Looking Ahead
2026-27 CSEE Events



Dialogue & Community: Building a Culture of Connection as Student Leaders
An event for students and faculty advisors
Sept. 30, 2026 • **Virtual**

Early Educators' Summit East Coast
Oct. 13, 2026 • New York, NY

Beyond Land Acknowledgement
Oct. 14 & Oct. 21, 2026 • **Virtual**

DEIB Leadership Under Pressure: Mission-Anchored Practice for Tense Seasons
Nov. 2, 2026 • **Virtual**

Middle School Summit
Nov. 4-6, 2026 • New Orleans, LA

Service Learning Summit
Nov. 11-13, 2026 • Chicago, IL

CSEE Pre-AAR World Religions Gathering
November 20, 2026 • Boston, MA

Advisory Exemplars
Jan. 21 & Feb. 4, 2027 • **Virtual**

Dignity and Decision Making
Jan. 26, 2027 • **Virtual**

Energizing Faculty
Feb. 1, 2027 • Baltimore, MD

When Culture Fractures, Mission Holds: Leading from the Middle
Feb. 9, 2027 • **Virtual**

Chaplains' Summit
Feb. 17-19, 2027 • Baltimore, MD

Civil Discourse
Feb. 19, 2027 • Baltimore, MD

Deans of Students' Summit
April 14-16, 2027 • Chicago, IL

Independent School Counselors' Summit
April 14-16, 2027 • Chicago, IL

Beyond Punishment
April 18-20, 2027 • **Virtual**

Dates Coming Soon!

Academic Integrity
An event for students and faculty

Foundations of Advisory

DEIB Exemplars

Designing a Health and Wellness Curriculum

Heads' Ethical Roundtable

Living the Question

Self-Care for Support Staff

Neurodiversity and School Culture

How to Listen • **Virtual**

Implicit and Unconscious Bias • **Virtual**

Developmentally Appropriate Equity and Inclusion Practices for Young Children
with Rosetta Lee • **Virtual**

LGBTQ Educators' Gatherings: West and East Coasts

The Gardner Carney Leadership Institute

Stanley King Institutes, East and West

Plus more! **Check out our PD offerings at csee.org/page/EventsByTopic**

Finding Our Way Home



By The Rev. Michael Spencer
Oregon Episcopal School • Portland, OR

As an educator, the history of my family informs my professional commitment to creating environments where students are seen and supported to live out my school's mission *"educating students to realize their power for good as engaged citizens of the world."* Affirming identity, we provide the space to grow and deepen understanding, and the tools to build Dr. King's vision of Beloved Community. For me, as a Cape Verdean American, this work is also deeply personal.

Cape Verde (Cabo Verde) is an archipelago off the west coast of Africa (near Senegal) with a rich cultural history and a complex legacy as a stopping point in the early slave trade. There are more Cape Verdeans in the diaspora than in Cape Verde. Growing up in the Cape Verdean community of New Bedford, MA, my identity was shaped by a multi-colored spectrum. My family's history is one of service: an uncle who was the first Black Cape Verdean high school principal in his Connecticut district and director of Peace Corps Operations in Central Africa, another who was among the first Black Cape Verdean Navy SEALs, and a father who was one of the longest-serving Black Cape Verdean Scoutmasters.

Despite these roots, moving into a predominantly white neighborhood highlighted for me the internal othering common to those of mixed heritage. This was not a new reality for my family. The race of my grandparents' was recorded differently in the census depending on who answered the door and who was taking the census! When your identity is a best guess for others, you

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often find yourself checking the "other" box. The embodied fact of my race was not as visibly embodied, and so, with the exception of my Cape Verdean community, I never fully felt belonging.

This personal history serves as a lens through which I view the subjugation of identity that remains part of systemic racism. To ignore this reality is to bury one's head in the sand. To call it out is the work of education that leads to honest conversations, repair, and healing. As schools confront the challenges of our changing times, we stand at a critical crossroads. Our opportunity is not to mimic cultural confusion that dominates, but to serve as a catalyst for cultural transformation that inspires. To build a true Beloved Community, our work must embrace three key pillars:

> ***"Our opportunity is not to mimic cultural confusion that dominates, but to serve as a catalyst for cultural transformation that inspires."***

1. Belonging and Mattering

The dynamics of othering creates systems of marginalization. In *Belonging Without Othering: How We Can Save Ourselves and the World*, john a. powell and Stephen Menendian offer a compelling new paradigm. Belonging should not require othering and exclusion. Ironically, the consequence of well-intentioned DEI efforts often creates exclusionary practices that alienate key allies in the critical work of dismantling systemic injustice. Instead, powell and Menendian suggest shifting toward a broader understanding of self that affirms the multiplicity of identity—connecting people across former divisions, offering "social spaces and experiences that affirm these connections."[1] This relational concept of belonging requires connection, recognition, inclusion, and agency[2]; elements that can be honed and practiced through an institutional commitment offering social spaces that affirm connections rather than individual silos that perpetuate separation.

