Preparing for Tomorrow by Living for Today: 5 Take Home Lessons for Cultivating Connection in Schools

Janis Whitlock, Research Scientist FLDC / Lecturer HD at Cornell University

When I set out to study the conditions in schools most likely to foster thriving in adolescents, I expected to simply document what most of us already know—that individual relationships with adults are central. What I gained, however, was a much more complex understanding of the importance and influence of student engagement. In order for students to thrive, they do need meaningful relationships with adults, but they also need much more than that.

After sifting through decades of research in this area, I found these five critical take home lessons for all educators, parents or student leaders focused on cultivating engagement and positive connection to school life:

1) Far more happens at school than academic development. The halls and classrooms of every school provide developmental spaces in which young people try out social identities and relationships that form the basis for adulthood. These developmental spaces also provide information to youth about their individual and collective value in the world and contribute mightily to academic achievement and social health. The foundation of healthy development, brain and cognitive research tells us, is the development of trust, connection, and agency in daily life, and a child without these tools struggle to accomplish the cognitive tasks so highly prized in today’s culture.

2) Living fully today is as important as preparing for tomorrow. Like the adults who so diligently prepare them for it, youth long for the future. To most fully realize their potential, however, they must also acquire the skills needed to be fully where they are in each moment. They need time, space and support to forge a positive and cohesive identity, and to balance this with the immense pressures to perform and plan. Indeed, the ability to live each moment fully and with gratitude is the foundation of a successful life. (continued on page 2)
message from the president

“A positive school climate means being a community and acting like one, helping others approach their goals (including your own), being available for each other, and making that community a safe place.”

—DIANA, Junior student at a NY High School

dear friends,

As we head into the holiday season, it is a wonderful time to stop and celebrate the community of teachers, students, parents, and support staff that truly makes our schools shine. As a place where students and adults alike spend the majority of their week, the school is often a secondary home—and the quality of the relationships within that space directly impact students’ healthy development and their ability to learn. In our busy days, however, this critical aspect of school life tends to be one of the areas we focus on least, which can have serious negative consequences.

In this issue, we share simple, concrete strategies for supporting and improving your school’s community and connectedness—from Dr. Janis Whitlock’s core lessons for cultivating community based on her research in the field to eight student-directed activities from WINGS for Kids that you can try in your classroom tomorrow. We also include an inspiring story of one school’s success in creating an engaging and positive community, with lessons you can apply to your own school.

As always, we hope you’ll explore the deeper list of resources included in this issue, and look forward to hearing your own thoughts on what efforts have been most successful for your school community. Please feel free to send your stories, comments, and ideas to newsletter@csee.net.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder Center for Social and Emotional Education

3) Individual connection with adults at school makes a significant and lasting impact. Like family, school is a place in which the tensions between childhood and adulthood are played out. Heightened adolescent need for visibility and recognition means that adult actions assume great significance. Something as small as an adult noticing a change in a young person’s hairstyle, clothing, or demeanor communicates respect and attention. These things are particularly important in large schools where many students may go unnoticed by adults for long periods.

4) Opportunities for exercising agency and voice are critical. Adult relationships are valued, in part, because adults are the gatekeepers of power and change. The tendency for adults to ignore power issues while youth focus so strongly on them is repeatedly demonstrated in gaps of perceived connectedness in school climate studies. The vast majority of school climate concerns shared by youth and adults alike have power struggles at the core and can be overcome by building in systematic and fully transparent means of including young people in decision making processes.

5) The most disconnected kids have the most to gain by opportunities to connect. Systematic assessment of perceived connectedness consistently demonstrates that most opportunities to connect with adults and to exercise agency and voice in school settings are available largely to youth who have proven academic or leadership capabilities. As in so many other life realms, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” in schools as well. In most schools, for example, a minimum GPA is often required before a student can run for office (school representation has the added difficulty with adolescent social dynamics such as popularity). Moreover, the majority of appointments made to community councils or advisory boards come from area high schools whose administrators have strict grade requirements for participating and thus tend to select highly capable and academically talented youth. Functionally, this systemic reward-based selection bias serves only to widen the gap between support-rich and support-poor youth and thus positive and negative outcome trajectories.

