

Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action

Positive Developmental Relationships

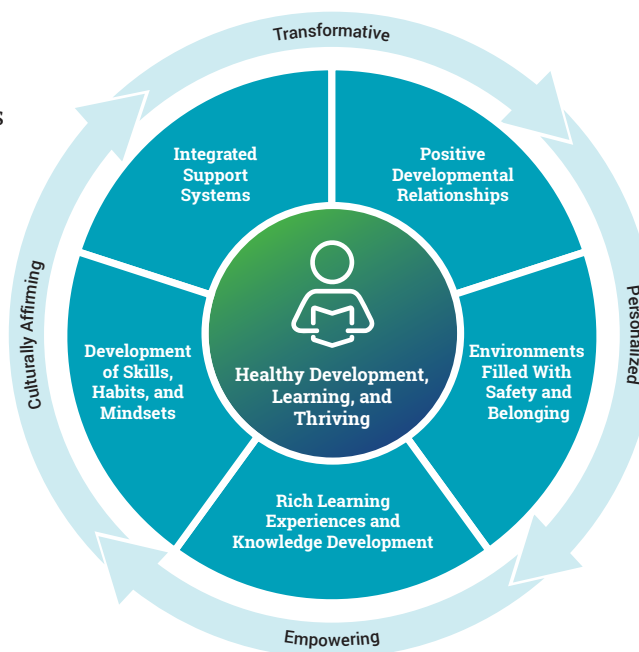
Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children

in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment
and in association with the SoLD Alliance

Emerging science tells us an optimistic story about the potential of all learners. There is burgeoning knowledge about the biological systems that govern development, including deeper understandings of brain structure and wiring and their connections to other systems and the external world. This research tells us that brain development and life experiences are interdependent and malleable—that is, the settings and conditions individuals are exposed to and immersed in affect how they grow throughout their lives. This knowledge about the brain and development, coupled with a growing knowledge base from educational research, provides us with an opportunity to design systems for educational transformations that advance social justice and enable each and every young person to learn and thrive.

This playbook, *Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action*, seizes this opportunity. It suggests a set of engineering principles that build on the knowledge we have today to nurture innovations, build new models, and enable policies that advance change. It provides an overarching framework—the Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design—that can guide the transformation of learning settings for children and adolescents and illustrate the ways that practitioners can implement and integrate structures and practices that support learning and development for all students. That framework includes:

- Positive Developmental Relationships
- Environments Filled With Safety and Belonging
- Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development
- Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets
- Integrated Support Systems



This section is part of the larger playbook and focuses on how educators, school leaders, and district officials can strengthen the structures and practices that foster positive developmental relationships. These design principles do not suggest a single design or model for building relationships in schools. Rather, the desired result is to spur robust innovations, new collaborations aligned with the resources for positive growth found in young people’s communities and cultures, and a commitment to the redesign of our education and learning systems in learning settings. The full playbook [can be found online here](#).

Positive Developmental Relationships

Student-Led Conferences at Gateway Middle School

In a 6th-grade classroom at Gateway Middle School, located on a steep hill in San Francisco, Anisha and her advisor sit next to each other across from Anisha's parents for their first student-led conference. The advisor explains that she will not be talking during the conference and that this presentation will instead be led by the student. Anisha's parents look a little surprised but are eager to hear what their daughter will share. Anisha starts by reading a letter that she's written to her parents: "Dear Mom and Dad, First, I want to thank you for coming today," and she looks quickly at her notes to make sure she's reciting the welcome letter just as she has prepared. Her parents patiently smile and nod as their daughter reads; every so often Anisha peeks up from her paper and smiles.

Launching into the heart of the conference, Anisha pops open a large three-ring binder and tells her parents what she is most proud of, what she found most challenging, and how she has grown from her work in her humanities, science, learning seminar, and art classes. Next, Anisha reflects on her contribution to the school community and on her overall goals for the quarter, saying:

This year I have contributed to the school community by building stronger friendships, creating shared spaces with my peers, participating in class more regularly, conducting community service, and volunteering to do small classroom jobs such as passing out papers. In the beginning of the year, I didn't raise my hand to share my thoughts during class, but now I participate and share out and speak up, especially when we're doing work in small groups. I have grown so much from the start of the school year when I was really nervous to speak up.

Using sentence stems generated by her advisor to scaffold the flow of the conference, Anisha explains, "Resources that helped me feel more confident were my math teacher and my table group because they encouraged me and offered me some strategies to use, such as setting a goal to raise my hand once per class and to share ideas with my teachers before or after class even if I wasn't able to speak up publicly." And, finally, she ends with, "This goal in life and school is important because if I don't learn to participate in my own learning, I will never get over feeling nervous and I won't grow."

Anisha's parents sit across from her, beaming with pride, and politely inquire if they can now interject with questions.

This web of strong relationships is a cornerstone of the school's academic success. Gateway Public School serves a diverse group of about 800 students, most of them students of color from low-income families, in both a middle and a high school. The school was founded to serve students with disabilities in an inclusion model and continues to serve a disproportionate number of such students. About half of incoming students read below grade level when they start 6th grade. Because of its strong system of supports, the high school has a graduation rate of 98%,¹ and 96% of students have matriculated to college since the high school was founded in 1998.²

Source: Adapted from Cook-Harvey, C. M., Flook, L., Efland, E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). *Teaching for powerful learning: Lessons from Gateway Public Schools*. Learning Policy Institute.

Overview of Positive Developmental Relationships

The student-led conference profiled in the vignette above is just one of the many ways that Gateway Middle School in San Francisco fosters close connections among students, teachers, and families as partners in the learning process. Anisha's experience and the science of learning and development converge on the essential understanding that positive developmental relationships are the active ingredient in any effective child-serving system.

Positive relationships enable children and adolescents to manage stress, ignite their brains, and fuel the connections that support the development of the complex skills and competencies necessary for learning success and engagement. Such relationships also simultaneously promote well-being, positive identity development, and students' belief in their own abilities.

Parents from all backgrounds want their children to attend schools where their children are well known, cared for, respected, and empowered to learn. Families with financial privilege often choose private school settings for their children that provide small, personal learning communities where their children will be known and where relationships are prioritized. All parents hope that their children will be able to feel safe and valued at school, and all children deserve such contexts for learning. Recent brain research suggests that parents are right: Secure relationships build healthy brains that are necessary for development and learning.

Having secure relationships at school does not just mean that children are treated kindly by adults. It also means that students are nurtured through those relationships to develop independence, competency, and agency—that they grow to become confident and self-directed learners and people. As we saw in Anisha's student-led family conference, Anisha is developing the reflective skills to understand and lead her own learning, to assess her strengths and weaknesses, and to create goals. Anisha's skills and growth mindset are cultivated by a web of positive relationships that connect her with her teacher, her parents, and her school community.

These kinds of [relationships](#) provide the avenue to learning and growth and buffer individuals' negative experiences and stress. A strong web of relationships between and among students, peers, families, and educators, both in the school and in the community, represent a primary process through which all members of the community can thrive.

Why Positive Developmental Relationships Are Important: What the Science Says

Human relationships are the essential ingredient that catalyzes healthy development and learning. Relationships that are reciprocal, attuned, culturally responsive, and trustful are a positive developmental force in the lives of children. For example, when an infant reaches out for interaction through eye contact, babble, or gesture, a parent's ability to accurately interpret and respond to their baby's cues affects the wiring of brain circuits that support skill development. These reciprocal and dynamic interactions literally shape the architecture of the developing brain and support the integration of social, affective, and cognitive circuits and processes, not only in infancy but throughout the school years and beyond. When children interact positively with teachers and peers, qualitative changes occur in their developing brains that establish pathways for lifelong learning and adaptation.

Adult relationships best support students when they are attuned and responsive to all aspects of the child’s experience, including—importantly—their cultural experiences. All children need to feel that they belong and are valued in their classroom and school community. If children experience anxiety about whether they will be valued for who they are, which may accompany stereotype threats associated with students’ identities (race, class, language background, immigration status, dis/ability, sexual orientation, or other marginalized status), the cognitive load this creates undermines their achievement. When educators build cultural competence—including their knowledge of and respect for students’ cultural backgrounds and personal experiences—research shows that they are better able to understand the verbal and nonverbal communication of students and respond appropriately, helping all students to be respected and heard, and supporting stronger achievement.

