EAB

Promoting Positive Adult-Student Connections

Identify and Engage Disconnected Students with Relationship Mapping

This Guide Will Help Users:

- Promote greater engagement between adults and students at school

- Create an effective forum for discussing each student's connection to adults at school

- Implement a range of strategies to interact with students who lack a meaningful connection to educators at their building

District Leadership Forum

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Executive Summary

The Importance of Adult-Student Connections

Lack of a meaningful connection to school can lead to chronic absenteeism, academic struggles, and dropping out of school. Fortunately, that connection can be as simple as having an adult who knows a student and cares about his or her well-being.

This type of relationship is particularly important for students with a history of trauma or a difficult background, as they are less likely to have a strong support system at home.

Research has demonstrated several benefits to students that come from having a trusted relationship with an adult outside of home.

Controlling for student background, **children with a caring adult outside of home are:**

10%
more likely to **show interest in learning**

11%
more likely to **stay calm** when facing a challenge

28%
less likely to **feel sad or depressed**

21%
less likely to have been **bullied in the past month**

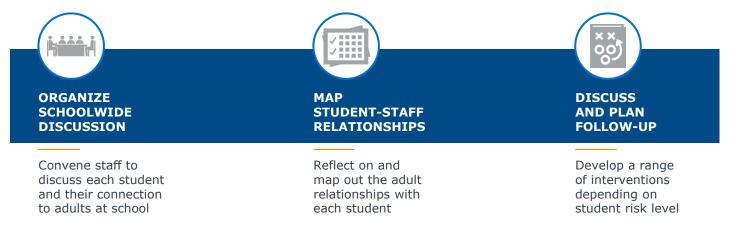## Systematic Reflection Process Helps Staff Focus on Relationship Building

Administrators at *Washoe County School District* in *Reno, Nevada* realized that meaningful adult-student connections are too important to be left to chance. They set out to foster a school culture where students felt connected to, and supported by, the adults around them.

As part of a broader social-emotional learning campaign, Washoe County implemented a simple exercise to map out the relationships between adults and students at school. This exercise serves as a powerful strategy to identify and engage students who may otherwise pass through school unnoticed.

How To Use This Toolkit

This resource provides a step-by-step guide with templates to help schools conduct their own relationship mapping exercise and identify students who may be disconnected and disengaged from school. The toolkit also suggests a range of strategies for adults at school to better engage with students who may be at risk.

Key Steps to Conducting a Structured Relationship Mapping Exercise

ORGANIZE SCHOOLWIDE DISCUSSION

Convene staff to discuss each student and their connection to adults at school

MAP STUDENT-STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

Reflect on and map out the adult relationships with each student

DISCUSS AND PLAN FOLLOW-UP

Develop a range of interventions depending on student risk level

Sources: Korbey, H. "The Power of Being Seen," Edutopia, October, 2017; Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, "Partner Districts, Washoe County," 2018, https://casel.org/partner-districts/washoe-county-school-district/; Murphey et. al., "Caring Adults: Important for Positive Child Well-Being," Child Trends, December 2013; Balfanz, R., Neild, R.C., Herzog, L., "An Early Warning System," Johns Hopkins University Everyone Graduates Center, October 2007; Washoe County School District, Reno, NV; EAB interviews and analysis.

Step 1: Convene School Staff

Description

The best way to conduct a relationship mapping exercise is via a schoolwide meeting (or series of meetings for larger schools) where all staff come together to discuss how well they know the students. The discussion should include the entire range of adults at school: teachers, administrators, bus drivers, custodians, and anyone else who regularly interacts with students.

Attendees should go through the entire student roster while answering a short series of questions to determine how much they know about each student.

Resources

Time: 90 minutes to 3 hours, depending on size of school

Recommended Owner: School principal

Materials: Whiteboard or large projection screen; attendee checklist; invitation letter

Overview

1 **Gather all school staff together once a year to discuss each student.** Do not limit the discussion to teaching/instructional staff only. Any adult at the school can and should be encouraged to develop supportive relationships with students, not just the teachers.

2 **Manage the size of the discussion according to your needs.** In smaller schools, the activity may be more easily conducted for all students at once. Larger schools might consider conducting relationship mapping in grade-level teams or breakout groups, and then include input from non-teaching personnel as much as possible.

