

### The Problem

Belonging is critical for student success at school. The Mount Horeb School District has strong opinions about this, so much so that it is a goal in their Breakthrough 2032 Strategic Plan. Well-being is one of the four pillars in this strategic plan, and increasing a sense of belonging to support the whole child is a goal.

### The Solution

The District's work on belonging occurs on different levels – students, staff, and family.

**For students, "You Belong Here" is a prominent call out.** Towards achieving that, the District commits to: Listen to student voice; condemn all forms of racism, hate speech, bigotry, and discrimination; ensure curriculum contains accurate historical teaching on social and racial injustice; and build a shared culture with families.

Grant money allowed the District to do a middle school retreat that focused on team building and bonding. The whole-day event put students into different groups where they worked through activities together.

Sources of Strength, a student-led mental wellness program, is active in the middle and high schools and fosters student belonging. Additionally, social media focuses on the positive ways students build belonging.

**For staff, training aims to develop skills that help them increase student belonging.** Specific training asks staff to think about how their individual views of belonging and culture impact their day and work with students.

**To foster belonging with families, the District is strategic in encouraging engagement.** Understanding that families are busy and not all parents have had positive experiences with school in their own lives, the District uses social media as a first point of engagement. In social media posts, fun photos of students engaging in school work and activities are

showcased. Staff engage by taking and sharing photos. As a result, social media followers have more than doubled from around 2,400 to nearly 6,000. With that following, the District invites families to school events, such as barbeques and popsicles in the park, and is seeing an increase in attendance. The District also offers learning events for parents on relevant topics. And they don't shy away from tough topics – a discussion on sextortion and what to look for in students was well-attended.



Students at the middle school retreat.

### Results

The District is seeing positive results from their focus on student belonging. There are 20 peer leaders at the middle school, staff are reporting they are more likely to refer students to a trusted adult because of belonging training, and families are more engaged.

Theapy dogs are also making a difference. After a tragic school shooting at Mount Horeb Middle School in May 2024, loaned therapy dogs provided much needed support to students. Seeing how effective the dogs were with students, the District was able to get their own therapy dogs through community support as well as support from Custom Canines Service Dog Academy and the Office of School Safety.

The District and School Board are committed to their students well-being to the point of establishing "sense of belonging" goals. By 2028, students will report an increased sense of belonging in grades 6-8 by 2% and in grades 9-12 by 4% as measured by the Youth Risk Behaviors Survey.