

insights

June
2017

The Power of School Connectedness

Even as students, families, and teachers make plans to disconnect from school activities for the summer break, a recent study reminds us how powerful school connectedness is for the health and well-being of students. In the March, 2017 issue of *School Psychology Quarterly*, researchers Marraccini and Brier reported on a meta-analysis that examined whether greater school connectedness is related to a reduced risk of suicide. Their finding, that school connectedness is indeed a protective factor that reduces the risk of youth suicide, adds to a growing literature that demonstrates the many positive effects of a student feeling connected to his or her school.

School connectedness has been defined as “the belief by students that adults in the school community care about students’ learning and about them as individuals.” Barber and Schluterman (2008) operationalized the concept, offering the following four components of **school connectedness**:

1. **Social affiliations**, including positive school relationships, feeling cared about and/or respected by adults at school, and perceiving availability to interact with adults at school.
2. **School belonging**, including feeling part of the school, feeling safe in school, and feeling happy at school.
3. **Attitude about school importance**, including caring about school and trying to do one’s best at school.
4. **Supportive learning environment**, including clear and appropriate expectations, and perceived fairness in how rules are applied.

In June, 2003 an interdisciplinary group of education leaders convened to examine the available research findings, and issued what has become known as “The Wingspread Declaration.” This document asserts that there is strong evidence that school connectedness promotes improved classroom engagement and educational motivation; improves attendance; decreases bullying, violence and disruptive behavior; decreases substance abuse; and decreases involvement in early sexual behavior. The document also recommends that to foster school connectedness, schools should maintain high and supportive academic expectations, fairly apply just disciplinary policies, build trusting school relationships, support high expectations from family, and ensure that students feel connected to at least one adult in the school.

Teachers and administrators considering goals for the coming academic year might look for opportunities to foster school connectedness at both the district and classroom levels:

- Create problem-solving teams to promote activities that increase student and adult interpersonal interactions to ensure that every student feels connected to at least one supportive adult.
- Foster student ownership of school policies and facilities by including students in policy creation/revision work groups and facility-preservation activities (e.g. beautification projects like gardening, displaying art work; classroom decoration and maintenance tasks).
- Create opportunities for staff to interact with students outside of the classroom (e.g. in the hallways, the lunchroom, in student clubs and other activities).
- Foster a sense of belonging in the classroom, e.g. by establishing team names and activities that are unique to that classroom.
- Identify at-risk students for special services staff so that adult mentors can be assigned.
- Create student buddy programs, within classes and across grades, to foster connection and older/younger student mentoring.
- Engage families in events and activities, and offer parents research-based, concrete tools to foster motivation and the belief that school is important.

Resource:

Marraccini, M.E. and Brier, M.F. (2017). School Connectedness and Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors: A Systematic Meta-Analysis. *School Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 5–21.

Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, (Sept. 2004) *Journal of School Health*, Vol. 74, No. 7, 233-234.

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