

# The Essential Role of Relationships and Emotional Life

What should matter most in schooling isn't the narrow focus on standardized tests data

BY PETER SMAGORINSKY

Schools have experienced a remarkable rise in teacher turnover rates this century. If I were an administrator today, I'd surely wonder how I could make my school a place where teachers want to teach and students want to learn.

Most schools I know of are devoted to the constant collection of data, typically numeric reductions of complex phenomena. Faith in the veracity of data is a major contributor to teacher turnover. Teachers invariably say they got into education because they care about children, suggesting that they treasure and embrace the relational parts of teaching. Data on standardized test performance don't measure relationships so they never count in measures of school success.

In my view, anything that happens educationally follows from the quality of the relationships between teachers and their students. In order for teachers to cultivate relationships with confidence they are building the foundation for feeling an affiliation for school and for post-school success, they need administrators who share that value and who in turn believe the quality of their relationships with teachers and students

contributes significantly to creating an environment that validates why people come to school to teach and learn.

## A Teacher Perspective

When I consider the importance of relationships in education, I think about a teacher I have followed for nearly a decade. I believe Cathy's perspective illustrates how current school structures that are focused strictly on the collection and analysis of data produces a career that sacrifices relationships, one that prompts many teachers to leave the field.

Eric Hanushek, writing in 1981 in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, contends the "available evidence [in the form of test scores] suggests that there is no relationship between expenditures and the achievement of students and that such traditional remedies as reducing class sizes or hiring better trained teachers are unlikely to improve matters." Lowering class size, he believes, involves "Throwing money at schools" and is a poor investment.

Cathy had an average class size of about 20 students in her first job in a rural school com-



munity. She learned all of her students' names by the second day of school. Getting to know her students promptly helped her teach them effectively because they understood that she cared about them when she immediately knew their names. She was a poor fit in some ways in this politically conservative, parochial, Southern rural community, but she cared about her young students and centered her instructional thinking on how to build on their interests and needs to produce an engaging classroom and curriculum.

She moved back to the mega-district she'd graduated from after three years to be closer to her family as she began planning to have children of her own. She lasted one year. The school proudly aligned itself with national testing measures, referring to its approach as corporate and using the language of economics to boast of its success.

Many of her reasons for leaving her job, and the teaching profession, could be traced to an oppressive student load. She was assigned classes that averaged 35 students, totaling about 175 for a subject (English), in which teachers should ideally assign and grade a lot of writing. Let's say that she took one minute each day to devote to

each student assigned to her classes. That's three additional hours a day, and that's with one minute apiece.

She also felt frustrated by the scripted curriculum that required all teachers of a grade level across the entire district to teach the same thing in the same way on the same day, every day. To a teacher who finds planning to be highly stimulating, exciting, enjoyable and fulfilling, teaching a centrally designed instructional script is immensely frustrating. The implementation of a scripted curriculum takes the engaging, interpersonal, relational aspects of teaching and reduces them to a mechanical operation.

Teachers who are allowed to think for themselves always are playing with ideas, tinkering with lessons and using their intellect to teach more effectively and responsively. They are the kind of teachers whom students remember and are grateful for years later. Teaching scripted lessons requires no judgment, only fidelity to someone else's idea of what to do. But since these scripts are aligned with standardized tests, they



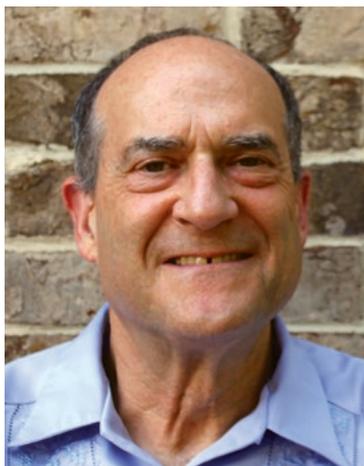
**A middle school teacher in the Hall County Schools in Georgia listens to a student defend her position during a group project.**

are prized administratively, to the detriment of what I consider to be dynamic, thoughtful, responsive teaching in which students feel recognized and cared for.

### **A Welcome Exception**

Cathy got out of teaching to work in the hospital business for a year, then took a teaching job in Hall County, Ga., whose motto is “The Most Caring Place on Earth.” I wrote an essay about her called “What If Schools Focused on Improving Relationships Rather than Test Scores?” Of all of the 100-plus essays I have written for public consumption, this one has been the most widely circulated. I assume it struck a chord with many who are exhausted by the testing frenzy that has gripped K-12 education, with college and career readiness tests now administered to kindergarten students as the gateway to a dozen years of continual, relentless testing.

