

Strategies that Build Relationships

National High School Center

Common features of the American comprehensive high school are depersonalization and a lack of a sense of community (Lee & Smith, 2001). Yet research strongly suggests that establishing a climate of social, emotional, and academic supports for students is central to improving conditions for learning and thriving in high school. Two practices generally associated with successful reform in low-performing high schools are personalized learning environments and establishing mechanisms that assist students in developing social networks and instrumental relationships (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Quint, 2006). Strategies for building relationships between students as well as between students and school faculty include:

- Smaller learning communities (SLC) which structure larger school populations into smaller groups of students and teachers. These structures are designed to foster school environments in which healthy, trusting, interpersonal relationships between students and faculty can thrive (Cohen, 2001; Jerald, 2006). Academies are a popular form of smaller learning communities that are typically organized by career aspiration such as a program designed to prepare students for engineering coursework in college. Academies are also commonly organized by grade-level, such as ninth-grade academies designed to ease the transition from middle to high school (Herlihy, 2007a). (For more information, see Chapter 4 in this *Handbook*.)
- Guidance and mentoring programs, such as student advisories which reserve time for students to meet one-on-one and/or in small groups with trained faculty advisors to create a sense of community (Herlihy, 2007b).
- A system of tiered interventions designed to prevent and remediate documented concerns led by teams of teachers, specialists, and administrators that offer targeted support and monitoring for the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students school-wide, specific student groups (e.g., ninth graders, learning disabled, English language learners) and individual students according to their risk factors (e.g., failing grades, poor attendance, suspensions) (National High School Center, 2007). (For more information, see Chapter 7 on “Using Response to Intervention” in this *Handbook*.)
- Student leadership development programs designed to engage and enlist students in needs assessment exercises and the school improvement planning process.

Action Principles

For State

1. Develop student-level and school environment assessment tools to be used by schools that can guide decision-making about what interventions to put into place in response to students at risk for school failure due to academic, social, and/or behavioral issues.
2. Gather and report indicators on key student risk factors such as readiness for high school-level coursework in the form of reports, guidelines, and checklists that districts and schools can use to determine which students need extra support.

For District

1. Determine district-wide strategies for increasing personalization (e.g., smaller learning communities, academies, etc.).
2. Refine and provide technical support for school data collection and retrieval systems to provide the infrastructure to identify and implement targeted interventions for students who are disengaged from school.

For School

1. Partner with parents and community stakeholders to foster awareness of and support for building and sustaining effective relationships.

2. Consider ninth grade academies and summer transition programs to facilitate student transition into high school.
3. Offer programming such as student advisories to set a foundation for positive discipline school-wide and to connect all students to the school environment.
4. Use a data-driven process to prevent problem behavior. One example is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a data-driven decision-making framework that directs the selection, integration, and implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices and systems for improving important outcomes for all students.
5. Institutionalize opportunities for students to participate in the process of improving the school climate, safety, and learning.
6. Identify and train teachers, specialists, and administrators to serve on tiered intervention teams that develop and lead school-wide, targeted, and individual student support programs.

References and Resources

- Cohen, M. (2001). *Transforming the American high school: New directions for state and local policy*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.
- Duffy, H. (n.d.). *Meeting the needs of significantly struggling learners in high school: A look at approaches to tiered interventions*. Washington, DC; National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_RTIBrief_08-02-07.pdf
- Herlily, C. (2007a). *Toward ensuring a smooth transition into high school*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/NHSC_TowardEnsuring_051607.pdf
- Herlihy, C. (2007b). *State and district-level support for successful transitions into high school*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_PolicyBrief_TransitionsIntoHighSchool.pdf
- Jerald, C. (2006). *Measured progress: A report on the high school reform movement*. Washington, DC: Education Sector.
- Kennelly, L., & Monrad, M. (2007). *Approaches to dropout prevention: Heeding early warning signs with appropriate interventions*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/NHSC_ApproachesToDropoutPrevention.pdf
- Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. (2001). *Restructuring high schools for equity and excellence: What works*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Martinez, M., & Klopott, S. (2005). *The link between high school reform and college access and success for low-income and minority youth*. Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum and Pathways to College Network.
- National High School Center. (2007). *New Hampshire's multi-tiered approach to dropout prevention*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/pubs/documents/Snapshot_DropoutPreventionNewHampshire_031307_2.pdf
- National High School Center. (2009). *Educating English language learners at the high school level: A coherent approach to district and school level support*. Washington, DC: National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/EducatingELLsattheHSLevel_042209.pdf
- Quint, J. (2006). *Meeting five critical challenges of high school reform: Lessons from research on three reform models*. New York: MDRC.
- Redding, S. (2006). *The mega system: Deciding. Learning. Connecting. A handbook for continuous improvement within a community of the school*. Lincoln, IL: Academic Development Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.centerii.org/survey/>