



STATE OF RELATIONSHIPS CASE STUDY:

Creating Relationship-Rich Spaces for All Youth



We write this as the world is deep into the second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of loved ones, and the disruption of school, work, family, and friendships due to social distancing has made the importance of relationships for all ages of people painfully clear. Research shows that relationships with caring adults are especially important for young people, and yet data routinely show that young people don't experience them as often or as intensively as they should, even before the pandemic made it worse.



What can we do to close the relationship gap?

A relationship gap exists for too many young people—the gap between what they need, and what they experience. By understanding what’s working and what’s not in creating relationship-rich spaces for all youth, we can design tools to improve youth-adult relationships.

Search Institute partnered with the Carlson Family Foundation in 2021 to conduct the State of Relationships study to further this understanding. This case study explored what schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs across one state, Minnesota, are doing to build strong youth-adult relationships. ***The study findings are from Minnesota but are relevant for any state, school, or OST program that wants to invest in a relationship-rich organization.***

State of Relationships Case Study Findings

Search Institute has released four briefs that highlight key findings from this work. These briefs provide school and OST staff and leaders with opportunities to reflect on the findings and how they might work to create a more relationship-rich space for the youth that they serve. These briefs focus on critical aspects of becoming a relationship-rich organization:

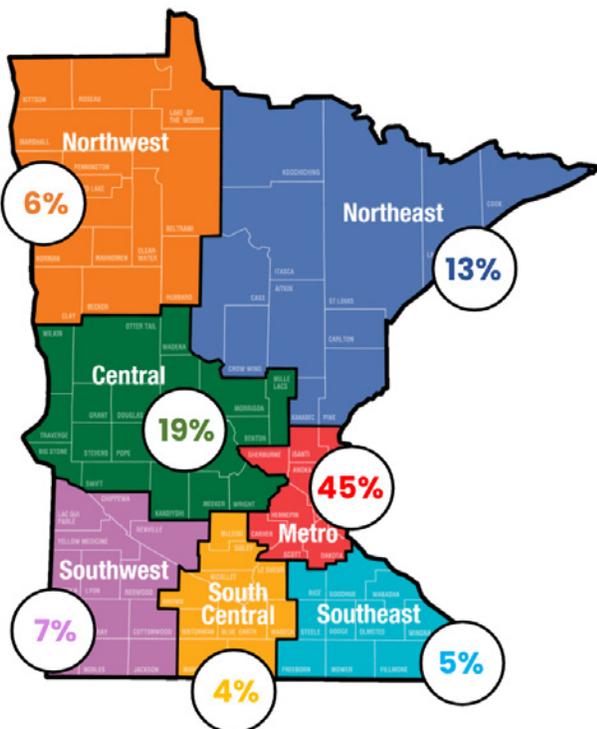
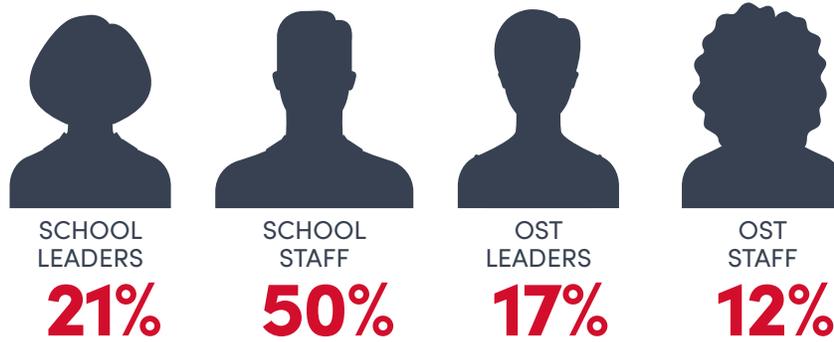
1. [Supporting Structures](#)
2. [Intentional Relational Climate](#)
3. [Inclusive Relational Climate](#)
4. [Equitable Relational Climate](#)

Methodology

Data provided in the briefs come from Minnesota school and OST staff (e.g., teachers, program staff) and leaders (e.g., principals, program directors) who took part in Search Institute’s State of Relationships study between February 2021 and June 2021. A survey was administered to engage staff and leaders from schools and OST programs to answer questions about the role of relationships within their organizations. Following the survey, 18 school and OST staff and leaders participated in interviews and focus groups to provide insight and context for the survey findings.

