

Secondary Strong Start Implementation Guide



Secondary Strong Start

The Whole Child Model is rooted in the understanding that a child's academic success is intrinsically linked to their overall well-being. Grounded in learning science, we firmly believe that academic excellence and holistic development can and must go hand in hand. Our vision is that every child attends school where his or her well-being is a priority. We hope that one day in schools across the country, each student feels safe and loved and can develop the social, emotional, and academic skills they need to thrive and transform the world.



STRONG START OVERVIEW

Strong Start is a set of rituals and routines that get students ready to learn by fostering a sense of safety, belonging, community, and agency. The routines begin as students enter their homeroom and continue as students transition to each class. The practices can be woven into academic content and personalized to meet the needs of the learning community. During times of crisis within the school community, Strong Start can be used to create a safe place where both students and staff can come together to navigate challenges collectively.

STRONG START COMPONENTS

Components	What	How	Why
Greetings	Greet students individually at the door at the beginning of every class.	Teachers stand at the door and personally welcome each student as they enter the classroom.	To create a warm and welcoming environment, establishing a positive tone and building relationships.
Breathe & Focus	Guided breathing teaches strategies to self-regulate emotions.	Lead students through breathing exercises and mindfulness techniques.	To equip students with tools for managing stress, improving focus, and maintaining emotional regulation.
Community Building	A class-wide routine fostering unity through shared joyful experiences.	Whole group songs, chants, and activities that encourage group engagement and joy.	To strengthen the sense of community, increase student engagement, and build a supportive classroom environment.
Purposeful Partnering	A ritual that fosters peer connection between students.	Choose activities and discussions that foster peer-to-peer connection.	To enhance peer relationships, encourage collaboration, and improve social skills.
Goal Setting	Students set a daily goal for living out the classroom agreements.	Each student identifies and articulates a personal goal.	To promote self-awareness, responsibility, and alignment with core values.
Optional: Reflect & Share	Students engage in relationship-deepening discussion	Facilitate structured discussions where students reflect on their feelings and experiences, and share insights.	To deepen interpersonal connections, foster empathy, and enhance communication skills.

MODIFYING THE PRACTICES

The time invested in establishing the Strong Start routine creates opportunities for students and staff to build meaningful relationships. Each practice is designed to work together to support students in building connections. However, the practices can be modified to fit the needs of the academic block and class schedule. Consider weaving them into learning so that academic content and social-emotional learning happen simultaneously.



Suggestions for Personalization

If you have 3 minutes at the beginning of class	If you have 15 minutes with your homeroom	If you have 20 minutes in advisory
- Greetings - Breathe & Focus or - Purposeful Partnering - Breathe & Focus	- Greetings - Community Building - Breathe & Focus - Goal-Setting	- Greetings - Community Building - Purposeful Partnering - Breathe & Focus - Goal-Setting or - Greetings - Breathe & Focus - Reflect & Share

Weaving in Strong Start Practices	
Greetings	- At the beginning of each class - During morning work
Goal Setting	- Develop a goal for the beginning of each week, month, or grading period - Students meet with rotating or running partners to review goals
Community Building	- Beginning of each class - Before an activity for group work or group transition
Purposeful Partnering	- To kick off a partner project or after partner work - Before peer feedback
Breathe & Focus	- Before or after a transition - Before an assessment

GETTING STARTED



Start with ‘Why’: Share the purpose and goals of Strong Start practices. Delve into the brain science behind Strong Start and how each component is designed to support mental and emotional well-being.

Norms & Agreements: Collaboratively establish norms and group agreements to create a positive environment that promotes safety, empathy, and community. Embrace core principles such as "Listen with Your Whole Body", "Share Your Truth", or "Try Something New". Regularly reinforce norms to maintain a positive and respectful group dynamic.

Skill building: Consider the competencies and classroom culture you wish to cultivate throughout the year. For instance, if fostering a community that gives meaningful feedback is your goal, consider integrating Goal Setting or Purposeful Partnering activities to cultivate this skill. Use student social-emotional data to select Strong Start activities. For example, Panorama's Sense of Belonging data on Peer Respect can inform Purposeful Partnering activities.

