



District
Management
Group

FEATURE

The Securely Attached Superintendent

The Leader Your Staff and Students Need

by Megan Marcus and Kelley Munger

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.32, Winter 2023

Because education is relationship work, the attachment style of district and school leaders is critical to leadership effectiveness.

The Securely Attached Superintendent

The Leader Your Staff and Students Need

Megan Marcus and Kelley Munger

As a social species, we humans become who we are as individuals through our connections with one another. We each have myriad connections through our families, communities, schools, teams, cohorts, and so on. Yet, nowhere is our social nature more evident than in the world of education. Education is relationship work. Teachers do best when they know an empathetic leader is available to hear and respond to their needs; likewise, students are more likely to reach their full potential when a secure educator creates a safe, nurturing, and challenging classroom environment. Especially after times of intense stress and even trauma, having secure relationships with one another is what makes us feel safe. This feeling is ultimately why relationships matter in education: secure attachment is the optimal condition for all learning and human development.

But what is being “secure” even about? The term originates from the scientific literature on attachment theory, which is the most widely studied and validated field of research on human relationships. Attachment theory examines our earliest relationships; from eye contact to touch to vocalization, an infant gives off an almost continuous flow of data for a parent or caregiver to respond to. The *pattern* that emerges from these constant interactions form what is called “attachment.” Researchers have classified these attachment patterns broadly into two categories: secure and insecure.

While the term “attachment” describes the early relationship pattern seen in a caregiver-child duo—whether secure or insecure—it also is used to describe the predictable



ways of relating in adulthood (also called your attachment style) that are established as a result of these early relationship experiences. Children who have secure attachments in childhood are more likely to become secure adults, and children who have insecure attachments in childhood are more likely to become insecure adults.

We all have a history of relationships, and we all have our own attachment styles—all of which shape our thoughts, feelings, and behavior in relationships with others. Because education is relationship work, the attachment style of district and school leaders is critical to leadership effectiveness. A leader’s awareness of their own attachment style and their willingness to work toward a secure attachment style can enhance the leader’s ability to grow the potential of others, and to more seamlessly build secure team cultures.

“

Because education is relationship work, the attachment style of district and school leaders is critical to leadership effectiveness.

What Does Secure Attachment Look Like?

Ideally, a caregiver intuitively responds to an infant's or child's cues to meet their needs, and as a result, the child experiences warmth, safety, closeness, and ultimately, survival. In turn, the child seeks proximity to the adult when needs arise, and what is known as a *secure* attachment emerges as a powerful protector during a developmentally vulnerable period. Parents build secure attachments by being able to regulate themselves and approach their children with a mostly calm and non-anxious presence. The message conveyed is, “I've got you! I'm up for the job of taking care of you!” When a child can trust a caregiver to predictably and consistently provide safety, soothing, and responsiveness to their needs—whether that be a clean diaper, a snack when hungry, or a hug when they cry—a secure attachment results. Not having to spend time worrying about whether their needs will be met (they have a trusted adult for that!), babies can invest more of their resources into learning, playing, and growing.

Moving into adulthood, securely attached adults are able to balance their own needs with the needs of others. They are able to show up for others—listening deeply, being attuned to others, responding proactively—but they also let others show up for them. They are self-assured, confident, yet open: able to set boundaries and pursue their own desires and dreams, while being flexible and collaborative enough to adjust when in conflict with others' needs. Sounds a lot like good leadership, doesn't it? In schools and districts, secure leaders have more capacity to build thriving cultures and retain educators. Secure teachers have more capacity to build thriving classrooms and secure relationships with students, who in turn can attend to social and academic growth and exploration. And there's a bonus: having a secure attachment style is also associated with lifelong wellbeing, health, and satisfaction.



What Is Insecure Attachment?

An infant or child whose cues either are not met or are inconsistently met can develop different types of insecure attachment. Within the category of insecure attachment, there are three variations of insecure attachment styles: avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and disorganized attachment. Here, for brevity's sake, we share two examples:

Avoidant Attachment Style: If parents of an infant minimize or dismiss their children's needs, the child learns not to protest, cry, or display fear, and develops an avoidant attachment style. In the laboratory, infants with an avoidant attachment style appear “cool as a cucumber,” but when vital signs are measured, their elevated heart rate and rapid breathing tell a different story. Essentially, by minimizing external displays of stress or need, the avoidant infant protects themselves from parental rejection. The downside of this survival strategy is that the infant is “swirling” on the inside—left to deal with hard situations alone.

