In order to ensure a strong start to 2020-2021, school systems should attend to the well-being of students and staff.

Addressing the well-being of students and staff will require that schools:

1. Acknowledge and address the unique end and start of school.
2. Prioritize positive, intentional relationships.
3. Attend to individual students' needs.
4. Respond to student behavior with appropriate support**.**

This document provides research, practical examples, and guidance to **prioritize building positive and supportive relationships in the classroom and school**.

Overview

Strong relationships are fundamental to promoting engagement among students, staff, and families, and to supporting the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students. In addition to beneficial student outcomes, school connectedness provides protective factors that reduce the effects of harmful stressors, such as those associated with a global pandemic. Schools can use a variety of strategies and structures to build meaningful connections across the school system—among staff, students, families, and the community—while schools are operating virtually and/or in person.

Build staff-to-student relationships

What we know and believe about our students—individually, culturally, developmentally—informs our expectations, reactions, and attitudes about those students. Research shows that strong student-teacher relationships play a critical role in student motivation and learning. Youth who have strong developmental relationships with their teachers have been shown to feel more connected to school and culturally respected, to rate the instruction they receive as high quality, and to perform better academically. Perhaps the greatest contributor to our ability to convince students to be engaged in learning is to relate to them in authentic and meaningful ways.

● **Assign each student a designated staff member** (e.g., mentor, learning coach, advisor) who will maintain a relationship with the student and their primary caregiver during the full school year, particularly leaning in during transitions from in-person to distance learning.

- ○ Set a schoolwide challenge that 100% of students will be truly known by at least one school staff member. Relationship Mapping ensures that each student has the opportunity for positive connection with an adult at school. Quick strategies, such as the two-minute relationship builder, provide a structure for staff members to build new connections with students.
  - ○ Include a wide range of professionals in staff-to-student relationship building. While teachers may be the adults with whom students primarily interact, all staff who interact with students, including but not limited to cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and custodial staff, are integral to school culture and part of creating students' sense of connection to the school.
- **Determine the schedule** through which staff and students will regularly meet. Vendors who support this can be found in the Student Well-Being Vendor Guide.
- **Provide staff with training and tools** to facilitate meeting time (e.g., advisory, teaming) and build relationships with students.
  - ○ Use intentional relationship-building strategies that appreciate, respect, and leverage the cultural assets of all students.
  - ○ Give staff challenge questions that require intentional engagement with students.
  - ○ Greet each student at the door each day by using their name and a nonverbal greeting.
  - ○ Survey students to establish personal connections and identify things they have in common.
  - ○ Provide checklists to help staff engage and support students during distance learning and when students return to the school building.

Build staff-to-staff relationships
Positive and supportive staff relationships develop through conscious intent and effort. School staff at all levels—from novice to leader—benefit from regular collaboration with peers. Administrators show that they value collegiality and staff collaboration when they create and support meaningful opportunities for teachers to engage and work together.

- **Build community and connection** among staff members through in-person and virtual events.
  - ○ Use virtual games and online challenges for building spirit and camaraderie, even when staff are not able to be physically together.
- **Leverage the expertise of key staff,** particularly the Well-Being Leadership Team, for peer support**.**
  - ○ Professional school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists are trained to provide supportive services to all members of the school community, both students and adults, and are a great resource for promoting self-care and/or developing a stress-management program for teachers.
- Choose a professional development model that **promotes relationship-building**.
  - ○ Develop and sustain teaming structures (e.g. peer coaching, mentoring, team teaching, vertical teams, professional learning communities) that allow individual teachers to

leverage the collective expertise of a group of close colleagues all striving to serve the same group of students and forge authentic relationships with them.

○ Identify and incorporate team building activities to build teacher morale, faculty cohesiveness, collaborative, high performing teams, and a strong school climate.

Build student-to-student relationships

Positive peer relationships influence students and their perceptions of school, with implications for their academic achievement; motivation; social, emotional, and behavioral health; and resilience. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities provide positive peer groups and impact subsequent college retention rates.

- **Utilize community building exercises** that create common language around social relationships.
  - ○ Create expectations and understanding of social norms through structures such as Classroom Shared Agreements.
  - ○ Provide time for building relationships among students such as a time to share "glows and grows" or "appreciations and feedback" (page 4) with each other.
  - ○ Create social learning experiences in the classroom through collaborative learning opportunities such as "Mix and Mingle" or Kagan strategies. These build community by encouraging participants to interact with each other, and they set the expectation that everyone's voice is valued.
  - ○ Allow students to learn about one another using classroom activities such as "3 Objects" or "Find someone in this class who…" These can be adjusted for various grade levels.
- **Ensure social engagement continues during distant learning**
  - ○ Continue to provide extracurricular activities, as possible. Consider virtual activities (i.e. virtual chess clubs, E-sports, virtual baseball team workouts, virtual job and college fairs, virtual college tours), as necessary.

Build staff-to-family relationships

Research has shown that students earn better grades and demonstrate better work habits and attitudes about school, demonstrate better social skills, adaptability, and have fewer behavioral problems when staff and families have strong relationships. Parent engagement also decreases absenteeism while increasing the likelihood of a student graduating high school and attending post-secondary education.

- **Communication, consistency, and collaboration** are key to building staff-to-family relationships.
  - ○ Leverage technology-based communication during in-person and distant learning.
  - ○ Engage vendors or community partners to support creating family engagement opportunities.
- **Use a climate and culture survey** to evaluate staff-to-family relationships. Use the survey results to identify and leverage strengths and to address areas of concern.
- Consult and share resources with families **for talking with children about trauma and COVID-19.**
  - ○ Talking with Children During Infectious Disease Outbreak
  - ○ Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus Crisis

○ Helping Children Cope With Changes From COVID
○ Speaking Up Against Racism Around the New Coronavirus

Additional Resources

Case Studies and Other Resources
● CASEL Schoolwide guide and Signature Practice Playbook ● Stories From the Field: Building Strong Relationship In The Classroom ● Building Trusting Relationships for School Improvement: Implications for Principals and Teachers ● How We Know Collaboration Works - Educational Leadership ● Easy Tips for Encouraging Positive Peer Relationships ● Eight Fun Student Engagement Ideas During COVID-19 and Beyond ● Parental Engagement: Building a strong culture of parent-school engagement ● 9 Techniques for Building Solid Parent-Teacher Relationships