

Education Innovation and Research Program (EIR) Project Abstract

Applicant Name: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University

Project Title: Improving School Connectedness in Middle and High Schools

Type of Grant Requested: (select one) Early-Phase Mid-Phase Expansion

Absolute Priorities the Project Addresses: (select all that apply)

- Absolute Priority 1-- Demonstrate a Rationale (Early), Moderate (Mid), Strong (Expansion)
- Absolute Priority 4-- Meeting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs

Competitive Preference Priorities the Project Addresses: (select all that apply)

- Competitive Preference Priority 2— Addressing the Impact of COVID–19 on Students, Educators, and Faculty

Total number of students to be served by the project: 6400

Grade level(s) to be served by the project: 6th – 12th grade

Definition of high-need students: Chronically absent, disconnected youth; historically underserved students, i.e. those in high-poverty communities and racially/ethnically diverse students.

Brief description of project activities: CSOS will develop a school connectedness intervention package that includes research-informed school-level and classroom-level practices, professional development tools, and associated measures. CSOS and partners will recruit 3-4 pilot schools, 6-10 field-test schools, and 60 RCT schools to co-design, pilot, refine and test interventions, measures, and professional development materials for four school connectedness components (adult-student relationships; peer-to-peer relationships, student engagement in prosocial activities, school climate that fosters student belonging).

Summary of project objectives and expected outcomes: Activities are aligned with four key objectives: (1) Design and pilot interventions, measurements and PD to ensure they work for intended audiences. (2) Conduct a field test to iterate and improve intervention impact for multiple school environments. (3) Conduct an RCT impact study of school connectedness interventions, measures, and PD. (4) Prepare final versions of strategies, actions and measures for each component of school connectedness for wider dissemination.

Summary of how the project is innovative: The Improving School Connectedness study operationalizes school connectedness. While a body of research conceptually examines school connectedness and illuminates its impact on student attendance, achievement, and well-being, there has been little research and development work focused on equipping schools with a set of specific and measurable strategies and actions that educators can use to increase students' school connectedness. This early phase project will design, test and implement a set of validated interventions, measures, and professional development packages to increase school connectedness by strengthening adult to student relationships, improving peer-to-peer relationships, increasing students' engagement in meaningful and pro-social activities, and improving the overall school climate to foster student

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belonging for schools facing high rates of student disengagement and chronic absenteeism, regardless of their context (urban, suburban, rural).

Other studies related to the proposed project: Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness (2003), a conceptual model, provides early evidence to indicate that improvements in students' school connectedness can lead to gains in academic achievement, school completion rates, and declines in fighting, bullying, or vandalism. In 2009, CDC's School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009) describe school connectedness and, most notably, breaks down the concept of school connectedness into more actionable components. More recent research further validates and extends the Wingspread conceptual model, demonstrating that school connectedness is also related to improved mental health (Hertz, et al., 2021; Malika, et al., 2021; Raniti et al., 2022) especially for students who are chronically absent; disconnected youth; students in high poverty communities; and racially and ethnically diverse students (██████ et al., 2024; Na'ilah Suad Nasir, Jones & Milbrey, 2011; Sosu et al., 2021).

Proposed implementation sites: Urban, rural and suburban schools across Indiana state

Organizations partnering with this project: University of Indianapolis Center of Excellence in Leadership and Learning (CELL) and National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC)