transportation, offering mental health spaces, or simply ensuring students have clean clothes—communicates that schools care about who they are, not just what they produce. When students feel holistically supported, they show up more fully as learners and as people.

### WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

*"They make sure we all look good—even bring in extra clothes if someone needs it."*

*"They [school social emotional support providers] actually listen to you ... like a therapist."*

*"When we don't have a home stadium. That makes kids not want to play.... We've had to practice at random gyms and football fields ... there's no consistency and the transportation is bad—very bad. It's gotten worse this year."*



## Prepare Us for What is Next

**HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ACROSS FOCUS GROUPS** spoke with clarity and confidence about one of their top priorities: being prepared for life after graduation. Whether students were headed toward college, trades, the military, or taking a gap year, they wanted their schools to provide real-world skills, academic rigor, and multiple pathways to future success. This desire wasn't just about ambition, but also about self-determination, readiness, and security.

Many students shared that their schools offer a range of college and career readiness opportunities, including access to honors, Advanced Placement, and dual credit courses. They appreciated being able to chart their own course without pressure to follow a singular post-secondary path. Students described school cultures that affirmed their individual goals, whether they aspired to earn a degree, launch a business, or explore alternative options. In some cases, a few noted that when schools had a narrow or singular focus for post-secondary success, they sometimes felt boxed in if their interests didn't align with that track.

Students shared excitement about "Freedom Fridays" at BELIEVE Circle City High School, a unique structure that allows them to explore electives, engage in college and career readiness activities, and connect their learning to the broader Indianapolis community through field trips. Advisory structures like "Senior

*"SAT prep is built into advisory. They make sure everyone goes to it."*



Seminar" and SAT prep sessions were also seen as helpful tools that made college prep feel more relevant and attainable across each of the high schools. These offerings, combined with supportive relationships and a smaller school environment, helped many students feel confident in their futures—though some still expressed a desire for even more tailored guidance and post-secondary resources.

In all, students made it clear: preparing them for what's next is about offering choices, affirming their goals, and equipping them with the tools to thrive—not just after high school, but for life.

### WHAT WE HEARD FROM STUDENTS

*"They're trying to prepare you from the time you start here to the time you leave ... so you're set—you're making money, you can provide for your family."*

*"I'll have my associate's degree by the end of December. I'm trying to get stuff done now, not wait until college."*

*"Senior Seminar teaches us about credit, debt, and how to do interviews. It feels real."*

*"There's AP Psychology, AP Calculus, AP Stats, AP History. You start with honors [classes] then you move up."*

# Where Do We Go From Here

## ***BELONGING AT SCHOOL: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE***

was designed as a micro-study—a small but deeply intentional effort to understand how a select group of K–12 students experience belonging in school. Through focus groups with students at four charter and innovation schools in Indianapolis, this project surfaced honest, heartfelt reflections about what it feels like to be supported, seen, and valued in the school environment.

While the sample size was limited and the findings are not intended to be generalized, the insights from students offer powerful direction for school leaders, educators, and policymakers who are striving to create more student-centered, inclusive, and responsive learning communities. These students' voices add important nuance to our understanding of school climate, teacher impact, and the supports that shape a young person's connection to their school and their future.

## **KEY REFLECTIONS AND HOW THIS REPORT CAN BE USED**

### **Students define belonging through lived experience, not through educational jargon.**

Even when they couldn't articulate formal definitions of school culture, students knew what felt fair, humanizing, and supportive. They described belonging as being seen by teachers, celebrated through school culture, challenged academically, and prepared for what comes next. These reflections provide a roadmap for adult action: listen more deeply, respond more personally, and treat belonging as a shared responsibility.

### **Relationships matter more than policies.**

In every school and across every age group, students lifted up the importance of teacher-student relationships. This report can be used by school-based teams to reflect on how relational culture is cultivated—and where it might need strengthening. From advisory time to classroom dynamics, students reminded us that learning happens best in places where mutual respect and care are the norm.

### **School culture is shaped by consistency, structure, and including every student.**

Students want clear expectations, meaningful traditions, and learning environments where they can be both individuals and part of something bigger. Use this report to spark dialogue about your school's culture—not just how it looks on paper, but how it feels for the students experiencing it daily.

