**Improving Teacher-Student Relationships**

**Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teacher-student relationships refer to the quality of the interactions between teachers and students within a classroom and school-wide context. Although some researchers consider teacher-student relationships to be comprised of three different qualities: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support1,emotional support is the primary focus in this training module. On the *Delaware School Climate Survey*, emotional support in teacher-student relationships is captured by items referring to teachers caring about students, liking students, listening to students when they have problems, and treating students of all races with respect. Although that survey assesses teacher-student relationships as perceived by students, teachers, and parents/guardians, the primary focus of this module is the perceptions of students.

**Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Supported by attachment theory, self-determination theory, and social learning theory, research shows that students’ perceptions of warm and supportive relationships between students and their teachers are associated with a number of positive student outcomes:

***At the individual student level*,** teacher-student relationships are widely recognized as a key dimension of emotional well-being that plays a primary role in motivating behavior. In school, teachers and peers are the two greatest sources of social support. As is true with peer support, social support from a teacher is related a number of positive outcomes for all students, including academic motivation, and also serves as a buffer for children who experience bullying, economic disadvantage, and other stressors in life – helping protect them from negative outcomes.2-4

*Students with positive relationships with their teachers tend to have:*

* Greater prosocial behavior and social competence5-12
* Fewer externalizing problems, including acting-out in the classroom, aggressing toward peers, and bullying5, 13-17
* Greater motivation to comply with their teachers out of respect rather than simply out of fear or the desire to earn rewards18-19
* Greater peer acceptance and friendships20-23
* Greater comfort in seeking help from teachers and other adults in school, such as when being bullied15
* Greater academic achievement14, 24-25, 71
* Greater academic initiative and engagement26-29
* Greater self-esteem, cognitive competence, and internal locus of control30
* Greater school satisfaction, liking of school, and school completion31-33

***At the classroom and school levels,*** teacher-student relationships impact classroom and school climate by influencing classroom norms and group behavior, both positively and negatively. As noted below, this is largely through classroom management – teacher-student relationships are a critical component of classroom management. Relatedly, students are inclined to adopt the values of those teachers they highly respect and whom they view as warm and responsive.18-19

**Primary Factors Contributing to Teacher-Student Relationships**

Classroom and school-based factors related to positive teacher-student relationships follow, with an emphasis on those that are malleable and can be targeted most effectively to improve teacher-student relationships.

**Student Characteristics**

Students with the following characteristics tend to have less close relationships with their teachers:

* Frequent antisocial or aggressive behaviors and behavior problems35-36
* Shy tendencies37
* Greater internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression10

*Important note: Although not malleable factors, age, gender, and race of students tend to be related to students’ perceptions of the quality of teacher-student relationships.* For example, students’ perceptions tend to be less favorable with increasing age, especially after elementary school.36, 38 However, studies also show that teacher-student relationships become more important in preventing negative outcomes as students age.39 Gender also matters; teachers’ relationships with girls tend to be closer and less conflictual than with boys.1, 35 Finally, African-American students tend to view teacher-student relationships less favorably than do students of other races.36

**Characteristics of Classroom Management, School Discipline, Teachers, and Classrooms**

Teacher support is widely recognized as being a critical part of not only school climate but also classroom management and school discipline. This is perhaps best seen in the authoritative approach to classroom management and school discipline, which emphasizes a balance of *support*, or responsiveness to students’ needs, and *structure*, or demandingness. Support refers to others, but especially teachers, demonstrating warmth, care, respect, and acceptance. Structure refers to teachers providing close monitoring and supervision, clear and consistent rules, expectations, responsibilities, and procedures. Together, these two dimensions have been associated with fewer behavior problems and greater prosocial behavior in classrooms40-42 and in schools.43-44 Students prefer teachers who:

* Demonstrate personal and academic caring, provide guidance, help with schoolwork, and show personal attention and respect (e.g., listening and learning about their individual interests, opinions, and concerns)45-46
* Spend more time individually with their students and engage them in their interests1,47
* Hold high expectations and manage their classrooms well – providing the balance of support and structure46,48
* Demonstrate self-efficacy in their teaching and classroom management – who are “firm” or “strict” but also are fair, not “mean,” and refrain from humiliating students publically or punishing them harshly for minor offenses46
* Make greater use of proactive and positive techniques than punitive techniques in managing student behavior49
* “Make learning fun” by motivating and engaging students, using humor, and demonstrating enthusiasm in teaching45-46
* Foster student autonomy and self-determination: giving them choices and involving them decision-making about their classrooms, rather than emphasizing their external control46,50
* Communicate often with their families36,51

