

Education Select Committee inquiry into the Every Child Achieving and Thriving White paper

*Evidence Statement from the **Belonging in Education Research Network***

Introduction

Very high numbers of children and young people in England miss large parts of their education. Permanent exclusion and suspension rates remain much higher than pre-pandemic levels and rates of persistent absence have also risen. Students who miss education are more likely to have special educational needs, have experience of children's social care, and/or live in poverty. They are also disproportionately drawn from particular ethnic groups. There is an urgent need to address the systemic reasons and barriers for fruitful engagement in education for all.

This written submission has been developed from the University of Oxford's work and research on Belonging in Education drawing and includes contributions from some members of the Belonging in Education Research Network¹. This evidence gives professional insight as well as research-informed evidence to support the statements.

Ian Thompson is Professor of Inclusive Education and the Interim Director of the [Rees Centre](#) (Research and Evidence for Children's Social Care) at the University of Oxford's Department of Education and co-convenor of the Belonging in Education Research Network. The Network brings together practitioners, system leaders, and academics working in education, children's social care, special educational needs and disabilities, and youth justice to collate, improve, and act on evidence to enhance school practice in promoting belonging. The purpose of the Network is to build an evidence base for why belonging in education matters and how it can work effectively in practice, and to use this to advocate for change at national and local levels. The Network seeks to take forward learning from our work from [Excluded Lives \(The Political Economies of School Exclusion and their Consequences\)](#), [Equity by Design](#), the [Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Programme in Schools](#) and [The Hadley Trust project | Rees Centre](#) exploring

¹ The Belonging in Education Research Network was established by the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford's Department of Education in partnership with Anewarc Ltd, Association of School and College Leaders, Local Government Association, and National Association of Head Teachers

good practice examples of local authorities supporting schools to develop attachment aware and trauma-informed approaches. The Network has produced a working definition of [Belonging in Education](#) which draws on a recent review of literature by the National Children's Bureau (Smith & Culbert 2024), subsequently published research, and practice insights from Network members.

Our definition is:

“Belonging in education refers to the dynamic processes by which schools and other learning settings create the conditions to ensure everyone in their communities:

- feels physically and psychologically safe, supported and included, and protected from discrimination;
- feels known, valued, and that they matter and can develop and express their authentic selves in a way that celebrates difference;
- can make, maintain, and mend positive relationships and navigate rupture and repair;
- can develop their learning aspirations and be enabled to achieve them; and
- is empowered with meaningful opportunities to actively participate, shape, and contribute to an increasingly inclusive, equitable, and anti-discriminatory environment that values difference.”

In general, the Network members with whom we have consulted welcome the White Paper's ambition to create a more inclusive education system in which every child can achieve and thrive, and its recognition of the fundamental importance of belonging. Our research suggests that for a range of children facing adversity, including those with experience of children's social care, achieving and thriving depends fundamentally on developing relationships in order to build a real understanding of children's needs rather than making assumptions based on labels (e.g. Free School Meals (FSM), care-experienced, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)).

The case for WHAT belonging is and WHY it is important to long term outcomes, was summarised in our Statement earlier this year. But implementation is just as important as aspiration. Our focus now is on the HOW: what is needed to make belonging a reality:

- Designing school systems that include the most disadvantaged children (including, but not limited to, SEND and children with experience of children's social care).
- Starting with an understanding that pupil disengagement and behaviours that challenge are a response to systemic factors (not individual deficits).
- Importance of 'whole school' relational approaches in addressing this.

What we mean by belonging (including what it is not)

Belonging in education refers to the dynamic processes by which schools and other learning settings create the conditions to ensure everyone in their communities belongs in education.

For a child to belong at school they need:

- Safety and stability – to feel physically and psychologically safe, supported and included.
- Identity and authenticity – to feel known, valued and that they matter. This includes developing and expressing their authentic selves in a way that celebrates difference.
- Agency (voice and participation) – to be empowered with meaningful opportunities to actively participate, shape, and contribute.
- Relationships and connection – to learn how to make, maintain, and mend positive relationships (and have this modelled for them).
- Purpose and achievement – to be helped to develop their learning aspirations and enabled to achieve them.

This does not work where schools privilege performance over the welfare and wellbeing of students in their care. Schools that adopt rigid and inflexible behaviour policies and sanctions produce compliance not belonging.

Why belonging in education matters

1. **Belonging is an essential, not a nice thing to have** – belonging is foundational to learning. Research evidence suggests belonging is associated with better attendance (Moore et al. 2026), engagement (Gibson and Soussi 2026), behaviour (Goagoses et al. 2026), attainment (Banerjee 2026; OECD 2026), and mental health (Osbutth et al. 2023). School belonging is relational and contextual (Gibson & Soussi 2026; Sotardi & Rudolf 2026). Pupils are more likely to attend when they feel connected to school and know that people would notice and care if they were absent. Attendance strategies should address relationships and pupil experience and recognise the complex reasons that sit behind absence, as well as attendance monitoring. Belonging and mattering (Flett 2022) should be considered central outcomes of education. Belonging answers the question "Do I fit here?" Mattering answers "Do I count here?"