Cultivating connectedness requires changes in institutional culture, practice, and attitude; it rarely requires additional resources. Even the most cutting edge neuroscience confirms what most of us know well—the formation of human relationships is the primary developmental priority of all human beings and the bedrock of all healthy development. Studies consistently show that levels of connectedness and school satisfaction directly revolve around our relationships with youth and adults. Although material and fiscal resources are useful when employed as tools for improvement, the only real resources needed in schools hoping to enhance connection is a willingness to listen, engage, and shift attitudes, policies and practices in response to authentic youth-adult dialogue. Ultimately the most important first step in cultivating connectedness in school settings is to invite adults and youth to be partners in identifying the most salient challenges and solutions in their school since working alongside each other in coming up with a solution is, in and of itself, part of the solution.

Jonathan Whitlock is a Research Scientist in the Family Life Development Center and a Lecturer in the Department of Human Development.

Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D., President and Co-Founder Center for Social and Emotional Education
Catholic Memorial School: Empowering Students and Staff to Take Control of their Environment

Brian Scott, Director of Campus Ministry and Lacrosse Coach

Students travel from over 90 different communities and five countries to attend Catholic Memorial School, coming as far away as China, even though it doesn’t offer boarding. Why?

“CM is somewhere you look forward to being,” says Miles McCarthy, a sophomore. “You want to go to school. You’re excited for it.”

Senior Lance Murray agrees. “I love this place. I love coming here every day.”

Catholic Memorial has built a rigorous academic program on top of a commitment to creating a learning environment where students feel respected, engaged, and where they can take control of their education. The attention to school climate allows students to tap into their own curiosity and explore things that they might not otherwise risk trying.

“When you know the faculty cares about you, it changes how you feel about going to school,” says alumnus Tom O’Hear, class of 1978, whose two sons currently attend CM.

Creating and sustaining such an environment is a continuous process that stems from a clear vision. “We want to make sure that no student falls through the cracks,” says eighth grade language arts teacher Ellen Eberly.

Making sure that no student goes unnoticed requires a number of programs that are tailored to reach the diversity of students that we serve. That diversity does not just apply to academics, but to race and economic background, too.

Student-driven programs at Catholic Memorial are instrumental in creating a culture of engagement. At Catholic Memorial, upperclassmen are assigned to mentor smaller groups of seventh, eighth, and ninth graders. Since the inception of the mentoring program, a team of professionals developed a series of workshops that train students on how to welcome and engage new students during student orientation and throughout the year. That team included Catholic Memorial faculty, guidance, the school psychologist, and School Mediation Associates, a consulting firm specializing in peer mediation training.

Student mentors frequently interact with their mentees throughout the school year during homerooms and designated times on the school calendar ensuring that students feel safe and supported, and that they are developing the academic and social skills needed to thrive. In the process, they build a strong sense of community by nurturing peer relationships.

One current mentor, junior Chris Stathopoulos, reflects on his time at CM as a new seventh grader.

“I remember I was in seventh grade, nervous as ever, on the first day of school walking through the halls pretty overwhelmed,” he recalls. “But Shane McDougall, the captain of the lacrosse team, came up to me and asked how I was doing.” Such interactions are frequent and those first impressions make a tremendous impact on a student’s perception of safety.

A student leadership program offered as an academic class for juniors and seniors teaches students to lead by being attentive to the needs of those entrusted to their care and thus growing their authority. Students begin by articulating a vision of the ideal school culture. They then explore systems of power, identify characteristics of moral leadership and bystander theory, practice and incorporate skills that help them listen and empathize with others, and work side by side with administrators implementing events that impact the climate of the school, such as liturgies, service experiences or fundraisers. These skills help students implement their shared vision.

Finally, faculty meet regularly to address the needs of specific students. In October, for example, faculty traveled offsite on retreat to gather by grade and department. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss strategies in differentiated instruction that have worked with specific students who are returning, and to assess the learning styles of new students.

The October retreat is also an opportunity for the faculty to take the CSCI survey, a tool that will help realistically measure whether the impressions of the faculty, staff, and administration align with the perceptions of the students. The results of the survey are then processed before the winter break so that faculty can then adjust their strategies for the second semester.

