



WestEd  
Western Educational  
Equity Assistance Center

# Community-Centered Approaches to Safety and Well-Being

## A Tool for Reflection and Action

By Natalie Walrond, Rebeca Cerna, Giselle Farrell,  
Brandi Simonsen (University of Connecticut),  
and Kent MacIntosh (University of Oregon)

Our nation's K–12 learning communities are experiencing more traumatic events than ever before, from wildfires to school shootings to fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activity. At the same time, there are powerful examples of communities banding together tightly in the face of this harm, drawing from deep wells of relational trust, connection, and belonging to provide each other with protection, care, and well-being.

To help K–12 educators and community leaders learn from the evidence base and from examples of how some communities have effectively focused on safety and well-being, this resource provides the following:

1. **Context**—an introduction to community-centered approaches to safety and well-being
2. **Essential Ingredients for Collective Care and Well-Being**—evidence-based key definitions and discussion
3. **Guiding Questions for Educators and Their Teams**—questions to guide reflection and planning
4. **A Tool for Taking Action**—a structured set of recommendations and practical, evidence-based resources to engage further



## 1. Context

**Taking a community-centered approach to safety and well-being is not new.** For generations, many cultures in the United States have prioritized collective well-being and community cohesion. For those cultures, communities have been primary sources of learning, connection, support, and protection (DeAngelis, 2021; Yosso, 2005). Further, research has shown that in the face of external threats, communities are often the “first responders,” providing support and care well before emergency professionals arrive (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015).

**And yet, social isolation in the United States has increased dramatically, with far-reaching consequences to individual and collective well-being.** In 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy declared social isolation a public health concern. In *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*, he described the profound impact that social isolation has on physical and mental health and on educational and economic outcomes (Murthy, 2023).

“This Surgeon General’s Advisory shows us how to build more connected lives and a more connected society. If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone. ... It will require reimagining the structures, policies, and programs that shape a community to best support the development of healthy relationships.”

—Dr. Vivek H. Murthy (2023, p. 4)



In the following examples and many others, traumatic events have revealed a consistent pattern:  
**Before systems stabilize, relationships carry people through. People rely on their existing, trusted networks to organize and support one another.**

On August 8, 2023, wildfires unexpectedly surged and devastated Lahaina, Maui, Hawai'i. **While formal systems struggled to reach survivors, communities did not wait.** Neighbors evacuated together, and others organized boat networks to deliver food, water, and supplies when roads were closed (Fitzmaurice et al., 2023).

On January 7, 2025, the Eaton fire reached Altadena, California, burning down schools and homes in the community. In that case, too, **the community responded immediately.** Residents raised funds to cover salaries and fund the cost of rebuilding. Aveson Schools' online communication platform became a critical way to match families in need with available resources (Aveson Schools, 2025).



**Evidence suggests that relational trust, connection, and belonging are powerful foundations for safety and well-being in a learning community.** When every member of a learning community is responsible for building relational trust, making and sustaining connections, and contributing to a sense of belonging for other members of that community, this shared accountability can ensure the durability of the community's collective well-being. The community is fortified so that, together, its members can respond quickly, thoughtfully, and in coordinated ways to protect itself from harmful and traumatic events that threaten safety and well-being. The following section provides more on the evidence base for and definitions of these essential ingredients.

"The Hawai'i DOE [Department of Education] strengthens a sense of belonging through the culturally focused well-being framework (HĀ- Nā Hopena A'o) policy and the implementation of the Hawai'i Multi-tiered System of Support that includes four domains: Academic, Behavioral, SEL, and Physical Health. After the pandemic, Hawai'i DOE also implemented the Here to Help training series that trains educators to strengthen mental health literacy. The Department also has a partnership to provide short-term tele-health therapy through a contracted organization. The Department participates in a threat response team that partners with outside organizations and law enforcement. All schools are trained to implement threat assessments, suicide protocols and conduct campus vulnerability assessments every three years."

*—Respondent from March 2026 Needs Sensing Survey*

## 2. Essential Ingredients for Collective Care and Well-Being

Every community member—including students, families, and educators—deserves to feel safe and connected and is responsible for the safety and connection of others. As evidenced by the research cited in the following paragraphs, relational trust, connection, and belonging can be essential ingredients (see Figure 1 ) not only for academic success and healthy human development but also for creating a firm foundation for preventing and responding to external threats to physical or psychological safety.

