Through classroom projects, author visits and affinity groups, Crossroads students examine the values of belonging and inclusion on campus and beyond.

From buddy programs in the Elementary School and a silent Middle School rally in support of the LGBTQ community to Upper School students’ participation in the annual People of Color Conference and the interfaith dialogue held recently on campus, the Crossroads community continues to demonstrate a sustained commitment to inclusion.

These efforts, though, are never complete. Indeed, as part of the new strategic plan, the School aims to further enhance a sense of belonging for students, families, employees, alumni and beyond.

“We want to be more intentional about the way we make sure every member of our community feels fully supported and included,” Head of School Bob Riddle says.

This past semester, the importance of belonging and inclusion—both at Crossroads and in the world around us—was reinforced through a variety of programs and initiatives.
Starting in the Elementary School, students at Crossroads begin developing an understanding of their own identities while learning to embrace those of their peers.

First-grade students recently explored multiculturalism through a lesson in gastronomy, using the book “What the World Eats” as a launching pad for their social studies discussions. The students then crafted still-life watercolor paintings of their favorite foods.

At the start of the school year, third-graders played “Classmate Bingo” to help build and strengthen connections among peers. They also created individual “My Place in the World” presentations to learn about the histories, geographies and cultures of their ancestries.

These curricular elements promote belonging, inclusion and empathy at a time when community members look to the School for comfort and guidance in the face of ongoing local, national and global divisions.

“We’re part of the larger world,” Bob says. “Things that impact students and families outside of Crossroads—and things going on in our country—are going to impact them here, too. So, we need to be aware of what’s going on, how that’s affecting members of our community and what we can do to better support them.”

Crossroads has further advanced belonging and inclusion through the creation and growth of affinity groups for students. More than a half-dozen affinity groups are available for Upper School students. Divisional diversity coordinator and Spanish teacher Silvia Salazar says they fortify the School’s efforts to make all students feel supported and respected.

“In the Queer Student Union that launched at the end of the 2016-17 school year, LGBTQ students find support in closed weekly meetings. The affinity group is distinct from the activism-oriented PRIDE Club, which is open to allies.

“Affinity groups can provide safe and comfortable spaces where students can be their true selves and where they can navigate courageous conversation and find support from peers,” she says.

In the recently launched Multiracial Student Union (MRSU), for example, students of mixed backgrounds embrace their differences and have open discussions about their experiences.

“Identity can be a struggle for multiracial students—it can be difficult to find your ‘place’ and to know what part of your heritage to associate yourself with,” sophomore Maya Armus says. “By no means do we want to generalize the experiences of multiracial students, but these are some of the issues that have come up in our group and some of the reasons why we started MRSU.”

Members of the group have discussed the challenges of being multiracial and handling insensitive questions and doubts about their identity. They have shared stories about how their racial ambiguity—or lack thereof—impacts others’ perceptions of them. And they have started conversations about current events and examined the roles of multiracial people in media and pop culture.

“Affinity groups can be a great way to share certain unique experiences that others may not face,” sophomore Nora Cazenave says, “and realize that no one is alone in their experiences.”

In October, author Ellen Oh visited Crossroads to speak to Middle School students about the need for diversity in young-adult literature. Organized by librarian Jay Chang and sixth-grade Core teacher Nancy Seid, Oh’s day included presentations to the sixth, seventh and eighth grades as well as an informal lunchtime Q&A with a smaller group of students from each of the three grades.

“She shared some shocking statistics about how, 10 or so years ago, nonwhite people made up only about seven to 10 percent of characters in children’s stories,” eighth-grader Meazi Light-Orr reports. “How much she cared about the issue of unequal representation really made [her presentation] fun and easy to understand.”

Oh’s visit followed Middle Schoolers’ summer reading of “Flying Lessons & Other Stories,” a collection of inclusive stories for young-adult readers that was created in partnership with Oh’s nonprofit, We Need Diverse Books. The book includes works by authors such as Jacqueline Woodson, the 2018-19 National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, who came to Crossroads with illustrator Rafael López this fall as part of an inspiring evening presentation about diversity and acceptance.

“[Oh] made a point to say that she used real-world issues of inequity to set the stage for the things she wanted to write about,” says Derric J. Johnson, founding director of the Crossroads School Equity & Justice Institute. “These are the types of things that she felt today’s children should be reading.”

Crossroads students paint with watercolors as part of a unit on identity.