### **Academic challenge is a form of care.**

Students spoke candidly about wanting to be pushed, supported, and prepared. This report can support conversations about curriculum design, course offerings, and differentiated supports that meet students where they are and move them forward. For students, rigor is a sign of respect.

### **Holistic support is essential to student success.**

Belonging doesn't stop at the classroom door. From access to mental health resources and extracurriculars to meals and transportation, students need systems that reflect their whole lives. This report can serve as a tool for cross-functional school teams to assess what wraparound supports are in place—and what's still missing.

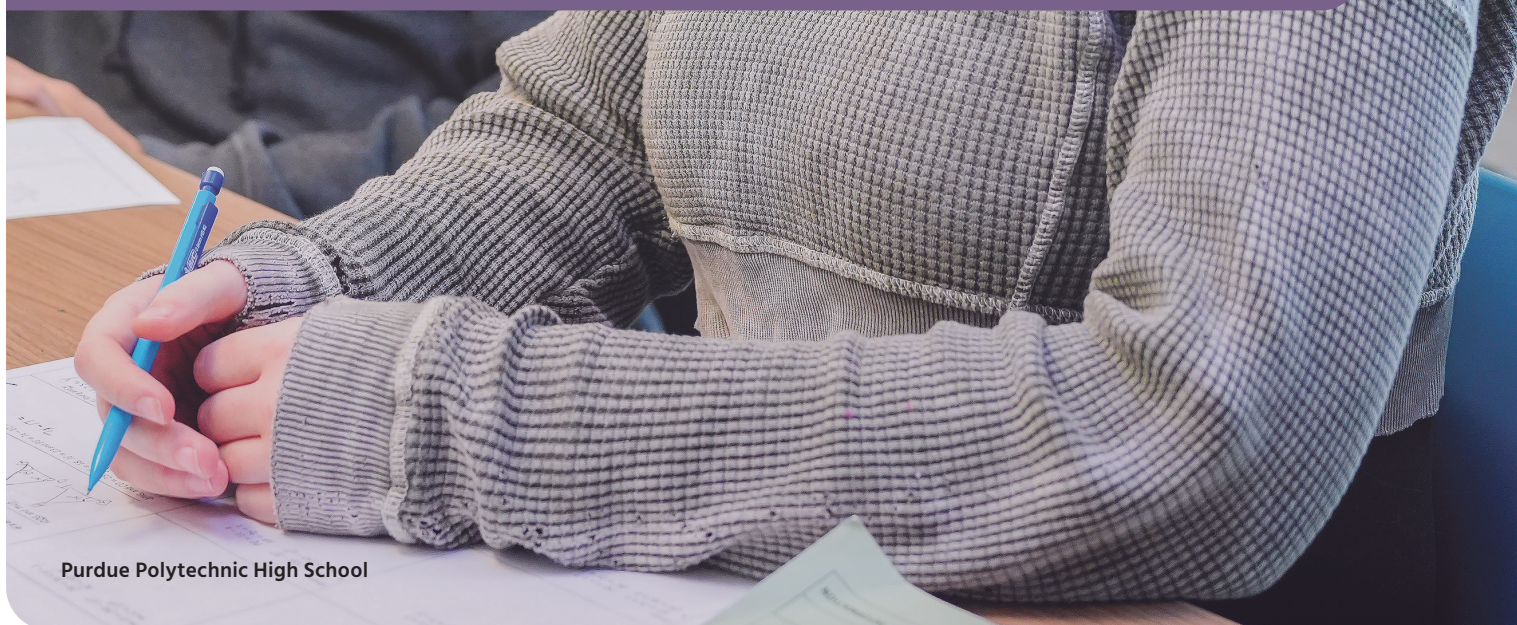
## **USING THE REPORT IN PRACTICE**

This report is best used as a starting point for reflection, not a checklist for implementation. Its themes are a window into student perspectives—captured at a moment in time, from a small group of young people across grade levels who were eager to share what works and what doesn't. Schools may consider using the report in professional learning sessions, student advisory councils, or leadership retreats to inspire ongoing dialogue.

As we think about the future of education in Indianapolis and beyond, these students offer a compelling call to action: build schools where students don't just attend, they *belong*.



*"I feel like we get to express ourselves in our own way and in our own culture here."*



Purdue Polytechnic High School

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