



# Student- Adult Relationships Cheat Code

Improvement Lab:  
*Building Student-Adult Relationships*  
2024-25



# STUDENT SUCCESS NETWORK

## Student-Adult Relationships Cheat Code

### Improvement Lab: Building Student-Adult Relationships 2024-25

**Student-Adult relationships** are a central component of student success and contribute to positive long-term outcomes including academic persistence and achievement ([Collins, 2016](#); [Darling-Hammond et al., 2024](#)). They are also particularly important for young people who face greater systemic inequities, as strong relationships can help reduce the high stress that impacts their ability to learn and thrive in school ([Hernández & Rivero, 2023](#)). However, we have heard from practitioners that there is a lack of measures to assess and improve upon these relationships, despite the effort that is invested into them.

This “cheat code” is guided by the Search Institute’s [Developmental Relationships Framework](#), which describes five interrelated elements of developmental relationships. [Sethi and Scales \(2020\)](#) use these elements to outline methods that teachers can use to strengthen relationships, and describe the positive student outcomes that occur as a result of their teachers’ efforts, namely academic motivation and perceptions of school climate. Each element is bolstered with research, practices, and resources ([Houltberg et al., 2023](#)). Here, we seek to integrate what we have learned in transfer school and NYC contexts into our knowledge base - providing examples from peer-reviewed research as well as homegrown resources and ideas. Improvement teams may use this resource to identify change ideas and measures as they work to improve relationships in their own contexts.

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

[1. Express Care](#)

[2. Challenge Growth](#)

[3. Provide Support](#)

[4. Share Power](#)

[5. Expand possibilities](#)

[Appendix](#)

[Resource Libraries](#)

[Practical Measures](#)

[References](#)

## 1. Express Care

*Be dependable, listen, believe in me, be warm, encourage*

From the Search Institute:

- [Approaches](#) include: building trust, active listening, checking in, and showing up for students.
- When asked what this looks like in practice, high school students said they appreciate teachers who have a positive attitude and get to know their students.

### Research:

- ❖ [Foundations for Youth SEL](#) (Student Success Network, 2019) outlines six elements that help build a supportive environment for SEL development. These include affirmation and self-expression along with culture of care. The document provides a reflection tool with guiding questions, and example practices from bright spot sites.
- ❖ [How They Thrive](#) (Eskolta, 2022). Based on the experiences of NYC transfer school alumni, this report describes how supportive relationships helped humanize their school environments and contributed to success during and after high school. The study shares city-wide survey results to show students report stronger relationships in their transfer schools than in their prior schools. Transfer school students feel cared for when staff members provide comprehensive support. This includes meeting students' basic needs (such as food), displaying openness and mutual respect, and exhibiting a genuine attitude that makes students feel accepted and capable of success.
- ❖ [Student Perspectives on Meaningful Adult Relationships in Transfer Schools](#) (Collins, 2016). Through interviews with transfer school students, this paper gives a student perspective into the ways that meaningful relationships leave a lasting positive impact. Students perceiving that they are cared for leads to feelings of being “known and connected” (p. 103). Authenticity and privacy are central to feeling cared for, and they help establish a trusting relationship between students and adults. For transfer school students, these relationships give them an adult that will listen and can truthfully talk through school situations, which they may not have experienced at their previous schools or at home.
- ❖ [“It’s going to help me in life”: Forms, sources, and functions of social support](#),,, (Varga et al., 2023). This study looks at the forms of social support that youth naturally receive from adult mentors in their lives. One of these is emotional support, which includes showing empathy and caring. This form of support helps build a trusting relationship that allows the young person to feel like they can talk to the adult without being judged or

invalidated. The paper goes on to share students' quotes about how emotional support benefitted them and strengthened the relationship with the adults.

### ***Express Care: Practices from Transfer Schools***

- Counselors have an open door policy.
- *Every* student has a primary person (counselor, mentor, etc.) who checks in with them daily and focuses on their social emotional wellness.
- Celebrations help students feel seen and understood. These can include public recognition or awards for growth and achievements, birthday celebrations, and cultural celebrations. Recognition can also be small, like noticing when a student helps a classmate or tries something new.
- Community-building activities can include the entire community. Examples include staff vs student sport competitions, game night, field day or "Olympics", door decorating, and spirit week.
- The ways we use our time can be important for relationship-building. Both formal and informal moments (ie. morning greeting at entry, during transitions) can be valuable.

