



# GETTING RELATIONSHIPS RIGHT

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55 Leaders Discuss What It Will Take to Create Schools  
and Youth Programs Where Developmental Relationships Thrive



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# SUMMARY

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In 2013, Search Institute launched a multi-year program of applied research to study and strengthen developmental relationships in young people's lives. Our studies have identified five essential elements of relationships with adults and peers that help young people grow into thriving and contributing adults: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities. Early evidence suggests that young people who experience relationships with these qualities are more likely to do better on an array of indicators of psychological, social-emotional, academic, and behavioral wellbeing. In the years ahead, my colleagues and I at Search Institute will use multiple research methods to further examine and improve our understanding of developmental relationships that transform young people's lives for the better.

In addition to conducting rigorous research on relationships, Search Institute is also creating and testing resources that help schools, youth programs, and families form and strengthen relationships with and among young people. A major vehicle for that work will be the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative, or ROI, through which Search Institute will partner with five youth-serving organizations for three years to help them improve youth outcomes by building developmental relationships. Those partner organizations will include a school or an organization that works closely with schools, an out-of-school time program, a mentoring program, a peer program, and an organization that engages families.

To inform the design of the ROI project, two other Search Institute researchers and I interviewed 55 leaders in the fields of education and youth development between January 6 and February 10, 2017. The findings from those interviews are summarized and interpreted in this report. The major themes that emerged from those interviews are:

1. Interviewees believe that staff in their organizations greatly value relationships, but many report that their schools and youth programs are not as intentional about building relationships with and among young people as they could or would like to be.
2. Interview participants strongly agree that the quality and quantity of the relationships young people experience in their schools and programs influence the outcomes that young people achieve. Participants identified more than 70 youth outcomes that they believe can be influenced, for better or worse, by relationships.
3. Taken together, the ROI interviews suggest that there are three preconditions for creating organizations in which all young people experience developmental relationships:
  - A. *Relationships Are Part of the Mission:* The organization is committed to build relationships through (rather than only apart from) its primary curriculum or program.
  - B. *Adults are Eager:* The organization has staff members who are committed to building stronger relationships with and among young people.
  - C. *Time is available:* The organization dedicates meaningful time to building relationships with young people and also provides staff with time for training and support.
4. Interview participants identified an array of barriers to building relationship-rich organizations, including:
  - Not having the time needed to build relationships with young people or to build relationship-rich organizations
  - The difficulty of sustaining strong relationships over time if staff frequently leave the organization
  - Belief by some staff that building

relationships is not an effective way to improve youth outcomes

- Limited ability of some staff to start and strengthen relationships with young people
- Dysfunctional relationships among adults that create a toxic organizational culture in which it is difficult to build positive relationships
- Evaluating relationships only from the adults' point of view, making it difficult or impossible to understand the kinds of connections that young people believe they need to succeed
- The psychological and emotional toll that building close relationships with young people can take on adults, especially with young people who live in difficult circumstances
- The perception among some practitioners – specifically some classroom teachers – that when administrators and others urge them to build better relationships with students, those leaders are suggesting that they do not already care about or work hard to establish strong relationships
- A lack of tools, techniques, and training for building stronger relationships with and among youth
- The challenge of building developmental relationships across lines of race and culture
- A lack of accurate and actionable ways to measure young people's experience of developmental relationships within and beyond their schools and youth programs
- Being urged by some funders to reduce resources devoted to relationships in order to take interventions to scale
- The challenge of building relationships via

email, social media, or other electronic means (which was mentioned only by a small group of interviewees)

- The perception within family-serving organizations that strengthening family relationships is not a sufficiently compelling reason for many parents to participate in family programs, which forces family-serving organizations to emphasize other objectives when recruiting parent participants
5. The interviews we conducted also found that many youth-serving organizations around the country are taking tangible steps to remove barriers to building developmental relationships with and among all young people. Twenty-two examples from our interviews are briefly described in this report.
  6. Interview participants identified a range of tools and services that they believe would help them build developmental relationships but that are not yet widely available. Many interviewees indicated that they hope such practical resources will be developed through the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative and will be shared with organizations that are not active participants in ROI.
  7. Most interview participants said that they think Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework and its accompanying tools and techniques can be valuable resources for the fields of education and youth development. They also raised a number of issues that Search Institute and its partners should consider as the work on developmental relationships moves forward.

My colleagues and I will take all of the ideas outlined in this report into consideration as we implement the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative in the years ahead. We are extremely grateful for the insights and experiences that all 55 of the leaders we interviewed shared with us during the time they generously contributed to our cause.

While this report summarizes the major themes we heard during those interviews, it does not include

all of the diverse observations and suggestions we encountered. The ideas that are cited and quoted below were expressed by more than one interviewee. Ideas that were expressed by a single interviewee and that are therefore not included in this report were nonetheless noted and will be taken into account as we launch the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative.

It is important to emphasize that the conclusions outlined in this report should not be attributed to anyone who participated in the interviews upon which it is based. *Getting Relationships Right* is more a work of interpretation than synthesis or summary, and the people who participated in the interviews for ROI have not been asked to endorse its conclusions.

In the interest of anonymity, no one who participated

in the interviews we conducted is identified in *Getting Relationships Right*. The version of the report that you are reading now is being shared only with people who participated in the interviews and a small group of additional youth-serving organizations that are being invited to apply to participate in the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative. Before *Getting Relationships Right* is shared with broader audiences, we will secure the approval of the people who participated in the ROI interviews to list them by name and organization.

Although future versions of *Getting Relationships Right* will list the names and affiliations of the people who agree to be identified in the report, quotes and specific comments still will not be attributed to individuals.

# BACKGROUND

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In 2013, Search Institute launched a multi-year program of applied research to better understand developmental relationships that help young people grow. Building on more than two decades of research on the developmental assets that enable young people to thrive, we conducted focus groups with youth and adults, engaged in dialogues with practitioners and other leaders, and examined the research literature on the role of a range of relationships in young people's lives.

Through these and other efforts, we defined developmental relationships as close connections that help young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. Or, to put it somewhat more succinctly, we have concluded that developmental relationships are connections that help young people develop positive identity, agency, and a commitment to community.

Our research to date has also identified five essential elements of a developmental relationship: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities. Each of those elements includes more specific actions that are articulated in our Developmental Relationships Framework. More information about the framework and Search Institute's ongoing studies of developmental relationships can be found in the recent report *Relationships First: Creating Connections that Help Young People Thrive*, available at <http://search-institute.org/relationships-first>

Our early studies suggest that young people's experiences of developmental relationships vary widely. Some young people experience them often and intensively, while others experience them infrequently and weakly. We are also learning that when young people experience developmental relationships with parents, teachers, and others, they do better on a variety of indicators of psychological, social-emotional, academic, and behavioral well-being. Our early data also suggest that the more such relationships young

people have in their lives, the more likely they are to be ready to succeed and contribute as adults.

