SPARK
Stronger futures for all

LEARNING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

How strong connections with teachers
propel student motivation in school.

The SPARK Youth Voices Survey is a partnership between Itasca area schools, SPARK: Stronger Futures for All, and Search Institute, with support from the Blandin Foundation.

The survey is designed to:

- Amplify youth voice by telling the story of youth in the Itasca area aligned with the themes in SPARK's Pathway for Student Success.
- Identify opportunities for enhancing student success by strengthening relationships and opportunities for young people in their schools and communities.
- Focus attention on a shared commitment to young people's growth and thriving across the Itasca area.
- Motivate individual and collective actions among youth and adults to create stronger schools and communities where all young people learn and thrive.

SPARK: Stronger Futures for All (www.sparkfutures.org) drives community engagement to ensure success for all Itasca Area youth.

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About This Report

This report was prepared for SPARK by **Search Institute** (www.searchinstitute.org), a non-profit organization that bridges research and practice to help young people be and become their best selves. Our current work seeks to surround young people—particularly those from marginalized communities—with developmental relationships that put them on the path to become thriving and contributing adults.

THE OTHER CRITICAL 'R' FOR LEARNING

More than two decades ago, educators began to embrace a new set of "3 R's" of learning: Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.[1] As a nation, we've invested heavily in the first two. But sometimes that focus has come at the expense of the third: Relationships.

The *2018 SPARK Youth Voice Survey* shines a spotlight on relationships, providing evidence that relationships are key to student motivation and learning. The challenge is to create the space to be intentional and inclusive in both building individual relationships and creating a culture and community in the school where relationships flourish.

Highlights from this report

In fall 2018, more than 3,000 6th- to 12th-grade students from 11 Itasca-area public schools completed the SPARK Youth Voice Survey. The survey examined a wide range of students' experiences and relationships in their families, schools, and communities, which are being summarized for various stakeholder groups.

This report focuses on students' relationships with teachers, their experiences in their schools, and their motivation to learn. Among the key findings:

- Itasca area students who experience strong relationships with their teachers and school staff are more likely to be motivated, feel like they belong in their school and community, and see a future for themselves in their communities.
- Too few students experience strong relationships with their teachers, as reflected in the elements of developmental relationships (see back cover).
- Students want to connect with their teachers and school staff, and there are everyday, practical actions that make a difference.
- If students feel like they belong in school, they are more motivated to learn. However, too few feel like they belong in their school or like they can really be themselves at school.
- Students vary widely in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that shape their motivation in school. Most want to do well in school, for example, but they are much less likely to report setting and working toward achievable goals.

[1] Coined by Dr. Bill Daggett of the International Center for Leadership in Education

THE POWER OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

When Itasca area students experience strong developmental relationships* with their teachers and school staff, they are:

3.7 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to believe their school is fair and safe for everyone.

3.3 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to feel like they belong in the school.

2.5 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to work hard to learn in school, even if it doesn't affect their grade.

2.3 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to be committed to and enjoy learning.

2.1 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to set and work toward achievable goals.

2.0 TIMES MORE LIKELY
to see a future for themselves in their communities.**

*"Developmental relationships" refers to relationships that reflect the actions shown in the framework on the back cover of this booklet.

**Ratios based on logistic regressions after controlling for grade level, gender, and race-ethnicity.

STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Search Institute has identified five element of "developmental relationships" that help young people be and become their best selves (see back cover).

Students are more likely to experience "challenge growth" than other elements in their relationships with teachers and school staff.

Percentages of Itasca area students who said their teachers and school staff did each action often or very often.[*]

Show that you matter to them.	Express Care	41%
Push you to be your best.	Challenge Growth	69%
Help you get things done.	Provide Support	59%
Listen to your ideas and take them seriously.	Share Power	44%
Connect you with new people and places in your community.	Expand Possibilities	28%

*Each action represents one element of a "developmental relationship" in Search Institute's research-based framework, which is shown on back cover of this report.

