

Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Schools

Structures That Matter



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Summary

The science of learning and development demonstrates the value of positive relationships for student success and well-being. This brief describes structures that secondary schools can integrate to cultivate conditions that enable healthy attachments to grow. Specifically, it highlights structures that can foster personal teacher–student relationships, including those that create small learning communities, promote safety and belonging, support culturally sustaining and relevant education, and foster student voice and agency. In addition, it describes structures that enable relationship-building between and among staff and families so that relationships can become more fully embedded into a school’s culture and fabric. School structures can create opportunities for relationships to develop, but those structures are only as powerful as the interactions within them. Thus, this brief is a companion piece to the brief *Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Classrooms: Practices That Matter*, which describes practices secondary-school staff can adopt to cultivate deep and affirming connections among individuals in their schools.

The full report on which these briefs are based is available at <https://k12.designprinciples.org/>.

Relationships Matter for Educational Success

The [science of learning and development](#) demonstrates the value of positive relationships for educational success and well-being. It suggests that when fostered between and among students, teachers, and families, positive connections support students in developing:

- higher levels of motivation, engagement, and academic success;
- greater social competence; and
- increased ability to take on and persist through challenges.

Cultivating positive relationships is especially important in adolescence, when youth are exploring their identities and have a growing need for connection and belonging. It is also especially crucial for adolescents experiencing the effects of poverty, trauma, racism, and other forms of discrimination, which can affect their relationship-building with school adults.

While research indicates that relationships matter for learning, many secondary schools are organized in ways that make it difficult for young people to be connected to a caring adult. This brief provides insights into how schools can counteract this pattern. Drawing upon [Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action](#), it presents structures that secondary schools can institute or redesign to make relationship-centered schooling a reality. As the examples in this brief illustrate, there is no single way to integrate relationship-centered approaches. Instead, secondary schools can integrate an array of structures that enable positive connections and healthy attachments to grow in their unique contexts.

How Relationships Support Learning and Development

Positive and caring relationships, when central features of a school, support student learning and development in multiple ways. Research suggests that relationship-centered schools:

- are rich in protective factors that help reduce anxiety and stress among students;
- support social and emotional development, which can bolster student engagement, motivation, healthy attachment, and a sense of school connectedness;
- allow students to explore new learning experiences and develop their multifaceted identities; and
- pave the way for improvements in student outcomes such as academic achievement and graduation rates.

Beyond the important impact relationships can have on individual students, attention to relationship-building in schools can create a ripple effect that contributes to the development of a positive school culture and climate.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019). [Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development](#). *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140.

Personalizing Relationships With Students

Connections between students and school adults are at the core of relationship-centered schooling. To optimize student success and well-being, positive relationships should be:

- consistent and individualized, affording ongoing opportunities for students to be well known by and connected to educators and other staff;
- trustful, respectful, and reciprocal;
- focused on all aspects of young people's development, helping to foster their cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities and a positive self-concept.

To provide opportunities for relationships with these characteristics to grow, schools can institute structures that create small learning communities, promote a sense of safety and belonging, support culturally sustaining and relevant education, and foster student voice and agency.

Creating Small Learning Communities

Small learning communities are a primary mechanism for promoting personalized relationships in schools. These learning communities are designed for staff and students to work together in smaller and closer-knit units, which create the conditions under which students can be known well. Research suggests that students—particularly those who face significant social, economic, and academic impediments—demonstrate stronger academic, social, and emotional development in smaller settings. Large, comprehensive secondary schools have several options for creating smaller learning communities:

- **Develop cohorts** that keep groups of students and, to the greatest extent possible, the same teachers or staff together throughout the school day. Middle and high schools may keep a student cohort—commonly called a “house”—together in one classroom and have teachers rotate between cohorts, or have cohorts move together in passing schedules. Although some houses in large comprehensive schools contain 300 to 600 students, the ideal would be to identify much smaller cohorts of 80 to 120 students.
- **Establish advisory systems** that provide each student with a home base, a caring community, and an adult liaison between school, student, and home. In effective advisory systems, each advisor serves as an advocate for a small group of students (usually 15–20), often over 2 to 4 years. The advisor facilitates an advisory class that meets regularly, promotes a sense of community among peers, and presents opportunities for students to receive support on academic and nonacademic issues.
- **Implement looping**, which allows educators to remain with the same students for more than 1 year. Commonly used in elementary schools, looping is equally beneficial for secondary students, who are better able to form strong relationships when they have the same subject matter teachers or maintain the same advisor beyond 1 academic year.
- **Institute block scheduling**—the practice of having fewer, longer class periods each day to reduce teachers’ overall pupil load and lengthen time for instruction. In schools with block scheduling, educators may have, for example, three 90-minute classes each day instead of six 45-minute class periods. This structure can foster consistent interactions and relationship-building during classroom instruction, especially when courses continue for a full year and teachers use the longer class periods to implement teaching strategies that support inquiry, help students obtain directed practice, and personalize instruction.