Search Institute's work on developmental relationships extends beyond research to include the creation and evaluation of practical tools and techniques that educators, youth program staff, parents, and others can use to create close connections with and among young people. Beta versions of those tools and techniques have been developed over the past three years through partnerships with schools, family-serving organizations, out-of-school time programs, mentoring partnerships, and community coalitions. Those resources include:

- Surveys that measure young people's experience of developmental relationships,
- Activities that help young people and adults share their sparks (deep talents and interests),
- A process through which young people map the developmental relationships in their lives
- Shared activities that encourage children and parenting adults to explore and strengthen their relationships.

With generous support from two national funders, Search Institute is now able to take the next step in its effort to understand the developmental relationships that transform young people's lives. Through the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative (ROI), Search Institute will partner with five youth-serving organizations to strengthen relationships in ways that improve the outcomes that the five partner organizations are working to achieve. Those organizations will include:

1. A school or an organization that works closely with schools
2. An out-of-school time program



3. A mentoring program
4. A peer-to-peer program
5. An organization that engages families

The tools and techniques that are developed through ROI will be disseminated through a larger system or network of these organizations in later phases of the project. The first phase will begin in September 2017, and conclude in July 2020.

The core premise of the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative is that, as the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) put it, “Relationships are the ‘active ingredients’ of the environment’s influence on healthy human development.” Or as researchers Junlei Li and Megan Julian (2012) argued, interventions that don’t focus on relationships are as effective as toothpaste without fluoride.

We developed the ideas behind ROI with the support of a generous planning grant that enabled us to review the scholarly literature on organizational change, analyze the implementation and outcomes of previous Search Institute projects, and engage two other research organizations, FrameWorks Institute and Minds at Work, as partners in the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative. FrameWorks Institute will generate strategic communications tools that frame relationships in ways that organizational leaders, front-line practitioners, policy makers, and funders will

find persuasive. Minds at Work will help the partner organizations move beyond good intentions to address the hidden dynamics that create “immunity to change.”

The process of planning for ROI also featured in-depth, open-ended interviews with 55 leaders, practitioners, and researchers in the fields of youth development and education. The main themes that rain through those interviews are summarized in this report. In order to encourage interview participants to be as candid as possible, participants were told in advance that comments in the summary report would not be attributed to individuals. As such, in the text that follows quotes are attributed to a general description of the person who made each comment.

I was assisted in conducting these interviews by two colleagues at Search Institute: Dr. Gene Roehlkepartain, vice president of research and development; and Dr. Terri Sullivan, director of applied qualitative research and community mobilization. The interviews took place between January 6 and February 10, 2017. A majority of the interviews were conducted in person, and the rest were conducted over the phone. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and followed one of two protocols: one for the leaders of and practitioners in youth-serving organizations and another for researchers. The interviews were recorded and the interviewers also took notes during the conversations.

# RANKING RELATIONSHIPS

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To help us understand how leaders think about the role that relationships play in their organizations today, at the outset of the interview participants were asked to respond to the following question:

On a scale of 1-5, how much emphasis do you think your organization currently places on building relationships with and among young people? A score of 1 means you devote no time or resources to building relationships, a score of 3 means you devote a moderate amount of time and resources to building relationships. And a score of 5 means you devote a great deal of time and resources to building relationships.

Almost every one of the 55 leaders we interviewed ranked the value that their organizations place on relationships at a 4 or 5 on this admittedly simplistic scale. One exception came from a participant whose work focuses primarily on educational policy. She ranked the importance of relationships to her organization at a 2, explaining that while students' relationships unquestionably influence their ability to achieve policy goals such as raising high school graduation rates, her agency generally focuses on more standard policy levers such as improving academic standards and assessments. That interview participant also noted, however, that she wishes factors such as relationships and school climate could be stronger themes of educational policy at the state and national levels. That interviewee and several others suggested that as national policy priorities shift under the new federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it may be possible to advance that objective.

Although the vast majority of the people we interviewed gave their organizations a 4 or 5 (and sometimes a 6 or 7) on the relationships scale, many of those interviewees also told us that their organizations struggle to operationalize their deep belief in relationships. For example, no interviewee told us that their organization has defined the types of relationships they seek to build with and among young people. Only a few interviewees told us that their organizations

have articulated a process through which they seek to build those relationships. And although a small group of interviewees told us that their organizations have launched efforts to measure young people's experience of relationships and to provide staff with training on the importance of those relationships, few of those organizations are providing staff with practical tools and techniques for starting and strengthening relationships.

The dichotomy between the importance that many youth-serving organizations place on relationships and what they do to build relationships is illustrated by the following comment from a senior leader of a national organization that helps schools meet the needs of struggling students. When asked to rank the time and resources her organization devotes to building relationships from 1-5, she said:

*I would say, I'll be honest, I would say a 3. But if you had asked me how much importance we place on it, I would say a 5, because this literally is at the core of our DNA, and our entire organization was founded on the principle of "It's not programs that change people, it's relationships." . . . We had a board meeting last week, and it was two things we will never take our eye off of, and that's relationships and quality. But I would say, because it's almost assumed, we don't put enough emphasis on consciously making sure that we are building those relationships.*

The program director of a large non-profit organization that promotes youth development discussed the same dynamic during her interview:

What I'll say is, for us, we talk about relationships a lot, but we have devoted very little resource to actually teaching people how to do that and then measuring it. So, I would give us a 5 for how much we talk about it and how important we say it is, and then I'd give us a 1 or 2 for how well we've done at investing in it.

Other interviewees said that while their organizations

often emphasize the importance of relationships, they have nonetheless implemented major organizational improvement initiatives that have not attended to the importance of relationships. For example, a national organization that works with schools to prepare students for success in higher education recently launched a new tool that enables schools to monitor how well they are implementing the organization's model at the classroom and school-wide levels. A senior leader told us that the new process "has created a tremendous buzz over the last couple years. Our sites are going crazy about it, they love it." However, he went on to note with obvious dismay that despite the

benefits of the new self-assessment process, "relationships aren't called out properly. In other words, there are no benchmarks that specifically speak to relationships. However, everything that we do and many of the strategies we implement and we train are around collaboration."

