K12 *Insight*

RELEVANCE & WHY IT MATTERS

4 strategies to keep your students engaged in school

Why student connectedness needs to be a part of everything you do

When students feel connected in school, their achievement soars. Research shows that students who feel part of a *safe, caring, and connected* learning environment are more engaged in their studies and more likely to succeed academically and socially (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Being connected to school is as much about schoolwork and activities as it is about the people in a student's school community. K12 *Insight* helps school districts nationwide discover why relevance, or the extent to which students feel connected to what they are learning, matters.

What is school quality?

School quality is the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape the interactions between students, teachers, parents, and administrators. A school with high ratings for school quality often has at least one of the following attributes: *A supportive, caring approach from teachers; a sense of safety from violence and bullying; rigorous and relevant content; clear connections between content and life outside of school; and strong parental involvement*. Since 2010, K12 *Insight* has conducted more than 500 studies in 1,200 schools in 40 school districts on topics related to school quality. K12 *Insight*'s School Quality Survey measures parent, staff, and student perceptions of a school's environment across five dimensions: Academic support, student support, school leadership, family involvement, and safety and behavior. Survey results help school and district leaders gauge the extent to which students feel connected to their school community and the overall quality of a school's environment.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT   **STUDENT SUPPORT**   **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**   **PARENT INVOLVEMENT**   **SAFETY & BEHAVIOR**

Why measure school quality?

The quality of a school's environment can **foster student development and success**. Students who feel connected in school are more likely to have better attendance and higher grades, perform well on classroom tests, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009.). Positive student, parent, and staff perceptions of school quality matter. They can enhance the district's reputation and help build positive brands for their schools and district. By gathering feedback from the entire school community, school and district leaders are empowered to make meaningful changes that drive student success.

What K12 *Insight*'s national benchmark study says

The School Quality Survey Benchmark Study includes more than 16,000 responses from stakeholders nationwide and provides insights about school educational and professional environments. The results show that school staff members rate school quality higher than parents or students across all five dimensions. One item in particular has critical implications for district leaders: *Teachers successfully show students how lessons relate to life outside of school* had the lowest overall weighted score from parents, staff, and students. See the table below.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT SURVEY ITEMS	STAFF	PARENTS	STUDENTS
This school has high learning standards for all students.	3.46	3.22	3.03
Teachers set high expectations for all students.	3.44	3.18	3.03
This school's learning standards and expectations are clearly explained to students.	3.37	3.15	2.87
Students are challenged by their schoolwork.	3.37	3.11	3.05
Teachers give timely feedback about student work.	3.38	3.04	2.66
Teachers give helpful feedback about student work.	3.40	3.05	2.80
Teachers successfully show students how lessons relate to life outside of school.	3.31	2.97	2.39

NOTES: THESE DATA POINTS ARE FROM K12 INSIGHT'S SCHOOL QUALITY SURVEY BENCHMARK STUDY. THE RESPONSE OPTIONS INCLUDED A 4-POINT AGREEMENT SCALE — STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, STRONGLY DISAGREE — AND DON'T KNOW. EACH RESPONSE OPTION WAS GIVEN A WEIGHT, RANGING FROM 1 (STRONGLY DISAGREE) TO 4 (STRONGLY AGREE). DON'T KNOW RESPONSES WERE EXCLUDED FROM CALCULATIONS. STAFF INCLUDE ALL SCHOOL-BASED STAFF, RANGING FROM CLASSIFIED TO PROFESSIONAL STAFF.

This data has critical implications for district leaders, and K12 *Insight* clients were interested in learning more, especially about student perceptions of relevance and connectedness. K12 *Insight*'s research team delved deeper into the importance of connecting what students learn in class to their lives outside of school by conducting focus groups with secondary students in several states. These findings can inform school and district approaches to better connect secondary students in school.

Focus group findings

Secondary students who participated in the focus groups honed in on the importance of building relationships. They specified the characteristics of classroom environments and dispositions of teachers who make them excited about learning. The findings presented in the next section provide insights into what keeps students engaged in their learning.

