PARTNERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE of LEARNING CALIFORNIA

Transformational Community Schools: Belong Circles

What are transformational community schools?

In 2021 and 2022, California made a historic investment of $4.1 billion in seed funding to expand community schools across the state as a transformational, place-based strategy for reimagining public education. Community schools are a holistic approach to how we do school rooted in trust, shared leadership, and deep partnership with students, families, educators, and community members. By organizing in- and out-of-school supports around the strengths and needs of each local community, they create culturally-rooted, inclusive environments that promote academic success, social-emotional wellbeing, and meaningful engagement from cradle to career.

Belong Circles by the Numbers

- 1,796 students and 73 teachers received the Belong Circles Curriculum
- 26 schools and school districts and 10 community agencies were part of a county-wide training.
- 11.4% increase in belonging among students (CHKS CA Healthy Kids Survey data from 2023/24 and 2024/25 school years)

Impacts of Belong Circles

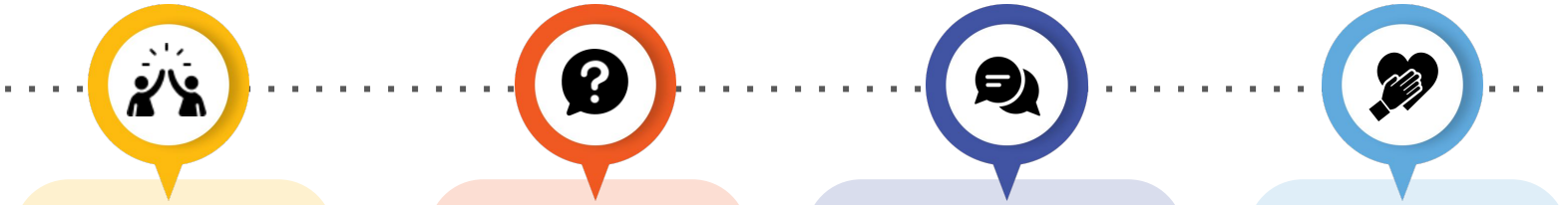
Over $43 Million in community school funding made possible:

- Improved student engagement and leadership
- Stronger family, parent, and caregiver involvement in school governance
- Restorative approaches to discipline and student well-being

Belong Circles: A Community-Led Approach to School Transformation

Belong Circles are intentional, structured gatherings based in community organizing and restorative justice practices that support connection, dialogue, and action within school communities. In schools where students have historically felt disconnected, Belong Circles are helping to foster belonging, elevate leadership, and rebuild trust. They are woven through the school day and often embedded in advisory periods or leadership classes, and they serve as a relational infrastructure for deeper learning and community building. In Humboldt County, Belong Circles have helped students move into leadership, families gain decision-making power, and schools transform into spaces of healing, care, inclusion, and joyful learning. They provide a relational structure that deepens community connections and has direct implications for classroom practice, culturally-rooted project-based learning, and inclusive curriculum design.

How do Belong Circles work?



Purpose and Agreements

Participants establish a safe, inclusive space with shared values

Icebreaker Activities

Strengthen trust and connection through interactive exercises

Community and School Conversations

Participants explore challenges, aspirations, and ways to take action

Closing and Commitments

Reflections and next steps to ensure meaningful change

What Constituents are Saying:

"When I first came in 2018, the children didn't smile, didn't play, yelled, and fought each other; it was not a place where they were happy. I realized the key was the staff — unhappy and traumatized. My goal was to turn that around. The way to help the students was to provide a better environment for staff; by the time I left in 2022, a happy place with a lot of fun and community structure put in"

— Autumn Chapman, former principal and superintendent of Loleta Union Elementary School District

"I started at 13, but I wasn't really a social person. Once I started getting more involved in belong circles and Truth North, I wasn't a social outcast anymore, and I became better than I ever thought I could. I still struggle with how to talk and public speaking, but it's definitely an improvement."

— Donovan, student

"Native American students, among the largest populations in the state, struggled to find their place in a system not aligned with their culture. Belong Circles changed that. Instead of a teacher at the front, students and families engage in shared learning, storytelling, and building a common language. It's about belonging—'You are the other me I didn't know yet.'"

— Ashlin Malouf-Gashaw, Othering and Belonging Institute

Transformation for Students & Schools

Starting with a partnership between True North Organizing Network, Loleta Union Elementary School District, and members of the Wiyot Tribe in 2022, Belong Circles were first piloted as a response to deep disconnection among students – particularly Native American and Latinx youth who faced high absenteeism, low engagement, and a lack of culturally affirming school experiences. Over time, the practice has grown into a county-wide movement, with support from the Humboldt County Office of Education and implementation in districts across the region, including its largest, Eureka City Schools.

At Loleta Elementary, students used Belong Circles to advocate for better school meals, leading to the hiring of a school cook who now prepares fresh meals from the school garden. At Eureka City Schools, students now lead Belong Circles for their peers, fostering a culture of support, inclusion, and accountability throughout the school.

By embedding Belong Circles within a broader community schools strategy, Humboldt County is showing how relationship-centered education can transform student experiences and build lasting community partnerships. School districts like Eureka City Schools are beginning to see early signs of improvement in student engagement and school culture, with efforts underway to track the impact on chronic absenteeism and other key outcomes.

Belong Circles have also helped seed complementary programs like the Elevate Youth Mentorship initiative, which supports middle and high school students in developing leadership and life skills through consistent participation and trusted relationships. Plans are underway to expand this work through paid internships, curriculum development, and deeper partnerships with local institutions such as Cal Poly Humboldt, College of the Redwoods, Loleta Union Elementary, and Toddy Thomas Middle School.

Together, these efforts demonstrate how a sustained investment in relational, student-centered practices can cultivate belonging, leadership, and opportunity in schools and communities alike.

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The **California Partnership for the Future of Learning** is a statewide alliance of community organizing and advocacy groups advancing **a shared vision of racially just, relationship-centered community schools** that confront the historical legacy and generational impact of inequitable schooling in California and the country to **birth a transformational education system built for us all**. Our work together centers equity, elevates the voices of students and families of color in partnership with educators, focuses on long-term systemic change, and connects to a larger national effort to strengthen public education systems.