

(4/10/24) This continuing education resource is from the national  
*Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA*

## Featured

(1) *What Fosters School Connectedness?*

(2) *Chronic absenteeism is a complex problem not solved by simple strategies*

(3) *Links to a few other relevant shared resources*

### For discussion and interchange:

#### >*What Fosters School Connectedness?*

Everyone agrees that schools should ensure a positive school climate to enhance school connectedness. Less agreement exists, however, about what this means and how to accomplish it. This is especially so when the call is for developing a safe and supportive environment that also is nurturing and caring and that provides all students with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Researchers report that students who feel connected to schools tend to succeed at school and engage in healthy behaviors. As the following example illustrates, recent studies have focused on clarifying precursors for school connectedness and disconnectedness.

From: *What Fosters School Connectedness?*

“...School connectedness is widely defined as ‘the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals’....

School connectedness decreases dramatically and disconnection from schools has been frequently reported during adolescence.... One possible explanation for this disconnection is the potential mismatch between adolescents’ developmental needs and the opportunities provided by their social environments (e.g., home and school). Compared to middle schools, high schools are typically larger and more bureaucratic and there is often little opportunity for students to connect to teachers or other adults, which further undermines motivation and involvement of many students....

Teachers are essential in shaping classroom climate and promoting school connectedness. Considerable research has documented that effective classroom interactions are important and can promote a variety of positive outcomes, such as academic performance....

When teachers provide an emotionally supportive environment, students are able to be more self-reliant and willing to take intellectual risks. Research findings have supported that students whose teachers offer more emotional support have more positive and respectful relationships with their teachers, which promotes school connectedness....”

As students move from elementary school and one teacher per year, creating close connections at school becomes a greater challenge (e.g., multiple classes and larger enrollments). At all levels, the concern is both to minimize ways the environment might work against school connectedness and maximize positive opportunities. Addressing such concerns calls for a wide range of classroom and school-wide approaches that play out across a full continuum of interventions.

For resources on school connectedness and how to promote it, see the following:

- >from [the Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- >from [the American Psychological Association](#)
- >from [WestEd](#)
- >[Strategies to Promote School Connectedness](#)
- >[Fostering school connectedness](#)

Integral to school connectedness are efforts to improve *working* relationships at a school between adults and students, among adults, and among students. Establishing effective, respectful, caring, and durable working relationships calls for contextual improvements (e.g., developing a personalized approach to instruction, minimizing factors that work against connectedness, providing student and learning supports in the classroom and school-wide).

Here a few relevant resources from our Center:

- >[Enhancing Student/Learning Supports in Classrooms](#)
- >[About Student Voice and Participation](#)
- >[Enhancing Classroom Climate for All Students](#)
- >[Schools as Caring, Learning Communities](#)
- >[Improving Working Relationships Inside the Classroom](#)

For more, go to the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Finds on

- >[School Climate](#)
- >[Engagement](#)

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**Positive working relationships are at the core of school connectedness;  
school connectedness is at the core of a safe and supportive school climate**

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### **A Special Concern is for Disconnected Students**

Equity concerns are heightened when schools are viewed using the lens of how they interface with students who are struggling academically, acting out, and experiencing relationship conflicts with school staff and peers. Response to intervention can be a useful in efforts to reengage a student. Minimally, the approach adds additional assessment information about what has gone wrong. Used in conjunction with a problem-solving process, students and their families can engage in clarifying the problem and generate steps for enhancing connectedness with peers and adults at school.

As we all know, the causes of student problems are hard to analyze. What looks like a learning or an attentional problem may be emotionally-based. Misbehavior often arises in reaction to learning difficulties. What appears as a school problem may be the result of problems at home. Properly implemented, a response to intervention process can delineate problem-solving steps and strategies. From this perspective, we suggest the following approach.

- (1) Understand the problem – the first steps in reengaging a student should involve getting the youngster's view of what's wrong (including, as feasible, exploring the problem with the family). Consider this process:
  - (a) Through enhanced personal contacts, build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family.
  - (b) Focus first on assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class).
  - (c) Ask about what the youngster doesn't like at school.
  - (d) Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)

- (e) Explore other possible causal factors.
  - (f) Explore what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.).
  - (g) Discuss some new things the youngster and those in the home would be willing to try to make the situation better.
- (2) Try new strategies in the classroom — based on the best information about what is causing the problem.
  - (3) If the new strategies don't work, talk to others at school to learn about approaches they find helpful (e.g., reach out for support/ mentoring/coaching, participate with others in clusters and teams, observe how others teach in ways that effectively address differences in motivation and capability, request additional staff development on working with such youngsters).
  - (4) If necessary, use the school's referral processes to ask for additional support services.
  - (5) Coordinate with referral resources.

*For more, see – [School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School](#)*

### **For discussion and interchange:**

#### **>Chronic absenteeism is a complex problem not solved by simple strategies**

The complexity of chronic absenteeism is being increasingly discussed.

From: *[Leveraging the Opportunity of Adolescence to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism](#)*

“...Nationwide, higher rates of chronic absenteeism are generally found among students from historically marginalized communities.... Student-level factors underlying the rising rates of chronic absenteeism include unstable access to basic needs, uncertainty about safety, lack of a sense of belonging and connection, and students' inability to find value in schooling. ...

