

Building Connections *with* Students

A TOOLKIT FOR
FIRST NATION SCHOOLS IN BC



FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION STEERING COMMITTEE
FIRST NATIONS SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

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Building Connections with Students: A Toolkit for First Nations Schools in BC

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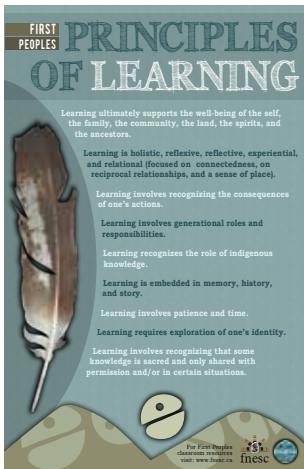


BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS

Background

The First Peoples Principles of Learning¹

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).



First Nations have known since time immemorial that positive relationships are integral to the teaching and learning process. Traditional ways of learning focused on collectiveness, interdependence, and mutual well-being.

Learning is as much an emotional process as a cognitive one, and students learn best from people they trust. Students learn more effectively and remember more when education is relevant, and when strong positive feelings are attached to their learning. We are all shaped by more than the content of the classroom; we are also shaped by the way we interact together, how we share what we know, and how we collectively understand what more we need to learn.²

Evidence shows that relationships fuel student success.

- ▶ When students feel that school staff care about their education and well-being and feel a strong sense of belonging in the school, it leads to higher student performance, greater motivation, safer learning spaces, improved student behaviour, and lower school drop-out rates.

¹ The First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL) are a complex set of learning principles written by a diverse group of Indigenous educators, scholars, and knowledge-holders, which identify commonalities in Indigenous knowledge systems about effective approaches to teaching and learning held by Indigenous peoples in British Columbia. (FNESC, 2008)

² Chrona and Moore, 2023.

- ▶ Belonging is a gatekeeper for all school efforts; if students feel disconnected from people in the school and from their learning, even the best instruction won't be effective.
- ▶ There is more and more research showing that students who feel a sense of belonging experience improved health outcomes. The mental health crisis that arose as a result of the COVID pandemic clearly demonstrates the effects of isolation on people of all ages.
- ▶ Studies show that high levels of school and family connectedness for students who have exceptionalities are associated with reduced emotional distress, fewer suicide attempts, and lower involvement in violence.³
- ▶ Positive relationships are preventative, protective, and restorative, and students who experience adversity or personal challenges (academic, social, or behavioral) often benefit from positive connections even more than their peers. (See Appendix One for a short discussion paper on the importance of relationships for teens who are enrolled in alternate education settings).
- ▶ "Belonging is the feeling that we're part of a larger group that values, respects, and cares for us – and to which we feel we have something to contribute." What does that mean?
 - Feeling: we experience it; it is emotional and psychological.
 - Larger group: we feel part of a community of learners.
 - Values: there is a sense of worth or importance.
 - Respects: each person's talents and qualities are recognized.
 - Cares: there is concern and attention to each person's well-being.
 - Something to contribute: everyone feels that they can make a difference to the group.⁴

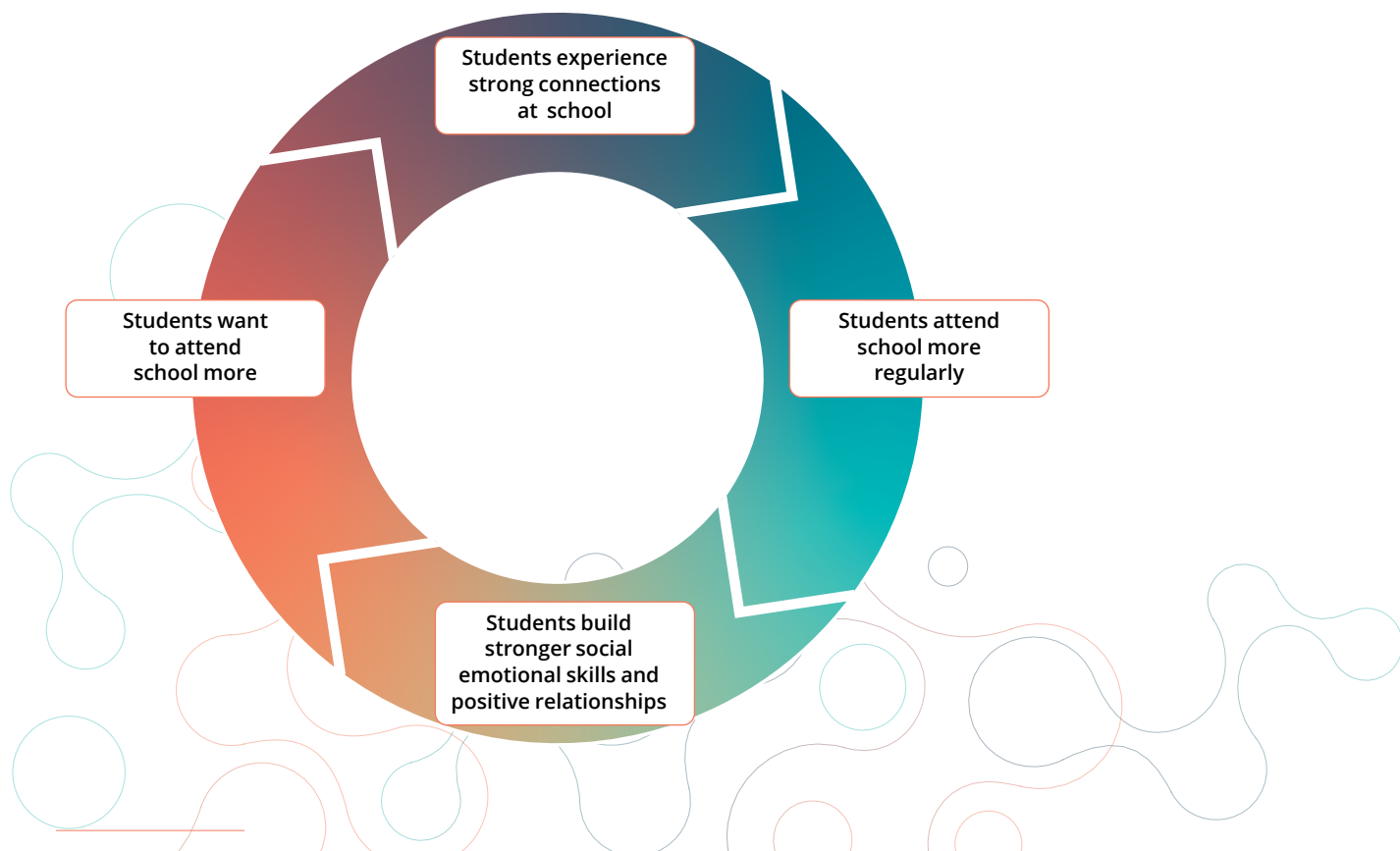
3 Smith et. al. 2024

4 Adapted from Smith et. al. 2024

There is also a strong, reinforcing relationship between students' sense of connectedness to school and their attendance.

- ▶ There is a wealth of evidence that attendance improves when schools are places that students want to be, with personal connections between staff and students.
- ▶ Students who attend school regularly and on-time have more opportunities to experience positive relationships with school staff and their peers, enhancing their social-emotional skills and thereby helping to build a more constructive school climate – one in which more students will choose to come to school more often.

Research demonstrates that authentic and positive connections to teachers can help students develop academically and socially, and that student success and engagement in education is impacted by the quality of a teacher's instruction *plus* the quality of teacher-student relationships. Strong teacher-student relationships can “change the trajectory of a student's educational path,”⁵ and whether at the elementary, middle, or high school level, positive bonds between teachers and students promote a genuine desire to learn and are a cornerstone for stronger student outcomes, attendance, and behaviour.



5 Creekmore and Creekmore, 2024

Additionally, studies show a correlation between positive student-teacher relationships and higher teacher morale and effectiveness. A positive school and classroom environment can improve the mental health of school staff. Educators often feel discouraged by student disengagement, disruptions, and chronic absences, and many teachers report classroom management to be one of their greatest stresses. Responding to misbehaviour can be exhausting and time-consuming; it is much better to use strategies that will facilitate constructive interactions, which can prevent challenges from arising.

How can schools foster positive staff-student relationships? Most importantly, the goal must not be to change students; rather, schools can focus on changing the setting so that students feel they are seen, they have potential, and they are not alone.⁶

Relationship-building is founded on the creation of affirming, safe, and meaningful education settings. Making connections with students also involves the use of small, caring interactions that are consistently woven into the school day, to reinforce to students that they are recognized and valued as individuals. Deliberate and proactive efforts can then be made to establish deeper, trusting attachments between students and school staff.

Ideally, all teachers will strive to:

- ▶ create a safe and inclusive atmosphere for students to learn and build their social-emotional skills;
- ▶ use a kind and personal style while still maintaining high aspirations for what students can achieve, challenging students intellectually while making them feel comfortable and secure; and
- ▶ consistently show interest in and positive perspectives toward students' identities, families, community, culture, and their lives outside of school.

Further, while teacher-student relationships are vital, focusing on that connection alone is limiting. Other school staff can also promote students' growth and development by making them feel seen and heard by caring adults in the school.

- ▶ Principals, as school leaders, can emphasize and role model the value of positive relationships in the education setting, and can build a climate that reflects that goal.
- ▶ Education Assistants (EAs) can build strong bonds with students, especially because they are often familiar with students' experiences, families, home circumstances, traditions, and values.

6 Smith et. al. 2024

- ▶ Learning Assistant Teachers (LATs) are often a special source of encouragement and support for students – particularly those who have exceptionalities.
- ▶ School secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, food service personnel, and other staff in First Nation schools are likely well known to students – and in fact are often family members who understand students deeply. These staff can be invaluable in enhancing the school's sense of belonging.
- ▶ When students see adults (all school staff, families, and volunteers) as partners in their learning, respecting their interests and encouraging meaningful experiences both in and outside of the school building, students are more engaged and excited about their learning.

WHAT CAN WE ALL DO?

In the first staff meeting of the year, ask every person to think of three ways they will try to make students feel like they are connected to a supportive learning community. Then follow-up in subsequent meetings with a five-minute check-in ... what have we been doing and is it working?

Intentions of this Toolkit

It is important to recognize that all kinds of connections are important in education settings.

- ▶ Positive understandings and constructive relationships between the principal and staff are key.
- ▶ Collaborative, respectful interactions amongst staff help make schools healthy, safe, and collegial places to work, and they demonstrate to students the importance and value of strong interpersonal skills.
- ▶ First Nation schools have unique and special relationships with families and their communities.
- ▶ In First Nation schools, connections to place and the land are inseparable from learning.

"I plan to give the checklists included in this Toolkit to staff. I will encourage them to consider which of the suggestions they are already using, and what new ideas they might be able to try. They can also add the additional things they are already doing, and "pat themselves on the back" for the efforts they are making."

Feedback from a
Connectedness
Capacity Building
Session, February 2025

However, while all kinds of connections are fundamental to school success, this paper is focused primarily on building relationships between school staff and students.

This Toolkit is intended to help First Nation school staff consider strategies for building student connectedness that might be appropriate for their own circumstances. No single program or approach will create and sustain an environment of connection and belonging. The ideas highlighted in this paper will have to be adapted according to each school and classroom context, and used in ways that reflect and respect the unique characteristics of individual school staff and students.

This Toolkit includes suggestions shared by First Nation school representatives and at numerous events, including the April 2023 FNSA Conference, the October 2023 FNSA Authorized Representatives Meeting, five "attendance capacity building" sessions held in February, March, and August 2024 with school representatives and First Nations parents and families, three "connectedness capacity building sessions" held in February 2025, and various workshops with First Nation School Governing Authority members, principals, and teachers.

Sections Included

The information included in this Toolkit is presented in the following sections (although the ideas clearly intersect).

HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

1. Consistently demonstrate a positive perspective of students
2. Make the learning setting relevant
3. Focus on building and maintaining a safe school
4. Take attendance seriously
5. Get to know students
6. Build trust
7. Make the learning environment fun
8. Recognize students who contribute to a positive school climate
9. Provide students with voice and choice
10. Accept all students – and their mistakes
11. Recognize the importance of extra-curricular activities
12. Engage families
13. Monitor your success

Project Sponsors



The **BC First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNEsc)** is committed to supporting First Nations in their efforts to improve the success of all First Nations students in BC. FNEsc facilitates collaborative services in the areas of research, communications, advocacy, program administration, and networking, and FNEsc strives to share up-to-date information about available programs, government policies and initiatives, and local, provincial, and national education issues that affect First Nations learners. See www.fnescc.ca.



The **First Nations Schools Association (FNsa)** was formally established as a non-profit society with charitable status in 1996. The FNsa represents and works on behalf of First Nations controlled schools in BC and has a mandate to support those schools in creating effective, nurturing, and linguistically and culturally appropriate education environments that provide students with a positive foundation in all academic areas. More information is available at www.fnsa.ca.

WHAT DOES FEELING CONNECTED MEAN?

It can be useful for school staff to use a staff meeting or participate in a special meeting to consider this question.

- ▶ For example, individual staff can self-reflect on their vision of connectedness and then share their reflections with other colleagues in the school.
 - ▶ Or all staff could work as a team to brainstorm what a sense of belonging means for their school community.
-

WHAT BUILDS BELONGING?

- ▶ Students feel welcome and wanted.
 - ▶ Students get the supports they need.
 - ▶ Students experience friendships.
 - ▶ Students feel accepted and seen.
 - ▶ Students feel a strong sense of identity.
 - ▶ Students know their language, traditions, values, and culture permeate the school.
-

WHAT ELSE?

What might a school that has strong connectedness look and sound like? What would you see people doing? What would you hear people saying?

And what would it feel like in our bodies? How would we experience it?

Can you invite parents and/or students to contribute their thoughts to these conversations?



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Consistently Demonstrate a Positive Perspective of Students

School staff are better able to build positive relationships when they consistently demonstrate a belief that all students are valued and can be successful. Among other things, school staff should:

- ▶ Recognize and celebrate students' identities and culture.
- ▶ Identify, maintain, and communicate high aspirations for student behaviour, effort, and improvement.
- ▶ Encourage students to achieve more than they thought possible.
- ▶ Hold all students to high standards, while supporting any students who need assistance to get there - including scaffolding lessons, providing needed resources, and adapting approaches according to students' individual needs.

First and foremost, First Nations students must know that their schools, families, and communities are connected.

- ▶ When children and teens see their culture integrated into their learning settings, it builds their confidence, resilience, and self-esteem.

- ▶ Learning their own language connects students to the land and the source of their knowledge.⁷

“We need to expand our concept of land-based learning activities. It is about our relationship with the land. It is about our history, our territory, the names of our people. Our land, our language and our people are connected. And the language is how that is expressed.”⁸

- ▶ The First Peoples Principles of Learning reinforce that “learning requires exploration of one’s identity.”
- ▶ Honoring and celebrating who students are, their traditional knowledge, and the families and communities they come from, is fundamental to demonstrating a belief in their intrinsic worth and abilities.

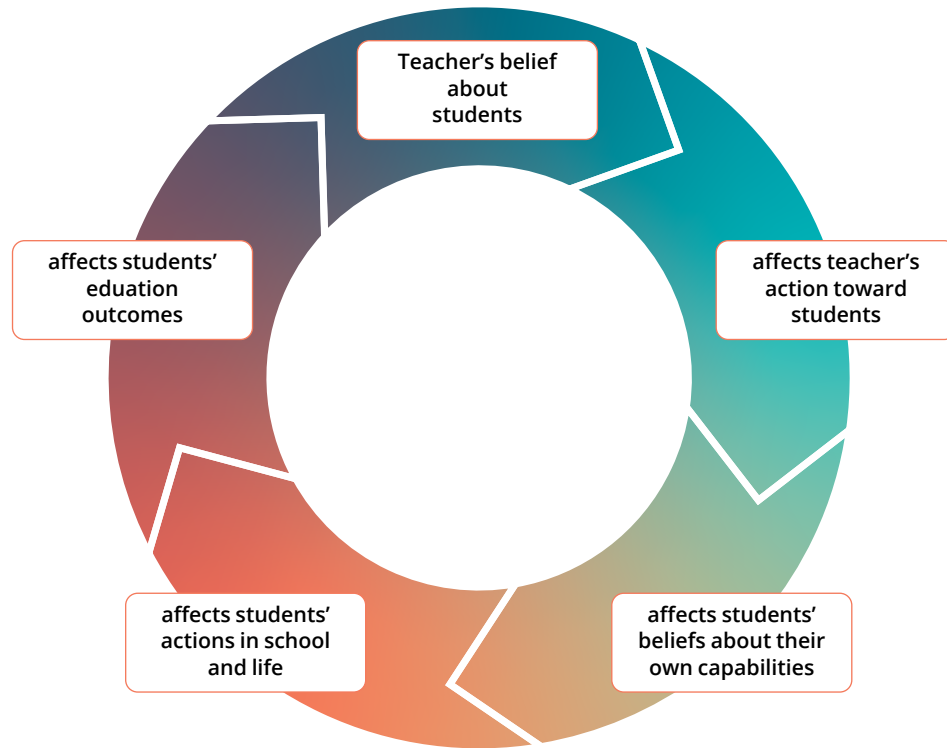
In addition, how adults in the school think about students impacts their self-assurance, commitment to learning, and sense of attachment to their school and classrooms. Feeling confident and believing that they can be successful has a powerful effect on people’s actions; when students feel they *can* accomplish learning goals, they are more likely to invest time and effort in achieving more demanding tasks. By encouraging and respecting students’ talents, and by mirroring those talents back to students, teachers help students believe they can be resilient and successful learners.

Teachers’ expectations create a reinforcing cycle.

- ▶ What a teacher believes about students’ potential affects the teacher’s actions: *When a teacher believes all students can learn, the teacher is usually more positive and enthusiastic in the classroom.*
- ▶ The teacher’s actions, in turn, have an impact on students’ learning; *when the teacher is more positive and enthusiastic, students are encouraged to learn, and the classroom climate supports increased achievement.*
- ▶ Students’ learning then reinforces the teacher’s beliefs about students; *when students achieve more, the teacher’s belief that all students can learn is strengthened.*

7 A Guide to Language Revitalization: Promising Education Practices for Consideration by First Nations Schools. April 2023. FNEC and FNSA.

8 IBID.



Adapted from
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-teacher-expectations-empower-student-learning/>

Research shows that students who believe more is expected of them tend to outperform students who do not have that belief – regardless of their actual abilities. Educators can help students develop those beliefs by delivering reasonable but challenging opportunities – those that are not so difficult that students get frustrated and give up, but not so easy that they lose interest.

Maintaining a growth mindset for all students requires an understanding of the very real challenges and circumstances students face, balanced with a continued focus on helping students believe in their ability to improve and stretch themselves to new levels of learning.

It is also important that students feel that they will achieve more by working with their peers. When educators and students feel that they are working *together* to achieve shared goals, achievement increases. A term sometimes used in the education literature is “academic belonging”—meaning that students feel like a valued, accepted, and competent member of their academic community.

- ▶ **Effective school staff believe in the potential of all students, which empowers young people to pursue their goals.**
- ▶ **Effective school staff also believe in their own ability to help all children and teens meet high levels of learning and achieve their full potential.**

WHAT CAN SCHOOL STAFF DO TO HELP?

- ☐ Demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the principle that all students *can* learn, and that schools can and must ensure that all students *do* learn as a result of the efforts made by the school community.
- ☐ Be a “warm demander.” Hold high standards for behaviour, respectful interactions, attendance, and achievement, while offering emotional support and understanding to help all students meet those aspirations.
- ☐ Use small comments at appropriate moments to demonstrate confidence in students, like “I know you can do this task,” or “You faced similar challenges before, and you did really well. You can do it again.”
- ☐ Use positive, strengths-based, collaborative language, such as “this problem is difficult, but I know we can tackle it because we have made so much progress already.”
- ☐ Value all students equally and ensure that all students (including students who have exceptionalities) are provided appropriate opportunities and supports that reduce potential barriers and complement each student’s unique talents and specific needs.
- ☐ Be thoughtful about assigning students to collaborative groups. Research shows that teachers with low expectations more regularly group students according to ability and assign tasks to groups based on their achievement levels, often giving students in the “lower-achieving group” lower-level learning activities. Conversely, teachers with high expectations use heterogeneous groups and change groupings regularly. To make heterogeneous grouping most effective, it is beneficial to think about which students will complement each other’s skills and ability levels, start small with short learning tasks, track which students have had opportunities to work together, monitor what works and what doesn’t, and make adaptations as needed.
- ☐ Understand the roles and responsibilities of all school staff for including students who have exceptionalities. Collaboration by an entire school community is key for supporting students who have exceptionalities, and research is clear that student growth and achievement is linked to education leaders, staff, and families believing that every student can meet high aspirations, and that everyone in the school community shares a collective responsibility for providing opportunities for all students to succeed. For example, principals must ensure that the school is equipped to support all students, general education teachers must believe in their responsibility and ability to teach students who have exceptionalities, learning assistance teachers can work with other education staff to share relevant strategies, and EAs are invaluable in creating classrooms where all students can excel.

Further information about this issue is included in a FNEC and FNSA *Discussion Guide for First Nation Schools: Supporting Students Who Have Exceptionalities*.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"So much starts with teachers and other adults knowing themselves, and understanding and believing they can impact student connectedness and relationships, thereby impacting student achievement. It is also necessary for adults to know how to positively impact student connection and achievement. Sometimes, "you gotta see it to believe it." Let's highlight what is working."

"When people are under chronic stress (staff or students) they can be walked into isolation. Safe, attuned relationships are the cornerstone of building resiliency. Building staff capacity for understanding their impacts is the foundation for connectedness."

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS IN 2025 CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

What would a school with high expectations look and sound like?

- ▶ All staff taking responsibility for all students.
- ▶ Staff helping students identify their own aspirations. Students are more inspired by goals they identify for themselves.
- ▶ Everyone being nice and kind to each other.
- ▶ Staff and students with the confidence to help and encourage others.
- ▶ People engaging in fierce discussions about how to support students and build inclusivity.
- ▶ Clear language and transparency about expectations, including parents being aware of what high expectations look like.
- ▶ Critique versus criticism.
- ▶ Conversations and learning opportunities centred on students and their hopes.
- ▶ Students knowing they matter, their voices count, and they can be change-makers.
- ▶ Positive reinforcement, and pro-active efforts to help everyone strive beyond where they are currently.
- ▶ People acting with purpose. Motivation gets you started; action keeps you going.
- ▶ Kids seen and acknowledged for non-academic things that make them feel unique and talented.
- ▶ A family atmosphere, with fun, laughter, smiles, and compliments.

"It is so important that we instill confidence in our students from a young age. Success breeds success. If students believe they can learn to read, they will learn to read. It's up to us to encourage that, and provide appropriate supports and interventions."

The Words of Participants in February 2025 Connectedness Capacity Building Sessions *A school with high aspirations for students would reflect...*



THINKING ABOUT A STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Approaching student learning, behaviour, and relationships from a strengths-based perspective means building on what students know and making plans based on what more they can learn and accomplish.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH IS ...

- ▶ Focusing on what students can, not what they cannot, do.
- ▶ Considering learning and development holistically, celebrating students' intellectual, physical, social / emotional, and spiritual gifts, understood within the context of their identity and community.
- ▶ Understanding that *all* students have things they do well and things they can do better.
- ▶ Acknowledging that *all* students periodically experience barriers and sometimes need specific attention and supports.
- ▶ Understanding what works well for each student and setting high aspirations that will help students grow and excel.

A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH IS NOT ...

- ▶ Only seeing positives / ignoring or accepting difficulties.
- ▶ Lowering standards for achievement, behaviour, or effort.

WHAT ELSE DOES STRENGTHS-BASED MEAN IN YOUR SCHOOL?

- ▶ Take time to think about how all staff can approach education from this foundation.
- ▶ Try to think about a student who might be hard-to-reach. Do you think perceptions of the student could be positively framed by thinking about the student's strengths?

To maintain a strengths-based perspective, it might be helpful to consider the following questions, perhaps with students and / or their families.

- ▶ This student consistently does ... well
- ▶ This student excels at ...
- ▶ This student seems happy when ...
- ▶ This student is motivated by ...
- ▶ This student often talks excitedly about ...

What other questions could you ask yourself?

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Make the Learning Setting Relevant

The First Peoples Principles of Learning

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

Both large and small cues in education settings can make a significant difference in whether students feel like they belong, and all staff can play a role in creating a learning environment that reflects and celebrates students and their communities. The First Peoples Principles of Learning honor the holistic nature of education, and the connectedness of learning with other aspects of life and the surrounding community – including the land and the people. The Principles also acknowledge that learning “recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge” and is “embedded in memory, history, and story.”

Schools and classrooms should be relevant to and reflective of all students and their lives, and as much as possible learning activities should be meaningful and personal. When the Nations’ values and perspectives permeate all aspects of the school, it reinforces students’ pride and self-confidence – which enables them to build stronger relationships with others.

To understand how learning settings can reinforce students’ identities, educators can begin by exploring their own beliefs and attitudes, which influence what and how they teach, what they consider important for students to learn, their expectations and aspirations for learners, and what they think about learning processes.⁹

⁹ Chrona and Moore, 2023.

A FNEC and FNSA publication, *A Field Guide to Empowering Students Through Learning on the Land and Water*, is available with suggestions for implementing on-the-land learning.



