



SEL Helps Valued Outcomes to Happen: A Series of Examples...

Emphasizing Caring Relationships to Support Student Achievement and a Sense of Belonging

Caring relationships among both students and adults in a school are an essential factor in supporting both student achievement and a sense of belonging in a school. Schools should ensure that every student – especially those most vulnerable – has strong peer, adult, and institutional support in place. In particular, every student should have at least one identifiable adult in the school that can serve as a positive adult role model and advocate. Making this connection with a caring and inspiring adult is a key factor in student success both academically and from a social-emotional viewpoint. Almost everyone can identify a significant adult who served as a mentor or cheerleader in and/or out of school. Identifying this mentor is a significant step in student development. Consider this:

“A [five-year study](#) sponsored by Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada found that children with mentors were more confident and had fewer behavioral problems. Girls in the study were four times less likely to become bullies than those without a mentor and boys were two times less likely. In general, young people showed increased belief in their abilities to succeed in school and felt less anxiety related to peer pressure.”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-moment-youth/201301/mentoring-youth-matters>

When students have a significant adult mentor, they can reach out for advice and counsel about peer issues, academic problems, and a variety of other concerns. Sometimes these mentor relationships help students deal with problems that they could take nowhere else. Knowing when to consult a trusting adult is an important step in the student’s development. Mentors have even been known to help determine a student’s path in life.

“Mentoring, at its core, guarantees young people that there is someone who cares about them, assures them they are not alone in dealing with day-to-day challenges, and makes them feel like they matter. Research confirms that quality mentoring relationships have powerful positive effects on young people in a variety of personal, academic, and professional situations. Ultimately, mentoring connects a young person to personal growth and development, and social and economic opportunity.” <https://www.mentoring.org/mentoring-impact/>

Research shows that there are other benefits when students have a mentor they can trust. Students with mentors are much less likely to miss school, they are more likely to have a positive attitude toward school and are much more likely to go on to higher education. After schooling, they are more likely to become mentors themselves, to become volunteers, and to hold leadership positions.

Students from “vulnerable” populations can derive particular benefit from having strong peer, adult, and institutional support in place. By vulnerable populations, we include a wide range of student differences and characteristics ranging from students with learning disabilities, physical attributes, minoritized racial and ethnic group status, economic disadvantage, English Language Learning (ELL) students, students of diverse gender identity and expression, and others. The school as an institution needs to provide support opportunities for each of these vulnerable groups appropriate to the needs of those students.

Because every student derives powerful benefits from caring relationships and mentoring, there can be no exceptions or biases in who does or does not receive that support. The specific nature of that support should be aligned with students’ specific needs.

However, the guiding principle needs to be one of inclusiveness. Connections need to be made between special education students and the general education population; ELL students need to have authentic conversation interactions with their native English speaking peers; groups celebrating particular identities should be encouraged and supported, as should opportunities that bring diverse youth together (such as GSA clubs, Unified PE, youth councils, student government, project-based learning groups, and school and community service). School posted signage, symbols, documents, and policies should be reviewed from a diversity perspective, and schools need to undertake an inventory of school activities and opportunities to be sure that all students can find a place to explore their interests, talents, and potential. When schools identify the gaps and the students that are under-served, every effort should be made to create opportunities the meet the needs of every student group.

When schools intentionally take steps to encourage caring relationship-building, address the needs of all students, and embrace student uniqueness and distinctiveness which enriches the life of the school in general, there is a greater likelihood that all students will feel both connected to and supported by their school.

This information sheet was provided by SEL4NJ, the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance of NJ, a voluntary, grass-roots organization working with schools and communities to promote social-emotional and character development and supportive, engaging, inclusive, equitable classroom and school environments for learning. Prepared by William H. Trusheim, SEL4NJ Trustee and President, NJASECD. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org.