Supporting Students with Emotional and Behavioral Problems

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

by

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Contents

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11

Enhancing Student Connectedness to School

Student connectedness to school is a powerful resilience factor that helps to improve both student behavior and academic performance and prevent truancy and dropout. Following a brief description of research that documents its importance, we present practical strategies that school staff can use to increase student connectedness. The strategies are presented in relation to a multi-tiered framework emphasized throughout this book, with Tier 1 strategies used for all students, Tier 2 strategies used to assist students at risk who are showing early signs of disengagement, and Tier 3 strategies used for students who have already disengaged from school and have an enhanced likelihood of dropout. We describe multiple ways of building and improving connections to school in two major dimensions: 1) strategies to enhance student connectedness to school and 2) approaches to increase positive relationships among schools and other youth-serving systems.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

In one of the largest studies on student health, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997), more than 36,000 students from 7th through 12th grades were surveyed on risk, protective, and personal adjustment factors. A range of individual, family, and school factors were found to be associated with positive student adjustment including school connectedness, family–child connectedness, high expectations among parents for school achievement, and student involvement in religious activities. Notably, student connectedness to school was found to be the most powerful factor in protecting

male and female students from substance use, early sexual involvement, excessive school absences, and exposure to injury and violence (Resnick et al., 1997). Another large-scale study of more than 11,000 students in Canada also found engagement in school (i.e., being involved in school) to be a critical factor in students staying in school (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009), illustrating the importance of this construct and its relevance across nations.

An important finding is that when students do not feel connected to school, they disengage, usually before high school, and are at significant risk of later dropout (Orthner et al., 2010). It is important to keep students engaged, because dropout is associated with many other problems in life, including greater unemployment, poorer lifetime wages earned, more health problems, and increased incarceration (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

GENERAL THEMES IN PROMOTING STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

Strategies described in this and the following sections are based on the presumption that 1) the school is committed to enhancing student connectedness and 2) there is a team of interdisciplinary staff (e.g., school psychologist, counselor, assistant principal, teachers, nurse, parent[s], school resource officer, others) that is meeting regularly and guiding implementation and ongoing quality improvement of student support, prevention, and intervention in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 (see Barrett, Eber, & Weist, 2013). This team may be the same as the schoolwide positive behavior support (SWPBS) team, or it may be a separate team that is explicitly focused on enhancing school connections and mental health issues. This team should be operating with and using up-to-date literature and strategies to promote student connectedness to school. In this regard, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in an important summary of the literature (2009), identified four critical themes to enhance student connectedness: 1) support offered to students by adults, 2) student belongingness to a positive peer group, 3) student commitment to education, and 4) a positive school environment. Each of these factors is reviewed in more detail here.

Increasing support from adults. As cited in the CDC (2010) article, students feel more connected to school when school staff are viewed as dedicated, interested, willing to give of their time, and supportive. Similarly, Conner (2011) found that students' perceptions of emotional connections with teachers were directly related to their sense of connection to school. Although intuitive, these findings emphasize the importance of education staff seeking positive relations with all students they encounter. Simple things—such as asking students about their weekend, smiling at them, and wishing them well—can meaningfully increase student engagement and connections with school.

Positive peer relations. The CDC (2010) article emphasized the importance of students having relationships with peers displaying social competence. It is also important that they are involved in other prosocial activities, such as

completing homework assignments, having membership in school clubs, and helping others. Consistent with these findings, Ream and Rumberger (2008) found Latino/a students to be more engaged in school and less likely to drop out when they were connected to peers who expressed that school was a priority in their lives.

Commitment to education. The CDC (2010) report stated, "Students who are personally invested in school and believe that a good education is important for reaching their life goals spend more time on homework and in school activities and have an increased sense of connectedness to school" (p. 22). Such investment by students is related to actions of school staff, such as promoting mutual respect among students in classrooms and tailoring strategies to meet the individual needs of students (CDC, 2010).

School environment. A number of environmental characteristics of schools promote student connectedness. These can include aspects of the physical environment (e.g., a clean and pleasant environment that is free from graffiti), elements of school climate (e.g., positive relationships among school staff and students), opportunities for students to participate in decision making, shared positive norms (e.g., social standards agreed upon by faculty and students, such as making eye contact and greeting others when passing them in the hallway), and consistent and positive classroom management strategies used by teachers (CDC, 2010).

