California Center for School Climate

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TOOLKIT FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Cultivating Caring Relationships at School:

15 Activities That Promote Staff and Student Connection

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

School climate is a multifaceted concept. Generally, it is defined as the qualities of a school environment that are experienced by students and staff, encompassing relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Center, 2021). School climate has a clear impact on all members of the school community, including its students, staff, families, and community members. This toolkit provides activities to support **caring relationships between adults and students,** which is the foundation of a positive school climate.

"A safe and supportive environment consists of the welcoming, acceptance, awareness, and celebration of many different cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds."

Julian Berkowitz-Sklar, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Why Focus on Relationship-Building?

Disruptions to education due to COVID-19 and the accompanying surge in students' mental health needs has led districts and schools to reexamine the kinds of support they offer to students. Now more than ever, building relationships with students is imperative to creating positive learning conditions for them. Dedicating intentional time to fostering caring relationships between staff and students provides the foundation for a positive school climate.

Research shows that when students have a safe and supportive relationship with an adult on campus, they are more likely to show up and engage in relationships and learning (National School Climate Center, 2021; Redding & Corbett, 2018). Students who have access to caring relationships are more academically engaged, display stronger social skills, and exhibit increased positive behavior. Caring relationships can also be protective factors against the impacts of trauma, stress, and adversity, all of which reduce students' capacity to learn, develop, and grow (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).

Students learn best in a school environment where they feel safe, supported, and engaged. Cultivating trust between adults and students can heighten students' motivation. Trust also sets the foundation for learning, as it facilitates open communication and an exchange of ideas between the teacher and students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Adults can prioritize an environment of trust by responding to students in ways that display respect and fairness based on the needs of each student.

Students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with learning disabilities are more harmed by negative teacher affect and benefit more from positive relationships with teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Caring relationships provide a strong tier-1, schoolwide system of support that benefits the entire school community. As such, adults serve as the models for supportive relationships that reinforce and provide students with positive interactions.

This toolkit provides school staff with a variety of actionable strategies to cultivate relationships with and among students. Remember — building caring relationships requires a continuous improvement process. It takes time and deliberate effort for these caring relationships to become a part of the DNA of the school community.

"If you are an adult that works or is close to youth, please consider having a relationship with them. It might improve their attitude, participation, and/or experience as a student."

Jubia Chavez, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed for school staff — such as educators, counselors, and coaches — who work directly with students in grades preK through 12. The toolkit provides 15 activities that can help staff prioritize structured time within the school day to cultivate meaningful and authentic adult–student relationships and student–student relationships. Each activity is meant to be

- » easy to understand and implement,
- » a resource for all school-based staff,
- » free or low-cost,
- » applicable to special populations, and
- » able to be used in person and/or virtually.

In the sections that follow, each of the 15 activities are outlined in detail, including the activity location (in person or virtual), time requirements, overview, materials needed, instructions for preparation and facilitation, and tips and optional modifications. Activities in this toolkit can be used within existing classroom structures and embedded into academic content to support broader improvement efforts. When implementing these activities, consider diverse student perspectives, learning styles, and strengths.

The following tables list the 15 activities broken out by grade level (elementary, all grade levels, and secondary).

Table 1. List of Activities for All Grade Levels

Title	Overview
Activity #1: Pass the It On!	Students answer questions about themselves on a sheet of paper and crumple them up to form "snowballs." Then, students find a paper's original owner by walking around and asking questions. Through a movement-based activity, multiple student–student connections can be made quickly.
Activity #2: Quick Connectors	A selection of question prompts is provided to facilitate quick opportunities for students to get to know each other. The prompts can be answered in pairs or small groups. Brief opportunities for students to learn about their peers can yield meaningful connections over time.

Note. Activity #1 is designed as an in-person activity. Activity #2 can be done either in person or virtually.

Table 2. List of Activities for Elementary Grades

Title	Overview
Activity #3: I Am Portraits	Students create self-portraits and choose 3–5 words that describe who they are. The portraits can be displayed around the classroom as a visual reminder of the classroom community.
Activity #4: Switch It Up	Students are paired randomly in concentric circles with peers to answer icebreaker questions. Multiple rounds allow for students to make quick connections with several peers.
Activity #5: Pause and Move	A selection of quick movement activities is randomly drawn when a pause in instruction is needed. Over time, the selection of activities expands as students contribute ideas.
Activity #6: Call-and-Response Affirmations	Verbal affirmation statements are developed collaboratively as a class, followed by a facilitated discussion about the meaning of each statement. Call-and-response affirmations are a positive and energizing reminder of classroom values and expectations.
Activity #7: Let's Check In	Educators hold one-on-one semistructured check-ins with each student over a period of time. These check-ins provide opportunities for teachers to gain deeper insights about each student that support teaching and learning.

Title	Overview
Activity #8: Dance It Out!	Students are assigned to be the "DJ of the week" to share their favorite song with the class in a closing dance that is a fun and energizing way to end the week.

Note. Activity #4 is designed as an in-person activity. All other activities listed can be done either in person or virtually.

Table 3. List of Activities for Secondary Grade Levels

Title	Overview
Activity #9: This Is Me![a]	Students design their own virtual backgrounds for use in virtual classroom settings followed by small-group presentations. These personalized backgrounds facilitate a sense of community by serving as a visual representation of student interests and identities.
Activity #10: Newsfeed[a]	Using a digital bulletin board, students answer the prompt, "What's new with you?" Once set up, the digital bulletin board provides a structure for ongoing check-ins throughout the year.
Activity #11: Getting to Know You Survey	An online survey at the beginning of the year is one way to learn more about students' interests and strengths. Survey responses provide information that can be used to draw on students' interests and strengths in classroom activities that facilitate engagement in learning.
Activity #12: We Are in This Together	Structured prompts and sentence starters guide students as they offer encouragement or gratitude to their classmates. In a classroom where students know each other well, this activity strengthens existing positive peer relationships.
Activity #13: Imagining Our Best Classroom	Using different forms of visual media, students describe their ideal classroom. A facilitated discussion among students promotes reflection and makes explicit their role in contributing to a positive learning environment.
Activity #14: We Learn Better Together	A classroom discussion about shared accountability provides clarity for working collaboratively in groups. This discussion sets the stage for students as they develop agreements in their project- or assignment-based groups. When students take the lead in setting expectations, they are more likely to uphold them.

