

# Connecticut Case Study: Academy of Computer Science and Engineering Middle School

## Embedding Belonging Into Discipline Practices

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### Summary and Purpose

The CREC Academy of Computer Science and Engineering Middle School (Comp Sci Middle), located in East Hartford, Connecticut, is a public magnet school dedicated to rigorous academics and inclusive community. In 2024–25, as participants in the Connecticut Schools of Choice Inclusion Project, Comp Sci Middle leaders joined a statewide, WestEd-led community of practice called Redefining Safety by Centering Belonging and focused their work on embedding belonging into discipline practices and policies. This case study highlights the school’s efforts to move beyond theory to practical impact.



Comp Sci Middle’s approach stands out by embracing the “adjacent possible,”<sup>1</sup> implementing small but purposeful changes within existing systems to transform those systems. By asking, How can our discipline be grounded in a sense of belonging? the school demonstrates how incremental shifts can address complex climate and safety challenges and build a truly inclusive school environment one step at a time.

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## The Challenge

Scaling a sense of belonging is complex, especially when urgent safety or climate issues arise. Although Comp Sci Middle has been following restorative practices for a long time, leaders noticed a disconnect between those efforts and discipline data. “We do a lot of restorative work here, but we were having a hard time making the restorative [practices] work and the suspension numbers make sense,” said Principal Jill Wnuk. “It was that tier three group [of students], ... so that really was the challenge: What do we do about this? How can we lower our numbers? How can we give kids the skills that they need so that their behavior changes?” Staff recognized that while suspensions can be a “break” for adults, this response to discipline rarely solves underlying issues. Often, students do not understand what they’ve done wrong or how to repair it.

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## Introducing Logical Consequences

To connect discipline more directly with the school’s value of inclusive community, leadership introduced “logical consequences” through summer professional development with classroom behavior specialist Polly Bath. As participant and social

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<sup>1</sup> Kauffman, S. (2023, April). *The “adjacent possible”—and how it explains human innovation* [Video]. TED Conferences. [https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart\\_kauffman\\_the\\_adjacent\\_possible\\_and\\_how\\_it\\_explains\\_human\\_innovation/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_kauffman_the_adjacent_possible_and_how_it_explains_human_innovation/transcript?language=en)



worker Jocelyn Nelson explained, “Logical consequences are natural and direct responses to behavior that aim to make right with the community.”

Logical consequences tie student actions closely to meaningful repair in the school community. Unlike default detentions or suspensions, logical consequences are intentionally and directly connected to behavior, fostering student understanding, ownership, and restoration. In more serious cases, logical consequences may be paired with traditional discipline as policy or safety requires.

For the school, logical consequences are not about abandoning existing discipline policies. Rather, they are about aligning them with core school values and belonging efforts. With this approach, accountability for behavioral incidents is synonymous with community rather than exclusion from it.

Implementing logical consequences is not about achieving perfection or eliminating behavioral issues. Instead, the focus is on learning and iterating toward greater connection. Staff and students view mistakes as opportunities for growth, and student efforts to repair are visible and valued. “Kids learn best from each other. . . . It’s valuable for kids to see their peers have something valuable to say based on the lesson they’ve learned,” noted Nelson. Belonging emerges through consistent, creative engagement.

At Comp Sci Middle, “logical consequences were already naturally happening in small, informal, and sometimes invisible ways,” says Wnuk. “Like, you spill something, you clean it up. Now we’re just applying that kind of framing onto the bigger stuff.”

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## **Embracing the Adjacent Possible: Small Moves With Big Impact**

Instead of waiting for ideal conditions or a sweeping overhaul of disciplinary policies, Comp Sci Middle staff are intentionally operating within the adjacent possible, making



manageable moves within current constraints. This creative, adaptive stance allows staff to try out new practices and bring belonging to life through small actions, decisions, and interactions that shape school culture and build toward lasting change.