Mulloy (2014), in a review on "resilience building" in schools, emphasized the importance of a climate of increased monitoring and individualized attention to promote student connectedness and positive functioning in school. For example, the following questions might be considered by school staff: What systems are in place to monitor students who are frequently absent? What supports are available to teachers to reach out to students or the families of students who frequently miss school or classes or who seem to be struggling to make connections? How are students identified who are experiencing transitions (e.g., new to school, change in family circumstance, new involvement in their life of another youth-serving system such as juvenile justice or child welfare), and what additional supports are available to them?

In addition to these general themes, specific strategies can be embedded within each of the three levels of a multi-tiered system of support, such as SWPBS (see Chapter 2), to promote student connectedness. In the following sections, we describe strategies focused on Tier 1 (increasing connections for all students), Tier 2 (prevention and early intervention for students not responding to Tier 1 programs and supports), and Tier 3 (intervention for students who are already disconnected).

TIER 1 STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

The Wingspread Declaration on School Connectedness (Wingspread, 2004), also described in the CDC report (2010), identified 60 strategies to promote

student connectedness that reflect key theme areas. These theme areas include clear and inclusive opportunities for decision making for students and staff, mechanisms for families to provide guidance to schools, increased opportunities for families to be actively involved in their children's schoolwork and achievement, adequate professional development for staff to enable skills in responding to diverse needs of students, and trusting, open, and caring relationships among school administration, staff, students, and their families. These themes reflect guiding principles for Tier 1 programs and strategies to promote school connectedness. The following subsections describe specific strategies that can increase student connections to school.

Parent or Family Involvement in School

In general, the more parents and other family members are involved in school and their child's education, the better the outcomes are for individual students. Parent or family involvement also benefits the school overall, as it helps to improve the climate, which, as discussed in this chapter and others in the book, helps promote positive student behavior and academic performance. Teachers and school leaders should reflect on the style of staff members' interactions with family members. For example, do staff members convey aloofness and communicate with families almost exclusively around a student's problem behaviors, or are staff collaborative, enthused to engage with families, and willing to interact more often about student accomplishments? Of course, the latter is the style that individual staff members should demonstrate.

School staff also need to be cautious about blaming parents for student problems or acting in a way that blames students for their problems. This is a very common behavioral pattern and clearly contributes to families being disconnected from (even angry at) schools. Instead, school leaders, teachers, and other staff should interact with students and families in a respectful, collaborative, and nonjudgmental way. We have found the following four themes to be particularly important: 1) engagement, or purposefully working to build rapport by empathizing with student or family issues and stresses, discussing past experiences with help-seeking (e.g., positive versus negative experiences) while providing assurances that current services will indeed be helpful, and problem solving with the student or family on ways to increase the likelihood of their active involvement; 2) support, or immediately trying to provide assistance to the student or family in the first meeting, connecting them with tangible school and community resources, and helping with strategies that address immediate and pressing problems; 3) collaboration, or working with the student or family as true collaborators, treating them as experts in their own situation who can help develop and implement plans to improve student emotional and behavioral functioning, as well as inviting the student or family into other roles where they can share expertise (e.g., to a planning meeting to improve the school's SWPBS program);

4) empowerment, or conveying to the student or family optimism and hope for positive outcomes, encouraging bold steps toward improvement, and promoting independent problem solving and action. These specific collaborative strategies set the stage for a strong working relationship with the student or family and increase the likelihood of resolving emotional and behavioral problems as well as achieving academic goals (Weist et al., 2009). Teachers can use this framework in interacting with families of students; for example, by asking about past experiences with schools and youth-serving systems and empathizing with past challenging experiences; soliciting and conveying genuine interest in their perspectives, ideas, and recommendations; connecting the family and student to helpful programs and resources in the school and/or community; and displaying a positive, encouraging attitude and hope for positive outcomes.