Title	Overview
Activity #15: Advice From Former Students[a]	At the end of the year, small groups of students make a 3–5-minute video to share their experience, advice, and tips for doing well in your class. Students often relate to and appreciate the perspectives of their peers. The videos also demonstrate that student voice is an important part of the classroom.

[a] This activity requires the use of student media, photos, or videos. Before implementing this activity, it is recommended to check with your district regarding media release forms for parent/guardian approval.

Activities for All Grade Levels

Pass It On!

Activity contributed by CCSC Youth Advisory Team member, Alexa

Activity type: In Person | Time: 20 minutes

» Preparation: 5 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

Overview: Students answer questions about themselves on a sheet of paper and crumple them up to form "snowballs." Next, they stand in a circle and quickly pass the snowballs around. Once the timer stops, students find the original owner of the snowball they have by asking questions. This interactive activity engages students through movement and conversation, which encourages them to learn about their peers' interests, hobbies, and strengths.

Materials

» One sheet of paper per student

» Activity prompts (see below)

Preparation (5 minutes)

1. Select 3–5 prompts from the activity materials, or create your own prompts and write them on a slide, whiteboard, or other display.

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Share with students that the purpose of the activity is for them to get to know each other.

2. Keep the numbered prompts displayed throughout the activity for students to reference. Have students answer the prompts on one piece of paper in the same numerical order as the displayed questions.

3. When students are finished answering their questions, have them crumple up the paper into a "snowball" and stand in a circle.

4. Set a timer for about 30 seconds and play music while students quickly pass around the snowballs.

5. When the timer stops, have students find the original owner of the snowball they're holding by asking the chosen prompts of their peers.

6. Once they have found the snowball's original owner, have them return the snowball.

7. If more time is available, this process can be repeated for another round.

Optional Follow-Up

1. As a class, ask students to share their responses to these prompts:

    a. What's something new you learned about a classmate?

    b. What did you find that you had in common with a classmate?

    c. Did you learn about something you've never heard of before?

Tips & Modifications

» Collect the snowballs and repeat the activity another day to provide more opportunities for students to get to know each other.

» Implement the activity again with new questions.

"In a classroom setting, being able to talk with peers and feel comfortable in the classroom is crucial to effective learning. Through this activity, I was able to talk to peers that I can now ask for help in class. I also get to learn interesting facts about my classmates that I wouldn't have learned otherwise."

Alexa Southall, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Pass It On! Prompts (choose 3–5)

» Share a hobby or something you do for fun.

» What is your favorite class subject and why?

» Share a career that you're interested in.

» Write three words you would use to describe yourself.

» What is one goal you have for yourself this school year? (academic, personal, extracurricular, etc.)

» When you think of (name of class), what are some words that come to mind?

» Share something that you're proud of.

» Share a favorite food or meal.

» Finish this statement: "When I'm at my best at school, it's because…"

» What is something you value in a friend?

Quick Connectors

"Something that makes me feel like I belong ... is a simple question about my day or how I am feeling."

Jubia Chavez, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

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"What also creates this positive connection is when friends ask, 'How are you today?' or even when a teacher asks in the middle of class while doing individual work. This helps establish a trust between a student and teacher."

California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 7 minutes per *Quick Connector*

» Preparation: 2 minutes

» Facilitation: 5 minutes

Overview: This is a quick, low-preparation opportunity for partner or group check-ins. Regular opportunities for students to check in with their peers, even briefly, yield meaningful connections over time.

Materials

» *Quick Connectors* prompt (see below)

Preparation (2 minutes)

1. Choose a prompt from the activity materials.

2. Decide how you would like to group students (pairs, small groups, etc.). Grouping students may be as simple as having them turn to someone nearby, randomly pairing or grouping them, having them count off, or using any other grouping method.

Facilitation (5 minutes)

1. Pair off or group the students.

2. Share the selected prompt. Allow students 1–2 minutes to think about their answers to the prompt (this helps them to be more present during their check-ins, as they will not be thinking about what they want to say).

3. Students share their answers to the prompt for about 1–2 minutes each.

4. If time allows, ask the class if they learned anything new about someone.

Quick Connectors Prompts

Energy Check-Ins

» On a scale of 1–10, choose a number that represents your current energy level and share why.

» If you had to describe your current mood using a weather pattern (e.g., fog, light rain, sunshine, hail, etc.), which weather pattern would you choose?

» Share one word that describes how you felt coming into today's class and one word that describes how you are feeling leaving today's class.

Getting to Know You

» If you had your very own theme song, what would it be?

» What genres of music do you like best?

» Share something that inspires you.

» Share something that makes you feel peaceful.

» What is a tradition, holiday, or practice from your family or community that is meaningful to you?

» Who is someone important in your life? (someone you know personally or a public figure)

» What's the best advice that you've ever received?

Positivity and Gratitude

» What is something or someone you're grateful for?

» Share about a time when someone helped you when you needed it.

» What always puts you in a good mood?

» What is something that you're looking forward to?

» What is something that you're proud of?

Learning and Reflection

» Share about a time when you worked with a partner or group that felt successful and why.

