

LEAD & MANAGE MY SCHOOL

School Connectedness and Meaningful Student Participation

DAY 1 -- WHY CONNECTEDNESS MATTERS

"What we have found from our research is that kids who felt connected to school . . . smoked less, drank alcohol less, had a later age of sexual debut and attempted suicide less. On top of this, from the educational literature, they do better across every academic measure we have. As our research expanded, [we learned that] this is not just an association - kids who smoke less also felt more connected to school. It is a causal relationship. There is something in that bond, in that connection to school that changes the life trajectory - at least the health and academic behavior. It is very powerful - second only to parents in power. In some contexts it's more powerful than parents."

Robert Blum, professor and chair, Department of
Population and Family
Health Sciences, Johns
Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

When Kristen Pelster took over as assistant principal of Ridgewood Middle School in Arnold, Missouri, she knew that the school had some big problems. Many of the children who were coming into the seventh grade from their elementary school were scared and inhibited and did not know what to expect. As a result, they weren't ready to learn. Pelster and Principal Tim Crutchley, who was also new, saw that something was fundamentally amiss - the new students did not feel connected to their school. And that connection did not get any better once children started attending Ridgewood. The school district hired Pelster and Crutchley in 2000 to address some of the daunting problems the school faced.

"It was in really bad shape," Pelster says. "There was a lack of leadership, the kids were out of control, and there was an extremely high failure rate and a high discipline rate."

Pelster and her colleagues launched an intensive set of simple but critical changes to turn the school around. Among them was a series of events to help the incoming students feel welcomed and connected to their new school. Activities started at the beginning of the sixth grade - a full year before students arrived at Ridgewood. The sixth-graders came to school several times to sit in on classes, attend an advisory period, and go to a "lock in," where they spent an entire evening at the school with students from other elementary schools who would be attending Ridgewood. Through fun activities, students got to know one another and the school staff and become more familiar with the school and what would be expected of them.

"Children are not going to learn unless they feel like they are cared about and belong to the culture of the school," Pelster says. "By the time they start Ridgewood, they have met the principal and myself [as well as teachers and other staff] so they feel comfortable. [Now] they are ready to be here on the first day of school and learn."

[Click here](#) for steps in helping students transition to middle school

Throughout this five-day course, we will take a closer look at the ways that Pelster and other educators have increased their students' connectedness to school, as well as the school staff's and parents' feeling of connection to schools. We will refer to a number of schools that will illustrate how to build connectedness. In these schools, educators have addressed daunting problems, including high failure rates, chaotic

classrooms, constant disciplinary problems, and low test scores. With vision, time, and patience, these educators have seen dramatic results in children's attendance, disciplinary referrals, and test scores. They and researchers say that students who feel connected to school are also developing the skills they need to be productive adults in society. What's more, teachers, other staff, and parents also become more engaged in schools where connectedness is a priority, educators say.

Researchers say that by high school, as many as 40 to 60 percent of students are disengaged from school. That disengagement worries many educators and researchers, who say that a sense of connection to school is vital to children's and adolescents' academic engagement. They also say that engagement to school can help protect youth from a variety of health-threatening behaviors.

So then what is "connectedness" and why is it so important?

Understanding Connectedness

Robert Blum, one of the leading researchers in this area, recently oversaw a series of papers and a conference that sought to provide more definition and clarity to this term. Writing in the *Journal of School Health*, which devoted an entire issue to the topic, Blum and Heather P. Libbey state, "School connectedness refers to the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals."

[Click here](#) for Ten Strategies That Foster Connection to School for School Administrators

According to Blum, school connectedness is influenced through:

- Individuals (students and school staff)
- Environment (school climate and school bonding)
- The culture of the school (social needs and learning priorities)

In the same issue of the *Journal of School Health* Heather Libbey examined the literature and found that researchers use a variety of methods to measure school attachment or connection, yet there were some consistent themes that seemed to be markers for students' sense of connection at school:

- **Academic engagement.** The extent to which students are motivated to learn and do well in school.
- **Belonging.** This includes being proud of one's school, feeling respected, being able to talk to teachers, and feeling like school staff are interested in students.
- **Discipline/fairness.** The extent to which students perceive the rules of the school to be enforced fairly.
- **Liking for school.** Whether students looked forward to going to school.
- **Extracurricular activities.** Participation in out-of-school activities.
- **Student voice.** This includes, for example, opportunities for students to participate in decision making.
- **Peer relations.** This includes the presence of friends and students' feelings of loneliness.
- **Safety.** The extent to which students reported that they feel safe in school.
- **Teacher support.** The most common theme that emerged from the literature review, this includes whether students feel close to or valued by teachers and school staff.

