

Connect

Establish strong relationships with students & families to cultivate a culture of learning & respect.

“Students notice when you notice them.”—*Multi-Classroom Leader*® Ellen Rayburn

Finding ways to connect with *all* students forms the foundation for instructional success. Extending those connections to families ensures that students feel supported wherever learning happens.

Connecting with students and families to cultivate a culture of learning includes the following:

- * **Impart a collective vision that all students can succeed**
- * **Build positive, genuine individual relationships**
- * **Communicate student learning information regularly**
- * **Motivate everyone to do their best**

* **Impart a collective vision that all students can succeed**

How do you put into practice the concept of imparting a vision of students’ success? Great teachers emphasize:

- the **power of communicating a belief** in every student’s learning ability...
- and **demonstrating high expectations** for students...
- **with the support they need** to meet those expectations.
- **Focusing on growth**, so students can see **smaller successes** along the way, is especially powerful...
- along with **visible signs of success**—such as posters, data trackers, and small celebrations.

“It’s a daily thing where you have to say, ‘You know, **you guys can do it**, you’re the best, you’re going to be the best, we’re going to see the results, they’ll pay off.’ ”—*Multi-Classroom Leader*® (MCL™) Lance Kanter

“What I have to do is...make sure they know that **I’m here for them, no matter what**, and I will not give up on them. And I will not let them give up on themselves.”—*Master Reach Teacher Jimmel Williams*

“[The curriculum I’ve created] has challenging texts, and that **tells kids that they are respected**, that tells students that they matter, that we have high expectations for them, that we believe that they can do this. ... The biggest change that I’ve seen is by introducing these rigorous texts, these rigorous

expectations, the kids just come alive. ... They don’t feel like they are being pandered or condescended to, and they feel like people are investing in them.”—*MCL*™ Hadley Moore

These great teachers emphasize the need to focus on growth to help students stay motivated and energized.

“Kids can be very dejected when they realize that ‘I didn’t get that 3, that 4, that 5’ on the end-of-grade tests. But when **we’re able to show them that they are growing**, that really sparks a lot of interest in our kids. ... The conversation that they have is just invaluable because you walk in the hallway, you see the kids going, ‘Yeah, I got 15 points growth, what did you do?’ And there’s that positive culture that we’re building where kids are learning to be accountable, and they’re learning to really be invested in their learning and do their best.”—*MCL*™ Erin Williams

“I have some video clips of **scholars that I taught in first grade** talking about their reading goals and then **talking about school and grad school and college**...I like to show those little videos and pictures of their own personalized trackers, which is like a giant caterpillar on a tracker that they got to color in and kind of own the data with.”—*MCL*™ Kristin Cabbage

* **Build positive, genuine individual relationships**

Teachers agree that using **multiple methods to genuinely connect** with every student, and to foster connections among students, is essential. Those include morning class meetings in elementary and middle school, where students share both highs and lows in their lives (as do their teachers, when appropriate); surveys that both students and teachers fill out to discover common interests; lunches with students; and finding time to talk with students about more than that day’s classwork.

In the classrooms of teachers whose students make high growth, their connections and positive emotions

with students can be seen in their words and body language, such as when they make frequent eye contact, call students by name, praise students when they have earned the praise, listen carefully, make empathetic statements, and share personal stories.

MCL™ Stan Whalen notes a time when he successfully used **the simple technique of using a student's name in a math problem**: "I couldn't reach this one student, no matter how much I pushed and no matter how much I reached out to the parent. He was very good in math, though. So, one day...I put his name in a math problem, and he came to life. ... No joke, he came alive ... [we] just started a brand new relationship."

MCL™ Molly Whelan also thinks about how students relate to class materials. "I also...look at that curriculum that we use and just realize how boring some of it could be, and just thinking if I were a student sitting here doing those lessons...I might not even understand it, because it's talking about things I can't relate to and I don't even necessarily know. [We must ask] 'how can we engage our kids in a way that is going to be effective in their success and our teaching?'"

Excellent teachers also note the need to be very careful with discipline. Although students may need to leave a room when upset or disruptive, making that absence as short as possible, and showing students genuine forgiveness after a bad day, are crucial to both solid relationships and educational success.

"Another big thing...is **providing each student with a fresh start every day**. So they may have torn your classroom up the day before...but giving them a warm welcome [the next day] and letting them know it's a new day is huge."—MCL™ Kellie Brotherton

Getting input on students' lives from family members or involved adults can also help build strong relationships. Within time constraints, they use phone calls, emails, and home visits, as well as parent nights at school.

"I go support this particular scholar at their basketball game on the weekend or staying after school for tutoring, or reaching out to their parents to give a positive phone call, let them know that their scholar had a great day," MCL™ Bobby Miles says. "**Open up the line of communication between the parents and the teachers** so the parent doesn't feel like they're doing this by themselves, but they have a support system here at school as well."