The gap between the degree to which both individuals and organizations value relationships and the degree to which they act on those beliefs was the single most common theme across all 55 of the interviews we conducted. Closing that gap between organizational intentions and actions is the primary purpose of ROI.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND OUTCOMES

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Many of the people we interviewed described the connection between relationships and outcomes in terms similar to those used by the leader of an organization that helps students stay in school and on track to graduate:

*I think what we see is that you have to have the relationship and the trust in order for the corps member to engage in any interventions or activities designed to enhance students' attendance, course performance, social emotional development, et cetera. The relationship is really the enabler of all of the work that we do.*

The leader of an organization that works to enhance teaching and learning made the same point in the reverse. Just as positive relationships often enable positive youth outcomes, he told us that the absence of strong relationships is often a cause of poor performance:

*We think about high leverage problems as things that have affected students and young people for a long time. Oftentimes, one of the primary drivers in addressing that specific problem – whether it's dropping out of school or drug abuse, any sort of thing – one of the primary drivers in address-*

*ing such a concern is often going to be around strengthening relationships, whether it's among students or students and adults, or among adults.*

Because the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative is predicated on the idea that building developmental relationships with and among young people will improve youth outcomes, it is essential to identify the outcomes that youth-serving organizations are working to achieve. Toward that end, we asked interview participants to list any outcomes that they believe could be improved by building stronger relationships with and among young people. The diverse responses we received to that question are listed below in no particular order.

As the list below suggests, interview participants saw close connections between development of relationships and what are sometimes called "non-cognitive skills." Or, as the leader of a non-profit that helps educators promote values and skills for thriving told us during an interview, "Social-emotional learning and developmental relationships go together."

Here is the full list of the outcomes that interview participants connected to relationships:



# The POWER of RELATIONSHIPS

*Outcomes that interview participants report can be developed through relationships.*

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1. Social emotional skills
  2. Resilience
  3. Decision making
  4. Positive orientation toward the future
  5. Life skills such as showing up and being on time
  6. Collaboration
  7. Confidence
  8. Thinking before acting
  9. Being inclusive of others
  10. Critical thinking
  11. Empathy
  12. Ability to lead oneself
  13. Ability to lead other people
  14. Ability to strategize and plan
  15. Ability to set and achieve goals
  16. High school graduation
  17. Reducing suspensions
  18. Disciplinary infractions in school
  19. Academic literacy
  20. Attendance
  21. Classroom behavior
  22. Progress toward higher education
  23. Progress from grade to grade
  24. Course Grades
  25. Taking college-level classes in high school
  26. Applying to college
  27. Going to college
  28. Graduating from college
  29. Graduating from high school prepared for the future
  30. Academic success
  31. Connection to school
  32. Developmental Assets
  33. Reducing risk behaviors
  34. Cultural identity development
  35. Civic engagement
  36. Violence prevention
  37. Conservation orientation
  38. Adult self-sufficiency
  39. Having purpose
  40. Identity formation
  41. Embracing difference
  42. Social trust
  43. Perspective taking
  44. Interpersonal understanding
  45. Willingness to stand up for what's right
  46. Leadership skills
  47. Success in life
  48. Self-efficacy
  49. Self-esteem
  50. Optimism
  51. Adult self-sufficiency
  52. Achieving developmental milestones
  53. Students believe they can live meaningful lives
  54. Students believe they have meaningful connections with people
  55. Skills to lead self and others
  56. Skills to pursue their vision for the future
  57. Bullying prevention
  58. Suicide prevention
  59. Volunteering
  60. Community involvement
  61. Savvy in building relationships
  62. Academic performance
  63. Social emotional support
  64. Prevention substance abuse
  65. Prevention teen pregnancy
  66. Psychological safety
  67. Deeper learning
  68. Adults less burned out
  69. More attentional teaching practice
  70. Improved communication with peers
  71. Developed relationships with peers who are different
  72. Improvements in negotiation and refusal skills
  73. Ability to be a leader
  74. School climate
  75. Decreasing risk behaviors
  76. Engagement in school

# ORGANIZATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS: The Broader Context Matters

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Many of the people we interviewed stressed that factors beyond the control of individual schools and programs influence the capacity of those organizations to build developmental relationships. For example, the leader of an organization that works with schools to prepare young people to become lifelong learners pointed to interference from school district leaders as a continual impediment to his organization's work. "It's not so much that we have a static situation in schools that we're trying to remedy," he explained with frustration. "It's that we're trying to remedy it and there are equal or greater forces that, at the same time, are trying to destroy relationships."

The leader of a community coalition in an urban area that suffers from high rates of poverty and crime described how the pressures of life in that community influence the ability of young people and families to form relationships with coalition staff and with each other:

*In 2016, it was a year unlike I'd ever seen in community trauma and violence. Indiscriminate, you know. At least before then, you kinda knew who was getting shot.... The biggest thing for me around relationships is, you have to really care about the other person and have an expectation that life can be better. We're in a community where gunshots, to some degree, have to become normal, or you'd have to move. So, you start getting used to that kid getting shot, that family not making it, that family needing to move again,*

*that family being—you just, it's like, "Yep, that's what happens in the hood." And so, if I'm doing that, my level of relating to you, like the quality of the relationship, especially if I'm in a relationship with you because we're all trying to get better [laughs], then it's not at the level that it needs to be for real transformation.*

During the same interview, the leader also described how the difficulties of life in her community influence the attitudes of her staff members and their ability to form relationships:

*I visited one of our academic specialists at one of our schools, and I knew the school had an inordinate amount of violence recently. The staff specialist was like, "It's gotten a lot better here, really," and she was telling me about how the school went on lockdown, how gang members were coming through from other communities. And she was like, "I'm working hard, you know, there was a 14-year-old girl who got shot at McDonalds in the leg," and I was like, "Wait a second, one of our scholars got shot in the leg?" and she was like, "Yeah, a month ago." And I said, "Did you tell anyone?" And she said, "No, it's okay, I'm working with the parent now," and she doesn't want to send her back to the school. (What struck me was that) our academic specialist mentioned the student getting shot like you would say, "A kid tripped."*



# THREE PRECONDITIONS FOR CREATING RELATIONSHIP-RICH ORGANIZATIONS

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The complexity of creating youth-serving organizations in which all young people experience developmental relationships was a common theme across all 55 of the interviews we conducted. For example, the leader of an organization that runs a network of high-performing schools that serve low-income students captured that complexity when we asked him what needs to be in place for developmental relationships to flourish in schools:

*Well, pretty much everything in the school has to be going well. Classrooms have to be going well to be the places where the alchemy that we're describing is happening. So it means this intersection of having strong teachers that stay, the stability of focus in an adult learning community, high degree of relational trust, structural stability. And enough ability to maintain a focus on an attainable number of goals for schools over time.*

The interviews through which we developed the ideas for ROI surfaced three preconditions for creating organizations in which developmental relationships can thrive. It is important to note that these three preconditions articulate what needs to happen to establish environments in which all young people experience developmental relationships with adults and each other in sustained and serious ways. Relationships between young people and adults undoubtedly take hold for a time within organizations where one or perhaps all of these preconditions are not met. However, multiple participants in the ROI interviews argued that when these three preconditions are not met, young people are much less likely to experience developmental relationships within and beyond the environments in which they live their lives.