By focusing on the needs of each student, Catholic Memorial strives to create an atmosphere where students trust the faculty and one another. Once students understand that the community wants them to achieve and will provide the support necessary, they actively engage in their education, and master not only content, but the skills necessary to live well in a democratic society.

One current parent sums it up best. “They know my son. They know his strengths and they know the areas that he needs to work on. He takes risks here. He has tried speech and debate, has done community service. I think it’s good for him to take risks.”

Catholic Memorial School is an independent college preparatory school for boys in grades 7-12. Founded in 1957 by the Congregation of Christian Brothers, Catholic Memorial is located in West Roxbury, a neighborhood in Boston.

Get a baseline measure of school connectedness and engagement in your school to focus your initiatives where they are needed most. The CSCI School Climate Survey thoroughly assesses student, staff and parent perceptions of the environment (in addition to dimensions of safety, teaching and learning, relationships and more). Learn more at www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.
You can implement state-of-the-art math and reading software, conduct stimulating field trips, offer compelling arts and sports activities, but if kids don’t feel a connection to each other and to the staff, they simply won’t want to come.

Would you?

What makes school a welcoming place are the emotional connections forged with staff and with the other students. And the way to build those strong relationships is to develop their social and emotional skills.

Kids skip happily into our after school programs at elementary schools in Charleston’s most impoverished neighborhoods because that’s where their emotional connections are. They yearn for the encouragement and respect they find from staff and peers. These caring relationships make them feel good about themselves—so they keep coming back for more.

The way to build those strong relationships is to develop their social and emotional skills. You also need to train staff, ensure that they’re implementing what they’ve learned, and monitor and measure whether they and the kids are mastering the skills you’re teaching. The way we do that is by utilizing a Web-based performance management system where youth leaders routinely record their efforts toward the 30 learning objectives we teach.

Here are some social skills development activities that can be easily adapted to any classroom or program:

1. **Five Cents’ Worth of Positive Feedback**
   
   Psychological research demonstrates that positive feedback has a huge impact on motivating behavioral change: the more attention kids get for the good things they do, the more they want to repeat the behavior. Yet we can easily find ourselves focusing instead on what they do wrong.

   A useful way to remind staff to give kids more of the approval they crave—instead of focusing on what they do wrong—is to put five pennies in your pocket or on the window sill each day. Each time you praise a student, move a penny to the left-hand pocket or the other side of the sill. By the end of the class period (or day), all of the pennies should be moved to the other side.

2. **Giving Effective Feedback**
   
   Remember that it’s not empty praise but positive feedback that makes kids feel valued. Effective feedback gives kids specific information about the good and bad things they do in a constructive, respectful way that helps them improve. They will exhibit even more good behavior if they understand clearly the cause and effect. It may seem obvious to you, but often the connection is missing in their minds.

   To be effective, feedback should describe the behavior, describe the situation and state the effect. For example: “Jordan, when you cleaned up the crayons, it made me realize you’re really pitching in to help and it gave me more time to finish hanging up the artwork.”

3. **Caught in the Act**
   
   Another way to build connection to kids and accentuate their positive behavior is to give kids Caught in the Act (CIA) cards to reward good behavior. The card should describe in specifics why it’s been given. Kids can display them to friends and family and turn them in for a reward.

4. **Reassure with Routines and Rituals**
   
   School often brings social and emotional pressures that present enormous challenges for kids. As a parent, try some reassuring rituals in the home to create an emotional connection as your kids leave for school and return home. As an educator, try some reassuring rituals every day or week in the classroom.

   Along with academic skills, children are also learning how to rely on themselves and develop confidence and, as a caring adult, you can help build the social and emotional smarts that foster self-reliance. Before tests or presentations, tell some stories of your own experiences—especially with happy endings—to help ease anxiety and help kids stay connected.

   As a parent dropping your child off at school, you can offer your child a routine handshake or fist bump or farewell. Stick with it, even if it’s greeted with an eye roll or class laugh—these are the kid of routines your kids with always secretly love.
5. **Have Contests**

Have contests for the students to encourage desirable behaviors. Get creative about the prizes and make them fun! (It’s important to also have contests for staff members—motivate and reward them toward desirable behavior, while also mixing in positive feedback and recognition.)