3 **Map out responses in real-time to provide helpful visualization of the student population.** Staff can be given the reflection prompts in advance to help them better prepare for the meeting, but visually mapping out responses in the moment as a group allows attendees to immediately see students who may be disconnected from school. This provides a great foundation for discussion among staff and for follow-up action.

1 | Attendee Checklist

Ensure broad representation from all adults at school by inviting as many individuals as is practical from each of the following groups:

INVITEE	✔
Principal (school leadership representative)	
Teachers	
Counselors	
Medical and Support Staff	
Food Services	
Bus Drivers	
School Administrators	
Instructional Coaches and Aides	
Custodial Staff	
Security	
Sports Coaches	
Librarians	
Other	

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

2 | Sample Outreach Letter to School Staff

[Insert institution logo here]

Dear [**Name of Staff Member**],

I hope this message finds you well. As you know, at [**Name of School**] we are committed to creating an environment where all students feel connected to our school, and to the adults who work here and play an important part in their young lives.

As part of our efforts to create strong relationships between students and adults in our community, we are gathering all educators, administrators, and support staff at a schoolwide meeting to discuss how well we know, and how connected we are to our students. We strongly encourage you to attend, as we know that every single individual at the school has forged a relationship with one or more students and we want to hear about those relationships.

Our meeting will take place on [**insert meeting date, time, and location**] and we're hoping you would be available for about [**1.5–3**] hours to join the rest of your colleagues and discuss how we can better connect with our students.

You do not need to prepare anything in advance for the meeting, but as we discuss each student at our school, we will ask all of our staff whether they can answer in the affirmative to the following prompts:

- *I know this student by name and face*
- *I know this student's academic standing*
- *I often provide positive feedback to this student*
- *I know 2 non-academic facts about this student (e.g., likes, dislikes, hobbies)*
- *I know this student's family story*
- *I believe this student trusts me*
- *I believe this student is at risk of being disconnected from school*

We realize that you are busy and would greatly appreciate you taking the time to attend.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me if you have any questions about the meeting. I look forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,

[**School Principal**]

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Step 2: Map Student-Staff Relationships

Description

Staff should begin by reflecting on questions that indicate how much they know about students (the quality/depth of their relationship) and by placing checkmarks when they can answer with a "Yes" to the prompts. This creates a visual representation of relationships that allows attendees to quickly identify students in need of support.

Resources

Materials: Relationship mapping grid

Owner/Facilitator: School principal or assistant principal

Overview

1 **Keep focus on relationships, not on complaints about students.** Relationship mapping is not a form of behavior intervention, but a way to ensure all students are connected to the school. Discussion should not escalate into complaints about particular incidents. School leadership should keep focus on the prompts and seek to identify students who may be disengaged and disconnected.

2 **Look for students with few checks marks.** This indicates that adults at school may not know much about that student and may not have forged any personal connections with them. Students who have a majority of checkmarks in only one area (name/face; academic standing, etc.) may also need to be discussed further.

3 **Keep meeting focused on overall observations.** Leave detailed discussion or intervention planning about any individual student to smaller, more suitable follow-up forums (such as intervention teams, counselor meetings, etc.).

4 **Use the exercise as an opportunity for adults to change their own behavior.** Look for patterns in adults' knowledge (few who know students' family histories, few who give positive feedback, etc.) and make sure to educate them on how to more effectively connect with students.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

1 | Sample Relationship Mapping Grid

Use this grid as a guide to conducting a relationship mapping exercise at your school. Downloadable Excel file available at eab.com.

Student Name	Name/ Face	Academic Standing	Regular Positive Feedback	Two Non-Academic Facts	Family Story	Trusted Adult	At Risk

