

## Establishing Supportive Relationships between Teachers, Staff, and Students

### WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

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On February 16 and 17, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center (Center) hosted a Webinar titled “Establishing Supportive Relationships between Teachers, Staff, and Students.” During the session, the presenter, Mr. Clay Roberts, a senior trainer from Vision Training Associates, Inc. and expert, Dr. David Osher from the American Institutes for Research, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenters could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center ([sssta@air.org](mailto:sssta@air.org); 1-800-258-8413).

*Please note the content of this summary was prepared under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to the American Institutes for Research (AIR). This Q&A summary does not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor do they imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.*

#### **Q1. What have you found effective in engaging staff in building relationships with students when they do not see that being part of their job, are burnt out, and/or are hostile to the idea of it?**

**Clay Roberts:** Staff who don’t build positive relationships with students and who are resistant to this approach create problems and issues for students and with fellow staff members. I am reluctant to provide much advice on these situations without knowing more about the specifics on any given situation. As an example, I would want to know if this person is aware or unaware that their behavior is a problem. Are they at all open to change or are they very defiant? Do you have power and support in this situation or very little power or support? What have you already tried and what was their response?

Having said that, I do have some general guidelines that I think apply in these situations. I prefer starting with a positive, graduated approach. Such an approach begins with the same skill (strategy #2 redirecting inappropriate behavior) that I modeled in the Webinar. I think if you are trying to create lasting change it may be helpful to give this staff person some initial steps to take that are small, immediate, specific, and doable. The idea here is to make them aware of the issue, provide them with the skills or small steps to make a difference, and reward them when they do it. It is also helpful to have a coach or mentor who can model, and support staff members through this kind of change. All of this is so much more powerful when the entire staff have gone through an effective training on relationship building first, and where staff have agreed on staff norms (strategy #6).

If you have already tried the positive approach and the behavior hasn’t changed, then I prefer a more direct approach. The data are very clear that positive relationships are necessary for

higher levels of achievement. We don't give staff a choice of whether to deal with state standards. We don't give them a choice about whether they teach the district-adopted curriculum. We should not give them a choice of whether they develop strong personal connections with students. The only choice in this matter should be the methods they choose to use in building those relationships.

If they continue to be defiant they should be monitored regularly. Inappropriate behaviors should be documented and reported, and people who can't change or won't change should not be working with children. All this requires courageous conversations and a lot of unpleasant work. But remember, people don't change when they are comfortable; they change when they are uncomfortable. Sometimes our job is to make them feel uncomfortable with their behavior so they want to change.

My last guideline is not to spend all your time with those people who are not doing the job of building positive connections with kids. Instead, you need to make sure that you surround yourself with staff who are doing this and who believe it is important. Remember you and your positive climate colleagues need to keep your spirits high and support one another because the movement begins with you.

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## **Q2. How do you suggest going about repairing relationships between staff and student?**

**Clay Roberts:** Set aside a time and make sure you budget enough time to be able to thoroughly and thoughtfully discuss the issues. Reserve a space that allows privacy and minimal interruptions. You might want to invite a third party, a trusted person—perhaps trained in conflict resolution, to sit in and facilitate the session. Speak from the heart and encourage the student to do the same. Remember, whenever you have to give them critical feedback sandwich it between two positive comments. Try to get commitments on specific behaviors that the student will do and be willing to commit to specific behaviors yourself. You can develop a contract with the student and make sure you have a review schedule and reward system built into the contract.

## **Q3. What if you are working with a student that has a poor relationship with a teacher who says "I know the teacher hates me"? How do you help the student in that relationship and in that class?**

**Clay Roberts:** The first thing I might do in this situation is to try and identify, from the student, what specific behaviors lead them to believe that this staff member hates them. If I feel the student is justified in their feelings, I would approach the staff member in question and let them know that a student came to me and asked to remain anonymous. I would give the staff member the specific behaviors that the student is reading as hateful. I would encourage them to adopt other warm and engaging behaviors where appropriate. It also may be helpful to foster

other supportive relationships (using other staff members and/or students) for the student in this situation.