### **Resources:**

- [Roster Reviews Informed by Caring Relationships](#)
- [High Tech High: Personalizing Belonging. The 2x10 Strategy](#)
- [XQ Design Principle: Caring, Trusting Relationships](#)
- [Listening Deeply Strategy | Making Caring Common](#)
- [Teacher Caring and Support | DASH | CDC](#)
- [Build Trust with Your Students | Greater Good In Education](#)
- [Building respectful relationships – TeachingWorks Resource Library](#)
- [Teacher Caring | Learning Condition Guide - BELE Network](#)
- [#DegreesNYC](#) – the Student Ready Schools and Campuses Report shares YPAR findings on how schools can build a “collective care team” (p. 16) to holistically support students

## 2. Challenge Growth

***Expect my best, stretch, hold me accountable, reflect on failures***

*From the Search Institute:*

- [Approaches](#) include: promoting a growth mindset, emphasizing continuous improvement, developing critical thinking schools, and holding students to their goals.

- When asked what this looks like in practice, high school students said they experienced growth when teachers had clear, high expectations and created opportunities to reflect on mistakes – from the students as well as the teachers.

### Research:

- ❖ [Student Perspectives on Meaningful Adult Relationships in Transfer Schools](#) (Collins, 2016). This paper from the first section also speaks to how students are able to co-create plans to meet their goals, and adults help them move forward while affirming that the student is capable of reaching these goals. If setbacks occur, adults do not “sugar coat” (p. 110), keep students accountable, and work together to understand and plan how to move forward.
- ❖ [Redesigning High Schools: 10 Features for Success](#) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). Feature 3 of this report, Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching, notes that high expectations and being a “warm demander” are effective practices that help push students in a supportive, encouraging way. The report also discusses case studies of schools where these practices were implemented, and how students were able to grow.

### ***Challenge Growth: Practices from Transfer Schools***

- Student Success Teams include a group of adults that come together to talk about students who need additional support. At one school this group includes a Community Associate, Parent Coordinator, and Social Worker. Teachers and other staff are brought to the table based on the student being discussed. The team reviews student data and makes intervention plans.
- **Advisory** is a space to incorporate academic counseling, social-emotional learning and consistent goal-setting and monitoring.
- Set rigorous academic and behavioral standards and clearly communicate them to students and families. Engage stakeholders including parents and staff to ensure consistent support and understanding of expectations.

### Resources:

- [How They Thrive: Positive Youth Development in Practice](#) (see High Expectations pgs. 14-18)
- [Feedback for Growth | Learning Condition Guide - BELE Network](#)
- [Providing feedback to students – TeachingWorks Resource Library](#)
- [Guiding Students to Harness Mistakes for Learning](#)
- [Establishing Alliance in the Learning Partnership - Figure 6.2 - Warm Demander Chart](#)

### 3. Provide Support

*Navigate, empower, advocate, set boundaries*

*From the Search Institute:*

- [Approaches](#) include: connecting students to resources, validating feelings, problem solving, and advocating for equity.
- When asked what this looks like in practice, high school students said they felt supported when teachers responded to their learning needs and would “not give up” on them.

#### Research:

- ❖ [Long-Term Impacts of Lead Peace Service Learning Program](#) (McMorris et al., 2014). This report looks at the experiences of high school seniors who participated in a middle school youth development program that aimed to improve school connectedness. One of the themes from this study was the importance of caring relationships with the adults in the program, where the adults helped guide them during a transitional period and continued playing an active role in their life even after the students completed the program.

