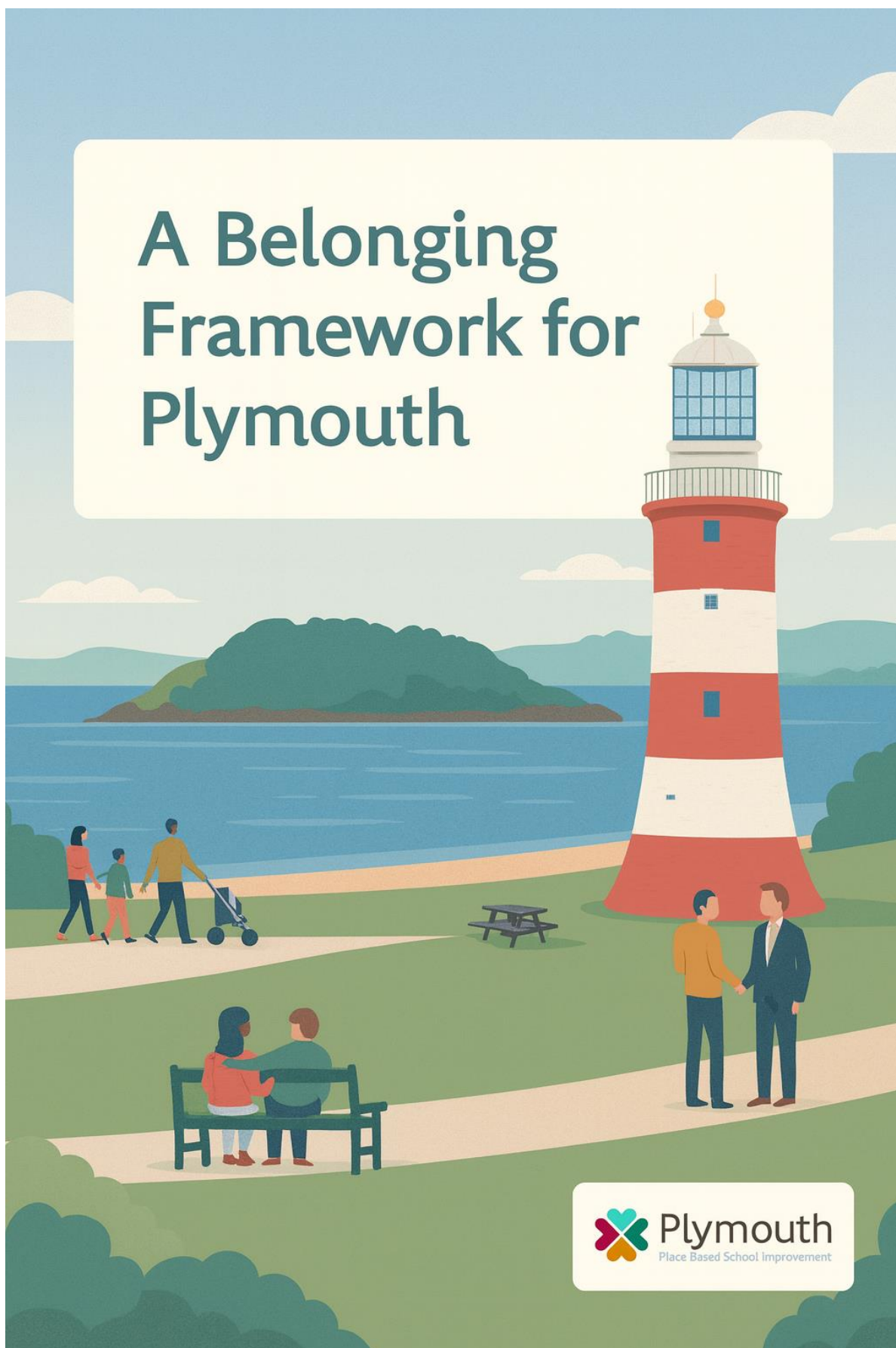


A Belonging Framework for Plymouth



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Introduction

Belonging sits at the heart of school improvement. It isn't just about wellbeing; it's the foundation for how children engage, attend and achieve. After years of disruption from the pandemic and the ongoing impact of the cost of living crisis, too many children feel cut off from the life of their school. Establishing a culture where every pupil feels safe, recognised and valued has never mattered more.

The evidence is clear: when children feel they belong, they are more likely to come to school, join in, and succeed. This framework is designed to help schools in Plymouth strengthen that sense of belonging, offering practical ideas to build inclusive cultures where pupils don't just feel present, but feel part of something bigger.