**Q4. I actually really like the idea you are bringing up. I work as a counselor and I do see a HUGE difference in student's behavior and academic motivation when a teacher makes an effort to build a relationship. I am working on building a program or something to help enhance our service in the area of personal/social and I thought about creating a mentoring program inviting certificated and classified staff to volunteer to "adopt a child" who has been in discipline problems such as excessive attendance issues, multiple disciplinary entries (ex. class disruptions, defiant etc). What do you think of that idea? How do you advice I coordinate such program?**

**Clay Roberts:** I like the idea. It has some similarities to other models with which I have worked. For information on the models I have used, please contact the Safe and Supportive TA Center at [sssta@air.org](mailto:sssta@air.org) or 1-800-258-8413.

**Q5. Do you have any suggestions for a good program or model for peer mentoring training?**

**Clay Roberts:** There are several strong peer programs that I could recommend, but first it is important to be clear about your objectives in implementing a peer program before selecting any one model since each model takes a little different approach to the work. For information on the models I have used, please contact the Safe and Supportive TA Center at [sssta@air.org](mailto:sssta@air.org) or 1-800-258-8413.

**Q6. As a facilitator who only briefly comes into schools for six classes at most, I'm challenged by building relationships and creating a safe classroom atmosphere. Our Sexual Violence Prevention lessons rely heavily on the students discussing what's relevant to them. However I'm often struggling with students interrupting each other. Sometimes it's just over-enthusiastic sharing which is manageable, but I'm concerned with interrupting put-downs and side conversations while a peer is sharing. We always begin by having the group state their own conversation ground rules, but sometimes they are still broken. How can I encourage safe conversation space?**

**Clay Roberts:** I like the fact that you have incorporated discussion as a method in teaching this really important content. I also believe that having students set the ground rules better insures that they will follow the rules. I'll offer a couple of thoughts on getting your class to follow those rules. First, you need to be very consistent in monitoring the rules and providing feedback to the class. It is consistency and redundancy that helps shape their behavior. I suggest using the effective feedback format (strategy #2) that I shared in the Webinar as a method here. Don't ignore, let them know when they are doing well and don't ignore inappropriate behaviors - especially the put downs. Be kind, even when a student may be unkind. Focus on the positive, even when correcting their behavior. Make sure you sandwich corrections by starting with a positive, providing the correction, and ending with a positive. Redirecting inappropriate behavior is the last step and remember . . . it is important to model for students what you want them to do.

The other thought I have here is that you may want to enlist the help of your class in monitoring the rules. Have a designated group of students monitoring the discussions. You may need to teach your student facilitators how to provide effective feedback around the ground rules. I have also used some students who have the most difficult time with the ground rules to be the monitor or facilitator.

**Q7. How do I build these relationships when I'm not in a school on a regular basis?**

**Clay Roberts:** I can understand your frustration. Several ideas come to mind that may or may not help you with this problem. I will just throw these out and you can be the judge and decide if any of these might work for you. You could do any of the following: concentrate your efforts - mentor a small number of young people who need your help the most. Feed the staff – build relationships with key staff. Support them and build them up so that they can do a better job of connecting with students. Consistency and redundancy of message – develop your own warm and friendly demeanor in your day-to-day interactions with students. It may take more time to build relationships and you may make fewer connections if you are only there part-time, but be confident that those relationships will develop over time. Be creative – Leave notes for students and staff. Show up at an event or performance. Make your initial contacts in a face-to-face manner, but follow-up and keep in touch with staff electronically.

**Q8. What are some good examples of measurement?**

**David Osher:** There are multiple studies that measure the quality of relationships. Some are employed to evaluate intervention programs. For example, the late Victor Battistich did wonderful studies of what is now called *Caring School Communities*. His research and tools are cited in the technical appendices of the What Works Clearinghouse review of this intervention: [http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/techappendix12\\_103.pdf](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/techappendix12_103.pdf). Other measures have been developed for quality improvement and/or performance measurement. For example, Bridget Hamre and Robert Pianta have developed a powerful measure of classroom/teacher relationship called CLASS. My colleagues and I have developed scales to measure the relationship between students and teachers; see the following report for more information: [http://www.air.org/files/Spencer\\_final\\_report\\_3\\_31\\_08.pdf](http://www.air.org/files/Spencer_final_report_3_31_08.pdf).

