

Newsletter Resources for Schools that are Community of Belonging Schools/Receive the Belonging Bursary

1. One of the key characteristics of young people who are happy and engaged is that they can see that they **belong**. God made human beings to be social creatures, and part of our identity comes from the groups in which we have our place. A family is the first group in which most of us belong, and for many, a faith community is close behind. Young people who feel safe and who feel like they have something to contribute at their school feel like they belong. Those who don't feel safe often feel alienated or isolated – which is really the opposite of **belonging**. When our school says it is a Community of Belonging, we are saying that we want all God's children to feel like there is a safe place for them here; they are valued, they are loved: they **belong**. This is true no matter what level of ability or disability any one of us may possess. We want Grace Christian School to be this kind of Community of Belonging school.
2. Christian schools that are Community of Belonging Schools are really just schools that practice the loving and accepting approach to others that we see Christ model. When Jesus met young or old, males or females, sick or healthy, rich or poor, He seemed to first see in them the image of God. Yes, He quickly saw what their needs were and moved to address those needs (even when the people themselves didn't see their own true needs!), but first and foremost He saw children of the heavenly Father. If we first see each other in this way, and not first as white or black, walking or in a wheelchair, calm or hyperactive, Grace Christian School will be well on its way to being a genuine Community of Belonging school.
3. If I have two students in my class who learn really well when they physically interact with the material, and the rest of my students can learn this material in a variety of different ways, including by physically interacting with it, I have an opportunity. I can design a lesson using Universal Design – it is crafted to work well for everyone and make everyone feel like they belong! If I start with an approach that works for all but these two, and have them feel like they are 'failures' or 'dumb' or 'have a hard time learning', and then require they do extra work to catch up, I've missed an opportunity to show them they **belong**. Universal Design means finding a way that works for all, so that all participate and all belong. That's not always easy, but it is always worth it, especially because Grace Christian School wants to be a Community of Belonging.
4. It is hard to say, "We are glad you are here!" to a grandparent in a wheelchair, if they can't go upstairs to see their grandchild's classroom. Similarly, if your custodian shovels and salts the steps in front of the school before she clears the accessible ramp, it's hard for the student in a wheelchair to feel like they really **belong**. The idea of Universal Design, and the desire to show "all belong" would see us clear the ramp that everyone can use – whether they are walkers or rollers – first. How does awareness of our friends' situations influence how we handle the physical environment at Grace Christian School? How can this show that we are a Community of Belonging school?
5. When the Good Samaritan helped out the injured stranger, it cost him something. What did it cost the Levite and the Priest when they passed on the other side of the road? Some people have said, "We are an independent school, so we don't need to have students with disabilities in

our school if we don't want to." Sometimes they say this because they think it will be less costly. But it costs us all something when Grace Christian School misses out on the gifts and opportunities that a student with disabilities can bring to our learning community. That's why our community believes we can't afford to miss out on being a Community of Belonging school!

6. There is no doubt that all of us have needs that differ from the needs of others. To pretend we are all identical – or at least close enough so we can all roughly fit into the same mold – is to kid ourselves. But there are also some needs that are true for us all. I'm thinking of the need for food and water and shelter in the cold Canadian winter. But I'm also thinking of the need to feel like we have a place here in God's world; that we aren't just an accident, but that we **belong**. There are many people who have committed suicide even though they had ample food, water and shelter. Sadly, they have felt like others would be better off without them – that they just didn't belong. At Grace Christian School, there are lots of people with lots of special needs. But that one need – that one very common and important need – to feel like we **belong**, is a need we see in every student. That's why our school is a Community of Belonging school.
7. "When students share a classroom with others who have very obvious and visible needs, does their learning progress suffer?" I'm always glad when I hear this question from parents because it means they care deeply about the educational experience their children are having at our school. As long as we are providing adequate support for the classroom teacher, the research is showing us that in fact the academic accomplishments of everyone in the classroom is either not affected, or it is in fact improved. That's why our school doesn't have a staff member or two responsible to make us a Community of Belonging. It has to be something we all do together – and then everyone can benefit when all belong.
8. What does my child learn when he shares his learning space with classmates who have more visible needs and disabilities? For sure he will learn his reading, writing and arithmetic. But he will also learn in very tangible ways what it means to be sensitive to the needs of others, what it means to rely on others when we hit our own limitations, and he will have the opportunity to live life with others who are similar and different. Talk about a high-value education! It is one reason why Grace Christian School is a Community of Belonging!
9. Can being a Community of Belonging school be the sort of project that our school staff can just implement on its own? Not really. We love that our staff does take leadership in creating a culture of belonging here at Grace Christian School. But everything our Christian school does is more effective when the whole community 'buys in'. If the Board sees the importance of being a place of belonging, if the parents capture the value of being a Community of Belonging and say, "Yes! We want this to be a place our child belongs!", that makes all the difference in the experience of our students both inside the walls of Grace Christian School, and outside it.
10. This is the tenth note we have included in our school publications about what it means to be a learning Community of Belonging. If something we've touched on has sparked a new question for you, or you have some other feedback you'd like to provide, we'd love to hear from you! Send us your feedback at: