

# A Return to School: What Should Be Our Focus? Relationships

Mental health and engagement were two of the biggest concerns revealed in statewide surveys

By Katie Pekel, Ed.D., and Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., University of Minnesota



Katie Pekel, Ed.D.



Kim Gibbons, Ph.D.

As schools across the state return to what they hope will be a more “normal” year, there are many things that understandably will vie for attention: COVID-19 safety protocols, perceived learning loss, mental health, social and emotional learning, and racial equity, to name just a few. While we know each school and district has its own context, we draw upon the results of the two statewide MN Safe Learning Surveys<sup>1</sup> to advocate that a focus on relationships, specifically educator and student relationships, is the route to productively addressing many competing priorities. We realize this is easier said than done.

## Defining Relationships

While we believe educators value relationships, and strive to develop them with their students, we recognize that relationship-building itself is rarely the focus of professional development in back-to-school sessions or PLC meetings. While educators understandably spend time on things like data analysis,

grading practices, literacy instruction, and a whole host of other really important topics, we would invite you to ask yourself, “when was the last time our district explicitly focused on relationships either in professional development or in data gathering and analysis?” In a discussion about “relationships,” we feel a conceptual framework is helpful. We offer the Developmental Relationships Framework<sup>2</sup> from Search Institute (<https://searchinstitute.org>), a nationally recognized nonprofit research to practice organization located in Minneapolis. Drawing on both the vast literature surrounding relationships and their own research, Search Institute defines a *Developmental Relationship* in five elements: (1) expressing care, (2) challenging growth, (3) providing support, (4) sharing power, and (5) expanding possibilities. Supporting these five elements are 20 actions educators can draw upon as they work to build these developmental relationships with young people.

<sup>1</sup> MN Statewide Learning Surveys <https://www.cehd.umn.edu/research/safe-learning-survey/>

<sup>2</sup> Search Institute Developmental Relationships Framework <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/developmental-relationships-framework/>




## DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

### The Framework

Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Just as trees rely on a system of roots to support and nourish them, young people need to experience developmental relationships in their families, schools, programs, and communities. However, too many young people miss these opportunities due to bias, prejudice, and systemic exclusion based on their race, ethnicity, income, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, or other differences. Ensuring that every young person experiences the developmental relationships they need is a vital challenge for the 21st century.

The Developmental Relationships Framework was developed by Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. 800-888-7828. www.searchinstitute.org  
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**EXPRESS CARE**  
*Show me that I matter to you.*

**Be dependable**  
*Be someone I can trust*

**Listen**  
*Really pay attention when we are together*

**Believe in me**  
*Make me feel known and valued*

**Be warm**  
*Show me you enjoy being with me*

**Encourage**  
*Praise me for my efforts and achievements*



**CHALLENGE GROWTH**  
*Push me to keep getting better.*

**Expect my best**  
*Expect me to live up to my potential*

**Stretch**  
*Push me to go further*

**Hold me accountable**  
*Insist I take responsibility for my actions*

**Reflect on failures**  
*Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks*



**PROVIDE SUPPORT**  
*Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.*

**Navigate**  
*Guide me through hard situations and systems*

**Empower**  
*Build my confidence to take charge of my life*

**Advocate**  
*Stand up for me when I need it*

**Set boundaries**  
*Put limits in place that keep me on track*



**SHARE POWER**  
*Treat me with respect and give me a say.*

**Respect me**  
*Take me seriously and treat me fairly*

**Include me**  
*Involve me in decisions that affect me*

**Collaborate**  
*Work with me to solve problems and reach goals*

**Let me lead**  
*Create opportunities for me to take action and lead*



**EXPAND POSSIBILITIES**  
*Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.*

**Inspire**  
*Inspire me to see possibilities for my future*

**Broaden horizons**  
*Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places*

**Connect**  
*Introduce me to people who can help me grow*

Developmental Relationships Framework from Search Institute (<https://searchinstitute.org>)

## Why Relationships

Our findings from the two statewide MN Safe Learning Surveys (SLS) aimed to capture the experiences of educators, families, and students during the 2020-2021 academic year. Over 39,000 respondents across two distributions overwhelmingly told us they are concerned about mental health, engagement, and being behind academically. Addressing these will be important, but an overarching vision or vehicle for doing so may be found in a genuine focus on relationships. Let's look at each of these areas more closely.

### Mental Health

In both the winter and spring SLS, when asked about needed supports, teachers, support professionals, administrators, families, and students all cited mental health within their top three

challenges. When asked in the spring survey what they wanted to see moving forward, educator comments focused on infrastructure and workload, families cited desires to return to full-time in-person learning, and students were concerned about grades, assignments, and workload. All of this quantitative and qualitative data supports the need to be focused on mental health. Yet, we know classroom teachers cannot do this alone. Experts are needed. Financial investments in support systems that link school-based mental health experts with those in our communities to support students and families could provide needed space for classroom teachers to focus on the other remaining concerns.

### Engagement

Perhaps the most difficult finding from the SLS to wrap our heads around is that surrounding student engagement, as respondent groups were fairly divided in their reported experiences. Educators reported "engaging students in learning" as their No. 1 success and their No. 3 challenge. Similarly, families reported "receiving support from teachers" as their No. 1 success and their No. 2 challenge. Students reported "keeping up with schoolwork" and "understanding schoolwork" as their No. 1 and No. 2 challenges, respectively. This likely contributed to the perceived difficulty of engaging students that educators reported. As most return to school this fall, there may be a desire to fix "learning loss." (See "How to Redirect the Tempting Conversation of Learning Loss" on Pages 24-27 in the July-August 2021 edition of the MSBA Journal magazine at <http://www.mnmsba.org/Portals/0/Journal-MayJune2021.pdf>).

