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**Urban Health**  
INSTITUTE

*The future of our communities depends on a generation, not only skilled in academics, but also excited about belonging to an educated community. That community will arise only if schools engage and connect with today's children. Effective schools create an environment that increases academic, social and emotional success—an environment of strong school connectedness.*

## School Connectedness

Research has demonstrated that students who feel connected to school have both positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Increased student connectedness promotes classroom engagement and school attendance which increases students' academic achievement and competency to overcome challenges. Connected students are focused, achieve higher grades, and invest in relationships at school.

## Strategies for Creating Effective Schools

### The Triad of Engagement

Students feel connected to school when they experience:

- Interpersonal connectedness with school staff and peers;

- An engaging environment that is physically and emotionally safe; and
- Academic engagement—support to reach their personal best with flexible, relevant instruction

This “triad of engagement” is interconnected and builds upon itself.<sup>1</sup> Each element promotes the characteristics that make youth more resilient. When schools excel in the triad of engagement, students feel safe, supported, and capable of solving academic and personal challenges.

## Interpersonal Connectedness

Studies have verified that when students feel connected to at least one significant adult in their education they experience greater engagement and satisfaction with school. Students report that

they learn more, attend school more often, and perform better academically.<sup>2,3</sup>

In order for teachers to better connect with their students, teachers must increase interpersonal connectedness in their classrooms. Connected teachers are welcoming, able to identify students' needs and

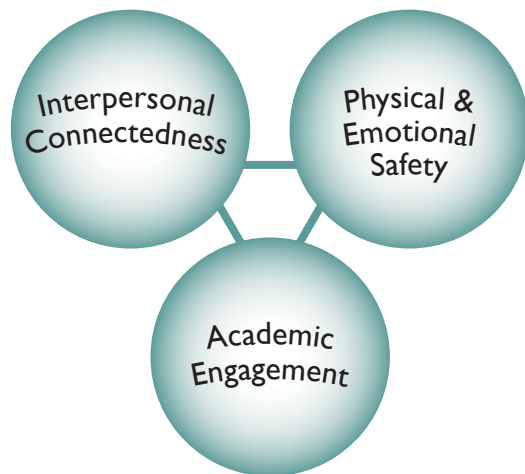
## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The *Best Practices* series brings together the knowledge of the Johns Hopkins Schools of Arts and Sciences, Medicine, Nursing, Public Health to deliver best practices for issues that profoundly affect Baltimore. Each brief was developed by an expert at Johns Hopkins University for the Urban Health Institute and reviewed by a panel of peers to ensure accuracy.

The series is intended to be used as a source book for developing best practice programs.

This is the abridged brief. For the complete manuscript, visit the UHI website at [www.jhsph.edu/urbanhealth](http://www.jhsph.edu/urbanhealth).

## The Triad of Engagement



potential, respectful of students' input, and engaged in each student's successes. These teachers are fair and supportive and create a caring, structured environment with high and clear expectations.

Yet teachers cannot create a climate of connectedness alone. The school's climate is strongly influenced by the philosophy and policies of the school leadership. When school leadership is dedicated to engaging students, evidence shows a more powerful effect than when teachers make isolated efforts to connect.<sup>4</sup>

### Environmental Connectedness: Physical and Emotional Safety

Promoting a positive school-wide environment means creating a zone of physical, emotional, and academic safety. Creating this safety zone involves implementing strategies that encourage students to feel valued and competent and to act with pride and respect for school policies and property. In such an environment, students have fewer behavioral problems and find it easier to create interpersonal connections with their teachers and peers. Specifically, student connectedness increases when unstructured common areas, such as lunchrooms, playgrounds, and hallways, are monitored by staff members who treat students respectfully and ensure that students treat each other with respect.

### STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE STUDENT-TEACHER CONNECTEDNESS

- Assign academic work that encourages students to talk about themselves, such as creating an autobiography, developing portfolios, or writing essays or poems about topics that are important to them.
- Have a regular time each day or week to share thoughts and concerns.
- Schedule times to be available to students and parents outside of class throughout the year.
- Treat students with respect by giving public commendation and private correction.
- Maintain avenues for private communication, such as the "student to teacher mailbox" where students can send confidential notes to the teacher.
- During class, minimize "teacher talk" time and increase "student talk" time by incorporating peer review, group work and student-to-student discussions.
- Set a goal to highlight positive student contributions daily so that students know you notice their positive attributes.
- Develop family ties. Communicate regularly with families regarding students' successes and challenges. Solicit shared problem-solving and celebration.

### STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SCHOOL-STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

- Create "schools-within-a-school" such as small learning communities, magnet schools, or career academies.
- Create opportunities for lower student-to-adult ratios in classes through use of paraprofessionals, teachers' aides, and family and community volunteers.
- Have an adult personally greet students each day at the entrances to the building.
- Provide every student with an identified staff person who tracks, mentors, and advises them academically and personally.
- Provide mentorship programs that pair school or community volunteers with students, or pair students with other students.

## STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

- Maintain respectful noise levels in shared spaces.
- Decorate shared school spaces with evidence of students' work.
- Ensure quick response to graffiti and clean it immediately.
- Provide consistent curriculum-based opportunities for students to talk together with adults about their feelings of physical and emotional safety.
- Create student-run programs for recycling, school beautification, and school grounds clean-up.
- Create a peaceful place on school property, such as a garden or silent reading room.
- Enforce a fair and just discipline program.
- Engineer a discipline system that is compassionate, and allows for corrections.
- Ensure that all staff demonstrate respect toward students and each other.
- Celebrate differences in cultural backgrounds.
- Create systems to allow all students to showcase their work.

To promote this safety zone, schools should implement fair and just discipline systems with clear rules and consequences for aggressive behavior, including bullying.

## Academic Engagement

Increasing students' engagement in learning means setting high academic and behavioral standards, implementing flexible teaching methods, and making students feel that learning is relevant.<sup>5</sup> Helping students to reach a high academic and behavioral standard requires learning support for all students.

Academic goal setting should be individualized and based on an "as-soon-as-mastered" timeline. This strategy allows those who may not reach the school standard to reach their personal best.

Engaged schools also understand that students do not succeed in a rigid environment where all students are expected to learn in the same way. School leaders must be committed to providing ongoing professional development for teachers to build on their skills of creating diverse learning opportunities.

One avenue to encourage students to feel learning is personal and relevant is through active learning. Active learning projects encourage student decision-making and problem-solving skills. Active learning allows students to personalize the learning experience, in turn engaging their curiosity.

Teachers can determine what their students find meaningful and relevant by surveying students about their special interests and experiences and building this information into the content of the course. For example, calculations using basketball scores could engage math students who are also members of the basketball team. See the list on page 4 for additional examples of active learning projects.

School leaders can empower teachers to increase academic engagement. School leaders set the policy and train teachers to be flexible, to use methods based on student needs, and to devise instructional methods that address multiple learning styles. To continually improve their teaching methods and implement engaging academic strategies, teachers need training, mentoring, and ongoing coaching. If administrative duties could give way to additional planning time, teachers could create individual education plans and monitor and track the progress of their students.

## *In Summary*

Implementing strategies to create the triad of engagement requires time, training, and support. When given this support, school staff can maximize their personal connectedness with students and establish high academic and behavioral standards in an academically and emotionally safe learning climate where every student reaches their personal best through flexible and relevant instruction.

## STRATEGIES FOR SETTING HIGH ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL STANDARDS

- Provide school-wide tutoring and other learning supports.
- Provide teacher-supervised homework study hall, before- and after-school tutor programs, mentors, cross-grade tutors, and volunteers to support students who are struggling or who are in need of special attention.
- Older students can volunteer to tutor the younger students' after school, during lunch time or on Saturdays.

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING FLEXIBLE TEACHING METHODS

- Provide teacher training, in-service opportunities, and coaching to help teachers keep pace with innovative instructional methods.
- Encourage teachers to address all learning styles.
- Vary assessment methods to meet the needs of the students.
- Use strategies to encourage the use of higher-level reasoning skills, not just memorization skills.
- Adjust the curriculum to accommodate transfer students.

## EXAMPLES OF ACTIVE LEARNING PROJECTS

### *English and History*

Every community has its unique history and literature. Teachers can develop reading and writing assignments based on local culture and lifestyle. The English teacher can team-teach with the history and art teachers to create interdisciplinary projects.

### *Social Studies*

Students can research the economics, geography, or culture of foreign countries. They can make the topic relevant by personalizing assignments. One topic for an essay would be, "If I were the president of the U.S., I would..."

### *Math*

Students can use the scores of the local sports team to learn calculations from basic multiplication to figuring averages, percentages, etc.

### *Science*

Find out the various places students have lived. They can research the geology, climate, and terrain of these places. The class can create a terrarium to simulate the environment there.

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