



ILLINI CENTRAL C.U.S.D #189

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Superintendent's Report October 15, 2026

Believe. Belong. Become. Twenty-nine people shared their experience trying to invest in one student, and what stood out to me wasn't a particular strategy or program but how much impact came from really simple and intentional moments.

Staff checked in with students in the hallway. They greeted them by name. They noticed when they were doing something right. They offered encouragement, listened to their stories, celebrated small successes, helped them work through challenges, and simply made sure students knew that someone saw them and cared about them. And it mattered. 28 of the 29 staff who responded reported seeing a change in their student. Ten said they definitely noticed a change, while 18 noticed a small change. And the one person who hasn't seen a change yet? They're going to keep trying.

But the stories behind those numbers are even better:

- A student began saying good morning first.
- A student who rarely spoke up voluntarily shared an idea in class.
- A student who struggled with behavior began talking about their emotions before reacting.
- A student sat a little taller and showed more confidence.
- A student who was struggling socially began making more positive connections with classmates.
- A new student who once wasn't sure where to sit at lunch now confidently walks to a table with friends.

Students began asking for help instead of struggling alone. They raised their hands. They brought their materials to class. They opened up about their lives. They smiled more, worked harder, improved grades, and began initiating conversations with the adults who had intentionally invested in them.

And our students weren't the only ones impacted. Staff repeatedly shared that the challenge reminded them of the importance of relationships, made them more intentional about encouragement, helped them notice small successes, challenged them to be more patient, and reminded them why they chose to work with kids in the first place. One staff member summed it up beautifully, "It forced me to focus on



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the fact that he is just a little boy coming to school each day, a boy who needs connection."

That is what BELIEVE looks like. Sometimes believing in a student means seeing something in them that they may not see in themselves yet and making sure they know we see it.

This month, we move from "Believe" to "Belong." Students don't truly belong simply because their name appears on our enrollment list or because they walk through our doors every morning. There is a difference between "fitting in" and "belonging." Fitting in says, "I know how to exist here." Belonging says, "Someone here knows me. Someone notices when I'm here—and when I'm not. Someone knows a little bit of my story."

So our October challenge is "Know the Story." Choose three students you don't already know well and learn something meaningful about each of them. Maybe it's what they love to do outside of school, something they're proud of, who is important to them, a goal they have, a talent they don't often get to show, or simply something that makes them smile.

But don't stop with learning it, take what you learn to connect with them again. Ask about the game. Remember the dog's name. Follow up on the weekend plans. Ask how the project went. Show them that you didn't just hear their story but that you remembered it.

September showed us what can happen when a student realizes, "Someone here believes in me." Now, in October, let's help them experience something just as powerful, "Someone here knows me. I belong here."

Teacher Boot Camp: On September 30, district staff participated in professional development presented by Todd Fox and his co-presenter. The session focused on building meaningful relationships with students, classroom management, professional boundaries, and practical strategies for supporting student success.

Staff feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with several common themes emerging:

- **Relationships First:** The message "Love first, teach second" resonated strongly with staff, reinforcing the importance of relationships and student connections.



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- Practical Classroom Strategies: Staff appreciated reminders about the importance of the first and last seven minutes of class, consistency, classroom structure, and intentional instructional practices.
 - Responding Rather Than Reacting: Strategies for remaining calm, pausing before responding, and managing difficult student behaviors were frequently identified as valuable.
 - Engaging Presentation: Staff praised the presenters' enthusiasm, humor, practical experience, and ability to connect their messages to everyday school situations.

While most feedback was positive, staff identified several areas for additional support, including student behavior de-escalation, special education and paraprofessional training, and practical strategies for responding to challenging behaviors. A few respondents also noted that portions of the presentation were less relevant to their specific roles or repeated previous training.

The district will use this feedback to guide future professional development planning. Opportunities include incorporating key strategies into building-level staff meetings, providing additional behavior management and de-escalation training, and exploring more role-specific professional development for support staff.

Moving forward, our goal is to build upon this learning by providing staff with continued support and opportunities to apply these strategies in their daily work with students.