Students are less likely to experience strong relationships with teachers and school staff in high school than middle school.

While there was a clear difference in how developmental relationships are experienced across age groups, there are no meaningful differences in levels of developmental relationships by gender, race-ethnicity, or level of financial strain students' families experience.

(Teachers do "often" or "very often")			Middle school	High school
Express Care		Show you that you matter to them.	45%	38%
Challenge Growth		Push you to be your best.	75%	64%
Provide Support		Help you get things done.	65%	54%
Share Power		Listen to your ideas and take them seriously.	47%	41%
Expand Possibilities		Connect you with new people and places in your community.	30%	27%

STUDENTS' PRIORITIES

Students' emphasize "sharing power" in strengthening relationships

The survey also asked whether students wanted teachers and other school staff to do each action more, less, or keep it the same. Most often, they said, "keep it the same," Only a few students (2 to 8 percent) wanted some actions to be less frequent.

However, quite a few students wished some actions were more common, suggesting that these areas may be opportunities for strengthening relationships.

Almost one in three students wish more teachers and school staff would share power with them more often.

Show that you matter to them.	Express Care	23%
Push you to be your best.	Challenge Growth	18%
Help you get things done.	Provide Support	24%
Listen to your ideas and take them seriously.	Share Power	30%
Connect you with new people and places in your community.	Expand Possibilities	20%

Female students wished teachers and staff took more actions to build developmental relationships.

Percentages of students who want teachers and other school staff to do each action more.		Female	Male
Express Care	Show you that you matter to them.	29%	16%
Challenge Growth	Push you to be your best.	20%	16%
Provide Support	Help you get things done.	27%	20%
Share Power	Listen to your ideas and take them seriously.	34%	25%
Expand Possibilities	Connect you with new people and places in your community.	24%	14%

Note: Only minor differences arose across racial-ethnic and age groups in these analyses, so they are not shown here.

EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS

Students are more motivated and goal oriented when they feel safe, accepted, and like they belong in their school.

What students experience every day in their relationships in their schools matters for their motivation to learn and their aspirations for the future.*

If students feel like they...

Belong at the school

Are **accepted** by their **teachers**

Go to a school that is **fair and safe**

They are more likely to...

Be **committed to and enjoy learning**

Work hard to **learn in school**

Have a **growth mindset**

Set and work toward **achievable goals**

However, too few Itasca area youth feel like they belong in their school or like they can really be themselves at school.
(Percent who agree or strongly agree.)

People in my school accept me for who I am. — 51%

I really feel like a part of my school. — 52%

I can really be myself at school. — 47%
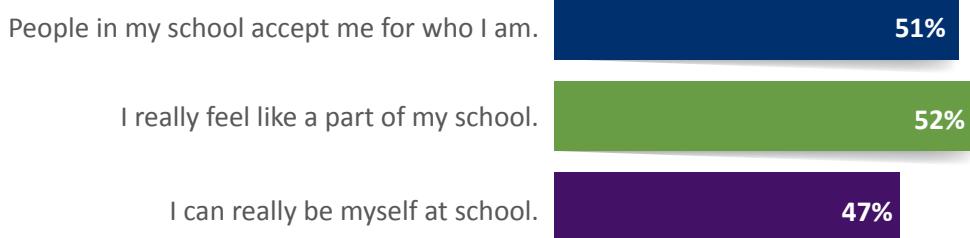
Female and Native students, and those whose families experience financial strain, are less likely to feel like they are accepted and like they belong in their school than their peers.

Percent who agree or strongly agree	Females	Males	Native	White	Other**	Multi-Racial	Not Financially Strained	Financially Strained***
People in my school accept me for who I am.	49%	58%	42%	53%	53%	51%	58%	44%
I really feel like part of my school.	41%	54%	40%	48%	47%	45%	61%	43%
I can really be myself at my school.	43%	62%	43%	52%	53%	49%	54%	38%

* Each of the experiences in the left column is meaningfully correlated with each of the social-emotional qualities in the right column (Pearson correlation coefficients ranged between .36 and .49, which are considered quite strong in similar social science and educational research.)

** Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

*** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

What contributes to students' motivation in school?

There is growing attention to social-emotional and motivational factors that play important roles in students' engagement and, ultimately, their learning and achievement.

The SPARK Youth Voice survey asked students about a number of key motivational factors that teachers can influence through their relationships and teaching strategies.

Students vary widely in the levels they report of key attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that shape their motivation in school. Most want to do well in school, for example, but they are much less likely to report setting and working toward achievable goals.

These qualities can spark important conversations about ways to work together to increase students' motivation in school. They highlight critical, and changeable, factors that shape students' motivation and success in school. This section shows key findings from the survey.

Are students committed to learning?

Commitment to learning focuses on students' values, habits, and skills for learning. As shown in this table, middle school students, male students, non-white students, and those whose families experience financial strain are less likely, on average, to care about school or to enjoy learning—even though they are almost as likely as others to want to do well in school.

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING

Percent who agree or strongly agree		I want to do well in school.	I do my homework.	I care about school.	I enjoy learning.
All		**91%**	**75%**	**69%**	**50%**
Grade Level	Middle School	90%	76%	66%	45%
	High School	91%	75%	71%	54%
Gender	Female	94%	82%	75%	55%
	Male	90%	70%	65%	47%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	86%	63%	56%	41%
	White	92%	78%	72%	52%
	Other*	87%	72%	56%	45%
	Multi-Racial	87%	68%	65%	47%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	92%	82%	74%	51%
	Strained	90%	69%	59%	46%

 * Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

Mastery goals or performance goals?

The goals educators and students set for themselves affect their motivation. Some goals—called "performance goals"—emphasize achieving certain grades or rank in class. Other goals—called "mastery goals"—emphasize really learning or internalizing content or improving skills. Mastery goals tend to be much more motivating in the long term.

About 6 out of 10 students in the Itasca area respond to survey questions in ways that suggest they have more of a mastery orientation. It's more common among females than males. It seems to decline among high schoolers (a time when they focus extensive class time on meeting graduation requirements).

MASTERY GOALS FOR LEARNING

Percent who agree or strongly agree		I work hard on all my assignments, even if they won't affect my grade.	My main reason for working hard in school is to learn new knowledge and skills.
All		**56%**	**57%**
Grade Level	Middle School	63%	64%
	High School	52%	53%
Gender	Female	65%	61%
	Male	49%	56%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	52%	57%
	White	58%	58%
	Other*	52%	55%
	Multi-Racial	50%	56%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	60%	60%
	Strained	48%	56%

 * Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

Do students believe they can get smarter with effort?

When students believe intelligence can be changed with effort (that it's not a fixed trait), they are more likely to work hard in school and see failures and mistakes as opportunities to learn. Overall, about two-thirds of Itasca area students seem to show a "growth mindset" when responding to the survey. However, this attitude is less common among Native students than other youth. It is also less common among young people whose families experience economic strain.

GETTING SMARTER WITH EFFORT

Percent who agree or strongly agree		I can get smarter by working hard.	How well I do in school depends more on how hard I work than on how naturally smart I am.	If I work at it, there are no limits to how smart I can become.
All		**74%**	**63%**	**63%**
Grade Level	Middle School	77%	65%	65%
	High School	72%	62%	62%
Gender	Female	74%	65%	65%
	Male	77%	63%	63%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	62%	55%	55%
	White	76%	65%	65%
	Other*	67%	58%	58%
	Multi-Racial	71%	61%	61%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	79%	65%	65%
	Strained	66%	59%	59%

 * Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

When students experience strong developmental relationships with their teachers and school staff, they are more likely to:

- **Work hard in school**
- **Be committed to learning**
- **Set and work toward achievable goals**

Do students set and work toward realistic goals?

