

Check & Connect

What It Is

Check & Connect is a targeted intervention intended to complement universal intervention initiatives of schools and districts (see www.ici.edu/checkandconnect/). Check & Connect addresses students' engagement at school and with learning – the “bottom line” of school completion programs. It is designed to promote student engagement through relationship building, problem solving, and persistence for marginalized students. It consists of four components: (1) a mentor who keeps education salient for students, (2) systematic monitoring (the “check” component), (3) timely and individualized intervention (the “connect” component), and (4) enhancing home-school communication and home support for learning. A mentor works with students and partners with families for a minimum of two years, regularly checking on the educational progress of the student, intervening in a timely manner to re-establish and maintain the student's connection to school and learning and to enhance the student's social and academic competence. Seven core intervention elements guide the actions of mentors (see Table 1).

Theoretical underpinnings for the model include analysis of critical engagement variables, systems theory for home-school-community collaboration, and the literature on resiliency, cognitive-behavioral interventions and motivation to increase the holding power of schools (Sinclair, Hurley, Evelo, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2002). Coleman's (1987) notion of social capital (i.e., referring to the amount of adult-student interaction focused on students' academic and personal matters as well as the support networks available to the family) is crucial to the mentor's role, as are McPartland's (1994) components to increase the holding power of schools (i.e., opportunities for success in schoolwork, relevance of education to future endeavors, power of a caring and supportive environment, and helping students with personal problems). Mentors strive to support students' educational progress in the context of the family and the school and to increase social capital where it does not naturally occur by brokering existing resources. Resiliency research supports these claims. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) suggest that a strong relationship with a caring adult, high expectations and standards, and opportunities for meaningful participation contribute to youth “beating the odds.” Furthermore, these ingredients of supportive communities can be supplied by formal programs, families, neighbors, and significant adults such as educators, coaches, clergy, and youth workers.

Check & Connect addresses the social-emotional and academic needs of individual students and builds capacity within families to assist their children's educational performance. Mentors work to create positive relationships with youth and between family and school, promote regular school participation in academic, social, and emotional learning, and keep school progress a salient issue for students, parents, and teachers. A “no blame” approach to working with youth and families is adopted. Persistence-plus (persistence, continuity, and consistency) is the basis for building relationships with the student and his/her family (see Table 1). At the same time, the mentor aims to increase the student's ABCs – namely autonomy (responsibility, decision

making), belonging, and competence.

How It Works

Student levels of engagement are *checked* regularly and used to guide the mentors' efforts to increase and maintain students' *connection* with school. Systematic checking by the mentor of attendance (absences, tardiness, skips), social/behavior performance (suspensions, behavioral referrals, detentions), and academic performance (course grades, credits earned) keeps interventions focused on the student's educational progress – it helps to identify early warning signs of withdrawal – and necessary supports and opportunities for the student to be engaged.

Two levels of interventions are used to enhance protective factors for students, help students develop habits of successful school engagement, and maximize the use of finite resources in schools. All students receive *basic* interventions (i.e., sharing monitoring data, discussing the relevance of school for students' goals, practicing the five-step problem solving strategy to enhance students' adaptation to schooling demands, and fostering opportunities for participation) because it is not sufficient to simply monitor student performance. Students showing high risk behaviors (i.e., not meeting the predetermined criteria for successful performance) receive *intensive*, individualized interventions (e.g., academic support, coping strategies, goal setting, family-school problem solving supportive meetings). The delivery of intensive interventions is based on indicators of the student's engagement from the check component where risk is determined by a percentage of time or the number of incidents per month. Individual needs of the student and family dictate the specific intervention strategy used.

To persist in the face of challenges, marginalized youth and their families need a sense of optimism and hopefulness for their children's learning (Floyd, 1997). To accomplish this task, mentors build trusting relationships while applying *persistence-plus* concepts: *Persistence* means there is someone who is not going to give up on the students' ability to learn nor allow the students to be distracted from the importance of school and learning how to behave and improve academically. *Continuity* means there is someone who knows the students' educational history, is familiar with the students' family background, and is available throughout the school year, summer, and into the next year. *Consistency* means mentors reinforce the same message– a caring adult believes school and learning are important, and students can succeed, do the work, express frustration constructively, and learn – education is important for the students' future. The centrality of relationships for students' learning is evident in the literature; however, the translation of theory and research into practice has been sparse. Check & Connect is one exception.

Six variables that enhance the effective implementation of Check & Connect are described in Table 2.

Note: Drawn from: Christenson, S.L., & Thurlow, M.L. (March, 2004). Keeping kids in school: Efficacy of Check & Connect for dropout prevention of high-risk students. *Communique*, 32(6), 37-40. For additional information: contact Sandra Christenson at chris002@umn.edu.

Table 1.

Core Elements of the Check & Connect Model of Student Engagement

Elements	Description
Relationship Building	Mutual trust and open communication, nurtured through a long-term commitment that is focused on student’s educational success.
Problem Solving	Cognitive-behavioral approach to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively, encourage the search for solutions rather than a source of blame, and foster productive coping skills.
Individualized, Databased Intervention	Support that is tailored to individual student needs, based on level of engagement with school, associated influences of home and school, and the leveraging of local resources.
Affiliation with School and Learning	Student access to and active participation in school-related activities and events.
Persistence-Plus	A persistent source of academic motivation, a continuity of familiarity with the youth and family, and a consistency in the message that “education is important for your future”.
Focus on Alterable Indicators of Disengagement	Systematic check of warning signs of withdrawal (attendance, academic performance, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and that can be altered through intervention.
Following Students and Families	Following highly mobile youth and families from school to school and program to program.

Table 2.

Considerations for Effective Implementation of Check & Connect

Themes	Description
Partnering with Families	Refers to a family-centered approach, home visiting, and the allocation of bilingual and multilingual staff.
Systematically Targeting Students for Intervention	Refers to systematic identification, monitoring and follow-along, and includes the use of multiple referral criteria derived from alterable indicators of engagement.
Using Data to Guide Intervention and Improvement	Refers to a progress monitoring approach that demands allocation of time and selectivity, and encourages routine use of the student engagement data.
Flexibility to Accommodate Student Needs	Refers to the need to address misconceptions about the term accommodation and to explore alternate routes and alternate time lines to school completion.
Maintaining a Focus on Student’s Educational Progress	Serves to foster common ground, keep outreach focused on amenable factors, and to minimize demographic differences between student and mentor.
Making a Sustained and Long-Term Commitment	Allows for time needed to build relationships, redirect student’s trajectory, provide support through critical transitions, and to manage staff learning curves.

Strategies to Promote Student Engagement

Source: National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Guidelines for the Consideration of Educators

- Programs motivating students allow for close adult-student relationships; knowledgeable, skilled, and caring teachers enhance student engagement.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced in well-structured educational environments with clear, meaningful purposes; with a challenging curriculum, high expectations, and academic press; and with a challenging but individualized curriculum that is focused on understanding, particularly for disengaged students.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have multiple pathways to competence. Engagement increases in environments where students have some autonomy selecting tasks and methods and play an active role in learning.
- Motivation and engagement is enhanced in a school community that engenders a sense of support and belonging, with ample opportunities to interact with academically engaged peers.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced where students develop education and career pathways. There are opportunities to learn the values of schoolwork for future educational and career prospects.
- Motivation and engagement is enhanced when there are strong ties linking the school with students' families and community professionals.
- Motivation and engagement are enhanced when the organizational structure and services address students' nonacademic needs.

Source: Christenson, S.L., Reschly, A.L., Appleton, J.J., Berman, S., Spangers, D., & Varro, P. (2008). Best practices in fostering student engagement. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 1099 – 1120). Washington, DC: National Association of School Psychologists.

Engagement Type

Description

Academic

Universal

Ensure the instructional match is appropriate for the students and clear directions of what is expected are provided

Use mastery learning principles to guide instructional planning and delivery

Use principles of effective instruction (e.g., direct instruction, scaffolding, guided practice; informed feedback; pacing of lessons)

Ensure that there is both academic press (high expectations, well structures learning environment) and support for learning (caring environment)

Maximize instructional relevance (e.g., clearly stated purpose, graph progress toward goals)

Attend to the effect of the organization/structure of the school on learning (e.g., smaller learning communities, Academies)

Allow students to have choices within course selection and assignments (Skinner et al., 2005).