#### ***Provide Support: Practices from Transfer Schools:***

- All staff are trained in **Restorative Practices**. Training covers the following topics: the centrality of relationships, school to prison pipeline, trauma-informed and healing-centered care, restorative circles, restorative questioning, affective statements, social discipline window, RP for staff and restorative collaboration. Resources come from the [International Institute for Restorative Practices](#).
- **Advisory** is a space for students to explore topics together like setting boundaries or identifying emotions and triggers. Establishing norms in a space that makes students feel safe to build relationships and community will then, in turn, help them feel open to learning, sharing, and growing.

#### Resources:

- [Supportive Teaching | Learning Condition Guide - BELE Network](#)
- [WWC | Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do](#)
- [Learning Partnerships — National Equity Project](#)
- [All In! How Educators Can Advocate for English Language Learners | Colorín Colorado](#)
- [Using Technology to Empower Students With Special Needs | Edutopia](#)

## 4. Share Power

*Respect me, include me, collaborate, let me lead*

From the Search Institute:

- [Approaches](#) include: sharing responsibility, practicing perspective taking, responding to feedback, and building leadership skills.
- When asked what this looks like in practice, high school students said teachers gave them opportunities to be part of decision-making and didn't talk down to them.

### Research:

#### ❖ [What Builds Student Capacity in an Alternative High School Setting?](#) (Lind, 2013).

Supportive healthy relationships were found to be one of the most important components of student “capacity-building” - their feeling of being capable and able to realize their goals. A mutual community of learning where everyone could be considered both a teacher and a student enhanced the feelings of mutuality and valued student input. Using first names with adults, for example, helped students view teachers as human beings and assisted in breaking down artificial barriers, making teachers seem more approachable from a student perspective.

### **Share Power: Practices from Transfer Schools:**

- Each spring, students complete a Participant Satisfaction Survey to assess whether they feel connected, respected, and safe. They are given space to provide feedback on the staff and school. Students are also encouraged to express their interests and develop clubs, teams, or activities their peers would enjoy. They are more willing to share their ideas when they trust staff are listening and willing to support them.
- Good Shepherd's annual Youth Summit is an energetic youth-led event that brings together teens from over 20 Good Shepherd schools and programs to exchange ideas, share critical thought, and coalesce around topics of importance to them. Led by a Youth Leadership team, students work for months to determine a theme, select topics, prepare research, and create a presentation.
- Other student-led initiatives can include student government, ambassador programs, or peer-to-peer mentoring programs to foster collaboration and boost student leadership skills.
- Student choice and voice can be incorporated into personal and academic goal setting, curriculum design, and course work, providing opportunities for students to influence what and how they learn.
- **Restorative Practices** acknowledge that all parties, whether they are harmed or perpetrators, have thoughts and feelings that are worth exploring. Restorative practices allow adults to reflect and strategize “with” students, minimizing power dynamics.

**Resources:**

- [Student Ownership of Program](#)
- [Prioritizing Student Choice and Voice in Lesson Plans](#)
- [Student Voice | Learning Condition Guide - BELE Network](#)
- [XQ Design Principle: Youth Voice and Choice](#)
  - ◆ [XQ Youth Voice Kit](#)
  - ◆ [Youth Voice Cards](#)
  - ◆ [Ladder of Youth Participation](#)
- [Redesigning with Students: A Playbook for Success by DCPS Design Lab - PDF Books](#)
- [The Student Voice Toolkit | Search Institute](#)

## 5. Expand possibilities

*Inspire, connect, broaden horizons*

*From the Search Institute:*

- [Approaches](#) include: using culturally responsive content, broadening perspectives, sharing stories of others finding their path, and helping students think forward while acting now.
- When asked what this looks like in practice, high school students said their teachers connected them with opportunities beyond the classroom and inspired them to think about their futures.