**Q9. Do you have sample of class surveys we could use for students?**

**David Osher:** Please go to the Safe and Supportive Schools website to view a compendium of student, staff, and family surveys that can be used as part of a school climate needs assessment: <http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133>

**Q10. How can you work with a school when the administration is resistant to your program?**

**Clay Roberts:** If you are dealing with a resistant administrator you might start by sharing with them some research from this Webinar on why relationships are important. (Look at citation #19) Many administrators are data driven and they are looking for evidence-based practices. You might also have them access this Webinar, which is archived for future use.

I am reluctant to provide much advice in these situations without knowing more about the specifics. As an example I would want to know if this person is aware or unaware that their behavior makes it difficult for staff to prioritize relationship building. Are they at all open to change or are they very resistant? Do you have power and support in this situation or very little power or support? What have you already tried and what was their response?

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**Q11. Relational competence is so critical for adults in a school building. How do you see this becoming part of teacher preparatory programs, in addition to the content competence that so many institutes of higher education do well?**

**Clay Roberts:** That is a great observation and question. I truly believe that one of the long-term solutions to emphasizing school relationships lies in recruiting the right staff and effective pre-service training. I have had an opportunity to work with two very progressive teacher-training institutions and work with all their education majors. The response of the students and faculty has been terrific. The challenge is incorporating relational competence in more teacher education programs.

We could make some headway here, if local school superintendents and district human resource staff would communicate clearly to teacher training institutions that they will only hire people that have a strong background and demonstrated ability in building connections with young people. I also believe we need to do a better job of recruiting young people who have these skills into the teaching profession and making sure that they get jobs in our schools. Maybe we would do better if schools would hire for attitude and train for skill.

If you have ideas on how to make this happen I would love to hear from you.

**Q12. Just did a workshop for school staff on needs of LGBTQ students and got resistance on doing anything that is specific to needs of a student subgroup. How would you address the global versus the individualized?**

**Clay Roberts:** Your question makes me wonder if the staff reluctance to deal with student subgroups isn't really a discomfort in talking about or dealing with LGBTQ youth. I truly don't believe that you can really reach all students or subgroups with one strategy, message, or approach. I think we have learned over the years that you don't treat everyone the same. You do need to treat everyone with dignity and respect, but some groups of students are really

disenfranchised and have very different needs. I don't think that the global approach is the best strategy here.

**Q13. To what degree would these relationship-building strategies be effective in building relationships with adults? What modifications might you suggest?**

**Clay Roberts:** I have used the same individual strategies that I shared in the Webinar on a regular basis with staff. I think that for the most part they can be used as outlined. Adults have love languages, adults need effective feedback and when we are struggling to develop a relationship with a fellow staff member, or another adult, a relationship plan makes sense. A few modifications to consider when working with adults: adults need a little more choice and voice in relationships than do children; I also feel you can be more direct with feedback dealing with adults; lastly, adults tend to be more entrenched in their behaviors—which means you may have to stay the course longer to bring about change with adults.

**Q14. How can we engage more of our "at-risk" youth into the educational process? I feel we are getting better at involving high performing youth in shaping the educational process (i.e., serving on curriculum design teams, student representation on the school board, student government, etc.), but students who have been marginalized, continue to get marginalized and rarely are included in meaningful conversations within the school.**

**Clay Roberts:** It is very important to engage young people as our partners in making schools a caring place for everyone. If we are to do that successfully we must involve a real cross-section of our students. The model that I like here surveys students to find out who the peer opinion leaders are in our student body and selects the highest rated helper from each sub-group in the school. School staff then provide that group with on-going training and support. It is very important that all sub groups and cliques are represented in this process.

