RELATIONSHIP-RICH ORGANIZATIONS:

Supporting Structures

The relational culture of an organization, how rooted it is in relationships, grows out of the supporting structures that prioritize and make space for relationship-building. Supporting structures may include hiring practices, internal communications that emphasize the importance of relationships, and recognizing staff who are great relationship builders.

Teachers and other practitioners working with youth can build strong relationships with the youth they engage with in programs or classrooms, even without broader organizational structures to support them. However, supportive structures make it more likely because they can catalyze, amplify, and sustain these efforts. How? By continually promoting a positive relational climate and the mindsets, skills, and actions that make up a relationship-rich culture. More than perhaps any part of Search Institute's Rooted in Relationships model, creating these structures requires leadership buy-in and commitment.

Drawing on data from the State of Relationships case study, here is what we're learning about the availability of supporting structures for growing relationship-rich schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs.

Investing in Relationships Matters to Practitioners

Most school and OST staff and leaders are invested in and believe that relationships matter. In fact, roughly **9 out of 10 adults** reported that staff in their school or organization view a relationship-rich culture as something worth investing in.

The State of Relationships

A Minnesota Case Study on the Landscape of Relationships in Schools and OST Programs

A relationship gap exists for too many young people—the gap between what they need, and what they experience. By understanding what's working and what's not in creating relationship-rich spaces for all youth, we can design tools to improve youth-adult relationships.

Search Institute partnered with the Carlson Family Foundation in 2021 to conduct the State of Relationships study to further this understanding. This case study explored what schools and out-of-school time (OST) programs across one state, Minnesota, are doing to build strong youth-adult relationships. *The study findings highlighted here are from Minnesota but are relevant for any state, school, or OST program that wants to invest in a relationship-rich organization.*

For more information on the study design and sample, click here.

Supporting Structures: Valued But Underdeveloped

While it is encouraging that staff and leaders overwhelmingly say they're invested in relationships, the potential that support has for the relational climate of an organization can't be realized unless schools and OST programs have the right infrastructure in place to support relationship-building. Most staff and leaders believe this infrastructure is critical to achieving their organization's goals. *Yet, although valued, the study showed that these supporting structures are underdeveloped in many settings, and that there's a disparity in how these are experienced by staff and leaders in schools and OST programs.*

Relationships are often prominent in organizations' mission, vision, and communication, but not nearly as emphasized in the concrete, everyday supporting structures needed to bring that mission and vision to life.

1. Mission, Vision, & Communication
Building positive relationships with youth is stated as a priority goal in written, spoken, and verbal communication.

💡 Fully 8 in 10 staff and leaders said this rhetorical support for strong youth-adult relationships is present.

However the follow-through on this solid rhetorical support for prioritizing relationships is much more mixed, according to other data from the study.

82%
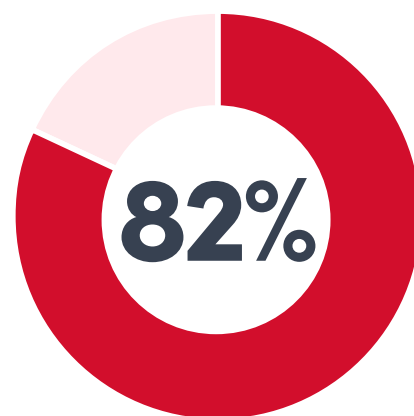
2. Recognition
The organization recognizes and rewards staff who build positive relationships with youth.

💡 Although the majority of staff and leaders said relationship-building was recognized and rewarded, it was just a bare majority: It might be in the mission, yes, but staff are unlikely to keep doing things with full conviction and effort that aren't noticed and positively reinforced.

56%
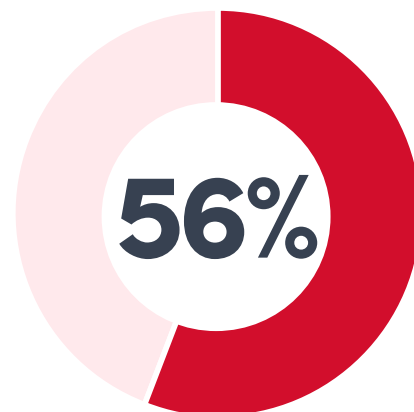
> "I think sometimes leaders are above, they have this vision of how things are supposed to go and like, 'If we do this, of course, we've got built in time for relationship-building.' ... of course that's our intention, but there's so many other things that have to get done. And so, I think, that there can be a disconnect sometimes between staff and leadership."
>
> – School staff, Greater Minnesota

3. Recruitment and Hiring

The organization has recruitment and hiring practices in place to ensure staff value building positive relationships with all youth we work with.

