



*Information for Teachers
and Other School Staff*

Fostering School Connectedness

Improving Student Health and Academic Achievement

Students feel more connected to their school when they believe that the adults and other students at school not only care about how well they are learning, but also care about them as individuals. Young people who feel connected to school are more likely to succeed academically and make healthy choices.

All school staff, including teachers, principals, counselors, social workers, nurses, aides, librarians, coaches, nutrition personnel, and others, can have an important and positive influence on students' lives. The time, interest, attention, and emotional support they give students can help them learn and stay healthy. This fact sheet provides guidance for fostering school connectedness and creating a more welcoming and supportive school environment for all students.

Why is school connectedness important for your students?

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





What steps can teachers and school staff take to increase school connectedness?

School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth (Division of Adolescent and School Health, CDC, 2009) summarizes the research on school connectedness and describes six science-based strategies that can foster it. The chart below outlines those six strategies and lists specific actions under each that you can take to enhance the connections at your school.

Strategies and Actions Teachers and Other School Staff Can Take to Increase School Connectedness

ACTIONS	Strategy 1	Create processes that engage students, families, and communities and that facilitate academic achievement.
		• Brainstorm and get involved in taking steps to improve the school climate and students' sense of connectedness to school. Involve diverse groups of school staff, students, and families in these efforts. • Help plan school policies and activities with teams of students, faculty, staff, and parents. • Encourage students to talk openly with school staff and parents. Involve students in parent-teacher conferences, teacher evaluation, curriculum selection committees, and school health teams.
	Strategy 2	Provide opportunities for families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.
		• Engage parents in meaningful ways in school activities, such as school health teams, tutoring, mentoring, or assisting with grant writing. Identify special opportunities for parents with limited resources or scheduling difficulties to participate in or contribute to classroom or extracurricular activities. • Seek opportunities for parents and students to share their culture with others in school. • Communicate regularly with families about school and classroom activities and policies by e-mail, letters, or updates on the school's Web site. • Translate materials into languages spoken in students' homes. • Establish regular meetings with parents to discuss their children's behavior, grades, and accomplishments. Request interpreters as needed to ensure clear communication and to avoid misunderstandings arising from language barriers.
	Strategy 3	Provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills they need to engage in school.
		• Provide opportunities for students to improve their interpersonal, stress management, and decision-making skills. • Foster critical and reflective thinking, problem solving, and working effectively with others. • Allow and encourage students to identify, label, express, and assess their feelings. • Use classroom and extracurricular activities to explore and discuss empathy, personal strengths, fairness, kindness, and social responsibility. • Use interactive, experiential activities, and help students personalize the information they learn. • Encourage students to be involved in service learning, peer tutoring, classroom chores, teacher assistance, extracurricular activities, sports programs, and creative projects. Provide public recognition for students' accomplishments in these areas. • Correct inaccurate perceptions about what are "normal" behaviors among students. For example, compare the number of students who actually smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol with the perception that "everyone is doing it". • Help students identify their career and personal goals and map out the steps they can take to meet them.

Strategy
4

Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.

- **Clearly communicate** expectations for learning and behavior that are developmentally appropriate and applied equitably. **Describe** the goals of the lesson and relate them to your students' lives and the real world.
- **Ensure** lessons are linked to standards and that student learning is sequential and builds upon prior lessons.
- **Be flexible** with instructional strategies to allow for teachable moments and personalization of lessons.
- **Use** student-centered pedagogy and appropriate classroom management and discipline strategies that meet students' diverse needs and learning styles.
- **Engage** students in appropriate leadership positions and decision-making processes in the classroom and school.
- **Establish** a reward system for both academic and extracurricular achievements, but also **encourage** the intrinsic rewards of learning and excelling in extracurricular programs.
- **Fairly enforce** reasonable and consistent disciplinary policies.
- **Encourage** open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints.
- **Advocate** for class-size reduction to ensure more time for individualized assistance.

Strategy
5

Participate in professional development opportunities to enhance your abilities to meet the diverse needs of your students.

- **Further** develop your expertise in child and adolescent development, and **share** lessons learned with other school staff to increase understanding about the needs of the students.
- **Participate** in professional development opportunities on implementing required school curricula, using effective teaching methods, and organizing the classroom and school to promote a positive environment.
- **Attend** workshops and trainings on communicating effectively with and involving parents in school activities, and **share** ideas for involving parents with other staff at your school.
- **Request** materials, time, resources, and support to use the skills you learn in training.
- **Form** learning teams to observe experienced teachers who effectively manage classrooms and facilitate group work.
- **Coach** or **mentor** other teachers and staff to develop effective teaching techniques and classroom management strategies, and **engage** in creative problem-solving.

Strategy
6

Promote open communication, trust, and caring among school staff, families, and community partners.

- **Communicate** expectations, values, and norms that support positive health and academic behaviors to your peers throughout the school community.
- **Provide** opportunities for students of all levels to interact, develop friendships, and engage in teamwork.
- **Support** student clubs and activities that promote a positive school climate, such as gay-straight alliances and multi-cultural clubs.
- **Create opportunities** for students to partner with and help adults, such as internships and service learning projects.
- **Commit to** and **model** respectful behavior toward principals, other teachers, and school staff.
- **Challenge** all school staff to greet each student by name.
- **Encourage** teachers, counselors, health service professionals, coaches, and other school staff to build stronger relationships with students who are experiencing academic or personal issues.
- **Request** access to a school counselor, psychologist, or other expert for consultations or student referrals when needed.





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 be considered when planning for action to improve school connectedness?

A team effort is needed to improve school connectedness. Your team should involve those in the school along with individuals, groups, and organizations outside the school. Your team needs to be committed and involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating actions that can improve students’ health and education outcomes.

Some actions will require small changes in how your school works and can be done easily. Others might require more time, money, or administrative change. Schools and school districts should determine which actions are most feasible and appropriate, based on 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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