

## Teacher Support: High Expectations and Caring Relationships

A school environment in which all students are nurtured and challenged helps foster greater attachment to school and student learning (Hattie, 2009; Klem & Connel, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Two important aspects of teacher support—high expectations and caring relationships—help students avoid problems such as emotional distress and risky behavior and promote academic achievement and social development (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009). High levels of teacher support are a critical component of school climate targeted for improvement by California's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Program.

In this factsheet, we use California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey System (Cal-SCHLS) data to describe how student well-being differs across California high schools with different levels of teacher support. Consistent with a school climate framework, we examine how a *school's environment* with regard to teacher support is related to the well-being of students. We also examine the extent to which academic performance varies across schools with different levels of teacher support. Before describing how teacher support is related to student well-being and school academic performance, we briefly summarize research describing why high expectations and caring relationships with teachers are important for children's social and academic development.

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1 For a description of school practices aimed at providing students with supportive, caring connections to adults and exposure to high expectations messages, see O'Malley and Amarilla's (2011) California S3 What Works Brief entitled "Caring Relationships and High Expectations," retrievable from: <http://californias3.wested.org/tools/2>

### WHY ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS & CARING RELATIONSHIPS IMPORTANT?

Both high expectations and caring teacher–student relationships are critical factors associated with student success (see O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011). Clear and positive expectations structure and guide behavior and provide the challenge necessary to press students to succeed (Benard, 2004). High expectations represent an orientation toward improvement and growth in the classroom, involving clear communication about behavior and performance, as well as an emphasis on student responsibility and accountability to meet expectations (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). A critical component in conveying high expectations messages is communication of the innate capacity of *all students* to develop and succeed at high levels (Benard, 2004).

Teacher expectations influence students in a number of ways. Students likely internalize the beliefs teachers have about their abilities and potential (Benard, 2004). Additionally, teacher expectations affect students indirectly by influencing teacher behavior (Harris & Rosenthal, 1985). For example, studies have found that teachers provide students who are perceived to be high in ability more opportunities to learn new material and to demonstrate what they learn (Harris & Rosenthal, 1985). Expectations also likely influence students in more subtle ways. Several studies, for example, have found that teachers engage in supportive nonverbal behaviors such as smiling and making eye contact with students more frequently when they believe they are dealing with high-ability students (Weinstein, 2002).

Although high expectations are critical for student success, students appear to benefit most when high expect-

tations are combined with high levels of teacher warmth and support (Bryk et al., 2010; Shouse, 1996). Caring teacher–student relationships help meet students' affiliation needs and are positively linked to student engagement in school, academic performance, and personal well-being (Benard, 2004; Danielsen et al., 2009; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Caring teacher–student relationships are thought to be centrally important in motivating students to perform well in school. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), students are more likely to internalize the values of those to whom they feel a strong sense of attachment. Students' attachment to teachers is fostered when teachers exhibit high levels of warm, supportive behavior. Consequently, students whose teachers demonstrate caring behavior are more likely to internalize the value of succeeding in school (Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010). Warm, caring teacher–student relationships also likely provide a safe space for students to learn and grow.

### SAMPLE & MEASURES

The study sample consists of all 793 public high schools that administered the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) during the 2008/09–2009/10 period in California. In addition to the CHKS, we used data from the 2010 Base Academic Performance Index (API) file released by CDE to obtain school–level academic performance information.

We constructed a school–level measure of teacher support using a six–item scale that assesses two areas: caring relationships with adults in the school and exposure to high expectations messages. The items comprising the scale ask students whether there is a teacher or some other adult who: (a) really cares about me, (b) tells me when I do a good job, (c) notices when I am not there, (d) always wants me to do my best, (e) listens to me when I have something to say, and (f) believes that I will be a success. A statistical model (confirmatory factor analysis) was used to estimate scores for each student. School–level averages of student scores were then calculated for each high school with CHKS data, and the scores of

schools were ranked to determine the distribution of scores across comprehensive high schools in the state.<sup>2</sup>

Student well–being was measured by the following CHKS items:

- » **STUDENT GRADES**—a dichotomous variable indicating that the student reported receiving grades of mostly B's or higher during the 12 months prior to the survey,
- » **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS (HIGH)**—a dichotomous variable signifying that students reported "high" levels (> 3.75) on the 5–item school connectedness scale. The school connectedness scale has a maximum potential range of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and is based on the following items: (a) I feel close to people at this school, (b) I am happy to be at this school, (c) I feel like I am a part of this school, (d) the teachers at this school treat students fairly, and (e) I feel safe in my school.
- » **TRUANCY**—a dichotomous variable indicating that the student reported skipping school or cutting classes one or more times during the 12 months prior to the survey.
- » **LOW SCHOOL SAFETY**—an indicator variable representing that the student reported feeling "unsafe" or "very unsafe" at school.

To assess school–level academic performance, we relied on California's 2010 Base Academic Performance Index (API) scores. The API, the cornerstone of the state's accountability system, is a weighted index based on a school's student subject–specific scores on California standards–based tests and other indicators.

### TEACHER SUPPORT & STUDENT WELL–BEING

Figures 1 and 2 show that students' reports of school grades, school connectedness, truancy, and school safety

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2 The measure of teacher support used is identical to that reported on the School Climate Report Card developed for California's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Program. School Climate Report Cards for S3 schools are available from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/CSRC/searchname.aspx>

vary considerably across schools with different levels of supportive teacher–student relations.

