

You Are Welcome: Creating Safe & Supportive Schools



Students learn best when they feel physically and emotionally safe, connected to school, challenged academically, and respected by adults.¹ However, many students report that they do not feel safe and supported at school, a feeling especially true for students of color and students who receive special education services.² School communities around the country are working to better develop safe and supportive environments. The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest developed this documentary to highlight research about safe and supportive school environments and promising strategies to support student sense of belonging.

“For students to learn, they really need to feel like they belong. They need to feel and be safe. They need to feel and be challenged. And then they also need supports to meet their basic needs.”

Greta Colombi

Principal Technical Assistance Consultant
American Institutes for Research

“School should be a place where you’re welcome, where you feel like it could be another place you can call home.”

Jayden, student

Ellet Community Learning Center

About the documentary

This 30-minute public television program—produced by the REL Midwest [Making Equitable Schools Audit \(MESA\) partnership](#) with Ideastream Public Media—spotlights efforts in Akron Public Schools in Ohio to foster safe and supportive school environments. In the program, educators, students, and leaders share their experiences and lessons learned from these efforts. The documentary features the [MESA approach](#), a yearlong collaboration with a school that includes onboarding sessions, leadership coaching sessions, an in-person equity audit, and action and monitoring sessions. The program also highlights student-focused practices used by educators and leaders at the school and district levels in Akron. The documentary includes expert commentary from Greta Colombi (American Institutes for Research), Dr. Devon Carter (University of Akron), and Dr. Jameela Conway-Turner (REL Midwest).



Scan the QR code to watch the documentary





Intended audience

REL Midwest created this documentary to build awareness about the value of safe and supportive school environments among students, families, educators, policymakers, advocates, and community members. The documentary also serves as a resource for school and district leaders to learn about how an equity audit approach can bring together diverse school communities to build a more welcoming school environment. Further, the documentary highlights promising strategies that support students' sense of belonging in school. Although the documentary focuses on efforts in Akron, Ohio, the lessons of this documentary are relevant for educators and policymakers across the country.



Discussion questions

- ▶ What is your first reaction to this video? What parts of the video resonate most with you and why?
- ▶ The video highlights three key components for ensuring a positive school climate: engagement, safety, and environment. What actions can your school, district, or state take to expand a positive school climate for all students, especially students of color and students receiving special education services?
- ▶ Do you think that your school or district community may benefit from an equity audit? Why or why not? How might perspectives on equity challenges and opportunities differ across diverse participants, including teachers, staff, families, and students?
- ▶ Thinking about your high school experience, did any outstanding teachers, school programs, or other opportunities help you feel welcome at school? How did those opportunities help you learn and thrive in school and develop a sense of belonging?
- ▶ Every school and community faces challenges in ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all students. What assets in the community can help address these challenges and build a safe and supportive learning environment?
- ▶ This program highlights the importance of student voice in developing a sense of belonging in school. How can you help students better voice their perspectives within school and the broader community?

¹ Chang, H. N., Osher, D., Schanfield, M., Sundius, J., & Bauer, L. (2019). *Using chronic absence data to improve conditions for learning*. Attendance Works & American Institutes for Research. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED602448>

² Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Byrd, C. M. (2020). Why Black adolescents are vulnerable at school and how schools can provide opportunities to belong to fix it. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7(1), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219868744>; Kelly, A. E., & Viola, J. (2019). Sense of school community among high school students with a disability. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, 47(4), 343–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10852352.2019.1617385>

About REL Midwest

REL Midwest is part of a network of 10 regional educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. REL Midwest works in partnership with practitioners in seven Midwest states to conduct applied research and provide training, coaching, and technical support to create a more evidence-based education system.

Contact Us



relmidwest@air.org



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