



Developmental Relationships in Schools

Research Brief

January 2026

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Students thrive when their inherent value is known, nurtured, and activated. Our research shows that developmental relationships—strong, supportive connections that help students discover who they are, cultivate the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to contribute positively to the world—play a powerful role in shaping student engagement and success.

This research brief summarizes insights from collaborations with middle and high school partners in Indiana, Minnesota, and New York. School leaders, staff, and communities in each setting view relationships as an essential component for cultivating the conditions that help students and staff thrive. We are grateful to each student, staff, administrator, family, and community member for their support and participation in collecting and analyzing data and in co-creating solutions to strengthen their relational ecosystems. The shared wisdom from research, youth voice, and practitioner and community expertise is what drives the learning and action for enduring change.

Across our research, one message is clear: **developmental relationships are essential for cultivating thriving in school communities.** When students experience developmental relationships with adults in their schools, they are more likely to attend regularly, feel motivated to learn, and engage positively with their peers and teachers. These developmental

relationships – characterized by care, support, high expectations, shared power, and new opportunities – create the foundation for learning, growth, and contribution.

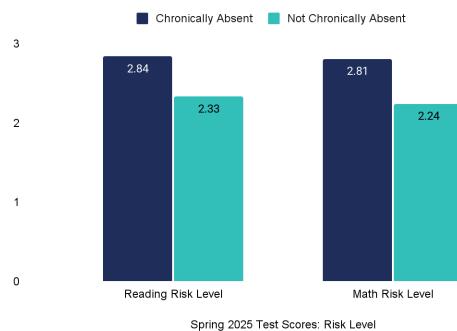
Students who have strong and consistent relationships are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and purpose and less likely to be chronically absent. Conversely, when students lose those key connections during the school year, we see lower levels of motivation, belonging, and even academic performance, underscoring that relationships must not only be built but sustained.

The benefits of developmental relationships extend to each and every student. For students receiving accommodations or special education services, strong relationships can be especially powerful—they are linked to higher social-emotional competencies, motivation and grades. The benefits also extend beyond students. For educators, these same connections are tied to higher levels of well-being, a greater sense of belonging, and stronger mindsets and practices for accessible and inclusive environments.

Developmental relationships create ripples across the entire school community. When schools intentionally invest in building and maintaining these relationships, they strengthen the conditions that help students and educators thrive.

Relationships, Attendance, and Achievement

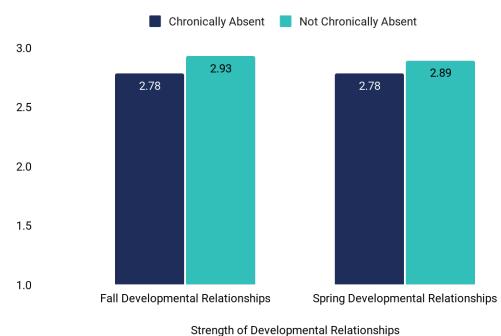
When students are absent from school, they miss out on essential opportunities for learning, growth, and connections to the school community. Chronic absence, defined as missing at least 10% of school days, can be especially challenging, with negative impacts on academic achievement, educational opportunities, and school belonging. Middle school students with higher rates of attendance have lower risk scores for reading and math, meaning they are on track to meet learning goals¹. In contrast, middle school students who are chronically absent have higher reading and math risk scores, indicating a greater need for targeted, intensive intervention.



Note. In t-tests, differences between the two groups in Reading and Math Risk Level scores were statistically significant, $p < .001$

Ultimately, addressing student attendance requires an understanding of challenges and barriers that get in the way, including health issues, accessible transportation, and safe routes. Schools must partner with families and communities to identify challenges and co-create solutions. We also know that **strong relationships make a difference**. For example, data from our middle school partners show that students who experience strong developmental

relationships attend school more regularly and are far less likely to be chronically absent than their peers with weaker relationships. Because attendance is closely connected to academic success, strengthening developmental relationships offers schools a powerful, human-centered way to support engagement and learning outcomes.



Note. In t-tests, differences between the two groups in DR scores were statistically significant in both fall and spring, $p < .001$.