*Important Note:* *These same themes emerge in studies of students of various cultures and backgrounds, including studies focusing on African-American and Hispanic students, students who feel alienated, and students living in poverty.*46

*Important Note: Teachers who have higher levels of stress, more depressive symptoms, and lower self-efficacy tend to have more negative relationships with their students.*52-54

**Recommended Evidence-Based Strategies and Interventions for Improving Teacher-Student Relationships**

In this section, evidence-based strategies and interventions are presented for improving teacher-student relationships at Tiers 1, 2, and 3. First, Tier 1 strategies and interventions are presented, which consist of those designed to be implemented for *all* students at the school-wide and classroom levels. For heuristic purposes they are grouped into four general categories: **(I)** data to determine needs, strategies and interventions **(II)** implement classroom management strategies for prevention and promotion **(III)** employ strategies and provide opportunities that build and maintain positive teacher-student relationships **(IV)** implement an evidence-based SEL curriculum that has been shown to strengthen students’ social-emotional competencies while also fostering positive teacher-student relationships. Next, Tiers 2 and 3 strategies and interventions are presented, which are designed for individual students and small groups of students who have the most difficult time forming positive relationships with teachers.

**School-wide and Classroom Strategies and Intervention at Tier 1**

**I. Examine data, especially school climate data, to help determine the need for interventions and which interventions that might be most effective.** It is strongly recommended that interventions for improving teacher-student relationships are guided by a needs assessment that includes a comprehensive school climate survey, such as the *Delaware School Climate Survey*. Results of the surveys would help answer the critical question:

*Are teacher-student relationships viewed favorably across students, teachers/staff, and parents, and across subgroups within those respondents, including grades (e.g., ninth versus twelfth grade), racial/ethnic groups, and gender?*

* + Favorable responses across all subgroups would indicate little or no need for the interventions that follow or for related staff development.
  + Unfavorable responses across multiple subgroups would indicate the need for comprehensive and sustained interventions, including related staff development.
  + Unfavorable responses for specific subgroups would indicate the need for more targeted interventions for those subgroups (e.g., African American students in the school, male students in fifth grade)

*Important note: In examining scores it is very important to consider not only the extent to which students, teachers/staff, and parents agree/disagree that teacher-student relationships are favorable or unfavorable, but also the developmental differences in students’ scores (e.g., adolescents tend to view school climate, including teacher-student relationships, less favorably than younger students).* The Delaware School Climate Survey Interpretation Worksheets are designed to help schools do this. See http://wordpress.oet.udel.edu/pbs/school-climate/use-of-school-climate-data/

I.1. Be sure to look at responses to specific items on surveys, such as on the Teacher-Student Relationship subscale. Examine if students respond favorably to some items, but not all. For example, negative responses to “Teachers treat students of all races with respect,” but positive responses to all other items that do not include race would indicate that the school should examine teacher-student relationships and interventions that are more race specific, such as communicating greater understanding and respect toward one or more racial groups.

I.2. If data from the school climate surveys indicate that teacher-student relationships are an area of need, additional data should be gathered and examined to help determine *why* respondents do not view teachers and other staff members in their school as caring, listening about their students’ problems, respecting students of all races, and liking their students. Scores on other subscales of the surveys and data from other sources should provide some clues. For example, scores on the Use Positive, Punitive, and SEL Techniques Scales, especially when combined with high office discipline referrals and suspensions, might indicate that frequent use of punitive practices and infrequent use of positive and SEL techniques are factors in students reporting poor teacher-student relations. Thus, interventions targeting those behaviors (and the teachers who exhibit them) would be warranted.

I.3. Share results of the survey(s) and other data with focus groups comprised of representatives of subgroups that responded unfavorably to the items. For example, if fifth grade teachers or Hispanic/Latino students responded negatively you should consider meeting with those groups to gain insight into their perceptions of poor teacher-student relationships and their perceptions of which interventions recommended below are likely to be effective.

**II. Implement general strategies of classroom management and school-wide discipline that prevent behavior problems *and* promote positive teacher-student relationships.**

* Note: The strategies for preventing and managing student misbehavior listed in the module on Student-Student Relationships apply not only to improving *student-student* relationships but also *teacher-student* relationships. They include strategies reflecting an authoritative approach to classroom management, consisting of a balance of social support (from both teachers and peers) and structure. Such strategies include those summarized below (please see Student-Student Relationships module for greater descriptions of these Tier 1 strategies):

II.1. Use praise and other recognitions wisely and strategically not only to teach and reinforce prosocial behaviors, but also to express positive emotions and approval toward students. For example, place a brief sticky note on the student’s desk, or in his/her notebook, communicating that you care about the student or are pleased with his/her behavior. This is likely to increase students’ perceptions of positive interactions and the closeness of the teacher-student relationship.55

II.2 Model prosocial behaviors, especially those related to liking of others (e.g., caring, respect, listening). Provide multiple additional models of those qualities in individuals in the community, literature, history, film, sports, and news.