The framework is shaped by research, lived experience and the voices of local children and families. It focuses on eight core areas where belonging can be strengthened:

1. leadership and school values
2. curriculum and pedagogy
3. classroom culture and relationships
4. pupil voice and agency
5. transitions and pathways
6. inclusion and targeted support
7. family and community engagement
8. attendance and engagement

This is not a set of instructions. Not every idea will suit every school. Instead, these strategies are offered as inspiration and stimulus. What matters most is that each school chooses approaches that fit its own unique community, ethos and values.

1. leadership and school values: setting a vision for belonging

Lead with purpose

Belonging starts at the top. The most inclusive schools don't treat inclusion as an extra; it's woven into everything they do. Leaders in these schools are clear about their values and show high expectations for every child. Their vision is about more than results. It's about connection, care and fairness. Leaders should regularly ask: *Do our values reflect belonging? Do they speak of respect, diversity, safety and relationships?* If the answer is no, it may be time to work with staff, pupils and families to refresh them.

From words to action

Belonging is built in the daily decisions leaders make, not just in policies. Leaders who model their values in the way they speak, and act set the tone for everyone else. The best leaders return again and again to their purpose: *every child matters here*. They celebrate everyday acts of kindness and connection, and they give staff the freedom to make decisions within the school's values. Distributed leadership is key. Belonging grows when staff and pupils are trusted to lead it. One Plymouth headteacher created a cross-school "belonging team" so staff could guide the work together.

Supporting staff belonging and wellbeing

Research is clear – when staff feel supported, pupils are more likely to feel they belong too. Staff stress or poor morale quickly undermines the wider culture. Leaders should therefore treat staff wellbeing as part of their belonging strategy, not as something separate.

Simple actions include:

- **listening to staff** – mirror pupil surveys by asking staff how valued and supported they feel, then respond to what you hear
- **peer support and supervision** – create regular chances for staff to share successes and seek advice; coaching and mentoring reduce isolation
- **recognition** – celebrate staff contributions just as you celebrate pupils' efforts; being seen and appreciated helps adults feel they belong too

Governance and outward reach

Governors can play an important role by asking questions about belonging, listening to pupil and parent feedback, and celebrating inclusive practice. Schools can also grow their belonging culture by connecting beyond their own gates, with the local authority, community organisations and other schools. Belonging thrives when it is shared.

Policy with purpose

Policies should be reviewed through the lens of belonging. Do rules promote fairness and inclusion, or do they risk pushing children away? For example, uniform or behaviour policies may need flexibility, so they don't alienate vulnerable pupils. Restorative approaches can help, ensuring that discipline is rooted in relationships and learning. Alignment between vision and policy sends a clear message: *this school sees and values every child*.

Ideas for action

- **Belonging walks:** Carry out regular walks around the school looking for signs of belonging: Are pupils greeting staff warmly? Are displays inclusive? Do all pupils look comfortable joining in?
- **Values in action:** At staff meetings, invite colleagues to share a weekly example of someone living the school's values of belonging.
- **Inclusive decision making:** Build a question into policy and budget decisions - *How will this affect our most vulnerable pupils' sense of belonging?*
- **Professional development for leaders:** Take part in training such as Doug Lemov's *Reconnect* or inclusion leadership programmes, then share the learning with staff.

2. Curriculum and pedagogy: inclusive and engaging learning

Curriculum that connects

What children learn, and how it is taught, shapes how they feel about school. In Plymouth, survey results showed that pupils who enjoy their subjects, feel lessons are meaningful, and believe school prepares them for life are much more likely to attend regularly. A curriculum that feels relevant and representative can be a powerful way to build connection.

That said, curriculum alone won't solve attendance if relationships and wellbeing needs are not met, it must sit within a wider culture of care.

An ambitious, broad curriculum that reflects local context helps every pupil succeed. For example, one school redesigned its approach to reading across all subjects, closing vocabulary gaps and giving pupils greater confidence. Representation matters too: use texts, case studies and examples that reflect the backgrounds of your pupils. Link lessons to the real world — a science unit might explore local environmental issues, or PSHE lessons might draw on pupils' own experiences. When pupils see themselves in the curriculum, especially those with EAL or from minority backgrounds, they are more likely to feel valued and engaged.

Teaching that includes

How we teach matters just as much as what we teach. Inclusive pedagogy means teaching in ways that keep every pupil engaged and give every child a voice. Plymouth pupils told us that “lesson disengagement” is one of the biggest barriers to attendance.