Beyond belonging, schools must also nurture "mattering." According to Jennifer Breheny Wallace "mattering" is essential to living a life of purpose. It requires that an individual feels valued (recognition), needed (reliance), significant (importance), cared for (ego extension), and understood (attunement).[3] By building this "mattering core" through deliberate acts of empathy, schools create a social framework that sustains every student.

2. Pluralism Through Bridging

Democracy depends on pluralism: the ability to hold together diverse perspectives to affirm common understanding. The motto of the United States is *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one). This reflects our founding and reflects the promise of our future. More than a century before this motto was adopted, William Bradford affirmed this hope before the colonists disembarked in 1620: "We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body... we shall be as a city upon a hill and the eyes of all people are upon us."[4]

The philosopher and educator John Dewey famously emphasized the key role of schools in this endeavor of community creation. He said, "democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife."[5] In this ongoing generational work, "bridging" is key. Bridging requires deep listening. It "strengthens our capacity to hold and maintain an empathetic space"[6] in which we are not centered on agreement, but on profound understanding, being more present to another "with their feelings, their fears, and their suffering."[7] Bridging creates a culture of belonging: the shared space of empathy across established divides.

> ***"Bridging creates a culture of belonging: the shared space of empathy across established divides."***

The challenge of the current age and the isolation created by the echo chambers of social media, causes like-minded individuals to turn inward and away from each other. This can lead to what powell calls "'breaking' which goes further than 'bonding,' and is actually the antithesis of social capital... where members of a group not only turn inward, but explicitly push members of other groups away."[8]

1. john a. powell and Stephen Menendian, *Belonging Without Othering: How We Can Save Ourselves and The World*, (Stanford University Press, 2024), 11.

2. Ibid., 144.

3. Jennifer Breheny Wallace, *Mattering: The Secret to A Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*, (Penguin: 2026), 14.

4. John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, excerpted from https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (Macmillan, 1916), 82.

6. Ibid., 174.

7. john a. powell, *The Power of Bridging: How to Build a World Where We All Belong,* (Sounds True, 2026), 118.

8. powell, *Belonging Without Othering*, 176.

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In this current time of increased polarization, the work of schools in cultivating humanity and sustaining democracy—fostering pluralism, and practicing bridging in a world of breaking—could not be more critical. Rather than turning inward and away, the work of schools in this moment should invite us to turn outward and toward. In the words of Bryan Stephenson—founder of the Equal Justice Initiative—we need to be more proximate. "By getting close to those suffering, we see and hear things not apparent from a distance, allowing us to understand and solve, rather than ignore, systemic problems."[9] How might our schools invite us to be more proximate, cultivating the pluralistic space for bridging and belonging—rediscovering "our commission and community in the work."

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3. Fostering Civil Discourse

Martin Luther King, Jr. defined Beloved Community as one characterized by *agape* love: "understanding goodwill for all people... an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return."[10] A community reflecting this love, will "transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age."[11] King said this journey from gloom to gladness would be "the salvation of civilization."[12] Together with civil discourse, grounded in respect and dignity, he believed people could unite across difference, opposers could become friends, and the dream of realizing the Beloved Community could become a reality.

The Vietnamese Theravadan monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, vowed to continue building the Beloved Community. His concept of Inter-Being includes all life: "We do not exist independently. We inter-are. Everything relies on everything else in the cosmos in order to manifest—whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, or you and me."[13] Through this "interdependent arising" we are interconnected. Through this realization, differences become insignificant against the backdrop of shared and common humanity. The Episcopal Church encapsulates this in the phrase: "to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being."[14] This is the creation of a community where all perspectives are valued, where viewpoints are considered, where civil discourse builds bonds of understanding rather than division, empathy rather than enmity, and curiosity rather than cancellation.

