

MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

“Not all meaningful relationships start out through a positive experience. It is important to never give up on students, even though your patience may be tested on a regular basis,” says Keith Johnson.

Developing meaningful relationships helps to ensure that no student remains anonymous in high school. Paying attention to students and working to get to know them allows teachers to connect with students’ lives beyond the classroom. The results directly impact what goes on in the classroom. A relationship that demonstrates genuine interest between students and staff brings a level of trust and healthy interaction that stimulates intellectual pursuit and collaborative learning. Finding and creating more opportunities to build meaningful relationships strengthens the learning experience in high schools.

Norbert Baharally comments on meaningful relationships by saying “The key point of [meaningful relationships] is ‘genuine care and concern’ on the part of teachers – students easily identify what is and what is not genuine. Teachers who truly care about their students are able to quickly form relationships with those students.”

Keith Johnson notes some points that could be added to improve the description of meaningful relationships. He says, “I would add, ‘personal success.’ [This] would involve students being confident in society and having a solid sense of self-esteem.” Johnson added that meaningful relationships include “students being prepared for the world of work through a mentorship relationship focused on career planning.”

“Teachers are not teaching to a group of students – they are teaching individuals who they know and care about. This results in a dramatic shift in instructional pedagogy and in the atmosphere of the school.”
Norbert Baharally, Principal, Wm E Hay

What is the impact on students?

Positive interactions with adults, on a regular basis, help students feel good about themselves. But more than self-esteem, communication skills are built. By having regular conversations with teachers, students can actually hear themselves speak about personal interests without fear of being assessed by the teacher or judged by a room full of peers. Janet Grenier notes, “There’s not a day that our kids don’t see their TA [Teacher Advisor] for about 40 minutes.” The TAs communicate with the parents, establish objectives, celebrate birthdays. “It’s a little bit like elementary school – and the kids need it. Two minutes a day is not a TA [Teacher Advisory] program.

“If you only see kids during class time and you’re busy teaching, you might just see a kid who is acting up.” But if the kid is talking to the TA, and the teachers are talking to each other, “often problems can be dealt with before they get out of hand.”

Norbert Baharally agrees. He says, “Relationships in one realm spread to relationships in every realm of our school. Even small gestures, such as administration standing outside of the school to greet every student entering the building in the morning,

the one-on-one work with struggling students, attending extracurricular events of TA students and knowing their hobbies and interests – students feel a sense of connection and a sense of belonging to our school and that is how we engage students in their learning.”

Friendships are built in this way. So are meaningful relationships with adults. Keith Johnson describes a program used in his school that fosters meaningful relationships. He says, “Through the TA program, students connect with a teacher for three years [so] there is less chance of students going through high school unnoticed. Students feel that there is an adult in the building who cares about their lives. ... One of the key benefits to students in developing a positive relationship with adults during their three years of high school is that they begin to understand what a genuine real-world relationship feels like outside of their family relationships. There is a sense of security with students communicating with significant adults in the school community, as they are able to communicate more freely regarding certain issues.”

What is the impact on staff?

Getting to know the students on a personal level provides a greater understanding of home, peer or community issues students may be trying to solve.

Wanda Gerard, Josina Nagtegaal and Debbie Terceros describe the impact of mentoring on staff by discussing their experience with Academic and Individual Mentor (AIM) teachers. These teachers, who mentor to a group of cross-graded students throughout their high school experience, have an important role to play. The trio says, “The role of the AIM teacher continues to evolve. The variety of interpretations of this role is as different as the number of teachers on staff. Time is being incorporated once per month as AIM time for teachers to meet with their entire mentorship group. Teachers are looking to build a stronger rapport with students through this time. The level of parent involvement has increased at the school through the connection parents are able to establish with their child’s AIM teacher.”

By talking with students about their personal issues, or simply talking about the latest movie, you can get a greater glimpse of individual personalities. Norbert Baharally says, “Staff have become more invested in their work. They know their students and understand their needs and that understanding has resulted in more individualization of instruction and assessment.” The adult perspective you openly offer informs your role as a mentor and guide to students. You can help to shape careers in this way, simply by being present to student interests and creating new awareness in students who may be eager to learn more about what you know.

“Build trust with students by keeping your commitments to them. For example, if you say you are going to watch them play basketball, show up and stay for the entire game. Also, keep the relationships with students honest and open. Tell them how you feel their action led to a consequence and help them understand how to change an attitude or behaviour.”

Keith Johnson, Principal, James Fowler

“Students genuinely appreciate the mentorship and relationships between student and adult. They may not show you [this] immediately, but in time you will see the difference.”

Keith Johnson, Principal, James Fowler

“The significance of the relationships often comes back at year-end when you get a card or an e-mail saying, ‘I was having trouble and I had no one to talk to and you were there.’ I can’t speak for my teachers, but what I hear is that they feel more connected – and that’s why you become a teacher.”

Janet Grenier, Directrice, École Ste-Marguerite-Bourgeoys

When meaningful relationships are fostered:

- no student feels anonymous
- teachers and students communicate regularly
- teachers and students respect one another
- students see teachers as mentors
- students are supported in achieving high standards or excellence
- teachers build trust by keeping commitments to students.

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