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- Lessons from the Field -

## Free to Learn Miniseries: Strategies for Supporting Full Student Participation

*Wednesday, December 13, 2023 | 3:00 – 4:30 PM ET*  
*Transcript*

**Megan Gildin:**

Good afternoon and welcome to today's webinar, the second in our Free to Learn Miniseries: Supporting Full Student Participation. On behalf of the US Department of Education, we are pleased to have you with us. In fact, over 680 people registered for this webinar and we expect more to log on shortly. This webinar is part of our Lessons from the Field Webinar series. This series highlights effective tools, techniques, and strategies employed by everyday practitioners to address topics that are on the top of educator's minds.

As always, as you participate, if you have additional strategies that are working for your community, please reach out to [bestpracticesclearinghouse@ed.gov](mailto:bestpracticesclearinghouse@ed.gov) to share. Our work is stronger together and we all benefit from sharing effective strategies.

Please note that the content of this presentation does not necessarily represent the policies or views of the US Department of Education, nor does it imply endorsement by the US Department of Education. My name is Megan Gildin. I serve as the Deputy Director of the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE, and will be your moderator for today's event. NCSSE is funded by the Office of Safe and Supportive Schools within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Please visit our website to learn more about Nestle and to access a range of resources that address school climate and conditions for learning to give you a sense of what the website looks like and the content it contains. Here we share an image of our homepage on the right, along with some of our most popular products on the left. Also, consider following us on social media where we share the latest resources and events coming from the field.

Please note, this webinar is being recorded. All materials that you will see today, including the slides referenced resources, and the recorded version of this webinar will be available on the event webpage within the website. Some items, including the slides and speaker bios have already been posted.

Please also note you can access previous lessons from the field sessions by visiting the webinar series webpage, which is also listed here and will be posted in the chat.

Let me share our agenda for today. So after we finish up the logistics, Hamed Negron-Perez from the US Department of Education, will welcome us and share more about the Free to Learn initiative. We'll then have a context setting presentation that will ground us in the current landscape of chronic absenteeism and strategies to build a positive student climate and support full student participation. From there, we'll move into our panel discussion to talk about what these strategies look like in real school and afterschool environments.

After a brief closing of the content delivery, we'll move into a Q&A with the panelists. Please post your questions for both the context setting speaker and the panelists into the Q&A feature using your Zoom control panel.

All right. It is now my pleasure to introduce Hamed Negron-Perez, who will provide our welcome. Hamed is the Group Leader of the Title IV-A Student Support and Academic Enrichment Group in the office of Safe and Supportive Schools and the Program Manager of School Emergency Response to Violence at the US Department of Education. Welcome.

**Hamed Negron-Perez:** Thanks, Megan. On behalf of the US Department of Education, and as a recovering high school principal, I am pleased to welcome you to our latest Lessons from the Field webinar and the second session in our Free to Learn Miniseries: Supporting Full Student Participation.

Our nation has been contending with a disturbing series of hate motivated attacks, as well as a rising cases of antisemitism and Islamophobia following an eruption of conflict in the Middle East in October 2023. And schools often reflect the health and challenges in our communities. The US Department of Education is committed to supporting states, districts, and schools in one, improving their ability to prevent hate based threats and bullying and recover from hate based violence. And two, enhancing their overall school safety and climate.

In September of 2022, the United We Stand Summit was held at the White House to bring national attention to the need to counter the destructive effects of hate fueled violence on our democracy and public safety, mobilize diverse sectors of society and communities across the country to respond to these dangers and put forward a shared inclusive bipartisan vision for a more United America.

The Department of Education, again has two primary tasks, support educational authorities and educational institution to improve their ability to prevent hate based threats, and bullying, and recover from hate based violence and enhance overall school safety and climate.

Free to Learn. In response to the 2022 White House Summit, United we Stand, the Department of Education launched the Free to Learn initiative last spring. The goal of this initiative is to galvanize states, districts, schools, public health agencies, and local communities to understand, implement, and sustain evidence-based practices and policies that support school safety, mental health, and positive school climates, and prevent bullying, violence and hate so all students are free to learn.

A new section in ED'S Best Practices Clearinghouse website provides easy access to critical information, tools and resources related to Free to Learn that can help build and improve state and local practices, policies, and partnerships to support safe and healthy learning environments that effectively prevent and address any forms of bullying, violence, and hate, in our schools.

Organizations can also become pledge partners and engage in implementing resources and sharing examples of implementation successes and participating in topical webinars and communities of practice. As I mentioned before, today is our second webinar in our four-part Free to Learn Miniseries. Each webinar will offer evidence-based practices to prevent, address, and ameliorate the effects of bullying, violence and hate, while also supporting school safety, school-based mental health, and positive school climate. These practices are needed at the key moments in a student and family school experience as they enter the school or a classroom, or engage with learning and extracurricular activities, navigate circumstances that might result in differences of opinion or conflict, and utilize various supports and opportunities to enhance their school experiences and academic achievement.

In this webinar, we'll first hear from Student Attendance and Engagement Center to explore the connection between chronic absenteeism and school climate. We'll discuss why students disengage and identify strategies like increasing school connectedness that will support school communities in engaging all students.

Next, our panelist will talk about how they are working to create learning environments that facilitate a sense of safety, connection, and belonging that enables all students, especially those who are more likely to experience acts of discrimination, hate, and violence to fully and meaningfully participate in school. When all students are provided with the necessary supports to be present and participate academically and socially in general education settings, we can create learning environments where all students are free to learn.

Following today's webinar, we'll have two additional Free to Learn webinars in early 2024, focusing on navigating conflicts and providing ongoing supports for

students to reduce identity-based bullying and violence to promote student connection and wellbeing. We hope to see you all there.

As we proceed with today's webinar, we know you will hear valuable information and strategies that you'll be able to use in your schools and your districts. Thank you again for joining us today. Now, I'd like to go back to Megan to introduce our context setting speaker. Megan.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you so much for that framing. It's so important to hear about the Free to Learn initiative, especially as we dive into the topic of full student participation today. Now it's my pleasure to welcome Sarah Frazelle from the Student Engagement and Attendance Center, who will provide some foundational context for our discussion today, on why students disengage and strategies to consider to promote engagement and connectedness.

**Sarah Frazelle:**

Thank you, Megan.

So I'd like to start out today we're going to talk a little bit about chronic absenteeism, and I want to first define what chronic absenteeism is. Chronic absenteeism is when a student is missing 10% of the school days or more. Roughly, that translates into about two days a month of missed instructional time. One thing that I want you guys to keep in mind as we talk about this is that chronic absenteeism is both unexcused absences and excused absences at any time that's missed for the student in or out of school suspensions or behavioral punishments where the student is removed from the classroom. It's important measure, a lot of times we're looking at average daily attendance or other measures of attendance, but chronic absenteeism is really important because it's by the individual student and it's looking at that student's attendance patterns. It's really important to look at because then that gives us a little bit more information about when to intervene, when to reach out to the family and start talking to the students before they run the risk of falling greatly behind academically and have a lot of challenges catching up with their peers.

Generally, we know that it's easier to support students and families when they're first running into attendance issues rather than waiting for the attendance to really pile up and accumulate. Problems have compounded by that point, and it's really hard for the student to get caught back up.

So that is what we're talking about with chronic absenteeism, think both excused and unexcused and any kind of in and out of school suspensions anytime that's missed by the student in those learning opportunities.