Increase time on task and substantive interaction through cooperative learning, whole class or group instruction (Greenwood et al., 2002) and peer assisted learning strategies (Boudah, Schumacher, & Deshler, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993)

Provide home support for learning strategies to fit content area

Enhance critical thinking through project work and ungraded writing assignments

Use supplemental program within school, i.e., Academic Coaching Team (Hansen, Cumming, & Christenson, 2006)

Increase opportunities for success in schoolwork

Encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom (Lee & Smith, 1993)

Enhance teacher-student relationships and/or teacher-student support (Hughes & Kwok, 2006)

Reinforce students frequently and base it on the amount of work completed (Skinner et al., 2005).

Utilize a variety of interesting texts and resources (Asselin, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000)

Incorporate projects that take place in the community (Lewis, 2004)

Individualized

Utilize after school programs (tutoring, homework help)

Increase home support for learning – such as home-school notes, assignment notebooks, and academic enrichment activities

Implement self-monitoring interventions

Ensure adequacy of educational resources in the home

Help parents to understand and set expectations (Klem & Connell, 2004)

Foster positive teacher-student relationship for marginalized student

Utilize Behavior Education Programs: Have students check in with the teacher each hour to ensure they have pens, notebooks, etc. Check in with teacher each hour, check-out at the end of the school day (Hawken & Horner, 2003).

Seek out and utilize college outreach programs and tutors for students (Rodriquez et al., 2004)

Behavioral

Universal

Examine suspension policies; strive to eliminate out-of-school suspension

Examine discipline policies; ensure they are considered fair, nonpunitive and understood by students. E reliance on negative consequences as a means of managing student behavior.

Encourage social interactions and planning for the future through smaller learning communities that target vocational interests (e.g., Academies)

Offer developmentally appropriate social skills training to all students as part of the curriculum

Implement school-wide positive behavioral support systems that include positive reinforcement and group contingencies

Use coordinated, collaborative home-school interventions to address

attendance

Involve students in hands-on-learning that is directly related to future career paths or interests

Create an orderly routine environment that promotes consistency

Offer professional development on classroom management strategies

Gather student input about classroom rules, school climate and evaluation of coursework/assignments; use feedback to make appropriate changes

Encourage participation in and provide extracurricular activities; actively seek to involve uninvolved students

Consider ways of having multi-level sports teams

Ensure that the school climate, school culture is respectful to all students

Systematically monitor student population on key variables (attendance, academics, behavior) for signs of disengagement from school and follow up with students showing signs of withdrawal.

Individualized

Provide additional, supplemental supports for students not responding to positive behavioral support systems implemented school-wide

Devise an individualized approach to addressing attendance or participation issues at school; strive to understand student perspective and unique family circumstances

Implement programs that work to build specific skills such as problem solving, anger management or interpersonal communication

Provide an adult mentor who works with students and families on a long term basis to foster engagement in school and deliver the message that school is important (i.e., Check & Connect)

Develop specific behavior plans or contracts to address individual needs

Provide intensive wrap-around services

Provide alternative programs for students who have not completed

school

Encourage parents to monitor and supervise student behavior

Implement student advisory programs that monitor academic and social development of secondary students (middle or high)

Implement school-to-work programs that foster success in school and relevant educational opportunities

Cognitive

Universal

Guide students in setting personal goals in courses and monitoring their progress

Provide student with choices when completing assignments

Enhance or explicitly identify relevance of schoolwork to future goals (see six year plan for St. Paul Public schools ninth graders at <http://studentresources.spps.org>.)