First Nation schools also use on-the-land learning to connect students to their territories, traditions, and culture, and to teach respect for the Nation and help students better understand who they are and their connections to the land, water, and animals.

Effective teachers in First Nation schools embed culturally relevant materials, resources, examples, lessons, and teaching approaches into their classrooms. They highlight positive images and select toys, books, and other materials that authentically reflect First Nations people, conscientiously avoiding any materials that include stereotypical characters and outdated cultural representations.

School staff who are not from the community can demonstrate a personal interest in and commitment to learning more about the community's culture and traditions, by seeking out resources, enthusiastically and respectfully participating in relevant school and community events, and consistently demonstrating a genuine openness to new experiences. They can ask questions and, whenever necessary, consult with colleagues or relevant community experts for advice and/or to teach students about appropriate protocols. A commitment to these approaches is consistent with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, which emphasize dispositions of patience, respect, and humility – including being an educator and a learner at the same time.¹⁰

More information is available. Given the importance of effectively integrating authentic First Nations perspectives and content into learning, FNEC and FNSA, in collaboration with teachers and other partners, have developed a Learning First Peoples series of resources to reflect the First Peoples Principles of Learning, as well as the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Given the dramatic increase in the number of Indigenous texts available, FNEC and FNSA also have developed tools to help educators in BC make decisions about which resources might be most appropriate for use with students. See: Learning First Peoples Classroom Resources: <https://www.fnesc.ca/learningfirstpeoples/>

First Nation schools can also offer First Nations Authorized Courses (FNACs). FNACs are courses designed and offered by First Nations to reflect the unique needs and circumstance of their communities and students, which have been approved by the School Governing Authority and by a First Nation Approving Body. More information about FNACs is available in the FNEC and FNSA publication: *A Guide To Options For Students In Non-Independent First Nation Schools To Access Credits For the BC Graduation Certificate* (The Dogwood Diploma).

¹⁰ Chrona and Moore, 2023.

SCHOOL STAFF CAN ALSO ...

- ☐ Reflect and build on the understanding that First Nations cultures are contemporary and alive.
- ☐ Understand and reflect on the First Peoples Principles of Learning and what they mean to educators and other school staff – thinking about how they can affect decisions about teaching and relationships in the school.
- ☐ Respect the importance of students being present / participating in important events, activities and ceremonies within the community, such as facilitating student participation in community and cultural events by being flexible and respecting community protocols. Schools can also encourage student involvement in community services / projects (e.g. volunteering, fundraising for local events, involvement in ecological projects, etc.).
- ☐ Connect lessons to students' lives and experiences, include relevant content in assignments and assessments whenever possible, integrate local knowledge and cultural activities into all areas of the curriculum, and strive to ensure that learners see themselves and their community reflected in the learning environment.
- ☐ Encourage students to contribute their own unique understandings and knowledge to learning activities and assessments. In order for students to absorb and retain what is being taught, capturing their interest is crucial. This can include focusing on contemporary community issues, such as economic development initiatives, First Nations' legal advancements, First Nations education legislation and policy, and leaders within their own Nations.
- ☐ Use the First Nations' language whenever possible (such as in classroom materials, signs and labels in the classroom, communications, etc.). Staff who do not know the language can make efforts to learn key words or phrases – showing students that everyone is a learner.
- ☐ Create a classroom setting that reflects the community in a multitude of ways, including welcoming knowledge keepers and community members to participate in the classroom to share their expertise and act as role models for students – while understanding and following community protocols for language and culture use, community traditions, and the respectful inclusion of Elders and community leaders in classroom activities. As the First Peoples Principles of Learning state: "Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain circumstances."

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"What keeps our kids in school is our language and culture programming. It makes kids want to attend no matter what it takes. It helps our students feel they belong, and it stretches their wings."

.....

"We start and end each week with a cultural circle to check in with each other."

.....

"We host an Elder-in-Residence to help students see the connection between the school and their lives and culture. Elders sharing their knowledge is so important."

.....

"We have to find a way to honour each student's life."

.....

"Offering language classes in the school builds stronger connections with Elders, and shows we are part of the larger community."

.....

"We have students create a booklet on 'who I am and where I come from.'"

"Our connectedness starts every day with a morning song. We teach everyone in the school, including non-Indigenous staff, the songs we sing together to strengthen our hearts for the day ahead."

.....

"We changed our school year to start earlier, providing opportunities for students to get out on their territory to connect with Elders. It supports a full circle of learning."

.....

"We start each morning drumming outside. Kids, staff, parents dropping off their kids ... everyone can join in. We alternate grades of students who are responsible for drumming, and they share songs they know. We make morning announcements and share special notices. It is a positive start for the day."

.....

"To help students feel a sense of belonging, we teach hand drum songs and hold weekly assemblies for cultural sharing."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"It is important to bring the community into the school and the school into the community, to show kids we are all connected."

.....

"Our school is the heart of our community. If we make the school a welcoming place to be, people will come ... which is good for our students and helps them to see that everyone cares about their education. We started offering "Pot of Soup Days" at the school – bringing people into the school to enjoy a healthy meal together. That helps build a school community that is reflective of our students."

.....

"We find it particularly valuable to arrange to have Elders spend time with our students."

.....

"We find cultural activities really build a sense of connectedness. For example, we use drumming instead of bells in our school."

.....

"Our staff attend community events together, to build connections with each other and to show we are committed to school-community connections, too."

"We can all reflect and focus on how we can build the cultural safety of our students, which involves developing the cultural competency of our staff. They need to understand what is important to us as First Nations people."

.....

"We find it so valuable to take walks on the land and implement nature-based learning opportunities and field trips to help our students and staff spend healthy, less structured time together."

.....

"We found our older students were not engaged, so we thought about what would make them feel like their education was relevant to them. We started hiring them to help with the PE program, with our language and culture learning opportunities, in our early learning settings, as reading buddies, with the breakfast program or extra-curricular activities ... Their employment contract includes a commitment to attend school and keep up with their academics. We find this has made them feel like they are really a part of the school, and they are coming to school more often as a result."

QUICK CHECK

With a colleague or as a small group of staff, walk through the school or classrooms together and talk about what you see. Are the messages welcoming? Will students see their identities reflected? Do the classroom walls feature generic commercial products, or do they celebrate the community and student work? Does the classroom reflect the community's history as well as contemporary activities? Share your perceptions and any ideas for improvements. Taking time to reflect is a valuable investment.

THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT: KEY FIRST NATIONS EDUCATION TOPICS

It is important that educators in First Nation schools are aware of advancements in First Nations issues. First Nations have worked steadfastly toward the resumption of First Nations control over First Nations education, building from the pivotal National Indian Brotherhood's 1972 policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE), which was presented to and accepted by the Government of Canada. First Nations in BC are on a path toward full control over the education of their children, as envisioned by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972 and reiterated by the Assembly of First Nations in 2010.

"All peoples have the right to maintain their cultural and linguistic identities, and education is essential to actualizing this right. First Nations control over education will provide the means to acquire the necessary skills to be self-empowered and self-sufficient and to maintain First Nations cultural values and languages. This is essential to actualizing an individual's success in society. It will also provide a strong foundation for empowering proud First Nations peoples who are fully able to contribute to the development of their families, clans, communities and nations. (*First Nations Control of First Nations Education. It's Our Vision. It's Our Time. Assembly of First Nations. 2010*)

There has been growing recognition of the assertion of First Nations control of First Nations education by both the federal and provincial governments, and First Nations' educational rights are affirmed in a number of national and international commitments and agreements. For example:

- ▶ Section 35 of the *Canadian Constitution Act, 1982* recognizes and affirms existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada. These rights include First Nations' inherent right of self-government, including inherent authority over matters related to the education of their children.
- ▶ In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognizes the right of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child. It affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning, and have the right to all levels and forms of education of the state without discrimination. Canada endorsed the UN Declaration on November 12, 2010.
- ▶ In November 2019, the provincial government passed the BC Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (the Declaration Act), which aims to create a path forward that respects the human rights of Indigenous peoples while introducing better transparency and predictability in work done together. The Declaration Act establishes the UN Declaration as the Province's framework for reconciliation, as called for by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

What do you know about First Nations education issues, nationally, provincially, and locally? Do you look for opportunities for you and your students to learn more?

WHAT ARE MODULAR COURSES?

Many First Nation schools implement what are referred to as “Modular Courses” – short-term, flexible, experiential learning opportunities that cover a portion or all of the Learning Standards for an approved grade 10 - 12 course that counts toward a student’s graduation.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

- ▶ **Short-term:** a modular course may be implemented for several hours total, or several hours per week, possibly for one or for several months
- ▶ **Flexible:** modular courses may be scheduled during school hours, after school, on a weekend or week-ends, over a full week ...
- ▶ **Experiential:** in modular courses, students usually “learn by doing” and by reflecting on their experiences.
- ▶ **Learning Standards:** modular courses connect to the BC curriculum, particularly the Curricular Competencies, which are the “Do” portion of BC’s “Know, Do, Understand” curricular model.

Many modular courses involve people who have specific skills and subject-matter knowledge to share with students. This may be school staff, community members, non-community members who are already working in the area, or people from outside of the area who are brought in to help implement a short-term course offering. Modular courses may provide opportunities for artists, tradespeople, entrepreneurs, cooks, Knowledge Keepers, or a range of other experts to share relevant information and skills with a group of interested students.

Modular Courses can offer meaningful opportunities to enhance regular school programming, and help students experience relevant, active learning opportunities that are directly related to their lives, communities, and goals. First Nation school representatives have also noted that modular courses that focus on high-interest, fun learning

activities are particularly beneficial for connecting with students who are not regularly engaged with the school. They can help students build an understanding of how their education can support their goals for the future, including employment options, and many students also enjoy success in modular courses that focus on their specific passions, which helps build their self-esteem and self-confidence. Modular courses can also be directly related to the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL).

Modular courses provide important opportunities to be innovative, involve families as volunteers and participants, connect students with other community members (especially Elders and Knowledge Keepers), allow students to enjoy and share their successes, incorporate community knowledge, and honor the Nations’ traditions and protocols.

- ▶ More information to support the organization of these opportunities is available in a new *Modular Course Guide for First Nation Schools in BC*.

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

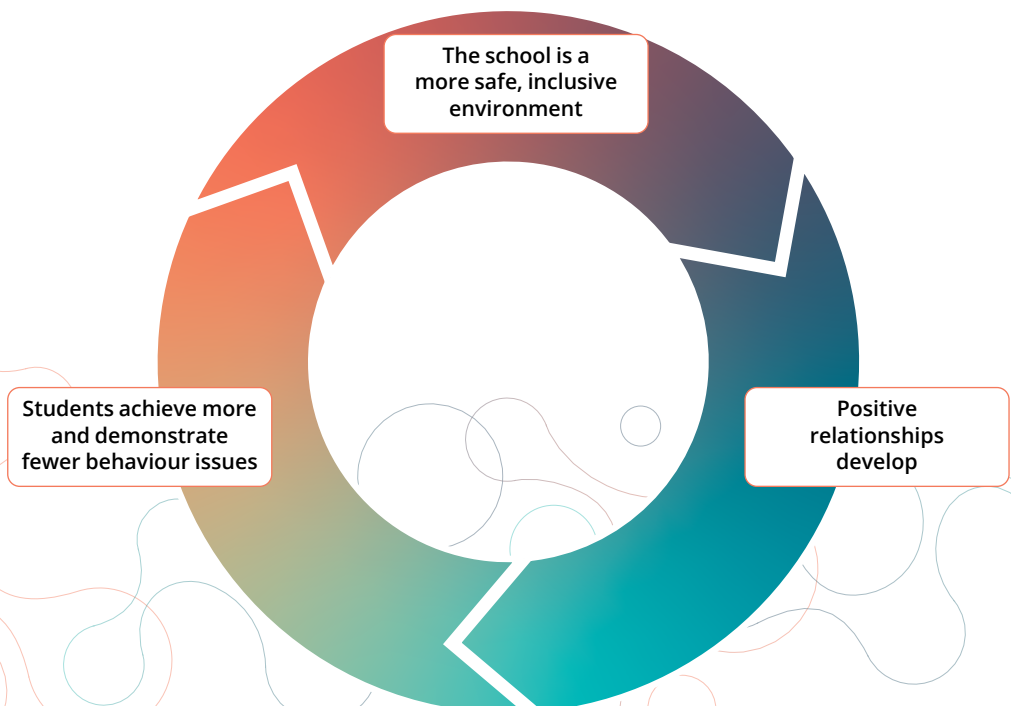
Focus on Building and Maintaining a Safe School

“We must gently remind ourselves and others ... safe spaces may be few and far between for some people. Schools can be a safe haven for students. We need to continually remind ourselves that we are providing security and support for our future generations.”

Feedback from a
2025 Connectedness
Capacity Building
Session

Efforts to promote a safe school climate and create a sense of belonging are directly related and mutually reinforcing.

- ▶ Building positive connections is possible when students (as well as staff, volunteers, and families) feel secure in the learning environment.
- ▶ When students feel connected to their peers and adults in the school, they achieve more and demonstrate fewer behaviour-related challenges, and as a result the school becomes a more accepting, safer place for everyone.



To ensure that every student feels respected and secure, schools should embrace positive behaviour approaches. When they are thoughtfully developed and implemented, preventative, supportive, and corrective approaches to student misbehaviour (sometimes called discipline approaches) can:

- ▶ strengthen students' social and emotional development by addressing causes of behaviour challenges and promoting positive change;
- ▶ preserve the integrity of the learning environment by minimizing disruptions and disorder in classrooms, and reducing conflict; and
- ▶ promote the safety and dignity of all students, staff, families, and school visitors by maintaining respectful settings that value all school community members.
- ▶ To help schools consider these issues, FNEESC and FNSA have created a *Policy and Procedures Resource Guide*, which includes a paper that highlights some research-based suggestions for developing effective, equitable, and fair policies and procedures to prevent (as much as possible) and (when necessary) deal with behaviour difficulties.

Schools should also implement clear and consistent anti-bullying policies, procedures, and practices. School staff should pro-actively confront any stereotyping, bias, and discrimination when they see it, and disrupt instances of students teasing or disrespecting one another. Students who feel comfortable being themselves, without fear of harassment, are more receptive to both relationship-building and learning opportunities.

A sense of pride in the school can enhance feelings of safety. The school and classrooms should be clean and well-organized; when physical spaces are well maintained, it sends a message that people care about education and that the students deserve a pleasant, well-kept, ordered place to learn.

Emotionally safe schools deliberately and systematically promote a predictable routine and rhythm to help all students feel comfortable and focused on learning. While it is beneficial for teachers to demonstrate some flexibility and spontaneity in response to students' emerging ideas, needs, and interests, almost all students benefit from predictable structures and orderly procedures in the learning environment.



The physical space of the classroom is directly connected to classroom management and both physical and emotional safety. The learning setting should be considered to ensure that noise and light levels, classroom design and set-up, and limited clutter create a relaxing, non-stressful environment. Sight lines are also important to ensure that staff can appropriately monitor students and use proximity when needed to provide support.

Classroom expectations (sometimes called rules or norms), ideally created with students, should be positively worded, specific enough for students to understand (e.g. “be respectful” is important, but is it clear to students?), and deliberately taught and re-taught as needed. It can also be helpful to remind students of norms using the phrase “at school we” This can be useful for helping students understand that expectations might be different in school and in other parts of their lives, and it is important for everyone to understand how to behave in varying circumstances.

It is particularly important that schools ensure that every student is connected to staff who they can reach out to in a time of need. Widespread research confirms that a positive relationship with at least one adult in the school (a teacher, the principal, a counsellor, an EA, the secretary, etc.) can have significant benefits for students, including reduced bullying, lower drop-out rates, improved social-emotional skills and resilience, and better attendance. That adult can monitor the students’ well-being, social interactions, and try to do something special for the child or teen at least once during the school year.

Schools must also be inclusive, which means creating a school in which all students are accepted and can participate and succeed – a principle that is generally extended to students who have all kinds of learning needs, gender identities, family backgrounds and experiences, and socio-economic circumstances. All students have a right to feel included, with appropriate supports that enable them to join in, learn, and contribute to all aspects of school life. It is critical to make schools places where all children and teens (and adults) feel visible and welcome.

FNESC and FNSA work closely with SOGI 1, 2, 3, which helps educators make schools inclusive and safe for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI). At a SOGI-inclusive school, students’ gender does not limit their interests and opportunities, and their sexual orientation and how they understand and express their gender are welcomed without discrimination.

Importantly, new research is showing the positive impact SOGI 123 sexual orientation and gender identity resources are having in schools throughout BC. A 2024 report titled “Students feel safer here, and more included”: Evaluation of SOGI 123 in B.C.” written by researchers at the Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre at the University of British Columbia’s School of Nursing, reports that training, policies, teaching materials, and strategies to foster schools that are inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth reduce bullying and discrimination and increase feelings of acceptance.¹¹

More information about SOGI resources is available at www.sogieducation.org.

¹¹ <https://apsc-saravyc.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2024/10/SOGI-123-Evaluation-report-2024-10-08-FINAL.pdf>



Relationships are restorative, and establishing a positive school and classroom climate, in which students feel a sense of belonging, is fundamental to implementing trauma-responsive practices. There is a wealth of research demonstrating that students' well-being and resilience, motivation, achievement, and attendance will also increase as a result.

See Appendix Two for a short overview of research-based trauma-informed practices.

In particular, it is important to be aware of how stigma can adversely affect educational expectations and academic outcomes for many students who have exceptionalities. Students with learning and attention issues can be subject to labeling, stereotyping, feelings of separation from their peers, and discrimination. The entire school community can be attentive to the possibility of students experiencing stigma, with staff continually examining their own biases and being attentive to how students who have exceptionalities interact with and are treated by other students and adults in the school. Staff should also be intentional in eliminating stigma related to mental health issues.

Friendships are also shown to help protect students from bullying and cyberbullying. Educators cannot mandate friendships amongst students, but they can facilitate conditions for friendships to grow, which will enhance peer relationships and foster improved outcomes.

There is also a growing understanding that trauma and related stresses can have very serious impacts on students' development and learning. Awareness of the serious educational impacts of stress increased significantly given the effects of the COVID pandemic on students' (and staff and families') mental health, and the effects of trauma on First Nations children, teens, and adults has been an issue of serious concern for some time. In addition to the range of factors that impact on the mental health of students generally in today's society, the well-being of First Nations students can be undermined by what some researchers refer to as "Intergenerational Indian Residential Schools trauma," or what is more generally called "historic trauma." This type of trauma affects not only the generation of survivors who directly suffered or witnessed traumatic events; it can also impact second, third, and further generations. It is not the job of educators to diagnose or treat trauma, but they can learn about strategies that are shown to benefit students who experience trauma - which are generally helpful for all students.

Overall, schools must be attentive to students' social and emotional wellness, by creating awareness of mental health issues through curriculum and staff training, and by being trauma informed.

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Bullying was a real concern at our school, and we knew we had to do something pro-active about it. So, we built a firepit and allowed the students to gather there after school without organized activities. But that didn't work for breaking down barriers between students. We then switched to having students do team building exercises and debriefing by the firepit afterward to share their feelings. This made a real difference. Sometimes you just have to try something, see what works, what doesn't, make changes ... keep trying."

"We encouraged our students to decorate the learning space so they feel 'invested' in the building. We have pictures of the students doing things. We show off their work. We want the physical environment to be theirs."

"To build school spirit, we hold SWAG Monday – we encourage everyone to wear their school swag, and those who do are entered into a draw."

"Our grade six students painted a "friendship" bench with an inclusive rainbow."

"We find it useful to reach out to parents and tell them: 'You love your child. We love your child. And we are the adults. We need to work together to figure out how to get your child to school, and to make sure your child feels safe, loved, and welcome when they get here.'"

"We find it really helpful to have a safe, quiet space – for kids who have sensory issues, but also for kids who are introverts or just need a break. We have a room that has low light, is quiet, maybe with a quiet video playing ... a place kids can go at lunch time where they don't need to engage with others if they want to chill out."

"When we put up an LGBTQ+ flag in a grade 7 classroom, several students noticed and celebrated the change, and said it made them feel like it was a safe space."

"We need to pay more attention to the physical representation of our space. What does it look like? What do we have on display? How can we be more purposeful about what people see when they come in our building?"

"We need to focus on creating trauma-informed and culturally safe places."

"We organize an after-school tutoring and homework club. The club leader provides healthy snacks, uses games, and really relates to the kids. Students sometimes ask their teachers for extra homework so they can attend! Kids will come when it is a safe and welcoming place."

"As the School Governing Authority Chair, I try to uplift our school whenever possible. I post positive messages about the school on Facebook. I promote the school however I can. I want everyone to feel good about the school."

FEEDBACK FROM CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

What We Do To Promote Safety

Physical safety

- ▶ *Providing for essentials – breakfast and lunch, sleep, etc. – is the foundation.*
- ▶ *We focus on designing spaces with safety in mind.*
- ▶ *We strive to maintain our building properly.*
- ▶ *We changed our classroom seating arrangement to promote better inclusiveness.*
- ▶ *Our hallways are well lit and constantly supervised.*
- ▶ *We provide outdoor walking breaks to help everyone feel calmer and more relaxed.*
- ▶ *We consistently enforce our policies against bullying and harassment.*
- ▶ *We constantly emphasize healthy habits, like drinking water, exercise ...*
- ▶ *Food security is fundamental. Our food programs are critical.*
- ▶ *We are attentive to how younger and older students interact, promoting positive opportunities while staggering lunch and recess breaks ... thinking about what is most safe for unstructured times.*
- ▶ *We use criminal record checks appropriately.*
- ▶ *We have a bus supervisor.*
- ▶ *Regularly conducting safety drills, being attentive to student supervision, addressing potential hazards ... it is vital.*
- ▶ *We have surveillance cameras around the school and a monitoring system for the playground to keep our kids safe.*
- ▶ *Our older students volunteer to help the younger kids come into the school and get to class.*
- ▶ *A doctor visits our high school every second week and has appointments with the kids.*
- ▶ *We monitor students' well-being and health.*
- ▶ *Be patient, be diligent, be an active educator.*

Social, emotional and spiritual safety

- ▶ *Our Elder-in-Residence is crucial.*
- ▶ *We have a designated Elders room, so Elders know they are always welcome and to help make sure Elders have a comfortable space for them to enjoy in the school.*
- ▶ *Our students have access to a counsellor, and a spiritual counsellor as well.*
- ▶ *Staff greet students.*
- ▶ *Our staff consistently and regularly tell students they are available to help.*
- ▶ *We use a restitution-based discipline approach.*
- ▶ *We maintain open communications.*
- ▶ *We try to provide regulation zones in all of our school spaces.*
- ▶ *We monitor students' well-being and mental health.*
- ▶ *We use morning prayers to create a calm environment.*
- ▶ *We have an art therapist who visits the school once a month.*
- ▶ *Rather than conventional "discipline," we use talking circles to address conflict between students and/or staff.*
- ▶ *Every Monday morning, we have a whole school meeting in the gym so we can review expectations for how we will all interact.*

FEEDBACK FROM CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

- ▶ *We do buddy walks and buddy reading so the younger kids know the older kids.*
- ▶ *It is helpful to teach students how to talk about their feelings.*
- ▶ *We implement clear and consistent rules and guidelines.*
- ▶ *2-3 three times each week, we take a walk on the land.*
- ▶ *We have a counsellor who visits the school once each week to meet with our adult students individually.*
- ▶ *Our staff take time and always use terms students choose for themselves, such as their pronouns (he, she, they ...) and the names they prefer.*
- ▶ *We implement the Dare to Care anti-bullying program.*
- ▶ *We show students they can count on us, and they can openly talk to us about anything without judgment.*
- ▶ *We provide onsite and online counselling.*
- ▶ *The principal has an open-door policy for kids to come and talk whenever they want.*
- ▶ *Our staff are all trained in emotional coaching.*
- ▶ *Regular check-ins are so important – asking students to share their ideas and struggles, listening and offering encouragement.*
- ▶ *We practice restorative responses to conflict. We have forums to help with problem-solving and moving forward.*
- ▶ *We have a school-wide WITS approach: Walk-away, ignore, talk it out, seek help. We use that phrase on posters, lanyards, door signs, etc.*
- ▶ *We use sports to help calm kids, facilitating a healthy use of their energy.*
- ▶ *We hold a kindness challenge.*
- ▶ *We ensure all staff are committed and equipped to understand and respond appropriately to student behaviours. If staff can't contribute to a safe environment, our school is not the right fit for them.*
- ▶ *Staff training around mental health is important.*
- ▶ *We practice "leading with love."*
- ▶ *We purposefully check-in with students who are struggling or are on their own during lunch, at breaks etc.*
- ▶ *All staff in our school are provided pro-d on trauma informed practice.*
- ▶ *Be a positive, smiley person at all times. Be what you want to see!*

Academic safety

- ▶ *We structure opportunities for students to help each other with challenging questions.*
- ▶ *We host a homework club.*
- ▶ *Teacher teams regularly review and respond to achievement data.*
- ▶ *We teach a growth mindset.*
- ▶ *We provide opportunities for extra help. We review assignments with students and allow rewrites before final drafts are submitted.*
- ▶ *Group projects are useful.*
- ▶ *We focus on that "learning space" – the place between knowing and not knowing, providing opportunities that help students move beyond what they already know and can do, without being unrealistic so students feel discouraged and frustrated.*
- ▶ *We break content down into manageable pieces.*
- ▶ *Land-based learning and cultural learning / responsibilities are key.*

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

EXERCISE: QUESTIONS FOR YOUR SCHOOL TEAM TO ANSWER TOGETHER

1. Does our school have effective safety, behaviour (discipline), and bullying policies? If not, what steps can we take to address this situation?
2. Is our school clean, free from graffiti, well maintained, and reflective of our community and students? Is the physical space one we can all be proud of?
3. Does our school consistently reflect the principles of inclusion?
4. Do our staff feel we are adequately trauma-informed? Is any professional development needed to help?