Interactive and responsive lessons can make a huge difference — using group work, discussion, hands-on tasks and scaffolding to make sure all pupils succeed. Adaptive teaching is vital for pupils with SEND or learning gaps. High expectations remain important, but they must be matched with strong support. When teachers believe in pupils' potential, they are sending a clear message of belonging.

Leaders can invest in staff development around inclusive practice, culturally responsive teaching, and trauma-informed approaches. Encouraging peer observations also helps teachers learn from each other's strengths.

Meaning and motivation

Children are more motivated when they see why learning matters. Teachers can connect lessons to pupils' futures through career links, goal-setting, or personal reflections. Giving pupils some choice over their learning pathways, whether through GCSE options, enrichment or project work, builds ownership and a stronger sense of belonging.

Support should be layered: provide targeted interventions such as literacy catch-up or tutoring but keep inclusive strategies in place for all pupils. This reduces stigma and fosters a culture where everyone is supported to thrive.

Ideas for action

- **Curriculum audit for inclusion:** Ask subject leaders to review schemes of work for representation and bias. Use a checklist to identify gaps, quick wins and longer-term changes.
 - **Pupil interest survey:** Find out what topics or issues pupils care about, then weave some of those into lessons. For example, if football is popular, a maths teacher might use match statistics in examples.
- Active learning techniques:** Choose two or three high-impact strategies (such as Think-Pair-Share or project-based learning), train staff to use them, and build in reflection time to review their impact.

- **Mastery and support:** Use a mastery approach so essential skills are revisited until secure. Provide tutoring or extra clinics framed positively as “we want you to succeed,” and offer stretch projects for pupils who need extra challenge.
- **Celebrating progress:** Display before-and-after work or ask pupils to reflect on how they’ve grown. Celebrating effort and improvement reinforces a growth mindset and tells pupils their journey matters.

3. Classroom culture and relationships: fostering safety and connection

Small gestures, big impact

Belonging is often built in the little things. In Plymouth’s survey, the two biggest drivers of belonging were friends and positive teacher relationships. A warm greeting, using a pupil’s name, a smile or eye contact may seem small, but over time they tell a child: *you matter here*. Even corridor duty can be reframed as “belonging duty” — a chance to connect, not just supervise.

Building community

Tutor time is a golden opportunity to build connection. Simple rituals like morning circles, “good news” check-ins or co-created class charters give pupils a sense of shared identity. Weekly shout-outs, applause for progress or moments of gratitude also help kindness and community feel normal.

Knowing every child

No child should feel invisible. High-belonging schools make sure every pupil has at least one trusted adult. That might be through mentoring, regular check-ins, or even quick one-to-one chats in the corridor. Teachers who take time to learn pupils’ interests and strengths — and then reflect those back in feedback and conversations — send a powerful signal that each child is seen.

Safe, inclusive spaces

Classrooms where children feel emotionally safe are the bedrock of belonging. Anti-bullying needs to be proactive, with clear norms, fast responses and opportunities for pupils to act as upstanders. Some schools train Belonging Ambassadors or peer mentors to help watch over others.

A climate where mistakes are treated as part of learning also matters. When teachers model vulnerability — “I got this wrong, let’s fix it together”. Pupils feel safer to take risks without fear of shame.

Restorative responses

When behaviour slips, it’s possible to set boundaries while still protecting belonging. Restorative conversations focus on reflection and repair, helping pupils feel supported rather than rejected. For children with SEMH needs or trauma backgrounds, a calm tone, belief in strengths and time to reset can make all the difference. Talking about behaviour in terms of values (“That wasn’t respectful - how can we put it right?”) helps separate the child’s identity from their actions.

Physical environment

The classroom space itself shapes belonging. Layouts that allow for interaction, displays that celebrate all pupils, and inclusive representation make a difference. Quiet zones, calming corners or sensory tools can support regulation. Even small touches like plants, cushions or soft lighting can make classrooms feel more welcoming.

Ideas for action

- **Positive greetings at the door:** Greet every pupil by name as they arrive; research shows it boosts engagement and reduces disruption.
- **Belonging cues blitz:** Run a staff challenge for a week: greet every pupil, end every class with a positive note, and give each child at least one piece of specific praise each day. Share reflections afterwards.
- **Class meetings:** Hold short, regular class or tutor group meetings so pupils can raise ideas about improving class climate. Use structured formats to keep it constructive.
- **Restorative chats and circles:** Train staff in short restorative conversations using prompts like “What happened? Who was affected? How can we fix it?” Build occasional class or year-group circles for collaborative problem-solving.
- **Monitor belonging at class level:** Use quick surveys or exit tickets asking pupils: *Do you feel like you belong in this class?* Review results and act on what you find.
- **Celebrate kindness and teamwork:** Highlight acts of care or collaboration in assemblies or tutor time. Small awards for kindness reinforce that these behaviours matter as much as achievement.