» What is something you do to help when learning feels hard?

» What is something you want to learn? (new skills, topics, etc.)

» What ideas or concepts from this lesson/unit do you feel you understand well? What ideas or concepts are you still wrestling with?

Elementary Activities

I Am Portraits

Activity type: In person or virtual | Time: 1 hour

- » Preparation: 10 minutes
- » Facilitation: 40 minutes
- » Follow-up: 10 minutes

Overview: Students create self-portraits and write 3–5 words around their portrait that describe who they are. The *I Am Portraits* are then displayed in the classroom on a bulletin board. This activity provides an opportunity for students to express who they are and serves as a visual reminder of the classroom community.

Materials

- » Paper
- » Drawing materials
- » *I Am Portrait* examples
- » Sample "I Am" statements (see below)

Preparation (10 minutes)

1. Prepare a list of sample character traits for "I Am" statements.
2. Create an example *I Am Portrait*.

Facilitation (40 minutes)

1. Share your example *I Am Portrait*. Describe what a self-portrait is (a drawing or other visual representation of one's face) and show examples of self-portraits. Explain to students that they will be drawing their own self-portrait and choosing words from a list (or coming up with their own) that describe who they are (not what they look like).
2. Share a list of sample traits, or descriptors, with the class and ask if students have any to add to the list. Keep all words displayed on the board so your class can reference the list as they work on their *I Am Portraits*.

   a. Invite students to share words from their home languages.

3. Give students 20 minutes to complete their self-portraits and choose 3–5 words from the board or come up with new words that describe who they are.

Follow-Up (10 minutes)

1. Display students' *I Am Portraits* around the classroom.

Tips & Modifications

» For younger grades, support your students by having them verbally tell you their words and writing them on their *I Am Portraits* for them.

Sample "I Am" statements

I am

» Strong

» Friendly

» Funny

» Respectful

» Loyal

» Creative

» Courageous

» Authentic

» Joyful

» Imaginative

» Sociable

» Proud

» Helpful

» Curious

» Persistent

Activity 4

Switch It Up

Developed by Youth Advisory Team member Alexa Southall

Activity type: In person | Time: 25 minutes

» Preparation: 10 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

Overview: Students are placed into two concentric circles and are paired randomly with a peer to answer prompted questions. When the time is up, students rotate randomly based on the number shared by the teacher to find their new partner and answer a prompt. This activity is a fun and energizing way for students to get to know each other through quick interactions with several peers.

"I think it's memorable to be able to discuss and laugh about a random topic with someone you wouldn't normally talk to. It's a bonding experience for the students to feel closer to each other and makes the classroom environment feel more comforting and supportive."

Alexa Southall, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Materials

» Timer

» A space that is big enough for students to stand in two circles: an inner circle and an outer circle

» Activity prompts (see below)

» Optional: dice or a random number generator

Preparation (10 minutes)

1. Choose from the list of prompts or create your own.

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Divide students into two groups by numbering each student as a one or two.

   a. Have students form two circles that face each other based on their number. Ones will make an inner circle, and twos will make an outer circle.

   b. If there is an odd number of students, join one of the circles as a participant while facilitating the activity.

2. Set a timer for 30 seconds and ask one of the selected prompts.

   a. Example prompt: "Do you prefer pancakes or waffles?"

3. The student in the inner circle will discuss the question or topic until the timer goes off.

4. When the timer goes off, reset the timer and have the student in the outer circle answer the same prompt.

5. When both students have had a chance to speak, call out a random number and then say "left" or "right."

6. The students in the inner circle will move that many places to the left or right.

7. When everyone is facing a new student, ask a new question for the students to discuss.

8. Repeat steps 2–7 for as many rounds as desired.

Tips & Modifications

» This format can be used to review lesson concepts and ideas. Students can create review questions based on content they have learned that serve as the prompts for this activity.

Sample *Switch It Up* Prompts

» If you could choose only one food/meal to eat for the rest of your life, what would it be?

» If you could be any animal, what would you be?

» Who is important to you?

» What makes you smile?

» What do you want to do for work when you are an adult?

» If you could do one thing to change the world, what would you do?

» Who is your favorite superhero and why?

» Is hot or cold weather better?

» What do you hope to learn from this class?

» What is your favorite subject and why?

Pause and Move

Activity type: In Person | Time: 30 minutes

» Preparation: 15 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

» Note: Once developed, each *Pause and Move* activity can be 1–5 minutes.

Overview: With your class, create a selection of brief movement activities to implement when a pause in instruction is needed. Developing the list of movement break activities collaboratively with your students is a way to honor students' voices, interests, and choices. Then, whenever your students need a break or during a transition, choose (or have a student choose) an activity from the list/cup at random.

Materials

» One cup

» Popsicle sticks or strips of paper

» *Pause and Move* activity examples (see below)

Preparation (15 minutes)

1. Gather strips of paper or popsicle sticks (one per movement activity).

2. Write the name of some movement activities on a strip of paper or popsicle stick.

3. Place the strips of paper or popsicle sticks inside the cup.

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Share with students that the *Pause and Move* cup contains different movement activities that can be used during short breaks any time during the school day throughout the year.

2. Select a student to choose an activity at random from the cup. Shake the cup before the student selects an activity.

3. Explain the directions for the movement activity that has been selected. Lead the class through the activity for several minutes or rounds.

4. Now that students have an idea of what *Pause and Move* is, invite them to contribute more activity choices to the cup. Do one or both of the following:

   a. Hand out a strip of paper or a popsicle stick to each student to write on if they wish. They may need to explain the activity to the class if it gets chosen.

b. Ask for students to share activity ideas aloud, and ask for or suggest a short name that you can write on a new strip of paper or a popsicle stick.