IDENTIFYING SAFETY HOT SPOTS

It can be very beneficial to ask students general questions about how safe they feel at school, and possible survey questions are included in Section 13.

Some schools also use anonymous surveys to find out if there are any particular places in the school where students feel more stressed or uncomfortable – such as, for example, the cafeteria, the playground, a hallway ...

What can you do if there are any places where problems seem to arise more often?

- ▶ Ask students why they experience difficulties in that area. What do staff think are possible reasons?
- ▶ Talk about ways you might increase supervision in any trouble spots.
- ▶ Other ideas you can think of?

You can also consider whether students and staff find any times especially stressful. The morning drop off? After school pick up? If there are “hot spots,” what can be done in response?

MONITORING STUDENT INTERACTIONS

In addition to paying careful attention to how students and staff interact, it can be very valuable to monitor how well students are connected to their peers to check in on their sense of belonging in school.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Ask your students to confidentially answer questions like the following (using age-appropriate language) – telling students you want to understand how they work best inside and outside of the classroom.

- ▶ Who are three people in this class you would most like to play with at recess (younger students) / eat lunch with (older students)?
- ▶ Who are three people in this class you most like to work with when we are doing group projects?
- ▶ Who are three people in this class you would choose as a reading buddy (younger students) / a lab partner (older students)?

Review the data, analyze which students are named the most, and especially pay attention to students who are not named often or at all. Observe these students carefully and think about their social skills. Would they benefit from extra attention or support so they can improve their relationships with peers? Do you think there are other possible concerns, such as bullying or anxiety, that need to be investigated?

STAFF ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP MAPPING

Widespread evidence emphasizes the importance of ensuring that each student has a personal relationship with at least one supportive adult at school. Rather than leaving these critical connections to chance, school staff can support an intentional “relationship mapping” strategy, such as the following.

- ▶ Staff meet in a room with a list of all students posted on the wall or written on the white board.
- ▶ Staff are given stickers to apply to the name of every student they feel they have a positive, trusting relationship with – such as a student who would likely come to them with a problem or need.
- ▶ If helpful, staff can place a different colour sticker next to the name of students who may be struggling personally or academically, or who are at risk for chronic absenteeism.
- ▶ When done, if there are any names without any stickers, talk about those students and identify a staff member who will volunteer to build a relationship with each of them.
- ▶ Follow up a few weeks later to check if connections have been made with all students. Staff can support each other by sharing their successes and challenges, and if one staff member is finding it difficult to relate to a student, another adult can try to reach out.

Variations on this process are possible. For example:

- ▶ An administrator can build an excel sheet with students’ names, and staff can virtually access the worksheet and put a mark next to students with whom they have a genuine relationship – with a clear deadline for completing the task. Then a team can review the list and share their analysis at a staff meeting.
- ▶ For elementary schools, a similar approach could be based on a class list, with the classroom teacher and support staff identifying any students who don’t experience a trusting relationship.
- ▶ In addition to noting which students are identified as having a personal connection with an adult in the school, the list can also identify if the student is involved in extra-curricular activities in the school or community (which provides additional opportunities for positive relationships, as discussed in section 11), and if the student’s parents are connected to the school.

Relationship mapping can take place at the beginning of the school year, to identify students who might benefit from more connections right away. It can be followed up at the end of the school year to foster discussions about how the school’s connectedness strategies have worked, and to help plan for the year ahead. Note: Students should not learn about this process, as it may make them feel singled out or targeted.

Schools that have embedded relationship mapping in their school report that little time is needed to complete the map, and that positive outcomes, including improved attendance, are usually seen in a short time.¹²

12 Educational Service Center of Central Ohio.

TIPS AND TRICKS: ESTABLISHING CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS

Establishing classroom expectations (sometimes called rules, norms, or possibly a class contract) can involve everyone working together to identify key aspirations for how staff and students will work together. By brainstorming together as a class, having students write ideas on sticky notes, using collaborative IT tools, or using another strategy, think about (in age-appropriate ways) ...

- ▶ What can we do to help us all learn together?
- ▶ How do we want to be treated by others?
- ▶ What kinds of actions will keep us all physically and emotionally safe?

Create a list of ideas and identify themes. Then talk about:

- ▶ Is anything missing? Is there anything else we need to do?
- ▶ Are some things more important than others?

OTHER TIPS

- ▶ It is important to incorporate, as much as possible, the community's perspectives and language related to respectful behaviour and interactions.
- ▶ Write up the shared expectations using positive language that everyone understands and post them in the classroom.
- ▶ Practice them, as appropriate, with students. Show younger students what each expectation looks and sounds like. For example, practice getting into line without pushing.
- ▶ Help students understand why certain behaviours are expected in the classroom or school, to help them develop their personal and social awareness competencies.
- ▶ Model the expectations yourself, and if you make a mistake, model how to apologize and move on.
- ▶ Periodically review the expectations, and reference them often, such as noting "I am so happy that we all just demonstrated expectation ..., " "Let's try to show class expectation ... when we are in assembly this morning."
- ▶ Many students appreciate talking about what they can expect from the teacher, including expectations that the teacher will not yell at students, or that the teacher will listen to students' concerns. Discussing students' expectations of the teacher does not mean giving up authority or responsibility for the classroom; instead, it demonstrates respect for students and is a good way to model co-created expectations.

HOW CAN WE BUILD A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY?

Adapted from L. Walker Peroff. *Helping Classmates to Get Along*. October 24, 2024. Edutopia

Building a thriving classroom can include encouraging friendships. It can also involve equipping students with skills that will help them be contributing members of a learning community.

ONE IDEA TO TRY? CONSIDER CREATING A “COMMUNITY BOARD.”

Begin by asking students to talk about what they’re good at, what they need help with, and why it is important to ask for help and share our talents with others.

- ▶ Once students have identified their unique strengths and areas for stretch, present students with a simple sentence frame, such as “If you need help with ... I can help you” or “I need help with ... ; can you help me?”
- ▶ Hang up a “community board” that is divided into “Help Wanted” and “Help Offered” sides, and have students post their sentences on the board.
- ▶ Students can then use the community board as a place to go when they need help.

This simple activity can empower students to work as a classroom community by helping and receiving help from their classmates. It can teach students the power of asking for help when it is needed. It can also build self confidence in students; when students help their classmates, they feel good about themselves, and because everyone has different skills, everyone can be a helper. Through this, students come to appreciate each member of the community as a valuable resource, with unique strengths to offer.

When people have opportunities to contribute, they feel valued and appreciated. Helping is beneficial for both the helper and the helped. This activity can also emphasize the valuable lesson that people are stronger together than they are separately – which is what being a community is all about.

Note: Could a similar activity be used with staff to promote collegiality and strengths-based relationship building? Do you have space in your school for families to gather? Could they be invited to use a “community board” to offer help and share what they might need?



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Take Attendance Seriously

“Fostering connections fosters attendance.”¹³

Attendance is a critical issue that is directly correlated with students’ sense of connectedness.

- ▶ When students miss too much school, they miss out on important foundational knowledge. Then they may feel frustrated or embarrassed, and they may want to stay home from school. But that leaves them further and further behind their classmates and can make them feel less connected to their peers and their education.
- ▶ Sometimes students might stay away from school because they feel bullied or they do not feel like they fit in. But missing school means that problems cannot be addressed, and students may feel even more uncomfortable returning to school after missing several days.
- ▶ Students develop important relationships in school, but when they miss too many days, they might find that friendships have changed when they return – meaning they lose their sense of belonging.

These factors can then become a cycle. If they feel left out, students often avoid being in school – leading them to feel increasingly isolated and lonely, causing more attendance challenges, and decreasing their positive connections. And students who experience chronic absenteeism are more likely to find it difficult to build meaningful connections at school, so they may struggle with building behavioral and emotional skills that are critical for school success.

¹³ Feedback from a First Nation school representative, October 2024 Principals Network



Further information about these issues and numerous ideas to promote attendance are outlined in *Attendance Counts: A Toolkit For Raising the Attendance Rates of First Nations Students In British Columbia*, which can be accessed from www.fnesc.ca.

"Students not coming to school isn't an attendance issue; it's a relationship issue."¹⁴

Positive teacher-student-parent relationships provide the foundation for good attendance. Many students are "voluntarily absent" because they feel disconnected from classroom materials, their teachers, or both. In order to get the absent students back and keep students who are coming to school from leaving, they must be engaged.

Teachers who provide a caring and inclusive atmosphere in their classrooms, offering kindness and being positive about students' cultures, traditions, and families, are most successful in encouraging regular attendance.

In addition, the school principal, teachers, EAs, and other school staff can consistently send messages to students and families highlighting why being in school is important. What can all adults in the school do to help?

- ▶ Share information with families and the community about the reasons regular attendance is so impactful.
- ▶ Let parents know how much you want to have students at school.
- ▶ Let students know you are excited to see them every day and you care about them being at school and learning. Tell students you miss them when they are away. Welcome them back warmly and excitedly when they return to school after an absence.

¹⁴ Harris, 2024

WHAT ELSE CAN SCHOOLS DO?

- ❑ Focus on prevention. One of the best ways to address absenteeism is to make schools places that students choose to attend – that is, safe, supportive, and engaging environments where students feel welcome and valued.
- ❑ Carefully track absences to identify students who appear to be at-risk of chronic absenteeism – and then make concerted efforts to build open and supportive relationships with those students. Students miss school for a myriad of reasons ... many of which may be beyond their control, and even beyond the control of their families. Promoting attendance and responding to chronic attendance issues requires understanding and respect, and research demonstrates (not surprisingly) that students have the best attendance records in schools that set high standards and concurrently provide high levels of support to meet those aspirations.
- ❑ Try implementing an “attendance huddle.” Appropriate staff can gather for a five-to-ten-minute stand-up meeting early in the day to talk about which students are absent, identify any potential concerns, and decide how to respond (e.g. phone the parents, reach out to arrange a ride for the students, ...).
- ❑ Email when students are absent, telling them “We miss you in class, get well soon.” Then enthusiastically greet students when they return to school – no matter why they were away.
- ❑ Build connections early by using friendly introductory phone calls and emails with all parents in (or close to) the first week of school, establishing a foundation for regular communication throughout the year, and setting the stage for respectful interactions if attendance (or other) difficulties later arise.
- ❑ If possible and if supported by the community, consider making home visits to connect with students’ lives – including a community member or another person well known to the family, if appropriate. Many case studies show that home visits (or perhaps visits in another setting, like a coffee shop, if that’s more comfortable for the teacher or the parents) have been shown to raise achievement and attendance, and feedback from First Nation school representatives reinforces the value of home visits.
- ❑ Hold students accountable for what they miss when they are absent – while providing support to help them catch up. If students don’t think they will miss any important learning when they are away, they won’t think coming to school is necessary. And if students think they can’t or they won’t be helped to make up for lost learning, they will stay away more. To avoid these perceptions, it can be useful to emphasize that missing school matters ... and that added effort will be needed and supported when they are back.
- ❑ Model good attendance. Evidence shows a correlation between good staff attendance and good student attendance. If you know you are going to be away from school (such as for a personal reason or for professional development), tell students why and let them know what efforts you are making to prepare for your absence, as well as how you will find out what you missed when you return.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Really, attendance is a reflection of the climate in our school. It is an extension of our attitudes. Our voices, what we notice, our words ... they really matter. We hold high expectations for achievement. We need to hold high expectations for attendance. It starts with us."

.....

"When school feels like a home away from home, students will find a way to come."

.....

"I really suggest – start by making connections. Then add specific attendance promotion strategies as you can over time."

.....

"We make little things available in the school to encourage kids to want to get to school on time. For example, we have a remote-control robot in the front office, and if kids come to school early, they can play with it. We also put out musical instruments kids can play before school. The students love it. Making school fun brings the kids in."

.....

"We invested in upgrading our playground to make it a place students can enjoy daily. It helps make them want to come to school."

.....

"We remodeled our outdated library to make it an amazing learning / study space / gathering hub, with all the new technology, etc. It is a safe environment where kids really want to hang out before and after school."

.....

"We rearranged the school schedule so that the most fun learning opportunities happen at the beginning of the school day – especially our language and culture activities."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

How can we build connections with students who are chronically absent to encourage them to attend?

- ▶ *Start a homework club – an after-school fun opportunity for students to catch up on schoolwork.*
- ▶ *Use social media / texting chains to reach out with personal messages.*
- ▶ *Connect with families through home visits, cultural nights ... sharing information about topics families care about.*
- ▶ *Invite students to monthly luncheons to build rapport and instill self-accountability and self-awareness.*
- ▶ *Show students you are a safe adult who will hear them out and be on their side / be an advocate.*
- ▶ *Work one-on-one with students to help them catch up on their work.*
- ▶ *Create attendance campaign teams – including teachers, administrators, EAs, parents, students, council members, Elders ... to talk about how to support each and every student."*

"We try everything possible to keep kids coming to school. We even tried an "Attendasaurus" strategy. I bought a dinosaur costume, and some days the "dinosaur" greets the bus; other days it doesn't. We keep the identity of the person in the costume anonymous. It keeps kids guessing. It keeps them excited about arriving at school."

"We host a 'Lunch Bunch.' Students who are on the counselling list who have low attendance or are struggling with connections come and have lunch with the counsellor. They can invite a friend to come with them and they play games together."

"We organized 'Community Cupcake Connection'. Community members were invited to the school to decorate cupcakes with the students. A child who was struggling with attendance made sure to come that day!"

"As an attendance incentive, we let kids earn mini marshmallows to throw at the principal, who was behind a cutout target. The kids loved it. They wanted to do it every day!"

"What can we do to encourage students to attend? Keep them happy. Keep them interested. Keep them motivated to access opportunities after they graduate."

WHAT DO PARENTS SAY SCHOOLS CAN DO TO HELP WITH ATTENDANCE?

AMONG OTHER THINGS ...

- ▶ *Address student achievement – provide strong instruction, as well as tutoring supports and after school academic programs.*
- ▶ *Create a sense of belonging and make sure students feel safe and wanted at school – including students who experience behaviour challenges.*
- ▶ *Build positive connections with students so they know you are coming from a place of genuine caring.*
- ▶ *Acknowledge the real struggles some students experience, and show them you appreciate how hard they have worked to get to school and make it through the day.*
- ▶ *Tell students you are happy to see them at school; use positive affirmations.*
- ▶ *Implement programs and activities that help students feel excited about attending school, including: language and culture activities; more on-the-land opportunities; special field trips; spirit weeks; summer programs for fun activities like drama and dance; movie nights ... activities “kids don’t want to miss.”*
- ▶ *Address student mental health and wellness, including providing nutrition programs and efforts to help with teen anxiety, ideally with counselling supports and adequate resources for students who have high anxiety and who are scared or bullied.*
- ▶ *Assign staff to support students who are experiencing challenges, and encourage vulnerable students with special gatherings / extra activities.*
- ▶ *Make efforts to ensure all students know what supports are in place, and make sure students never feel shame reaching out for the help that is available.*
- ▶ *Host an Elders-in-Residence program / create culturally safe spaces for students, with traditional foods and teas, etc.*
- ▶ *Create a pleasant, constructive environment students want to be a part of.*
- ▶ *Offer and encourage students to join in extra-curricular activities.*
- ▶ *Provide professional development so teachers understand who First Nations people are, and First Nations’ educational rights.*
- ▶ *Make sure there is positive energy in the school.”*



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Get to Know Students

As a foundation for building meaningful relationships, teachers and other education staff can deliberately create opportunities to get to know students as individuals.

- ▶ School staff who are from the community can build on their existing relationships with students and their families, using strategies to learn new things about children and teens in the school.
- ▶ If teachers and other staff are not from the community and do not yet know students well, a range of methods can help them learn about students' families, their culture and traditions, as well as their unique interests, likes, and dislikes.

Don't treat social connection as a "nice to have"— make it a planned part of the day. For example, classroom schedules could be adapted to include short check-ins, check-outs, or morning meetings. Or teachers could implement a weekly routine of activities to increase social connectedness, such as:

- ▶ **Monday Mood Booster:** Students write each other affirmations or "shout outs."
- ▶ **GratiTuesday:** Do brief gratitude practices at the beginning of class every Tuesday.

Making social connections a critical part of the school day not only creates authentic connections in class; it will help students develop skills that will help them form authentic relationships in their future.¹⁵

¹⁵ Mielke, 2023

Making time for additional activities is not always easy, but dedicating time and effort to investigate students' interests and discover things that will keep them engaged and connected to their learning will be worth the investment.

Research shows that even a few minutes of dedicated effort each day can help develop relationships that will drive student success.¹⁶



Getting to know students who have exceptionalities is a particularly important consideration, so staff understand their unique talents, gifts, and needs. All school staff will be better able to support students who have exceptionalities if they understand what strategies and techniques work best for them. Knowing the interests and capacities of students who have exceptionalities can help with the selection of learning activities, roles, and activities that will foster their success. It may also allow school staff to help the students build friendships with their peers, if needed.

Relationships are often built in small moments; never underestimate the impact of a simple “hello,” “have a great day,” and “goodbye” at the end of the day. Take advantage of small opportunities to connect, such as using the time before and after class to be fully present and attuned to students you meet. Students remember adults who take the time to give them a smile and a kind word each day.

A wealth of evidence confirms that teachers greeting students at the classroom door is a simple, cost-free, and research-based way to increase student connectedness, student attention to learning (on-task behaviour), and teacher rapport with students. Positive greetings at the classroom door can increase students' academic engagement, decrease disruptive classroom behaviour, and result in higher attendance rates. A short paper on the value of greeting students at the classroom door is attached as Appendix Three.

In fact, all school staff can make every moment count, and greetings don't have to be limited to students entering the classroom.

- ▶ The school bus driver is often the first-person students see each day. Their positive messages first thing in the morning are very meaningful.
- ▶ Principals can stand outside the school and greet students by name.
- ▶ Teachers can stand outside their classrooms and say hello to students as they pass by in the hall and enter the classroom.
- ▶ The school secretary may be the first person to interact with students when they arrive at school late. A welcoming environment often starts with them.
- ▶ Staff and volunteers who support the school breakfast program, custodians ... everyone can greet students when they see them.

Everyone can use small opportunities to help students feel seen and wanted at the school.

¹⁶ Rockwell, 2022

Educators, in particular, can implement strategies to get to know students better – the foundation for connections. Among many other things, educators can ...

- ▶ Begin by being committed to learning more about students' identities and experiences. This involves celebrating the uniqueness and potential of each student, and showing an interest in learning about each student's background, interests, strengths, and special characteristics. Teachers can then use that information to help encourage positive relationships in the classroom, and to drive lesson content and instruction.
- ▶ Develop an interest in students' interests. The music, books, role playing games, and sports teams students like are great topics to learn more about. Asking questions about students' passions can help school staff relate to students – even with hard-to-reach kids.
- ▶ Use a "Get to Know You" questionnaire at the beginning of the year. Ask fun questions, like "What is your favourite animal and why?" or questions about learning, such as: "What are you looking forward to in this class?" "Is there one thing you most hope to learn this year?" "Does anything about this class make you nervous, and how can I help?" Because survey answers aren't shared with peers, some students may be more open in their responses.
- ▶ Ask simple questions, such as "What do you hope will be on the menu for lunch today?" or "What is one thing you are looking forward to this week?" as entrance or exit tickets, or perhaps for a bonus point at the end of a test. The answers can then be used to start a brief interaction ... such as, "I see you like pasta lunch day; that's my favourite, too."
- ▶ Ask students how they're feeling as they enter the classroom each day. To quickly gauge students' emotions, you could post a list of feeling words or emojis on the wall and have students tap the word or image that best captures how they're feeling. And try to find out what responses work well for each student. Some students who are having a bad day need a little extra space and/or patience. Some students appreciate a kind word or an offer to talk if they need to.
- ▶ Let students tell their own stories. For example, students could create a presentation including 10 fun facts about themselves, using video, photos, a poem, etc. To make this activity less stressful and to help build students' confidence levels, teachers or EAs could act as role models by making and sharing their own presentations, which will also help everyone in the classroom community get to know one another better – teachers and students.



Whether it's a smile, a compliment, or an "I believe in you," don't miss an opportunity to let students know you're there for them and rooting for them to succeed.¹⁷

¹⁷ Silver, H. F. and A. L. Boutz. 2024

- ▶ Have one-on-one meetings that are conversational and positive, especially with students who struggle with behavioral issues. Some students can feel lost and think that their voices don't matter. Students feel heard when they know that the person they are speaking to cares about what they have to say; that what they say matters and is valued. Meeting with the principal, teacher, or EA one-on-one means a student has their full attention – and without others listening, students may feel more comfortable speaking honestly. Simply asking a student what's going on in their life, how an after-school or community activity is going for them, how they're feeling about their classwork ... anything to show genuine interest in their experiences, is valuable. There is nothing more powerful than school staff showing they are available to listen when students want to talk.
- ▶ For early learners, try to find time for short one-on-one play time, with time to talk informally, observe the child's behaviours, and help children practice talking about their feelings and emotions.
- ▶ Try a 5 x 5 assessment. Choose five students to think about for five minutes each day. Consider "What have I noticed about them recently?" "What behaviour patterns?" "Any changes?" Then interact with the students that same day, following up on your reflections.
- ▶ If students sit in table groups, reassign seats regularly; there are online seating chart generators to help with this task. Each time students move to their new seats, use deliberate structures to have students connect with each other, such as sharing responses to non-threatening questions like "What food could you eat every day for the rest of your life and never get tired of?" Educators in the classroom can circulate throughout the room and participate in the discussions, as well.
- ▶ Try show and tell. It is an old practice, but it can still work. Students can bring in something that represents them, their culture, or their passions, with five or ten minutes set aside each day for a few students to share what they brought until everyone in the class has participated. Or use a "Me Bag," giving each student a turn to show five things that are important to them. This strategy can strengthen the classroom community and communicate interest in students' lives.

- ▶ Young students could be the “top dog” of the week (of course, substituting a different phrase as appropriate for the community and/or in the students’ language). That student can bring in a picture to talk about and hang on the bulletin board, and they can choose a favourite book to read – explaining why it is special to them. They can also be the teacher’s special helper that week – building their sense of importance and inclusion as a valuable member of the classroom.¹⁸
- ▶ Create a student interest bulletin board – celebrating what students like to do beyond the classroom.
- ▶ Use student work time to connect with individual students, or eat lunch with students in the classroom or cafeteria.
- ▶ Implement five-minute talks. Ask students to write down questions they’d like to discuss in small groups. Set aside five minutes at the beginning or end of class for students to share with each other. When educators also participate in a group, it demonstrates that they are attentive to what students want to talk about.
- ▶ Use dialogue journals. Exchanging short letters (three to five sentences) with individual students during the year can help you connect with them individually and improve their writing. A simple notebook can be passed back and forth. Initial entries can build off surveys or other get-to-know-you activities, and this activity may help to identify mutual interests. For example, “You wrote that you like hockey. Me too! Who is your favourite player?” Or provide students with sentence starters they can complete, like “I am happy when _____,” “I hope to _____,” or “I am most excited in class when we _____”.
- ▶ Half-way through the day or period, take time to think about whether you have connected with students.

18 Bruhn, 2022

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"We have Elders come on the first day of school and greet students at the door. Then they help lead a welcoming assembly."

"Our school implements an 'I see you program.' Every teacher is assigned 4 – 5 students, and they are expected to connect with those students daily – even if it is just a 'hello, glad to see you.' On Valentine's Day and at Christmas, we put cards in the staff room, and teachers make sure they give their assigned students a card."

"Our teachers use journaling as a strategy to check in with what students are thinking."

"Little things really do go a long way, like the principal at the front door, greeting students, saying 'nice new shoes,' 'I like your haircut' What you are really saying is 'I notice you,' 'you matter to me.'"

"We have created a schedule so we have staff at the door each morning to greet students who arrive late and connect with families who are dropping off their children."

"We have changed our cell phone policy, and all students now have their own pouch – they have to store their device in it for the day. We schedule staff to hang around that area in the morning to make informal connections. We chat about our devices having no power. We make jokes together. It leads to more conversation, more engagement. It has made a huge difference for connectedness."

"I try to make connections by inviting students to play their music at the beginning of the day – as long as it is appropriate for the school setting. Later, I ask them to chat about why they like it. I sometimes play music I like, as well, and tell students what it means to me."

"We found that some students were hesitant about completing interest surveys at the beginning of the school year. They were shy about exposing themselves to teachers they didn't know well. So we tried something different. We have them fill out interest surveys at the end of the school year, with teachers they have come to know and trust. Then those are passed to their new teachers in the fall of the next school year, and students are encouraged to change or add things if they want to."

"We play 'people bingo.' We make bingo cards with characteristics or experiences and play bingo. For example, a bingo card might include 'I like brussel sprouts,' 'I have gone surfing,' 'I can play the ukelele.' It's a great way to get to know more about each other – while having fun."