Teacher-Led Beginnings: For the first two weeks, teachers lead Strong Start to set the tone. Sharing personal stories and modeling vulnerability in front of students helps create a sense of authenticity and student buy-in, fostering trust between teachers and students.

Elevating Student Voice and Leadership: Encourage ownership by shifting from a Strong Start leader to a facilitator role. Take stock of student interests and create systems where they can lead each practice.

STRONG START ROLLOUT

Strong Start could be rolled out on the first day of school and gradually introduced to students two practices at a time. This phased approach helps students grasp the purpose of each practice. Below is an example of a four-week rollout plan for a class implementing all the practices:

Week	Component	Objective	Notes
1	Greetings, Community Building, Breathe & Focus	Establish greetings and foster unity through shared experiences.	● Introduce Strong Start and its purpose. ● Review expectations and norms. ● Introduce Greetings, Breathe & Focus, and Community-Building activities. ● Reflect on the week's activities and their impact on class unity.
2	Purposeful Partnering & Goal Setting	Promote peer connections and implement daily goal-setting.	● Add on Purposeful Partnering and Goal Setting. ● Reflect on partnering activities and goal achievements. ● Take stock of student interest (interest surveys, group discussions).
3	Breathe & Focus and Reflect & Share	Teach self-regulation strategies and deepen discussions.	● Add on Reflect & Share and review Breathe & Focus. ● Teach mindfulness and encourage sharing personal experiences. ● Students lead Strong Start - guide students in outlining activity plans, materials needed, and roles for each participant.
4	Greetings, Community Building, Purposeful Partnering, Breathe & Focus, Goal Setting	Integrate all components into daily routines.	● Reflect on how these techniques and discussions aid in stress management and foster connections. ● Have students lead Strong Start

GREETINGS



What

Greet students individually at the door at the beginning of each class.

Why

- Sets a welcoming and positive tone.
- Allows educators to gauge students' emotional state.
- Facilitates connections with students.
- Signals that students' presence is valued.

How to do this well

- **Greet students by name** at the classroom door or once they've settled in.
- Monitor students' body language, tone, and facial expressions (support with check-ins).
- Make a **personal connection** with each student, exchanging 1-2 conversational turns.
- Encourage students to **greet each other** in the classroom.
- **Co-create greetings visual** with various levels of touch for student comfort (allowing students to set their boundaries).
- Depending on the tone of each group of students, greetings can be simple and direct (fist bump, handshake, high five, etc.) or personalized and varied.

BREATHE & FOCUS



What

Guided breathing, mindfulness exercises, and meditation teach strategies for self-regulation.

Why

- Intentional breathing calms the central nervous system and reduces stress hormones. Proactively teaching breathing strategies prepares students to use them during future upsets.
- Mindfulness helps reduce impulsivity and increase emotional and behavioral awareness.
- Meditation supports those with depression, anxiety, and attention deficit disorder.

How to do this well

- Incorporate Breathe & Focus **throughout the block**, transitions, or before testing.
- **Teach, model, and practice strategies** and share the purpose of each practice. Use instructional strategies like **role-playing and problem-solving scenarios** to introduce and practice self-regulation strategies.
- Leverage **student leaders**.
- Use a **variety of techniques** such as mantras & affirmations, journaling, guided meditation, and grounding exercises.
- **Personalize the approach** to adolescents' individual needs with videos, books, or podcasts that will help them learn about the benefits of breathing.
 - **Ask students** what helps them feel grounded or connected.
 - **Meet students where they are** and help them identify the barriers.



What

Community Building is a class-wide routine fostering unity through shared joyful experiences, reinforcing the message "We're all in this together."

Why

- A sense of belonging is a prerequisite to learning.
- Coordinated neural activities support adolescents' problem-solving, learning, cooperation, and compassion.
- Rituals allow students to participate in collective activities, building trust and group relationships.
- Research shows immense benefits from groups interacting in synchrony.