It's one thing to set lofty goals. It's another thing to set reasonable, specific goals, and then work on achieving them. This discipline and skill plays a big role in students being effective in school and in preparing for their future.

Students in the Itasca area are more confident in setting goals than in the specifics of listing goals and working on those goals. Though we might hope these skills would increase during high school, we don't see a meaningful difference between middle school and high school on these items. Young people whose families experience financial strain say they are less likely to set goals and work toward those goals.

SETTING REALISTIC GOALS

Percent who agree or strongly agree		I set goals that are possible for me to reach.	I can list specific goals I want to achieve in the next year.	I am good at working toward the goals I set.
All		70%	59%	56%
Grade Level	Middle School	71%	56%	55%
	High School	70%	60%	57%
Gender	Female	70%	61%	55%
	Male	73%	58%	58%
Race-Ethnicity	Native	68%	55%	48%
	White	71%	58%	56%
	Other*	67%	63%	55%
	Multi-Racial	69%	60%	56%
Financial Strain**	Not Strained	79%	60%	61%
	Strained	65%	52%	48%

 * Includes students who self-identified as being Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a American, Pacific Islander, or other.

** A young person's family was considered to be experiencing financial strain if the young person indicated that their family sometimes can't buy the things they need or just has enough money for the things they need.

...set reasonable, specific goals, and then work on achieving them. This discipline and skill plays a big role in students being effective in school and in preparing for their future.
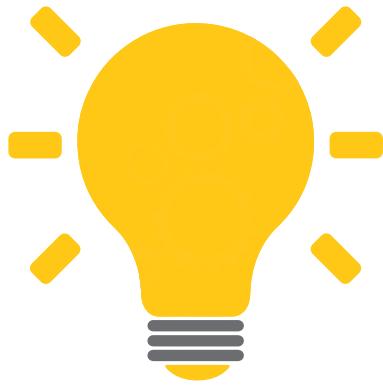
ACTION IDEAS

Attending to relationships...
amid everything else

Schools face intense pressure to fulfill many different objectives for their students, families, and communities. And it all has to be done on non-test days—with a constrained budget.

The promise of strengthening relationships, however, is that relationships are like yeast in bread—they make all the other ingredients work better. When we work on relationships, the other things we do become more effective and have greater impact. The challenge is to create the space to be intentional and inclusive in both building individual relationships and creating a culture and community in the school where relationships flourish.

On the following pages are some starting points to consider for action for different stakeholders in school communities. They are organized around the five elements of developmental relationships.

Relationships toward relevance and rigor

This report began by referencing rigor, relevance and relationships[*] as drivers of education reform in the past two decades. Yet too often, the commitment to rigor and relevance has pushed relationships aside, rather than recognizing relationships as potential catalysts or gateways to relevance and rigor.

Through relationships, teachers connect learning with what really matters to students and what is relevant to their lives and their futures. Through relationships, teachers can tap students' deeper motivations and challenge them to push themselves to learn.

Almost all Itasca area students say they want to do well in school—though they may not always show that when they are sitting in the classrooms and walking in the halls. The question and opportunity lies in how creating more relationally rich cultures and individual interactions in schools might tap their motivation and energize the learning community for everyone.

*Coined by Dr. Bill Daggett of the International Center for Leadership in Education