CONNECTING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

ADULTS CAN USE A VARIETY OF TECHNIQUES WHEN INTERACTING WITH YOUNG STUDENTS.

- ▶ Being child-centred helps, which means letting children lead conversations. Allowing conversations to revolve around the child's current interests and talking about what children are paying attention to makes it easier for them to understand what is being said – and often makes conversations more enjoyable for both the child and the adult!
- ▶ Another way to be more child-centred is to squat, kneel, or sit down to a child's level. When face-to-face, children are more likely to pay attention to what an adult is saying, and adults are more likely to notice what the child is experiencing. In fact, being aware of body language is important for students of all ages – and can be particularly important with our youngest students.
- ▶ Patience and waiting are also important skills for adults to employ. Children may need time to think about what they hear and to think about what they are going to say. Adults have a tendency to follow up on questions too quickly. Some children need more time to think. It is worth experimenting with longer pauses to see if a child talks more when given an opportunity and “wait-time.”
- ▶ Engage in genuine conversations with children. Wonder aloud. Encourage curiosity.
- ▶ Help children explain what they are thinking or feeling. Explicitly teach what emotions look and feel like. Offer words / vocabulary when needed to help children articulate and explain their thoughts and emotions.

STRATEGIES TO TRY: USING ATTENDANCE QUESTIONS TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

Adapted from Charles, N. September 11, 2022. <https://teachsimple.com/blog/classroom-management/attendance-questions/>

One strategy for building a creative and interactive classroom community is using attendance questions. What does this mean?

- ▶ At the start of class, ask a “question of the day.” Students can then respond to show they are in attendance – and to help them get warmed up to think and learn.

This strategy can provide an opportunity to promote brief discussions and help students develop social skills in the classroom setting. It can help students think critically and share their ideas and opinions, which can build their confidence for speaking in class. It can also help everyone get to know each other a little bit better to encourage trust and help students feel more comfortable taking risks in the classroom and in their learning.

TIPS

- ❑ Consider putting slips of paper with questions in a jar, and let a different student choose a question each time you use this strategy.
- ❑ You could ask a question about a lesson you are teaching that day.
- ❑ After your students have had practice answering attendance questions, you could choose different students to ask the attendance question, providing leadership opportunities.
- ❑ Ask open-ended questions that require thought.
- ❑ Give students a minute or two to think about their answers and respond.
- ❑ If you want your students to be engaged with the question, ask about something that’s relevant to them ... a community event, pop culture, or their personal interests and experiences.
- ❑ Try to mix up the types of questions you ask. You might want to ask a mix of factual questions, opinion questions, and brain-teaser questions.
- ❑ And don’t forget to answer the question yourself to share a bit about you, which can add to your efforts to build trust and connections.

STRATEGIES TO TRY: USING ATTENDANCE QUESTIONS TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

Sample Questions

For Elementary

- ▶ What would life be like as your favorite animal? (students should pick only one animal)
- ▶ What holiday do you wish happened more often?
- ▶ What pizza topping do you dislike the most?
- ▶ How much do you think you weigh on the moon? (could be discussed later in a science lesson)
- ▶ What's your favourite breakfast cereal and why?
- ▶ What's the best book you ever read?

For Middle School

- ▶ Would you rather be a mammal, a bird, a reptile, or a fish? (choose one and explain)
- ▶ Who is one person you wish you could have lunch with and why?
- ▶ What candy do you love the most? (choose one and tell why)

For High School

- ▶ Would you rather have one million dollars or have a penny double every day for 30 days? (reveal the comparison later in class)
- ▶ If you were a social media influencer, what positive message would you promote?
- ▶ How can you help a random person today? (e.g. smile at them, hold the door)



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Build Trust

A critical component of creating positive connections with students is building trust. Students who feel psychologically safe and feel confident about what they can expect from adults in the school will enjoy coming, want to do well, and strive to be their best selves in the classroom.¹⁹

To establish trust, it is often helpful for school staff to begin by reflecting on their assumptions, thinking deeply about how they act with all students and what they can do to build a real classroom community. Due to the day-to-day pressures of their job, educators can sometimes fall into patterns of thinking that fail to fully appreciate students' potential and interest in learning.²⁰ Staff need to be aware of their own aspirations for students, and their actions. What questions can educators ask themselves?

- ▶ Do I assume the best about every student (and their families)? Do I identify, value, and build on the aspirations and contributions of students and their families?
- ▶ Do I engage with students and their families from a strength-based rather than deficit-based stance?
- ▶ Am I approachable, kind, and friendly, while always behaving in ways that are professional?
- ▶ Am I equally attentive to all students, which includes equitably calling on students for input and answers, directing lower-order and higher-order questions to all, and identifying and assigning appropriate leadership roles regardless of students' gender identities, abilities, behaviours, and circumstances.

¹⁹ Creekmore and Creekmore, 2024

²⁰ Margolis, 2024

- Do students believe that I genuinely care about them and am committed to their success?

First impressions do matter, and building a foundation for positive relationships can begin even before students start school. Some educators call students' homes before the start of the school year to introduce themselves and share positive messages about the year ahead. Some teachers send home post-cards – telling students how excited they are about building a classroom community, and sharing encouraging thoughts about what will be happening in the months to come. Simple steps can help reduce students' nervousness or anxiety and can send a welcoming tone even before the school year officially starts. In one First Nation school, teachers decorate their classroom doors and classrooms for the first day of school in a competition for best theme! It makes the students excited to come and see what the school looks like – making the first day extra welcoming. Or you could drive the school bus filled with staff around the community, to meet and welcome students and families just before school starts.

Authenticity, honesty, and relatability are also fundamental for trust. Students must feel confident that they can be themselves and, conversely, they must believe that school staff are also being genuine. Students need to know that people will be accepted as individuals, in a school and classroom environment that values differences and does not allow anyone to be ridiculed or excluded. Acceptance must be unconditional – based not on what students do, but instead based on who they are – a particularly important focus for secondary students. Teens who feel accepted and connected are less likely to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviours, and generally express greater school satisfaction.²¹

Predictability and reliability are key for building trust. Trust is fostered when people do what they say they are going to do and follow through on commitments. Students feel secure when school staff and the learning environment are dependable, ideally with expectations that have been jointly developed and are consistently maintained. This includes having clear, reasonable boundaries that are fairly and compassionately implemented – so students see that rules are not haphazardly enforced and to preserve everyone's right to learn. There is strong evidence that students want a fair, steady, caring adult in the room who will ensure smooth classroom operations.²²

For example, staff can maintain an 'empathetic mindset' about behaviour; students can face reasonable and logical consequences for misbehaviours, but that can happen in a way that pulls students closer rather than pushing them away. The First Peoples

²¹ Smith et. al. 2024

²² Smith et. al. 2024



Principles of Learning state: “Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions.” When problems occur, responses should be focused on maintaining strong relationships while still standing up for the norms that are needed to create a safe classroom that facilitates learning for everyone (Young, 2024). This may involve:

- ▶ Being consistent in implementing expectations and consequences, without playing favorites.
- ▶ Ensuring consequences are reasonable and the reasons for consequences are clear.
- ▶ Letting students explain their actions and tell their side of the story.
- ▶ Taking into account context and mitigating circumstances when determining responses.
- ▶ Treating information about students’ difficulties and mistakes respectfully, being as confidential as possible while attending to student safety.
- ▶ Apologizing if a student is treated unjustly.

A productive relationship between teachers and students requires deliberate efforts to ensure more positive interactions than negative ones; positive comments should out-number corrections or reminders. Knowing students well helps educators understand when they need encouragement or praise, and when they are most open to constructive feedback.²³



Inviting Versus Uninviting Teachers

(adapted from Smith, Fisher, Frey, Pompei, and Stewart. 2024)

Uninviting teachers ...

- Are judgmental and belittling
- Are uninterested in the lives and feelings of students
- Isolate themselves from school life
- Seek power over students
- Have low expectations
- Don't feel effective, and blame students for low results
- Fail to notice students’ learning differences
- Offer little feedback to students

Inviting teachers ...

- Are consistent and steady with students
- Notice learning challenges and respond accordingly and in a timely way
- Respond regularly with constructive feedback
- Seek to build, maintain, and (when necessary) repair relationships
- Are reflective about their connections to students
- Are aware of what works well with students
- Find ways to respond when students are not learning

23 Rockwell, 2022

WHAT ELSE CAN SCHOOL STAFF DO?

- ❑ Find opportunities to talk informally to students. Talk to them about their lives outside of the classroom. Get to know who they are, what they like, and what they hope to do. Show students the school's staff are available and ready to listen; this often leads to students opening up, talking about their feelings, and reaching out for help when they need it.
- ❑ Arrange a one-on-one meeting with a student if it is difficult to make a connection. Have an open conversation, being transparent, open-minded, and an engaged listener. Withhold any judgment in talking to the student and avoid any argumentative responses or corrections.
- ❑ Spend the first 5-10 minutes of a staff meeting writing post-cards to students with encouraging messages – making sure every student receives a post-card at some point during the year. Or write students letters of appreciation for their persistence and hard work.
- ❑ Follow through on promises and conversations. For example, if you say you will read a book or watch a movie a student recommends, do it. Attend an after-school event if you've said you will be there. If you can't, tell students why.
- ❑ Share your stories. Sharing personal stories that are topic- and age-appropriate can help students feel more connected to adults. It is also a safe way to help students make sense of situations, because the stories are about someone else. For example, using stories about your own educational challenges can help students see how important it is to persevere and understand that challenges are just part of the journey to success. Never underestimate the importance of giving students time to share what is going on in their lives – and sharing what is going on in your life, as well. This opportunity can change the way you view students, and it can help students see other people in new ways, as well.
- ❑ Intentionally use simple but constructive strategies when interacting with students, such as:
 - actively listening, talking with – not about – students, and following their lead in conversations.
 - being observant and respectful of students' feelings, showing sensitivity and caring about their thoughts and experiences.
 - welcoming, appreciating, and respecting student feedback.This can be especially important for teens, who often feel misunderstood; adults in the school can role model positive attention, help teens identify and understand their feelings, and encourage teens to share their opinions in respectful ways.
- ❑ Model the standards of behaviour, tone, and language expected of students, while considering possible cultural and individual differences and, when necessary, making adjustments in response to the unique characteristics of students who have specific support needs or exceptionalities.

- ☐ Ensure that students feel safe and comfortable by behaving in ways that demonstrate warmth and kindness, while always being respectful of appropriate student / staff roles and boundaries.
- ☐ Notice and attend to changes in students' behaviours and achievement; investigate why students might be exhibiting challenges in order to inform appropriate responses and support.
- ☐ Be approachable, so students feel welcome to ask questions and seek assistance when needed.
- ☐ Contact two students per week to give them a compliment that they can then pass along to their families.
- ☐ Occasionally put notes on students' desks, recognizing something they have done well, providing encouragement about an upcoming test or assignment, or expressing gratitude for just being a great person.
- ☐ Respect students' confidentiality, to the extent that it will not put anyone in danger / is consistent with legal and professional responsibilities related to reporting suspected abuse or self-harm.
- ☐ Expect and encourage respectful behaviours amongst students, and intentionally plan activities and opportunities to help students develop their ability to create positive relationships with others. Think about how to structure daily routines and practices to promote opportunities for students to interact together in collaborative and constructive ways, reflecting on the classroom seating arrangement, layout of space, learning activities, and areas set up to accommodate various activities, meal and snack times, tidy-up times, and outdoor activities.
- ☐ Immediately attend to any conflict / bullying / disrespectful interactions amongst students, and promote kindness, providing students opportunities to notice and compliment others' positive choices and behaviours. For example, a teacher can ask students after recess, "Did you notice anyone being especially nice to someone else?" "How did you help?" "Who did you invite to join your game?"
- ☐ Be particularly aware of the needs of students who have exceptionalities and the importance of ensuring that all students have opportunities to interact with their peers and make positive personal connections.
- ☐ If you make a mistake, take steps to repair trust. Be a role model for being honest and acknowledging when things have not gone well. For example, if you had a bad night's sleep and you have low energy or might not be at your best, explain that to students and let them know your mood or reactions have nothing to do with them.
- ☐ Always be mindful that students notice how adults in the school interact with others. They see how adults speak about each other and they are aware of body language; is it respectful, patient, kind? This can set the tone for how members of the school community are expected to treat each other. If students don't think the adults in the school are working together as a team, if they are aware of division amongst the staff, they won't be as comfortable seeking help when they need it.

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Kids are resilient. No matter what is happening with them, if someone is genuinely talking with them, they will listen."

"We have a school-wide check-in first thing in the morning, and our staff eat breakfast with our students."

"I recommend starting each school day off with a morning circle, or an announcement that reminds everyone in the school 'don't forget to be awesome!' Make sure to begin each day in a positive way."

"School staff can make a huge impact on students when they are young, and if you build a relationship with them early, they will keep looking to you for advice as they advance in school."

"We implement a 'week without walls' every year at the end of the summer. Students do daily activities related to outdoor education, language and culture, team building, and community service. We plan activities that are meant to build connections and build students' self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, in the community service group, students made gift bags with toiletries and basic supplies, and then they handed the bags out to families. We talked with the students about the importance of generosity. For the outdoor group, our theme was building mastery. All of the students rotate between the activities, so they get to know all of the school staff in a more relaxed setting – outside of the classroom. We also invite families and community members to volunteer and help, and on the final afternoon we have a big BBQ with families invited."

"We regularly let students know they are important and the school cares about them, and we check in with students one-on-one."

"We ask our students to be vulnerable and open with us, and it is just as important that we honestly show our students that we also feel frustrated, tired, excited, celebratory ... at times. We can't ask kids to be vulnerable without leading the way. Sometimes our school teams need to be reminded of that."

"We make sure all staff use clear but gentle discipline practices."

"We need to pro-actively teach interpersonal and life skills, and teach kids how to communicate effectively by being role models ourselves."

"What classroom / school routines could provide added opportunities to build connections with students? Try ..."

- ▶ Morning meetings / breakfast sharing circles
- ▶ Exercising / stretching together in the morning
- ▶ Daily drumming
- ▶ Looking for ways to provide more outside time / land-based teachings
- ▶ Using support circles
- ▶ Having hard conversations when it will benefit students
- ▶ Songs in the language to start the day"

HOW TO BUILD AN “INVITING” CLIMATE

Everyone wants to feel invited, and schools can be intentional in building a climate that makes everyone feel they are wanted. Think about how this can happen.

- ☐ Be a role model. Use respectful, positive invitations for students to contribute their ideas or add input into class discussions and projects.
- ☐ Intentionally plan learning activities that involve students inviting others to join in.
- ☐ Encourage students to ask peers to join them on the playground, in the gym before or after school, in the lunchroom ...
- ☐ Prepare for a field trip by facilitating a class discussion about how everyone can help each other feel part of the group.
- ☐ Model inviting behaviour by emailing, calling, or sending home messages to parents, inviting them to school events, asking them to join in a classroom activity, ...

Try to think about other ideas – independently, or “inviting” colleagues to discuss this as a team.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH CONFLICT

School staff can help students learn conflict resolution strategies, such as giving students sentence starters or frameworks for responding to difficulties. Deliberately addressing this issue can begin with young children. For example ...

- ▶ Young students often approach adults saying, “NAME, is being mean to me.”
- ▶ Often, the adult will step in and try to resolve the conflict or simply tell the students to stop.

Consider the following approach, instead.

- ▶ Ask the student what made them feel unhappy. What did the other student do to upset them?
 - ▶ Ask the student if they told their classmate how they are feeling. Did they ask the other student to stop? Did they say they didn’t like what was being done or said?
-
- If not, help the student have a conversation with their classmate. Help both students learn to express their side of the incident in a respectful way.
 - If they have already spoken up and asked the other student to stop making them feel bad, you can still help facilitate a productive conversation. Ask the students if they heard each other. Talk about how important it is to truly listen to other people when they tell us something we are doing makes others feel bad. Share – in an age-appropriate way – an example from your own life when you learned about something you were doing that made someone else uncomfortable, and how much better you felt when you were able to correct your behaviour. It feels very good when we have opportunities to say, “sorry I didn’t know, and I can stop doing that.”

STRATEGY TO TRY: THE TWO-BY-TEN STRATEGY

Adapted from McKibben, S. July 1, 2024. The Two-Minute Relationship Builder. ASCD.

Sometimes called the two-minute intervention, the Two-by-Ten strategy is a research-based way to connect with students who may be hard-to-reach. Many students who act out in the classroom are actually seeking a safe outlet to communicate with a trusted adult. The Two-by-Ten approach can help build authentic relationships and offer social-emotional support, and it can be used by teachers, principals, Education Assistants, or any other school staff members.

The strategy involves spending two minutes a day for 10 consecutive days getting to know a student who is struggling to maintain positive bonds or is exhibiting disruptive behaviors. Some students will be more receptive to conversations than others, but persistence can help, and most students become less resistant by the end of the two-week period.

Keeping the content of the conversations easy and pleasant, centered on low-pressure topics and the student's personal interests, is essential to making the strategy work. The discussions should extend beyond the typical "how are you today, nice to see you," and talking about a school assignment or lesson is less effective. The focus of Two-by-Ten is just getting to know the child or teen outside of the school and classroom context – talking about extra-curricular interests, favourite foods, movies, books, sports teams, etc. Open-ended questions work well.

Setting up opportunities to casually "run into a student" can make the two-minute conversation less threatening, such as walking beside the student to music or PE, checking in on them at lunch, or walking out with them at the end of the day.

Consistency is key; several short conversations are more effective than fewer longer conversations.

After the 10 days of deliberate connections, the momentum often continues – leading to real relationships.

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Make the Learning Environment Fun

While schools must clearly maintain a focus on learning and using instructional time deliberately and constructively, ensuring that the learning environment is comfortable and fun can help build connections – which increases student achievement and well-being.

Although humour may not be the first priority in the classroom, smiles and shared laughter can foster positive relationships.

Appropriate humour makes learning more engaging and encourages students to pay attention, and it is possible to have fun while still maintaining strong classroom management. Weaving humour throughout the lesson lightens the mood and can help reduce anxiety.

Staff can make jokes, share funny stories, post cartoons, be light-hearted, and not take themselves too seriously – which makes students more open to connecting with the adults in the building. Playing games together can also be engaging – such as mock quiz shows with fun questions and answers. Friendly competitions can build community, with the keyword being *friendly*; make sure competitive activities are low stakes and put the emphasis on learning instead of winning.





**Classroom
Expectations:
SAMPLE**

In our class we all
do our best to learn.
We try hard, we
do our best, and
we try new things
without being afraid.
We think making
mistakes means we
are learning. We are
kind and respectful
to each other and
want everyone to be
safe. And most of all,
we have fun.

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

- ☐ Hold school assemblies aimed at creating togetherness, teamwork, and school pride.
- ☐ Host fun events with entertainment to bring all staff, students, and families together to create positive energy and help everyone feel part of a greater whole.
- ☐ Play together – sports, board games, outdoor activities.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Once a month, we have a secondary student versus staff basketball game. We have found it sometimes brings in students who normally don't attend regularly. Now we are recognizing that some kids don't love basketball, so we are thinking about whether we can do other types of activities that are fun and build friendly relationships."

"Host a whole school fitness dance – with staff and students joining together for a fun and healthy activity."

"We use a "Joke Day," with older students sharing jokes with younger students in the gym."

"We host a back-to-school BBQ, with live music, food, and gifts for everyone who attends (students, staff and parents). We make it as exciting as we can."

"We really promote our outdoor education activities – kayaking, canoe sessions, etc. – to build interest in the school and improve attendance."

"It is important to encourage staff to play with students during breaks and find opportunities for the principal to spend unstructured time (e.g. during recess or lunch) with students."

"We try to connect our learning centres – such as having staff and students in our alternate centre play baseball against the elementary school. It allows us to enjoy being together as a larger learning community."

"There are lots of ways to enjoy each other's company."

- ▶ *Share jokes during announcements.*
- ▶ *Dance together for ten minutes each morning.*
- ▶ *Host a monthly bonfire as a school community.*
- ▶ *Use students vs. staff games / activities to enjoy and get to know one another.*
- ▶ *Implement gratitude circles."*

FEEDBACK AT FEBRUARY 2025 CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

How do you incorporate humour and fun into the learning environment in productive, appropriate ways?

- ▶ *We do Halloween big!*
- ▶ *A “Yahoo” over the PA at the end of the day.*
- ▶ *Spirit weeks – PJ day, crazy hair day, etc.*
- ▶ *Card games that challenge students to remember tasks they've learned.*
- ▶ *Juggling and sleight of hand tricks.*
- ▶ *Field trips and outdoor learning.*
- ▶ *We organize after-school swimming, bowling, skating, gymnastics ...*
- ▶ *Fun Fridays work for us.*
- ▶ *Incorporating fun technology activities into lessons, like Kahoot, Blooket, etc.*
- ▶ *Brain breaks / movement breaks throughout the day.*
- ▶ *We post a “joke of the day” students see when they come in each morning.*
- ▶ *Many of our classes begin the day with a soft start for engagement / opportunities to connect. Students can choose board games, art, reading, etc. to start the day.*
- ▶ *What is simple and effective? Keep a smile on your face even when you don't feel “smiley.”*
- ▶ *We planned a fun fair with a bouncy castle, a clown, a cake walk, games and prizes.*
- ▶ *Staff versus student games are fun!*
- ▶ *Reading funny short stories gets everyone laughing.*
- ▶ *Incorporating the “trickster raven” into lessons when we can.*
- ▶ *Dress up silly on theme days.*
- ▶ *Going outside with students is so important.*
- ▶ *Quoting funny movies or Tik Toks, etc.*
- ▶ *I put up a daily riddle written in our language.*
- ▶ *Sometimes we take a break using Youtube videos for short, simple yoga / fitness / meditation activities ...*
- ▶ *Organizing fun evening events for families.*
- ▶ *Using game design as classroom projects.*
- ▶ *Using music or songs to promote memory and retention.*
- ▶ *In PE classes we always warm up with a GLO activity – Games of Low Organization – to build comfort and fun for all.*
- ▶ *We have a lake day at the end of the year. We go to the lake, swim, play, have a hot dog roast and a picnic ... staff and students really bond.*
- ▶ *Turning learning activities into group challenges can be fun and engaging.*
- ▶ *Knowing what type of learning is fun for your groups, creating multi-disciplinary lessons that include art, PE games, experiments, etc.*
- ▶ *Jeopardy type game on the smartboard, focused on the lesson being taught.*
- ▶ *Being open to silliness, such as pretending the principal is calling me to talk about the class positively.*
- ▶ *Grade 7 teachers offer to do a popular TikTok dance if students complete their work.*
- ▶ *We have play-based learning daily.*
- ▶ *I use a special puppet only for circle time, with its own voice and personality*

USING HUMOUR WISELY

Adapted from Miriam Plotinsky. 2024, December 4. Using Humor—Sparingly—in the Classroom. Edutopia.

Not all teachers are comfortable using humour in their classrooms, but the use of humour can be an effective strategy and can make students feel more positive about the learning space when it is leveraged correctly.

HOW TO MAKE THE USE OF HUMOUR PRODUCTIVE?

- ▶ Using gentle forms of humour can make course content more accessible and build a strong sense of classroom community. For example, cheesy humour that does not have a sharp edge will at worst make kids groan.
 - A geometry teacher might joke that if you are cold, go to the corner of the room because it is always 90 degrees there.
 - A chemistry teacher might brag about having all the solutions.
 - After a snowfall, a math teacher might say “I wish we could all go outside and make snow angles.”

“Dad jokes” can make students smile, and can increase comradery as classmates all roll their eyes together.

- ▶ Avoid sarcasm at all costs. It has no place in the classroom. Students often interpret this type of humour as meanness.
- ▶ If a joke has landed wrong, apologize. Often students whose feelings have been hurt do not explicitly let teachers know; instead, the signs are more subtle, such as becoming more quiet or withdrawn. If concerns arise, follow up with students privately and be explicit about how much you care about them. This might involve offering positive statements such as “your success is important to me” or “you make such valuable contributions to our class.”

Being thoughtful about the appropriate use of humour can help to lighten the atmosphere by embracing the joy of teaching and learning without offending anyone.

INPUT AT FEBRUARY 2025 CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

- ▶ *We use “Dad jokes” as a way to talk about language and the meaning of words.*
- ▶ *Our staff joke with each other in appropriate / gentle ways in front of students.*
- ▶ *Be yourself; don't force humour, but be relaxed and joyful.*
- ▶ *I love making jokes WITH students, but NEVER about students.*

IDEA TO CONSIDER: FIRST FRIDAY

Adapted from Rossi-Munpower, N. July 13, 2023.

On the first Friday of each month, the school lunch hour can be used as an opportunity for staff, students, and families to come together as a school community.

- ▶ Invite students to showcase their talents and interests. For example, student musicians can sign up to perform, either in groups or solo. Performers can choose the material to perform (provided it is school appropriate), which offers them a sense of agency. Or students, with adults as relevant, can share their cultural learnings – music, dance, stories, etc.
- ▶ Use food to connect. Perhaps allow students to suggest a theme or idea for food tasting, or use a surprise menu to generate excitement. Invite feedback about what foods students enjoy and would like to try. Making a lunch hour special can help foster deepened relationships between students and food service providers, enhancing everyone's connectedness to the school community.
- ▶ Showcase student artwork and crafts on First Fridays. Set up a gallery walk to celebrate pieces of art produced by students. In addition to building self-esteem and confidence, sharing offers a real-world audience to student artists and craft makers, and can spark conversations among students and adults who may not have previously connected.