Tips & Modifications

» Throughout the year, ask students to contribute more ideas to the *Pause and Move* cup or suggest some that can be removed.

Pause and Move Examples

» **Random dancing:** Play a song when you notice that students need a break, and invite students to engage in random dancing.

» **Wiggles:** Have the class stand up and call out a body part. Instruct students to stretch and wiggle that body part as you say it.

» **Twists:** Have students hold their arms out in a T shape and twist side to side. Repeat several times.

» **Copy the rhythm:** Create a rhythm with whole-body movement that students mimic.

» **Color:** Choose a color and call it out to signal to students to get up and walk toward the first thing they see in that color.

» **I spy:** Students stand up and are given clues that will help them guess an object in the room. As you share the clues, students walk around trying to find the object. Share with the class when a student has successfully identified the object.

» **Mum ball:** Students toss a soft, small ball to each other without making any noise or calling out the name of the student to whom the ball is being tossed. This activity requires students to pay close attention.

» **Four corners:** Ask a question and label the corners of the room with each answer choice. Have students move to the corner of the room of their choice.

» **The wave:** Students stand in a line and one by one raise their arms and bring them down in order. The aim is to have a flowing wave. Repeat with different speeds by calling out "Fast wave!" or "Slow wave!"

» **Keep it up:** Students must keep a balloon from touching the ground. Have students do this activity outside in small groups.

Call-and-Response Affirmations

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: ~45 minutes

- » Preparation: 15 minutes
- » Facilitation: 30 minutes
- » Follow-up: 2 minutes
- » Note: Once developed, each daily or weekly affirmation can be recited in 1–5 minutes.

Overview: In this activity, affirmation statements are selected ahead of time by the teacher, and the class engages in a facilitated discussion about the meaning of each one. Affirmations can help to build students' confidence, which fosters positive identity and can have an impact on classroom or group culture. Discussing the affirmations as a group increases student understanding of how to practice each one.

Materials

- » Whiteboard, poster, Google Jamboard, or other tool for notetaking that will be visible to the whole class
- » Sample affirmations and activity prompts (see below)

Preparation (15 minutes)

1. Choose 3–5 affirmations that speak to different aspects of classroom life.
2. Select from the sample affirmations provided or create your own.
3. Print the Template for Classroom Affirmation Discussions (see below) or create the template on a board visible to all students.

Facilitation (30 minutes)

1. Share the definition and purpose of affirmations with students.

   a. "Affirmations are statements that can help us build our confidence and remind us of how we want to be in this class. They are positive statements that encourage us."

2. Share the selected affirmations with students.
3. As a group, discuss the question "What does this affirmation mean to you?"

   a. If needed, use these probing questions to facilitate the discussion.

   i. What are some examples of when someone is modeling this affirmation?

   ii. What are some examples of when someone is not modeling this affirmation?

   iii. Why do you think this is important for our class?

4. In the template, record examples of student responses to the questions.

5. Post the 3–5 affirmations selected in a visible location.

Follow-Up (2 minutes)

1. Create a routine for reciting affirmations. Start by saying the affirmation out loud and asking students to repeat after you.

Tips & Modifications

» Allow different students to lead the group recitation of affirmations.

» Verbal affirmations can also serve as cues for transitions between activities.

» Specific affirmations can also be applied to certain activities if they are relevant. For example, before a group discussion, it might be useful to recite the class affirmation, "We listen to the ideas of others."

» Have students periodically reflect on how well they feel they are embodying the affirmations.

Sample Affirmations and Student Responses

Affirmation	What does this affirmation mean to you?
Learning	
We are ready to learn.	• We have school supplies out at the start of class or when the bell rings. • We are dressed and ready to start practice at the start of class. • We are actively engaged in class.
We will do our best.	• We do our best to complete assignments. • We try to make sense of what we're learning. • We stay focused and on task.
Learning is helping us grow.	• When something is challenging to learn, we have patience with each other. • When we don't know something, we research the answer or ask a peer.

Affirmation	What does this affirmation mean to you?
Community	
We learn better together.	• We speak respectfully to each other. • We encourage others when they need it. • When our peers need it, we are happy to help.
We listen to one another.	• We raise our hands and wait for our turn to speak. • We try our best to listen well.
Mind and Body	
We are in tune with our minds and bodies.	• We take deep breaths when we are feeling frustrated. • We ask for help when we cannot calm our bodies down.
We try our best to take care of ourselves every day.	• We try our best to sleep enough every night. • We drink water regularly.

Template for Classroom Affirmations Discussion

Affirmation	What does this affirmation mean to you?

Discussion Prompts

1. What does this affirmation mean to you?

   » What are some examples of when someone is modeling this affirmation?

   » What are some examples of when someone is not modeling this affirmation?

   » Why do you think this is important for our class?

2. What questions do you have about this affirmation?

Activity 7

Let's Check In

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: Varies

» Preparation: 5 minutes

» Facilitation: 10 minutes per student

Overview: One-on-one check-ins allow for deeper insights and connections to be developed between teachers and students. Informal check-ins conducted in a safe and welcoming environment provide an opportunity for the development of meaningful learning partnerships between students and teachers. While these check-ins are a commitment of time, they are a worthwhile investment that provides benefits throughout the year.

Materials

» A place to take notes on the student check-ins

» *Let's Check In* prompts (see below)

Preparation (5 minutes)

1. Create prompts or use the examples below.

Facilitation (10 minutes per student)

1. Tell your class that you will be doing one-on-one check-ins over a few days during student work time. Ask them to think of a question they would like to ask you during their conferences.

   a. Share sample questions that students can ask during their conferences.

2. Let students know in advance the questions that you will be asking them during the conferences so that they can think about their responses.

