

## CARING RELATIONSHIPS & HIGH EXPECTATIONS

**R***elationships are the bedrock of all successful school activities.* High-quality interpersonal relationships keep teachers motivated to be innovative and inspiring. These relationships also keep students engaged in learning. In fact, the quality of relationships at the school is among the strongest known predictors of both student academic achievement and teachers' career satisfaction (Hattie, 2009; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Relationships happen everywhere human interaction occurs—between staff members; between parents, teachers and students; and between students themselves.

Positive relationships with colleagues help teachers and other school staff members develop and maintain their professional identities, support them through challenging professional and personal experiences, and encourage them to stay in the teaching profession. By cultivating supportive relationships amongst themselves, adults at school model healthy communication and collaboration skills for the youth they serve. When adults in schools feel supported and engaged, they are more likely to nurture relationships that communicate both warmth and high expectations for their students.

Students harvest great rewards from positive adult relationships at school. In some cases, youth spend more time with their teachers than they do their parents, so it is no wonder that the quality of adult-youth relationships in schools is a powerful predictor of a host of important youth development outcomes, including students' satisfaction with, and connection to, school; academic performance; quality of peer relationships; and experience of personal well-being (Griggs, Glover Gagnon, Huelsman, Kidder-Ashley, & Ballard, 2009; Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, & Li, 2010; Pianta, 1999; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

Students report that they have the highest quality relationships with teachers who are willing to help; are honest, calm, and fair; and cultivate students' ability to work autonomously (Ludwig & Warren, 2009; Wentzel, 2002; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Due to the fact that they spend a good deal of time with youth, teachers' relationships with students are the most frequent subject of research. However, other school-related adults, such as coaches, after-school mentors, and instructional aides can play important roles as well. These adults within the school community can develop positive relationships with youth through ordinary, day-to-day interactions that are high in empathy, warmth, and non-directive communication (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Caring, supportive relationships with adults are the foundation for the development of the prosocial interpersonal skills that students use to build and maintain friendships. As children develop, their relationships with peers become critical to their personal and academic success. The quality of peer relationships is a strong predictor of students' school attendance, academic performance, and social and emotional wellbeing. The benefits of building and sustaining positive relationships with the school environment are many.

While many programs and curricula are available to help schools deliver relationship-building skill instruction, these programs can do little good if the overall culture of the school does not support healthy interpersonal relationships. It is recommended that schools think about ways to communicate the premium placed on relationships by weaving interpersonal values and norms into the fabric of the school's culture.

## QUICK WINS: WHAT TEACHERS & OTHER ADULTS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

### *Make connections*

- » Practice active listening, including reflecting what students have said. Have students practice active listening and reward them for doing so!
- » Make time for greetings in the morning—go beyond roll call.
- » Know not only the names of students in your class, but also the names of students you see often in the hallways and shared spaces.
- » Take time to learn about students' special interests and family members, and recall those details when speaking with students.
- » Volunteer to coach a team or become an advisor to a student-led group.
- » Offer volunteering opportunities for causes that you and the students care about.
- » Avoid sarcasm or negativity.
- » Become a member of your school's Student Support Team.
- » Consider co-teaching. Staff model healthy working relationships through their own interactions with colleagues.
- » Request parent volunteers for your classroom. Folding parents into the day-to-day functioning of the school helps build relationships without requiring staff to work after school hours.

### *Be helpful and non-directive*

- » Give students many opportunities for choice in their day, including choosing assignments, partners, and topics for study.
- » Open your door during lunch or after school.
- » Use technology, such as a blog or email, to give your students access to you for help on homework and projects.
- » Give students the benefit of the doubt.

### *Focus on growth, not ability*

- » Communicate high expectations for effort (e.g., "I know that you will work hard on this!")
- » Communicate a belief in the ability for students to grow (e.g., "You worked hard on this. Tomorrow you will finish even more than you did today!")
- » Give opportunities for students to re-take tests. This communicates that your focus is on growth and learning, not absolute performance.
- » Base statements of encouragement on growth, not ability. Don't say, "You're so smart, I knew this would be no problem for you." Do say, "Wow, you got this done so quickly. It looks like you are ready to challenge yourself with the next assignment!"

### *Support students' peer relationships*

- » Use group work, paired work, and project-based learning.
- » Encourage positive, supportive language shared between students.
- » Notice students that seem isolated from peers and refer to the Student Assistance Team or school counselors.
- » Pair students from diverse backgrounds.

## UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: SCHOOLWIDE POLICIES, PRACTICES & PROGRAMS

A deliberate focus on relationships requires schools to rethink their structures, starting with a comprehensive evaluation of the school's resources—staff, school volunteers, existing programs, infrastructure, and learning materials. Reallocation of resources may be necessary to put relationships at the

center of learning, with special considerations made for at-risk subgroups.

The Doing What Works Clearinghouse ([dww.ed.gov](http://dww.ed.gov)) of the U.S. Department of Education recommends the following general practices:

### *Encourage student participation in extracurricular activities*

- » Teachers and staff should personally invite students at risk of dropping out to school-related activities.
- » Schools also can provide extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, after-school field trips, guest speakers, post-secondary partnerships, or service groups.

### *Create extended time through changes to the school schedule*

- » Implement innovative schedule features, such as block scheduling, extended class periods, or advisory and study periods, that provide more time for student-teacher and student-student interactions during the day. Students also have the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth.

### *Establish small learning communities*

- » Small learning communities can be implemented for one grade level or as a whole school reform model. The students may be housed in a separate wing or floor of the school building, with core-academic teams that share the same students. Each small learning community consists of an interdisciplinary team of teachers with whom students work consistently.
- » Keep students together for multiple years.

### *Establish team teaching*

- » Pairing teachers as partners in the classroom has benefits for personalizing the learning environment. Not only can teachers conduct common lesson planning and decision-making about the classroom, but students have access to more than one teacher who can offer individualized attention or new perspectives for the student.

### *Create smaller classes*

- » Lowering the number of students in the class allows for teachers to interact with students on an individual level more frequently. Having fewer students in the classroom also improves students' ability to get to know one another more deeply.

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### **System–Level Supports**

**ESTABLISH LEARNING SUPPORT TEAMS (LSTs).** Learning Support Teams (LST) are established to locate school and local resources, including agencies that provide family and youth health and mental health services; identify school needs and existing resources; and coordinate service delivery across programs and settings. LSTs are used to reduce fragmentation in service availability and ensure that resources are delivered to appropriate students.

For more information on LSTs, visit the UCLA Center for Mental Health in the Schools: [smhp.psych.ucla.edu](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu)

**ESTABLISH STUDENT ASSISTANCE TEAMS.** Student Assistance Teams (SATs)—a.k.a., Child Study Teams, Student Study Teams—are established to perform a number of important duties, including: (1) providing a process within which teachers can refer students that appear to be at-risk, (2) providing a process within which administration can refer students who appear to have behavioral and/or emotional difficulties stemming from challenging life situations, and (3) connecting students to appropriate resources, both at school and within the community. SATs usually include teachers, administrators, and student assistance staff (counselors, psychologists, speech therapists).

For more information on SATs, visit: The California SAP Resource Center: [casapresources.org/home.php](http://casapresources.org/home.php)

### **Universal Supports for Staff Members**

Positive, supportive relationships start with staff members. In the way they act toward, and speak of one another, adults who work with youth are modeling how to form healthy, connected relationships. Staff relationships are built upon ongoing, consistent opportunities to engage in collegial dialogue. Schools must make a deliberate effort to provide systems that support connected staff members. Some frameworks for peer dialogue include Professional Learning Communities (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), such as:

**CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUPS (CFGs).** Critical Friends Groups are groups of approximately 10 educators who meet at least once per month to collaborate, using a structured format for review and feedback. CFGs encourage professional development through reflective teaching practices and collaborative learning. Staff who are members of CFGs perceive themselves to work in schools with more positive climates (see Darling–Hammond , Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, (2009), for review). [nsrfharmony.org](http://nsrfharmony.org)

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## *Universal Supports: Programs & Curricula for Students*

Universal supports for student relationships target the whole student population, rather than any single at-risk group. Because they generally require more planning across people, programs, or communities, universal supports for relationships may take longer to implement than “quick wins.”

### **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

While attention has been largely focused on the remediation of weak social skills with youth who are at risk, a new wave of research has focused on the benefits of explicitly teaching prosocial skills as a preventative approach. SEL programs systematically teach the skills that underlie healthy, sustained relationships. These are the skills that students rely upon to make new friendships and navigate social conflicts. [casel.org](http://casel.org)

SEL programs with evidence for effectiveness in high schools include:

**RIPPLE EFFECTS.** Ripple Effects Whole Spectrum Intervention System is a tiered, self-directed, behavioral intervention program, that is the first and only comprehensive, technology based, direct-to-learner, children’s mental health intervention to be listed on SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. It addresses a wide range of children’s mental health issues and hundreds of risk factors that may underlie them.