Such a celebratory routine can improve relationships, and can also have a positive impact on participants' mental health and well-being. Coming together for a communal activity can create a sense of comradery, enjoyment, and belonging.

GAMIFYING THE CLASSROOM

Adapted from Best, 2019.

Games are a powerful source of engagement for students, and they can be a great way to build rapport within the classroom and encourage student attendance. Here are a few quick tips to gamify the learning in your classroom.

1. Choose a goal for the game. All classroom games should have a purpose that supports learning. The goal might be:
 - a general instructional goal, such as completing an activity or assignment.
 - a specific learning goal, such as developing an understanding of a specific concept, and showing progress in learning.
 - a behavioural goal, where the game is designed to promote positive behaviour, engagement, or attention.
2. Whatever goals you choose, make sure they're clear to your students. They'll lend the game a greater sense of importance and show how it is part of the learning journey.
3. Encourage *friendly, fun, low-stakes* competition. It is important to make sure games are not stressful or intimidating; they should build a sense of community, not detract from it. For example, perhaps groups of students can work together toward a goal. The group nature of the activity lessens the pressure felt by individuals. Or make it teacher versus students – which can work particularly well for behavioral goals. For example, you might set a goal (e.g. everyone has to stop talking within three seconds of a call to attention) and award students a point every time they follow it. If they don't — that's a point for you. Set a fun reward for the winner at the end!
4. Give classic games an educational twist. Classic board and card games can easily be adapted for learning. Scrabble is great for developing vocabulary and spelling skills. Give students access to the dictionary while they play and they'll progress even further. Or simple games like Go Fish are great for younger learners developing number sense, and you can also create your own game with a regular deck of cards. Perhaps students could arrange them to create number families, put them on top of each other to make fractions, etc.
5. Give your students a sense of ownership over the learning game by setting their own targets or goals for success or creating their own progress tracking system. (Depending on their age, this could be a sheet that gets stickers or an Excel spreadsheet).
6. You can give rewards (maybe a certificate or a small token) but don't over-emphasize the prize. The goal is for students to feel motivated and engaged. And you can reward all types of "winning:" students who set new personal bests, demonstrate impressive effort, work well with peers while playing the game, etc.

DESIGNING JOYFUL LEARNING

Adapted from Culatta, R. Designing Joyful Learning; Schwankem J. A Thing and a Buddy: The Power of Identity as a Path to Joy; and Scott, D. The Joy-Driven Principal. December 1, 2024. Educational Leadership. Vol. 82. No. 4.

Using joy as a lens can help with the design of learning experiences that students will want to be a part of.

To explore this issue, school leadership teams can ask themselves how positive mindsets, thoughtful choices, and equitable systems can create experiences that compel staff, students, and families to come to school – and stay.

Schools can create intentional time and space to think more deeply about how to create the conditions for joy. One school began to infuse joy among staff and students by forming a Sunshine Committee, a team of volunteers who lead joy-building activities. The team plans staff outings and celebrations, and welcomes new educators warmly. They plan deliberate ways to help students feel joyful.

SCHOOL STAFF CAN ASK THEMSELVES:

- ▶ What does joy-infused learning design mean to us? To center joy in the school community, it is important to develop a shared language to talk about joy and align school goals and policies accordingly.
- ▶ Imagine what it would look like if all learning experiences were designed through a lens of joy. How would our school feel if joy were an underlying design principle?
- ▶ How can we create magical moments for students?
- ▶ What can we do today to make everyone want to come back tomorrow? Joy makes teachers and students want to be in the school and creates excitement about the work they are doing.

Building students' sense of identity and helping them feel positive about their future options is part of their path to joy. Identity gives us the answers to questions like What are my strengths? Where do I fit in the world? What excites me? What makes me optimistic? How do I like to spend my time? Where do I find peace? Students can build identity and confidence about their futures through choice-based assignments, project-based learning experiences, off-site learning, a capstone event to a unit, a performance-based assessment, a guest speaker, a reward day—the list goes on and on.

Joy isn't constant. It can show up in flashes of happiness, satisfaction, or accomplishment. But one or two joyous moments for a child throughout a day can make all the difference in how they feel about school and their future.



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Recognize Students Who Contribute to a Positive School Climate

Recognition is powerful; it can dramatically effect both teacher and student behaviour, and small tokens of appreciation and respect have a strong impact. When you acknowledge children and youth for their accomplishments, positive attitudes, and contributions in front of their peers, you not only highlight the association between effort and achievement; you also satisfy their need to be appreciated. Even small rewards can boost motivation and promote behavioural change.

Student recognition can come in many forms, such as ...

- ▶ Being celebrated in the morning announcements, on a school bulletin board, or in a school or class newsletter.
- ▶ Certificates of achievement or a hand-written note.
- ▶ Tangible rewards, such as donated gift cards, candy, or inexpensive prize selections.
- ▶ Points accrued toward a bigger reward.
- ▶ Low- or no-cost privileges, such as lunch with the principal, extra playground time, class leader for the day, etc.
- ▶ Phone calls or emails to parents, praising a student's accomplishment - no matter how big or small.
- ▶ "Go to the Office" slips, for teachers to give students who do something positive. The student takes the slip to the principal, who then compliments the child, writes a note to the parents on the slip for the child to take home / calls the parents to share the positive news.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"We use a program we call the "awesome job" box. When kids have been helpful, demonstrated good behaviour, or did something nice, we say, "awesome job" and they get a box with some candies, stickers, small toys"

"Use "Gotcha Tickets" to reward and publicly acknowledge students when they are making positive contributions. Our school staff hand out "Gotcha Cards" to students who are caught doing something helpful. Then we have a daily draw for a "Gotcha" winner."

"We put a tree up and add leaves with students' names to recognize all the good things they are doing in school."

"At our school, we celebrate the "Three R's" ... Ready Respectful, and Responsible. Each month, our teachers nominate students who are recognized for practicing the three R's."

"We host a "Rock-Star-Lunch." When a student does something kind, their name is put on the bulletin board. Then once a week we draw names to have a special lunch with the principal."

"I use a "pompom pop-pop strategy." Every time the kids do something thoughtful, I put a pompom in the jar. When it is full, we have a popcorn party."

"Whenever you see something positive ... pounce on it."

"When teachers catch kids doing good things – picking up garbage without being asked, holding the door for others ... they can award "class bucks" that kids can save up to "buy" small rewards."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Our principal awards a certificate to a few 'students of the week'." Students love taking the certificates home to show their families. Then we have a Pow Wow each year, and students are acknowledged for their certificates there, as well."

"We have a 'Kindness Cup.'" Our counsellor awards it to a different class each month that seems to be doing nice things for each other. The class gets a small reward, and everyone looks forward to having the Kindness Cup passed to their classroom."

"We put kids' names on a board when they have done something kind. It is really fun to watch the kids run to the board to see their names on display."

"Recognizing kids who contribute to the school is really important, but we need to remember that older kids may not want attention. We need to accommodate kids who like public acknowledgement, and those who would prefer it to be private."

"It is nice to find ways to have students acknowledge one another. Being recognized by their peers often means more to students than being recognized by adults."

"You can organize a 'don't forget to be awesome' challenge – having teachers recognize students who are being positive / helping others / doing something great."

"We can all work to normalize incentives. Many schools offer incentives as part of attendance campaigns. But we can offer incentives not just for attendance, but also for showing kindness, making a strong effort, improved behaviour ... a range of things."

"Our community leads a 'You Rock' program. We reach out to our students' teachers a month before the school year ends. We ask them to nominate all students for a recognition award. It might be improved attendance, or showing kindness, or outstanding effort, or helping another student We make sure every student is nominated for something. We then host a community meeting at the end of the school year to celebrate all of our children and teens. A few winners receive prizes, but all of the students receive a certificate, which includes a message from the teacher describing why the student was nominated."

"My granddaughter is in middle school. She showed me a feather she had decorated in school, and she said, 'I don't really know what to do with this.'" I asked her if I could have it, and I got it framed. When she saw that, she felt such pride – seeing that I really valued her work. She is a bit shy, and this acknowledgment meant so much to her. We need to remember that recognizing our children's work really means something."

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Provide Students With Voice and Choice

Research shows that students do their best work and experience a greater sense of connectedness when they have:

- ▶ a sense of belonging and opportunities to share and contribute as respected and valued members of a community of learning;
- ▶ the spirit of mastery that comes through encouragement of their competencies and reminders that each student's gifts enhance the overall learning environment; and
- ▶ independence and agency, with chances to show responsibility and contribute to decision-making.

Each student has their own unique knowledge, perspectives, and identity, and it is important to seek out input about the education setting and participation from all students. Inviting students to share their thoughts might involve using open dialogue, as well as confidential surveys about specific concepts or topics, possibly designed by staff and/or students. Some schools and educators might even use a suggestion box, or a structured time for students to write down and share one celebration (something that went well) and one challenge (something they wish was going better). Regardless of what method is used, students feel more trust when they are asked for their opinions – and when they see that there is follow-up to their input (even if it is an explanation about why something might not be possible).

Giving students choice also relates to their sense of emotional safety. For example, a teacher might ask a student, “Would you like to write your response on the board, or would you like to write your response on your paper to show only me?” Teachers can even incorporate student choice as a whole-class activity. For instance, students might be asked, “For this activity, you can choose to share your own answers with the class, or you can share your answer with a partner first and then share what you think.” Utilizing “choice” in the classroom allows students to maintain a level of control that can reduce anxiety or any fear they might be feeling about participating.²⁴

The more opportunities students have to take the lead, the more ownership they feel over their learning experiences, and the more likely they are to want to spend time in school. When students are invited to share *their* ideas and opinions, we’re telling them that we value who they are and what they think. We are also building a classroom climate that fosters positive attitudes and greater attendance. Teachers, especially, can provide students with academic, social, and leadership experiences so they understand how to find and use their voice, building their capacity to communicate confidently and advocate for themselves.

Giving learners voice and choice transforms them into active participants in their own growth; they can become their own teachers. When students are more involved, they become more aware of their gifts and areas for further development, thereby better understanding and developing their own identity as learners. Knowing their strengths and challenges helps students understand how they can grow and contribute to others (including their family, community, and their environment and land).²⁵ Evidence suggests that when students have an active role in their learning, they learn to set and achieve goals, develop greater independence, and graduate more often.

Feeling useful and needed also contributes to students’ willingness to build relationships and engage confidently in academic and school activities. When children and youth are given chances to provide support and help others, their well-being and self-identity improve. Providing relevant opportunities for students to share their talents might include peer tutoring, cross-age mentoring, service learning, community-based projects, etc.

²⁴ Mabie, 2023.

²⁵ Chrona and Moore, 2023.

HOW CAN TEACHERS PROMOTE STUDENT V.O.I.C.E?²⁶

- ▶ Provide a **variety** of ways to demonstrate understanding. Differentiate instruction and allow students options for what and how they learn, how they can demonstrate what they know, and where they want to learn.
- ▶ Promote students' **ownership** of learning. This involves teaching students the value of learning tasks and helping them feel confident that they can tackle challenges and overcome any boundaries. To ensure students stay motivated and engaged, they can be allowed to choose topics that resonate with them. To facilitate students' agency, they can choose what problems to solve and the order in which to solve them. Having students self-assess their own work or the work of their peers can also help promote independence and responsibility for learning.
- ▶ Cultivate **innovation** and creativity, valuing questions as much as answers, helping students create and play, and challenging all students to explore their own curiosities.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for **collaboration** to develop students' social skills and promote a true classroom community.
- ▶ **Engage** students, partnering with them and guiding them through the process of identifying who they are, while facilitating learning through personalized curriculum and assessment. Students will be empowered by making choices in their education, using their voices, and self-evaluating their decisions.

26 Adapted from Cypher Learning. 2019

WHAT ELSE CAN SCHOOLS DO?

- ❑ Many schools establish a Student Advisory Committee, so students see that their opinions are being considered and to let students lead conversations about consequential school structures and systems. A Student Advisory Committee is also a great way to build students' leadership skills – and to meaningfully ensure that school practices are meeting the needs of students.
- ❑ Whenever possible, provide flexibility and choice in assignments and learning methods. For example, when assessing students' skills and knowledge, give options for how students will demonstrate their abilities, such as writing a story, sharing a narrative, creating a video, singing a song, making a collage ... Students can choose what book to study, design their own experiment, etc. Students can explore topics that interest them and make them feel excited about learning. The more students are given choice and autonomy, the more they'll feel valued as individuals.
- ❑ Involve students in critical (authentic) decisions about classroom learning, such as the development of classroom expectations / behavioral guidelines and the consequences of not demonstrating those expectations.
- ❑ Give students roles and responsibilities so they contribute to the success of the classroom.
- ❑ If you notice students who are reluctant to contribute, meet with them one-on-one to find ways to make them feel more secure in adding their thoughts and perspectives.
- ❑ Show students their voice matters by referencing their previous input, such as: "Remember when we were talking about essays before, and many of you suggested Let's try that this time." Or "Yesterday, you shared important information about how this topic relates to your community's traditional values. I would like to follow-up on that today."
- ❑ Encourage students to create, design, or adapt assignments to make them personally meaningful whenever possible. Choice promotes self-reliance and decision-making skills.
- ❑ Articulate clear expectations written in student-friendly language so everyone shares an understanding of learning targets and success criteria. Students can then be meaningfully involved in monitoring their own progress and growth.
- ❑ Consistently provide feedback that is high-quality, positive, encouraging, and relevant, and provide opportunities for students to promptly use that feedback in their learning. To help students feel comfortable receiving feedback, it can help to acknowledge students' efforts and demonstrate empathy, such as using "we" statements: e.g. "You've done a good job trying three problems. Let's see if we can do two more together to practice [this skill]."²⁷

WHAT ELSE CAN SCHOOLS DO?

- ☐ Pro-actively counter stereotypes or previous bad experiences. Deliberately interrupt comments such as: “I’ve always been bad at art,” “some students just can’t do math,” “everyone says I’m a trouble-maker.” Help students to reframe negative thinking, and to realistically evaluate *and celebrate* their own achievements.
- ☐ Build students’ sense of ownership of their learning and learning activities, including their sense of self-efficacy – i.e. a belief in their own capability to achieve a goal or complete a difficult task. This skill is related to students being intrinsically motivated, as well as their persistence, willingness to take risks, and commitment to keep trying. Focusing on self-efficacy is related to belonging and involvement, as it promotes students’ feelings of safety and value. Self-efficacy is related to being able to set goals, take steps toward those goals, and monitor and acknowledge progress. It includes feeling:
 - I am learning and what I am learning is important
 - I feel proud of my learning progress
 - I am ready and I can learn more

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

- ☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Do our students have voice? When they genuinely have a voice, they will want to be in school more."

"We tell our high school students – 'We know you can be successful. Here are the people who can help you. Use them.' We want to empower our students to advocate for themselves."

"Choice is powerful. For example, if you run an attendance incentive campaign, ask students "if you come five days in a row, what would you choose as a reward?" When we ask students this question, we find they consistently ask for very reasonable things."

"I have opened my door to students, and I encourage them to come to the principal's office just to check in when they need to. I let them talk first. I just listen. Then I ask them, "what can you do about it?" I want to help them learn to take accountability for their lives. I find more and more students are dropping in to see me. They appreciate an open ear."

"At the intermediate grade level in our school, we have a "legacy project." We ask students "what do you notice at school that needs improvement? What can you do to help? We have had kids volunteer to be reading assistants in classrooms, they have taken on recycling, they lead a cooking club ... It is exciting."

"Our intermediate students do an exhibition. It is like a science fair, but they can choose a passion-project on a topic of interest to them – the environment, cats, Pokeman ... whatever passion they have. Students make a presentation to share with the whole community. It helps students take a risk – show more about themselves, be seen in a way that is special to them. It allows us to celebrate our kids for who they are."

"We have a student leadership group that contributes to the school. They also fundraise so they can go on trips together."

"When kids take risks, put themselves out there, we need to put our blankets around them and really celebrate their courage."

"We promote leadership by having our older students act as "assistant supervisors" on the playground. Having older kids helping younger kids really holds them up."

"We held a "project fair" instead of a science fair. Kids did magic shows, played guitar, did a Nintendo demonstration ... showcasing their hobbies and things they feel good about."

"Our school has a Student Advisory Committee, which helps with attendance initiatives, planning spirit days and assemblies, organizing scavenger hunts"

"We are emphasizing students' innovation by encouraging them to pursue a creative hobby and helping them create things they can sell on a web site. Families are starting to join in, as well."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Connections can be increased by promoting students' confidence and public speaking skills so they can use their voices."

"Don't underestimate the importance of letting our children express themselves. It empowers them. It prepares them to be future leaders."

QUICK CHECK

Small messages matter. Do staff in your school use language that builds students up?

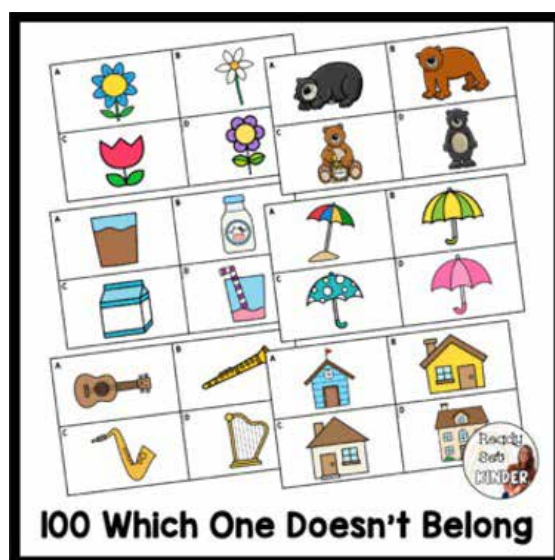
- ☐ **DON'T SAY:** "You have a lot of potential, but you are being lazy."
- ☐ **DO SAY:** "I know you have the potential to achieve great things. I've seen what you can do when you put in the effort. Let's keep trying."

- ☐ **DON'T SAY:** "Your school work is so disorganized it's no wonder you are finding it hard to get things done."
- ☐ **DO SAY:** "Getting organized is a skill like anything else. It just takes practice and commitment – and you are good at those things. You learned to be great at basketball. You can learn to stay organized. Let's talk about some systems you could try."

- ☐ **DON'T SAY:** "If you don't stop coming to school late you will never keep up with the other students."
- ☐ **DO SAY:** "I believe in you, and we love having you with us in class. I know if we work together we can think of ways you can arrive on time."

WHICH ONE DOESN'T BELONG ACTIVITY

Which one doesn't belong is a fun activity to get students engaged and thinking critically. Student groups look at four images and share their ideas about which one doesn't belong. There are no right or wrong answers. It is a great way to hear different perspectives, and it can help students practice their communication and persuasive skills. Some things to consider may be size, shape, color, surroundings, real/not real, angles, beginning letter sounds ...



FEEDBACK FROM CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS FEBRUARY 2025

- *"We use which one doesn't belong regularly in the classroom. It is a great, constructive way to fill unplanned breaks or extra time. It helps students really understand that there aren't always right or wrong answers. It is valuable for students who are sometimes hesitant to speak up in class for fear of being wrong. It encourages them to find their voice."*
- *"We use this activity to help students build their readiness for persuasive writing. It helps make students feel they have choice. It helps them learn to articulate their thinking and see that everyone has different approaches and understandings."*

STAFF MEETING REVIEW

Take time during a staff meeting to talk about how your school empowers students.

- ▶ How are students currently involved in decision-making in classrooms and the school? Do they have a voice in classroom set-up, classroom expectations / procedures, learning activities?
- ▶ Are students involved in school assessment and improvement planning processes?
- ▶ Do students have opportunities to provide their opinions, and is there follow-up to discuss whether and how student input can be implemented? How do educators and school leaders invite and promote this?
- ▶ Are students provided age-appropriate leadership opportunities – caring for the classroom pet, helping in the library, being part of a school hiring team, helping to plan a modular course or high-interest unit, helping to organize a field trip ...?
- ▶ Does the school encourage service learning / community service projects? Peer tutoring or other types of mentoring opportunities?
- ▶ Does the school offer a cooperative education program / career exploration opportunities?
- ▶ Are few, many, or most students involved in school activities?
- ▶ What else can be done to empower all students?

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP ALL STUDENTS HAVE A VOICE IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS - EVEN WHEN THEY DON'T ALWAYS ATTEND REGULARLY

Adapted from Kay, M. R. July 2024. Adapting Discussions to Unpredictable Attendance. ASCD

For many reasons, including reasons that are not in their control, many students struggle to attend school regularly, and pervasive and unpredictable absences can make it difficult to plan lessons and class activities. Students who miss school can also feel disconnected and alienated when they return – especially if they don't feel part of conversations. This can lead to more absences.

If attendance is a challenge in your classroom, it is important to consider ways to facilitate meaningful discussions within the context of a single class period – without assuming prior knowledge, knowing that some students will not have done the related readings or preparations, and not expecting to follow up with all of the students the following day.

WHAT CAN YOU TRY?

Provide students immediate access to relevant information and key terms at the beginning of the lesson or discussion. Some students may not need this background, but it can serve as a reminder or prompt, and students who missed school will need the information to participate; otherwise, they will likely fall further behind, feel left out, become disengaged, and possibly cause classroom management problems. As Kay (2024) states, “we cannot fill students’ return to school with “gotcha” moments meant to shame them into attending” – even if they are unintended. Instead, it is crucial to find ways to bring them back into classroom activities.

There are various ways to ground students in the information being discussed. For example:

- ▶ The teacher or students can read aloud a portion of text that will be discussed. Even a two or three-minute investment will benefit students who were absent – as well as students who could use a review.
- ▶ The lesson or discussion can begin with a quick summary that might only take a few minutes. The teacher could share some vital background all students need to participate, or student volunteers could be asked to provide a short summary.

Even with a short introduction, students who have been absent or who were not involved in previous learning opportunities might not benefit from a discussion as much as students who were there. However, providing some background will help all students get something out of the learning activity, and it may help to ensure that class discussions are not just another chance for students who miss school to feel excluded from the classroom community.



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Accept All Students - and Their Mistakes

Related to building relationships with students is the importance of valuing all students - treating them with the same level of respect and kindness, even when they are struggling or acting out. A behaviour is usually a form of communication, and it serves a purpose.

- ▶ Sometimes, there are things going on in the classroom or school that can affect a student's behaviour. These are more easily addressed by the teacher.
- ▶ Sometimes significant events in a student's life have an effect on the student. While teachers cannot change those events, they can thoughtfully respond to the behaviours that result.

The two most common needs that cause disruptive behaviours are:

- ▶ To get something (e.g. more time, understanding, order, calm, peer or adult attention, a desired object or activity, or sensory stimulation).
- ▶ To avoid something (e.g. a stressor, a frustration, a difficult, boring, or too-easy task, a physical demand, an activity the student doesn't like, or an unwanted interaction with another person).

Some disruptive behaviours may be mild and easily corrected, while others may be more severe and need more targeted interventions (such as involving other school resource people).

It is important that school staff remain patient when things become difficult and don't take students' behaviours personally. As the First Peoples Principals of Learning state: "Learning takes patience and time" – a principle that applies to both educators and students. Educators can ask: "Are the student's actions related to their learning?," "What are they trying to express when they behave that way?," "Can I do anything to help?," "What might the student need?," "What are they seeking?"

Education staff must accept that mistakes are a natural part of learning, and they must regularly communicate that belief to students. When mistakes are made, everyone can ask "What did we learn from that?," "How will that help us grow?," and treat each day as a fresh start. Deliberately helping students view challenges as opportunities to develop and learn will help them believe that school is a place where they can take risks, sometimes fail, and still be accepted and welcome. Risk-taking is an important part of the learning process that empowers students, builds their self-esteem, and increases their resilience. Students can be encouraged to try new things by praising their efforts, providing positive feedback when things go well, and helping them debrief unsuccessful outcomes.

For some students, addressing these issues involves helping them reflect on their own thinking and the stories they tell themselves about what they can and cannot do. A short paper on Reframing Our Thinking and building a positive inner voice is attached as Appendix Four.

Associated with the principle of accepting students' difficulties is a willingness to show students that adults in the school also sometimes make mistakes and don't have all the answers. In fact, showing vulnerability and sharing personal stories about when things have not gone well can increase trust between school staff and students.²⁸ If there has been a misunderstanding or miscommunication, it should be addressed pro-actively and constructively. Staff can model useful ways to respond to failures. Students will feel more comfortable and connected to adults who are willing to admit mistakes and say sorry – and this practice also role models critical social-emotional skills that will benefit students throughout their lives.

WHAT CAN SCHOOL STAFF DO TO HELP?

- ☐ **Have a short memory.** Part of learning is finding out what works and what doesn't – which requires making lots of mistakes. When that happens, provide clear and effective feedback, and then move on.
- ☐ **Practice "useful failure" as a learning tool;** intentionally turn mistakes into learning opportunities to build students' resilience.

28 Creekmore and Creekmore, 2024



WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"I model making mistakes and how I handle them. I say 'it's ok, it's how I learn. Do I get upset?' Students say 'no' and we smile together."

"Have role models talk to students about their challenges, mistakes, and how they have moved forward."