As adults, those with an avoidantly attached style tend to minimize distress by downplaying their needs or emotions (“it really wasn't that bad”) and avoiding closeness in relationships (“I'm just a loner”). Intimacy can be activating (as opposed to soothing), and so avoidant adults may come across as independent and self-protective. While making themselves emotionally inaccessible to others *feels* like a safer choice for an avoidant adult, it unintentionally creates a prolonged experience of unacknowledged loneliness for them. In the educational setting, the district or school leader with an avoidant attachment style is often viewed as “rock solid” and highly competent, but may not feel appreciated or valued, and may slowly begin to feel resentful of the burden of carrying so much alone.

Anxious Attachment Style: Caregivers of children who develop an anxious attachment style generally respond to their children in one of three ways: they respond only to the child's loudest displays of need; they respond inconsistently; and/or they are simply unable to meet needs (as in the case of a child's illness or pain). In this context, amplifying displays of distress or need—crying, or angry protest—becomes the best way for the infant to keep the caregiver nearby and available. An infant with anxious attachment may become frequently dysregulated and seem difficult to calm down, and may later have painful memories of being described as “difficult” or “dramatic.” Instead of developing an internal compass, these children depend primarily on relationships with others as their source of identity and security.

Adults with an anxious attachment style have an almost continuous need for assurance and closeness in order to feel safe in relationships and themselves. Relationships are all about togetherness; separateness may be viewed as a source of threat. Approval-seeking and people-pleasing behaviors become strategies for ensuring that relationships go on. Intense, unstable, or needy relationships often feel familiar and even comfortable to adults with an anxious attachment style, and it may be hard to have their emotional needs met or emotions soothed—no matter how hard another person may try. With an overt focus on others (at the expense of themselves), individuals with an anxious attachment style miss the opportunity to advocate for their own needs, desires, dreams, and identity, and as a result, may find themselves

DO YOU RECOGNIZE YOURSELF OR YOUR STAFF IN THESE EXAMPLES?

Meet Mr. Adams

Mr. Adams characterizes himself as a “servant leader.” He sees his role in the district as primarily keeping a very complicated, well-oiled machine from breaking down. He takes pride in improving systems and solving problems but tends to avoid situations that involve emotionally distraught staff. He is extremely action-oriented, and views pointless complaining as a waste of time. Mr. Adams has learned that in leadership you need a thick skin. Sometimes when he puts himself out there to ask something of one of his colleagues and doesn't get a response or acknowledgment, it produces a visceral negative reaction in him. He always comes through for others but doesn't really feel like he can count on other people. He reacts to these feelings by focusing more on “administrivia” and less on the people around him, spending more time in his office, showing up a few minutes late to meetings, and avoiding unnecessary interactions.

Mr. Adams has an Avoidant Attachment Style. He gets a lot done and he gets results, but his staff view him as distant and aloof, and he's lost some high-quality leaders as a result. As an infant, he was often left alone to fend for himself, and therefore, unknowingly, he carries the weight of “not being too much” for others, which keeps him from sharing the load, even when he is overwhelmed.



Meet Dr. Perez

Dr. Perez is two years on the job as superintendent. She is an enthusiastic go-getter who wants her teachers and students to have the very best experience possible. Dr. Perez is beloved by her staff and has excellent people skills. Dr. Perez works tirelessly to listen to as many stakeholders as possible, often crafting complex solutions to meet the needs of many, but she struggles to “listen to her gut” when making tough decisions. She feels extremely overwhelmed and, deep down, pretty angry when people get upset about her decisions. She tries to keep everyone happy, and works tirelessly, but sometimes she can't hide how frustrated and anxious she feels. It's hard for her to leave work at the office or to leave work at all, if there are others who need her. She sometimes wonders how long she'll be able to keep up this pace and feels guilty about all that she's neglected in order to get the job done.

Dr. Perez has an Anxious Attachment Style. She is an effective leader in many ways, but her people-pleasing tendencies make sustainability challenging. She has been focused on the needs of others for as long as she can remember, and this quality has even helped her succeed in some ways; on the other hand, she's tired, and this way of relating to others is exhausting, jeopardizing her ability to stay in the field she loves so deeply.



feeling angry or victimized. In the educational setting, the district or school leader with an anxious attachment style is at high risk of developing burnout symptoms, including emotional and physical exhaustion and decreased empathy.

Becoming a Secure Leader: Earned Secure Attachment

A secure leader is more likely to build secure relationships that build emotional safety and thereby enhance neuroplasticity, learning, and performance, while an insecure leader is more likely to build insecure relationships that do just the opposite. Why is that?

“Many district and school leaders, upon learning about attachment, immediately want to “fix” the teachers. But secure attachment is built through the experience of secure attachment—and leaders are in a prime position to provide it.

Our bodies keep a record of experiences in our lives where safety was lost, so any unprocessed trauma can be triggered in the classroom, district office, or boardroom regardless of whether it happened 20 years or 20 days ago.¹ In fact, the more disproportionate our emotional reactions are to any given situation, the more it may be a clue that they may not belong to the situation at hand but rather to baggage from our earliest (insecure) relationships that has not been “unpacked.” And though these reactions can be driven by protective instincts, they can also exhaust educational leaders emotionally and damage relationships in equal measure. Call it a job hazard for educators, whose careers are built on emotional regulation and whose effectiveness is grounded in their ability to build healthy relationships.