> ***"Be present. Be more curious than certain. Be clear in your purpose. Be relationship-centered."***

At Oregon Episcopal School we have developed Principles of Civil Discourse for students and employees: *Be present. Be more curious than certain. Be clear in your purpose. Be relationship-centered.* This, combined with a clear institutional policy on political expression—grounded in our values as an Episcopal School—fosters a school community defined by vibrant and diverse intellectual inquiry, critical thinking, and constructive dialogue. In support of these goals, students have the freedom to express their ideas, respectfully engaging with each other and with public life. Embracing a spirit of inquiry, schools demonstrate that what is best for student learning is the creation of an educational experience that develops their reasoning and critical thinking skills, building spaces of connection across difference, engaging with challenging ideas against the backdrop of shared humanity.

Longing and Communion

The fastest-growing demographic in our nation is those who identify as "two or more races." My Cape Verdean heritage offers a unique perspective on this: a reconciliation of racial identities that points toward human identity transcendent of race. Those of mixed heritage might become a bridge for others across the racial chasm that divides. The 19th century Cape Verdean poet, Eugenio Tavares, writes: "We sing with water in our eyes, we dance while our soul is grieving." Cesaria Evora, sings of *Sodade*—a uniquely Cape Verdean word for longing. Anyone in the diaspora can relate to *Sodade*. It is a longing for deeper belonging in the forgotten home of our shared humanity.

9. Bryan Stephenson, "The Power of Proximity," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMKIpycFaOg&t=37s.

10. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living; Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now*, (HarperOne, 2017), 14.

14. Episcopal Church. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church.* Seabury Press, 1979, 305.

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Hundreds of thousands of years ago, the human race was born in the cradle of Africa and spread throughout the world.[15] Our common ancestry is in Africa and we are all black at our deepest ancestral level, suggesting that Black Lives Matter for many reasons, not the least of which is because we are all part of the same human race. We have been conditioned to believe differently. Racial constructs are relatively new: developed in the 1400s during the Spanish Inquisition, coalescing into a racial hierarchy by the 1700s to maintain colonialism and slavery, and then perpetuated by the anthropological theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This perspective was drilled into the collective psyche to underscore our disconnection and difference, countering the force of *Sodade*. Suppressing this longing perpetuated racial hierarchies and systems of oppression; denying common bonds, common ancestry and our place within Beloved Community.

Moving forward requires a deeper understanding that transcends the constructs of race, embracing multiplicity, fluidity, and shared humanity. The African word *ubuntu*—I am because we are—reflects an African relational ontology and offers a helpful approach, highlighting powell's framework for belonging and Thich Naht Hanh's concept of Interbeing. When we recognize the concept of *ubuntu* and the reality of our *Sodade*, we begin the work of repair and healing, moving from a rhetoric of fear and hate to a dialectic of hope and love.

> ***"The power that unites us is not our difference, but our communion.* E pluribus unum: *out of many, one."***

Our schools provide fertile ground for this transformation. The power that unites us is not our difference, but our communion. *E pluribus unum*: out of many, one. Through this recognition, when we sing with water in our eyes, when we dance while our soul is grieving, we move from gloom to gladness, building a Beloved Community where every individual truly matters and belongs. ●

15. "There's No Scientific Basis For Race–It's A Made Up Label," *National Geographic*, March 12, 2018.

The Rev. Michael Spencer currently serves as Head of School at Oregon Episcopal School in Portland, OR. For over thirty years, he has worked as a boarding school chaplain, teacher, adviser, coach, and administrator. He is the author of published articles, sermons, and poetry, and serves as president of the governing board for the National Association of Episcopal Schools (NAES).

New Media

Contributed by Debbie Bensadon

Our students are becoming more and more diverse in their cultures, identities, and learning styles—and that diversity is a gift. But it also calls us to be more intentional than ever about how we create environments where every student genuinely feels like they belong. Belonging will not happen on its own. It requires intention, awareness, and a commitment to a research-informed practice.

Building and Sustaining a Sense of Belonging During the Transition to High School

Two resources have shaped my thinking on this recently. A research brief from Stanford's John W. Gardner Center, "Building and Sustaining a Sense of Belonging During the Transition to High School," explores belonging through the voices of students and families themselves. What emerges is a picture of belonging that is deeply multidimensional—shaped by academic confidence, peer connection, identity recognition, and students' ability to navigate institutional systems. Importantly, the research reminds us that small, everyday moves carry enormous weight: how a teacher arranges seating, whether families receive information in their home language, or how a staff member responds to a student in a difficult moment can all quietly signal whether a student belongs here.

Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments

"Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments," from the Student Experience Network, zooms out to examine how school policies, norms, and practices work together—or against one another—to create conditions where all students can belong, not just those already well-served by the system.

What both resources make clear is something I deeply believe: belonging is not a program we roll out. It is a culture we build—together, deliberately, and with every student in mind. ●

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