



COMPANION BRIEF

Building Bridges to Belonging: A Story of Authentic Family and Community Engagement

July 2026

Research and practice show that belonging is an essential ingredient for safe and supportive learning environments in which students, their families, and their educators can thrive. Educational psychologists have shown that promoting belonging in schools improves the “ABCs” of educational outcomes: attendance, behavior, and course performance.ⁱ Belonging builds over time when educators consistently demonstrate through their relationships, routines, and instructional practices that students and families are welcome and their voices are valued.ⁱⁱ

This spotlight shares several ways in which Alice Birney Elementary School in Eureka, California, has built a deep sense of belonging for its diverse learning community.

To build an environment and culture for belonging, leaders of the school community must understand what it means to belong. School belonging is defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by people, especially teachers and other adults, in the school’s social environment.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Alice Birney school community has worked to embody this definition by

- building a strong foundation of **relational trust** between parents and the school, providing meaningful opportunities for parent **partnership in learning**, and
- actively **celebrating the diversity** of its school community by inviting students into culturally rich and engaging activities.

Alice Birney Elementary School by the Numbers^{iv}

Details	
Number of Students	375
Geographic Setting	Small Town
Grades Served	K–5
School Model	Traditional Public School

Demographics	
American Indian/Alaska Native	3%
Asian	20%
Black	3%
Hispanic	33%
White	25%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3%
Two or More Races	13%
Students With Disabilities	Data not available
English Learners	29%
Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	78%



Building Relational Trust

At Alice Birney, the school leadership and staff have explicitly prioritized building trust and understanding across and within the school community. Long-standing research on parent involvement and family engagement shows that schools must understand and support the lived experiences of their families to effectively engage with them.^v Trust between home and school does not happen automatically. Schools need to adopt intentional strategies for acknowledging, respecting, and embracing family circumstances and cultures to fully partner with families. Alice Birney staff and leadership have spent years creating an environment in and out of school in which the school community feels like family.

Sandra, a CARE Specialist at Alice Birney, notes that the “foundation of relationship building between us and families, between kids and teachers, all of us just being, [is] knowing that we can trust each other and build connection with each other.” Furthermore, she states that at Alice Birney, “Kids feel like they’re all kind of cousins and their aunties [are] taking care of them. I feel like the relationship building with the families kind of has made it feel like we’re just one big family here.”

Partnering for Learning

Parents and families are critical to reinforcing the learning that happens at Alice Birney. Research shows that school communication that is focused on student learning and individually directed to parents results in parents who are more informed and engaged in their student’s unique learning progress and goals.^{vi} Research has found that offering parents and families meaningful information about what and how students are learning can help parents understand—and even create—meaningful learning goals for their students.^{vii} This approach builds parent agency because parents are actively involved as partners in supporting their students’ learning. At Alice Birney, parents are regularly invited into the classroom to observe learning and to take an active role in participating in their students’ education.

Pam, an English Learner Educator at Alice Birney, explains that the school’s English Language Advisory Council “is a place for parents of our multilingual learners to be able to come together and discuss everything having to do with their child’s education and our school site. We’ve really put in a lot of time to be able to create a space that feels really welcoming and inclusive to everyone.”

Celebrating Diversity

At Alice Birney Elementary, embracing and celebrating the community’s rich diversity is a deliberate way to offer students and their families a sense of belonging. Research shows that schools and educators who go beyond basic or traditional supports (e.g., translating materials, providing interpreters) are more successful at engaging their diverse communities.^{viii} In fact, celebrating students’ diversity not only honors their lived experiences but also builds empathy and makes learning more meaningful.^{ix} At Alice Birney, there are many ways that sharing in different cultural traditions has helped students build a sense of connection through the community’s diversity.



For nearly 2 decades, Alice Birney has held a multicultural fair at which families share their foods, music, dress, and customs. As Kathy, a teacher, explains, at the multicultural fair, “Everyone is joyful. Everyone is sharing. Everyone is appreciating other people’s cultures and also being proud of their own culture and being able to share that. It’s just amazing. ... You have to be here and hear the sounds and the smells and seeing the smiles and just the way everyone interacts with each other. It’s incredible.” Derixa, a parent, especially likes “getting to watch the kids shine in their different cultural experiences and then getting to see other students in those cultural experiences with their friends.”

The Path to Meaningful Family Partnerships

Building effective family engagement and creating a culture of belonging is no small task. Experts in family engagement recognize that meaningful engagement is an ongoing journey for schools. The Flamboyant Foundation, for example, offers a [roadmap](#) for creating the conditions for school leaders and educators to work in partnership with families. This model recognizes that including all families, listening to community voices, sharing power, and building trust are foundational principles for guiding systems and schools in engaging with families.^x

The staff and community at Alice Birney Elementary School have spent decades, and especially the last few years since the COVID-19 pandemic, intentionally building trust in the community, providing authentic opportunities to partner with families, and celebrating what makes them unique. Together, these approaches allow students and their families to feel uniquely valued by their school community. As Derixa noted, “I think it is really important to have kids honored for their experience and heard for their experience and validated.”

Listening Guide and Questions for Team Reflection

As you listen to the audiocast from Alice Birney Elementary School, pay attention to how the participants describe their experiences, and consider what you might apply in your own school community. Some guiding questions for team reflection are offered in bold below.

- Toni Smart, Alice Birney’s reading interventionist, describes a wide portfolio of strategies for engaging parents and families, impacting both school climate and academic outcomes. This includes opportunities to participate in the English Learner Advisory Council, literacy night breakout rooms, instructional walk-throughs, and after-school programming. **What strategies to engage families do you use in your school? How do you know if they are effective? How might you strengthen those strategies?**
- The audiocast lifts up big and small ways that Alice Birney connects with its diverse community. This includes several dance groups honoring different traditions, English Learner Parent Advisory Council (ELPAC) information nights offered for parents of English Learner students, and the multicultural fair. **What activities and opportunities in your school deliberately elevate and celebrate diversity? How do those activities benefit your entire school community? What new strategies might you try?**
- Pam Brittenburg, one of Alice Birney’s English Learner educators, describes how their English Learner Advisory Committee began with one parent participating during the pandemic and went on to become a thriving parent body that led to literacy nights and instructional walks for parents. **What strategies does your school employ to connect with families when they are hard to reach? How might you broaden those opportunities for family connection and belonging to strengthen inclusion?**



Endnotes

- i Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30, 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8>
- ii Keene, B. (2020). *Belongingness (sense of belonging)*. EBSCO. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/belongingness-sense-belonging>
- iii Štremfel, U., Šterman Ivančič, K., & Peras, I. (2024). Addressing the sense of school belonging among all students? A systematic literature review. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 14(11), 2901–2917. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe14110190>.
- iv National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). [CCD public school data for 2024-2025 school year]. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=0600052&ID=060005201475; California Department of Education. (n.d.). *School profile: Alice Birney Elementary*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sdprofile/details.aspx?cds=12755156007751>
- v Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M. T., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkinson, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 105–130.
- vi Bergman, E., & Riddick, Z. (2026). *The engagement advantage: Findings from a mixed-methods study on family-school partnerships* (Learning Heroes).
- vii Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005.
- viii Bergman & Riddick, 2026.
- ix University of Kansas School of Education and Human Sciences. (2025, September 5). Effective strategies for building inclusive school cultures. *KU Online Education Graduate Programs Blog*. <https://educationonline.ku.edu/community/inclusive-education-strategies>
- x Flamboyant Foundation. (n.d.). *The family engagement roadmap: A practical guide for school system leaders to build enduring family partnerships*. <https://roadmap.flamboyantfoundation.org/>