4. Pupil voice and agency: empowering learners as partners

Listening, not just saying

Children thrive when they feel listened to and respected. Too often, pupils say that schools *talk* about valuing voice, but don’t always act on it. To close this gap, schools need to move from token gestures to genuine partnership. When pupils see that their ideas lead to real change, their sense of ownership, and belonging, grows.

One simple step is to create meaningful forums, like a Pupil Belonging Committee, and give them real issues to work on, such as tackling bullying or shaping lunchtime routines. Follow-through is crucial: even if the answer is “not now,” explain why. Publishing “You said, we did” updates show pupils that their voice matters.

Voice in the classroom

Pupil voice isn’t just about councils and committees; it should live in the classroom too. That might mean pupils helping to agree class norms, giving feedback on lessons, or being offered choices in how they show their learning. Even young children can share what helps them learn best. These small acts signal to pupils: *your perspective counts here.*

Agency and leadership

Belonging deepens when pupils feel needed. Roles such as buddies, wellbeing reps, club leaders or ambassadors give pupils the chance to contribute to school life. Invite pupils to help shape policies too. For example, reviewing behaviour rules or uniform guidelines. Involving them in decisions that affect them builds buy-in and a sense of fairness.

Inclusive voice

It's important that all pupils are heard, not just the most confident. Actively seek out quieter or marginalised voices through surveys, focus groups, or safe spaces such as young carer groups or LGBTQ+ forums. What you hear from these groups may highlight blind spots. The key is to use this feedback to make changes and to explain openly what has shifted as a result.

Ideas for action

- **Pupil surveys and belonging metrics:** Run an anonymous belonging survey each year, with questions on relationships, safety, voice and support. Break down the results by group (year, gender, SEND, etc...) and involve pupils in co-writing action plans.
- **Town halls or open forums:** Hold occasional “town hall” style meetings by year group where leaders take questions directly. Ground rules keep it respectful, and leaders commit to following up.
- **Pupil-led projects:** Set aside a small fund and staff mentor time to support pupil-driven initiatives that improve school life, such as cultural celebration events, peer tutoring schemes or redesigning a shared space.
- **‘Democratising’ the classroom:** Try strategies like “class choice time” or “genius hour,” where pupils pursue personal interests. Use quick exit tickets (“Did today’s lesson make you feel included?”) to gather feedback and adapt practice.
- **Training in leadership and advocacy:** Provide workshops or coaching for pupil leaders on skills like communication, empathy and problem-solving. A well-prepared pupil council or ambassador group can be a real asset in shaping school culture.

5. Transitions and pathways: keeping belonging through change

Moments that matter

Times of change can either strengthen or weaken belonging. Moving schools, stepping into a new year group, or returning after an absence can all disrupt a pupil’s sense of connection. When schools handle these moments with care, pupils feel secure and supported.

Primary to secondary

Transitions between primary and secondary are some of the most significant. Starting early makes a difference: visits from secondary staff to Year 6, taster days, or summer schools for vulnerable pupils all help. Share more than just data — pass on information about friendship groups, hobbies and worries. Year 7 should feel like a fresh start built on relationships, not just a new timetable. Buddy systems or a “Belonging Day” focused on connection before academics can make a big impact.

New starters and internal moves

Mid-year arrivals or class reshuffles deserve special attention. Simple things like buddy systems, welcome packs, and early check-ins help new pupils settle quickly. Teach existing pupils how to welcome new classmates too, so the responsibility for belonging is shared.

Post-16 and beyond

For Year 11s, belonging is about feeling confident about what comes next. Visits to colleges or training providers, alumni talks, and practical workshops help pupils see themselves in the wider world. Framing these opportunities as *finding your next place of belonging* gives them extra meaning.

Reintegration after absence

Returning after a long absence, whether due to illness, mental health or exclusion, can leave pupils feeling like outsiders. Plan these returns carefully: phased timetables, academic catch-up, mentoring and social support can all help. It's vital to send the message: *we're glad you're back — you belong here*.

Families as partners

Transitions are smoother when families are involved. Host welcome events, provide clear handbooks, and invite parents into planning meetings, especially for pupils with additional needs. Meeting together in advance — staff, families and professionals — reduces anxiety and builds trust.