And so I want to present some of this data that is the most recent levels of chronic absenteeism across the United States. This is 2021- 2022 school year data. That's the most recent data that we have available to us, and this is just a snapshot of pre-pandemic post pandemic. So we can see in 2017, 2018 what those rates were, and this is the percentage of schools with extreme levels of chronic absenteeism. That means that more than 30% of the students in the school building are missing more than 10% of the time. So a lot of turnover, a lot

of churn of the students, different students showing up every day. And so you can see these huge increases across all of the school levels. I know that Sarah just put into the chat a link to this report. In that report, they break it down in a lot of different ways that you can look at just for your own information. But suffice to say from this, there's a lot of issues with attendance, especially since the pandemic that have been going on.

And so one of the things that that report does is also break down who has been impacted really by this chronic absenteeism. And we know that about 30% of students nationwide, about 14.7 million students nationwide, are chronically absent at this point, missing more than two days a month, more than 10% over the school year. About two thirds of enrolled students actually attend a school with high or extremely high levels of chronic absenteeism. So that means when they're walking into the building, they might be seeing a lot of different faces. It's not the same kids every single day because these schools are having a lot of students with this chronic... Who are chronically absent. And about one third of our districts nationwide all have about more than half of their schools with extreme levels of chronic absenteeism. Again, that's 30% or more of the students are chronically absent.

And when this happens, this really has a huge impact on learning not only for the individual student, but also for the classrooms as a whole. Students from all backgrounds and localities are experiencing this kind of widespread chronic absenteeism, and it's really widening educational inequities. Students from populations that have been historically had less access to equal opportunities to learn, they're much more likely to be enrolled in one of these school buildings or school districts where they're facing extreme levels of chronic absenteeism. And when this happens in the school room in your classrooms, what's going on is that the educational experience of all of the students are impacted, not just the students who are chronically absent, because there's this constant churn of students in the classrooms. So the teachers are kind of having to stand in between this place of like, "Do I catch these kids back up? How do I really manage my classroom when I know that kids are getting different learning experiences every day that they're there?" So this is why it's really important to think about.

Prior to working at AIR was in the state of Washington working for an educational service district. We were focused a lot on this chronic absenteeism issue, especially post-pandemic. We were able to look across the state and do a survey with kids who had completely disengaged. So these are kids who are no longer enrolled in school. We had re-engagement specialists reach out to talk to the students and the families, and they gave them a survey basically, that had them rank what were their barriers to re-engaging in school, why they had completely disengaged from the school? And what I really appreciate about what I was hearing is that there tended to be a narrative across the state of, well, these kids just don't care. The families don't care. And while that is true for some of the kids that, as you can see from this list, the sixth reason on the survey was, "I don't want to return to the same school. I don't know what other options there are, just kind of given up."

There's all of these other reasons why students were disengaging as well. So school not feeling relevant or helpful. Family barriers, not feeling like there's anybody in the school that actually cares about them if they do show up, not having access to the services that they need for their physical health, their mental health. I'm sure all of us are familiar with the huge rise in mental health issues for students. And then getting into more of, I am so far behind at this point that I don't know what I need to do to get caught back up. And so there's this level of hopelessness kind of that after a student misses many, many days, then they get so far behind and they don't know how to get caught back up. So again, returning to that idea that it's really critical for us to be intervening as early as possible. And so these chronic absenteeism measures are something that we can use as a data-driven process within our school building to see which kids are we needing to reach out to earlier rather than waiting for a long time? And the student falls really far behind.

So that was a national or a statewide survey that we were doing very cut and dry. Here are the list of things that the students could choose from. But I was working with one district in particular, in one of their high schools, and they were talking about how they wanted to know a little bit more about their particular student population. So we did this activity called an Inside/Outside fishbowl, and there's a resource, it's called Speak Out, Listen Up. It's tools for using student perspectives and local data for as a school improvement practice, basically. And what I loved about this Inside/Outside Fishbowl is it's not just a student listening session, it's more of that Socratic method kind of.

So we have the students on the inside with a facilitator that's asking asset-based questions like, "What makes you want to show up to school? What are some of those challenges that you've had or what makes you excited about the school day?" And then we had it flipped. So the students were in the inside and the educators that we were working with were on the outside just listening. They were not allowed to cut in or anything like that. They were just listening to what the students had to say. Then we flipped it around and asked the educators at the end of the session, "What did you hear from the students? What are some of those action steps that you could actually take based on what you're hearing from the student population?" And then flipped it back around one more time actually to make sure that the students had a say to clarify if there were any misconceptions or anything like that.

I highly suggest this as an activity. If you are working within a school or with a group of students. The students really feel heard in these kind of setups. I know we had some follow up with some of the students and the students who were the most shy, who felt like they never really got their voice heard. They really felt seen through this kind of activity, and they felt like there was actual action that was going to be taken from what they were saying. Because a lot of times when we collect student voice, we kind of hold onto it and we don't share that back out with what we're actually doing with it. So really strongly encourage this activity if you are interested.

Now, one of the things that we did, some of the stuff that we did here from that listening session, I'm just going to kind of high level summarize. Again, this is a very discussion oriented set up, and these were some of the big themes that came out of it. One was that depression and mental health issues were huge for these students. We had students saying things like, "A lot of times I just lay there in bed and I stare at the ceiling wondering what's the point?" And so trying to get that motivation to get up and go to school was really challenging for those students.

Transportation also came up. This was a high school, so at that point you're looking at students who had to drive. They had younger brothers and sisters that also had to get to school. Some of their bus rides were up to an hour with using public transportation, having to switch buses and things like that. So transportation was really a big issue.

There were also things that were family related, more family related, where they had to take care of a younger brother or sister, or one of the siblings didn't really like school, so the parent was wrestling with them.

They would make the whole entire family late. I'm sure we've all been in that situation where we're trying to get all the kids out the door, and if you've got one that's kind of dragging their feet, then that really impacts all the other students in the family. So there's those family related issues.

Social anxiety was another piece that came up, and that one was really interesting because when we did this listening session, it was at the end of the school year, so I think it was in May. And at that point, some of these kids who showed up for our session, they didn't even know the names of all of their classmates. So within, they felt a lot of social anxiety about showing up to school, when they did get to school and they had to do a presentation or something like that, that would give them huge social anxiety because they didn't even know each other. Even at the end of the school year in the same classroom with the same kids. They still were struggling to make those connections with their peers. So I think that social anxiety piece was really interesting that it came up. And it definitely falls in line with some of the research on how we support students through school climate, school connectedness, things like that.

Another piece was not feeling supported by teachers or schools, or the school. So a lot of them had 508 plans, IEPs, things like this that they were supposed to be given certain ability to do different things, and they were kind of ignored through that. So that was a big piece of just making sure that we're honoring what the kids actually need to be successful within the classroom.

And then finally, there were work obligations. A lot of our students ended up needing to take jobs over the pandemic to help support their family. Those jobs have still become important to them, so as an important source of income for the whole entire family. So we also were hearing some of that churn of, "I'm missing part of the day and I'm just not going to go ahead and show up the rest

of the day because nobody's there. I don't feel like they care. I'm going to get in trouble." Things like that.

