ASTRA
CENTER FOR
INNOVATIVE
EDUCATION

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

STUDENTS

ADMINISTRATORS

Equity & justice

Belonging, connection, & wellbeing

Humility, care, & curiosity

RRR

TEACHERS

Agency & trust

Shared purpose & responsibility

FAMILIES

COMMUNITIES
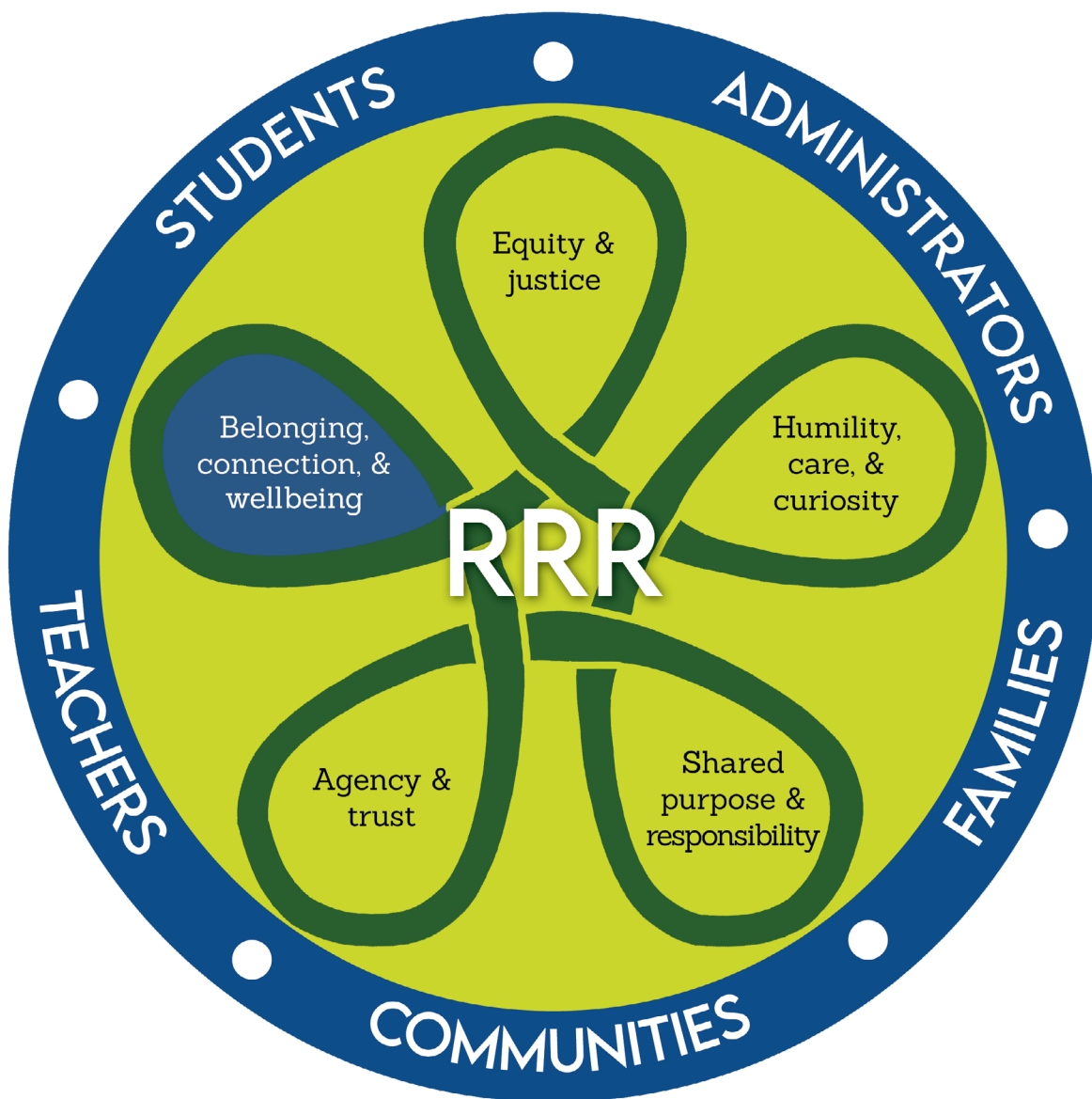
CONNECTION, BELONGING, AND WELLBEING:

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

At Astra, we believe that schools and school communities must engage administrators, teachers, staff members, students, and their families in profoundly different kinds of interactions with one another. Rather than following strict, hierarchical structures with "stay-in-your-lane" philosophies, we encourage school communities to form new kinds of bonds that recognize the strengths, humanity, and dignity of every person – child and adult. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships (RRR) at the center, we see evidence of commitments in five relational zones: Equity and Justice; Connection, Belonging and Wellbeing; Humility, Care, and Curiosity; Agency and Trust; and Shared Purpose and Responsibility. There is not one way to get relationships right. Each relational zone presents a variety of opportunities and a wealth of indicators that may demonstrate a school is on the RRR journey.

