

# A Case for School Connectedness

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**Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school.**

*School bonding, school climate, teacher support, student engagement:* Researchers have used these terms over the years to address the concept of school connectedness. School connectedness refers to an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals.

Klem and Connell (2004) provide a frightening statistic in this regard, noting that

By high school, as many as 40 to 60 percent of all students—urban, suburban, and rural—are chronically disengaged from school. (p. 262)

Is it possible that half of our high school students may *not* believe that adults in school care about their learning and about them as individuals? More to the point, what can educators do to reconnect these large numbers of chronically disconnected students?

Although connecting students to school is important at all grade levels, it's especially crucial during the adolescent years. In the last decade, educators and school health professionals have increasingly pointed to school connectedness as an important factor in reducing the likelihood that adolescents will engage in health-compromising behaviors. A connected school environment also increases the likelihood of academic success.

A great deal of research looks at school connectedness. But because this research spans so many fields—medicine, education, psychology, and sociology—and because it tackles so many related concepts, such as student engagement and school climate, the concept of school connectedness does not offer a clearly defined empirical base. In this era of accountability and standards, school connectedness can seem like a soft approach to school improvement. It can, however, have a substantial impact on the measures of student achievement for which schools are currently being held accountable.

In response to the weight of evidence that supports school connectedness, my colleagues and I convened an invitational conference at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. Our goal was to bring together key researchers as well as representatives from the government, education, and health sectors to identify the current state of research-based knowledge related to school connectedness. Using this information, we synthesized a set of core principles about school connectedness to guide schools across the United States.<sup>1</sup> We titled this synthesis the *Wingspread Declaration on School Connections* (see p. 20).

## Distilling the Research

When one looks at the research literature across the different fields of inquiry, three school characteristics stand out as helping young people feel connected to school while simultaneously encouraging student achievement: (1) high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support; (2) an environment in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful; and (3) a physically and emotionally safe school environment. Students who feel connected to school (independent of how these students are faring academically) are less likely to use substances, exhibit emotional distress, demonstrate violent or deviant behavior, experience suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide, and become pregnant (Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano, 2002; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998). In addition, when young people feel connected to school, they are less likely to skip

school or be involved in fighting, bullying, and vandalism (Schapps, 2003; Wilson & Elliott, 2003). These students are more likely to succeed academically and graduate (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Wentzel, 1998).

What are the factors that influence school connectedness? Students who experience school connectedness like school, feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities.

Major threats to school connectedness include social isolation, lack of safety in school, and poor classroom management. Social isolation, which is especially risky for adolescents, can result from students being ignored, bullied, or teased (Bishop et al., 2004) and tends to flourish in environments predominated by social cliques. Unsafe or chaotic schools and schools with poorly managed classrooms simply cannot provide a stable environment for respectful and meaningful student learning.

## How Schools Can Help

How can schools encourage school connectedness? It does not come about purely as the result of rules, regulations, and zero-tolerance policies, which can actually mold harsh school environments. Connections spring instead from individual action on the part of both teachers and administrators as well as from more elusive factors, such as school environment.

Teachers are obviously central to the equation. Although school connectedness might suggest smaller class sizes, the classroom's culture seems to matter more than its size does. Effective teachers can create connectedness in the classroom in a number of ways. When teachers make learning meaningful and relevant to their students' lives, students develop a stake in their own education. When teachers create a clear classroom structure with consistent expectations for behavior and performance, they provide a healthy setting in which students can exercise autonomy and practice decision-making skills. Teachers build connectedness in the classroom when they encourage team learning exercises. Cooperative learning tends to break down social isolation by integrating student teams across gender, academic ability, and ethnicity. Rewarding a variety of student achievements and recognizing student progress—not only top performance—are also important components.

But teachers cannot create school connectedness on their own. Without a supportive administration, teachers will not be able to effectively support their students. For example, when a school allows a young person to fail—when it doesn't do everything in its power to retain that student—students get the message, "In this school, there are winners and there are losers." This assumption sets up a dysfunctional dichotomy: Those less likely to do well academically will strive to create an anti-academic climate because they know they can't win at the game. The perceived winners—those who are academically proficient—are seen as "nerds," as "dorks," and, ironically enough, as "losers." But when a principal calls home, when he or she follows up every time a student misses school, students get a different message entirely: "In this school, all students are expected to succeed."

A study panel from the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) identified a series of factors associated with school engagement. Educators can substantially increase school connectedness in their students when they

- Avoid separating students onto vocational and college tracks.
- Set high academic standards for all students and provide all students with the same core curriculum.

- Limit the size of the school to create small learning environments.
- Form multidisciplinary education teams in which groups of teachers work with students.
- Ensure that every student has an advisor.
- Provide mentorship programs.
- Ensure that course content is relevant to the lives of students.
- Provide service learning and community service projects.
- Provide experiential, hands-on learning opportunities.
- Use a wide variety of instructional methods and technologies.
- Extend the class period, school day, and/or school year.
- Provide opportunities for students who are falling behind to catch up.

## **The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections**

A generation of exciting research has reviewed strategies that have proven effective in creating engaging school climates in which young people feel connected. The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections is based on a detailed review of this research as well as on in-depth discussions among leaders in the health and education fields. The declaration's insights can form the foundation for school environments in which all students, regardless of their academic capacity, are engaged and feel part of the education endeavor.

We are responsible for our schools. We need to use what research and experience have taught us to create schools where students feel connected. We want high schoolers who are convinced that the adults with whom they interact care about them as individuals and care about their learning. These schools must establish high standards, challenge all students to reach their potential, and provide the support students need to succeed.

## **Wingspread Declaration on School Connections**

Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The critical requirements for feeling connected include students' experiencing

- High academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning.
- Positive adult/student relationships.
- Physical and emotional safety.

Increasing the number of students connected to school is likely to influence critical accountability measures, such as

- Academic performance.
- Incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism.
- Absenteeism.
- School completion rates.

Strong scientific evidence demonstrates that increased student connection to school promotes

- Motivation.
- Classroom engagement.
- Improved school attendance.

These three factors in turn increase academic achievement. These findings apply across racial, ethnic, and income groups.

Likewise, there is strong evidence that a student who feels connected to school is less likely to exhibit

- Disruptive behavior.
- School violence.
- Substance and tobacco use.
- Emotional distress.
- Early age of first sex.

The most effective strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will be connected to school include

- Implementing high standards and expectations and providing academic support to all students.
- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff,

administrators, and families.

- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.

#### **Best Bets Warranting Further Research**

- Programs and approaches that create positive and purposeful peer support and peer norms.
- Strategies that work to promote connection to school among disenfranchised groups.
- Analysis of the costs and effectiveness of different programs for fostering school connectedness.
- Evaluation of new and existing curricular approaches, staff and administrator training, and various institutional structures.
- Effects of school connectedness in students on teacher morale, effectiveness, and turnover.

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## Endnote

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