

# REHUMANIZING EDUCATION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

Continuous Improvement Practices For School Staff And Leadership

This brief is intended to promote supportive and equitable learning environments for children and youth

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**This brief addresses how educational psychology can promote rehumanization through equitable, relationship-focused practices and policies in a continuous improvement framework.**

In the U.S. education system, experiences of dehumanization—from disproportionate discipline practices to deficit-based, color-evasive pedagogy<sup>1</sup>—are all too common, especially for marginalized students.<sup>2</sup>

- **Rehumanization** is the restoration of human dignity to those denied it.
- Schools can rehumanize education by **supporting positive relationships** among students and staff (i.e., all adults within the school) and promoting **equitable systems**.
- We offer a continuous improvement framework—the **Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle**—with evidence-based practices to strengthen relationships and systems.

## DEHUMANIZATION IN EDUCATION

Dehumanization is the denial of characteristics that make us human, such as intelligence, emotion, and individuality.<sup>3</sup> Dehumanization in education—through experiences such as disproportionate discipline and deficit-based, color-evasive pedagogy—erodes institutional trust, increases disengagement, reduces academic achievement, and strains relationships.<sup>4</sup> According to Self-Determination Theory, dehumanization may reduce feelings of relatedness, competence, and autonomy, undermining not just motivation and performance, but social development, mental health, and well-being.<sup>5</sup>

The root of the problem is a system driven by meritocratic ideology, implicit bias, and incentives that prioritize cost-efficiency and expediency over humanity.<sup>6</sup>

## PROMOTING REHUMANIZATION

*Rehumanization* is the restoration of human dignity to those denied it.<sup>7</sup> School staff and leaders across the U.S. are rehumanizing education by strengthening relationships and reimagining systems.

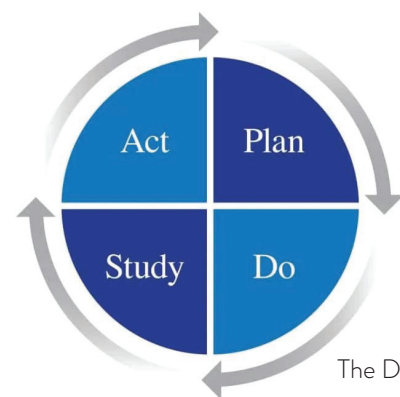
For example, in Illinois, Forest Park Middle School staff and students are collaborating to build relationships among their students, teachers, and administrators to co-create an equitable school climate and culture. They conduct empathy interviews and collect survey data about teacher caring, student belonging, and cultural identity affirmation. Additionally, they have a circle team, which includes district and school leaders, teachers, and students. This team reviews data, anchors it in student experience, and makes collective decisions to improve practices and policies. Through this collaboration, they are building trusting relationships, transforming school culture, and addressing disparities.

## A RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED FRAMEWORK FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

This brief provides research-based practices that help build supportive relationships and change the policies that get in the way. Links to practitioner-friendly resources are provided to help put this work into action. We draw on a framework for continuous improvement: Plan-Do-Study-Act.<sup>8</sup>

By adapting this process to your unique context, you can identify, implement, study, and sustain small shifts that can make your school a place that honors everyone's humanity.

## THE PLAN-DO-STUDY-ACT CYCLE



The Deming Institute

## RESOURCE LIST

- [A Primer for Continuous Improvement in Schools and Districts](#)
- [The 5 Whys for Inquiry](#)
- [Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments](#)
- [Family Engagement Guide](#)
- [The Toolkit Before the Toolkit: Centering Adaptive and Relational Elements of Restorative Practices for Implementation Success](#)
- [Trauma-Responsive MTSS Toolkit](#)

## STEP 1: PLAN

Build a diverse project team that includes district and school leadership, staff, families, and students with the shared goal of building rehumanizing relationships and systems. Include the voices of those who are most often dehumanized.

Develop a plan that includes specific goals for strengthening relationships and systems.

Gather data such as attendance and discipline, as well as interviews and surveys. This data, alongside a root cause analysis like [5 Whys](#), will allow your team to identify issues and strengths, select priorities, and plan interventions.

## STEP 2: DO

To implement your plan, you can draw on a wealth of evidence-based resources. For example:

### **If students feel disconnected from their peers,**

- increase [social belonging](#) through brief, low-cost school-wide interventions to affirm students' capacity for connection;<sup>9</sup> and
- facilitate student relationships through programming such as [The Connection Project](#).<sup>10</sup>

### **If families are disconnected from the school community,**

- enhance staff–family relationships through improved communication pathways, including [home visits](#)<sup>11</sup> and family liaisons, as well as
- use [family engagement guides](#) to identify and overcome barriers to participation.

### **If students feel disconnected from school staff,**

- conduct [relationship mapping](#) to ensure every student has a connection to a trusted adult in school; use this information to
- strengthen staff–student relationships by providing staff with interest surveys<sup>12</sup> and [learner profiles](#);<sup>13</sup> and
- create opportunities for staff to spend more one-on-one time with students.<sup>14</sup>

### **If discipline policies are damaging trust and relationships,**

- implement equity-focused discipline practices, including [restorative practices](#);<sup>15</sup> and
- support staff to use [empathic discipline](#).<sup>16</sup>

Other best practices include:

- [culturally responsive pedagogy](#), such as inclusive environments that value diverse identities and cultures;<sup>17</sup>
- [professional development](#) that supports development of critical practices and reduces bias; and
- [trauma-responsive supports](#) to offer all students what they need to be successful and well.<sup>18</sup>

## STEP 3: STUDY

Collect data to evaluate the fidelity of implementation (e.g., are these practices enacted throughout the school?) and outcomes (e.g., are we seeing improvement in the relationships and systems we targeted?).

This will allow your team to answer key questions to guide your next steps:

- What is working?
- What is not working?
- What can we change to achieve our goals?

## STEP 4: ACT

Based on what was learned from the previous steps, your team can lead ongoing improvement efforts. This step is reflective, grounded in experience, and solutions-oriented. It can be used to:

- change priorities;
- make small adjustments; or
- expand implementation.

If priorities have shifted, your team can return to Step 1 and begin again. If adjustments or expansion are the next step, continue looping between Steps 3 and 4—collecting data and continuing to improve.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS** Maya Angelou wrote: “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

By committing to this continuous improvement process, your school community is choosing to know better and do better. This work takes time, creativity, and persistence—but has the potential to transform learning environments into the equitable, safe, and supportive spaces our students deserve. By focusing on relationships and the systems that support them, we are honoring the humanity of our students, ourselves, and our community.

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