1. **Relationships are Part of the Mission:** The youth-serving organization is committed to build relationships through (rather than only apart from) its primary curriculum or program.

➤ Several of the educators we interviewed told us that their schools have created advisories, and multiple leaders of out-of-school time organizations told us that their programs include summer components and special sessions devoted to building relationships. Search Institute's previous efforts to help schools and programs strengthen relationships suggest that while providing staff and students with dedicated time to build relationships can be very valuable. However, truly relationship-rich organizations go beyond advisories and summer components to deliver their core content to young people – whether that content is teaching math or swimming – in highly relational ways. Building relationships only during times set aside for that task might be described as the inoculation approach to relationships, through which young people are injected with a dose of relational connection that the organization hopes will encourage them to engage in the curriculum or the program in positive ways.

Too often, however, that inoculation of relationships is not sufficiently powerful to achieve that objective. In contrast, when the relationships that are built during advisories and summer components are carried over into and deepened during classes and programs, young people are often more motivated to invest in the curriculum or the program and persist through difficulties. As researcher Lisa Delpit (2012) has concluded from her studies of schools and education, “Many of our children of color don't learn from a teacher, as much as for a teacher. They don't want to disappoint a teacher who they feel believes in them” (p. 86). That type of academic motivation is possible only when teaching and learning are highly relational endeavors.

2. **Adults are Eager:** The youth-serving organization has staff members who are committed to building stronger relationships with and among young people

► Participants in the ROI interviews generally agreed that most people enter the fields of education and youth development because they want to work with children and/or adolescents and make a positive difference in their lives. In some cases, however, they later discover that spending their days working with young people is not a good fit for their skills and personalities. In other cases, people go into education and youth development because they want to introduce young people to content they love, whether that content is environmental conservation or art or history. In still other cases, adults have a genuine desire to work with young people but lack the knowledge and skills to do so effectively. A number of the participants in the ROI interviews told us that adults who struggle to build relationships with young people can become better at the task when their organizations expect them to do so and they are provided with support. That said, many of those we interviewed also stressed that it is impossible to force people to invest in relationships. They argued that organizations

that seek to activate the active ingredient of relationships should begin the process of organizational change with a coalition of the willing. They suggested that with such a nucleus in place, all staff can and likely will become engaged in the effort over time.

3. **There is Time:** The youth-serving organization dedicates meaningful time to building relationships with young people, while providing staff with time for training and support

► The challenge of finding time to build relationships was mentioned by almost all of the practitioners we interviewed. Many of them told us that the primary obstacle in allocating time to build relationships is financial. An educator succinctly made that point when she told us that, “Because money is so precious or nonexistent, and building relationships takes time and it’s intensive, finding time in a school day to do what is the most expensive thing you can do is the last thing an administrator wants to say yes to – especially because they can’t measure it.” Leaders of out-of-school time programs also reported that they struggle to find time to strengthen relationships, though the constraints on time in that sector are not as great as they are in schools.

## BARRIERS TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

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I have described the three factors discussed above — mission, people, and time — as preconditions for creating a relationship-rich organization because they were cited by a large and diverse sample of the people we interviewed. Smaller numbers of interview participants mentioned other obstacles to building developmental relationships with and among all young people in schools and youth programs. A list of those barriers to building relationships follows below. Each of those barriers is captured in a quote or two from one of our interviews.

### The Belief Gap

A researcher who studies and works to strengthen developmental relationships argued that the rhetoric about the power of relationships is not matched by how programs and institutions are structured:

*The way we have structured systems and organizations, it is as if we don’t believe that relationships are the active ingredient of that work. So, our first step, which is the work of the last*

*few years, is simply to get people to believe that again. And our aspiration is that if people believe that, then the people in the organization itself will start to ask the follow-up question, which is, “Why are we not doing this or that?”*

## Staff Who Don't Value Relationships

The program director of a non-profit that promotes youth development in schools, out-of-school time programs, low-income housing, and other settings said this about the challenge of finding staff who are ready to invest in relationships:

*In terms of hiring, I think sometimes—it’s amazing to me, I’ll have staff who come and say, “I’ve had this staff for a whole year and they’re not very good with building relationships.” And I just think, “Oh, why would we ever hire someone who’s not good at that? That’s our whole business.” But I think people haven’t figured out how to hire the right people who are good at that, and how do you tell that in a forty-five minute interview? So, I think there’s some interesting pieces there around hiring that is a barrier at this point in that we don’t know how to do it better.*

## Dysfunctional Relationships Among the Adults

A number of the people we interviewed told us that poor relationships among the adults in an organization make it much more difficult to build developmental relationships with and among young people. For example, during one of our interviews, we shared a one-page summary of Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework with the leader of a network that works with out-of-school time programs and schools to enhance social and emotional learning. This was her reaction as she glanced at the document:

*It’s very interesting because I looked at that—can I see that again? [takes hold of the one-page summary of the Developmental Relationships*

*Framework] I mean, part of that is, I believe you have to show this to everybody. You can’t be this way with kids and not be that way with your staff. I mean, this is like, for everybody. This is how you develop staff, right? You express care, you challenge their growth, push to get better, help them complete tasks and achieve goals, treat them with respect. So, if an organization is basically dysfunctional in these regards, I don’t know how they pass that on to kids. Kids have their antennas out, especially kids who’ve grown up in shaky circumstances, that’s their skill, is seeing and noticing and being able to figure out how to dodge the next bullet and how to manipulate into the next safe space. Those are kids’ strengths, right?*

A researcher we interviewed also discussed the ways that relationships among adults influence relationships with young people in describing a study he conducted earlier in his career:

*We had data on teacher/principal relational trust as well as teachers with teachers, and you have to be careful interpreting it, but if the teacher/principal trust was weak, you tended not to see the strong teacher/teacher trust. The relationship of teachers to their supervisors, or principal, conditioned whether or not you could have strong inter-collegial trust. And you can go one step further, which I think is where you’re heading. The quality of the relationships among the adults probably conditions relationships between adults and students. That doesn’t mean that individual teachers don’t have very powerful relationships with individual students, but it probably wouldn’t characterize the whole school unless you’ve got, if you want to use that term “social capital,” among the adults in the school.*