These structures provide opportunities for students and adults to connect in substantive and productive ways to support learning and development.

Small Learning Communities in Action

[Vista High School](#), in Vista, CA, a large comprehensive high school serving a diverse small suburban and rural community, has used a house system to build relationships among teachers and students. The freshman class is typically broken into multiple houses of 100 to 130 students who share a set of four teachers who cover core subjects and one special education teacher. Each team defines how spaces in and around their classroom and house could be used to meet the learning needs of students and considers how the grouping of students and grouping of teachers can

positively impact student learning. Despite the high proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students attending Vista (over 70%), the school's graduation rates have consistently exceeded the state average.

[Oakland International High School](#) in Oakland, CA, is a secondary setting that uses looping, along with cohorts and advisories, to support its diverse students. An interdisciplinary team of four core content area teachers stays with a group of 80–100 students for 2 years. In addition, the school assigns each 9th-grader to an advisor—usually a teacher, but it can also be a school leader or other staff (e.g., a counselor). Advisors and the interdisciplinary team of teachers work with the students for 2 years before they transition responsibilities to other staff who will work with the students for 11th and 12th grade. These looping and advisory structures have been especially important to [the success of Internationals schools](#), as they enable practitioners to provide personalized supports to their recently immigrated students.

Source: Thompson, C. (2023). *Oakland International High School: A thriving community school for Oakland's newcomer students*. Learning Policy Institute.

Promoting a Sense of Safety and Belonging

Relationship-centered schools do not solely emphasize individual attachments. They also systematically place care at the center of the school's culture and integrate structures that enable inclusion and create a sense of social, emotional, and psychological safety for all students. Fostering a sense of safety and belonging requires the elimination of structures that segregate and separate students. [Academic tracking](#) and [zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies](#) are among these harmful structures, as they have been shown to contribute to stigmatization, heightened stress, and disengagement among students as well as discriminatory treatment toward students of color and other student subgroups. In their stead, secondary schools can:

- **Institute detracking** to create heterogenous learning opportunities that support academic learning while allowing youth to make connections across socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, and ethnic lines.
- **Offer varied and enriching extracurriculars** with minimal barriers for participation so that students have more opportunities to form relationships and a sense of community with each other. [Evidence](#) suggests that extracurriculars are socially supportive when they are forums that affirm students' identities, strengthen interpersonal skills, and, in some cases, foster future career skills and credentials.
- **Implement restorative approaches to conflict resolution** that acknowledge and repair harm when it occurs and cultivate strategies for creating healthier, more positive interactions. These [evidence-based approaches](#) can take many forms. They can include impromptu conferences to redirect students' behavior to minimize disruption to instructional time or the use of shared vocabulary to enable individuals to express feelings in productive ways. In addition, restorative circles and conferences are cornerstone practices that are structured and facilitated to support reflection, communication, and problem-solving.

Structures like these promote relationships, safety, and belonging while mitigating the sense of differential worth that can emerge amid academic tracking or harsh disciplinary policies.

Structures That Build Safety and Belonging in Action

[Ralph Bunche High School](#), in Oakland, CA, has used restorative approaches since 2012. Under the guidance of a full-time, on-site restorative justice coordinator, the school has instituted a range of restorative approaches, including restorative circles. As the name implies, restorative circles take place in a circle, and students share their thoughts and experiences when holding a talking piece. Restorative circles can serve many additional purposes, such as community-building or welcoming a student back to school after an extended absence. This [video](#) provides an example of a restorative circle in action, as members of the Ralph Bunche school community gather to engage in a restorative welcome and reentry circle for a student who returned to school after time spent in a juvenile justice facility.

[Hillsdale High School](#), in San Mateo, CA, engaged in a 3-year conversion process to institute relationship-centered and inclusive school structures. The comprehensive high school created three heterogeneous small learning communities for 9th- and 10th-grade students. (Students then take courses specialized around their interests starting in 11th grade.) In addition, the school eliminated low-track science classes and now enrolls all students in 9th-grade biology and 10th-grade chemistry. As a result, 3 years into the redesign, 100% of African American and Latinx 9th-grade students were enrolled in biology, compared to only 18% in 2002–03. In addition, Hillsdale’s performance on District Common Assessments was equivalent to that of schools that enrolled only high-track students in these courses.

Source: Klevan, S. (2021). *Building a positive school climate through restorative practices*. Learning Policy Institute.

Supporting Culturally Sustaining and Relevant Education

Relationship-centered schools also affirm and nurture students’ full selves. [Structures that promote culturally sustaining and relevant education](#) are essential features of a whole child approach that recognizes the everyday experiences and knowledge of students as valuable resources for learning and development. These approaches build on students’ backgrounds and experiences, helping to foster a greater sense of safety and belonging and an engaging atmosphere for learning. In addition, young people are more able to learn and take productive risks when they and their culture are a valued part of the school community. Secondary schools can cultivate these educational experiences by:

- **Implementing a diverse and culturally relevant curriculum** so that students can relate learning to their life experiences and understand other cultures and histories. Curricular content and materials should reflect and respect the legitimacy and accomplishments of those from different backgrounds and empower students to value all cultures.
- **Showcasing cultural pluralism in the physical environment** by ensuring that school walls, displays, and names reflect the diversity and history of the student population.

- **Providing professional learning** that educates teachers about students' backgrounds, challenges, community, and cultural assets. This professional development should also support educators in incorporating culture and diversity into the heart of the curriculum, instead of treating it as peripheral content.

Instituting culturally sustaining structures can pave the way for educators to disrupt the effects of discrimination as they build student confidence and a broader embrace of cultural pluralism—all in the service of student learning and well-being.

Culturally Sustaining and Relevant Education in Action

[Oakland International High School](#), in Oakland, CA, creates professional development opportunities that support educators in implementing culturally sustaining and relevant educational experiences. For instance, the school regularly engages staff in student- and family-led [community walks](#) to educate teachers about students' backgrounds, communities, and cultural assets. These walks integrate stops at community landmarks to help teachers develop a more robust understanding of where their students live and what they see in their everyday lives, which can support teachers in designing learning experiences. In addition, community walks play a role in reimagining conventional power dynamics embedded in teacher–student relationships by creating opportunities for teachers to learn alongside students and families.

Source: Thompson, C. (2023). *Oakland International High School: A thriving community school for Oakland's newcomer students*. Learning Policy Institute.

Fostering Student Voice and Agency

Relationship-centered schools are also those that enable students to develop independence and self-advocacy so that they become confident and self-directed individuals. While these competencies can be fostered during the learning process, school structures play an important role in signaling the importance of student voice and perspectives. To cultivate student voice and agency in a school environment, secondary schools can:

- **Establish or redesign decision-making structures** to include youth by, for example, increasing youth representation on hiring committees, student advisory boards, and school culture and climate teams. Strategies to include youth representatives from a broad cross-section of the campus (e.g., recruiting from varied clubs, rotating representation) can help ensure that the most vocal or visible student leaders are not the only voices represented.
- **Create shared learning forums** that enable adults and students to grow their knowledge, skills, and relationships together. Practices can include inviting students to regularly scheduled staff meetings and establishing new forums to encourage relationship-building, collaboration, and shared learning.

When used in conjunction with instructional practices that cultivate student agency, structures like these provide opportunities for students to express what they have experienced, know, think, care about, can do, and aspire to do. Moreover, they position youth as partners and elevate the knowledge and expertise they bring into schools.

Structures to Elevate Student Voice in Action

At [Oakland High School](#), in Oakland, CA, student representatives play an increasing role in the school's culture and climate team. Previously, this site-based committee was composed exclusively of school staff who congregated to respond to equity issues after they had transpired. With the addition of student representatives, the culture and climate team more proactively explores issues of equity by elevating the perspectives of students who bring challenges to their attention. In turn, youth collaborate with staff to develop structures that increase students' sense of belonging.