Some practitioners boil it down even further to a few essential elements. For example, J. David Hawkins, one of the architects of the Social Development Research Group, which seeks to help children develop strong bonds to school, says that connectedness or bonding to school has three elements: (1) providing opportunities for active involvement so students have a contributing role in a social unit, (2) developing the skills to be successful in that involvement, and (3) making sure that young people are recognized for their skills in ways that mean something to them.

It is important to note, however, that connectedness does not just involve students. There are several dimensions to connectedness:

- Prosocial connectedness between and among children and adolescents.
- Caring and supportive connectedness between and among children and adults.
- Respectful and collegial connectedness between and among adults, including school staff, administrators, and families.

Is school connectedness or engagement a topic that your school is addressing?

Connectedness: Beyond Students

While much research on connectedness or building school community focuses on improving the nature of relationships between adults or between adults and students, connectedness between children is also critical - as long as it is positive. Children can become involved with antisocial peers, such as gangs, and become attached to them. They can become part of cliques at schools that exclude others and foster a sense of disconnection for other students. Just as those who are attached to good role models will emulate them, youth who are attached to poor role models will try to fit in with them by engaging in unhealthy and sometimes dangerous behavior. Some researchers have traced the roots of juvenile delinquency to just this type of negative connectedness.

If teachers do not feel connected to a school, it can be difficult for them to help their students feel connected. The same is true for others who work at schools, including custodians, cafeteria workers, paraprofessionals, and secretaries. Parents need to feel connected to their children's school so they can provide encouragement to their offspring in pursuing their studies and advocate for them. In addition, some researchers argue that community members must be engaged with students and school as well for youth to feel truly connected. Throughout this course, we will look at ways not only to engage students but teachers, parents, and community members as well.

Why Positive Connectedness is Important: Research

A number of research studies have taken place over the years looking at the link between school connectedness and outcomes, both health-related and academic.

Health Outcomes

One of the most widely cited is the Adolescent Health Study, a comprehensive school-based study of the health-related behaviors of adolescents in the United States. Between 1994 and 1995, more than 90,000 students in grades 7 through 12 attending 132 U.S. schools answered questions about their lives. Administrators at participating schools also completed a questionnaire. A sample of 20,000 students who completed the school survey were later interviewed at home.

Sifting through the data, researchers found some of the most compelling evidence yet for the importance of school connectedness. In a 1997 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Michael D. Resnick and his colleagues report that school connectedness was a protective factor in the lives of young people.

Amplifying on these results in *Improving the Odds: The Untapped Power of Schools to Improve the Health of Teens*, Robert Blum and Clea McNeely write, "When middle and high school students feel cared for by people at their school and when they feel like they are part of school, they are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. When they feel connected to school, they also report higher levels of emotional well-being." In the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), researchers found that students who feel connected to school are:

- Less likely to use alcohol and illegal drugs
- Less likely to engage in violent or deviant behavior

- Less likely to become pregnant
- Less likely to experience emotional distress and suicidal thoughts or attempts

"Kids who have the sense of connection with teachers not only smoke cigarettes less but when they have started to smoke, they are less likely to become heavy smokers and more likely to transition out," Blum says. "They are less likely to become heavy drinkers and less likely to have ongoing suicidal thoughts. The impact on health behavior is very, very substantial."

Measuring School Connectedness

Researchers in the Add Health study measured school connectedness based on responses to the following:

"How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

- I feel close to people at this school.
- I am happy to be at this school.
- I feel like I am part of this school.
- The teachers at this school treat students fairly.
- I feel safe in my school."

Students responded on a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

Source: Blum, R.W., McNeely, C.A., & Rinehart, P.M. (2002). *Improving the odds: The untapped power of schools to improve the health of teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota.

Academic Outcomes

Researchers have also found links between school connectedness and academic outcomes. According to Adena M. Klum and James P. Connell, "Researchers have found student engagement a robust predictor of student achievement and behavior in school regardless of socioeconomic status. Students engaged in school are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores and have lower drop-out rates."

Klum and Connell cite a study that examined the link between student engagement and achievement and behavior. Researchers measured student attendance and achievement in reading and math. The study found that elementary school students who reported high levels of engagement were 44 percent more likely to do well and 23 percent less likely to do poorly on the attendance and achievement index. Middle school students with high levels of engagement were 75 percent more likely to do well on the attendance and achievement index.

Connectedness Provides Indirect Link to Academic Achievement

In a review of studies that looked at the link between supportive schools and academic success, Eric Schaps found that a sense of community at school may have a direct effect on students' enjoyment of school, educational aspirations, academic motivation and engagement, and tendency to stay in school. Schaps found that building community in schools does not seem to have a direct effect on achievement as measured by grades or test scores. Instead, a safe and supportive school tends to encourage motivation and engagement, which then leads to higher academic grades and test scores. Schaps concluded that building a sense of community may not be sufficient, particularly for low-income students and students of color, without a concurrent "academic press" that consisted of strong norms and expectations at the school that

encourage academic effort and achievement.