Supportive relationships in childhood and adolescence have an important protective effect against the impacts of stress and trauma. Research has found that a stable relationship with at least one committed adult can buffer the potentially negative effects of even serious adversity. These relationships, which provide emotional security and reduce anxiety, are characterized by consistency, empathetic communications, modeling of productive social behaviors, and the ability to accurately perceive and respond to a child’s needs. Two research reviews including over 400 studies on positive school climate have found that the elements of positive school climate that contribute the most to increased academic achievement were teacher–student relationships, including warmth, acceptance, and teacher support.⁵

Supportive relationships, which provide emotional security and reduce anxiety, are characterized by consistency, empathetic communications, modeling of productive social behaviors, and the ability to accurately perceive and respond to a child’s needs.

Relationships are multidirectional and interdependent. As a child is influenced by other people, they are also capable of changing the beliefs and actions of others as well. If a child learns how to communicate effectively, this shapes the ways others respond to them. This extends to the multiple relationships in a student’s life. For instance, if a child’s parents communicate with the child’s teachers, this interaction may influence the child’s development. When relationships are structured to be mutually reinforcing and multidirectional, like those at Gateway Middle School, positive effects on development are the outcome.

Developmental relationships allow children to grow in trust, competence, and agency. That relationships are important is not new information to educators, families, or researchers. Relationships engage children in ways that help them define who they are, what they can become, and how and why they are important to other people. However, not all relationships are developmentally supportive. In a developmental relationship, the emotional connection is joined with adult guidance that enables children to learn skills, grow in their competence and confidence, and become more able to perform tasks on their own and take on new challenges. Children increasingly use their own agency to develop their curiosity and capacities for self-direction. As developmental relationships enable the young person to grow, the balance of power shifts toward the student, as shown in the vignette with Anisha. Looked at this way, developmental relationships can both buffer the impact of stress and provide a pathway to motivation, self-efficacy, learning, and further growth.

What Can Schools Do to Foster Positive Developmental Relationships?

The science of learning and development shows that warm, caring, consistent, trustful teacher–student relationships matter for the activation of student motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement. Such relationships with nurturing and responsive educators promote positive development and successful learning. This is particularly true when teachers are explicit about their expectations and belief in students. Together, these things contribute to an enhanced school experience for the entire community, as students acquire greater social competence and increased ability and willingness to take on new challenges. School designs that enable these kinds of responsive, reciprocal relationships with caring adults provide the foundation for healthy development and the attainment of holistic goals for children. (See Appendix B for “Goals for Youth Learning and Development.”)

When schools focus on strengthening relationships, they create the conditions for raising academic standards by giving students more challenging and meaningful work and, at the same time, enabling them to engage the work productively in the context of those relationships. With scaffolding and support, students’ social and emotional growth and character development can become an integral part of academic learning, and students can be empowered to become more self-directed as learners.

When schools focus on strengthening relationships, they create the conditions for raising academic standards by giving students more challenging and meaningful work and, at the same time, enabling them to engage the work productively in the context of those relationships.

Schools that have been redesigned to foster positive developmental relationships have found new organizational approaches that enable school staff, educators, students, and families to know each other well in a context of trust and collaboration. They also enable students to become active participants in their relationships and in the creation of their learning environment and experiences. These schools adopt both structures and practices that allow for effective caring and the building of community. These include at least the following:

- **Structures that enable the development of continuous, secure relationships** and allow teachers to know children well, as well as opportunities among adults for collaboration toward shared goals. These structures include:
 - small schools and small learning communities;
 - advisory systems that create small family units within schools;
 - looping that allows educators to be with the same children for more than one year;
 - time and protocols for home visits and other outreach that connects families and educators;
 - staff collaboration time and structures; and
 - opportunities for shared decision-making.

- **Practices that allow educators to engage in trust-building and collaboration** with students, families, and each other to achieve shared practice around a developmental approach to learning and development. These practices include:
 - behaviors that communicate respect, caring, and valuing of students and families;
 - pedagogies that allow educators to develop deep knowledge about their students, their talents and interests, their families, and their cultural contexts;
 - classroom and schoolwide strategies that counteract stereotype threat through cultural affirmation and reinforcement of students’ capacities; and
 - collaboration skills for building productive relationships among staff and with families.

In many schools, creating strong relationships may require reimagining and restructuring key parts of the school designs inherited from an educational system put into place nearly 100 years ago. Large comprehensive schools in which teachers see 150 students a day in 45-minute periods provide little opportunity for teachers to come to know all of those students well. Many students can go unnoticed. Those experiencing challenges or trauma may have no opportunity to get help from a caring adult.

Fortunately, many schools have been redesigned to center relationships, and a number of school networks have been established that have adopted similar features, which they now help other schools to adopt. Evidence shows that these redesigned schools have stronger attendance, achievement, and graduation rates than others serving similar students.⁴ (See “Where to Go for More Resources” at the end of this section). One such network with a strong record of school success is the [Institute for Student Achievement](#), a national nonprofit organization that partners with districts to redesign high schools. Among the strategies adopted by the network schools—also common among other redesigned schools—are:

- **Small school sizes**, typically 300 to 500 students.
- **Advisors** assigned to each student for multiple years who serve as an advocate; connect with families; and hold advisory classes, like family groups, that provide academic support as well as social and emotional learning opportunities.
- **Teaching teams** in which staff work in groups to develop shared norms and practices so that a cohort of interdisciplinary teachers (English, math, science, and social studies) teaches the same students. In some schools these teachers loop with the students to the next grade.
- **Explicit relationship building** leveraged through advisories and teaching teams.
- **Attention to student voice and needs** through student engagement in research and student-initiated projects on topics of concern.
- **Student leadership** in advisories and clubs.
- **Outreach to families** that includes frequent communication with parents in multiple ways.

Another school network that combines these types of relationship-building practices, [EL Education](#) (formerly Expeditionary Learning), offers a curriculum focused on inquiry learning in English language arts, combined with social and emotional learning and character development. Schools implementing the EL Education model across the nation, typically serving students of color in low-income communities, outpace district and state averages on state assessments and graduation rates.⁵

There is no single way to achieve these goals, but district and school leaders can consider a variety of structures and practices that can enable, rather than undermine, positive relationships.

Below, we describe the structures and practices schools can implement to design schools that foster positive developmental relationships, organized into three areas: (1) personalizing relationships with students, (2) supporting relationships among staff, and (3) building relationships with families.

Personalizing Relationships With Students

“[The teachers] treat us like people with emotions. We have real relationships with our teachers. We want to do our work because we care about our teachers.”

—New Tech High School Student⁶

Continuity, consistency, and trust are key principles when designing structures and practices to build relationships with students. Continuity is especially important for children who have minimal continuity outside of school. Discontinuity in relationships is, in itself, stressful and can be counterproductive—especially for young people who have experienced disruption in their home or community environments. In addition, it is important to create time and space for supportive relationships that are accessible to students and sustainable by adults. Structures found to be effective in this regard include:

- looping,
- advisory systems,
- block scheduling,
- longer grade spans, and
- small school size and/or small learning communities.

Looping

Looping teachers with the same students for more than one year enables continuity in relationships and stronger achievement gains.

Looping can occur when an elementary teacher works with the same students in 4th and 5th grade, for example, or when a secondary teacher has the same students for 9th- and 10th-grade English language arts. When teachers stay with the same students for more than one year through looping, they can come to know the students and families well, uncover how students learn, build trust, and gain time for productive instruction, since effective instructional strategies that address children’s individual needs can carry over from one year to the next. Furthermore, the reduced anxiety, understanding of the classroom context, and heightened trust enable more productive learning. The strong relationships and deep knowledge of student learning supported by these longer-term relationships between adults and children can substantially improve achievement, especially for lower-achieving students,⁷ and can also boost student and teacher attendance while lowering disciplinary incidents and suspensions, grade retention, and special education referrals.⁸

Teachers in such settings report a heightened sense of efficacy, while parents report feeling more respected and more comfortable reaching out to the school for assistance. As a teacher at Benjamin Franklin Intermediate School in Daly City, CA, noted:

Through looping, I've had my students in math and science class for 2 years now. What strikes me most is the progress of students who often get lost in the system—the shy ones who now ask questions because they trust me, the unmotivated ones who now come in for help because they know I'll be supportive, and the defiant ones who now recognize that I'm an ally who cares for them. These are the kids who need adults' support the most, but it takes them the longest to develop relationships. Looping gives us the time to make these relationships happen.⁹

While looping has been most often used in elementary schools, it is also found in some high schools. In the [Internationals Network](#), a successful school model for newcomers who are new English learners, an interdisciplinary team of four core content area teachers stays with a group of 80–100 students for 2 years, with a counselor attached to the cohort.¹⁰ These personalized supports are especially important in the Internationals schools, where as many as one third of students arrive as unaccompanied minors and struggle to manage housing, food, health care, and other basic supports, as well as learning the language and customs of a new country (as illustrated in this vignette of [Oakland International High School](#)).