The [Long Beach Unified School District](#), in Long Beach, CA, has instituted student-led and -facilitated Learning Days that provide time, typically outside of school hours, for youth and practitioners to build relationships and collaborate to remediate equity challenges. To date, these experiences, which are attended on a voluntary basis and range from half-day to full-day sessions, have engaged students and educators in direct learning on deep-listening practices and have focused attention on issues of implicit bias alongside intentional relationship- and community-building opportunities.

Sources: Hernández, L. H., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute; Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland's districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

Supporting Relationships Among Staff

Relationship-centered secondary schools also build a healthy community for staff, enabling practitioners to build relationships as they support each other in their professional and personal growth. Research suggests that these relationships are important in schools. When staff maintain strong relationships and have frequent opportunities to collaborate, they are more effective in supporting student learning and well-being. In addition, approaches that support collaboration and teacher leadership contribute to [staff retention](#), which [fosters relational trust](#) by enhancing the stability of a school community.

Facilitating Productive and Positive Staff Collaboration

Structures that enable staff collaboration are central in relationship-centered schools. Positive staff collaboration includes making opportunities for staff to develop collective expertise, which is generated through a process of sharing, attempting new ideas, reflecting on practice, and developing new approaches. It also necessitates ongoing efforts to ensure everyone on the staff feels known, heard, and valued. Effective structures for building productive collaboration include:

- **Allocating consistent collaboration time** for educators to build collegial relationships as they plan together and/or codevelop curriculum and lessons for their students. In addition to departmental collaboration, structures should connect practitioners who work with the same group of students across content areas, so that educators can discuss the ways they might design learning experiences to better support students.

- **Giving attention to staff wellness and relationship-building** during meetings and professional development. Staff convenings can be designed to include activities that bolster staff culture and promote their social and emotional wellness.

Through structures like these, teachers and school staff can share and reflect on their practice and attempt, develop, and inform new approaches while building their interpersonal connections.

Structures to Promote Staff Collaboration in Action

[Oakland High School](#), in Oakland, CA, leverages its Linked Learning pathway structure to create opportunities for staff relationship-building and interdisciplinary collaboration. The school's pathways dedicate a team of teachers and administrators to a smaller group of students and are designed to ensure that every student has an adult they can reach out to for support. The pathway structure also allots educators in each pathway 90 minutes of common planning time every other day, during which they can plan academic programming and extracurricular activities together. Collaborations such as these allow teachers to draw on one another's expertise to create interdisciplinary learning experiences for students.

At [McLane High School](#), in Fresno, CA, leaders integrate opportunities for relationship- and community-building during professional development, particularly as educators learn to implement restorative approaches to school discipline. For example, leaders have engaged staff in restorative circles for community-building activities or for harm repair if incidents emerge. These experiences have allowed McLane staff not only to learn about facilitation techniques that support restorative circles in their classrooms but also to build a staff culture that seeks to foster honesty, vulnerability, and community.

Sources: Hernández, L. H., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute; Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehr, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland's districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

Elevating Staff Expertise

Involving staff in decisions about how the school functions also contributes to a relationship-centered staff culture. Structures that support collective decision-making and teacher leadership are not only [associated with increased achievement](#), but they also provide concrete ways for those closest to students to inform policy decisions. Structures that elevate staff expertise include:

- **Creating shared decision-making structures** in which teachers serve on site-based committees that support continuous improvement or strategic planning. Committees and work groups can have changing membership to increase representation and involvement.
- **Providing opportunities for distributed leadership**, such as by having teachers organize and manage school committees; lead grade-level or departmental teams; and play lead roles in professional development, instructional improvement, and curricular implementation.

Shared decision-making and distributed leadership models embody the collaborative and democratic principles that effective teachers expect their students to develop, which further integrates a relationship-centered focus into a school's culture and fabric.

Structures to Elevate Staff Expertise in Action

To support its advisory structure, [Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#), in San Fernando, CA, designates teacher leads for advisories as part of its distributed leadership structure. Advisory leads design the advisory curriculum and collaborate with other leads from each grade level to manage and improve the content in advisory. Specifically, they support the implementation of the social and emotional program at the school as well as family engagement efforts, including parent nights and student-led conferencing. With the latter, advisory leads identify topics that will strengthen the school community and student learning—from social and emotional learning to networking opportunities to college and career preparation to discussion of important cultural events.

Source: Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute.

Supporting Regular and Meaningful Family Engagement

Building trustful, reciprocal, and culturally affirming relationships between practitioners and students' families is another essential ingredient of relationship-centered schooling. Families are critical to providing deeper knowledge of youth and greater alignment between home and school values, norms, and practices. In addition, positive school–family relationships have been shown to [support school improvement](#) and are associated with a range of [positive student outcomes](#).

