



RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS: AN INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

We believe that respectful relationships between teachers and students improve student engagement and achievement. Furthermore, we encourage educators and school communities to think about relationships in a broader and deeper way, one that engages administrators, teachers, other staff members, students, and their families in equitable and authentic relationships with one another. In schools where we've witnessed this, great care is taken to cultivate and sustain strong relationships based on respect and mutual trust among all members of the school community, with an intentionality that influences everything from daily schedules to curriculum to how success is measured, and by whom. These schools have made a deep commitment to what we're calling "Radically Reimagined Relationships."

When a school attends to its relational work—that is, when Radically Reimagined Relationships are in place—this creates fertile ground for the academic work of the school, which is manifest in more authentic learning experiences, safety for risk-taking, and more meaningful and equitable outcomes for students, staff, and families.

INDICATORS OF RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of the following among and between students, families, and school staff: a commitment to equity and justice; a culture of belonging and well-being; dispositions of humility, care, and curiosity; shared purpose and responsibility; and agency and trust.

Depending on a wide variety of factors, including a school's organizational affiliations, a school's governance and oversight, the age of the school, and its community context, schools will be at different points in their journeys to fully achieve Radically Reimagined Relationships.

Furthermore, when we take the time to build relationships and engage each member of the school community, we quickly realize that different individuals and groups need particular and different things.

This means that the *manifestations* of Radically Reimagined Relationships, and the *resources* required to implement them, will differ from one school to another. That said, we feel strongly that the two most vital resources any school needs for Radically Reimagined Relationships are shared values and individuals who possess--and are continually improving upon--personal skills that foster building respectful and authentic relationships.

KEY INDICATORS OF RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

Commitment to Equity and Justice:

Individually and collectively, the school community works to combat inequities as well as the implicit and explicit biases of individuals, structures, practices, and policies that create and further injustice amongst all members of the school community. The school recognizes the dignity of each person and their right to find challenge, joy, and purpose in their lives.

Culture of Belonging and Well-Being:

Young people and adults are valued and welcomed into a culture of inclusiveness, empathy, belonging, and connection. The school community cultivates and tends to the well-being of all its members and strives to provide a trusting and respectful place for individuals to share their opinions and identities.

Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity:

Community members seek to know one another well. They bring humility, care, and genuine curiosity to the work.

Shared Purpose and Responsibility:

Students, staff, and families create the community together. They work with a common purpose and share responsibility for the school and its members.

Agency and Trust:

Regardless of age or position, all school community members are respected and seen as capable. Students, staff, and families have agency, real responsibility, and clear and meaningful roles in decision-making.

VALUES

In schools that have made a commitment to Radically Reimagined Relationships, members of the school community cultivate and share a set of values that shape how they understand themselves and treat each other. These include a belief that:

- Each person deserves to be recognized, respected, and heard and to have their unique lived experiences and cultural identities valued.
- Each person wants to be their best self and is an essential part of the whole.
- Each person (students and adults) have strengths to offer and to further develop.
- Cultivating a community of genuine curiosity, care, and humility aids in discovering each person's many strengths, perspectives, and unique ways to contribute to the community.

- Education is a human endeavor, and humans are complex beings. The school community must concern itself with the health and wellness of all its members, and there can be no commitment to health and wellness without a commitment to equity, justice, and overall well-being.
- As a community, working for a common purpose is essential, and this purpose cannot be dictated from on high; it derives from an orientation toward collaboration and power-sharing and away from an overly rigid hierarchy.

SKILLS

Building on a set of shared values, Radically Reimagined Relationships require that members of the school community draw upon and develop their skills in the following areas:

- The ability to listen deeply, communicate ideas, and express disagreement directly, respectfully, and constructively.
- The ability to respond to others in ways that convey interest and respect for their emotions, perspectives, concerns, and ideas.
- The ability to engage people and topics with empathy, curiosity, and with an appreciation of diverse identities and perspectives.
- The ability to reflect on and change one's own perspective and/or actions accordingly.
- The ability and desire to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others and generate mutually beneficial solutions when challenges arise.
- The ability to give and receive honest and constructive feedback.
- The ability to recognize and express gratitude for the contributions and achievements of others.
- The ability to set goals and manage progress toward reaching them, both independently and as part of the team.
- The ability and willingness to examine, reflect on, and challenge one's own implicit biases and widely held beliefs.

OTHER RESOURCES

Leaders of schools that are doing this well counsel that the following types of resources have also been important to their school communities:

Time utilized regularly and intentionally for building community skills on: reflection and self-awareness; learning about diverse identities, values, strengths, and interests of others; co-creating and improving school culture; and family engagement.

Training for staff, students, and families to aid in: strengthening relational skills; building awareness and competencies on addressing inequities, racism, and implicit and explicit biases; observation and coaching; and learning design that promotes student agency.

Structures and protocols for things like: shared decision-making and distributed leadership; conflict resolution; ensuring a safe space for the expression of diverse opinions and identities; hiring, onboarding, and student orientation approaches that cultivate, and sometimes challenge community norms; and performance evaluations that contemplate agency and relational skills.

School, district, and state policies that enable and strengthen: more authentic and holistic assessment; teacher-powered course and curriculum design; reasonable student-to-staff ratios and teaching loads; and streamlining or eliminating compliance tasks.

If you're interested in exploring what this looks like in practice, we encourage you to read our report, *Radically Reimagined Relationships: The Foundation of Engagement*, available on our [website](#). The report includes examples and practical guidance from more than 20 public, charter, and private schools across the country that are working to transform PreK-12 education for diverse student populations so that educators and students alike find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing.

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships 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 centers 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 www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education.

© The Astra Foundation, 2020.

Text from this report may be used under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike license.



On the cover: Image of hands, holding each other.