Enhancing Protective Factors

Consistent with the Wingspread Declaration (Wingspread, 2004) and ideas from the CDC presented earlier, enhancing student connectedness to school relates to a long history of important research on protective factors for positive youth development. Mulloy (2014) proposed that protective factors are "either internal (e.g., self-esteem, problem-solving ability) or external (e.g., positive life events, high levels of social support), and can interact dynamically to promote greater resilience" (pp. 1–8). She described the following specific protective factors that schools can employ to increase student connectedness:

- Supportive and caring teachers
- Consistently high but also achievable school expectations
- Orderly and safe school environments
- Clear and consistently communicated schoolwide expectations for student behavior
- Opportunities for meaningful student engagement
- Specific support for student social-emotional well-being

Improving Classroom Environments

The classroom environment has an important influence on students' feelings of connectedness. For example, Cooper (2013) found that Latina/o students performed better in classrooms that were perceived as safe and affirming, where students are focused on academic engagement and performance. In Chapters 4 and 5, we delineated a number of strategies to improve the classroom environment and increase academic engagement. Classroom teachers may also want to review the Developmental Assets Framework, the Search Institute's research-based list of 40 developmental assets representing positive

qualities that help children and youth become caring and responsible people (see http://www.search-institute.org). Table 11.1 lists the 40 developmental assets.

The Developmental Assets Framework has been used widely in the United States and around the world as a strategy to help youth to better understand and increase the operation of protective factors in their lives. In general, research findings emphasize that the more developmental assets children and youth report, the less likely they are to engage in high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to be thriving. For example, Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth (2000) measured these developmental assets in a sample of 6,000 students in grades 6–12 and found that beyond the contribution of demographic variables, the more developmental assets students reported, the more likely they were to display "thriving indicators," described as school success, leadership, and physical health. Edwards, Mumford, Shillingford, and Serra-Roldan (2007) recommended that school approaches to enhance developmental assets align directly with comprehensive school reform initiatives, and made a number of recommendations for schools and districts to broadly implement programs based on the framework.

Teachers could use the framework presented in Table 11.1 in a number of ways. For example, items have been organized in checklists for students to report on whether the asset is present in their lives. Students could complete the checklists, which then could be used for interactive discussions on external assets (e.g., having a caring neighborhood) that are present or absent in their lives. Similarly, there could be discussion in classes on ways to increase internal assets (e.g., reading for pleasure, providing service to others,

Table 11.1. List of developmental assets

40 Developmental Assets			
1. Family Support	11. Family Boundaries	21. Achievement Motivation	31. Restraint
2. Positive Family Communication	12. School Boundaries	22. School Engagement	32. Planning and Decision Making
3. Other Adult Relationships	13. Neighborhood Boundaries	23. Homework	33. Interpersonal Competence
4. Caring Neighborhood	14. Adult Role Models	24. Bonding to School	34. Cultural Competence
5. Caring School Climate	15. Positive Peer Influence	25. Reading for Pleasure	35. Resistance Skills
6. Parent Involvement in Schooling	16. High Expectations	26. Caring	36. Peaceful Conflict Resolution
7. Community Values Youth	17. Creative Activities	27. Equality and Social Justice	37. Personal Power
8. Youth as Resources	18. Youth Programs	28. Integrity	38. Self-Esteem
9. Service to Others	19. Religious Community	29. Honesty	39. Sense of Purpose
10. Safety	20. Time at Home	30. Responsibility	40. Positive View of Personal Future

The Developmental Assets® are adapted with permission from Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN. More information is available at www.search-institute.org.

resisting negative peer pressure). Such classroom interaction around the developmental assets framework is likely to enhance a positive connection to school among students (Scales, 1999).

Enhancing Student Aspirations

The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA, 2014) focuses on increasing engagement in school by enabling students to pursue their aspirations and feel a sense of empowerment and leadership within the school environment. This differs from the prevailing culture of adults in schools telling students what to do. QISA describes eight conditions that promote student aspirations for academic accomplishment, including 1) belonging, or feeling accepted or a part of a group; 2) heroes, or having others in school who will provide support when needed; 3) sense of accomplishment, or having achievements recognized; 4) fun and excitement in school activities and work; 5) curiosity and creativity, or experiencing encouragement for exploration and out-of-the-box thinking; 6) spirit of adventure, or experiencing encouragement to try new things; 7) leadership and responsibility, or feeling a sense of voice and influence over school functioning; and 8) confidence to take action, or feeling supported in setting and reaching goals. A basic theme in this work is for students to feel in control of their education and to have a voice in helping to shape their lives in school.

A way to put QISA into action is for teachers to consider ways they promote or do not promote student voice and leadership in the multi-tiered framework. Reflective questions, for example, that are relevant to planning at all tiers include the following: Are students active in planning? Are there adequate numbers of students on planning committees? Are students able to speak freely? What is the proportion of student to teacher or staff comments? What happens with follow-up to student questions? Do students believe they are actually shaping school policy and programs? Think of a recent initiative in your school (e.g., to improve school climate) and reflect on those questions and the extent to which student voices were heard. In most cases, such reflection will reveal that students were not or were only minimally involved in school decision making, that adults made most if not all of the decisions, and that decisions were focused on contingencies that improved school life for the teachers and staff as much if not more than improving it for students. We encourage teachers and school staff to explore resources of the Quaglia Institute at http://www.qisa.org.

