Decades of research shows that high-quality relationships are essential to young people’s growth, learning, and thriving, especially for youth who face serious challenges. Further, youth of color are more likely than their white peers to be disconnected from key sources of social support like parents, extended family, and teachers. This is the by-product of centuries of systemic racism and discrimination, as well as racist or discriminatory actions of individuals, that together have led to long-standing inequities in learning and social capital-building opportunities. This includes higher chances of youth of color hav-
ing under-resourced schools, fewer opportunities to participate in relationship-rich out-of-school time (OST) programs, and living in poverty, all of which contribute to relational disconnection.

Youth who have their unique needs met do better in nearly every aspect of their development. Thus, the relational gap for marginalized youth presents a significant threat to their well-being. Although macroeconomic policy responses and cultural shifts are needed to end systemic racism, we know that strong youth-adult relational webs are also powerful mechanisms for disrupting inequity.

Drawing on data from the State of Relationships case study, here is what we’re learning about how schools and OST programs are nurturing an equitable relational climate.

“We can do a better job of making sure that the experiences all students have are more equitable. For students who are economically disadvantaged, why is their experience different? Well, if you want to play basketball in our society, your parents have to have financial abilities in order to be able to get you on the traveling team, so you can be competitive enough...So I think, systematically as a society, we could be doing things differently that would provide a more similar experience for all students.”

- OST staff, Twin Cities metro
Meeting Youth Where They Are

What do we mean by “equity” when it comes to positive youth-adult relationships? We mean that each young person gets what they uniquely need to discover who they are, grow their talents and interests, and contribute to the world. Equity does not mean equality. Promoting strong youth-adult relationships equally for each young person does not produce equity, because some youth are in an unfair position in their developmental paths due to historical and systemic marginalization. Therefore, equity means at times providing them more or different opportunities and supports so that their odds of success are more fairly equivalent to the odds of more privileged youth. Nurturing relational equity is an ongoing, continuous process—equity is negotiated every day in every interaction adults have with youth.

In the State of Relationships case study, we asked school and OST staff and leaders about the actions staff in their organizations take to create a space where all youth have their individual needs met. We focused on three core strategies:

- Intentionally creating an environment where youth feel their individual needs are seen and responded to;
- Reflecting critically about how to improve organizational policies, programs, and practices to ensure that all youth experience positive relationships with staff;
- Tailoring their approach to building relationships with each youth they serve, based on their unique needs and/or circumstances.

More than three-quarters of school and OST staff say they act in ways that help generate an equitable relational climate, but one-quarter do not.

![Disagree Agree](20% 80%
Create space where youth’s needs are seen/responded to)

![24% 76%
Reflect critically](24% 76%
Reflect critically)

![27% 74%
Tailor their approach](27% 74%
Tailor their approach)
While the overall rate at which these strategies are being used in schools and OST programs is promising (upwards of 75%), it is equally as important to interpret the other side of this finding: about 1 in 4 staff say these strategies are not happening in their organizations. As a result, there are large swaths of young people who likely are not having their needs seen or met.

Tellingly, only slightly more than 60% of staff and leaders indicated each of these strategies for nurturing equity were “very important” in helping their organization meet their goals. This is a critical insight from the data. What an organization prioritizes—centers in its mission, emphasizes in allocation of time and money, recruits and hires for, trains in, rewards—staff are more likely to do. A sizable proportion of the 25% not doing these actions might be more engaged in relational equity efforts if their organization did a better job of communicating, supporting, and reinforcing how central relational equity is to its mission and goals and to how staff are evaluated.

Of course, no matter how stellar their efforts, schools and OST programs can’t do all of this by themselves. One way schools and OST programs try to meet all of a youth’s needs is by leveraging resources available in their community. A solid majority of staff and leaders said they already do that, but for 30%, building more community partnerships is an equity-nurturing strategy that could be improved and more often utilized.

“We don’t ever have control over the environments these kids are coming from. Even though some of these kids are going to give you the run for their money... it’s not because they’re having a bad day, it’s them testing you. It’s testing you to see: Are you going to cast them aside? Are you going to give up on them?”

- School leader, Greater Minnesota

64% of staff and leaders indicated these strategies were “very important” in helping their organization meet their goals

70% established partnerships with community programs and resources that allow youth and their families easier access to the supports they need
What’s the difference between being inclusive and being equitable when talking about relational climate?

