

## Personalization & Caring Relationships with Adults in Urban High Schools: Is There a Relationship with Academic Achievement?

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*Schools pay too little attention to the importance of personalization or the creation of positive, caring relationships that form strong connections between students and the adults. Students reporting higher levels of personalization to their school have significantly higher weighted grade point averages and English test scores according to longitudinal data from 14 urban California high schools with diverse enrollments. The data also suggest that personalization matters more when it appears in informal, improvised, and more authentic encounters than within formal course structures. With an eye toward improving academic achievement, policies are needed to encourage and strengthen more positive school climates based on closer, more caring relationships and mentoring that develop naturally over time. Teachers need resources and supports to learn personalization and connectedness strategies and skills. Youth, especially disadvantaged youth, need opportunities to develop leadership and voice.*

The environments of large, urban high schools in the United States are often impersonal, isolating, unsafe, and unengaging. This may help account for why drop-out rates, overall poor performance and attendance, victimization, and high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and suicide are increasing at an alarming rate. Making secondary schools warmer, safer, and more nurturing environments can help stem the tide of these dangerous trends. To shed light on this issue, the relationship of achievement to school “personalization” or adult connectedness was studied among California students in high schools with diverse enrollments in a large urban school district. Too little attention is given within schools to the importance of personalization and creating engaging and caring school climates. In challenging

school environments — like those in urban, low-income, neighborhoods — personalization, connectedness, and caring relationships may be especially important for improving academic engagement and achievement.

### What Is Personalization?

What personalization means and how it is enacted in a given district or school can vary tremendously. At the heart of these efforts is a desire to create more positive and caring relationships that form strong connections between students and the adults responsible for teaching and mentoring them. The term captures a host of protective factors that schools and communities can promote to shelter and support students throughout their develop-

ment and education. Young people who are connected emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally to their education are less likely to show signs of alienation and more likely to be engaged in school.

Research indicates that, by improving the relationships and feelings of connectedness between students and teachers, students will not only work harder academically, they will also engage in fewer risky behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997; Benard, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Steinberg & Allen, 2002). Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) showed that, as the percentage of students who score high in having caring relationships with an adult at the school increased, so did gains one year later in reading, language, and mathematics on SAT-9 test scores (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004).

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## What is the Scope of the Problem in California?

CHKS data for 2005–07 reveal a lack of school connectedness and caring relationships with adults at school among the majority of students, especially those in low-performing schools. Only 26%–33% of secondary students scored high in having *caring relationships*, and 14%–18% scored low. Likewise, only 39% of seventh graders, and 31% of ninth and eleventh graders scored high in *school connectedness*, and about 17% across grades scored low.

When secondary schools were categorized into quintiles based on the Academic Performance Index (API) scores, only 21%–29% of students across grades in the lowest quintile had high levels of school connectedness. In contrast, almost twice as many students in the highest quintile schools (41%–53%) had high levels of school connectedness. This pattern remained consistent when students were asked about having adult supports at school. Only 29% of ninth graders, and 37–38% of seventh and eleventh graders, in the lowest-performing quintile scored high in having adult supports at school (caring relationships and high expectations). In the highest-performing quintile, percentages were significantly higher, by 4 points (eleventh grade) to 11 points (seventh grade) (Hanson, Austin, & Zheng, in press).

There is a growing awareness that disenagement or a lack of connectedness is a major contributor to students dropping out of school. One of the three “essential questions” that the California P-16 Council (2006) investigated regarding the state’s dropout problem was how students could develop a sense of community in school. The Council pushed for programs that would help schools develop a sense of “oneness,” where the environment was built on trust, acceptance, and shared responsibility.

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## Study Design

Much research related to personalization and connectedness has been conducted on the merits of school- and class-size reduction. Little research has been done on the effects of in-school personalization efforts. To address this gap, an analysis was conducted of data collected over a three-year period (2005–2007) from 10,581 students attending 14 recently-converted “small” (fewer than 500 students) California high schools in a large, urban district that serves a high-risk, high-needs population. The students were racially and linguistically diverse, and over half came from impoverished homes. Personalization was assessed by a scale asking students about level of adult trust, help with solving problems, knowledge of the student’s strengths and weaknesses, and communicating positive and encouraging messages.

Particular attention was paid to one personalization strategy — advisory programs. Advisory programs developed as a school reform strategy to re-make junior high schools into a more successful transitional experience that recognized the social and emotional stresses faced by early adolescents (Alexander & Williams, 1965). They take many forms, but generally share several common goals; a forum where students can talk with an adult regarding personal issues, address academic concerns, and receive help navigating the transition to college and career (Epstein & MacIver, 1990).