## “Adultism”

The director of a non-profit that promotes youth development through relationships in mentoring programs, schools, and out-of-school time programs uses the term “adultism” to describe a condition in which the purpose and quality of relationships



is considered only from the adult perspective. She described the negative consequences of that approach when she told us about her organization's work with mentors:

*We spend a lot of time talking about the charity model of mentoring, where the young person is this empty vessel and the adult has all of the answers and will pour that information into the willing vessel. And just how problematic that is and how sometimes, the idea of mentoring has some really intense power dynamics that are just about fulfilling or acting out that sort of idea. So, when adults come to a relationship also with the idea that they're receiving, not just giving, and that they are building some sort of scaffolding but they're also learning, thinking about things in a different way, and valuing the context that the student is in, instead of judging the context the student is in, I think those are really different types of relationships. And I think that in some of the research literature, there's interesting information about developmental versus instrumental versus prescriptive relationships. I think one of the key things is whether or not a mentoring relationship is one on paper or it's a transformational relationship. We started to feel like the term "mentoring" doesn't distinguish between the two, so we really love the concept of it being a developmental or transformational relationship because it's not necessarily about the adult pouring information into someone.*

## Burning Out the Adults

A researcher who studies instruction, classroom environments, and teacher-student relationships reminded us that building a meaningful relationship with a young person requires significant personal and emotional investment from the adult:

*By my review of the literature and my own definition of the developmental relationship, you have to be willing to be vulnerable yourself. It's not a true developmental relationship if one side of it is not open and vulnerable and authentic. It just can't be because they're not giving the space*

*for the other person to make sense of and give back to you. . . . A developmental relationship is truly when both parties co-construct development over time.*

Several practitioners we interviewed told us that the challenge of building authentic developmental relationships with and among young people can take a serious toll on the adults who are working to build those relationships, especially if the young people live in difficult circumstances. For example, a leader of a national organization that provides an array of services to young people who live in poverty told us that, "Caring for kids hurts people. [Staff] have been burned. Kids are soaked in trauma. Our staff saw a kid get gunned down. It's traumatic for the adults." Similarly, the President & CEO of a non-profit that provides at-risk urban youth with support, guidance, and opportunities to achieve personal and academic success shared: "When you build deep relationships, there is drama involved. Real things get said and done. People's feelings get hurt. If not managed well, it can be a huge problem."

## Seeing the Call to Improve as a Cause for Shame

An interview participant who is a veteran teacher in urban schools pointed out that when school administrators and others urge teachers to build better relationships with students, some teachers hear it as an accusation that they are not fulfilling an essential responsibility of their jobs:

*Part of it is the larger language that teachers hear and so it becomes that interpretation, becomes that filter we use, like: "Now, what are you telling me I'm not good at? Now, what are you telling me I'm incompetent at?" And we do it explicitly sometimes, by standing up opening week and saying, "You have to build better relationships with kids" without ever exploring, "So...how do you build relationships with kids?"*

That veteran teacher went on to suggest that efforts to help educators build better relationships with students should avoid suggesting that they aren't doing a good

job and should instead help them activate their “inner critics” to develop their own ideas for improvement:

*What we want teachers to say is, “I should do a better job with that second period.” We rarely tap into that. Teachers are, as you know, incredibly motivated to improve our craft. We get really defensive very easily, though, when we’re told that we suck at it. And so, when you find ways...of motivating people, you get them to actually fuel themselves with that inner critic. Like, “Oh, I could actually do a better job. This might be why fourth period goes crummy for me, because I haven’t built relationships in that classroom of thirty-six kids the way I have in my second period of twenty-four kids.” We need to (creation conditions in which teachers) start self-diagnosing. And so, the shame around building relationships is that there may be an assumption that you’re not intentionally building them.*

## Lack of Tools, Techniques, and Training

The director of a community coalition for youth that works with schools, out-of-school time programs, and families underscored the need to provide adults who work with young people with practical resources for starting and strengthening relationships. In discussing her organization’s work with educators, she said: “Folks working within schools are very, very interested in very specific and concrete strategies, not just general things, like ‘Yeah, all kids are great and you need to support them,’ but very, very specific strategies of what to do in the first week, the first three months in their classroom. So more concrete tools like that. I think they are responsive to that.” The director of the community coalition went on to highlight the particular importance of providing people who work with middle school and high school students with such practical resources for building relationships.

The founder and CEO of a non-profit that engages recent college graduates in effort to prepare low-income young people for success in higher education and high-skill employment told us that his organization needs tools, techniques, and training that

can help the young adults who provide his program’s services to high school students build relationships more quickly and effectively:

*We provide onboarding and we provide training for our coordinators, but they’re coming in and they’re twenty-four, twenty-five years old, a couple years out of college. They’ve never managed a group of people, they don’t know much about human relationships. And we put them in front of twenty students and we expect them to figure it out. We’re at a stage, as an organization, where we just can’t leave it to chance. We just can’t leave it to the coordinator to figure it out on their own.*

A high school principal we interviewed also cited the need for tools, techniques, and training, but he cautioned that no matter how well-designed those resources are, they cannot replace the unavoidably slow work of building strong interpersonal relationships. “You give the kids and teachers tools to create those relationships,” he commented, “but what does that mean? It’s not like you’re going to be taking kids out for coffee. It means you’re having a different kind of conversation when things are going well and not going well, rather than a more hierarchical traditional teacher-student relationship.”

## The Challenge of Connecting Across Cultures

Many people we interviewed highlighted the challenge – and opportunity – of building relationships with young people across lines of race and culture. For example, the director of a school network captured the importance of creating those cross-cultural connections when he noted that, “Only about 4% of teachers in our state identify as people of color, and that’s not sufficient. But it is an important part of relationship building, which is that you can connect with the identity of the kid. Oftentimes, adults lack the cultural competency.” Similarly, one of the senior leaders of a non-profit that helps teachers engage students in the study of ethics and history also discussed the need to help educators and others reach across lines of race:

*One of the things we've been working on is culturally responsive teaching, because that is about relationships. If we have people—not that all teachers are like this—but if you have a white teacher going into an African American community, how can you build relationships if you don't understand where their lives are, and you're not open to listening, and you're following the rule books? We've been doing a lot of that work, . . . teaching our own staff those skills, 'cause that's a huge barrier with relationships.*

The principal of a diverse urban high school (who is herself African American) pointed out that building relationships across racial and cultural divides requires much more than sensitivity training. Instead, she told us, building developmental relationships with young people across lines of race and culture requires educators to, “Go deeper with the impact of race and how it strengthens or depletes or destroys or dismantles relationships. Because then people have to take ownership and acknowledgment for the role they play in that. . . You really have to strip and go with raw courage around relationships and identifying and reflecting on who you are as an individual. That's a much, much more difficult conversation to have. For a building like ours, where we are so diverse — we are 36% African American, we're 33% Asian, we're 24% white, 13% Hispanic, 33% English Language Learners — it is an amazing challenge.”