3. During scheduled student work time, call students to your desk to conduct the check-ins. Create a welcoming environment to reduce any hesitation that students may have in the one-on-one discussion.

4. Take notes on the conversations to reference at a later time. Explain to the student why you are taking notes.

Tips & Modifications

» Implement this activity a couple of months into the school year so students can become familiar with your class and know what supports to discuss. Students will feel more comfortable sharing their needs once they have built a relationship with their teacher.

» Hold student one-on-one check-ins two to three times during the school year.

Sample *Let's Check In* Prompts

» How can I support you as a teacher?

» What do you want to learn this year?

» What about this class helps you learn? What makes it difficult to learn?

» Who are your friends in this class?

» What is something you have accomplished in this class that you're proud of?

» Is there anything you want me to know?

"This makes it easier for students to open up and be comfortable in a school setting. These conversations may aid students in stepping outside of their shell because now they know a teacher is interested in supporting them."

Amiya Farias, California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Dance It Out!

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 10 minutes

» Preparation: 5 minutes

» Facilitation: 5 minutes

» Note: Once developed, each *Dance It Out!* session can be done in 5 minutes.

Overview: Assign a student to be the "DJ of the week" who chooses a favorite song to share with the class for a closing dance at the end of each week. The closing dance serves as an opportunity for positive self-expression and an energetic ritual to end the week.

Materials

» Phone or computer with speaker

» Music streaming platform (e.g., YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music)

» DJ of the week sign-up list

Preparation (5 minutes)

1. Create a DJ of the week schedule or sign-up list to assign students to their DJ days.

2. Post the DJ of the week assignments in your class for students to review.

Facilitation (5 minutes)

1. Choose a song for the first week of the closing *Dance It Out!* session. Model how to be the DJ of the week by playing your chosen song and leading the class in a dance that students mirror.

   a. Allow students who are not comfortable being the dance leader to choose "free dance" instead of leading the class in the dance session.

2. Explain that *Dance It Out!* will be happening at the end of every week to close on a positive note.

3. Share examples of appropriate songs with your class.

4. Ask students to write the name of the song they want to play in their assigned week if they have one in mind.

   a. Each week, remind the DJ of the week to choose a song.

   b. Before each closing session, ensure that songs are school-appropriate and do not have explicit language.

5. Play the student's DJ of the week song and invite the student to lead the class in the dance session.

Tips & Modifications

» Collect students' song selections at the beginning of the year. When each student has their turn, ask them if they would like to use the song they shared or select a new song.

» Periodically invite guests from your school to join in the dance session — for example, the principal, librarian, classroom volunteers, custodian, or food service staff.

» Create a classroom playlist with the songs that students chose throughout the year and play the songs during independent work time, movement breaks, or an end-of-the-year party.

Secondary
Activities

Activity 9

This Is Me!

Suggested time of year: Beginning of the school year

"Pictures are more expressive than words. They let you know what things you have in common."

California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

Activity type: Virtual, with in-person adaptation | Time: 1 hour and 20 minutes

» Preparation: 20 minutes

» Facilitation: 1 hour

Overview: In distance learning, a student's virtual world becomes their classroom. Personalized virtual backgrounds can help students express who they are and foster peer-to-peer connections in the online classroom. They may also increase students' comfort levels with turning on their cameras. In this activity, students design their own virtual backgrounds for use in virtual classroom settings. Each student is invited to share their background with their peers in a brief small group presentation.

Materials

» Microsoft PowerPoint, Google Slides, Canva, or another digital creation application

» Personal or stock photos

» Prompts (see activity materials)

» Technology instructions (see activity materials)

Preparation (20 minutes)

1. Ensure that your school or district allows custom backgrounds to be uploaded to your virtual meeting platform.

2. Determine the image file requirements for the online meeting platform used in your classroom (JPEG and PNG are common allowable file types for custom virtual backgrounds). Select an application that students will use to create their virtual backgrounds (e.g., Canva, Google Slides, Microsoft PowerPoint).

3. Create a prompt, or use a prompt from the activity support materials below, that your students will use to design their backgrounds.

4. Design your own example to show students (refer to applicable technology instructions).

5. Choose a class session date and time for students to showcase their backgrounds in small groups.

Facilitation (1 hour)

1. Explain to your class that each student will be creating a virtual background that answers the selected prompt. Explain and model for students how to create a background using the application you have chosen.

2. Let students know that they will be sharing and explaining their backgrounds with peers. Be sure to provide the date they will be expected to present their backgrounds.

3. Share applicable technology instructions with students.

4. Give students 30 minutes of class time or homework time to work on their backgrounds.

5. Create breakout rooms of around 5 students to share their backgrounds for about 2 minutes per person.

6. If time allows, ask students to reflect on the following and share with the whole group:

   a. What was it like to learn about your peers? Did you find you had anything in common?

   b. What was it like for you to share about yourself?

In-Person Adaptation

1. Create a shared collaborative presentation file (like a Google Slideshow) with one blank slide per student. Ensure that all students have editing access.

2. Assign each student to a particular slide and have them follow the "Creating the background" instructions below. Ask students to be mindful of accidentally deleting other slides in the presentation.

3. For in-class presentations, have groups of 5–6 students open the shared class file on one device. Students can take turns passing the device around their small group as they share their slides.

Follow-Up

» Invite students to update their backgrounds as the year progresses to show growth and changing interests.

Tips & Modifications

» PDFs are not compatible with uploading backgrounds to most meeting platforms.

» Ask students to check that their backgrounds are working before the day they present.

» Encourage students with strong technology skills to help their peers create and upload the backgrounds.

» Encourage students to find PNG images, which have transparent backgrounds and blend well with backgrounds of all colors. These images can be found by typing "PNG" after the search term in Google (e.g., "house PNG").