Advisory systems

“Our advisors are really cool; they make sure we do the work. If they see that I am trying to get it done, they help me prioritize. They don't let people fail.”

—June Jordan School for Equity Student¹¹

Advisory systems can ensure that each student has an in-school “family” and a strong relationship with a caring adult who is an advocate, supporter, and link to a student’s family.

In effective advisory systems, each teacher advises and serves as an advocate for a small group of students (usually 15–20), often over 2 to 4 years. Teachers facilitate an advisory class that meets regularly to support academic progress, teach social and emotional skills and strategies, and create a community of students who support one another. In a distributed counseling function, advisors support students on academic and nonacademic issues that arise and serve as the point person with other faculty teaching the same student. The advisor functions as a bridge between student, school, and home so that students are provided the supports they need in a coherent way that allows them to navigate school in a productive and positive manner. Many studies finding positive effects of small schools or learning communities note the importance of advisories in enabling these effects.¹²

For advisories to be effective, they should occur all or most days of the week and be supported with curriculum (for example, for social and emotional learning) and/or other shared protocols for advising. In secondary schools, they should replace a course in the teacher's normal course load, rather than being an add-on, and should be supported with professional development. When possible, English learners (ELs) should be paired with advisory staff who speak their native language. It is also important that advisors be well versed in any special needs of their advisees, including individualized education plans (IEPs), and be in regular communication with case managers.

Advisory Models

The EL Education advisory model, called “Crew,” is cited by students and teachers as a primary reason for the EL network’s academic and college-readiness success. At the elementary level, Crew meets in a circle at the beginning and end of every day and can also meet to address issues during the day. At the secondary level, Crew meets every day for a full period, supporting academic habits and mindsets; college readiness and the college application process; social and emotional health; and courageous conversations about difficult topics such as discrimination due to race, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation, and body type. It also engages in team building and service work.

Phoenix Union High School District in Arizona has pioneered an “Every Student Every Day” approach to advising, in which every student in the district’s 21 high schools is “connected to a caring adult who monitors the teen’s progress, attendance, and social-emotional well-being.”¹³ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students connected with advisors daily, and when brick-and-mortar schooling closed in March 2020, the district recruited administrators and school board members into the advisory program to be able to reach out to all students at home for wellness check calls. District advisors documented their calls and either provided resources or connected families to other programs or community organizations for assistance meeting their needs.

Block scheduling

Block scheduling creates more time for teachers to collaborate and build relationships with students.

Block scheduling is the practice of having fewer, longer class periods in a given day to reduce teachers’ overall pupil load and lengthen time for instruction. For example, instead of six 45-minute class periods, schools might schedule only three 90-minute classes each day. Each teacher sees half as many students, and students see fewer teachers. This smaller pupil load allows teachers to provide more attention to each student and to engage in more in-depth teaching practices. Block scheduling has been found to support improved behavior and achievement for students, including higher grades and higher rates of course completions, 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. When a school adopts block scheduling for part or most of the day, it is important that teachers be given ample time and professional learning support for transforming their pedagogies. Longer lessons are effective when teachers make good use of the time by bringing in active challenges, problem-solving, hands-on work, group work, presentations of thinking and learning, and synthesis of learning. During a transition to block scheduling, it is helpful to have teachers share their learning and best practices with each other as they find good ways to engage students with more complex thinking and work.

Longer grade spans

Longer grade spans allow for closer, longer-term relationships and smoother school transitions.

Schools with longer grade spans (e.g., k–8 or 6–12) are also found to be more effective in supporting student outcomes than schools with shorter grade spans, as they help to establish and build upon close relationships among and between school staff, students, and families. Many studies have

found that school transitions have a negative effect on student achievement: In particular, the transition to middle school at 5th or 6th grade has been found to decrease achievement in reading and math and, moreover, sharply increase the odds of dropping out.¹⁴ These results are consistent across multiple states, as well as in urban, suburban, and rural areas. This may be in part the result of the transition itself and in part the result of the departmentalized structures that many middle schools adopt, which create larger pupil loads for teachers and more disruption for students. At a vulnerable time in young adolescence, when children should be developing greater competence and confidence to support their growing autonomy, they may flounder when placed into an environment that reduces their opportunities for attachment and introduces them to the system of tracking. The tracking system is known to cause teachers to draw comparisons between students and to cause students to draw comparisons with their peers, comparisons that include negative attributions about competence and intelligence.

Small school size and/or small learning communities

Small school size or small learning communities within larger schools allow students to be well known and allow educators to create a community within the school with shared norms and practices.

Reviews of research about school size have consistently found that students benefit when they are in smaller settings where they can be well known, and these effects are strongest for students with the greatest economic and academic needs.¹⁵ These settings include smaller schools (typically 300–500 students) as well as small learning communities created within large school buildings, where staff and students work together in smaller units that function as close-knit communities (see “Designing for Relationships: Houses and Cohorts,” below). More intimate settings allow educators to more easily develop shared norms and practices and to create a community within the school in which caring is a product of individuals knowing each other in multiple ways. Such environments also allow more students to be engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities and to take on leadership opportunities, which promotes greater confidence and agency.¹⁶ Multiple studies have found these features are most effective when combined with other elements that personalize learning—such as small classes, advisories, and block scheduling—so that relationships are a principle embedded in the school culture.¹⁷

Designing for Relationships: Houses and Cohorts

The house system was a traditional feature of schools in England in the 19th century, when students were divided into subunits called “houses” to which teachers were also assigned. (Think of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, the four houses at Harry Potter’s Hogwarts.) American public schools have reintroduced the [house system](#), a smaller learning community within a larger building, as a way to help students feel more connected and to develop a sense of belonging. Some schools that serve students who have had their [education interrupted due to homelessness](#), mobility, or family circumstances also divide their students into smaller learning communities to provide them with a consistent set of experiences and relationships as well as the opportunity to personalize learning.

Vista High School, a large comprehensive high school serving the needs of a diverse small suburban and rural community north of San Diego, CA, has redesigned to combine block scheduling with a house system. The freshman class was broken into six houses of 100 to 130 students who shared a set of four teachers to cover core subjects and one special education teacher. Each house was located in a dedicated area of the Vista High School campus so teachers and students could have space to build stronger positive relationships (including relationships between students, between students and teachers, and among teachers within the house structure). Each team defined how spaces in and around their classroom and house could be used to meet the learning needs of students and reimagined how the grouping of students and grouping of teachers within that space and time could positively impact student learning. Despite the high proportion of socioeconomically disadvantaged students attending Vista (over 70%), the school's graduation rates exceed the state average.¹⁸

Source: Adapted from Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (with Badrinarayan, A., Cardichon, J., Cookson, P. W., Jr., Griffith, M., Klevan, S., Maier, A., Martinez, M., Melnick, H., Truong, N., & Wojcikiewicz, S.). (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: Learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute.

An example of a high school that successfully underwent a multipronged redesign to convert from a traditional high school to one centered on relationships is Hillsdale High School. Hillsdale High School, now known as a high-performing district secondary school in the San Francisco Bay Area, serves a student body that is more ethnically and economically diverse than the neighborhood in which it is situated, comprising predominantly students of color and more than 40% that speak a language other than English at home.¹⁹ Before undertaking a 3-year conversion process in 2002, Hillsdale was a traditional, large, comprehensive public high school that was both less diverse and less academically successful than it is now as a relationship-centered school. Now, Hillsdale uses looping, cohorts, advisories, and interdisciplinary team structures within a house system to help achieve personalization within a student body of nearly 1,500 students whose academic performance has strongly improved.²⁰ Below, we summarize Hillsdale's process of redesigning for relationships.

Redesigning for Relationships: Hillsdale High School

In summer 2005, Hillsdale entered the final year of a 3-year process of converting from a single comprehensive high school serving approximately 1,200 students to three relatively autonomous, vertically aligned small learning communities (SLCs) serving 400 students each. Each SLC—Florence, Kyoto, and Marrakech, named after medieval centers of learning consistent with Hillsdale's knight mascot—has a Junior Institute for the 9th and 10th grades and a Senior Institute for 11th and 12th grades.

