Centering School Connectedness

High schools are creating student success teams that prioritize relationships and leverage actionable data to reconnect students to school.

Robert Balfanz

Students are voting with their feet. Through rising chronic absenteeism, increases in behavioral challenges, and declines in college enrollment after high school, many students are signaling that school is no longer a place they can or want to be.[1] In short, they feel disconnected. To address this problem, high schools across the country are consolidating disparate student support efforts into a unified approach led by student success teams. State boards can support and elevate this work.

Fostering school connectedness is an effective, universal prevention measure that affects many important student

outcomes.[2] Students who are connected to school get better grades, attend more often, have fewer behavioral challenges, graduate from high school, and go to college at higher rates than their disconnected peers.[3]

They also have better mental and physical health and engage in fewer risky behaviors.[4] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, students who felt close to people at school were less likely to feel persistently sad or hopeless, to have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide, and had significantly lower prevalence of poor mental health.[5]

Students are connected to schools when

- there are adults there who they believe know and care about them as a person,

- they have a supportive peer group,

- they are engaged in learning experiences and activities in school they find meaningful and prosocial (that is, students can see how they will help others), and

- they feel welcome and accepted for who they are.

During the pandemic, high school students who said that there was an adult at school who knew and cared about them reported 40 percent fewer mental health challenges than students who reported there was no caring adult at school. Unfortunately, only half of high school students—and only a third from historically marginalized populations—reported that they had such a connection.

The costs of disconnection are high:

- Students lose opportunities to reach their full potential and suffer increased challenges to their mental and physical health.

- State and local school systems are locking in, and in some cases accelerating, the academic impacts of lost instruction during the pandemic—threatening the progress made from 2008 to 2019 in increasing high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment gains.

- Now and in the future, the U.S. economy and the society in general need young adults to develop lifelong interpersonal and learning skills that help them be successful now as students and navigate the workplace later on.

The good news is that school connectedness is knowable and actionable. Schools can, by themselves, act on the elements that drive connection: They can establish baselines, identify improvement strategies, measure impact, and then work to continually improve. But to optimize limited resources, schools must first determine which students need what kinds of support. What is the lowest cost, most effective data for determining which students need stronger connections to school?

Prioritizing Relationships

Strong relationships are the heart of school connectedness and the means by which students who have stopped believing in school can reengage. It is possible to strengthen positive, supportive relationships 1) between students and the adults who teach them and operate their schools, 2) between students and peer groups, and 3) among school adult colleagues. Strong relationships motivate students to be in school every day and to engage in learning. Negative or unsupportive relationships can drive them away.

Some educators do not feel prepared to intentionally build relationships with students. Or they believe they were hired only to deliver lessons. Or they worry about becoming "friends" with students. But building developmental relationships with students is easier than they think and more vital for school connectedness.

The first step to developing productive, appropriate relationships is identifying how many students have good relationships and whether those relationships are improving or changing. Baseline and periodic data guide the development of strategies to foster meaningful relationships and to continuously improve.

Fortunately, this information is easy to get by simply capturing what adults in the building already know. By pooling teacher's everyday knowledge of their students, examining school records on extracurricular participation, employing a few well-chosen survey questions, and listening to a representative sample of students in focus groups, schools can learn how many of their students have the building blocks of school connectedness and where more work needs to be done. Students are a vital source: Ask students if they believe they are engaged,

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through school learning experiences and activities, in work that helps others.

Students and Adults. Schools can institute a relationship audit to determine which students do and do not have supportive relationships with an adult in the school. It can be as simple as teachers gathering by grade level or small learning community teams, reviewing a list of students in their cohorts, and putting a sticker next to the name of each student with whom they have a supportive relationship.[6] And then looking to see which students on the list have no such relationships.

Students and Students. Teachers and other adults also can deduce the extent to which students have a supportive peer group. They can readily identify which students are usually alone and which do not engage in extracurricular activities. School staff can first calculate the percentage of the student body that actively engages in extracurriculars. The extent to which students feel they are a welcomed part of the school community can be accurately assessed through two or three short survey questions.