Now, those are all very individualized responses, but when we are looking at 30% or more of the school missing more than 10% of the days of learning, we really need to start thinking about school-wide supports, tier one, if you're familiar with multi-tiered systems of support, but basically what are those processes that we're putting in place that affects every single student across the building? And so one of these strategies that continually to be research-based is family engagement. There's a report that I'm sure you can look at in the slides, the links in the slides, but it really looked at family engagement and student and school outcomes after the pandemic. And schools with higher levels of family engagement had significantly lower increases in chronic absenteeism. There was also a positive impact of family engagement that was greater for families with incomes below the poverty line. So we know that making sure that we are making those connections with the families is really critical for families who have felt historically marginalized, pushed out. Maybe their parents felt that way too, maybe their grandparents as well. So really making sure that we are connecting with those families is critical, even though they might be sometimes the hardest ones to reach.

And then making sure that the communication from the school to the home is provided in that home language is really critical for family engagement. In general, you just want to know what the barriers that the families are facing and how the system can help address them. Really work together in connection with the families to ensure that those historically marginalized communities are engaged in conversation and that they know what's going on with their voice when we're asking them. "How can we help support you, that they actually see that connection? Another tier one support that we continually find that's research-based, is school connectedness. Now, what is school connectedness? That could be a bunch of different things, but generally what we consider school connectedness is for students when they believe that there's an adult in the school, who knows and caresses about them, that they have a supportive peer group. So other students that they're being able to connect with, that students are engaging at least some of the time in activities that they find meaningful, which may help others.

There was a lot of research also done around that altruism is really important for teenagers as well to feel like they have that opportunity and then that students feel seen and welcome in the school. All of these are pretty actually easy to measure. So it's not some thing that we can't get our hands around. We can look and see where students have connections, which adults are reaching out and things like that, which students are enrolled in afterschool activities, things like that.

So to build that school connectedness, there's a few things that schools can do. One is to make sure that you're providing physical opportunities for the students. Be it physical education, recess, classroom activities, getting the kids up and moving really helps promote that connectedness and kind of sharing and



getting to know each other within the classroom. Encouraging types of school projects like gardening or student teacher lunchtimes. Again, anything that's really building that connectedness between the student and the adults in the building. You want those relationships between the adults, but also between the students. So that can really help when you have projects that they're all working on together.

Another piece is making sure that they have the resources to manage any chronic health conditions. They list asthma and diabetes, food allergies, things like that. But also since we know that mental health is such a huge issue right now, making sure that students have access in some way or form to some kind of mental health supports when they are starting to feel suicidal and things. We know across our states out here in the Pacific Northwest, at least that this has come up statewide in all of the states around us.

And finally providing some professional development and support for school staff to understand where the students might be coming from. So we try to get away from some of that implicit bias. And then finally ensuring that every student has an adult in the building that they can trust. So I really appreciate the time today, and I hope that you kind of think about your own context and how you're prioritizing some of these things that we know are good for all students. Thank you. Megan.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you so much, Sarah. In addition to all the strategies that you provided, I really appreciate the processes that you shared for meaningfully involving students in these efforts to identify barriers and strategies for engagement.

So we will now move into our panel discussion. We're thrilled to welcome our panelists today, who are actively implementing different strategies to create learning environments where students receive all the supports that they need to fully and meaningfully participate both academically and socially in our general education settings. So first, we have from Walt Whitman High School, three seniors, Ian Gaul, Kyla Ngeno, and Dani Klein, as well as Principal Robert Dodd. We're also thrilled to welcome Cathi Davis, principal at Ruby Bridges Elementary in Washington. Dr. Cassie Martin, the executive director of special education at the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington. And CJ Morgan, the co-founder of TheGifted Arts in North Carolina.

So please visit our event webpage at the link on this slide to read more about them. We'll get right into our panel discussion now. So I want to start with a question for our three students who are on our panel today. I'm curious to know what does full participation in school feel like for you? So we'll start with Dani.

**Dani Klein:**

Hi, I'm Dani. I'm a senior at Walt Whitman High School. So full participation for me feels like feeling engaged in everything that your school has to offer from classes to school spirit to clubs, to special programs at school. And if you're deeply engaged in your academics, but you don't feel connected at all to

theater, art, music, athletics, or any other kinds of non-academic activities at school, you aren't necessarily fully engaged and fully participating just as you aren't fully engaged in your school if you do tons of school activities, but you feel alienated from your classes and your teachers.

So for me, something that makes me feel really connected to my school is that I'm engaged in so many Whitman related things that my school is embedded in every part of my life. So I go to school every weekday. I have club meetings several nights per week. I spend lots of time after school working on the school newspaper and being engaged in all of these different facets of what Whitman has to offer is how I feel like I'm fully participating in school.

I also think that full participation means taking charge of your education so you not only join the clubs and go to the events that you're interested in, but you also use your resources to make sure that your courses are also something you can get excited about and making sure that you're an active participant in your own education. So picking interesting classes, asking questions, advocating for yourself, going beyond the class curriculum. And yeah, this kind of participation has so many benefits and you never regret making your new connections and making friends by engaging with your school fully.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you so much, Dani. Now we'll hear from Kyla. Kyla, it looks like the connection may be a little spotty, so I think we'll go to Ian and come right back to you, see if we can get your connection together. All right, Ian.

**Ian Gaull:**

Hi, I'm Ian Gaull. I'm a senior at Whitman. Full participation in school for me has been really interesting because specifically at Whitman, there really are just myriad leadership opportunities for students within the school and outside of school. Me personally, I'm the president of our Jewish student union, and so I've had the opportunity to work very closely with staff and other students and other student organizations. And I feel like when your school promotes leadership and promotes student leadership, that's when the most participation comes into the picture because as soon as you give students the feeling of their voices truly being heard, it gives them a sense of agency and a sense of power and connectedness just inherently.

And so in my work with JSU and Dr. Dodd and Whitman administration, I've always felt treated like an equal and that I've been heard and that actual action has been taken based on my word and student word. And that's been really important because while, yeah, all of these wonderful administrators and Dr. Dodd, they are the staff, at the end of the day student leaders are not staff, but to feel really valued and valued as an equally important voice has been really important and has been something that, especially Whitman, of course, I can only speak to Whitman, has done really, really well. So yeah.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you both so much. I'm hearing these common themes of really feeling like you are heard and have a voice and are able to really meaningfully engage with your fellow students and with staff. We'll try to go to Kyla one more time, see if she is maybe in a better spot now.

**Kyla Ngeno:** Hi, can you hear me?

**Megan Gildin:** Yes, we can.

**Kyla Ngeno:** Perfect. I think it works better when my camera isn't working, I'm not sure why. But much like how Ian and Dani said, I feel like school... by the way, my name is Kyla and I'm a senior at Whitman. But within school, school participation in general is to me understanding the knowledge that we learn from our classes and applying it to what we want to do in our community and moving that aside from just within our community, but figuring out what to do and what we want to do in the world ourselves. And from participating in clubs and just in general in our own schools through things like One Whitman, and figuring out how we could create the change within the resources that we do have as students is a big part of school participation. And just realizing that even though we are students, our voices are validated and we can do stuff with the little resources that we do have. And Dani and Ian summed it up really well.

**Megan Gildin:** Great. Thank you so much. I appreciate you adding this layer of not just engaging within the school community, but thinking about how you can use your voice and use your actions to impact the community around you. All right. So that's a wonderful grounding and context to frame the rest of our panel discussion. So our next question is, what approaches are you taking to supporting engaging all students in schools? And we'll start with Cassie.