These three essential ingredients can be a deep well that schools can draw from for protection and care when faced with traumatic events. They are different but interrelated concepts. Following are research-based definitions for each construct to complement your intuitive understanding of them.

**Figure 1. Essential Ingredients for Collective Care and Well-Being**



**Relational Trust.** *Relational trust is commonly described as an ability to rely on another person's good intentions. A seminal study by Tony Bryk and Barbara Schneider defined four elements of relational trust: mutual respect, personal regard, professional competence, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Their study found that when relational trust in schools was high, educators were more likely to collaborate with each other and with parents, resulting in significant gains in student learning.*



**Connection.** *In the context of schools, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes school connectedness as a student's knowledge that adults and peers care about them (CDC, 2009). In its 2009 study, the CDC found that school connectedness provides the strongest protective factor for children to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (such as drinking and driving). In the same study, school connectedness was second in importance, after family connectedness, as a protective factor against emotional distress, disordered eating, and suicidal ideation and attempts.*



**Belonging.** *Belonging, which can be built in the context of relational trust, describes the deep feeling of acceptance that fosters safety, connection, and emotional well-being (Keene, 2020). The desire for belonging is innate (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and research shows that a sense of belonging can promote both physical and emotional well-being and can positively influence major educational outcomes: attendance, behavior, and course performance (Allen et al., 2016). Finally, belonging builds over time. Therefore, educators must demonstrate consistently, through their words, routines, and instructional practices, that students are welcome and their voices are valued.*



"I am a member of multiple minority groups. I make myself visible not only at school, but in the community as well. I try to send home 2–3 positive emails a day, which is not a lot for a population of 600 students, but it's a start. I also make myself available to all my classrooms (we have mild to moderate special ed classrooms that are self contained). I model and provide data-driven interventions and encourage the inclusion of parents in our system of supports for students and offer my support to collaborate with other staff members who want/need more unique approaches or interventions."

—Respondent from March 2026 Needs Sensing Survey

In New Mexico, **programs such as Community Action Response Teams train community members to lead local disaster response**, emphasizing communication, mutual aid, and shared responsibility (Taylor, 2025). Preparedness is relational. Communities recover faster when trust, connection, and belonging already exist.

When Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrived in Portland, Oregon, **networks were created to help** with meal delivery, errands, and rides to school for the children of families who were afraid to leave home (Amaro, 2025).



### 3. Guiding Questions for Educators and Their Teams

This section offers questions for school teams to use in reflecting on relational trust, connection, and belonging in their own learning communities. Consider ways to integrate some of these reflection questions into community well-being work already happening at your school, district, or community agency, such as in your school climate and culture initiatives or family engagement strategies.

#### Personal Reflection

Start by reflecting on how you show up in this work with your team.

- What values, beliefs, or mindsets guide me? Where did they come from?
- How do my values, beliefs, or mindsets support—or unintentionally hinder—relational trust, connection, and belonging?
- How do I approach opportunities to connect with people who are different from me? What helps or prevents me from taking these opportunities?

#### Community Reflection

Next, think about the safety and well-being of your school or other learning community. Consider the three elements of relational trust, connection, and belonging.

- What are our community's assets? Think beyond access to financial resources—also consider cultural wealth, generational wisdom, community partnerships, and so on.
- Whose voices and experiences contribute to our learning community's culture and climate? Who feels connection, inclusion, and belonging in our community? Who does not? Why?
- How do we cultivate a shared responsibility for building connections and creating a strong sense of belonging?
- How do we respond when harm occurs? How do we repair relationships?
- Who are the helpers in our community when harm occurs? Consider students, families, educators, local family service agencies, local mental health providers, hospitals, local parks and recreation services, and so on.



## System Reflection

Finally, think about the school, district, state, and national systems that create the conditions of your community's safety or well-being. System elements include policies, practices, and administrative structures. Systems are also shaped by the social, political, economic, and historical context.

- How do systems contribute to or hinder relational trust, connection, and belonging?
- Where does power reside in our community? Where is power lacking?
- Does every community member have efficient access to the resources they need in a crisis? Do they experience those services in the same way? Are the outcomes the same?