Why Positive Connectedness Is Important: Theory

Several theories undergird the research and belief in the importance of connectedness. Among the foremost is attachment theory. Developed by John Bowlby, British psychiatrist, and Mary Ainsworth, a Canadian developmental psychologist, attachment theory describes the process in which infants become attached to their parents as parents meet their basic needs with adequate nutrition, safety, and feelings of love. The attachment that infants form with their parents is their first model in forming social connections with others.

As children who have healthy bonds with their parents want to emulate them, the same can happen when children form bonds with their teachers and schools. They will strive to achieve the school's goals, according to Eric Schaps, president of Developmental Studies Center in Oakland, California, which has developed the Caring School Community project, aimed at increasing the attachment of elementary school students to school.

When children have not formed a healthy attachment to their parents, schools and teachers can still help them form attachments that will aid them in working hard in school, avoiding risky behaviors, and passing through key developmental milestones on their way to adulthood, Schaps said.

A second theory is Travis Hirschi's theory of deviant behavior, which states that bonding within a socialization unit like school or family consists of four elements:

- Involvement in the school or family
- Attachment or affective relationships
- Investment or commitment to the school or family
- Belief in the values of the unit

According to this theory, once the social bond is established, it can affect future behaviors, including inhibiting deviant behavior.

A third theory is social development theory, which suggests that social interaction strongly influences cognitive development. Children are socialized through the following processes:

- Opportunities for involvement in activities and interactions with others
- Development of skills to participate in this involvement
- Rewards from involvement and interaction

In contrast to Hirschi's theory, the social development model sees involvement as only one of the necessary elements that lead to bonding, according to J. David Hawkins. This model says that involvement that is skillful is more likely to be reinforced, and skillful involvement that is reinforced is more likely to build bonding (attachment and commitment). Hirschi's control theory also suggests that bonding only occurs among prosocial people. The social development model hypothesizes that interactions with antisocial people that are reinforced may lead to bonding to those antisocial peers, which increases the risk of delinquency.

The ABCs of Intrinsic Motivation

The theory of the Caring School Community project is encapsulated in the ABCs of intrinsic motivation: Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence. The need for belonging and to feel accepted and worthy of care by others is part of attachment theory. Children also need to feel that they have some autonomy and influence or control over their life at school. Researchers have found that "children in elementary school classrooms with teachers who had controlling styles reported less intrinsic motivation for school learning than children in classrooms where teachers offered more choice, explained the reasons behind the rules and in general offered more autonomy," according to the Caring School Community *Principal's Leadership Guide* produced by the Developmental Studies Center. The need for competence is the need to be effective in one's work.

Much of the Caring School Community project's theoretical work is based on the work of Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and their colleagues. "These researchers argue that when children are in an environment where they can satisfy the three needs, then they will be intrinsically motivated to learn what is important to learn in the environment. Likewise, children's motivation is undermined to the degree to which any of these conditions is not met. The implications for a school setting, then, are to satisfy all three needs in creating a classroom environment and in designing learning tasks," according to the *Principal's Leadership Guide*.

Programs that aim to increase students' connectedness also focus on the developmental needs of the students, depending on their age.

Elementary school students: "With elementary kids, the relationships with teachers, especially K-3, are absolutely critical," says Eric Schaps. "Does my teacher like me, does my teacher care about me? For older kids, the relationships with adults matter, but the peer relationships are a bigger factor, so schools should also encourage healthy peer relations and healthy peer dynamics."

David Hawkins adds that children need developmentally appropriate opportunities for involvement in their classroom, family, and peer group. It is important for schools to try to help children develop interpersonal skills, such as recognizing the emotions of others.

Middle and high school students: "Adolescents are not likely to feel connected to school if they are in a school that does not meet their developmental needs," write Clea McNeely and colleagues in *Promoting School Connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*. "Conversely, school connectedness is maximized when the social environment meets their core developmental needs. The main developmental needs of middle and high school students include steadily increasing opportunities for autonomy, opportunities to demonstrate competence, caring and support from adults, developmentally appropriate supervision and acceptance by peers."

Janis Whitlock, a research associate at the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y. did her doctoral dissertation on school and community connectedness in one community in upstate New York. Her findings were based on 318 surveys and 10 focus groups of eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders.

"For seniors, the only variable that matters for connection was meaningful roles," Whitlock says. "Seniors want to know they mean something. They are getting ready to hit the big world, and there are no opportunities or structures to help them outside of the family."

In a presentation of her findings, Whitlock quotes one senior who said, "I think it's 'cause we feel like we're growing up and turning into adults, yet we're in an institution like this where they basically treat us like eighth graders."