## Measuring Relationships

A unifying theme across all of the interviews we conducted was the need to measure the impact of investing in relationships. Several interview participants connected this challenge to pressure from funders to demonstrate results. For example, the leader of a non-profit that teaches character, leadership, and life skills to urban youth highlighted this tension during our interview:

*Well, I believe in the fundraiser's world, everybody wants to quantify everything, which I believe we need to. But in doing that, I don't think people really truly understand how hard it is to quantify a relationship. It's kinda like, “How*

*much do you love me?” [laughs] This is not like math or reading and writing, where there are some things that you can tangibly—there are clear outcomes, but it's really hard to quantify things in our space. But for the donors, it's like, “Well how do you do that?” And when you do try to quantify it, there's not a whole lot of research around this kind of stuff.*

Most of the people we interviewed reported that their organizations do not currently measure young people's experience of relationships in their schools and programs. However, several interviewees shared that their organizations do collect such data through self-report surveys. A researcher who studies teacher-student relationships described both the value and the limitations of such surveys during her interview. She noted that surveys that ask young people general questions about relationships are helpful because they have been proven to predict learning, but she also told us that, “From a practice standpoint, I have no idea what to tell a teacher if a student in the classroom is reporting that they think the teacher doesn't care about him or her. What do I inform the teacher to do differently? What's the material for those perceptions around care?”

In addition to highlighting the need for more actionable measures of relationships, interview participants also discussed the importance of connecting relationships to the outcomes that their organizations are working to achieve. For example, the director of a non-profit organization that works to reduce school dropouts told us that, “We want to collect data and do predictive analytics over time and understand the role relationships play in helping to drive and build competency skills, improve academics, and how that might look different depending on characteristics of students and what they bring with them.”

While many of the people we interviewed shared that desire to connect relationships to outcomes, a researcher who studies developmental relationships in youth programs and schools cautioned against evaluating the impact of relationships primarily based upon the degree to which they improve outcomes such as grades and graduation rates:



*I think you control the relational interaction that kids experience in an organization, you know? You can't even control your organization's strength and weakness, because that's determined by overall infrastructure. But no matter the strength and weakness, you control the kind of interactions youth have while they're with you, and that you have an impact on, and this is where I'm wary of outcomes. Take a typical youth outcome, like high school graduation. So many different developmental relationships may need to come together for a child for that outcome to be met, right? So, to hold any one relationship or one setting responsible for that outcome is challenging.*

*But on the other hand, you can hold a setting accountable for the kind of interactions that they have with that child to make sure the setting is at least a positive one for that child. Sometimes I make the analogy that many of us are parents, and we certainly don't evaluate the quality of our parenting by waiting until our kids went to college, and see if they ended up in Ivy League or something [laughs]. We measure, improve, and reflect on our own quality of parenting by examining the day-to-day interactions that we have with our children. That seems to be sufficient to guide most of us to do the most important job we have to do, which is to be a parent. It would be silly for someone to evaluate their day-to-day parenting solely by longer term child outcomes.*

## Finding Funding

As noted above, multiple interview participants told us that the greatest pressure they face to connect outcomes to relationships and to produce improvements in those outcomes on a short timeline comes from funders. For instance, the founder and CEO of an organization that helps low-income young people prepare for success in higher education and the workplace said the following during his interview:

*Establishing relationships with students is the way by which we can transform their lives. And you know what's interesting, some of our unso-*

*phisticated funders, they're looking at our size and scale and saying, "Man, wouldn't it be great if you could serve 10x or 100x more students? Wouldn't it be great if all students in the school system could benefit from this learning?" And they go as far to say, "You need to put all this teaching and learning on the Internet so that students can go there virtually, read it and learn it and go on." And I'm like, boy, if you're suggesting that, you have no idea how important a relationship is.... So, that's one thing that funders have to understand, that there's a direct relationship between ROI and depth of impact and how much you want to invest in the relationship.*

## The Slow Start

Perhaps the biggest barrier to creating relationship-rich organizations that emerged during our interviews was the sense that funders, practitioners, parents, and even young people want to see quick returns on their investment in relationships. At the most micro level, the lag between investing in relationships and seeing a return on those investments is due to the length of time that it takes to build a relationship with a young person – especially one who is going through the challenges of adolescence. The research director of a non-profit that helps low-income young people prepare for success in college described this challenge in the following terms:

*I think there are barriers on the mentees' buy-in side that I think are an adolescence thing, potentially. That would be one, it's like, if you're not an easy student or willing to go with the flow for a while, because it feels awkward for adults when you just get matched and are going to the events—it's weird, but if you ride it out, it gets better. But I think that initial engagement is a barrier that our frontline staff talks about a lot.*

Just as building developmental relationships between young people and adults takes time, building the capacity of staff to strengthen relationships is also an unavoidably slow process. A researcher who studies developmental relationships told us during an interview that the slow pace of change is due in part to the

fact that helping staff build relationships is a “practice-based” rather than a “knowledge-based” endeavor:

*This is very different from the traditional in-service training, where you block out a day and someone comes in and trains you on this and that, this is—I think what we call this kind of work, it’s practice-based, right, it’s not knowledge-based. It’s not someone telling you something you don’t know. It’s for you to study your own practice, and what’s the three things we call it—practice-based, community-based. You have to do it with the local community, and the third one is active ingredient-based, which means... it’s not just telling the math department, “Go talk about how you teach math.” It’s about all of them getting together and talking about how they interact with children while they’re teaching math, while they’re teaching reading, while they’re teaching music.*

## Sustainability

Given the significant investment of time that it takes to build developmental relationships with and among young people, interview participants also told us that sustaining relationships over time is an critical priority and a major challenge. A researcher who conducts extensive applied research with organizations that serve young people described that challenge in the following terms:

*The major challenge for us is sustainability—not financially for us, but for the folks we’ve been working with. As you know, within child-serving professions in general, maybe K-12 is an exception, but in most places, there’s very high turnover of frontline staff and organizational leadership....So, it made us wonder whether the impact of our work is meant to be a sustained process of a community of practice in that place, or that we need to be pretty humble and just say that our impact is within the first two or three sessions... We haven’t really been to places where this work can self-sustain when we’re gone. We haven’t given up on that, we have about one or two*

*instances in which it could, but in most of the places, when we’re gone, that part of the work is gone. I don’t think the impact is gone, but that part of the work is gone.*

## Technology

While most people who participated in our interviews did not mention the challenge of building relationships with young people via social media, email, and texting, several were extremely focused on that issue. As the leader of an organization that helps young people prepare for college told us, “There’s, for sure, a challenge there, getting a relationship formed, because it’s all virtual....The part that would be interesting is, when people are trying to do coaching through some form of technology—from phone to texting to email to FaceTime to Skype—what are some best practices there?” It will be important to observe the degree to which more people and organizations struggle with building relationships through technology as the use of technology in schools and youth programs continues to grow in the years ahead.