	ALL ADULTS IN THE SCHOOL	TEACHERS
Express Care	• Actively listen to students during brief conversations. Reflect back what they have said to show you're listening. • Privately check in with students who aren't acting like themselves. • Give students space to express their feelings without judging them for it.	• Greet students warmly at the beginning of class. Remind them of one thing they can do to make the day successful. • Start each day fresh with students. Welcome them back to the classroom, even if the last class period was hard.
Challenge Growth	• Expand students' thinking by asking hard questions, providing alternate explanations, and encouraging openness to different opinions. • Emphasize mistakes are a necessary part of learning. Praise students for hard work, whether they succeed or fail.	• Recognize understanding and comprehension of material, not just when students give correct answers. • Reduce fear of failure and make trying new skills feel safe and enjoyable by providing initial non-graded learning periods for new material.
Provide Support	• Show young people how to ask for help when they need it. • Give more support when young people are struggling, and less when they are making progress. Step back as their skills and confidence build.	• Give constructive feedback when students don't do well. • Be as flexible as you can to help students be successful if they are dealing with difficult issues outside of school (while also challenging them to grow and holding them accountable).
Share Power	• Let young people make decisions about activities you do together and what you talk about. Don't jump in too fast when they don't make quick decisions or think of things to talk about. • When you can, offer choices ("So, what could you do differently to tackle this problem?"), rather than always giving instructions. • Let students know when you've learned something from them that you're excited about.	• Hold classroom meetings to make decisions, prepare for changes, and gather perceptions of challenges. • Ask for students' input on class content, types of homework assignments, and how they can show their proficiency—and then act on their suggestions when they can work. • Integrate project-based learning into your classroom, giving students opportunities to tackle topics and issues that matter to them.
Expand Possibilities	• Highlight future goals. Talk with students about the things they look forward to or dream about. • When students seem curious about an activity, topic, or issue, ask questions such as "what strikes you about this?" • Introduce students to a wide range of people, places, ideas, cultures, and vocations. Start with ones they're curious about.	• Model being a curious learner by asking questions and sharing with students about the knowledge or skills you are trying to get better at as a teacher and in life outside of school. • Connect students with other teachers, staff, and community resources that can be good sources of learning, mentoring, and motivation for them.

	SCHOOL LEADERS	STUDENTS
Express Care	• Model care as a priority in the school by noticing what's happening in the lives of teachers, staff, and students. • Consistently thank teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community for their roles in creating a positive learning community.	• Thank teachers, school staff, and others when they go out of their way to connect with you or help you learn. • Be friendly to students in your school, even if you don't know them well. They'll appreciate it, and it will make your day better too.
Challenge Growth	• Work with teachers and staff to set goals for strengthening relationships with students. Focus on areas that are motivating and intriguing for them. • Examine school recognition programs. Do they emphasize comparisons and performance, or do they emphasize mastery and growth? How might they be shifted to emphasize the latter?	• Model how you put in effort to learn. Push back if others dismiss the value of education. • Be clear about your own learning goals and interests so that teachers and others can encourage you to learn in ways that fit you well.
Provide Support	• Create space and provide resources for ongoing professional development of staff around building relationships. • Elicit feedback from staff and students to identify the academic, emotional, and mental supports that students need. Remove obstacles if they are in the way of students receiving these supports.	• Be allies for friends who may have trouble speaking up for themselves when they need extra support. • Offer to help a teacher or another school staff person with a project.
Share Power	• Regularly ask students from different subgroups within the school about their perspectives on issues and priorities in the school and community. • Collaborate with a student advisory panel to respond to feedback from students and enact change.	• Offer ideas to your teachers and school leaders for how to make school a better experience for both students and adults. • If you think a school policy doesn't make sense, ask for the rationale behind it. If you have a better recommendation, build a case and bring it to your principal with the reasons you believe it should be considered.
Expand Possibilities	• Provide staff and students opportunity to experience other school contexts or local organizations for career and personal development. • Invite community experts to visit with students and share skills and knowledge.	• If you have connections or experiences in other parts of the world or cultures, languages, or religions, offer to share them with your classes and teachers. • Ask teachers and school leaders about what inspired them to become who they are today.

BACKGROUND

The SPARK Youth Voices Survey

Survey development: The survey used in 2018 was updated from a survey conducted in 2014 based on extensive input from students, teachers, and leaders in Itasca area schools and the SPARK Council to ensure that the findings are relevant and valuable.

Data collection: Between August 31 and October 15, 2018, a total of 3,253 Itasca area students were surveyed via computers or tablets during a class period. A total of 242 surveys were dropped from the sample during data cleaning (due to missing data or suspicious responses), resulting in a final sample of 3,011 students.