💡 Nearly two-thirds of staff and leaders said recruitment and hiring processes in their organization do emphasize building positive relationships with youth. Still, this means that 1 in 3 organizations are not seen as doing a good job to ensure that new staff have the mindsets and skills.

64%
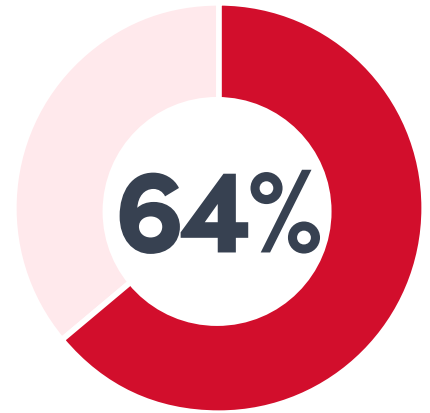
4. Time Allocation

Job requirements are structured in a way that ensures staff at the organization have time to build positive relationships with the youth we work with.

💡 Similar to recruitment and hiring, about 1 in 3 of the staff and leaders said that their organization didn't make adequate time available for building positive youth-adult relationships. At the least, setting performance expectations without providing the time and space to meet those expectations is likely to lead to staff burnout and quitting. For youth who have experienced trauma, or have been historically marginalized and discriminated against, the time needed to establish trust is likely to be even greater, and thus, the organizational support for the needed time more considerable.

63%
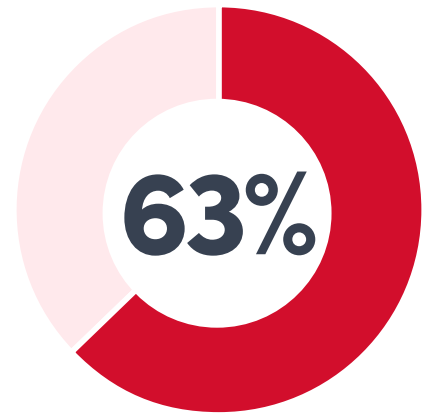
5. Program Content and Structure

The structure of the organization (e.g., schedule, activities, space) makes it easy for staff to build positive relationships with the youth we work with.

The structure of the organization makes it easy for...

...staff to **build positive relationships with the youth we work with.** **67%**

...for youth to **build positive relationships with staff.** **56%**

...for youth to **build positive relationships with their peers.** **65%**

Similar to the data on other supporting structures, about 60% of staff and leaders felt that the schedule, activities, and space of their organization makes it easy for staff and youth to build positive relationships with each other. And yet, the schedule, activities, and space—the program content and structure—is the heart of schools or OST programs. That nearly 40% of these youth-serving staff and leaders did not agree that the heart of what they do makes it easy to build relationships is concerning.

When disaggregated, we find differences in how these relational supporting structures are experienced in schools and OST programs; with staff and leaders in OST programs tending to report more of each of these supporting structures. School leaders are also much more likely than teachers and other school staff to agree that these supporting structures are in place. These disparities are quite similar to what researchers find in comparing adults' and youths' perceptions in schools: across studies of relationships, staff and leaders generally think things are going better than youth do.

> " I think for me relationships are a priority when people take time to make connections with students, even at the administrative level. You could tell our superintendent's mission was all about students, connection, and building relationship. I also can see that from our principal too! "
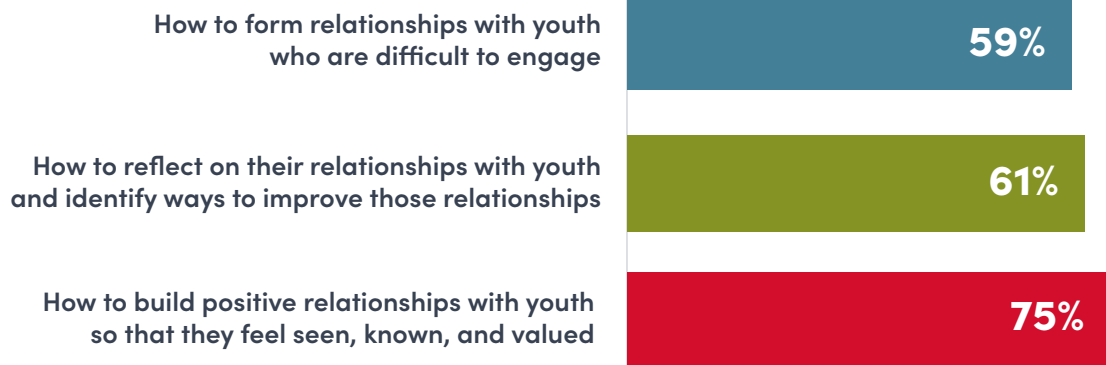>
> – School staff, Twin Cities metro