The principal at one of our partner schools affirmed the importance of relationships for improving attendance and test scores: *"Over the last two years as [we have] collaborated with Search Institute, chronically absent students declined by 6%, reading achievement improved by 5%, and math achievement improved by 10%(!). I absolutely believe that our implementation of the DR framework into classroom rituals and routines contributed significantly to each of those numbers."*

He added that historical disparities in reading scores by race-ethnicity were attenuated for students with high rates of attendance. *"Attendance was a larger predictor of reading success, rather than race, between those [groups]."*

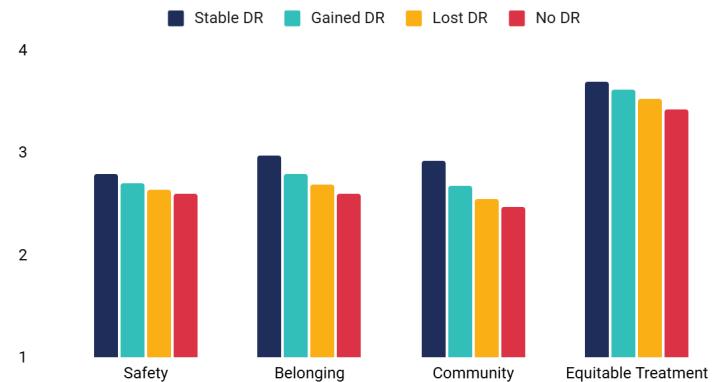
¹ Based on Minnesota FastBridge test scores

Sustaining Relationships Matters

Relationships do not only matter in the moment – they need to last. Students who maintain or build strong developmental relationships with staff over the school year feel good about the climate of their schools. They report a high sense of safety, belonging, and community and feel their school treats students fairly and values diversity. These same students have high levels of

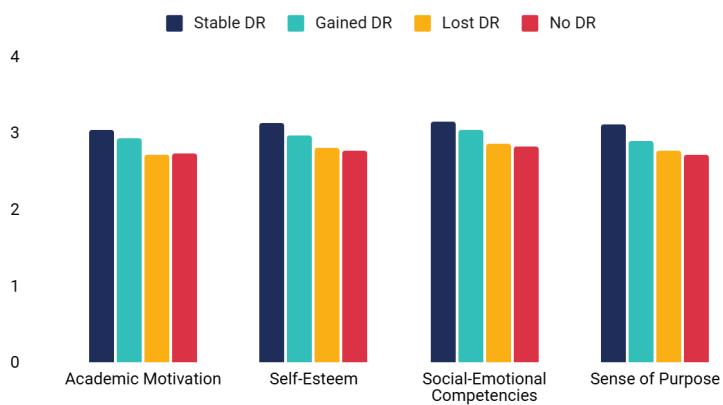
academic motivation, self-esteem, and social-emotional competencies, and they feel a strong sense of purpose. In contrast, students who lose a key adult connection or do not have one at all during the school year have more negative perceptions of the school climate and lower levels of academic motivation and well-being.

Student Perceptions of School Climate by Change in Access to Developmental Relationships (DR)



Note. In Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests, significant differences emerged for Safety: Stable DR > No DR***; Belonging: Stable DR > No DR, Gained DR and Lost DR***, and Gained DR > No DR**; Community: Stable DR > No DR, Gained DR and Lost DR***; Equitable Treatment: Stable DR > No DR***, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Student Motivation and Well-being Outcomes by Change in Access to Developmental Relationships (DR)

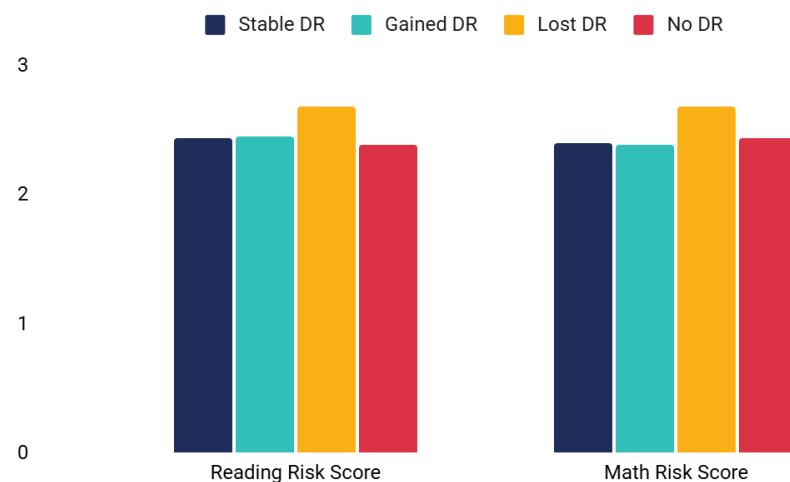


Note. In Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests, statistically significant differences emerged for Academic Motivation: Stable DR > No DR and Lost DR*** and Gained DR > No DR and Lost DR**; Self-Esteem: Stable DR > No DR and Lost DR***, Stable DR > Gained DR**, and Gained DR > No DR*; Social-Emotional Competencies: Stable DR > No DR and Lost DR***, Stable DR > Gained DR**, Gained DR > No DR***, and Gained DR > Lost DR**; Sense of Purpose: Stable DR > No DR, Gained DR, and Lost DR***, and Gained DR > No DR**
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Losing a developmental relationship during the school year can impact academic performance. Among students in four Minnesota middle schools, those who lost a developmental relationship between the fall and spring had the highest risk scores on state reading and math assessments; these results remained the same even after taking