TIER 2 STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

In addition to the Tier 1 strategies just discussed, ideally used by schools to improve the climate and enhance connectedness to school for all students, there are specific Tier 2 strategies that can be used to increase connectedness to school for students showing early signs of experiencing challenges or living with a condition of risk (e.g., from a high-crime or high-violence

neighborhood). In the following subsections, we review general strategies to reduce risk for these students and then present specific strategies, including those focused on mentoring and on reducing conflict.

Reducing the Impact of Risk Factors

The flip side to protective factors presented in the previous section is a range of risk factors that students commonly experience. Risk factors make students more vulnerable and suggest the need for additional supports to reduce their impact. Mulloy (2014) summarized these risk factors, including the following:

- The experience of poverty, a broad and powerful risk factor that is associated with other risk factors presented herein
- Abuse and neglect
- Being exposed to violence in the home, neighborhood, and broader community
- Affiliation with delinquent and drug-using peers
- Having others in the family with mental illness
- Being in a school that is under-resourced and/or overcrowded
- Experiencing frequent school changes
- Being in a family with low expectations for academic achievement
- Being in a family with low levels of emotional and/or social support

Although an understanding of these risk factors should assist in schoolwide Tier 1 strategies that help improve school connectedness (e.g., education and training on the effects of violence and strategies to avoid and reduce violence exposure; see Warner & Weist, 1996), they are most helpful in guiding Tier 2 strategies. That is, students with risk factors should be identified for Tier 2 support. Unfortunately, such screening efforts in schools occur infrequently and/or in a disorganized manner (Dvorsky, Girio-Herrera, & Owens, 2014). Systematic screening for risk factors in schools is a critical need and should be completed regularly (i.e., at least yearly) and whenever a new student enters the school. Specifically, from the list of risk factors presented earlier in this subsection, schools should develop procedures to identify students in school who are within the child welfare system, who have experienced frequent school transfers or moves, or who reside in neighborhoods characterized by high violence.

Teachers are intuitively able to identify students who are struggling or presenting unmet needs. Abraham Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954) is useful in understanding students and enhancing connections with them. The hierarchy emphasizes the foundational importance of lower-level needs; only when these needs are satisfied are people

(students) able to focus on higher-level needs. At the base of the triangle are physiological needs (e.g., food, shelter, sleep), followed by feeling safe, being connected to others and experiencing love and belonging, feeling self-worth and esteem, and having abilities and skills. All of these needs are necessary for self-actualization, which occurs when a person is meeting his or her full potential and experiencing a range of positive emotion.

Whether the student is new to the school, has experienced numerous transfers, is in another youth-serving system such as a child welfare agency or juvenile services, has experienced violence, or appears in need of clothing or food, a key factor is for the school to have proactive strategies in place to identify students in need. Foundational to this work, as emphasized throughout this book, is the functioning of teams such as the SWPBS team and its effective use of data to identify students in need. School-employed health staff (e.g., nurses) and mental health staff (e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers) should be involved in this early identification process and assist in outreach and supportive services that follow. An important strategy is to construct a resource map of programs and services offered within the school building and district and in the surrounding community that would be relevant to addressing student needs. These programs can be organized into a directory that is updated on an annual basis. With an understanding of school and community resources and programs (ideally facilitated by a directory), staff can assist students or families in making connections to these programs. Decision-making teams should then regularly follow up on the status of these connections, reinitiating outreach and assistance to students and families as indicated.

However, a reality that needs to be considered in this work is that when school staff refer students and families to programs offered by community agencies, often these referrals fail. For example, in a study of students referred for mental health services either offered within the school or in a community mental health center (CMHC) located close to the school, Catron, Harris, and Weiss (1998) found that 96% of students referred to the school program received services, as compared to only 13% of students referred to the CMHC. This is related to the many barriers that get in the way of students receiving services in mental health centers, such as poor knowledge of mental health and mental health services, stigma associated with mental health problems, stress in families that impedes a focus on child emotional and behavioral functioning, transportation challenges, and financial or insurance barriers, among others (see Weist, 1997). Unfortunately, in some situations, simply referring a student for services signifies the end of support for some school staff (e.g., checking the "I helped" box), and as suggested by the list of possible barriers, this "support" may be completely unhelpful to the student.