How to do this well

- **Take stock** of student interest and personalize activities that promote a sense of team across all members of the classroom
- Incorporate activities with **synchronized** movement, rhythm, chant, song, words of affirmation, and quick team-building games
- **Ask students** to introduce, practice, and lead community-building activities
- True community building occurs when the activities belong to the participants and **reflect themselves**.

PURPOSEFUL PARTNERING



What

Purposeful Partnering is a ritual that fosters peer connection between students through an engaging partner activity.

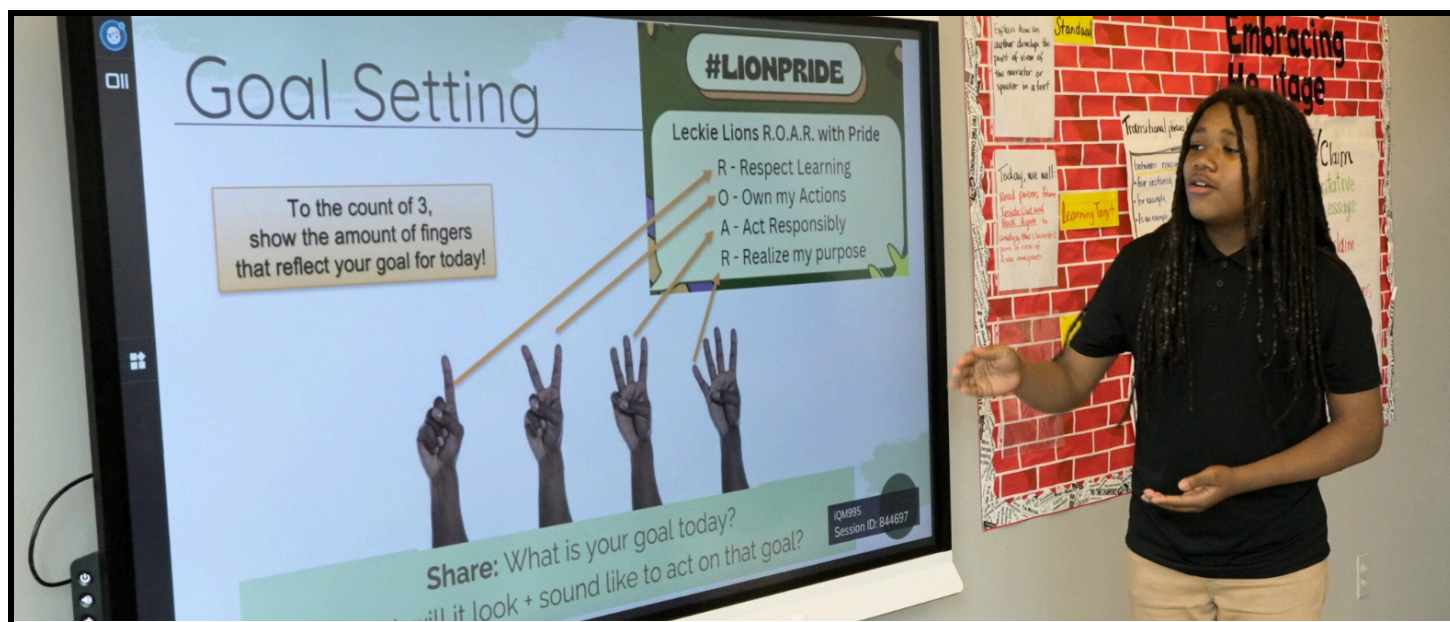
Why

- Human connection optimizes brain function by releasing oxytocin, a soothing brain chemical.
- Building attunement and synchronicity in movements, voice, and feelings fosters this connection.
- Peer support builds trust and promotes a sense of belonging as well as reduces feelings of isolation in adolescence.

How to do this well

- **Take stock of student interest** and choose activities that foster peer-to-peer connection through appropriate touch, tone of voice, eye contact, presence, and playfulness.
- Build in activities that involve movement, **elements of play**, dance, and rhythm
- **Select collaborative** activities where students can build, create, or problem-solve together
- **Ask students** to introduce, practice, and lead purposeful partnering activities

GOAL SETTING



What

Students set a daily goal for living out the classroom agreements.