What we'd like to see: belonging as a more explicit objective rather than an implicit aspiration. The Government should ensure attendance reform includes a stronger focus on belonging, pupil voice, trusted relationships, and early intervention rather than relying primarily on compliance-based approaches:

- *Make belonging and mattering explicit dimensions within the Pupil Engagement Framework and include questions exploring whether pupils feel cared for and about, listened to, respected, and valued.*
- *Develop measures that capture learner voice, connectedness, participation, and sense of inclusion.*
- *Move away from accountability measures that disproportionately reward school exclusion as a behaviour management strategy.*
- *Ensure race and racial equity are included in guidance for schools for inclusion policies.*
- *Promote relational practice and restorative approaches nationally.*
- *Ensure that 'Experts at Hand' include a team of people who can support schools/colleges with belonging from a universal level through to crisis with a focus on prevention and early intervention.*

2. Belonging matters for adults as well as children – teacher retention and wellbeing, engagement of parents and carers.

School staff are the primary creators of belonging and mattering. Developing environments where pupils feel known, valued, and listened to requires specific skills and professional development. Staff who themselves feel valued and supported are better able to create those conditions for pupils. The quality of relationships between staff and learners is one of the strongest predictors of engagement and success (Thornberg et al., 2022). Staff require training, time and support to develop relational approaches, trauma-informed practice and inclusive teaching. Workforce wellbeing is intrinsically linked to learner wellbeing. Schools should also work at engaging all parents and carers in the development of school belonging for their children.

What we'd like to see: Make relational practice, inclusion, trauma-informed approaches, and belonging central elements of initial teacher education, Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and leadership development programmes. Ensure workforce reforms adequately address workload to create capacity for relationship-building and pastoral support. Devise further guidance including successful examples for schools and Trusts in how to secure appropriate flexible working policies and practices.

What is needed to promote belonging

3. Relationships are the key mechanism. Teachers and schools who know children well and model how to build, maintain and repair positive relationships can help children to improve engagement, reduce behaviour difficulties, strengthen resilience and support educational recovery after adversity.

What we'd like to see: Professional development needs to prioritise relational practice alongside curriculum and behaviour. There should be more focus on relationships in the curriculum and references to relationships in behaviour policies.

4. Attendance and behaviour need to be understood relationally. Behaviour often communicates unmet need – e.g., relational trauma and adversity. Belonging should be recognised as a foundational protective factor. Young people who feel known, valued and respected are more likely to engage positively, participate in enrichment opportunities, and demonstrate positive behaviour. Behaviour should be understood through a relational and developmental lens rather than solely a disciplinary one. School exclusion should be viewed as an outcome that indicates earlier support opportunities may have been missed.

What we'd like to see: While behaviour policies should rightly set high expectations for behaviour we'd like to see more emphasis on relational approaches, understanding of children's circumstances and consistent support, and less emphasis on sanctions as the primary response.

5. The right for all to be safe in school. Alongside these challenges is the very real issue of how to address staff feelings of safety while balancing the need to support students too. Both students and staff need to feel safe and this needs to be reflected in school policies and practice. This position will enable the needs of the other students and teachers, as well as the individual child, to be acknowledged and met, thereby ensuring the safety of all parties and supporting their sense of belonging.

Many young people are persistently absent because they feel disconnected, unsafe, anxious, excluded, or have unmet needs. Attendance strategies that focus solely on compliance risk missing the underlying causes. In managing behaviour schools need to ensure that all school members, children and adults are safe enabling appropriate action to be taken to safeguard others, while also acknowledging that the child exhibiting harmful behaviour requires support and safeguarding from existing or potential harms. Relationships, belonging, and trusted adults are central to re-engagement. Greater support should be taken to acknowledge staff *and* students' best interests. [Equity by Design](#): 'Our Children, Our Responsibility' Policy and Practice

Recommendations for Developing School Inclusion and Reducing School Exclusion in England specifically focuses on the right for all to be safe.

What we'd like to see: Acknowledge the fundamental role of relationships within addressing behaviour. Remove emphasis on 'zero tolerance' and extend support and more nuanced and proportional responses to harm. Acknowledge victim/'perpetrator' overlap. Take steps to build safety plans for staff and students. Ensure attendance reforms prioritise relational and preventative approaches. Include belonging, inclusion, and student voice within attendance frameworks. Invest in early intervention and transition support programmes. Facilitate policy and practice approaches that help schools to acknowledge safety in their contexts built on staff and student accounts.