II.3 Provide clear behavioral and academic expectations, routines, and procedures; fair rules and consequences; and close monitoring and supervision of student behavior.

II.4. When correcting misbehavior, a major goal should be not only to prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring but also to maintain a positive teacher-student relationship. The following strategies might help:

* Where feasible, correct misbehavior privately instead of publicly.
* *Always* combine any negative consequences with recognition of positive behaviors.
* Use inductive discipline, which emphasizes the impact of the student’s behavior on others and relations with others, including the teacher-student relationship (e.g., a focus less on punitive consequences and more on empathy and social perspective taking).
* Communicate that it is the misbehavior that you dislike and find unacceptable – *not* the student.
* Communicate that it is a shared responsibility to help improve the misbehavior – shared by you and the student (and in many cases also classmates and family).
* Communicate that you are optimistic that the misbehavior will not be repeated and will be replaced by more appropriate behavior when the student faces similar problem situations in the future (while also communicating the consequences if it *is* repeated).

**III. In addition to the strategies and techniques of classroom management above, employ strategies and provide opportunities that build and maintain positive teacher-student relationships.**

III.1. Get to know *every* student individually, including their interests, preferences, talents, skills, families, cultural values, etc. Be sure to communicate such knowledge and communicate that you care.

III.2. Spend time individually with students. This may include:

* Making sure each student receives at least one positive interaction from a teacher daily or as frequently as feasible.
* More intensive time, especially for students who likely view their teachers and school negatively. For example, Banking Time47, 56 has been shown to improve teacher-student relationships. Although Banking Time was designed for children in preschool and early elementary grades, aspects of it would apply to all grades. In Banking Time, teachers spend time with students individually during set periods of time to get to know them better. These positive experiences with students help prevent behavior problems and reduce teacher-student conflict when problem behaviors occur.

III.3. Greet students when they enter the school and classrooms. Be in the classroom before class starts so students can speak with you. This can help facilitate one-on-one interactions.57

III.4. Notice when students are having difficulties (academics or personal). Listen to them and show concern. Use active listening techniques by listening to what they say and reflecting back a brief summary so they know you understand.58 Provide support, when needed.

III.5. Treat students equally and do not indicate “favorites” (or “non-favorites”) in the classroom.

III.6. Communicate your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings to allow your students to get to know you better. Students may identify shared interests with you, which may help them relate to you.

III.7. Join students for lunch occasionally.

III.8. Have fun and use humor when appropriate. Play games, tell jokes, and read funny stories.

III.9. Attend sports/extracurricular activities in which your students participate (and let them know you watched them).

III.10. Reflect upon how well you know each of your students, their interests, backgrounds, and cultures. Act upon such reflection by getting to know students better who might feel overlooked, forgotten, or neglected. For example, you might try the following (adapted from <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/blog/how-well-do-you-know-your-students>):

* + On a piece of paper, make three columns:
    - First column: List student names in your class. Write them from memory and do not try to list them based on order in the classroom seating arrangement, alphabetically, etc.
    - Second column: Write one thing the student likes to do or is very interested in.
    - Third column: Make a star if you are sure the student knows that you know this about him/her.
  + If there are students’ names you forgot to include in the first column, you might need to spend more time with those students.
  + If you had difficulty naming interests of some students, try to spend more 1:1 time with those students and otherwise get to know them better.
  + If stars are missing in the third column, you might need to connect with those students more often.

III.11. Provide *school-wide* activities that promote positive teacher-student interactions, such as extracurricular activities in which staff and students participate together, service learning, pep rallies, games, etc.

III.12. Advocate for your students when appropriate. For example, defend a student’s actions to a parent or administrator when you feel strongly that the student did the right thing but is being unjustly or too harshly punished for that behavior.

III.13. Communicate *positive* messages about each student to the student’s home. For example, call or send a note home when the student behaves particularly well that day, achieves a high grade, or performs a noteworthy prosocial act. Regularly communicating about positive things the student has done will help you understand more about the family’s values and experiences and will help strengthen the bond between the school and the family, as well as the teacher-student relationship.