Ideas for action

- **Transition passport:** Create a simple booklet or digital profile that pupils fill in before moving to a new school or key stage. It captures their strengths, interests, and what helps them feel safe, giving new teachers a head start.
- **Orientation and peer buddy:** Assign a trained peer buddy for new pupils starting mid-year. They give a tour, sit with them at lunch, and check in daily during the first week. Recognise and thank buddies for their role.
- **Welcome-back plans:** For pupils returning after absence or exclusion, hold a small meeting with staff, the pupil and parents to reaffirm their place in the community and outline support for the coming weeks.
- **Primary-to-secondary buddy letters:** At the end of Year 6, pupils write letters to their future selves or to a Year 7 buddy. In the autumn, older pupils reply, offering reassurance and encouragement.
- **Enhanced transition for vulnerable pupils:** Run extra visits for pupils with SEND or high anxiety. Small-group sessions in the summer term to practise routines, meet key staff and explore the site can make transitions much less daunting.
- **Belonging-focused home visits:** Voluntary home visits before Year 7 or for mid-year starters can strengthen trust. Research shows that even one home visit a year reduces persistent absence, particularly when the focus is on hopes, strengths and relationships.

6. Inclusion and targeted support: meeting every child where they are

Universal belonging, targeted care

Belonging is for everyone, but some pupils need more tailored support to feel safe and successful. Children with SEND, pupils learning English as an additional language, those from minority backgrounds, LGBTQ+ pupils, and those experiencing disadvantage can all face additional barriers. An inclusive school recognises these challenges and designs support with them in mind. Inclusion should be proactive, not reactive.

Neurodiversity and SEND

Pupils with SEND can feel isolated if they are frequently withdrawn from class or if their needs are misunderstood. A neurodiversity-affirmative approach means creating classrooms that work for a wide range of learners: sensory tools, quiet spaces, visual timetables and flexible communication can all help. Prioritise in-class support and adaptive teaching where possible. One-page profiles, co-written with pupils and families, give staff practical guidance to meet needs in a way that feels respectful.

Celebrating strengths is just as important. Highlight neurodiverse role models in the curriculum and run awareness events such as Autism Acceptance Week. Some schools have found success in helping pupils explain their needs to peers — with consent and support — so classmates better understand and can respond with empathy.

EAL and ethnic minority pupils

Language or culture should never be barriers to connection. Offer interpretation for families, provide bilingual support in lessons, and use visual prompts around the school. Represent different cultures in displays, curriculum content and school events. Acknowledge and celebrate cultural or religious observances so pupils see that their identity matters.

When discrimination occurs, deal with it firmly and openly. Challenge bias in lessons, provide safe spaces or affinity groups, and offer role models from the community. Mentors who share pupils' cultural backgrounds can also give a powerful sense of belonging.

Tackling disadvantage

Poverty can erode belonging, often in ways that are subtle but deeply felt — stigma, exclusion from activities, or family stress. Schools can help by removing practical barriers: free or subsidised uniforms, funded trips, and access to clubs and equipment. Visible kindness also matters: breakfast clubs, quiet spaces, and staff who show belief in every child's potential send strong signals of inclusion.

Assigning a trusted adult or mentor can be transformative for pupils facing disadvantage. Actively include them in enrichment and leadership opportunities — don't assume they won't want to take part. Gentle but consistent outreach to families, especially those who may be harder to reach, can also shift engagement significantly.

Supporting LGBTQ+ pupils

For LGBTQ+ children, a safe and affirming environment is essential. Review policies to ensure they support inclusivity, from anti-bullying to uniform choices. Small signals of allyship, like rainbow stickers on doors or visible staff advocates, show pupils they are seen. Representation in the curriculum and recognition of Pride Month or similar events reinforce that message.

Pupil-led LGBTQ+ groups, supported by staff, can provide safe spaces for connection and confidence. For some pupils, the presence of one visible ally is enough to make school feel like a place where they belong.

Mental health and SEMH

Anxiety and poor mental health are significant barriers to belonging, particularly for older pupils. Schools can support by embedding wellbeing into daily life: tutor time check-ins, access to counselling, safe spaces and predictable routines. Staff training in trauma-informed approaches helps ensure pupils are met with understanding, not judgement.

Normalising conversations about emotions and providing low-stigma routes for support (such as self-referral or peer listeners) can encourage pupils to ask for help when they need it.