6. Give children a voice: Giving children more voice, active participation and agency is a key ingredient of effective belonging. Our engagement with school leaders and young people suggests strong appetite for locally developed relationship-based approaches that place pupil voice, inclusion, and community participation at their centre. Research evidence from Excluded Lives and BeeWell showed that schools who adopted this culture had lower disruption and were less likely to suspend or permanently exclude (Cahill et al. 2026; Daniels & Thompson 2024).

What we'd like to see: the proposals need to do more to implement learning from social care and beyond on how to engage children (especially the most disadvantaged) more effectively. The innovative work of Coram Voice on BrightSpots and 'Ask me What Matters' can/should be adapted to education settings. Government should incorporate children's experiences as part of the evaluation criteria for these reforms.

7. Stability and effective transitions matter. Educational stability is not simply an educational issue but a children's social care issue as well. Specifically for children in social care, our work consistently shows that instability affects educational success (Selwyn 2026); and our work on school exclusions highlights the importance of re-integration processes (Thompson & Daniels 2025). The White Paper needs to take a much broader view of transitions as this is not just about progression across phases but about returns from absences, including both external and internal exclusions. Admissions and transitions should not be viewed solely as placement processes. Successful inclusion depends on how quickly pupils develop relationships, belonging, and a sense of mattering within their new community. Transitions into school, on to college or sixth form, and within school all need to be handled thoughtfully.

What we'd like to see: Strengthen expectations around induction, transition, and relationship-building for pupils entering new schools. Admissions processes should promote inclusion, continuity, and belonging from the outset. Transition is a critical period during which learners either begin to build belonging or become disengaged. Strengthen requirements around transition planning, especially for learners with SEND,

care experience, and other vulnerabilities. Encourage schools to measure successful transition and belonging, not simply enrolment.

Potential threats/challenges to delivering belonging contained within DfE proposals

8. Belonging requires leadership of culture change. This cannot be driven by requirements to produce strategies and policies (e.g. behaviour) or confined to ‘measurement’ (e.g. the proposed Pupil Engagement Framework). Change is a process that typically takes three years to embed in schools and requires a collective understanding of what the culture change is, why it is needed, the benefits it will bring, and support for all in its implementation.

What we’d like to see: investment in relational leadership, and time/space and peer support through Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Authorities. Accountability only through Trusts misses opportunity for link to Children’s Social Care. We should build on the use of sector level improvement mechanisms such as the DfE funded [Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Inclusive Leaders Network](#).

9. Schools cannot do this alone. Implementation should strengthen cross-school collaboration and reduce competition between schools and Trusts.

What we’d like to see: Ensure accountability mechanisms incentivise collaboration rather than competition. Require Trusts to demonstrate how they work with external partners to support belonging, inclusion, and vulnerable learners. Require and hold to account other services to provide support, including early intervention. Schools/colleges need to work with parents/carers and learners to break barriers down in a way that will provide a long-term solution. Fines and threats will not do this. Support place-based approaches that allow schools to develop belonging strategies relevant to their communities.

10. Measure what matters but recognise measurement is not sufficient: Currently accountability focuses heavily on attainment, attendance, and school exclusions and not enough on experience of children. Early attempts to measure safety and belonging are welcome but need proper development to ensure they capture the five dimensions we have identified: Safety and Stability; Identity and Authenticity; Agency (voice and participation); Relationships and Connection; Purpose and Achievement.

What we’d like to see: Government investment in developing robust measures of belonging and inclusion and use this as a core feature of educational quality across the system. The Government should develop a national approach to understanding and measuring belonging, mattering, and pupil participation, using the proposed Pupil

Engagement Framework as a key mechanism. Belonging and mattering should be reflected consistently across education policy, accountability, and inspection frameworks. Develop policy guidance that supports meaningful evaluation of students' lived experiences rather than relying on compliance indicators alone.

Closing Points

Belonging needs to be elevated to an explicit objective, with proper investment in ensuring it can be properly measured (for children, parents/carers, and staff) and embedded in accountability systems, recognising the time taken to achieve culture change. This requires:

Serious investment – through sector-led improvement model involving Children's Social Care and Health (physical and mental) as well as Education – in improved infrastructure to support schools in implementation.

- Extend investment in researching what interventions are impactful, and why. Organise / extend opportunities for universities and others to collaborate closely with schools to identify and evaluate what works.
- Require schools to measure and report indicators of belonging, engagement, and participation alongside attainment measures. Explicitly recognise belonging as a driver of educational success within accountability frameworks.
- Belonging should be viewed as a national priority that cuts across education, health, social mobility, youth policy, SEND reform, mental health policy, and community cohesion. Young people who feel they belong are more likely to engage in learning, employment, civic participation, and their communities. Belonging is not an "additional initiative"; it is the foundation upon which successful outcomes are built.
- The adoption of a cross-government strategy that explicitly recognises belonging as a protective factor and driver of educational success. Encourage Ofsted, the Department for Education, and other agencies to recognise belonging as a key indicator of effective educational practice. These are our children and our responsibility.

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