**Peter Smagorinsky, a professor at the University of Georgia, believes schools that promote staff members’ relationships with students will have the greatest impact.**



Hall County provides a vivid and welcome exception to the testing emphasis. At the school’s fall faculty orientation, Cathy’s superintendent spoke about the importance of human relationships, above all else. Not student test scores. Not real estate values tied to test scores. Rather, he spoke compassionately about how everything educational follows from developing and fostering productive relationships within the school district.

The emphasis on relationships was the central driving force in Cathy’s return to teaching and in her happiness with this new position. The community is home to many chicken-processing plants, and the workforce relies on a large immigrant population along with a native workforce whose families often raise the sorts of children who end up dropping out of school. But here was the superintendent telling teachers and staff at the time of orientation to tune out the noise about standardized test scores and to focus on making the school feel positive to kids, teachers, counselors, principals, and I’m sure the cafeteria staff, grounds crew and custodians as well.

The district recently launched an initiative to focus on students’ mental health needs. According to news coverage in the *Gainesville Times*, step one started with listening to students. “A kid who’s in their seventh house in the last three months and has a step dad who’s beating them and a mother who’s addicted, just doesn’t care much about advanced algebra,” Hall County’s superintendent, Will Schofield, said during a school board meeting last fall. “It’s not that they don’t want to learn advanced algebra, it’s not even on their radar screen.”

Joy Schofield, who is a student services liaison in the school district, believes educators’ attention to children’s social and emotional learning sometimes must take precedence over all else. “There are kids having issues with depression, different types of abuse, anxiety, divorce, sexuality issues, relationship drama — so many issues. It’s just overwhelming to see the sheer number of issues our kids are facing every day and see it all in one place,” she says.

In a school like the one where Cathy now teaches, with a predominant population of students of color whose heritages get little representation in textbooks produced by large corporations, the likelihood of students becoming estranged from their schools is consider-



**Will Schofield (right) serves as superintendent of Hall County Schools in Gainesville, Ga., whose motto is “The Most Caring Place on Earth.”**

able. As part of its mental health initiative, her school asks students what they think, what they have experienced and what they need. In one setting, students were asked to complete the following sentence: “If my teacher really knew me, they would know ... .” Answers included: “... they would know how much potential I have if someone just gave me the chance. I could help guide others in the right direction and also myself, but it’s hard when you lack hope.” Another wrote, “... they’d know that I’ve been verbally abused all my life and treating me unfairly makes me feel like I can’t do anything.”

### Promoting Growth

Relationships follow from genuine interaction, mutual listening, generosity, care, responsiveness to emerging needs and hopes, and constructive thinking in relation to shared challenges. There’s at least one district in Georgia where the superintendent has rejected the premises behind the assumption that standardized tests are valid indicators of school success and has insisted that good teaching begins with forming relationships with kids.

Most teachers probably would continue with their careers in the classroom if their work were oriented to relationships and not performance data. Students, as well, would buy into education much more if alienating barriers to relationship building with teachers and other school staff were removed or reduced.

A focus on relationships can promote the social and emotional development of young people into active, willing contributors to a positive

society. That’s why most teachers enter this field. Yet the reduction of measurement in school to data points works against this value and contributes to the dropout rate of teachers and the disaffection of students.

### Moving Forward

When I first presented on this subject to the Horace Mann League’s annual luncheon in San Diego in late February, the nation was two weeks removed from shutting down because of the sudden, deadly spread of COVID-19. Not long after, I wrote an essay for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in which I related the work in Hall County and wondered aloud whether the shutdown might provide an opportunity for schools to follow their example by seeking input from students and teachers on how they feel about their schools.

Doing so would require a change in school culture. The collection of data would need to inform a greater understanding of how people’s emotional states and mental health makeups affect their affiliation with the institution of school. That sort of data would be meaningful in making school a place that teachers and students care about and want to engage with. If teacher attrition is a concern for school administrators, asking the people who are most affected by policies how they feel about their consequences seems a good way to begin to address the problem. ■

**PETER SMAGORINSKY** is Distinguished Research Professor of language and literacy education at University of Georgia in Athens, Ga. E-mail: [smago@uga.edu](mailto:smago@uga.edu). Twitter: [@psmagorinsky](https://twitter.com/psmagorinsky)