



Tackling Student Connectedness and Attendance Issues

As teachers, we often talk about being lifelong learners, but that commitment sometimes requires us to face information that is uncomfortable. Looking closely at data—especially data that shows our students struggling—can be discouraging. Yet those moments can also spark the most meaningful ideas for change.

As a teacher of the Capstone class at RFK, I'm fortunate to be able to step outside my classroom and participate in activities across our school community. One of those opportunities is the Student Design Team. This year, our team—led by our partner, Michelle Starnes from Johns Hopkins University and Cindy O'Niell—has been taking a deep dive into our attendance data to better understand the root causes behind increasing attendance challenges. When we looked closely at the numbers and talked honestly with students, one major “ah-ha” moment emerged: many students simply feel disconnected from school. They spoke

about not always feeling connected to friends, teachers, or even the curriculum. Members of the design team shared that they often notice students sitting alone, looking sad, and seeming out of touch with what's happening around them.

Rather than stopping with the problem, the students began brainstorming solutions. Ideas ranged from attendance incentives to schoolwide events like a fun field day. As I listened, I kept thinking that the process itself—students identifying a problem and designing solutions—would make a powerful Capstone project. It was a reminder that some of the best ideas in education come directly from students themselves.

Eventually, the design team focused on something simple but powerful: small acts of kindness that could help students feel seen and connected in the moment. They talked about how a smile, a kind word, or a small gesture can shift someone's mood and help them feel like they belong. The group decided to create pins with positive messages that could be given to students to place on their backpacks—a small symbol of encouragement and connection. One of my Capstone students, Destiny Vigil, created a slideshow to share the project with students working on similar initiatives across the country. [Project Connection RFK](#)

This year, we had a trial run of the project where we gave out roughly 50 pins and positive messages to students and staff. Next year, this will become the basis of one of our capstone projects, and we will begin earlier in the year with new students on campus. We will also come up with a way to track the effectiveness of such efforts and collect data from our staff and students around the project.

Experiences like this remind me that teachers cannot work in isolation if we want to truly support our students. Being present in spaces where students are talking, questioning, and creating allows us to learn alongside them. If I had not taken the time to sit in on that meeting with students, Cindy, and Michelle, I might never have recognized the opportunity to support Destiny and the rest of the team as they brought their idea to life. I would not have known where my supplies, time, or encouragement could make a difference.

Teaching is full of moments like this. When we remain curious, when we examine the data—even when it's discouraging—and when we truly listen to our students, we open the door to meaningful change. Teachable moments are everywhere, but sometimes we have to step outside our classrooms to find them.