Adults and Adults. Staff surveys paired with focus groups can indicate the quality of relationships among adults on campus. Teachers serving on coordinating teams tend to value the opportunities to collaborate with and learn from their peers. Teachers who have a sense of individual and collective efficacy are more likely to stay at a school. Thus, staff retention rates may also indicate the quality of adult-to-adult relationships.

While essential and useful, these data are only valuable when they are put to use. Once schools have baseline data, a team must analyze them to identify ways students feel connected and welcome and to design ways to better support more students.

Some schools are using their survey data to discover those who did not report connections or a sense of belonging. More detailed focus group conversations with a representative sample of these students help school leaders understand what might be preventing connection and belonging. Students are invited and encouraged to offer ideas and suggestions on ways the school can support connection. Schools have set up fairs for the entire school

or for a more targeted subset of students who are not reporting connections. During these events, all clubs, sports, and teams showcase their club or activity and recruit students.

Setting Up Student Success Teams

I head the GRAD Partnership, a consortium of nine organizations that create student success systems alongside schools and districts. The nine have each been supporting schools, districts, and state education agencies for 20 years or more. We combined efforts to help educators build robust systems that can handle the increased number of students needing support and the added dimensions of support needed in the pandemic's wake.

Through surveys and interviews in the summer of 2022 with over 300 front-line teachers, counselors, and school leaders, the GRAD Partnership team learned that schools were seeking ways to combine disparate systems that often focus on a single need—for example, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports for behavior, Multitiered System of Supports for academic success, attendance teams for attendance, On-Track teams for dropout prevention. They sought a more holistic approach that could replace many meetings, each with a limited focus, with one meeting that addressed the full, complex range of student needs.

At the same time, many teachers and school leaders have been redesigning the schooling experience to increase students' sense of agency and belonging. They are using student success systems as a means to make this work comprehensive and focused on improvement.

Student success teams are integral to these efforts. Teams often include teachers, a counselor, community school coordinator, special educator, and an administrator. They meet regularly to analyze key indicators of student success, including connectedness. The team then seeks to understand why students are disconnected and what might reengage them. Often, they began by listening to the student and their family.

With insights in hand, the team acts to improve students' connections. Sometimes, their responses are tailored to a given student's circumstances. Other times, the team sees a

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pattern across many students and identifies actions that can help many at once.

What It Looks Like

The GRAD Partnership spotlights schools that commit to student success systems. Understanding and responding to each school's context is key because one school's strategy may not be appropriate for another. Nevertheless, these schools demonstrate a process by which any school can improve school connectedness, among other key student outcomes. Because connectedness is essentially about building relationships and encouraging participation in extracurricular or other prosocial activities, these student success systems do not cost much. Large and small schools alike can develop them.

Manzano High. GRAD Partnership first selected Manzano High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for its positive engagement of students and staff's regular monitoring and measuring interventions to identify the most appropriate actions, structures, and processes for the school as whole. One year after designing and piloting a student success system, their team interviewed students who had exhibited indicators of disconnection and received interventions. Listening to students led the school to create a structure, processes, and resources for teachers who would serve as advisors. Students said that the intervention they valued most was having a "champion" check in with them weekly to support their goals. During advisory sessions, teachers help students reflect, create, and execute individual student success plans that capture all four elements of a highly effective student success system.[7]

Manzano High, which serves more than 1,000 students, created 11 student success teams. Manzano staff listened to students who struggle with chronic absenteeism, analyzed data to identify common barriers to strong attendance, and gained understanding of the breadth of challenges facing the families they serve. In response, Manzano High School held a family resource evening to help families of students who were chronically absent identify available supports. The student senate created social media reels to raise awareness about the importance of regular attendance and timely arrival.

Southeast Lauderdale High. Nestled outside Meridian, Mississippi, Southeast Lauderdale High School serves 400 rural students from across a large area. The majority qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. In the wake of the pandemic, the school used their student success system to implement creative, inclusive ways to foster student connections, scheduled enjoyable activities that would draw students to campus, and through improved regular attendance increase course performance.