» This activity could be done with school staff if meetings take place online.

» This activity can also be used to have students think about their identities as they relate to course content — for example, who they are as scientists, writers, social scientists, or mathematicians.

» Instead of presenting in small groups, have a few students present their backgrounds each day for the first few weeks of school.

"Doing the Zoom background activity was very fun. I really enjoyed getting to see everyone's and I think it helped to make our relationship closer."

California Center for School Climate Youth Advisory Team member

This is Me! Activity Prompts

Try to create a virtual background that describes "Who am I?" Some things you might want to consider include the following:

» Hobbies/things you like to do for fun

» Clubs, sports, or any extracurricular activities

» People who are important to you

» Your community

» Music you enjoy

» Words you would use to describe yourself

» Something that you're proud of

Technology Instructions

Creating the background

1. Create the background using a presentation application (e.g., **Microsoft PowerPoint** or **Google Slides**), as follows:

   a. Create a slide with personal photos, stock photos found on the internet, and/or text.

   b. Do the following when your background is complete:

   i. For PowerPoint: Select File, Export, File format: JPEG or PNG, and Save Current Slide Only.

   ii. For Google Slides: Select File, Download, and then choose either a JPEG image (.jpg, current slide) or PNG image (.png, current slide).

2. Create the background using **Canva**, as follows:

   a. Using the background template, create a collage with personal photos or stock photos found on the internet.

   b. When your background template is complete, click share, then download the background from the menu bar.

c. On the drop-down, choose JPEG or PNG and save the file.

Uploading the background to the online meeting platform

1. Upload the background to **Zoom**, as follows:

   a. Join a meeting and look for the up arrow on the video icon located in the toolbar.

   b. Click the up arrow and select Choose Virtual Background.

   c. A window will pop up; click the plus symbol on the right, and add your JPEG or PNG image.

2. Upload the background to **Google Meet**, as follows:

   a. Before a meeting: When the self-view screen loads, click the bottom right Change Background option. Select + and upload the image file from your computer.

   b. During a meeting: Click the three dots menu icon in the screen at the bottom right and select Change Background. Select + and upload the image file from your computer.

3. Upload the background to **Microsoft Teams**, as follows:

   a. Before a meeting: In the self-view screen, switch on the video button. In the background options screen on the right, select Add New and upload the image file from your computer.

   b. During a meeting: Click the three dots More menu at the top of the meeting screen, select Apply Background Effects, and then select Add New and upload the image file from your computer.

Note. If your school or district uses another platform for online meetings, research that platform's specific steps for uploading a custom background image.

Newsfeed

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 25 minutes

» Preparation: 10 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

» Note: Once developed, the *Newsfeed* does not need continuous facilitation.

Overview: The *Newsfeed* activity provides a structure to regularly build connections and allow students to share what is important to them. Using a digital bulletin board, students answer the prompt, "What's new with you?" Once set up, the digital bulletin board is a quick way for students to learn about their peers' lives. If used regularly, the *Newsfeed* becomes a meaningful collection of class memories by the end of the year.

Materials

» Digital bulletin board platform

- E.g., Padlet (recommended), Google Jamboard, Google Slides, discussion boards in learning management systems available in your school/district

» Activity prompts (see below)

» Optional: Photos that students have available to them

Preparation (10 minutes)

1. Create one *Newsfeed* digital bulletin board per class period or group of students.

2. Create an example post by answering the prompt, "What's new with you?"

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Share the purpose of the *Newsfeed* with your class and explain that they will be answering the prompt, "What's new with you?" They can include text, photos, and/or videos on the bulletin board. Examples of updates to share might include life events, participation in extracurricular activities, interesting news, and accomplishments.

2. Instruct students to reply to 3–5 of their peers' posts on the *Newsfeed*.

   a. Examples of replies include making a personal connection to the post, offering encouragement, or asking a question.

Optional Follow-Up

» Have students update the *Newsfeed* biweekly, monthly, or quarterly using different prompts (see activity materials).

Tips & Modifications

» The *Newsfeed* format can also be used to reflect on academic growth, classroom agreements, and goals.

Elementary Adaptation: News Broadcast In Person or Virtual

Materials

» Index cards or quarter sheets of paper

» News-themed broadcast music (found through a Google search)

Preparation

1. Create an example of your response to the prompt, "What's new with you?" on a small sheet of paper.

    a. It should be 1–3 sentences and will be used to introduce the News Broadcast to your students.

2. Facilitation

3. Start the activity by playing news music and reading your news in a news broadcaster/anchor voice.

4. Give each student an index card or quarter piece of paper to answer the prompt, "What's new with you?"

5. Students write a 1–3 sentence response to the prompt.

    a. For younger grades, have students draw photos and then verbally dictate their stories.

6. Share the response to their prompt with the class in a news broadcaster/anchor voice while playing news music.

Tips & Modifications

» Implement the activity multiple times throughout the school year (e.g., when returning from school breaks, after a weekend).

» Invite students to read the class news as coanchors.

» If your students are comfortable with technology, implement the activity using the virtual format as described in the original activity.

Newsfeed Prompts

1. What's new with you?

2. What is something you are looking forward to?

3. Share something that made you smile this week.

4. What is something you want to work on?

5. Share something you are proud of.

Getting to Know You Survey

Activity type: In Person and Virtual | Time: 1 hour

» Preparation: 15 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

» Follow-up: 30 minutes

Overview: Administer an online survey at the beginning of the year to learn more about students' interests and strengths. Create a survey using questions from different categories below that would best serve your classroom throughout the year. Draw on students' interests and strengths to inform classroom practices that facilitate engagement in learning. Survey responses can be referenced immediately and throughout the year to help teachers get to know their class.