However, as the often cited saying goes, "Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." And, as we will see in the next section, being behind academically is a real concern, yet engaging students in learning cannot be demanded, and it will not come without an intentional focus on building authentic relationships with young people.

### Being Behind Academically

When asked about learning this past school year, all respondent groups agreed they felt some learning was taking place; however, they also overwhelmingly reported they felt more learning was taking place pre-COVID. That information combined with the fact that students reported their No. 1 concern moving forward was

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“being behind academically” and families reported it as their No. 2 after social interactions and relationships, brings us back to how we approach the potential need to “catch kids up.” If we do so absent relational engagement and instead communicate to students and families that they are behind, there is a likelihood that we could only be exacerbating the already established concerns for mental health. Instead, we encourage educators to draw upon the potential actions in Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships framework. When communicating with students, sending messages like, “I believe in you,” “I expect you will live up to your potential,” and “I will help guide you through the hard situations and systems as we navigate getting there” along with, “I will respect you by taking you seriously and treating you fairly as we work to solve problems and reach goals” may go a long way in securing engagement and addressing academic concerns.

### The Equity Connection

We know a simple focus on relationships without a genuine acknowledgement of the fact that our schools are fundamentally producing inequitable outcomes along lines of race would be irresponsible as two white women authoring this article. As our team at the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement have begun initial analyses of the SLS results by race, we found some important differences in the areas of learning, connectedness and perceptions of racism and racial microaggressions. Families of students of color, American Indian students, and multiracial students felt less connected to teachers and support staff while their students felt less connected to their classmates than their white peers. These students, along with their families, also reported they in fact felt they were learning *more* this school year than pre-COVID, a stark difference to their white

counterparts. We hypothesize this ties to the finding, that students of color, American Indian students, and multiracial students and their families were more concerned about racism and racial microaggressions when asked about their top concerns around schooling moving forward. A focus on relationship-building without an understanding of the inherent historical nature that race and racism has played in schooling would be naïve. As we approach relationship-building with students from minoritized groups and their families, we need to do so while also being critically self-reflective. Given that in Minnesota only approximately 5% of teachers are teachers of color, of American Indian teachers, much of that critical self-reflection around potential biases and hidden biases must be taken up by white educators<sup>3</sup>. This does not mean white educators do not or cannot build relationships with BIPOC students, in fact we know the opposite can be true. However, in order to build authentic developmental relationships, educators must seek to know and understand the students and communities they serve by examining their own epistemologies and share power.

### Resources

The following links may be helpful to schools, districts, and stakeholders as they consider the topics in this article:

#### Relationships

- Redesigning Schools for Stronger Relationships – <https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org/redesign-schools-stronger-relationships>
- The Power of Relationships in Schools (Video) – <https://www.edutopia.org/video/power-relationships-schools>

<sup>3</sup> 2021 Biennial Report Supply and Demand of Teachers in Minnesota [https://mn.gov/pelsb/assets/Supply%20and%20Demand%202021\\_Final\\_tcm1113-463801.pdf](https://mn.gov/pelsb/assets/Supply%20and%20Demand%202021_Final_tcm1113-463801.pdf)



*Sophie S.*

#### *Mental Health*

- A Quick-Start Guide to Reframing Children’s Mental Health – <https://live-frameworks-institute.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Emerging-Minds-Toolkit-Quick-Start.pdf>
- Restart & Recovery: Leveraging Federal COVID Relief Funding & Medicaid to Support Student & Staff Wellbeing & Connection – <https://learning.ccsso.org/restart-recovery-leveraging-federal-covid-relief-funding-medicaid-to-support-student-staff-wellbeing-connection>

#### *Engagement*

- Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap for Reopening School – <https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SEL-ROADMAP.pdf>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Resources – <https://casel.org/resources>

#### *Being Behind Academically*

- Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action – <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/sold-design-principles-report>
- Leveraging Recovery Funds to Prioritize Wellness and Accelerate Learning – <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-leveraging-recovery-funds-prioritize-wellness-accelerate-learning>
- Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond – <https://restart-reinvent.learningpolicyinstitute.org>

- SEL & MTSS Toolkit for State and District Leaders – <https://753a0706.flowpaper.com/CCSSOSELMTSSToolkit/#page=1>

#### *Equity*

- The Importance of Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Schools – <https://bit.ly/3rPd1Pq>
- Five Equity Practices for Principals – <https://www.ascd.org/blogs/five-equity-practices-for-principals>
- Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework – [https://www.academia.edu/36162495/Culturally\\_Responsive\\_School\\_Leadership\\_Framework](https://www.academia.edu/36162495/Culturally_Responsive_School_Leadership_Framework)
- Great Lakes Equity Center Resources – <https://greatlakesequity.org>

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*Katie Pekel, Ed.D., is the Principal in Residence at the University of Minnesota where she leads the Minnesota Principals Academy (<https://innovation.umn.edu/mnpa>), the Executive PhD program (<https://www.cehd.umn.edu/olpd/graduate-programs/education-policy-leadership/executive-phd>); and the Urban Leadership Academy (<https://innovation.umn.edu/ula>). Dr. Pekel has served at all levels of K-12 education including as a high school English teacher, an elementary principal, and a middle school principal. Dr. Pekel recently has led three statewide surveys regarding the impacts of the pandemic on K-12 education in Minnesota.*

*Kim Gibbons, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota and the Co-Director of the Wisconsin Minnesota Comprehensive Center. Her most recent book is *Effective Universal Instruction: An Action-Oriented approach to Improving Tier 1* (2018).*