Using data with care

Track attendance, behaviour, exclusions and wellbeing data by group, and ask tough questions about any gaps. Use pupil voice to understand what sits behind the numbers. Share successes, adapt what doesn't work, and keep refining. Inclusion isn't a single project, it's an ongoing cycle of listening, acting and learning.

Ideas for action

- **Inclusion profiles:** Create one-page profiles for pupils with additional needs, co-designed with them and their families, and share with every teacher.
- **Peer support and allies:** Establish schemes like "circle of friends" for pupils who struggle socially, giving them a network of supportive peers.
- **Target group forums:** Hold focus groups with pupils from groups such as EAL, pupil premium, or BAME backgrounds, and act on what they share about their experiences.
- **Awareness campaigns:** Run pupil-led events like Neurodiversity Celebration Week or Anti-Bullying Week, educating the school community that everyone belongs.
- **Flexible support and alternatives:** Adapt policies that unintentionally marginalise pupils. For example, provide lunchtime restorative tasks instead of after-school detentions for young carers who need to get home quickly.

7. Family and community engagement: a belonging ecosystem

Families as allies

Parents and carers have a powerful influence on how children view school. In Plymouth, parental encouragement was the second biggest driver of attendance. Schools that build trust with families don't just share information — they work in partnership. A quick

positive phone call home, a text celebrating effort, or a short chat on the gate can shift the whole tone of a relationship.

Workshops and information sessions can help families support attendance and wellbeing, but it's often the small things that count most. Giving parents simple tools to ask deeper questions — “What made you proud today?” rather than “How was school?” — can open up richer conversations at home.

A welcoming school

Families need to feel that school is a place for them too. First impressions matter: a friendly receptionist, clear signage in different languages, displays that reflect the community. Informal events such as coffee mornings, cultural days or pupil-led showcases can help parents feel at ease. Some schools use parent ambassadors or buddies to support families who are new or less confident in engaging with school life.

Listening is as important as informing. Advisory groups that reflect the diversity of the community can provide insights that improve policies and build stronger trust.

Families in learning

Inviting families into the learning process deepens belonging. This might be through family reading evenings, storytelling sessions, cooking projects or careers talks. When pupils see their families welcomed into the classroom, they take pride in their heritage and feel more connected to school.

Early help and support

Families under pressure often need compassion, not judgement. Having a trusted family liaison or support worker can make a huge difference, linking families with housing, financial or parenting support. For families struggling with mornings, practical solutions like breakfast clubs or routine-setting advice can reduce stress and improve attendance.

Community partnerships

Strong schools look outward as well as inward. Links with local sports clubs, cultural groups, businesses and charities can give pupils opportunities and role models beyond the school gates. Community organisations can contribute to careers events, run after-school activities or co-host events. Pupils gain pride and perspective when they see their school rooted in a wider network.

Ideas for action

- **Belonging-focused home visits:** Voluntary visits before Year 7 or for new arrivals can build trust and connection. Research shows that even one home visit in a year significantly reduces persistent absence.
- **Enrichment and breakfast programmes:** Ensure vulnerable pupils can access clubs and breakfast provision, ideally with support from community partners. These provide nourishment, safe spaces and social connection.
- **Parent belonging survey:** Ask families how welcome and connected they feel. Break down the results to spot groups who feel less included and act on the feedback.

- **Community “open house” day:** Invite local organisations to set up stalls in school, turning a school fair into an opportunity for families to discover wider support.
- **Cultural celebrations and shared meals:** Host events where families bring food, music or traditions from home. These evenings celebrate diversity and strengthen community ties.
- **Local mentors and role models:** Link pupils with mentors from the community, such as business volunteers or university students, to provide encouragement and broaden horizons.

8. Attendance and engagement: belonging as a lever for change

Why belonging matters

Pupils are far more likely to come to school and engage when they feel they belong. When they feel valued, safe and connected, school becomes a place they want to be. Without that sense of connection, attendance often drops, and anxiety or disengagement rises.

The Plymouth 2025 survey showed that pupils with low belonging reported higher levels of stress, conflict and disconnection — all of which directly affect attendance. Improving attendance is not about slogans or sanctions alone; it’s about making school a place where children genuinely want to show up.

Tracking impact

To understand what’s working, schools should track both data and lived experience:

- attendance trends (by group, year and class)
- behaviour, punctuality and exclusions
- participation in clubs, enrichment and leadership roles
- survey responses from pupils and parents
- insights from focus groups and individual stories

Patterns often tell the story — perhaps a mentoring scheme improves attendance for Year 8 girls, or a more flexible uniform policy reduces detentions. Tracking these small shifts helps schools refine their approach and share what works.