WHY A CULTURE OF CONNECTION, BELONGING, AND WELLBEING?

Research attests to the importance of prioritizing a sense of connection, belonging and wellbeing in schools. A sense of belonging increases students' motivation and engagement in academics, improves students' grades and test scores, and decreases the likelihood of bullying, depression, and dropping out. We also know that it correlates positively with improved mental health, sleep, resilience, and happiness.[1]

Still, loneliness and alienation plague many young people. One measure of this, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, shows that 32% of all U.S. high school students report feeling persistently sad or helpless, 19% report having been bullied at school, and 17% say they have seriously considered attempting suicide. The CDC identifies school connectedness, which it defines as "the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals," as an important protective factor.[2]

A sense of belonging is particularly important during transitional moments; for example, when students transition from elementary to middle school. During such times, peer support, feeling safe in school, feeling connected to school, and feeling

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1   See Roffey, S., Boyle, C., & Allen, K. A. (2019). School belonging–Why are our students longing to belong to school? Educational and Child Psychology, 36(2), 6-8; also Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. Educational Psychology Review, 30, 1-34.

2   Center for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health (2018). Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/index.htm.

connected to teachers are all important influencers of students' sense of wellbeing.[3]

Creating a sense of community and belonging for all students means we must honor individual students' identities. Well-intentioned but unconsciously biased or overly simplistic approaches can actually cause belonging and achievement gaps to grow wider over time; these include celebrations of multiculturalism and diversity that don't recognize and root out systemic inequities that students experience at school because of their race, family income, citizenship status, religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other factors.[4] Often we send messages, unintended and otherwise, that students must change to fit conventional definitions of school, rather than changing the school environment to increase students' sense of belonging.

Figure 1. A family at an event at the Beacon School in Brooklyn, NY. (Source: Beacon School of Excellence, 2019)

Schools we've visited that have a strong culture of connection, belonging and wellbeing have worked intentionally and carefully to create a safe and welcoming environment for all students, staff, and families and to honor their diverse experiences and perspectives. These schools go beyond "parent involvement," which suggests an imbalanced, hierarchical relationship, to "family and community partnership," which suggests a more equal, bidirectional relationship.[5]

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3   Lester, L., & Cross, D. (2015). The relationship between school climate and mental and emotional wellbeing over the transition from primary to secondary school. Psychology of Wellbeing, 5(1), 9.

4   See Gray, D. L., Hope, E. C., & Matthews, J. S. (2018). Black and belonging at school: A case for interpersonal, instructional, and institutional opportunity structures. Educational Psychologist, 53(2), 97-113; also Celeste, L., Baysu, G., Phalet, K., Meeussen, L., & Kende, J. (2019). Can school diversity policies reduce belonging and achievement gaps between minority and majority youth? Multiculturalism, colorblindness, and assimilationism assessed. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.

5   Cauldwell, J. (2019, December 3). Centering Equity: Authentic Family Engagement Is BiDirectional: Engaging in Meaningful Family Partnerships [Blog series]. Retrieved from https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/centering-equity-authenticfamily-engagement-bi-directional-engaging-meaningful-family-partnerships/.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

Advisories are one way that schools of all sizes can build a culture of belonging among staff and students – but only if advisories are done thoughtfully and not used merely for make-up assignments or administrative information and paper-work. At Vaux High School in Philadelphia, which is part of the Big Picture Learning network, daily advisory runs 90 minutes or more for the school's 320 students. Big Picture Philadelphia's executive director David Bromley observes, "You get to know your students in a way different from anywhere else… Building community comes back to intentional use of time and what message you are sending to kids about how their time is used each day. Saying it's a priority and really making it a priority is key."

Across the country at Vancouver iTech Preparatory School, which serves 407 grade 6-12 students in Vancouver, WA, advisory is called "Advocacy" and it's scheduled every morning for 30 minutes Monday through Thursday. Advocacy is one way the school ensures that each student develops a close relationship with at least one staff member; one student says, "Everyone here knows each other. That means no one falls through the mesh, and the mesh is held up by the teachers."

In some schools, advisories are deliberately structured as multi-age mentor groups. At the Science and Math Institute in Tacoma, WA, a school with an enrollment of 555, students are assigned to a multi-age mentor group they stay with throughout their four years of high school. Joni Hall, SaMI's co-director, explains, "The mentor knows and cares about each child in the group… if there's a problem, the teacher will contact the mentor first, before administration. Mentors also help families navigate the system. They'll go meet with parents at homes, McDonalds, wherever they are comfortable. We spend a lot of time on culture and community and personal life. The kids call their mentor groups 'Samilies' (SaMI families)."