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## How are Personalization and Achievement Related?

The analysis revealed a clear and consistent pattern: student attitudes about personalization, connectedness,

and advisory *were* significantly related to academic outcomes. Students who reported higher levels of personalization in their school had significantly higher weighted GPAs — which take into consideration advance course and English scores on the California Standardized Test (CST) — as compared to students reporting lower levels of personalization. Simply stated, the more that students felt personalization at their schools, the better they did academically. With one sub-group exception, an increase of one point on the 6-point response scale was associated with weighted increases ranging from 0.08 to 0.23 grade points on a GPA scale from 0.00 to 4.0+ (accounting for honors courses) and increases of 4 to 8 points on the English CST's. This is a robust finding.

However, counter to our original predictions, the *better* students felt about advisory, the lower their weighted GPAs and English test scores. A likely explanation is that students are distinguishing between the “real life” experiences of personalization versus the more formal structure of advisory programs. This indicates that relationships matter more when they appear in informal, improvised, and, therefore, more authentic, encounters between teachers and students, than when they appear because of formal structures of courses, like advisory, that are institutionally designated for that purpose.

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## What Can We Do?

These results can help educators and policy makers understand the growing importance of personalization and connectedness within districts and schools. They are credible, quantitative support for the ideas espoused by researchers and educators who argue that social-emotional relationships between teachers and students matter for academic outcomes (e.g., Klem & Connell, 2004). A previous study examining personalization efforts in seven schools found that, as self-reported levels of personalization increased, students reported increased academic expectations for themselves and increased personal accountability between students and teachers (Wallach et al., 2006). The current study helps bolster these findings by linking increases in personalization with increases in weighted GPA and standardized test scores. Protective factors such as strong mentoring relationships between teachers/counselors and students are important facets of

secondary instructional services, particularly for urban and low-income youth.

These findings have implications in an era of decreasing state funding and heightened academic press. They underscore the importance schools and educators must place on efforts to personalize education and the social-emotional *and* academic benefits they can reap by doing so. Creating schools with adults who are attentive to students' needs appears to have value when the payout is academic success both in school and on standardized tests. How do we go about transforming our schools to enhance more personalization and connectedness?

- *Policies are needed to address cultural and social components of school that will result in integrated strategies for increasing personalization and connectedness, rather than relying on isolated, adjunct programs.* Limited structural changes are likely to be insufficient to increase student learning, engagement, and achievement. The cultural and social component of schooling must be explicitly addressed as well, and personalization and connectedness must be woven throughout the school community. Ultimately, personalization approaches must move into the core of schooling and instruction. Schools need to integrate strategies of caring into their daily work and overall school climate, as opposed to simply annexing it within an advisory period.
- *Strategies for integrating personalization and connectedness more completely into schools may require more creative approaches by policy makers and educators to allow more caring and positive student-teacher relationships to develop naturally, over time.* Among those approaches are looping (retaining the same students with the same teacher over multiple years); retention incentives for teachers, particularly in low-income and high minority schools; multi-age grouping strategies; and team teaching arrangements.
- *Schools and teachers need to be provided with resources and supports to make this happen.* The teachers at the schools whose students were surveyed repeatedly expressed a lack of confidence and a desire for assistance regarding developing mentoring skills. Although not every teacher felt this way, many believed that they had been

trained to teach a particular content area, not children, necessarily. And they had little time, resources, or energy to receive and really learn from mentorship training. Policies should advocate that teachers work on personalization and connectedness content in a professional learning community and be provided with on-going school-site support.

- *Finally, personalization and connectedness strategies need to include youth empowerment, such as opportunities for leadership and voice, especially in low-income areas.* Counseling and mentoring low-income, urban youth may fall short despite adults' best efforts. This is because youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, more than peers from other socio-economic groups need to feel a sense of empowerment and entitlement as much as they need concrete information and encouragement. Only when youth take an active role, alongside adults, in shaping the school and community contexts in which they live, learn, and work will we see fundamental change.

## BEING WELL. LEARNING WELL.

**The California Healthy Students Research Project** is devoted to understanding and addressing issues of health and well-being that hurt student achievement. By researching health and education issues in the state, the project provides evidence-based policy and practice recommendations

to foster the school culture, environment, supports and services needed to give all youth the opportunity to be successful learners.

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**Find complete research reports at [LearningWellBeingWell.org](http://LearningWellBeingWell.org)**

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