With federal relief funds, the school hired a graduation coach, Robbi Cooper, who supports the work of a student success team. The team includes seven adults: teachers, coaches, counselors, and the principal, who review biannual student surveys, interventions, and strategies for student success.

"We gained insight into [students'] internal struggles, and how they truly feel about school, themselves, and life in general," Cooper said. "We will be able to see if there is improvement by having students fill out the survey twice a year."

In the initial survey, the team found that 40 percent of students were not involved in any school activities beyond required courses. With these results in hand, alongside anecdotal information from direct chats and observations, the student success team tried to connect all students to a school activity, tracking results on a shared Google spreadsheet. They often sought new opportunities for students based on their interests—for example, creating positions on sports teams for photographers, data analysts, and drone camera operators.

Thomas Kelly College Preparatory. On Chicago's southwest side, GRAD Partnership's most recent addition to its featured schools was selected partly for how it employs student voice to build student-centered mind-sets. One of the largest schools in Chicago, Kelly College Prep reflects the economic, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of its neighborhood. Forty percent of Kelly students are bi- or multilingual, and 93 percent are part of low-income families.

"In education, we say we are here for students, or we want to give students what they need. What I'm learning and what the research is telling us is that we hardly ever ask students what they want, but their sense of identity and connectedness is critical to helping

them succeed in school," said Principal Raul Magdaleno. "At Kelly, we use students' voices to select pathways and listen to what they're saying is happening in the classroom to impact instruction. We talk to our kids."

Using a professional learning tool developed by the nonprofit Project for Education Research That Scales, Kelly's teachers deploy student surveys in short cycles to try new ideas and understand how students are experiencing the changes they make. They collectively review data in cross-department professional learning communities, naming opportunities and challenges.

"During our more than a decade journey into this work, our focus has shifted from graduation rates to encompass the following: GPA, B's or better, student voice, and the student experience," Magdaleno said. "This work is vital in order to give our students the best possible chance at succeeding in school and in the world."

State Boards' Role

State boards of education play a vital role in setting conditions for districts and schools to counter the effects of the pandemic. Student success systems are equipped for this task, as well as for preparing all students to graduate high school ready for postsecondary schools or training. State board members are well positioned to raise awareness and set the context to advance these systems. They can also advocate for the resources needed to support them.

State board members can elevate the importance of student engagement and school connectedness. They can encourage districts to rethink and consolidate their student support efforts. They can talk with communities about the importance of centering positive relationships in schools as part of efforts to accelerate learning, foster students' mental health, and increase teacher retention and overall satisfaction. They can highlight schools that are doing good work and provide opportunities for their staff to share their strategies, tools, and processes with others.

State boards can also highlight the role of community partners. They can stress the need for districts and schools to allow teachers sufficient collaboration time, ideally during the school day, to interrogate data and develop action plans.

Now is not the time to double down on punitive attendance or behavior policies that have not worked in the past. The evidence is clear that increasing all students' school connectedness—including by purposefully building strong relationships with the most disengaged students—is the best approach. ■

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report, 2011–2021" (2023).

[2] Shanette C. Porter et al., "Investing in Adolescents: High School Climate and Organizational Context Shape Student Development and Educational Attainment" (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2023).

[3] The supporting research is referenced on this web page: CDC Healthy Schools, "School Connectedness," https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/school_connectedness.htm#.

[4] Riley J. Steiner et al., "Adolescent Connectedness and Adult Health Outcomes," *Pediatrics* 144, no. 1 (2019), doi: 10.1542/peds.2018-3766.

[5] Sherry Everett Jones et al., "Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness among High School Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic—Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021," *MMWR Supplement* 71, Suppl-3 (2022): 16–21, http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a3external icon.

[6] Harvard Graduate School of Education, "Relationship Mapping Strategy," Making Caring Common web page (N.d.), https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/relationship-mapping-strategy.

[7] Manzano High School, EWI Student Success Plan, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xp8aRLclWAEqIoaLrMzJWefuqxqGW73DsS4IiU9oDFI/edit.

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