

Targeted Intensive Tutoring

Expanded Learning Time

The Importance of Strong Relationships



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# Strategies to Solve UNFINISHED LEARNING

WHEN THE PANDEMIC FORCED SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY TO CLOSE THEIR DOORS IN MARCH 2020, many district and school leaders worked quickly to plan for and address students' "unfinished learning."<sup>1</sup> How would they support students who had been exposed to content, but had not yet had a chance to master it? A [recent study](#) indicated that students, on average, could experience up to five to nine months of unfinished learning by the end of June 2021. But it will be sometime before we know the true amount of unfinished learning caused by schools closing their doors.

What is certain, however, is that as the nation continues to battle this pandemic and at-home learning continues, there will be a need to help students, especially the nation's most vulnerable students, complete unfinished learning for weeks, months, and even years to come. The lack of adequate time for districts to prepare for sudden shutdowns as well as the lack of resources for many districts, especially those that are chronically underfunded, to adjust to virtual learning has exacerbated inequities for Black, Latino, and Native students and students from low-income backgrounds.

For example, a [national survey of school leaders](#) revealed that students in high-poverty districts were expected to spend far less time on instructional activities during virtual learning than were their peers in low-poverty districts. More specifically, 24% of leaders in high-poverty districts compared to just 12% in low-poverty districts said that distance learning for elementary school students primarily involved content review rather than teaching new material.

Families, especially in communities with more students from low-income backgrounds, more English learners, and more students of color, also face many obstacles to participating in distance learning opportunities, for reasons ranging from [inadequate access to technology](#) to competing responsibilities such as jobs or childcare [that limit the time available](#) to focus on learning. It is most important to note that these inequities are not limited to the current crisis; they are [longstanding](#).

Moving forward, educators will need to administer high-quality assessments to determine where learning must be accelerated and provide high-quality instruction to ensure students have the opportunity to reach high standards. Students will need access to opportunities, supports, and strong and supportive relationships. And targeted actions from school and district leaders and policymakers are required to ensure stretched budgets do not result in policies and practices that harm the students who face the most injustices.

The degree of unfinished learning caused by the pandemic will differ by student, subject, and grade — affecting math more than reading, younger grades more than older, and students already lacking adequate supports more than others. Research supports two ways schools can give students the opportunities and supports they need to complete unfinished learning: **targeted intensive tutoring and expanded learning time**. The Education Trust and MDRC designed the following briefs to help leaders make decisions on how to implement these strategies and where to invest resources, especially in ways that best support the country's most underserved students. We also highlight research-based interventions to **build and maintain strong relationships**: without strong relationships and connections between students and school staff, educators cannot catch students up. Finally, when evidence exists, we highlight the tradeoffs between effectiveness, affordability, and feasibility when implementing a strategy in different ways.

As we navigate these unprecedented times, it will be even more important that investments are made to grow the evidence base and evaluate the effectiveness of programs used to accelerate learning.

1. The Education Trust uses the term "unfinished learning," as opposed to "learning loss" or "learning gaps," to describe material that should have presented to students, but has not yet been mastered. The idea that learning is not complete better reflects the reality that all students can learn and "gaps" can be closed with equitable opportunities, materials, assessments, and high-quality instruction. With this phrasing, our goal is to redirect any focus on "fixing students" toward a focus on systemic changes to meet the needs of students.

# The Importance of STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

ANXIETY, STRESS, AND IN SOME CASES, TRAUMA are prevalent as we live through the COVID-19 pandemic. Students are facing food and housing insecurities, isolation caused by school and business closures, uncertainty due to parents losing jobs, and the fear of catching the coronavirus or grief of losing family members to it. Educators are facing their own personal stresses, in addition to being concerned about teaching academic content and about the well-being of their students, which can ultimately wear on their well-being.

But even with all of these stressors, teachers and students are trying to remain connected to schools and each other. Strong relationships with teachers and school staff can dramatically enhance students' level of motivation and therefore promote learning. Students who have access to more strong relationships are more academically engaged, have stronger social skills, and experience more positive behavior.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, too many students do not have this experience. A survey of 25,400 sixth to 12th graders in a large diverse district, found that less than a third of middle schoolers had a strong relationship with their teachers, and that number dropped to 16% by the time students reached 12th grade.<sup>2</sup> Students from low-income backgrounds report even fewer strong relationships with their teachers.<sup>3</sup>

When schools closed their doors in March 2020, these connections went away for many. But building trusting relationships will be critical to addressing the months of stress and missed classroom instruction, or unfinished learning, that has followed. Estimates show that as many as 3 million students are offline, hard to find, or have left school altogether as a result of school closures. In some places, data shows as many as 1 in 5 students did not participate in virtual learning in the spring.<sup>4</sup> Building and maintaining strong "developmental relationships" that reconnect students with adults in school buildings will matter more now and in coming months than in previous school years.<sup>5</sup> Without these trusting relationships and connections, educators cannot catch students up.

Strong relationships between adults and students must include: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities (see related chart for explanations). Importantly, these relationship-building actions must be done with an equity lens, one that supports positive racial, cultural, and ethnic identity development. The country's attempt to reckon with 400 years of anti-blackness in response to recent acts of racial violence and injustice is highlighting the long-standing systemic inequities affecting students of color. And the pandemic is exacerbating them.

Creating strong relationships between students and those charged with educating them therefore will require adults to acknowledge the long-standing harms caused by racism in schools. Bias and discrimination, both implicit and explicit, can easily lead to harmful in-school practices that erase students' cultural identities. Relationship building, however, must be done intentionally with the needs of students of color in mind and with a strength-based lens that recognizes and values the rich cultural and linguistic assets they bring to the classroom.

In this brief, we highlight the important practices of fostering strong relationships between students and adults, as well as how to build these relationships in ways that encourage and support students to engage in tasks that move them beyond their current understanding and skills.

BUILDING DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS	
Elements	Sample Actions (and Explanations)
<b>Express Care</b>	Be dependable (Be someone I can trust) Listen (Really pay attention) Encourage (Praise my efforts and achievements) Believe in me (Make me feel known and valued)
<b>Challenge Growth</b>	Expect my best (Expect me to live up to my potential) Hold me accountable (Insist I take responsibility for my actions) Help me reflect on failures (Help me learn from my mistakes) Stretch me (Push me to go further)
<b>Provide Support</b>	Navigate (Guide me through hard situations) Empower me (Build my confidence to take charge of my life) Advocate (Defend me when I need it) Set boundaries (Establish limits to keep me on track)
<b>Share Power</b>	Respect me (Take me seriously and treat me fairly) Include me (Involve me in decisions that affect me) Collaborate (Work with me to solve problems and reach goals) Let me lead (Create opportunities for me to take action)
<b>Expand Possibilities</b>	Inspire (Inspire me to see possibilities for my future) Broaden horizons (Expose me to new experiences, ideas, and places) Connect (Introduce me to more people who can help me)

*Note: This is adapted from page four of Roehlkepartain, Eugene, Kent Pekel, Amy Syvertsen, Jenna Sethi, Theresa Sullivan, and Peter Scales. Relationships First: Creating connections that help young people thrive. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute. 2017.*

## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT WHAT WORKS?

District and school leaders considering emphasizing relationships as a strategy to help students catch up and stay connected with school will have to make intentional and important decisions about structuring time for teachers and staff, investing in activities, training on building developmental relationships, and about how to most effectively group students.

As school leaders consider what type of strategy could work best with their staff and students to build strong developmental relationship, they will have to make challenging decisions based on their specific circumstances or contexts. These decisions will come with tradeoffs. In this brief, we draw on research on strengthening student-teacher relationships, school-based mentoring, school-based after-school programming, and school-based case management to provide insight on those tradeoffs. The following chart shows how implementing different elements of building strong developmental relationships impacts the effectiveness of those relationships.

## HOW EFFECTIVE IS RELATIONSHIP BUILDING?

We looked at the research to help leaders navigate these complicated decisions. The chart below shows the most effective elements of relationship-building strategies in schools.

Elements	<div>More Effective</div> <div>Less Effective</div>			
Adults	Certified teachers and other staff	Other in-school adults	Trained volunteers	Outside mentors
Group size	Individual or small groups			More than 8 students
Activity	Social activity around a student's goal	Academic activity around a student's goals	Activity not structured around student's goals	No structured activity
Training and Supervision	Pre-service & ongoing training, & feedback		Pre-service training only	No training

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

### Who benefits most from strong relationships?

Students from all backgrounds and ages benefit from strong relationships.<sup>6</sup> Research also shows:

- Students who experience either a high level of environmental adversity or a high level of personal challenge (i.e., academic or behavioral) benefit the most.<sup>7</sup>

### Why are strong relationships important?

Strong relationships provide a foundation for student engagement, belonging, and, ultimately, learning. The more high-quality relationships students have with their teachers, the better their engagement in school.<sup>8</sup> Research also shows:

- Students learn more when they have access to positive relationships** with their teachers and other adults.<sup>9</sup> For example, a program designed to improve the relationships of high school students with at least one teacher resulted in **these students having higher grade point averages** (an increase of 0.28 points on the standard 1-4 GPA measure).<sup>10</sup>

### How can schools strengthen relationships among students and staff?

The most important thing schools can do to foster these relationships is to have a culture that explicitly values adults nurturing relationships with students and providing teachers and school staff with the time, space, and occasions to interact repeatedly with individual students, especially those that seem less engaged.

- Start informally with teachers and staff **taking time to get to know individual students** and consistently checking in. Once trust is established, the relationship will grow.<sup>11</sup>

- **Formalize interactions** between students and staff in scheduled activities to ensure they happen.<sup>12</sup>
- Have adults **meet one-on-one or in small groups with students**, and have activity driven by students' goals and desires.<sup>13</sup>

### Which adult relationships are most impactful?

*All in-school adults should strive for strong relationships with students. When students have strong relationships with their teachers, in-class motivation increases the most.<sup>14</sup> In these instances, students are motivated by teachers' high expectations as well as their own. Research also shows:*

- Strong relationships with other adults in the building also strengthens students' motivation to learn.
- In-school adults (teachers, cafeteria workers, nurses, cleaning staff, etc.) have the opportunity to interact informally with students, and school work is often a topic of conversation.<sup>15</sup>
- Relationships with mentors who do not work inside school buildings, like those from the community, can also help drive student motivation and connectedness.<sup>16</sup>
- Mentors can support student learning through building strong relationships. One study found that City Year AmeriCorps members can have positive social, emotional, and academic effects when they are well trained and use an integrated approach that focuses on three critical factors: social-emotional development, academics, and an inclusive environment. When this is done well, the corps members have an asset-based lens and a focus on positive identity development, which allows for diversity in development without seeing differences as deficits.<sup>17</sup>
- Teachers of color are more likely to have higher expectations of students of color, and students of color feel more cared for and academically challenged by teachers of color. These perceptions suggest that **hiring and retaining teachers of color is critical to building strong relationships**. Similarly, relationships between other staff and students form more easily if they have similar backgrounds and cultures.<sup>18</sup>

### How should schools group students to foster relationships between adults and students?

*Smaller groups are most effective for fostering relationships. One-on-one interactions allow for the greatest opportunity for individualized attention and support, but some adults and students benefit from a larger group setting.<sup>19</sup>*

- Relationships can **develop easily with small groups (ideally two to four students)**, but it is possible to form strong relationships when a single adult interacts with large groups such as eight to 10 students. However, students are **more likely to just interact with other students in larger groups**.<sup>20</sup>
- When schools use larger groups that are well managed (generally with the presence of multiple adults), **it can offer an opportunity for students to practice, improve, and become more comfortable with social skills**.<sup>21</sup>
- For relationship building to be effective in group settings, **leaders need training on group management**.<sup>22</sup>

### What tasks will foster strong relationships in individual or group settings?

*Activities are most effective when they are based on students' interests or goals.*

- Activities that promote relationships include: interacting informally with the students, effectively helping students accomplish a goal or task they want to achieve, and treating students with respect.<sup>23</sup>