Many of the factors identified as key contributors to students' chronic absenteeism highlight a disconnect between these unique opportunities of adolescence and the school-based settings our young people encounter every day. The lack of safety, belongingness, relationships, and feeling of being valued in schools expressed in the interviews creates significant barriers to the motivation to explore, discover, and connect with the world that typifies the adolescent period....

Three key types of experiences take advantage of the opportunities of adolescence to promote mental health and engagement in learning. All three -- in combination with the mitigation of structural factors known to impede consistent attendance -- could be equally relevant for enhancing young people's connections to school and reducing chronic absenteeism.

First, adolescents need compelling and supported ways to explore the world. Thoughtfully designed efforts both inside the classroom (e.g., project-based learning) and outside the classroom (e.g., interest-based clubs and activities) leverage adolescents' natural inclination to explore and learn from experience. These efforts also can capitalize on the strong emphasis on social relationships during adolescence by incorporating peer collaboration....

Second, young people need avenues to contribute to their schools and communities, in ways both small and large. Longstanding research on classroom environments points to the ways in which incorporating student participation in decision-making promotes motivation and achievement. Similarly, extracurricular programs that encourage adolescents' contributions to their school, teams, and communities enhance students' attachment to school.

Finally, healthy and supportive relationships with adults remain essential during adolescence. Having these relationships at home and in the school and community is predictive of virtually every aspect of healthy adolescent development, including engagement with school. Although time spent with adults may decline relative to time spent with peers during adolescence, strategic and supportive connections with caring adults remain essential....”

In responding to the complexity, the current policy emphasis on MTSS, while insufficient, at least has stressed a continuum of interventions as illustrated below:

From: *Chronic Absenteeism is the Real Problem*

“...the San Diego County Office of Education’s Improving Chronic Absenteeism Network ... partners with schools in districts across the county to implement evidence- based strategies to combat chronic absenteeism....

**Strategies generally break down into three tiers.**

The first tier includes broad strategies meant to improve campus culture and impact all students. The second tier is more precise and aimed at students falling into chronic absenteeism.

The third tier is the most specialized and involves finding customized solutions for the most chronically absent students.

According to experts those tiers are vital, because finding the right fix is key to having an impact....

Serious intervention is difficult, though, because every family’s story is different. For some, absences may be related to basic needs like a lack of transportation or clean clothes, while for others they may be due to a lack of a sense of belonging....

When it comes to educational data, disparities are no surprise. Poverty correlates incredibly closely with academic performance. The same is true with chronic absenteeism. Even before the pandemic, kids from less affluent communities and students of color were more likely to miss class....”

School attendance problems provide another indication of the need to move forward in new directions for student and learning supports. Ideas for developing more sophisticated approaches can be adapted from current efforts. But, policy and practice must now evolve so schools, families, and communities are working together to develop a system of interventions that reflect the complexity of attendance problems. We discuss the move toward a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports in:

- >*Absenteeism: Beyond Reporting and Beyond Another Special Initiative*
- >*School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement*
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Families When a Student is Not Doing Well*
- >*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*

**What did you learn at school today?**



**That I should have stayed home!**

>**Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

- >**Predictors of social emotional learning in after-school programming: The impact of relationships, belonging, and program engagement**
- >**A case for school connectedness**
- >**How can districts ensure students have enough social-emotional support?**
- >**Vague school rules at the root of millions of student suspensions**
- >**Poverty Among Hispanic Children in the U.S.**
- >**Ed Dept: Districts should start now to improve 2024-25 attendance**
- >**How School Discipline Impacts Students' Social, Emotional and, Academic Development**
- >**Special education advocates warn of 'chilling effects' from anti-DEI efforts**

**A Few Upcoming Webinars**

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to **Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts**

- 4/10 Current substance abuse trends and risks
- 4/10 Resolving disputes through the special education process
- 4/11 Turn the tide on teacher morale
- 4/11 Establishing family and community partnerships
- 4/11 State strategies for sustaining pandemic recovery efforts beyond ESSER
- 4/11 Motivation in mental health recovery
- 4/17 Family guide to support students mental health
- 4/17 Foster care and unhoused families <https://www.sswaa.org/webinars>
- 4/17 Bullying in elementary and middle schools
- 4/18 Mentoring
- 4/23 College students share their transition from high school to college
- 4/24 Legal and Ethical Complications in Working with Minors in Schools
- 4/24 Getting help for students with mental health needs
- 4/25 De-escalation in behavioral health
- 4/25 Cyberbullying
- 4/25 Social determinants of health
- >***How Learning Happens*** (Edutopia's updated series of videos explores how educators can guide all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become productive and engaged learners.
- >Webinar recording: ***Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth***

**To Listserv Participants**

- Please share this resource with others. (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- Let us know what’s going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)  
Looking for information? (We usually can help.)  
Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

**We look forward to hearing from you!**  
Send to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

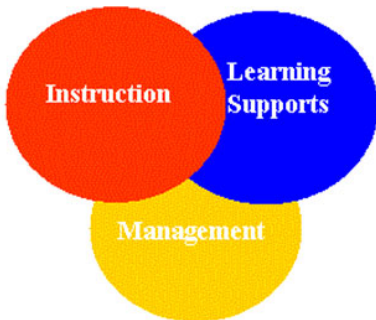
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**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

**Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.**

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info and requests to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)



**Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.**

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**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

**For new sign-ups – email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.**

**THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER**

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.