

Opening School with a Focus on Community and Connection

Starting the School Year by Building Trust-Based Relationships with Students

“All faculty members, new and veteran, walked away with concrete strategies, new ideas, and a clearer understanding of what our students need and how we can help them.”
—Brooke Giese, Associate Head of School, Rumsey Hall School, CT

The first days of school set the tone for the whole academic year, so it's important to start strong by focusing on making connections with students and setting up a space where they can get their needs met. The beginning of a new school year is the ideal time to talk as a faculty about setting expectations around the relationship side of teaching—both the benefits and the professional limits. After Shannon Kruger, Principal of Allenstown School District in New Hampshire, brought OTA founder Brooklyn Raney in to speak with her staff at the start of the year, Kruger said, *“The experience helped everyone link the work they had done in previous trainings to the intended next steps for this school year. Everyone left the gymnasium inspired to put their training into action. There is no doubt that staff will be focusing on deeper student connections in all classrooms and through advisory.”*

The research is undeniable: Young people who can name a trusted adult at home and at school are less likely to bully or be bullied, drop out of school, experience depressive or suicidal thoughts, act violently, or abuse substances. And they are more likely to complete tasks they start, remain calm in the face of challenges, volunteer in their communities, and experience overall better physical and emotional wellness.



All of these benefits accrue when we go upstream from the issues and focus on the heart of prevention—relationships. “[Educators have] always known how important the impact of their work is,” noted Jessica Keough, Associate Head of School at Westminster School in Connecticut, “but learning the ways in which it really makes a difference, putting labels on what had been abstract/intangible instincts, and sharing in the commonality of what we do was wonderful.”

But trusted relationships rely on boundaries, and it’s easy for caring educators to blur those boundaries. Today, most educators whose boundaries slip are well-intentioned, but they are working outside their own scope of expertise to try to help young people who are struggling, inadvertently causing harm and burning themselves out in the process. We can leave the counseling to credentialed professionals while still supporting our students—all youth need places and spaces where the adults are focused on possibility rather than problems.

Katie Stack, Director of Advising and Wellness and a history teacher at Gould Academy in Maine, implemented OTA programs for both students and staff, and the school started its academic year with an OTA presentation for faculty. She shared, “OTA training was immediately helpful and the perfect way to kick off the year! We have continued to use pieces of the OTA programming with student leaders, in advisory, and in small faculty groups.”



The beauty of understanding the heart of positive and productive relationships with youth is that we can train and get better at making these connections. All it takes is a commitment from you and your school community. OTA is on a mission to ensure that every young person can name at least one trusted adult. Part of fulfilling that mission is designing programs—from professional development to advisory to student leadership—that teach young people how to advocate for themselves and that expand the capacity of trusted adults to be who their students truly need.