6. **Talking Stick**

Another simple practice that strengthens bonding is regular discussion time. At WINGS we use a “talking stick,” decorated by the kids or staff, to collectively regulate the discussion. Whoever wants to speak takes the stick. These talks can be about very simple questions: What’s the best part of your day at school? What music do you like? Name something kind a friend did for you today. At times like this, kids are learning to listen to each other, to express themselves, and to become self-aware.

7. **Heys and Praise**

We start each week with “Heys and Praise” to help kids gain confidence as they learn to stand in front of a group and share feelings. Kids or staff who have praise to offer raise their hands and wait to be recognized by the program director, who calls each to the microphone in turn.

- The person with praise to offer says, “Hey, Rasheeda, can I give you some praise?”
- Rasheeda responds from her seat on the floor, “Yes.”
- The person shares praise. “I think you are really good at jump rope. It shows that you practice a lot.”
- Rasheeda responds, “Thanks.”

The children are taught that only the person giving praise may speak, that praise offerings must be positive. Anyone making fun of others is removed immediately from the activity. And we tell them that praise should be given about character and actions rather than the clothes they’re wearing or how their hair looks.

8. **Reassure with Routines and Rituals**

At WINGS we find that it’s especially important to greet the kids when they arrive for the after school day. It’s a small thing that yields big benefits. As students arrive, their assigned leader greets each and every child with smiles, hugs and pats on the back. Each group of kids has an assigned leader who initiates a handshake that’s special for their group. Sometimes the group keeps the same handshake all year—others like to change it up. This is just as important for the school day as well.

Remember to promote positive habits and behaviors. Kids who feel appreciated and recognized feel good about themselves. And they repeat the behavior!

Sounds simple, doesn’t it?

But routines and activities intentionally designed to build social competencies can have tremendous impact. Feeling cared for and connected motivates children to participate. These are effective ways to generate a sense of belonging and reinforce the social and emotional skills that make school a welcoming place where kids feel valued and motivated to succeed.

WINGS for Kids is an organization dedicated to teaching social and emotional skills through after-school programming.

**share your experience**

**As an educator, how do you build partnerships with parents to keep kids engaged?**

Email newsletter@csee.net so we can share your work with other schools dedicated to improving student engagement in our next newsletter.
resource corner

More School Engagement Resources

Please visit the blog, http://blogs.csee.net, to pick up more information and share in the dialogue about improving school connectedness and engagement.

On the Web

U.S. Department of Education:
This is a great resource from the U.S. Department of Education’s website including comprehensive training and facts on how to promote student connectedness.

10 Strategies that Foster Connection to the School:
http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/connect/school_pg5.html
These tips on the US DOE’s website are geared toward school administrators.

School Connectedness Report:
Improving Children’s Lives:
http://cecp.air.org/download/MCMonographFINAL.pdf
This report shares research and strategies for improving student connectedness.

Bully Police:
http://www.bullypolice.org/grade.html
Learn how your state’s bully law (or lack thereof) is graded and pick up best practices from other states and schools that make the grade.

The National Center for School Engagement:
http://www.schoolengagement.org
NCSE partners with school districts, law enforcement agencies, courts, and state and federal agencies to support youth and their families to be engaged at school. Check out their Research and Publications.

NH Parent Information and Resource Center:
http://www.ncpie.org/Resources/NCPbranding/NCPIE dreadfuls of FROM SpeakSpoken. This is the story of a full group of parents. Check out their resources for parents, educators and administrators.

NH State PIRC:
http://www.nhpirc.org/index.shtml
NH State PIRC is a US Department of Education-funded program aimed at improving student academic performance by increasing parental involvement in children’s education.

Child Trends:
This resource shares why school engagement matters and how out-of-school time programs can affect school engagement.

