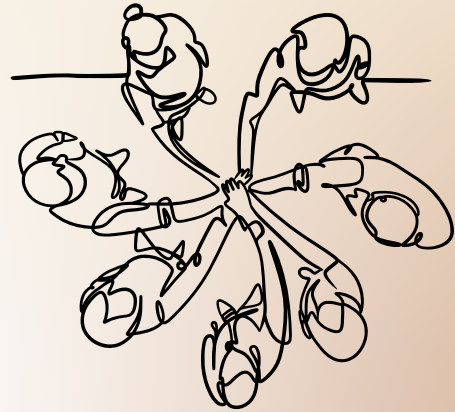




The Power of Us in Action:

Building Systems That Sustain Relationships

AMANDA MATHEWS



*"Relationships aren't an initiative. They are
the infrastructure."*

A Little About Me

- Amanda Mathews
- 10-year Elementary Educator
- M.A. Special Education
- M.S. Educational Leadership
- Presented *Resilient Roots* at the 2025 Summer Symposium
- Featured in NIU Ed News
- Passionate about relationship-centered school systems



THE POWER OF US IN ACTION

My Story

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I want to share a quick story before we truly dive in -

Last year, I had the opportunity to present at this symposium for the first time.

But two days before my presentation, my dad unexpectedly passed away.

In the span of about 36 hours, my family and I drove down to Peoria, met with family, sat with the funeral home to begin making arrangements, and then made the trip back home.

And shortly after we returned... I was supposed to stand up here and present.

A lot of people asked me the same question:
'How are you possibly going to do this?'

But the interesting thing was... the session I was scheduled to present was all about resilience.

You might be wondering why I'm starting today's session with this story.

I share it because in that moment, resilience stopped being a concept I taught in my classroom and became something I was experiencing in real time.

And what carried me through those few days wasn't just my own strength. It was the people around me – my family, my colleagues, my community – the support systems that made it

possible to keep moving forward.

That experience reminded me of something that applies just as much to our schools as it does to our personal lives.

*Resilience rarely
grows in isolation.*

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Resilience rarely grows in isolation.

It grows in environments where people feel supported, connected, and part of something bigger than themselves.

And that's really what today's session is about.

We talk a lot in education about the importance of relationships — and we know they matter.

But the real question is:

How do schools intentionally build systems that sustain those relationships?

Not just in individual classrooms...

not just through the efforts of a few amazing educators...

but through structures that make belonging part of how the entire school operates.

Because the strongest school communities aren't built by individuals alone.

They're built when we lead and grow together.

What We'll Explore Today

01

Explore how relationships are sustained through school systems.

02

Reflect on how current systems influence belonging in our schools.

03

Identify practical strategies to strengthen relational culture.

04

Leave with one actionable shift to bring back to our teams.

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So during our time together today, we're going to explore four key ideas.

First, we'll look at how relationships in schools are often talked about, but not always intentionally supported through our systems.

Then we'll reflect on how the systems that already exist in our schools—things like instruction, behavior supports, collaboration, and communication—can either strengthen or unintentionally weaken a sense of belonging.

Next, we'll explore some practical strategies for building a relational culture that supports both students and educators.

And finally, we'll identify one actionable shift you can take back to your school or team to help strengthen those systems moving forward.

Because the goal today isn't to add another initiative to your plate.

It's to look at how the systems we already have can work together to support stronger relationships and a deeper sense of belonging in our school communities.

MORNING MEETINGS

PLCs

BEHAVIOR RESPONSES

INFORMAL
MOMENTS



COMMUNICATION
WITH FAMILIES

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I want to start by asking you a question.

When you think about your school...
where do relationships actually live?

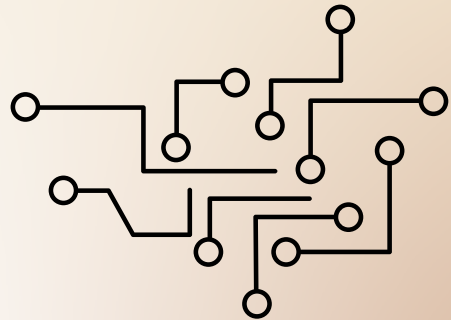
And I don't just mean in general—I mean specifically within your systems and structures.

