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# EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES: Building Relationships for Student Success

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## **Disclaimer**

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# EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

## Building Relationships for Student Success

### PART I: RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS MATTER



*“The evidence is striking; healthy, cooperative relationships are the most effective and efficient resources to develop the innate talents and abilities of teachers and students.” (Adams, Ford, & Forsyth, 2015, p. 16).*

As the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child concluded in a 2004 report, “relationships engage children in the human community in ways that help them define who they are, what they become, and how and why they are important to other people.” Or as researchers Junlei Li and Megan Julian have argued, interventions that don’t

focus on relationships are as effective as toothpaste without fluoride (Li & Julian, in press).

How do you build positive relationships with students in schools, classrooms, and out-of-time school programs? How do these relationships contribute to the overall culture of the learning environment in schools? Why is this particularly important for students who have to overcome challenging childhood experiences? Data show the more positive relationships that students have, the more likely they are to be successful in school and in their lives (Roehlkepartian & Pekel et. al, Science Research, 2017). Again, this is particularly true for our more vulnerable students who may face challenging situations outside of school and need adults at school who can engage and motivate them.

Schools are small societies. These small societies are usually under considerable stress because they must perform in the

context of many internal and external demands. All too often a sense of siege results and a garrison mentality can arise. One of the pioneers in the sociology of education, Willard Waller, characterized school culture as “a despotism in a state of perilous equilibrium.”

But Waller’s vision is too bleak. Schools can be joyful and exciting places to learn if attention is paid to ensuring and promoting healthy relationships among students, teachers, administrators, staff, families, and the community. The sum total of these relationships is a school’s culture and building them must be a priority.

Harvard educator Roland Barth (2002, p.6) once observed, “A school’s culture has far more influence on life and learning in the school house than the president of the country, state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, and even the principal, teachers and parents can ever have.”

According to the Great Schools Partnership, the term “school culture” generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how

a school functions.

The term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.

The importance of a positive school culture based on health and productive relationships for student success is supported by research. James Coleman and his associates, in particular, brought to public attention the power of positive relationships and school cultures in shaping student achievement.

Since their 1981 publication, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared*, the study of school cultures has grown to include the work of other scholars such as Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2004), whose study of trust makes it clear that healthy relationships build trust which in turn leads to inclusive and productive learning environments.

A school’s culture reveals its underlying ethos and its unspoken assumptions about the value of relationships. These characteristics matter to young people

seeking to find themselves and envision a positive future. Capturing this organizational magic in a bottle is not an easy task, but to ignore the cultural DNA of schools is to overlook their potential power to transform lives. Positive relationships which help to build positive school cultures, however, are not ends in themselves. The goal is to create great schools and school systems that unleash human talent by becoming genuine learning communities. As Adams, Ford, and Forsyth (2015) write:

*Teachers learn and grow from personal and shared reflections of teaching practice. Principals leverage trust and commitment to bring transformative visions to life. Students are motivated and engaged when they relate to instructional materials and find meaning in academic tasks. Learning opportunities expand when schools, families and communities establish relational cohesion.*

Today the issue of building relationships for student success is critically important. Roughly half the country's public school students are eligible for free or reduced priced meals. Less than half the students enrolling in public schools today are white. We are a multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual society.

We must learn to celebrate differences and work together for the common good. These positive relationships begin at the school house door. What can we do on a practical basis to ensure that we build positive relationships and school cultures so all students succeed?

### PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?



The elements that contribute to positive relationships and school culture include: building trust, conveying care, stimulating growth, sharing decision making, increasing possibilities (Search Institute, 2017), a safe and supportive environment, effective school leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy and practice, high quality teachers, rigorous instruction, numerous extracurricular activities, staff collaboration, and college and career readiness.

The bedrock quality of a positive school culture is the inclusion of family and community. Community is a big concept;

inclusion means everyone. Below are some principles and practices that educators have used to build positive relationships and school cultures:

### **ADHERE TO AND INTERNALIZE BASIC PRINCIPLES**

The first step is a commitment to basic principles including:

*Relationships with students matter.*

First and foremost, time, effort, and caring can result in increased student engagement and higher academic achievement. Professional learning opportunities to develop relational skills are vital to creating a positive learning environment.

*A school's vision and mission should be based on a co-constructed approach between schools, diverse families, and communities where all cultures are elevated and respected.*

Differences in culture and language should be seen as assets and funds of knowledge.

*Policies and practices should be aligned with specific needs of students.*

It is imperative that program offerings are aligned to teach and assess diverse students, including English Learners, African American, Latino children, and

other populations whose academic achievement needs to be addressed to reduce and eliminate the achievement gap.

*School leaders must set the tone and demonstrate consistent commitment to inclusion and mutual respect.*

Leadership is essential to the success of building a positive school culture. Successful school leadership requires both modeling and implementing practices that include the whole community in decision making. Teachers need embedded professional learning opportunities to empower them to act as agents of change. On-going culturally competent professional development enables teachers to learn skills and receive support as needed.

### **POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURES INCLUDE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY**

We know there are certain policies and practices which increase learning for all students and promote inclusive and supportive school cultures. Here are some suggestions:

*Communicate regularly with families, community, and the public.*

All positive relationships are based on open and honest communication. No one in a school should feel silenced.

Communicate positive information about students to their families.

*Build on identified family resources and their funds of knowledge.*

This will help create authentic engagement to increase and sustain academic achievement (e.g. home visiting programs).

*Revise or refine the school's discipline code with student and family input*  
Emphasize understanding and reconciliation rather than punishment.

Reflection is critically important for creating positive relationships. By embracing diversity and, by recognizing the worth of all people, schools can change from the inside-out in a genuine organic way and become nurturing environments where positive relationships develop and thrive. And students develop and thrive.

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## Building Relationships for Student Success

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