

Bank of Student Relationship Structures

PURPOSE

This tool provides a bank of research-based relationship structures that can be implemented throughout school systems. Educators can use this tool as a reference document as they determine actions that are best suited to their context.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Pick one relationship structure to learn about or read through the list.
2. Consider the implications for your work. Is there a structure you would like to learn more about, enhance, or plan to add?
3. Review the action prompts at the end of the tool and plan your own next step.

Designing all of our learning settings with relationships at the core is important for many reasons—to ignite the neural networks that develop complex skills, to reduce stress for both children and adults, to address the impact of trauma, and especially to engage young people and bolster their belief in themselves and their futures. There are many ways to support relationship development, from our daily interactions to how we design our school settings. This tool introduces nine school structures, identified in a recent synthesis of the science of learning and development,¹ that support the kinds of relationships and learning opportunities needed to promote young people’s well-being, healthy development, and transferable learning.

	Type of Structure	What to Know	This might look like ...
CLASSROOM	<p>Class meeting/ advisory</p> <p><i>A structure that creates a regular opportunity for students to build relationships with their peers and teachers outside of the normal routines of teaching and learning.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A way to create a smaller, more personalized learning community within larger school settings ✓ Provides students with a daily (or regular), reliable, and predictable place and time in which they know they will be recognized, respected, and invited to participate ✓ Provides a space for students to give and receive social support and to engage in co-regulatory supports with a trusted adult ✓ Research suggests that students are more likely to attend and graduate from school, attach to learning, and succeed academically when they have strong, trusting, supportive connections to adults, including at least one intensive relationship with a close advisor or mentor.^{2 3} 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An advisory cohort and teacher who follow you through your high school years • A multi-age advisory where bonds can be formed between older and younger students • A daily meeting where students greet each other, get to know their classmates more deeply, and engage in activities outside of subject-matter content

Type of Structure

Cooperative small group learning

The instructional use of small groups to promote students working together to maximize their own and each other's learning.⁴

Peer mentoring

A developmental relationship structure that engages students in a structured, supported, and purposeful relationship on a regular basis.

What to Know

- ✓ Can be implemented within most existing structures and subjects
 - ✓ Characterized by sophisticated questioning and scaffolding skills by teachers, “group-worthy” activities, individual and group accountability, direct interactions, development of group skills and behaviors, and group processing of their own and the group’s ability to work together
 - ✓ Has wide-ranging cognitive, social, and emotional benefits to students and can promote higher achievement, as compared to individualistic efforts⁵
 - ✓ These benefits relate to opportunities to engage in social processes, such as: sharing original insights, resolving differing perspectives through argument/reasoning, explaining one’s thinking, providing critique, observing the strategies of others, and listening to explanations⁶
 - ✓ Peer collaboration and joint thinking can result in the generation of strategies that are extremely unlikely to be observed when individuals work alone⁷
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- ✓ A student-centered process that broadens the network of supports available to students
 - ✓ Grows student agency and holistic skill development as students develop relationships, make meaning together, and problem-solve personally relevant issues
 - ✓ Can be used for academic and social support
 - ✓ Especially beneficial to ease school transitions (e.g., for new students, entering 9th-graders)

This might look like ...

- Gallery Walk or Carousel
 - Jigsaw activity
 - Experiments
 - Group inquiries and investigations
 - Problem-based learning
 - Social problem-solving
 - Design challenges
 - Literature circles
 - Service learning
 - Student advocacy and activism
 - Complex Instruction⁸
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- Reading buddies (within a class or between different grade levels)
 - Shadow-An-Upperclassman
 - Subject-matter tutoring
 - Student panel discussions
 - Reciprocal teaching
 - New student ambassadors

Type of Structure

Expanded learning structures

Expanded learning programs develop the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs and interests of young people through hands-on, engaging learning experiences that complement, but do not replicate, learning activities in the regular school day and school year.

Block scheduling

The practice of having fewer, longer class periods in a given day to reduce teachers' overall pupil load and lengthen time for instruction.

What to Know

- ✓ These structures are primarily implemented beyond the school day and school year, but can also take place during the school day
 - ✓ Deepens and diversifies student engagement and support systems; allows schools to draw on a wide range of community and cultural resources and individuals that strengthen trust and engage youth beyond their typical classroom interactions and experiences (e.g., with staff who are often young and from similar backgrounds as students)
 - ✓ Provide positive learning environments for students to explore interests and passions, offer multiple opportunities to develop and practice student voice and agency, and build holistic skills, mindsets and knowledge across settings
 - ✓ Should be locally driven—aligning local needs while harnessing community strengths⁹—and adequately resourced (e.g., a full-time program coordinator, competitive staff pay, diversified funding sources, dedicated program space)
 - ✓ Requires authentic, bidirectional commitment to developing and maintaining a partnership, including a shared vision, planning and communication
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- ✓ When using block scheduling, each teacher sees half as many students, and students see fewer teachers.
 - ✓ A smaller pupil load allows teachers to provide more attention to each student and to engage in teaching strategies that support inquiry, collaboration and “group-worthy” activities.
 - ✓ Teachers will need substantial time to develop and reflect on new practices and approaches to content.

This might look like ...

- A partnership with a community-based youth organization (Boys & Girls Club, 4-H, local nonprofit) that offers a variety of after-school classes, clubs, and/or tutoring either on the school campus or at a neighborhood facility
 - A partnership with a local park and recreation department for activities and sports
 - Clubs and student affinity groups, run by community members (e.g., parents/caregivers, teachers, paraprofessionals, local artisans, older students)
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- **A/B Blocks:** Using 80- to 110-minute blocks that alternate on “A” days (4 subject blocks) and “B” days (a different 4 subjects). Sometimes includes a modified fifth day where students attend all classes for a shortened length.
 - **Stand-alone Block Days:** Students experience three days of standard scheduling, plus two days of extended blocks, which may include group projects and labs.
 - **Flexible Modules:** A school day is broken into short modules (e.g., 20 min blocks) which can be combined in a variety of ways.