Hillsdale phased in one grade level per year, beginning with the freshman class in 2003–04. All freshman and sophomore students in the Junior Institute (except for beginning English speakers and special education students in day classes) are currently taking their four academic core classes (English, social studies, math, and science) from a team of teachers who share a collaboration period in addition to each teacher's individual preparation period. Most special education and English language development teachers also serve their students within the house system. (Newcomers and special education students in day classes experience other personalized structures.) All teachers in the three houses also have an advisory group of 25 students with whom they meet regularly and for whom they serve as the main point of contact and advocate. Math, English, and social studies

teachers loop with students in their classes and advisory for 2 years. Hillsdale reduced class sizes, added the collaboration period, and hired additional teachers through a reallocation of existing staff, additional district support, and temporary funding through a federal SLC grant.

In the Senior Institute, which was implemented during the 2005–06 school year, all juniors take their core classes (math, physics, social science, and English) with teams of four teachers who have a shared common collaboration period in addition to their individual preparation periods. In each house, the four core teachers also serve as advisors to the junior cohort and teach an advisory period focused on portfolio work and college preparation. Advisors, English and social studies teachers, and, to the degree possible and appropriate, math and science teachers loop with students into their senior year. Although electives are outside of the house structure, physical education and health teachers are attached to or affiliated with houses to help them connect and plan with core teachers. Hillsdale implemented a seven-period day in 2005–06, though students generally still take six periods of classes, in order to better facilitate access to electives. The goal is for the four core academic teachers to have autonomy over their time within a daily 4-hour block.

Hillsdale has used its structural changes to foster teacher collaboration across subject areas, chip away at student tracking, and use performance-based assessments to help all students achieve at high levels. With a long-term process of change, Hillsdale has made significant changes to the school's structure and allocation of resources to deliver on its vision of a more personalized, equitable, and rigorous education for all its students. These changes have yielded positive and powerful outcomes. The school has eliminated low-track science classes and enrolls all students in 9th-grade biology and 10th-grade chemistry. As a result, 3 years into the redesign, 100% of African American and Latino/a 9th-grade students were enrolled in biology, compared to only 18% in 2002–03. Thus, compared to other schools in the district, Hillsdale was enrolling a far greater percentage of African American and Latino/a students in biology and chemistry than other schools in the district. In addition, Hillsdale's performance on District Common Assessments was equivalent to that of schools that enrolled only high-track students in these courses. (See this [video](#) for more insight into Hillsdale's redesign process.)

Now, thanks to the school's redesign, Hillsdale Principal Jeff Gilbert says, "You know every family, and you know every student. You stop dealing with them in these sorts of large, abstract cohorts, and allow for much more individualized responses."²¹

Source: Adapted from School Redesign Network. (2005). *Windows in Conversion case study: Hillsdale High School*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University.

Practices to strengthen relationships between educators and students

Personalizing structures that enable students to be known are most effective when they are joined with practices that build positive school culture, community, and trust.

Structures that enable students to be known and valued by each other and by adults provide a foundation for healthy academic and personal growth. But structures alone are not sufficient. They must be joined to a schoolwide commitment to build a healthy learning community in which adults and children value and model positive behavior, exhibiting habits like respect, responsibility, courage, compassion, and integrity (see "Environments Filled With Safety and Belonging" for more on building a caring school community).

Practices that build a positive school culture and community. The deliberate development of classroom learning communities that create and strengthen relationships is critical. These practices may include classroom meetings, check-ins at the beginning of class to see how students are doing, and celebrations of community events and accomplishments, as well as routines for how to work in groups productively, engage in respectful discussions, and resolve conflicts. They may also include regular student–teacher conferences as well as student–teacher–family meetings. In collaborative communities, members feel personally connected to one another and committed to each other’s growth and learning. Teachers can learn about the strengths and needs of students as well as their families’ funds of knowledge through regular check-ins, conferencing, journaling, close observation of students and their work, and connections to parents as partners (see “Building Relationships With Families” later in this section). These practices can foster trust and alignment among students, families, and staff, as described in the following sections.

Teachers can learn about the strengths and needs of students as well as their families’ funds of knowledge through regular check-ins, conferencing, journaling, close observation of students and their work, and connections to parents as partners.

Practices that build trust. Turnaround for Children has built a [continuum of strategies](#) for building trust that focuses on several interrelated dimensions of relationship building:

- *The quality of interactions:* All students predictably experience interactions with adults that are marked by interest, inquiry, support, affirmation, and empathy. Schoolwide prioritization of relationship building results in frequent reflection, collaboration, and continuous improvement around the quality of adult–student interactions.
- *Personalized understandings and reflections:* Adults get to know all students as whole individuals by actively listening, asking questions, and providing opportunities for students to speak about their interests, experiences, and beliefs, recognizing the culturally grounded experiences of each student as a foundation on which to build knowledge and connections within and beyond the classroom.
- *Choice and voice:* Meaningful opportunities for student choice and voice are regularly and seamlessly integrated into classroom routines, structures, and practices (e.g., providing a choice of how to practice a skill or demonstrate mastery, providing input on a classroom policy). All students are given increasing levels of responsibility and autonomy as they grow, as adults support them through both successes and setbacks. Students lead conversations and projects, give feedback to adults, and co-construct classroom and school culture.

Practices that seek to ensure all students thrive. Particularly in large secondary schools, it is possible for students to “hide” while they struggle with academic or emotional issues. Even in elementary schools and small secondary schools, it can be challenging to track the struggles that students are experiencing internally or in their home lives. To address this, schools use a range of strategies to catch students before things unravel. Pairing older students with younger students (e.g., 5th-graders with 1st-graders; high school seniors with freshmen) as reading buddies or mentors can build relationships that are positive for both. In some schools, students who are

struggling with emotional or behavioral challenges are connected with a caring adult—a counselor, social worker, nurse, or aide, or even a school custodian or administrator—to spend time, not as a disciplinary consequence but as a therapeutic experience (i.e., getting some love and attention).

Many schools also create ways to review their progress regularly to determine strategies for supporting students who may be struggling with academics, attendance, or behavior—or who may have experienced a traumatic event. When students are flagged for high concern, the first step is to determine who on the staff knows that student well (e.g., their home life, health, interests) and then to learn what is needed to wrap around that student with supports. Often, teaching teams meet for child reviews to support problem-solving and to figure out the best outreach and resources for individual needs.

Supporting Relationships Among Staff

A positive and supportive staff culture is the foundation of a school climate that enables positive developmental relationships. Student culture follows staff culture. If staff are not respectful, compassionate, and inclusive with each other, if they do not model a growth mindset in their learning and a commitment to equity and social justice, how can we expect students to display these habits? Recent research makes clear that mindset interventions with students are effective when those students have teachers who model productive mindsets; when they do not, the positive effects of the intervention tend to evaporate.²² Furthermore, research on teacher effectiveness shows that teachers become more effective over time in collegial settings where they have opportunities to collaborate with and learn from one another.²³

This means that school leaders need to prioritize structures and practices that build a healthy professional learning community for staff, enabling staff to strengthen relationships that support each other in their work and to continue their professional and personal growth. It also requires ongoing efforts to be sure everyone on the staff feels respected, heard, and valued.

Schools in the United States often need new structures that provide opportunities for staff to develop collective expertise about students and a shared developmental approach. Expertise in teaching—as in many other fields—comes from a process of sharing, attempting new ideas, reflecting on practice, and developing new approaches. However, U.S. school structures were built on the notion that teachers are only working when they are in front of students. Thus, many American teachers spend their Sunday nights sitting at their kitchen tables, all by themselves, creating their lessons for the week. This model has resulted in U.S. teachers teaching more hours per week and year than any other teachers in the industrialized world and having less time for individual and collective planning. International surveys show that the average teacher around the world has, on average, 8 hours more per week for planning and collaboration than the average teacher in the United States.²⁴

Structures that help cultivate positive relationships among school staff include:

- structures and time for staff collaboration within and across disciplines, such as grade-level or subject-matter teams;
- dedicated time and structures for professional learning and decision-making; and
- meetings and events to build positive school culture.

These structures are enabled to be effective by the way in which they are used and implemented in practice, as described in greater detail below.

Collaborative planning

“There is structured time every Wednesday [for teachers] to meet as a family and just talk. When I think back to my previous teaching experience, we didn’t have this collaborative time, and so it was kind of like every teacher was in their own little world. There’s just this expectation that teachers are communicating. And that time builds culture, and I think it has really helped me to be able to know what is going on.”

—City Arts and Technology High School Teacher²⁵

Collaboration time for teachers enables them to develop a collective perspective, create a more coherent curriculum, address problems of practice, and ensure that students do not fall through the cracks.

