

Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness

The declaration that follows is based upon a detailed review of research and in-depth discussions among an interdisciplinary group of leaders in education convened on June 13-15, 2003, at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, by the Center for Adolescent Health and Development at the University of Minnesota, with support from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health and the Johnson Foundation.

These insights and strategies are based on empirical evidence, and should form the basis for creating school and classroom environments where all students, independent of academic capacity, are engaged and feel a part of the educational endeavor

Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The critical requirements for feeling connected include students' experiencing:

- High academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning^{1,2}
- Positive adult-student relationships^{3,4}
- Safety: both physical and emotional^{4,5}

Increasing the number of students connected to school is likely to impact critical accountability measures, such as:

- Academic performance;^{6,7,8,9,10}
- Incidents of fighting, bullying, or vandalism;^{11,12}
- Absenteeism;¹³
- School completion rates.^{8,14,15,16}

Strong scientific evidence demonstrates that increased student connection to school promotes:

- Educational motivation;^{4,5,13,17,18}
- Classroom engagement;^{2,4,13}
- Improved school attendance.¹³

These three factors in turn increase academic achievement. These findings apply across racial, ethnic, and income groups.

Likewise, there is strong evidence that a student who feels connected to school is less likely to exhibit:

- Disruptive behavior;^{1,8,19}
- School violence;^{8,19}
- Substance and tobacco use;^{8,19}
- Emotional distress;¹⁹
- Early age of first sex.^{19,20}

Based on current research evidence, the most effective strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will be connected to school include:

- Implementing high standards and expectations, and providing academic support to all students.¹
- Applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced.^{1,13,21}
- Creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families.^{1,13}
- Hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learner's needs.⁸
- Fostering high parent/family expectations for school performance and school completion.^{1,8}
- Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school.^{1,13}

Best Bets

Warranting Further Research

- Programs and approaches that create positive and purposeful peer support and peer norms.
- Strategies that work to promote connection to school among disenfranchised groups.
- Analysis of the costs and effectiveness of different programs for fostering school connectedness.
- Evaluation of new and existing curricular approaches, staff and administrator training, and various institutional structures.
- Effects of students feeling connected on teacher morale, effectiveness, and turnover.

Copies of a special issue of the *Journal of School Health* are available by contacting Linda Hrobak, lhrobak@ashaweb.org, 330/678-1601, or Tom Reed, treed@ashaweb.org, 330/678-1601. In addition, the Declaration and research reviews are available electronically at www.allaboutkids.umn.edu – look under “what's new”

Coming soon – a 20-page monograph describing the Wingspread concepts and strategies in more detail.

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