



# ENGAGING STUDENT VOICES: ACCEPT, INCLUDE, & UNDERSTAND

While creating the action plan for the SS/HS grant, Beloit's Core Management Team had an epiphany: *We need student voice.* A student-driven social marketing campaign was the beginning.

Challenged by this opportunity, students were clear about the message: *Accept, Include, & Understand Me.* From there, it could be put into action—student to student, staff to student, and student to community.

## ➔ CHALLENGE

Thomas\* was unsure of his value and worth at school. Sure, he had friends... or were they more like acquaintances? He was not sure how he fit in. Sometimes it seemed like his teachers didn't understand him. Did they really care? Life can be complicated and the demands intense. He worried about how he was going to make it through the school year.

Thomas was not alone. Almost every teen experiences self-doubt, worried they do not belong, or do not have what it takes. Eighty-three percent of teens report that they consider school one of the greatest sources of stress (<https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2013/stress-report.pdf>).

The SS/HS team consulted with other adults at Beloit Memorial High School (BMHS) and pondered: *How can we engage student voices to address these mental health needs? What systems might lend themselves to capturing student stories?* These questions led to planning for a social marketing campaign led by students, for students. We needed to get **student-driven** messaging in the public eye. BMHS staff assumed it would be best for students to simply create a slogan on billboards and posters. But as diverse student groups were invited to create their message, much more happened.

*\*Name changed to protect privacy*

## ➔ SOLUTION

One February, the SS/HS team facilitated a gathering of several BMHS students. The students took a day to reflect on their high school experiences, review the Youth Risk Behavior Survey data for the school, and discuss what was truly on their minds. The day culminated with the creation of a clear message to convey what they wanted from each other, their classmates, the staff, and the larger community. That message was **Accept, Include, & Understand Me (AIU)**, and it was just the start.

Weekly meetings followed. Did some students just come for the snacks? Absolutely! But then they came back for more—and they opened up. This campaign was not just a “once and done” experience; it was going to be more than billboards and posters. This became **student voice empowered**. During the first year, the group was small but mighty. They even worked through the summer, preparing grade-level lessons for Advisory and giving staff insight into a student mindset.



### FROM PARTICIPATING STUDENTS:

“AIU HAS MADE ME A BETTER MAN.”

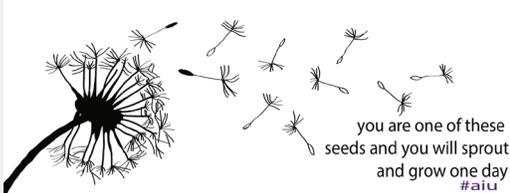
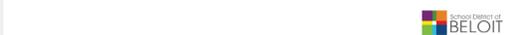
“AIU HAS HELPED ME UNDERSTAND OTHER PEOPLE.”

“AIU IS A SAFE PLACE FOR ME TO TALK TO PEOPLE WHO ACCEPT AND INCLUDE ME.”

**Project AIU is grounded in the conviction that student voices deserve to be heard. As the saying goes, “Nothing about us without us.”**



*Accept, Include, & Understand Me*



**MANY AIU STUDENTS CONSIDER THEIR INVOLVEMENT AS EMPOWERING, AN EXTRAORDINARY OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH, AND A WAY TO GIVE BACK TO OTHERS.**

Multiple opportunities were available for all students to learn more about AIU and to get involved, but the most significant was the development of **Project AIU**. The students wanted a chance to really put into practice what it truly means to accept, include, and understand others. They realized this would take concentrated effort and time—to engage in conversation, create memories, and share their stories with the support of staff and community members. Through this process, the students learned that they are not alone, that others have an interest in them, and that others are present for them.

## → RESULTS

After the original five *Project AIU* days occurred, they are now held each quarter, with 23 to 47 students engaged and 10 to 16 adults each time. The day is built on challenges, just like life—filled with laughter, conversation, skill building, reflection, and determining messages. Students and staff are pleasantly surprised to connect with each other in ways they couldn't have imaged before.

Each *Project AIU* carves out time to create messaging. Students collaborate on infomercials that air during Friday morning school announcements. Messages encourage creating a safe and engaging learning environment for all.

Participants also created a “Gathering Wall of Voices,” focused on breaking the stigmas and stereotypes of what others may think. This wall sets the record straight and gives the students voice. For closure, final messages of appreciation were created and shared.

AIU students shared their insights in a variety of ways throughout the SS/HS grant period. As a panel, they shared insights about their perceptions and basic needs to the entire high school staff. Seven students presented at the Teen Summit in Wisconsin Dells with rave reviews. Four students shared their personal stories of conflict, courage, and growth at a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Core Management Team meeting. The BMHS AIU youth also created, prepared, and presented mini AIUs at each of the four intermediate schools, addressing 121 students in 7th and 8th grade.

Their epiphany? People have their own stories and their own depth, and are real.

## → SUSTAINING SUCCESS

AIU has had a tremendous impact on BMHS students. It began as a SS/HS student-driven social marketing campaign, and along the way, created a safe space for students to share their diverse strengths, to collaborate, and to engage in empowering and extraordinary opportunities for growth and a way to give back to others. *Project AIU* won't be slowing down any time soon. Dates have been set for the 2018–19 school year, and once again, student voices will drive the message—and action.

For more information about the program, contact:

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