Goals and narrative

Clear goals keep everyone focused. Targets such as “reduce persistent absence by 30%” or “raise belonging survey scores by half a point” show commitment and ambition. Share these aims across the community, celebrate progress openly, and repeat the message: belonging is not a soft extra, it’s central to attendance, attainment and wellbeing.

Ideas for action

- **Use the framework to tackle root causes:** Address issues such as:
 - *Mornings:* breakfast clubs, flexible starts, and family support.
 - *Mental health:* compassionate spaces and wellbeing provision.

- *Fear of sanctions or conflict with staff*: restorative approaches and stronger teacher–pupil relationships.
- *Lesson disengagement*: inclusive, meaningful curriculum and pedagogy.
- *Peer issues*: proactive anti-bullying and a kind, respectful culture.
- **Promote pro-social activities**: Encourage service projects, peer mentoring, eco-initiatives or pupil-led fundraising. Helping others builds agency and strengthens connections.
- **Avoid public shaming**: Research from Johns Hopkins shows that addressing disengagement publicly can make pupils feel less connected. Private, positive conversations focused on re-engagement are more effective.
- **Link aspirations to learning**: Bring in alumni, run careers events, and hold goal-setting sessions. When pupils see a clear link between learning and their future, attendance rises.

Supporting white working-class pupils in Plymouth

White working-class children remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in education. Across Plymouth this challenge is particularly visible. The impact of industrial decline, coupled with the limited opportunities in many coastal and rural areas, has left some families facing deep social and economic barriers.

Yet we know that schools can make a difference. Research and local evidence show that the schools where these pupils thrive have a lot in common: they keep expectations ambitious, make learning meaningful, act early when difficulties arise, work side-by-side with families, and above all, create environments where children feel that they truly belong.

This section shares five strategies designed with our local communities in mind. These are not quick fixes, nor will every idea fit every school. Instead, they are practical starting points for schools to adapt, drawing on their ethos, context and community.

The five strategies are:

1. High expectations and a curriculum rooted in local life
2. Building trust and partnership with families
3. Targeted academic support and early intervention
4. Wellbeing, relationships and restorative practice
5. Enrichment, aspiration and belonging

Strategy 1: High expectations and a curriculum rooted in local life

Why it matters

When children grow up in disadvantaged contexts, there can be a temptation, sometimes unconscious, to lower expectations. But schools that succeed with white working-class pupils do the opposite: they keep ambition high while making learning feel connected to the lives their pupils lead.

Ideas for action

- Academic and vocational routes are celebrated equally. Assemblies might showcase a former pupil who became a marine engineer at Devonport Dockyard alongside another who studied law at university. Both journeys are presented as successes.
- Lessons feel relevant and local. In Geography, pupils might explore how climate change affects Plymouth's fishing industry. In History, they might look at Plymouth's role in global exploration. Local history and family heritage are not side notes but become part of the main story.
- Careers education is tangible. Pupils shadow apprentices at a local college, spend a day with healthcare teams at Derriford Hospital, or learn directly from employers who regularly visit schools, not just at a one-off fair.

Strategy 2: Building trust and partnership with families

Why it matters

Parents and carers are the most powerful influence on children's attitudes to school. For many white working-class families, their own experiences of school were not always positive. Rebuilding trust takes time, but it is the foundation for progress.

Ideas for action

- Schools create informal spaces for connection. Saturday coffee mornings, led by staff who chat first about football or local issues before moving to learning, can make school feel less intimidating.
- Support is practical and judgement-free. Instead of a lecture on phonics, staff show parents a simple reading game to play at home. As one parent put it, "It feels like something I can actually do without feeling daft."
- Information is explained clearly and personally. Rather than a confusing letter, staff sit down one-to-one with parents to walk through support such as free school meals or pupil premium.
- Schools help families access wider services. They don't just advertise Family Hubs – they take the time to introduce families, sometimes even walking them in for the first visit.

Strategy 3: Targeted academic support and early intervention

Why it matters

Many disadvantaged pupils start school already behind in language and literacy. Without quick action, the gap only widens. Early intervention, done well, changes trajectories.

Ideas for action

- Tutoring is built into the school day, aligned with what pupils are learning that week – not bolted on when they are already tired. For example, a group of Year 2 pupils might start each morning with 20 minutes of focused reading.
- Language is prioritised. From EYFS onwards, children are encouraged to talk in full sentences. Teachers use props and prompts to develop vocabulary and structured talk.
- Transitions are carefully supported. Year 6 pupils meet their secondary mentors months before September, with summer projects that mix art, sport and social opportunities across phases.
- Predictive risk models are used sensitively. Instead of labelling children, schools look at patterns and step in early when multiple small risks combine, offering support before challenges escalate.

