

Personalization & Caring Relationships with Adults in Urban High Schools: Is There a Relationship with Academic Achievement?¹

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An analysis of longitudinal data from 14 California high schools with diverse enrollment in a large urban school district clearly reveals that students reporting higher levels of personalization or connectedness to their school had significantly higher weighted GPAs and English test scores. However, weighted GPA tended to decrease the more that students felt that the advisory period, one personalization strategy, was a meaningful addition to the school curriculum. This may be because relationships matter more when they appear in informal, improvised, and, therefore, more authentic, encounters between teachers and students than when they appear within formal structures of a course designated for that purpose, such as advisory. Policies are needed to encourage and strengthen more positive school climates based on closer, more caring relationships and mentoring that develop more naturally over time with an eye toward improving academic achievement. Teachers need resources and supports to learn personalization strategies and skills. Youth, especially disadvantaged youth, need opportunities to develop leadership and voice.

Why is This Important?

Educators and researchers are troubled that large, urban high schools in the United States are impersonal and harsh places where youth feel isolated, unsafe, and under educated. Making secondary schools warmer, safer, and more nurturing environments may help stem the tide of dropouts and overall poor performance, as well as reduce instances of victimization, low self-esteem, and high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use

or suicide. To shed light on this issue, the relationship of achievement to school “personalization” was studied among California students in high schools with diverse enrollment in a large urban school district. Too little attention is given within schools about the importance of personalization and creating engaging and caring school climates. In challenging school environments, like those in urban, low-income, neighborhoods, this may be especially important for improving academic engagement and achievement.

¹ This Brief is derived from a report by the authors that may be downloaded from

What Is Personalization?

What personalization means and how it is enacted in a given district or school varies tremendously. At the heart of these efforts is a desire to create more positive and caring relationships between students and adults responsible for teaching and mentoring them. The term captures a host of protective factors that schools and communities can foster to shelter and support students throughout their development and education and that foster a sense of connectedness. Young people who are tied emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally to their education are less likely to show signs of alienation and more likely to be engaged in school.

By improving the relationships and feelings of connectedness between students and teachers, research indicates students will not only work harder academically, they will also engage in less risky behaviors (Resnick et al. 1997; Benard 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Steinberg & Allen, 2002). For example, as the percentage of students scoring as being high in caring relationships with an adult at the school on the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) increased at the school-level, so did gains in SAT-9 test scores in reading, language, and mathematics one year later (Hanson, Austin, & Lee Bayha 2004).

What is the Scope of the Problem in California?

Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey reveals both a lack of school connectedness and caring relationships among the majority of students, and especially among low-performing schools. Data for 2005–07 reveals that only 26%–33% of secondary students score high in having caring relationships with an adult in their school, and 14%–18% scored low. Only 39% of 7th graders, and 31% of 9th and 11th graders, scored high in school connectedness. About 17% across grades scored low. When secondary schools were categorized into quintiles based on the Academic Performance Index

(API) scores, only 21%–29% of students across grades in the lowest twenty-percent of schools scored as having high levels of school connectedness, compared to 41%–53% of students in the highest performing quintile, about twice as high. Only 29% of 9th graders, and 37–38% of 7th and 11th graders, in the lowest-performing quintile scored high in having adult supports at school (caring relationships and high expectations). In the highest-performing quintile, percentages were significantly higher, by 4 points (11th grade) to 11 points (7th grade) (Hanson, Austin, & Zheng in press).

One of the three “essential questions” that the California P–16 Council (2006) investigated regarding the state’s dropout problem was how students could develop a sense of community in school. The Council pushed for programs that would help schools develop a sense of “oneness” where the environment was built on trust, acceptance, and shared responsibility.

Study Design

Much research related to personalization has been conducted on the merits of class-size reduction and the effects of reducing school size. Little research has been done on in-school personalization efforts such as advisory programs and their effects. Advisory programs developed as a school reform strategy to re-make junior high schools into a more successful transitional experience that recognized the social and emotional stresses faced by early adolescents. They take many forms but generally share several common goals: a forum where students can talk with an adult regarding personal issues, address academic concerns and receive help navigating the transition to college and career.

Data were collected over a three-year period (2005–2007) from students (N=10,581) attending 14 recently converted “small” (fewer than 500 students) high schools in a large, urban district in California serving a high-risk, high-need population.