"I intentionally make mistakes sometimes, like a typo in my power points, etc. That shows students it's ok when we're not perfect. And they find it fun to catch my errors."

"Use game-based learning activities and talk about how mistakes will be handled while preparing for, during, and after the game."

"Scaffold students' learning about how to approach challenges optimistically."

"Kids have fun when adults tell appropriate embarrassing stories about themselves (i.e. we own our mistakes)."

"We reinforce to students that we are all learning; that's why we are in school. It's ok to make mistakes ... even for adults."

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Recognize the Importance of Extra-Curricular Activities

Schools that are successful in addressing students' emotional safety and ensuring their connectedness deliberately foster student participation in and responsibility for school life. Students' attachment to the school and sense of belonging can be increased by offering activities and programs to enhance the academic curriculum, such as community service projects, sports teams, and cultural, educational, and interest-based clubs (such as arts, hobby, coding, technology, math, chess clubs ...), etc. These opportunities are far more than just fun activities that keep students supervised before or after school hours; they have been shown to ...

- ▶ improve student-school connections.
- ▶ increase students' attendance.
- ▶ improve students' social skills and teamwork.
- ▶ build students' self-confidence.
- ▶ build leadership, time management, and organizational skills.
- ▶ enhance students' self-discipline, commitment, and tenacity.
- ▶ help students explore their interests and expand their perspectives.
- ▶ encourage physical activity, engagement, and healthier habits.

Well-planned extracurricular activities can reinforce the lessons learned in the classroom, offering students the opportunity to apply academic skills in a real-world context. They are therefore considered part of a well-rounded education. Working hard and mastering new skills in a fun, relaxed - and sometimes competitive - setting allows students to be successful without the pressure of getting a good grade, and it can help students learn to take risks and be resilient.

Research has shown that students who participate in extra-curricular or school-based enrichment activities have higher grades, better attendance, more positive attitudes and perceptions toward school, fewer behaviour issues, and higher academic aspirations.²⁹ Extracurricular activities can also offer meaningful opportunities to integrate the First Nations' language, culture, and traditions into students' learning.

- ▶ Could your school send hand-written invitations to students, asking them to join an after-school activity or a school club?
- ▶ Extra-curricular activities can be led by school staff, but they also represent an exciting way to involve families and community volunteers in helping to organize, supervise, and lead activities, sharing their time and showcasing their special skills and talents – and showing students they matter to the whole community.

Also, many students love seeing school staff at their cultural performances, sporting events, music performances ... and attending will give staff and students something meaningful to talk about together. Connections grow when staff show real interest in students' extracurricular activities.

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE?

- ▶ **Help students participate in extracurricular activities by raising awareness about the research-based benefits for students.**
- ▶ **Try to offer transportation to and from opportunities.**
- ▶ **Provide snacks and meals before or after activities to encourage students to come.**

29 Ahmad et. al.; 2015; Council for Children's Rights, 2019; Crimson, 2021

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?







WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"What makes a real difference for many students is school sports teams, clubs (robots, chess, etc.), after school art classes ..."

"We find that art opportunities are really important for some students. We found staff who can support music, guitar, hip-hop sessions Our alternate education students love it."

"We have a small school with limited staff. So I have reached out to our community's youth support worker to ask for help offering some extracurricular opportunities for students. Lean on your youth worker for help."

"Feeding people is so important. We hosted a basketball tournament, and we fed all the teams and the fans. After, many people talked about how we took good care of people, and it made everyone feel really good about the school."

"At the end of each year, we recognize all students who participated in a school club or program. It doesn't matter how much they participated. If a student came to two archery club practices, we include them in the recognition. We want to encourage kids from wherever they are."

FEEDBACK AT FEBRUARY 2025 CONNECTEDNESS CAPACITY BUILDING SESSIONS

How does your school promote extracurricular activities for students?

- ▶ *We do dance-a-thons in the morning, and we organize drumming, basketball, book club, walking groups, equine clubs, ...*
- ▶ *We make extra-curricular outputs as visible as possible to excite students about what is happening.*
- ▶ *We do drumming and traditional music together.*
- ▶ *We include students in the planning of activities.*
- ▶ *We have after-school clubs available every day of the week, always with snacks.*
- ▶ *We allow kids to come to practices and join teams part way through the season if that works for them, and there are no try-outs for teams. Everyone is welcome at any time.*
- ▶ *Our school collaborates with our local school district so our kids can join the band. This also helps our students experience the school and make a few friends, which helps when they transition to that setting.*
- ▶ *We post photos on private Facebook pages and distribute flyers for opportunities students may like.*
- ▶ *We host basketball games: our students vs the RCMP or chief and council ... All students watch and cheer on our team, they make signs and chant, etc. It is lots of fun.*
- ▶ *We offer a variety of options to appeal to all, many of them student-led at lunch or after-school, such as book clubs, Dungeons and Dragons Club, Pokeman Club, Garden Club, Lego Club, cross country, sports*
- ▶ *Student led extracurriculars have been a hit!*
- ▶ *Karaoke club is a huge hit.*
- ▶ *We host weekend long hunting trips for students who want to participate.*
- ▶ *If we have to, we beg kids to join teams and clubs. We don't give up no matter what.*
- ▶ *We email parents to remind them of opportunities.*
- ▶ *We make posters to promote extracurriculars, and put notes in students' bags.*
- ▶ *Our school offers a wide variety of sports and physical activities through the PE program, hoping that will encourage participation in extracurricular activities outside of schools, such as yoga, jujitsu, gymnastics, kickboxing, rock climbing, swimming, laser games, etc.*
- ▶ *We offer rides to and from extracurricular opportunities to help students participate*
- ▶ *Our staff sign up to plan and implement extracurriculars that match their passions. As principal, I role model by coaching the basketball team*



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Engage Families

Although the primary focus of this paper is connectedness of students and school staff, the issue of family engagement is inseparable from staff-student relations. Connections to students will be stronger when school staff are aligned with parents and work in partnership to support children and youth in achieving their goals.

Parental rights and responsibilities are fundamental aspects of First Nations control of First Nations education. The landmark 1972 policy document ***Indian Control of Indian Education*** clearly states: “If we are to avoid the conflict of values which in the past has led to withdrawal and failure, Indian parents must have control of education with the responsibility of setting goals.” Further, the right of First Nations parents to have a strong and meaningful voice in the education and learning of their children continues to be at the core of First Nations perspectives of education today. The First Peoples Principles of Learning state: “Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.”

A wealth of evidence shows that when school-family relationships are built on respect, listening, welcoming, and shared decision-making, multiple benefits for students result, including:

- ▶ higher grade point averages and test scores.
- ▶ better attendance.
- ▶ enrollment in more challenging courses.
- ▶ improved social skills.
- ▶ improved behaviour at home and at school.

When families are visible within the school, students understand that their families value learning and feel a stronger connection to their learning.

Just as schools must maintain high aspirations and support all students in reaching their full potential, it is critical to embrace the school's ability to empower parents, and school staff must maintain high expectations for their efforts to involve parents / caregivers and families as valued partners in the education process.

Where trust and positive relationships have not always been part of historic or recent experiences between families and schools, deliberate, pro-active efforts may be needed to help build bridges with parents, leaders, and other community members who are so important in students' lives. All school staff can help to make family engagement a priority and pro-actively reach out -- being positive, patient, and persistent, and demonstrating a deliberate desire to form partnerships. It is important to remember that some families are struggling with very real difficulties. This means that some parents may initially appear to be cautious, indifferent, or inconsistent in supporting their children's learning, when they are really coping as well as they can. All parents want the best for their children.

In considering and implementing family engagement initiatives, it is important to not become discouraged if progress takes time. Just as little things make a real difference in building connections with students, sometimes even small steps and what may seem like simple practices are more important than they seem; they may be necessary initial efforts to make parents feel more welcome in a formal education setting.

What might help?

- ☐ Always assume that parents are concerned about their child's education and welfare. The attitudes of educators are key to positive relationships. While it is important to be understanding about the challenges that exist for families, schools can promote real change by focusing on the beliefs and assumptions that shape the school's family engagement practices.
- ☐ Have teachers email parents at the start of the school year to introduce themselves, and ask parents to reply with an interesting fact about their child.
- ☐ Have an open-door policy. Make families aware they are welcome to drop in at any time to see the principal, a teacher, or other staff.
- ☐ Respond to parent requests in a timely manner, and try to convert their feedback into action.
- ☐ Take advantage of spontaneous and natural opportunities to get to know families - such as at drop-off and pick-up times. Every interaction is an opportunity to build relationships and demonstrate respect for families and their pivotal role in their children's education.



- Find out what engagement strategies work for each family and accommodate their preferences as much as possible. Use a variety of approaches depending on circumstances, such as newsletters, friendly notes, emails, apps designed to promote communications with parents, social media, texts, personal phone calls, opportunities to meet with staff individually, and group activities like a tea or coffee for staff and families to get together.
- Use two-way communication strategies. Rather than telling families how to engage with the school, listen to families about how they want to be engaged. When meeting with parents, focus on inviting input and listening first, and speaking and providing information second.
- Regularly contact parents to discuss their children's learning and development, and to share and ask for input about their children's progress.
- If possible and if supported by the community, consider making home visits to connect with students' lives. Home visits are an excellent way to build rapport and have been shown by research to be associated with higher family involvement and student achievement.
- Create portfolios of children's work and invite families to come and see them. This approach can excite parents and help promote genuine conversations, providing a foundation to reflect together on student growth and plan for next steps.
- Encourage parents to drop by for informal and fun interactions, such as inviting them to have lunch with their children. Families develop a better understanding of the school by seeing classrooms first-hand and observing children interacting with their teachers, peers, and surroundings.
- Try "refrigerator notes." Give students a positive note for their parent ... like "Thanks for helping [name] get to school on time today," or "We can't wait to see you at our parent conference next week." Ask students to "Take this note home and put it on the refrigerator."
- Consider the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences, and possibly consider moving to parent-teacher-student conferences.



A Student Reporting Handbook for First Nation Schools is available on the First Nations Education Portal, available for BC First Nation school representatives. Among other topics, that Handbook includes suggestions for implementing effective conferences with parents.

Schools can also work with families as allies to help students feel a sense of belonging at school. Appendix Five includes a short paper on how families can help their children feel connected.

WHAT DO YOU DO ALREADY?

Celebrate what you do already. What else could you try?

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"Last year, we moved to student-led conferences, which was a big success in terms of building connectedness."

"Food is huge. I cook a meal every Friday and I invite families to join me. When I started, three parents came. Then more joined us over time. Parents are not always comfortable coming into the school, but if we can make a connection to parents, that builds a connection with the whole family."

"Invite parents to every event and cultural activity you offer. When students see their families in their school, they feel school is more connected to their lives and their experiences."

"We send out newsletters that have pictures showing our students doing exciting, important learning activities, such as on-the-land opportunities. The families appreciate it; they love seeing their children and teens looking happy, having fun, doing things they enjoy. It makes the whole community feel positive about the school."

"We do everything we can to build strong relationships, so we can have difficult discussions later if they are needed."

"What builds connectedness? A team approach ... involving families as partners in problem solving."

"We give out raffle tickets to parents who attend parent-teacher conferences, and we make a big deal of awarding prizes."

"We use social media to our benefit. We take photos of positive things and share them (with signed consent) on a private Facebook page that parents use a lot."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"To encourage parental involvement, we start with "low stakes" opportunities."

"Our parents love coming out on the land with our students, or joining extracurricular in the gym, like basketball and volleyball games. For some people, those are less intimidating ways to be involved."

"At the beginning of the school year we have a games night with parents, so families can be introduced to teachers in a fun environment."

"We send out a "Get To Know the School Counsellor" document at the beginning of the school year."

"When we host feasts for students to learn cultural responsibilities, parents are invited to participate or help."

"Any food programs really build connectedness. For example, each month we host a family breakfast. Attendance is really high. Anything that brings people into the school works."

"Positive phone calls home are so important. Families don't want to always hear problems. We ask teachers to choose a couple of families to call each Friday – rotating through to reach out to all families over time."

"We assign "teacher advocates" for individual students, who act as a single point of contact for parents."

"We repurposed some EA time so they can start each day reaching out to parents."

"We send home attendance updates every day, and we host a parent-teacher meeting every other month."

"We take photos of kids doing fun things and send them directly to their parents."

"To encourage families to attend parent-student-teacher conferences, we hired a professional photographer, and we provided family photos to those who attended."

"We do drop-off and pick-up check-ins."

"We host Family Fridays, with coffee and hot chocolate and reading together."

"We invite parents to access the school's IT resources, woodshop, etc. We welcome them to use our resources when possible."

"Parent interaction nights – e.g. arts with children, pumpkin carving with children ... they bring families in for fun and information sharing."

"Some families like being included in breakfast and lunch preparation."

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"We bring students door-to-door to personally invite families to school events."

"Our school hired a family engagement coordinator – a former student from our school, whose sole purpose is to connect with parents, to find out what their concerns are, what they need, and help them advocate for their children. She is young, from the community, and she knows families – so she's someone who can talk to families in a non-threatening way. Parents don't ignore her phone calls, because they know who she is."

"When I begin a meeting, I warn people ... 'please understand that if I see an opportunity to connect with a family member, I will take it right away, even if it disrupts this meeting.' Never underestimate the power of leaving your office or even leaving the school to reach out to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles ... Show how much you care about their children and teens. Drop everything when you have the chance to do that."

"Take every opportunity that comes up to be relentlessly positive with parents. If you see parents at drop off or pick up, in the grocery store, on the water taxi ... tell parents 'your child did really well this week,' or just 'thank you for your efforts.'"

"We want to be connected to the community. We invite other Departments to use the school for events. We host community programs and classes in the school. We turned our annual Christmas concert into a winter celebration, with the whole community invited to join us for a meal. We hold Mother's Day and Father's Day brunches. Other community Departments help with the school garden. We work with other agencies and they bring Elders to the school for lunch; the students serve the elders, and they all love it."

"Food is central. Coming together while eating is crucial for relationship-building."

"We try to be active in the community and build relationships. Our goal is to make the school feel like an extension of the home and community."

"What do parents want? We want to be a part of solution-based conversations."

TIPS FOR MEETING WITH FAMILIES IN WELCOMING WAYS

- ▶ **Be timely.** If a student has done something worth celebrating, reach out and let the parents know, so students and families see that you notice and care. If a problem has arisen, don't wait. Waiting too long can make it more challenging to find an appropriate solution. It may also convey to parents that their child or teen is not a priority.
- ▶ **Try to meet in person** (if possible). Any time parents are able to see where their child or teen learns provides an opportunity to encourage their participation in their child's education. Invite parents to drop in.
- ▶ **When meeting parents, it is important to ensure that the space is welcoming.** Avoid sitting behind the "teacher's desk." Create seating options that are open and comfortable.
- ▶ **Remember that many parents might be apprehensive** about interacting with teachers and schools in general. Invite parents to bring other family members or support people to meetings at the school if that would make them feel more comfortable.
- ▶ **Always begin with something positive.** Even when there is a concern to discuss, beginning with something positive about the child or teen (i.e. a strength) will result in a more productive conversation. Be optimistic about finding solutions that will work.
- ▶ **Discuss what can be done to help the child or teen.** Keep the discussion focused on solutions, not what is wrong. Make it clear that you have the student and family's best interests at heart.
- ▶ **Follow through on commitments** and follow up by thanking parents for their help.

[illegible]



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

Monitor Your Success

It is always important to regularly consider whether the strategies being used to promote connectedness are effective and whether your efforts are achieving their intended results. If they are, celebrate your success, knowing that your investment of time and commitment is paying off. If you aren't satisfied with the outcomes, what else might be possible? Would it help to offer professional development to enhance the capacity of school staff to value and build relationships with students? How can the school listen to and honour student perspectives? Are the school's staff regularly discussing the school climate, whether the school feels like a community, and whether all students feel secure and seen?

And think about what's next for students. How can schools help when students are making transitions ... to another class, but also to another school or another stage of life? Appendix Six includes a short paper on how to use connectedness to help students with transitions.

FNESC and FNSA have also produced *Opening Doors, Unlocking Potential. Helping Students Who Have Exceptionalities Transition to Adulthood. A Toolkit for First Nations Schools*

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"How could you talk about connectedness as a school community?"

- ▶ *Use morning check-ins.*
- ▶ *Talk about it in team meetings.*
- ▶ *Build in personal connection time and make it a routine.*
- ▶ *Invite Elders to come in and talk with the school community.*
- ▶ *Do a book study on connectedness.*
- ▶ *Consider using in-service days as an opportunity to connect and discuss how relationships are progressing.*
- ▶ *Use student surveys to monitor connectedness.*
- ▶ *Host a workshop to discuss connectedness.*
- ▶ *Let staff build a staff meeting agenda on relationship-building, and leave space for everyone to talk about the issue.*
- ▶ *Ask students to attend a staff meeting to discuss the topic."*

"How can we know if students feel connected?"

- ▶ *Check-in with previous students to ask for their input and ideas.*
- ▶ *Monitor the types of interactions we are having ... positive versus negative. And consider your school's behaviour data.*
- ▶ *Think about how students treat the school. Is there vandalism?*
- ▶ *Notice how students greet you outside the school setting.*
- ▶ *Ask all staff their opinions: bus drivers, custodians, EAs, etc. Do they notice a positive school climate? Do they feel part of a positive school community?*
- ▶ *Use journaling in the classroom, student self-assessments, etc. Do they feel connected to the school? To other students?*
- ▶ *Ask your parent advisory committee for their thoughts.*
- ▶ *Monitor your student attendance. If kids aren't coming, more needs to be done. And monitor parents' participation in school events. If parents aren't coming, more needs to be done.*
- ▶ *Create a safe space for students to communicate how they are feeling, and give them the tools and language they need to talk about the important relationships in their lives. For example, use feelings charts and student surveys to check in and get input.*
- ▶ *Use conversations and observations."*

EXERCISE: HOLD A CONNECTEDNESS STAFF MEETING

- ▶ Provide a brief overview of the importance of connectedness
- ▶ Ask staff to fill out a brief survey on connectedness, such as rating 1 to 5 for the following statements about the school:
 - Each student is connected with at least one caring adult at school
 - Staff treat one another with respect
 - Staff know about their students' lives outside of school
 - The school's behaviour policies and practices are fair
 - The school environment is safe for students and staff
 - Staff value what students have to say
- ▶ Avoiding any blame or judgment, ask people to describe key obstacles they face in building relationships with students, such as:
 - Needing to use teaching time for classroom management
 - Any external circumstances that affect relationships
 - Not having enough time to get to know students as individuals
 - Differing cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds
 - Other (explain)
- ▶ Discuss how the responses are linked to connectedness
- ▶ Ask what areas of connectedness need to be addressed
- ▶ Identify actions and assign staff to follow through
- ▶ Commit to follow up in future staff meetings

This could be a great before and after activity – taking place at the beginning and end of the school year.

EXERCISE: ASK STUDENTS HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Going to the source can be invaluable in knowing how students experience connectedness in the school.

By assessing student perceptions, schools can identify key issues for reform, examine trends, set priorities and goals, and monitor improvement.

The data could also be shared with students in age-appropriate ways, to foster self-reflection and discussions about how everyone can contribute to positive relationships. Talking together about feelings of connectedness can provide opportunities to:

- ▶ Acknowledge that relationships can change; if a student doesn't feel a sense of belonging now, they can in the future.
- ▶ Talk about what supports might help all students experience positive connections.
- ▶ Make sure students understand that if they don't feel a sense of belonging, it isn't their fault. Many factors contribute to how students can connect to others.

Perceptions data can also inform discussions with the School Governing Authority and parent groups about connectedness and the school's climate.

- ▶ See Appendix Six for a list of questions that might be used to ask staff and parents about their perspectives of connectedness.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK STUDENTS:

CHOOSE SOME OF THESE OR CREATE YOUR OWN, ADAPTING THEM AS NEEDED FOR RELEVANT GRADE LEVELS

Provide options: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, don't know (made age-appropriate, such as ... always, sometimes, rarely, never; or smiley face 😊, neutral face 😐, sad face ☹️)

- ☐ I have friends at school who support and care about me.
- ☐ I regularly connect with friends at my school.
- ☐ I am comfortable asking adults in the school for help with my schoolwork.
- ☐ At my school there is at least one teacher or other adult who listens to what I have to say.
- ☐ I always try hard to do well in school.
- ☐ I work hard on all assignments, even if they won't affect my grade.
- ☐ At least one of the topics we are studying is interesting and challenging to me.
- ☐ I like the challenge of learning new things in school.
- ☐ My teachers notice if I have trouble learning something.
- ☐ I am encouraged to join after school activities.
- ☐ Adults in the school provide good examples of how to behave.
- ☐ Adults at school teach me how to show my feelings in appropriate ways.
- ☐ My school encourages students to respect peoples' differences.
- ☐ In my school, we learn ways to solve arguments so that everyone is happy with the results.
- ☐ My family often visits the school and attends school events.
- ☐ My teachers help me try out my own ideas.
- ☐ I am rarely called names, teased, or made fun of at school.
- ☐ At school, we talk about how our actions make other people feel.
- ☐ At school, we are taught how to stop other students from being mean to others.
- ☐ I have friends who will help me when I have questions about my schoolwork.
- ☐ In my school, we have clear rules about not hurting other people.
- ☐ Adults in my school demonstrate the values the school teaches (like respect, responsibility, fairness ...).
- ☐ Teachers understand my problems.
- ☐ Teachers are available when I need to talk to them.
- ☐ It is easy to talk with teachers in my school.
- ☐ My teacher makes me feel good about myself.
- ☐ Students respect each other in my school.
- ☐ If I am absent, people in the school notice.
- ☐ Students have lots of chances to help decide things, like class activities and expectations.
- ☐ I have lots of opportunities to be a part of class discussions or activities.
- ☐ I feel like I belong at school.
- ☐ I am glad I attend this school.
- ☐ I feel safe going to and from school.
- ☐ I never stay home because I don't feel safe at school.
- ☐ Students in the school do not fight very often.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK STUDENTS CONT'D:

CHOOSE SOME OF THESE OR CREATE YOUR OWN, ADAPTING THEM AS NEEDED FOR RELEVANT GRADE LEVELS

- ☐ Students at school are rarely bullied.
- ☐ Students at school are rarely teased.
- ☐ Students rarely spread rumours or lies using the internet.
- ☐ I know what to do if there is an emergency at school.
- ☐ The school building and classrooms are clean.
- ☐ The school grounds are kept clean.
- ☐ Things that are broken in the school get fixed quickly.
- ☐ I have enough supplies to help me learn.
- ☐ My teachers give me individual attention when I need it.
- ☐ My teachers congratulate me when I do things well.
- ☐ My teachers usually connect what I am learning to my life outside of school.
- ☐ The things I am learning at school are important to me.
- ☐ My teachers expect me to do my best all the time.
- ☐ My teachers really care about me.
- ☐ I can talk to my teachers about problems I am having in school.
- ☐ Adults in the school make it clear to me when I have not behaved properly.
- ☐ Adults in the school reward students for positive behaviour.
- ☐ Students in my school are treated fairly.
- ☐ School rules are applied in the same way to all students.



HOW CAN SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED?

SUMMARY

Making concerted efforts to build positive relationships is an investment that will benefit staff, students, families, and the entire school community. It will boost student achievement, well-being, and social-emotional learning, resulting in lifelong benefits. It will improve the school climate, increase student attendance, mitigate behavioral issues, and make the school a safer and more enjoyable place to learn and work. It will make families more confident that the school is a nurturing setting, where staff care about their children and teens and believe in their ability to succeed. As a result, focusing on connectedness is one of the most valuable ways First Nation schools can work toward their missions and advance the principles of First Nations control of First Nations education.

School staff can make a difference in students' lives by making time to self-reflect, collaborate, and take actions (large and small) to create a sense of belonging for students - which in turn will increase their own satisfaction with the school environment.

How can that be achieved? The fundamental beliefs of school staff, the school's reflection of students' values, traditions, and identity, and small, consistent messages sent each and every day can reflect the following goals.

(Adapted from the Search Institute's Development Relationships Framework, cited in Smith et. al., 2024).

Student Needs	Actions	What This Means
Express Care: Show me that I matter to you	Be dependable	Be someone I can trust
	Listen	Really pay attention to me when we are together
	Believe in me	Make me feel known and valued
	Be warm	Show me you enjoy being with me
	Encourage	Praise me for my efforts and achievements
Challenge Growth: Push me to keep getting better	Expect my best	Encourage me to reach my potential
	Help me stretch myself	Push me to go further
	Hold me accountable	Insist I take responsibility for my actions
	Help me take risks	Help me learn from my mistakes and set-backs
Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals	Navigate	Guide me through difficult situations
	Empower	Build my confidence to take charge of my life
	Advocate	Stand up for me when I need it
	Set boundaries	Put limits in place that keep me on track
Share Power: Treat me with respect and give me a say	Respect me	Take me seriously and treat me fairly
	Include me	Involve me in decisions that affect me
	Collaborate	Work with me to solve problems and reach goals
	Let me lead	Give me chances to take action and lead
Expand Possibilities: Connect me to new ideas	Inspire	Help me see possibilities for my future
	Broaden horizons	Expose me to new experiences and perspectives
	Connect	Introduce me to people who can help me grow

WHAT HAVE FIRST NATION SCHOOLS SHARED?

"How can we engage our most disengaged students? Get creative. Try anything and everything we can. Never give up."