You might think about things like PLCs, morning meetings, those informal moments in the hallway or at lunch, how behavior is handled, your communication with families...

Go ahead and turn to someone near you—take about a minute and share what comes to mind.

Relationships are already happening...

but they're not always connected.



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What I'm hearing—and what I often see—is that:

relationships are already happening in all of these spaces.

They're in classrooms,

in conversations,

in team interactions,

They're everywhere.

But here's where the challenge comes in.

They're not always connected.

So relationships might be really strong in one classroom...
but not consistent across a grade level.

Or they might show up in informal moments...
but not in formal systems like behavior or communication.

*Relationships must
be supported by
systems.*

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And when that happens,
belonging becomes something that feels inconsistent.

Something that depends on who you get,
instead of something students and staff can rely on.

And that's where the shift comes in.

Relationships must be supported by systems.

RELATIONAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

Belonging is Sustained Through Systems



When these systems work together, **relationships grow stronger** and **belonging becomes consistent**.

So instead of asking where do relationships live,

I want us to think about:

How are relationships supported through the systems in our schools?

When we look at schools through this lens, there are a few key systems that shape whether people feel connected and like they belong.

Instruction -

Behavior -

Collaboration -

Communication -

And well-being.

All of these systems are constantly shaping the experiences people have in our buildings.

*Belonging isn't built by
personality. It's
sustained through
systems.*

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And here's the big idea that grounds all of this:

Belonging isn't built by personality.

It's sustained through systems.

Instruction

Students experience belonging through how they experience learning.



Student Voice



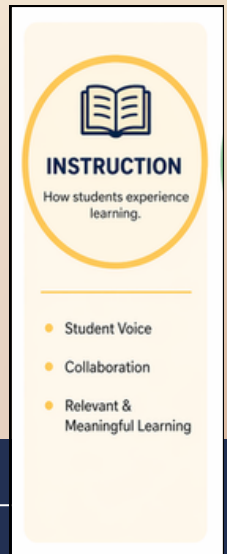
Collaboration



Relevant Learning

BELONGING IS BUILT INTO THE LEARNING PROCESS.

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Let's start with instruction.

We don't always think about this first—but this is where students experience belonging most consistently.

If students have opportunities to share their thinking,

work with others,

and see themselves in the learning,

they begin to feel like they are part of the classroom, not just sitting in it.

Belonging is built into the learning process—not added onto it.

Behavior

Behavior systems should protect belonging—not threaten it.



Reflection



Repair



Consistency

EVERY RESPONSE SENDS A MESSAGE ABOUT BELONGING.

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BEHAVIOR SYSTEMS

How we respond when
things go wrong.

- Reflection Over Punishment
- Opportunities for Repair
- Consistent & Fair Practices

Behavior is one of the fastest ways students either feel included—or pushed out.

When systems focus only on compliance, students may follow rules,

but they don't always feel like they belong.

But when we build in opportunities for reflection, repair, and consistency, we send a different message:

You're still part of this community—even when mistakes happen.

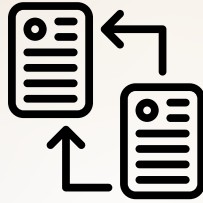
Every behavior response sends a message about belonging.

Collaboration

Students experience belonging when adults model it.



**Team Problem
Solving**



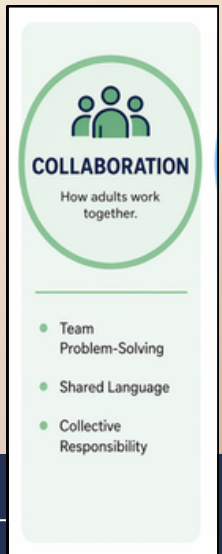
**Shared
Language**



**Collective
Responsibility**

STUDENTS WATCH HOW ADULTS TREAT EACH OTHER

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Now think about collaboration.