Why

- It empowers students to focus on meeting their personal goals and commitments to the group which develops a sense of individual and collective agency.

How to do this well

- Students set a goal based on the classroom or **community agreements**.
- Students verbally and/or symbolically (e.g., in a journal or goal-setting document) **share their goal with a running partner** and what reaching their goal will look like:
 - Today I intend to [goal] by [actions or strategy to reach the goal] because [why it is important]
 - I am going to complete [task] by focusing on [this agreement]
- Establishing a routine to discuss the previous day's progress before setting new goals can **facilitate goal tracking**.

REFLECT & SHARE



What

During Reflect & Share, all students participate in a brief discussion in which they have a chance to share and process their feelings in a way that (a) supports their feelings of emotional safety in the class community, (b) deepens their connections with their peers, and (c) strengthens their ability to cope with stress and strong emotions.

Why

- Students will bring additional stressors to the classroom from pandemic trauma, racial injustice, media violence, and personal experiences like losing a loved one, food insecurity, or police violence.
- The Reflect & Share time is one opportunity to give voice to these feelings, to normalize them, and to support one another in determining how to address these emotions.

How to do this well

- Take a **few deep breaths** to center themselves.
- **Discuss a question** in partners, small groups, whole groups, or a combination (e.g., first partners, then whole group). Teachers may offer the option to journal writing.
- Respond to one another in **supportive, inquisitive, socially-appropriate ways**, with teacher support for discussion skills.
- Wish each other well, and **send thoughts of love** and care to anyone in the world who needs it.
- Take additional deep breaths or mindful moments if needed during or after the discussion.

Additional Inspirational Practices that Build Belonging

Below are inspirational practices that build a sense of belonging. Integrating these methods creates an environment where students feel connected, supported, and empowered to succeed. In addition to a Strong Start, schools may want to supplement with the following aligned approaches.



CHECK-IN CHECK-BACK

Valor Circles | poweredbycompass.org



Check-ins allow every student to briefly share their current emotions and any assistance they may need from the community. This practice helps students become more self-aware of their feelings by encouraging them to identify, articulate, and reflect on their emotions.

The Check-Back allows students to expand on their feelings and receive community support. This practice encourages compassion, attention to relationships, and a culture of attunement and support.

How to do this well:

Check-In:

- **Gathering:** The class forms a circle.
- **Three-Part Check-in:**
 - 1) Students say their name "I'm..."
 - 2) Students offer 1-2 words that best capture their current state of being "Today I'm feeling x and a little y"
 - 3) Students pass to their friend... "and this is my friend x"
- **Teacher Role:** As students share, the teacher notes each student's feelings and models attunement with nonverbal affirmations, such as leaning in, eye contact, and matching facial expressions.

Check-Back:

- **Selection:** The teacher selects students to check back based on emotions that signal a need for support, an opportunity to share joy, or the chance to highlight less-heard voices.
- **Reflection:** The teacher reflects on the feeling words shared during the Check-In and offers select students the opportunity to expand on their check-in words if that feels supportive to them (e.g. "You said you were feeling x... would it be helpful to share more about what's going on and how we might support you?").
- **Invitation to Share:** Additional sharing is optional. Students uncomfortable sharing further can be offered support outside the practice for a more private discussion. Students are given the opportunity to say "No, I'd rather not share more right now"...
- **Teacher Role:** The teacher attunes to the students' sharing through body language, facial expressions, or words of support, and validates their feelings and experiences. They ask deepening questions as needed, and help students ask for and receive support from others in the Circle so they feel heard and supported by their community.

For more information about Compass Circles and the Compass Model, please visit <https://poweredbycompass.org/compass-circles/>



LOVE GROUPS

Johnson Middle School | johnsonms.org

Love Groups are small, supportive groups designed to foster positive relationships and a sense of belonging among students. At Johnson Middle School, every student receives consistent support from an adult, including teachers, custodial staff, and the leadership team. These groups create a safe, inclusive environment that promotes well-being, builds strong connections, and ensures each student has a trusted adult to rely on.