The students were racially and linguistically diverse and over half came from impoverished homes.

How are Personalization and Achievement Related?

Our analysis revealed a clear and consistent pattern: student attitudes about personalization and advisory were significantly related to academic outcomes. Students who reported higher levels of personalization or connectedness to their school had significantly higher weighted GPAs and English scores on the California Standardized Test (CST). Simply stated, the more that students' felt personalization at their schools, the better students did academically, although we are not inferring causality. How big was the effect? With one sub-group exception, an increase of one point on the 6-point response scale was associated with weighted increases ranging from 0.08 to 0.23 grade points on a GPA scale from 0.00 to 4.0+ (accounting for honors courses) and increases of 4 to 8 points on the English CST's. This is a robust finding.

However, counter to our original predictions, the better students felt about advisory, the lower their weighted GPAs and English test scores. Possibly this is because the worse they performed, the more they valued advisory. An alternative explanation is that students are distinguishing between the lived experiences of personalization versus the more formal structure of advisory programs. This indicates that relationships matter more when they appear in informal, improvised, and, therefore, more authentic, encounters between teachers and students than when they appear because of formal structures of a course designated for that purpose, such as advisory.

Recommendations

These results help educators and policy makers understand the growing importance of personaliza-

tion within districts and schools. They lend credible quantitative support for the ideas espoused by researchers and educators who argue that social-emotional relationships between teachers and students matter for academic outcomes (e.g., Klem & Connell 2004). Protective factors such as strong mentoring relationships between teachers/counselors and are important facets of secondary instructional services, particularly for urban and low-income youth.

Our findings have implications in an era of decreasing state funding and heightened academic press. They underscore the importance schools and educators must place on efforts to personalize education and the social-emotional and academic benefits they can reap by doing so. Creating schools with adults attentive to students' needs appears to have value when the pay out is academic success both in school and on standardized tests. How do we go about transforming our schools to enhance more personalization?

🍷 *Policies are needed to encourage and strengthen personalization across schools without an over-reliance on isolated adjunct programs, such as advisory. Limited structural changes are likely to be insufficient to increase student learning, engagement and achievement. The cultural and social component of schooling must be explicitly addressed as well and personalization woven throughout the school-community. Ultimately, personalization approaches must move into the core of schooling and instruction. Schools need to integrate strategies of caring into their daily work and overall school climate, as opposed to annexing it within an advisory period, may be more successful.*

🍷 *Strategies for integrating personalization more completely into schools may require more creative approaches by policy makers and educators to allow more caring and positive student-teacher relationships to develop more naturally over time. Among those approaches are looping (retaining*

the same students with the same teacher over multiple years), retention incentives for teachers, particularly in low-income and high minority schools, multi-age grouping strategies, and team teaching arrangements.

👉 *Schools and teachers need to be provided resources and supports to make this happen.* In numerous conversations we have had with teachers at the schools whose students were surveyed, we were struck repeatedly by the teachers' lack of confidence and desire for assistance regarding developing mentoring skills. Although not every teacher felt this way, many believed that they had been trained to teach a particular content area, not children, necessarily. And they had little time, resources, or energy to receive and really learn from mentorship training. Policies should advocate that teachers work on personalization content in a professional learning community and be provided on-going school-site support.

👉 *Finally, personalization strategies need to include youth empowerment, such as opportunities for leadership and voice, especially in low-income areas.* Counseling and mentoring low-income, urban youth may fall short despite adults' best efforts. This is because youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, more than peers from other socio-economic groups need to feel a sense of empowerment and entitlement as much as they need concrete information and encouragement. Only when youth take an active role, alongside adults, in shaping the school and community contexts in which they live, learn, and work will we see fundamental change.

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The California Education Supports Project

The California Education Supports Project is a partnership between WestEd and the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies, UC San Francisco. The purpose of the project is to: (1) Review, synthesize and analyze current California-specific data and the state of knowledge related to the relationship of health and education; and (2) Make evidence-driven policy and practice recommendations aimed at fostering the school culture, environment, supports, and services needed to ensure that all youth are engaged and successful learners. The project is funded by: The James Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment, and the Hewlett Foundation.

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