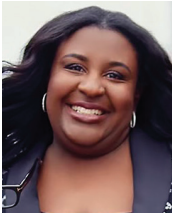


# Lower Merion School District Emphasizes “Building Belonging” with a Social Media Campaign

By Shawanna James-Coles and Amy Buckman



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For decades, both the fields of education and psychology have recognized the significance of belonging (Booker, 2016). A sense of belonging at school is associated with many positive school adjustment outcomes (Gray, Hope, & Byrd, 2020). Building a sense of belonging in schools is crucial for fostering a positive learning environment. Research has consistently shown that when students feel connected to their school community, they are more likely to engage in learning, have higher academic achievement and experience better mental health.

A sense of belonging contributes to a supportive social environment, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting positive relationships among students and between students and teachers. Building belonging can impact students’ overall wellbeing and academic and personal success.

Understanding the necessity of fostering belonging, the Lower Merion School District (LMSD) aims to reduce the “belonging gap.” The belonging gap occurs when some groups experience a lack of belonging, belonging uncertainty or violations of dignity (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). LMSD prides itself on providing students and staff with a safe and welcoming environment.

LMSD was the first district in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to enact Policy 259 protecting Transgender and Gender Diverse students and staff, a policy that has since become a model for many other districts. It was one of the first suburban districts to enact Equity Policy 101 and was a founding member of the University of Pennsylvania’s Delaware Valley Consortium for Excellence and Equity (DVCEE). In addition to policies that support student wellbeing, the Committee to Address Race in Education (CARE) – comprised of students, staff, administrators and community members – has met monthly since 1997. The parent/guardian Committee for Special Education has worked collaboratively with the district since its founding in 1972.

As political polarization began to predominate the national landscape, some of the district’s longstanding efforts to build a sense of belonging for all students were called into question. These included the district’s “Cultural Proficiency for Kids” lessons, efforts to engage more girls and Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) students in advanced STEM courses, and its support for LGBTQ+ students and staff. To help cut through the fiery rhetoric and to better explain

the intent and execution of these efforts to students, families and the community, Director of School and Community Relations Amy Buckman and Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Shawanna James-Coles developed the #LMSDBuildingBelonging campaign.

On the district website, [www.lmsd.org](http://www.lmsd.org), social media pages and in other communications, staff and students are encouraged to share the hashtag #LMSDBuildingBelonging, along with its accompanying logo, which shows a school house, where the building blocks of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion form the foundation for Belonging.

When the district shares stories and messages about students’ and staff’s accomplishments and activities, it calls out how Diversity, Inclusion, Equity and Belonging (DIEB) concepts are embedded in everything done in the district,

knowing that children flourish when they feel a sense of safety and belonging. Student organizations and the home and school associations are encouraged to use the hashtag and logo in their communications to help further the message that everyone is valued in LMSD.



LMSD’s “Building Belonging” schoolhouse illustrates that Diversity, Equity and Inclusion build the foundation for belonging in the district.

Holiday meals sponsored by the Best Buddies organization; programs by the various high schools’ affinity groups; activities fairs where students can see the myriad of clubs, sports and activities they’re welcome to join; Unified Sports competitions; and the “Jazz and Friends” family reading night hosted by the All Gender Sexuality Alliance (AGSA) are all examples of district events that are shared on the website and social media with the hashtag.

In addition, a hallway display featuring the #LMSDBuildingBelonging logo and the faces of dozens of students and staff was created to welcome visitors to school board meetings in the district administration offices. Beyond the logo and hashtag, the district is working to increase a sense of belonging and engagement for families who may not have felt welcomed in the past. This includes Mrs. James-Coles, Dr. Steven Yanni, the

Superintendent of Schools, and other administrators attending grassroots “Community Conversations” held at churches and community centers and the traditional “Ask the Superintendent” meetings on school properties. Ms. Buckman, Mrs. James-Coles and other district administrators have hosted a table at the community “National Night Out,” handing out crayons and back-to-school coloring books to children while assisting parents and guardians with signing up for online accounts and sharing information about free and reduced lunch and district-sponsored, free at-home internet access.

*“Focusing on belonging is crucial because it creates environments where everyone feels valued, respected, and included. When people feel a sense of belonging, they’re more likely to engage, contribute their best and collaborate effectively. It enhances overall wellbeing, fosters diversity of thought and cultivates a supportive community where individuals can thrive. Ultimately, prioritizing belonging leads to stronger relationships, increased productivity, and a more positive and inclusive culture for all,” said Dr. Steven M. Gianni, LMSD Superintendent of Schools.*

Mrs. James-Coles has brought the #LMSDBuildingBelonging campaign to our youngest learners. According to Roffey, Boyle and Allen (2019), it is essential that all students feel a sense of belonging to their school. Our elementary students enjoy listening to stories about belonging, making connections and engaging in activities where they find things they have in common with peers.

Mrs. James-Coles is also working with student-led groups to encourage them to incorporate the #LMSDBuildingBelonging into their peer-to-peer messaging, while Ms. Buckman is working closely with the English Language Development (ELD) teachers, school psychologists and social workers to implement additional language translation services for families who may have difficulty understanding or accessing communications sent by the district and their children’s schools. At the annual spring ELD ice cream social and resource fair, the #LMSDBuildingBelonging logo was used on buttons worn by staff and volunteer translators and interpreters to identify them as community-builders for ELD families most comfortable in languages other than English.

The #LMSDBuildingBelonging campaign is ongoing work. Schools play an essential role in building groups and social networks and offer opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging (Allen & Bowles, 2013). The district hopes to continue to build the sense of belonging that students and staff need to achieve their highest levels of success.



An example of LMSD's social media campaign. #LMSD-BuildingBelonging

For further information, please contact Mrs. James-Coles at [jamescs@lmsd.org](mailto:jamescs@lmsd.org) ■

The success of the campaign is identified through positive feedback from the belonging survey, active participation of the campaign in schools and across the district, the inclusion of the campaign at school events, sharing positive comments on social media, personal narratives/stories and the feeling of a sense of

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**ABOUT THE AUTHORS: Shawanna James-Coles, M.Ed.**, is the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging for the Lower Merion School District. Having begun her 30-year career in the Philadelphia School District, she spent 20 years serving the students and families in various roles before being appointed principal of Davis Elementary School in the Centennial School District. Mrs. James-Coles also served as an assistant director of elementary education and the district’s first director of diversity, equity, inclusion and education, where she worked tirelessly to close the achievement and opportunity gap for marginalized and economically distressed students. She is a graduate of Temple University, Cambridge College and Lehigh University, and is a doctoral student at Immaculata University. She has presented at national educational conferences on Distributed Leadership, Educational Equity, Building Belonging and African-American Women in Leadership.

**Amy Buckman** joined the Lower Merion School District as Director of School and Community Relations in March 2018, after spending 28 years as a television news reporter and producer, including 25 years at Philadelphia’s powerhouse 6abc/Action News. Determined to use her communication skills in support of vitally important, mission-driven work, she transitioned into public relations, first in support of journalism, as manager of public relations and special events for the Philadelphia Inquirer and then by returning to the school district from which she graduated to promote high-quality public education for all students.