**IV. Consider implementing an evidence-based SEL curriculum that has been shown to strengthen students’ social-emotional competencies while also fostering positive teacher-student relationships,**

IV.1. Look for programs that include lessons on relationship skills and that have been *shown* in empirical studies to improve teacher-student relationships. Such programs should include lessons and strategies that target specific social skills associated with prosocial behavior (e.g., being helpful, cooperative, respectful, self-confident), the absence of antisocial behavior (e.g., bullying, aggression, rejection of peers), but also attending and listening skills.

IV.2. A number of programs have been shown to improve relationships, including teacher-student relationships. See CASEL.org for a list of such programs, and descriptions of each. Packaged programs available for purchase and/or training and with the most substantial research evidence follow:

*Responsive Classroom approach (K – Grade 6)*

<http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/>

* Comprehensive approach to classroom management and developing SEL skills, with an emphasis teacher support, morning meetings, home-school collaboration, and active involvement of students in decisions making and social problem solving.
* Research has found greater teacher-student closeness and more positive student perceptions of the classroom environment60-61
* *Note: The Caring School Community is a comprehensive evidence-based program that shares many features of the Responsive Classroom approach*. It also includes lessons for teaching social and emotional skills that are integrated into the language arts and the use of inductive discipline (focusing on empathy and perspective taking). This program has been shown to improve multiple aspects of student-student relationships, including classroom behavior, but also to increase respect and trust for teachers.63 Unlike Responsive Classroom, however, support materials and training for other schools are lacking.

*4Rs (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution; Pre-K – Grade 8)*

<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>

* Includes lessons for teaching social and emotional skills are integrated into the language arts curriculum.
* Research shows better classroom emotional support and overall classroom quality.62

*RULER (K – Grade 8)*

* <http://www.therulerapproach.org>
* Focuses on teaching empathy, perspective taking, and social awareness. Encourages teachers to integrate these skills into their curriculum and parents to promote these competencies at home.
* Studies show that the program leads to greater connection between teachers and students and increased teachers’ focus on student interests.64

*Second Step (Preschool – Grade 8)*

* http://www.cfchildren.org/second-step
* Emphasis on curriculum lessons that target comprehensive SEL skills.
* Research has found improved social skills and prosocial behavior; reduced several externalizing and internalizing behaviors, including aggression, compliance, anxiety, and poor on-task behavior and academic engagement65-67; (see Fitzgerald and Van Schoiack-Edstrom, 2012, for review of program and research)

**Strategies and interventions for Students at Tiers 2 and 3**

**1. Apply the strategies and interventions listed above as appropriate at the universal level.** Every strategy and intervention listed above applies to all students, including those at Tiers 2 and 3 who have the most difficult time forming positive relationships with teachers. However, for improving teacher-student relations at Tiers 2 and 3, the interventions should be:

* Of greater frequency and intensity. For example, teachers may need to devote more time to positive interactions with students individually.
* More comprehensive, including multiple components. This would include not only targeting multiple areas, such as the development of a range of social, emotional, and cognitive skills associated with relationships with others but also their delivery across multiple settings and providers other than the school, especially the home.
* More individualized and guided by a more thorough assessment of the student’s needs and especially individual and environmental factors that might help explain and contribute to poor relations with teachers. For example, where appropriate, an individual assessment might be conducted by a school psychologist and others to identify:
  + Specific social skill deficits. Identifying those deficits would help determine the social skills to be targeted, such as managing emotions, social perspective taking, communication skills, and prosocial skills.
  + Academic deficits, and contributing factors.
  + Individual strengths that might be used to help foster positive teacher-student relationships.
  + If classroom management and school-wide discipline need improvement. This may indicate the need for staff development and improving teacher-student relationships. In cases of an on-going very poor relationship between a teacher and student, transferring the student to another classroom should be considered.
  + Systems of social support and resources, including those in school, home, and community, that might be necessary and useful in fostering positive student relations. Strategies and interventions would be individualized and aligned with the assessment results.

**2. Provide social skills/SEL training (in addition to that provided in the regular classroom) that targets specific prosocial skills and antisocial behaviors associated with relationships with others.** Such additional training might be provided in small groups or individually by the school counselor or school psychologist.

* This might be done using lessons from a universal curriculum (e.g., Second Step or 4Rs) that are delivered not only when lessons are taught to the entire class, but also to selected individuals before (pre-teaching) or afterwards (booster sessions).
* It also might be done using evidence-based curriculum lessons that are designed more specifically for use at Tiers 2 and 3 instead of Tier 1, such as Incredible Years (preschool-grade 2; see incredibleyears.com) and Coping Power (grades 4-6; see Copingpower.com). Each of these programs including training for targeted students *and* their parents.