Ripple Effects has been listed for all three tiers of intervention: universal promotion, targeted prevention, and selected intervention, for children and adolescents, urban, rural and suburban settings, school achievement outcomes, and resiliency asset outcomes. [rippleeffects.com](http://rippleeffects.com)

### **Conflict Resolution Education**

Consider implementing a conflict resolution education program, such as a peer mediation program and/or curriculum. Conflict resolution programs take many forms, from training a core group of students as peer mediators to training all students in the school. The goal of conflict resolution programs is to build students’ ability to apply learned self-awareness and communication skills to prevent and resolve interpersonal conflicts as they naturally arise within their peer groups. Conflict resolution education programs have strong positive effects for reducing disciplinary infractions and suspensions in high-school aged children, with more comprehensive programs showing greater results (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007).

View the Association for Conflict Resolution’s “Recommended Standards for School-Based Peer Mediation Programs 2007” at: [acrnet.org](http://acrnet.org)

## TARGETED SUPPORTS: INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

The most developmentally appropriate targeted support programs in the area of Caring Relationships and High Expectations for high-school students are generally designed to meet the goal of reducing dropout. While the final aim of these programs is to improve rates of school completion, the process through which this is achieved is by (a) improving students' connection to school-affiliated adults who serve as their advocates and mentors, and (b) building students' sense of community within their peer groups.

### Check & Connect (WWC) [checkandconnect.org](http://checkandconnect.org)

The Check & Connect program (Christenson et al., 2008), which was originally designed for dropout prevention efforts, has a strong emphasis on building relationships between school-based adults and youth. Key elements of the Check & Connect model include: 1) pairing of adult mentors with at-risk youth, 2) systematic monitoring of attendance, behavior, and academic data, 3) individualized intervention, and 4) home-school communication.

### Achievement for Latinos Through Academic Success (ALAS) Dropout Prevention Program [raiseinspiredkids.com](http://raiseinspiredkids.com)

The ALAS program (Larson & Rumberger, 1995), also designed as a dropout prevention program, focuses on providing youth with meaningful relationships at school. The ALAS program is operated by a group of supervisors and mentors within the school campus. Youth in this program are provided with a mentor who serves as the students' liaison and advocate. Elements of the ALAS program include: 1) monitoring attendance, 2) problem-solving skills instruction, 3) ongoing performance feedback from teachers, which is communicated to families, 4) parent training, 5) opportunities for group bonding of

students within the program, and 6) connections to community services.

### Youth Helping Youth: Peer Support Systems

There exist many types of peer support systems, from peer conflict mediators to peer counselors. Peer led conflict resolution programs, one of many kinds of peer support systems, have been linked to perceptions of positive school climate, including amplified perceptions of positive relationships (Naylor & Cowie, 1999). In some cases, peer support is viewed as more effective than adult support. For example, peer-led alcohol and drug programs have been found to be more effective than teacher-led programs (Black, Tobler, & Sciacca, 1998).

Youth can support each other through a variety of experiences, including those related to bullying and victimization, and minority group status, including religion, race, ethnicity, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)-related needs. While comprehensive programs are available, creative interventions including peer-led, student need-related educational campaigns have also been shown to reduce bias and change negative attitudes (Salmivalli, 2001).

### The Safe School Ambassadors® (SSA) [community-matters.org/ safe-school-ambassadors](http://community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors)



This program empowers leaders from the diverse groups and cliques on campus and equips them with nonviolent communication and intervention skills to stop bullying and violence among their peers. Check it out from the California Healthy Kids Resource Center: Safe School Ambassadors: Harnessing Student Power to Stop Bullying and Violence (#4620) [californiahealthykids.org/Pages/product.html?record@R4620](http://californiahealthykids.org/Pages/product.html?record@R4620)

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*What Works Briefs* summarize state-of-the-art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system-wide issues. All *What Works Briefs* are organized into three sections: Quick Wins: What Teachers & Adults Can Do Right Now; Universal Supports: School-wide Policies, Practices, & Programs; and, finally, Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for At-Risk Youth.

## CITATIONS

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