Materials

» One device per student (laptop, phone, or tablet)

» Link to online survey

» Sample survey questions (see below)

Preparation (15 minutes)

1. Review the questions provided in the activity materials below and choose questions from each category that best suit your needs. A maximum of 7–10 questions for the entire survey is recommended.

2. Copy and paste the questions into an online survey tool.

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Share with students the purpose of the survey and how the information will be used throughout the year. Let them know that only you will have access to the survey.

2. Disseminate the link to the survey. This can be done in several ways, such as sending an email, posting on an online learning system, using a link shortener, or creating a QR code.

3. Give students 10 minutes to complete the survey, and ask them to be as thoughtful and thorough as possible with their answers.

Follow-Up (30 minutes)

1. Read and process the survey results.

2. Throughout the year, refer to student responses. This is most easily and quickly done by viewing the responses in a spreadsheet format. Most online survey tools can automatically create spreadsheets from survey data.

Tips & Modifications

» Implement this activity a few weeks into the school year, after relationships have begun to develop, to allow students to feel more comfortable answering deeper questions.

Sample *Getting to Know You Survey* Questions

Question category	Sample questions
Opener Survey Questions (choose 2–3)	
Basic information	• What is your first and last name? • What are your pronouns (if you feel comfortable sharing them)? • Which period/class are you in? • What languages do you speak? • What are your favorite school subjects? • What are three adjectives that you would use to describe yourself?
Deeper Survey Questions (choose 3–4)	
Learning styles and preferences	• I learn best in a classroom that is... • I learn best when the teacher... • I learn best—alone, in groups, in pairs, etc. • Think about a classroom that you learned really well in and describe it. • What helps you focus?
Interests and hobbies	• What goals do you have for yourself this year? (academic, social, personal, etc.) • What interests and hobbies do you have? • Are there extracurricular activities that you participate in or plan on joining? If so, what are they? • What are your career interests? (It's okay if you're still unsure.)

Question category	Sample questions
Feelings and attitudes toward school	• What part of school do you enjoy? • What part of school feels challenging? • What's something you're proud of? • What do you think adults at this school should know about being a student? • When I think about [insert class subject], the words that come to my mind are...

Activity
12

We Are in This Together

Contributed by an 11th grade Youth Advisory Team member

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 20 minutes

» Preparation: 5 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

Overview: Students use the provided prompts and sentence starters to offer encouragement or gratitude to their classmates. This activity might take place before an assessment, at the end of a project, or any time when students are working together to accomplish a project. Expressing and receiving gratitude, encouragement, and/or affirmations builds community. When students are given the opportunity to acknowledge and encourage each other, it emphasizes the importance of positive relationships as an integral part of classroom life.

Materials

» In person: Sticky notes or small pieces of paper

» Virtual: Digital message method (Zoom chat, email, other available student-to-student messaging platforms available to your school/district)

» Sample statements (see below)

Preparation (5 minutes)

1. Determine how you will pair students (e.g., randomly assigned, table partners).

2. Gather sticky notes or pieces of paper for each student. If you are doing this activity virtually, determine how students will share their notes with each other.

3. Create example statements of encouragement or gratitude as a model for students.

Facilitation (15 minutes)

1. Explain to students that the purpose of this activity is to show appreciation and encouragement to their peers.

   a. Note: Students should know their peers relatively well for this activity to be meaningful and authentic to them. It is easier for students to share appreciation for others when they already have positive relationships. If you feel like this does not yet describe your classroom, consider first focusing on other activities in this toolkit that allow students to learn more about each other.

2. Share sample sentence starters or prompts for writing the notes. Let students know they can use these or come up with their own.

3. Share example statements of gratitude or encouragement.

4. Give students a few minutes to write their notes and share them with their assigned partners.

5. As a whole group, discuss the following prompts:

   a. What was it like to give appreciation or encouragement to a peer?

   b. What was it like to receive appreciation or encouragement?

   c. Why do you think showing others appreciation or encouragement is important?

6. Remind students that sharing encouragement or gratitude is not limited to this activity but can happen any time they feel it is meaningful and authentic.

Tips & Modifications

» For authentic words of encouragement, implement this activity a few weeks into the school year when relationships have had time to build.

We Are in This Together Sample Statements

» Appreciation

   • _____ (student name), thank you for helping me when I am confused on an assignment.

   • _____ (student name), I appreciate you listening to me.

   • Thank you _____ (student name), for leading our group during a project.

   • _____ (student name), you're a great artist!

   • I appreciate ____ (student name) for bringing humor to our lessons.

   • ____ (student name) helped our team when we didn't understand the assignment.

» Encouragement

   • I know this project seems hard right now, but we can do it together!

   • Be patient with yourself as you're learning something new.

   • Just take things one step at a time!

Imagining Our Best Classroom

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 45 minutes

» Preparation: 15 minutes

» Facilitation: 30 minutes

Overview: Students define and describe what a positive learning environment looks, feels, and sounds like using different forms of visual media. Educators lead a discussion on common themes among the students' perspectives. Visuals offer a different way for students to share their perspectives, which may help them with self-expression. Exploring what it means to have a positive learning environment reinforces the values of the classroom.

Materials

» Collaborative slide deck platform (e.g., Microsoft PowerPoint Online, Google Slides)

» Devices for students to upload their images to the slide deck (ideally, one device per 1–2 students)

» Activity prompts (see below)

Preparation (15 minutes)

1. Decide how you will assign prompts to the class.

2. Create one slide deck per class.

3. Each slide deck should have three slides with one prompt each.

4. Ensure that students have editing access.

Facilitation (30 minutes)

1. Share the purpose of the activity and the three prompts. Assign prompts equally among the class. For example, with three prompts, a class of 30 would have 10 students answering each prompt.

   a. Prompt 1: "A positive learning environment looks like…"

   b. Prompt 2: "A positive learning environment feels like…"

   c. Prompt 3: "A positive learning environment sounds like…"

2. Explain to students that they will each find (or create) a visual that answers the prompt they are assigned.

   a. This visual could include photos, memes, emojis, other images, or a quick sketch.