"We need to set our intentions for making students feel they belong and develop a plan to get there!"

"Our students need to know 'whatever is happening outside of this building we can't control. But while you are here you are loved and wanted.'"

"Try something. Try everything. Everything counts."

"When I was a student years ago, when we missed the school bus we had to hitchhike to school. One day I was late and an Elder picked me up to take me to school. He said to me "You are so important, and I am glad you are going to school. I hope you will keep going and become a teacher, or a doctor, or a nurse ... We are looking at you as the next generation of leaders." Those words have always stayed with me. When I see students struggling today, I try to encourage them in the same way that person encouraged me when I was young. We can make a difference. I am always grateful when I can share words of encouragement. Always say something positive to students. You don't know what impact it will have on their lives."

"We need to build connections to empower our students, empower our staff, and empower our communities for the benefit of our future generations."

WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?

The following feedback was shared by participants in November 2024 Capacity Building Sessions for First Nations parents.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO TO HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED TO SCHOOL?

- ☐ Host a welcome circle every morning with drumming, singing, and prayer.
- ☐ Bring culture into the school and use land-based learning opportunities.
- ☐ Create culturally safe spaces for students.
- ☐ Focus on relationship building.
- ☐ Host staff versus student sporting events.
- ☐ Encourage student involvement in school activities, such as music, plays ...
- ☐ Greet every student, and check in on them throughout the day. Know and use students' names.
- ☐ Organize a homework club and tutoring so kids feel successful.
- ☐ Model good behaviour and teach social emotional skills.
- ☐ Make sure the school is safe and accepting of everyone.
- ☐ Meet students where they are and help them get where they want to be.
- ☐ Acknowledge and celebrate students' achievements.
- ☐ Be adaptable (flexible with students).
- ☐ Focus on community engagement; come into the community to meet people and have fun.
- ☐ Ask students for feedback about how they feel at school.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO TO HELP FAMILIES FEEL CONNECTED TO THE SCHOOL?

- ☐ Provide regular updates (calls, emails, texts, newsletters, apps ...).
- ☐ Host monthly dinners for families. Use food as a connection. Host hot lunches families can attend.
- ☐ Ask for volunteers, and then make them feel genuinely valued.
- ☐ Have an open-door policy.
- ☐ Welcome Elders and families.
- ☐ Get feedback from families by hosting a dinner and asking two key questions: How are we doing? What can we improve?
- ☐ Use a suggestions box to get feedback.
- ☐ Provide transportation to help families get to the school for parent-teacher conferences, events, celebrations ...
- ☐ Invite families to join field trips. Host a game night or movie night. Or organize a sewing club or regalia making club.
- ☐ Invite families to help organize seasonal activities. Reflect the community's language and culture in school programming. Make sure the culture is seen and felt in the school.
- ☐ Organize a Parent Advisory Council.
- ☐ Invite parents to "pop in's" to observe / enjoy seeing children in the school environment.

WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?

WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO TO HELP STUDENTS FEEL CONNECTED TO SCHOOL?

- ☐ Ask kids questions about their day.
- ☐ Be as involved as possible. Connect yourself. Role model connections.
- ☐ Encourage attendance and involvement in clubs.
- ☐ Show up! Show interest. Participate in school activities, assemblies, concerts, awards days ...
- ☐ Check-in with students to see if they feel safe at school. Do they have a sense of security?
- ☐ Wear school swag. Show school spirit! Talk positively about education. Help students feel proud of their school.
- ☐ Reach out to the teacher; communicate with the school about how our kids are doing and what they need.
- ☐ Help with after-school activities, or create programs of interest if possible – such as language and culture clubs.
- ☐ Help out with school meals or events.
- ☐ Read school communications and ask questions.
- ☐ Support a positive start in the morning.
- ☐ Help kids set out good intentions for the day.
- ☐ Demonstrate excitement about our children's learning.

[illegible]



APPENDIX ONE

Supporting Students Who Are in Alternate Education Programs

Educators understand that every aspect of a young person's life can impact their ability to learn and there are any number of circumstances that can put students at risk of not succeeding in school. Recognizing this reality, educators must take responsibility for ensuring that all students can be successful, providing extra support and resources as much as possible and offering alternate education settings and approaches when needed.

The first step in supporting all students is learning how to identify those who are struggling – academically, socially, behaviourally, emotionally, and/or physically. The following are warning signs of at-risk or unmotivated students that all educators should be aware of:

- ▶ Slipping grades
- ▶ Tardiness or absenteeism
- ▶ Disruptive, disrespectful or risky behaviours
- ▶ Failure to complete assignments
- ▶ Easily feeling overwhelmed by tasks
- ▶ Unwillingness to engage in classroom activities
- ▶ Lack of self-confidence

Once potential issues have been identified, it is then important to act on the understanding that behaviour, attendance and performance can improve for at-risk students when the right settings are found for them, and when schools engage with students and their parents in positive ways. Research shows that educators unequivocally can make a difference and develop ways to retain at-risk youth and involve them in learning.

What Can Schools Do?

Prioritize Relationship-Building and Ensure Students Feel Seen and Heard

Building close, nurturing, and sustained relationships with students in alternate education is not always easy, but at-risk youth need caring and stable connections with adults in the school.

- ▶ All students, but especially those who are facing challenges, need to be trusted and have a sense of trust, and they need opportunities to communicate the complexity, frustrations, and positive aspects of their lives in and out of school.
- ▶ Extensive research emphasizes the value of students feeling that at least one adult in the school knows them and is available to support them. For example, many alternate education programs use the check-in-check-out system to encourage students to have regular, positive interactions with a trusted adult.
- ▶ A system of planned, focused meetings with students can create a predictable, supportive structure for students and can teach students accountability to others.

Check-In/Check-Out (CICO) is an evidence-based intervention that provides predictable opportunities for educators to check in with students who need added support and provide positive reinforcement (e.g. praise and feedback). Students may also be given tangible reinforcement (rewards or prizes) when they achieve daily goals. In CICO, students meet with adults throughout the school day to reinforce and track goals. Usually, the student “checks in” with an adult first thing in the morning. Throughout the day, teachers provide positive and corrective feedback. Students then “check out” with the adult at dismissal to review their day.

By providing students ample opportunities to receive positive attention from adults, CICO implementation has been shown to produce positive outcomes for students:

- ▶ Increased adherence to school-wide positive behaviour expectations
- ▶ Reduced rates of office discipline referrals (behaviour incidents)
- ▶ Reduced rates of mild disruptive behaviours

Research also suggests that CICO may result in increased academic engagement and pro-social behaviors.

Schools that most successfully reach at-risk students use a range of approaches to educating young people, but an understanding that one-on-one relationships can yield unmatched benefits is a recurring theme. It is also important to teach at-risk youth that their opinions matter and that their voices are worth hearing. If students can actively help make some decisions related to upcoming lessons, classroom layout, or even what text to read next, it can help them feel that their opinions and actions are valuable. It also makes them more familiar with real-world problem solving and helps create solutions that work for everyone.

“Students need to feel they have ownership of their day. Students want to feel that people are interested in what they want to do. Some students step up and are leaders, providing insight into our program. They appreciate that. It gives them a sense of belonging because they were involved in the decision-making.”

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

Positive behavioural interventions and supports also promote an understanding that teachers don’t control students. Sharing power can help students learn to manage their own actions and is far more effective than punishing problematic behaviours.

Schools can address this goal in a number of ways.

“What is priority number one for our at-risk youth? Get them connected to safe adults.”

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

Establish positive and respectful communications

- ▶ Deliberately teach students how to be openly expressive and pro-actively encourage them to be supportive of others.
- ▶ Provide clear explanations and expectations, as well as consistent and equitable approaches and responses to student behaviours and performance.
- ▶ Interact with students – formally and informally, whenever and wherever possible – to create connections.
- ▶ Use praise frequently and freely, making an effort to catch students doing things well.
- ▶ Post encouraging messages on the walls, on message boards ...
- ▶ Be patient and model kindness to students. Be empathetic to students’ challenges and understand the circumstances that may be causing their difficulties – but then be solution oriented and help students to overcome obstacles.

"What is fundamental? Having staff who are compassionate and understanding of the challenges our students are experiencing."

Feedback from a July 2023 First Nations Adult Secondary Education Focus Group Participant

"Supporting our students' mental and emotional needs comes first. Our staff participate in activities with students. If one staff person can't make a connection work with a student, then someone else tries. It starts with an open heart and an open mind – a willingness to do things differently. We're not a system. It can't be "you have to write that test now." It has to be approaches and timing that work for each student."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

Support Students

- ▶ Ask questions directly. Talk to students themselves.
- ▶ Don't assume the worst. Some students may be missing school because they are trying to help their siblings eat breakfast and get to school. Some students may be demonstrating poor behaviour because they are tired or hungry. There are innumerable issues students may be dealing with.
- ▶ Build students' sense of competence.
- ▶ Celebrate effort as well as achievement. Notice successes – even seemingly minor wins.
- ▶ Promote students' self-determination. Consistently and fairly implement jointly (teacher and students) created rules and norms.
- ▶ Laugh with your students. Be honest and vulnerable.
- ▶ Remind students that with patience they can and will succeed. Students in alternate education usually didn't start experiencing challenges overnight. If they have struggled for some time, they may believe that school will always be hard for them. Reinforce a growth mindset.
- ▶ Practice "useful failure" as a learning tool; intentionally turn mistakes into learning opportunities to build students' resilience.
- ▶ Take an authentic interest in students' lives outside of school.
- ▶ Provide a safe learning environment for students.

Overall, let students know you care about them and that they are wanted in the school – every day! Building positive relationships can pave the way for learning.

"Your day should be built around the voices of the students. Staff need to be the type of people who are capable of doing that kind of listening."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

Create an Environment for Success

Students feel engaged and positive about their learning when they have opportunities to receive positive recognition and make meaningful contributions. Engagement is also facilitated when the school environment encourages teamwork, and students are learning new skills that they find valuable and helpful in their lives. Engaging settings build students' sense of belonging and pride. When students can choose topics of personal interest to study or determine the subject of a learning project, they are also more likely to be motivated to do well, and giving students choices underscores that they are in charge of their learning.

Engagement can be promoted by ...

- ▶ Using culturally relevant curriculum, instruction, programs, and resources.
- ▶ Implementing courses and designing lessons around students' interests.
- ▶ Giving students choice about how they can complete assignments.
- ▶ Integrating technology into teaching and learning opportunities.
- ▶ Incorporating hands-on and cooperative learning activities.

"For our alternate education students, individualizing their programs is key. We involve students in community activities, such as work experiences, working with Elders, or specific trainings that could lead to work opportunities. For one student who was not interested in school, we built a program around go-cart design, which was their passion. Now they are on a trades pathway. We tailor to individual students. Look at what they need, and provide supports around that."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

"We focus a lot on staff development. We helped our staff build their skills around counselling. We support our EAs in gaining specialized skills so they can help lead electives (food, photography, textile courses etc.) around high interest topics. We focus on flexibility and running with things that capture students' curiosities. We explore how we can offer experiential learning that connects to the curriculum."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

FNESC and FNSA have created a **Modular Course Guide for First Nation Schools** that provides suggestions for designing and implementing high-interest, experiential learning opportunities that can be run in a variety of ways, including short-term "courses" or "units" that offer students motivating learning options that provide course credit.

Encourage Optimism About Learning

Many students in alternate education are pessimistic about school – and other things – and benefit from strategies to reinforce a positive outlook. For some students, their problems in school, and in life, may come from never having had anyone who could be there for them every day, encouraging them, telling them they did a good job. In response, educators can communicate that they believe in students, appreciate their efforts, and will support their growth.

School must also provide students with real experiences of success. It is vital to maintain high aspirations for students in alternate education in order to avoid reinforcing messages that they cannot achieve. All students need access to challenging experiences, as well as opportunities to develop strong social and emotional skills. Educators can help.

- ▶ Model practical optimism and point out examples of student achievements; for example, say, “We knew this would be a tough project, but you stuck with it and worked hard. You should be proud of what you accomplished! I am.”
- ▶ Share examples of how you have overcome challenges. Remind struggling students that everyone faces obstacles. They are not alone. You are there to help them remove barriers.
- ▶ Maintain a positive learning atmosphere. Each day, ask students “What was the best thing that happened today?” “What was the highlight of that opportunity for you?” “What did you enjoy most about ...?”
- ▶ Have students keep a success file, which is a continually updated collection of tangible evidence to help students internalize and remember their learning successes. At the start of each school day or class, remind students to look through their success file. The more students can reconnect to their previous achievements, the more positive their perceptions will become and the more successful they’ll be in the long run.
- ▶ Some students find it helpful when teachers check in often and regularly provide additional instruction and feedback. Use formative assessments to help students identify their strengths and areas that need further practice and reinforcement, and encourage students to try self-assessments such as journal entries and personal checklists to monitor their progress. Keeping track of their growth and the difficulties they have overcome helps to foster a growth mindset.

Be optimistic yourself, about your own role and your ability to facilitate change. Every day brings new opportunities to break down barriers, model positive attitudes, support learning, and help students understand and reach for meaningful options.

Implement Interventions

Many students have trouble with the structure of school, and setting up systems, schedules, and activities that will work for students who need alternative approaches is invaluable. There is also little controversy about the value of directly and systematically intervening with at-risk students. A wealth of research has shown that students who are at risk of failing academically or who are otherwise struggling benefit greatly from a variety of extra supports, such as one-on-one tutoring, emotional counselling services, small group advisories, connections with Elders ... Being alert to undiagnosed exceptionalities or mental illness, including anxiety, depression, or the effects of trauma, and supporting the development of students' social and emotional skills, is vital.

If students are behind academically and need interventions to catch up ...

- ▶ Dig deep to spot gaps. Often students are missing critical skills that will block them from making meaningful progress. This can be incredibly frustrating, both for the student, who may perceive their learning challenges as insurmountable, and for the teacher, who may have trouble identifying exactly what the gaps are and what to do. Identifying specific areas to address can make progress seem much more manageable.
- ▶ Online, self-paced learning options may help for some students.
- ▶ Offer supports daily and directly teach organizational skills.

Help Students Set Reachable Goals – and Realistic, Hopeful Pathways to Get There

For some students in alternate education, the key to success lies in convincing them that a satisfying future is within their grasp. Students who don't see a connection between their learning and their future success are not going to be motivated, and "one way to turn on turned-off students is to help them understand the role of high school achievement in reaching their goals in life as well as in education and employment."³⁰

"Sometimes you have to dream for students until they are able to dream for themselves."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

³⁰ <http://www.academicinnovations.com/believe.html>.

Maintaining high aspirations for all students is fundamental to their success, but students may sometimes have unrealistic goals based on what they learn from the media.

- ▶ It is important to help students set challenging but reachable career, personal, and educational goals – not talking down to students or unnecessarily lowering their ambitions, but speaking to them honestly and respectfully about their next steps.
- ▶ The most motivating goals are those that are within reach *with effort* (i.e. not too easy).
- ▶ To help with goal setting, students need to be seen in the context of their whole lives; adults who know students well and care deeply about their well-being can provide individualized support to help them form meaningful goals that encourage their engagement in school.
- ▶ Tools to determine students' interests and social-emotional needs can help with building personalized programs, and quizzes to help students understand how their personality traits might match with potential careers can lead to important dialogue about learning goals and the importance of high school graduation.

Students are more likely to move ahead when they know there is a path they can follow. Adults can help students create exciting and realistic pathways and prepare them for obstacles, letting them know that support will be provided to them when they run into problems, and ensuring them they will have help achieving their vision for the future. This includes using restorative consequences if students' erroneous actions violate school rules or perhaps even legal boundaries – focusing always on maintaining each student's dignity. It also involves reinforcing to students that everyone takes a different path to success. What's important is helping students define what success looks like for them, getting them on a path that will lead them there, and encouraging them to explore a range of possibilities that make them feel optimistic about the way ahead: What are they good at? What opportunities are available? What could they be?

Connect With Families and the Community

Evidence clearly demonstrates that schools with high levels of family and community engagement are more effective in supporting students and raising achievement levels. For students in alternate education settings, it is especially important that school staff make pro-active, continuous, and positive connections to parents and caregivers.

Schools must treat parents as partners, regularly sharing information about available interventions and student progress with students and families. It is also valuable for staff to support families in creating positive learning environments at home.

And generally, work with anyone and everyone who can help make a difference for students.

- ▶ Maximizing the use of community resources and developing and maintaining strong connections with other community agencies can greatly enhance a school's capacity to support all students. For example, when the school's resources are not sufficient, school staff will ideally be able to refer students and families to community-based mental health and counselling services in a timely manner.
- ▶ Schools can also team up with community leadership, relevant community agencies, and the RCMP to widen the commitment to keeping students in school and out of trouble and, if problems arise, avoiding consequences that will further alienate students, make them miss more school, and put them further behind.
- ▶ Using volunteers to help bridge students to education and encouraging students to spend time in engaging settings outside of school is important for them to build their confidence and sense of connectedness. Mentors in after-school and community settings can help communicate clearly to students the potential consequences of their actions, the behaviours they need to develop, and how to grow. Caring adults who are external to the education setting often have a strong understanding of students' lives outside of school and can often help young people find support and safe havens when they need them.

"We brought in community members to make a plan for high-risk students, and their families, grandparents, house chiefs ... everyone met with the teens to let them know "you matter and we believe in you." We don't always focus on academics right away. Maybe we start with attendance. We prioritize student needs based on what is actually going on in their lives."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

"What are the four non-negotiables for a successful program?"

1. The right leader.
2. The right staff – experienced and new educators who care about kids.
3. A space that people want to come to.
4. Community involvement – with key community people who want to help the school engage with at-risk students."

Feedback from a First Nation School Representative

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APPENDIX TWO

Understanding Trauma and How It Impacts Learning

Each individual's story and personal circumstances will always be unique, and experiences of trauma often result in different effects in different people.

However, it is widely recognized that trauma has the potential to impact students' physical, physiological, emotional, mental, and intellectual development. Students living with trauma may have difficulty relating to or connecting with others, may be easily overcome by worry or anger, and may struggle to create meaning from course content. Prolonged exposure to chronic pressure or anxiety activates a stress response that may make it difficult for students to learn and concentrate, develop trusting and reciprocal relationships, regulate behaviour, and use calming strategies.

Fortunately, the damaging effects of trauma can be mitigated, and evidence shows that schools can make a positive difference.

Whenever possible, schools - working in partnership with other community service agencies - will help trauma-affected children, teens, and ideally their families access appropriate counselling services. Professional guidance and support can make a significant difference in the lives of students and their families.

Additionally, trauma-sensitive learning environments can help to nurture resilient learners by building strong relationships with students and families, creating safe spaces, and focusing on strength-based approaches that help students learn to seek solutions and break negative cycles of anger and stress.

Educators and other school staff can implement a range of trauma-sensitive strategies, such as the following - strategies that actually benefit *all* learners.

Forming Positive Relationships To Build Greater Resilience

In order to learn, students must feel that they are emotionally and physically safe during their school day. Fostering positive relationships with traumatized students starts with recognizing that early adversity has played a role in their neural development. They are not to blame for their reactions. Behaviours that now threaten these children's academic and social achievement were originally adaptations to stress in their lives. But students often don't know how to ask for or accept the support they need, and they may actually push others away. If challenging behaviours occur, adults must remain objective, working to de-escalate problematic behaviours in calm, respectful ways that communicate comfort and concern.

Adults can reassure students that the relationships they have built together are strong by establishing and maintaining clear, well-understand boundaries while also staying composed in moments of crisis. Seeing that their teachers are neither frightened nor surprised by strong emotions can increase students' abilities to tolerate uncomfortable feelings themselves – eventually helping vulnerable students build their capacity for self-control.

It is also important to consistently remind students of things that are going well, emphasize their strengths, and show that people in the school genuinely care about them – even if the students are as yet unable to readily return the positive gestures.

Focusing Attention and Creating Predictable Structures

To gain the trust and attention of students, predictable and regular classroom routines can be very beneficial. Normalcy can be profoundly healing and comforting, particularly for students who do not feel much control in their lives.

Students who are touched by trauma may be reluctant to participate in classroom activities that involve risk-taking. Students – especially those who appear nervous or tentative – should be allowed to gradually increase their willingness to try new tasks that make them feel uneasy or anxious, letting them take on new challenges as they begin to feel more at ease.

Students who are continually stressed may appear forgetful and seem to lose track of content-area ideas from one day to the next. If this is the case, intentional strategies for increasing focus are useful, such as designing lessons so they follow the same sequence of steps, and using a standard format and regular cues that students will learn to recognize over time. Additionally, deliberately focusing student's attention on instructional

content as it is presented, perhaps using fun props or creative, entertaining strategies, can help children develop the neural pathways required for sustained attention.

Transitions and unexpected circumstances can be especially difficult for students effected by trauma, as sensing a loss of control can activate their stress response. If possible, try to avoid abrupt and unexpected changes, but also prepare students for the fact that there will be transitions. Proximity can also help. Standing near students during especially active periods or transitions can provide an extra sense of security.

Teaching Students to Understand and Control Emotions

Within the safety of a predictable classroom environment, teachers can purposefully show students how to control their emotions and teach them skills to regulate their feelings and understand the role of stress in their reactions.

When students understand how anxious feelings affect their minds and bodies, they can take active measures to reduce and control these reactions. Therefore, it can be helpful to provide a short lesson on stress and the brain early in the school year. It is often helpful for teachers and other school staff to model or role-play appropriate and effective ways to deal with conflict or disruption.

Creating Environments That Help Students Regulate Their Emotions and Behaviour

Calming activities can help to reduce stress, such as strategies that involve quiet movement, deep breathing, music, stretching, etc. All students can benefit from short “movement breaks” or brief calming activities every 30 minutes or so, allowing them to “reframe the brain.” Keeping the classroom uncluttered, with calming neutral colours, and encouraging students to take breaks when needed, can also help. Some teachers offer a “comfort zone” – a quiet space or room for children who feel overwhelmed – sometimes using something as simple as a bean bag chair. Encouraging students to draw or engage in other creative projects for a few minutes may help them to decompress after especially active lessons or situations.

Collaborating with students to identify relaxing strategies that work for them is most valuable. Students know their own needs and preferences best. Talk to them for ideas to help.

Avoiding Burn-Out and Frustration

Remember – healthy people are more effective in helping others, and students who have experienced trauma especially need support from adults who practice self-care themselves.

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APPENDIX THREE

The Value of Greeting Students at the Classroom Door

Studies show an effective way to increase student connectedness, student attention to learning (on-task behaviour), and teacher rapport with students: simply greeting students at the classroom door.

It may be tempting for teachers to use the time when students are entering the classroom and getting settled to undertake administrative tasks – such as taking attendance, checking off homework, firing off an email ... But taking the time to set up students for success can be very valuable – for students, and for teachers.

- ▶ Positive greetings at the classroom door can increase students' academic engagement by 20% and decrease disruptive classroom behaviour by 9%, according to a study published in the *Journal of Positive Behaviour* (*Positive Greetings at the Door: Evaluation of a Low-Cost, High-Yield Proactive Classroom Management Strategy*). "The results from this study suggest that teachers who spend time on the front end to implement strategies such as positive greetings at the door will eventually save more time on the back end by spending less time reacting to problem behaviour and more time on instruction," the study authors write.
- ▶ Earlier studies (reported in *Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis*, 2007 and 2011) showed the practice of greeting students resulted in an increase in student engagement and students getting on task faster, in comparison to a control class that was not greeted (Wong and Wong, 2013).

- ▶ Greetings at the door set an immediate and positive tone. The approach promotes a sense of belonging in the classroom; it gives students social and emotional support and helps them feel invested in their learning. It also can reduce students' and teachers' stress levels as the day / class begins.
- ▶ By starting the day or class on a bright note and with a warm greeting, honouring and acknowledging students' presence from the moment they step up to the door, students will feel happier about coming to school and approach learning with a more optimistic mindset.
- ▶ Greetings at the door help build relationships between students and teachers, which is an important part of making connections to enhance learning throughout the rest of the day. Special things – a secret handshake, greeting song or poem, an interesting quote or thought-provoking question to spark discussion – can set a relaxing and positive tone for the class. Even older students who change classes throughout the day can benefit from time to pause and connect about how their day is going when they arrive at the classroom. They may want to take a few moments to talk about things happening in the world and they may not have another adult willing to take the time to hear their perspectives on things. These few moments don't need to drag on and take away from learning time; just a few very short interactions can make a surprisingly important difference.
- ▶ The practice also builds a sense of community in the classroom. Students need to feel that school is a safe refuge for them – a place where they are loved and wanted. By supporting these feelings, teachers are encouraging students to engage more fully in the learning process.
- ▶ The first few minutes of class are often the most chaotic, as students transition from busy areas such as the hallway or playground. Left unchecked, disruptions can become difficult to manage, but a proactive approach to classroom management can help students get focused and ready to learn. For students who have trouble switching classes, greeting them at the door with explicit directions can be helpful, giving students a sense of purpose with a task to do as they enter the room. This can be a whole-class activity, such as preparing their desks for the day, or a few students each day can be asked to take on helping roles, providing everyone an opportunity as the year progresses. For example, the teacher can use reminders of what to do at the start of class, such as "spend the next few minutes reviewing what we covered yesterday."

