

# Stories from the Field:

## Building strong teacher-student relationships in the classroom

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### About TransformEd's Series on Fostering Strong Relationships

Transforming Education has developed the [SEL Integration Approach](#) to guide classroom educators in how to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into academic curriculum and daily classroom routines through six key components. One of the foundational components in our approach is *Strong Relationships: Intentionally building connections with students, having a personal regard for them as individuals, and facilitating meaningful peer interactions*. **In order to further understand what educators can do - and are doing - to build strong relationships, TransformEd has produced a series of briefs or “stories from the field” that are intended to share student and educator perspectives about developing and sustaining strong relationships within the classroom and throughout the school.**

These briefs emerged after a series of visits to school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills and favorable perceptions of the school environment. The goal of these visits was to learn directly from students, teachers, and administrators about the practices and supports being implemented that may be leading to more favorable school culture and stronger student social-emotional competencies and mindsets. In this series, we draw from what we learned about fostering strong relationships through our conversations and on-site observations at these schools. These briefs are grounded in student, teacher, and leader voice; present the latest research on the importance of building strong connections in the classroom and school; and provide additional resources that school teachers and leaders can easily implement in their schools to foster stronger relationships with students, among students, and with staff.

**This brief focuses on ways teachers can develop and sustain strong relationships with their students, based on the theoretical underpinnings of the importance of this component, the perspectives of educators and students in the schools we visited, and evidence-based best practices.**

## Why do teacher-student relationships matter?

Strong, positive relationships between teachers and students in the classroom are fundamental to promoting student engagement, social-emotional development, and academic growth.<sup>1</sup> Teachers can foster such relationships by establishing personal connections with their students, making sure their students feel cared for and supported, establishing high expectations for student success, and providing constructive guidance to ensure their students are meeting those expectations.<sup>2</sup> When students have the emotional security brought about by meaningful connections with their teachers, they can immerse themselves more fully into their learning.<sup>3</sup> Studies suggest that warm and trusting teacher relationships are associated with positive school outcomes—including increased effort, academic self-efficacy, and better grades and standardized test scores.<sup>4,5</sup> Moreover, positive teacher-student interactions have been found to result in fewer disruptive behaviors from students and longer periods of engaged academic time.<sup>6</sup>

Teachers also benefit from having strong relationships with students. A recent study found that teachers who felt positive connections with their students were more likely to report experiences of joy and less likely to report feelings of anxiety and anger.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships motivate teachers to dedicate more time and resources to promote their students' success.<sup>8</sup>

From early school experiences, teachers can provide students with the support they need in order to explore and adapt to their learning environment. These connections continue to be valuable through transitions into more advanced grades, as supportive relationships with teachers help maintain students' interest in academic activities and foster positive peer relationships.<sup>9,10</sup> Overall, positive connections with teachers can promote students' academic and social-emotional wellbeing, safety, and belonging in learning environments that can have long-term impacts on social and academic outcomes.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

Given these benefits, the importance of building strong teacher-student relationships in the classroom cannot be underestimated. While developing strong relationships may come easier with some students than others, it is important for teachers to use a variety of strategies to find ways to connect meaningfully and authentically with all students. By finding different approaches and learning what works for each individual, teachers will be able to connect with a greater number of students.<sup>14</sup> The next two sections of this brief offer insights from students and teachers about their experiences with building relationships and provide promising practices teachers can use to foster positive relationships with their students.

I think the teachers really pay attention and they really want to make sure that we're okay. I like that.

ANTHONY  
UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENT

## What do students and teachers say about building positive teacher-student relationships?

In seeking to learn more about what makes a learning environment conducive to positive social-emotional development, we identified six school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills, a strong sense of belonging, and strong connections with their teachers. We then talked to both students and teachers in grades 4-6 about their relationships with one another. Several themes arose in those conversations that suggested how and why teachers and students felt connected. For example, in one student's words, their school was described as a place where "Adults treat us awesomely!" In this section, we share more of what we heard and learned.

**Making time to check-in with students can have a meaningful impact on them.** Teachers and students that we spoke to talked about the importance of connecting with each other on a personal level.

Students expressed the importance of having teachers recognize if they were having a hard day or needed help navigating difficult emotions. One student said, "When something really troublesome happened at home, I came to school the next day. When I came in, my teacher asked me to her desk and asked me what's wrong and she gave me a hug and asked me if I wanted to talk to her about it. And, if I needed to go into the hallway and have a minute, then I could." Checking in with students intentionally like this communicates to students that adults in their school are available to help them. For teachers, helping students address what was on their minds was an important component of supporting the student in making space to focus on their academic activities.

**Using positive approaches to help students navigate setbacks in behavior, learning, and peer interactions goes a long way.** Teachers and students highlighted positive approaches to resolving conflicts or addressing challenges in the classroom. One teacher explained, "We talk about consequences, and what's the better decision, and how we're going to try not to do that next time. Just problem solve together. I'm like, 'Okay, well what can we do better next time? What should we have done?'" This approach to problem solving was recognized by students as a welcome experience that offered the opportunity to do better, while treating students with kindness and patience. "[The teachers] support you to try again and try and regroup," explained one student. Additionally, engaging students in finding solutions that aligned with shared classroom community expectations, norms, and values helped to frame conversations that made the goal for alternative behaviors more evident to the student.