One of the most overlooked systems is how adults work together.

Because students are always watching.

When teams share responsibility,

support one another,

and stay aligned,

it creates consistency—and consistency builds trust.

Students learn belonging by watching how adults treat each other.

Communication

Belonging grows where communication is clear and consistent.



Clear
Expectations



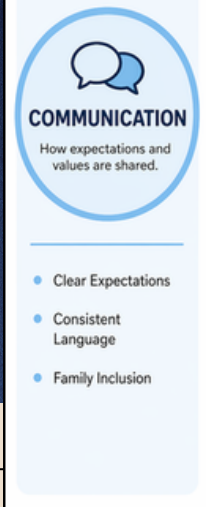
Consistent
Language



Family
Inclusion

CLARITY BUILDS TRUST

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ACTION



Communication shapes whether people feel informed—or left out.

When expectations are clear and consistent across classrooms,
students feel more secure.

And when families are included in communication,
it strengthens that sense of connection beyond the classroom.

Clarity builds trust—and trust builds belonging.

Well-Being

We can't build relational systems if adults are depleted.



Support



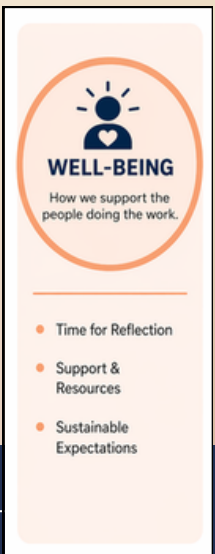
Reflection Time



Sustainability

ADULT WELL-BEING FUELS STUDENT BELONGING

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And this one is critical.

If educators are overwhelmed or unsupported,

it becomes incredibly difficult to sustain relational practices.

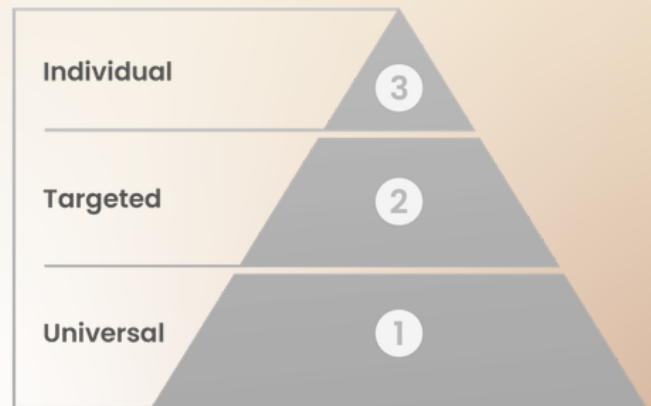
Strong systems don't just support students—

they support the people doing the work.

Adult well-being is essential to student belonging.

This isn't "one more thing."

It strengthens the systems we already have.



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At this point, some of you might be thinking,

‘This sounds great... but where does this fit?’

Because let’s be honest—
educators are carrying a lot right now.

And the last thing any of us need is another initiative.

So I want to be really clear:

This is not one more thing.

This is actually a way to strengthen the work schools are already doing—
particularly through an MTSS lens.

Relational Systems + MTSS

Tier 1 - Universal Supports

Relationships, belonging, predictability, consistency

Tier 2 - Targeted Supports

Small group interventions, mentoring, check-ins

Tier 3 - Individual Supports

Individualized planning, wraparound systems



Strong Tier 1 relationships reduce the need for higher levels of intervention.

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When we think about MTSS, we often think about academics or interventions.

But at its core, MTSS is about building systems of support that respond to student needs.

And relationships are foundational to that work.

Because when belonging is strong at Tier 1—
when students experience consistency,
feel connected,
know expectations,
and trust the adults around them,
we reduce the number of students needing additional support.

This framework really lives here in Tier 1 first.

Instruction, behavior systems, collaboration, communication, educator well-being,
all of these shape the universal experience students have every day.