How to do this well:

Logistics:

- **Group Formation:** Form small groups of 8-10 students and pair each group with an adult from the school staff, including enrichment teachers, custodial staff, counselors, etc.
- **Scheduling:** Determine the frequency of Love Group sessions and review the master schedule to find suitable times for each grade level. An example is conducting sessions twice a month for 30 minutes.

Content and Goals:

- **Safe Environment:** Create a supportive space where students feel empowered and valued.
- **Initial Sessions:** Start with teacher-led sessions for the first 1-2 weeks to set the tone.
- **Themes:** Cover topics such as gratitude, growth mindset, and goal setting.
- **Activities:** Include engaging activities like vision boards and college/career readiness.
- **Discussion Topics:** Address important issues like conflict resolution, violence prevention, and relationship building.

Adult Learning:

- **Authentic Connections:** Encourage genuine interactions between teachers and students.
- **Personalization:** Allow staff to tailor sessions to reflect the school's unique culture.
- **Flexibility:** Provide flexibility in planning to accommodate core class schedules.
- **Opportunities for Growth:** Highlight these sessions as chances for meaningful lessons and connections.
- **Support:** Promote openness to new approaches and assure staff that resources and lesson plans are available without disrupting core classes.

GOAL SETTING

EL Crew | eleducation.org

Goal setting empowers students to set meaningful goals, reflect upon their progress, and receive targeted feedback. This enables them to translate ideas into actionable plans and monitor their development. Goal setting enhances executive functioning in adolescents by promoting self-direction, perseverance, and the skill to seek support when necessary. (Gonzalez & Martinez, 2020)

How to do this well:

Setting the Goal:

- **Outlining the Goal:** Students choose a meaningful academic, social-emotional, or character goal. Teachers help students break down these large goals into smaller, more specific steps. They also guide students in identifying potential obstacles and monitoring their progress.
- **Choosing a Strategy:** Students choose a habit, strategy, or practice activities that will allow them to pursue their goals and maintain perseverance. These activities can be worked into Community Building and Purposeful Partnering.

Feedback & Reflection Cycle:

- **Acquiring Feedback:** Students have check-ins with peer accountability partners (running partners, teammates, triad teams) to both seek and share feedback. Teammates share areas they would like feedback on, critique each other's work, and ask questions to enhance their understanding. Critiques may follow specific guidelines:
 - **Be kind:** Acknowledge effort and positivity in the work.
 - **Be helpful:** Offer suggestions and constructive advice.
 - **Be specific:** Provide detailed feedback on areas for improvement that are aligned with the criteria set by the class.
- **Revise and Reflect:** Students reflect on the progress made, challenges faced, and lessons learned from the process. Students then use the feedback received to revise and improve the work.
- **Possible Timeline of Goal Setting:**
 - Weekly Check-ins: Meet with a teacher to reflect and set new goals or discuss progress and strategies with a grade-level "running buddy."
 - Biweekly Practice: Develop goal-setting skills and celebrate progress in advisory groups.
 - Quarterly Step-back Meetings: Reflect on metacognition and goal-setting skills, and plan long-term goals.

For more information about the EL model, please read *An Ethic of Excellence* by Ron Berger

Adult Structures Aligned to Strong Start

Educator Wellbeing

Teacher well-being has a profound impact on both the academic success and overall well-being of students. Research indicates that prioritizing teacher wellbeing is crucial when schools aim to enhance the overall well-being of their community (Jennings, 2009). When teachers feel supported and balanced, they are better equipped to create a positive and effective learning environment, directly benefiting student outcomes.