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CLAIRE  
UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENT



## SEL CONNECTIONS

Helping students find ways to cope with overwhelming emotions and persist through challenges is also great for supporting students through self-regulation. Some examples from the classrooms we visited included having students sketch a drawing or take deep breaths when they felt stuck in the middle of a problem. As one teacher said, “[We] teach strategies to help support kids when they’re in ... those different zones so that they can learn to regulate and come back to safe space.” Find additional strategies to support students’ self-regulation [here](#).

Building relationships is also about creating a welcoming classroom environment that can be achieved through personal connection and engaging in fun moments. Teachers discussed the importance of sharing stories about themselves as well as inviting humor into the classroom and finding moments to laugh with their students. Making room for joy and celebration were important elements of making students and teachers feel connected. One teacher explained, “I’m a very tough teacher, and school is very serious, but we have to have fun too. Little things like that [help] us connect on a different level.” Students agreed, often describing their experiences and communities as positive, inviting, and “fun.” One student reflected, “A lot of teachers can be serious, but a lot of them are actually really fun once you get to know them.”

### What strategies can be integrated into the classroom easily to build stronger relationships with students?

In this section, we recommend strategies to implement in the classroom to build and sustain strong relationships with students. This list is by no means exhaustive; the strategies described are ones that we’ve observed implemented well in our partner schools, that align with research on best practices, and that can be integrated seamlessly into daily activities with little additional time required.

#### DEMONSTRATE CARING

As students shared, it mattered to them that their teachers noticed how they were doing and showed that they cared about them. Spend time showing students care and concern through warm greetings and by checking in with them. Invite a positive connection from the moment students enter the classroom by [standing at the door to greet them](#).<sup>15</sup> When you see students show strong emotions (whether excited, angry, or anything in between), check in with them with a quick, “What’s going on?” (Consider whether the check-in should occur in front of the entire class or in a more confidential setting.) Make sure to listen intently, sincerely, and with empathy, to help students feel seen and heard. Find additional strategies to demonstrate caring [here](#).<sup>16</sup>

## FINDING SIMILARITIES

Teachers and students talked about the importance of getting to know one another on a personal level. Finding shared interests can help facilitate conversations and build relationships. Ask students questions about themselves to discover what you share in common with them. A recent study found that when a teacher found five similarities with their students' responses in a [“Get to Know You” survey](#), teachers rated those relationships more positively.<sup>17</sup> When teachers learned about those commonalities, their students earned higher grades in class. Learn more about the study [here](#).<sup>18</sup>

## THE TWO-MINUTE RELATIONSHIP BUILDER

Being more intentional and aware about connecting with all students can help build the foundation for equitable classroom practices and collaborative problem-solving with each child. The “Two-by-Ten” strategy is described as, “a way to not only break the ice but also form the foundation for a sustainable relationship—and better classroom behavior.”<sup>19</sup> Teachers who have used this strategy have found it particularly helpful to engage students with whom they are having a hard time connecting due to behavioral challenges. To use this strategy, teachers spend two minutes a day getting to know a student for ten consecutive days. By having at least one teacher or staff member use this plan with every student at the school, it offers all students the opportunity for positive connection with an adult at their school, which can encourage a sense of safety and security. During these points of connection, teachers seek to learn more about students outside of the classroom, for example, about their hobbies, favorite foods, or after school activities. Read more about how other teachers have used the strategy [here](#).<sup>20</sup>

## What have we learned?

Fostering positive teacher-student relationships helps create environments conducive to optimal learning experiences and social-emotional wellbeing. From speaking with teachers and students, we learned that taking the time to check in, using positive approaches that demonstrate kindness and patience, and incorporating fun in the classroom can help students feel more connected and valued by their teachers. While building these kinds of relationships takes time, by incorporating small, intentional practices into the day, teachers can find ways to strengthen their relationships and have a positive and long-lasting impact on the whole child.

## Additional Resources to Explore

[“How to Build Relationships Quickly”](#) by Eyka Stephens & William Sprankles. Offers a list of simple, quick practices and practical advice to help create an authentic teacher-student connection.

[“Improving Students’ Relationships with Teachers to Provide Essential Supports for Learning”](#) by Sara Rimm-Kaufman and Lia Sandilos. Offers more information about the impact of strong teacher-student connection, as well as “Do’s and Don’ts” to cultivating positive relationships.

[“Developing Positive Teacher-Student Relations”](#) by Mark Boynton and Christine Boynton. Offers strategies to integrate into everyday interactions with students.

Learn more about the importance of strong relationships and other key components for fostering optimal social-emotional learning (SEL) with Transforming Education’s SEL Integration Approach by clicking [here](#).

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