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

2 | Relationship Mapping Prompts and Red Flags

Prompt	What to Look For?
Name/Face *I know this student by name and face*	**Avoid bias towards specific student personalities:** ○ **Shy students** may have few existing relationships with adults at school. The goal of relationship mapping is to strengthen those relationships, not to try and change students' personalities. ○ In contrast, **outgoing students** may be well-known, but have few or no trusted adults. The discussion should focus on which adults truly believe they know the student.
Academic Standing *I know this student's academic standing*	**Academic excellence can easily mask other issues a student may have.** "Straight A" students can still be disconnected from their school, socially isolated, bullied, or relatively unknown to adults. Educators should treat academic standing as one among multiple risk factors and avoid the temptation to dismiss a great student as "connected" to school.
Regular Positive Feedback *I often provide positive feedback to this student*	Consistently low numbers of students who get regular positive feedback **may indicate a problem with adults** (who aren't taught to reinforce positive behavior consistently) rather than with the students.
Two Non-Academic Facts *I know 2 non-academic facts about this student (e.g., likes, dislikes, hobbies)*	**Encourage contributions of non-academic staff to this prompt.** Bus drivers, security guards, custodial staff, etc. are able to see and interact with students in an environment where students may be more relaxed and open about speaking with adults.
Family Story *I know this student's family story*	**Avoid devoting too much time during the meeting to discussing difficult family backgrounds.** Specific details of trauma, concerns about risk, socio-economic status, etc. should be discussed at smaller meetings more suited to a targeted discussion.
Trusted Adult *I believe this student trusts me*	**Adults should indicate if they believe the student would come to them with a personal problem or concern.** Keep separate note of each student's trusted adults.
At Risk *I believe this student is at risk of being disconnected from school*	**Adults should indicate if they believe the student is at risk** academically, personally, and/or socially (e.g., homelessness, family instability, peer rejection, withdrawal, anger issues).

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Step 3: Discuss and Plan Follow-up

Description

Match follow-up interventions to each student's needs. The exercise is not a behavioral or mental health screener – it simply identifies students with no strong connection to school staff. Therefore, not every identified student needs a formal intervention afterwards. Simply paying more attention to that student and making sure they are noticed and included by adults can be sufficient for most.

Resources

Time: Variable, depending on chosen intervention.

Recommended Owners: Grade-level teams, cross-functional behavioral teams

Overview

1 **Keep note of who the trusted adults are for each student.** Make sure they are among the first people to call in case of a behavioral incident, or even simply when a student's academic performance drops significantly. Having the trusted adult speak to the child when there's a problem can often be more effective than what even trained counselors can achieve.

2 **Do not underestimate the importance of small, everyday interactions.** At the most informal level, existing routines (both academic and non-academic) can be leveraged to begin developing closer relationships with students. This includes welcome greetings, morning circles, discussion times, etc.

3 **Engage in formal mentorship efforts when necessary.** Students identified as most at-risk by the mapping exercise (i.e., who have multiple red flag categories) should receive additional attention and are the best candidates for a formal mentorship plan. Discuss appropriate follow-up steps for each at-risk student with the counseling and support staff.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

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1 | Relationship-Building Strategy Guide

Formal

Develop a Mentorship Plan

Resources for Developing Mentorship Plans

- The ABCs of School-Based Mentoring
  (National Mentoring Resource Center)

- Mentoring Program Policy and Procedure Manual
  (National Mentoring Resource Center)

- Elementary Success Mentor Action Planning Tool
  (Attendance Works)

Call Trusted Adults When Necessary

Make sure to create a contact list of trusted adults for at-risk students at your school and ensure staff have quick access to the list in the event the student needs help during a crisis.

Student Name	Trusted Adult Name(s)	Trusted Adult Position	Trusted Adult Phone Number
Sally B.	• James Dohner • Patricia Connor • Chris Holmes	• Security officer • 1st grade teacher • Custodian	• (555) 234-6791 • (555) 676-9902 • (555) 446-7667
Pete T.	• Jennifer Lowe	• School nurse	• (555) 561-8681
Maria W.	• Jane Muller	• Bus driver	• (555) 569-9043

Leverage Existing Routines

Examples:

- Greet each student individually every day

- Organize morning circles or weekly class meetings to foster sense of community

- Initiate conversations about a student's favorite activities, objects they bring to school, etc.

Informal

Source: National Mentoring Resource Center, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC; AttendanceWorks.org; EAB interviews and analysis.

2 | Schoolwide Trusted Adult List

Fill out this table with basic information about the trusted adult(s) for each student at your school. Downloadable Excel file available at eab.com.

Student Name	Trusted Adult Name(s)	Trusted Adult Position	Trusted Adult Phone Number

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