There is no single strategy for cultivating effective family engagement. Yet secondary school staff can institute approaches that enable regular and meaningful engagement. These include:

- **Having diverse communication tools** in place (e.g., emails, text messages, written notes, phone calls, web forums) so that families can easily and consistently learn how their child is doing and find important information about school operations and events. Communication should be conveyed in families' home language wherever possible.
- **Creating time for virtual or in-person meetings** to support school–family communication. These meetings should not only occur in response to a negative incident but rather be conducted proactively to build rapport and interpersonal connections. Choosing times thoughtfully and, to the extent possible, at times matched to parent or guardian availability, is particularly important, as is making additional supports (e.g., translation services, babysitting) available for meetings to increase family participation.

- **Reimagining student–teacher–family conferences** to improve their ability to engage families and support learning. This can include enacting student-led conferences in which youth are active facilitators and participants in teacher–family discussions, as well as using conferences as opportunities to learn from family members and plan together for children’s goals, rather than communicating judgments about how children are doing.
- **Including families in decision-making or strategic planning forums** that distribute power and responsibility, such as school site councils or strategic planning committees. Schools must work to ensure that all families can lend their voices to school efforts—including families who face impediments to being deeply engaged in their child’s school. In addition, it is important that shared decision-making forums are not merely forums for families to express their opinions; rather, they represent opportunities for the knowledge and expertise of families to substantively inform a shared school vision and community.

Structures that provide opportunities for regular and meaningful family engagement are essential for all schools, but they hold particular relevance in communities where interpersonal and institutional trust has been violated. Approaches like these point to the ways staff can institute structures that seek to build or rebuild trust through proactive processes as well as honor the expertise and cultural assets families bring to bear in school settings.

Structures That Engage Families in Action

Once each semester, educators at [Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#), in San Fernando, CA, hold parent advisory nights to discuss topics or themes related to the school’s practices. The school structures parent advisory nights to provide parents with the opportunity to engage in the same kinds of learning as their children. This includes introducing families to council—a practice in which a group of people sit together in a circle and take turns sharing their stories—which is a central element of community-building and social and emotional learning at the school. At Social Justice Humanitas’s orientation for incoming freshmen, teachers run councils in both English and Spanish in small groups for parents. In doing this, one teacher remarked that this collaborative approach helped students and families see how the school works as a partnership.

As members of equity design teams established at select secondary schools in the [Long Beach Unified School District](#), in Long Beach, CA, family members work alongside students, teachers, and school leaders to identify equity challenges and propose solutions. To do this, they collect and analyze data that draw on the knowledge and experiences of students and families and meet regularly to discuss data patterns. Through this process, family members are partners in strategic planning and help design more equitable school policies and structures.

Sources: Hernández, L. H., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*; Learning Policy Institute; Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute.

Putting It All Together

This brief describes an array of structures that secondary schools can put in place to create conditions that can foster relationship-centered schooling. The structures are treated separately here, but they are most powerful when used in combination to realize a school's unique vision for creating personalized and inclusive learning environments.

The existence of relationship-centered structures alone does not guarantee their success. The nature of relationships matters greatly, and schools also should ensure that student-practitioner interactions are trustful, empowering, reciprocal, and culturally responsive for every student. Only then can the promise of positive relationships be fully realized to support learning and development. Thus, the companion brief, *Cultivating Relationships in Secondary Classrooms: Practices That Matter*, focuses on day-to-day practices for educators.

This brief concentrates on actions that members of secondary school communities can take in their settings. Yet redesigning schools to be more relationship centered has implications for the educational ecosystem—from the school to the district, and the macrosystems that work together to improve the quality and character of learning environments. A concerted effort across the system to enable the implementation of relationship-centered approaches is needed to ensure that secondary settings build and sustain relationships as a foundation for learning.

Acknowledgments

This brief is based on the report *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action*.

This research was supported by The California Endowment and the Stuart Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, Skyline Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. The ideas voiced here are those of the authors and not those of our funders.

Suggested citation: Hernández, L., & Darling-Hammond, L. (with Nielsen, N.). (2024). *Cultivating relationships in secondary schools: Structures that matter*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/cultivating-relationships-secondary-schools-brief>

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Document last revised November 19, 2024