

READING EAGLE

Superintendents' forum: Relationships first – The human side of school leadership

PUBLISHED ON JANUARY 1, 2026

BY DR. ALAN FUTRICK, MUHLENBERG SCHOOL DISTRICT

In an era when school districts are increasingly measured by test scores, graduation rates, and fiscal reports, it is easy to overlook the single most powerful driver of school improvement: Relationships. Buildings may run on schedules, budgets and policy — but people run on connections. The most effective leadership does not begin with directives or mandates. It begins with trust.

This focus on relationships is not philosophical — it is practical. Districts that invest in strong relationships see higher attendance, improved behavior, stronger staff retention, and increased academic growth. These outcomes matter to families, educators and taxpayers alike because they directly affect student achievement and the efficient use of public resources.



Strong relationships are not soft work; they are foundational work. When teachers feel appreciated, seen, heard, and valued, they are more likely to invest in their craft and in one another. They collaborate more freely, share ideas and materials and take instructional risks that lead to stronger learning outcomes. Students behave the same way. A child is far more willing to accept redirection, embrace a challenge, or recover from a mistake when it comes from an adult they believe is firmly in their corner.

Achievement does not happen in isolation. It happens when teachers feel supported enough to refine instruction, collaborate with colleagues, and respond to student needs in real time. It happens when students feel confident enough to ask questions, persist through challenges, and engage deeply with their learning. Relationships create the conditions where high-quality instruction can take root and where effort leads to results.

Consider this: a child spends more than 14,000 hours in our schools from kindergarten through graduation. Over that time, the quality of the relationships they experience

becomes a powerful driver of self-confidence, resiliency and a willingness to learn. Students learn best in environments where they feel safe enough to struggle, fail, and try again. Relationships create that safety — and that safety fuels growth.

One of the most overlooked elements of school relationships is extracurricular involvement. Connecting a student to a club, sport or activity is not merely a scheduling decision — it is often a lifeline to belonging. With belonging comes motivation, confidence, and a stronger sense of well-being. Involvement gives students identity and purpose. For many, it becomes the reason they come to school on the hard days, when they face adversity or feel down.

These experiences also introduce students to healthy competition — an opportunity to strive, prepare, and persevere alongside others. Athletics, academic competitions, performing arts, robotics teams and service organizations teach students how to push themselves, respond to adversity and grow from both success and failure. When guided by strong relationships, competition is not about comparison; it is about growth, teamwork and collective improvement.

Healthy competition plays an important role in achievement. It teaches students to set goals, measure progress and respond constructively to feedback—skills that translate directly to academic success and future careers. When competition is grounded in strong relationships, it pushes performance upward while reinforcing teamwork and accountability.

A student may forget a homework assignment or the details of last week’s lesson, but they remember the coach who encouraged them after a loss, the advisor who noticed they were having a rough day, or the teammate who stood beside them when confidence was low. These bonds anchor students to school, and anchored students are more willing to persist through challenges, overcome obstacles and handle adversity.

If our mission is to improve academic achievement, strengthen behavior, and support student well-being, then we must ensure every student feels connected to something. Engagement is not an extra. It is the heartbeat of connection and a catalyst for growth.

Student engagement is also a smart investment. When students feel connected to school, attendance improves, discipline issues decrease, and graduation rates rise. These outcomes not only strengthen academic performance — they reduce long-term costs associated with remediation, disengagement, and student attrition.

To fuel this growth, our schools need leaders who can read a room, listen deeply, and lead with empathy while still holding high expectations. Standing in a hallway greeting students each morning, stopping to ask a teacher what support they need, or sitting with a parent simply to understand their concern are not small gestures. These are acts of influence. Over

time, they build trust and credibility — the very capital leaders rely on when difficult decisions must be made.

Visibility matters not because it looks good, but because it signals availability and approachability. When leaders are present in classrooms, cafeterias, and community spaces, they send a consistent message: you matter, and I am here. Over time, that message becomes culture. Culture shapes behavior, and behavior drives performance. In healthy cultures, people are not pushed to perform out of fear — they are inspired to perform because they believe excellence is possible.

Relationships also anchor decision-making. It is easy to design plans and policies on paper. It is far more difficult to implement them in ways that people trust. Leadership is not just about choosing the right strategy — it is about bringing people with you. Our schools are not held together by perfect structures, but by meaningful relationships that allow those structures to function effectively.

This moment in education calls for leaders who can balance humanity with rigor. We must expect excellence, and we must make people feel worthy of reaching it. Healthy competition thrives in environments built on trust. When students and staff feel supported, they push themselves — and each other — to be better, not because they fear failure but because they believe in themselves and what they can become.

Teachers grow most under leaders who coach rather than command. Students thrive when they feel connected rather than managed. Communities support schools when they feel invited into the work rather than simply informed of decisions.

In our district, this approach is not theoretical. We see the impact in improved attendance, stronger student engagement, growing participation in activities and academic gains driven by collaborative teaching and consistent expectations. These outcomes reflect a school system that is focused on continuous improvement and responsible stewardship of community resources.

In the Muhlenberg School District, every person contributes to the climate, and everyone helps shape it. If we want to improve academic outcomes, retention, engagement, and morale, we must start by strengthening relationships.

It begins with a person — and sometimes, with a jersey, a paintbrush, a robotics controller or a role in the school musical. Strong relationships are not a substitute for achievement; they are how achievement happens.

Because in every school, progress does not begin with a program. Relationships are not a substitute for achievement — they are how achievement happens. And when schools function well, the entire community benefits.