Professional Learning Opportunities

Professional learning opportunities—e.g., workshops, conferences, mentoring, directed reading, or video-based training—are a great way to strengthen staffs' skills and capacity to form strong relationships with youth. In the State of Relationships case study, we asked staff to report on the learning opportunities they've had focused on relationship-building.

More than half of staff report having access to relationship-focused professional learning opportunities focused on:

How to form relationships with youth who are difficult to engage	**59%**
How to reflect on their relationships with youth and identify ways to improve those relationships	**61%**
How to build positive relationships with youth so that they feel seen, known, and valued	**75%**

Relationships are often the gateway to learning and feeling a sense of belonging for young people. For example, Search Institute's studies have consistently found student motivation is highly predicted by how strong young people's relationships are with teachers.

And the value of relationships is deeply understood in school and OST organizations, and yet considerable numbers (25%–41%) of staff and leaders said relationships are often overlooked or undervalued as a topic for professional development. Here, too, we find that leaders are much more likely than staff to report that these kinds of professional learning opportunities are available in their organization.

What we also don't know from this case study is how deep these learning opportunities were, or how often staff and leaders participate in them. "Dosage" usually matters for changing mindsets, skills, and the actions people take. But it is likely that the great

majority of the 59%–75% who said these learning opportunities were available to them or that they had participated in them, probably do not participate frequently (e.g., at least once a year), or for much time (e.g., at least a few hours). How much impact those more limited learning opportunities can make is therefore an open question.

Barriers to Building Strong Relationships

Leaders and staff highlighted a number of barriers that got in the way of their developing strong relationships with youth.

Lack of time specifically dedicated to building relationships with youth emerged as the top barrier.

Barrier	Percentage
This organization does not consider relationships as critical to achieving our targeted youth outcomes	12%
Organizational policies or structures make building relationships with youth difficult	19%
Leaders lack the resources to support staff with building positive youth-adult relationships	21%
There is a lack of time specifically dedicated to building relationships with youth	43%

Supporting Structures: Reflection & Discussion

The State of Relationships case study data underscore the need for staff and leaders to build an organizational infrastructure that promotes relationship-building and an overall positive relational climate. This work starts with bringing together people with diverse points of view on the organization—including leaders, staff, volunteers, and youth themselves—to evaluate how existing structures support (or impede) relationship-building and then use these insights to construct ways of growing in relationships across the organization.

This State of Relationships case study showed overwhelming support for the value and importance of building strong relationships between youth and adults in schools and OST programs, so that youth development is rooted in relationships in those settings. However, only small majorities said their organizations have set the stage that allows young people's developmental roots to grow and be nourished — backing up that support with time, resources, hiring, training, relationship-promoting activities, and recognition.

More In This Series

Want to learn more about how to build a relationship-rich organization? Check out the other briefs in this series:

- **Intentional Relational Climate**
- **Inclusive Relational Climate**
- **Equitable Relational Climate**

Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about the relational supporting structures in your organization. How much do the data in this brief describe your organization's "state of relationships"?

What?   What 2-3 things stood out to you as you read this brief?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Say What?   What questions or issues does this brief raise for you about becoming more aware of, and strengthening, the state of relationships in your own school or program?

_____

_____

_____

So What?   What possibilities for improving the relational richness of your school or program do you see? What actions might your organization take? What could YOU do?

How do you think young people might want adults in your school or program to respond to findings like these?

_____

_____

_____

Now What?   What activities or efforts would your school or program be willing to try to enhance your investment in relationships and the organizational structures that support relationship-building?

_____

_____

_____

**To learn more about creating a relational culture in your organization,
check out Search Institute's Resources Hub.**