**Cassie Martin:** Thank you, Megan. Hi everyone, this is Cassie. I'm coming to you from Washington. So in the state of Washington, we already knew that we had a lot of work to do around inclusive education. But about five to six years ago, our state had an urgent call to action when we were rated in the top 10 of the least inclusive states in our nation. So that meant that for students with disabilities specifically, they're spending the majority of their day in segregated settings, and that wasn't a ranking that we were comfortable with. So in response, we've been investing a lot of time and money in what we call inclusionary practices over the course of four, going on five years.

And to support more inclusive schools in Washington, our state legislature provided the state agency with \$25 million in the 2019-2021 biennium, another 12 million for the following biennium. And then this last year, 5 million to provide educators with professional development opportunities and support of inclusionary practices across the state of Washington. So our goal for the first two years of the Inclusionary Practices Project, which I'll call IPP to make it shorter, was by spring of 2021 was to increase LRE, which is least restrictive environment, which is the amount of time students spend in general education alongside their non-disabled peers during the course of the school day. To 80 to 100%, the data is 60% for students receiving special education services. And by the end of 2020, Washington met this goal and we had these IPP pilot districts, which were districts in our state that had the least amount of inclusion, and they were provided with targeted professional development and dollars shown an increase in students moving to the most inclusive settings of over 11%. And that's a seismic shift across a state. And our most recent data shows 18%.

So I mean this incredible growth, and we are seeing the same kind of growth in our pre-K data and our K-12 data overall. But then when we're looking at the data, we are feeling pretty good. We're feeling really good about it, and there is a lot of good here. But what we have been noticing and is why it resonates so much to me what the last panelists were just sharing, was that when we started disaggregating our data, we noticed that we weren't making the same growth for Black students with disability and students who spend the majority of their time in segregated settings. So students with extensive support needs, students with intellectual disabilities, students with more extensive behavioral needs. And so what that actually means is that we're seeing a larger gap in our data as we improve inclusive education for specific populations of students.

So as we move forward and in response to that, we aren't just focusing on increasing inclusionary practices, but really trying to disrupt those systems of segregation that exist in our schools by really interrogating our beliefs about who we continue to provide permission to exclude. And just because I want to make sure everyone else on the panel gets an opportunity to speak, I'll talk about what the research says my next turn to talk, so we know why this is so important.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you so much Cassie, and I appreciate you digging deeper into specific populations of students to making sure that you're really getting specific with your approach. So with that state level context, I want to move to Cathi to share your approach to inclusionary practices at the school level in Washington.

**Cathi Davis:**

Thanks, Megan. And thank you Cassie for the lead in on Washington's work. I'm also joining today from Washington State and as a partner demonstration school site working with Cassie Martin and the OSPI from our state. So Ruby Bridges Elementary opened in the 2020 school year and is an elementary school that is a fully inclusive school just north of Seattle. So really central to our school design and process, not only looking at what kind of work was happening at the state level and the support that we were receiving from the state to really shift practices across the state, but also just in the design process, knowing that we really wanted to open a school where our vision could really come to life of all students being learners, all students being leaders, and all students experiencing belonging.

So a couple of the things I wanted to get a little bit more deeply into today to share with you about what happens at our school is first and foremost is we're really focusing in on belonging in more of a deep way. So I think that oftentimes we use the word belonging, but we really don't put together a common definition between school staff and students and families around what we mean when we say that we want students to belong or we want families to experience belonging. So our staff has really benefited from using Dr. Eric Carter's work and partnership with the Thai Center where they have taken a real deep look at belonging through 10 dimensions.

The team works at our school not only to understand that belonging is much more than giving students the opportunities to be present or welcomed in the

environment, but really to, and I think connected to what our student panelists have already shared, really to experience an opportunity to co-create, to co-lead, and to make demands on the environments that they're a part of. So that's been really central to us lifting an inclusive school model at Ruby Bridges and something that I think has been centrally important and really shifting the culture of the work that we're doing with students and families.

The other big thing that's really happening in thinking about what classrooms and instruction can look like for students that create more full engagement is prioritizing that as a team general education is the place where our students not only deserve to have opportunities to learn, but really that we need to think about our general education spaces as places that we get ready for all students to learn within, not places where we move our students to build a belief that school is a place that only is designed for certain students and that they need to conform to one particular identity or one particular way of learning in order to perceive themselves as successful or to feel success, kind of magnified or mirrored back to them from the staff that works with them.

So we've spent a lot of time really working on developing our skills for Universal Design for Learning. We have received lots of support from the University of Washington Haring Center. Cassie helped co-design a principals and practices tool that supported our team to delve deeper into key practices that would advance inclusion at the maximum level and really get specific about what we were doing or what we needed to change in our practice.

I think the other thing that's been particularly profound is the realization that that staff collective commitment to working to design barrier-free learning experiences for students in the classroom actually creates an opportunity where all students benefit from supports that in some settings, particularly more segregated or pullout spaces are traditionally only given to some students can be tools, supports, and ways of engaging that all students benefit from. It might not be that all students need those supports every single day, but when those supports are available within classrooms, students become more attuned to understanding what they need as learners. And like our student panelists said, they also feel a sense of agency that they can affect change in what learning looks like in the classroom, and that set of tools is available to them across the school day and in a variety of venues.

The last thing I'll just say in close related to our inclusive practices at Ruby Bridges is our staff is really taking on flexible service delivery. So what that is looking like is a staff team that works together to co-plan and collaborate to design instruction. So our students get the sense that not only one adult is interacting with them across the school day or one adult is their teacher, but rather that all the adults in the building are there to support them. And I believe from what our student leaders and our students have told us as they were transitioning out of the school into middle school is the thing that they appreciate so much is knowing that all the adults at the school are there to support them and that every adult knows who they are and is willing to be a

support and a partner to them, not just a small group of adults or just one classroom teacher. Thanks.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you so much, Cathi. I appreciate all of the different frameworks and approaches including belonging and universal design that you are using to implement in your school. I want to switch over from elementary school to high school. We'll continue with Walt Whitman. Robbie, can you share a little bit about your approach at Walt Whitman?

**Robert Dodd:**

Sure. Thanks Megan. Thanks Cathi, I was an elementary principal once upon a time, best job I ever had. I also want to thank the three amazing seniors, Ian and Dani and Kyla, who were voluntold to be here and who have done just such an amazing job. So Walt Whitman High School is a large, comprehensive high school. We have approximately 2,200 students. Whitman has a long history of academic excellence and achievement and is usually ranked number one in the state of Maryland each year in US News and World Report.

But I'm here largely to talk today about how incidents of hate, bias, intolerance have affected our school and I know schools across the nation. We have been particularly affected by intolerance in my six years at Whitman. And at the same time, I think you heard from our students today, I'm incredibly proud of the work that students and staff and the community have done to ensure that all students or as many students as we can each year feel engaged and valued and included at Whitman because our school is a majority Caucasian, historically underserved groups of kids like our African-American and Hispanic students, have not always felt valued and have been able to thrive at Whitman. So our focus has really been on creating safe and inclusive spaces for historically marginalized kids and communities.

And then in light of recent events like the war between Israel and Hamas and horrific incidents of antisemitism that we've experienced at our school and in our local community engagement and the safety of our Jewish and our Muslim students is also a primary concern right now. So I would say that the thing that tells us the most about how engaged kids are or how included they feel at Whitman is really based on student voice data. I've heard that referred to a lot today. Over the last six years, hearing from our kids, whether it's through surveys or student focus groups, or through the leadership groups that the students on the call today represent. We do our best work as a school when our students inform our approach.