## A Unique Challenge for Family-Serving Organizations

People we interviewed who work in organizations that serve families told us that they face a challenge that we did not hear about from other interviewees whose work generally does not involve parenting adults. That challenge is convincing parents to participate in programs and activities that are designed to strengthen family relationships. Interview participants told us that they deal with that challenge by emphasizing aspects of their programs other than relationships, such as adult education and family literacy. As the leader of an organization that provides low-income families with an array of support services described during an interview, strengthening relationships is the “hidden curriculum” of his organization’s work with families:

*We can do workforce training, we can help them get adult basic ed, but to do that, we also want them to engage in a relationship with their child,*



*because that's gonna help them. So, you gotta be—it's not like all of our programs our perfect, but the ones that are the most successful, that's what we see them doing. I would like to say, I'm making the parents sound very self-interested. When we look at our survey data over the years, the parents almost always identify—the number one reason they want to participate in a family literacy program is to become the best parent for their child. But getting to the relationship part, sometimes that is the hardest to sell. Putting up a flier that says, “Have a great relationship with your child” wouldn't cut it.*

Similarly, a senior leader of another national organization that helps low-income parents prepare their children for success in high school and higher education told us that her organization also does not emphasize relationships in its outreach to potential parent participants:

*I think we have never approached parents telling them we want to talk to them about how to build a better relationship with their child. That's not our mission. It is a byproduct of the mission. But because I have been with the program for 29 years, and I have interviewed many families personally and...conducted the trainings, I've never seen a dad or a mom that, on the graduation day, are not saying, “Oh my gosh, my whole relationship with my son has changed. I didn't know what I didn't know. I didn't know how impactful my messages to my children about school were.” Now, our approach to recruiting parents is, when we make the phone call, we actually tell them about sharing with them some of the resources and applications that are there for their children to not only do better in school, but to achieve a goal of maybe going to college or a higher education. That seems to be a hook that parents—and there's no parent I've ever met who doesn't want their children to do better than they do. We go to the low-income, very diverse, sometimes very violent communities, and that is where the families—that message resonates with the families. “I want my daughter to escape poverty,” “I want my son to not end up like his brother who's in jail*

*already.” We tap into that deep, deep reservoir of these parents to get their children out of danger and we provide them with an opportunity.*

## Points of Progress

Although the people we interviewed identified numerous obstacles to building developmental relationships in youth-serving organizations, they also told us about a number of promising practices that can be studied and potentially replicated. For example, over the course of our interviews we learned that:

- Communities in Schools has recently added students' experience of developmental relationships to the logic model that guides all aspects of the organization's work. They are integrating measures of developmental relationships into the metrics they use to serve students and to improve organizational performance.
- The Student Success Network based in New York City has formally identified building “diverse, equitable, and inclusive relationships” with caring adults as a top organizational priority.
- Genesys Works has revised its mission statement to explicitly articulate the organization's commitment to relationships, stating that the mission of the organization is, “to transform the lives of disadvantaged high school students through skills training, meaningful internships, and impactful relationships.” Genesys Works strives to fulfill that mission in multiple ways, including building time for socializing and play into the program to help create positive peer relationships.
- In and around Palo Alto, California, the community collaborative Project Cornerstone has launched an ambitious effort to help adults understand and act upon two simple but profound ideas: (1) at a moment in time, you can make a difference in a child's life through the interactions you have (2) every child should have five caring adults in their lives in a sustained relationship.

- Colorado Uplift has articulated a relationship-building process that it hopes teachers and mentors will move through that uses the metaphor of a house. Level 1 is the front porch, level 2 is the living room, and level 3 is the kitchen, where the adults and children become part of each other's real lives. Colorado Uplift's objective is to have all young people that participate in the organization's programs feel that they are in the living room or the kitchen.
- Johnson Senior High School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, has created a student leadership initiative that is making the diverse urban high school a more relationship-rich environment through changes in school policies, structures, and protocols. Johnson High School has also created the Positivity Project, through which teachers are using iPads to film student responses to the question "Who makes you want to come to school?" Staff then spend time analyzing students' answers to that question as part of ongoing school improvement efforts.
- The Mikva Challenge operates an intensive summer program during which staff spend five hours per day with students over the course of eight weeks. The first two weeks of that summer component are designed to help students build relationships with program leaders and with each other.
- Facing History and Ourselves engages young people in an activity called Universe of Obligation, through which young people think through who they want in their circles of care and commitment.
- The Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility in New York City creates a safe space for young people to share what is really going on in their lives and helps them build relationships across lines of difference.
- The Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is training staff on the technique of motivational interviewing, through which they are learning how to lead as role models and to guide parents to answers, without giving them those answers.
- The Fred Rogers Center at Saint Vincent College is working with a diverse array of adults who touch young people's lives – from crossing guards to health care providers – to help them interact with young people in ways that promote personal and social development.
- The Hiawatha Academies network of schools evaluates applicants for teaching positions on their ability of to build relationships with students by observing how applicants interact with students while teaching a sample lesson. Hiawatha Academies also evaluates the performance of staff based in part on the degree to which students' attitudes and interactions communicate that they feel respected, cared for, and affirmed.
- Similarly, the Future Project requires applicants for the position of Dream Director to demonstrate their ability to build relationships with young people as part of the organization's interview process. The Future Project also asks job applicants to describe previous positions they have held in which they successfully built strong relationships with young people.
- Como Senior High School in Saint Paul, Minnesota, asks applicants for teaching positions to describe a healthy relationship they have had, to describe a relationship that helped them grow, to describe how relationships are important (or not important) in their work as a teacher, and to describe how relationships matter after the school day ends at 2:00 PM.
- Camp Fire has developed a module in their online learning system that provides staff with an introduction to Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework.
- The YMCA of the USA has also launched new online training that emphasizes relationships and is designed to be used by front-line staff who have limited time to attend workshops and professional development sessions.

