



*Information for School Districts
and School Administrators*

Fostering School Connectedness

Improving Student Health and Academic Achievement

School connectedness is the belief held by students that the adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Students who feel connected to school are more likely to have a number of positive health and academic outcomes. This fact sheet answers questions about school connectedness and identifies strategies school districts and administrators can use to foster it among their students.

Why is it important for students to feel connected to school?

School connectedness is an important factor in both health and learning. Students who feel connected to school are

- More likely to attend school regularly, stay in school longer, and have higher grades and test scores.
- Less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or have sexual intercourse.
- Less likely to carry weapons, become involved in violence, or be injured from dangerous activities such as drinking and driving or not wearing seat belts.
- Less likely to have emotional problems, suffer from eating disorders, or experience suicidal thoughts or attempts.

Implementation of evidence-based health promotion programs, coupled with strategies to promote school connectedness, can help schools have the greatest impact on the health and education outcomes of their students.

What factors can increase school connectedness?

Four factors can help strengthen school connectedness for students: **adult support**, **belonging to a positive peer group**, **commitment to education**, and a **positive school environment**. School staff members are important adults in students' lives; the time, interest, attention, and emotional support they give students can engage them in school and learning.





What steps can school administrators take to increase school connectedness?

School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth (Division of Adolescent and School Health, CDC, 2009) describes six science-based strategies for fostering school connectedness. The chart below outlines the six strategies and describes specific actions school districts and administrators can take to influence their implementation in schools.

Strategies and Actions School Administrators Can Take to Increase School Connectedness

ACTIONS	Strategy 1	<i>Create processes that engage students, families, and communities and that facilitate academic achievement and staff empowerment.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead students, faculty, staff, and parents to develop shared standards of learning and behavior. • Team with teachers and staff to improve the school climate and students' sense of connectedness to school. • Engage teams of students, faculty, staff, parents, and community members to plan school policies and activities. • Give teachers and principals the appropriate decision-making authority to use school resources to enhance their school's physical and psychosocial environment. • Empower students to communicate openly with school staff and parents, such as through parent-teacher-student conferences and teacher evaluations. • Engage community partners to provide health and social services at school that students and their families need, such as dental services, vaccinations, and child care. 	
	Strategy 2	<i>Provide education and opportunities to enable families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer workshops and trainings for parents to increase their ability to be actively involved in their children's school life and to help their children develop academic and life skills. • Create opportunities to involve and accommodate parents with varied schedules, resources, and skills, to help them participate in meaningful school and classroom activities as well as share their culture and expectations. • Translate materials into languages spoken in students' homes and provide interpreters at events when needed. • Communicate the school's behavioral and academic expectations to families via school newsletters, conferences, and Web sites and encourage families to reinforce those expectations at home. • Assign school staff members to work with specific students and their families to help connect the family to the school and classroom. 		
Strategy 3	<i>Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills they need to engage in school.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for students to improve their academic, social, and interpersonal skills through personal tutoring programs or summer and vacation learning camps. • Support academic interscholastic competitions, debates, and other projects within and among schools. • Use school sporting events and physical education classes to promote teamwork, sportsmanship, and nonviolence. 		

Strategy 4

Promote the use of effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.

- **Reduce** class sizes to ensure more time for individualized assistance.
- **Provide** opportunities—such as service learning, creative projects, and extracurricular activities—that promote meaningful student involvement, learning, and recognition.

Strategy 5

Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of their students.

- **Hire** teachers who have expertise in child development, who apply student-centered pedagogy, and who use diverse classroom management techniques and teaching methods to meet the needs of different learning styles.
- **Offer** professional development to teachers on organizing the classroom to promote a positive environment, applying developmentally appropriate discipline strategies, and assisting students in developing self-control.
- **Educate** school staff on strategies for communicating with parents and involving them in their children's school life.
- **Provide** trainings on all school curricula to be used and on effective teaching methods.
- **Ensure** that teachers have the materials, time, resources, and support to use skills learned in training.
- **Build** learning teams that can observe experienced teachers who effectively manage classrooms and facilitate group work.
- **Develop** a teacher-coaching program that promotes problem solving and sharing in a supportive work environment.

Strategy 6

Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

- **Consider** structuring the school to allow teachers to stay with the same students for consecutive years.
- **Allow** students and parents to use the school facility outside of school hours for recreation or health promotion programs.
- **Apply** and fairly **enforce** reasonable and consistent disciplinary policies that are jointly agreed upon by students and staff.
- **Hold** school-wide, experience-broadening activities that enable students to learn about different cultures, people with disabilities, and other topics.
- **Support** student clubs and activities that promote a positive school climate, such as gay-straight alliances and multicultural clubs.
- **Provide** opportunities for students of all levels to interact, develop friendships, and engage in teamwork.
- **Create** opportunities for students to communicate, work, and partner with adults, such as service learning activities and internships.
- **Involve** students in parent-teacher conferences, curriculum selection committees, and school health teams.
- **Have** principals, teachers, and other school staff commit to and model respectful behavior toward each other.
- **Challenge** all school staff to greet each student by name.
- **Encourage** staff to build stronger relationships with students who are experiencing academic challenges or social problems, such as bullying or harassment.
- **Ensure** that school staff members have access to a school counselor, psychologist, or other expert for consultations or student/family referrals when needed.
- **Communicate** expectations, values, and norms that support positive health and academic behaviors to the entire school community.





School Connectedness Is Especially Important for At-Risk Youth

School connectedness is particularly important for young people who are at increased risk for feeling alienated or isolated from others. Any student who is “different” from the social norm may have difficulty connecting with other students and adults in the school, and may be more likely to feel unsafe. Those at greater risk for feeling disconnected include students with disabilities, students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or question their sexual orientation, students who are homeless, or any student who is chronically truant due to a variety of circumstances. Strong family involvement and supportive school personnel, inclusive school environments, and curricula that reflect the realities of a diverse student body can help students become more connected to their school.

What should school administrators consider when planning for action to improve school connectedness?

Advancing students’ health and academic outcomes by improving school connectedness is a team effort. It involves the school community as well as individuals, groups, and organizations outside the school grounds. Making changes of this kind requires 1) convincing these stakeholders of the importance of school connectedness in helping students learn and stay healthy, 2) involving them in the development, implementation, and evaluation of these actions, and 3) securing their buy-in to ensure the changes happen.

Some of the strategies and actions described in the previous pages require small changes in school processes that can be done in the short term with relative ease, whereas others might be broader and longer-term and might require administrative or budgetary changes. Schools and school districts should determine which actions are most feasible and appropriate, according to the needs of the school and available resources.



Resources

School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth

www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/AdolescentHealth/connectedness.htm

Student Health and Academic Achievement

www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/health_and_academics/index.htm

FindYouthInfo.gov

www.findyouthinfo.gov

Enhancing Student Connectedness to Schools

<http://csmh.umaryland.edu/resources.html/caring%20connectedness%20brief.pdf>

School Connectedness: Improving Students’ Lives

<http://cecp.air.org/download/MCMonographFINAL.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
Division of Adolescent and School Health
www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth

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