In the summer of 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, we had a critical form of student voice emerge, which was called Black at Whitman on Instagram. And it really gave us 20 years of data about how students who are underrepresented in our school experienced Whitman over the years. And that was a real turning point for us as a school and our work on equity and inclusion. So our engagement approach has really focused on three things. One I already mentioned, which is consistently hearing from our kids about their experiences at Whitman, both positive and negative, and then developing school programs that address, explicitly address hate and bias and inclusion. I think Kyla

mentioned OneWhitman, which is a program that we're very proud of that other high schools have emulated, which is really a school-wide advisory period, one to two times a month, where over the last five years we've tackled everything from residential redlining based on racism.

Ian was involved at one time in providing a seminar to the whole school on confronting and eliminating modern antisemitism that our Jewish Student Union help plan with our OneWhitman planning committee, which Dani is a member of and Kyla is a member of. So OneWhitman has really kind of been the foundational piece of all of our work on equity and inclusion.

And then finally, building and supporting smaller groups of students or student clubs that really directly serve the interests of kids. For example, our Minority Scholars program, our Jewish Student Union, our Muslim Student Association, our Whitman Pride Alliance, our Black student Union, all of those groups play really central role of student leadership in our school.

Finally, I would just add, I think that programming developed by adults at the high school level is great, but as our kids have mentioned, they're not... right, Dani? She's about to smile. They're not afraid to come in my office and let me know what we're not doing well. So I would just say that over the last six years we've been really fortunate that students have stepped up to lead the work at Whitman to combat intolerance and hate and bias, and we have three of those kids on the call today.

**Megan Gildin:**

Right. Thank you so much. And that provides the perfect segue. I'll ask Kyla, can you share a little bit more about ways that you're involved and what your experience has been like?

**Kyla Ngeno:**

Yes. I would love to. I... my sophomore year right out of COVID and I was really eager to get really involved in our school community that I didn't realize what a load that would be, all of the clubs I was joining. But I got really involved in the Minority Scholars Program, which... throughout the US. And finding a role in Minority Scholars program ultimately set my pathway towards I want to do something in social justice. So yeah, I started out as kind of hesitant, but then because of the leaders, they helped me find a leadership role.

And then now I'm president because of the ongoing participation and creating new roles for other people to help load off of. And aside from this Minority Scholars program, it's classes like, I mean not classes, it's clubs like Navigators where participation, it might not be needed from essentially everyone for every single meeting, but participation when it happens, it ultimately creates a huge difference in our club. But yeah, I think, yeah, that's all.

**Megan Gildin:**

Absolutely. Thank you so much for sharing and I'll pass it to Ian to continue.

**Ian Gaull:**

Yeah. Really one thing comes to mind, of course, my work with the Jewish Student Union. Because of the events of October 7th and the conflict in the Middle East, we kind of had this need for immediate action and I felt

responsibility and my fellow board members on the JSU felt responsibility to say something or do something.

And really, the important thing though in doing that was recognizing that not everybody in... No two students at Whitman have the same exact viewpoint on things and everybody comes from different experiences, different perspectives. And so in working with Dr. Dodd and administration, we really were kind of intricately working at, we ultimately hosted a community-wide forum in collaboration with our Muslim student association. But really the point was working towards a solution that didn't alienate any perspective and allowed all students to feel heard and welcome and encouraged to participate in the resources that we were building.

And so again, ultimately that culminated in the forum that I talked a little bit about. We got all the mental health staff from Whitman on board, and it really was just this beautiful moment in the community. And what would have normally maybe been this divisive, polarizing thing that put a lot of stress on the general Whitman community was ultimately a pretty unifying experience.

And that really came down to working directly with Dodd and admin, working with the Muslim Student Association and fast. I mean, we really, we pulled the whole thing together in probably 10 days. The events took place on October 7th and we did our event on October 18th. And it was meeting after meeting, meeting with so many different leaders and mental health professionals in the building and pulling this thing together. And that was the collaboration. And through and through, it's the collaboration, so.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you so much for sharing. I appreciate how you both talked about finding what feels right for you and really centering that humanity of all of the students and working collaboratively. I want to pass it now to CJ to talk to us about TheGifted Arts program and philosophy and your after school partnerships work.

**CJ Morgan:**

Thank you. CJ Morgan, co-founder of TheGifted Arts. And at TheGifted Arts, our mission is to transform the lives of youth through culturally responsive artistic experiences. And we look to develop personal power in youth. And the personal power that we are referring to is developing self-worth, confidence and drive. The arts that we use at TheGifted are cultural arts that are rooted in black and brown communities, which is hip hop, dance, step, fashion, music creation, spoken word, and theater.

And we are able to connect with schools. We generally use dance and step to connect with schools. And what we find is that principals understand that before students are able to truly engage into the academic learning environment, they first have to have their needs met. And then second, they have to have the fuel to be able to expend that work ethic and energy in order to engage that, in order to gauge the learning.



And that fuel we found is again, that what has connected to personal power, which is the self-worth, which is the confidence and the drive. And through our artistries, we get to know the school and the community of students and we develop themes and messaging that speak toward wherever they may be in that arc.

For example, this year we had, when we spoke with a group of students at a elementary school, they really had a hard time being able to speak up for themselves, even to introduce themselves. Or it was like, "Say your name, say your name loud." And what we wanted to really reinforce in them is that your voice matters. And that's the theme and the mantra that we had for the rest of the time that we worked with them. We developed a step performance that was centered around their voice and their voice mattering.

And also it's centered around just coming up with, "Let us know who you are, what are your I Am's. We want you to say it loud, say it out to for one, for yourself, to your peers." And then when we were able to bring in their families, they were able to say it to their families. So what we do at TheGifted is we just take those performing artistries and we build that personal power within students. And through our afterschool program, we were allowed to do that with a number of different partners that we had in the community.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. Thank you so much, CJ. I so appreciate centering that personal power of young people and really meeting them where they are to bring that to light. So I want to move on to our next question. We're a chatty group, so I think I'm going to combine the next two questions together. So I'm curious with your approaches to full student participation, one, what needs to be in place for this to be successful? And then two, are there any changes or effects you've seen with students, staff, or families? And we'll actually go, let's start with Dani.

**Dani Klein:**

Yeah. So I think that's something that has been really helpful in the OneWhitman program, which we've explained a little bit. And in LASJ, which is the Leadership Academy for Social Justice, which is a group of social justice-related courses that we offer at Whitman. Something that's been really helpful in those areas has been involving student feedback. So that's something that obviously is very relevant in high school because we are really old enough to understand what is and isn't working for our education in a lot of ways.

And when we ask for feedback in things like OneWhitman and LASJ, people feel like their voices are valued, which is something that's really important for people to feel that way, even if they're not people like me, Ian and Kyla who are comfortable marching down to the office saying, "This isn't fair."

And that's true in education as well, where just making sure teachers and peers, making sure every student feels like they have agency and autonomy in their classes, making sure people have chances to get to know people, making sure people feel comfortable asking questions, they know where to go if they're having a problem with a teacher or a fellow student.