Programs That Seek to Increase School Connectedness

The Seattle Social Development Project is one of the oldest projects that specifically aim to increase students' sense of connectedness or bonding to their elementary schools. The project started in 1981 in eight Seattle public elementary schools that were located in high-crime neighborhoods. The intervention was provided to selected classrooms of first grade students, their parents, and their teachers. The students received the intervention throughout elementary school.

Teachers were responsible for three components:

- Proactive classroom management that establishes consistent classroom expectations and routines at the start of the year
- Interactive teaching that gave teachers techniques designed to motivate students to learn
- Cooperative learning that involves small teams of students of different abilities and backgrounds as learning partners.

Children received a curriculum in using cognitive and social skills, and parents received optional training classes that were appropriate to the developmental level of the children. A school-wide replication of the project, Raising Healthy Children, was started in 1992.

[Click here](#) for more details on the Seattle project

According to a report by the Social Development Research Group (SDRG), studies of the Seattle project showed that children who participated in elementary school showed increased school bonding and achievement and reduced problem behavior. In addition, during middle and high school - a time when bonding typically decreases for all students - the level of school bonding declined less for the full intervention students than for the control students. One of the goals of this and other elementary school programs is to give children early and sustained intervention that will put them on a positive developmental track through secondary school and into adulthood.

Specifically, studies found the following in the Seattle project sample:

- *School bonding was related to lower rates of drinking and smoking initiation.* Bonding to school in fifth grade was associated with postponement of drinking initiation, which reduced the likelihood of alcohol misuse in twelfth grade. Students who were more committed and attached to school in fifth and sixth grade were less likely to start smoking by seventh grade. They were also more likely to never smoke during adolescence than to begin smoking then. These results were also found among high-risk populations.
- *Students with lower school attachment and commitment in fifth or sixth grade were about two times more likely to join a gang in adolescence between grades 7 and 12 compared with students who had greater attachment and commitment to school.*
- *Students who were bonded to school in fifth grade were less likely to engage in any violent behavior between grade 7 and age 21 than students who were less bonded to school.*
- *School bonding in grade 8 was associated with a greater likelihood of academic achievement in the same year, which in turn decreased the chance of dropping out before the end of tenth grade.*

The Caring School Community (CSC) project is a whole-school reform that seeks to help elementary schools become caring communities that foster students' social, ethical, and intellectual development. CSC emphasizes the promotion of positive development among all children and youth, rather than the prevention of disorder among those deemed at risk.

[Click here](#) for more information on the CSC project

According to the Developmental Studies Center, the CSC project has been evaluated in several studies over the past 20 years. One study looked at the effects in middle school of the elementary school program. The study looked at six CSC schools and six comparison schools. Three of the six CSC schools had widely implemented the project, while the other three were considered "low implementers."

Researchers found that compared with students in the other schools, CSC students appeared to be much more connected to school (e.g., had a greater sense of the school as a community, liked school more, worked harder and were more engaged in their courses, had greater trust in and respect for teachers and had higher educational aspirations). The study also found the following for the high-implementing schools:

- Students had significantly higher test scores and grades in core academic subjects.
- Students were more involved in positive youth activities.
- Students engaged in less misconduct at school and fewer delinquent behaviors than did comparison students.

[Click here](#) for more information on the CSC project

The Danger of Disconnection

Just as positive connection can yield important benefits for students, lack of connection can hurt them. Researchers have found that the major forces behind dropping out from school come from academic failure and disengagement from school.

According to Karen Osterman, "A study of 100 Pittsburgh school students who left but eventually returned to complete their schooling in a job corps program (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin) found that dropouts felt alienated and estranged from their schools - teachers and peers - as well as from their homes, neighborhoods, and society in general."

These students saw their schools as uncaring places, and they had no sense of belonging to their schools. What's more, as they felt less engaged with their schools, they tended to spend more time with other students who were dropping out, which reinforced the pressure on them to reject school values.

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We have spent today exploring the meaning of connectedness and looking at the theory and research behind connectedness. Tomorrow we take a closer look at the elements that can make students and others feel connected to school. We will examine numerous examples of schools that faced difficult challenges in engaging their students and the solutions they found.

[Click here](#) to print a PDF of today's materials.

Discussion Questions

Please think about the questions below and share your responses, comments, and/or any questions about today's material in the Discussion Area .

- Kristen Pelster came to a school with high failure rates, high discipline rates, and disengaged students who often ignored school rules. If you were a coordinator at her school, what are some concrete first steps you would take to improve the sense of school connectedness there?
- Take a look at the themes of connectedness outlined by Heather Libbey. Where do you see that your school has strengths, and where does it need work, specifically?
- How would you go about assessing connectedness in your school? Who would you talk to or survey? What questions would you ask?
- What do you think are the best arguments for trying to increase connectedness in your school? What additional information would you need to make the case?

You have completed this section.

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