



EDUCATOR RELATIONSHIPS: ANOTHER COVID CASUALTY?



It's the little things. The smile when you say hello. The handshake or embrace. The questions about the kids, the weekend, the neighborhood where you live.

Combined, baby steps like these are the building blocks of warm and functional relationships between teachers, administrators, families, and students. And, combined, all of them took a hit over the last two years due to COVID, Huriya Jabbar and NEPC Fellow Jennifer Jellison Holme, both of the University of Texas at Austin, found [while studying four large, high-poverty schools](#). While the teachers in these schools were working from campus during much of that time, their students were not. Moreover, as a result of valid concerns about transmitting the disease, teachers could not collaborate with one another in person. If they met, it occurred over Zoom. In fact, teachers rarely had in-person encounters with their colleagues—especially those working in other departments or areas of their buildings.

This relative isolation put a strain on teachers' relationships, in a pattern Jabbar and Holme described as “worrisome.”

“These weaker relationships can erode school culture and undermine schools' collective aims, which are essential for improving student learning,” they wrote in a recent commentary in *The Hill*.

Schools cannot function, much less improve, without strong relationships among teachers, leaders and families, particularly in schools serving marginalized students. Without strong relationships, it is difficult for teachers to work collec-

tively to improve student learning, or to implement new reforms and initiatives.

Based on what they've observed during their study, Jabbar and Holme recommend that educators seriously consider allocating at least some federal COVID relief funds toward rebuilding the human relationships that form the foundation of high-quality education. This might include adding facilities like cafes where educators, students, and families can interact. It could include hiring or assigning staff to strengthen connections between teachers, help resolve conflicts, and coach leaders on relationship-building skills. Because transparency is the foundation of trust, it might also include investing in internal and external communications efforts.

While relationship-building may not be as clear-cut or easily explainable as, say, purchasing a new curriculum or hiring an after-school tutor, Jabbar and Holme argue that it is critical work that is essential to putting the negative educational impacts of the pandemic in the rearview mirror.

“To effectively recover and move forward after the pandemic, school districts should invest in social capital by strengthening relationships between staff members within schools,” they write.

There are no easy fixes to building social capital—it requires significant resources, creativity and a willingness to change existing routines. Yet, given that the pandemic has already upended the way we teach and learn, there is no better time to engage in necessary systemic change.

NEPC Resources on Social Context of Education

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