## Logical Consequences in Practice

Logical consequences often take creative forms that build agency rather than mere compliance. For example, a student writing on desks is required to clean the desks, and students misusing supplies help restock them with the custodian. At Comp Sci Middle, when a group of students were caught wasting paper towels in the bathrooms, Nelson shared the school's response: "You took away from the community, and now we can't dry our hands. So now you're going to help restock the bathrooms as a way to give back." Other responses might include research or peer presentations. For example, a student caught vaping created a presentation on vaping's dangers, sparking conversation with peers and families.



One student's presentation about cyber security



These practices foster visible learning and community. Students see their “outcome artifacts” shared in school, which reinforces growth and accountability. “They’re seeing some of their work shared out. ... That’s encouraging them to put the time and the effort in,” said Wnuk. “And other students are seeing that [their peers] made the same mistake and that’s okay. They’re still here with us. They’re still part of our community, but they learned, ... and now they’re sharing [their lessons learned] with me.”

Such strategies reinforce that making mistakes is a part of growing, and repair is possible: “Show them, yep, you are going to make a mistake—that’s okay,” says Nelson. “You’re going to survive, you’re going to do this to make it better, and you’re going to grow from it. And you’re going to share with us what you’ve learned.”

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## Outcomes

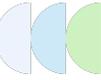
Outcomes are both practical and deeply linked to belonging. Staff are noticing shifts in how students view mistakes and accountability. And peer-to-peer learning and increased ownership have emerged as students model repair for one another.

Applying logical consequences is successful in aligning discipline with school values, growing a sense of belonging, and improving school climate. Staff and students report improved morale, and early data suggest fewer repeat offenses and stronger community feedback.

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## Recommendations for Schools and School Leaders

**Change Mindsets:** Leaders who are seeking to integrate belonging and discipline must move beyond punitive approaches and focus intentionally on community. “Suspension is not going to fix your problem. ... You have to have the desire to try something different,” said Wnuk. Meaningful change requires preparation and initial effort, but the work gets easier and more effective over time.



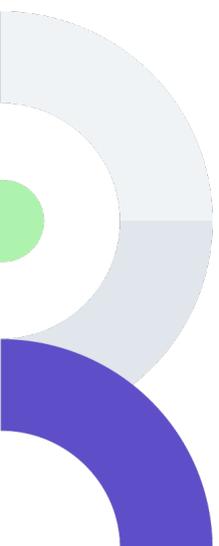
It is important to acknowledge and embrace the tension between discipline policy and belonging work—even when the feedback includes criticism. “Administrators need to be able to hear things that are going to be hard,” said Wnuk. “And [they need to] ground what they’re hearing in the belief that everyone is doing their part to build a community that they want.”

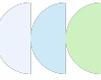
**Foster Authentic Staff Collaboration:** Ensure staff buy-in through feedback and a collaborative rollout. “[At Comp Sci Middle,] leaders presented information to staff and then said, ‘Tell me your thoughts and experiences.’ ... And the cocreation of a [bank of] logical consequences ... helped staff feel a sense of belonging,” shared Nelson. Reviewing data, reflecting on values, and brainstorming alternatives together helped with the rollout because the collaboration among staff made the process transparent and participatory.

**Take the Long View:** Applying logical consequences emerged from nearly 8 years of wider work on belonging at the school. It was not a one-time initiative but rather a part of a journey to create a true sense of community for students and families. “Data showed that people feel welcomed but not a sense of belonging like, This is my school, my community,” said Wnuk. “So a goal became, how do students and parents see themselves in this space?”

**Obtain District Support and Identify Small Wins:** The district’s flexibility allowed Comp Sci Middle to innovate and try approaches that fit in with their communities. Leaders find value in low-risk, safe-to-fail opportunities—trying out changes before committing to full overhauls fosters buy-in, creativity, and meaningful improvement.

**Center Student and Family Voices:** Center the voices of students and families, making accountability meaningful and inclusive. Relationships and clear language about repair are key. Collaborative reflection and a culture of listening empower leaders to make belonging a lived reality.





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## WestEd Resources

- [Reimagining School Safety: A Guide for Schools and Communities](#)
- [Restorative Ways of Being to Embody What Is Possible: A Guide for Restorative Leaders](#)

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