Sample Characteristics:

Participating Schools	Students in the final sample
Bigfork High School	114
Deer River High School	352
Floodwood School	98
Grand Rapids Area Learning Center	66
Grand Rapids High School	865
Greenway High School	480
Hill City School	133
Nashwauk-Keewatin High School	170
Northern Lights Community School	86
Northland High School	125
Robert J. Elkington Middle School	522
TOTAL	**3,011**

NOTE: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Grade Level

Middle school (Grades 7-8)[*] **42%**

High school (Grades 9-12) **59%**

[*]Includes 183 sixth graders in four schools: Deer River, Northern Lights, Hill City, and Greenway.

Gender

Female **47%**

Male **51%**

Other[*] **3%**

[*]The 'Other' category includes youth who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. This sample was too small to include in the broad gender analyses for this report, but will be used for focused analyses.

Race-Ethnicity (self-reported)

Native **5%**

White **66%**

Other[*] **6%**

Multi-racial **24%**

[*]Students who selected Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or Other have been combined due to insufficient sample sizes.

Financial Strain (self-reported)

63% (n = 1,584)
Not financially strained—Family has little or no problems buying what they need or can buy special things if they want to.

37% (n = 928)
Financially strained—Family sometimes can't buy the things they need or has just enough money for the things they need.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

Use this page to reflect on your own—or with others—about the findings in this summary report.

What?

What 2-3 things stood out for you the most as you read the findings?

1.

2.

3.

Gut?

How did you react to the findings? Where you surprised? Upset? Pleased? Puzzled?

_____

_____

What do you think made you react the way you did? What experiences did it stir up for you?

_____

_____

So What?

What possibilities do you see that need to be considered? What actions need to be taken? What's most important to you?

_____

_____

How do you think young people might want others in the community to respond to these survey findings?

_____

_____

Now What?

What questions do you want to ask someone to help you understand the "why" behind the findings?

_____

_____

Who can you share the findings with who could really use them?

_____

What's one thing you'll be willing to try to respond to the findings?

_____

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Young people are more likely to grow up successfully when they experience developmental relationships with important people in their lives. Search Institute has identified five elements—expressed in 20 specific actions—that make relationships powerful in young people's lives.

ELEMENTS	ACTIONS	DEFINITIONS
Express Care *Show me that I matter to you.*	**Be dependable**	Be someone I can trust.
	Listen	Really pay attention when we are together.
	Believe in me	Make me feel known and valued.
	Be warm	Show me you enjoy being with me.
	Encourage	Praise me for my efforts and achievements.
Challenge Growth *Push me to keep getting better.*	**Expect my best**	Expect me to live up to my potential.
	Stretch	Push me to go further.
	Hold me accountable	Insist I take responsibility for my actions.
	Reflect on failures	Help me learn from mistakes and setbacks.
Provide Support *Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.*	**Navigate**	Guide me through hard situations and systems.
	Empower	Build my confidence to take charge of my life.
	Advocate	Stand up for me when I need it.
	Set boundaries	Put in place limits that keep me on track.
Share Power *Treat me with respect and give me a say.*	**Respect me**	Take me seriously and treat me fairly.
	Include me	Involve me in decisions that affect me.
	Collaborate	Work with me to solve problems and reach goals.
	Let me lead	Create opportunities for me to take action and lead.
Expand Possibilities *Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.*	**Inspire**	Inspire me to see possibilities for my future.
	Broaden horizons	Expose me to new ideas, experiences, and places.
	Connect	Introduce me to more people who can help me develop and thrive.
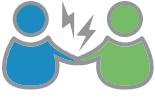
NOTE: Relationships are, by definition, bidirectional, with each person giving and receiving. So each person in a strong relationship both engages in and experiences each of these actions. However, for the purpose of clarity, this framework is expressed from the perspective of one young person.

More information on developmental relationships:www.searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships/