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## SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

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“School connectedness” generally refers to students’ belief that adults at school care about them as individual learners and people (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Children who feel connected to school want to come to school each morning. Despite challenges in their families and neighborhoods, connected youth look forward to seeing their friends and teachers at school because they feel valued, respected, and supported by them (Goodenow, 1993).

Scholarly interest in school connectedness has exploded in the past decade, with results demonstrating its strong relationship to a variety of positive outcomes for youth. In fact, connected youth are more satisfied with school and attend school more regularly (Klem & Connell, 2004; Zullig, Huebner, & Patton, 2011). Connected youth also report experiencing higher quality peer relationships; they believe that their friendships at school are positive, supportive, and low in conflict (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006).

What is more, youth who are connected to school experience lower rates of emotional distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, both in the short-term

and over the course of their young adult lives (Shochet, Dadds, Hamm, & Montague, 2006). Across ethnic and racial groups, youth who are connected to school report lower rates of substance use, including smoking, alcohol, and drug use (Bond et al., 2007; Vaughan, Kratz, & d’Argent, 2011).

Not only are these children more satisfied with their schools (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006), but the positive effects extend into their home lives. Some of the adverse consequences of early risks, such as negative family functioning (Loukas et al., 2010) and weak social skills in childhood (Ross, Shochet, & Bellair, 2010) are buffered by students’ connectedness to school.

Generally, schools can improve students’ school connectedness by focusing on providing safe and disruption-free learning environments where relationships are paramount. Positive behavior management practices at the classroom and school levels, small school size, and participation in extracurricular activities have been found to improve school connectedness in youth (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Specific strategies, policies, and programs are offered in the next sections.

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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.

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

### *Focus on building relationships*

- » Know your students' names as well as the people, hobbies, and activities that are important to them.
- » Inquire about extracurricular activities that your students are involved in. Take careful notice of youth who report having no hobbies or interests.
- » Connect academic goals and curricula to the personal interests of your students.
- » Greet your students at the door of your classroom every day.
- » Open your classroom to parents by holding monthly parent morning or afternoon meetings. Use this time to share student work and to get to know more about your students.
- » Focus on getting to know the strengths and interests of just one "tough" student.
- » Encourage your students when you notice them supporting and encouraging each other.
- » Use cooperative learning strategies to facilitate interdependence and connectedness between students in class.

### *Connect outside of the classroom*

- » Attend the extracurricular events students are involved in.
- » Become a mentor to a student-led initiative/campaign (e.g., "Alcohol Awareness Week") or interest group (e.g., "Asian American Student Association" or "Math Club").
- » Facilitate an extracurricular project or activity in your content area (e.g., bridge building teams for physics).

### *Make learning opportunities engaging & meaningful*

- » Add student-selected project-based assignments to your year's curriculum.
- » Use a wide variety of instructional methods and technologies.
- » Make learning opportunities strongly experiential.

### *Provide a safe, disruption-free learning environment*

- » Be clear, consistent, and fair with regard to rules and expectations (these rules and expectations should be informed by students). Any deviation from the classroom and school-wide rules and expectations by an adult will communicate preference among students, a process that undermines the sense of community.
- » Keep assessments private.
- » Make learning goals transparent and clear.
- » Never accept excuses. Challenge excuses to encourage students to take responsibility, regardless of external difficulties or ability levels.
- » Encourage students to take risks and make mistakes.
- » Display student work—not just exceptional work of individuals, but ALL students' work.
- » Display images on classroom walls that represent the demographic of the class and counter stereotypes (e.g., a female scientist).
- » Visit [www.transformativeclassroom.com](http://www.transformativeclassroom.com) for more great ideas.

## UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: SCHOOL-WIDE POLICIES, PRACTICES & PROGRAMS

Underlying school connectedness is the feeling that one belongs at school because one makes meaningful contributions, holds decision-making power, and enjoys positive, healthy relationships. Universal supports for school connectedness 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 school connectedness may take longer to implement than “quick wins.”

### *School policies that reflect the value of school connectedness*

- » Limit the size of the school to create small learning environments or structure large schools into smaller “learning communities.”
- » Form multidisciplinary education teams in which groups of teachers work with students. This facilitates collaboration across disciplines and provides time for planning of cross-disciplinary projects.
- » Extend the class period, school day, and/or school year.
- » Ask students, teachers, other staff, and families what they want and need from school. Meaningfully integrate their ideas into classroom, school, and district planning, budget decisions, and policy writing.
- » Ensure that opportunities for participation are broadly inclusive and reflect the school community’s ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity.
- » Provide family-centered activities at the school site. Ask families to volunteer to plan and coordinate activities that are meaningful to their communities.
- » Provide before- and after-school and weekend activities at the school site.
- » Examine guidelines for report cards, assessment tools, and parent conferences to ensure they provide for reflection of students’ strengths.
- » Provide school-wide training in the area of youth development, asset building, and resiliency approaches.
- » Avoid separating students onto vocational and college tracks.
- » Provide highly trained, quality teachers to all students, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or language background.
- » Set high academic standards for all students and provide all students with the same core curriculum.



### *School practices that reflect the value of school connectedness*

- » Provide meaningful opportunities for students to volunteer within the school community, such as through cross-age mentoring, peer tutoring, service learning, and cooperative learning.
- » Provide opportunities for student-led conferences at which youth share their work with their peers, teachers, parents, and others in their school and community.
- » Provide mentorship programs.
- » Ensure that every student has an advisor.
- » Identify and use informed youth as peer leaders and community spokespersons, or “school ambassadors.”
- » Involve students in setting behavioral and academic standards.
- » Provide opportunities for students to engage in project-based learning around their own interests and ideas.
- » Provide students opportunities to assess their own performance.
- » Provide high quality afterschool programs.
- » Establish Learning Support Teams (LSTs) 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. For more information, visit the UCLA Center for Mental Health in the Schools: [smhp.psych.ucla.edu](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu)

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

Disconnected youth are frequently tardy or absent. When they do come to school, they may engage in disruptive behavior, disturbing their learning and the learning of peers. Often, youth who feel disconnected receive poor or failing grades. When it becomes clear that a student has become disconnected from the school, it is important to consider ways to re-engage him or her. It is also important to think carefully about coexisting problems that may exacerbate the feeling of being disconnected from school, such as substance use issues, experiences of trauma or victimization, or family-related concerns.

Interventions for at-risk youth should be selected after a comprehensive review by appropriate school personnel, such as a student assistance team or school counselors/psychologists. Often times, work with the highest risk youth occurs in a one-to-one setting with a trained psychologist, counselor, or therapist. Therefore, the first line of action is for schools to identify referral resources in the community. Community agencies often employ the types of skilled staff and evidence-based therapeutic interventions that may not be available in the school setting.

### **Establish Student Assistance Programs**

Student Assistance Programs (SAPs) (a.k.a., Student Assistance Teams, Child Study Teams, Student Study Teams) are established to perform a number of important duties, including:

- (1) provide a process within which teachers can refer students that appear to be at-risk,
- (2) provide a process within which administration can refer students who appear to have behavioral and/or emotional difficulties stemming from challenging life situations, and
- (3) connect students to appropriate resources, both at school and within the community. SAPs usually include teachers, administrators, and student assistance staff (counselors, psychologists, speech therapists).

For more information on SAPs, visit:

- » The California SAP Resource Center [casapresources.org/home.php](http://casapresources.org/home.php)
- » The UCLA Center for Mental Health in the Schools [smhp.psych.ucla.edu](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu)

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