**David Osher:** All youth have strengths, and every young person I have ever worked with appreciates the opportunity to make a difference in at least their own space. I think it is very important and equally doable to involve youth who are at risk for poor outcomes (the term I prefer to use) as partners in this work. For example, in developing our conditions for learning survey, we did focus groups with 22 groups of young people get their perspective on conditions for learning as well as on how to best engage youth in evaluating those conditions. We found all of the young people to be interested in the process because they were given an opportunity to act on things rather than to again experience being acted upon. This approach is consistent with good youth development practices which are usefully elaborated upon at:

[http://www.findyouthinfo.org/topic\\_pyd.shtml](http://www.findyouthinfo.org/topic_pyd.shtml)

**Q15. What suggestions would you give to staff that have a thin line between being a professional and being a "friend" with their students? Some teachers are too caught up in being the students "friend" than in managing their classroom and educating their students.**

**Clay Roberts:** Relationship building works best when combined with good instruction and effective classroom management. If your issue is that some staff are not good classroom managers or are not providing effective instruction, those are important and should be dealt with as separate issues.

In the Webinar I introduced the idea that there are levels of relationships and the deeper the relationship the more influence one has. Building relationships with students at levels one and two can look a lot like building a friendship. The difference in this model is level three. The goal isn't to get to level two and stop. Great teachers challenge, mentor, and try to deliberately and intentionally move students to higher levels of academic performance and better behavior. They leverage relationships to influence students.

If what you are observing with some staff just looks like being friends with kids they are probably stuck on level two. I would share the level three relationship idea with them. I would also challenge them to go deeper with their students. You might want to share individual strategies #2 and #3 from the Webinar as tools to help them do this work.

**Q16. How can we utilize Professional Learning Communities to engage teachers in getting better at developing meaningful connections with our young people?**

**Clay Roberts:** Professional Learning Communities (PLC) provide a wonderful vehicle to deepen relationship building in schools. PLC's, because they are focused more on learning than teaching, could provide a supportive environment for staff to study the issue, make commitments to change behaviors, and support each other in sustaining change.

I would suggest getting started by having PLC's read a brief overview of the research and ideas on how schools can do this work. I would recommend "Fostering School Connectedness: Improving Student Health and Academic Achievement" from the CDC (citation #19 from the Webinar). Next, I suggest that each member of the PLC make a commitment to change one behavior in order to improve a relationship with a student or group of students. Have staff identify how they will support each other in making those changes. Give PLC's time to implement changes and then suggest addressing the following three questions: What did you do? What did you learn? What do you need to go deeper with this work?

The Webinar is archived and could also be used as a resource for your PLC's if they want additional ideas or information.

**Q17. What suggestions do you have for staff who engage the "dark side" of Strategy #2 (e.g. use sarcasm, criticize students regularly, etc.)?**

**Clay Roberts:** It is very important that schools are warm, safe and engaging places for young people. If some staff are engaging in negative behaviors it is important that you take immediate and specific action. First, you or other staff members or administrators need to make them aware that their behavior is inappropriate and suggest some positive approaches to dealing with

students. You might want to review the effective feedback strategy from the Webinar. You might also want to share with them the research about sarcasm and constant criticism.

If the behavior persists I think you are obligated to report it or take swift and immediate action to stop the behavior. Bullying is bullying whether it is done by students or staff.

**Q18. What considerations should be taken when transitioning students from school to an off-site after-school program?**

**Clay Roberts:** It is important that there is a consistent positive climate between school and after-school programs for young people. In order to achieve that end I suggest that all staff in both programs be trained in building relationships and that both staff are trained together. Having a common vision and common language for the work is very important. The training should focus on the same topics that our Webinar addressed; why relationships are important, who can build them, describing what they look like, and strategies for building connections with students. The Webinar has been archived and could be used as a part of the training process.

**Q19. How do you want us to cite this if we lift slides as part of a presentation? As Safe and Supportive Schools, or just as Clay Roberts?**

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