Focus on necessary steps to reach/pursue personal goals and career aspirations

Set learning/mastery goals over performance goals – ensure mastery goals permeate the philosophy of the classroom/school culture

Provide students with challenging and motivating assignments that relate to life outside of school

Model learning strategies when teaching specific concepts

Provide feedback that emphasizes self control and the link between effort/practice and improvement

Provide professional development training to teachers (e.g., goal setting and self-regulation combined with informed feedback that focuses on improvement and enhancing intrinsic motivation)

Encourage students who are “on the cusp” to put forth effort to earn credits by calculating a graduation achievement rate (e.g., number of credits earned divided by number of credits possible, compared with % needed to graduate) (Hansen et al., 2006)

Encourage parents to deliver messages related to motivational support for learning (high expectations, talk to students about school and schoolwork)

Individualized

Enhance student's personal belief in self through repeated contacts, goal setting, problem solving and relationship (e.g., Check & Connect)

Implement self monitoring interventions (e.g., graph progress toward goals)

Explicitly teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies (e.g., mnemonic strategies) and teach effective notetaking and study skills

Discuss the link between student's effort and the outcome/behavior/success achieved to increase the student's perceived self control, self-efficacy, and self-determination

Design tasks that have the characteristics of open tasks (e.g., student interests, autonomy, collaboration with peers) (Turner, 1995).

Affective

Universal

Systematically build relationships/connections for all students - Educators identify students who may not have a connection with a staff member (i.e., list all students names at grade levels and determine who knows the student) and match staff members and alienated students for future regular "mentor like" contact

Address size through implementation of smaller learning communities

Enhance peer connections through peer assisted learning strategies

Implement a mentoring program (use of college age students)

Increase participation in extracurricular activities

Combine social support for students (from teachers, peers, parents, and community) with high levels of academic press (i.e., teacher belief that they are challenging students and student perception that they are being challenged (Lee & Smith, 1999).

Create a caring and supportive environment (ethos) (Baker, 2001)

Intervene early, persistently, and across the contexts of school peers, school adults, and the home and community to change student developmental trajectories.

When evaluating results, be sure to check for delayed outcomes associated with early interventions

Individualized

Build personal relationship with marginalized students – enhance relationship with one caring adult

Personalize education (e.g., alter assignments to match personal interests and goals)

Assist students with personal problems

Provide extra support for students in a timely fashion

To improve generalization, intervene across peer, family, and community contexts when possible

Check & Connect at a Universal Level

A school-wide application of Check & Connect could involve:

- *Systematic monitoring of student performance in broad areas of attendance, academic achievement, and behavior.* This is the “check” piece. School personnel set specific criteria for the selected indicators of engagement and/or goals for individual students. Consider the following:
 - The demands of checking must be deconstructed. For example, a home room advisor could check on 4-5 students per week, reaching the assigned 20-25 students per month.
 - Use of a simple monitoring sheet expedites the task, and links student performance to student and parental feedback.

- Some students (those in the tip of the triangle – 20%) may need more frequent checking. All students (even those doing extremely well) can be checked, as this serves as an avenue to make feedback very specific to level of student performance.
- *Maintain a focus on basic intervention.* Basic interventions use minimal resources in an effort to keep education a salient issue, particularly after a working relationship has been established between the mentor, student, parents, and school staff. The basic interventions are comprised of four strategies: (1) sharing general information about the mentor's/advisor's role and the Check & Connect model; (2) formally providing students feedback about their overall progress in school; (3) regularly discussing the importance of participating/staying in school, relevance of school for future endeavors, and the value of learning; and (4) problem-solving with students about indicators of risk for disengaging from school and learning and/or embellishing student knowledge about opportunities for involvement, etc. At the beginning of the program, general information about the mentor's role is shared with the student and his or her family on a repeated basis, each time with a bit more detail.
- *Maintain contact with parents.* Establish a communication system using e-mail, phone, or home visits. Regular systematic contact to parents could mean once per quarter for universal students, but once per month for higher risk students (perhaps the Check & Connect mentors working at the selected or indicated level communicate on behalf of the teachers).
- *Consider crafting a mentor message about what is important.* See persistence-plus messages on website. Also, what do students hear about the relevance of schoolwork for their future goals? What is the school wide message?
- *Establish a referral system to* counselors, social workers, school psychologists and others serving as Check & Connect mentors for the selected and indicated students.

Check & Connect has met the evidence-based standards of the Department of Education's *What Works Clearinghouse* ([WWC], 2006; <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>).

This handout was prepared for a presentation on January 29, 2009 at the Minnesota School Psychologists Association. Contact Dr. Sandra Christenson at chris002@umn.edu for more information.