**Research:**

- ❖ [Connecting Youth to High-Resource Adults: Lessons From Effective Youth Programs](#) (Sullivan & Larson, 2010). This study describes how programs (leadership, service, and civic action) connected youth to community adults in ways that led to youth gaining resources. Program leaders worked with both youth and community adults in advance to set up meaningful interactions, and debriefed afterward. Despite not leading to long-term relationships, these interactions provided youth with information, skills, and access to adult worlds.
- ❖ [“It’s going to help me in life”: Forms, sources, and functions of social support...](#) (Varga et al., 2023). – A study of mentoring showed that relationships can offer different kinds of support. Instrumental support includes offering tangible, practical assistance. Informational support includes offering knowledge or advice.
- ❖ [The Missing Metrics: Emerging practices for measuring students’ relationships and networks](#) (Christensen Institute, 2023). This research looks at relationships as an



outcome in and of itself - as a skill for students to build social capital and expand future possibilities

### ***Expand Possibilities: Practices from Transfer Schools***

- An ***internship program*** that runs after school gives students an opportunity to explore different careers within the school community before taking on external internships. Students see staff outside their typical roles and connect with students during this time. They begin to build confidence within the internship - this confidence ripples into everything else they are involved with in the classroom and with relationships in the school.
- Exploration and exposure activities can include career fairs with professionals from diverse industries, mentoring partnerships, early college course access, and extracurricular opportunities to provide networking opportunities and develop skills and interests beyond the classroom.
- Visits to colleges, trade schools, and cultural institutions, including overnight stays, can help students discover interests they might not have considered before.
- Culturally responsive curricula and programming introduce students to diverse viewpoints and experiences. Diverse representation in staffing, curricula, and in the physical space enriches learning by reflecting what students will encounter in the world.
- Integrating community service and civic engagement projects can foster a sense of responsibility and connection to broader communities.

### **Resources:**

- [5 Ways to Build Career Connections in High School | Edutopia](#)
- [Social Capital Framework](#)
- [5 Steps for Building & Strengthening Students' Networks](#)
- [Elevate: Affirming Identities](#)

## Appendix

### **Resource Libraries**

[The BELE Network](#)

[Resources + Tools - XQ Institute](#)

[Resources Hub | Search Institute](#)

[Resources — National Equity Project](#)

[Elevate: Practice Guide 2023-24](#)

[TeachingWorks Resource Library](#)

[Social Impact and Systems Transformation Resources - reDesign](#)

[Resources | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments \(NCSSLE\)](#)

## Practical Measures

Practical measures can tell us along the way whether the changes we are making are leading to improvement. They should be pretty simple to implement, and give timely feedback. They may include student questionnaires, interviews, or self-assessment rubrics. They could also include observations, existing data like measures of attendance, time spent on an activity, or a participation rate. The following tools are examples and can be adapted to assess the effectiveness of change ideas:

- ❖ [Inventory of Teacher-Student Relationships](#): This self-assessment tool asks students to reflect on their relationships with their teachers, measuring communication, trust, and alienation.
- ❖ [Student Survey](#): This Panorama Survey includes a 4-question scale to measure student-teacher relationships both in the classroom (p. 12) and in the school environment (p. 20). Additionally, the survey offers a variety of other scales that can help teams measure student perceptions in areas that support relationship-building, such as rigorous expectations, classroom/school climate, and student mindset.
- ❖ [SEL Data Reflection](#): This protocol provides a structured reflection process for analyzing data. It can help teams identify trends, gaps, and implications in building relationship-building practices.
- ❖ [Self-Assessment Matrix: Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement](#): This matrix helps schools assess youth participation by evaluating student involvement in decision-making both in the classroom and the school environment.
- ❖ [Student Growth Goal Rubrics](#): These rubrics help educators set and measure instructional practices that promote student growth.

## References

- Collins, Susan E., "Student Perspectives on Meaningful Adult Relationships in a Transfer School" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/1307](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/1307)
- Darling-Hammond, L., Alexander, M., & Hernández, L. E. (2024). Redesigning high schools: 10 features for success. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/533.285>

Hernández, L. H., & Rivero, E. (2023). Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign. Learning Policy Institute.

<https://doi.org/10.54300/621.856>

Houltberg, B. J., Scales, P. C., & Williams, J. (2023). Developmental Relationships: The Roots of Positive Youth Development - 10 Years of Youth Voice, Practitioner Wisdom, and Research Insights—A Search Institute Position Paper. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

Sethi, J., & Scales, P. C. (2020). Developmental relationships and school success: How teachers, parents, and friends affect educational outcomes and what actions students say matter most. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 63, 101904.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101904>