Just making sure that people don't feel like they have to be quiet if they're having any kind of problem in school because there are adults and there are peers who are there to help. And also just in general, everything is better in a school when people feel like they're part of the Whitman community or a school community. So spirit is a big part of that. Attending school events, understanding school traditions, wearing school merch, just everything's part of that.

And it's just really great to walk around a school and look at everyone you pass and say, "We're both Whitman students. We belong to the Whitman community." And then one last thing that's been really meaningful to me and I think meaningful to the Whitman community has been journalism, student journalism.

Because in my role on the newspaper, we really value holding people accountable for the privilege that they have in our community, but also holding people in power accountable for any role they might play in creating or perpetuating inequalities. So that's just one example of a way that students can participate in holding the adults and their peers accountable.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you so much. I love the range from accountability to community to celebration and joy, that it's all important to this work. We'll go to Kyla next.

**Kyla Ngeno:**

I think one of the biggest things that bring participation to Whitman is the idea that, like how Dani said, there's something for everyone here, and I assume at most schools. But even if there isn't something, just getting the sense that if you come up with an idea, you can go ahead and follow through with it. And just realizing that even if you have an idea and it doesn't relate to everyone, you will find your community.

And through organizations like Navigators or Best Buddies, where you might go in a little bit hesitant, and then when you go in and realize that there's other people who will be there to support you, really inspires and supports the change for participation, especially since recently I've noticed a sense of slight lack of participation in our generation.

I'm not sure if it's for the feeling of it's not being cool, but from getting people to come together and to support actually participating, it brings more participation. Even though that's kind of a run on words, but yeah, just slightly carrying everyone and seeing the strength in numbers honestly brings participation.

And even in the classroom, how Dani said, but speaking up and realizing that even if you say something and you make a mistake when you say it, that even if it was a mistake, someone else could have made that same mistake and then they can also feel inspired to also participate, makes all the change, in my opinion.

**Megan Gildin:** Absolutely. That last piece you said about having a space where it's okay to make mistakes is so, I think so important in all of this. I'll pass it over to Robbie to share a little more.

**Robert Dodd:** All right, thank you. Our Whitman students have covered a lot. I would just focus on a few things as it relates to shifts that we've seen. When we started OneWhitman five years ago, it was not without challenges and issues. Kids didn't love it, staff didn't love it, parents wondered what it was all about. As of this year, we have over a hundred student facilitators, Dani and I think a couple of my other friends on this call being they stand up in front of classrooms, in front of their peers with teachers and teach our OneWhitman lessons.

So we always thought that we needed kind of an army of student leaders and it's happened. So that's been really gratifying and it's had a huge impact. The other thing that Dani mentioned that all three of these students are involved in is the Leadership Academy for Social Justice. That was really born out of the development of OneWhitman. LASJ, as we refer to it, is the only social justice high school signature program of its kind in the state of Maryland.

And starting next year in 24, 25, LASJ will be open to our whole school system through a lottery-based process. So we're going to track kids from all over the largest school system in Maryland, which we're really excited about, which will in turn continue to change our school and I think improve it. And then finally, a group of folks that I don't think I certainly have not talked about enough that have been vital to this work and we've also seen shifts with is our parent community.

We haven't done this work without the engagement of our parent community. After incidents of racism and anti-Semitism, I now have, I'm really gratified that I have local rabbis, imams, the NAACP. We have affinity parent groups like our parents of black and brown students that meet regularly during the school year to consistently work with us to ensure that all of our kids are engaged and that our environment is both physically and psychologically safe for all of our students at Whitman.

**Megan Gildin:** Great. Thank you so much. I appreciate adding in that parent and family and community component into all of this. I'll pass it over to CJ to share a little more.

**CJ Morgan:** So we are a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. So some of the things are resources that we would need to, or that non-profits need to continue the work is of course access to funding or access to true partnership that can lead to sustainable funding to allow these programs to continue to happen. Transportation, I have to just say that's one of the biggest things that we found is that the students that want to be a part of our programs, they need to be able to get home and after the program.

So transportation is a huge thing. Before COVID in North Carolina, the district really supported that, but then after COVID there's not been a lot of bus drivers. So there's been a lack of the district being able to support transportation for

students home. The biggest piece or the one that I'm always small about is what effects have we seen? And when we say transformation, we're not just saying it just to throw it out there, but truly transformation.

It's the greatest experience to see teachers walk down and look at a student and say, "This person is in this doing. Yes, they are out here stepping and dancing and being celebrated." And we're able to have a different type of relationship with them that we can then take and have it reflect in the classroom because then we can have them to be held accountable in the classroom to say, "Hey, you can't be a part of this if you're not also doing what you need to do." Because can make that connection to what they're learning, to how it will be able to impact them later in life. So it is that definite, that transformation.

And another piece of it I wanted to mention is just the mental health component. We're all seeing the impacts of COVID and trauma on our youth and being able to have outlets and being able to be in spaces where they're able to create, they're just able to express themselves or just to have a space where they're able to talk to someone that really wants to hear and listen to them has been very, very impactful for students being able to heal from the things that they've had to go through.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you so much. I love having that space for expression for that transformation, but also the very practical, how are they getting to and from so that they can participate. That range is wonderful. Let's go over to Cathi to share.

**Cathi Davis:**

Thanks, Megan. So, so much of what CJ was saying really connects with me and some of the things that we've needed to put in place at our school. And so the first thing that comes to mind is just this idea of building a shared set of commitments as a staff, student and family community. And so at our school in particular, as we were designing the school and being a neighborhood school, but also being a school that supports a very diverse set of learners with a variety of strengths and challenges that they might have for barriers for learning as well, we talked to so many families in this process of opening the school.

And one of the common threads that families shared is that they really wanted to know that school was a safe place and that their students would experience belonging. But they also shared that they had already either early on or along the way in previous years, experienced messages from the schools or school systems that told them that the school wasn't the right place for their student or that certain places within the school or certain classrooms within the school were the only places that their student could really thrive as opposed to having a level of access and community across the breadth of the entire school.

So I think ultimately when we think about what needs to be in place, this commitment as a staff to understanding that all of our students have competence, all of our students have variability, and that that's not something that we should be working to try to work around, but rather to help support leaning into understanding the variability of our learners, that they're going to

come with a lot of different strengths. They're going to come with individual challenges.

And I was thinking about what CJ just said about staff or others walking up and being surprised to see certain students engaging in a particular activity, right? Because we don't know the full breadth of a student's identity just by whether that's a label, whether that's the enrollment paperwork, or how they show up in math class or how they show up in recess, that they really have so much to offer to us and that if we can presume their competence and really as a staff make the least dangerous assumption about their capacity and their potential, that we can create a community with them that allows them to thrive in ways that they can't in communities where those assumptions and presumptions really get in the way from the moment that they walk in the door.

I think the other thing that has been really profound since opening the school has been the shift in staff really operating in more individualized or siloed contexts. In many schools, our classroom teachers, our support services staff, they really operate in separate venues. Classroom teachers have their classroom or grade levels have their grade level.

Support services team members might be doing pullout instruction somewhere. And so we get very disconnected. And when we first opened, because of those experiences for our staff and students we're really the story they had been told in school for so long, when we first started, the initial panic was, "I have to know everything. I have to be able to figure everything out. I have to know how to do all the things, and if I can't, then I'm not successful or students won't be successful."