Relationship-centered schools commit time and resources to collaborative planning and asset-based professional development. This supports both more thoughtful and effective teaching within the classroom and greater coherence across courses and grade levels, as well as relational trust among staff members. These practices have been found to retain teachers in schools, contributing to staff stability, and to increase teaching effectiveness and gains in student achievement.²⁶

A growing number of schools have been redesigned to **find time** for **teacher collaboration**. At successful schools, teachers work together to develop the curriculum, develop lessons that will work with their students, look at student work, evaluate their lessons, and troubleshoot for future classes. Collaboration time can also be used for teachers to talk together about individual students to figure out how to best support them.

Finding Time for Collaboration

A wide range of strategies is available for building staff collaboration opportunities. At Sherman Oaks Community School in San Jose, CA, for example, an innovative schedule allows elementary school teachers to meet for collaborative planning and professional development for 90 minutes a day over lunch. Instead of having students take electives such as art, music, and physical education at various times during the day, as is the case at most elementary schools, Sherman Oaks contracts with community-based agencies such as local museums to provide these classes all at the same time, in the middle of the school day, combined with lunch and recess. This provides a long period of time during the workday (not at the end, when teachers are generally tired) for teachers to work together to develop their skills and figure out how best to support individual students.

Vanguard High School is one of many redesigned schools in New York City that has found opportunities for teachers to regularly plan together, both within content areas and in grade-level teams. It has reallocated its resources to reduce class size and provide teachers with significant time for collaborative planning and professional development by: (1) hiring more teachers and fewer out-of-classroom personnel (and having all staff teach in some capacity); (2) creating a schedule in which the core subjects all occur at the same time during the day; and (3) hiring part-time teachers to offer elective courses while the core teaching staff are doing collaborative work.

Source: Adapted from Darling-Hammond, L., Alexander, M., & Price, D. (2002). *10 features of good small schools: Redesigning high schools, what matters most*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University.

One important strategy that supports collaboration and student-centered practices in secondary schools is **interdisciplinary teaming**, through which a group of teachers shares a group of students and has common planning time. This structure allows teachers to share their knowledge about students in planning curriculum to meet student needs, while creating more continuity in practices and norms, which supports students emotionally and cognitively. As one synthesis of research notes:

Effective interdisciplinary teaming reduces the levels of developmental hazard in educational settings by creating contexts that are experientially more navigable, coherent, and predictable for students. Interdisciplinary teaming can also create enhanced capacity in schools for transformed instruction through enabling the coordination and integration of the work of teachers with each other, including in instruction, and as ongoing sources of professional development and support for each other.²⁷

Some middle and high schools combine courses in **interdisciplinary team block schedules** in which teachers from two or more courses share a common group of students—such as a combined math and science course taught by one teacher alongside a combined English language arts and social studies course (often called humanities) taught by another teacher. Often these courses are co-planned with other math or science or humanities teachers so that all teachers get the benefits of each other’s disciplinary expertise, even as they are teaching smaller groups of students for longer blocks of time individually. Team block schedules can further reduce the total number of individuals with whom students and teachers interact while also fostering greater collaboration among teachers to coordinate curriculum.

Professional learning and decision-making

Opportunities for shared learning and decision-making across the school—including distributed leadership, staff meetings, events, rituals, and retreats—foster staff relationships and school coherence.

Many schools have allocated a block of time for the purposes of shared learning and decision-making once a week toward the end of a workday—usually about 2 hours—by banking instructional time during the week (i.e., adding 30 minutes of instructional time on other days). Students may be involved in internships or in clubs or extracurriculars offered by community members and organizations during that time.

Involving staff in decision-making about school practices and professional development fosters both commitment to the decisions that are made and coherence in practices across the school. There is evidence that teacher participation in school decision-making can lead to improved academic achievement for students.²⁸ Engagement in decision-making at the school level models the collaborative work that effective teachers expect from their students (and, indeed, the democratic process of the larger society) and enables small schools to make significant improvements in their practice with the full endorsement and engagement of all members of the school community.²⁹

Distributed leadership is also important: In addition to teachers serving as interdisciplinary leaders, grade-team leaders, or department heads, staff can lead the committees that interview and hire staff, plan and implement professional development, and manage other functions that cut across teaching teams. These smaller groups of staff work on specific issues, bringing them back to

the whole staff when policy decisions must be made. This shared school governance maintains the coherence and unity of purpose in the work of the school. It can also help eliminate and prevent actions based upon misinformation about the school’s values, policies, or practices. At some schools, committees and work groups have changing memberships to increase representation and involvement, as well as to create opportunities for people to develop shared perspectives and learn from one another. As one elementary teacher at San Francisco Community School described:

There is a level of trust that gets built over time because everything is with other teachers.... The leadership model means we are always together. It’s a lot of shared responsibility, and it is really supportive.³⁰

Staff meetings, events, rituals, and retreats can also be used to build positive staff culture. Teaching students and managing schools can be relentless work, discouraging at times, and being part of a staff community that is positive and supportive can be a key to staff resilience and efficacy. If all staff gatherings are dedicated to getting the business of school done, with no attention to the social and emotional health of staff members and their professional and personal growth, meetings can end up wearing staff down more than supporting them. Meetings, events, rituals, and retreats can be used to build positive staff spirit—learning together, eating together, celebrating together, and sharing their personal lives. Staff development work that is respectful and meaningful for staff can also play that role.

In addition, it is important to create safe and productive contexts for staff to grapple together with a range of issues, including whether staff from all races, cultures, and backgrounds feel respected and heard in the school community. That work may include courageous conversations, perhaps facilitated by external experts, to grapple with how racism, sexism, and stereotypes affect staff members and staff culture (see “Environments Filled With Safety and Belonging” for more on creating identity-safe learning experiences).

Practices that build productive relationships among staff

Collaborative learning among staff can be used to build both shared teaching expertise and relational skills.

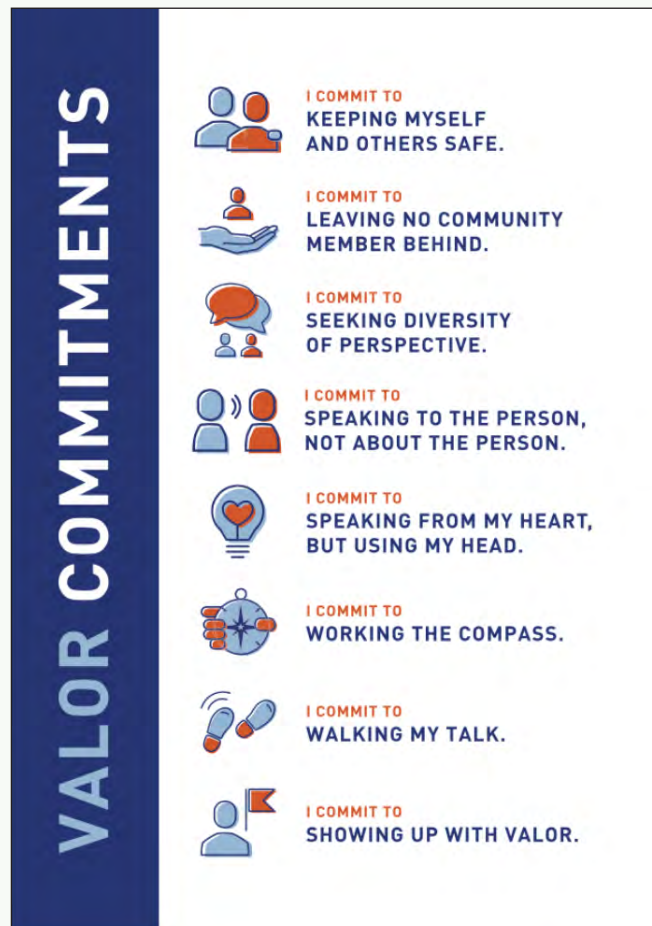
Structures to foster relationships can only be effective if the adults in the school have the knowledge and relational skills to realize the potential of those structures for building positive developmental relationships. Collaborative practices for developing these skills are asset based, avoid blame, and provide explicit skills and tools.

Collaborative learning to build shared teaching expertise enables all teachers to serve students well. In particular, this can be critically important for relationships with English learners and students with disabilities, areas of expertise that are everyone’s shared responsibility. In the Internationals Network of schools, one mantra is that “[everyone is a language teacher](#)” and must have opportunities to support English learners’ language development regardless of the subject area. Using a team approach to adult professional learning, teachers who have not been well prepared to support English learners collaboratively develop the expertise to meet the needs of students, mirroring the collaborative project-based learning approach that is used in the classroom with students.

Collaborative learning to build relational skills not only enables teachers to adjust their pedagogy to help students learn, but also provides opportunities for all school staff to reflect on and embody the school’s vision and goals to create a stronger culture among adults on behalf of children and families.

Building Relationship Skills Among Adults at Valor Academies

Valor Collegiate Academies—two public schools on one campus in Nashville, TN, that serve grades 5 through 8—hold as their mission “to empower our diverse community to live inspired, purposeful lives.” The schools’ mission is further articulated through the Valor Commitments that students and staff are expected to make. The schools’ leaders recognize that in order for the Valor Commitments to have an impact and become more than just nice words on the wall, staff need to be formally supported to develop fluency in relationship skills and know-how to live out the commitments of the mission. A key forum for building staff capacity for relationship work is through Valor’s summer “base camp” trainings. The trainings focus on two dimensions of this work: (1) proactive relationship work to take responsibility, check things, and offer support; and (2) responsive relationship work to repair relationships when one or both people in a relationship experience a sense of hurt, disconnection, or damaged trust. Professional learning includes reflections, guided questions, and scenarios to “name it, see it, script it, and do it.” Staff also progress through self-directed, competency-based social and emotional professional learning focused on the individual, relationships, and community throughout the year (referred to as “Badge Work”). Valor has also offered *Compass Camps* to provide professional learning on Valor’s Compass Model to other educators from around the country.



Building Relationships With Families

Family engagement provides opportunities for deeper knowledge of children and greater alignment between home and school. Building strong relationships between the school and the family increases academic outcomes for students across all grade levels. Schools can cultivate such partnerships by developing structures that support school–family relations as part of the core approach to education. These structures can include:

- tools for outreach and regular communication to actively engage families as partners;
- student–teacher–family conferences that are scheduled around families’ availability; and
- dedicated time and resources for home visits (virtual or in person).

The practices and strategies that can be used to fulfill the promise of these structures to successfully build meaningful relationships with families are described below.

Tools for outreach and regular communication with families

“You call, email, text, whatever method they give you to get in contact with them, and the teachers use it. They check it. They answer it. That’s my personal experience. I have not contacted any of my son’s teachers or principal without an immediate answer, and that’s pretty sweet.”

—City Arts and Technology High School Parent⁵¹

Tools for outreach and positive, regular communication with families can actively engage families as partners, including student–teacher–family conferences and home visits.

Schools that have successfully engaged parents and guardians have moved beyond traditional approaches, which often exclude families that are working long hours, are unable to get to the school easily at inflexible hours, or do not speak English as a native language. Among the tools that are used successfully by many schools are:

- Regular, positive communication with families about what the school or classroom is doing and how a child is doing through regular postings on the school website in multiple languages, as well as phone calls, emails, and text messages, translated into home languages whenever possible.
- Face-to-face meetings online as well as in person and, to the extent possible, at times matched to parent or guardian availability. Choosing times thoughtfully and providing babysitting for in-person meetings can increase family participation. Many schools have also learned that their shift to online communications with families through online town hall meetings, posted videos, and one-on-one parent conferences have solved transportation and child care problems and sharply increased family participation during the pandemic.
- Sending books and other materials home for reading, math, science, art, or other activities. This can enable families to support children in their learning (e.g., shared book reading with specific strategies and tips; math games to play at home; how to use walks in the neighborhood or trips to the grocery store for learning).

Periodic **student–teacher–family conferences**, scheduled around families’ availability, engage families in their student’s learning while creating student agency and ownership over their own learning.

Several innovations on traditional parent–teacher conferences can greatly improve their ability to engage families and support learning:

- holding them more frequently (e.g., two or three times a year) at times that family members can attend (which requires rearranging teachers’ time and finding compensation for teachers);
- using student-led conferences at which young people are active facilitators and participants in teacher–family discussions; and
- using them as opportunities to learn from family members and plan together for children’s goals, rather than communicating judgments about how children are doing.

Such meetings are designed to help teachers learn from parents about their children, review student progress and set goals, and provide an opportunity for parents to see and hear in their child’s own words what they are learning. As this section’s opening vignette, “Student-Led Conferences at [Gateway Middle School](#),” illustrates, when student-led conferences are held midway through the school year, they allow students to formally share their cumulative work across the semester with their family members and teachers. Such conferences help students build important skills for meaningful learning, including agency and self-advocacy, while also encouraging self-reflection and metacognition (see “Development of Skills, Habits, and Mindsets” for more on promoting such skills).

Home visits can proactively build relationships with families throughout the year. Home visits, conducted in person or [virtually](#), allow for proactive, intentional engagement with families and enable teachers and families to learn about one another with the aim of developing a true partnership to benefit students. [Parent–teacher home visits](#) have been found to be a particularly effective strategy for engaging families, informing teachers, and combating implicit bias, particularly where staff experiences are not rooted in the same community and cultural backgrounds as their students.³² Home visits enable teachers or staff members to:

- proactively establish trusting relationships with families;
- learn about the parents’ aspirations and insights about their children;
- communicate information (such as school schedules, ways of working, academic approaches, and health and safety protocols); and
- allow for students to be connected to additional supports or resources in order to be successful and learn.

Home visits and other family communications are most effective when they are conducted not just at the beginning of the school year but more than once during the year, such as in conjunction with key milestones or transition periods (e.g., between terms or before or after a long holiday break). (See “Where to Go for More Resources” at the end of this section for additional resources for home visits.)

Practices to build productive relationships with families

Diverse families are more successfully engaged as partners with valued expertise when schools embrace shared power and responsibility.

There is no single strategy or silver bullet, but several successful means for engaging parents and increasing achievement have been found when teachers and school staff work together with families as partners to develop common strategies for working with children, seeking parents' advice and knowledge as well as working together through the logic of specific approaches. Helping parents learn how to read with their children and how to ask about and check in on students' homework or projects can be helpful, even if parents do not have the knowledge or language background to offer specific help on these activities. Students can be the readers and information providers, knowing that their family members care about their progress.

Importantly, schools that succeed in engaging families from diverse backgrounds embrace a philosophy of partnership in which **power and responsibility are shared**. It is important to recognize that in some communities in which trust has been violated, relationships must be rebuilt through a proactive, authentic process that includes extensive listening and concrete demonstrations of respect indicating that educators are trustworthy.

In some communities in which trust has been violated, relationships must be rebuilt through a proactive, authentic process that includes extensive listening and concrete demonstrations of respect indicating that educators are trustworthy.

As articulated by the [Dual Capacity-Building Framework](#), once the essential conditions of family-school partnerships are in place, in order to build and sustain trusting and effective relationships between educators and families, both educators and family members need support to build and enhance their capacity in their capabilities (skills and knowledge), connections, confidence, and cognition (see Figure 2.1). As described below in the “Comer School Development Program,” this program is one approach to building this mutual capacity.

Figure 2.1
The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships



Source: Version 2. Adapted from Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships*. SEDL. <https://www.dualcapacity.org>.

Comer School Development Program: Building Mutual Capacity for Collaborative Learning Around Development and Relationships

Collaborative and shared professional learning is a cornerstone of the [Comer School Development Program](#), which has been implemented in more than 1,000 schools in 26 states in the United States and in England, Ireland, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago. The Comer School Development Program framework helps to redesign school operations based on guiding principles that promote respect for all members of the school community and a developmental perspective on the work that is done with students, among adults, and for the growth of the school as a whole. The Comer Process underscores the importance of all members of the school community working and learning together in a focused and authentic way—from paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, janitors, bus drivers, and parents to teachers and principals. No one is incidental or peripheral, and all participate in professional learning together. All staff and parents are provided with training around child development and around a set of processes for developing the school community. These include no-fault problem-solving, consensus decision-making, and collaboration. These guiding principles are used in the work of three key teams: the school planning and management team, the student and staff support team, and the parent team.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Flook, L., Gardner, M., & Melnick, H. (2018). *With the whole child in mind: Insights from the Comer School Development Program*. ASCD.

One powerful practice for building relationships and breaking down barriers between schools and families is the **community walk**. During **community walks**, students lead teachers (and potentially other school staff) through their communities. Oakland International High School, a community school in Oakland, CA, that primarily serves newly arrived immigrants from over 30 different countries, has been doing community walks for several years and builds them into the professional development calendar each fall. Prior to the walks, the principal and community school manager prepare teachers by reviewing the community walk itineraries and facilitate reading circles to learn more about the specific immigrant communities they will be visiting (see “Breaking Down Barriers Between Schools and Families: Community Walks at Oakland International High School”).