Importance of Building Relationships

Participating students said their teachers drive their connectedness. Students shared that their classes are more engaging when their teachers have a genuine interest in getting to know them and that building relationships with their teachers helps them feel more connected to school. They said they like when teachers take a real interest in getting to know them and show empathy

and flexibility. Students equated teachers getting to know them as people with caring. Students also reported that teachers' perspectives on what is meaningful to students was somewhat dated and that getting to know students would help teachers stay current.

Making Curricula Relevant

Students who participated in the focus groups shared the importance of teachers making the connection between what students are learning in school and how it connects to their lives outside of school. Students said they were more engaged when their teachers used personal stories and examples to relay course content. In fact, that was students' top suggestion for how teachers could make classroom instruction more relevant to their lives. Students also expressed a desire for teachers to connect lessons to **careers and real-world challenges**. Students recommended that teachers incorporate career exploration into the curricula to make the content more enjoyable. In addition, students said it would help them navigate their own career paths if teachers shared their career pathways, especially the **decision points and timing**. When thinking about relevance, students suggested transforming day-to-day classroom activities into more interactive projects centered on real-world scenarios. Students said that teachers should use personal stories and connections from their lives, role-playing, videos, and visuals. "If teachers connect content to the real world, students would be more interested in school," students said.

Teaching Strategies to Keep Students Engaged

The majority of participating students described their classroom experience as a teacher doing most of the talking and students completing worksheets and taking notes. Students expressed an interest in having more engaging and interactive classroom experiences such as hands-on activities that allow them to learn by doing rather than listening to a lecture. Students commented on the importance of solving problems that apply to real-world issues and on completing projects that help them learn the material rather than moving through the curriculum in the traditional format. Students – especially secondary students – said they are very in-tune with their "social network," as one student called it, and are eager to complete in-class activities with their peers. They also said they value when a teacher is aware of pacing and stops to ask students why they may not understand the material.

Profile of a Successful Teacher

Focus group participants described characteristics of effective teachers. According to participating students, an effective teacher is approachable, caring, empathetic, energetic, fun, kind, patient, trustworthy, and understanding.

This teacher also:

- Encourages students to ask questions and voice concerns

- Has an authentic/genuine interest in students as people

- Is flexible in recognizing when to be authoritative and when to be a friend to students

- Is passionate about teaching and makes learning enjoyable for students

- Openly shares personal stories from his/her academic and professional experiences

- Promotes curiosity and encourages students to explore new things

- Communicates well with students

- Understands the different needs of students, adapts by teaching in a variety of ways, and utilizes different activities to keep students engaged

Collectively, these findings suggest that **focusing on forging positive teacher-student relationships and implementing a variety of instructional techniques** can improve students' ability to connect what they are learning in school to life outside of school. How can you help teachers share personal stories more frequently and genuinely get to know their students? The next section presents some strategies district administrators and teachers can employ to foster positive relationships between students and teachers.

What can you do now?

There are several strategies that school districts can implement to ensure students feel connected at school and to help teachers show their students that they care.

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Learn more about your students

Teachers should ensure students feel known, cared for, and heard. Teachers can support active participation by providing students greater autonomy in their learning, emphasizing the authenticity of learning tasks, and providing time for students to reflect on their learning. In addition to these day-to-day activities, districts may want to consider launching one of two surveys to collect **baseline data** that can help teachers further get to know their students and their level of engagement in order to offer individualized learning.

THE K12 INSIGHT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

- K12 *Insight*'s **Student Engagement Survey** is used to understand how connected students are to their studies, classes, and school community. The survey is aligned with the latest research, which defines two types of student engagement: ***Cognitive engagement and social and emotional engagement***. Cognitive engagement is the quality of students' psychological engagement in academic tasks and activities. Social and emotional engagement is the process through which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relations, and make responsible decisions.
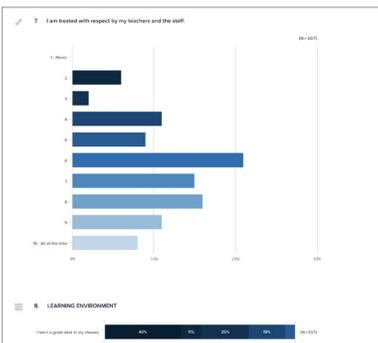

- K12 *Insight*'s **Student Profile Survey** is used to understand student perceptions and identify opportunities for additional individualized instruction. The data collected from this survey can help teachers understand their students, the teaching strategies they should use, and how to best work with their students.