So I think one of the things that is in place now in our school, and it's super exciting to see what schools can do when they work together, is that we have this perspective of collective efficacy. That I know something, I know some of the things and I can contribute those things to my colleagues and to the student experience. And through that collective work together, we can really firm up the foundation and the supports for our student. But not that we're responsible individually, but rather that we're responsible to and for each other. So those are the two things that come to my mind.

**Megan Gildin:**

Yes, and I appreciate. I'm seeing this nice through line of collaboration and collective work in all of this coming from everyone. I'll send it over to Cassie.

**Cassie Martin:**

Great. I'll keep that conversation going. So I appreciate what I've heard from everyone and I wanted to build off of what Cathi was just talking about. One of the things I love about Ruby Bridges and the school where Cathi is Principal is that one of the things that they said when they opened their school was they wanted every student and family to feel like, "I thought of you when I made this place." So thinking about that for students with disabilities and our public education system, that is not typically the way they feel. Our educational system was not created with students with disabilities in mind.

So I loved what Dani was saying about everything feels better when you're part of a community. Robbie talked about all students being engaged, but I do want, again to encourage everyone to interrogate their beliefs. When we say all students, oftentimes there's an asterisk there and we're not talking about students with disabilities. We still have segregated programs in our school. So let's ask ourselves, who are we still providing permission to exclude? We have over 80 years of research that tells us, 80 years, that tells us that students do better when they're educated in general education classrooms with the supports they need learning those grade level standards. So we have all the research we need, we have all the evidence, and we have the evidence that tells us that they have poor outcomes when they're educated in segregated settings.

In addition to that, we know that there's benefits for students without disabilities. We know that those benefits are social, emotional but also academic. But I keep thinking about all these opportunities we're talking about today and how oftentimes students with disabilities aren't included in those opportunities even though we say all students. So I just want everyone to keep in mind that inclusive education isn't about massaging around the edges to make room for students with disability, but it's really about re-imagining and creating spaces and opportunities across our general education system. It's that transformation that we all are committing to doing things differently on behalf of each and every student. If we say each and every, we really need to mean it. We can't just mean some, we can't just mean a few.

So a lot of people understand inclusive education as a special education initiative, but it's really a cultural shift in how we engage in teaching and learning and how we think about our extracurricular activities and all of those opportunities that our students have across our educational system. And I love how Cathi was talking about earlier that this isn't about placing an emphasis on preparing students to better fit into our general education system. It's about transforming our general education system so it works for all of our students. And that's part of why we've made this transition in Washington from we are this inclusionary practices project. And we said, "Well, project doesn't feel right because that assumes that there's an end to this."

And also, we're talking about inclusionary practices. Well, we can be engaged in these inclusionary practices, but what we really want to focus on are those inclusionary outcomes. What are those outcomes that we want to see? And what we know, and we've been hearing the word leadership talked about a lot today too, is that we need leadership across every single level of the system. Inclusive leadership, all levels of the system, from our state system to our districts, to our school level systems, to our students and families. We need everyone to have leadership in a voice and transforming our schools to make sure that each and every student belongs and that we're really focusing on the transformation of our larger educational system and we stop trying to fit students into a system that's not working for them.

**Megan Gildin:**

Cassie, I think that's a perfect way to close out this panel discussion is to really charge us all with interrogating what it means to be inclusive of all students and

really taking time to reimagine and to make that cultural shift. So I want everyone to keep that in mind as we get into the final stages of our session today. A big thank you to all of our panelists. We will now close out the formal content delivery section of the webinar and then move into our live Q&A. We'll pull questions that were submitted through the Q&A feature in Zoom, so please add any lingering questions that you have now.

While you're doing that, I want to again thank our presenters and panelists for the excellent information and strategies that they shared today. This is such an important topic to keep in mind as we continue to make our schools safe in supportive learning environments where truly all students are free to learn. We also want to thank over the over 245 people who are participating as the audience in this webinar today for your active engagement, for your questions and your comments.

I want to share a few opportunities and webinars that we have coming up. First, tomorrow you can join the U.S. Secretary of Education for two national webinars on how pre-K through 12 schools and institutions of higher education can support students and ensure all are free to learn in a safe and inclusive learning environment. The registration links for these webinars are being shared in the chat and can also be found on the webpage for today's webinar under related resources.

Additionally, join us in 2024 for more webinars in this Free to Learn Miniseries, as well as our next human trafficking webinar. We'll send out the announcements for each of these webinars, so please watch out for those and be sure to join us. Again, we greatly appreciate your time today and thank you for all that you do to provide students with safe supportive learning environments. We hope to see you in a future webinar and we encourage you to stay with us until 4:30 Eastern to hear speakers' responses to Q&A through the questions that you all have submitted.

Finally, on the screen you'll see the link to our feedback form. So I encourage all of you who have attended to just take a few minutes to provide us some feedback on today's session and share what topics and format you prefer for our upcoming sessions of the series. In addition, please visit our website where today's presentation will be posted. You can listen to an archived version of the presentation or share it with colleagues who may have an interest in this topic. You can also see the slides that were shared along with links to all of the resources referenced during the session. As a reminder, we will be capturing all the questions posted in Q&A so that we make sure that information is shared with the U.S. Department of Education to inform upcoming events in the lessons from the field webinar series. So without further ado, we'll transition into our Q&A session. So I'll ask our panelists to come back on screen. Let me pull up questions that have been coming in through the chat here.

So I want to start, this is a question I think that anyone and everyone is welcome to answer, but curious how you start this process of getting family input on sense of belonging and what that means in schools?

**Robert Dodd:**

I'll take a system stab at it, Megan. After the summer of 2020 that I referenced before, the Montgomery County Public Schools, where Whitman is located, took on a pretty big lift, which is that they conducted what was called the Anti-Racist audit. Our school system has over 200 schools in it, and it really was based on focus groups and a survey that was developed to get feedback from parents that I really spoke to how certain groups of parents, particularly African-American and Hispanic parents don't feel seen or heard, feel that their kids are treated differently in schools. Each school had their own individual data that we spent a significant amount of time reviewing as a part of our school improvement process.

And so that was a very powerful first step I think at the system level, which trickled down to each individual school of hearing from parents. For example, African-American kids at Whitman said in the Anti-Racist Audit survey that they didn't feel that they got the attention from teachers that other groups of students did. So that was a really important piece of data for us to work with our staff in a variety of ways to address. So I think reaching out directly to our communities is an important first step.

**Kyla Ngeno:**

I might not know too much about it, but we talked about it in our Median Society class, which is one of the Leadership Academy for Social Justice courses. But we were talking about how to get more participation for the families and how to get it into our community. And one of the things we realized were people who may not speak English, they may not have or feel a sense of community within our school community. So they might not feel like they are able to speak their mind or are able to get the right amount of resources for themselves.

And also, just technology because I know technology is a new thing... Well, not a new thing, but we're using it a lot more to communicate within our teachers and from teacher-parent relationship is now more through technology. And if a parent who may be older who might not know how to work the technology, they might not feel a sense of community or feel a sense to participate. So essentially just finding a space, whether it's more in-person meetings or getting to know them one-on-one or getting to have a group community bonding where it's not feeling so excluded wise. And then just helping other parents who might not know how to use the technology to just educating, because adults still need education too, and I think that's important to recognize as well.