The two are highly related, but distinct. A climate that is inclusive is one that ensures all young people experience positive and healthy relationships within an organization. In contrast, a climate that is equitable ensures that all groups of youth have a fair chance of experiencing the benefits of those relationships, which means meeting each youth where they are and being responsive to their needs. This might mean engaging in extra efforts for some groups of youth.

Equity-Focused Professional Learning

One way to strengthen the ability of staff to form strong, equitable relationships with youth is to provide professional development and capacity-building training. Staff in both schools and OST programs reported on whether they had received equity-focused training on:

- Trauma, and its impact on youths’ physical, social-emotional, and mental health, and how best to support them in this program or school;
- Examination of how their biases (conscious and/or unconscious) may impact their relationships with youth;
- How to build relationships with youth who have different backgrounds and experiences than staff;
- How to build relationships with youth who may have been discriminated against because of something about them (e.g., ability, race, ethnicity, gender, and/or sexual orientation);
- Critical examination of the role their school or OST program plays in reinforcing and/or buffering systemic racism.

“Another thing we do with our staff is looking at our own culture and our own backgrounds and learning about ourselves and where we come from and taking a deeper look at our story. If you don’t know yourself, how are you going to be able to understand and empathize or be able to be as open to learning about somebody else?”

- School staff, Twin Cities metro

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Professional learning on the impact of trauma was the most common training topic, and examination of the role of organizations in reinforcing/buffering systemic racism the least.

Overall, staff in schools and OST programs reported fairly similar access to these kinds of equity-focused trainings (about 60%). A higher percentage of staff in schools (76%) reported access to trauma-focused training relative to staff in OST programs (66%).

School leaders also were somewhat more likely than school staff to report that their organization provided this type of equity-focused training (5%-9% more often). The source of this discrepancy in schools is unclear. It may be that leaders are reporting on the kinds of professional learning opportunities that are available, and staff are reporting on the opportunities that they actually take advantage of.

“We get a ton of Critical Race Theory training, probably six or seven sessions a year, at least. The training is not even equitable... What we’re going through and dealing with is much more in-depth than what this other school is going through.”

- School staff, Greater Minnesota
Equitable Relational Climate: Reflection & Discussion

Strong youth-adult relationships are a critical resource for well-being, thriving, and resilience, yet, as for many other resources and opportunities, are not equitably experienced by all groups of youth, particularly by youth of color. In this brief, we examined how much school and OST staff and leaders in the State of Relationships case study took three key actions to nurture a more equitable relational climate in their settings. We looked at whether they were tailoring their approach to building relationships with each youth they serve, based on their unique needs and/or circumstances; reflecting critically about how to improve organizational policies, programs, and practices to ensure that all youth experience positive relationships with staff; and, intentionally creating an environment where youth feel their individual needs are seen and responded to.

There were both positive results and more challenging findings. Most promising is that upwards of 75% of staff and leaders said they did take those actions for equity. More challenging is that this leaves roughly 25% whose organizations are not taking these basic steps to nurture an equitable relational climate. One reason for this might be that only about 60% said these actions for equity were very important for achieving the organization’s goals. If more organizations did a better job through their policies and practices of communicating, supporting, and rewarding the centrality of relational equity, then it’s likely these actions that advance equity would increase, and both the organizations and the youth they serve would benefit.

More In This Series

Want to learn more about how to build a relationship-rich organization? Check out the other briefs in this series:

- Supporting Structures
- Intentional Relational Climate
- Inclusive Relational Climate
Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about how equity is centered in your organization’s relational climate. How much do the data in this brief describe your organization’s “state of relationships”?

What? What 2-3 things stood out to you as you read this brief?
1. ________________________________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________________________________

Say What? What questions or issues does this brief raise for you about becoming more aware of, and strengthening, the state of relationships in your own school or program?
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

So What? What possibilities do you see that need to be considered? What actions might be taken? What is most important to you?
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
How do you think young people might want adults in their school or program to respond to these findings?
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

Now What? What activities or efforts would your school or program be willing to try to create a more equitable relational climate?
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

To learn more about creating a relational culture in your organization, check out Search Institute’s Resources Hub.

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