EASILY ACCESS AND UNDERSTAND SURVEY FINDINGS

Schools can use this information to align clubs, classes, and electives to match secondary students' interests. K12 *Insight* recommends that schools launch **an interest survey** at the beginning and end of each school year (or once in the spring for planning for the upcoming school year) to ask students about their interests, hopes, and dreams. The results can help school leaders understand what students want and guide the adoption of curricula and programming that will keep students engaged.

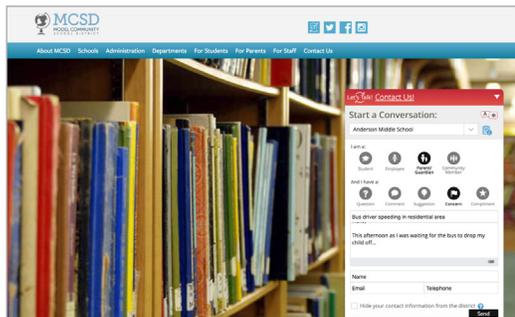

Strategy 2

Deliver great customer service

What tactics is your district using to ensure teachers are approachable, caring, empathetic, energetic, kind, patient, trustworthy, and understanding? Research indicates that **exceptional customer service builds trust** (Toothman, 2004). K12 *Insight* offers customer service professional development opportunities for certified and classified staff members that help create positive, service-driven school environments where students can thrive academically and personally. Join us to build a team of customer service superheroes!

Strategy 3

### Make it easy for students to provide ongoing feedback

It is important for students to have an ongoing voice in their educational experiences. Many school districts use Let's Talk!, K12 *Insight*'s online community engagement and customer service solution, to **engage students on topics that matter most to them**.

- Teachers can use Let's Talk! to collect student feedback throughout the year and help learn more about their students.


- School leaders can invite students, parents, and school staff members to share feedback via Let's Talk! about interactions with teachers and staff, which can be used to improve the service school employees provide.
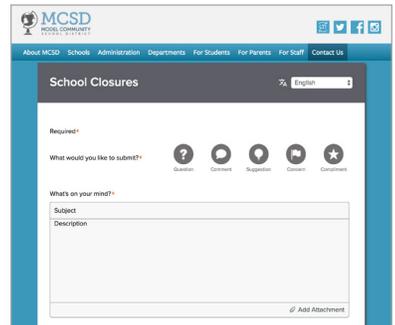
A SIMPLE ONLINE FORM MAKES IT EASY TO SUBMIT FEEDBACK

A POP-OUT TAB MEANS STUDENTS CAN CONTACT YOU RIGHT FROM THE SCHOOL OR DISTRICT WEBSITE

- A real-time data dashboard provides school and district leaders with key insights, such as number of inquiries, average response time, and customer feedback score, to help schools **create a customer-first environment**.
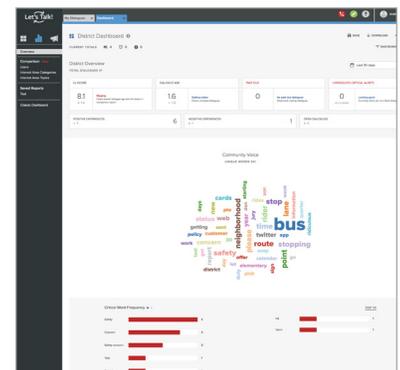
A REAL-TIME DASHBOARD GIVES YOU INSTANT ACCESS TO KEY INFORMATION

Strategy 4

Leverage existing tools to communicate

Some districts struggle to place important student information in a central location. We recommend leveraging existing student information systems to share information with all school staff. Implementing these strategies will signal to students that **you care about them academically and personally**.

About Us

K12 *Insight* combines a powerful customer experience platform with engaging professional learning and industry-leading research services to help schools deliver remarkable experiences for students, parents, teachers, and staff. Our team of Ph.D. education researchers has managed thousands of research projects for hundreds of school systems nationwide on a range of topics, from school climate to social-emotional learning to student and employee engagement.

Ready to turn feedback into action in your schools?

If you are interested in learning more about K12 *Insight*'s research services, contact Dr. David Blaiklock, head of research, at **703-542-9642** or visit **www.k12insight.com**.

References

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