## Tools Organizations Could Use

Over the course of the 55 interviews, participants identified a number of tools, techniques, and services that they believe would help them activate the active ingredient of relationships in their organizations. Many of those interviewees told us that they hope such practical resources will be developed through the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative and will eventually be shared with organizations that are not active participants in the project. The following bullets briefly summarize some of the ideas we heard:

- The Massachusetts Mentoring Partnership and the Institute for Youth Success at Education Northwest in Portland, Oregon, provide training on building relationships for a wide range of youth-serving organizations, including mentoring programs, schools, afterschool programs, and social service providers.
- Facing History and Ourselves introduces teachers to culturally-responsive instructional strategies that help them connect with young people from racial and cultural backgrounds that are different from their own.
- The Center for Supportive Schools, EL Education, the Future Project, and Facing History and Ourselves all prepare adults to build relationships with and among young people by first engaging those adults in some of the same relationship-building activities and approaches that they later use with young people.
- Colorado Uplift tracks the way that staff members spend time with young people, enabling the organization to evaluate the degree to which staff are effectively balancing time with individual young people, small groups of young people, and larger groups of young people.
- The Institute for Youth Success at Education Northwest based in Portland is helping schools and youth programs identify short-term measures of change in their capacity to build relationships with and among young people. The organization believes that, if sustained over time, the relationships will lead to improvements in outcomes such as graduation rates and foster care placements.
- iMentor has developed measures of the quality of relationships between mentors and mentees that it uses to predict outcomes such as academic motivation in high school and college enrollment. iMentor has also developed measures of the degree to which relationships between mentors and their mentees are aligned and attuned.
- Activities that can be used at the start of a class or program that help teachers and program staff get to know young people for their strengths, values, and sparks (deep interests and talents)
- Group activities that help the young people in a class or program build positive relationships with each other
- A process that brings young people together to support each other as they work to complete tasks and achieve goals
- Relational techniques that can be used to bring to implement the elements outlined Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities
- Studies that make the case for investing in relationships in applied settings (as opposed to in carefully controlled experiments that don't reflect the real world of youth programs and schools)
- Surveys (or survey scales and items) that can be used to assess young people's experience of relationships within and beyond youth-serving organizations and that can track change in those relationships over time
- Measures that enable organizations to examine connections between relationships and youth outcomes

- Professional development that helps educators and youth program staff integrate relationship building into the curriculum and the content of their programs
- A way to map the relationships in a young person's life so that the young person and the people on the map can take steps to strengthen those relationships
- Practical ways to evaluate the relational potential of job applicants
- Fair, accurate, and reliable ways to evaluate the degree to which staff build strong relationships with young people
- Practical ways to help young people take the lead in building better relationships with adults and with each other
- A readiness assessment that helps schools and youth programs decide where to begin the work of strengthening developmental relationships across their organizations
- A summary and analysis of the different structures that schools and youth programs use to dedicate time to building relationships, such as advisories, link crews, youth leadership initiatives, summer components, and more.

## SEARCH INSTITUTE'S DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS FRAMEWORK

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A number of the people who were interviewed for the ROI project told us that Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework has the potential to become a valuable resource for their organizations and the fields of education and youth development in general. For example, the leader of an organization that provides a range of social services to young people living in poverty told us during an interview that, "We need some formalized framework that helps us be more intentional about relationships and then helps us measure it, which is how I see this project going. And to do it from a holistic way so that it can inform and change different parts of our organization, but also so that it creates lasting sustainable change."

The director of a non-profit that helps young people develop values, qualities, and skills they need to thrive and contribute to their communities said the Developmental Relationships Framework can help organizations move beyond urging staff to become "caring adults" in the lives of youth:

*The framework was helpful for me in helping identify the key aspects of a developmental relationship. You know, it takes it away from*

*just some lovable, nice connection between an adult and youth. Because people can have nice connections with kids and the kids love them and everything, but they aren't necessarily developmental relationships unless they have those other aspects that have to do with high expectations and strong support and opening horizons and so on.*

Similarly, a senior leader in an organization that provides an array of support services to young people told us that the Developmental Relationships Framework is valuable because it paints a more detailed picture of the close connections that transform young people's lives:

*I think there's this sweet spot in the middle. You have these people where building relationships is not their thing and they're never going to be good at it, and you have people on the other end who are almost over developed. We always say, "Okay, now you have the relationship, but to what end?" Now, you have to actually do the challenging the growth, right, maybe all they do is express care and provide support and we're not expanding possibilities. So, there's parts of it where there seems to be this, "Yeah, but I have a*



*really good relationship.” Okay yeah, but so what? It’s because they don’t have the full spectrum, which is why I really like your framework.*

A number of people we interviewed who were enthused about the Developmental Relationships Framework also offered the following cautionary points about our work:

- Strive to avoid making building relationships “another thing” that teachers and others who work with young people are expected to do. Instead, help them integrate building relationships into the work that they already do in their schools and programs.
- Align efforts to build developmental relationships within youth-serving organizations with other initiatives going on in those organizations, such as implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Building better relationships should not be seen as competing with other important priorities.
- Emphasize equity. A researcher who studies mentoring said the following about the Developmental Relationships Framework during our interview, “This could be a really great leverage point for addressing issues of inequality...especially for marginalized kids who need different people for different things. Being able to connect with people who expose them to new opportunities—social capital expansion – middle-class youth already benefit from that.”
- Help young people understand both healthy and unhealthy relationships. Although the Developmental Relationships Framework identifies the actions that lead to positive relationships, the leader of a community coalition who we interviewed argued that it is also essential to help young people identify and avoid negative relationships:

*A lot of the violence and the killing is going on around relationships. So, the police are in love with social media. They can totally map relationships and who’s mad at whom, who’s in whose network, who might’ve been there when that person got shot and why. I’ve gone on some sites and the general public has*

*no idea what’s happening with these cliques and online and the threatening—and it’s all relationships. You can connect one Facebook post to the next, to that person, to that person. So yes, I know we’re talking about healthy relationships and so on, and helping a young person to differentiate, you know, ones that are destructive and ones that are beneficial to them is critical. So it’s not just, “Isn’t this great?” but also juxtaposing it with, “And that right there can get you killed.” I’m being stark, but the relationship thing is a tricky thing.*

## A Final Word

The leader of a coalition of nonprofits and foundations summed up the unique opportunity that Search Institute and its partners have as they work together to create and implement the Relationships for Outcomes Initiative:

*If your work creates enough gravity of attention and is transferrable enough that relationships become the center of the way we do this work for kids, rather than a means to an end, and that there is a way that a variety of players...can see a pathway into integrating what you have learned—that is an enormous contribution, that alone.*

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