Search Institute’s **Rooted in Relationships model** elevates the importance of nurturing the relational climate needed for youth-adult relationships to grow and support the developing young person. Search Institute studies and research-practice partnerships consistently suggest a relational climate defined as intentional, inclusive, and equitable is ideal.

Drawing on data from the State of Relationships case study, here is what we’re learning about how schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs are building an intentional relationship-centered climate.
The Quality of Relationships in Schools and OST Programs

The web of relationships that exist in schools and OST programs is vast: youth have relationships with their peers and staff, staff have relationships with each other, and with leaders. To understand this web, staff and leaders rated the quality of relationships at their schools and programs along a continuum ranging from Weak (0) to Strong (10). The findings suggest that, on average, both staff and leaders rated their relationships with each other as the weakest, and staff-staff relationships and youth-staff relationships the strongest.

Although the ratings across relationships vary somewhat, the larger point is that they’re all in the moderately strong range. They suggest “okay” relationships in these schools and OST programs—not great, but not terrible, either. In other studies with young people, we have found similar average ratings: students generally rate their relationships with teachers as “okay” too.

The work to be done is not in fixing awful relationships in these settings, but in nudging essentially “okay” ones to become good or even great ones that powerfully affect young people’s development in positive ways. A key strategy for achieving that impact is for school and OST staff and leaders to increase how intentional, explicit, and purposeful they are about building truly authentic and positive youth-adult relationships.
Intentionally Build Developmental Relationships with Young People

While, on average, staff and leaders rate the quality of relationships slightly above the midpoint (5.0), there is room for improvement. Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework can be a useful guide for helping adults think about how to intentionally build strong relationships with young people.

Search Institute defines developmental relationships as close connections through which young people discover who they are, gain abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to the world around them. A developmental relationship includes the combination of five interconnected elements: express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities.

More than 80% of school and OST staff and leaders reported that they agree or strongly agree that staff intentionally engage in the five elements of a developmental relationship and that each of these is somewhat or very important to achieving their schools’ or programs’ mission. That is good news! And yet, it comes with a couple of caveats...

If we had asked youth themselves, there is a good chance their responses would have been notably lower than these staff and leader responses. We consistently have seen the youth-adult gap in perceptions about relationships in other studies. The relationship reality as youth experience it is probably not as rosy as these staff and leaders see it.

And, there is a good chance that not all groups of youth are frequently experiencing intentional, purposeful developmental relationships in these settings. Search Institute research together with the studies of other scholars have shown that youth from lower-income backgrounds and youth of color often have worse relationships with adults in school and program settings than more affluent and white youth do. These disparities are rooted in centuries of systemic rac-
ism and discrimination, and the racist or discriminatory attitudes and actions of individuals, including—sometimes—school and OST staff and leaders (such as school discipline practices and eligibility for Advanced Placement courses, or fee structures in OST programs that prevent many less affluent youth and youth of color from participating). These marginalizations may often be unconscious or unintended, but their impact is still exclusionary, and they deny these youth the developmentally powerful relationships they, like all youth, deserve.

Given these caveats, the backdrop for interpreting the data in this brief is that we should probably adjust downward how positive they appear, once we apply the perspective of young people themselves, and especially the perspective of youth of color and youth from low-income backgrounds.

“I make it a point that every interaction is building a relationship...I’m in the hallway every time there’s a passing period, I’m in the cafeteria the entire duration of lunch, I’m in the hall prior to school, at the end of school, putting myself in relationship-building opportunities.”

- School leader, Twin Cities metro

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.
Intentionally Cultivate a Relational Climate

The above data suggest that school and OST staff and leaders in our case study generally felt they’re being intentional about building relationships with youth, and that overall they thought relationships in their organizations were at least okay. **But how did they think they were doing on specific day-to-day interactions that actually make those broad intentions concrete?**

Large majorities of staff and leaders report being specific and thoughtful in how they plan for building relationships.

- Spend time and energy thinking about what is working and how to improve their relationships with youth: **78%**
- Intentionally include in their classroom/program activities designed specifically to build relationships: **75%**

Roughly 20%-25% did not agree they were doing these things.

These kinds of relationships (and relationship-building efforts) tend to flourish in environments that prioritize psychological safety, and are youth-centered, where people are held accountable and there is a shared sense of community.

Roughly **9 out of 10 staff and leaders** rated all four of these climate indicators as somewhat or very important to achieving their mission.
Both staff and leaders felt that each of these intentional climate indicators were important, and for the most part there were only small differences in staff and leader perspectives, differences that have little practical importance. However, all four indicators tended to be reported more frequently in OST programs than schools. This echoes similar differences we found between OST programs and schools in a different study of staff and youth relationships in those settings.

**Staff who work directly with youth are intentional about creating an environment that focuses on the following:**

1. **Psychological Safety**
   *Youth can be their authentic selves.*
   
   Feeling psychologically safe is a fundamental need for people to build trusting relationships. When youth describe settings where they feel this kind of safety, they often talk about spaces where they feel comfortable showing up as their full and authentic selves. About 80% of participants report that staff in their organizations are intentional about creating a psychologically safe space for youth. The absolute value of this is promising, with room to improve.

   “Teachers will say to me a lot, ‘Well it’s their job. School is their job,’ I just think it absolutely is not, and it’s really minimizing to the kid that this is all that they have going on. It’s not, for most kids. I think teachers need to...share some stuff too so the kids can see you as more than just Mr. So-and-So...That shows vulnerability on both parts, and then that’s the key to building relationships.”

   - School leader, Twin Cities metro

2. **Accountability**
   *Rules and expectations are clearly communicated and reinforced.*

   Environments that clearly communicate and consistently reinforce rules and expectations are spaces that youth can depend on and know what to expect when they show up. Staff and leaders, on average, said this happened with greater intentionality in OST programs than in schools.
3. Social Cohesion

*Youth feel part of a larger community.*

Intentionally creating classrooms and programs where youth feel part of a larger community takes significant and ongoing effort on the part of staff and youth. About three-quarters of OST staff, and school staff and leaders report their staff actively work to promote this kind of climate. OST leaders reported a much higher rate. The gap between what OST leaders and OST staff reported suggests that leaders and staff may have a different sense of what “feel part of a larger community” means, or that they are getting very different data on how youth in their programs feel, or both.

The overall responses are positive, but of course mean that about 25% of school and OST program staff are not taking actions to cultivate a sense of belonging and community for the youth they serve, or feel the actions they are taking are not having that impact on youths’ sense of belonging. This is problematic, as studies consistently show that when youth feel like they belong they are more likely to engage in learning, have better mental health, and have higher levels of social responsibility, among other positive outcomes.

4. Youth-Centered

*Youth have a voice in decisions.*

Giving youth a voice in decisions is an important part of building their sense of agency and competence. It says clearly that they’re a valued member of the group and will be listened to. Sharing power with youth in this way therefore also builds their sense of connectedness and belonging. In this regard, OST programs see themselves doing considerably better on encouraging youth voice than schools do.
Intentional Relational Climate: Reflection & Discussion

The State of Relationships case study data showcase the ways that staff and leaders are actively working to cultivate a positive relational climate, and where there is room to do better. The data showed overwhelming support for the value and importance of intentionally building strong youth-adult relationships, particularly around the core ideas of expressing care, providing support, challenging growth, expanding possibilities, and sharing power. In addition, majorities—and often, very large majorities in OST programs—said they were doing well on four specific ways of being intentional about building relationships: psychological safety, accountability, social cohesion, and being youth-centered.

“As educators, we have a lot to teach and pass down, but the information and knowledge that youth have is just as valuable and relevant, right?”

- OST Staff, Twin Cities metro

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
- Inclusive Relational Climate
- Equitable Relational Climate
Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about how intentional your organization is about building positive youth-adult relationships. 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 for improving the relationship-richness of your school or program do you see? What actions might your organization take? What could YOU do?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

How do you think young people might want adults in your school or program to respond to findings like these?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

**Now What?** What activities or efforts would your school or program be willing to try to enhance your investment in relationships and improve the intentionality you bring to relationship-building?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

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

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