## Making Meaning Together

Before taking action, pause to reflect on what you are noticing and experiencing as a school community. This shared reflection can help build understanding and ensure that your next steps are grounded in relationships that support connection and belonging.

- Strengths: What is working well for us right now, and why?
- Pressure points: Where do we feel stretched, under pressure, or less connected?
- Build from assets: What strengths, relationships, or existing practices can we build from to address our pressure points?
- Synthesis: What is this telling us about what our community needs most?

Once your team has reflected on the questions above, you can use the following tool (pages 10–13) to plan a small number of feasible, concrete actions you could take to strengthen relational trust, connection, and belonging in your learning community.



“At our Winter Health and Resource Fair, we invited community partners to support our immigrant community and hosted a ‘Know Your Rights’ speaker. Every school in our district has a family advocate to support families with preparedness. We also trained every school on our resolution and ensured front office staff had a plan in the event of an immigration official coming to their building.”

—Email correspondence from district administrator, June 2026

On September 10, 2025, Evergreen High School in Evergreen, Colorado, experienced a school shooting. At graduation on May 16, 2026, the community celebrated their seniors and remembered how the school and broader community had showed up for each other. In her speech, salutatorian Louise Laigle said, “It would have been easy to stay home, isolated, and grieve by ourselves. But instead, **we all chose to reach out to each other, help each other and carry each other through the finish line.** We listened, we supported, we showed up together, and, most importantly, we stood together, even in those hard times, especially in those hard times. That is strength” (Breunlin, 2026, para. 13).



## 4. A Tool for Taking Action

### Universal Prevention



#### **Strengthen connections.**

Bolster systems and everyday practices that build relational trust, connection, and belonging for all community members.

**PLAN:** What is one strategy we can try as a team? What are the steps to implement that strategy?

**ENGAGE:** Who could we include for building and sustaining this strategy?

**SCHEDULE:** When will we begin to implement it? When will we evaluate?

**EVALUATE:** How will we know if this strategy is working?

### Relevant Resources for Universal Prevention

[\*Belonging: A Weekly Practice\* by the Othering and Belonging Institute](#) (Othering and Belonging Institute)

[\*Overview: Effective Belonging Messages\*](#) (Equity Accelerator)

[Home Visits](#) (Southern Poverty Law Center, Learning for Justice)

[Six Global Lessons on How Family, School, and Community Engagement Can Transform Education](#)  
(Center for Universal Education at Brookings)

[Centering Student Experience: A Playbook for Improving Student Outcomes by Centering Student Experience](#)  
(BELE Network)

[Culturally Responsive Teaching Checklist](#) (Reimagining Migration & UCLA)

[The Family Engagement Roadmap](#) (Flamboyant Foundation)

[Positive Greetings at the Door](#) (Center on PBIS)

[Supporting and Responding to Behavior Guide](#) (Center on PBIS)

[Facilitating Civil and Productive Classroom Conversations](#) (Center on PBIS)



## Targeted Prevention



### Identify gaps and strengthen support.

Use data (e.g., school climate surveys, focus groups, interviews) to identify groups of students and individuals who feel less connected and identify opportunities to strengthen support.

**PLAN:** What is one strategy we can try as a team? What are the steps to implement that strategy?

**ENGAGE:** Who could we include for building and sustaining this strategy?

**SCHEDULE:** When will we begin to implement it? When will we evaluate?

**EVALUATE:** How will we know if this strategy is working?

---

### Relevant Resources for Targeted Prevention

[Supporting LGBTQ+ Young People: Tips for Parents and Caregivers](#) (Chicago Public Schools)

[Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students and Staff](#) (National Center for School Mental Health)

[Understanding Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Education](#) (Learning for Justice)

[Transforming School Culture to Address Antisemitism and Islamophobia](#) (Learning for Justice)

[Social and Emotional Thinking Routines for Teaching in a Diverse, Complex, and Moving World:  
An Educator's Guide](#) (Reimagining Migration & Project Zero at Harvard University)

[Cultivating Stories About Family Migrations](#) (Project Zero at Harvard University)



## Community Preparedness



### Build systems and relationships in advance.

Strengthen policies, partnerships, and systems that support coordinated, relationship-centered crisis readiness, based on lessons learned from other school and district communities.