Strategy 4: Wellbeing, relationships and restorative practice

Why it matters

If school feels like a place of judgement, children switch off. When school feels like a place of belonging, relationships grow, and behaviour improves. Restorative approaches help build long-term resilience and connection.

Ideas for action

- Teachers know pupils personally. A small question in the corridor e.g. “How was your football match?”, signals to a child that they are seen.
- Social and emotional learning is taught directly. In PSHE, pupils practise conflict resolution or learn how to ask for help when stressed.
- Mental health support is visible and accessible. Pupils know who they can talk to, whether that’s a trusted adult, a peer mentor, or a lunchtime drop-in counsellor.
- Restorative practice becomes a culture. After incidents, staff take time to listen, repair and rebuild, rather than defaulting to suspension.
- Community mentors strengthen the message. Retired coaches, ex-service personnel or other respected figures offer credibility and connection, showing pupils that adults beyond school care about them too.

Strategy 5: Enrichment, aspiration and belonging

Why it matters

Belonging is central to success. When pupils feel that school is a place for them, that they are valued and part of something bigger – attendance, engagement and outcomes all improve.

Ideas for action

- Clubs and trips are genuinely accessible. Schools make sure cost is not a barrier, using funding to cover transport, kit or music lessons.
- Achievement is celebrated in many forms – academic success, leadership in sport, mentoring younger pupils, or creative contributions to school life.
- Pupil voice is taken seriously. Councils influence decisions on uniform, clubs and policies. When pupils see their ideas acted upon, they feel ownership.
- Family learning is fun and shared. Schools host practical sessions such as cooking or building projects where parents and children learn together.
- Partnerships widen horizons. Links with local arts organisations, sports clubs, charities and businesses give pupils new opportunities, role models and mentors.

Conclusion

Supporting white working-class pupils is not about lowering expectations or looking for a single solution. It is about holding ambition high, making education meaningful, and ensuring children and families feel that they belong to their school community.

These five strategies offer practical, evidence-based approaches that schools can use now, adapted to their context. If we act with determination, and in genuine partnership with families, employers and communities, we can help these young people develop the skills, confidence and sense of identity they need to thrive.

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Plymouth Case Studies

Appendix

Implementation tools

Reflection questions for school leaders

Belonging is built step by step. These questions can help leaders reflect honestly on where their school is and what needs attention:

- What would a visitor notice straight away about belonging in our school?
- How might a Year 7 girl, a Year 11 boy, a young carer, or a newly arrived EAL pupil describe their experience here?
- Which pupils might be “flying under the radar”? Do they have a trusted adult, and how do we know?
- Do our classrooms feel emotionally safe? What’s one thing we could improve tomorrow?
- Which group currently feels least well served in terms of belonging, and why?
- Do our staff feel they belong, and do they feel empowered to lead this work?
- Have we genuinely heard from families this term, especially those who don’t usually speak up?
- Is our belonging work embedded in our systems, or is it dependent on one or two key people?

- What's one new idea we could try out next?
- Are we celebrating small wins as well as big successes?

A cycle for action

To support schools in planning and sustaining this work, we've adapted a simple five-step cycle from Cambridge's *Belonging in School* model.

1. Preparation – set your focus

- What do we want to improve? (e.g. Year 9 belonging, SEND support)
- Who's in the team? (staff, pupils, parents)
- What's our goal? (e.g. "Increase X group's belonging score by 20%")
- What's the timescale?

2. Mapping – understand your current picture

- What data do we already have — both numbers and voices?
- Where are the gaps?
- What are pupils, staff and families telling us?
- What resources and capacity can we draw on?

3. Planning – design the response

- What could we try, and what's already working?
- Which approach best fits: culture shift, co-design, structure redesign, or a neurodiversity focus?
- What are our quick wins and longer-term aims?
- Who is responsible for what, and by when?

4. Implementation – take action

- Share the plan clearly across the community.
- Provide staff training and support.
- Roll out carefully, adjusting as needed.
- Keep a log of progress, feedback and emerging challenges.

5. Evaluation – learn and refine

- Did it make a difference? What evidence shows change?
- What did pupils, staff and families notice?
- What should we keep, adapt or expand?
- What's next — refining, scaling or shifting focus?