



The Evidence Says: Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

Positive Adult Relationships are Critical to Student Success

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Engaging Families and Communities, Closing the Gap

In a number of fields, including medicine, mental health, and education, positive relationships between professionals and those they serve are connected to positive outcomes. Within education, positive relationships are at the core of a number of evidence-based, research-based, and promising practices, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Practices, Social-Emotional Learning, Trauma-Informed Practices, and Culturally-Responsive Teaching.

In other words, positive relationships go a long way toward supporting the most desired outcomes in our schools, including positive culture and climate, safety, and academic achievement. Within the first month or two of school, these relationships are formed with many students. It is also an important time to focus on the students who still lack these positive adult relationships.

We all tend to gravitate more towards some people than others. They may be people with similar interests, similar personalities and, often, similar

values, beliefs and cultures. This is one manifestation of implicit bias, which we all experience.

For teachers and other staff who work with students in a public school setting, it may require focus and effort to build meaningful relationships with each and every student. When staff come from different cultures and backgrounds than their students, developing meaningful relationships may be a little more challenging, but it is all the more important.

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All students need to feel that their teachers and other important adults understand them, support them, and are engaged in their success and helping them reach their full potential as people. The practice of forming positive relationships is not “one more thing” — rather, it is at the core of effective educational practices.

Zaretta Hammond writes in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* about “learning partnerships” as “a teacher-student relationship in which the teacher builds trust and becomes a student’s ally in order to help the student reach a higher level of achievement” (p. 156). These relationships, she says, support the development of students’ brains by strengthening relationships

through the release of dopamine (a neurotransmitter) and the building and shaping of neural pathways that support increasingly complex learning.

Dr. Hammond describes the role of the teacher as a “Warm Demander,” who:

- Shows personal interest in students by inquiring about people and events that are important in their lives.
- Has an explicit focus on building rapport and trust, expressing warmth through smiling, warm or firm tone of voice, and good-natured teasing.
- Earns the right to demand each student’s engagement and effort.

- Holds high standards, offers emotional support, and provides instructional scaffolding (p. 99).

These aspects could describe trauma-informed teaching, as well. The result is adults are viewed by students as caring, and they help to put a positive spin on students’ challenges, rather than making them appear combative or disheartening. Regardless of the curricula or behavioral approaches a school or district may select, these types of positive relationships should be at the core of them.

Forming positive relationships early in the school year will pay dividends throughout. PBIS or other building teams can be strategic, intentional, and methodical about identifying the students who may lack positive relationships so teachers and other staff dedicate their time and effort to build them with each and every student. ■

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