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Throughout our community, teachers are putting their finishing touches on classrooms this weekend, and EVERYONE has August 10th (the first day of school) on their minds. So as we get ready to start this school year, I'd like to take a minute to talk about connections and relationships and why they are so important.

There's been a plethora of research about the value of extra-curricular activities and how sports and clubs help students socially, academically and emotionally. As the father of three girls who attended Bay District Schools, I can personally attest to the impact extra-curricular activities had on my girls. From band to student government to sports and a variety of clubs, my girls ALWAYS had something to feel connected to at school, and they were always busy and engaged in helping others and learning new skills outside the classroom. To be candid, though, those groups and teams helped my girls far more than they ever were able to help someone else.

**All students need to belong to something.**

Ponder that powerful phrase for a moment and think about their options. Students can belong to a positive peer group, a team, a club, a youth group, a performing group like choir or band or they can belong to negative peer groups. All students WILL belong to a group because it's human nature to seek out relationships and form bonds.

In elementary school, the group is formed quite naturally since most elementary students spend the entirety of their school days in the same class and with the same students. As a result, you often see t-shirts proclaiming membership (Mrs. Smith's Superstars etc.) and students generally feel connected to their classmates.

However, that connection fades in middle school and beyond as students juggle six or more different teachers and sets of students. In these environments, children need a club or a team to give them a smaller group of students they can relate to and learn from and with.

**And that's why I am imploring ALL parents to ensure their students are connected with some sort of group by the time they reach sixth grade.**

I know that school is hard for many of our students, and I know that ONE powerful and positive relationship can be a game changer. For example, we have high school students who come to school because they LOVE their construction academy classes, feel connected to their choir group, or know their attendance and participation matter to their athletic team. Some students ensure they never miss school on a Chess Club day or when ROTC is dressing out and working on drills. I know some kids come to bake in culinary class, and there are large groups of students who wouldn't think of being absent on the day of a community service project.

Students often find and make these connections independently, but many need our help and encouragement to get started, figure out HOW to join or try out, etc.

So, parents/guardians/teachers/youth pastors/community leaders and others .... please take a few minutes this week to talk with the young people in your lives about what they're going to connect with this year and then help them get connected.

I firmly believe that an increase in youth participation in extracurricular/cocurricular activities will correlate to a decrease in truancy, a reduction in troubling behavior and an increase in

graduation rates. But, most importantly, I believe these connections will boost self-confidence of all involved.

What more could we ask for at the beginning of a new school year? I believe we can achieve these lofty goals when we work together and help our students connect in all the right and positive ways.

Please help us help our students by having this meaningful conversation with them and sharing your experiences. So many of our students may be just one gentle push in the right direction away from changing their lives for the better.

Thank you, and God Bless!