ADULT MORNING HUDDLE

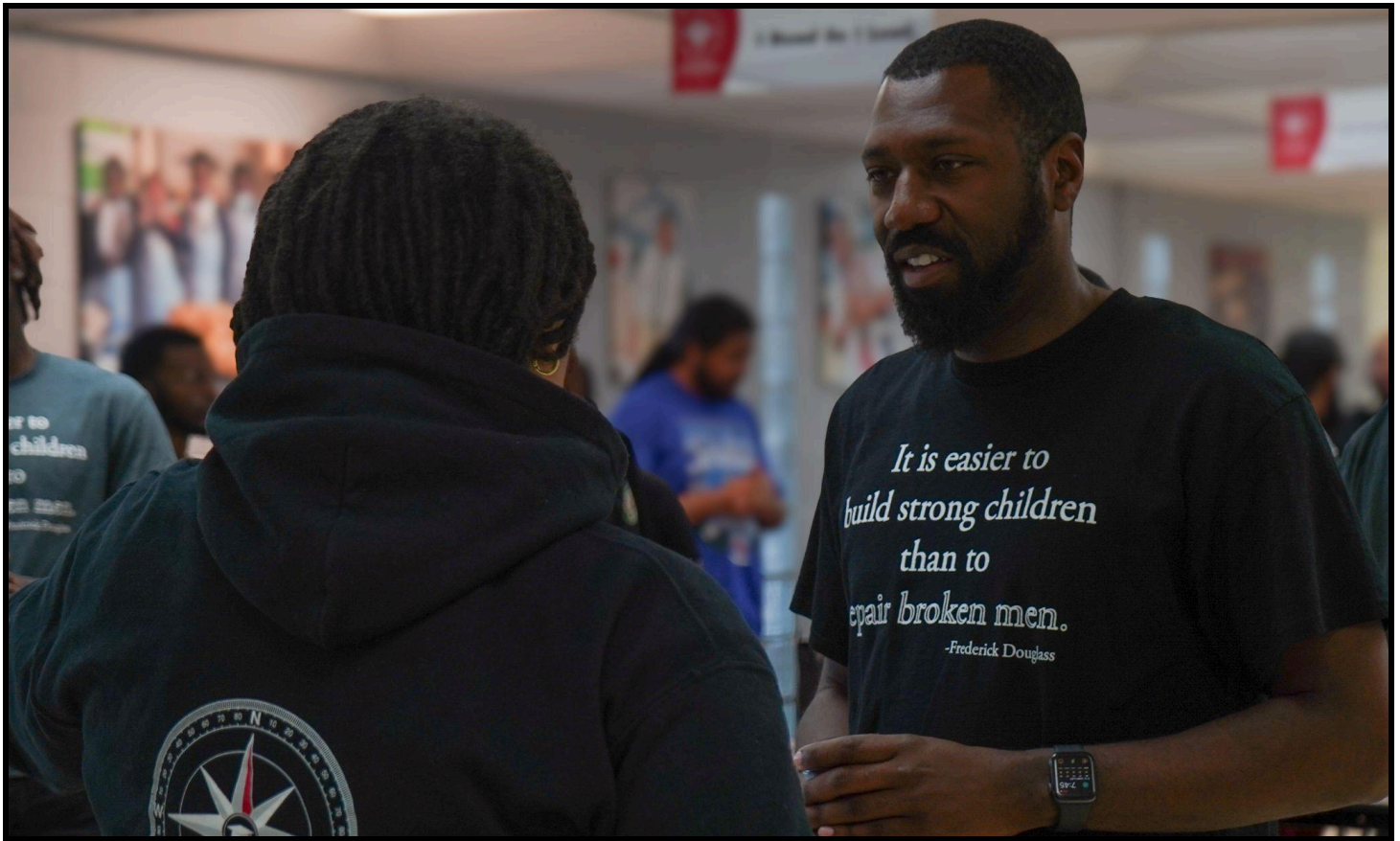
Statesmen Boys College Prep | statesmenboys.org



Prioritizing adult mental health is the cornerstone of fostering well-being in children. From the bell schedule to the professional development calendar to the school budget, Statesmen Boys College Prep’s design takes a comprehensive wellness approach to everything they do. The investment in therapeutic practices, personal relationships, and developing mindfulness strategies among educators nurture a supportive, resilient, and effective learning environment for students.

How to do this well:

- **Mindfulness + Meditation:** The facilitator leads guided deep breathing, emotional check-in, and mindfulness practices.
- **Greetings:** All staff warmly greet one another with an emphasis on connecting through eye contact, physical touch, and words of love.
- **Connection:** Guiding thoughts and questions that reground in vision and purpose.
- **Announcements:** Announcements serve to connect the whole staff by sharing information and aligning on values.
- **Connection:** Warm close involves engaging in a connection activity, reinforcing agreements rooted in love, and sharing appreciation.



