Search Institute’s Rooted in Relationships model highlights the importance of creating a relational climate defined as intentional, inclusive, and equitable. This brief looks more closely at how schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs are doing to create environments where all youth feel included.

Feeling like one is known and belongs has important implications for young people’s well-being. Studies show that when youth feel like they belong they’re more likely to stay in school, experience academic gains, exhibit fewer behavior problems, demonstrate higher social-emotional competence, and be resilient in the face of persistent challenges. However, we also know that there are large groups of young people who feel marginalized and left out of these spaces, particularly—in some settings—youth of color and youth who identify as LGBTQI+.

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

One of the ways schools and OST programs create an inclusive space is by investing time and energy in groups of youth who, historically, feel marginalized in these settings. In the State of Relationships case study, we asked staff and leaders about the degree to which they put in this effort and the value they give it.

Investing Time and Energy on Less-Engaged Youth

Large majorities of participants said they do put time and energy into building relationships with youth who are difficult to engage. This might include youth who are shy, have weaker social skills, have physical, cognitive, and/or mental health disabilities, and/or who don’t think they need or want relationships with adults. School staff and leaders were much less likely than OST staff to say this happens in their classrooms and programs. Surprisingly, 25% said that this kind of effort is not made in their organizations. This means that a considerable proportion of the very youth who most need that sense of relational connection, which we have found directly affects academic motivation and well-being, are not getting it.

The State of Relationships

A Minnesota Case Study on the Landscape of Relationships in Schools and OST Programs

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 highlighted here are from Minnesota but are relevant for any state, school, or OST program that wants to invest in a relationship-rich organization.

For more information on the study design and sample, click here.
Investing Time and Energy on All Groups of Youth

Overwhelming majorities of staff and leaders said they focused time and energy on relationship-building, regardless of youths’ identities, although school staff and leaders were again less likely to agree than were OST staff and leaders. Even acknowledging that some of this high percentage of agreement might be due to participants giving the socially desirable response that “discrimination doesn’t occur here,” these remain quite significant proportions who say they’re being inclusive.

We do a lot of community outreach, so we’ll do parades or library day. During summer time, we’ll invite the families to come to the elementary school across the street...just making sure that we are having that connection community wise. Ramadan just happened, we got a lot of information to help us understand the needs of our families that were having a very different schedule and different physical needs during that time.

– School staff, Twin Cities metro
Barriers to Building an Inclusive Relational Climate

School and OST staff and leaders highlight a number of barriers that get in the way of developing inclusive relationships with youth.

In another brief in this series on relationship-rich organizations, we focused on how an organization’s supporting structures—such as their mission and vision, recruitment and hiring practices, time and resources for relationship-building, and professional learning opportunities—can either accelerate or hinder promoting positive youth-adult relationships. The barriers to being inclusive that school and OST staff and leaders identified in this brief included some that are directly affected by those supporting structures.

Across both school and OST staff and leaders, having different life experiences than the youth their organization works with emerged as the top barrier.

- The external systems that we operate within are structurally racist: 41%
- Staff lack the skills necessary to engage youth in culturally responsive ways: 47%
- Staff lack the skills necessary to provide trauma-informed care: 51%
- The diversity of our staff does not reflect the youth we work with: 55%
- Staff have different life experiences than the youth this program/school works with: 58%

Staff and leaders can’t change the fact that their individual life experiences and background are different from those of many of the youth they serve, the top-named barrier. Yet, recruitment and hiring practices that focus on adding staff who are strong relationship builders and who are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background can often better reflect the backgrounds of the youth an organization serves. Likewise, the lack of skills in providing trauma-informed care, and in being culturally re-

It’s really easy to build relationships with the students that you have more in common with. I think that staff need to be more open-minded to the diversity in students’ experiences. Sometimes it’s hard for staff to make connections with kids because, maybe, we’re not coming from the same place or we have little understanding.

- OST staff, Twin Cities metro
responsive, that were cited as barriers to relationship building by around 50% of staff and leaders, can be addressed by intentional and well-resourced professional learning opportunities.

Yet in our research brief on supporting structures, considerable proportions of study participants, roughly 25%-45%, said their school or OST program was not doing a good job either in recruiting and hiring for relationship-building skills (much less diversity), or in providing adequate professional learning opportunities on relationship building (much less on doing so with cultural responsiveness and understanding of trauma-informed care).

Staff named structural, systemic racism in the external systems they deal with as another key barrier to inclusive relationship building. At a macro level, single organizations and schools cannot change those societal patterns the way they can make changes to recruitment and hiring, and professional development. But the very fact of identifying racism as a barrier can also lead to changes in recruitment, hiring, and staff development that themselves can make a big difference to combating racism within that one organization, which then does make a contribution, even if a small one, to lessening racially marginalizing attitudes and actions more broadly. In some schools and OST programs, providing youth with avenues for contributing to social action for racial justice may also be an important way of being intentional in encouraging and listening to youth voices.

Just as strong youth-adult relationships in general don’t happen by accident, neither are relationships likely to be truly inclusive of all groups of youth, unless intentional efforts are made in the supporting

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.
I can not tell you how much time I’ve spent just looking at religion, language, even countries of origin that we work with since we have a large refugee population. So looking at what the refugee experience is like, the countries that people come from, just...I mean, you can find so much. So I think you can go out and search for a lot on your own.

- OST staff, Twin Cities metro

Inclusive Relational Climate: Reflection & Discussion

This State of Relationships case study showed overwhelming support for the value and importance of building strong relationships with youth “regardless of their identities,” and with youth who were not already well-engaged. However, roughly 40%-60% of school and OST staff and leaders said there were key barriers to actually achieving those aims, including staff and youth backgrounds being different, not having a diverse staff, not having the skills for trauma-informed care and cultural responsiveness, and the larger context of systemic racism. Yet, being intentional about supporting structures like recruitment and hiring practices, and the priority and resources given to targeted professional learning opportunities, are concrete ways organizations can make their commitment to relationship-richness become more inclusive of all groups of young people.

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
- Equitable Relational Climate
Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about the ways your organization is being relationally inclusive with all groups of youth, and what the barriers are in your setting to doing better.

**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 make sure all youth feel included in the classroom or program?

_______________________________________________________________________________

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

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