- ▶ If a student struggled with behaviour the previous day, the teacher can share a positive message to encourage improvement and suggest a fresh start.
- ▶ Classroom door greetings provide a chance to connect with every student and to gauge their emotional state. To quickly gauge students' emotions, you could post a list of feeling words or emojis on the wall and have students tap the word or image that best captures how they're feeling. Although brief, it's a chance to have a one-on-one conversation with each student. Sometimes directing a small, simple gesture toward a student can help to see if they have something on their mind.
- ▶ The practice provides an opportunity to model (and for students to practice) positive social behaviours that are expected in the classroom, as well as adult behaviours often expected outside of school.
- ▶ In greetings, teachers can ask each student a question to formatively assess their understanding of the previous day's lesson.
- ▶ This simple practice can be a time saver. Even if a consistent classroom routine has been established, greetings at the door allow the teacher to cue students to something that may be different ("please be sure to turn in your homework," or "please pick up the work you missed yesterday from the absent folder").

Establishing a positive classroom climate in which students feel a sense of connection and belonging is invaluable, given the research demonstrating that motivation, achievement and STUDENT ATTENDANCE can all increase as a result.

And a welcoming classroom environment doesn't benefit students alone; it can improve the teacher's mental health as well. Many teachers feel stressed by student disengagement or disruptions, and many teachers report classroom management to be one of their greatest concerns. Responding to misbehaviour is exhausting and time consuming. It is much better for both student and teacher well-being to instead focus on no-cost, easy-to-implement strategies that can help to prevent problems from arising.

Tips:

When greeting students at the door, use students' names, give a few words of encouragement, and ask how their day is going. Nonverbal interpersonal interactions, such as a friendly handshake or a thumbs-up, can help make greetings feel authentic and build trust — taking care if students feel uncomfortable with physical contact. While remembering that not everyone likes attention focused on them, even a very subtle gesture can let a reluctant scholar know that you see them and value them. It is just necessary to be attentive to students' varying preferences.

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APPENDIX FOUR

Reframing Our Inner Stories

Adapted from Mangels, J. 2024, October. *Reframing Student Self-Talk*. ASCD Smart Brief.

Students may sometimes feel that the adults in the room have all the power, but in reality, their own thinking has a significant impact on their experiences and achievement.

Most students don't regularly reflect on the stories they choose to tell themselves, but their own patterns of thinking actually affect their effort, persistence, and learning. Psychological research also shows that what we think can have a powerful influence on how we feel emotionally and physically, and on how we behave.

For many students, a challenge or a temporary failure can cause negative thoughts and a shutdown. They may wait for an adult to help them fix a mistake, walk them through each step of fixing a problem, or they may become frustrated or disengage. A discouraging inner voice can create stress and discourage students from trying new things.

But research shows that harmful thinking patterns can be changed.

How can we help students reframe their inner critic into an inner champion?

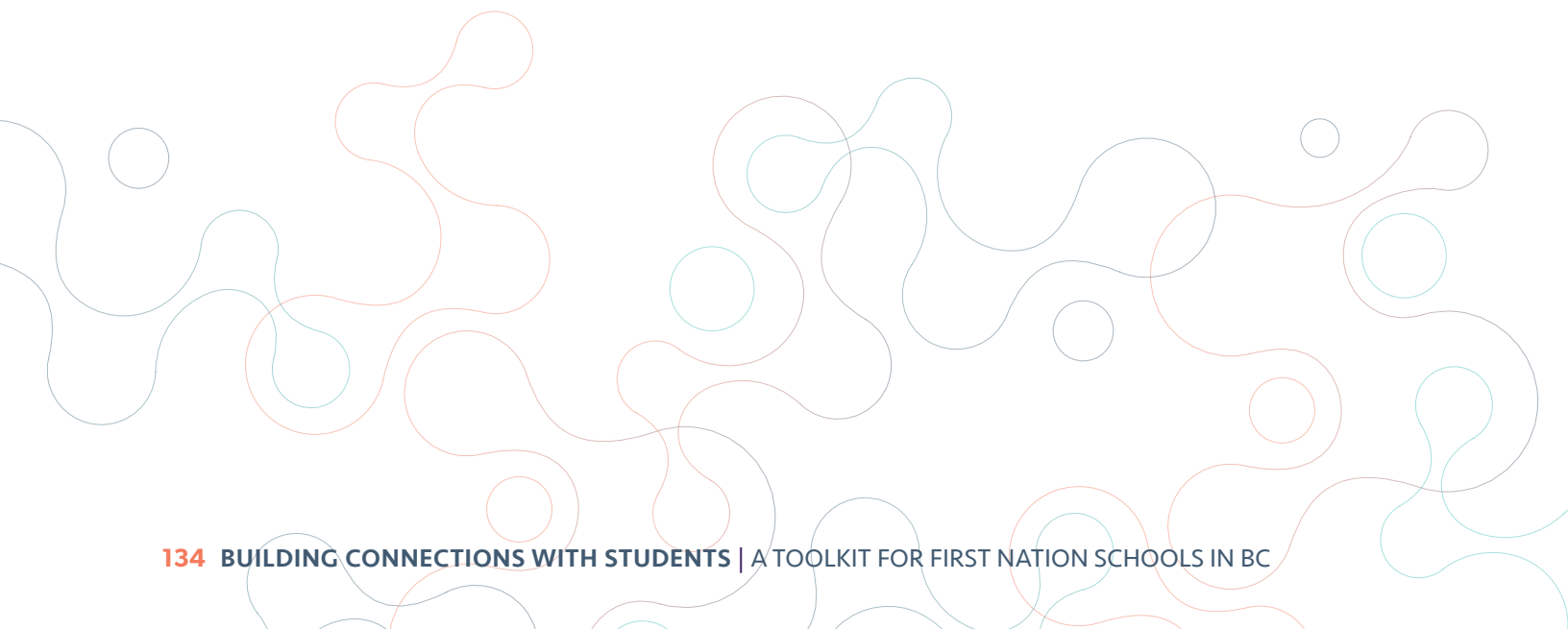
1. Model how we ourselves approach challenges. Our words and actions can demonstrate healthy responses. Show how you process your feelings and pause to think when negative thinking is getting in your way. Let students see you take a slow, deep breath, talk through your response to a challenge out loud, and show you can stay optimistic when things don't go as expected. Show students how to move from the habit of negative self-talk to positive self-talk by reframing "this is hard" into "this is difficult, but I will do my best to tackle this situation."

2. Help students to step out of their comfort zone into the growth zone – and make this concept concrete. One option is to place a hula hoop or other small circle on the ground to represent the comfort zone, and have students practice stepping out of that circle so they see and feel themselves moving out to a larger space. Help students reframe challenges as invitations, shifting students from a focus on showing what they already know to asking questions about what they don't yet know. Help students move from avoiding mistakes to leaning into them for growth. Help students expect that new learning won't always feel easy, and help them feel comfortable in that understanding.
3. Use deliberate strategies to help students be aware of their thinking. Have class discussions about how an inner voice can be encouraging versus critical. Talk about how to focus on taking on tasks one step at a time and how we can reframe the negative voice in our heads.
4. Celebrate growth. Students often become more willing to take academic risks when they are deliberately encouraged to notice and enjoy moments when they extend themselves. For example, just before dismissal each day, the class can gather to share their successes in overcoming a challenge – no matter how big or small.
5. Spotlight student effort. When students need a confidence boost, remind them of past times when they've done something hard. Intentionally spotlight student effort. Our words do more than just draw students' attention to their positive learning choices; our words can become students' self-talk over time and elevate their perspective of themselves as capable learners.
6. Engage parents as partners. Parents can play a vital role in helping their children to develop the critical life skill of noticing their negative thoughts and deciding how to act based on more realistic perspectives.

Together, education staff and parents can help students reclaim ownership of their own stories.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS THAT PARENTS AND EDUCATORS CAN DISCUSS ...

- ▶ Do we think the children and teens in our school tell themselves more positive or negative stories about their abilities?
- ▶ Are there any specific times or circumstances when students' inner voices generally seem to be more or less negative or positive? If so, what can we do in those times?
- ▶ What can we all do to help students reframe their thinking, so they recognize and celebrate their talents and feel confident that they can take on challenges and accept mistakes as learning opportunities?
- ▶ How do we approach our own challenges? What can we do to role model for students how to tell ourselves optimistic stories?





APPENDIX FIVE

Information for Families: How Families Can Help Build Connectedness

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Interventions. <https://encouragehopeandhelp.com/Connectedness-Parents.pdf>

All families want their children to do well in school, and to be healthy and avoid behaviours that are risky or harmful. Your guidance and support are key to achieving those goals. Education staff can also be important allies in helping your children learn and feel safe in school.

Research shows that students who feel a true sense of belonging at school are more likely to do well, stay in school, and make healthy choices. This feeling is often described as *school connectedness*. Connected students believe their families, teachers, and school staff care about them and are partners in supporting their success.

Why is it important for your child to feel connected to school?

Research shows that strong connections at school can help children and teens:

- ▶ Attend school more regularly
- ▶ Get better grades
- ▶ Stay in school longer

In addition, school connectedness helps promote students' emotional wellness and encourages students to lead healthier lifestyles.

What Can Families Do?

Families can take important actions at home and at school to help build connectedness.

1. Encourage your child to talk openly with you, their teachers, counselors, and other school staff about their ideas, needs, and worries.
2. Find out what the school expects your child to learn and how your child should behave in school by talking to school staff, attending meetings, and reading information your child brings home. You and the school can work together to help your child meet expectations.
3. Try to help your child access the books, supplies, and a quiet space they need to do their homework. This might be at home or possibly at an afterschool program or community space. If you need help, reach out to the school so they can help.
4. Encourage your child to help others in your community. Volunteering and community service build students' self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of connectedness.
5. Read school newsletters, attend parent-teacher-student conferences, and follow the school's social media messages so you keep up with the latest news.
6. Encourage your child to participate in school activities. Students who participate in extra-curricular activities are more likely to feel like they are part of a school community.
7. Meet regularly with your child's teachers to discuss their grades, behaviour, and accomplishments. You know your child better than anyone else.
8. When you can, help in your child's classroom, attend school events, participate in a school committee, or offer to share your cultural understandings in the school or classroom. When students see their families in the school, they feel a stronger sense of connection.
9. Ask your school to offer programs or classes that would help you become more involved in your child's education. For example, families might benefit from:
 - ▶ Ideas for talking with children and teens about critical topics, such as Internet safety, screen time, health and wellness issues ...
 - ▶ Information about how to help children and teens learn.

- ▶ Opportunities to ask about school programs, assessment approaches, report cards, etc.

10. Talk with school staff to suggest simple changes that can make the school a more pleasant, culturally relevant, and welcoming place. For example:

- ▶ Would families enjoy a space in the school for them to come and meet with each other or with school staff?
- ▶ What do you think could increase attendance at school events?
- ▶ What kinds of cultural and on-the-land activities would you recommend for students?

Your ideas are important. You have special and unique understandings. Share them!

What you do matters. You can help your school make sure all students feel connected and cared for, and that will help all students achieve and succeed.

WHAT FIRST NATIONS PARENTS HAVE SAID

HOW DO YOU THINK FAMILIES CAN HELP THEIR CHILDREN OR TEENS FEEL CONNECTED TO SCHOOL AND THEIR EDUCATION?

Support the school's land-based learning opportunities and cultural connections.

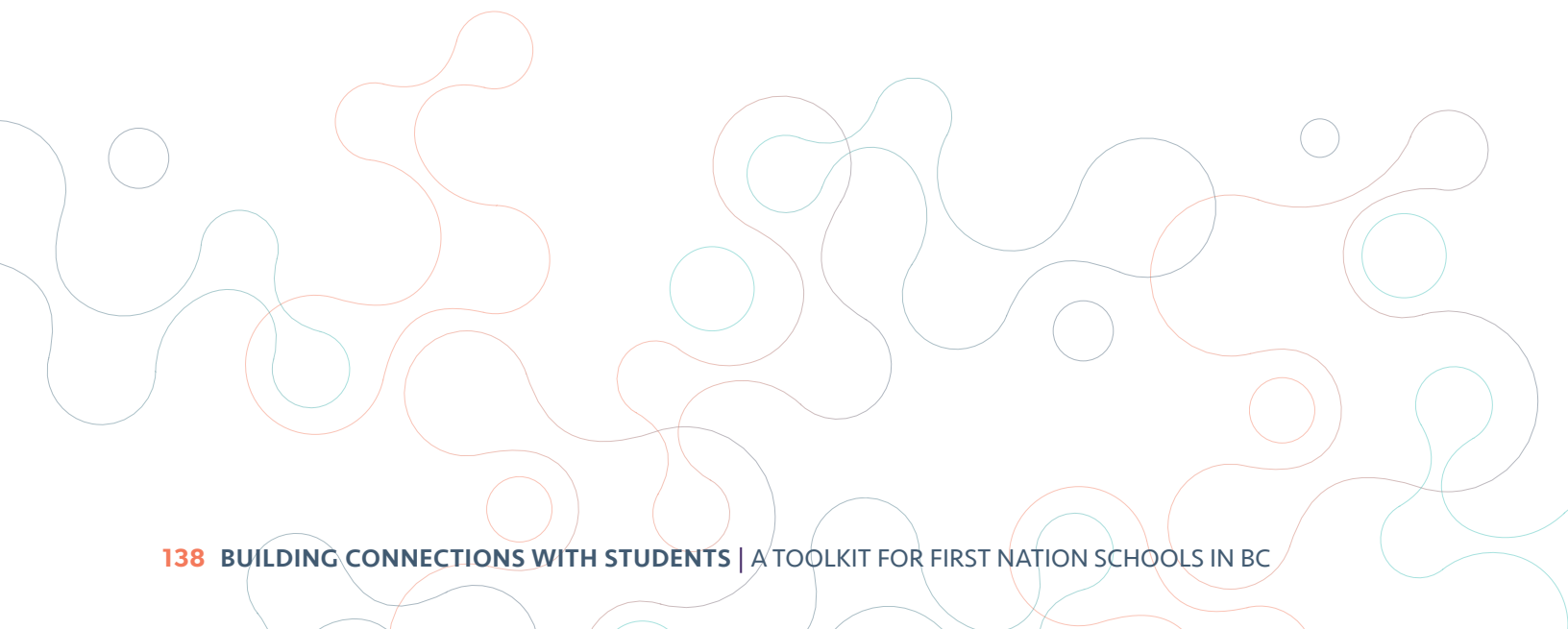
Attend school events; get involved so you know what's going on.

Find a good group of friends = a support group.

Maintain open dialogue with children; share your dreams for their future, ask them questions about their day, be encouraging and positive about what they can accomplish.

Establish family time, read together at home, and turn off the internet.

Volunteer if you can; students like to see their parents involved and attending school events.





APPENDIX SIX

Supporting Students Through Transitions By Being Connected

It is important to help maintain student connections during educational transitions – such as elementary to middle school, entering high school, moving to a new school, etc.

Times of change can be difficult for some students, and attention to their needs and relationships can be especially meaningful at these times, when students may feel anxious, sad, nervous, or a lack of control.

What can help address this key issue?

Start early and build a strong foundation

- ▶ **Prepare ahead.** From a young age, help students develop their independence.
 - Allow students to take on new challenges gradually, with scaffolding and opportunities to debrief their experiences.
 - Deliberately teach students social and emotional skills. Social emotional learning strategies might include a circle time routine to begin and end the day, assigning “class jobs,” allowing time for unstructured talking, and teaching self-regulation skills.
 - Embed activities such as a daily reflection prompt or meditation into lesson plans.

Also, facilitating opportunities for students to make meaningful contributions can help reduce anxiety and stress. Psychologists suggest that “giving back” is the most important way to cultivate resilience.

- Students can be encouraged to use their own values to create personal and effective ways to contribute.
 - In the classroom, teachers can focus on helping students cultivate gratitude as a means of lessening anxiety. Simply having students write down three things they are grateful for each day can help. It may also be beneficial to incorporate a daily check-in at the beginning of class.
 - A simple check-in is the “Rose and Thorn” activity; students share a concern or challenge (thorn) and something positive for which they’re grateful (the rose).
- ▶ **Promote resilience.** Help all students develop coping mechanisms to manage stress and face challenges. Emphasize the benefits of deep breathing, counting to ten, meditation, adequate sleep, exercise, nutritious foods and hydration ...
- ▶ **Encourage students to build their communication skills.** Help build their self-confidence and ability to self-advocate. Coaching or assistance can help students feel more comfortable taking a lead in their learning and navigating change.
- ▶ **Teach students how to keep an open mind.** People experience changes – big and small – throughout their lives, so one of the best ways you can help students is by encouraging them to be open to change. A great tactic for helping students be more comfortable and accepting of change is asking them to reflect on what has helped them through previous transitions they’ve experienced, and what might help them in the future. Emphasize students’ strengths and competence. Tell them you know they are ready for the change, and you are confident they will be successful.

Before the transition

- ▶ **Communicate openly.** Explain the reason for future changes and why new routines are necessary. Answer students’ questions honestly. Prepare students for what is ahead. Actively teach and practice new routines to ease the change process. Help describe new expectations clearly and explicitly. For example ...
- Elementary teachers can prepare students who are moving to middle school or high school by talking to them about the experience of having multiple teachers.
 - Students in high school may have an advisor who will help with setting academic goals and measuring their overall performance. Help students know who they can talk to if they feel confused in a new setting.
 - If students are moving to a different school, it is helpful to explain that school rules and expectations will be different, but that is nothing to be worried about.

- ▶ **Provide opportunities for discussion.** Recognize that unfamiliar experiences can be anxiety provoking. In particular, students with a history of trauma may have a range of reactions, including hypervigilance, increased irritability, or withdrawing. It is crucial for educators to validate students' concerns, maintain consistency, and encourage open dialogue and questions. Creating a safe space where students can share their feelings about the transition is key. Leaving them without a means for discussing their experiences and emotions is likely to worsen anxiety. Sometimes, just talking it out makes a world of difference!

Remember that students may vocalize their concerns, or they may act out in ways that are seemingly inappropriate. Children who act out in difficult ways are usually expressing underlying emotions and anxiety. Educators often need to act as detective, trying to identify what a student is really trying to communicate. Then it is possible to respond with authenticity, honesty, and empathy. It is possible to validate a child's emotions without validating their inappropriate behavior.

- ▶ **Be an active listener.** Encourage students to share their feelings, concerns and experiences without judgment. Let them know it's okay to feel anxious, frustrated, or excited about the change. Those are all normal feelings.
- The "Yes, and" strategy can be used to recognize a challenge and work productively through it. It can help educators model how to hold competing emotions. For example, you can share, "Yes, I am sad about you leaving my classroom at the end of the year, and I'm looking forward to seeing you and my other students grow and enjoy new experiences." "Yes, leaving this school may be hard, and you can look forward to a new school and all the new challenges and opportunities that will bring."
- ▶ **Provide opportunities to "practice."** Let students feel what transitions are like. If students are transitioning to a new school, set up a time for them to visit, if possible. Let them try entering the new building, walking around the halls, seeing the library Ask the school counselor or other staff of the new school to arrange a buddy so they meet someone before they arrive. If students are worried about transitioning to a new grade, visit that classroom together, and have them buddy up with students in that grade during the last month of school, so they feel comfortable when they return in September.
- Pairing students with a peer who has successfully made a similar transition can boost their confidence!
- Provide counseling services to ease the adjustment and reduce stress, if needed.

- ▶ **Be patient and continually optimistic.** Allow students time to adjust and process what's ahead. Recognize that each student may react differently to change and tailor your approaches accordingly. Provide frequent reassurance and help students develop a structured plan to move forward. Set small, achievable goals. Celebrate each milestone to help students see their progress. Incorporate enthusiasm! Games or team-building exercises can lighten the mood and empower students to embrace change with excitement!
- ▶ **Help students stay calm about what is ahead.** As students move ahead in their education, they will experience more challenging classes and new academic expectations. Teachers also expect students to take charge of assignments and projects with less day-to-day guidance. Not surprisingly, with so many changes, it's possible that a student may initially experience some challenges. Let students know ... if this happens, don't panic! Help them understand how to identify stress or problems ... and seek help. Create a supportive environment, provide individualized support, and address emotional well-being.
- ▶ **Focus on positive aspects.** Highlight the potential benefits and exciting aspects of the change. Share your own stories of overcoming challenges during critical transitions, emphasizing the lessons you learned and how you apply those lessons in your life.
- ▶ **Connect with families to help guide students with what to expect through transitions.** Keeping lines of communication open with families is vital. Keep parents informed about changes and give them adequate information so they can help their children at home. Families can provide the most invaluable support for students who might be struggling.

After the transition

- ▶ **Keep an open door.** Tell students they are always welcome to come back to see you. Let them know you won't stop caring about them even though you might not see them as much. Let them know relationships don't have to change just because circumstances are different.
- ▶ **Try to connect students with trusted adults and peers** if you think they need additional support and are not finding the transition easy.

Finally, school staff can remind children and teens that their feelings are not permanent (even though it feels like they are) and reinforce the idea that there are multiple endings to a story. In this way, educators can help students learn to cope with new realities with hope for brighter days ahead.



APPENDIX SEVEN

Sample Connectedness Survey Questions for Staff and Parents

Staff

- ☐ I try to understand why my students are or are not actively participating in class.
- ☐ Students have the support and resources they need to be successful with their learning.
- ☐ I make myself available to my students outside of class time.
- ☐ This school encourages students to get involved in extra-curricular activities.
- ☐ Adults in this school are good examples of the values the school teaches (e.g. respect, responsibility, fairness).
- ☐ In this school, adults teach students to express emotions in proper ways.
- ☐ The school encourages staff to get involved in extra-curricular activities.
- ☐ Students in this school respect each other's differences (for example, gender, sexual identity, learning differences, etc.).
- ☐ In this school, we teach ways to resolve disagreements so that everyone is satisfied with the outcome.
- ☐ Teachers encourage students to try out their own ideas.
- ☐ Most staff in this school are generous about helping others with instructional issues.
- ☐ The school encourages families to be part of school events.
- ☐ It is very uncommon for students to tease or insult one another.
- ☐ The school has adequate materials to support the integration of the First Nations' language and culture into teaching and learning opportunities
- ☐ The school encourages all students to take challenging classes.
- ☐ The school provides effective supports and services for students with exceptionalities.
- ☐ Staff of the school regularly give students individualized attention and help.
- ☐ Staff of the school teach strategies to manage emotions.
- ☐ Students are taught positive behaviours.
- ☐ Students are taught conflict resolution strategies.

- ☐ Students are given opportunities to provide input into rules and classroom activities.
- ☐ The school effectively helps families know how to support their children's learning at home.
- ☐ The school and families work well together to help students learn social and emotional skills.
- ☐ Staff of the school get along well.
- ☐ There is a feeling of trust among the staff.
- ☐ The school helps parents find community supports for students who need them.
- ☐ Students and staff in the school build strong relationships.
- ☐ Students have opportunities to show leadership skills.
- ☐ I am inspired to do my very best at my job.
- ☐ There are rarely physical conflicts between students at this school.
- ☐ Bullying is rarely a problem at the school.
- ☐ Cyberbullying is rarely a problem at this school.
- ☐ School staff always stop bullying when they see it.
- ☐ The school is an inviting, clean and pleasant place to work and learn.
- ☐ Staff take responsibility for ensuring that all students learn at high levels.
- ☐ Staff at this school expect students to do their best all the time.
- ☐ Student attendance is not a problem at this school.
- ☐ This school provides the materials, resources, and training necessary for me to support students' social and emotional needs.
- ☐ Students have adequate access to counselling services.
- ☐ Staff of the school recognize students for positive behaviour.
- ☐ School rules are applied equitably to all students.
- ☐ Staff at this school encourage students to think about how their actions affect others.
- ☐ Staff at this school work together to ensure an orderly environment.

Parents

- ☐ I have the information I need (e.g., schedule, class expectations, attendance and participation policies ...) to support my child's education.
- ☐ I am able to establish a consistent daily routine with my child to support his/her learning.
- ☐ The school encourages students to join after school activities
- ☐ Adults in the school teach my child to express emotions in appropriate ways.
- ☐ Adults in the school are good examples of the values the school teaches (e.g. respect, responsibility, fairness).
- ☐ In my child's school, students learn ways to resolve disagreements so that everyone is satisfied with the outcome.
- ☐ Teachers encourage students to try out their own ideas.
- ☐ I am encouraged to visit the school and be part of school events.
- ☐ I feel welcome in the school and classrooms.
- ☐ I find it easy to connect with my child's teacher when I need to.
- ☐ My child is rarely or never insulted, teased, or harassed at school.
- ☐ Children in the school discuss issues that help them think about how to be a good person.
- ☐ The school encourages all students to take challenging classes.
- ☐ My child feels a sense of belonging to the school.
- ☐ I feel comfortable talking to someone at this school about my child's behaviour.
- ☐ This school has quality programs for my child's talents, gifts, or special needs.
- ☐ School staff really care about my child.
- ☐ I feel that my child is safe at school.
- ☐ Physical conflict is not a problem at the school.
- ☐ Bullying is not a problem at the school.
- ☐ The school building is clean and well-maintained.
- ☐ Attending school every day is important for my child to do well.
- ☐ This school has high hopes and goals for all students.
- ☐ This school sees me as a partner in my child's education.
- ☐ Students have enough healthy food choices a school.
- ☐ When my child does something good at school, I am informed about it.
- ☐ School rules are applied equitably to all students.

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BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH STUDENTS

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