If we are to build secure attachment in others, it seems we must first be securely attached ourselves. This begs the question, “Can attachment styles change?” The resounding (and very hopeful, exciting) answer is: yes. Even though we may have had insecure or even traumatic

experiences in childhood, it is possible to change or “earn” our own secure attachment style. “Earned secure attachment” is the classification for adults who experienced insecure caregiving in childhood *but* have developed secure attachment styles as adults.

In the lab, adults with an earned secure attachment style are able to tell the story of *not* feeling safe, loved, and/or accepted in early attachment relationships. Their ability to tell a coherent, balanced, and reflective version of an insecure childhood story is both a powerful indicator and an agent of healing. Research indicates that earned secure adults are more likely to have made sense of their attachment story by attending therapy, doing reflective

work, and/or experiencing subsequent secure relationships, such as with a partner or best friend. Because security can be developed across the lifespan, all leaders in education have the capacity to develop more security, and in turn, to develop others in this way.

Practically speaking, the following action points are a pathway for earning secure attachment—district wide.

- **Start with you.** Many district and school leaders, upon learning about attachment, immediately want to “fix” the teachers. But secure attachment is built through the *experience* of secure attachment—and leaders are in a prime position to provide it for staff, thereby creating a ripple effect of secure attachments throughout the district. But this can only happen if you focus on yourself first. Experiencing subsequent secure relationships (perhaps with a friend, romantic partner, colleague, or therapist) in which you can explore your story and practice the skills of secure attachment can help you rewire early attachment patterns, and thus become a secure leader for your district.
- **Unpack your triggers.** Begin to examine your way of being in relationships, starting with a look at those moments when you have been triggered: What tends to trigger you, and what is your go-to reaction in these moments? Do you shut down and isolate? Seek safety through affirmations? Each of

these are habitual patterns of the past that may be playing out in the present, and possibly getting in the way of building secure relationships that can change lives. Taking a journey inward and unpacking those triggers can help you arrive on the other side: healthier, happier, and more whole.

- Develop new relationship skills. One of the most powerful relationship skills is empathic listening—or listening for understanding. Empathic listening is one of the most reliable ways to ensure that others feel seen and heard by you on a regular basis. This is a skill that can be learned and developed, by you and others on your team.
- Normalize earning secure attachment as a part of the teaching profession. In addition to becoming a secure leader, you can take action to support your educators to develop earned secure attachment, too. For example, improve access to counseling benefits for educators, provide professional development related to educator relationship skills and wellbeing, and embed

relationship-driven practices into your school and district operations that can serve as a proxy for secure attachment.

The good news is that no matter your position, temperament, or years of experience in education, your brain can re-adapt to a secure attachment pattern. In FuelEd’s ten years of working with public school districts on adult social-emotional competency, we have seen time and again with our participating educators that when educators begin to understand and identify their attachment style, they grow in their capacity to experience other people’s behavior through a new lens, one based in curiosity and acceptance, rather than judgment or criticism. Exploration of your own and your team’s attachment styles can help you reach new levels of social and emotional development and leadership effectiveness. ♦



NOTES

¹ A. N. Schore, “The Effects of Early Relational Trauma on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health,” *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22, nos. 1-2 (2001): 201–269, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0355\(200101/04\)22:1<201::AID-IMH18>3.0.CO;2-9](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0355(200101/04)22:1<201::AID-IMH18>3.0.CO;2-9); B. A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).



Megan Marcus, guest contributor to *DMJ*, is the founder of FuelEd, a nonprofit established in 2012 that partners with K-12 schools to develop teachers’ social-emotional competencies to bolster teacher retention and student achievement. She holds a B.A. in psychology from the University of California at Berkeley, a master’s degree in psychology from Pepperdine University, and a master’s in education, policy, and management from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education.



Kelley Munger, guest contributor to *DMJ*, is a partner at FuelEd. She is a researcher and licensed therapist working in the areas of trauma, adult attachment, special education, and human development. She holds a B.A. in English from Auburn University, an M.A. in teaching from Lee University, and an M.A. in counseling psychology from Covenant Seminary. She completed her Ph.D. in early intervention and special education at the University of Oregon in 2019.



FuelEd is a nonprofit that partners with K-12 school districts to develop educators’ social-emotional competencies to bolster teacher retention and student outcomes. Synthesizing research from developmental psychology, counseling psychology, and social neuroscience, FuelEd offers in-person and virtual trainings that bring educators the science, skills, and self-awareness needed to grow into secure attachment figures.