Type of Structure

Looping

An organizational structure where teachers stay with the same group of students for more than one year.

Interdisciplinary teaming

A group of teachers that share the same group of students, collective responsibility for planning and teaching, the same schedule, and often the same area of the building

What to Know

- ✓ An opportunity to strengthen and deepen adult and peer relationships and a sense of belonging
- ✓ Learning time is expanded and enhanced as educators work with students and families that they know well.
- ✓ The continuity of the student experience reduces cognitive load and anxiety for students when they do not need to learn new systems and reestablish their identity.
- ✓ These longer relationships and deeper knowledge of student learning have been shown to have positive impacts for students, educators and families: improved student achievement; attendance, retention and lowered disciplinary incidents; teachers reporting a heightened sense of efficacy; parents reporting feeling more respected and more comfortable reaching out to the school for assistance.^{10 11 12 13}
- ✓ This structure allows teachers to share their knowledge about students in planning curriculum to meet student needs, while creating more continuity in practices and norms, which supports students emotionally and cognitively.¹⁴
- ✓ Coordinated and integrated instruction can contribute to transformative learning experiences for students.¹⁴
- ✓ Teaching teams serve as ongoing sources of professional development and support for each other, jointly solve problems of practice and develop a sense of collective responsibility.¹⁵

This might look like ...

- A teacher who teaches the same students in 4th and 5th grade
- A secondary teacher who has the same students for 9th and 10th grade English
- An interdisciplinary team of teachers stays with a group of 75-100 students for two years.
- A teaching team consisting of ELA, math, science and social studies teachers who share a cohort of students and plan collaboratively
- Interdisciplinary teaming of STEM teachers, who support different aspects of students engaging in real-world investigation and problem-solving

Type of Structure

Small class sizes or small learning communities within larger settings

Small learning communities or units that are created within large school buildings (sometimes called a "school within a school" model)

Longer grade spans

An organizational design that increases continuity of experiences and relationships and minimizes transitions

What to Know

- ✓ Research has found that students benefit when they are in smaller settings (*high schools below 900 students, school sizes of 300-400 for high-needs students, class sizes below a threshold of 15-18 students*).
 - ✓ Small size alone is not enough to produce these beneficial effects; they must be personalizing and humanizing structures.
 - ✓ Effort must be taken to ensure that students are well known by teachers and peers; instruction and supports are more personalized; opportunities for agency and leadership are available; and more communal practices are facilitated (cooperative learning, advisories, and block scheduling).
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- Schools with longer grade spans (e.g., K–8 or 6–12) can allow closer, longer-term relationships and are also found to be more effective in supporting student outcomes, as they help to establish and build upon close relationships among school members with students and families.
 - Can help to counteract the negative impact that school transitions can have on students by fostering strong attachments and greater competence and confidence to support their growing autonomy

This might look like ...

- “Institutes” where students engage in structured trajectories and immersive learning experiences within a particular domain (e.g., *STEM, humanities, citizen empowerment, health sciences*)
 - Freshman academies
 - Career academies characterized by career-related electives and integration of a career theme across entire academic curriculum
 - Multi-grade “house” systems where students engage in peer supports, personalizing experiences, and friendly competition
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- A school community that considers opportunities for longer grade spans in response to student population shifts
 - A district that considers creating two smaller K-8 schools, instead of a expanding a larger middle school
 - A district that decides to co-locate middle and high school buildings on the same walkable campus, where students engage in activities across the campus buildings and grounds

Relationship Structure Action Prompts

Here is a chance to choose your own entry point into this work. Review a few of the suggested action prompts for improving student relationship structures, then plan your own next step. It could be one of these suggestions, or it may be one that you come up with on your own. What is the right step forward for you?



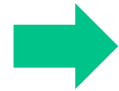
After taking a look through this list, what are you most excited about? Why? What does this prompt you to learn or do next?



Take an inquiry stance and gather input about student and staff experiences of a current relationship structure. How is the structure working in service of the intended relational goals? How might it be improved?



Reach out! What do schedules/structures at other local schools or districts look like? Why are they structured that way? What impact does this have on student, staff, and community relationships?



Who else might be interested in this work? What is one next step to engage them?



You don't need to change everything at once. Consider: What is one change right now that is feasible? What is one longer-term change to work toward?

My next step forward with student relationship structures is:

Endnotes

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- ⁹ Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins University School of Education, COVID Collaborative, & City Year. (2021). Framework for action: Building a corps for student success. https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CorpsforStudentSuccessFramework_FINALa.pdf
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- ¹² Burke, D. L. (1997). Multi-year teacher/student relationships are a long-overdue arrangement. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77(5), 360–361. EJ 516 053.
- ¹³ George, P., & Alexander, W. (1993). Grouping students in the middle school. In *The exemplary middle school* (2nd ed., pp. 299–330). Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- ¹⁴ Felner, R. D., Seitsinger, A. M., Brand, S., Burns, A., & Bolton, N. (2007). Creating small learning communities: Lessons from the project on high-performing learning communities about “what works” in creating productive, developmentally enhancing, learning contexts. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 209–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701621061>
- ¹⁵ Lee, V. E., & Loeb, S. (2000). School size in Chicago elementary schools: Effects on teachers' attitudes and students' achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312037001003>