Breaking Down Barriers Between Schools and Families: Community Walks at Oakland International High School

Standing at a busy intersection in an industrial part of town, Juan,* a senior at Oakland International High School (OIHS), discusses what it is like to work as a day laborer: how to get picked out from the crowd for jobs, how to avoid getting cheated, and how scary it is to operate heavy machinery. Juan worked as a day laborer for a year after arriving in the United States before enrolling in high school. He still goes to look for work at the *parada*, the corner where day laborers gather to be hired, on days he is not in school or when making the rent is tight.

The *parada* is part of OIHS’s annual community walks. One year, students and families led seven different all-day walks through different neighborhoods in the city. Because the school serves newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth from around the world (more than 35 countries are represented), learning about students’ lives and the communities they live in is essential for educators and staff.

Lauren Markham, OIHS Community School Program Manager, describes the walks as

professional development sessions [that] educate teachers about students’ backgrounds, challenges, community and cultural assets, and the educational concerns of OIHS’s diverse students and families. They also serve to immerse teachers in the home environments of their students and give students and family members the opportunity to serve as leaders, inverting roles such that our teachers become the students, and our students and families become the teachers.

One of the community walk options focused on the Guatemalan community, a sizable student population at the school. For the first hour, educators and staff on the walk gathered to discuss intentions and goals for the day before the students and families joined in. After the introduction, four students led a session in which they had the room of 15 or so participants read and discuss a one-page excerpt from Rigoberta Menchú’s book about Guatemala’s civil war (1960–96). They shared information about the different indigenous groups in Guatemala and which ones they belong to and showed on a map the regions where they are from. The students selected three short videos to show more about their home country: one about teen pregnancy (one student talked about her sister having to drop out of school back home after getting pregnant), another about political reforms, and a third with scenes from different regions of the country. Each student also talked a bit about their family and migration story.

Next, everyone loaded into cars and headed to the *parada*, where Juan explained to the group what it is like to look for work. They then entered a Mam (indigenous-language) church for the Guatemalan immigrant community where the father of Amalia, one of the four leaders of the walk, is a pastor. He discussed how the church welcomes newly arrived immigrants and organizes donations to send back to parishioners' home villages. He also explained the history of the church and the Guatemalan community in this part of Oakland.

Everyone then headed to a local restaurant, where several other students and their families joined staff to eat and get to know one another better. After lunch, the group headed back to the high school to debrief and share reflections from the day. One of the teachers mentioned that this was her third OIHS community walk and that it is one of her favorite parts of the year, saying, "It's really good for us to know [about our students' lives]."

Most schools do not have as diverse a student population as OIHS does, but great diversity still exists among families and neighborhoods with students of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds, and there is often a knowledge gap about students' social and cultural realities. Any school can engage in community walks through neighborhoods, meet with local community leaders, and provide forums for families to share their insights and concerns outside of the traditional parent-teacher conference format.

Source: Adapted from Bajaj, M. (2016). *Community walks: A day of learning for schools*. Learning for Justice.

Summary

The development and implementation of these kinds of structures and practices has been ongoing for more than 40 years in many schools across the country that have already redesigned their work. Currently, national and local networks such as Big Picture, the Boston Center for Collaborative Education, EL Education, Envision Education, the Internationals Network, Institute for Student Achievement, the Middle College National Consortium, New Tech, and others are made up of schools in which developmental relationships are a central organizational feature (noted in "Where to Go for More Resources," below).

All children have the potential to thrive, and all children are vulnerable to the challenges they encounter in their experiences and contexts. In communities, in homes, and in schools, relationships characterized by sensitivity; attunement; consistency; trustworthiness; and social, emotional, and cognitive stimulation provide the protection as well as the scaffolds through which children grow as students and as whole human beings.

As illustrated throughout this section, positive developmental relationships are an essential organizing principle for equitable and empowering whole child education. When students and teachers have close, caring relationships, students feel more comfortable taking risks on behalf of learning and stretching to do things they have never done before. They will have a safe space in which to express themselves honestly and make sense and meaning of the things they are learning and experiencing, whether those are supportive or difficult.

Beyond individual teacher-student relationships, a strong web of relationships between and among students, peers, families, and educators, both in the school and in the community, can provide the opportunities to build, and in some cases rebuild, essential trust and create the collective will to enable equitable experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for each and every child.

Where to Go for More Resources

Personalizing relationships with students

- [How Learning Happens](#) (Edutopia): This video series illustrates strategies that enact the science of learning and development in schools and includes a set of videos focused on fostering positive relationships.
- [Insights From Networks Video Feature](#) (Learning Policy Institute): In these videos, school and district educators and network representatives share their insights on the strategies and practices to support designing schools to be student- and relationship-centered.
- [Classroom Looping: What It Is and Why Schools Should Consider It](#) (Mimio Educator): This short blog post from 2016 discusses the benefits of looping, a practice in which students stay with the same teacher for multiple years.
- [Advisors for All](#) (Stand for Children Leadership Center): This how-to guide is based on the pioneering “Every Student Every Day” advising approach of Phoenix Union High School District in Arizona, where every student in the district’s 21 high schools is connected to a caring adult who monitors their progress, attendance, and social and emotional well-being.
- [The Advisory Guide: Designing and Implementing Effective Advisory Programs in Secondary Schools](#) (Engaging Schools): This guide is intended to help secondary educators design and implement an advisory program tailored to their school’s needs and goals.
- [Five Tips for Teaching Advisory Classes at Your School](#) (*Greater Good Magazine*): This 2017 article discusses the importance of advisory periods for relationship building as well as how to structure them into meaningful learning opportunities.
- [Planning to Implement the Townhall and Mind & Body Components of Class Meeting/Advisory](#) (Turnaround for Children): This toolkit outlines how a school might leverage a structure like class meetings or advisories to address students’ self-regulation and build developmental relationships.
- [Big Picture Learning](#): Schools within the Big Picture Learning network develop advisories of 15 students each, among other personalized structures, to strengthen relationships.
- [Institute for Student Achievement](#): The Institute for Student Achievement assists with whole-school reform efforts around the country using seven evidence-based principles.
- [The Internationals Network](#): The Internationals Network helps schools in seven different states meet the needs of multilingual learners, focusing on recent immigrants and sharing best practices while influencing English learner policy.
- [New Tech Network](#): This network supports deeper learning across more than 50 schools at all grade levels nationwide and boasts high college persistence rates through its project-based learning approach.
- [EL Education](#): This network supports academic, social and emotional, and character learning across more than 150 schools, as well as school districts that serve over 500,000 students, and offers a range of free and open educational resources (e.g., curriculum, videos, documents, books, and student work models).

Supporting relationships among staff

- [Positive School Relationships](#) (Greater Good in Education): This website compiles information on practices for fostering positive peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, staff relationships, and family and community relationships.
- [We Are Crew: A Teamwork Approach to School Culture](#) (EL Education): This book is accompanied by a suite of freely available companion resources, including an online toolkit, a collection of nearly 40 videos, and professional development packets, to support the construction of a culture in which all members of the school community support one another and the structures that go along with that, such as morning meetings and advisories.
- [Finding Time for Collaboration](#) (ASCD): This resource compiles 15 examples of creative ways that schools throughout the country have made or found time for shared reflection and collaboration among teachers.
- [Finding Time for Collaborative Planning](#) (ERS): This resource highlights six strategies for finding sufficient time for collaboration.
- [It’s About Time: Organizing Schools for Teacher Planning and Learning](#) (Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education): This report details the benefits and challenges of creating time and capacity for teacher collaboration and shared learning, along with how Hillsdale High School redesigned its master schedule to facilitate the school’s collective mission and goals to support collaboration and relationships.
- [Toolkit: Connected Professional Learning for Teachers](#) (ERS): This toolkit covers strategic practices, how to organize resources, and where to get started to shift school systems to engage teachers in effective connected professional learning.
- [Valor Collegiate Academies](#) (The Learning Accelerator): Valor Collegiate Academies partnered with The Learning Accelerator to share resources about Valor’s relationship-centered human development school model, Compass, including details of the social and emotional learning and growth activities in which staff participate.

Building relationships with families

- [Preventing a Lost School Year: The Crucial Importance of Motivating Students & Engaging Families](#) (Stand for Children): This guide identifies essentials for motivating and supporting students and for creating strong partnerships with families, including advisors for all, staff teaming, and virtual home visits, accompanied by tools and resources.
- [The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships](#) (Karen L. Mapp, Eyal Bergman, and the Institute for Educational Leadership): The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2) was designed to help districts and schools chart a path toward effective family engagement efforts.
- [Family-School Partnerships](#) (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning): This webpage provides a list of resources for starting, supporting, and strengthening family–school partnerships, from accessible blogs and videos to interviews with veteran researchers.