- Relationships can form when adults and students engage in academic activities, but students often describe these adults as “friends who help them understand things” **but with whom they have little closeness.**<sup>24</sup>
- How adults choose to teach, i.e., the practices and curriculum they use, are key to creating an environment where students feel they can build relationships with adults. For example, using relational pedagogy<sup>25</sup> and culturally sustaining pedagogy<sup>26</sup> can create opportunities for adults to relate to students’ experiences and backgrounds. Also, using culturally relevant materials and place-based learning can open dialogues in community-building.<sup>27</sup> And lifting students’ voices can empower their engagement in relationship-building.<sup>28</sup> Informal actions like “two by 10,” where a teacher simply spends two minutes for 10 consecutive days informally getting to know a student, can improve teacher-student relationships.<sup>29</sup>
- In the classroom, teachers should be mindful of the challenge of **balancing teaching skills with building a strong relationship and sharing power to foster the student’s ownership of the activity.**<sup>30</sup>

In 2010, Oakland Unified School District launched a program targeted toward Black boys in high school. The class was designed to combine college and career readiness and social-emotional well-being and development with culturally relevant pedagogy. These classes meet daily during regular school hours — an intentional design to change the experience of Black boys in schools and increase their engagement with caring adults. The instructors in the program receive training, have a history of involvement in the Black community, and are expected to build nurturing relationships with students in their classes. This program increased on-time graduation for Black boys by 3 percentage points and was found to have some positive effects for Black girls as well.<sup>31</sup>

### What training do adults need to build strong relationships?

*Schools should provide all the adults in the school building with training on the elements of developmental relationships, time, and strategies to build developmental relationships. Schools should also provide individual feedback based on observations of adult interactions with students. This training will ensure that relationships are stronger and more effective in accelerating academic learning.*

- Pre-service training **improves student outcomes.**<sup>32</sup>
- Programs that provide **ongoing training and group support to adults are twice as effective at changing student outcomes than those that do not.**<sup>33</sup>

Two such evidence-based professional development programs are the Search Institute’s [REACH program](#) (which has a [free online strategy guidebook](#)) and MyTeaching Partner, a professional development approach for teachers.

## PROMISING PRACTICES

### *Project Arrive*

For some students, transitioning from middle school to high school can be a challenge. To address this challenge, San Francisco Unified School district created [a mentoring program](#) for ninth grade students. The purpose of this program is to support ninth graders successfully transition into high school and to connect them with the people, resources, and inspiration they will need to graduate. Schools identify and reach out to students with academic

or attendance challenges and ask them to voluntarily participate in this mentorship program. Once students commit, they are placed into small groups and assigned two district staff members – counselors, principals, nurses, or advisers. Each mentor receives four hours of pre-service training and ongoing support throughout the school year. The student group meets once a week, all school year, during a period that doesn't conflict with their core academic classes.

Mentors for these groups are tasked with aligning curriculum and student interest. They collaborate with students to choose activities and events to attend together. As a result of this relationship building, this program helps students build positive relationships with adults as soon as they begin high school, to foster a sense of belonging and safety within school buildings, to support academic success, and participate in special events and leadership responsibilities. An evaluation of this program found that students earned more credits both in ninth and 10th grade relative to a comparison group of similar unmentored students.<sup>34</sup>

### *Communities In Schools (CIS)*

Communities in Schools (CIS) is a national nonprofit organization that works with low-performing K-12 schools to provide wraparound support to students in need. As a part of this support, site coordinators work with students to identify their needs, to provide them with support directly, and to connect them with additional school and community supports. The site coordinators also regularly monitor student progress and develop an individual plan to ensure that students' needs are sufficiently being met. They also have regular one-on-one check-ins and hold group discussions with students. After two years, students who were assigned to case management reported better relationships with adults and better relationships with their peers. They also reported being more engaged in school and valuing their education more.<sup>35</sup>

### *Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR)*

BARR is a whole-school approach that uses a strength-based model to help schools meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students. This model employs block scheduling and small groups, where core teachers have the opportunity to get to know individual students. Core teachers, counselors, and school administrators receive pre-service professional development and coaching. Every week, students spend 30 minutes on a SEL curriculum, facilitated by core teachers, that allows students to learn more about themselves, discover their strengths, and build relationships with staff and other students. This program requires teachers to meet regularly to discuss student strengths, progress, and challenges. Parents are also active participants in BARR; they are encouraged to participate in orientation and an advisory council. One study found that after just one year of BARR, students had stronger relationships with their teachers, experienced a sense of belonging in the classroom, had significantly higher GPAs, were more engaged in school, had higher attendance rates, and were more likely to pass courses.<sup>36</sup>



## ENDNOTES

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