Participants

Data come from a diverse sample of 668 school and OST staff and leaders who work with middle and high school-aged youth. About half of the survey, focus group, and interview participants consisted of school staff, with the remainder divided among school and OST leaders and OST staff.



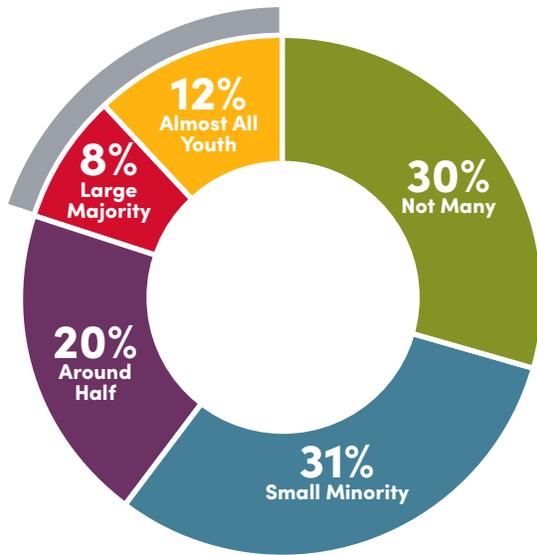
Sample

The sample was distributed across the state of Minnesota, representing all seven regions. Compared to state demographic data, participants were more geographically dispersed than the populations of adults in the state.

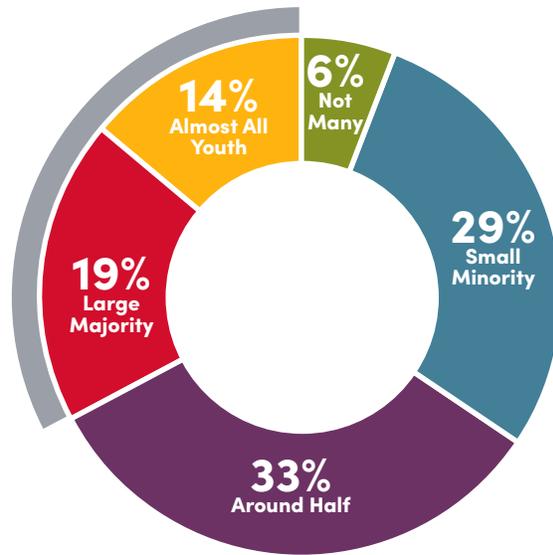
Demographics of Students Served

Participants served a wide range of young people. About 20% of participants said they engaged with youth in settings where a large majority of youth identified as people of color, and about 35% of participants said that a large majority of the youth they serve come from families that are low income.

% of YOUTH SERVED who IDENTIFY AS YOUTH OF COLOR



% of YOUTH SERVED from LOW-INCOME FAMILIES



To be relationship-rich, organizations need a relational climate that is intentional, inclusive, and equitable. They also need the supporting structures required to make that commitment come alive.

Summary of Key Findings

Each of the briefs draws on data from the State of Relationships Study to highlight the importance and experiences around each of the key aspects of a relationship-rich organization.

Overall, here's what we found:

- Rhetorical commitment to building positive relationships among adults and youth is strong in both schools and OST programs, and is considered a highly important part of organizations' missions.
- And, yet, only bare majorities of schools and OST programs say they have the supporting structures in place to make that commitment to relationships come alive. These include providing resources and time for connecting with youth, making relationship-building a key part of staff recruitment and hiring, and providing adequate professional learning opportunities for staff to get more skilled at building positive youth-adult relationships.
- Larger majorities say staff are intentional and purposeful in trying to build relationships with youth, ensuring their organizations are places where youth can be themselves, there are clear rules that are consistently reinforced, a strong sense of community, and young people are given a voice.
- OST staff are consistently more likely than school staff to say they are intentional about building positive relationships in these ways.
- Being inclusive and equitable in promoting positive relationships fairly among all groups of youth is considered a highly important value in both schools and OST programs.
- Staff identify a number of barriers to being truly inclusive and equitable. These include both site-specific issues such as differences in the backgrounds of staff and the youth they serve, to larger social issues, including the effects of systemic racism. Staff also identified issues that organizations can take action on including lack of diversity in hiring, and insufficient skills among staff for providing trauma-informed care and culturally responsive programs and relationships.

Each brief makes it clear that schools and OST programs are largely committed to the goal of being relationally-rich spaces for all youth, but there is considerable work to do in creating concrete, everyday ways to turn that vision into reality.