Although it's difficult to get to know details about a student's family life, making the effort is well worth the time, teachers say.

"Knowing their parents and their family situation does help, because then **I can be empathetic to their situation but still hold them accountable**, so that when they come in I know this is happening but you still have to be able to learn, read, and write, this is what we're here for. So I use family situations to empower myself or to help kids."—MCL™ Russ Stanton

* **Communicate student learning information regularly**

- *Initiate positive, constructive, and helpful dialogue*

Students want and need to know where they stand. Share their data and progress with them routinely, and explain the meaning behind the data—for their current work as well as how it affects their future.

"We use those data as talking points basically every Friday. We want to use it to reward students, so we have data trackers, and students are tracking their own data towards that goal. ... It's kind-of been built into the culture of **students always reaching to have something to achieve**."—MCL™ Erin Burns

Ensure that parents also understand expectations and their children's progress, with simple, direct, jargon-free communication, including newsletters, open houses held early in the school year, parent nights on a specific topic, parent surveys, and direct communication with individual parents.

"**I'm in communication with parents over the phone** all the time."—MCL™ Kathryn Smith

* **Motivate everyone to do their best**

- *Foster trust and joy: be trustworthy and joyful*

"The **biggest thing is building a relationship** with these kids, and once you form that bond with them and they trust you, then they're willing to dive in and do the dirty work—but it takes a little while to do that."—*Team Reach Teacher™ Katherine McAuliffe*

"Talk to [students] constantly and listen. So, a lot of teachers will talk at them, but you really listen to what they have to say, respond, and remember what they say so you can bring it back up later. Some students it's really easy, and some students it takes a few weeks or longer, a few months before they learn that they can trust you," MCL™ Ellen Rayburn says. "**Whatever you say you're going to do, do it**, and over time students learn that you do what you say that you're going to do, and they start to respect that trust. It's also setting the relationship boundaries of 'in class we're very business, and outside of class I'm much more casual.' ... When you message that our class time is important, that messages to students that they are important and that you believe in what they can do, because you're not

going to waste their time, and I also don't expect you to waste my time. So when students get that message, they feel like you're a person worth having a relationship with."

"If you're dry and boring, then that's what the kids are going to give you. They're going to give you just lazy work—and my passion is in everything that I do. ...I really do believe that the excitement that I have for science is what has kind-of bounced off to the kids, and so, **because I'm excited, they're excited**. Kids who in other classes aren't succeeding—they are succeeding in my room."—*MCL™ Tonya Reaves*

- *Celebrate achievements!*

Celebrate not just in class with students, but also with parents.

"I definitely like to **call to celebrate good things**, and to celebrate the things that the students are doing that are helping our building grow."—*MCL™ Kathryn Smith*

MCL™ Erin Williams tells the story of resetting student and teacher expectations—and the joy they all felt upon seeing their progress: "In analyzing student data, we saw that we needed to raise the bar. We raised schoolwide expectations beyond the grade-level norm, to MAP and interim assessment achievement levels 4 and 5—college- and career-ready levels. Now, our students needed to reach even higher! Thus began our "Strive for 5" campaign. **Teachers showed their support and rewarded students' work**. On test days, we wear Strive for 5 T-shirts to encourage student achievement—meaning you will see my alter ego, Felicia Focus, striding the halls in bright sunglasses, waving a wand, with the goal for the day taped to the back of my outfit. I'm a walking billboard!

"I tell the kids that they can put [our school] on the map. Our students' reading growth did that—we moved into the top 10 of the district's 48 middle schools for achievement growth! **Our students dream big, because we dream big**. And then, when students meet their goals, we celebrate!"¹

Note: Some quotes have been edited for clarity and length. Quotes come from interviews conducted with Opportunity Culture® educators over several years; titles for each educator here reflect the role the educator was in at the time of the interview.

Learn More: Watch the [Connect videos](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **strengths** for you or your team?
2. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **weaknesses** for you or your team? Think about actions you never take, fail to take as often as needed, or do not take as well as needed to achieve strong learning growth consistently.
3. What one to three specific changes will you or your team make to **use your strengths more** often or more consistently and **improve weaknesses** in the coming months?
4. Make a brief **action plan** with specific goals, roles, and time by which you will make specific changes!
5. Did your changes produce **better learning results**? If so, keep them. If not, think again about what other changes to make!

For more elements of instructional leadership and excellence, visit the [Instructional Leadership and Excellence webpages](#), which each have **video clips** of teacher-leaders who have achieved high-growth student learning; **discussion questions** for developing your team and yourself; **training links** for ongoing professional development; and other **developmental resources** including books, videos, articles, and tools

For more on the Opportunity Culture® initiative, visit [OpportunityCulture.org](#).

We're happy to hear your feedback on this element; [contact us!](#)

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¹ Williams, E. (2017, May 15). *When students own their academic results, they transform their schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/opinion-when-students-own-their-academic-results-they-transform-their-schools>