- [Parent Teacher Home Visits Toolbox of Best Practices](#) (Parent Teacher Home Visits): This webpage compiles resources for educators, families, and communities to help implement home visit programs, including tools for getting started, training, and outreach.
- [Virtual Home Visits: Building Essential Relationships](#) (Stand for Children): This website includes a guide and an app designed to make virtual home visits easier.
- [Making Families Feel Welcome](#) (Greater Good Science Center): This brief reflection activity for school staff lists methods for making students' families feel valued and respected.

References

For more information on the research supporting the science and pedagogical practices discussed in this section, please see these foundational articles and reports:

- Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649>.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B. J., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>.
- Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650>.

Endnotes

1. California Department of Education. (2018). California School Dashboard school performance overview: Gateway High, 2018. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/38684783830437/2018>; California Department of Education. (2018). 2017–18 Local Educational Agency accountability report card: San Francisco Unified. <https://www2.cde.ca.gov/larc/leacontact.aspx?d=3868478000000&y=2017-18> (accessed 08/04/19).
2. Gateway Public Schools. (n.d.). Our impact. <https://www.gatewaypublicschools.org/results> (accessed 08/04/19).
3. Berkowitz, R., Moore, H., Astor, R. A., & Benbenishty, R. (2016). A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 425–469; Wang, M-T., & Degol, J. L. (2016). School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 28(2), 315–352.
4. Darling-Hammond, L., Ross, P., & Milliken, M. (2006). High school size, organization, and content: What matters for student success? *Brookings Papers on Education Policy*, 9, 163–203. www.jstor.org/stable/20067281; Hernández, L. E., Darling-Hammond, L., Adams, J., & Bradley, K. (with Duncan Grand, D., Roc, M., & Ross, P.). (2019). *Deeper learning networks: Taking student-centered learning and equity to scale*. Learning Policy Institute; Lee, V. E., Bryk, A. S., & Smith, J. B. (1993). The organization of effective secondary schools. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 171–268; Friedlaender, D., Burns, D., Lewis-Charp, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Zheng, X., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Student-centered schools: Closing the opportunity gap*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
5. EL Education. (n.d.). By the numbers. <https://eleducation.org/impact/school-design/by-the-numbers> (accessed 11/25/20).

6. Friedlaender, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). *High schools for equity: Policy supports for student learning in communities of color*. The School Redesign Network at Stanford University. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/scope-pub--high-schools-for-equity-report.pdf>.
7. Bogart, V. (2002). *The effects of looping on the academic achievement of elementary school students*. East Tennessee State University; Hampton, F., Mumford, D., & Bond, L. (1997). Enhancing urban student achievement through family-oriented school practices. *ERS Spectrum*, 15(2), 7–15.
8. Burke, D. L. (1997). Multi-year teacher/student relationships are a long-overdue arrangement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(5), 360–361; George, P., & Alexander, W. (1993). “Grouping Students in the Middle School” in George, P., & Alexander, W. M. (Eds.). *The Exemplary Middle School* (2nd ed., pp. 299–330). Harcourt Brace.
9. Darling-Hammond, L., Alexander, M., & Price, D. (2002). *10 features of good small schools: Redesigning high schools, what matters most*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University. (p. 5).
10. Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners*. Learning Policy Institute; Darling-Hammond, L., Aness, J., & Ort, S. W. (2002). Reinventing high school: Outcomes of the coalition campus schools project. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(3), 639–673.
11. Friedlaender, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). *High schools for equity: Policy supports for student learning in communities of color*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/scope-pub--high-schools-for-equity-report.pdf>.
12. Darling-Hammond, L., Ross, P., & Milliken, M. (2006). High school size, organization, and content: What matters for student success? *Brookings Papers on Education Policy, 2006/2007*, (9), 163–203; Felner, R. D., Seitsinger, A. M., Brand, S., Burns, A., & Bolton, N. (2007). Creating small learning communities: Lessons from the project on high-performing learning communities about “what works” in creating productive, developmentally enhancing, learning contexts. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 209–221.
13. Zalaznick, M. (2020, June 26). How student–teacher relationships can prevent a lost school year. *District Administration*. <https://districtadministration.com/preventing-a-lost-school-year-student-teachers-engagement-equity-sel/>.
14. Rockoff, J. E., & Lockwood, B. B. (2010). Stuck in the middle: Impacts of grade configuration in public schools. *Journal of Public Economics*, 94(11–12), 1051–1061; Schwerdt, G., & West, M. R. (2013). The impact of alternative grade configurations on student outcomes through middle and high school. *Journal of Public Economics*, 97, 308–326; Simmons, R. G., & Blyth, D. A. (1987). *Moving Into Adolescence: The Impact of Pubertal Change and School Context*. Aldine.
15. Darling-Hammond, L., Ross, P., & Milliken, M. (2006). High school size, organization, and content: What matters for student success? *Brookings Papers on Education Policy, 2006/2007*, (9), 163–203.
16. Lee, V. E., Bryk, A. S., & Smith, J. B. (1993). The organization of effective secondary schools. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 171–267.
17. Bloom, H. S., & Unterman, R. (2014). Can small high schools of choice improve educational prospects for disadvantaged students? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33(2), 290–319; Wasley, P. A., Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, N. E., King, S. P., Mosak, E., & Powell, L. C. (2000). *Small schools: Great strides, a study of new small schools in Chicago*. Bank Street College of Education.
18. California Department of Education. (2019). California School Dashboard school performance overview: Vista High. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/37684523738705/2019> (accessed 11/25/20).
19. School Redesign Network of Stanford University. (2005). *Windows on Conversions case study: Hillsdale High School*. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/scope-pubs-hillsdale-case-study.pdf>.
20. California Department of Education. (2019). California School Dashboard school performance overview: Hillsdale High. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/41690474133070/2019> (accessed 11/25/20).
21. Cornwall, G. (2018, May 14). How being part of a ‘house’ within a school helps students gain a sense of belonging. *KQED MindShift*. <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/50960/how-being-part-of-a-house-within-a-school-helps-students-gain-a-sense-of-belonging>.

22. Dweck, C. S., Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2014). *Academic tenacity: Mindsets and skills that promote long-term learning* [White paper]. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. <http://studentexperiencenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Academic-Tenacity-White-Paper.pdf>; Rattan, A., Good, C., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). “It’s OK—Not everyone can be good at math”: Instructors with an entity theory comfort (and demotivate) students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *48*(3), 731–737; Paunesku, D., Walton, G. M., Romero, C., Smith, E. N., Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2015). Mind-set interventions are a scalable treatment for academic underachievement. *Psychological Science*, *26*(6), 784–793.
23. Jackson, C. K., & Bruegmann, E. (2009). Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, *1*(4), 85–108; Kraft, M., & Papay, J. P. (2014). Can professional environments in schools promote teacher development? Explaining heterogeneity in returns to teaching experience. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *36*(4), 476–500.
24. Jerrim, J., & Sims, S. (2019). *The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018*. OECD.
25. Lewis-Charp, H., & Law, T. (2014). *Student-centered learning: City Arts and Technology High School*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/SCOPE-student-centered-learning-CAT.pdf>.
26. Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2016). *Solving the teacher shortage: How to attract and retain excellent educators*. Learning Policy Institute.
27. Felner, R. D., Seitsinger, A. M., Brand, S., Burns, A., & Bolton, N. (2007). Creating small learning communities: Lessons from the project on high-performing learning communities about “what works” in creating productive, developmentally enhancing, learning contexts. *Educational Psychologist*, *42*(4), 209–221.
28. Smylie, M. A., Lazarus, V., & Brownlee-Conyers, J. (1996). Instructional outcomes of school-based participative decision making. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *18*(3), 181–198.
29. Darling-Hammond, L., Alexander, M., & Price, D. (2002). *10 features of good small schools: Redesigning high schools, what matters most*. School Redesign Network at Stanford University. https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/10-features-good-small-schools-redesigning-high-schools-what-matters-and-what-works_0.pdf.
30. Wentworth, L., Kessler, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2013). *Elementary schools for equity: Policies and practices that help close the opportunity gap*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/elementary-schools-equity-policies-and-practices-help-close-opportunity-gap.pdf>.
31. Lewis-Charp, H., & Law, T. (2014). *Student-centered learning: City Arts and Technology High School*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/SCOPE-student-centered-learning-CAT.pdf>.
32. McKnight, K., Venkateswaran, N., Laird, J., Robles, J., & Shalev, T. (2017). *Mindset shifts and parent teacher home visits*. RTI International. <http://www.pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/171030-MindsetShiftsandPTHVReportFINAL.pdf>.