3. Once students have found or created a visual, have them add it to the slide with their assigned prompt.

4. When students complete this activity, display the slides and review them with the class. As a whole group discuss the following:

    a. What do you notice about these images?

    b. Are there themes or anything in common across them?

    c. Is there anything you think might be missing?

    d. What role do you think you have in maintaining a positive classroom environment?

Optional Follow-Up

» Revisit the slides periodically as a way to discuss how well the classroom community is supporting a positive learning environment.

Tips & Modifications

» Implement this activity at the beginning of the school year as a way to start integrating student-voice activities into your class.

» Use this activity as a check-in to monitor the classroom environment and make changes that reflect the evolving needs of your class throughout the year.

» Create an additional prompt that relates directly to the content of the class (see optional content-specific prompts below).

Imagining Our Best Classroom Prompts

» Prompt 1: "A positive learning environment looks like…"

» Prompt 2: "A positive learning environment feels like…"

» Prompt 3: "A positive learning environment sounds like…"

Sample content-specific prompts (optional)

» Math: "We learn to think more like mathematicians by…"

» Science: "Thinking like scientists looks like…"

» English: "The attitudes we need to become better writers are…"

» Physical Education: "Being physically active helps me to…"

We Learn Better Together

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: 40 minutes

- » Preparation: 5 minutes
- » Facilitation: 35 minutes

Overview: Before a group assignment, lead students in a discussion about working with a team. Students will then develop agreements with their teams to set clear expectations for how each team member will contribute to the assignment or project. Creating agreements facilitates meaningful group work through shared account-ability as students work together toward a common goal.

Materials

- » Whiteboard or large poster paper
  - • If virtual: virtual bulletin board (e.g., Padlet, Google Jamboard)
- » Activity prompts (see below)

Preparation (5 minutes)

1. Determine how prompts will be shared and where responses to the whole-group discussion will be recorded.

   a. If it is virtual, create a virtual board to facilitate the conversation.

2. If you have not already, place students in groups for the class assignment or project.

Facilitation (35 minutes)

1. Share with students that the purpose of the activity is to make group work a positive experience for everyone.

2. As a whole class, ask students the series of prompts below. Record (or designate a student to record) key words from student responses under each of the prompts.

   a. Prompt 1: Share some challenges you have had working on a team.

   b. Prompt 2: Share some successes you have had working on a team.

   c. Prompt 3: How do you know when you're contributing meaningfully to a group project?

3. Share with the class that in their small groups they will create a set of 3–4 agreements that will guide their work together. Encourage students to consider the ideas from the discussion as they develop agreements. Share examples of items to include in a group agreement (e.g., ask questions if you're confused, help each other out).

Tips & Modifications

» This activity is best done after a group project or assignment has been explained to students.

We Learn Better Together Prompts

Prompt 1: Share some challenges you have had working on a team.

Prompt 2: Share some successes you have had working on a team.

Prompt 3: How do you know when you're contributing meaningfully to a group project? Others?

"I made friends through projects and working with other people. One of my teachers gave us a lot of group work, which was nice because we got to work with the new faces around us and because it's always scary starting new schools, especially like me where I didn't know anybody there."

Kieran Tingin, California Center for School Climate Young Adult Advisor

Advice From Former Students

Activity type: In Person or Virtual | Time: About 1.5 hours

» Preparation: 30 minutes

» Facilitation: 15 minutes

» Student independent work time: 30 minutes

» Follow-up: 15 minutes

Overview: Students are the experts on what it's like to learn in your classroom. At the end of the year, students create 1–3-minute videos to share their experience, advice, and tips for doing well in your class. The videos can be shared with new students at the beginning of the next school year, a time when they may be especially apprehensive about meeting a new teacher and classmates. Sharing videos from your previous students builds excitement about the things they will learn and communicates that you value student voice and perspective.

Materials

» Camera, phone, or other device that can record videos

» A digital bulletin board (e.g., Flipgrid, Padlet)

» Activity prompts (see below)

Preparation (30 minutes)

1. Determine which class or group of students will record the videos. Check to see if media release forms are needed (generally required if videos will be posted online).

2. Create a page or discussion topic using your digital bulletin board of choice.

Facilitation (15 minutes) & Student Independent Work (30 minutes)

1. Explain to your class or selected group of students that they will have the opportunity to share their experiences through a video recording for your future students.

2. Share the activity prompts with students to guide their video creation.

3. Explain to students how to record and post based on the devices available and the chosen digital bulletin board.

Follow-Up (15 minutes)

1. Show the videos to your new class of students in the beginning of the next school year.

2. Allow time for new students to ask questions, share their hopes for the class, and/or share any concerns they may have.

Tips & Modifications

» Some students may not feel comfortable showing their faces on camera; doing so should be voluntary.

» Ensure that diverse student perspectives are represented in the final videos (e.g., students with different strengths and learning styles) shown to your new students at the beginning of the next school year.

» Modify this activity without technology by asking your class to write letters to your future students that answer the prompts. At the beginning of the next year, give each student 2–3 different letters to read through as an introduction to the class.

» The activity can also be modified to be used with new staff to welcome them to the school, department, or district with advice and perspectives from other colleagues.

Advice From Former Students Prompts

» What did you enjoy or find meaningful during your time in this class?

» What advice do you have for incoming students?

» What can students look forward to in _____ grade?

» What was your favorite unit or subject in this class?

» Share about how you overcame a challenge.

» Share about when you learned something new.

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