Statesmen also systematize wellness through:

- Access to WISE Mental Health services
- One-third of staff training is dedicated to adult mental health
- Staff Morning Huddle/Community Meetings for a positive start
- Systematized positive interactions between staff, students, and teachers
- Emphasis on mindfulness, connection, and emotional well-being
- Integration of personal narratives and values into training

Optional Reading: The Science & Research



The Adolescent Brain & Development

Adolescence is a critical time when teens explore their priorities, whether focused on present experiences or future goals (Search Institute, 2023). Social interactions leave lasting impressions, shaping empathy and connections. Developing emotional skills is crucial for their future societal roles (Crone & Fuligni, 2020). Close, supportive relationships are essential, providing a foundation as teens explore and define their identities (Search Institute, 2023). Research shows that deepening educators' understanding of brain-based learning can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness, diversify instructional methods, and boost student confidence (Hardiman et al., 2013).

During adolescence, the brain undergoes significant changes that impact behavior and emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning, prioritizing, and decision-making, is the last part of the brain to develop. Since this crucial part of the brain is not yet fully developed, adolescents may have increased risk-taking and impulsive behavior. The active amygdala contributes to intense and fluctuating emotions, making teens more sensitive to rewards, peer acceptance, and social dynamics. (Aacap, n.d.) While their abstract thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning skills improve, their ability to plan and foresee consequences is still developing (Steinberg, 2008).

What Can Influence Development Early Adolescence (Grades 6-8)

Belonging & Identity	External Factors	Positive Relationships
- Young people's self-concepts are just forming, and it is critical for young people to experience a constant sense of belonging (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). - Young people who identify as gender or sexual minorities (LGBTQIA+) may face additional challenges to feel like they have support and fit into their family, school, and community (Search Institute, 2023). - Young people of color may experience or see bias and prejudice more often and be more vocal about these injustices (Search Institute, 2023). - Young people's changing bodies, how they think, and who their friends are can be a source of stress and pressure at this age (Search Institute, 2023).	- Young people living in war or famine are more strongly associated with a decrease in total life span than if experienced at any other age (Falconi et al. 2014). - When young people have experienced trauma early in their lives, they develop more acute survival functions over executive functions (Washington State, 2017). - This age is often associated with negative peer associations about one's self from bullying, especially for young people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). - Young people are particularly susceptible to the negative influences of social media. However, with the right skills, social media can create a positive, wider network of support for young people (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).	- Early adolescents benefit from collaborative, supportive relationships with caring adults (EL Education) - Strong support can help them develop the confidence they need to make positive choices as they sort out who they are (Search Institute, 2023).

The Neurosequential Model

Intervention strategies and practices within Strong Start can be used to promote resilience and healing. Dr. Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model is an evidence-based approach that supports educators in understanding the impact of early adversity and trauma. (The Neurosequential Network | Neurodevelopment, n.d.).

- **Regulate:** In order to connect with others and learn, we need to be physiologically regulated - having a relaxed autonomous nervous system
- **Relate:** In order to reason, we need to be related - connected to and engaged with our teachers and classmates
- **Reason:** Reasoning - learning - is only possible when we are regulated and related

Considerations for School Start Time

Secondary schools face a common challenge with student tardiness. Adolescents' delayed melatonin release and slower build-up of sleep pressure make it difficult to fall asleep early. They naturally feel more alert in the evening, leading to later bedtimes and a preference for sleeping in. These shifts in circadian rhythms can greatly affect school performance and mood.

Adjusting school start times can have a tremendous impact. Research involving over 30,000 students across 29 schools has shown that delaying school start times improves attendance and graduation rates (McKeever & Clark, 2017). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends starting school later to ensure adolescents get 8.5–9.5 hours of sleep, which reduces depression and enhances overall quality of life (Marx et al., 2017, *Sleep Medicine Reviews*).

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