The finding by Catron et al. (1998) underscores the need for the development of a range of supportive services for students in need in school. This can and should include 1) conducting focused assessment of student

or family needs (and not emphasizing diagnostic labels); 2) providing helpful strategies to address identified needs or connecting students or family to a school or community program and ensuring this connection actually happens; 3) giving students or families a resource directory, flyers from community-based programs, or phone numbers of helpful programs (e.g., for suicide prevention, emergency assistance in relation to economic needs) and following up with them on the helpfulness of these resources; 4) enhancing parent involvement in schools, including making connections to family advocacy organizations (e.g., the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health), with representatives of these organizations offering experience and many resources for assisting youth and families in need; and 5) providing focused group and individual support for students on themes such as avoiding and coping with community violence, effectively handling conflict with peers and family members, and building organizational skills for school success (see Mulloy, 2013).

Mentoring Programs

A significant amount of research supports the effectiveness of structured mentoring programs to enhance school engagement (e.g., DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). A *mentor* can be defined as an adult who makes a commitment to being involved in a consistent relationship with at least one young person who would benefit from mentoring related to some non optimal condition in his or her life (e.g., single-parent status, having a disability, experiencing adverse events in the family or community). The adult should be vetted by an organization (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, school system) as not having a criminal background and having positive qualities.

In a review of the mentoring literature, McQuillin, Terry, Strait, and Smith (2013) documented that mentoring programs are particularly popular in schools, but that effects of programs in this setting have not been as strong as programs provided in other settings. This is likely due to the unique barriers to implementing mentoring in schools, such as vetting of mentors, obtaining parental consent and student assent for participation, connecting with students in need in ways that match the way schools operate, and ensuring consistent meeting times. For example, barriers can include navigating the academic schedule and coordinating times for the student and mentor to interact regularly.

To overcome these barriers, McQuillin and colleagues (2013) developed university–school partnerships, involving advanced college students who go into schools to provide focused mentoring (two to three sessions) including motivational interviewing (MI) with students, with findings showing positive impacts on students' academic performance. Generally, MI involves the helping person (e.g., counselor, teacher) assisting the student to explore dimensions of a situation through Socratic questioning (i.e., illuminating relevant choices and suggesting the positive choices so that the student is likely to feel

ownership). For example, in working with a ninth grade student who states a desire to apply to college but is not completing homework and is receiving grades of Cs, Ds, and Fs, a script of an interaction using MI principles could proceed as follows: "So, Jimmy, you want to go to college? That is outstanding. Have you considered a major? Which colleges are you most interested in? Have you explored qualifications students need in order to get into those colleges? Hmmm, that is interesting, so in general at the colleges you like the most, students need a GPA of 3.25 to get in. What is your GPA now?" As shown, in this brief example using MI, students are helped in reviewing relevant facets of a particular decision (in this case, going to college) and, rather than the counselor or helper specifically stating what the student needs to do (in this case, improve grades), questioning is organized in ways that will enable the student to arrive at the decision on his or her own, increasing personal motivation and investment to pursue it.

Check & Connect

Check & Connect is a structured mentoring intervention that allows students and an adult in the school to "check in" on behavioral difficulties (e.g., attendance, grades, suspensions) and "connect" by developing a caring relationship, including aspects of psychological engagement (e.g., improving teacher or mentor and student relationship), behavioral engagement (e.g., behavioral monitoring of attendance, suspensions, and other behavioral indicators), and cognitive engagement (e.g., goal setting). Depending on individual student needs, it can also be used to promote academic engagement. For example, the adult can help the student track assignments, learn study skills, and plan for and organize his or her agenda and homework. Interventions using Check & Connect have been shown to decrease dropout rates and mobility (i.e., nonpromotional school transfer during the academic year) and increase attendance rates and enrollment status for ninth-grade students with EBD (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). For specific details on implementing Check & Connect, see http://www.checkandconnect.umn.edu.