Figure 2. A student and teacher work together in the Vancover iTech Preparatory robotics lab..
(Source: Vancover iTech, 2019)

During Advisory and in other parts of the school day, staff members at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, work diligently with students and their families on college and career success. Sixty-two percent of Blackstone's 362 students are Latinx, 81% qualify for free and reduced-price meals, and many will be the first person in their family to attend college; consequently, Blackstone staff members invest a great deal of time in students' long-term wellbeing by counseling students, tak-
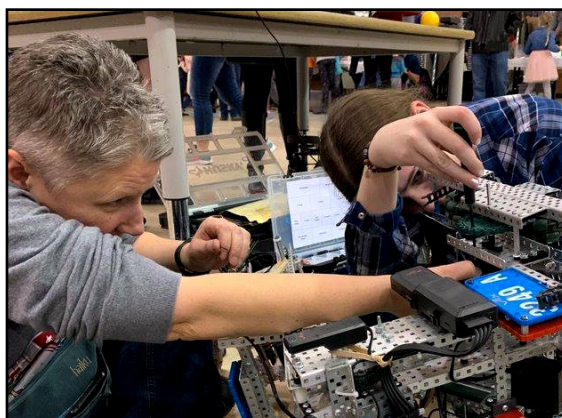
ing them on college visits, and helping them with FAFSA and other application paperwork. To gauge students' college and career readiness, the school requires portfolios each year that incorporate information about both in-school and out-of-school experiences including college visits, job shadowing, and internships.

Blackstone Academy also emphasizes a culture of belonging within the greater community: the school has formalized a commitment to community-based service learning as part of its curriculum and graduation requirements. Head of school Kyleen Carpenter explains, "Other schools have community service, but these kinds of projects within the core curriculum are unique. We're trying new assessment techniques. We're getting into longer relationships with community partners, which is great, and we're able to help students understand why this is a core part of the curriculum." Examples include refurbishing bicycles with Recycle a Bike; photojournalism projects with Progreso Latino that have been displayed in the Rhode Island State House; creating a skate park in Pawtucket; and advocacy around the DREAM Act, affordable housing, and Rhode Island's free in-state tuition program.

Finally, Blackstone Academy staff members engage parents and other family members as partners in students' learning, by inviting them to participate in portfolio presentations, offering programming (with childcare provided) on important topics like immigration law, and celebrating with families when students receive college acceptances and job offers.

At Centreville Elementary, in Centreville, VA, the school staff reaches out to families in a different way. The staff does a "Welcome Walk" at the beginning of each school year before its 820 students return to school. Assistant principal Morgan Occhuizzo explains, "The teachers come in to work at 4 pm with school shirts on and school flags on their cars. Every teacher goes out with a specialist and we visit every students' home… many parents are out having block parties waiting for the teachers to arrive. This gives our teachers some perspective on where kids are coming from. After the Welcome Walk, parents are so excited because they have made that connection." In the summer, Occhuizzo and other school leaders make an effort to keep the building open, with weekly library nights and regular barbecues.

In schools that prioritize a culture of connection, belonging and wellbeing, we see a more holistic definition of success: above and beyond students' academic success, these schools are asking whether staff members, parents, and other members of the school community are getting their needs met as well. At Windsor Elementary, a school serving 392 students in Imperial, MO, principal Denise Funston told us that her ideal outcomes would include: "1. All of our students would answer a survey that they feel safe and loved at school. 2. All of our parents would be heavily involved at school. Also, if we could have kids reading and doing math on grade level, that would be great, too." (It should be noted that state testing indicates

Windsor is achieving Funston's third outcome.)

Because the school prioritizes a culture of belonging and wellbeing, staff members know that their mandate is somewhat different than at many other schools. "I don't care if you teach anything the first few weeks of school," says Funston. "I want you to get to know your students and their families. Every successful child has at least one supportive adult, and we take that on as our goal." At Windsor and other schools like it, emotional intelligence and skill in relationship-building are factors in hiring, induction, professional learning, evaluation, and leadership development. Creating a culture of belonging is the foundation for academics and everything else that the school must be and do, rather than a byproduct or an afterthought.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Institute daily advisories or some other protected time for small groups of students and staff members to meet. Be intentional about using this time to create community, rather than for other purposes.
2. Offer professional learning and resources for staff members serving as advisors. Remember that this may require different skills and strategies than teachers use in classroom instruction.
3. Remember that the adults in your school community—staff and families alike—benefit from a sense of belonging and wellbeing, too. Solicit their ideas and ask for regular feedback to gauge your progress.

RESOURCES

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For additional resources, please visit our Resource Library.

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relation- ships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work cen-ters around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging

schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at AstraFoundation.org.