Research & Guides

21 Ways to Engage Students in School:
Best Practice in Schools’ Engagement with Parents:
http://www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/bEST_PRACTICE_IN_SCHOOLS.pdf
A Guide to Creating School-Community Partnerships That Make a Difference:
http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp
Promoting School Engagement for Struggling Students:
New York State’s ACT for Youth Center of Excellence:
http://www.actforyouth.net/?schoolConnectedness
Developing a Leadership Program:
www.teachingtheleaders.com
The World’s Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to Become a Servant Leader:
www.jameshunter.com

Community Conversations for High School Students:
A Facilitator’s Guide for Student Discussion Groups

Don’t miss this guide for developing student voice and connectedness, and getting them involved in the school climate improvement process.
Download: http://www.ascd.org/programs/The_Whole_Child.aspx

Also check out ASCD’s Engaging the Whole Child e-book online for a collection of articles from Educational Leadership, all dedicated to improving student engagement.

featured program

PROMOTING SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS:
The Foundation for Effective Risk Prevention Efforts and Student Learning

This workshop is designed to help educators and administrators develop plans to ensure each student is connected to a caring and responsible adult. The series also support educators understanding what complicates our being able to connect with certain students, how to manage the boundary between being an educator and counselor, and how to foster even more caring, responsible and connected relationships in your school. This program is designed to meet schools where they are and directly help them reduce risky behavior and promote student learning and achievement. Participants will receive a field-tested manual with a wide range of information, guidelines, tools and resources.

To find out how the Promoting School Connectedness program can serve your school or district, call us at (212) 707-8799 or email PD@schoolclimate.org to learn more about our Professional Development Services.
CSEE & The City University of New York, School of Professional Studies present:
Creating the Foundation for Comprehensive School Climate Reform:
Promoting Safe, Healthy, Engaged and Democratic K-12 School Communities
with Special Keynote Address by Kevin Jennings,
Assistant Deputy Secretary of the US Department of Education, Office of Safe & Drug-Free Schools

July 6–8, 2010
Fordham University
New York, NY

LEARN MORE:
www.schoolclimate.org/programs

Specifically, participants will learn about:
• A continuous process for measuring and improving school climate.
• Recent research and best practices in social, emotional, and civic education and school climate
  improvement efforts that support effective bully prevention, pro-UPstander behavior and academic
  achievement
• Classroom, school-wide, and school-home-community interventions that transform schools from
  communities of passive bystanders to UPstanders who say “no” (directly or indirectly) to bullying.

TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Almost 30% of youth in the United States (over 5.7 million) are estimated to be
involved in bullying as either a bully, a target of bullying or both. Every seven minutes a
child is bullied in the playground.

What's more staggering is the inverse response: only 4% of adults and 11% of peers
intervene. Sadly, **85% of the time there is no intervention at all.**

This past fall, CSEE launched a new campaign—**BullyBust**—to help students “stand
up” to bullying and become part of the solution to end harmful verbal harassment,
teasing and violence in our nation’s schools.

Statistics show that cracking down on individual bullies is seldom effective, but a
school-wide commitment to end bullying can reduce the problem by 50%. Through
BullyBust, we provide schools with the tools they need to launch these effective school-
wide initiatives that make a significant difference in a child’s life.

We count on the support of committed friends like you to help us continue with the
incredible work we are doing. Please help us bring the critical supports of the BullyBust
campaign to every school-in-need. Together we can stand strong and help put an end
to bullying in our nation’s schools:

**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:**
www.schoolclimate.org/supportus

All of us at CSEE thank you for your continued support and wish you all the best for
a safe and happy holiday season.

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“A **school-wide commitment** to end bullying can reduce the problem by **50%**

“The only way to stop bullying is if we all acknowledge that it is hurtful, wrong, and
vow to stand up for what is right.”

—GABRIELA, 8th grade student,
Castle Hill Middle School
CSEE is an organization that helps schools integrate crucial social and emotional learning with academic instruction to enhance student performance, prevent drop outs, reduce violence, and develop healthy and positively engaged adults.

For more than a decade, CSEE has worked together with the entire academic community—teacher, staff, school-based mental health professional, students, and parents—to improve total school climate.

We continue to help translate research into practice by establishing meaningful and relevant guidelines, programs and services that support a model for whole school improvement with a focus on school climate.

CSEE’s vision is that all children will develop the essential social, emotional, and intellectual skills to become healthy and productive citizens.

CSEE’s mission is to measure and improve the climate for learning in schools to help children realize their fullest potential as individuals and as engaged members of society.

CSEE achieves this through:

- Advocacy and policy
- Measurement and research
- Educational services