Addressing and Reducing Student Conflict

Clearly, when students experience conflict with other students, it has great potential to reduce their connectedness to school, and in fact these experiences directly compromise their school performance and achievement (Nansel et al., 2001). Bullying is a major problem that directly affects student connectedness to school. When implemented with fidelity, the SWPBS framework addresses bullying by ensuring an emphasis on clear rules and expectations, positive behavior, monitoring of student behavior, and identifying problematic situations and environments that may lead to increases in problem behaviors and other factors (see Chapter 2). As such, teachers and school leaders are encouraged to ensure adequate functioning of teams focused on Tier 1 SWPBS strategies. These teams may consider implementing

specific evidence-based programs such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP; Olweus, Limber, & Mahalic, 1999). Implementation of programs such as the OBPP is enhanced when this work is done in the context of well-functioning SWPBS (e.g., www.PBIS.org; Barrett, Eber, & Weist, 2013). In addition, please note that a key to reducing bullying and other climate problems is to enhance student voice, as in the ideas presented in the section on Enhancing Student Aspirations (see QISA, 2014).

TIER 3 STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

Students presenting concerning and/or established problems have intensified needs for programming focused on improving their connectedness to school. In fact, these students are the most likely to be poorly engaged in school (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). In addition to comprehensive support plans (Chapter 9), students at Tier 3 may benefit from focused interventions in the form of individual, family, and/or group intervention. Often students and families struggle to receive mental health services in traditional community settings (e.g., specialty "clinics"), and schools themselves are usually under-resourced and unable to effectively address the range of students presenting mental health needs.

These rationales underscore the need for developing "expanded" school mental health (SMH) programs that involve community mental health programs joining with schools to augment the work of school-employed mental health staff and move toward providing a full continuum of effective promotion, prevention, and intervention at Tiers 1, 2, and 3. Increasingly, these SMH programs are joining together with SWPBS to add depth and quality to programs and services at each tier and to promote improved decision making, use of data, implementation of effective practices, and synergistic impacts of programs (i.e., positive impacts may be particularly enhanced when SWPBS and SMH programs work together versus separately; see Barrett, Eber, & Weist, 2013). Teachers are playing a prominent role in the development of these SMH programs (ideally interconnected with SWPBS), which assist in promoting positive behavior in classrooms (see Chapter 4), identifying and assisting youth with more intensive needs so that they receive appropriate intervention more rapidly, and directly helping students gain skills that promote their positive emotional and behavioral functioning (see Chapter 12 for a more detailed review of intervention approaches).

Foundational in identifying and providing effective services for students with more serious emotional and behavioral issues is involving them as partners in care. This approach contrasts with more traditional approaches in mental health service delivery wherein providers take the stance of experts who teach and train the student and his or her family on strategies to help them be more successful. As presented earlier in the chapter, a key to involving the student (and his or her family) in school is to emphasize a collaborative relationship, which includes dimensions of explicitly focusing

on engagement (including past negative experiences and ways to make the current experience more helpful), support (tangibly helping the student with a need, such as connection to a mentoring or tutoring program), and empowerment (an overarching theme that results from strong collaboration and a sense of hopefulness to achieve valued outcomes).

INCREASING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG SCHOOLS AND OTHER YOUTH-SERVING SYSTEMS

In any community, schools will be the largest youth-serving system. However, schools are often isolated from other systems, such as juvenile justice, child welfare, health care, and developmental disabilities systems. In addition, schools are very busy places, with teachers and administrators contending with the significant and critically important agenda of educating children and youth while adhering to local and state policies, laws, and federal mandates.

Isolation from other systems and intensive workloads can contribute to a limited focus of schools on the whole child. Strategies that improve student wellness and emotional or behavioral functioning and reduce or remove barriers to learning ultimately increase the likelihood that students will succeed academically and graduate from school. Ideally, these efforts are nested within a philosophy of a "shared agenda" wherein schools and other youth-serving systems work together on mutually recognized goals.

This framework of a "shared agenda" is foundational to expanded school mental health programs and involves community mental health staff joining with schools to augment programs and services at all three tiers (see Weist, 1997). Such partnerships lead to enhanced resources for schools and increased ability to provide high-quality programs and services at Tiers 2 and 3, and, for the mental health systems, lead to significantly improved access to students. Similarly, youth in juvenile justice, child welfare, and other systems usually attend public schools. Without formal connections to these systems, schools often struggle to meet the needs of these youth, who usually experience elevated levels of trauma, emotional and behavioral problems, and challenges in learning.

THE INTERCONNECTED SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOLWIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT AND SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

Unfortunately, in most communities, infrastructure to link various youth-serving initiatives together and with the schools does not exist, nor is there a group that steps forward to organize such a linkage and move the various agencies toward a shared agenda. As mentioned earlier, there are considerable benefits to establishing and enhancing SWPBS and interconnecting this work with SMH to promote depth and quality of services at all three tiers of the multi-tiered system of support. When this is accomplished, as in the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF; see Barrett et al., 2013), schools

begin to become an anchoring point for multisystem collaboration. The ISF provides detail on well-functioning teams, using data to make decisions, choosing interventions based on evidence of positive impact, adjusting interventions to maximize impact, and using evaluation findings for ongoing quality improvement. An example of the added value of the ISF is presented in the following subsection in relation to team functioning.

Critical Role of Teams

As noted throughout this book and in this chapter, the functioning of teams is critical to effectively reduce barriers to student learning and promote student wellness, including positive emotional and behavioral adjustment as well as learning. Ideally, there is at least one well-functioning and inclusive team in a school, with sub-teams focused on planning and implementation of the best practices at each of the three tiers. These sub-teams should be responsible for reaching out to other community agencies to enhance resources and approaches. For example, at Tier 1, school climate enhancement can be assisted through connection to parent–teacher and family advocacy organizations to increase the presence of family members and positive adults in the building. At Tier 2, mentoring programs can be facilitated through connection with communities of faith, recreational programs, and local universities. At Tier 3, services to students with intensive needs can be facilitated by joint planning with agency leaders (e.g., to identify trauma-focused intervention for students with such needs).

In fact, well-functioning school teams are one of the most important processes and quality indicators of programs to assist students in need and promote their academic achievement (Markle, Splett, Maras, & Weston, 2014). However, in most schools, there are multiple teams, such as the individualized education program (IEP) team for students in special education, student assistance teams for students presenting highly challenging problems and/or substance abuse issues, crisis intervention teams, school improvement teams, and so forth. Commonly, many of the same school leaders are on multiple teams and do not have time to participate effectively in all of them. Consequently, teams often lack strong leadership, consistent agendas and processes, and meeting follow-through required to be successful. Thus, a critically important action to improve programs and services for youth contending with emotional and behavioral problems is to engage in resource mapping of teams (see discussion earlier in this chapter), including documenting for all teams 1) the name, 2) members, 3) goals and actions, 4) meeting schedule, and 5) an honest assessment of its impact at student and school-building levels. This information can be used toward potential integration of smaller, less effective teams into a larger, well-functioning team as described in the ISF (Barrett et al., 2013). However, there are a number of strategies for effective team functioning, and in some cases, two or three smaller, effective teams will be an appropriate plan for a school. Resources for effective team

functioning in schools can also be found on web sites of national centers for SWPBS (http://www.pbis.org) and SMH (http://csmh.umaryland.edu).

SUMMARY

Student connectedness to school is a powerful protective factor that promotes success in school and beyond. Teachers play a critical role in promoting student connectedness through positive relationships with students, using simple strategies such as making sure every student in the school has at least one positive interaction with a teacher or staff member every day and smiling at and greeting students by name. In addition, there are many strategies that can be integrated in the three-tiered SWPBS framework for enhancing student connectedness, including enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors (Tier 1), mentoring programs (Tier 2), and improving connections with other youth-serving systems to assist students with more challenging problems (Tier 3).

Self-Reflection

1. Given what was presented in this chapter on enhancing student connectedness to school, think about your own experience in school. What contributed to your feelings of connection? Disconnection? In your current school, identify factors that help students feel connected (i.e., pulling them toward school) versus disconnected (i.e., pushing them away from school). How will you be involved in school teams and decision making to improve strategies for students to feel connected to your school?
2. Think about the concept that every day, every student should have at least one positive interaction with an adult (e.g., teacher, staff member) in the building. What do you do to live out this principle?
3. A reality is that teachers often rapidly form negative impressions of some students related to their behavior, behavior problems, appearance, peers, negative interactions with family, or other factors. When this happens, how does it affect your ability to promote school connectedness among these students? How can you overcome these biased perceptions to positively reach out to these students?
4. Think of an environmental feature in your school that promotes connectedness (e.g., nice lunchroom, consistent and positive rules, outstanding lunchroom monitors) and one that does not (e.g., area of the building that is isolated and not patrolled by teachers, where student misbehavior occurs). How can you be an environmental change agent in your building?
5. Is it possible for you to smile and positively greet all of your students every day, regardless of their past behavior?

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