attendance and chronic absence into account. **Our findings highlight that consistency in developmental relationships is critical: when students can count on supportive connections throughout the year, they are more likely to thrive both personally and academically.**

Spring Reading and Math Risk Scores by Change in Access to Developmental Relationships



Note. Results from regression analysis with Lost DR as reference group. Statistically significant differences emerged for Reading Risk, Lost DR > Stable DR ($p = .01$), Gained DR ($p = .04$) and No DR ($p = .007$); and for Math Risk, Lost DR > Stable DR ($p = .001$), Gained DR ($p = .004$), and No DR ($p = .02$).

Changing Conditions to Amplify the Power of Relationships

In a sample of Black students in grades 8-12², strong student-teacher developmental relationships were positively associated with students' sense of purpose and their perceived resilience. However, the association between developmental relationships and goal-directed purpose was weaker for students who experienced discrimination. This finding underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing/changing underlying conditions so that each and every young person has the opportunity to thrive.

² Redmond, N. M., Shubert, J., Scales, P. C., Williams, J., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2025). Unveiling potential: Culturally responsive teaching practices to catalyze social-emotional success in black youth. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 5, 100124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sel.2025.100124>

Supporting Students with Special Education Services Through Relationships

We consistently find that strong developmental relationships with adults in school are linked to greater academic motivation and performance, higher social-emotional competencies and lower rates of chronic absenteeism. For high school students with 504 plans receiving accommodations and students receiving special education services, developmental relationships can be especially powerful. Students with individualized education plans (IEPs) who experience strong developmental relationships report even higher levels of social-emotional skills and motivation, while students with 504 plans have higher grade point averages when those relationships are strong. When schools invest in building and sustaining meaningful relationships, they help all students succeed.

When students with learning differences described the teachers with whom they had the strongest relationships, they most frequently cited actions that reflected **Express Care**, particularly behaviors categorized under **Be Warm**. Students described these teachers as

nice, kind, and positive, creating classroom environments that felt safe and welcoming. One student reflected that his math teacher had a relationship with every student in the class, “Everyone loved him... Everyone lifted each other up... It was not a class; it was like a little family.”

Students also emphasized teachers’ efforts to **get to know them personally**, both academically and beyond the classroom. For instance, one student noted, “If you have sport stickers out, she’ll ask, ‘What sport do you play? When do you do it? Do you do it for the school?’... She asked me last week, ‘Did you have any soccer games this weekend? Did you win?’, just small talk so she’s not a big, scary teacher; she’s like your friend.”

These relationship-building actions were linked to meaningful outcomes. Students who reported stronger relationships with their teachers also reported higher levels of academic motivation, self-determination skills, self-esteem, and sense of belonging at school.

The Benefits of Developmental Relationships for Educators

Developmental relationships can improve the climate and culture one relationship at a time, benefitting not only students, but educator's sense of belonging and well-being. Ensuring that educators themselves experience strong relationships and a sense of belonging is not an 'extra'—it is essential to the sustainability of their work and foundational to a healthy school ecosystem. When educators feel connected, supported, and valued, they are better able to sustain the energy, compassion, and instructional quality that students rely on every day.

Educators who build meaningful connections with students report higher well-being and a greater sense of

belonging within their schools. These relationships are also linked to stronger skills and mindsets for inclusion and access, as well as to school environments that better support cultural awareness and responsiveness. Moreover, developmental relationships help explain how inclusive mindsets and culturally responsive practices translate into a deeper sense of belonging for educators. In short, when educators invest in authentic, supportive developmental relationships with their students, they not only enhance student outcomes – they also foster their own engagement and connection to their school community.