1. **Work closely with the home in targeting social and academic skills** (see Home-School Communication and Collaboration module).
2. **Where appropriate (e.g., Tier 3), develop a behavioral contract** that targets specific social skills necessary for positive student-student relationships.
3. **Consider implementing elements from the Check & Connect intervention**, especially those that foster closer relations between students and adults in the school. Research on this intervention has demonstrated that students in Check and Connect were less likely to drop out of school and were more engaged in school compared to students in the control group.68-69
   * + Check and Connect increases students’ engagement in school by fostering relationships and problem solving. A school staff member is responsible for developing a supportive relationship with not only the student but also his/her family.
     + The school staff member meets individually with the student at least once a week and maintains communication with their family through phone calls, notes, or in-person interactions.
     + The staff member regularly assesses the student’s behaviors associated with engagement, such as attendance, grades, and behavioral referrals. The staff member connects with others to implement interventions to increase engagement.
     + For more information, visit: <http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/resources.html#adminresources>
4. **Arrange or provide more intensive supports, as needed, including individual counseling, family therapy or parent management training, and social services.** Parent management training has been shown to be a critical component for the effectiveness of programs at Tiers 2 and 3.

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| **Checklist of Activities for Fostering Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**  Using the rating scale below, please rate each of the following strategies for fostering positive teacher-student relationships. Where appropriate (e.g., all classroom teachers), please rate each strategy according to your use of that strategy (i.e., classroom level) and your perceived use of the strategy school-wide. | | |
| **NA = Not appropriate for grade or school (e.g., some activities might be viewed as not age appropriate in elementary school or high school)**    **1 = Weakness: Something we should devote more attention to**    **2 = Neither Weakness Nor Strength**    **3 = Strength: This is done often and well** | **Rating for My**  **Classroom** | **Rating for the**  **School** |
| Faculty review and discuss results of the Delaware School Climate Survey and other sources of data pertaining to teacher-student relationships and use those results to help guide strategies and interventions. |  |  |
| Individual students are praised or rewarded by teachers and other adults in a wise and strategic manner for exhibiting prosocial behaviors and competencies, such as demonstrating care, kindness, teamwork, and respect. |  |  |
| Teachers provide models of acceptance, respect, care, listening, and other prosocial behaviors. |  |  |
| Behavioral and academic expectations, routines, and procedures are clear; rules and consequences are fair; and students’ behavior is closely monitored and supervised. |  |  |
| Teachers’ lessons are motivating and engaging. |  |  |
| Teachers and school staff communicate and collaborate with students’ families. |  |  |
| Teachers are attuned to the social dynamics of the school and classroom. |  |  |
| When correcting misbehavior, strategies are used that prevent negative teacher-student relationships. For example, teachers use private instead of public correction, recognize positive behaviors, use inductive discipline, and communicate of optimism for the future. |  |  |
| Teachers get to know *every* student individually, including their interests, skills, hobbies, families, and cultural values. Teachers engage students in conversations that are meaningful to students’ interests. |  |  |
| Teachers spend time individually with students, which may be informal daily interactions or more formal and intensive interventions like Banking Time. |  |  |
| Teachers and school staff greet students when they come into school. |  |  |
| Teachers notice when students have difficulties, listen to them, and show concern. |  |  |
| Teachers treat students equally and do not indicate “favorites” in the classroom. |  |  |
| Teachers communicate their own experiences feelings, and thoughts to allow students to get to know them better. |  |  |
| Teachers have fun and use humor with students when appropriate. |  |  |
| Teachers frequently reflect on how well they know each of their students. |  |  |
| Students are provided with frequent opportunities for decision-making and autonomy, such as choosing activities, developing classroom rules, collaborating on meaningful activities, and engaging in discussions. |  |  |
| Teachers frequently monitor every student’s academic progress and behavior. They communicate positive and realistic expectations to students. |  |  |
| School-wide activities occur that promote positive interactions between teachers and students, such as extracurricular activities, service learning, games, and pep rallies. |  |  |
| Teachers advocate for their students when appropriate. |  |  |
| Teachers communicate positive messages to students’ families. |  |  |
| An evidence-based SEL curriculum is used for all students that have demonstrated a positive impact on social-emotional competencies and teacher-student relationships. |  |  |
| For students at Tiers 2 and 3, interventions are of greater frequency and intensity, more comprehensive, and more individualized. An assessment of the student’s needs and the contributing factors is completed as appropriate. The following strategies are also used as needed:   * Small group or individualized social skills/SEL training * Frequent communication and collaboration with their family * Elements of Check & Connect intervention |  |  |