- » **SCHOOL GRADES.** Schools with high scores on the school climate measure of teacher support had larger percentages of students who reported receiving high grades than schools with low scores. Among schools in the lowest quartile of teacher support, 54% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders reported receiving mostly B's or above, compared to 70% of students in the highest quartile in the state. A similar pattern was evident for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- » **SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS.** Supportive teacher–student relations were positively related to school connectedness. One-third of 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> graders in schools in the lowest quartile of teacher support exhibited high levels of school connectedness compared to 57% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 55% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the highest quartile schools.
- » **TRUANCY.** Students in schools with low scores on teacher support had larger percentages of students who reported skipping school. Thirty-nine percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 52% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported skipping school in lowest quartile schools. This compares to 28% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders and 43% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the highest quartile schools.
- » **LOW SCHOOL SAFETY.** School-level teacher support was strongly associated with student perceptions of school safety, particularly for 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Among 9<sup>th</sup> graders, 54% of students in schools in the lowest quartile schools reported feeling unsafe at school. Forty-seven percent of 9<sup>th</sup> graders reported feeling unsafe in the highest quartile schools. Among 11<sup>th</sup> graders, the percentage of students who reported feeling unsafe was 60% and 45% in the lowest and highest quartile schools, respectively.

In sum, California high schools exhibiting high levels of teacher support have more students that report receiving higher grades and being strongly connected to school, and fewer students that report skipping school and feeling unsafe at school.

Figure 1. Ninth grader well-being by supportive teacher–student relations (school quartile)

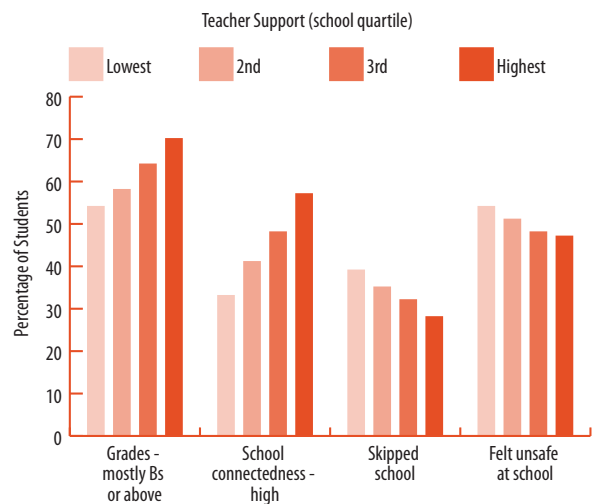
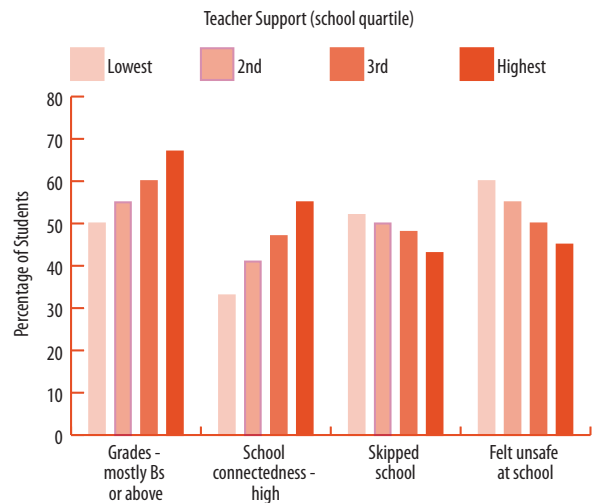


Figure 2. Eleventh grader well-being by supportive teacher–student relations (school quartile)

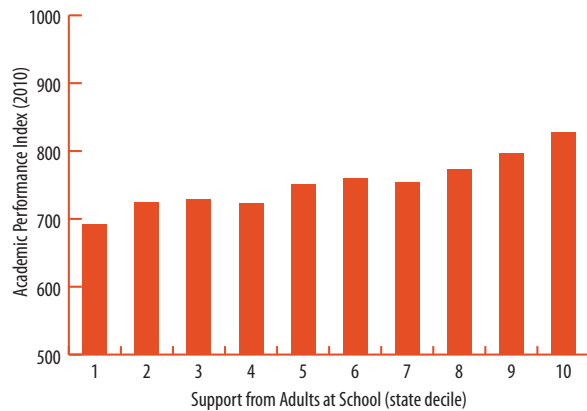


### TEACHER SUPPORT & SCHOOL-LEVEL ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Figure 3 displays how school API scores vary across schools with different levels of teacher support. In general, the higher the level of teacher support, the higher the school API score, although the relationship appears to be non-linear (i.e., the relationship between teacher support and API scores depends on the level of teacher support). High schools in the lowest decile on teacher support exhibit the lowest API scores – averaging 693. High schools in deciles 2–4 average 725 on the API, with

no noticeable differences across the three decile groups. Similarly, API scores rise to an average 756 in deciles 5–7, with only small differences across the three decile groups. Thereafter, average API scores increase in a step-wise fashion for each succeeding decile, rising to 774 in decile 8, 797 in decile 9, and 827 in decile 10.

**Figure 3. Academic Performance Index by supportive teacher–student relations (state decile)**



### SUMMARY

California high schools that provide high levels of teacher support—as indicated by student perceptions of caring relationships with adults in the school and exposure to high expectations messages—have more students who report receiving higher grades and being strongly connected to school, and fewer students who report skipping school and feeling unsafe at school. These California high schools also exhibit substantially higher API scores than other schools. Although the associations of school-level teacher support to student well-being and school API scores are strong and consistent, the analyses are based on non-experimental, correlational data. These results thus should not be used to make inferences with regards to causal mechanisms linking teacher support to student well-being and school-level academic performance. The results do suggest, however, that supportive teacher–student relations are an important component of school climate that is strongly related to student performance, student connectedness to school, and student perceptions of school safety. These results support previous research suggesting that school practices that provide students with supportive, caring connections to school adults who model and support healthy development and

provide clear and consistent high expectations messages hold great promise for improving conditions for student learning.

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