Caring Teacher-Student Relationships

Why Is This Strategy Useful?

Researchers have examined the types of teachers’ behaviors that are perceived as caring by students, especially minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that are associated with better student outcomes. Students who view their teachers as caring may be more likely than their peers to have positive attitudes towards learning, more self-confidence, and greater motivation to work hard and overcome challenges. Teacher-student relationship are especially important for promoting the outcomes of students at-risk of academic failure or dropping out of school.

Description of Strategy

Teachers should self-reflect on classroom practices and consider areas for additional support to students. Here are few examples for key actions that may promote the perception of teacher as caring:

- Communicating to students that all students can succeed.
- Model respect, interpersonal understanding, integrity, and caring through communications with students and other staff.
- Provide opportunities for students to contribute to the determination of classroom rules and routines.
- Offering students a number of ways to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- Providing individual feedback that is encouraging, positive, and includes prescriptive instruction how to improve current problem solving processes.
- Accommodate students learning styles, interests, and strengths through class instruction class assignments, and extra-credit assignments.
- Maintain communication with parents and legal guardians.

Research Evidence

Two large correlational studies are described here as examples of the evidence base for this strategy. One large longitudinal study with a nationally representative sample of eighth-grade students who were followed at the tenth and twelfth grades provides support for the importance of strengthening teacher-student relationship. Results showed that students’ trust in teachers’ ability to help them learn and the feeling that the teacher cares about them were associated with students’ academic effort in math. The behavior of at-risk students was associated with perception of the teacher’s commitment to help them to reach their academic goals.

A second study included 968 middle-school students from four economically and ethnically diverse school districts in the Midwest. The purpose of this two-year longitudinal study was to assess students’ goals and avoidance behaviors in mathematics. Results showed that when students thought that their teachers tended to embarrass students who have difficulty, they were likely to avoid seeking help, disrupt class, and attribute their difficulty to the teacher or the “unfairness” of a test.
Sample Studies Supporting this Strategy


Why do students avoid seeking help on their schoolwork when they need it? Why might they blame the teacher when they do poorly on an exam? What might explain students’ disruptive behavior during class? These are the questions that drive our current research. In this study, we focus on goal theory of motivation, basing our research on studies that have linked these maladaptive student behaviors to the goals they perceive at the classroom level. We realize, however, that goals represent only one aspect of the classroom dynamics students’ experience. Students’ behaviors may also depend upon the extent to which they feel supported rather than embarrassed when they do not understand the lesson. As we consider the ways in which classroom environments relate to young adolescents’ academic behaviors, we examine both the motivational goals students perceive in the classroom and their perceptions of teacher support and enthusiasm.


This study uses information from both teachers and students to explore how the perceptions of each other’s investment in the relationship affects the productivity of the relationship. Using the National Longitudinal Study of 1988, the author analyzed the conditions and academic consequences of students’ investment in the relationship with teachers and school. 6,007 public school students were included in this analysis. Findings show that teachers’ perceptions that the student puts forth academic effort and students’ perceptions that teachers are caring are each weakly associated with mathematics achievement for most students. For students who are judged by their teachers as at risk of dropping out of high school, however, the value for math achievement of having teachers who care is substantial and mitigates against the negative effect of having been judged as at risk. The results suggest that social capital, as defined by a relationship that facilitates action, is especially high for at-risk students who feel their teachers are interested, expect them to succeed, listen to them, praise their effort, and care.

Additional Resources


Qualified and caring teachers. Available at: http://pubs.cde.ca.gov/tc5ii/ch5/qualifiedcarnqths.aspx