

# Belonging in Schools

Building a school where all students belong in New York City's Williamsburg

*Review the case study and reflect on the follow-up discussion questions*

## This case illustrates:

The power of co-creation within a school system. How engagement from parents students, staff and community can come together and implement changes that work for more people. The case study emphasizes key aspects of belonging such as connection, seeing oneself reflected in their environment and the power that individual agency and voice can bring to a larger, collective, co-created space.

### Key topics considerations:

Building for systemic change, implementing equity, thriving in education, belonging in school, co-creating, agency, changing internal structures of organization, power reallocation and sacred circles.

### Setting:

This case is based in the Southside of Williamsburg, Brooklyn in NYC. Invested in the success of young people, community leaders had a vision to improve and empower their neighborhood by providing crucial support to young people. In 1982, El Puente Community-Based Organization (CBO) was founded and over the years El Puente CBO has grown to include two public schools structured with belonging in mind. This written case focuses on the schools: El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice (founded in 1993) and Middle School 50 (designed in 2014).



Tamia Dantzler and members of the Williamsburg Leadership Center painted this mural at MS50 as part of a Restorative Justice project.

## BREAKING

The systemic breaking point is between the public school system and students of color, such as the young people living in the Southside of Williamsburg. Students of color have historically been and continue to be othered in the traditional public school system. Students' needs are not being met; students of color are criminalized; and they are made to feel invisible and worthless. Furthermore, the curriculums do not allow students to see themselves, their culture, their language, and their history as part of their educational journey. Lastly, in a traditional school setting, parents are often isolated from the school, particularly those who are immigrants and do not speak English.

## BRIDGING

In order to address the breaking dynamic, community leaders that deeply care about the success of children got together to create a school and later restructured a second one. They implemented a transformative community building model to change the way the school operates. They set out to transform the curriculum, ensure inclusion of parents and caretakers in decision making, open spaces for tough conversations, to grow arts and culture and ensure that students could be seen and see themselves in all aspects of their studies. They opened up to co-creation and valuing each person's voice to generate a more welcoming environment. They created a less hierarchical school environment and trained teachers as facilitators recognizing the bi-directional learning from student to teacher and vice versa. Sacred circles were implemented as a facilitated space for students, teachers and parents to share vulnerably and deeply listen.

## BELONGING

They have established a community school model that developed a positive and caring school climate, greater engagement, improved growth mindset, a school where people care about one other, their community, and ambitious goals among students. Most importantly, their students feel seen and heard and experience a greater sense of belonging.

# Questions for Discussion:

We want you to keep your thoughts to the points or facts illustrated in this story. For the questions in your life or your examples, please speak from the “I” experience.

Question	Educational Goal
1. Where do you see breaking in the story?	Be able to identify a breaking dynamic.
2. How did the breaking dynamic manifest in the relationships of the folks involved?	Be able to identify the negative impacts of breaking, what happens when we don't bridge.
3. What policies and practices are the reason for othering in this particular case?	Be able to identify policies and practices that create structural othering.
4. In this particular case, what opportunities were opened by bridging?	Be able to identify the impact that bridging can have.
5. What questions or critiques do you still have about breaking, bridging and belonging?	Be able to understand the frameworks enough to offer questions and critiques.
6. Where do you see or experience breaking in your own community, organization, school, or work setting? Can you describe the negative impact that these have?	Be able to apply the breaking framework in their own life experience.
7. Where do you see or experience breaking in your own community, organization, school, or work setting? Can you describe the negative impact that these have?  8. If you don't already bridge, how might you apply what you learned today?	Be able to apply the bridging framework.
9. What world do you see when we instead decide to bridge?	Be able to understand that smaller 'we' leads to harm. Be able to imagine a world where we focus on the bigger 'we.'