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships Support Math Engagement

Black and Latino/a middle and high school students shared that negative teacher-student relationships—characterized by dismissive, impatient, or unfair treatment—were a notable barrier to engagement in math courses. In contrast, teacher support and positive student-teacher relationships were an important asset for cultivating engagement and learning. In particular, students shared that when teachers took time to get to know them and fostered connections within the classroom, they felt more encouraged and engaged.³

³ Learn more about these findings. Hsieh, T. Y., et al. (2025, October). Strength-based strategies and assets that Black and Latina/o middle and high school students use to navigate contextual barriers of math engagement. *Frontiers in Education*, 10:1645533. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1645533>

Conclusion

What does all this mean for schools? It means that the most powerful lever schools already have, the daily relationships between students and adults, is also the one that can create the deepest and most sustainable change. The research shows that when students experience consistent, responsive developmental relationships, they attend more regularly, engage more meaningfully, and feel a stronger sense of belonging and purpose. Educators, too, feel more connected, supported, and grounded in their work.

Developmental relationships offer schools more than a framework, they offer a pathway. A pathway for aligning routines, instruction, and school culture around what strengthens learning. A pathway for amplifying the strengths already present in classrooms. A pathway for ensuring every young person experiences belonging and connection in their school community.

The “so what” is simple but profound: when relationships become intentional, consistent, and shared across a school, the conditions for thriving emerge. Not because a new program was implemented, but because the culture shifted in ways that bring out the best in students and adults.

A Moment for Reflection



As you move through your week, notice the patterns of connection around you, the moments that make your community feel alive. Imagine what could happen if these meaningful moments weren't just happy coincidences, but became an intentional part of how your whole system operates—benefiting educators, staff and students. We can't wait for perfect conditions. Now is the time to take the next step and become a Relationship Ready School. [Let's connect!](#)

About the Projects

Cultural Adaptation of Developmental Relationships in Education (CADRE)

CADRE was designed to support educators' capacity to adapt the Developmental Relationships Framework and associated relationship-building practices to be responsive to their students' diverse backgrounds and needs. The two-year, mixed-methods project was conducted in partnership with six middle schools in three school districts – two in Minnesota and one in Indiana. We collaborated with staff teams in three schools, who examined students and staff data on DRs and other constructs (e.g., school climate, student success and well-being) and used the data to design and implement practices to strengthen their school's relational climate.

CADRE Sample Demographics

Category	Fall 2023		Fall 2024	
	Students	Staff	Students	Staff
Student Grade/Grade Taught^a (%)				
Six	24.9	24.2	28.0	23.5
Seven	37.4	39.0	37.0	38.1
Eight	37.7	37.1	35.0	38.5
Age (Mean)	12.4	n/a	12.3	n/a
Gender (%)				
Boy/Male/Man	47.7	21.0	47.6	21.8
Girl/Female/Woman	48.4	78.5	48.8	77.9
Non-binary	1.2	-	1.0	0.4
Other	2.8	0.5	2.6	-
Race-Ethnicity (%)				
Asian/Pacific Islander	16.3	3.5	18.5	5.6
Black/African American	13.9	1.0	16.2	3.0
Latino/a/e	10.8	4.0	9.1	2.6
Multiracial	12.5	2.0	13.2	2.6
Native/Indigenous American	0.7	-	0.6	-
Other	4.9	-	4.9	-
White	40.9	89.6	37.6	86.2
Total	3,925	205	3,331	271

Note. ^a Staff reported all grades taught so percentages do not add up to 100

Cultivating Developmental Relationships for Students with Learning Differences

Cultivating Developmental Relationships is focused on adapting the Developmental Relationships Framework to the specific needs of culturally diverse students with learning differences. We are conducting the multi-year, mixed-methods project in partnership with two high schools in New York State. We collaborate with an advisory team of staff, students, and parents in gathering and analyzing insights from schoolwide surveys and interviews and focus groups. We are using these insights to co-create, test, and improve tools and strategies to support adults in building webs of developmental relationships that support social-emotional learning and development for students with learning differences.

Cultivating DRs Sample Demographics

Category	Total (%)
Gender (%)	
Boy/Male/Man	48.8
Girl/Female/Woman	49.1
Non-binary	2.1
Race-Ethnicity (%)	
Asian or Asian American	10.7
Black, African, or African American	3.1
Hispanic or Latina/o/x	22.2
Middle Eastern or North African	2.1
Multiracial or Multiethnic	14.5
Native American or Alaska Native	0.1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1
Other	2.2
White	44.8
Students with IEP or 504 Plan (%)	17
Total (N)	1,451



About Search Institute

We collaborate with schools and youth-serving organizations to conduct applied research, co-design solutions, and create an environment where each and every young person can thrive. Through professional learning experiences, surveys, measurement tools, and support for continuous improvement, we build capacity and inspire change.

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