**PLAN:** What is one strategy we can try as a team? What are the steps to implement that strategy?

**ENGAGE:** Who could we include for building and sustaining this strategy?

**SCHEDULE:** When will we begin to implement it? When will we evaluate?

**EVALUATE:** How will we know if this strategy is working?

---

### Relevant Resources for Community Preparedness

[Considerations for States and Districts Preparing for and Responding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\) Actions](#) (Northeast PBIS Network)

[Promoting a Safe and Secure Learning Environment for All: Guidance and Model Policies to Assist California's K-12 Schools in Responding to Immigration Issues](#) (California Department of Justice)

[What to Do if Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\)/Homeland Security Shows Up at Your School: Step-by-Step Guidance](#) (Los Angeles County Office of Education)

[What to Do if ICE Visits Your School: Sample Policies and Guidance From School Districts and States](#) (Immigrant Connections)

[School Crisis Toolkit](#) (Colorado Department of Education)

[Crisis Prevention and Preparation](#) (Center on PBIS)



## Community Response



### Activate supports.

Have tools, communication systems, and other support networks ready to activate during and after a crisis.

**PLAN:** What is one strategy we can try as a team? What are the steps to implement that strategy?

**ENGAGE:** Who could we include for building and sustaining this strategy?

**SCHEDULE:** When will we begin to implement it? When will we evaluate?

**EVALUATE:** How will we know if this strategy is working?

---

### Relevant Resources for Community Response

[After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools](#) (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, and Education Development Center)

[Healing Our Schools After a Loss: A Toolkit for Schools Responding to a Suicide or Sudden Death](#) (Utah State Board of Education)

[Gun Violence Prevention and Response](#) (National Education Association)

[Crisis Recovery](#) (Center on PBIS)

[Supporting Families Impacted by Disasters and other Crisis Events](#) (Center on PBIS)

[Planning for Student Return to School Following a Crisis](#) (Center on PBIS)

## References

- Aldrich, D. P., & Meyer, M. A. (2015). Social capital and community resilience. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(2), 254–269. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/0002764214550299>
- Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2016). 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>
- Amaro, Y. (2025, November 7). How Oregonians are creating networks to shield their immigrant neighbors from ICE. *The Oregonian*. <https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2025/11/how-ordinary-oregonians-are-creating-networks-to-shield-immigrant-neighbors-from-ice.html>
- Aveson Schools. (2025). The Eaton fire: Aveson's story. <https://www.aveson.org/blog/the-eaton-fire-avesons-story>
- Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.
- Breunlin, E. (2026, May 14). 8 months after Evergreen High shooting, seniors credit community for getting them to graduation day. *Colorado Sun*. <https://coloradosun.com/2026/05/14/evergreen-high-school-graduation-school-shooting/>
- Bryk, A., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2009). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- DeAngelis, T. (2021). Reimagining mental health for communities of color. *Monitor on Psychology*, 52(7), 66.
- Fitzmaurice, D., DeRose, J., Mehta, J., & Sommer, L. (2023, August 13). See how one volunteer group organized aid deliveries after fire decimates Lahaina. NPR. <https://www.wesanews.org/2023-08-13/see-how-one-volunteer-group-organized-aid-deliveries-after-fire-decimates-lahaina>



Keene, B. (2020). *Belongingness (sense of belonging)*. EBSCO. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/belongingness-sense-belonging>

Murthy, V. H. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Taylor, J. (2025, November 5). Community resilience projects foster recovery amid disasters and tragedy. *Mind Journal*. <https://themindsjournal.com/news/community-resilience-projects-foster/>

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.

© 2026 WestEd. All rights reserved. WestEd leads the Western Educational Equity Assistance Center, serving Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, California, Colorado, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

#### Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Marcianne Rivero Koetje, PhD, Multilingual Programs and Equity Coordinator, Corvallis School District, for serving as a reviewer of this resource with a practitioner's lens.

The contents of this brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (S004D220004). The Department does not mandate or prescribe practices, models, or other activities described or discussed in this document. The contents of this brief may contain examples of, adaptations of, and links to resources created and maintained by another public or private organization. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. The content of this brief does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department. This publication is not intended to represent the views or policy of, or be an endorsement of any views expressed or materials provided by, any Federal agency.