**Cassie Martin:**

I was going to say, I appreciate everything Kyla, that you just said. Part of it's just making sure that everything is accessible. Part of what we try to focus on is really thinking about families as co-designers of their child's education. So especially when they're younger and as they continue through that, if their co-designers also with us and that their students are also helping to co-design that education. And that way, we're elevating families' expertise. We're establishing trust with families and with the community and demonstrating integrity of word and action.



And also, again, getting back to that thread of leadership that we're connecting with families who have historically been underrepresented and excluded from leadership roles in our schools and making sure that if it is a family with a disability, that they're just not siloed into this separate section that's around students with disabilities, that they're really part of that larger school community if we're really talking about transformation.

And when we are really thinking about how will we know? How will we know when a student feels a sense of community and belonging? We've had families giving us this feedback that they will tell us, they will let us know. So we need to again, keep asking whether or not we're getting it right and really re-shifting and shaping what are those indicators that we're looking for that really make sure that we know that people are feeling really good and they belong at their schools? Like back to what Cathi said that we thought of them when we made this place.

**Sarah Frazelle:**

Can I add one more thing just that goes off of, there's a question about how do you engage students who are chronically absent? We don't want to call them out and we don't want to make people feel bad. The way that we handled that was very much respecting them as experts in what they know. So framing it and truly believing ourselves as the adults, that they had information that could be shared that could help other peers and saying that to them, "We think you've got some unique experiences here, will you share with us so that we can learn from you?" And really focusing on that partnership piece is really critical. You can frame things in an asset-based based way instead of deficit-based. And I think those are the ways that you're trying to reach out to different folks who normally haven't been reached out to.

**Megan Gildin:**

Great. I want to give everyone an opportunity. We had one question we didn't get to in our panel discussion is what do you see as a next step or a hope that you have for the future? So I'm going to give everyone an opportunity to share their hope or next step.

**Dani Klein:**

I can go ahead and talk a little bit about the student's perspective. Just in terms of what has to happen next for student engagement, student participation, and also addressing the issue with chronic absenteeism. I think it's just really important to value intrinsic motivation in terms of attendance because in a lot of cases it's like the automatic reaction to turn to punishment or to turn to making sure students understand the rules when it comes to attendance or when it comes to being engaged in class. But students genuinely want to be involved and they want to feel motivated to do something. They just only feel that way when they're allowed and able to form their own intrinsic motivation and intrinsic connections to school.

So part of that is I think it is actually students' job to make it seem cool to be involved. It's cool to have a debate tournament this weekend. It's cool to, "Oh, I can't go. I have tryouts for the school basketball team." So that's something that we have to make socially a positive and that obviously extends to attendance as

well. It's not cool to have 20 missing assignments. It's cool to do your best and it's cool to ask questions.

So that's the kind of social environment that I think students are responsible for cultivating, but the adult side of that is that adults have to promote or continue to promote student self-advocacy and make students feel like their voice is not only heard, but actually is responded to and has an impact. And just generally encouraging free speech and self-efficacy for students in schools.

**Ian Gaul:**

I want to piggyback off of that. There are so many reasons why a student might not be in class. And like Dani said, sometimes being absent is met with punishment or being reprimanded. And while there are certainly cases where that's suitable and expected, it's also the kind of thing... How do you encourage being present in class and paying attention or showing up to school at all without making it sound like a chore, without making it sound like a drag?

And personally for me, there are times where I'm not in class because I struggle with pretty debilitating anxiety and panic. So I may not be in class and I may miss material or lessons because I am dealing with anxiety or panic. Whitman specifically has pretty good systems in place for situations like that. Students struggling with that kind of thing can go and get... What do they call? Flash passes, which you can discreetly show to your teacher and then you're allowed to go out in the hall or to the counselors.

And just Whitman has myriad mental health resources. We have a program called Bridge to Wellness where students can engage in a casual therapeutic environment. We have social workers alongside our just main Counseling Department. We have so much mental health staff on hand. And so it is conducive to a really good learning environment for those kinds of issues. But that's not where that ends, and there are so many different reasons why a kid might not be in class. And so it needs to be met with the same kind of care and caution as you would approaching a student struggling with anxiety or a rough home life, or whatever it may be. And I feel like that is not forgotten, but maybe not prioritized in a lot of cases, which I think definitely contributes to lack of, like Dani said, intrinsic motivation.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you for sharing. I know Kyla has to hop off, so I want to make sure we get her answer in here real quick.

**Kyla Ngeno:**

Yeah. Similar to what both Dani and Ian said, recognizing that school is also a place where people are coming from different perspectives and different lives, and there could be other confounding variables and other reasons why someone might not be participating. And honestly, for teachers to understand that, "Hey, maybe I could just sit and talk for a second and understand why they're acting or maybe not participating in the best way and figure out a way that works for them," because every single person is different. And at the end of the day, if we all want people to help and continue to participate, we need to figure out what works best for each individual person.

But overall, just helping in community. Creating a community within each schools is essential to create more participation. And what I want to see more is more teachers empathizing with students and realizing that we're still humans and we're going through our own stuff. And life isn't just go to school, go home and sleep, and there's other stuff to handle. But yes, that's all I would like to say. But thank you so much.

**Megan Gildin:** Thank you. We've got about a minute left. Does anyone have a final thought or hope they want to share?

**Robert Dodd:** I would just say really quickly, it's kind of what Kyla said, that as the Principal of a school with 2,200 kids, and when I walk around, a concern that I always have is when I see that one student who's not with anyone or doesn't have a friend or is eating lunch by themselves. And unfortunately in public high schools, that's more common than it should be. My hope is that we could find a way to ensure that every one of those kids feels like they're connected to someone or something at Whitman.

And then like Kyla said, this is my job, but I would love to continue to move teachers just towards a more student-centered approach to instruction. That too often in high schools, content is king and teachers, as they should, spend a lot of time focused on that. But as Kyla said so well, just taking the time to get to know kids and build really strong relationships. Those are the things that impact students' lives.

**Megan Gildin:** Thank you. And then really quick, 30 seconds or less, Cathi and then Sarah, would you like to share?

**Cathi Davis:** I just wanted to encourage everyone and piggyback off of what Cassie ended her last sharing with, that our biggest emphasis is on how we collectively work to dismantle ableism in our schools and really any constructs that are set up in the same manner. I think it's super important for us to think about spaces within our schools and our community where when we think about inclusiveness, we think about it as addition to. And what we always talk about at our school is any place where you're adding folks to, you can just as easily subtract them. Those are indicators. Those moments when we realize we're adding is a moment when we realize that our core identity doesn't actually include the wealth and the community itself as a whole.

Those are places for our systems, our schools to really interrogate and shift and change because our kids need spaces that they don't need invitations to, but rather spaces where their seat is so essential at the table that the meal, the party, none of it can happen unless they're there. So that's what I would encourage and that's what I feel really passionate our kids are asking for in our schools today.

**Megan Gildin:** Thank you. And Sarah?

**Sarah Frazelle:**

Yeah, just real quick, just so much appreciation for the students who are on here for Whitman and the work that you're doing. And what I really encourage all of us to think about is how do we share power and agency with the students and families who are experts in themselves to help create these supportive environments within the school? And so thank you for this opportunity. Appreciate it.

**Megan Gildin:**

Thank you everyone. We could continue this conversation much longer, but we are over time. So thank you again to all of our panelists. I know I'm leaving with what Ian shared around prioritizing, approaching folks with care. So I will leave you all with that. Thank you again and enjoy the rest of your day.