Then when students need more support, we bridge to Tier 2.

Relational systems help us respond intentionally.

Maybe that's a check-in/check-out system,

mentoring,
restorative conversations,
small group SEL support...

But notice—
those interventions become stronger because they're layered on top of a relational foundation.

And for students needing intensive supports at a Tier 3 level,
belonging matters even more.

Because intervention without connection rarely creates lasting change.

MTSS works best when students experience support as something done with them—
not something done to them.

SMALL SHIFTS BIG IMPACT

TEAM STORY:

**STRONG CLASSROOMS - INCONSISTENT EXPERIENCE
REALIZATION - SYSTEMS ALIGNMENT ISSUE**

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So when we look at all of these systems together,

we start to see something really important.

Belonging isn't created by one thing.

It's shaped by how these systems work together.

As an example, this is exactly what I saw happen with a team of teacher leaders who were incredibly strong individually.

Their classrooms were engaging,
relationships were strong,

but students were having very different experiences depending on the classroom they were in.

System Alignment

- Shared student voice routines
- Consistent behavior reflection
- Structured team conversations
- Clear communication expectations

NOTHING NEW - JUST ALIGNED

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Some classrooms had strong student voice - others didn't.

Some used reflection for behavior - others relied on consequences.

Communication varied.

And they realized—
they didn't have a relationship problem.

They had a systems alignment problem.

SMALL SHIFTS BIG IMPACT

SMALL SHIFTS + ALIGNED SYSTEMS = CONSISTENT BELONGING

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So they made small, intentional shifts.

Nothing dramatically new,
but aligned.

And because of that—

belonging became more consistent.



ALIGNMENT PROBLEM

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And this is true in most schools.

We don't have a relationship problem.

We have a systems alignment problem.

Mapping Belonging in Your Schools

RELATIONAL SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK Belonging is Sustained Through Systems



**THINK
ABOUT
YOUR
SYSTEMS**

**WHERE IS BELONGING
ALREADY STRONG?**

**WHERE COULD BELONGING
BE STRENGTHENED?**

~ 5-7 MINUTES

REFLECT & DISCUSS

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ACTION**

So instead of thinking about what we need to add,

I want us to take a few minutes to look at what already exists in your school.

Because the most powerful shifts don't come from doing more—

they come from adjusting what we already have.

Think about your systems:

Where is belonging already strong?

And where could it be strengthened?

I don't want you leaving here with ten new ideas.

I want you leaving with one meaningful shift you could realistically strengthen in your current system.

We'll take about 5–7 minutes.

Let's come back together.

Would anyone be willing to share one insight?

**EVERY SCHOOL HAS
STRENGTHS.**

SMALL SHIFTS - BIG IMPACT

THE POWER OF US IN
ACTION

What I'm hearing is this:

Every school has strengths -

and small shifts can create big impact.

belonging
becomes
more
consistent.

It becomes
something people
can rely on -

not
something
they have
to hope
for.

When
systems
align...

small shifts - big impact

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ACTION

When systems align,

belonging becomes consistent.

It becomes something people can rely on—

not something they have to hope for.



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And this brings me back to the story I shared at the beginning.

In one of the hardest moments of my life,
what carried me through wasn't a program.

It was the people around me.

And schools are no different.

The strongest communities are built when people feel supported, connected, and not alone in the work.

What I Hope You Take With You

- Relationships must be systemic
- Consistency builds belonging
- Culture grows through collaboration

**As you head back to your school,
what is one system you can
strengthen?**

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ACTION



If you remember nothing else today:

Relationships must be systemic

Consistency builds belonging

Culture grows through collaboration.

As you head back to your school,
what is one system you can strengthen?

“The strongest school
communities
are built together...
that’s the power of
US.”

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Because the strongest school communities,
are built when we lead and grow together.

That’s the power of us.

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IN ACTION

2026 SUMMER
SYMPOSIUM

Scan the QR code for
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resources!



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Anything*

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Thank you so much for being here and for the work you do every day.